



FOUR STORIES FOR YOU

JOSS SHOVE, JOHN SHOVE, ELIZABETH SHOVE 2021

Contents

Ellexis	1
Hortense	9
Hilda	17
Florence	25

Ellexis

Ellexis slowed to catch her breath. She had been running fast through the empty streets. She looked down at her fitbit. It said 9:11. That was wrong. It was definitely earlier, more like 7.30 but the sky was already that amazing blue of a bright September morning. A yellow car passed. Then another. And a second later the ground gave way. There was no one else around, just Ellexis disappearing down the hole that had formed in the tarmac.

This is quite a nice sensation, I thought, as I floated down through the layers of the earth, past the sandy surface and into the dark masses of what could well be igneous rock. No school for me today, no physics, and no maths either. Just plain gravity, if that's what it is.

The walls of the hole were quite uneven, there were ledges that looked like shelves, and some fronds of ferny vegetation here and there. So there must be some water and some light coming from somewhere. I looked down at my feet to check that I wasn't dreaming. There were my shorts, my legs and finally my running shoes, 'New Balance', size 6, azure with a blaze of pink. It was all real.

Eventually I felt myself slowing down. I landed softly on some loose gravel – it might have been road chippings, hard to say. I looked about. It was definitely not as dark as it should be in the middle of the earth. But there was no sign of the shaft I had come down. I stood for a moment, wondering what to do.

I checked the GPS coordinates on my new fitbit – the 'super-tracker V301' that I'd got for my 13th birthday. The data flicked on the screen. Good, I thought, I am not that far from home, but what about the third dimension? How far have I fallen? My fitbit was no good for that.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom I realized I was not in a cave, I was at the intersection of a mass of tunnels, leading off in every direction. Since the GPS was

working and since I had stored the coordinates of my current location I decided to explore.

I could see the floor, still loose gravel, but as I went on further I saw something like steam swirling ahead, and there was a slightly acrid smell. I decided to turn back. I checked the fitbit again to check the direction. At first the screen was blank, then it said 'Adrian Approaching', in a type face I'd never seen before.

The next moment, he was there, right in front of me. He spoke in a deep voice. "You must be Ellexis. Welcome". It was hard to tell in the gloom but from what I could see he had a very soft thick fur coat. Adrian (that must be his name) opened a door just off the main tunnel.

There were dozens of computers and in a locked glass cabinet set in the rock, a collection of fitbits dating back to the very first 'Ultra'. He followed my gaze.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed your regular morning run Ellexis, and especially on a day when your mood was already amber 5.6, but as you can see I am a collector and I am missing the V301. If you would just hand me your fitbit, and your password, I can show you the way out and you'll be home before you know it".

"No way" I said, "This was my birthday present, I'm not giving it to anyone".

Adrian shrugged. "No rush.. I'll make some breakfast. I'll leave you to think it over". And with that he left, closing the door firmly behind him.

I sat on one of the swivel chairs and swung my legs around. The computer monitor to my left was on. The screen was full of details and data. I took a closer look. It was all about me!!!

Ellexis Ali. Age 13 and 2 months. Unique identifier: XE!/88*a2D, Address: 22 Dark Lane Drive. Model: 'super-tracker V301' Speed: top 10%. Heart rate: excellent. Sleep: 6.1 weekly average. Sociotemporal rhythm: regular. Mood: amber 5.7; Stress level: rising. Location: 0.00/0.00; Life expectancy: data not available; Political affiliation: data not available. Favourite colour: data not available. Extended Social network: data not available; Weekly income and expenditure: data not available.

The dashboard on the computer showed more, including the path I had taken that very morning. I had been tracked by my own 'super-tracker V301'.

I tried the 'NEXT' button – what else was there to discover and who else was being tracked? It didn't work. The screen was frozen.

I swung around a few more times on the swivel chair. On the shelves there were some old Lever Arch files. I went across and pulled a red one off the shelf: it said 'PLANS' in big letters on the spine. I opened it up. Inside there were pages and pages of sketches of military installations, each carefully labelled with the fitbit unique identifiers of soldiers –the maps showed the routes of their runs! I checked the dates:2013-2017, I put the file back, and picked out the one next to it.

It was marked 'INVOICES'. One was to a company called 'Vitality: Life Insurance'; another was to Nike. They were all from an organization called 'Adrian's data services'. A few pages on, there was a query from MI5. Would Adrian be so kind as to reveal the location of nuclear facilities in the USA?

I was starting to put the pieces together. Adrian wasn't that organised – his filing system was a bit random and there were stacks of paper everywhere, including a pile of school exercise books. I opened one at random. It was full of figures, but of what? There were what looked like strips of heart rate data, sellotaped in here and there, and some equations.

I went back to the chair and swung around a bit more. The sink hole was no accident. I had been captured for my 'smart-tracker V301' and my password. But why? I looked back again at the glass cabinet. Where were the owners of those old fitbits now?

The knock on the door made me jump. It was Adrian. "Breakfast is ready..."

I always have rice krispies for breakfast, but not today. Adrian wheeled a trolley into the room. It was laden with cutlery, crockery, a stainless steel coffee pot and a large plate of what looked like spam on toast. He looked across: "I could scramble some eggs for you if you like, but I know you are not that keen on them."

How does he know that, I wondered, and I glanced at my fitbit. Was that the source? I sat in silence. I had been captured. I had to find a way out. I swung my legs back and forth. Had anyone else escaped before? Probably not. It would have been in the news, for sure. I gripped the edge of the swivel chair and spun it round again a few times.

Adrian busied himself: clearing a space on one of the desks, laying out the breakfast things. He sat down opposite and poured the coffee. It smelled good.

Adrian: "My I-C-U everywhere monitor tells me you have been looking through my files whilst I was out. You know it is not very polite to go through other people's belongings without them knowing. There is no point in trying to go behind my back, I can see you everywhere. Look, there is no escape." He held out his arm to show me a little device strapped to his wrist. On it, there was a grainy photo of me surrounded by a mass of indecipherable data.

I was aghast. I looked him straight in the eye. "I know exactly what you are up to. You are harvesting data from innocent people like me, you are invading our privacy, secretly stealing information and then selling it on. It is horrid.

And those experiments in the exercise books: you are trying to programme fitbits to make people run faster or slower. You want to control us. It is wrong and it is immoral.

And now I know why you trapped me. Its not me, its my V301 you want. At the moment you can only do the basics but when you get hold of a V301 and when you crack the super-tracker protocol, you will be able to collect and sell even more secrets. You will know all about my friends, you'll even know my favourite colour. That's wrong. You are not having my fitbit and I'm not going to tell you my password. Never. I am going to get out of here and I am going to tell everyone what you are doing. Then you'll be in trouble."

Adrian: "Come now, Ellexis. You've got the wrong end of the stick. It is you who are producing the data, not me. If you didn't go around wearing the fitbit, uploading your routes, your heart rate, your pace and your mood ratings on to your computer, if you just went out for a plain ordinary run, I'd know nothing about you.

If everyone did the same I'd be out of business in a flash. You are just as much part of the system as me. You can't pretend otherwise.

And anyway, how do you know I'm not doing good. Just think about it. I need to keep up to date. The latest fitbits are generating an unrivalled source of information about the human condition, the aging process and the physiological-psychological interface. If I didn't gather all this data it would just go to waste. When it is combined and analysed it can tell us a lot about bodies and their moving parts, their patterns of sleep and what it means to be fit and well. What's wrong with that?"

Adrian paused for a moment and then tucked into his breakfast. "I hope you like the meat" he said "it is cooked to perfection".

I wasn't going to let the argument go. I put down my coffee.

"But that's not what you are doing" I replied. "I've seen the invoices from Vitality – that is a health insurance company, all they care about are actuarial rates and profits. And I've seen your other files as well. I know you are using fitbit data from soldiers to reveal the layout of military installations and underground bunkers. I don't care if you are dealing with M15 or the Kremlin. What you are doing is wrong. It is immoral. When I get out I am going to tell everyone, but everyone."

Adrian shrugs. His thick fur coat just covers his big belly. "More coffee?" he asks.

I have just developed a taste for coffee and this is some of the best I have ever had. I hesitated. Should I take coffee from such an evil creature? This was a moral and ethical dilemma, but one that I swiftly resolved. "Yes please" I said.

Adrian went out to fetch the coffee. I looked around. I had to get away, but how? I was in the middle of a maze of tunnels and Adrian was spying on my every move. I looked around again. There was an old fridge-freezer over on the right, covered in magnets. Four of them were holding a sketch in place. The paper was all crinkled but I could make out a series of intersecting lines. Exit was marked in faded red felt pen at the far end of one of the tracks. That's it, I thought, it's a plan.

If the map was right, if I was at 0.00/0.00, and if I ran really fast, maybe I could reach the exit before Adrian could do anything about it. But what if it wasn't really a map? What if it was out of date? What if the exit was blocked? I pushed these thoughts aside and memorised the route. It was my only chance. I checked my laces were tied, I took a deep breath and then I was off like a shot: left, right, third on the right.. soon I would be out.

Third left, second right... not far to go now. It was then that I heard something behind me, faint at first but then louder. I looked down at the fitbit. It said 'Adrian Approaching'. I began to panic. Was it second right or was it third right? And what if I got it wrong?

I could hear him closer now, panting hard and gasping for breath. I had to decide. There was no time to waste. I looked at the branching tunnels opening up in front of me, and there, right ahead I saw the faintest chink of light. That's it! That's the way to go.

A moment later there was loud thud. I glanced back. It was Adrian, flat on the ground his fur coat quivering a bit. I checked the fitbit. It was flashing red. 'Adrian: danger! heart rate: 0.00'. I hesitated for a moment. Should I go back? What if it was a trap? I didn't stop to find out more, I just ran.

The exit was easy. I parted the curtain of ivy and there I was, out by the edge of the canal. I blinked. It was still morning and the sky was still bright blue. For some reason my fitbit had reset itself: it said 7.30am. I was puzzled. Surely it must be later than that? I checked it again, and as I did so a couple of morning runners waved as they flashed by, innocently sending data to who knows where.

I had to tell everyone that all this information was being stolen and stored underground. I raced home.

My mother barely looked up as she let me in. "Breakfast is ready ..." she said.

The rice krispies were laid out on the table, as they always were. My father and younger brother were fiddling with their phones. I didn't stop, not even to take off my shoes, I said:

“There is something terrible going on. I fell down this deep hole, and there were all these tunnels and computers and files and someone called Adrian who is a spy. He is gathering all sorts of private details and selling them on. He wanted to get hold of my fitbit. It is wrong. We’ve got to stop it.”

My brother turned from his phone and sneered. “I suppose this Adrian is a mole, is that right Ellexis?”

I paused.. “I suppose he might be. But I think he’s dead now. I don’t know. You see he was chasing me and he was quite fat and not in the least bit fit and then he collapsed. I didn’t go back to look”.

My mother interrupted: “Ellexis, eat up your krispies or you’ll be late.”

“But what about Adrian’s data services, we’ve got to stop him.”

My mother didn’t care. She said “I don’t know what you are talking about and anyway you said this mythical mole was dead. Don’t worry about it, go and get changed, you can’t go to school looking like that.”

Nobody, but nobody was listening to a word I said. I stared at them blankly – they just didn’t understand.

“Ellexis, get moving!” My mother was getting in a flap.

Back in my bedroom I unlaced my running shoes. It can’t have been a dream. I had seen all those files, and computers but how come it was 7.30am when I fell down the hole and the same time when I came out by the canal? Did Adrian and his data centre really exist? I wasn’t so sure now.

I waited at the school bus stop. “Hi Ellexis”. It was Jem. She tapped her smart watch. “Physics and Maths today, she said” and grimaced. I knew I could trust Jem, but should I tell her? What if she thought I was making it all up: an underground data centre, delicious coffee, a crinkled map and a narrow escape?

The bus arrived and we ran upstairs to the front seat at the top, as we always do. From there we get a good view of the digital advertising on the side of the bus stop: it is fun to watch it change from one topic to another. This time there was a boring

advert for some sort of electricity company. At the bottom, in small print were the words: 'customer details protected by Adrian's data services'.

I turned to Jem and said, "Jem I've got something to tell you". But Jem wasn't listening. She was looking down at her smart watch. "What's this?" she said. There on the screen was the familiar type face. "Adrian approaching". I spun round. I heard the sound of heavy breathing as someone climbed slowly up the stairs.

Hortense

Hortense got up early, as she always did. She put on her blue patterned dress and apron and went downstairs to the kitchen - full of pots and pans, strings of garlic and racks of vegetables. She set the water on the stove ready to boil the eggs. Every morning she did the same thing. It was May and her hens were laying well. She picked a couple of eggs out of the terracotta dish and put them in the bubbling water.

Hortense had been Claude Dupont's housekeeper for as long as she could remember. She lived in a small room in the attic of the house that Claude had inherited from his father. It was a large property at the edge of Haut Bouton, the village in which Hortense had grown up, and which she had never left. The house was fading a bit. The grey paint was peeling on the shutters. The wisteria wound around the windows.

As the steam rose from the boiling eggs she thought about the day ahead. Once breakfast was done and cleared up, she'd be back in the studio. The studio, as Claude liked to call it, was a converted lean-to on the south side of the house. Not much more than a shed really, but it was where she had learned her craft.

She loved it all, the smell of the rags and brushes, the sun on the low stone wall and the lizards flicking away. She could see the vegetable garden beyond and her chickens pottering about in the orchard, always fussing with something or another. But it was the paint that held her attention. Hortense never failed to be inspired by colour. Orange is her favourite. Orange as the setting sun, sinking slowly in the sea. Not that they can see the sea from here. But she likes the sound of it. Orange and blue together, and then a deep dark green. Just the thought of it thrills her. How to capture the light glinting on the water, the twisty trunks of the Provencal pines, the dappled shade and a red roofed house in the distance? That was her task for the day.

As usual, Claude had done a quick sketch whilst out with his fancy easel, the perfect image of the artist. But it was she who did the work in this little stone shed. And sometimes, she thought, it was she who had all the fun as well.

Later that afternoon...

Hortense put the finishing touches to the *Lac des Pins* - and sat for a while, gazing at the familiar view. She was in no rush. There was plenty of time to think about what to make for Claude's dinner. Perhaps a pissaladière, or maybe fish?

On a whim, she went to the back of the shed and pulled one of Claude's blank canvases out from the stack. He wouldn't miss this little one. Hortense found a stub of yellow lake oil pastel and began to draw. She had never done this before. Perhaps she could start from scratch. Perhaps she could make a picture of her own. Why not give it a go? She settled on her subject: the valley below, the small house on the left, and the outcrop of white stone behind. Soon she was lost in the work. Tomorrow she would turn this into a painting and no one would know the difference.

The following week...

Hortense was busy with the rough brown paper, packing up the pictures - the *Lac des Pins* and her own work, *Le Chalet Sud* among them, ready for Claude's next trip to Paris. He goes three or maybe four times a year, usually for just a few days. Hortense has no idea what Claude does with all the paintings she has completed and she doesn't mind either.

She always has the next one to do, and always the colours to enjoy, lead white, emerald green, viridian, cobalt blue, and the orange mixture of vermillion and Indian yellow. She likes the routine, the paint, the chickens, and the old black cat rubbing round her stocky legs.

Something like a year later...

The butcher always wraps the sausages in newspaper. As she peels the slightly damp layers away, something catches Hortense's eye. "Record Price paid for a Claude Dupont". She reads on. Someone called Lillian Cutler, an art collector from New York has bought one of Dupont's latest paintings *Le Chalet Sud* at auction for a record price. According to the auction house report, Dupont is fast becoming one of the leading artists of his generation. There is no doubt about it, this is his finest work to date.

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New York

Lillian Cutler knew from the moment she read the auctioneer's description. She wanted, no, she *needed* to own *Le Chalet Sud*. She *adored* Dupont's work and according to the auction house, this was an absolute gem. Dupont at the top of his game. Lillian had been left her fortune, her mansion and her art collection by her late uncle. At first it was a burden, but that was years ago. Since then she had become a familiar figure in the New York art scene, known as a connoisseur of French painting. She was famed for her impeccable taste and she knew it. Her infrequent purchases always caused a stir. As the saying goes, "Prices rise when Cutler buys."

She put the auction catalogue down on the onyx coffee table. She could just imagine it, a small perfectly formed Dupont alongside the Cezanne in the lounge. They would make the ideal pair. Lillian instructed her agent in Paris. "Get me *Le Chalet Sud*, money no object."

For the next sixteen years *Le Chalet Sud* graced the Cutler residence, known to all but seen by no one except Lillian and her small staff. When Lillian died, quite suddenly, her entire collection was put up for sale.

Steven Findlay's heart missed a beat when he heard the news. Steven was an expert in analyzing art works. He knew everything there was to know about

pigments and particles of paint. He used the latest polarizing microscopes and carefully chosen apochromatic objectives to reveal layers of colour and the drawing beneath. He knew about the detail of the brush stroke, the thickness of the paint and its impact on translucency and tone. He was *the* authority on Dupont and he had been commissioned to examine much of the artists' oeuvre, now held in galleries around the world. Steven was a physicist, an historian and a detective and he loved his job. No one had ever been able to study *Le Chalet Sud*, Dupont's most famous work. Maybe now was his chance. A few days later, he got a call from the Philadelphia Institute of Modern Art. The trustees were thinking of buying *Le Chalet Sud*, but they needed some advice before going ahead with such a huge investment. Could he perhaps take a look?

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Haut Bouton, Provence

Hortense was in the kitchen chopping vegetables. Thank goodness she no longer had to climb all those stairs down from the attic. She thinks back. It must be sixteen or maybe seventeen years since she had shown Claude the notice she'd spotted in the newspaper, wrapped around the sausages.

"Look" she had said, "Look, you've done very well with *Le Chalet Sud*". Claude had just shrugged. "That's the art market for you Hortense. You never know what's going to happen next." After a long pause he had continued "I know it's a trek to the attic and back and you've said your knees have been troubling you lately. We don't use the drawing room at the front of the house very often, so if you *did* want to do a bit more sketching yourself you could move in there and of course just let me know if there are any materials you might need."

So that's what happened. Hortense took up Claude's offer. She moved into the spacious drawing room with the big French doors opening out on to the garden.

Little else has changed. The chickens scratch around in the orchard. Hortense spends her days in the studio or out sketching on her own. Now in charge of the

whole process, she produces one or two Duponts a month. Claude does less and less. He makes fewer trips to Paris and more frequent visits to his somellier.

They had a telephone installed a few years ago, and one day it rang. Claude answered. It was a long-distance call from Philadelphia. Steven Findlay. Claude was getting a bit deaf but that's what it sounded like. Could this Steven come to visit? Well why not Claude thought, we don't get many visitors these days.

Hortense prepared the table for lunch outside. She set out the plates, the best cutlery and the wine glasses. "A crisp white for our guest", Claude had said, and so it was. A flinty dry Chablis from the cellar. Claude led Steven out on to the terrace. It was lovely. The wisteria had grown and grown, but the view was the same. Across the valley you could still see *Le Chalet Sud*, though the trees had grown up a bit in the foreground. "Do take a seat" said Claude.

Steven was entranced. There it was, the view that he had studied so carefully but that he had never seen before. He pulled himself together. No time for emotion, he was here to discuss an important matter of detail. Claude poured the wine and Hortense brought out the hors d'oeuvres, stuffed olives and a little charcuterie.

The sun beat down on the stone wall and the lizards flicked away. By the time they got to the end of the third course, the conversation was flowing but Steven had still not managed to bring up the reason for his visit. He must do that soon.

"Claude, there is something I'd like to ask. It's about *Le Chalet Sud*. I've studied many of your works over the years, but this one is different. The polarizing microscope shows that the sketch is in yellow lake oil pastel, not charcoal. I can see that it is a painting of your view, right in front of me, but I was wondering, why the pastel?"

Hortense was clearing the plates away when Claude interrupted. "Would you join us for a moment?" Hortense pulled up a chair and sat herself down. "Steven, this is Hortense, my housekeeper. Steven has a question about *Le Chalet Sud*".

Steven was puzzled. What would Claude's housekeeper know? He carried on anyway. "Yes, you see my analysis shows traces of oil pastel, not charcoal so I was wondering...."

Hortense gazed across the valley towards Le Chalet Sud. "That's right, it was yellow lake. It was a late spring afternoon, it might have been May. There was no charcoal but there was a bit of pastel. I think we've still got some in the studio"

Steven could not contain his curiosity. Would the traces of yellow lake match? Would he be able to see some Duponts in progress? Would he discover how Claude layered the paint to such effect? He just had to ask. "The studio" he said. "Do you think I could have a quick peek in the studio, I'd love to see where you work". Claude replied "Yes, of course. Hortense can show you round".

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Hortense lifted the heavy latch and pushed open the studio door. The light streamed in across the uneven stone floor. There was her old wicker chair and her painting apron and the big wooden table with her brushes and her colours. Vermillion, veridian and ultramarine. She savoured the names as well as the oily textures and the smell.

Steven had to duck his head as he came in. He looked around. The so-called studio was just a shed. There were cobwebs on the beams and gaps in the slates above. A stack of canvases lay propped up against the back wall. He turned to Hortense. "May I take a look?". Hortense glanced up and said "Yes, that's the next batch ready to go to Paris."

Steven went over to the pile and picked one out. He carried it carefully to the light. It was a stunning view of stony outcrops and below them, a lake catching the last rays of the evening sun. No doubt about it, it *was* a Dupont. He would know one anywhere. There were the angled brush strokes, the careful layering of paint, and the colour, always the colour. Hortense watched him.

“I think there are some other views from the same spot.” She pulled out an old cardboard box. “Yes, here are a few more. This is from last winter. And here is another one with the quarry. I’ll clear these things away to make some space.” Hortense pushed some of her rags aside.

Steven considered the painting in front of him. The water shimmered. The light played across the hard landscape. The dark shadows accentuated the delicate rosy glow on the limestone. From his microscopic analysis, Stephen knew that Dupont always used a layer of lead white and ultramarine, but that was not enough to capture the slightly ruffled surface of the lake. How had he done that? The technique was amazing.

Hortense was rummaging through the jam jars in which she kept old bits of crayon that might come in handy one day. “Here is a piece” she said. “Here is some of that yellow lake pastel you were asking about.”

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Claude was still at the table on the terrace when they returned. He looked up. “Did you find what you were looking for? I hope Hortense was able to answer all your questions.” Steven replied. “Yes, it was very informative, thank you so much”.

Before Steven could say any more Claude stood up and shook him by the hand. “I like to have a bit of a siesta these days and it’s time for my afternoon nap. Hortense can show you the way out. Very nice to meet you. Very nice indeed.”

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Steven opened the door of the hire car. When he got back to the lab he could match the fragments of yellow lake with the stub that Hortense had given him and that would be that. It was exactly the evidence he needed to show, beyond doubt, that *Le Chalet Sud* was an authentic Dupont. He reached for his spectacles. Damn. Not in his jacket pocket. Steven searched around. Not in the glove compartment. Not in the little brown holdall. He must have taken them off in the studio. Never mind, he could just pop back and fetch them: no need to trouble Claude again. Steven walked around the side of the house.

The studio door was ajar. To his surprise Hortense was there, mixing what looked like vermillion and Indian yellow. She was so absorbed that she didn't notice him. He watched as she began to apply the paint in distinctive, angled brush strokes.

Steven's entire career had been built on his knowledge of Dupont. But as he stood in the doorway it began to dawn on him that there were no Duponts. He took another look around the shed. It was now obvious that everything had been painted by Hortense. That's why she knew about *Le Chalet Sud* and the yellow lake pastel. That's why she had such a detailed knowledge of colour. This was not Dupont's studio, it was hers.

He tapped on the door and Hortense looked up. "Here they are" she said, handing him his spectacles.

Steven's flight back to New York was booked for the next day. What was he going to do? It would be the sensation of the century. Dupont's entire output painted by his housekeeper! Fortunes had already been spent. "Prices rise when Cutler buys" or so the saying goes. The value of Dupont's work had escalated after the record price paid for *Le Chalet Sud*, but what if the truth came out? Steven knew enough about the art world to know that the market would collapse. And then what? Dupont's – no, no, Steven corrected himself – Hortense's paintings would not be seen and admired. All that talent, the vibrant colours, the effect of light on water, it would all go to waste. How could he, Steven Findlay, let that happen?

Le Chalet Sud was a fine work of art. Yes, it had been painted by Dupont's housekeeper, but did that really matter? The traces of yellow lake would match the old stub of pastel from the studio. That would be proof enough. Steven made up his mind. He knew the system, and he knew his part in it. He *would* recommend that the Philadelphia Institute of Modern Art buy Dupont's most famous work. Steven lay back on the hotel bed and laughed to himself. Hortense would carry on producing art for the world to enjoy, Claude's reputation would remain intact and Steven's expertise would always be in demand.

Hilda

876 AD

I looked out across the misty creek. The reeds ruffled gently in the summer breeze. After four years of planning and negotiation it is my wedding day. The preparations have been underway since I was eight. All the food is ready along with the mead and the ale.

My father has promised he'll give me away without making endless speeches and exaggerations, but I'm not so sure. He can't resist an audience and us South Folk are known to be boastful and proud. Everyone, but everyone, will be there: All quests have been paused for the week. The swords have been prepared for exchange, one from Sten's family, one from mine, and the silver ring with its distinctive interwoven design.

My own hair was braided last night, I have a new set of clothes, and a new future awaits. Sten will have had a shave and a fresh tattoo. I don't know what styles and settings *The Creed* will have chosen for him, but I'll soon find out.

I was about to turn back along the grassy path that led to the village when I noticed something on the horizon. I squinted and looked again. Then I heard a faint but familiar click. Oh no. Not today! Please not today! But there was no mistaking it: a raiding ship, heading this way. I checked the tide and the wind.

We had a bit of time. I raced back and raised the alarm. Everyone knew the drill but we had so much food – boiled meat, bread and nettles - too much to carry. And the mundr (this is called 'bride price' in the manual: edition 6.2), the heiman-fylgia (the 'dowry') and the morgden-gifu (the 'morning gift'). What to do with that?

Sten, suddenly a man, stepped in and made the decision: bury the silver and take the animals and as much food as we can manage. Without food we cannot live. My father agreed. Just do it, but don't let anyone see you and don't tell anyone where you put the treasure.

So that's what we did. We hid the whole lot: 200 ingots in one spot. There were too many roots to dig close to the oak, so we had to move a bit further into the open field where the pigs snuffled around and where the soil was already disturbed. I paced the distances. We would be back.

Then we vanished into the shadows of the forest leaving 30 casks of liquor behind. We ran through the thick green leaves, in and out of the dappled light, we ran on to the edge of the terrain and we crossed over into another zone.

I was sure we would return. One day there would be another little click and we'd be allowed home. Sometimes the raiders stay for years, sometimes just a few weeks. To be honest, no one really knows who they are or where they come from. Legend has it that we are all of Viking blood: names, and traditions mingled. Our currencies and ingots are much the same, and so are the scores we settle.

That early morning is etched on my memory. I never did get back to Astrbrú. Sten and I were married, but in another settlement and after another two year's preparation (just 100 ingots this time). Now, 30 years on, I am old. I am sick and I know I don't have long to live. The coordinates are logged in *The Creed*, but in real life only Sten and I knew where the silver was buried, and Sten was disappeared by a vicious algorithm many moons ago.

I shouldn't let our secret die. I decided it was time to tell my eldest daughter, also called Hilda – the warrior. Maybe, one day, she'd be sent across the border. If she found the old oak tree, and if she followed in my footsteps we'd be back in the game.

2021 AD

The tractor was brand new. A bright red Massey Ferguson 8S Exclusive, bundled with the MF precision farming package. After months of indecision I had finally gone for a model at the top of the range. I was tempted by the John Deere, 7R 270 but in the end, I went for the Fergie. I had done my research and at the end of the day there is not much to choose between the two. I know farmers who say "if she isn't red, keep her in the shed". I'm not as prejudiced as that, but to be honest, I've

never really liked the green. In any case, Massey Ferguson *is* a good brand. The 8S had just won a prestigious award for design. The cab was beautifully laid out: 360 degrees visibility, a multi-pad joystick, total comfort and unrivalled control and connectivity. No wonder it had been named tractor of the year.

It was early March, and still cold enough to see your breath. I spent what seemed like half the morning setting up the Stanhay pro air 785. I have learned the hard way that you have to get the calibration just right. I went through the process methodically, one step at a time. I positioned the seed disc and the singulator, adjusted the gearing and filled the hoppers. Finally, I was good to go. I climbed up into the cab and started the engine. The radio came on (always radio 4) and the digital display sprang into life. I was still getting used to the new software but I'd programmed the precision farming settings and downloaded the database.

I sometimes wonder if I really need all these gadgets. I know the land like the back of my hand. I know the gentle curves of the fields and the way they dip down towards the creek, I know where the soil is still a bit gravelly and I know where the water lies after heavy rain. The farm has been in my family for as long as anyone can remember. Some say my ancestors were from here, and some say we are of Viking descent.

I pulled in to a large layby to let some cars pass. It was not far to go now, next gate on the left, but people get so impatient these days. Once I was in the field it was easy work. I fixed the depth of the drill and set off, birds in tow. Today's job was to plant the onion seed. Sometimes I grow potatoes, but this year it will be onions. The 8S was a dream: it almost drove itself. I settled into the rhythm and my thoughts wandered.

I had been widowed for a long time now. It was over ten years since the accident. Who would have thought I'd be running the whole farm on my own, or spending so much money on a fancy tractor? Things change. And not just for me. In a few weeks' time, Stan will be married. They've been planning the wedding for ages. The party will be in the village hall and from what I hear, everything is organised: the food, the drink and even the table decorations. Just the ring left to choose. I still can't quite believe it. Stan, my cheeky little fair-haired boy, now a grown man and planning to have children of his own. And what then? Will my grandchildren

want to be farmers too? Youngsters nowadays spend all their time playing with computers – what future is there in that?

I was about half way across the southern edge of the field when a warning light flashed on the display screen to the left. Two linked circles. What could that mean? I loaded the manual and checked the icons. Fault 241. Disengage part 56 under the chassis to access the reset. Turn 90 degrees with screwdriver No. 12. Damn. Everything had been going so well.

I found part 56 easily enough but as I reached behind for the screwdriver, I caught sight of something else. A small hoop poking out of the earth. I pulled. It was a complete ring. I gave it a rub. It was not rusty. I rubbed again and a faint pattern began to grin through. I slipped it into my pocket. I'd give it a proper wash when I got home. The tractor started up immediately, automatically recording the fault and my location in its digital log.

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The delicate interwoven design brushed up beautifully. The ring was perfect. Stan could have it for his bride - it would be my gift. Come rain or shine, Stan always calls round for sausage and lentil casserole on a Thursday night. Although I say it myself, I am a rather good cook. After dinner I cleared the dishes away and showed him what I had found. He turned the ring around slowly in his big hand. Then he looked up: 'where did this come from? If this is what I think it is, then there will be more.' I explained about Fault 241, near the old oak tree. He jumped up. 'The tractor log' he said, 'let's check the tractor log'.

It was already dark, but there was no stopping him. The tractor led us to the exact location. I reversed a bit, adjusted the controls and put the headlights on full beam. Stan began to dig. He was right! With the second spade full he brought up a pile of metal pieces. Coins. Silver coins. There were dozens of them.

Next morning, I called the East Suffolk Archaeology service. The young lady from the portable antiquities team came right away and I took her over to the field. She was absolutely thrilled. She said it was the most significant find of her life, and soon it was in all the papers as well. 'A big surprise! Viking hoard discovered near Eastbridge.'

The silver coins, some 200 ingots in all, and two highly decorated sword hilts are now in the British Museum but to tell the truth, I never did hand over the wedding ring. I gave it to Stan and it remains in the family – linking us to each other, to our ancestors and to our land.

2035 AD

Everyone knows me as Alice but my real name is Hilda. I am twelve and a half. I was named after my grandmother who died when I was quite young. I live with my parents on a farm near Eastbridge. Sometimes they grow potatoes, sometimes onions. They have a shed of tractors and my dad is always busy, but I am bored. There is nothing to do – and when I say nothing, I mean nothing, absolutely nothing. Just the fields and the creek beyond.

Thank goodness for my computer. I love my computer, and I love my character in *the Creed*. I decided to call her Hilda, and I gave her long golden hair, just like mine. Sometimes I am so engrossed I think I am possessed by Hilda. I have to plan for the year ahead, store food, manage her tribe, gather crops, and organize quests and raids. I selected metal work as their special skill. There is a library of objects they can make, and lovely designs to choose from. It takes time to build up enough ingots to pay for a wedding, but that's what you have to do. If there are no weddings, there are no children, and no more points.

I decided that Hilda should marry Sten, who is another character I invented. In this game you have to arrange everything. You have to pick the ring, and a sword hilt and you need at least 100 ingots for even a basic wedding. I decided to go for a more lavish option: 200 ingots and a huge stash of food. You get a seasonal allowance, but you can add to this by careful trading. I set the number of guests. I decided there would be drinking contests after the ceremony, and I spent more on mead and ale than I should have done.

Then there were the outfits. I picked a new set of clothes for Hilda and I decided that her hair should be plaited. And for Sten I went for a fresh tattoo. Everything was set, but then we ran into trouble. A random raid from the East. These happen

from time to time, and if you are not careful you can lose everything. Points and ingots down the drain. You have to make a decision: fight or flight.

It is not easy. If you stay and fight when you don't have enough weapons and skill ratings, your population will be wasted. If you run into another zone, you lose the credit you've built up but you can start again. I pressed pause. That's the good thing with this game, you can stop and start when you like.

I could bury the treasure. I'd still lose all the food and drink, but if I could get the tribe back to the zone, and if I kept the coordinates I could pass the details to another character, later in the game. Or I could make them bury the treasure and then fight. But no, there wouldn't be enough time for that. Best make them hide the ingots and run for it. The animation in this version is excellent and I could almost see my little figures sprinting through the trees, in and out of and the dappled light.

When the raiders landed, they had huge a feast and a drunken brawl and they smashed up everything that I had built. The whole village was razed to the ground. This game is *so* unfair.

I started Hilda and her tribe off again in the next zone. Farming, raiding, working hard. But to get anywhere at all I needed a new generation. I had to fix another wedding. A smaller affair this time round, but I figured I'd stick with the same couple: Hilda and Sten. Maybe there would be a time warp. Maybe I'd be able to send one of their children to find the hoard? Then I'd be back in the game.

I heard the door slam downstairs. It was my dad, in from the shed. He shouted up: 'Alice, your homework: don't forget you've got to do your history tonight. And supper will be ready soon. If you are playing that game, it's time you stopped.'

My mother ladled out the lentil and sausage stew. We always have that on Thursdays, I don't know why. I was still lost in the game, thinking about what I needed to prepare for the second wedding. 'Alice, pass your plate over'. My mother reached across with a big spoonful of steaming stew. As she did so, I

noticed – probably for the first time – the pattern on her wedding ring. It was identical. It was Hilda’s ring. The woven strands skillfully threaded together.

‘Alice, what’s wrong, are you ok? You look like you’ve seen a ghost’.
I said, ‘It’s the ring. I have seen your ring before’

Dad turned around from the sink. ‘Oh no you haven’t, there is only one ring like that.’

‘No’ I said, ‘It’s in the game, it’s in *the Creed*. Hilda and Sten buried it. They were about to get married and then there was this raid from the East and they had to hide it quick. I made them put it in a spot next to an oak tree, by a creek – but so far no one has found it. I don’t think I’ll ever get it back.’

This time it was dad’s turn to be surprised.

‘They buried the ring near an oak tree by a creek? That’s where your grandmother found the hoard. You are getting the game mixed up with what actually happened. I’ve told you before about how the tractor broke down and how we discovered the Viking treasure, right here on our land. Your mother’s ring is for real, this is our wedding ring, it’s not something from one of your fancy computer games.’

After dinner dad went to his study to download the latest updates for his precision farming software. I went back to my room. It was time for homework. I opened the set text: ‘Introduction to history: a beginner’s guide to the modern era’, and began to read.

History is not the past. It is constructed in the present. We carry the ghosts of previous generations with us. We are our history and that is why history is always being rewritten.

What could that possibly mean?

I looked up from my little desk in the bedroom and gazed out across the fields. It was starting to fall into place. *The Creed* was not just a game, it was our family history. I made Hilda the Viking. She had to bury the ring, but my grandmother found the ring, my parents got married and now I am here. *The Creed* had linked me to the mind of my ancestors, just as Ubisoft promised, but it wasn’t that simple.

If Hilda was a character in a computer game, what about granny? Was she real? To be honest, I can't remember much about her. But if she didn't exist, what about dad? And what about me?

Florence

London, 1st August 1860

Cher Monsieur Quetelet,

It was a delight to meet you at the International Statistical Congress last week. Finally, our paths have crossed. It might seem like a coincidence that we found each other, and that we have so many interests in common, but I have been an admirer of your work for many years. I acquired a copy of *La Physique Sociale* as soon as it was published and I am delighted to hear that you are intending to revise and rewrite it. It is so hard to get hold of the first edition these days and if we are to revitalize the field of statistics, your book *must* be freely available in our greatest universities. It is essential that the next generation of social and political leaders has ready access to your ideas.

I am planning a short work of my own, probably something about childbirth and maternity, that incorporates your techniques. As we both understand the thinking in our field is so backward, so sluggish and so thwarted by tradition that our only hope is to present factual evidence. I know many influential people who could use their good offices to do so much on our behalf if only they could be persuaded. Dr Farr - I think you know him too? – disagrees with me, but if we are to have effect we must develop more compelling methods of representing our results. We have data that could and that should transform diagnosis and treatment and that would, in the proper hands, revolutionise the administration of care and alleviate *so much* needless suffering.

As I mentioned when we met in London, I have been especially inspired by the way you combine data sets to identify underlying patterns. I am convinced that the trends you reveal do not arise by chance, they are not coincidences in the usual sense. They are co- incidences, that is correlated, co-existing incidents, as I discovered during my stint in the East.

I will never forget that thundery afternoon in my office at the back of the hospital in Scutari. I had my writing desk there and my boxes of data. I had been at work since dawn, copying, calculating and summarizing the figures that I had prised out of my reluctant colleagues at the front. I know they have so much to do, but unless they devote quality time to filling in the forms that I send their efforts will most likely be in vain. But I digress. I began to assemble the evidence on mortality, just as you have done. One question was upper most in my mind. Did it make sense to send wounded soldiers back to Scutari, a perilous journey in its own right, or to send nurses to treat them in field hospitals closer to the front? If I could answer this question to my satisfaction, I would know how to organize my resources to best effect. To my knowledge no one had done this kind of basic accounting before.

As the day wore on, and the air got heavier, I felt a sudden lightness. I could at last 'see' connections, conjunctions, coincidences if you will – that no one, but no one had seen before. The realities of life and death leapt from the page.

For this I will always be in your debt. I learned so much from your practical application of statistics, from the careful compilation of facts and figures, and from your concept of the 'average' man. But in my view, it is the combination of statistical data that is of greatest power in society. It is this that holds the key to much needed reforms in Legislation, Government, Criminal Law, Education, Institutions, Sanitary practice, &c, &c, &c.

Dr Farr is of a different opinion – he can be such a purist at times – but to make progress we must popularize your approach as a matter of utmost urgency. I have many ideas about what we could do, especially with colour. I have been experimenting with pink, grey and green inks, and I have been elaborating basic pie charts (I think you call these 'Camemberts' in French) to depict another dimension. If we extend the length of a 'wedge' then, depending on the variables we choose, we can show trends over time as well as the relative proportion of, let us say, death from wounds in battle, or from secondary infections. We can do likewise for different locations, and we can compare outcomes month by month over the year. In this way we can at last get a grip on the processes involved: we can isolate causes

and we can address them head on, secure in the knowledge that our attention is finally focused on the right problem.

I enclose a copy of one of my 'coxcomb' diagrams in the hope that you will find it of some interest.

Yours sincerely,

F. Nightingale

Dear Madame Nightingale

Thank you for your note. I will reply at greater length in due course, but I am not so well these days, and I am busy with other work.

Yours sincerely,

A. Quetelet.

Marseilles, 27th October 1854

My dearest sister,

Tomorrow we set sail for Constantinople. I don't know how long the mail will take to reach you from Scutari so I thought I'd write now to tell you about the journey so far.

I have been exploring the city with Auntie Mai and Uncle Sam. They set off on their way back to London this afternoon so it was my last chance to spend some time with them. I bought a pair of field glasses which the shop assistant kindly inscribed with the date and 'the Vectis', which is the name of the boat I'll be boarding tomorrow. We had an excellent lunch, and once I had waved them off on the train back to Valence I caught up with the rest of the party.

By now you may have heard that Charles and Selina Bracebridge decided to come along at the last minute. They are such good friends and it is such a comfort to have them with me. Even so not everything has gone according to plan. Whilst they were out shopping for supplies in Marseilles, Thomas, our courier-interpreter, found a job lot of cast iron bedsteads. Guess what! We now have six heavy bed frames to add to our already considerable luggage. That boy is impossible.

He made a complete mess of organizing our trip from Lyon to Valence. As you know, I travelled to Paris in advance in order to meet Mary. She sends you her very best wishes by the way. Selina, Charles, Thomas and the 37 newly recruited nurses came later, via Boulogne. Thomas had booked the Hotel des Bains and by all accounts everyone was treated very well. The next day they came on to Paris and we met together for the first time.

I can tell you, privately, that my heart sank. Almost none of the young women had been abroad before and they were chattering nineteen to the dozen. The nuns, of whom I would have expected better, were so naïve, waving to every *garçon* who took their fancy and giggling.

Next morning we were up early. We had to get everyone and everything from the hotel to the station for 10 am. You can't imagine how much stuff we have with us. I have the bare essentials, my beaded moccasins, my writing desk, my medicine

box, some books and letters, and two trunks - but it all adds up. We got to Lyon on time. The French Railways really do live up to their reputation, but then disaster struck.

Thomas, who claims to speak French and Turkish, went ahead to get the tickets for the boat. We took all the trunks and boxes down to the Rhone only to find that there was no space on the bateaux to Valence. There was nothing for it. We would have to spend the night in Lyon and travel on the next day. Thankfully, we had planned two days in Marseilles, so we were not in a complete pickle.

What a night that was. After a couple of hours, Thomas reported that he'd found somewhere for us to stay, but it was more than a mile up a steep hill. He recruited some local porters and we made our way to a rather basic hotel with a verandah and a good view over the city. I was frustrated and cross but the nurses were not put out at all: for them this was yet another new experience. We had a plain but nourishing supper of saucisson Lyonnaise.

So much rests on our shoulders. If nursing is to be recognized as a respectable profession these women must be up to scratch: all eyes will be on them and there is already such public interest. But who are they? Why have they volunteered and what material do I have to work with? That extra night in Lyon provided me with some chilling insight into the task ahead.

No sooner was my back turned than three of them vanished into the night. I calmed myself and decided to join the others in conversation on the terrace. "Miss", said one, "Miss, will there be rice pudding in Scutari?". Before I had the chance to reply another one chimed in: "Don't be silly, yes of course there will be rice pudding, and roast beef. It will be just like home, but more exciting". One of the nuns looked up: "I don't think it will be that exciting. I've brought my embroidery to do during the afternoons. Mr Manning promised that there would be a staff of Turks to take care of the laundry and from what I hear the army doesn't want us to be there at all, so I don't expect we'll have much to do. Just chat to the boys until they get better. Does anyone have any cards? We can simply keep the score, no gambling this time."

I was aghast. How could I turn this feckless crew into a disciplined team? I couldn't take any more of their chat so I retired to my tiny room with its cold clay tiled floor. Just as I was about to fall asleep I heard the sound of singing. I got up and looked

out of the window. It was the three who had gone missing, drunk as lords. I noted this fact in my small black note book and sighed.

I was still angry with Thomas. If he had been better organised we'd would have not had to stay in Lyon. But I have to say that evening showed me what I was up against. I was mentally prepared to cope with suffering and injury, to handle primitive and insanitary conditions, and to run out of essential supplies but it was beginning to dawn on me – perhaps my biggest challenge would be managing this troupe of volunteers. Some wayward, some backward, some just out for fun, but none, as far as I could tell, devoted to the cause.

There is no way back: Constantinople and Scutari lie ahead.

We have had many adventures together, you and I, but these are problems I must overcome alone. It is good to have the Bracebridges with me, but in confidence, I have my concerns about them too. Charles and Selina are seasoned tourists but this is not just another jaunt. I don't think they fully realise there will be no time for sightseeing where we are going. I know you had your doubts about this trip, and I am so glad that you and mamma have given me your wholehearted support. It means such a lot to me.

I promise to write again as soon as I can.

My fondest love,

F. N.

London, 17th December 1879

My dear Helen,

I do hope you will accept this small gift from me on the occasion of your promotion. I was absolutely thrilled to hear of your new position after all the trials and troubles of Montreal. This is a chance to make a clean start and make use of all that we have learned over the years.

The instruments are from John Weiss & Son, - nothing but the best! I took a very similar set with me when I went to Scutari, it must be more than 20 years ago now. On that trip I also took my precious medicine box - Powdered Rhubarb, Quinine, Carbonate of Soda and Essence of Ginger. All were essential then, and all are still important today, but of course I had nowhere near enough supply.

Instruments and medicines are the tools of our trade, but only for those who know what to do with them. You will have your work cut out transforming your new recruits into devoted, knowledgeable, disciplined and loyal staff. Helen, you were such a good student and I know you have your own ideas but I have always believed in leading by example. As you know I am a stickler for rules: no alcohol, a strict rota of work and rest, regular meals and no distractions for the staff. Over the years I have learned that small groups bond together better and that once you have established a team, the best amongst them set standards that others follow. I have also learned how much damage one rotten apple can cause. It is tempting to think the best of people and to give them a second chance, but in my experience, this is a costly mistake. Always be on your guard and do not hesitate to act decisively. If you do not dismiss those who step out of line they will undermine all that you seek to achieve. I don't want to exaggerate, but in the end, careful management is perhaps the most important tool we have. We can't do everything ourselves and unless our methods are reproduced and shared, and reproduced again, no progress will be made.

The future of nursing depends on rigorous training and the careful accumulation of scientific knowledge. I have already sent you quite some packages of books. These are also instruments of medical advance, transporting ideas from the author to reader, from you the reader to your staff, and from them to the next generation. Studying, writing and reflection are part of nursing, no question about it. I think you already have Quetelet's *La Physique Sociale* – it is such a shame he never did produce a second edition, but that is the kind of inspirational text we need.

Of course, you must not believe everything you read. If I was you, I'd beware of those who talk of germs as vectors of disease. These are fanciful ideas, based on just a few experiments conducted in France. They are nothing compared to the weight of evidence that we have on the importance of fresh air and ventilation, without which treatment will fail. As the hygienists and sanitary scientists confirm, cleanliness is also critical. Laundry – not the first thing that nurses want to do – is one of the most vital tasks. When you take up your post as Assistant Matron, do make sure that you introduce a system for regularly cleaning sheets, for changing dressings and for sweeping the floor.

These are basic measures, but if we are to be nurses in the true spirit of the word, we need to grasp the bigger picture. How is suffering distributed? Under what circumstances do the wounded recover? How can we identify, explain and mitigate the true causes of illness and death? I know it is not what your staff will want to hear, but as I have said before, data, data and more data is our real weapon. Helen, you must keep good records and you must spend time analyzing them. We need concrete evidence of the effects of what we do and we need to use this to counter the opposition. You will undoubtedly meet with traditionalists who have no understanding of what nursing involves. My advice is to stick to your guns. Be patient but firm and hold fast to your position: at the end of the day, the facts will speak for themselves. As Assistant Matron you will be an ambassador for our profession, you will be in the public eye and you will be able to influence funding not only for your own hospital, but for the improvement of public health across the board. You need to make sound decisions and for that you need good, clear,

statistical evidence. Nothing less will do. Earlier I said that disciplined staff were the key but systematic record keeping is equally important.

Sorry to be rambling on like this, but as I wrapped up the instruments it made me think - what are they without knowledge, where does knowledge come from, how does it circulate and how does it grow? I have jotted down my thoughts on these topics and having done so, it has become clear to me that no one aspect, not the medicine chest, not the data, not the scissors, not the clean sheets, has effect alone. It is the totality that counts, and it is on this that you must focus.

My very best wishes,

F.N.