

Shelf

The books were everywhere. The flat reeked of them – rotting, myiasitic – cheap floor joists sagging under their weight. Derek Strawberry could hardly breathe for the stink. Only the flap of the letterbox, a slit that split the door in two, brought any fresh air – blown in from two-hundred-and-twenty feet above the wet pavement – with each cardboard package, brought by unseen apparitions, two, three, four times a day. Vitamins, supplements, protein bars. The bare essentials to survive while deep in research. And more books, of course. Dry paper and packaging streamed steadily from the door down the narrowing corridor, stifling the mould of damp seals, pressing against the grain of its pinstriped walls, smothering the pitiful council-mandated fire emergency protocol sign and out into the widest parts of Supreme Studio Deluxe

flat 14C. Derek scratched his yellowed stubble with thick, ink-black fingernails. He pulled his shrunken *Dark Side of the Moon* t-shirt back down over where it had ridden above his lower navel and the ruined elastic of his joggers' waistband. Bare-toe-stubbing, he staggered between the walls of tattooed paper – printed, cut, bound – finding his way from the living room to the square, grimy, mud-honey-oak-panelled kitchenette, where he reached up, stretching further than he should have to, over and above a knee-high stack of *Global Security Studies* back-issues to clasp a murky glass tumbler from behind the squalling-hinged cupboard door. He let the tap run cold as he stood, clutching the sink, his body a thick hypotenuse, Achilles screaming, between floor and false-door-fronted unit. He filled the glass beyond overflow, dampening floor and clothbound covers of Everyman Homers and Virgils, wetting too his faded-black front, prism streaked with inkier tear-trails, before the remaining water, its surface tense and suspended below the rim, reached his lips. He guzzled, gasping.

Partially hydrated, he was finally able to think beyond the throbbing ache expanding inside his skull. The flat's mess shuddered into focus like the rain-rusted jaws of a beartrap. White daylight poked through thin nylon curtains, washing all in muddy bottle green. His dark eyes squeezed and, sweeping across the stacks, tried to bring into focus the world around him, his little corner of it, and what he'd done to it. Like a garden overgrown with invasive weeds, columns of books sprouted and trailed, spilling through doorways and over etiolated once-plum carpet that fizzed whenever he shuffled across it. He could see the trail he'd cut through the pile, a paler shade of wine. Between the fibres, mites crawled and larvae writhed on a buffet of hair and crumbs and skin. He could hear them blooming down there, a conspiracy of filth consuming him. They would have to be hoovered up, taken out. But before that he'd have to reach the boiler cupboard in the hall, clear aside the blocking stacks, set free its long-neglected house-keeping

appliances. But before that he'd have to hack through this thicket of books that knotted like Amazonian vines around themselves, engorged and sweating. But before that, even that, he'd have to start, a single square inch of space, restored into purity and order.

But no, there was no time now. After. After this job, he'll get it together. It has to change, he has to change. And he will. Only after. He took another huge gulp, closed his eyes, and pressed the coolness of the drained glass against his furrowing glabella, across which, long ago, he'd let his eyebrows meet.

The phone rang. Its clattered bell was muffled by bound sun-yellowed pages, cardboard, leather and glue, seventies reprints of Heidegger, a Gideon Bible or three. It stopped, the wake of its sudden silence causing his hairs to rise. Then it rang again, somehow with renewed verve, insistent. Derek cocked his head, seemingly towards the sound, discarded the glass, then cut a searching path, paused, turned his head towards the new or true emanation point, then veered at a new angle. He recalled a game he'd played with his little sister, where they'd hide that old wristwatch – irredeemably stuck on the beep-once-every-sixty-seconds setting – that they found months before, a treasured surprise on a typically dark School morning. 7:03 it beeped and hadn't stopped since. It must've impelled its owner to abandonment. In the game, they'd take turns as hider or seeker. The hider would hide the watch and tally the number of times it beeped before the seeker found it. Like golf, the lowest score won. Once, his sister had hidden it so well it drove Derek to collapse. He'd narrowed the location down to the living room, but every time he thought he knew where the sound was coming from, the next chirp seemed to come from a totally different place. As the tally marks filled page after page of the small spiral notepad they shared, Derek, increasingly frantic, tore magazines from the rack, overturned china ornaments, chipping cat ears and cherub wings, ripped through couch cushions, feathers flying, his low

teeth-grinding moan opening into a red-faced scream, while his sister just laughed and laughed until he shut her up. Then, forensically tidying before Dad got home, she – holding the kitchen-roll-wrapped ice cubes in one fist against her lip – pulled the dining chair to the room’s middle, climbed up, and, without triumph, extracted the watch from inside the big light’s frosted-glass shade, whose upturned-bowl-shape had deceptively dispersed the sound, dropped the device in Derek’s outstretched hand and, without a word, fled, keeping her bedroom door closed for a long time. Derek remembered looking down at that passive, unblinking digital face, still hot from contact with the bulb. Strange, he thought now. He couldn’t remember who first saw the thing on the park bench. He made the game, though, and the rules. Anyway, they stopped playing after that.

He found the phone in five rings. With shaking, sweat-slicked palms, he excavated it from beneath old Python and HTML manuals, whose covers popped with eighties’ hairspray, dayglo, and cathode-ray tubes. He lifted the handset from where it buzzed on its cradle.

I’m still waiting, Strawberry...

Her arresting voice crackled low. Harriet Pritchett, Regional Director of Human Resources at GalaTech International. He could see her there at the other end of the line, rough slender fingers coiled round the handset at the precise pressure needed for control. Armoured in black Chanel, she would be sitting, tall and square, reclining slightly into the chair’s firm leather. Beneath her desk, she’d press her Ralph Lauren pebbled-leather drivers into the floor, toes flexing inside, cold blood stirring. Francis Kurkdjian’s 724 clung to her, whipping arcs of

aldehydes and bergamot – soap scent of regents – whenever her body, carefully gesticulating in calculated emphasis, cut through the air. He felt his throat close, his tongue clicked, but he managed a faltering response.

Y-yes, Ms. Pritchett. I know you wanted to review the slides, and I'm almo-

What I *want*, Mister Strawberry, is that for which I paid. Strawberry Solutions, and I quote, provides Staunch Superior Service, does it not?

It had been quite the boon when Strawberry's fledgling independent contracting service for corporate training technologies had attracted the attention, and trial payment, of GalaTech International's UK branch, for which he had Harriet Pritchett to thank, and to please. More than a boon, in fact. Considering the almost-unthinkable volatility of the kinds of start-up debts he'd acquired from serious men in secluded lock-ups with deep pockets and arson-short fuses, the GalaTech account was a substantial lifeline.

Let's take that a word at a time. I'll make it that easy. I'll just say the word, and you tell me what it means, ok, Strawberry? Staunch, go.

Dependable.

Indeed, whether of a bloke, a building, or a bloodhound. Do what is required, no weeping, bleeding, or any other kind of snivelling leaking excuses. Good, now Superior.

Greater, better, finer.

Precisely, I *want* the best. I paid for the best. And so, dependably promised, I must believe that every expiring second marks an

improvement of what I will receive eventually, certainly, *by the work day's end*. That's five hours and thirty-two minutes, Strawberry. So what does that leave?

S-service.

Servitium. I am your master, Strawberry. I am serious. Never forget this. I have no tolerance for wastes of space.

Something far down deep inside him thundered like a depth charge.

I... I'll... It will be done.

Oh yes, Strawberry. Most certainly. For your sake, I strongly recommend that it is you who secures its completion.

GalaTech International > Services > Domestic > Fight Fire with Fire: Serious Security for a Serious World

Can I just have a little more...

Don't make me call again, Strawberry. That would be inadvisable.

The call cut off with guillotine finality. In the grave silence, he thought he heard his letterbox flap squeak and boots retreat, though nothing seemed to drop inside. His head rolled, occipitol-atlanto, around the flat. So much information unsynthesised into knowledge. Such mess. No, he couldn't wait until after. The next call might conjure something far worse. He can't think, can't finish, not with all this... disorder. Get serious, clean up, act fast. There was no time to lose.

In a single motion he found, replenished, and drained the water glass and set it down inside the sink, between an abridged Gibbon and a Hemingway primer that overhung port and starboard lips of stainless steel. He picked the books up, one in each hand. Wearing them like borrowed boxing gloves, he felt only the impotent inarticulation of fingers bound, clumsy ham-fists. He turned left, then right, twisting at his trunk, a flailing garden sprinkler, casting about, but, finding no place better than that from which he'd plucked them, he set the books back down on the sink.

He needed to think. He pushed a stack loudly off the kitchen chair and slumped down to the wobbly table, head in hands, less Rodin than Vidal. Towers of text loomed over and around him. They wobbled in his periphery, rustling whispers. He stared down at the table's old milky porridge marks and coffee rings, trying to read in them some kind of reassurance. His elbows took the slumped force into the surface which caused the stacks to sway, trembling perilously. He looked past the breakfast stains and into the table's pale wood grain.

Perhaps...

He clamped his fingers around the table's flat pine top, appraising its girth. If he could just clear some of these infernal volumes aside. Aloft. He couldn't be rid of them, of course, but could perhaps corral them a bit, herd them civilly to give him a bit more room. Mentally, he looked through an ominously tottering battlement of Old French crusade chronicles, finding a suitable spot on the Western wall. It'd take a couple of brackets each end, sure, and wall plugs, screws, pilot holes – if he still had the tools, it just might work.

He clambered over the stacks, into the hallway, and pushed aside a large cardboard box of supplements to expose the pale laminate chipboard of the boiler cupboard door. He shunted open a gap for the door to slide, haltingly as if a stiff corner of some hardback had popped the runner off its rail. He crawled inside, the giggling hiss and whine of the old boiler now above him, and dug his way down to where he thought he might have left the toolbox, just one of many neglected inheritances.

His fingers felt their way down the cracks and, just when they'd brushed the familiar studded plastic of the handle, another loud clatter jolted Strawberry and he whacked the back of his skull on a copper inlet pipe.

Ring, ring, ring, his phone his head his phone his head phone head –ead –d.

He sank into a stodgy memory. This thirteen-year-old Derek Strawberry had had an absolutely wonderful day. The immense High School was a bit of a shock from the provincial Primary, but he quickly navigated it. The biggest challenge was having multiple teachers, many different beings he had to identify by what they sought and to supply this forthwith. But he was achieving this rapidly. Indeed, his English teacher, coquettish Ms. Gray, had just returned his essay on *Fahrenheit 451* with measured, somberly sincere praise that glowed like hot coals in Derek's gut, and the blushing warmth consumed him. He floated home in sunlight, breezed past the boundary wall clung with clematis, through the gate and into the house through the back door. He shrugged off rucksack and blazer, brought the hifi whirring to life, and lay back on the bed. Compressed distorted guitars and canon drums soon filled the room, a fanfare to his day, as the white ceiling unfurled above him.

At some point, Derek nodded off.

Oi!

He woke to that unmistakable bark, and, before his eyes could focus, he felt his father's radiating presence.

Whit di yi think yi are *playin* at!?

Rocket launched, in stealth, already at its apogee.

Sorry, Dad, what...?

From the aggression crackling in the air around them, he could tell it was safer to start apologising. Don't wait: placate.

Whit di yi *mean* 'what'!? Whit am ah aleways havin ti say!?

Derek thought hastily, running through the scenarios, the possibilities, his mind feeling sluggish with insufficient RAM. The rocket was falling to earth now, a thousand thousand metres, five hundred thousand, one hundred thousand.

The music? The clothes? The gate? – bingo – he'd left it open, and he now replayed the moment his father found it swinging in the wind, latch free of its catch, atomic heat rising within.

All right, all right, I'm sorry.

Fifty thousand metres.

Strawberry Senior stalked away. It seemed over. But Derek would be a fool to ever think that. For, returning, the second round was soon on, calibrated from the spotting round.

And another thing!

Through the clouds now, the sky falling.

What have ah told you about leaving aw that crap lying about!?

One thousand metres.

He shook a thick finger at the original works by his son and Bradbury. Father had a compulsion for austere cleanliness.

Get it picked up and put away.

Actually, Dad, it's my English essay, and Ms. Gray said...

I couldnae care *less* what she said.

500m. 50m. 10m.

It's cluttering. Di yi *wahnt* tae live in a shitehole?

No, but

5m, 4m.

You, boy, need tae get yir head oot yir arse, you bloody

3

waste

2

of

1

space.

The detonation spread from inside Derek's chest, knees buckling, ears ringing, he collapsed on the bed. Shaking with the effort, he clenched his jaw and tried not to cry out, not to let his eyes betray him through his tears. After a few long minutes, the last of the aftershocks had dispersed and he ceased to quake. Clouds thinned to reveal the hole where something vital had been squashed out of existence. Derek sloped off the bed and picked up his essay and put it away in the desk drawer. Nice and tidy. He lifted the sleek charcoal-black copy of ...451, bent it, pulled it, tested its strength, which held. He pulled on the brass handle of his cupboard door and put the book back on the shelf within and, watching the wing of darkness blanket the spines, closed the door.

Now, rising back into the present, Strawberry woke slumped over in another dark cupboard. His head continued to throb long after the phone stopped ringing. He'd have to answer it. There was no other escape. Sweat bubbled in tiny rings all over his body. He hauled the toolbox out and into the hall. He heaved it up onto the nearest stack of Socratic dialogue commentaries, and, since he could not bear its weight while navigating the perilous path to the kitchen, he swung the box over to the next stack, squeezed through the doorway between two columns of Cornish cartography and into the living room, found his footing and swung the box through the threshold, past his body, crashing through another pile of pulp science fiction, slugged back issues of *Weird Tales*, too far gone to remain collectable. Pages flew. The momentum threw him to the ground as leaves floated down upon him. He looked around his tinder nest, glad he never seriously took up smoking.

He regained himself and started again. In this way he made it to within a yard of the kitchen. The volumes shuddered around him. Far behind, the letterbox rattled. Outside, an

infantry of couriers marched to and fro, payloads delivered. In they poured, cardboard-wrapped rectangular prisms piling. Inexhaustible. No, he would not give up. He could do this. He could dig himself out, back to mastery, or at least to functionality, holding all that had to be held in his head. He just needed some order. He just needed some clarity. He hurled the toolbox to the kitchen, popped open the tension clasps and extricated, by its beechwood handle, Dad's old rip-cut saw. He took his measurements and guideline from the large-print Hebridean Atlas by the empty fridge. Spine and teeth aligned, he made a few tentative bites. Soon the metal blade was ripping into the table's edge, sawdust puffing clouds. Onward, Strawberry sawed, tallying up the minutes in metronomic oscillations, sweat stinging the corners of his eyes. Then, done. Drenched, but done. He lay in the middle of the once-singular table, cleaved in twain.

He rummaged through the toolbox's upper compartments, sifting through burnt-out bulbs, flat batteries and three-amp fuses until he found an unopened pack of brackets, screws and plugs. With a screwdriver in his mouth like a Bowie, and his new-made shelves as crutches lodged in his pits, he trenched his way to the half-sunbleached face of the Western wall. He scaled the book pile at the foot of the wall to reach the flat surface above, screwed the brackets in as straight as he could, then slotted home one shelf, then the other, triumphant.

Giddy, Strawberry began to seek and find, grabbing fistfuls of books in reach, then stretching beyond, returning to the sanctity of the shelf. He ordered by year, oldest upper left, rearranging with each new addition. He quickly filled the top shelf, and was halfway through the lower, when the phone rang again. Strawberry turned. Its insistent metal rattle vibrated through the walls and the new screws of the top shelf gave way. The tomes above cascaded, knocking loose the screws of the lower shelf, whose corner swung into the rear of Strawberry's oblivious

skull. The smallest mist of port-dark blood plumed. He crumpled over and sprawled, flat on his back but twisted into an unnaturally serpentine S in between the stacks that stretched above him.

The phone rang out.

Minutes later, boots quick-marched across the walkway, accelerant spurted through the squeaking letterbox and a lit match followed. They were serious people, after all. Strawberry awoke spluttering. At first, he could make out nothing, then the dark square silhouettes of bound paper towers resolved through swirling soot-clouds and a red glow pulsed behind like hellish sunrise. Just for a moment, the paraffin-blackened smoke parted above him and he saw it – cutting through that patch of ceiling, which he couldn't believe he'd never noticed before, but then how often is it that you ever look up – there, somehow, despite the filth of neglect and rising carbon, still transparent, prism clear, open to the sky...

Flames licked up every page, every word, every letter. The shelves blazed longest, but, too, turned to ash, leaving only the screws that rolled like rotten teeth near Strawberry's head. Yet the fire spread no further, consuming like a kiln only what lay inside. All around him, he saw, the space was cleared, and he could begin anew. This was Strawberry's final thought as his lips parted and the evaporated ink of Rilke's prayers licked the inside of his closing throat.

The firefighters could not explain it. They'd seen similarly clad buildings go up like matchbooks, while this one lay almost unscathed, though steaming in the after-douse. Indeed, it was someone outwith the estate, a junior welfare officer pedaling home from work in her pink hi-vis, who spotted the thin stem of black smoke rising against the orange sky. Not a single neighbour of Strawberry's noticed anything amiss. The crew commander pulled off his face mask, blinked three times through the ash cloud, and refocused his eyes on the charred corpse

doubled over, mouth-wide. He pulled a wallet, warm, from its trouser pocket. Plastic melted around the surviving embossed letters

E K S T R A

He looked from the card to the twisted face of its owner, following the death gaze up from eyeless sockets to the inexplicably unsooted skylight directly above. He'd just celebrated his first decade in the service and, of course, had seen much worse than this. And yet, it stuck. Later, months and years later, the question would rekindle, whether those cured lips were pulled into a cleft of agony or joy.