

THE BOY OF HALVES

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**When the people decide to live,
Destiny will obey,
Darkness will disappear
And chains will be broken.**

Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi

Chapter One

The workshop was no place for a child. It was a deathtrap; a warren of sharp, heavy and toxic things; metal tools hanging precariously on hooks, rusting saws, teetering stacks of splintering wood and large tins emblazoned with the image of a skull and cross-bones.

The little girl sat towards the back of the room, past the burnt remnants of a large spider and in-between a time machine in the process of being recycled for parts and the tattered remains of a flying carpet. She sat cross-legged, dark curls curtaining her face and narrow shoulders tense, staring fixedly at something which lay among the rusty nails, bolts and wood-chips strewn across the concrete floor. Nearby, a young man in overalls glanced up from the large machine he was ministering to and at the sight of her sitting there so still and quiet, his brow creased. Before he could do more than make an apprehensive movement in her direction however, his attention was called back to the machine which had begun to judder threateningly, making some ugly clanking and hissing noises.

The little girl paid these no attention. Instead she bent further forwards, digging blunted nails into her palms, intent on whatever it was that had caught her attention. At the moment when her eyes began to bulge, her shoulders shaking with the strain, something lying amongst the detritus on the floor glinted. For a single instant, one of the screws lying near her left foot seemed to twitch as though summoned by the ghostly pull of a distant magnet. The girl redoubled her efforts, clenching her jaw and leaning further forward, her whole being concentrated on the small metal object in front of her. It could have been a trick of the light – or of our own straining eyes – but in response, the screw shimmied for a moment and then seemed to blur, as though it were vibrating at great speed.

The girl's face lit up, her dark eyes flashing and her expression oddly animated; part excitement, part triumph, but part something else too. It was the look of someone doing something they knew they weren't supposed to. The look of a small child playing with fire.

A minor explosion from the workbench made her jump, and as if released from extraordinary pressure, the screw shot across the room, pinging off a metal lamp and along a row of jangling tools before driving itself into the far wall amid a little cloud of plaster dust. The lamp, sent spinning with the impact of the screw, now collided with a half-empty paint can which teetered uncertainly for a moment before beginning a lazy, but purposeful trajectory over the edge of the shelf. Underneath the shelf, the young man in overalls was frantically

twisting a series of dials on his machine which had begun to spark and rock alarmingly from side to side.

Two things happened at once. The paint can hit the floor and burst open, slinging a graceful curve of cobalt blue across the room as the machine made a ferocious chundering noise and spat a huge jet of orange – and disconcertingly, green – fire from its nozzle.

The boy in overalls was covered in a showering of sparks, ash and cindered metal as well a generous splattering of blue paint. Before he could do anything more than yelp and hold his hands over his head, a cloud of thick, black smoke erupted from the machine and enveloped him

Leander stumbled forwards, coughing and gasping as the smoke billowed around him. He staggered out of the cloud and bent double, hawking up the worst of the scum from his lungs before smearing the tears from his soot-blackened face and blinking until he could see again. When his vision blurrily returned, what he saw was Gunthral Belarous-Scrool, arms crossed and soot dust coming to rest lazily across the shoulders of his immaculate three-piece suit, a river of vibrant blue paint snaking its way towards the polished toe of his left loafer. Leander swallowed and brushed the filth across the front of his overalls, succeeding only in smearing the thick, black muck around.

"Leander Reizman," Scrool drawled, a sharp edge to his voice, "what exactly do you think you are doing?"

Not wanting to risk a glance to the back of the room where his little sister was playing, Leander dragged his face into an innocent smile,

"I was just..."

"That is an expensive piece of equipment, Reizman. It is worth considerably more to me than you are. If something happens to that flame thrower, I don't care who your father is, I will string you up from the rafters of the main theatre myself. I will watch until your legs cease their jerking and then, when you are good and dead, I will throw your limp, lifeless body in the incinerator. Is that abundantly, exquisitely and luminously clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"You shouldn't even be *looking* at that thing without the Prop Manager present. Where the hell is Kammerham?"

"He's... Out pricing materials for the Krackenhall job..."

"Why the hell is he doing that?! That's *your* responsibility, Reizman. What, he can't even trust you with something as simple as..." Scrool bit his lip and stamped his foot impatiently. "That heap of junk has to be ready in less than a week and the blasted thing is still vomiting poisonous gas. This theatre's reputation is at stake, god damn it. Find Kammerham, get him back here, make him finish the job. I will not ask again."

"Yes, sir." Leander agreed pleasantly, trying to hold Scrool's gaze so that it didn't go wandering off in the direction of Elena sitting somewhere behind him.

Scrool's pale eyes narrowed, searching for just enough recalcitrance to legitimately punish him, but Leander kept his expression mild and his smile beatific.

"Fine." Scrool spat, giving him a scowling once over, "And for goodness sake get this place cleaned up."

He turned to leave and Leander was just letting out the breath he'd been holding when Scrool stiffened, spinning slowly back to face him.

"Reizman."

"Yes sir?" Leander did his best to keep his voice light.

Scrool's eyes had traveled over Leander's shoulder to where Elena sat muttering to herself amidst the broken props at the back of the room. He sucked in a sharp, horrified breath.

"What the hell is *that*?"

Leander cleared his throat, "What is what, sir?"

Scrool pointed savagely to where Elena was bent over something in her palm, her lips moving incessantly.

“*That.*” Scrool spat through clenched teeth. “Why is *that* in my theatre?”

Leander, smile fixed firmly in place, felt his jaw stiffen, “She won’t be any trouble, sir. It’s only an hour or so until the childminder can...”

“Get it out, Reizman. Now.”

“Right, it’s just...”

“Your continued presence in this establishment is already hanging by an extremely weak thread. You start infecting my beloved theatre with...” He clenched his teeth, apparently unable to allow the word to pollute his mouth.

“It was an emergency.” Leander assured him, only the barest hint of ice in his tone. “There was a problem at the nursery. It won’t happen again.”

“It had better not,” Scrool spat, “I have been magnanimous, have I not? But if you continue to push your unsavory heritage in my face...” His lips twitched in distaste. “This is the last time, you understand? You *ever* bring that in here again and I assure you it will be the last thing you do as an employee of this theatre.”

Before Leander had time to decide whether to incinerate his burgeoning career by punching his boss in his pointy face, Gunthral Belarous-Scrool had thrown a final disgusted look at Elena, spun on his heel and stalked out.

Leander took a deep breath and went over to check on Elena, who had somehow got hold of a tiny screwdriver and was muttering at it as though it had personally offended her. He negotiated the return of the screwdriver for a red notebook and, scanning her immediate surroundings for anything else unduly sharp or poisonous, turned back to the flame-thrower which continued to huff unhealthy, little jets of foul-smelling smoke. Despite appearances, he was sure he was nearly there: The flame jets worked, the nozzle was no longer combustible and the pumping mechanism was functioning beautifully. Now if he could just get the fuel compound right, fix that poisonous smoke problem...

Leander bit his lip and unconsciously rubbed black filth further into his face. He would have to clean the entire mechanism and then perhaps try a compound with less Benzene. He couldn’t imagine what was making the flame green though, that was a worry.

A loud snort followed by a rattling snore broke Leander's train of thought. Tiptoeing over to the fabric storage cupboard he peeped in to where The Prop Manager, former Sergeant Kammerham, – honorably discharged with medals for bravery no one believed he possessed – lay sprawled across a pile of old curtains, head tipped back, mouth open and his giant belly rising and falling with his uneven, raggedy breaths. The entire cupboard smelt like Schnapps, flavoured with just a hint of urine.

When Leander had arrived at The Belleview fourteen months previously, clutching his school portfolio and star-struck dreams of grandeur to his chest, he had believed he was being apprenticed to the famous husband and wife design team, renowned in Zentral's theatre circles for their technical mastery and artistic vision. Instead, he had been ushered into the secretary's office and informed in an undertone that *Mrs. Famous-husband-and-wife-team* had just run off with the Mago Stage Manager and *Mr. Famous-husband-and-wife-team* was not taking it so well. It quickly became apparent that Kammerham's wife had been the brains of the operation and in her absence – and during the grip of a steepening economic crisis, no less – it now fell to Leander to try and maintain the Prop Department's reputation, while fanning the illusion that the steamingly alcoholic Kammerham, was in fact in charge.

Unsurprisingly, there had been some failures; the helicopter crash that put a leading lady in the hospital was unfortunate and the huge mechanical spider that burst into flames causing truly gut-squirming amounts of damage had been a low point, but despite not inconsiderable challenges, Leander flourished. He was smart, dedicated and just enough of a wide-eyed fantasist to accomplish things that an older and wiser technician would have left well alone and although he received none of the recognition – The Prop Manager was not so insensible that he would allow his pupil any of the praise – the joy of bringing marvelous, nonsensical things to life more than made up for the menial salary, rather desperate working conditions and occasional brushes with death by immolation, explosion or asphyxiation.

Sensing the draft from the open cupboard door, Kammerham let out deep groan and rolled himself over, mumbling something incoherent before lapsing back into peaceful snores. Assured that his boss was not likely to choke to death in the immediate future, Leander pulled the door closed and went back to work.

Chapter Two

The child-minder had come to pick Elena up at three and by the end of the day, Leander had successfully diagnosed the green flame problem and finished cleaning the mechanism for the next flame-throwing trial on Monday. At six o'clock he set a small, wind-up alarm to go off at five past six, slipped it inside the door of the fabric storage cupboard and, checking his pocket for the umpteenth time to make sure a certain folded slip of paper was still in there, headed home for the weekend.

Leander's father's house was in West Zentral, one of the city's 'nicer' neighbourhoods, where even in the midst of economic freefall, the residents drove shiny new cars and paid other people to clean them. The Reizman family's fortunes had begun to dip long before those of The Puresion Republic caught up, but while they had had to cut back in all other areas, his father had drawn the line at moving somewhere more affordable.

Leander rattled his key into the rusty lock and stepped into the dingy hallway, navigating his way around the pile of disordered shoes and the slalom of his sister's wheeled toys. He threw his coat over the pile on the end of the banister but kept his scarf and gloves on – his father was remorseless about their use of the heating and nothing short of the taps freezing up would convince him to waste money on frivolities like avoiding frostbite.

Elena would not be dropped off for another half an hour, giving Leander just enough time to put dinner together. He was going to make his sister's favourite: Rolladas Romana, a family favourite consisting of flat bread rolled around cheese and drowned in a rich, spicy tomato sauce topped off with bacon and more cheese. The secret ingredients were butter, ketchup and cream in quantities which, to the unpracticed eye, might seem excessive.

The red light on the answerphone was blinking and Leander hit the button as he opened the fridge to seek out ingredients. The little machine whirred asthmatically before giving a curt beep.

"Councillor Reizman?" A woman's voice snapped, "This is Mrs. Beecham from Garden Green Nursery. As you are aware, Elena's disruptive and violent behavior in class has become increasingly worrisome and after the incident today, I'm afraid we had no choice but to issue her with an official reprimand. As I think I explained in my last two letters, we strongly recommend that you consider placing Elena in a facility better suited to addressing

her... Issues. In any case, as you know at Garden Green, we operate on a three-strike policy, so that..."

Leander, who had been staring at the machine with rising indignation, now hit the stop button so hard it was sent clattering to the floor. When he'd received the call to come and collect Elena that morning, he'd assumed she'd simply made a mess or caused some sort of commotion – she was hopelessly clumsy after all and was often getting in trouble for knocking things over or breaking things. Disruptive however, she was not, let alone violent.

After glowering at the little machine for a moment, he retrieved it from the floor and dumped it back on the kitchen counter, the red light still flashing ominously. This shouldn't come as a surprise, he told himself bitterly. He had also struggled at school and it wasn't until he took up karate lessons in year four that the fights he was supposedly starting petered out and his reputation as a trouble-maker subsided along with them. Even at the height of his infamy however, his mother had always been on his side, marching down to defend him against teachers, other parents and anyone else who messed with her boy. His father, it seemed, couldn't even be bothered to answer a letter in defense of his only daughter.

Well, if Councillor Reizman couldn't find the time, Leander would simply head down to the nursery on Monday and set these teachers straight himself. His sister had as much right to a decent education as her pale, blonde schoolmates and he would not let them forget it.

Half an hour later, garlic heavy on the air and his residual rage mostly worked out on the now very finely chopped vegetables, Leander was just camouflaging some peas inside the mess of cheese and bacon, when a knock at the door announced Elena was home.

The child-minder, a permanently exhausted-looking woman with two children of her own and another three she watched on various days, smiled wearily as Elena dived past them both into the house, already part-way into a narrative on her afternoon spent finger-painting. Leander thanked her distractedly, trying to remove Elena's shoes before she trod paint all through the hallway and graciously accepting the various pieces of colorfully smudged paper she thrust at him. Shoes safely extracted, coat removed and artwork dispensed with, his sister allowed herself to be herded into the kitchen.

"Rolladas!"

"Yep, extra spicy, just how you like them. You definitely won't need any more chili this time..."

“More chili!” Elena demanded happily, clambering onto her chair.

“Well okaay, but you tell me how much...”

This was a well-practiced game of chicken: He would pretend to overload her food with chili flakes and she would demand more and still more until he claimed to run out.

“That’s it Ella, that’s the lot. Chili plants all over the world are crying and begging for mercy.”

Elena jammed an overloaded spoon of dripping bread into her mouth and grinned mischievously around the gungy mess,

“Not hot,” She declared victoriously.

Shrugging defeat, Leander retrieved his own plate and the substantial quantity of paper towels that would soon be necessary. Elena ate with a reckless abandonment that would make a coyote blush, getting a fair proportion of whatever she was consuming across the table, her face and trapped in her curls. They had both inherited the same mess of hopeless, black ringlets from their Maga mother and Leander was almost indecently glad to have some echo of his mother's looks, over his father's Puresion pale skin and blonde hair. His skin had a hint of honeyed tan to it too, but his sister's complexion was even darker, much closer to their mother's and at times, the way she creased her brow or coughed or laughed was so startlingly reminiscent of the older woman she had never known as to choke him.

Elena had gone quiet, which was never a good sign, and looking up from his plate he saw that, far from being taken in by his clandestine peas, she had eaten around them and was now staring at the sullen, green vegetables in the fixed way she had when she was trying to use her powers. She caught him looking and bit her lip cheekily. She was not allowed to practice magic – their father was merciless on the point – but Leander just grinned and watched as she tried to persuade the reluctant peas to rise. She had inherited the gift from their mother, also a Telekinetic, who on occasion, husband safety absent, had loved to delight her wide-eyed son with impromptu magical performances: Toy soldiers made to march, a model plane flown around the room, dipping and circling as though it were in an air show. Elena was not yet four, but could already move cornflakes, crisps and had once almost managed to turn the page of a book they were reading. Leander, like his sister, was half Mago, but unlike her, couldn't so much as lift a matchstick. This failure had burned him

deeply when he was younger and had spurred him to take matters into his own hands, so that now, after years of practice, he had turned himself into an expert trickster: A sultan of suggestion, a master of misdirection an adept conjurer of pennies, disappearer of cards and reader of minds. It was all fake of course, but that didn't stop it being extremely effective when the occasion called.

The peas remained unmoved and uneaten and both Reizman children were forced to accept defeat and pad upstairs to get Elena ready for bed. She refused a bath on principle but generously allowed him to use a wet flannel on her hands and neck and then talked constantly about penguins the whole time he was brushing her teeth so that more toothpaste ended up on her and him than in her mouth. It wasn't until he was helping into her pajamas that he found the bruises on her arm. Tiny, purple marks with deep pink crescent moons at their centre: Child pinch marks. He spun the arm to get a better look, causing his sister to yelp in surprise.

"Elena," He tried to keep his voice level. "What are these?"

She glanced down and stared at the marks as though she'd never seen them before.

"Ella, did someone hurt you?"

She shook her head, twisting her arm out of his grasp and picking up her one-sided negotiation on the number of bedtime books he was to read her as though nothing had happened.

"... and then the one about the Tiger and then the one..."

"Elena," he interrupted her quietly, crouching down in front of her and pushing the curls from her face, making her look at him. "Did the boys at nursery do this?"

Another categorical head shake.

"Who then?"

"On accident." She stated with some conviction.

"Who did it by accident?"

“Tomas.” The word out, she clapped her hands over her mouth, eyes guilt-wide.

Tomas was the childminder’s younger son, a couple of years older than Elena. He’d always seemed like a nice, quiet boy.

Leander tried to keep the fury out of his voice, “Has he done this before?”

This time Elena shook her head so hard she almost fell over.

“Why did he do it?”

A confused stare.

Breathing in deeply, Leander ruffled his sister’s curls and negotiated three bedtime stories in return for her getting into bed. He would talk to the childminder about it tomorrow and if it ever happened again, well, little Tomas might not survive the adventure.

He was just reading the third and final story of the night when a key in the door announced his father’s return. He felt Elena stiffen, but continued to read the story about the tiger that had lost its roar as though nothing had happened. There were some clattering sounds from downstairs, the fridge opened and closed, a cupboard door slammed. Leander was still reading but now neither of them were paying any attention. Then there were footsteps on the stairs, the fourth stair from the top squeaked and their father’s tread reached the landing and approached Elena’s bedroom. The footsteps paused outside the door and Leander paused too, both children looking up expectantly. The moment hung. Then there was an uncertain creak and the footsteps continued along the landing to the study, the study door banged shut, there were some shuffling sounds and a chair scraped.

Leander finished the story and, the tiger’s roar safety restored, kissed Elena goodnight and tiptoed into the hall. The door of his father’s study was closed, light streaking out from under it. Leander imagined himself knocking, his father calling irritably for him to come in and then the older man’s resentful expectancy as Leander explained about the pinch marks on his sister’s arm and about the message from the nursery school teacher. He already he knew he wouldn’t knock. It was Friday night and he had places to be – the altercation with his father would have to wait. Fingering the piece of paper in his pocket, Leander turned into his own

room and debated the mess of clothes across his floor with a discerning eye. He couldn't wear just anything. Not tonight. Tonight was going to be special.

Chapter Three

It was Friday night and like any serious gambling addict, always convinced their luck was about to change, The city of Zentral was dragging itself off the sofa, fixing a false smile on its face and hauling its sorry ass out onto the bitterly cold February streets. Waiters lit candles for tables no one would sit at, bar staff cleaned glasses that hadn't been drunk out of since their last clean and bouncers readied for fights that no-one would have the energy to start. A few looked up as Leander passed, took in his black curls, the battered boots and the faded jacket with tails and dismissed him as another filthy, Mago punk who might pester their customers for change or try to sell them worthless trinkets. On another night, Leander might have paused to have some fun with them, but he didn't have time right now. He was late as it was.

Manuel was already waiting when he arrived at the café. His friend looked sleek as ever in a narrowly-cut, striped shirt and some figure hugging jeans that made the most of the arse he was so proud of. His blonde hair was swept back into a wave and the new moustache he was working on was waxed into symmetrical scoops above his lips. He raised a nonchalant eyebrow as Leander shrugged off his coat and dumped himself into the chair opposite.

"Dear Leander," His friend sighed, "late again?"

Leander glanced at the clock above their heads, "Not even by a half hour, dear Manny, that's practically early. Anyway, you always say you have more luck pulling when I'm not around."

Manuel rolled his eyes, "As if that matters anymore – I haven't had so much as a snog in months. This town is getting dangerously celibate."

"Economic free-fall not much of an aphrodisiac?"

"Apparently not. If I'd realised the economy was going screw up my love life this badly, I'd've been a lot more alarmed by all this talk of dropping points and defaulting and whatever. As it was, I ignored it completely and am only now starting to understand the repercussions."

"Small businesses closing, rising unemployment, a steady increase in petty crime..."

"Don't be ridiculous, darling, I couldn't give a dilated rat's sphincter about all that, I meant my increasingly desperate state of sexual starvation."

Leander, smiling, managed to wave down the aging waiter and order a soda.

"So where are we going tonight? Somewhere you can pull?"

Manuel sighed, "I should be so lucky."

"Just as long as it's not the YMA again, that place feels like a funeral parlor."

"How about Kitsch Klub?"

"They always ID you, Manny, we never get in."

"Speak for yourself. Pajaritos then?"

Leander rolled his eyes, "An *under-eighteen* club? Come on, it's full of fourteen year-olds."

"Panorama bar?"

Leander groaned.

"All right then princess, where would *you* like to go?"

Leander shot him a sly grin, "I was thinking, we've been hitting up the same, old Downtown spots forever – we're not kids any more – maybe we should try somewhere *completely* new..."

"Sir wishes to experiment?"

"Possibly..." Leander extracted the slip of paper from his pocket and waved it enticingly.

Manuel's arched, blonde eyebrows raised a notch higher. "And what, Leandy dear, might that be?"

Leander shimmied forwards in his seat and lowered his voice, "You remember Max?"

"From school? Skinny Maga chick you were desperately in love with."

"I wasn't *desperately* in love with her, we were friends, that's all."

"She got kicked out for doing magic and stopped taking your calls. You mourned for about a year."

Leander opened his mouth to argue and then shrugged. "Well anyway, yes *that* Max."

"What about her?"

"Well, I bumped into Alexa on the tram the other day, she just got a job at some big Mago music hall, and guess what? It turns out that Max works there too..."

"Leander, is any part of this going to be remotely interesting to me?"

"I promised Alexa fifty Kroners if she could sneak us in."

Manual placed his glass down on the table and keeping his eyes on Leander, leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms.

"Sir wants to go to *Trelladore*?" He breathed in deeply and closed his eyes for effect, "Is sir, by some miracle, unfamiliar with what is likely to happen to two under-aged, broke Puresions on that side of the Periphery? Or, if sir is indeed au fait with the probable repercussions of a trip out East, may I ask as to sir's plan to avoid us getting caught, robbed, beaten up and put on the first tram back West?"

"Shall I take that as a maybe?"

"You may take that as a Hell No, dearest. There's simply nothing in this world that would persuade me to risk my pretty arse in Trelladore."

"That," declared Leander, "sounds like a challenge."

The café had a single battered pool table and three games and five sodas later, Leander excused himself again to try calling the number Alexa had given him. It was engaged.

He returned to the table and shook his head, "Still no answer."

"You're serious, aren't you? About this whole night-out in Treladore thing?"

"Oh come on, you're not even a little curious?"

"Of course I'm curious, but look at me..." Manuel gestured to himself, his pale skin, blonde hair, tailored clothes. "You may be able to sneak through with your curls and that gypsy get-up you're sporting, but they'll spot me a mile off."

"Everyone knows the rich Puresions head there too. You'll just have to wave some cash around. It'll be fine."

"Darling, I'm a trainee journalist, I earn less than most road sweepers."

"How are things at the paper?" Leander began setting up the balls for their next game.

"Dull. It's all politics, politics at the moment. The whole ugly Mago question raising its tedious head again and that strange little man, what's his name? The Values Party leader who hates everyone?"

"Brinkman? So right-wing he can barely stand up straight?"

"That's him. Well he's going red in the face making lots of noise about something, those commie nut-jobs from the Workers' Party have got their panties in a twist about something else and our beloved middle-of-the-road Chancellor is looking older and more confused by the minute. As far as I can tell, everybody's making a tremendous fuss and getting themselves all excited about nothing."

"Manny, are you sure that journalism is the right career for you? You're really not very interested in... You know... News..."

"I know, but it was either this or following daddy dearest into the family business and I'm far too glamorous to sell health insurance."

Leander sighed,

“Do you actually listen to anything that comes out of your mouth?”

“Sometimes. Oh look! Looklooklook, is that Jacob?”

Leander turned to see a blonde guy wearing a shiny, gray suit that was too big for him come in with a troupe of similarly over-dressed Puresions. They all sported political rosettes and were laughing and slapping each other like a winning college football team.

“Who the hell is Jocab?”

“Captain of the volleyball team and of my heart, dearest. You must remember him?”

“Nope.” Leander watched as the newcomers spread themselves over the café, feet up on the tables like they owned the place. His distaste increased.

“Which flag is he flying?”

“Oh come on: Values Party, has to be with that suit. Brinkman likes them broad, blonde; a taste we share...”

“People like that are enough to make me vote Workers United.”

“You wouldn't dare.” Manuel snorted, not taking his eyes off Jacob. “Vote commie and your father would have you euthanized.”

“He's going to let you come on to him, Manny. Not with all his mini-mes around.”

“Probably not,” Manuel mused, “but I'm bored enough to give it a shot. Why don't you have a pop at one of those chubby eleven year-olds sitting over there in the corner simpering at us, they look desperate.”

Leander stuck his middle finger up as his friend rose with a wink and strolled off towards the newcomers, watching irritably as Manuel insinuated himself with the blonde and his friends. It wasn't hard. Manuel was pale, light-haired and well-dressed. He looked and spoke like a good Puresion should and except for his sexual orientation, fitted right in. Leander often wondered how the hell they ever became friends in the first place.

It didn't seem like Manuel would be coming back any time soon so Leander tried Alexa's line once more. Bumping into her that morning had felt like fate and he wasn't prepared to pass up the opportunity to see Max again, not even for one evening.

Manuel's assertion that he had been obsessed, was not as far off the mark as Leander might like to admit. From the day Max had arrived at their school, half way into year nine, he had been entranced. He was not the only one. The new girl's dark looks, exotic accent and unknown past caused quite a stir; it was whispered she was a mind reader, she was on the run, she'd killed a man, she was a spy from some barbaric Eastern nation, accusations Max herself refused to confirm or deny. For the rest of his year group, her derisive aloofness and refusal to answer basic questions, soon cooled curiosity into antipathy, but Leander was not so easily deterred. It had taken months, but he had chiseled through her wall of mocking indifference and slowly, they had become friends.

Then she'd disappeared. He heard she'd been expelled from school and when he'd called her house, her foster sister Alexa had told him she'd run away. That was almost two years ago and until that morning, when he'd happened to bump into Alexa on the tram, he'd had no idea what had become of her.

The phone rang three times and was answered by a gruff male voice. Leander hung up with a sigh. Alexa had warned him against asking for her by name – he had to wait until she picked up – but it was already nine o'clock, what if he couldn't reach her? He knew from bitter first-hand experience that young Puresions who risked an evening trip to a Treladore would wander the streets for an hour, be bullied out of all their money by street performers, sold dried herbs or sherbet under the guise of drugs and then be herded back onto the last tram before the night really got going. While Treladore was, in name, merely another district of Zentral, for all intents and purposes it might as well have been a foreign country, or even another planet. Without Alexa's help, there was no way they were getting in.

He headed back to their seats and with nothing else to do, ordered yet another soda. On the neighbouring table there was a discarded copy of *The Bugle*, the tabloid newspaper Manuel worked for, and Leander retrieved it, flicking idly through the pages. Sports, another bank going under, some gossip about a singer having an affair and then on page five, a headline reading: 'Innocent girls bewitched into sordid Mago sex ring'. Beside it was a blurry black and white photo of a room, the floor marked with the five-pointed star surrounded by candles and other indistinct paraphernalia. Next to this, were the mug shots of three dark-skinned

young men glaring malevolently at the camera. Leander scowled and pushed the paper away from him.

“Well that was a bust.” Manuel appeared at his side looking tight-lipped. “Let's get out of here, this place is killing my buzz.”

“Fine with me,” Leander agreed, downing the last of his soda. “Just let me try Alexa one last time...”

He dialed the number and listened to the line connect without much hope. Then, after only two rings, it was picked up and Alexa's voice sing-songed, “La Impressionánte” making him jump in surprise.

“Alexa? Hey it's me.”

“Who the hell is me?” She snapped.

“Lee, Leander, from school.”

“Oh shit, I forgot I gave you this number, what's up?”

Leander felt the barb but ploughed on,

“Me and Manny were thinking of heading your way tonight? Can you get us in?”

There was a long pause.

“Alexa?”

She sighed, “Yeah OK, fine. Forty minutes, in the alley by the kitchen door. You're not there on time, I'm gonna bounce.”

“Fine, great, thanks, I really...” But she had already hung up.