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Sunday Times



KNIGHTS OF THE BORROWED DARK

DAVE RUDDEN

PROLOGUE

TICK

Looking back, it had been a mistake to fill the orphanage with books.

Director Ackerby tapped the rim of his teacup with a finger. *The untidiness of it all*, he thought.

Far below in the yard, children dipped in and out of the shadow cast by his tower office – gossiping in scattered groups, voices raised in excited chatter. All talking about the visitors, of course. This was what happened when you bottled up 250 boys and girls. Last week, a thrush had bounced off a classroom window and the orphans hadn't shut up for days. Had they named it? He wouldn't be surprised.

His gaze swept the buildings below. Crosscaper Orphanage slouched against the mountainside like it had been dropped there – a greying stack of towers and flat, fat dormitories that shuddered when the wind was too harsh and sweated when it got too warm.

It was an uphill struggle for orphanages *not* to be dismal, but Ackerby had always thought Crosscaper took special pleasure in it, as though it knew that the groan of its slumping masonry and the rattle of its window frames were giving entire dormitories of children nightmares.

‘Sir?’

His secretary's voice seeped through the intercom and Ackerby stabbed at the button to respond.

‘Yes?’

‘Your two o'clock is here, sir. Shall I send them in?’

The director barely heard him. He was staring at the newest addition to the orphanage grounds, standing out against Crosscaper's comforting greyness like a healthy man in a hospital

ward. Bright white walls. New windows that shone. A door that didn't squeak but whispered open like the sharing of a secret. Children waited outside, as they had every day since it opened.

A *library*. As if the orphanage chaplain wasn't filling their heads with nonsense enough.

The intercom burped again. 'Sir?'

Ackerby sighed. He had flicked through some of the dog-eared books in the library and it had been much as he'd feared. His own office was lined with beautiful leather-bound works (the word *book* painfully inadequate – they were *compendiums*, they were *texts*, they were *tomes*), the kind one touched with gloves, if one touched them at all.

Some, he mused proudly, had never even been opened.

The library books, on the other hand, had been read to pieces. And as for the content? Story after story of noble orphans rescued from drudgery – and now, every time someone came to visit, hopeful orphans began packing their bags, ready for their new life as wizard, warrior or prophesied king.

Ackerby sniffed. *Chosen ones*. If they were wanted, they wouldn't be here.

'Yes, send them in. And bring some tea.' He thought for a moment. 'Forget the tea.'

Director Ackerby did not believe in coddling visitors. There was an art to these things. Inspectors were made to wait ten minutes; it didn't do to annoy them, but you also didn't want to make them feel too important. Solicitors were seen immediately (you never knew who might end up footing the bill) and potential parents had to wait half an hour, as a sort of test of their commitment.

In Ackerby's opinion, if you weren't prepared to drink bad coffee and flick through last year's *Home and Housing* magazine, then you clearly did not deserve a child.

'Mr Ackerby?'

There were shadows in his doorway.

Ackerby liked to keep the lights low. It shaved money off the bills and he had the vague idea that it might be beneficial to the children – exercise for their eyes perhaps. The visitors had stopped where the light from Ackerby's desk lamp and the glow from the hallway fell short. Their faces were obscured, indistinct.

For a moment, Ackerby wasn't sure if they were people at all.

'Thank you for seeing us at such short notice,' the smaller of the visitors said. 'I hate to steal time away from the busy.'

The couple stepped forward in unison. The woman was tall and thin, with a spine curved like an old coat hanger, her clothes and skin white as frost, hair chopped short around her neck in a frayed mop the colour of chalk. The man beside her was the shape and pallor of a goose egg, with a shock of colourless curls that jiggled and bounced as if trying to flee from his scalp. His waistcoat creaked as he offered Ackerby his hand.

Normally, Ackerby would smile firmly (if a little coldly) and grasp the visitors' hands a smidge too hard as he asked their names. Ackerby was proud of his handshake. He had read books on the subject. A firm and painful squeeze – *that* was how you dominated a meeting.

The man in the waistcoat took his hand. 'Of course, stealing time from the idle is no crime at all.'

Pain.

Distantly, Ackerby noted the throaty *pops* the bones of his hand made as the visitor's grip ground them together – like a plastic bottle reshaping itself. The books he had read on the power of a good handshake were replaced by hazy diagrams from medical textbooks, and then swiftly by nothing at all.

He fought back a gasp of relief when the man in the waistcoat let go. The visitor grinned cheerily up at him and dropped into a seat with a pleased sigh, waving at Ackerby to join him.

An unlit cigarette hung from one side of the woman's mouth. She didn't move. She just stared.

The pain in Ackerby's hand faded and he rallied. *Commanded to sit? In my own office?*

He stalked round his desk and spun on a heel, regarding the visitors coldly. Standing behind the desk made him feel better. He told himself that it was simply pride in the decor and not the comfort of putting a slab of solid oak between him and the man in the waistcoat.

'Good afternoon,' Ackerby said, though he didn't mean it and it wasn't. 'Welcome to Crosscaper Orphanage. And you are?'

His feeling of unease deepened as the visitors continued to stare blankly at him. He couldn't say what was wrong exactly, but there was something . . . calculated about their looks. As if they were working out something about Ackerby in their heads, an equation he wouldn't enjoy.

'Your names,' Ackerby repeated, and, although there was absolutely no need to explain such a simple question, he found himself stammering, 'For – for our appointment book. Our files, I mean.'

The sentence hung in the air, slowly starving to death.

'Names?' the man in the waistcoat said, after an eternity. 'Ah. Yes. Names. Sorry. We are new.' His dark eyes flicked over the office before settling on Ackerby like flies. 'I like the name Ellicott. A pleasure.'

It hadn't been so far, but you couldn't leave a statement like that hanging. Ackerby forced a smile. 'Yes, of course. Nice to meet y–' His brow furrowed. 'What do you mean *new*?'

The man's smile deepened. 'I understand that you must be busy so we will take as little of your time as possible. We are looking for a boy. Denizen Hardwick.'

It took a moment for Ackerby to bring up a mental image. Nothing wrong with that – that was what files were for and you didn't get points for rattling facts off the top of your head. Hardwick was . . . small. Unremarkable. Had . . . hair. Brown? Red?

The director frowned. The only thing he could really remember about the boy was that he had never caused an abundance of paperwork, which was the only trait in a child that Ackerby actually liked.

But there was something else . . . something he couldn't recall . . .

'What about him?' Ackerby asked.

The cigarette made a slow path to the other side of the woman's mouth.

'He is a resident here?' The man popped his knuckles against his jaw, the noise so loud it made the director flinch. 'Excellent. We have been looking for him for a long time. We are . . . relatives of his. Cousins.'

A knot formed in Ackerby's stomach. This Ellicott character was lying to him. Ackerby was sure of it. He had no idea *why* he was sure of it, but a smile like that wasn't cousin to anything, except maybe a spider.

'I would have to check my records,' Ackerby said stiffly. That was his usual phrase when he knew the answer to a question but hadn't liked being asked it. 'The name does sound familiar, but –'

'We will not take much of your time, Director Ackerby,' the man in the waistcoat said. 'We merely wish to know a few things. First, has he turned thirteen?'

Ah. That was why Denizen Hardwick had stuck in his head.

'Yes, actually,' he said. 'A few weeks ago.' He glanced around his desk. 'There was a card they wanted me to sign . . . I'm sure I saw it . . .'

‘The card is unimportant,’ the man murmured. ‘We have been looking for Denizen for a long time. It is a pity we missed the celebrations.’ The word skittered from his tongue like a cockroach. ‘No matter. Where is he now?’

‘Now?’

The man fingered the buttons on his waistcoat. ‘Someone would have come for him on his thirteenth birthday. Another . . . relative perhaps. Come to take him away to a whole new life.’ His plump lips twisted in a cheerless grin. ‘Exciting. We would like to know where they went. Where Denizen Hardwick is now.’

‘Oh,’ Ackerby said. ‘He’s downstairs.’

The man’s gaze sharpened. ‘Excuse me?’

‘He’s downstairs. In class, I would imagine.’ The director of Crosscaper drew himself up haughtily. ‘I don’t know where you got your information, *sir*, but no one has taken Denizen Hardwick away to a new life. He is still a resident here, thirteenth birthday or no.’

The couple glanced at each other.

‘Is that a . . . problem?’ Ackerby said, his sudden burst of defiance disappearing as soon as it had come. He didn’t know who these people were and their questions were unnerving him.

‘No,’ the man said slowly, as if tasting the word. ‘No problem. And he has received no visitors?’

‘On his birthday?’ Ackerby said confusedly. The conversation had got away from him and he felt the beginnings of a headache behind his eyes. The thrum of his heartbeat in his ears was suddenly very loud.

‘Ever,’ the man said. ‘But that day in particular. Anyone at all.’

Ackerby shook his head. The man’s eyes were . . . strange. They glittered with a sort of chill, metallic brightness. Ackerby wasn’t sure what was more difficult – looking into them or looking away.

‘Good. Now. Did anything strange occur on his birthday? Between midnight and midnight. Anything odd that caught your eye.’

Ackerby’s headache intensified. ‘Sir, I would ask you to –’

‘It’s a simple question, Director. Any fires, disappearances, injuries, spatial or luminal distortion, shadows moving strangely . . .’

Sweat broke out on Ackerby’s forehead. His patience, never the most stable thing at the best of times, finally snapped.

‘Sir, I do not know to what lunacy you are currently subscribed, but this questioning makes no sense. You cannot simply come in here with no identification, no papers, and start talking to me about *shadows moving strangely*! Who do you think you are?’

The man who had introduced himself as Ellicott sighed, lifting one chubby hand to his temple. His eyes narrowed like a disappointed uncle and Ackerby was suddenly aware of a noise. It was soft, barely audible above the echo of his own voice.

Ticking.

It underscored their words, as fast and quiet as the heart of a bird. Ackerby glanced down at the digital clock on his desk, taking his eyes off the couple just for a second.

And the woman in white *growled* at him.

The sound slid from her lips like a tide of grime, a rough-static snarl of hunger. Something gleamed between her teeth as she stalked towards him. The man in the waistcoat rose to stand beside her.

His head twitched to the side like a snake preparing to strike.

Her head twitched the exact same way.

Ackerby blinked, and in the darkness between eyelid and cheek the woman in white had vanished behind him. There were hands round his neck, forcing him to his knees. He felt breath, cold and fast, on the back of his neck –

– and Ellicott’s voice was a purr.

A pity. Such a pity.

The words were pins of ice in Ackerby’s brain as the man in the waistcoat knelt to stare into his eyes. The woman in white held him rigid, her white fingers like a steel trap, and though Ackerby was not a small man he could no more move than fly.

I thought we would not have to resort to this. Given time, we can be . . . convincing. Imaginatively and painfully so. Regretfully, in this instance, we just do not have the time to spare.

The ticking rose to a roar. It was suddenly very hard to breathe. Distantly, Director Ackerby noticed that when the man in the waistcoat spoke the woman’s lips moved silently in time.

You will tell us about any visitors he has had. Any watchers. Any letters. Any contact in the years since he was left here. Anything at all.

His eyes twinkled.

Family is so dear to us.

He nodded at his companion, one professional to another, and the woman broke the director’s collarbone with one smooth twist of her fingers.

Ackerby howled.

He couldn’t say how long they held him. An hour, maybe less – long enough for Director Ackerby to dredge up every fact he knew about Denizen Hardwick. There wasn’t much, but the visitors made him go over it again and again and again.

Denizen Hardwick had been left at Crosscaper Orphanage at the age of two. He had received no visitors and no letters, and his thirteenth birthday had passed without incident. It

was only after the director started to sob and repeat himself for the fourth time that the iron grip on his collarbone went away.

Swaying there, delirious and on his knees, it seemed that Ackerby saw the couple more clearly than he had ever seen anyone before.

The pendulum jerk of their heads.

The peculiar hardness of their skin, like fingernails or teeth.

Their bright and empty smiles.

Strange, the man in the waistcoat said to himself when they had finished. **If *she* didn't come for him on his birthday . . . then perhaps he is of no interest to her and then of no use to us. No matter. Confusion suits us more than symmetry.**

He patted Ackerby on one tear-stained cheek.

Thank you, he said. The woman in white bowed low, mockingly. They made to leave, but then the man turned to Ackerby with a thoughtful expression on his face. **You have satisfied us, Director Ackerby. And I like this place.** He gave the air a savouring sniff. **You are in great pain and you may wish to take out this pain on young Denizen in turn. We understand. We approve.**

The sound of ticking was fainter now.

Just a little more misery in the world.

Somewhere distant, a door closing.

That's all we ask.

CHAPTER 1

Absentee Aunts

Four months later – 2 October

‘I don’t have an aunt.’

Denizen Hardwick stared down sceptically at the note in his hand. That was the way he looked at most things and he had a face built for it – thin cheeks, a long nose, eyes the colour and sharpness of a nail.

The note, left on his bed in Dormitory 4E that morning, was receiving a special amount of scepticism, so much so that he was surprised it hadn’t started to char at the edges.

YOUR AUNT HAS BEEN IN CONTACT. SHE IS TAKING YOU AWAY FOR A FEW DAYS. YOU WILL BE COLLECTED AT 6 P.M. PACK A BAG.

DIRECTOR ACKERBY

‘I don’t have an aunt,’ Denizen said again. It didn’t sound any less stupid the second time round.

‘Well, that’s not exactly true,’ said his best friend, Simon Hayes, also staring at the note. ‘You just don’t have any aunts you’re aware of.’

Dormitory 4E was a long room with high ceilings built for spiderwebs. Massive windows invited the weak October sunlight in to die, their frames rattling occasionally with the wind.

There were twelve beds, and this particular lunchtime ten of them were empty. Most of Crosscaper’s orphans were outside because sunlight in October was a rare gift and they hadn’t been given a mysterious note to stare at.

Denizen ran a hand through his shaggy red hair. He was small for his age and, barring a late growth spurt, he would be small for every other age as well. The freckles that swarmed his cheeks and nose in summer had now faded in winter to lost and lonely things, all but the one on his lip.

He hadn't been aware you could have a freckle on your lip. Maybe Denizen was the only person a lip freckle had ever happened to. Maybe it was a mark of destiny, singling him out for great things . . . but he doubted it. Denizen Hardwick wasn't the kind of person to believe in special circumstances – in distinguishing freckles or meaningful birthmarks or fortuitous aunts.

Denizen Hardwick was a sceptic.

'I don't have a – Look, if I do have an aunt, where has she been for the last eleven years?'

'Can you get any clues from the paper?' Simon asked. The new library had a collection of detective novels, and Simon was very interested in what one could learn from the smallest details.

Gamely, Denizen inspected the note. Unfortunately, all he could see was that it was on yellow paper, which meant it had come straight from the director's desk and was therefore not to be argued with, in the same way you didn't argue with gravity. Apart from that, it was inconsiderately devoid of clues.

'No,' he said. 'Sorry.'

Simon's and Denizen's beds were beside each other and had been since they had both been three years old in Dormitory 1A downstairs. That had started their friendship. Furtive book trades at night, a mutual inquisitive nature and a shared dislike of sports had continued it.

There were a lot of things Denizen liked about Simon, but first and foremost was how he radiated calm the way the sun radiated heat. It was impossible to be annoyed around Simon.

It was impossible to be annoyed *at* Simon. A conversation with Simon had the soothing effect of the cool side of the pillow.

Through either blind luck or best-friend osmosis, Simon had snagged all the height Denizen lacked. His giant winter coat did little to bulk out his slender frame and, splayed as he was across his bed, he looked like a crow in a scarf.

‘But why now?’ Denizen said. ‘Why is she getting in contact now?’

‘Maybe it took her ages to find you,’ Simon said. ‘Or she was waiting for you to be older?’ He thought for a moment. ‘Maybe she travels a lot and you have to be old enough to travel with her. Or to be left on your own in her giant house.’

‘Giant house?’

‘You never know.’

‘I doubt she has a giant house.’

‘It’s not impossible. She could be a super-rich spy. It would explain where she’s been all this time. Or maybe she’s a chocolatier.’

Denizen rolled his eyes.

‘A spy-chocolatier,’ Simon insisted, grinning. ‘Solving international crises through the subtle application of nougat.’

Part of Denizen knew that he should probably be more excited. A relative appearing out of nowhere to take him away? Most of the other children and teenagers in Crosscaper had spent their entire lives dreaming of something like this.

That was what worried Denizen. Dreams were tricky things. He’d only ever really had the one, at least until the past couple of months.

Since the summer, his sleep had been haunted by Crosscaper’s dark corridors, a figure in white drifting down them like a moth made of glass. In the dream, the figure had lingered,

its milk-skinned hands caressing the door of each dormitory in turn before finding his and slipping in . . .

He shook his head. Definitely not a dream he wanted spilling over into real life.

Maybe Simon was right. Maybe his aunt was a chocolate-spy. Maybe Denizen's life was about to change. Less scepticism. More weaponized hazelnut creams.

His bed creaked as he sat down heavily on it. Like everything in Crosscaper, it was falling apart. The orphans relied on cast-offs and donations, and since neither Simon nor Denizen fell into the realm of average height they had the worst of it – more hold-me-togethers than hand-me-downs, skewered with a fortune of safety pins so that when the boys moved they clicked like ants.

The creaking of his bed didn't worry Denizen – there were too many books underneath it to let him fall.

One of Simon's fictional detectives had commented that you could tell a lot about a person from the contents of his bookshelf, but an inspection of Denizen's collection would simply tell you he loved words. *Love on the High Seas* sat next to *Politics of Renaissance Italy*. (Crosscaper's books were all donations and it had bothered Denizen for *years* wondering who donated books on ancient politics to an orphanage.) And, while some volumes were more well-thumbed than others, each one had been read until the covers frayed.

My aunt might have books, Denizen thought, and immediately quashed the idea before it had a chance to grow.

He was not going to a new family. He was not going to a new life. He was being brought out so a stranger could have a look at him. If afterwards this mysterious aunt decided she wanted to meet him again, fine, but he was not getting his hopes up just to be disappointed.

And the first thing she was going to do was answer his questions.

Simon hadn't brought it up. He hadn't needed to – he knew Denizen too well. Denizen was one of only a few children in Crosscaper who didn't know anything about their parents. Oh, he knew their last name. He knew that they were . . . Well, he knew he was in an orphanage for a reason, but he had no idea what that reason was.

Simon did. His parents had been killed in a car crash. Mr Colford, their English teacher, drove Simon to their grave on the anniversary of their deaths every year. Michael Flannigan, two beds down from Simon on the left, had lost his parents in a fire. Samantha Hastings's mum had died of. . . Well, she wouldn't say, and the unspoken rule of Crosscaper was that if you didn't want to share nobody had a right to pry.

But Denizen simply didn't know.

It was the only other dream he'd ever had. A woman – small like him, though it was hard to tell because he was looking up at her. Her arms were round him. She smelled of strawberries. Her song . . . something about the dark . . .

Denizen didn't remember his father at all.

Simon flashed him a faint, sympathetic smile. He knew exactly where Denizen's thoughts were.

'Listen,' he said as the bell announced the end of lunch, 'I should get down to class. I'll tell Ms Hynes you can't make it because you have to pack.'

'That'll take like ten minutes. I don't need to –'

'You're right,' Simon said. 'I'll tell her you'll be along shortly. Maybe you could ask for some extra homework to take with you.'

'Ah,' Denizen said, grinning. 'Cool.'

They stared at each other awkwardly.

'It's just a day or two,' Denizen said. 'I'll probably be home tomorrow.'

‘Sure,’ Simon said. ‘Yeah. Look. Enjoy yourself, all right? Have a chat with her. Try not to overthink things. Let her spoil you if she feels guilty about not being around. See what you can find – yeah? Best of luck.’

Denizen loved words, but that didn’t mean he could always find the ones he needed. Instead, he wrapped his arms round Simon in a tight, quick hug.

And then he was alone, note crumpled in his hand.

Outside, the courtyard quieted. Denizen sighed. As nice as it was to take a few hours off class – he wouldn’t have been able to concentrate anyway, the words *absentee aunt* bouncing round his skull like a bee in a jar – he wouldn’t have minded some company. Now he was alone with his thoughts, and he couldn’t help but turn them over and over in his head.

Denizen Hardwick had an aunt. So where had she been all this time?

Maybe she hadn’t known he existed. Families fell out all the time – that had been the main theme in both *Love on the High Seas* and *Politics of Renaissance Italy* – so maybe she was only tracking him down now. Was she his mother’s sister or his father’s? What had happened that had made them lose touch?

His stomach knotted. There was so much he wanted to ask her. Would she cry? He wasn’t going to cry – that would be terrible. But she might. Were there going to be hugs? Would that be weird?

Denizen tried to imagine what it would be like. The woman would be . . . small, he supposed, maybe with his eyes and hair. His imagination had very little to go on. A hazy image formed in his mind of a chubby woman with red hair, her features a strange mix of his and those of Crosscaper’s cook, Mrs Mollins – the most auntish woman he knew.

In his imagination, the hybrid Mollins-aunt fell to her knees and starting sobbing when she saw him. Denizen squirmed. That image just made him uncomfortable. Then again, if awkward aunt-hugging led to answers about his past . . .

As far as Denizen was concerned, 6 p.m. couldn't come quick enough.