

## The Thief and the Watchdog by Katya Bacica

As I shifted down the dark drop of the old Transfer shaft, my heart leaping, I knew I had to see the Priest. Tonight.

The package hung off my back, swinging lazily over the abyss. A whole mile of descending the maintenance ladder in near darkness and hot, unfiltered air; my limbs were shaking, my back screaming with the effort of the added weight. And once I got out, I knew I'd have to get back to the pawnshop, no matter how much I wanted to reach the bottom of this ladder and just lie down, sleep forever.

With all the sweat and grime on my hands, I was losing my grip. I'd told myself to count the rungs on the way up. Two thousand, five-hundred and forty-eight. Just so I'd know, in the dark, how far I had to go on the way back down.

Was it forty-eight? I was past exhausted, but if I dropped now, and I'd miscounted by twenty rungs, well... I imagined the sound my legs would make when they hit the bottom. I'd suffocate in the end, twisted and agonised down there, two steps from relative freedom, and then this whole thing wouldn't matter much anymore.

If I'd still had an implant, I could have set a damn counter. But I didn't; the Priest had seen to that with a scalpel and an unsteady hand.

If I let go now, my knees depended on the lack of human error.

I tried to shake the slick hair from my face, and breathed in. I could smell home: the damp, the salt, the fumes. I hoped it was real.

I dropped.

One second of oblivion and rushing air, then my feet hit the metal base. My legs buckled, and though they did not break, my balance was off, and down I went, the package landing hard and loud next to me. Far too loud. I lay still, winded, listening to the echo clatter up the shaft. Ten seconds, but nothing followed.

I couldn't stop. My muscles complained as I sat up, but I hissed through my teeth and fumbled around for the package in the gloom. There: the mass about the size of a small child but three times as heavy: bulky, metal, and old. Damaged? I wrenched open the bag. No. Intact. Tough thing to break, anyway. It would be my spine before this bastard.

I swivelled on my arse, and kicked out the hatch.

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Ten minutes later, I was wading through the shin-deep water of Leith Walk, avoiding the gaze of a man trying to sell me old tech from his doorway; his eyes were electric-blue with neo-narcotics. I'd strapped the package tight across my front, and I held it close, sheltering it from the mizzling rain like a mother.

The Transfer shaft had spat me out into a side-street near Easter Road, underneath an LED billboard advertising Cryo Insurance, with its famous bare-chested man blowing out icy, condensation-breath towards you through a diamond Californian smile. If you squinted past the glow of these billboards, sometimes, far above, you could see sparks of electrical discharge from the underside of the New City, glinting in the sky like comets and reflecting in the water. No real stars, of course. That underside had been our sky for ten years.

New Reekie, we'd called it. At the time, it meant defiance, pragmatism, and had just the right amount of self-deprecation in which all Scots were fluent. At the time, we thought the New City would be built for us, one mile above the original, as a haven. By then, Portobello was already underwater, and the lower streets of the Old Town had become canals.

It had only become clear about five years ago. We'd started to see the brochures, the posters, the ads streamed to our implants. Not just streets, but entire areas were missing from the designs. Their reconstruction of Leith was a gentrified fairy-tale, half the size of the original, and the boats there had no rust. Council meetings happened all over the city, and I remember one man in the front row raising a hand and asking, politely, why there wasn't a new Niddrie, nor a second Craigminty. That was the first time I'd seen the Priest: for all the calm in his voice, there was an indignant energy that pooled off him like radiation.

We knew then. We would never see that new place. New Reekie had been built, not out of necessity against rising sea levels, but rather a desperation to save the tourism industry the city was set to lose.

Of course, Layer 2 was never going to be 'Edinburgh 2'. It had to be cleaner, sharper, palatable, and most of all, nostalgic. Nothing would be damp, or half-hidden, or inaccessible. The rain would be scheduled, the transport impeccable.

And it would all be copyrighted. Even from its own people. The Council favoured this new theme park which would hold everything the visitor wanted: Victoria Street, the Castle, the Scott Monument. There, the Festival would run for two months, and Hogmanay for a week. After all, Layer 2 was not built to be residential. Anything that wasn't a shop, museum, or monument, was a hotel or rented accommodation.

The city's right to its own name was revoked, and given to a sham.

In the ten years of Transfer to Layer 2 – efficient drones deconstructing and moving the salvageable monuments from the original city, and reconstructing, from scratch, the ones already lost – EdinburghTM became a perfect example of combining the golden past and the profitable future. They'd tried to stop us calling it New Reekie too. Probably because they wanted to pretend it was all real. That this charade they'd built was the one and only city. There couldn't be a 'new' if there was no 'auld' in the first place. All they had to do was ignore our pleas as we were buried alive.

But, tonight, as I sat down in the monorail carriage that would carry me from New Town, over the black, wet, valley that used to be Princes Street, and onto the Bridges, I hoped something had changed.

The weight of this thing in my arms – how could it not change?

‘Brick by brick,’ the Priest always said. He’d say it tonight, I was sure of it.

*Forgive me, Father, I thought, for I have sinned. But only because you told me to.*

Well, maybe not *only* because of that. I wanted to. I don’t think I’ve wanted anything harder in my whole life, and I was not alone. I knew that. The way the people of this city – the ones who were old enough to remember when there was only one, when it still belonged to us, and the ones young enough to inherit their bitterness about it being stolen – my God, the way we all *spit* when we talk about The New City. We don’t give it the satisfaction of naming it most of the time: it’s just ‘thae c---- upstairs’.

A woman across from me in the carriage stared at me. I supposed I looked haggard, like I was definitely escaping trouble. And with this giant, oddly-shaped thing in a duffel bag, my hands white-knuckled around it? How could she not be suspicious? I gave her one of my grandmother’s hard glowers, but then I saw the implant glinting behind her left ear, and I noticed the tell-tale judder of her eyeballs. She was scanning, consuming some upper-layer reality show. Not really looking at me at all.

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From George IV Bridge, you could see the Transfer drones clambering over the dome of McEwan Hall like rats over a carcass. The whole thing would be gone in a week. I watched one of the machines twitch into the air and zoom off like a firefly, carrying two tonnes of stone, heading for the Transfer Shaft just beyond. Behind me: wandering shadows, and the siren of a distant police craft, like a banshee, somewhere in the forever-night.

The pawnshop is built on a makeshift outcrop, overhanging the Cowgate. Looking down as I stepped onto the gangplank, someone was shunting a dinghy up towards Holyrood with a scaffolding pole, cutting through the black water, trailing cigarette smoke.

I was swaying on my feet by the time he opened the door.

No-one ever called him the Priest to his face, but it was the name we all knew him by. He stood silhouetted in the doorway, his well-worn housecoat like a cassock and the crucifix tattoo on his left temple warped out of shape by a furrowed brow. He hadn’t expected me.

He immediately clocked the package.

‘Ye shoulda waited,’ he said in a low voice.

I told him I’d wanted him to see it, before we were both caught.

He held up a finger. ‘*If* we’re caught.’ He gestured that finger inside. ‘In.’

I staggered after him down the misshapen corridor of the shop, trying to stop the package knocking the glass cases on either side. I glimpsed his elderly mother sitting, sleeping open-mouthed in front of a guttering fire in one of the side rooms, the turntable next to her mumbling out some unfamiliar song. I liked her. She called me ‘bonny girl’, just like my mother did, and had pierced my ears.

I was already unhooking the package from my body when we reached his office, and as he took it off me, the sudden imbalance made me lurch forward. He caught me with one arm and pushed me into the armchair – ‘Sit down before ye fall.’ He took greater care with the package, placing it carefully on his desk. I drifted. Two minutes later the fire was stoked and roaring, and there was a mug of sweet coffee in my hand.

‘Well done, kiddo,’ he said, not looking at me, but at the shape on his desk. It looked like a tiny ghost in a sheet. ‘Nae trouble up there, I take it?’

I shook my head. I was light and fast, and after tonight, I could call myself experienced. But I was tired. *No, no trouble. Not yet.*

‘Like I said. Quick job. In and out.’ He absently touched the fabric of the bag. ‘But for so much, eh? This is how it starts. Something wee, but big consequences. We take our city back from the bastards, one symbol at a time. This’ll show ‘em. Think we’ll go quietly into the North Sea, do they? Think they can shut us up, like they did wi’ Mary King’s Close?’

I said I’d never been. He gave me a look that anyone else would have interpreted as anger, but I knew he was just sad. There was anger there too, for sure, but not at me. I’d had four years of this city before most of it was cut off permanently, including Mary King’s. He couldn’t blame me for not having seen everything.

He started to pull off the bag. It was funny, the way that dog appeared on the desk, unveiled like an auction piece, that blunted nose glowing gold in the firelight. Up in the New City, where it was daylight, it had seemed smaller. Here, it was like an occult figurine, catching the fire in its tiny, carved eyes.

‘Well then, Bobby,’ said the Priest, smiling at the statue. ‘Back on home turf.’

I started to laugh to myself. The planning, the terror, the sweat and exhaustion – all for a dog with a shiny snout.

*Our dog.*

I raised my mug and toasted the statue on the desk. ‘Brick by brick,’ I said.

The Priest looked up and met my eyes. The glint of wicked optimism. New plans, new missions.

‘Brick by brick.’