



## DOWN FROM THE STARS

‘I’ve concluded you’re a crook,’ says Alessia.

‘That’s a thing you pick up,’ he says. ‘It’s only saying less than you actually do.’

‘I’m off to help people,’ she says. ‘What’ll you do? Fish ideas, dole out other people’s art?’

‘It’s not warm, like blankets,’ he says. ‘But there’s no set price, so some comes cheap.’

‘Hedonism? Commitment?’ he wonders aloud:  
‘What’s for me?’

There’s Alessia, stretched out on a rug, fit as a wolf, her yellow eyes dwell on her future.

Alessia says, ‘That’s old stuff. Look how they’re doing. What they call research. Brains; beginning and end of the world; robot people; empires on other stars. They’ve gone into them all. It should be clear they know something, cover it up. It’s the last spurt. Who cares now, if you burn, or you burn things down? Imagining the big catastrophe – it’s an alibi, absolution, for all the other things that’s being done, the public and the private ones.’

‘Fresh pastures,’ he says, ‘for you, Alessia.’

‘You mean I’m a sheep?’ she asks, not coyly. Stern rote, perhaps. Sheep’s not so bad. There’s cows, and goats.

‘There’s something biblical about you,’ he says. ‘But then, that’s a book where there’s everything in, all hugger-mugger soldiering. Racism galore. Sacrifice maybe, for you – holding high the knife, waiting for the countermand.’

‘You mean there’s something bossing me?’  
She gets crosser.

‘You could just leave, and no wordplay,’ he says. ‘But it makes a mock of what was between us.’

‘It’s just perspective,’ she says kindly. ‘When there’s two of you, there’s three or really four and cousins too. When you’re alone, you see if you want another. A missing part.’

He’s had times of blame, for being the most moderate of the extremists. Now those terms are meaningless. Determined foreigners, gave a charge to us, they read the books, went home to Africa and were corrupt.

‘You look like a wolf,’ he says to her. ‘A husky dog. You’re all *en brosse*.’

‘It’s a myth,’ she says, ‘about dogs’ loyalty. They stick around. They have in mind the quest.’

This leads nowhere.

‘Bed?’ he asks. ‘At the last?’

Her mouth is closed. No.

She says, ‘We see the beauty of the life we eat. Food – it saddens you, but puffs you up. You won’t let it be, its glory, its heedless thrust. Eat, eat, is you.’

He says, ‘My folk used to sacrifice a sheep. It was for God; a present. Of course, we ate the



profane bits. But it was life too, to bring something for the big guy, they said, showing we thought He had an appetite. I hope the sheep believed. Me – I don't believe in it, not anything, not parents, not the fire, the knife. The family did. Believed in everything. Your mystical side, Alessia, the beauty stuff. It's new to me. And you're right. Sardines – a marvel. You wouldn't make one if you could. They're just right as they are, food, exploring and comradely.'

'God sniffs the smoke. There's lots around. Beauty comes to mind, it's sentiment – it's because I shan't come back,' Alessia says, 'and I'm leaving you behind.'

'I shan't miss you,' he says. 'Now you're here, and this is you. When you're gone, there's nothing. Of you, not a thing.'

She laughs, 'Brave little soldiers, all of us. Sardines in our can.'

'That's depression,' he says.

'No, no. Just sad.'

'Don't expect thanks out there,' he says.

'People in need thank their neighbours, not their saviours.'

‘I don’t want a compact with anyone,’ she says. ‘Not these societies that fell down. Absolutely not. I won’t save – just plaster over. No one will tell me stories.’

‘Well, if that’s enough...’ he says.

‘It’s something. I leave the adventure to you.’

‘Remember,’ he says, ‘shoot the bad guys. Think of payday.’

Their guns are issued when they get on the train. She clumps off down the stairs. She’s never seen again – at least, not round here.

There’s military everywhere. You go outside, there’s spies and uniforms. History running out the troughs and fountains, holes in everything, we float on, like a plank.

‘All here’s public property,’ says a guy. ‘So you can’t steal for yourself. You can’t have private stuff. If you steal, it must have gone to set up your clique.’

We’ve taken over what no one wanted. Trash that’s too heavy and grey to lift away.

Those two – that ‘he’, Alessia: both dead on her battlefield.

It’s the past; to call it ‘my past’ would be exaggeration. Enough of the ‘he’. Now it’s ‘me’, it’s ‘I’.

A woman I was with, not Jewish, not at all, no need nor wish to shoot at Arabs, went off to be a soldier. It’s a romantic comedy, Schlock. I’ve no loyalty to her, Alessia the soldier, doing without her like you do without a flag, a trumpet.



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