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This is the ‘sneak peek’ version of *Air* from The Elementals series.

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Air

Prologue

It was too late.

Filip sensed the air shifting around him uncomfortably as something materialised close by. It felt as though he were being shoved aside by an invisible force that was crushing its way into a space that was already too full; the effect was suffocating, squashing the air from his lungs and battering his body violently as it grew more intense.

The sound of a sharp intake of breath coincided with a burst of heat erupting near his arm and his gaze flickered towards his companion – her eyes were wide with confusion and fear – she had felt the change too and knew something was wrong. Filip swiftly scanned the tree line; searching for something – *anything* – between the dense branches.

Nothing visibly changed: the surrounding woodland remained bright to his eyes, bathed in green tinged sunlight filtering through the leaves overhead. But the atmosphere *was* different. A dark force pulsed at the edge of his consciousness and he sensed rather than saw the energy flowing in rapid currents, becoming more intense as it encircled them.

“They’re here,” Filip murmured through tight lips. It was a needless observation, but one he could not help offering. Ally’s breathing quickened at his words and the heat around him flared more fiercely this time. The dark energy throbbed excitedly in response to the inadvertent release of power: it sensed their fear and imagined its own triumph.

“GO!” He shouted abruptly, splitting the heavy silence of the forest.

Filip pushed Ally forwards, stirring her frozen feet into action, before grabbing the sleeve of her shirt and pulling her along with him, encouraging her to move. The skin on the palm of his hand scorched painfully as it brushed against her elbow, but he did not let go and they did not slow down.

Of course, even though Filip knew that running was useless – he could detect no break in the surrounding barrier – he still ran. It was fight or flight and they were not strong enough to fight them, not all of them. Adrenaline coursed through his body, filling his limbs with urgent energy to help his muscles work harder, move faster.

The surrounding trees and bushes flashed by in a blur of green and brown. Branches reached out jagged wooden fingers towards them to scratch at their eyes and skin; it was as though the wood was turning wild around them, trying to stop them getting away.

Ally stumbled over a root as she sprinted alongside him and Filip reached out automatically to pull her upright, holding on tightly until she was safe even though it burned hotly every second he held on. Her eyes met his as he released her arm, the horror in them piercing through his own fear.

“What do we do?!” Ally cried, dragging ragged gulps of air into her lungs between words.

Alone, Filip could get away; he had the power to break out of the ensnaring ring and was protected. But he couldn't take Ally with him, he didn't have the strength for that – it would probably kill them both.

Was this how it would end? Filip raged inwardly. After all the years he had waited, it had been such a short time and now it would end. He couldn't believe that this was what he had been preparing for and now it was what – over?

I've failed. The realisation hit him hard and painfully; ice bursting inside his chest. There were others far away who would suffer for his failure; but he could not think of what repercussions there would be for them right now – all he could think about was Ally.

Ally.

Filip had had no choice in finding her – she would already be dead if he had not gone to her – but still...*was this outcome unavoidable?* The people they were and what they had become: that was unavoidable, but this...?

“I’m sorry,” Filip gasped, the only thing he could say.

Ally only shook her head – Filip didn’t know if that meant she accepted his apology or was dismissing his words because they meant nothing right now. They would be dead soon.

Chapter 1 – Waiting Room

Filip Njord shuddered awake; his long legs jerking out from his body slamming his shins into the metal armrest of the bench he had been asleep on a few moments earlier. He had been asleep, but not *peacefully* asleep.

“Ouch!” Filip grumbled groggily, not fully alert yet and with his eyes still tightly shut. He was desperately trying to hold on to the memory of the dream that had startled him into wakefulness, but it was fading too quickly. Moving his legs again – more cautiously now as consciousness began to take over – he carefully avoided hitting another painful obstacle.

Where was I? He wondered sleepily, struggling to remember the last part of his dream and pushing himself to try and return to the place that had seemed so familiar a few moments ago. But he realised it was a pointless endeavour, like trying to catch a wisp of smoke in your hand – the images were gone – and he gave up with a disgruntled sigh.

Filip pressed his fists into his still closed eyes and rubbed firmly, pushing his eyelids onto his eyeballs until they watered; they were tired and sore, but it wasn't from a lack of sleep. He blinked slowly and opened two bloodshot, espresso-brown eyes to view the dimly lit waiting room he had been sleeping in. The emergency exit signs were the only source of light in the dingy, well-used room and they cast an institutional yellow glow across him and the sturdy, easy-to-clean furniture that filled the space.

A swift glance at his watch told him that there was no use trying for more sleep at this time and so he pulled himself upright on the bench, stretching out the stiff muscles in his long limbs and yawning loudly. He tilted his golden-haired head from one side to another, trying to work out the stubborn niggles in his neck without success. Sighing again, he let his breath exhale slowly from his body causing some litter nearby to rustle gently away from him across the dirty tiled floor.

The train station was quiet that morning. It was just after 4.00am and the platforms were empty except for the odd sleeping train, waiting to be awoken by the morning rush hour. Pigeons huddled next to one another between gaps in the brickwork of the station walls, whilst stranded travellers snuggled up in their own self-made nests of coats and bags to wait for the coming morning.

Filip left the relative warmth of the waiting room and wandered out across the high metal walkway that connected the silent platforms. The sound of his feet clumping gently on the wooden boards beneath his boots echoed loudly in the empty space and his tall figure cast long shadows across his path. He was wide awake in the slumbering station and hoped that his morning stroll would cure his itchy feet. But it hadn't so far.

Waverley station had been Filip's home for the past few weeks, at least it had been his home when it was raining, which it seemed to do a lot in this part of the world. On the occasional dry nights he would bivouack on one of the steep grassy slopes that ran up to the walls of the great castle that overlooked the station and the rest of the city, preferring to be out in the open air. There he could lie out beneath the dark, star-sprinkled sky and imagine that he was back home, relaxed and happy, instead of on his own sleeping rough in a strange place.

As usual it was raining that morning, but in the limited comfort of the station Filip had to admit he quite liked the drumming sound of the rain on the elaborate domed ceiling above his head. He tilted his face upwards to gaze at the silent cherubs, caught in their endless frozen metal leaps across the wreath-work dome. It amazed him that a place so hectic and filled with people during the day time, could take on a whole new personality under the cloak of darkness. He liked this darker, brooding side of the building's personality much better than its commercial daytime counterpart; it fitted more completely with the old beautiful city surrounding it built from ancient stones that had been chiselled and shaped into uniform blocks by men to build a new world for themselves.

Observing the sleeping station beneath him Filip knew it would be less than an hour before the first trains began to awake with a grumbling and sputtering of engines to begin another day of work. The busy commuters would soon appear, dressed in suits and overcoats, pulling wheeled cases of documents behind them or struggling to balance laptop cases and handbags as they clicked their way, business-like and self-important, down the platforms to the carriages that would transport them to another city and another place of work.

As he made his way down the steps of the walkway to the platform, Filip scanned the station below and he noticed that some of the stranded nesters on the benches were stirring as the early-shift employees of the station began to arrive and open up their various snack stands and coffee shops. Soon the nesters would turn their temporary homes back into the clothes and bags they had been yesterday, before venturing off in search of food or trains. With the station awakening around him, Filip knew it would not be long before Jonah arrived to meet him. He had reached the end of the platform and was walking into the main hall when Filip saw his only friend in the city wander casually into the station.

Jonah was a young man with old eyes, whose diluted-blue centres hinted at a hardness of life lived long beyond the years he had really walked the earth – perhaps living on the streets had aged him faster, or perhaps, Filip wondered, there was no story there except the one you created yourself when you saw him. Jonah's tale was always different, whether you pretended you didn't see him at all, like he was a part of building he leaned upon or the pavement he sat on; or you turned away with distaste from the person who lived outside your comfortable boundaries of society: not a worker, not a home owner, no longer a child worthy of protection, no longer a person?

As Filip headed towards his friend through the quiet station he thought back to the first night he had met Jonah; his first night in the city. It seemed a long time ago now.

Before travelling to Edinburgh – alone and without a plan – Filip had worried about a lot of things: the task he had been set...whether he was strong or capable enough for what was needed...how it would feel to return to a city and walk among the people there... What he had neglected to consider amid all these worries was the rather obvious issue of where he would stay when he reached his destination.

When he arrived there early in the morning he had been so distracted by the excitement of exploring this new world that it was not until darkness enveloped the city that he realised he had nowhere to go. He wandered aimlessly through Edinburgh's now shadowy streets, just as he had done during the daytime, his route alternating between streets filled with bustling evening shoppers and empty roads where the houses, converted to offices, had closed for the day.

As the evening drew on the shoppers and office workers gave way to the night-time crowd, an altogether different breed. They were the party goers, stumbling and laughing from one bar to another, dressed to impress and drinking to excess; seeking easy revelry and an escape from the grind of the working week. Even now Filip was not troubled by his lack of accommodation: he felt better out in the open, happy wandering invisibly through the public spaces of the city.

As the hours passed by and the party-goers became less light-hearted, Filip moved further into the shadows eventually finding himself in the large gardens below the castle he had visited earlier in the day. The families and tourists wandering amongst the neatly groomed lawns and flower beds were gone and only emptiness remained, or so he thought at first.

Taking a seat on an empty wooden bench he tilted his head back and gazed upwards to the great castle looming over him. Only a dim outline of the structure was visible in the darkness – a black shape against the light-polluted night sky – but its presence and solidity

was comforting. Filip liked the way the castle looked as though it had grown organically from the rock mound on which it stood, rather than a piece of architecture created by the hands of men.

Sitting alone, content in the dark and quiet, Filip was surprised to find he wasn't tired even though it was the early hours of the morning. Then he heard them.

"I don't want any trouble," the first voice said.

Filip tilted his head in the direction of the words, alerted by a slightly nervous tone in the speaker's imploration. He recognised the attractive lilt of the local accent and listened harder as the wind carried the words across the park to his bench.

"No trouble," a second voice replied, slightly slurred this time. Filip couldn't be sure of the accent this time, but he sensed an underlying aggression in the words.

"I'm sure you're no trouble," a third voice said, no slurring this time, but the hostility was not hidden by this speaker: he *wanted* trouble. "It's no trouble to be lazy is it? No trouble to scrounge from others, is it?"

"I'm not a beggar mate, just trying to get some sleep." The first voice spoke again, sounding weary as though this was a conversation he had had before, but tense at the same time, giving his tone an edge.

"I don't like you," the third, hard voice said, plainly aggressive now, "*your* sort."

Filip felt a change in the air around him, a low energy crackled towards him from the direction of the voices, he knew that something bad was about to happen and he was on his feet.

Filip heard a dull *thump* followed by a painful sounding breath of air being expelled from someone's lungs, then a second *thump* and a quiet exclamation of pain. He raced forwards through the dim gardens towards the sounds, every nerve in Filip's body telling him that if he didn't act quickly then something very bad would happen. As he rounded the corner

Filip saw three men ahead of him just to the side of the main pathway and partially obscured by bushes in the dark night, but clearly visible to him, as though the violence in the air lit the scene ahead of him in a red glow.

“Hey!” Filip called out as he moved towards the group, slowing his pace now he was near.

One of the men was lay curled on the floor, obviously in pain and no doubt the owner of the first voice Filip had heard. A large man stood crouched over the bent figure on the ground with his fist drawn back in the air preparing another blow, but he turned at the sound of Filip’s voice.

“Don’t think you want to get involved in this *lad*,” the smaller man said his words slurring together slightly as he turned in Filip’s direction, sneering as he spoke the last word.

Filip held up his hands at chest height as he walked closer to the group in a gesture intended to pacify the men; he did not want to fight them.

“Come on guys, leave him alone,” Filip gestured slightly towards the man on the floor with a nod of his head, “you’ve proved your point.”

“I don’t think I have,” the bigger man replied, straightening up from his crouched position and turning to face Filip, showing himself to be much broader and taller than he had appeared before. The distance between them was only a few metres now. “My friend told you to leave us alone and I think that was good advice. You should have taken it.” He moved forward a step in Filip’s direction as he spoke.

Filip stayed where he was, his arms still raised in front of him palms outward and his eyes focused on the dark, unwavering pupils of the advancing man. He was only a couple of metres away now; another step and he would be within striking distance. Filip focused his gaze completely.

“You don’t want to do this,” Filip said. His voice sounded different when he spoke this time, resonating slightly as though he were inside a room with an echo. “You *do not* want to do this,” he repeated, his words spoken gently but firmly.

The man did not respond, but his deliberate steps faltered.

“You want to walk away and go home,” Filip told him, his voice quiet but his words resounding clearly over the short distance.

The man hesitated and then dropped his balled fists to his side.

“Steve?” The other man murmured, his slurred voice sounding unsure.

Steve didn’t reply; he stared at Filip, seeming absorbed by his unblinking gaze. Then Filip nodded slightly once and the other man closed and re-opened his eyes in a slow blink.

“Steve..?” The other man asked again, even more uncertain this time.

No answer. Then Steve’s shoulders sagged, his muscles relaxing from their tensed position ready to fight, and turning away from Filip he walked off in the direction of the lights on the main street.

Steve’s companion looked at Filip in bemused shock, the alcohol dulling his reactions and comprehension of what had just happened. His mouth flapped open and closed a few times, as though trying to articulate some question or another and finding no words. Then he turned and half stumbled, half ran after his friend; his figure fading quickly into the darkness of the gardens.

Once he was sure that the two men had gone, Filip moved towards the injured man on the floor to help him. As he drew closer Filip could see that the *man* was not much older than his own eighteen years: even in the darkness he saw his clothes were worn and his appearance more dishevelled than would simply happen by being shoved around the ground by two drunken idiots. The man was also no longer lay down, but sitting upright, rubbing a bloody hand across his face and looking up at Filip.

“Now that was very odd,” the seated man said.

“Yeah, it’s strange how some people just want to cause trouble without any reason.”

Filip agreed and held his hand out towards the man to help him up.

“Not exactly what I meant mate.” The man replied as he heaved himself up using Filip’s hand for support.

“Oh right.” Filip sensed the conversation was turning onto a path he did not want to take and tried to steer them somewhere else. “Do you...er...sleep out here often?”

The man didn’t answer for a few moments, preoccupied with dusting the dirt and leaves from his trousers and arms. When he’d finished he glanced back at Filip, a look of curiosity on his face.

“You’re not from round here are you?”

“No,” Filip acknowledged, “just arrived today.”

“Strange ye’d be out here alone at this time of night – no offence, but you don’t look the type – aren’t you a student or something?” He asked, taking in Filip’s clothes and backpack.

“Yeah, something like that.” Filip replied noncommittally, glancing back along the way he’d come. “I didn’t have anywhere to sleep tonight and so I was just walking around trying to get a feel for the city.”

“Ye got a feel for it yet?”

Filip shrugged in reply.

“Yeah, well, it’s not a bad place really...idiots like those are few and far between, although, I don’t suppose you’d have any problems dealing with people like that...” His voice trailed off as though waiting for Filip to answer his unasked question. After a few moments he continued speaking when it became obvious that wasn’t going to happen. “I’m Jonah,” he

held out his hand to Filip, “let’s go get something to eat, there’s a little place I know not far from here still open now.”

Filip grinned in reply and took Jonah’s outstretched hand to shake.

“Sounds good, I’m Filip by the way.”

* * *

“Morning,” Filip said as he approached Jonah across the station hall, his voice sounding a little scratchy and dry. In the last few weeks it had begun to feel strange to Filip to hear his own voice: he had no one to talk to and no reason to speak for most of the hours in the day and so gradually his own voice was becoming a stranger to him.

Jonah nodded a silent greeting in return and abruptly changed his direction as Filip fell into step beside him. It had become a routine for them that if Filip had spent the night in the station then he would meet with Jonah for breakfast around this time.

“Too wet out here for ye was it last night, eh?” Jonah asked as they walked out of the station. He already knew the answer and Filip only smiled in response to his half-joking question.

“Where’d you end up?” Filip replied, noticing that Jonah wasn’t quite as wet as he sometimes was after spending a night out in the rain.

“Managed to get a few hours down at the back of the bus station,” Jonah shrugged his shoulders, as if to indicate that it didn’t really matter where he had slept that night. “I still can’t work out how you manage to dodge the station security to spend the night in here. They’re on my back just for wandering through to meet with you in a morning, let alone kipping the night.”

Filip remained silent.

“Yeah well,” Jonah continued when Filip didn’t speak, “probably you look a lot more presentable than I do.” He scuffed his beaten shoes against the floor as he walked along and dragged his dirt-stained, jean cuffs along the ground behind him to exaggerate his point.

“I’ve only been out here a couple of weeks remember...it’s probably beginners luck.” Filip dismissed.

Jonah’s eyebrows raised in a manner that made it look as though he both agreed and disagreed with Filip’s words at the same time, but he said nothing more and they wandered on in silence, heading towards “St Mary’s Cow” – Jonah’s odd nickname for the hostel they would hopefully get some breakfast from.

* * *

“Are ya back to the library today?” Jonah finally spoke again as they sat finishing the end of their breakfast. Filip nodded. “Found anything yet?” Filip shook his head. Jonah nodded back in understanding. “Best to fill yer time up anyway and stay somewhere nice and warm, damn rain never seems to stop.”

“I think I’m getting close though,” Filip offered, finding his neglected voice again. “I’m being given access into one of the restricted areas today where the documents are much older, dating back to collections that were donated to the university when it first opened. I’m sure there’ll be something to help me there.”

“Hope so lad, hope so...” Jonah murmured before pushing his seat away from the table and rising to his feet. “You must have beginners luck or something, getting away with sleeping in the station as well as sneaking into the uni.”

Filip didn’t reply and kept his eyes focused on the near empty plate in front of him.

“I’ll see yeh tomorrow, eh?” Jonah eventually said, waiting patiently with his plate and cup in his hands. Filip nodded and Jonah, appearing happy with the answer, wandered away to speak to a man across the dining area, whilst Filip finished his breakfast.

To look at Filip you wouldn't think he had been sleeping rough at all: his skin had a light, healthy glow and his natural blonde hair, although a little long for some tastes, looked in an enviable condition, even for someone able to get a decent meal and a shower most days. Filip's clothes were also surprisingly tidy and somehow he managed to change them frequently, even though his bag of worldly possessions was only very small.

Finally, Filip finished his food and clearing away his plate and utensils he left the smells of food and scraping of plates behind him and made his way to the shower rooms; he had a busy day ahead of him.

* * *

Filip loved the university and had spent most of his time in various buildings around the campus since arriving in the city. When he was in a crowd of other young people carrying bags and books he looked just like everyone else – an international student heading off to a lecture or tutorial session – rather than someone who had spent the previous night sleeping in a train station. At this early hour before the daily cycle of seminars and teaching began the campus was virtually deserted, the students too busy sleeping, and so Filip had no crowd to blend into.

The morning light was soft-grey in the sky as it struggled to filter through the persistent drizzle and spongy clouds. Filip's silent figure moved swiftly past the pale stone buildings, looking almost unnatural as he moved in the unusual morning glow, with his intense blonde hair the only bright spot of colour against the dark shades of his jacket and jeans.

Just as he expected the courtyard in front of the library was deserted that morning and Filip ducked between the large granite columns surrounding the entrance and headed inside. He had been at this building nearly every day since arriving in the city, searching for a book...a document...something that would tell him what he needed to know, but so far he had

found nothing that gave him enough detail...nothing that gave him what he wanted. Hopefully today there would be something new.

Pamela, the usual librarian appeared suddenly behind the reception desk as Filip wandered in to the silent, empty space of the library reception, his boots echoing hollowly against the highly polished, but aged parquet floor.

“Morning stranger,” the librarian joked, smiling warmly at the regular visitor. “You know you’re much keener than a lot of the students around here; we don’t open for another hour yet.”

“I know; I’m sorry to be so early...” Filip paused, shrugging and offering a disarming smile that illuminated his warm brown eyes. “I thought I’d pop in on the off-chance...” His sentence died away without an ending as he hoped she would remember the promise she had made the previous day to allow him access to the library vaults without him having to ask again.

Pamela grinned back understanding exactly what he was there for, her short, tidy grey-red hair rising upwards slightly as her face lifted with the smile. “Don’t worry Filip, I’ve got the swipe passes here to take you down to the vault.” She raised an assorted bunch of keys and plastic electronic swipe cards into the air and jingled them lightly. “It’s probably a good idea that you popped in early, anyway, as I’ll have to be out of the vaults before the library opens fully.” Her eyes suddenly looked a little doubtful, almost nervous, as though she was re-thinking her offer.

Filip noticed the change immediately and flashed another smile. “Don’t worry, it won’t take long at all; I’ll just be here for a few hours today,” he reassured her, his voice sounding slightly different, resonating deeper in his throat as he spoke.

Pamela blinked slowly once as the thought ran through her mind: *after all, he has permission from the Principle to access the vaults anyway, so you’re only doing your job by*

letting him in. Then the smile returned to her face and she nodded in agreement at Filip's words. She walked to the end of the reception desk and through the small, electronic plastic barrier that separated it from the large entrance hall beyond.

"I'll just lock the main doors again before we go," she said, walking swiftly past Filip where he stood waiting. "I must be losing my mind today, I'm sure I locked the doors after coming in this morning...but obviously not as you just walked in..." Pamela half-mumbled to herself as she slid one of the plastic cards over a reader next to the main entrance doors and the light turned from green to red. "Definitely locked," she nodded, satisfied. Filip remained silent as the librarian returned to the desk area, following softly as she led the way towards the back of the library.

There were no lights on in the empty rooms that morning; only the dim glow of emergency lighting lit their pathway as they walked through the various reading stacks. Their footsteps made no sound in the quiet library, muffled into silence by thick carpet tiles. As they passed through the numerous rows of books Filip glanced around at the seemingly endless range of subjects covered: philosophy, chemistry, mathematics, psychology, music...all standing neatly and in order on long rows of shelves that disappeared dimly into the unlit depths of the library like endless pathways made entirely of books.

When Pamela began speaking it sounded loud and almost eerie in the emptiness. "You know you have excellent references from Professor MacMillan." They were passing through the history section, heading towards the end of the reading stacks in the main library. "From what I understand that is no small feat," she went on, "he doesn't often take such interest in the dissertation subjects of his students, even those on PhD routes like yourself; it's especially unusual for him to request particular permission from the University Principle that you access the restricted collections."

“Um-hmm,” Filip murmured not offering an answer to the unasked question in the librarian’s words and he continued to follow her closely as they entered the spiral staircase that serviced the specially created library vaults in the basement of the old building.

Pamela suddenly stopped then, blocking the narrow corridor and turned around to face him, a question ready in the set of her lips: “I hope you don’t mind me saying, but you do look awfully young to be on a PhD route. Did you start university earlier in Sweden before coming to Edinburgh to study?”

“I left school early,” Filip said slowly, thinking carefully about how best to answer to avoid further questions; he did not have time for any delays, or to risk raising suspicions. “I did my studies via an alternate route which brought me up to speed slightly quicker than a conventional route would have.”

The librarian tilted her head, as though awaiting some further explanation of what an “alternative route” consisted of; but the expression on Filip’s face suggested this would not be forthcoming. *Reluctant teenagers*, she thought to herself and then nodded once in acceptance and turned away to continue on towards the library archive. A short while later as they stood in a small hallway at the base of the stairs; a large metal door with a swipe card access and pin code pad stood in front of them.

“Here we are.” Pamela said and quickly typed a six-digit code into the keypad, blocking Filip’s view with her shoulder as she did so, even though he had already turned away politely to give her privacy. A quiet beep, followed by a click from the door indicated that the pin code lock had been deactivated; then with a quick swipe across the second reader with a small, black card the locks clicked again and the librarian pushed the door open.

A gust of cool air blew across Filip’s face as the door opened, making him shiver slightly as he peered into the darkness of the room beyond them.

“Everything is temperature cooled and maintained at a specific humidity to protect the paper,” Pamela commented, noticing his reaction.

“Of course, I should have expected that,” he replied, nodding his head.

“It’s good for paper, but not so much for people,” she pulled her light woollen cardigan a little closer around her shoulders as she spoke, “let’s get some lights on and see if we can find a starting point for what you’re looking for.”

Filip watched her dim figure disappear completely as she walked into the dark room before him. A few seconds later a soft orange glow lit the space and he saw her again, standing next to a large panel with about three dozen switches on it, which hung above a small computer desk with a monitor and keyboard. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw that they were not actually in the vault yet; instead they stood inside a small plastic walled room, sealed off from the rest of the space by another swipe-card access door. Beyond the plastic walls Filip could only just make out two or three of the closest rows of cabinets on the other side, weakly illuminated by the castoff light from the room in which he stood. They were tall and pale – clinical looking in their sterile, white appearance – with a combination of drawers and large doors concealing the ancient contents within. It was not at all what he had expected; although he should have realised that it was unlikely he’d find the shelves, scrolls, cobwebs and clutter he’d imagined. Different from other archives he had seen.

“It’s even colder on that side of the door,” Pamela nodded towards the vault beyond them, as she bent down to flick a switch on the computer terminal. “Don’t worry, there’re some thick clothes we keep for people working down here.” She pulled down a large, padded coat from a stand Filip hadn’t noticed in the corner of the room and passed it across to him. The computer came to life with a hum as Filip shrugged his arms into the jacket.

“OK then, let’s see...” Pamela said as she settled down into the chair before the computer monitor. As Filip peered over her shoulder he saw that a database search box filled

most of the screen; there were spaces for dates, locations, authors, institutions as well as numerous other options. There seemed to be so many choices; *how will I know where to start?*

Pamela's voice broke into his thoughts as though reading his mind.

"It looks pretty intimidating at first glance, but you only need a small amount of information to get a search started. You said before it's the Dumfries region you're looking for records from?"

"Yes," Filip nodded, "I think that's where I need to look; my previous research indicates that trials took place around that area, which may have affected the families...er...research subjects...I'm looking at."

Pamela's fingers skipped across the keyboard, hitting the buttons in a rapid staccato and one of the many boxes was filled in.

"What period do you think the records will be from?"

"All I've read so far suggests anywhere in the last half of the seventeenth century...so say 1640 to 1710 to widen the range a little?"

"OK..." Pamela's fingers flew across the keys again, finishing with a click on the mouse. "And have you got any names of authors, or locations the documents would have come from?"

"I've not seen anything naming those involved that would have written the records, so no authors, but we should definitely look at church records from the area, if they exist...and there would probably be court records from local landowners courts if they handled things in the vicinity of the...er...*alleged crimes*..."

Click, click, click-click, click.

"There might also be records connected to Edinburgh from the justiciary commissions that travelled there who could have kept their records centrally?"

“Right,” Pamela said as she finished typing in the final search parameters, “let’s see what we’ve got for you.”

Filip’s heart skipped a beat as the pointer of the mouse hovered over the search key, then clicked.

Chapter 2 – The Reading Room

Filip's eyes were red-rimmed and dry from the constant cool air circulating the vault. He sat at a small reading table with a drawer of old documents in front of him, his gloved finger running across the parchment as he read – or tried to read – protecting the precious paper record from the damaging oils of his skin. It had been hours. Many hours that he had sat at the small reading desk rummaging through old parchments and ledgers, reading and searching for information, since first entering the library basement three days ago. Pamela had returned on the first day after he had been in the vault for sixteen hours, to throw him out as the library was closing. Filip had left reluctantly, only with the promise of being given early access to the archive the next morning and after spending his nights in the train station he had been back every day since, searching through the papers, folios and manuscripts that filled the countless drawers of the vault.

A knock from behind him broke the relentless silence and Filip turned to squint through the dim light towards the small plastic room at the end of the archive. Pamela stood inside the room holding up a steaming mug and pointing insistently towards it. Filip nodded reluctantly and closed the protective lid on the drawer of documents he was examining before standing (with some difficulty after hours of sitting hunched over the desk) and heading for the sealed room.

“You look tired,” Pamela noted concern tingeing her voice, as she handed over the mug of tea which Filip took gratefully. “You know, there's no rush for you to be out of here, the Principle granted you unlimited access to the resources here so you don't need to read everything in one go!”

“I know,” Filip replied, hearing the tone in her voice he smiled apologetically. “It's just hard to disengage yourself from the documents once you get into them.”

“I’m sure it is. How’s the research going?”

“Pretty good actually,” Filip’s tired eyes brightened up. “I’ve managed to narrow down the date range considerably for the trials of interest to around 1650 to 1680 as there were none in the area I’m looking at before or after that time. There’s some detailed records kept of the trials themselves as well, so hopefully I’ll get some information from those. I was just reading through a receipt from a local sheriff for handing over prisoners for a relevant trial when you came in.”

“Sounds like you’re making good progress...remind me what your dissertation is about again? I’m not sure the Principle mentioned it when his office passed on the permission for you to access the archives.”

Filip paused and took a long sip of hot tea before answering.

“Thanks for the tea – it gets very dry working down here.” He smiled and lifted up his mug to take another swig, burning his mouth in the process.

“Doesn’t it?” Pamela smiled back in agreement, but was still waiting expectantly for an answer to her question.

Filip cleared his throat.

“At the moment I’m just doing the preliminary research, I’m not sure which exact direction the dissertation will be taking.”

“Yes, but you must have some idea of what you want to work on haven’t you? Otherwise, why the seventeenth century witch trials? What angle are you looking at them from?”

Filip frowned slightly and paused to sip his tea once more, carefully this time to avoid burning his tongue. When he spoke again his eyes looked down into Pamela’s expectant face and held her gaze with his dark eyes; his voice sounded different and vibrated slightly in the air of the chilly plastic room.

“Essentially the witchcraft cases were criminal trials and so I’m looking at the female experience of justice around the period, specifically in relation to the witchcraft...but there’ll be lots of other ‘non-witchy’ work to do for me as I get deeper into the research. I don’t think anyone would take a PhD on hocus-pocus alone seriously!” Filip smiled sheepishly. “Thanks for the tea...I’d better get back to it.”

Pamela nodded slowly, returning his smile and accepting the now empty mug he offered her. She had no more questions.

“Don’t work too hard,” she said as she swiped the plastic access card across the reader and the door popped open to let him back into the vault, “I’ll be back for you in a few of hours when we shut upstairs.”

“Thanks.” Filip replied without turning around. He was already halfway back to the dimly lit reading desk when the door clicked shut behind him.

* * *

This has to be the connection, Filip thought as he shuffled the thick parchment pages in front of him and arranged them into chronological order to begin checking through them again. He had spent over twelve hours a day in the library vault for the past week, working his way through hundreds of documents, ledger books, court records and census papers and the sheaves of paper he held in front of him now were the evidence he had been looking for.

Moving his gloved hands gently across the parchment he picked up the first document. Filip looked again at the elegant faded script of Johnne Locking that was now as familiar to him as his own handwriting, having stared at it for long hours in the previous days. Locking’s receipt for his delivery of five prisoners to the Justiciarie for trial as witches in his capacity as the deputy sheriff overseeing the village of Cargentoun in the 1670s was the first piece of the puzzle.

I Johnne Locking – Sherriff Depute
of the sheriffdom off Cargentoun By
the ordor as the Lord commissioner of
Justiciarie at drumfreis the
seventeen Day of May 1673 – Appoynted
of the brugh of drumfreis to delyver
up to the Commissioner of Justiciarie
or his deputees the persones of
Bessie fleyming, Margaret paine,
Grisall hewart and the systers Gear
and Ainsley Fier – who Wer prisoners
in said brugh for severall articles
of Withecraft specified by Witnes to
effect ther persones and behaviours.

The accused witches: Bessie Fleyming, Margaret Paine, Grisall Hewart and two sisters
Gear and Ainsley Fier named on the receipt were no different from the dozens of names Filip
had seen in other similar records in the previous days. It was the second document in his pile
that made this one different from all the others. He moved Johnne Locking's receipt aside and

picked up the next piece of parchment: it was the execution order from the Justiciarie trial of the same women.

Forasmuch as in aue court of Justiciarie holden be us within the Tolbuithe of drumfries upon the Fyftein day of June 1673 the persones of Bessie fleyming, Margaret paine, Grisall hewart and Grear Fier were found guiltie of the severall articles of witchcraft in the verdict given against them and are adjudged be us the Lords Commissioners of Justiciarie to be delyvered upon thursday next the Twenty-Two day of June and betwixt the houres tuo and foure in the afernoone at the place of executione and there be wired at the stake till they be dead and thereafter their bodies to be brunt to ashes

Filip's eyes scanned the parchment, re-reading the words he had committed memory, pausing carefully when he came to the names of the executed women as though checking himself again that he had not become confused after days working in the dim light of the vault reading desk. As before he read the four names of the women found guilty of witchcraft: Ainsley Fier had disappeared somewhere between the handover by the sheriff and the sentencing at the end of the trial.

In the court records he had found he had not been able to locate any information on the trial of the five women, but this was not surprising. During his searches in the past few days he had come to realise that the documentation of such events and the detail with which they were chronicled varied greatly from one case to another. Since finding this discrepancy

he had been searching every type of available record for some clue as to what had happened to Ainsley Fier. It was not uncommon for criminals to die awaiting trial in the primitive prison conditions; but there was no evidence of this in parish death registers. If she had escaped during the trial there would surely be some mention of it in execution order naming her as an escapee; likewise if she had not been found guilty of the articles of witchcraft she and her sister were accused of, that would have been recorded in the verdict document he held.

With nothing further to support his search for Ainsley Fier, he had returned to looking for additional items relating to the other women tried for witchcraft, hoping for some link there. For several days he had found nothing, until he was looking at some unrelated medical records from the same period and stumbled across the journal of a Dr Micah Stewart. At first it had been difficult to understand the irregular spellings and script of the doctor's diary, and so Filip had begun to transcribe the journal piece by piece, until he had a full version of his own written out, that he could verify against other sources. He shuffled his own handwritten papers back to the top of the pile and began reading them.

It was about the beginning of September, 1673, that I, among the rest of my neighbours heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in the city. Some said it was brought from Italy; others say from Turkey, among goods brought home by the returning fleet; others say Amsterdam. It mattered not where it had come from; but all agreed it was back in the city again.

It seems that the council had a true account of it and were actively trying to prevent its spread, but all was kept very private.

Hence it was that people began to believe it only to be rumour and began to forget about it as though it was of little concern, hoping it to be untrue.

My next contact with the rumour came when I was called to the house of a wealthy merchant on Water Lane, close to the dockyards at Leith. The merchant's wife and daughter had been taken ill, with symptoms similar to that reported of the sickness, although the merchant swore he had not received any goods into his house recently that could have transported the disease. I administered the common treatment of bleeding with leeches, as best I could, to help restore the balance of the humours in the merchant's wife and daughter, but the skin on their hands and feet were already turned black with the mark of the disease and I feared that it would not be successful. I doubted not that the plague was in this house.

My suspicions were sadly confirmed, as on my next visit to the merchant three days later I found the daughter dead and the wife following closely; further bleeding was to no avail and she passed very quickly.

I was leaving the house after the death of the daughter when I heard two members of the merchant's household quarrelling. I

did not wish to intrude but was curious as it seemed that they were talking about the treatment being given for the sickness. As I approached, they broke off from the conversation and turned to leave before I stopped them. On enquiring as to what treatment they had been talking about the manservant proceeded to describe to me herbal remedies that were allegedly being given to the poor inhabitants of the closes in the Cowgate quarter of the city. I had worked with poorer plague victims in the last outbreak ten years ago and so was not afraid to visit Cowgate to examine the validity of the man's story, but was unsure whether I could consider it anything more significant than fancy at this time - I had always found that the poor relied upon remedies of a more magical variety when sickness and disease assailed them, but stories of a child healer were just too strange for me to take seriously.

I tried not to think of the story for several days and as I returned to my work; there were no further reports of plague among my patients and I began to believe that the merchant's family must have been unluckily afflicted due to his trade. However, as the time passed I heard further rumours regarding the Cowgate closes and my curiosity of the so-called healer became

too great. I submitted to visit Marlin's Wynd the next day, where reports of the plague were most common.

It was not a pleasant journey. As I entered the close on the edge of Cowgate the stench of death lingered in the stagnant air of the dark, narrow street and I knew that there would be plague here. The poor inhabitants could not afford the incense and rosemary that the wealthy burned when plague descended upon them and as I made my way deeper into the close I saw only the occasional fire burning to dispel the infected air. My sole protection against the sickness was the ointment of myrrh and camphor I had always used and I rubbed some on my chest and beneath my nose before venturing deeper into the close, which helped dispel the unpleasant odours surrounding me.

A short way along my path a man appeared through the doorway of one of the many taverns and I enquired about people suffering with the sickness. He had taken a lot of drink and was not able to answer me well, but directed me to another inn further along the close where relatives of the afflicted were reported to be. He also offered me an odd warning that this sickness was not as the others, but a curse of evil feeding on the inhabitants of the city. I had heard similar stories as this during previous outbreaks,

when there was little that medicine could do to help the afflicted, especially the poor; many relied upon their faith in the church or so-called magic remedies to help them, believing the illness to be an evil curse, so I was not surprised by the man's words.

In the next tavern I came across an unwholesome group, but found one among them who was able to help me well - a blacksmith by trade, his wife's family had been badly affected during the recent outbreak and though he'd warned her to stay away she had now been struck with the illness. He seemed a decent man and I offered my services as a physician for his wife and accompanied him to their lodgings in Peebles.

The blacksmith's wife undoubtedly had the sickness: the skin of her hands had begun to turn black, whilst large swellings were developing under her arms at the shoulders. Some victims exhibit fever at the onset of the disease accompanied by delirium and hallucinations and it became clear that the blacksmith's wife was such a case. However, her manner when divulging them was exceedingly coherent, unlike anything I had previously encountered. I will relay her story now, as it was one I came across frequently in my subsequent visits to Cowgate and became a legend of the closes.

Her story began with a witch trial the previous spring where four women were found guilty and executed as witches - all from the Drumfries area and brought to Edinburgh for trial. The crowd thought three of the women were guilty as charged, accused of raising curses against their neighbours and bewitching a local sheriff amongst other crimes; but the fourth woman was different.

When the blacksmith's wife and others from Cowgate attended the execution of the witches something came over the crowd as the fourth witch was tied to the stake to be strangled before burning. They say that the woman had a presence that extended across the watching mass, but it in no way felt evil, in fact quite the opposite. The noisy crowd became deathly silent, from the jeering and shouting mob that had observed the previous executions. In the silence before her death the fourth witch spoke to the crowd:

"I am Grear and I forgive those of you who have had a hand in my death, as you have been led to this by something you have no understanding of. I have been watchful of those around me and had hoped this would be enough to protect us, but it has not proved so.

In killing me today you open your city to him and those who follow him; they will come across the water and feed upon you like a plague, walk amongst you and you will know only death. The beasts that come from the water are not as you know them, they are unnatural and their disease evil. The witch-hunter is not as you believe and he has brought this to you. Though I will die today, there are others like me who will return to help you if it is safe to do so and if you keep their secrets. Blessed be my sister.”

The blacksmith's wife reported the words of the witch through her delirious vision as though reading from a book, her memory of them so vivid. When I asked about this she admitted the strangest thing was that when the woman spoke it was as though she were whispering, but that she had heard the words inside her head as though she had been talking to her and her alone.

The blacksmith's wife had felt disturbed by this notion at the time, but when she spoke with her neighbour about it later, the neighbour had admitted to feeling exactly the same way, which had put the blacksmith's wife's mind at ease. They both felt there was no doubt this witch had been powerful; but the overwhelming feeling was that she had not been evil.

Although I had hoped for something more meaningful, the blacksmith's wife's tale was little different to those accounts I had heard before: vengeful spirits, witchcraft and curses. I could only conclude the rumour to be local legend brought about by the onset of plague; in difficult times people want to believe anything that might help them hold onto life, or justify their death in this case. It was easier for the less fortunate to believe that the plague was a curse being inflicted upon them.

I did not wish to upset the sick woman and so tried not to let my feelings show, but the blacksmith's wife reacted to me as though she knew my thoughts:

"I know you think this is the silly superstition of a sick woman, but I believe what I have seen: the child can heal."

This was the first time she had spoken of a child and I asked what she knew about her; what she had heard or seen of people being healed, but she was too tired to talk any further and appeared to be dropping into a deeper fever.

I must admit that when I left the house I was disappointed to have come no further in finding evidence of the supposed healer, only the legend and superstition I had expected. Nonetheless I had resolved to help the blacksmith as much as I

could and so after administering leeches to his wife I left, promising to return the following evening.

I record the following incident - which sounds absurd to me now as I sit in my comfortable study surrounded by light and life and write about it- only because I cannot completely cast off the sense of the 'unnatural' in what I saw. And at the back of my mind there is the notion that somehow it means something, although in reality what I must confess I have no idea.

As I left the close I was startled by a large rat scuttling across the narrow path. This is not uncommon in any part of the city, but rats are an especially familiar sight in this area. What was unusual and caused me to take notice was the behaviour of the creature itself: as I passed its resting place the creature turned its head to follow my course, but not in the normal manner of the rodent, I felt as though it were examining me as another person might do. I felt most unsettled by this notion as soon as I had thought it and tried to assuage myself that it was simply a trick of the mind caused by immersing myself in the superstitions of the blacksmith's wife. But when I looked again at the rat it sat there still - watching me - it was most unnatural.

Filip stopped reading abruptly. The air-lock door at the entrance to the archives had just hissed open and he glanced upwards to see the librarian entering the large, chilly room. He dropped his gaze back to the stack of papers in front of him and raised his hand to gently rub the bridge of his nose; he was more tired than he could ever remember being and the script on the sheets blurred in front of his eyes as he rubbed harder.

The librarian was getting closer, moving quietly between the tall racks of specialised storage units, and Filip knew that his time was up. He quickly shuffled his notes aside to take with him – these at least he could review outside the archives – and he carefully placed the original documents back into their respective protective drawers. It had been a very long day and he wanted to get out of the library with as little conversation as possible; Pamela's questions were getting harder to answer as each day passed and as he glanced at her approaching figure again Filip knew that today would be no different. He decided his best course of action was to start the questioning himself.

“Just finished,” Filip greeted her as she drew close enough to hear and he gestured to the empty reading table as he stood up.

“Busy day?”

“Not bad – I've managed to make some more notes,” he waved the thick wad of paper in the air before pushing it carefully into his rucksack.

“Looks like you're doing well,” Pamela commented. She double-checked the inventory of the documents he'd been looking at against the items in the drawers and once satisfied everything was correct and accounted for she began loading them back into their slots in the storage units, walking up and down the aisles until they had all been put securely into place. “Are you ready to go?” She asked returning to the reading desk where Filip was waiting.

“Sure,” he replied and turned to follow her as she led the way out the archives.

As they headed towards the staircase that led to the upper levels of the library Filip sensed that Pamela was about to speak. “I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Filip said, his words coming out in a rush before she could say anything, “I wanted to take a look at some of the older parts of the city that are mentioned in the documents I’ve been using, to try to get a feeling for the context they were written in.”

“That sounds like an interesting idea; where are you looking at?” She replied, obviously interested.

Filip was relieved.

“The main place was an area called Cowgate, but there were streets I’ve seen mentioned Marlin’s and Peebles Wynd; have you heard of them?”

“Sounds like your research is taking you down the *hocus pocus* route after all!” Pamela laughed, pausing to turn and face him in the narrow corridor, her words recalling one of their earlier conversations. “You can visit some of the old wynds on the ghost walks you see advertised on the Royal Mile for the tourists – I’m surprised you’ve not already done at least one of them, they always seem popular with the students who aren’t from around here.”

“I hadn’t really noticed them,” Filip admitted, “but now you mention it I seem to remember being stopped when I first arrived by someone doing a pitch for some tour or another. They mentioned something about an underground city, is that right?”

“That’s the ones,” Pamela nodded and turned away to continue leading the way out of the library as she spoke. “I’m not sure if they’ll cover exactly the areas you’re looking for, but they would be similar enough for contextualisation. When the big South Bridge was erected in the eighteenth century they knocked down some of the old closes to clear space, but in some cases they just built right on top of the old buildings, filling in access routes to them, but leaving the rooms in existence underneath the new.”

“Oh right,” Filip was disappointed, “that doesn’t sound that spooky to be honest.”

“Ah yes, but even though the entrances were closed up, people still got into the spaces and even tried to live there: dark, airless rooms where disease and death could easily spread, and nasty people could do dirty deeds!” She replied, her voice rising theatrically, “not to mention the fact that even before the bridge was built there were rumours of plague victims being sealed up in the closes by the authorities to prevent the spread of the sickness...ghost stories aplenty!”

Filip could hear the grin in Pamela’s voice, even though he couldn’t see it. He was surprised: this was not the answer he had been expecting, but from what she said it might make sense after all. If these supposed ghost tours took you into the remains of the old closes that were maintained pretty much as they had existed over three hundred years before, it would give him an idea of the setting of the doctor’s journal. He didn’t expect anything too realistic or scary from a tour made up for tourists, but if nothing else, it would give him something to do that evening and after a day spent sitting cramped in the archive a walk would do him some good.

“I think I’ll give it a go,” Filip said to Pamela’s back as they neared the main entrance hall of the library. “I like a good spooky story.”

“Well have fun and don’t get too scared!” The librarian laughed as she waved him out the door.

Filip nodded and pulled the hood of his coat over his head and stepped out into the courtyard where the rain was falling in thick sheets in the premature evening gloom. It looked to him like the perfect night for a ghost walk.

The sky overhead darkened rapidly as Filip headed up the steep cobbled road from the library to the main thoroughfare of the Royal Mile. The hood of his jacket was pulled tightly around his face, but that did little to protect him from the onslaught of rain that was battering the city that evening. He had remembered from his earlier wanderings that most of the *olde*

worlde tourist stuff was around the Royal Mile and so he thought that would be the best place to find one of the tours the librarian had suggested.

His breath came in quick huffs as he reached the top of the small cobblestone road, which squeezed to barely a car width across between the unusual tall houses tightly rising on either side. Filip loved the quirkiness of some of the streets around the old town: where at the top of the hill it appeared as though you were looking at a two or three storey building, but as you walked down a steep street alongside it you would find another six or seven floors below the original street level, dropping down to another road beneath, or just hanging off the side of the hill, as the ones surrounding him now did. The phrase *upside down houses* always sprang to mind when he saw them, although he'd never been inside one to see if that was actually the case.

The narrow road led him onto the Royal Mile just a few hundred metres from the entrance to the large castle that overlooked the city. He turned slowly to appraise the path he had just walked, expecting to see the usual impressive view of the newer part of the city across the valley, but the artificial darkness of the storm had brought low clouds of foggy mist which blocked the outlook completely. Looking away from the mist up towards the outline of the castle Filip saw that the clouds there were absolutely black and he knew that the storm was only going to get worse. *The sooner I can book this tour and get out of the rain for a few hours the better*, he thought to himself. Hunching his shoulders inside his jacket against the rain, Filip turned his back on the castle and the impending downpour and hurried towards the area further down the road where he had seen the tours when he first arrived in the city.

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Energetic, bright salsa music pulsed through the air and an atmosphere of sunshine, if there could be such a thing on such a wet evening, permeated the small Mexican restaurant where Filip sat. He was happily concealed inside a small corner booth, across the room from

the entrance to the main kitchen and with an unspoilt view of most of the restaurant. Candles in brightly coloured bottles threw their flickering light onto the cheerfully painted, rough plastered walls and other diners laughed and talked as they ate spicy food from vibrantly coloured ceramic plates and sipped their light *cervezas*. Clusters of closed umbrellas dripping quietly beneath the tables were the only reminders of the world outside.

Pushing the empty plate away from him, Filip sat back and gazed around the room again: the delicious burrito with fiery rice and salsa had not lasted long and he felt nicely full. He was enjoying relaxing in a space with other people after the days of solitude he had spent searching and reading in the basement archives. Glancing at his watch he saw he more than an hour before he would need to meet up with the guided tour he had booked, so he had time to linger a while longer in the bright warmth of the restaurant, before heading out into the rain again.

Filip had spent a good thirty minutes trudging through the sodden streets at dusk searching for a suitable tour to go on and he was in no hurry to be back out on the street again. After speaking to several (overly) enthusiastic tour guides who promised poltergeists and body-snatchers, Filip had discounted the Haunted Graveyard tours and Ghost Hunt specials – where you actually tried to entice and record the spirits of haunted Edinburgh – in favour of a straight-forward tour of the underground city. Naturally, even this was headlined as being a “spooky” tour, but Filip thought it seemed the most sensible of the ones he had seen and really all he wanted was to see the old wynds and get a feel for what life might have been like in the world the doctor had visited.

The waitress suddenly appeared at Filip’s booth, disturbing his wandering thoughts of plague and the doctor’s journal. An easy smile played about her lips for the striking diner occupying the table. “How’re you doing with dinner?”

“All done, thanks.” Filip replied and returned her smile, pushing the empty plate towards her across the polished wooden table-top. She was probably around his age Filip thought as he took in her stylish, short hair cut and pretty face; *a student perhaps?*

She reached across and took the plate and looked like she was about to turn away when she paused. “You know something, you look really familiar...” she gestured with her finger vaguely in the air as though it helped her to think better. “You don’t go to uni here do you? Maybe I’ve seen you around the campus?”

Sensing the slight change in the atmosphere, Filip’s face coloured slightly and he dropped his gaze to the table-top to examine a small grain of rice that must have slipped off his plate whilst he ate. “Erm...I’m not sure...” he replied finally.

“You’re not sure?” The waitress laughed quietly, her blue eyes twinkling.

“Is that funny?” Filip looked up at her confused by her reaction.

“Sort of,” she smiled again. “Are you not sure if you go to uni here, or if you’ve seen me before?”

“Oh, I see,” Filip grinned a little sheepishly; he was finding it harder than ever to speak to people the more time he spent on his own, but most especially now when he detected the light flirtation in her voice. “Sorry, my head’s a little in the clouds today – I’ve spent most of it in the library and I don’t seem to function too well once I get back out into the real world. Yes I have been around the campus.”

“I know – exams and revision never seem to stop do they?”

Filip nodded in agreement. He didn’t know what else to say and didn’t really want to get dragged into a longer conversation and so stayed quiet again.

After a moment or two the waitress seemed to sense this and broke the long pause; she was all business once more. “So...can I get you anything else?”

“Another coke would be good, thanks.”

“Not a problem,” she said and grabbed the empty glass along with the plate and disappeared off through the door to the kitchen, appearing a few seconds later with a large tray of starters for a table of business men sitting across the far side of the restaurant. After efficiently delivering the correct dishes to the diners and laughing at their familiar banter with a smile which didn’t quite reach her eyes, she headed towards the bar nestled beneath the spiral staircase in the corner that led to the street level entrance upstairs.

“Can you get me another coke for table four?”

“Nice, eh?” The female bar tender nodded towards Filip’s table as she chose a glass and began pouring the coke into it.

Filip had his head down slightly and appeared to be reading papers that he had spread out onto the table now that it was clear of plates. His light hair fell across his face slightly as he read and he brushed it aside with his hand to hold it against his head as he leaned to rest into his palm. It was easy to see his high cheekbones and attractive slim face, even in the dimmer flickering candlelight of his secluded booth.

“Yep,” the waitress replied with a small sigh, “but he seems pretty shy to me.”

“What’s that?!” The barmaid gasped in mock horror. “A man that can resist your feminine charms? I don’t believe it!”

“Thanks,” the grimace of her face was clearly echoed in the tone of her voice. “Just give me the drink without the commentary, eh?”

“OK, OK,” the bar tender relented and handed over the fresh glass of coke with ice cubes clinking lightly against rim. “Anyway, not to worry, looks like you have a table of admirers over there.” She nodded towards the table of business men who were gesturing wildly at the large empty jug on their table.

“Oh joy,” she replied before heading off with the drink.

Filip looked up as the waitress re-appeared at the edge of his booth. He smiled briefly as she passed his drink over, dragging his attention away from the papers for a split second.

“More revision?” the waitress noted with a nod of her head towards the handwritten pages.

“Unfortunately,” he replied without really looking up again and she drifted off towards another table a few seconds later. Filip glanced up again once she had moved away. He felt guilty for being so quiet, but he knew that he was starting to run short of time – not for the tour, but for finding the answer to what he was searching for – and that scared him. He had been in the city for well over a month now and even though he felt like he was getting closer to finding what he needed, it still seemed to be far beyond his reach. And the longer he took, the more dangerous it would get. With these thoughts weighing heavily on his mind he turned his attention back to the translation of the doctor’s diary that was spread out in front of him and began reading from where he had left off.

If anyone ever reads this I am sure you will think me feeble-minded at what I will relay of my experiences over the past few weeks and for this, I can only offer you my word that I have recorded the truth as far as I have seen it. In all honesty I would be at a loss as to what to believe myself were I to sit here and read these words, had I not been witness to the events in person, because what I have seen goes against all I have ever known and the science I have studied - all I can confess is that I believe...

My first visit to the blacksmith's wife was more than three weeks ago now and so I must document what I have observed since that time. On my next visit, following the revelations of the blacksmith's wife's hallucination, I was surprised to find her in an improved condition, awaiting my return it seemed, seated by the small fireplace in their single-room home.

When I examined her I found no markings from the leeches I had applied previously (which should still have been clearly visible) and more unusually the swellings in her arms and groin had all but disappeared. I expressed my surprise at her near miraculous recovery since I had seen her but two days before and her response to this was only a smile. What I now understand to be a 'knowing smile'.

I had never seen such a quick or complete recovery in all my previous work with sufferers of the sickness and I was intrigued to know how this had happened. Initially, I have to admit, that her answers to my queries raised more questions than they solved: the blacksmith's wife was adamant that she had been cured by a magical healer. Not only this, but she was now convinced that she had not been suffering from plague - and neither were those others dwelling in the wynds who were ill - but instead they had

been infected by evil that was feeding off the death and sickness of the people.

Had I not met her previously I would have thought her to be quite mad to believe these notions. Also, in observing the extreme change in her condition, I began to question my own diagnosis as to the severity of the illness infecting her on my first visit - perhaps I had been mistaken and it had not been plague and that might explain her swift recovery?

As though she heard my thoughts, she quickly admitted that she knew it sounded unbelievable, especially to someone such as me. My scepticism must have been plain on my face as she went on to say that a condition of the healer's work was that she must keep the secret of who the healer was in order to protect them from the evil at work in the city. In spite of this she had encouraged the healer to return that evening to meet me, and she had agreed to come, if I would wait.

Although I obviously saw no truth in the claims, I was intrigued to get the opportunity to meet this mysterious 'healer' whose reputation had brought me to Cowgate in the first place. If I learned nothing else, I was interested to know how they were so completely able to convince others of their abilities - any 'magic' I

had come across previously was barely more than superstition, or only as marginally effective at curing plague as my own, more scientific methods appeared to be.

As we awaited the visitor I ventured out into the adjoining alleyway, not wanting to remain confined with the blacksmith's wife for too long. Along the narrow wynd were numerous other houses and I noted many with the dark mark of the plague daubed onto the doors of the infected dwellings. As I wandered slowly in the unusually quiet twilight I noticed something most curious. At nearly all of the infected houses I saw a slow, pulsing movement close to the ground, surrounding the marked doorways. I quickly dismissed this as a deception of my eyes in the dimness of the alley, but as I drew closer to the nearest house I saw immediately that it was no illusion - a small, dark mass of furry bodies created the pulsating movement surrounding the doorway.

The rats were simultaneously awful and fascinating in their behaviour, acting in a way I had never seen before. They swarmed and crawled over one another, as though they were confined into a small space and forced to move thusly, even though there was considerable space in the alleyway for them.

As I watched them I realised they were not moving in this strange way to escape some unseen threat in the wynd, it was more that they were fighting for a position closest to the doorway itself. The oddest impression I got of the whole thing as I watched was that the beasts were not individual, as the scuttling creatures usually appear to be, instead they moved as though they were lesser components of a larger single being. Indeed as they crowded around the small entry their shape took on the appearance of a stooped man, swathed in a cloak. The image was so disturbing I turned away - so unnatural to see a man's image in the abnormal behaviour of the tiny beasts.

No longer wishing to remain in the strange atmosphere, I was about to return to the blacksmith's home when a terrible cry fractured the stagnant air of the alley - a sound filled with pain and sorrow. Turning in the direction of the noise I saw with horror that the mass of rats from one of the doorways had broken away and was now surging towards me in a single, horrible swarm. The only thought I could comprehend through my shock was that they were going to attack me - as if they were a vicious dog or similar creature - moving as a single being.

I turned and ran but in the darkness of the wynd I tripped on a loose flag and fell to my knees. Rolling onto my side I turned to look back the way I had run and to my horror saw that the swarm was still pursuing me - their bodies rolling and clambering over one another to move as a single entity, just as they had done around the doorway. I struggled to my feet and staggered away, but in that instant I knew that I could not outrun the beast. As I turned to face the creature - or creatures, I still know not how to describe it - I saw the shadow of a face, grotesque and evil no doubt, but in the same instance undoubtedly human in appearance.

My scream caught silently in my throat as its terrible gaze found my own: not the hundreds of pairs of eyes of the swarming rats that should be there, but two large single eyes, burning darkly in sunken sockets.

In that instant I felt strange - hollow is the only way I can describe it - as though all of the life and energy had left my body and I was merely a shell waiting for death to claim me. But that did not happen. My eyes must have been closed in fear of the awful creature that pursued me; but in the instant that I thought my life would end a bright light filled the blankness of my closed

eyelids. I felt a surge within my chest, as though my heart was swelling inside me - filling with all the positive feelings I had ever experienced in my life, brought together into that one single instant: love, joy, happiness, hope...all in that single moment.

I wondered at first if I were dead - that the surge of pure positive emotion had occurred at the instant I departed the corporal sphere and entered the spiritual one. And that the light I had seen behind my closed eyelids was that of my soul leaving my body, shimmering and iridescent in the nightmare world I had uncovered.

But I wasn't dead - even as she spoke her first words to me she sounded as if she could be an angel - but the brightness faded, and I felt the hard stone surface of the wynd beneath my body as reality filled my head. The hollowness that had turned to luminance in my chest subsided and I felt...nothing...or nothing different to my usual self.

I opened my eyes and found her face hovering above me, dim in the shadows of the dark wynd but beautiful nonetheless. And this strange angel held out her hand towards me and helped lift me from the ground.