

Apparent Magnitude
By
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For Eliza, Viggo and Obi.

DARIA

Vines choked the street lights. Skeletons like litter after a festival. Daria Awolowo peered up through the windshield and slowed the car to a crawl. Twilight gathered overhead.

“We need a place to sleep for the night. Not much light left,” said Dara. She noticed the Australian accent creeping in at the end of her sentence. She knew she’d never sound fully New Yorker again.

“Dog alert?” said Abby slouched in the passenger seat. She played with a golden ring on her index finger, spinning it round and round.

“Well find out.”

Daria’s honked the horn, hovered her foot over the accelerator and scanned for movement. Autumn leaves skittered across the road, gathered at railings to mansions.

“Looks good,” said Daria, but the tension didn’t leave her shoulders.

The car continued its spluttering down the road. Refining petrol had become a problem recently. Cars would soon be a luxury. Every scavenging trip more important than the last. They passed mansions, one with Roman columns at the entrance, another with a dirty swimming pool running the length of the driveway. Two skeletons sprawled out on the nearest front lawn, weeds entangled through their rib-cages. Their clothes, rags flapping in the wind. Their jewellery glinted in the waning light.

“God, this would have been a posh place to live,” said Abby, her amiable gaze drifting like the breeze across the red and brown colours of a dying day.

“Yeah, but full of greedy bastards,” said Daria.

Abby paused and sniffed. “Are we, ya know, driving with a plan?”

“No.” Daria turned to Abby, “I’m aimlessly driving in circles, taking in the sights.”

“Just asking.” Abby held her hands up in mock surrender.” A familiar smile hatched at her mouth and grew across her slightly yellow ivory face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Funny feeling in my gut, or I ate something bad,” said Daria.

“What’s the feeling?”

“Some of these homes – they look lived in.”

“Really?” Abby narrowed her eyes and scanned the street. “They look pretty shabby to me.”

“But not shabby enough.”

“Right, like someone is trying to keep the appearance of the end of the world, but...”

“The world didn’t end,” Daria interrupted. “The world is doing great. Look, see those autumn leaves?” She pointed. “They don’t look as scattered

as they should. Those skeletons in the front garden back there – they should be completely overgrown. And look at that house.” Abby followed her gaze. “The ivy, it’s wild, it’s devoured the place, but the front door looks exposed.”

“Are you sure?” asked Abby, trying to hide her smile.

“No. Just a feeling. And I know what you’re thinking. I’m not being paranoid, just careful.”

Abby laughed. “Careful? That is not a word I’d use to describe you.” She sighed. “Wow, how strange would it be to meet new people? How long has it been – four, maybe five years?”

“You are too sweet, Abby,” said Daria. “Let’s not make this another Greg incident.”

“Everyone else worked out good, didn’t they? You did.”

“But I was there early on. Anyone living out here now, they might be crazy.”

“Cannibals!” Abby pretended to bite her shoulder.

“Fine.” Daria shook her off, but grinned. Daria leaned forward as if to escape the calmness Abby had always invited her to join. “You believe what you want, and when someone is spit-roasting your leg over an open fire, I’ll laugh. It’s all about the psychology of surviv-“

“Are you going to lecture me?” Abby interrupted.

“No. I’m going to laugh as your leg is seasoned and marinated.”

“Oh shit! Stop the car!” said Abby

Like an obsidian blade, sharp but dented, Daria tensed her body for a fight.

Abby grinned, follow me.

They left the car. Daria fastened her knife belt to her hip. Abby had forgotten hers, so Daria rolled her eyes and grabbed that too. Daria grabbed a rucksack and turned to Abby, but Abby had already jogged ahead to a large garden gate. The wooden slats broken in several places. She kicked it until she created a hole big enough to get through and scrambled inside. Daria followed; scowl of concentration set like a trench across her forehead.

“Yes! Abby punched the air in victory.

Before them a tennis court. Its blue floor had faded like a pair of well-loved jeans. Abby kicked the first fall of autumn leaves aside and ran her hand along the length of the net.

Daria turned to the mansion. A minimalist steel and glass knife edge three stories high. The huge windows like wounded eyes with half drawn blinds. Bamboo attacked the garden, speared the natives. A ragged row of red proteas formed a final stand before the back door. Ivy from a neighbour advanced over the fence and up the gutter, poised to devour it all. Across the battlefield a fallen giant. A mana gum uprooted by an unknown violent event

impaled the top floor of the house. Everyone was dead these days, but life fought on.

“Let’s go inside,” said Abby. “They must have rackets and a ball somewhere.”

“So, we’re sleeping here tonight?”

Abby peered up at the gum tree. “Maybe next door.” Then she sprinted up the path to the back door. Brushed aside the bamboo and ducked under the limbs of the fallen man gum. She searched for a rock and smashed the glass back door open. Daria shook her head. She strolled to the nearby shed. Kicked the door open and found several rackets and a bucket of balls. She tossed them onto the court, then followed Abby inside.

“Okay,” said Abby, almost hyperventilating with excitement. She put her hands on her temple and rubbed like a medium channelling a dead spirit. “I’m a rich, horrible person in the old world.”

“What kinda rich person?” asked Daria.

“The kind with a tennis court in my garden. I never donate to charity, I’m probably a banker, and I’ve got some Z-list celeb friends. I think I’m more important than I am. I have a tennis coach once a week, but I’m only good enough to beat my friends – I don’t ask anyone to play me unless I know I can beat them.”

“You sound like a total cunt.”

“So, where would I store my tennis gear?”

“You tell me – you’re the one communicating with spirits.”

“Bedroom, next to some plastic trophy for some random tennis competition.”

Abby turned and ran upstairs before Daria could reply. Daria scanned the kitchen for anything useful. She shifted through the cooking knives in the metal rack, each one worth hundreds of dollars in the old world. Worthless now. None of them had the weight to kill a dog quickly. She guessed the people here never cooked and would insist on ridiculous food like smashed pickles on sourdough toast and single origin, half-strength, extra-hot coffees. Daria couldn’t remember what milk tasted like. The choices she once had danced around her like whirling dervishes.

Daria entered the living room silently. Daria’s footsteps disturbed the tombstone of dust, like smoke from a bush fire the room erupted. Millions of particles swept forward, lit in the splinters of light. Daria pushed out a low whistle, jealously bubbled in her stomach, this room at least five times bigger than the hut she called home. Sparse, with faux fireplace, a long leather couch and a wall mounted TV the size of a black hole. She would have killed someone in the old world for a TV like that. Instead she pulled out her knife, cut the cords, and packed them in her bag. Cords made for good rope.

She returned to the kitchen, dumped her bag at the door and pulled a dark-grey hoodie on. The first chill of the evening skulked in through the broken glass. Winter was Daria's favourite time of the year. A fire kept her warm. In the summer, hand cranking the power into a small fan did not cool her down. Nothing did.

Daria narrowed her eyes at and watched a crimson rosella dart into the garden and peck at the dirt while she waited for Abby. Another joined it. They'd discovered something good and gorged on it. Daria bit her lip and fought to push away a feeling. She had no room for nostalgia in the new world. She had something good now and the past only served to hurt her. To sour anything sweet she might taste. She slammed the door on the feeling.

Abby tapped her on the shoulder.

"Daydreaming?"

"Something like that."

"No luck with the rackets," Abby said, shrugging her shoulders.

Daria pointed to the rackets she'd thrown on the court earlier.

"Where did you find those?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Well, come on then!" Abby squealed.

"Okay, Abby, but I've never played tennis, so don't humiliate me."

"I've played, like, twice in my life. I loved watching it, though."

Abby ran to the service line. "And it's Abby Williams to serve the first ball in the opening grand slam of the season!"

"Your name isn't Williams!" Daria called back.

"It's in honour of Serena Williams." Abby tossed the ball into the air, swung and missed. She tried and missed again.

"It's so much harder than it looks."

"Okay, new rule for the new world. All grand slam serves are to be served underarm."

She hit the ball to Daria. Daria intercepted, swung and hit the ball so hard it flew past Abby and into the metal fence at the edge of the court.

They both burst into laughter.

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Two days later.

"You know, they're gonna ruin theatre night," said Daria.

"Who will?" asked Abby, brushing her dandelion-blond hair out of her face.

"The babies. When they come," said Daria, as she hand pumped water into a bucket.

“Oh, come on. They’re gonna be so cute,” Abby stretched her back as she stood up and put her hands on her hips.

“Sure. And they’ll bring us nightmares and anxiety. I mean, a baby! What the shit do you do with a baby?”

“You won’t have to do much. It’s not your baby,” Abby hauled a bucket away from the pump.

“Good point.” Daria sealed up another bucket. “But it’s gonna be a whole new reality. Like, if a UFO parked overhead – imagine that. It’s an entirely new life that we’ll all have, and we have no choice about it.” She pulled her woolen beanie down over her ears.

“They’re kinda essential,” said Abby.

“UFOs?”

“No, babies. Hey, did you hear that story about a guy who tried to break into a house at Christmas?” Abby put her bucket down, her round pale face lit up by the morning sun.

“Abby, how long ago was this?”

“Like... Twenty years.”

“How do you remember this stuff? Is your brain a huge warehouse of randomness?” said Daria. She straightened her stiff back. “Don’t get me wrong, I love it. So come on, how are you linking UFOs with a break-in?”

“Turns out the guy is rubbish at breaking in,” continued Abby. “Cops pull up in five minutes and take him away. But the guy made national news. At his trial, his defence lawyer said he was trying to board a spaceship he thought was on the roof.”

Daria frowned. “Are you serious? What were his attorneys thinking? Were they sitting down with him and ping-ponging out ideas, like, oh yeah, we could go with the mental breakdown. Or we could talk about how hard this guy’s life is, and how it was a one-time mistake. Then someone says, ‘Hey, should we try the old UFO defence?’”

Abby laughed.

“Did it work?”

“I don’t remember.”

Daria shrugged. “I’m gonna believe it did. It’s so nuts it might just work.”

They sealed the buckets with plastic and twine, took two each and struggled up the hill towards home. Daria’s muscular arms flexed with the heavy load, but she knew to take her time. She’d dropped a lot of water in the early days.

“Where is everybody else?” Abby asked.

“Sleeping. It’s early and cold, and then they’ll curse themselves when that strange autumn sun burns them to a crisp.”

“Should we share the water when we get back, and they can pay us back later?” Abby panted as the hill got steeper.

Daria blew her black hair out of her mouth. “You can. I’m not. This is my water for the next three days. I hate this trip.”

“Don’t you ever share?”

“Don’t believe in it. It’s a bit like insurance.” Daria blew at the flies and tossed her head about as they landed on her. “Damn things, I think the flies enjoyed the apocalypse.”

“But we are a community now.”

Daria shook her head. “Remember what happened to the greatest community the world had ever known?”

“What community?”

“The internet. That omnipotent deposit of humanity and history accessed by the global community anywhere on earth. As soon as people’s mobile phones ran out of battery, that community withered and died in days. You know why?”

“Is it because they shared?” Abby’s tone uncertain.

“Exactly – but they shared their thoughts, feelings, emojis and videos of the world going to shit, instead of doing something about it,” said Daria. “You know what *I* did? I read every survival website I could and wrote it all down in my book, and I’m still here.”

“You sure are – no one could miss you,” said Abby. “But you know who else is here? Me. And that’s because of our community.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“OH!” A smile travelled across Abby’s face. “So I win one.”

“Sure. You got me there.”

They struggled up the hill until they reached the crest. Flies buzzed in their ears. The wooden wall of home crept into view, a ragtag lashing together of tree trunks, cut timber from Bunnings and broken-down cars. Coppery brown rust ate away the metal; rot set in the wood. A light breeze might knock the whole thing over.

Their home snaked along the top of a dam wall. On one side, a two-hundred-foot rock embankment that dropped down into scrubland. On the other, a colossal body of water that used to supply the city.

A shanty town of huts and tents threaded along the length of the causeway. A narrow path lead from one end to the other. At the start of the causeway, like the head of a serpent, a large communal space slopped down the dirt hill, The Medina. Here the kitchen, town hall, assembly area and fire pits created the only sense of space within the walls.

The one solid structure, Lao’s watchtower, a concrete cube that housed the dam’s administration office. A single storey high with a ladder leant against the wall. The community had pitched in together to build a

small shelter on the roof, and now Lao had a limited view of the land to spot dogs and storms.

Life at the end of the world was anything but quiet. The sounds of home echoed out from behind the wall. The clicking and clacking of dishes and cups from the kitchen. Hammers hitting nails in the workshop that operated from sunrise to sunset, maintaining rickety homes for over one hundred people. To Daria, the loudest noise was the hum of conversation – people catching up on the latest melodrama from the night before and what it all meant. The ever-present ambience of humans, communicating in a hive with little technology to distract them. It bothered her at first, but now those sounds were as ordinary as her own breathing.

Something that still bothered her was Hugo. And Hugo was at the top of a ladder, hammering something into the beam across the entrance gates.

“What is that?” asked Daria slowly.

“Hey, Abby!” Hugo called, waving with the hammer.

Daria noted she’d been ignored. She stopped, then Abby did. They both narrowed their eyes and reread the sign.

“Hey, Hugo. What’s Newtown?” Abby asked. “He was the ‘what goes up must come down’ guy, right?”

“What are you talking about?” said Hugo. He tossed the hammer down to the dirt, took a rag out of his pocket and rubbed his forehead and greasy brown hair. Built like a squat rugby player – or, as Daria imagined him, like a mythical version of a dwarf – he moved awkwardly down a few rungs of the ladder.

“The sign.” Abby pointed. “It says ‘Newtown’.”

“There’s no space,” added Daria.

Hugo turned back to the sign. “There’s a space between the words. New Town.”

“No, there isn’t,” replied Daria.

“Look. There.” He pointed.

They both squinted again. “Well, thank God everyone in the world died. This would be embarrassing if we had visitors,” said Daria.

“Hey, Hugo, when did we decide on a name?” asked Abby. “I thought there was a shortlist? New Town was never on it.”

“We voted over breakfast. New Town was a last-second entry.”

“What? How many people were at the vote?” Abby asked.

“You were the only people missing. Did you see the poster on the noticeboard?”

“How many people voted for it?” demanded Abby, her tone creeping into annoyance.

“It passed fifty-seven to fifty-one,” said Hugo.

“Abby, come on, it doesn’t matter,” said Daria.

“Of course it matters,” Abby batted back. “This is how we build a home.”

“This is not how you build a home. I know how homes get broken, and this is how they start.” Daria tried to be gentle but thought she’d come across combative.

“But it’s our democracy we’re talking about. A foundation for our new world,” Abby pleaded.

“That’s why we called it New Town,” said Hugo.

“Shut up, Hugo,” said Daria, her shoulders tensed and she looked to the heavens.

“Hey, Daria, have you ever heard of seasonal affective disorder?” asked Hugo.

“Yes.” Daria drew out the word, like making it longer could end the conversation.

“So you know it’s all about darkness and dark colours that lead to depression and mood swings?” Hugo’s tone like a teacher addressing an unruly child.

“Yes. Thanks for mansplaining.” Her eyes now fixed on his.

“Some colour might help you. You’re always in black.”

“It’s so that it matches my skin. Then I can seamlessly blend into the night, sneak about, straight-up murder someone and get away with it.”

“There’s no need to –” Hugo began.

“Hey, wait a second,” said Abby, turning to Daria. “Did you say you know broken homes?”

Daria ignored the question. “The point is, this is stupid...”

The bell rang out, and they stopped to look up at the watchtower. Lao, the watcher, pointed south.

“Dogs!” he yelled. “Lots of them!”

Daria pulled out her knife. Abby and Hugo ran inside to their defensive positions as several members of the Dog Squad ran out, Tobias at the forefront, leading the charge. Daria imagined he would fit perfectly into a medieval Scottish battle: a tree trunk of a man with brick coloured hair and a braided beard and tribal tattoos up his left arm. He grinned at Daria as he ran past her, a number of trainees with him.

“Dog burgers tonight!” he shouted, punching the air.

Daria joined the squad as they circled the dam and scrambled down to their defensive position on the southern embankment – a colossal slope of rocks. The dogs circled below.

Lao was right, Daria thought. More dogs than usual.

The Dog Squad adopted their fighting stances – knife in one hand and a rock in the other – as the dogs sprinted up the hill, barking and snarling. The trainees behind the main line of experienced fighters pelted the animals

with rocks that hit their snouts, legs and backs. The pack thinned as they approached the waiting fighters. The squad twisted their torsos so their knives were in front of them and their rock hands behind, ready to swing.

Daria noticed a few trainees on the front line, including Lincoln's son, Brad, who was only fifteen. His training complete, now he faced his first test.

Daria only had time to worry about him for a second, before the dogs were on them.

One jumped in her direction, fangs glistening with saliva. Daria smashed the rock into its jaw. Usually, that was enough to defeat them, but this dog came for her again. This time she spun and twisted the knife into the dog's guts as it leapt. It fell onto her as they both tumbled backwards. She regained her balance and hit its head with the rock, then drove the knife into its back. The dog didn't yelp. It was dead.

She scanned for more, but the pack retreated down the hill and into the forest. Brad was laughing. A manic laugh.

"I hit it," he screeched with pride.

"Head count?" yelled Tobias.

"Everyone is here," replied his Captain, Hal.

"Dog count?"

"Seven dogs, boss," said Carpella.

"Trainees, step forward!"

Five trainees awkwardly came forth.

"It's your turn today, then we rotate," said Tobias. "Bring the dogs back to camp."

He winked at Daria and strutted away.

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"How many?" asked Joy as she waddled over to Tobias and Daria, adjusting her bright floral dress.

"Seven." Daria washed her knife.

"Fabulous." Joy rubbed her belly then batted at the flies.

Tobias and his recruits lugged the dead dogs over and Tobias pointed at the floor in front of Joy. The new recruits dumped the dead dogs and panted for air.

"Oh." Her huge chest rose and fell as she took a deep breath. "This is a power play, isn't it? Show your recruits how in charge you are." She shuffled over to the kitchen bench, picked up a meat cleaver and slowly returned.

Tobias laughed. "Joy, you can't threaten me."

“Boy, who said anything about threats?” She hitched up her skirt and squatted down in front of the pile of dogs. She cleaved off a dog's balls and tossed them at Tobias. He jumped back.

“If you don't put the dogs where I ask, I'll serve all of you balls and assholes.” Joy pointed to a bench in the kitchen.

The recruits didn't wait for Tobias. They picked up the dogs quickly and placed them neatly where Joy had asked. She smiled and heaved herself upright.

“Don't fuck with a chef, Tobias.” Joy pointed with her knife.

“Fucking sumo,” said Tobias under his breath.

“What did you just say?” Joy barked, but Tobias walked off.

Joy turned to Daria. “If that boy calls me a sumo wrestler one more time, I will chop him up and serve him as bacon strips.”

“Christ, Joy, don't you think enough people have died?”

“There's always room for more. He's a big lad...” said Joy.

“Anyway, we could dry the meat out, like the Eskimos.”

“Are you talking about Tobias or the dogs?”

The chef hesitated. “The dogs.”

“Okay, I'm going to back away now.” Daria held her hands up.

“But where are you going? It's almost assembly time. I know how much you love it.” Joy's manic smile sent a shudder through Daria.

The jingle of the assembly bell rang out. Hugo always rang it with the joy of a cat chasing a mouse. “Assembly!” he called out. “Time for another great day in paradise,” he called.

Daria blew air out of her nose.

“Just shut up,” said Joy, looking at the meat.

Daria didn't ask if she was thinking about Tobias, the dogs or Hugo.

“Hey, Daria. What do you think about dog burger?”

“Sounds great.” Daria tried not to frown but failed.

“But we don't have any more bread. Ping said it was a day away – flour shortage again. So what about if the meat *is* the bread and I put lettuce between the meat?” Joy beamed a bright smile.

“Joy, you could just cook it, and we'll eat it.”

“What do you think my kitchen is? McDonald's? I'm inventing new ways for you lot to eat food and not get bored.”

“We don't get bored of eating, Joy. You get bored of cooking.”

“Fine. Maybe your serving will have a little extra spit sauce.”

Daria cursed herself. Abby often told her to think before she spoke. On this occasion, Abby was right.

“Joy, I'm...”

“I'm only joking, child!” Joy burst into a belly laugh. “You're one of the good ones.”

Daria had no idea if she really was joking.

“Ladies, assembly time,” said Hugo cheerfully as he walked past.

“Shut up, Hugo,” they said softly in unison.

Sometimes Daria preferred the madness during the fall of the world than sitting through an hour of New Town’s weekly assembly. Each month, a public vote would determine the Chair. Hugo was the Council Lead again this month, with the vote due next week. In the Community Charter, they had all signed the “Fifth Law” that read:

There shall be no one leader, no one voice of the people. The elected council will present the agreed upon issues, challenges and successes of the community for a rotating Council Lead to present to the people, and lead the community with the assistance of a Council Chair.

Okal, the Council Chair, smoothed out her brown and yellow sari as she waited for everyone to take their seats. She reset the tight bun that held back her wispy black-and-grey hair, smiling warmly at no one in particular. Okal had been voted Chair every month for the past four years. She’d earned the nickname “Organiser-in-Chief”.

Daria grabbed a piece of tree trunk from the log pile and sat down next to Abby. Abby handed Daria a cup of tea and smiled.

Attendance was not compulsory, but the council complained a lot if you missed the session. Daria was happy to sit through this one. It would be short, and it was important.

Okal finished her headcount and conferred with the council. She turned to Hugo, who nodded and ticked something in his notebook. Then, swiping away the flies, Okal took centre stage.

“Thank you all for coming. A ninety-one percent turnout is very, very good.” Her thick Indian accent had not diminished since the fall of the world. “As we are meeting formally I’d like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in which we meet and pay my respects to elders past and present.” She subtly nodded at Yarran and Killara, the only indigenous people in New Town. “This morning, we finally voted on a name for our community. It has been a long time coming. First, for the committee to decide if we needed a name; then, the council’s decision on contenders; next, of course, the second committee to consider names. Finally, the referendum on the shortlist versus no name at all, and this morning, the vote. I hope you all feel this was a democratic process.

“The name ‘New Town’ embodies the spirit of her people. We have a unique path ahead of us. We can all heal the scars of our collective past and move forward as a family, as a culture united in a New World. On a personal note, I like it very much.”

A loose patter of claps filled the awkward silence.

“The dog attack, only minutes ago, reminds us all that we need to be vigilant when leaving New Town,” Okal continued. “If rabies comes back, we will have a serious problem. Which brings me to item one. The rabid dogs have left their marks on us all. We lost four incredible people – John, Meera, Carole and Grace – to that awful Year of the Dog.

“We are now proposing a border force to keep the dogs out. We need volunteers; come see me afterward. Tobias and Daria, I’ll assume you are signed up.”

Everyone turned their heads towards Daria.

“Can I at least think about it? I made a promise to Abby earlier,” said Daria she swatted at the flies constantly buzzing around. “Can we add an agenda item to deal with the flies?”

“It’s the start of autumn, Daria, the changing of the seasons will deal with the flies for you,” said Okal. She paused and made a note in her book. “Where is Tobias?”

“Helping Joy get a fire going for the dog meat,” said Daria.

Okal nodded. “Next items. We need another supply run to the suburbs. We’ve drawn up a wish list; we are focusing on medicine for our beautiful mums-to-be. Alice is first and she’s is due in a week or two. We are low, and we don’t like to be low on medicine. I’ll need volunteers.”

A few people shifted uncomfortably in their seats and looked around at each other. Daria shook her head at them.

“And some good news,” Okal continued. “We have a wedding to look forward to.” Wolf whistles echoed out between the smattering of applause. “Louisa and Zack tie the knot this Sunday at the pagoda. We’ve rebuilt the deck, and it will be a beautiful time. Please come along. Lastly…”

Okal paused.

“I’d like to warmly invite you all to celebrate the life of Jane. As you know, she’d been fighting cancer for the last year, and if you’d all like to follow me, we’ve set up her remembrance by the lake.”

New Town’s citizens formed a quiet and orderly line down to the water.

Daria and Abby shuffled into the middle of the crowd. Daria swept her frizzy hair into a side pony tail and fastened it with an elastic band to smarten up. Abby smiled at her; the effort had not gone unnoticed.

A collection of bright red and yellow potted plants marked the freshly dug grave next to a weatherboard café. The café’s veranda a jungle of plants and flowers all meticulously cared for. Jane was often found here reading books and nurturing her plants.

Okal stepped forward over Jane’s grave with a smile. The fresh black dirt patted down. A slab of grey stone with her name already in place. Jane’s death had been a long time coming.

“Jane and I, as you all know, were best friends. I loved her like a sister,” Okal paused and swallowed hard. “And when the world fell apart, we both knew we would be safe, that we would survive, if we stuck together. So, it is my honour to pay my deepest respects to her life. You’ll remember her as a kind and darkly funny woman. Jane had asked to be cremated, as it would be her last chance for a smoking-hot body. I told her it was a grave mistake.”

The crowd laughed, the release of tension like the popping of a balloon filled with confetti.

“Jane and I were once in a circus,” said Okal. The laughing stopped, replaced with silence and gaping mouths. “It’s true. We toured Europe and the States. We didn’t perform together – she was on the high ropes, and I was a contortionist. One year, we had a troupe of incredible Chinese performers tour with us. One of them, who only called himself ‘the Monkey King’, was the best. He and Jane hit it off right away. They’d fly through the air like birds. They brought the best of the east and the west, and they fused it together in ways that no one thought possible. They became the stars of the show.

“Jane didn’t let this go to her head. One of the many things I love... loved, about her. So, word started to spread about this double act. And when I say ‘spread’, I mean in circus circles, not on the national news.”

Okal laughed.

“Then something strange happened. The Monkey King didn’t want his photo taken anymore. He didn’t want to do interviews with websites or the local paper. He confided in Jane that he wasn’t actually Chinese. He was a North Korean defector. He’d smuggled himself into the Chinese state circus at great cost. Not even the Chinese knew. His deception was perfect. However, with social media doing what it did back then, he was soon exposed.

“We’d just finished a show in Denver in the USA and started the circus move. But the police turned up. The Monkey King knew his time was up, then all hell broke loose. The big top was halfway through coming down – the giant cover was off and only the skeleton remained. The Monkey King did what he did best. He climbed. He climbed to the top of the big top scaffolding. The police surrounded him. And then we noticed another figure scaling the scaffolding. Jane.

“The police sent up their drones. And for a moment, Jane and the Monkey King held onto the top of the skyscraper big top and batted away drones. I laughed so hard for so long, watching our version of *King Kong* play out.”

Everyone laughed.

“Jane convinced the police to put the drones down, and she convinced the Monkey King to climb down. She made a bad situation better. She did that all the time. She didn’t think, she just did.” Okal paused and blinked like she could hold back the tears. A couple escaped. “You’ll remember Jane for her humour too. I asked her what I could set up for her funeral. And she said that she wanted people to be happy, so I could do whatever I wanted. I asked if I could set up a piñata, and she said that sounded like a great idea, but she didn’t want people too happy, so I should fill the piñata with bees.”

Everyone burst out laughing again. A few people brushed away tears. By this stage, Joy had arrived, and her belly laugh roared through the forest. “Best funeral ever,” she said.

Okal rubbed the tears from her face and chuckled along with the crowd. “So today and moving forward, let’s remember the laughter, the fun and the pitch-black humour she brought into our lives. That’s how she’d like to be remembered.”

Okal looked up to the bright sky and blew a kiss. “Thank you, Jane.” She placed a yellow flower on the grave.

People started to shuffle off into their cliques and began to chat and laugh more. Some placed flowers on the grave.

Daria and Abby stood with Tobias and the Dog Squad.

“Yup, that’s the way to go,” said Daria.

“If I go first, can you plant a tree seed on my grave so it’ll turn into a tree and I can feed it with my decomposing body?” asked Abby.

Daria put her arm around Abby’s shoulders. “Sure, we’ll turn you into tree food.”

“And Daria,” said Tobias, his hasty low voice like a tyre dragged on asphalt, “if you go first, can we turn you into dog bait?”

Daria kicked him in the shin. “If you go first, we’ll use you to cover the smell of the toilet.”

“Well,” said Abby, “that ended up in the gutter much quicker than usual.”

“On a serious note, ladies,” said Tobias, he leant in like a covert operation commander, “we were planning something bigger and better than the Dog Squad. Okal talked about it today, a proper force to secure our borders against those little fuckers. I wanna go hunt them down. Find their nest and then harvest them when we need them, rather than them hunting us.”

“Their nest?” teased Daria. “Are you Sigourney Weaver? They aren’t aliens, they’re dogs. They’ve got a den, and they are scavenging like us.”

“Either way...”

A huge roar went up from one of the groups, everyone clapping and hugging each other. The word “baby” carried on the wind.

Tobias and Daria turned to each other.

“Shit,” said Daria. “That makes three. We need those medical supplies, then.”

“And we picked the nearest hospital dry. You know where the other place is,” said Tobias.

“I do not want to go back to the city. And not to that place.” Daria rubbed her eyes.

“Looks like you don’t have a choice,” said Tobias.

“Oh, I’ve always got a choice. I know places you have no idea about. Abby and I will go for a few days, and we’ll come back with everything we need.”

“We will?” asked Abby.

Daria turned to her. “I know a place. We’ll leave first thing tomorrow.”

*

The south gate to New Town a simple barrier strong enough and tall enough to keep dogs and curious kangaroos out. Daria and Abby passed through the chain link gate and out on a single-track service road. To their left a sign hung above a basic corrugate metal shed. ‘New Town Garage,’ Daria raised an eye brow and huffed. Five four-by-four cars, two utes and one removal truck made up the New Town fleet. Petrol never used to be an issue once they’d figured out how to empty a car’s tank. Now the cars all coughed and wheezed, the petrol deteriorating. The experiments with vegetable oil and moonshine due to start next month.

Shuffling out of the garage, Chuck with his sketchpad.

“Hello, ladies.” Chuck grinned. Three of his front teeth missing. He took a long drag on his cigarette.

“Hey, Chuck. Keeping the stereotype alive,” said Daria.

He laughed. “Someone’s got to. ‘Last Pervert Alive’, remember?” It was the name of Chuck’s pornographic comic book adventure series. “Newest issue out today. Want a copy?”

“Sure.” Daria held out her hand and passed him three cigarettes.

He put his sketchpad down. Chuck stashed cigarette behind his ear and the other two in his check shirt top pocket. His fingers smudged with a silvery sheen from pencils, and he scratched his lead colour hair.

“Ah, my favourite customer.” Chuck grinned and rifled through his bag pulling out a thin comic badly stapled together.

“Before I read it – am I in it again? I don’t like surprises.”

“Yes, you are. The story arc called your name, and Daria the dildo destroyer saves the day.”

“Marvellous.”

Daria stuffed the hand-drawn comic into her bag.

“Oh, ladies, one other thing. I’m taking requests for the next issue.”

“Okay, great,” said Daria. “I’ll think about it. See ya.”

Daria and Abby strode away. Chuck fussed about with his bag and sketchbook, he couldn’t seem to put it in his bag.

“You shouldn’t encourage him,” whispered Abby as they walked away.

“Would you rather he kept it all locked up and get fucked up, or let him draw crazy comics like an eccentric old guy?” asked Daria.

“Do you know who he was before?”

“Why are you obsessed with who people were *before*?” Daria scowled. “This is who they are now, and that’s what matters. Besides, if you ignore all the dicks and tits, it’s great illustration. He’s talented.”

“There is no doubt about that,” said Abby.

Daria turned back to where Chuck was still trying to stuff his sketchpad into his bag and called out for him. He jogged over.

“Chuck, I need you.” Daria crossed her arms.

“Anything for my best customer. Hit me up.”

“Abby and I are going on an adventure. We’ll be gone for a few days, and I’ll be honest, it’s gonna be boring. It always is.” Daria paused to structure her question, but Chuck filled the empty space.

“Adventures aren’t boring.”

“Ya got me. I’m not going on an adventure, but I want to. I’m actually going to a long boring job, and I want to escape into my head on an adventure.”

“Books are full of escape.”

“That’s true, but that means lots of reading. Chuck, I’ll let you in on a secret. I’m not a fan of reading. I like pictures.”

“So do I!”

“BUT,” interrupted Daria. Chuck looked like a tortoise retreating into his shell. “But,” she said softly, “I’m your number one customer.”

Chuck nodded.

“So can I ask you to create a comic book adventure for me on my long, boring job?”

“YES!” Chuck’s face lit up like Christmas lights.

“One request. Absolutely no porn. No dicks, tits, vag, fisting, DP or anything like that. A porn-free adventure comic. Can you do that for me?”

Chucks hands flapped about. A noise gurgled in his throat. He fought hard against his programming.

“Yes,” he finally spluttered.

CHUCK

“Fucking perv,” said Tobias, loud and brash as he strolled past Chuck.

Chuck’s right eye twitched. He studied Tobias’s triceps as he walked off: big, manly. Tobias’s elbows didn’t jut out like his. Chuck frowned. *How did Tobias get so big? He’s not very tall. I wonder how big his cock is?*

Chuck took out his notebook and marked an ‘X’ next to Tobias’s name. Chuck marked an X when people were mean to him or a tick when they were nice. He thumbed to Daria’s page. More ticks than crosses. He smiled and stuffed the notebook away.

Chuck glanced at Tobias again, watching him haul rocks onto a trolley. He decided Tobias must have a small, veiny cock, and that was why he was mean.

Chuck approached the jobs noticeboard, full of cards and notes. Major jobs were assigned weekly and minor jobs daily. Chuck scanned the major jobs, which were recognised in the weekly council meetings. He looked for his name. Nothing.

He sighed and dropped his eyes to the minor jobs section. Chuck: toilet cleaning. Chuck: sweeping. Chuck: clean up dog blood. Chuck: bury dog bones.

He looked about, wanting to talk to someone, anyone. This was his moment.

“Hey, Hugo, don’t you think that burying the dog bones is a major job? I mean, I’ve got to find a location, haul the bones, dig holes for each dog...”

“No, Chuck,” replied Hugo. “Dig a hole, anywhere, and throw all the bones in. That’s not a major job.”

“But New Town signage is a major job?” Chuck pointed to Hugo’s name. “And why isn’t cleaning the long-drop toilet a major job? There’s a smell down there that will outlive prostitution, and that’s the oldest job in the world.”

“I don’t make the rules.” Hugo walked away.

Chuck tossed the conversation over in his head. Hugo wasn’t mean or nice; as usual, he just hung out in the middle, like a cock out of a zipper fly.

Chuck checked over his shoulder before moving the bone burial into ‘major’ and strutting off. He also made a mental note that Daria had given him a major job. No porn. Straight-up nice stuff. Fuck. Actually, no fuck. He tapped his head in frustration. *Don’t screw this up. This is important.*

His thoughts drifted to Daria and Abby both going down on him at the same time. He shook his head.

“No dirt,” he said out loud.

“The hell you doing, boy?” Joy tutted as she walked past.

Chuck’s eyes darted about the camp. He felt the chatter, but people never met his eyes. He climbed the ladder to stand atop the fortified wooden entrance to New Town. He took out a different notebook, this one full of sketches, flicking to a half-finished sketch of the view down the hill to the water pump. From there the land unfolded towards the forest and dipped again into shadows, like dust gathering at the corner of a room. A couple of old buildings raised their heads above the green. A visitors’ centre, a pub, a little hotel.

Chuck filled in the outline of the visitors’ center in his notebook. Squinting into the distance helped him concentrate.

“Ideas,” he whispered, tapping his pencil on his head. “Not a dildo fight. Not a naked grease fight surrounded by space gorillas.” He folded his notebook up. “Not a lonely virgin that saves the world with their unexpected BJ skills. Nope, none of the above.” He rubbed his lips. “Not porn, not porn.”

“Chuck. Will you shut the fuck up?” said Lao from the watchtower a couple of metres away.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were there.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.” Chuck paused. “I have to write a story with no porn.”

“Yeah, I heard ya. Just write a story and take the porn out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lonely person saves the world with their unexpected superpower of mind-reading, not BJs? How’s that?”

“You are amazing!” shouted Chuck. “I’ll add you to the credits as an Executive Storytelling Assistant.”

“Please don’t.”

Chuck slid down the ladder, took out his notebook and put a big tick next to Lao’s name.

*

DARIA

Night settled on New Town and like an inmate on the day of their release, New Town's residents rushed forward for all the possibilities that awaited them. With nothing but themselves for gossip and stories, Daria had watched over one-hundred people spin a million story lines over the last few years.

The confusion of love, lust and betrayal normally led the way. Competition, in particular, board game championships, fought with all the heat and soul of a boxing bout had become a new fountain of stories in the last year. Music, theatre and dance groups all sloshed about in the cocktail of culture and all led to more stories for the next day.

Solar twinkle lights lit the paths through the Medina, with two fading spotlights near the kitchen to help people pouring moonshine drinks. Daria tossed more wood into an already swollen fire pit and chuckled with Abby.

"Abby," whispered Daria. "Look at Elsie."

Abby tried not to stare, but she couldn't stop. She held her hands over her heart.

"That is so sweet."

Elsie's hands trembled as she held a small broken mirror and carefully applied mascara. Her ancient eyelashes deep and dark with the makeup. Her crumpled skin lightly brushed in foundation. A misty green shadow around her eyes. She'd been applying makeup for an hour under the spotlight next to the generator.

"Come on, Daria. Even you gotta say that's sweet."

"No denying that." Daria paused. "Who's the hot date, though?"

"Oh yeah. She's the oldest here by, like, twenty years."

They tried not to watch, pretending to be busy.

Daria frowned as she saw Hugo stalking off into the night.

"He's not so bad," said Abby.

"He's like a vine that climbs a tree – tangles up with it so completely that you can never get rid of it." Daria watched him slink away. "Where is he going, anyway?"

"Do you care?"

"No. What I care about is Elsie's hot date. It's gotta be Mike, he's the nearest in age."

"Maybe James?"

"He's only a few years older than me," said Daria.

"So you must be, what, thirty-five-ish then?" asked Abby. Daria glared at her and she grinned. "Ha. Now I know how old you are."

Daria ignored Abby's little victory. "Elsie is like, seventy-something. It's not James."

“You reckon whoever is it is gonna do a whole wine-and-dine experience?” asked Abby.

“You’d hope so.”

“Oh, wow.” Abby nudged Daria, who was still staring in Hugo’s direction.

James strolled over to Elsie and held out his hand. He looked smart in an old brown suit. The pair headed straight out of the camp towards the shed.

“Remind me not to go into the shed again until it’s had its monthly clean,” Daria pretended to dry heave, before glaring at Hugo again. “Hey, Abby, I gotta run.”

“You’d make the worst spy in the world.”

“I don’t know what you mean –”

“Go follow Hugo.”

Daria smiled and jogged off.

HUGO

“Just deal the cards, Tobias,” snapped Hugo.

“Okay, loser.” Tobias chucked the cards down. “Remember, a flush beats a pair, even if they are aces.”

“I know the rules,” grumbled Hugo.

Hugo, Tobias and four others sat around a tree-stump table – an old mountain ash they’d cut to suit their needs for a secret poker game every Thursday. Candles flickered in the breeze, the last of summer’s breath. Hugo shook a shiver away. Overhead possums rustled the branches. The distraction annoyed Hugo. He tutted at them.

Hugo tapped the table with his fingers. “Check.”

“Ha!” cried Tobias. “I’ll throw down a pack of cigarettes.”

Everyone folded until Hugo’s call.

“I’ll match that.”

The hand continued. Hugo focused on his cards, running numbers through his head. Tobias spat a bad peanut out into the forest.

A new card thrown down.

“Okay, I’ll bet an hour of time,” said Hugo, knowing Tobias wouldn’t want to owe time to him.

“I’ll see that,” said Tobias.

Hugo kept his focus on his cards, careful not to give anything away.

The final card thrown down.

“Another hour,” said Hugo.

“Me too,” said Tobias. “What you got?”

Hugo smiled and neatly splayed out a pair of eights and a pair of jacks.

“Two pairs.”

“I got a full house, dickhead.” Tobias tossed his cards down, laughing. “You owe me a pack of smokes and two hours of your time. I got a lot of clothes that need washing, and my personal shitter is looking grim. You can clean that first.”

“Fuck!” shouted Hugo.

“Shut the fuck up!” growled Tobias. “You wanna destroy our little game?”

Hugo took a deep breath and walked off into the forest. Tobias followed

“You do have my smokes, don’t you? You’re not betting air again. Remember what happened last time?”

“I got your smokes. Now leave me alone.” Hugo slapped a branch aside.

Hugo remembered how hard Tobias could punch. Last time he thought he'd broken a rib. He hadn't been able to move right for days.

"I'm going home," he said, his tail between his legs, as it often was when he confronted Tobias.

"Okay, you got twenty-four hours. That seems like enough time for you to pull my winnings out of your ass." Tobias grinned and went back to the game.

Hugo turned away and quickly made his way back to New Town. The darkness didn't bother him. He'd made this trip a lot. Once he saw the lights of the wall, he paused before he walked out of the cover of the forest. His gut stopped him. Hurt him. He burst into tears, biting his hand to stay quiet, and took a minute to get his breath back. Then he strode out of the forest and up the solar-lit path to the New Town gates.

He checked his sign again. Abby was right. He'd fucked that up, too. He shook his head and kicked a stone, catching it a little too well; it pinged up off another stone and hit the scrap corrugated metal at the foot of the wall. A 'ding' rang out.

Hugo froze. No movement. He'd gotten away with it. Nearly everyone would be in bed now. He knew the rhythms of his home.

He unlocked the night door in the wall. No one was on watch, again. The moon lit up the town, but Hugo could only see the imperfections in his creations. The town hall extension, nothing but a tangle of bad right angles and nails. His kitchen benches, weather-worn and in need of sanding back. All problems for another day.

Hugo pulled up his coat collar and focused on the issue. He only had four cigarettes. Not ten for a pack. He knew all the smokers, and he also knew that no one cared about security. The dogs couldn't unlock the door, and they didn't care about cigarettes.

He walked over to Alice and Frank's place. An ashtray lay on the table outside their hut, but no cigarettes. But as Hugo inspected each hut and tent, he found packs laying about.

"I only need six," he whispered. He walked the length of the dam, taking six cigarettes from six different packs and adding them to his own. The last he stole from his hut neighbour, Lao. Then he sat on the chair outside his hut and held his stomach, watching the wind play with the trees.

Hugo's mind raced. He began to analyse the right and wrong moves in the poker game and added them to the trend over the last year. He thought about how to crack the Tobias bluff.

New ideas formed that he could test next week, and Hugo began to feel excited.

*

The next day, Hugo peered sideways at Lao's table outside his hut. He watched as Lao pulled a cigarette out and lit it. No frown or hesitation. Lao loved smoking in the morning.

Hugo smiled. He sat outside under his awning on his couch, a row of airplane seats taken from a light aircraft crash not too far away, and started to scheme. What would his next trick be? How could he turn two hours of access to Tobias's hut, and shitter, into something he could profit from?

New Town was buzzing. People jostled past each other on the long, thin path through the tents and huts. Coffee roasting, food cooking, stories told about the victories and defeats from the night before. Hugo smiled again. He had been here at the start.

He built the first homes, the first wall. He built New Town with his own two hands. To see his community thriving like this gave him an enormous sense of wellbeing. So much so that he almost forgot his debts and theft.

He heard Abby's voice and spotted her walking in his direction.

"Oh, hey, Abby." He raised his hand.

"Hey." A quick smile flashed across her face. She brushed her tangled, straw-coloured hair out of her eyes. She only did that when he said hello, he was sure of it. But she seemed to touch her hair more when he was around.

Subconscious flirting, maybe? Maybe.

"So, I was thinking about what you said about the sign," Hugo sprang out of his seat and walked next to her. "You know, how you thought it was a scientist."

"Yeah – it doesn't matter, though." Abby smiled politely.

"It does. So I'm gonna build a new sign. It's a major job going up on the board today. Oh, also, are you still interested in those advanced woodworking classes? Did you find anyone else?"

Abby shook her head. "Sorry, Hugo, not enough people were interested." They stepped around a pile of wood.

"Sure. That's fine." He paused as Tobias glared at Hugo as he strode past them.

"What is going on with you two?" Abby asked quietly.

Hugo hesitated. "We disagree on the council a lot. And maybe he sees that my ideas work, and his don't."

"You have had some great ideas," said Abby. "The wall, the watchtower, those early huts. I mean, you have all the basics for survival covered."

She leant in and lowered her voice.

“Tobias... He’s a little like Daria, isn’t he? Hot head, but heart is in the right place.”

“Yeah.” Hugo nodded and let the silence hang, cursing himself. This was a perfect opportunity to get under the hood. Get to know Abby’s relationship with Daria more.

“You okay? You look a little lost,” said Abby, she led the way through a bottleneck of huts.

“It’s just that it’s the same as the old world sometimes,” Hugo said, his eyes glassy for a moment, lost in thought. “The strongest survive off the weakest. Tobias needs me, I need him, but he’s always the winner against the odds.”

“That’s your perception. People think Daria is so strong, and she is, but she’s also a normal person trying to make sense of the world. She’s sweet.”

“Sweet?” Hugo scoffed.

“You need to be nice to her. I know early on you had that whole thing...”

“Thing? She kicked me in the balls so hard I thought she’d cracked them.”

“That was a long time ago, Hugo,” Abby insisted. “We’re a community now. Your ideas get implemented, don’t they? You’re a leader in the council. You’ve been a key part of making us stable. Everyone knows that.” They emerged into the Medina. The fire pits smoking as people attended them while others gathered around drinking weak coffee and gossiping. The kitchen humming as the organised chaos of breakfast slowly kicked into gear.

Hugo smiled.

“And, well, actually –” Abby paused. Hugo’s heart beat hard. He could hear the thumping in his ears.

“There’s something I could use your help on.”

Hugo nodded. He tried to say something, but he thought he’d ruin the moment.

“I’m building something,” Abby continued. “It’s a little secret, though. It won’t *stay* secret, but I need to finish it first. It’s mostly wood. And a little glass. It’s not very big either, and I’ve made a good start, but I ran into a couple of challenges I can’t figure out. Can you help me after breakfast?”

“Yes,” said Hugo, a little too loud. A couple of heads turned. He could see Daria at the kitchen, scowling at him.

“Okay?” said Abby, sounding unsure of his response. “Thanks. I’ll knock on your hut after the dishes are done.”

She jogged over to Daria.

Hugo forgot about breakfast and returned to his hut. He tried to walk normally, but was aware he might have been skipping.

*

Odds. Numbers. Strategy. Hugo thumbed through his book on gambling for winners. He could take a risk with Abby now she'd invited him in. But at what cost? There were only fifty women in New Town and they'd not many any other survivors in over five years. Thirty-five were in a relationship, three were gay – so that left twelve eligible women.

Hugo scribbled the numbers down in a notebook. Only numbers, no context. There were four women around his age who were single, and seven men. That meant three would be losers. But there had been two breakups recently. That was two extra men and women potentially on the rebound.

If he went at it too fast, his first real chance at getting to know Abby one-on-one, he might scare her off. If he took too long, she might fall into the arms of one of the rebounding guys, or settle for someone else.

Hugo looked at his watch. She would be here soon.

He glanced around to make sure everything was set up. When Abby got here, he could grab his notebook and pen, flick open his Shakespeare book and pretend to be busy writing a new play for the theatre night. A good conversation starter.

Footsteps approached. Hugo stashed his *Winning Against The Odds* book underneath a pile of *National Geographic* magazines and tried to look casual.

The footsteps passed. He sighed with relief. He pulled out his notebook and waited. The blank page seemed to laugh at him.

More footsteps.

“Hey, Hugo, you in there?” said Abby softly.

“Come in,” he said, leaning over his notebook and began writing random words. They made no sense, but it didn't matter – he'd look busy to her.

Silence. She'd hesitated.

The door creaked open and Hugo peered up. Abby entered smiling respectfully.

Hugo carefully closed his notebook, placed it on the shelf, and slowly placed the Shakespeare book next to it.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah, sure. Sorry, you caught me writing.”

“Cool.” Abby turned and stepped outside. Hugo grimaced. *Don't construct the situation; go with the flow.* A lesson he knew and never followed.

In silence, Abby led Hugo out of the back exit and towards Big Hill on the northern border of the dam. They headed west via an old hikers' trail until Abby went off the track at a wooden sign that read “Sky Phone”.

“So, that's your sign, right? What's a Sky Phone?” asked Hugo.

“I'll show you.”

They emerged from the forest in a small clearing at the edge of the hill. The trees rolled out before them like green sapphires glinting in the morning sun.

“You have to promise not to say anything until this is finished,” Abby implored.

“You have my word.” Hugo felt a pang in his stomach. Like his word was worthless and only his gut knew.

Abby walked over to a large bush and pulled some branches away.

Hugo smiled. “Is that a phone box?”

“YES!” she shouted, clapping her hands together.

Hugo's mouth opened a little. “Uh-huh,” was all he could manage to say. How did he play this? Had Abby lost her mind? Was this an art project? What the hell was going on?

“Well, don't stand there silent as a grave,” said Abby. “What do you think?”

“Err... It looks like a phone box. Like one of those red ones in England.” Hugo walked over and inspected it. “Your foundation is a little loose, and these dove joints need some work if you want to put a roof on and the glass in.”

Abby smiled at him.

“You want some help?” asked Hugo.

“Yes, please.”

“Can I ask what it is?”

“Not until it's finished.”

Hugo immediately set to work. Abby had a hidden work station complete with scavenged tools, planks of wood and odd-shaped pieces of glass.

Hours passed by. Hugo and Abby formed a silent team, ticking through each bite-sized job efficiently. Abby took a backseat while Hugo worked on the more complicated pieces, fielding questions from her. He even made her laugh a few times.

Making huge progress, Hugo pushed himself to work harder and faster than ever before. When his focus finally wandered, he noticed Abby fixing the gears in an old rotary phone. Hugo's Nan and Grandad had had

one before mobile phones. The dial was a circular device with nine holes that you had to stick your finger into and turn to the start to enter each number. It took forever to dial anyone.

Hugo caught Abby's eye.

"It's okay," she said, leaving the phone box to sit on a log. She tapped next to her for Hugo to join.

He wanted to say something. He nearly said, "You're special," but his stomach twisted as the words left his mind and formed in his mouth.

"You wanna say something?"

"You – you are in touch with nature, aren't you?" stammered Hugo.

"I grew up on the very edge of a city. Not full countryside, but greener than grey, that's for sure. What about you?"

"Suburbia," Hugo answered. "I don't know anything about the countryside, and here I am – living in the middle of a forest, on top of a dam, at the end of the world."

"Okay. Close your eyes," said Abby. He obeyed. "What can you hear?"

"Birds and bugs."

"How many?"

"How many birds? I don't know."

"Listen."

Hugo took a deep breath. "Two on the left, one ahead and – I'm not sure. It all gets a bit confusing on the right and behind me."

"There are seven birds," Abby said. "Wattles, magpies, rosellas and one king parrot. I can also hear crickets, and it won't be long until the cicadas start up."

"Wow. I always thought you were an all-action girl like Daria."

Abby laughed. A wattle bird shot out of its tree cover above their heads and splashed into the sea of green behind them.

"You think I'm like Daria?" Abby stared at the dirt for a moment too long. Her shoulders slumped. "We've lived here for five years and you don't know anything about me, do you?"

"That's not true," said Hugo hastily. "I know you love Motown music and true crime stories."

"It's easy to know superficial things, but that doesn't mean you know someone. Daria and I are like a knife and a shield. I love her, I look up to her for strength and leadership, but I'm not the action person. I'm a thinker."

"But you look up to her strength and leadership?"

Abby sighed.

"Hugo, thank you for all the help today. Honestly, thank you, but I think it's time we went back." She stood and started to hide the phone box with branches.

Hugo went over the conversation in his head. He couldn't figure out what he'd done wrong after he'd done so much to help her.

"Hey, I want to help," he said. "And as I help, I'll get to know you."

"Sure. Just not today. Daria and I are off scavenging this afternoon for the medical supply run tomorrow."

"What you looking for? I can help."

"Rope, nets, hauling stuff." Abby turned to Hugo and sighed. "You can't fix everything all the time. I've got to go."

Hugo held back the confusion from his face. Pushed it deep inside. "Okay – but if it's good with you, I could stay a little longer? I like this project, feel good to get my hands dirty again. I've not been able to do something like this in a long time."

"I've already trusted you with my secret, so you can be trusted to stay too. Make sure you cover it up before you leave." Abby paused. "And thank you for today. I mean it."

She waved goodbye and vanished into the forest.

"Strength and leadership," Hugo whispered out loud. He pulled his notebook from his bag and began to write.

DARIA

“What the hell is that?” Daria’s voice echoed in the empty music hall.

“An echidna,” said Abby, as she moved broken amps.

“I love it. Can I touch it?”

“Can you help me instead?”

Daria helped Abby lug the amps to the side of the stage.

“So can I touch it?” asked Daria again.

“What?”

“Like, ya know, half the stuff in this country wants to kill you.”

“Where are you from originally?” asked Abby. “Come on, tell me. I don’t know American accents, east-coast, west-coast, it all sounds the same to me.”

Abby returned to the suitcases that sat beside the stage and began unpacking the clothes inside. The music hall had become a halfway house for storage: years of loot stuffed inside a secure location away from dogs and the weather, and only an hour from home.

“Can I touch it?” asked Daria once more.

“Yes. An echidna won’t kill you, it’s a cuddly version of a porcupine or hedgehog.” Abby tossed clothes into piles of what she could wear, what she could trade, and what could make a good net.

Daria focused on the funny little creature as it inched around a rusty mic stand.

“Isn’t it funny?” said Abby, as she folded Gucci gowns.

“Shhh.” Daria inched forward.

“Isn’t it funny,” whispered Abby. “At the end of the world...”

Daria shot her a school-teacher look.

“...at the start of the new world, that all the humans died and the animals are fine? I mean, monkeys share ninety-something percent of our DNA. Remember when we went to the zoo? They were absolutely fine, but we’ve not seen another person for three, four years? How does that work?”

“I don’t know, I’m not a scientist.” Daria brushed the echidna's yellow spines, and it bolted. Her face lit with a child’s unashamed smile.

“Wow, it’s like rubber.”

“So, when are you going to tell me what you were in the old world?” Abby threw a gown down into the possible net pile. Daria frowned.

“What?” said Abby. “It’s actually very strong, not like that last one. I’ve learned my lesson – classy critter traps can’t be a thing.”

“Fine.” Daria held her hands up in mock surrender and kicked a handbag into the storage pile. “But we got a lot of medicine to scavenge.”

“Don’t ignore my question, it’s rude,” said Abby.

“Does it even matter? The past is a corpse.”

“The past keeps me grounded in the new world.”

“Good for you.”

“But your past is a big question mark to me,” Abby persisted. “It’s not fair. You know loads about me. Come on. Tell me one thing. What job did you have? How did you end up here?”

Daria said nothing.

“Okay, fine, I’m going to make up a story and then tell everyone at New Town that you told me and they’ll think that’s what you did.”

“Go right ahead. I don’t care.” Daria’s eyes darted about for the echidna while she sorted the net pile and packed it into roller suitcases.

Abby tapped her fingers on her thigh and chewed her lip. Then a wry smile emerged. “You worked in marketing and communications, used buzzwords all the time, had a coffee addiction and a job title like Digital Disruptor Director or Communications Catalyst Coordinator –”

Daria’s mouth slowly opened.

“You are vicious…”

“Shareability Connector, Longform Engagement Agitator,” continued Abby.

“Okay, stop! My ears are bleeding.”

“So?”

“One thing, that’s all you’re getting,” Daria conceded. “What do you want to know?”

“If I suspect even a hint of sarcasm, I’ll tell everyone you are a Blue Sky Cloud Analyst.”

“You win. One question.”

Abby pumped her fists in the air triumphantly. “How did you end up here, in Australia?”

“You’re right. I’m not supposed to be here.” Daria looked out towards the dirty chairs of the auditorium. She preferred to look at them than at Abby. “I was in an airport when the news started to spread. I had a choice. And I chose to get on a plane, thinking the whole thing would blow over.”

Daria paused.

“No, that’s not true.” She sighed like she’d opened a door inside and a ghost had taken the chance to escape. “I got on the plane knowing that people would die. People I knew would die, and I wouldn’t have to watch or help. I could simply come back to a new world when I returned home. All my problems fixed. I took the easy way out.”

Daria swept up the clothes from the “keep” pile and stuffed them into a suitcase. “And now you know more about me than anyone else in the entire world.”

“Thank you,” said Abby quietly.

“Okay, you tell me one thing. You got the hots for Hugo?”

“What? ‘Got the hot’s’? Are we schoolgirls? No. No, I don’t,” said Abby. “It’s just... I pity him.” She cringed as the words came out of her mouth.

“You pity him?”

“You know what I mean. He’s a good guy, he’s lost his way recently, and that’s a shame. So I’m being nice to him. You could try it too?”

“Nope.”

“Where did you follow him to last night?”

“Gambling game,” replied Daria. “He lost big to Tobias.”

“Isn’t gambling illegal?”

“Sure is.”

Abby hung her head for a moment, like a loser on a roulette wheel. “It’s not hurting anyone, is it?” she said at the ground before slowly lifting her head again. “He’s a bit fragile; he’s lost his purpose on the council. He’s building signs rather than homes these days. That’s gotta hurt inside.”

“Fine.” Daria zipped up the suitcase and pushed it off the stage. “This is the last load. We won’t get caught short emptying a pharmacy again.”

She jumped off the stage and hauled the luggage up the narrow aisles to the theatre exit. She stopped halfway and turned back to Abby.

“Okay. Wanna do your thing? Now’s a perfect time. We might not be back for a while, so if you’re gonna do it, then do it. And if you don’t, then you can’t bug me about it ever again...”

Abby jumped up, kicking clothes and cases to the side. She grabbed the rusty mic stand and took a deep breath.

“Oh, I can’t, I feel silly now.”

Daria crossed her arms. “Ten seconds and I go.”

“Okay, alright.” Abby cleared her throat. “*She got eyes of the bluest skies...*”

Daria uncrossed her arms. Her mouth opened in awe and she whispered, “Fuck...”

Abby continued her rendition of “Sweet Child O’ Mine”. She ripped through the song, in tune, on beat, and took a bow when she finished. Daria clapped and shouted.

“Don’t make fun of me,” said Abby crossing her arms like she was hugging herself.

“Abby, I’m really not. That was drop-dead fucking amazing.”

Abby hopped off stage and helped Daria out of the theater with the cases. She smiled the entire time.

Outside, low clouds under a pumpkin-sky. The luggage cases rolled noisily along the cracked tarmac. The dark windows all around them held secrets; the past might be dead, but it was always present.

“So, while I’m at this strange moment of openness, I have something else to say,” said Daria, softer than usual.

“Yes?” Abby’s voice raised with suspicion.

“I forgot your start-of-the-new-world story. Can you tell me again?”

Abby stopped. She let go of the luggage case and rolled her tongue across her top row of teeth. “That’s horrible.”

“I haven’t forgotten the whole thing,” said Daria hastily. “Like, I know you’re from Melbourne, you worked admin jobs at banks and insurance firms and hated it... But I can’t remember the rest, the bit where it all fell apart.”

Abby didn’t say anything. She started to walk away.

“Aw, shit, Abby, I was just being honest.”

Abby whirled back around. “Honest? It’s not something you occasionally decide to be, you just *are*.”

“So I should have kept that a secret?”

“No, you could ask.”

“I just did.”

“Not like that.”

“Like how, then?”

Abby put her hands on her hips and took a deep breath like she’d just run a mile. “Look, it’s good that you can be honest and tell me you’ve forgotten who I was and how I lived through the end of the world. But don’t you understand that hurts?”

“Sure,” said Daria.

“No, you don’t.”

“All I know is that I care about what you think, so teach me this stuff.”

Abby’s shoulders tensed. She rolled her eyes, grunted, then kicked a nearby motorbike over.

“Enjoy that?” asked Daria.

“Yes.” Abby narrowed her eyes. “So when you made your choice, at the airport, what were you running from?”

“This is supposed to be about you.”

“Well, now it’s not. Talk, or I walk.”

“Tough crowd,” said Daria under her breath. She smiled. Abby did not smile back. “It’s getting dark, you know.”

Abby shrugged her shoulders.

“Yes,” Daria continued. “I was at the goddamn airport running from my old life. I needed some change. Then the flights started getting delayed. I was chowing down a burger, had my head buried in my iPhone, and – you remember what it was like.”

“I do, you don’t. I’ve already told you my story. Keep going.”

“You watched it all fall apart from a hotel room, right?”

“Not even close.”

“Fine. The news had been reporting the deaths for weeks. And I remember the PA system at the airport. I can still hear ‘This is a final call for flight UA34’. And I thought, ‘This is the final call for all the people I hate’.” Daria couldn’t look at Abby. She tossed the idea around of another lie, but she closed her eyes. Defeated. She swallowed hard and opened her eyes. “I smiled. I actually smiled at the thought of people dying. I was running from clichés. Shitty family, bad boyfriends, ya know? My mom passed away the year before and it was the anniversary, so I wanted to get the hell out of there.

“Then it really happened. On the TV screen, the news anchor freaked out on air and left the set. The entire airport rippled. Like a wave of panic, but it wasn’t panic. People didn’t lose their shit, they just woke up, like they were all hyper... *alert*. Maybe because they were at the airport, they knew they had to get somewhere, and that was the priority. Gave them focus.” Daria paused and clenched her fists. Her nails digging into her palms. “It gave me focus too. I didn’t want anything to stop me getting the fuck outta there. I knew then this would be huge, like, Spanish flu huge. Not end-of-the-world huge, nothing we couldn’t come back from. Plus, I thought it was only hitting the States. So I ran to my plane.

“The flight after mine got cancelled. I was on the last commercial flight from America to Australia. By the time I landed everything seemed slow. There was no one at passport control. People stood under the departure and arrival screens like zombies. I bought a pen and notebook, downloaded a survival app and wrote the whole thing up at the airport.” Daria straightened her back, the steel was back in her spine. Whatever weakness Abby had uncovered was gone now. “And you know what? I was more terrified writing that guide than I’d ever been in my life. I’ve seen the aftermath of a friend committing suicide, I’ve climbed a mountain, I’ve been bitten by a venomous snake, but writing down instructions on how to start a fire scared the shit out of me. It also lit a fire in me.” Daria pointed at her chest.

“The families who wanted to get home lost it first. Screaming, crying, kicking and punching. They had the most to lose as the flights all cancelled at the same time. Then something happened. I’m not sure what, but people started showing their phones to each other. Some breaking news or something. That’s when it happened. The blind panic. People ran in every direction; they attacked each other. I could see their brains pinging out ideas – steal a plane, run for the hills, steal a car, loot a shop. They all went nuts.” Daria kicked a stone along the empty road.

“I picked up someone’s phone, stole a map and some bottles of water, and ran for it. I couldn’t get out. Fighting everywhere. Police started

shooting people. So I hid. I waited but eventually I looked at my phone. That's when I saw the breaking reports. Millions dead in one day, all over the world. I knew then I'd never get back home. I didn't move. I don't know how long for. It felt like days. I waited until it was silent. When I emerged, the only sound was the wind blowing garbage and clothes flapping about on the dead. I stole an airport buggy and quietly made my way to the dam."

"Quietly made your way here?" said Abby. "We'll pick that up later."

"Fine. Otherwise satisfied?"

"What did you do? What was your job?"

"Professional diamond thief."

Abby crossed her arms.

"My job isn't what I am," Daria sighed. "Aren't you so much more than your job? Why does it define you so much?"

"What was my job?"

"I don't know." Daria's humility softened her tone.

Abby rolled her eyes. "I was a freelance writer, but had to work admin jobs to pay the bills."

"I was a fucking office monkey at a travel firm. I booked flights for other people to escape the everyday. A dead-end job in a disappearing industry." Daria picked up her suitcases and stomped off.

"Thank you," said Abby. She went to hug Daria but Daria shrugged her off with a gentle wave of her hand.

The sound of the roller suitcase Daria tugged behind her echoed out across the deserted street. A crow cawed overhead on a powerline. Daria walked around a skeleton and past a sign that read 'welcome to Belgrave.'

*

They loaded the ute with suitcases full of clothes, netting and ropes. Daria made some extra room for five six-foot-long planks of wood.

"This is the fifth or sixth time we've picked up wood from Bunnings, and I know it's not for the New Town wall," said Daria softly.

"Indulge me," said Abby. "It'll all become clear. I'll take you to see my little project when it's done."

Daria opened the driver's door but paused. "Wanna drive?" Her voice strained as she asked. She was self-conscious of her fumbled attempt to clear the air.

"You go for it. I like the white-knuckle ride that is your driving." Abby smiled as she got in and Daria's shoulders relaxed. Order restored.

They bumped along the road out of Belgrave and back towards the more remote area of the dam. Daria drove around fallen branches and over potholes, weaving through rusty car wrecks. Then she slowed down.

“What’s going on?” asked Abby.

“We had that storm last month – remember the one that nearly blew the whole town away?”

“Yeah, so?”

“I thought I saw something last time we drove back this way, but the bush had overgrown everything. I was hoping the storm had cleared things up and it has. Look.”

Abby’s eyes darted about. “What are you looking at? I see old cars, junk and forest.”

“And a cherry picker.” Daria pointed. In the distance, weeds and vines wrapped around a red cherry picker reaching up towards the power line.

“What on earth do you want with that?” asked Abby.

Daria grinned. “Indulge me.”

*

The New Town gates creaked open. The ute bumped over the mud and rocks, the cherry picker in tow. The evening chill scrapped Daria’s skin as stuck her head out of the window. She slowed the ute down as they passed under the New Town sign. She hoped the cherry picker would ‘accidentally’ hit it. It didn’t.

Tobias, Hugo and Okal walked over, all of them looking serious and important.

Daria smirked and turned to Abby. “I bet they’re gonna ask about the cherry picker and why the hell we’ve come in the main gates before they ask if our mission was a success.”

“Probably. It is a little strange.”

Daria and Abby hopped out of the ute.

“Hey, gang,” said Daria. “A welcome crew for us, so thoughtful. What’s happening?”

“We need to deal with Chuck,” said Hugo. Tobias stood next to him, looking hungrily at Daria, as if he’d chew her leg off. Okal looked through her like she usually did.

“What do you mean ‘deal with’?” Daria scowled at him. “You don’t get to choose who to ‘deal with’.” She made inverted commas with her hands.

“It was a group call,” said Tobias.

“So what did he do?”

“He exposed himself,” spat Hugo.

“Exposed himself?”

“Daria, you're going to have to stop repeating what we're saying,” said Hugo.

“Sure, when you start saying something interesting.”

“A dog attacked and Chuck killed it. Then he dropped his jeans and waved his junk around like a flag,” said Tobias, failing to hide a smirk.

Daria burst into laughter, followed by Abby.

“It's not funny,” said Hugo.

“Oh, lighten up,” spluttered Abby, still laughing.

“Yeah, what she said,” Daria put in. “Christ! You know it's ridiculous if even Abby isn't offended – she's the biggest sweetheart here.”

“We are trying to build a new world here, and that behaviour is dangerous, especially to the teenagers and we've got babies to think about soon. What example must we set them?” said Okal.

“Seriously, what's going on here?” Daria shifted her posture into attack mode. “We are living in the new world. Billions dead, dog attacks, low food and low medicine. We've got pregnant women and so many other things to think about, and we're having this conversation?”

“Chuck adds a uniquely unstable element to our community. We have planted the roots of civilisation and Chuck is...” Okal paused and stared at the ground. “Unacceptable.”

“He is a poison,” hissed Hugo.

“Chuck clearly has a mental disability.” Daria's tone leapt up a few notches. “He's a total love when you get underneath all that porn obsession. He lived through the end of the world, and he's a little broken – hell, aren't we all? How can you have a civilisation if it isn't inclusive of us all?”

“But none of us is a danger to the women and children here,” said Hugo.

“Neither is Chuck? He's not a paedo or a rapist, is he?” exclaimed Daria.

“But he could be –”

“And I could be president of the new world.” Daria interrupted.

“You would never be president of the world, Daria,” said Hugo.

“Why not?” Daria leaned into Hugo.

“Beaus—”

“I believe we are off-topic,” interrupted Okal. “We voted while you were away.”

“Can you stop voting on things when we're not here?” Daria said slowly, trying to calm herself down.

“The vote was pretty unanimous,” said Okal.

“So it wasn't unanimous, then?” said Daria.

“The majority voted.”

“Even with our votes?”

“Yes, you were still five people down.” Okal went to look at her notebook to confirm.

“Fuck me, five votes, that’s a slim win. Technically three votes, because you didn’t count Abby and me.”

“It’s still a mandate. We thought you might have objections, so thanks to Hugo’s strong leadership, we decided we wanted you involved to help decide the punishment.” Okal flipped open to her records.

“Fine, I’ve got a punishment—”

“Again, we’ve voted,” interrupted Okal and read from her notebook. “You’ve got three choices: exile, jail for a year or relocation.”

“What’s the fourth?” asked Daria.

“There is no fourth.”

“How about rehabilitation? How about understanding?”

“Why do you care so much?” asked Tobias.

Daria wanted to pull her hair out. “This is the new world. We all survived the end of the last one and when that ended, so did all the bullshit. And this is bullshit.”

“The vote’s final.” Hugo smiled at her. The smug smile of someone who has won.

“Fine.” Daria lifted up her top and jiggled her boobs about like a burlesque dancer.

Everyone’s mouths fell open. Abby covered her eyes.

Daria tucked her shirt back into her jeans. “Everyone,” she announced “I need a vote to judge my punishment. That’s how it works now, right?”

The council stood still, mouths still open. Tobias smirked.

“Your crime is different,” said Hugo.

“Fuck you it is,” Daria shot back. “I exposed myself in public. And I didn’t even kill a dog. Actually, how the hell did he kill a dog?”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Hugo.

“He squared off against it on the wall, the dog went for him, and he dodged and swung it off the side,” explained Tobias. “The dog hit the ground real hard, whimpered, and Joy stuck a knife in it for lunch.”

“Wow. Nicely done!”

“You see, he’s full of surprises,” said Hugo. “He could be a paedophile. He must prove to us without a doubt that he is not a danger.”

“That’s bullshit,” snapped Daria. “That’s like me saying you love getting blowjobs from goats. I can’t prove it, but you can’t disprove it either. So you’ve gotta prove to me, right now, that you don’t get blowjobs from goats.”

Hugo shifted his stance uncomfortably. “That’s ridiculous.”

“I’m waiting.” Daria crossed her arms.

“Of course I don’t.”

“How do we know that? I mean, we’ve got goats in the pen, you’ve got lots of opportunities, no one is there watching them twenty-four-seven...”

“Me getting sucked off by a goat and Chuck being a danger are two different things,” Hugo shook his head and glared at Daria.

“I’d say that someone who enjoys a goat going down on them is a danger too.”

“Daria, that doesn’t happen. I don’t do that.”

“And Chuck has never done what you are accusing him of.”

“But he publicly exposed himself.”

“As a victory dance after a near-death experience. Hugo, you ever heard of this thing called context?”

“As enlightening as this conversation is, I’m afraid we have a democratic decision,” said Okal stepping between them.

“Okay, said Daria. “I call for a vote on my trial and punishment.”

“I second it,” said Abby. “Bitch needs to be taught a lesson.” She burst out laughing.

“Abby!” exclaimed Daria. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard you swear. I love it.”

“Fine,” muttered Hugo. “You leave us no choice.”

He rang the assembly bell.

*

Okal unfurled the emergency assembly banner slung between two posts that formed a stage. The last emergency assembly had been for the Year of the Dog. Daria shook her head as Okal brushed the dust off the banner now.

All of New Town waited and gossiped. Everyone had paused their jobs, from washing to farming, and had settled on logs and picnic chairs. The sun hung low, the hills in the distance faded to purple. The breeze chilled Daria’s neck.

Chuck sat next to Daria, grinning at her. He passed her the first few pages of his new comic book. *The Adventures of Daria the Space Queen*. No porn. Just illustrations of a spaceship landing in the forest outside New Town, the area mapped in immaculate detail.

On the stage, Hugo took his place behind a lectern. “Christ,” whispered Daria. She caught Abby’s eye in the crowd and mouthed, *Lectern. Fancy.*

Hugo launched into his opening remarks about community responsibility. Okal countered with the need for expression with moderation.

It was all incredibly dull. Finally, Okal gestured for Daria to join them and speak at the lectern.

“If we are going to sentence Chuck for the same crime, I should be sentenced to the same punishment,” said Daria. “Erm... End of speech.”

She sat back down again.

“Very well,” said Hugo. Daria began to imagine Hugo as Eddy Izzard, a British comic who had dressed in drag and liked to over-pronounce simple words for comedic effect. Through that lens, everything Hugo said was hilarious. Daria tried to keep a straight face.

“The floor is open for comment,” said Hugo.

“Daria is one of our best fighters and scavengers,” said Tobias.
“Chuck is neither of those.”

“But he is an artist,” Daria piped up. “Have you seen his latest non-porn adventure comic? Evidence A.” She held it up, then paused. “Can we have evidence?”

“No. I think we’ve all heard enough,” said Hugo.

Abby put up her hand. Hugo nodded in her direction.

“Daria is fiery,” said Abby. “Chuck is strange. Okal is organised. We all bring our thing. If we didn’t, we’d be the dullest place on earth. We might as well kill ourselves, because we’d be too boring to represent the human race.”

“Agreed,” said Hugo. “But it doesn’t change the fact that they’ve both broken our code of conduct. Time to vote.” Hugo’s hurried tone shifted to annoyance. “All those in favour of punishing Daria the same way we are going to punish Chuck? Raise your hand.”

More than a hundred people awkwardly shifted in their seats. About a quarter of the crowd raised their hands immediately. “Right-wing assholes,” muttered Daria under her breath.

“Okay.” Hugo’s voice was softer now. “And all those in favour of no punishment.”

Everyone else raised their hands.

“Now that’s done, I’d like to add a vote,” called Tobias.

“You can’t do that. It’s not in the charter,” said Okal.

“All those in favour of speeding up the council leadership cycle, to replace Hugo with Daria with immediate effect?”

A clear majority raised their hands. Okal scribbled in her note book trying to keep up.

Hugo opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Daria was horrified. “Tobias – no, how could you?”

“Daria, dear leader, you are the boss for the next month,” he replied.
“Don’t kill us all.”

Daria gazed at the crowd like she’d been hit with a bat to the head.

“Daria,” mumbled Hugo. “You need to form a council of five of the fifteen people in the elected pool. You need to...”

“I know the rules, Hugo.”

“Great, so let’s sort a few things out then –”

“Actually, I’ve got a better idea.”

Daria stood and approached the lectern.

“It’s getting late, we’ve all had a long day, but we are all alive, and I can’t remember the last time we celebrated that fact. So let’s light the barbeque and have a few drinks and unwind, shall we?”

“Your first priority is a party?” asked Hugo.

“Absolutely it is. Fire up the cherry picker.”

Most of New Town’s citizens clapped, some tutted and folded their arms, yet all of them queued for a drink. The generators whirred into action with an injection of gas. The twinkle lights flickered on. The teenagers hand-cranked their iPhone chargers and plugged in speakers.

Daria and Abby waited patiently at the cherry picker. Dale, the engineer tasked with turning it on, ran his checks.

Daria bopped on the spot. “You know none of us have been higher than the watchtower? And how tall is that... Fifteen feet?”

“And the moon is out. It’s going to be magical,” said Abby.

“I miss getting on an airplane – the view, and space,” said Daria.

“This forest, amazing as it is, it’s claustrophobic. My eyes can’t stretch.”

“Okay,” said Dale. He flicked a switch, and the cherry picker lights blinked on. “Got her working. Hop on – one stick goes up and down, the other to the side. You can’t go wrong.”

“Thank you, Dale!” Daria couldn’t hide her excitement. She and Abby boarded, then Tobias pushed his way on.

“Tobias, be nice, or I will push you off when we get to the top,” said Daria.

“I’ll be a saint.”

Daria laughed.

“Okay, you got me. I’m a big kid too, I wanna see,” said Tobias.

Daria played with the controls; the picker lurched about.

“You ain’t planning some kind of suicide pact, are you? If you are, I’ll get off now.”

“You’re right; you can get off now if you want to.” Daria smiled, then fixed her attention on the controls. After a few simple steps, the picker started to ascend.

“Wow!” said Abby as they surpassed the height of the watchtower. The forest opened up before them. The moonlight washed through the undulations of the valleys and hills, the earth unfolding like the grooves on a vinyl record.

They climbed higher, and Abby gripped the cold metal handrail. Flat, dark patches emerged beyond the forest. Not a single light. They looked north to the towns and suburbs they'd scavenged and almost picked dry. Then, to the horizon, to the black hole that used to be the city.

"You can see one lit match from six miles. There really is no one out there," said Tobias.

The picker jolted to a stop. Daria looked down. A crowd had gathered beneath them, chatting and laughing amongst themselves, shouting questions:

"What do you see?"

"Are you gonna jump?"

Daria smiled. If her month of leadership only had one moment to remember, she wanted it to be this one.

The lights of New Town lit up like a landing strip, their rickety homes tightly packed along the top of the dam wall. To the east, the rolling forest, the city sprawl and the coast. Tobias and Abby cracked jokes with the crowd below. The picker kept rising. To the north, Big Hill. No one liked going up there. It was a nightmare to walk up with no roads and nothing but the state park for miles. But from the picker, for the first time, she could see further than Big Hill, into the far north.

Daria blinked a few times; her throat dried up. A weight pulled at her chest.

The dysfunctional family that snaked along the top of the dam was about to change.

This was the last moment of this world, the world she'd created and loved. Abby and Tobias were teased the crowd. Abby started a *Romeo and Juliet* skit. Daria let them enjoy it for a moment longer. Then her trembling hands fumbled for them in the darkness.

"Guys," she whispered. "Seriously – *guys*."

Abby and Tobias turned around and followed her gaze, fixed to the north. They froze.

"What were you saying about a lit match?" asked Daria.

Their mouths hung open.

"Th-that's a lot of matches," stammered Tobias.

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