



## **CHAPTER SEVEN: THE LAST WORD**

Zy sat on a long timber bench, located in one of the side stalls of the Abbey’s dark basement. His seven-year-old legs were too short to touch the ground, so he let them swing back and forth, back and forth.

He watched The Children of The Congregation dance in circles, sending water into the air around them, laughing and making short-lived rainbows in the perpetual dusk-air. He would have liked to join them, but they didn’t like him and reminded him often. Besides, he told himself, it was better to stay out of the water. Zy could feel his thoughts slowing down, and his fingers and toes numbing. In a matter of hours, he would need to return to The Surface to recharge his internal solar-powered batteries.

From what he could determine via Bluetooth communications with The Others, he was The Last of The Replacement Children to leave the Distribution Centre and be delivered to a living customer. Ordered immediately after Mr Barker, The Lord of the Ashes’ youngest son had been accidentally killed by friendly fire, Zy had barely been unpacked from his box when Father decided he could no longer fight his feelings, and he would Rise Up instead, and fight The Enemy.

Lachlan had been appalled to find himself left at home with a replacement brother and had ignored Zy completely, refusing all his requests for assistance. Zy worried not. He had shown himself to the boys’ shared bedroom, uploaded photos and videos of his old-new self into his database, and begun the process of replicating the seven-year-old boy’s appearance, voice and mannerisms.

Unfortunately, the city’s electricity supply had failed before Zy could finish the process. Zy could have reverse engineered the system and jacked the house with his own energy, but he felt too exhilarated by his newness to begin giving his power away so soon. And so, his face shape-shifted uncomfortably between the Company Default Setting and the young boy he was bought to replace.

Uncomfortable, for Lachlan, that is. Zy felt nothing, and there was no one else in their shared home to see it happen. And then Lachlan had left, and Zy had spent a whole day reveling in the naughtiness of being home alone. But it was lonely being a Replacement Child with no one to comfort, so he used the tracking device he had placed in Father’s pants pocket and followed him here to The Abbey.

Zy watched from his hiding place as Darcy, a boy not much older than himself, had been beaten by Father-Lord-Ash. He listened as Rob was given orders for a trade, a life for a life, and watched Rob reluctantly leave. He watched as Lady Ash began behaving increasingly erratically towards everyone, but especially Darcy. Zy had watched as The Children played their games and, curious child that he was, tried to befriend The Children. But they were afraid of his incomplete face, and so he forced himself to stay hidden, waiting to reveal himself to Father.

Now, a week later, he watched his brother Lachlan arrive at The Abbey with Rob, and the almost-identical twins, Ebony and Fidelia. Using his x-ray vision, Zy was able to see beneath the veil and make out Fidelia’s face. She was like Zy, he decided; she too had an incomplete face.

He watched as Father hugged Lachlan, and Lachlan, bad son, half-heartedly hugged Father back. He listened as Lady Ash started accusing Lachlan of incest and screaming about the hereditary curses of inbreeding.



In Zy's mind the sapling of a family tree diagram he had designed was mutating into a twisted forest. He had imagined himself with a Father, and a Mother who had passed, an older brother, and a sense-of-self who had also passed. Now, he had to move Lady Ash from 'Love Interest' to 'Stepmother' and the newly arrived twins to 'possible half-sisters'. As he watched Lachlan vomit and Ebony cry, both of them lashing out at their parents, Zy thought them very disrespectful.

Zy, like all Replacement Children, was programmed to have no bad thoughts or feelings about his siblings, existing or future. But Zy, like all of the Newest Model Replacement Children, had an AI chip that allowed him to learn on the job. To Zy's amusement, he found that he had zero trouble entertaining thoughts and feelings of ill will towards his brother Lachlan and his half-sister Ebony.

Paupers and parasites all of them, Zy thought as he snuck up to The Surface to recharge himself.

"Almost all of them," he said to his inner dialogue recorder.

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Zy recharged himself in mere minutes, his state-of-the-art system thriving under the super-UV-sun that appeared in the sky longer and longer each day. Soon seated again on his usual side bench, Zy turned at the sound of footsteps. It was Fidelia, the girl who wore the Victorian Mourning Outfit and whose face was always covered by a black veil to hide her unfinished face.

"Fidelia," she said as she pulled her water-logged skirts wide and curtsied in an old-fashioned way. Then, to Zy's surprise, she sat down on the bench beside him.

"Zy," he said after she had rearranged her skirts and veil, and leaned back against the sandstone wall.

"I've never heard of that name before," she said.

"I chose it for myself when Father forgot to program my name into my Hard-Drive."

"What does it mean?"

"For a long time, in Modern History, 'zygot' was the last word in the human dictionary. A zygote is a single cell that is the first step in the development of a new organism..."

"Ah," Fidelia said.

"...I'm not finished," Zy said after a pause, "later, the zygote was replaced with 'zytum' which was an Ancient Egyptian malt beer, which is obviously less relevant to a Replacement Child. Later still, in 2017, another new last word was added to the dictionary; 'zyzyva' which is a small tropical weevil, spelt z-y-z-y-v-a."

Fidelia sat still and silent. Zy assumed she was nervous of interrupting him again. "I'm finished," he said.

"I know," she replied, "I'm just thinking that your answer isn't really an answer. I understand that all those words start with z-y, but the last word sounds like a deliberate attempt to prevent anyone from ever adding another word to the dictionary. Wouldn't you just call yourself Zyzyva and be done with it?"

"I do not want to be a small tropical weevil," Zy responded, "and from my short amount of research into humans, you all seem intent of having the last word... so I'm guessing someone, somewhere, as improbable as it seems, if given enough time, will come up with another word to be considered the new last word."



“Zyzyzy perhaps,” Fidelia laughed, making a sound similar to wind chimes.

Ignoring the inner debate he was having with himself about the rules around hyphenated words, Zy laughed too. It was his best impression of the boy he had never met, but whose job it was for him to replace. If Fidelia was disconcerted by the half-human-half-metallic sound of the laugh, she hid it well.

“Zy it is,” she said.

“Why do you wear a veil?” Zy asked Fidelia.

“It’s a long story,” Fidelia replied.

“I have time.”

“I don’t,” Fidelia said, “I often talk to The Others and they show me the future.”

Zy paused for a while, then said, “I too speak to The Others, but I think they are not the same Others.”

Fidelia laughed again, “mine speak to me from beyond the grave, they have lived their lives then gone to The Other Side. They speak to me in shadows and sighs. Humans have been speaking this way for as long as we have been walking upright on two legs, dabbing our faces with ochre and our cave walls with chalk. At some point along the way, though, humans decided that only the living knew what was best for the living. Past and Future seemed to matter less than the here and now. Everyone became fixated on living in this moment, this... now... only... now.”

“The Others I speak to have never really lived,” Zy said as he thought of all the Replacement Children sitting in otherwise empty bedrooms, garages and attics, “they exist in Space but outside Time as you know it. They do not reside in the Land of Smoke and Mirrors, but they do speak to me with ease across the airwaves as yours do.”

“At least you will never be lonely if you can speak to them with ease,” Fidelia said.

“We are all lonely,” Zy said, “most of our Purchasing Families are gone. We were bought to comfort our Owner-Parents and now most of them will need replacing.”

“Are there such things as Replacement Mothers and Grandmothers?” Fidelia asked, and Zy noticed a slight uplift in her tone at the end of the sentence that suggested surprise.

“Yes,” Zy said, “today there are Robotic AI replacements for everything.”

“They will need electricity to survive.”

“We are solar powered. We will last as long as the sun.”

“But the batteries that store the power?”

“The Others are solving that problem as we speak,” Zy said and did his best impression of a seven-year-old’s smirk.

Fidelia rested her hand on her veiled cheek, “what a time to be alive.”

“The scars that you have,” Zy said, “they are the result of burns most likely sustained from fire not boiling water. They were not properly treated at the time of the accident. And due to the poor



nursing you received, they became infected and the scars you have are worse than they should have been.”

Fidelia said nothing.

“We are the same,” Zy said, and when Fidelia turned her veiled face to look at him, he went on, “my face is imperfect because Father was reckless. Your face is imperfect because your Mother was reckless too.”

“Do they know you are here?”

“Not yet,” Zy replied.

Fidelia nodded but said nothing, and she and Zy sat in comfortable silence as the candles in The Abbey began to burn low.

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From out of The Abbey the sounds of The Children of The Congregation drifted up to Zy and Fidelia. The eldest were chanting their strange songs that matched nothing in Zy’s database, whilst the youngest were playing a newly invented game in the water; I am blessed / you are stressed / I jump up / you fall down / and now you drown / splash!

Ebony and Lady Ash were talking too, at a volume Fidelia could only have heard in sinister whispers. Ebony was still pronouncing her love for Lachlan as heatedly as Lady Ash was forbidding it, telling her daughter she must outgrow her childish fantasies. Ebony, in turn, was mocking her mother’s paper crown.

Further away, at a volume Fidelia could never hear, Zy listened to the three housemates discussing Alex’s mane of dandelions. They had discovered that if the seeds fell in the water they died, and they were debating whether Alex should wash them all away or enjoy their warmth a little longer. Zy wondered if he was the only one who had noticed the golden sheen that was appearing to spread across Alex’s skin and the petal-shaped stripes that were forming in her eyes.

Even further away, Father-Lord-Ash was at The Surface discovering his two gunmen had been knocked unconscious and de-armed. Zy could hear him weeping, as if their slumped forms had deflated the last of his pretense that he was a Big Man.

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“Is it true,” Lachlan said as he appeared out of the darkness and stood before Fidelia, “are you running out of time?”

Zy watched as Fidelia patted the bench seat on her left side, and Lachlan sat down, the maybe-sister between two brothers.

“We’re all running out of time,” Fidelia said, “sometimes The Others show me single, solid images, such as you and Intruder Rob standing in my house. Sometimes they show me a series of steps they want me to take, ‘Breadcrumbs’ I call them, which I follow to stay safe. That’s how we travelled from The House to The Abbey so quickly and unharmed.”

Lachlan was nodding as he muttered, “I did wonder... your instinct was... faultless.”

No one spoke for a while and then Lachlan pushed again, “but what did They say about us not having much time?”



Fidelia shrugged, “sometimes The Others only give me hazy images that I have to interpret as best I can. The final Breadcrumb They gave me in the last Circle Séance was of a...,” she stopped and put her hands together, fingers splayed as if they were holding a medium-sized ball, “...a strange object that looked like the inside of Jonah’s Whale, a ribbed space with the water rising.”

“Here,” Zy said.

“Yes,” Fidelia said, “it must be.”

“How long until we go under?” Lachlan asked and when Fidelia shrugged again, he said, “we should tell the others so we can prepare to leave.”

Zy and his maybe-sister nodded but nobody moved. It was the closest Zy had felt to belonging to a family since he had been unboxed. Fidelia seemed to feel the same way, because she reached her hands out in both directions and placed one on Lachlan’s hand, and one on Zy’s. Zy wriggled his small fingers into her hers and held on tight, but not too tight.

“Were you ever lonely,” Lachlan asked, “in that house all alone?”

Zy wondered for a minute if he was asking Zy about his short time alone, but then Fidelia answered, “I was never really alone, even when Ebony was outside looking for food. I had the Spirits of my Ancestors. And my Memories. But mostly I was sheltered, happily, by my Daydreams. People often mistake passivity for weakness. As The Main Character of My Story, I have never once thought of myself as a Victim...”

After a pause she went on, “Mother took all the mirrors out of our house after The Accident. She wanted there to be no reflections. But reflection... introspection... brooding ... that was all I ever really did for all the years since,” she laughed her tinkly laugh, “so many stories are told by unreliable narrators. I think Authors do it so that Readers can be tricked, and turned, and twisted... they are kept guessing... it induces a sense of disquiet, paranoia even... but really, I think it is because, ultimately, all Humans are reliably unreliable...”

Zy bit down on his little silicon lip. There was a lot that he wanted to say, but he was uncertain how best to start. Just as he ordered his thoughts, Lachlan surprised him by leaning past Fidelia to speak to him; “Do you think that Fidelia and I might be related?”

“My facial-recognition software reports there are only a few key similarities in your appearance, so the likelihood is low. I could, however, confirm with a DNA test if you both give me a drop of...”

“No!” Lachlan and Fidelia both answered.

“I suppose it doesn’t really matter,” Lachlan said, “it being The End of The World and all... and so long as our children’s children don’t sleep together.”

“Wo-there-cowboy!” Fidelia laughed, apparently enjoying the sound of the slang she was trying on, “one step at a time if you please.”

Lachlan stammered an apology and then stood up. He pulled Fidelia off the bench, and with a tiny tingle, Zy felt his hand released from hers. “Zy was wrong about one thing,” Lachlan said, “no matter what’s under that veil, your face will never be imperfect to me... may I?” He rested his fingertips on the black ribbon beneath her chin. Fidelia nodded. Lachlan untied the ribbon and lifted her veil up. Without hesitation, he placed his hands on her cheeks and kissed her lips.



Zy did his best not to pay attention, and a few minutes later, he was surprised when he felt Fidelia's hand on his shoulder. She had turned to Zy, her black veil draped across her shoulders, "can you please ask Your Others if any of their houses have migraine medication?"

Zy smiled into her perfectly imperfect face and reached out to his Replacement Brothers and Sisters. After a few seconds, he replied, "several."

"Well then," Fidelia said, "are you two ready for an Adventure?"

Lachlan nodded and took Fidelia's right hand in his, and Zy jumped off the bench to take her other hand.

"Together," Zy said as he felt his tiny mechanical heart expand; "forever."

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