

*"Writing is an expedition into madness; a quest for a peculiar Utopia."*

**Virgil Hare**

**LEEPUS**  
**DIZZY**  
**DIZZY**

A flock of approximately 15 black silhouettes of birds in flight, scattered to the right and slightly below the word 'DIZZY'.

**Jamie Delano**

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**LEPUS BOOKS**



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# 1

**BludKlash** coming on.

At one end of the dripping underpass—four silent BurkaBabes with horror dogs on chains. A cohort of HateBoyz at the other looking for frontation.

*Caught out in the killzone. Heed the need to fade.*

One veiled sister giggles weird—slips leash from playful puppy. The dog fast and loose. Bouncing muscle. Snot festoons. A shrunk-down snorting bull.

*Sidestep swift. Veronica into shadow.*

The dog snuffles and bustles past on the scent of HateBoy groin. Nut-clamped human dogchew howls. BurkaBabes ululate—let go another mutt. Nervous bruvvas flicker machetes backlit by sick moonlight.

*Wall-slide snot-slick tile. Ooze towards the glimmer.*

Shrieks and bellowed battle-cries reverb in the dark. The electric thrill of violence flashes razor stripes.

*Out! Scramble the garbage-avalanche stairwell up into the stink smoke of NoGo.*

∞

Night rain in the rookeries. A street of dead-car tortoises—carapaces rusting.

*Step steady down the centre-line. Imagine a destination.*

Cross-legged on a cardboard prayer mat beneath a naked tree—a ragman. Damp dreadlocks brightly beaded. Placard hung round

scrawny neck—crooked grey-skin finger underlining its scrawled message.

*Step closer. Read.*

Kik me for a wanna. Kil me dedd for ten.

A barricade of worn-out white goods defends a cul-de-sac of maisonettes. Trashcan brazier smouldering. Yard guard in sandbagged shelter. He looks up from handheld porno—picks up a pistol crossbow.

*Eyes front. Maintain casual momentum.*

∞

Footbridge over railway.

*Zigzag up ramp. Blood pumping. Midway across—a rush.*

Weird fingers hooking diamond-mesh of rusty no-jump cage.

*Look down.*

Track-veins gleam in deep red cutting. Motion-quake trips palpitation. Disturbs vision. Excites bowel. Iron sings and whistles wet. A midnight SafeTran punches through. Shrieks—dives into howling tunnel.

*Look up.*

A mile away—haphazard geometry of dark buildings piled behind the Fence. Floodlit razor-wire spike-collar encircling anxious civic throat. SafeCity—a municipal reservation. Strivas toiling reassured. Predatory poors at bay.

*Catch a breath. Taste sour electricity—a blueness on the tongue.*

*Sway dizzy.*

*Dizzy.*

*Dizzy.*

∞

Freemart on washland outside River Gate.

A squabble of late-home privs jams the priority channel. Flash-highs dissipating. Clammy hands thrust passfones. Curfew-waiver

timeout soon—they need to get checked in.

Thrill skills hiss the revellers—pass out scratchcards. Casino suckabags of freeroll chips. Cocktail tokens. Whore maps. Burga vouchers. All kinds of brightly coloured shit to suck up unspent playkrip—encourage repeat business.

Alongside—the loser lane.

GateGoons shove daywork shufflas into scantraps. Swipe tags. Feel them up with sniffer wands. Run random biometrics—stash rejects in the cage. Make the deportation quota. Snag a tasty bonus.

*Pick an exit route.*

*Hesitate uncertain—another rush squirms sick. Tightens perineum. Assaults hypothalamus.*

*Hallucination bubbles pop pop pop. Heartbeat paradiddles.*

*Surrender to distraction.*

*Veer into market aisles.*

∞

A complexity of subprime commerce. Tables. Blankets. Barrows. A spilled cornucopia of crap.

Tarp-caves stuffed with dead tek. Blind TVs. Cable tangles. Multifarious media. A million old fones.

A musty suffocation of jumbled pissy clothes.

Bent cutlery. Cracked crocks. Stopped clocks.

A sprawl of car parts.

Battered bikes.

A wall of batteries.

The sickly smell of streetmeat—gut-rot foodcarts steaming. A sweaty tattoo tent.

The musk of mildewed books.

*Keep moving. Nothing to see there.*

∞

A constellation of LEDs dapples a battle booth—blood-spray patterned curtains obscuring smack and grunt. A fiva gets you fifty if you beat the monsta down.

Erbwitch squats in the entrance of a plastic-patchwork bender—peers up through cataract curtains. Need heart pills? Love powders? No-pain potion? Stiff-dick lotion? Any kind of poison to settle up your scores? Got all those things and more here to ease those old-man sores.

Fuck tents flank an oozing alley.

Kid shitting in puddled shadow.

Temptation in a candlelit vinyl boudoir. She smiles—uncovers tattooed breasts.

*Turn away. Move on.*

Temptation pouts—hip-sways and rolls down pants.

*Move on now.*

Temptation shows off swinging cock and hairy balls.

*Too late. Shadow swooping.*

Black-tooth scab-lip snarl. Spittle fleck. Bubble eyes and grease-spike hair.

Low-held blade gleams: Gimme!

*Act compliant. Slip hand into deep coat-pocket.*

Expectant desperado extends palm—thinks it might be Christmas.

*Bring out PocketPyro. Thumb-spark fuse and toss.*

A butane-fire halo—oiled hair flaring. The desperado yelps and flaps. Flame contagion ignites fuck tents.

*Leave now. Get lost.*

*Tread quick on shadow heels. Out-pace incandescence.*

*Walk.*

*Walk.*

*Walk.*

*Walk mapless into madness. Misery. Despair.*

∞

Dawn.

The sun heaves up behind Craphills—blears through a chink in filthy cloud and emits a stale gust of light.

Another phony new-day promise.

Shitgulls launch up screaming yellow. The sky filled with off-white wheeling. A refreshing squall of guano.

*Walk on.*

Rotcarpet softens underfoot concrete.

*Hawk. Taste brass. Spit.*

*Creep of surveillance prickling nape.*

Not law. Gulls would mob an overseer. Blind beady eye with blood and feather. Mashup dizzy rotors with splintered hollow bones.

It's skavvas squinting from their burrows in the screes and scarps of waste. They're sniffing threat potential—assaying scrap value.

Could be they got a verminator out to check his snares—out to snag a battla to keep and savage-up. He'll run it in the playpens—make himself good gold.

Could be they got a peedofuk looking for some tight. Or just some stupid lost meat wandering bad ground. Something to jump out on. Something to drag down. Shoddy shit to be recycled for a snap of krakkle.

*Duck through scrub out of skavva sight. Follow stream. Cross bombed-out NuHope zone.*

*Step surer here on known ground. Things starting to make sense.*

∞

Stencilled sign on terrace gable: WORLD'S END CAFÉ 400 yards.

*Looking good. Maintain course for imminent safe touchdown.*

Downhill glide past burned-out gallows-dodger barracks.

Across an allotment jungle—old girl foraging veg.

*Give her a friendly wave.*

Just sixty or so fluttered heartbeats now to breakfast chillpill. Caffy. Smokes. Recovery womb at Mother Mellow's. Warm oblivious downtime. Wake with consciousness rebooted—faculties restored. A cognitive renaissance.

But the world pitches. The world yaws. Progress wobbles—stalls.

*Pull up! Pull up!*

Dead dog in puddle. Oilslick iridescence swirling.

Closer.

*Pull up!*

Pratfall splashdown. The lap and slap of tiny waves. A bubbling of breath.

The forager applauds the hapless idiot.

Staccato handclaps fade ironic into black.

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## 2

‘Good night then, is it?’

‘Caffy?’ Leepus ignores Mike’s question—waves to the inscrutable dark flesh-mountain behind the bar. Mother Mellow fills fat sails—billows into motion.

‘Yeah.’ Mike tosses gauntlets onto cup-ringed table—unzips greasy leather breastplate. ‘Eggs’n’rashes too. With a double side of fungo. And a gristle burga—heavy on the ketchup.’

The leaky espresso machine hisses steam. A bulbous shadow moves in the mist.

Mike scrapes out a chair and sits—shakes a smoke debt from the wrapper slid across by Leepus. ‘Two hours through the rain. Half a dozen checkpoint face-offs with arsey militia cunts. I need a full fuckin’ breakfast.’

‘Two minutes,’ Mother Mellow wheezes clattering plate into microwave.

Leepus sparks Mike’s weedstick. ‘Have to buy it yourself, mate. Do my bastard stack.’

‘Fuckin’ mug.’ Mike inhales—coughs harsh. ‘That explains the filthy backyard weedsticks and general air of dejection. So what about the stab-wound eyes? And the fuckin’ corpse-stink clothes?’

‘Dizzy, I think. Maybe krakkle. Maybe a bastard cocktail.’

‘Old habits still not dead, then?’

‘Spiked,’ Leepus says tight-lipped.

Mother Mellow delivers Mike’s breakfast—lumbers back to the bar.

Mike shovels in a lurid forkful. Yolk drips. ‘Then you’re a double cunt, aren’t you? For going into shit town unprotected. And getting head-raped and fucked over.’

‘Spontaneous operation, mate. Get a ping on that doorstep organ-loan bastard—one who forecloses on Tattooed Sally’s eldest’s kidney when Sal loses her gig at the KashBak hospice and falls down on her payments?’

Mike sees a rasha with gusto. Leepus lunges—scoops smokes clear of slopped caffy ruination. ‘Fool fancies his chances in Sick Dick’s Big Fat Sunday live game,’ he continues. ‘Feel the urge to buy in too. Kick his parasitic arse and win old Sal some compo.’

‘Only a twat plays Sick Dick’s solo.’

‘No choice. Backup’s fucking AWOL.’

Mike masticates a gristle-wad—swallows. ‘Personal shit to take care of.’

Leepus wonders—decides not to ask. ‘Anyway,’ he says, ‘fish is an open book. I’ve got him down verbatim well before the dizzy hits.’

Mike bread-mops surplus ketchup.

‘So—’ Leepus smoke signalling for attention. ‘Hand sixty-nine. Prick’s got a neck-pulse telling he’s good pre-flop, but likely not that good. We get a bunch of chips in. Flop hits him. Hits me harder. All-in shove. Snap call. Nice—except the idiot sucks out. Badbeat on the river, Mike. Nothing fucking worse.’

‘Yeah there is.’ Mike extracts a trapped connective-tissue strand from between pearly canine and bicuspid.

It looks like meaty dental floss Leepus observes idly.

Mike’s long-lashed stare is green-eyed and unflinching.

‘What?’ challenges Leepus. Window light picks up the old fragscar question-mark curled around Mike’s cheekbone. Unfortunate disfigurement or curious enhancement he wonders—not for the first time. ‘What’s worse than a river badbeat?’

Deadpan Mike finger-rolls freed floss—flicks and says, ‘Having to listen to some sad cunt replay his bad card-karma blow by arse-ache blow, when you don’t have a clue what he’s whining about due to not

giving a soft shit about poka.’

‘Sorry,’ says Leepus. ‘Want to hear what happens next?’

‘Dunno. Will it make me laugh?’

‘Maybe the part where the horror-dog chomps HateBoy bollocks?’

‘Ho ho.’

‘And the rascal whose ugly head I set on fire so he burns down half a market?’

Mike frowns. ‘How?’

‘He just goes flapping and screaming off crazy through some fuck tents.’

‘No. How’d you torch the silly cunt’s head?’

‘PocketPyro.’

‘You successfully deploy a novelty weapon? Now I am fuckin’ impressed.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Impressed you don’t get charcoaled in a blowback—those things are ten years past their use-by.’

‘You never mention that.’

‘You don’t buy them if I do. Never dream you’ll find the balls to spark one.’

‘Dizzy makes me reckless.’

‘Yeah—that’s what I recall.’

Leepus leans forward and narrows his eyes—drops the butt of his smoked-out weedstick into the dregs of Mike’s caffy. It sizzles and dies sodden. ‘You done?’ he asks her cold.

Mike smiles sweet. ‘Sorry—it’s only ‘cause I care.’

‘I mean are you done eating?’

Mike shrugs.

‘Because you might want to wipe off the ketchup lipstick,’ Leepus says and stands. ‘It’s just a bit unsettling. Makes you look like a mad

fucking sex-clown.’

Mother Mellow’s playing roulette on a fone.

Leepus crosses the desolate bar. ‘Bit slow in here today.’

‘Right.’ Mother Mellow eyerolls the redundant comment. ‘Punters clock your sick mate’s ride outside—lose their appetites.’

Leepus watches Mike fixing her face in stab-knife mirror-steel. ‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘Mad cow’s a liability but I just can’t shake her off. No clue why she’s turned up here this morning.’

Mother Mellow sniffs. ‘I give her a shout when I find you dizzy-daft outside—face down in rotten-dog juice.’

‘Only yourself to blame, then.’

‘Don’t mention it. You’re welcome.’

‘Okay. What’s the damage?’

‘Rescue. Resuss. Vomit cleanup and disinfection. Womb time with sedation. Weedsticks, food, lost trade—even at mate’s rate that’s two-fifty.’

Leepus shrugs—grabs the fone from Mother Mellow and fingerslides chips onto random numbers. He passes it back with virtual wheel already spinning—says, ‘That hits, you’re covered with gratuity on top.’

Leepus leaves Mother Mellow staring and follows Mike outside. Hoarse exultations wheeze through the old café-door clattering shut behind them.

‘What the fuck?’ Mike cocks her head. ‘You picking up reads on fones now?’

Leepus winks—folds into the armoured sidecar. ‘Shot in the fucking dark, mate. Even idiots sometimes get lucky.’

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### 3

Leepus up on the roof of his high tower looking out. Lichen continents creep tectonic over the parapet concrete. His fingertips trace their coastlines. There's a time when he can name them and the nations that comprise them. But geography is unstable now—globally rebranded. He can barely recognise Inglund.

A sudden ragged clatter. Imperfectly combusted biodiesel gusting skyward.

Jackdaws lift from treetops—call raucous disapproval riding twitchy on the wind.

Mike coaxes the stuttering engine into throaty eloquence. Lurches the massive bike and sidecar around the compound turning-circle. Blares out through the briar-tangled anti-vermin fence.

The portcullis rattling down automatic.

Fumes persist as the noise recedes down the rutted tarmac lane. Booms through the scabby coagulation of rural habitations locally known as Shithole. Fades over Hanging Hill.

Jackdaws plane weightless back into position above twiggy filigree—extend hooked-claw landing gear to touchdown dark on brittle perches.

Effortless precision.

Air dank—autumnal. Leepus sucks up a restorative lungful.

A ride in Mike's combo is never relaxing. Trace dizzy eddying through cortex. Exhaust stink. Intolerable savage vibration. Five miles more and he's plucking his own damn eyes out.

Whining for mercy is futile. Hardboiled Mike's soft spot for her

hand-built pride and joy is borderline maternal—complaint is bound to be perceived as extraordinary bad manners.

Mike does not appreciate bad manners. Bad manners demand payback. For strangers—a short sharp shock of physical retribution. But for a transgressor she decides ought to know better—the remorseless application of protracted mental torture.

Leepus' masochistic tendency is marginal at best. He judges it best to bite his tongue—adopt an aspect of cheerful endurance.

Something invisible stirring the air. A damp chill pushed up the valley. The pressure wave provokes the wind turbine—its blades turning in elegant motion. Alternators whirl. Amps trickle. Batteries effervesce minutely.

Leepus shivers—grasps cold steel rungs. Climbs the ladder down into the re-purposed old water tower. Pistons hiss hydraulic—the heavy hatch-lid lowering slowly closed above his head.

The tank room quietly cavernous—close to hypothermic.

Leepus opens the stove. A hint of dull red in the ashes. He stuffs its empty belly and increases carburetion—watches glimmer glare to inferno.

Heat penetrates his heavy greatcoat—irradiates grateful bones. Leepus stares—mulls the odds on the water warming sufficient for a survivable shower before he crashes.

In the meantime—food.

Leftover broth lingering in the cold safe. He fetches it—sets it to warm on hot cast-iron and then stumbles to the cracked-leather sofa to kill time rolling a smoke.

∞

'What's this?'

'Huh?' Leepus parts gluey eyelids.

The tank room air is cool again. There's an aftertaste of cremation—the rank memory of smoke. A diminutive figure looms over him plump in layered coats—stares down accusative with scorched cooking pan inverted. 'Waste of top bleedin' food, that,' says Doll. 'Think our Duane risks 'is arse poachin' GreenField veels for you to

burn to ashes when there's babes starvin' down in the 'ole?'

'Sorry.' Leepus rubs eyes. Swings legs from the sofa. Winces at imminent bladder rupture. 'Moral compass on the blink.'

Doll's lip-ring twitching disdainful.

Leepus tries to stand. Tries again and succeeds. 'So this is a nice surprise,' he says with curious eyebrow arching.

'I always come on a Wednesday. Wednesday's my day, ennit?'

'It's Tuesday, Doll.'

'No it ain't.'

'You sure?' Leepus hobbles to the bathroom. 'It's Monday when I nod.'

'Ave to take your word for that—but I wouldn't be surprised. Obvious you've been at it.'

'At it?' Leepus standing over the toilet—anticipating relief.

'Badness. Getting off on dirty shit again.'

Pan-clatter in kitchen sink. Tap-water splashing. Leepus swaying grateful—his spring rising sympathetic.

'Ave a squint in the mirror,' nags Doll. 'Eyes like constipated cats' arseholes.'

Leepus gushes heedless.

'An' close that bleedin' door.' Doll's words eroded. 'There's 'orses that piss quieter.'

∞

'I make you eggs.' Doll nodding toward kitchen table.

'Cool.' Leepus sits—waits.

'I'd get stuck in or they will be.'

'Spoon? Fork?'

Doll huffs and jangles in a drawer. Hands over a random utensil. Holds on as he accepts it.

Leepus tugs. 'Thanks,' he says belated.

'No problem.' Doll bundles away—slams open the dumbwaiter stacked with logs. 'Hope it bleedin' chokes you,' she says enfolding an awkward armful.

Leepus munches impassive. A peripheral flicker on the monitor high-mounted on the wall. The remote on the dresser. He reaches it over—pans the rooftop *camera obscura*.

Red kites rising spooked from a hillside gorse-clump beyond the lane.

Leepus tilts up—zooms.

Blue overseer beacon blinking in a gyre of carrion birds.

'Fukkit.' Leepus spits out a crunched eggshell fragment—switches to infrared.

A green-laser godfinger incising the screen. It's pointing down cold and steady—accusing a suspect gorse-clump.

Leepus thinks about it—opts for procrastination. He abandons his dirty plate on the table—follows a trail of bark scabs into the tank-room dense with smog.

Doll squats under the cloudbase. She's feeding a log to a feeble smoulder—nurturing an appetite for fire in a reluctant cold-iron belly.

Leepus coughs. 'Fukksake, girl.'

'Some twat only leaves the woodshed door wide-open, dunnit? So the rain's pissin' in for days.' Doll clangs the stove door shut—stands and smears back a lank forelock with sooty finger. 'And less of the bleedin' 'girl'. I'm forty-three year-old, mate. Got three granbabs back indoors.'

'And I could be your dad.'

'Bollocks.'

Leepus on the sofa rolling up a smoke. 'Don't judge a book by its cover, Doll. I'm functionally dead inside.'

'Our Em's first boy, Ryda. He likes to look at books.'

'Beat the kid within an inch of his life and throw them on the fire.'

'What's wrong with books?'

Leepus shrugs—fires-up his weedstick.

'I'm thinking maybe you've got a few old ones knocking around,' says Doll unbuttoning one coat-layer. 'That the lad could have a lend of?'

'Thinking?'

'Something I hear.' Doll's eye probing. 'That there's a time when you're to do with them. You know. Before. Back then.'

Leepus obscure behind his smokescreen. 'Forget it, Doll,' he says. 'Then gets wiped in the dizzy years. Now there's only now.'

Dolls sniffs disgruntled. 'Alright, whatever you say. No 'arm asking, is there? Our Ryda's a pretty goodun. Not like his fuckin' dad.'

'Pleased to hear it. Your Em slips up badly there.'

'Can't blame the girl for gettin' took in by mental Jago. She fancies him for a right bold bastard—sly enough to jump the fence on those fanatics that raise him and 'ave it away with a chunk of their treasure. Who knows years later he'll flashback all mad fuckin' godly again—whip our poor Em naked up the yards for turnin' his 'ead with her 'fanny magic?'

'Prick's no trouble now, though?'

'Still skulking up the woods for all I know. Whatever Mike tells 'im on her 'nature walk' sorts his nasty shit out.'

'Mike knows how to make a point.'

Doll smiles appreciation studying the stove. 'Fire's caught.'

'Yeah,' says Leepus. 'I might be warm in another hour.'

'Reckon I'm done for today then,' says Doll hovering expectant.

'Sit for a bit.' Leepus offers the weedstick.

'Okay.' Doll takes it—props her arse on the arm of the sofa. 'But last time I have a smoke with you I go off without getting paid. Don't think you can tink me twice.'

'Treat me as a bank.'

'Yeah.' Doll inflates her bosom. She holds—scans the hazy concrete chamber and snorts smoke-jets down her nose. 'Must be nice to be a solid gold bastard snug up 'ere in his castle. I'm surprised you're not

more cheerful.'

'Me too.'

Doll cocks her head—delves and scratches an armpit. 'I could do you a nice shag if you fancy it? Only an extra fifty?'

'I don't.'

'Let a girl down gentle why don't you?'

'Not personal,' says Leepus moving to his strongbox. 'There's a time you don't have to offer twice. These days I just don't.'

'What—not ever?'

'Can't be arsed.'

'Fair enough.' Doll buttons up—waits.

Leepus counts out a stack and hands it over.

'See you next Tuesday then,' says Doll riffling chips as she drifts for the lift.

'Don't you say your day is Wednesday?' asks Leepus without thinking.

'Gotcha!' Doll smirking—the concertina-gate rattling shut. 'The old ones are still the best, mate,' she says disappearing beneath floor-level.

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## 4

'Name?'

'Leepus.'

'Leepus what?'

'Just Leepus.'

'D. O. B.?'

'Uncertain. Data rinsed. Reduction minus a few decades—give or take.'

'Stakeholder registration?'

'Disinvested.'

'Entitlement?'

'Expired.'

'Means of support?'

'I play cards.'

'Whose colours?'

'Strictly freelance.'

'Scrutinised by OurFuture on any prior occasion?'

'What? The College not omniscient, lad?'

The prefect noncom stiffens—says, 'Respond in English only.' The cohort behind him shifts leery—students hefting weapons.

Leepus reads adolescent gestures. Eye-flick in shadow of helmet visor. Stabvest breastplate thumb-hooked—forefinger pointing at voltwhip. The prefect feeling horny. The illiterate twat wants to jolt

him.

Leepus opts to muck—stoops and loses a couple of inches.

The prefect leans in with his headcam saying, 'Detail your last forty-eight hours.'

'Asleep.' Leepus coughs.

'For a full two days?'

'Been feeling a bit rough.'

'Rough?'

'Bringing up blood and stuff.' Leepus hacks ragged—spits out a whirling phlegm bolas. The prefect eyes it dangling from the twisted metalwork of the portcullis. Leepus picks up his thread—says, 'Erbwitch down in the village sorts me out with some magic powder. Puts me into a fucking coma.'

The prefect inching back then saying, 'Any activity out here you observe? Maybe you hear a vehicle? Some other kind of commotion?'

Leepus shakes his head—leans on a concrete doorpost.

'You reside here alone?' The prefect craning—scanning the ivy-veined tower.'

'Yeah—except for the bats in the lift shaft.'

'Wildlife harbours disease.'

Leepus shrugs—summons another expectorant spasm. 'Can we carry this on inside?' he wheezes. 'Damp air's killing my chest.'

The prefect's nostrils flattening reflexive. 'Preliminary investigation concluded,' he says. 'But scrutiny is ongoing.'

Leepus watches the students remount their armoured TacTruk. The vehicle snarls. Steel screams as it guns free of the mangled portcullis—turns and bellows off down the lane in a rattle of pulverised tarmac.

Leepus thinks about climbing the hill. He decides to give it ten minutes—rides up to the tank room instead for a smoke. When he gets there his fone is ringing. He finds it in the pocket of his greatcoat hidden in the wardrobe by mischievous Doll—answers it,

'Wrong number.'

'Cunts gone?' Mike's voice phasing through static.

'Heartbeats off the premises. Don't know about the drone.'

'Cloudbase is low but I can't see it.'

'You coming in?'

'Best not. Meet me.'

'Where?'

'Woods.'

'Fuck's sake. It's dark in twenty minutes.'

The fonescreen flashes Call Ended.

Leepus shrugs into his greatcoat and heads for the lift. He diverts to the armoury locker—pockets liquid capsaicin ampoules and a couple of poppers for good measure. Feral dog-packs hunt in the forest. The brutes like to run down humans—occasionally eat them.

∞

Leepus out on the hill. He noses through the plastic screens around the crime scene. A gorse clump felled at ground level—cleared vegetation heaped. Exposed turf glistens black and greasy. Bad-meat molecules taint his tongue.

A plodbot swivels on its tripod logging data. Leepus winds in his neck—spits and clumps up the hill.

Daylight dissolved in drizzle. The forest dark in the valley—a neighbourhood wilderness. Leepus descends gloomy—picks a random route through dripping trees to the derelict Cabin Café car park.

A straggle of buddleia erupting through ancient asphalt. Fronds drip around crouching Leepus. Eroded lettering suggests his space is reserved – in a long-lost quaintly sentimental era – for the convenience of the disabled.

Leepus checking out the café ruins. Red glow—a breeze fanning embers in tumbledown shadows.

Leepus infiltrates the collapsed-wall logjam—acquires a new

perspective. Mike's bulk dark against dying fire. He hisses a soft greeting—moves closer. Mike unresponsive. Head slumped—chin on chest. Mike asleep on watch.

Leepus is amused. He sneaks up behind—delivers a toe-prod to Mike's kidneys.

Mike topples.

'Fuck!' says Leepus jumping back as Mike's body impacts the fireplace—sends sparks mosquito-dancing brief above dark sizzle.

Leepus' heart's a panicked hare trapped inside his ribcage. Sudden branches rattle. He turns to find buddleia looming—tumbleweeding from shadow.

'Ah!' Leepus dives—scrabbles through damp leaf-litter in search of an improvised weapon.

'Easy.' Mike's voice from foliage. 'Sorry if I spook you, mate. Don't lose your fuckin' arse.'

'Pissoff,' says Leepus down on hands and knees. 'Shit's not even funny.'

'Right.' Mike shrugs off her camo cape and stoops—rolls the stumpwood avatar from the fireplace and recovers her scorched leather. 'I follow you in from the tree-line—you don't have a fuckin' clue. Mine to shag at will, mate.'

Mike scattering kindling on embers—raising tentative fire.

A mouldering banquette in a ruined log-wall corner. Leepus brushes off debris and sits down sullen. 'Fucking paranoiac,' he says. 'You could just come to the tower.'

Mike arse up head down—lighting twin smokes from nascent flame. 'Don't think so, mate,' she says standing and moves to join Leepus on slimy vinyl. 'Sweaty College pride'n'joyboys squirting all over the gaff? I might do something silly.'

They smoke. Leepus waits till Mike opens her mouth to ask—then says, 'I pick up the drone but get distracted by Doll looking to top up her wages. By the time she's safely out the door the hill's already captured. I decide to mind my own business.'

'Overseer finds something murky?'

'Must do. Tags it for ground patrol.'

'You see what it is?'

'Not really. They have a squint and screen the site.'

'That's when I roll up. I'm scoping from Fox Covert.'

'Bodydump is my best guess. Grass is all black and nasty.'

'They haul it out in five plastic bags. One little wanker pukes.' Mike lights a smoke. Leepus takes it from her. Mike lights another—continues, 'And then they have a sniff around—decide to canvass suspect towers?'

'I'm halfway down to let them in and they've rammed the damn portcullis. No call for that shit, is there?'

'Classic force projection, mate. Cunts see a castle they have to crack it. My advice—rebuild stronger. Include a few IEDs.'

'Pretty sure pink-misting the Prefecture's finest counts as a capital crime. But it's probably fun at the time.'

'So—they chat you up a bit. Any intel on the dead meat?'

'Head Boy's pumping testo. Officer material—wants to make an impression. So I fold under minimal pressure, throw a bit of a coughing fit and put the fear of diseases in him.'

Mike frowns. 'Obvious this corpse is tracked—and well-enough connected to warrant search and rescue. Not what you need on your doorstep.'

'My sentiment exactly.'

'Right.' Mike stands—zips leather. 'I'd give it some serious thought, mate.'

'We can chew it over indoors,' says Leepus kicking humus to smother the fire. 'Maybe make some calls.'

'Another time, mate. Running late.'

'Not out here to visit then?'

'Nah.' Mike looks off into darkness. 'Just sliding through when I see the fuss.'

'What's up, Mike?'

'Stuff going on.'

'Stuff?'

'This and that. Nothing special.'

'Later then,' says Leepus too old and wise to press.

'Yeah,' Mike says fading. 'Mind how you fuckin' go.'

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## 5

A mile beyond Shithole—the river. A valley-side scrub jungle intervening.

The scorched stumps of watchtowers felled by fire—climbing weeds drag down rusty chain-link strung between them.

Twin rows of sooty concrete hut-pads with grass infringing. Their geometry disordered by a charred sprawl of fallen frames. Charcoaled wood decaying—velvet black mosaic eroding into mulch.

Leepus salutes the fortitude of the righteously assertive tactical-default commando that kicks off the first debt-slave rebellion—picks up the crumbled asphalt of Repayment Pathway #1. He pauses for a moment—appreciates the ambient dereliction. Then he strolls on down through the trashed infrastructure of the DebtShrink Honest Labour Park. Marches out past the exploded gatehouse. Stops where road meets water.

Lamppost tops chalky with bird-shit track the submerged roadway across the flow. Cormorants silhouetted on them—black flags hanging static above turbulent green.

The road re-emerging on the far bank vague through murk. Skeletons of drowned trees. The spire of the submarine church.

The river rising year on year—widening into mere. Wetlands oozing closer. Fish and fowl encroaching.

Leepus on the stonempath above waterside scrub-willow. Rats scuttle for cover in root clumps. Coots racket sudden—foot-slap alarmed across water. A red-eared terrapin slips from a log.

Terrapins, thinks Leepus. Since when do they live in Inglund?

A wall of vegetation defends a blackwater oxbow. Leepus negotiates a maze of weed-cloaked junk—arrives at a greasy wooden wharf. The rotten hulk of Bodja's houseboat floating a cable-length offshore.

A faded sign nailed to an alder: RING IF I NO U - FUKKOFF FAST IF I DONT!

Leepus picks up the hammer provided—beats the corroded cast-iron chunk chain-hung from its miniature gallows. Steely tintinnabulation cuts the swampy air.

Leepus gives it a couple of minutes—rings again. Bodja doesn't show.

A two-stroke motor echoing in stillness. An outboard on the river—puttering closer. Bodja nosing his skiff into the oxbow. His attention on the houseboat. Leepus lights up. Smoke catches Bodja's eye. He alters course and kills the motor—broadships the skiff to the wharf. 'Leepus?' he says blinking frog-like. 'What up? Got trouble, man?'

'Trouble?' Leepus raises an eyebrow. 'You'll need to be more specific.'

'Mike's not with you, is she?' asks Bodja peering wary.

'No.'

'Okay.' Bodja relaxes minutely—hands the skiff's painter up to Leepus. 'Don't see you down here for a while. Think maybe something's occurring.'

'Do you, mate?' Leepus loops the wet rope around a bollard. 'So what are you up to when I ring?'

'Just a bit of fishing.' Bodja clambers onto the wharf.

'No good?' Leepus sniffing—scenting only unwashed Bodja.

'Into a fuckin' monster. Catfish I reckon. Have to let it take my line or it sinks the skiff and eats me.'

'Obviously not picky then, those catfish?'

Bodja frowns—scratches manky beard with ragged nails. Dark residue in cuticles. Crusty tideline between fingers.

Leepus follows Bodja's gaze to the listing houseboat. 'Old wreck's still afloat then—or is it the mud-bank keeping her up?'

‘Couple of sprung planks to caulk when we get some working weather. Bilge needs pumping now and then—but I generally keep my arse dry, if it’s any of your business.’

‘Okay—just banta.’ Leepus shrugs. ‘No need to get the hump.’

‘All right for you coming down here to take the piss.’ Bodja sniffs disgruntled—musters a half-hearted comeback. ‘Leepus Tower still fuckin’ standing, is it? Bet you haven’t got round to rigging that lightning conductor yet.’

‘Slipped my mind.’

‘You’ll be sorry when you hear a bang one night and wake up carbonised.’

‘Maybe you can sort it when you’re over to fix the portcullis.’

‘What’s wrong with the portcullis?’

‘Traffic accident. Kids in a fucking halftrack.’

‘Welding job, is it?’

‘I’d say so.’

‘When do you want it doing?’

‘Soon as you like.’

‘Got jobs outstanding on the boat. And I’ll have to service the jenny.’

‘Come over tomorrow.’

‘Need a few chips up front—welding rods and fuel. Say fifty?’

Leepus measures off a short stack. ‘Should be seventy-five there. Get a handful of weedsticks too—improve your fucking mood, mate.’

‘Cheers.’ Bodja trousers the chips—steps down into the skiff and rewinds the outboard pull-cord.

‘Okay, mate.’ Leepus shrugs wry as the motor revs high—settles to a steady splutter. ‘I’ll be on my way, then. Better things to waste a day doing than bandying fine words with you.’

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Leepus trudges back up the hill through the pissing rain. ‘Fuck Bodja,’ he mutters under his dripping hatbrim. Bastard’s too far up

his own arse to offer hospitality on board—Leepus is soaked to the fucking bone now. But that's probably best in the long run—an hour in that festering houseboat's a proposition that likely proves fatal.

Even bathed in sunshine - an event not recalled by many - Shithole is not classically picturesque.

A few streets of abandoned artisan-cottage holiday homes repossessed by Blut of Inglund squatters in the aftermath of the Reduction.

Two-dozen sound old council houses strung sullen along Windy Edge preserving inbred village-bloodlines.

The enclave of unfinished StrivaHomz caged in rusty scaffolds. Flapping blue-plastic roofing. Plank bridges strung precarious across mud and flooded trenches. A few families of co-operative self-builders huddled despondent in un-glazed kitchen-diners awaiting better weather.

Behind a dark conspiracy of yew on a stonewalled barrow of ancestral bones at the ancient heart of the village: the Peasants' Party Palace—formerly St Peters. It's a shrine to godless pleasure now. Sexually energetic locals gather there on arbitrary shindig-days to indulge in joyous affirmation of community cohesion. Devotional intoxicants are imbibed—bonkers music relished.

And at the corner of High Street and Knacker's Lane overlooking the trash-filled duckpond: the Queen's Head on a Spike. His hat sheds water cold down Leepus' neck as he clocks the gory caricature of royal decapitation swinging over the door of the pub.

The past jumping out on Leepus—some arty anarchistic gal taut-arsed on a ladder. She hangs her rebel masterpiece—turns and flushes proud. Ribald Poors Militia lads raise sloppy glasses cheering.

It's one of those fleeting moments—a wildly optimistic recognition of a glorious but ultimately futile spasm of social-levelling with violence. Leepus buys the artist a drink—entices her to bed to revel in the slaughter.

Or maybe he just wants to. It's sometimes hard to tell with dizzy what really happens and what doesn't.

Leepus ducks into the snug. A dim fire flickers a faint welcome from the hearth. There's a comforting fug of weedsmoke marred by a pissy bouquet of wet dog. John Fox and Bob the Butcher turn from the bar to check him. Dribbling Dave's curled up poorly on the floor—Bob's dog lapping happy at pooled vomit.

The bar untended—Big Bethan in the corner passing slack time with video poka. The landlady looks from gambling machine to Leepus. 'Fuck me,' she squawks in greeting. 'Look what the rain flushes out.'

'Alright, Leepus?' Bob nods sly and lifts his empty jar. 'You're just in fuckin' time.'

'Thanks.' Leepus nods back. 'Mine's a caffy, mate.'

'Walked into that one, Bob,' John Fox says and chugs off his ale. 'Old Leepus ain't no fish.'

'Up himself is what he is,' Bob the Butcher says sour. 'Fuckin' caffy's liquid gold. What's wrong with regular bevvi?'

'Devil's piss,' says Leepus pulling up a stool. 'Look what years of drinking it does to you.'

Bethan gathers empty jars—ladles ale from a barrel and glances shrewd at Leepus. 'I'll be needing to see someone's gold on the bar before I put beans in the grinder.'

Leepus pulls out his chipstack. He measures a squat column on the sticky counter—sighs and tips it over.

'Nice one, mate.' Bob the Butcher is relieved.

'Pleasure,' says Leepus. 'Just don't blame me when you find yourself in the shitta one fine morning squirting out your liver.'

'That can't really happen, can it?' John Fox looking queasy.

Leepus shrugs. 'Just saying. Chance is yours to take.'

'Here,' says Bethan. 'I do my best, but the beans seem kind of furry.'

'Thanks,' says Leepus. 'As long as it's got some jangle. Get a jar in for yourself while you're at it. And Dave too—when he's feeling better.'

'Much going on up your ends then?' Bob shifts heavy on his barstool—adjusts the overhang of arsecheeks.

Leepus shrugs. 'Time passes, mate—thanks for asking. Any fun to be

had down here?’

‘Squad of fuckin’ snotface studs roll through yesterday. Aggy round the yards a bit—try to scare-up background rabblegabble on “the dirty disease-bag grizzle scrote who lives up in that scabby tower”.’

‘Daft Danny tells ‘em you’re alright, though.’ John Fox chiming in. ‘Just as long as we throw you a juicy priv virgin now and then.’

‘Yeah? They piss themselves at that, I bet,’ says Leepus.

‘Nah—but poor old Danny-boy fuckin’ does when the top stud gets into him with a voltwhip.’

‘Ouch,’ says Leepus passing more chips to Bethan. ‘Bottle of grog there for the lad when he stops twitching. Tell the dope I’m proud.’

‘What do they want then, up at yours?’ Bob not letting it go.

‘Mystery.’ Leepus gulps the last of his foul caffy. ‘Anyone got any special problems?’

Big Bethan shakes her head. ‘If they ‘ave then they’re not saying. I ‘ear every bastard’s troubles. Makes me right depressed.’

‘Other strangers about?’

‘Pack of tinkish scuttlas doorsteppin’ looted bits and bobs.’ Bob the Butcher spits disgusted. ‘Slippy little shits. Blink and they rob the eyeballs out your head while you ain’t looking.’

‘Steady, Bob.’ Leepus cocks his head. ‘There’s a clause in the Articles on ethnic slurs. Says they’re out of order.’

‘Fukkoff!’ Bob’s jowl wobbles. ‘No way that applies to fuckin’ tinkish scrotes. That’d just be mental.’

‘Yeah.’ Foxy sneers. ‘Anyhow, this one mucky little tart—can’t be more than twelve—says she’ll toss me off for twenny.’

Big Bethan aghast. ‘You never.’

‘Course not.’ Foxy smirks. ‘Like I’m going to pay you twenny for a hand shandy, says I—when the barmaid up the Queen’s only wants ten for a gobble.’

Big Bethan not amused. Her straight arm jutting across the bar—bursting Foxy’s nose. ‘Landlady, you cheeky sod,’ she says. ‘An’ I’d want at least a nundred.’

Leepus sidesteps as Foxy topples facedown onto flagstone. The dog barks surprise—sniffs and lunges eager after nose blood.

Bob the Butcher mirthful—struggling for breath.

‘Later.’ Leepus winks at Big Bethan. ‘Thanks for the entertainment.’

‘Don’t be a stranger.’ Big Bethan winks back. ‘Always glad to put on a show—for a minted old griz like you.’

Leepus is halfway out the door when a flicker catches his eye—the poka machine flashing alluring. He ducks back and feeds it chips—waits to see how the virtual cards fall.

Deuce. Another. Ace. Ace. Ace.

Full house—that’s nice, thinks Leepus.

Tinny electronic trumpets fanfare his good fortune. Leepus whips his hat off—holds it at the ready. The machine pukes a copious rattle.

His hat brimful—overflowing.

Big Bethan’s face a picture.

