



## Brief

There's a day, fast approaching, when TV weathermen don't look quite so happy to tell us it won't be raining again today. The day will dawn when they'd much rather report a good old-fashioned downpour, than another glorious, record-breaking heat wave. On that day, a documentary will follow the News, explaining how, for years, Australians living in the outback have dealt with what they call crossfires. Gradually, the world will come to terms with what that means.

A crossfire is a fire that burns without fuel in the earth's lower atmosphere. It generates heat like a dirty-great power station going into meltdown. It can't be extinguished. Can't be starved of Oxygen. And is fast expanding its territory.

Only one boy, Cassian Prey, has ever survived more than a few minutes inside one. The full glare of the media spotlight turns on him. But he's got no answers. In the end, his parents quit the UK to escape the attention of Fleet Street. They run to Normandy where they have friends.

They anticipate a quiet break, away from the fear and anxiety that's gripped London lately. But the French have just agreed to host a world summit on the subject of the crossfire. Due to be held in the Louvre, the gathering of ambassadors is hastily relocated when cracks appear in paving slabs beneath the Eiffel Tower. The city streets are literally buckling under the intense heat of a fire that's been hovering over it for a week. The monastic island of Mont Saint Michel is chosen as the new venue.

Cassian will be less than a mile away, over drained salt flats, staying in a whitewashed gite with a drafty door. The roads around him will choke up with black limousines and he'll find it impossible to control his curiosity. What's the word on the other side of the guarded causeway that serves the monastery? What's the future of the crossfire? To his surprise, the answer he's looking for is FreeSky.

## Synopsis

Environmental scientists have long predicted rising sea levels and violent storms will result from increased volumes of CO<sup>2</sup> in the earth's atmosphere. But none have anticipated the emergence of the crossfire phenomenon.

Crossfires are fires that burn holes in the sky. The early part of the twenty-first century will be defined by their presence over our major cities. And Cassian Prey will be defined by his ability to walk through them, unharmed.

Not that he will understand or value this gift. Instead, he will quickly learn what a burden it is. Plagued by the media and placed under constant surveillance by a mysterious government ministry, his family will decide to spirit him out of London, taking him to Normandy on an extended holiday. But the bay of Mont Saint Michel will not prove to be the haven of peace and tranquillity they were hoping for.

Paris is being raked by crossfires. Birds that would normally roost in the Jardin des Plantes or the Parc de la Villette, have taken refuge inside its beautiful buildings to escape the flames. And as a result, a conference of world leaders, due to be held in the Louvre, has been hastily relocated. The monastic island of Mont Saint Michel is chosen as its new venue.

News teams and camera crews arrive first. Then support staff and secret service agents. Finally, ambassadors, politicians and heads of state descend on the countryside around Avranches to decide what to do about the crossfire plague. The whole world is suffering its effects. Reports of mass bird hibernations cannot be ignored. The threat to public health is unprecedented.

Cassian's curiosity gets the better of him. He visits the abbey during one of the summit's lengthy sittings to find out more. Of course, he is refused permission to cross the heavily guarded causeway that leads to the island, but risks the patches of quicksand in the estuary and walks to the outer walls of the citadel.

Caterers drafted in to feed the summit's attendants are enjoying a well-deserved cigarette break outside. They have propped open a fire door to allow them back in when they've finished. Cassian sneaks through and climbs the steep stone steps on the other side.

He overhears a private conversation in a tranquil rose garden. A representative from a company calling itself FreeSky is explaining how the incidence of crossfires could be controlled by a series of gigantic turbines, constructed to purify the atmosphere and reduce its CO<sup>2</sup> content. Unfortunately, a passing security patrol spots Cassian and he is escorted off the island. He'll have to wait for the conference's official press release, to learn more.

He walks home, across the reclaimed pasturelands between the abbey and the tiny village of Ardevon. A television crew have discovered his whereabouts and are hassling his parents. So he doubles back, searching for a beach party he's been invited to. Hidden in the low dunes behind Courtils, he comes across it, a campfire and a case of beer surrounded by half a dozen rolled towels. The partygoers are on the beach, night swimming. A small crossfire ignites over the bay as he joins them in the cool water. They ignore it, bodysurfing the small waves blown in from the English Channel.

Cassian is caught by a current and dragged onto a nearby reef. He is cut off from the rest of the group. The crossfire sweeps towards them but stays hundreds of feet up in the air. Powerless to help, should it descend to earth, he watches the crossfire getting closer. Luckily, a local fisherman picks up the kids on the beach, and ferries them to safety.

Dropped on a rocky quay on the East side of Mont Saint Michel, they wait, shivering, while the authorities sort out some transport for them. But, afraid of what their parents will do when they find out what they've been up to, some of them decide to make a run for it. They set off down the island causeway as the crossfire changes direction yet again.

Cassian manages to reach the causeway and chases after them. Running through the crossfire bubble, which is now just a few feet above sea level, he reaches them in time to push them to safety. The crossfire dies and everyone goes home.

The next morning, Cassian helps with work to convert one of their gite's outbuildings into a new holiday annex, completely unaware of the danger he's in. But his abduction is being carefully planned by FreeSky. They don't want Cassian's *gift*, getting in the way of their plans to manipulate the weather with their turbines.

Cassian is taken in his sleep. First, he's interviewed in the sacristy behind the monastery's high altar. Then, an ancient dungeon deep beneath its foundations is found for him. The summit ends and its attendants disperse, back to their home countries. Cassian is left guarded by a single mercenary whose instructions are to drown him as soon as the tide comes in. But before that happens, another, much larger crossfire lights up the Cotentin Peninsula. And a million seabirds flock into the buildings of Mont Saint Michel.

Cassian's guard is terrified. The birds crowd into the maze of narrow corridors and vaulted cellars all around them and cut off their exits. His guard pushes Cassian down a shaft leading to an old, World War Two ammunitions dump and leaves him for dead. But, despite everything, Cassian escapes.

A coastguard vessel spots him swimming from the monastery and picks him up. Safe and sound, in a French police station, he dials a number given to him by a senior member of a mysterious agency monitoring his activities. Someone from the ministry is sent to collect him and drive him to Bayeux. In the bowels of a deserted museum, he is shown a tapestry as old as the famous one that carries the town's name. On it are depicted detailed scenes of a medieval battle and a bustling pagan fair.

'What do you notice about the image?' asks the museum's curator.

Cassian shrugs. 'Nothing,' he admits. 'Nothing unusual.'

'You're wrong,' the man points at the sky. 'Look more closely.'

Cassian shrugs again, then he sees it. 'The Sky's a funny colour,' he says, 'oh, and there aren't any birds,' he whispers.

In fact, there are birds on the tapestry but only in the windows of the Town Hall.

'What does it mean? Do you think this has all happened before?' Cassian asks. 'The crossfires, the birds hiding in the buildings? Way back when this tapestry was woven...'

'The Medieval warm period,' the man from the Ministry admits. He points to a figure standing alone on top of a church steeple, 'and I think that's you. Or at least, your twelfth century ancestor...'

At dawn the next day, Cassian is back on the causeway linking the abbey of Mont Saint Michel to the mainland. The citadel is in the grip of a violent crossfire. He walks through it. The man from the Ministry has given him specific instructions. He is to climb into the monastery's bell tower, unlock the service door to the roof space and step outside. Further instructions will be relayed to him via a headset he's wearing.

Watching through high-powered binoculars, several miles away, ministry officials tell him to activate the piece of hardware they've given him. It looks like a lightsaber. Cassian switches it on and waves it above his head. Immediately his actions have an effect. The crossfire flames change colour. Cassian feels his lungs expand. Scientists are fed live data from sensitive equipment monitoring the site. The fire's core temperature fluctuates, its walls begin to contract, and then, they begin to expand...

A chain reaction has been set in motion. Violent blue flames burst from Cassian's fingers, spreading across the sky, replacing the crossfire's red spectrum of colour. He is held like a statue, perfectly still in the centre of the crossfire, while flares burst and tumble all around him. And then, the fire goes out. Everything is dark and silent. The wind forces him back inside.

Elsewhere, workmen toil to complete two immense nuclear turbines, to be installed on a greenfield site in Cadarache, southern France. The project is being managed by FreeSky.

The Ministry are satisfied Cassian has done all he can to help them and allow his family to travel home to London. Thinking their troubles are all behind them, they relax but a substitute teacher has been placed in Cassian's school. FreeSky are not at all convinced Cassian's part in all this is over. He is kidnapped and given a truth serum to reveal everything he knows. Drugged and confused, he is dropped in Soho. From there, he manages to stagger to the Ministry's headquarters.

Now, he and his family are placed under proper police protection. They are housed in a Ministry research facility in Staffordshire. By studying Cassian, the Ministry hope to artificially manufacture responses from crossfires similar to those witnessed in Normandy. Soon, they'll have a solution they

can implement. Meanwhile, religious leaders, including representatives from the Vatican, have persuaded governments to set challenging CO<sup>2</sup> emissions targets.

FreeSky finally gets the go-ahead to turn over their turbines in Cadarache, but are they too late? Have the Ministry already come up with a formula that will successfully control the crossfires? There's no prize for second place. And FreeSky cannot afford to fail. They infiltrate the Staffordshire research facility and sabotage it.

The facility burns to the ground. Cassian, his family and the site technicians escape, but lose the majority of their research material. Now there's nothing to stop FreeSky expanding their turbine matrix across Europe. Except, that is, for the vial of blood Cassian has in his fist.

The active cells in his body, the ones that help him interact with the crossfires, have been concentrated in this test tube. One of the ministry scientists believes if Cassian were injected with it, and climbed into the heart of a crossfire, he could snuff it out, forever.

On top of the London Eye, Cassian waits for a nearby fire to envelope him. As it does, sapphire flames begin to extend from his fingers. This time they stream miles out, over the capital, taking on a life of their own. Weather stations in Greenland and the Falkland Islands record incredible wind speeds and pressure variations. Satellites feed exciting thermal images to TVs everywhere. Until, at last, the crossfire is extinguished.

Birds flock back to the royal parks of London. The story of Cassian's imprisonment on Mont Saint Michel breaks and the guilty parties are arrested. The phenomenon that will forever define the second decade of the new millennium has passed. And with it, the gift that has defined Cassian Prey.

Gradually, he fades into obscurity. His brief spell in the limelight is over. His gift is no longer useful. Even the Ministry is closed down. Will it be another seven hundred years, before the sorcery depicted on *the other* Bayeux tapestry is witnessed again?



## LEON

Cassian had a scar on his cheek from a cycling accident when he was younger but it wasn't disfiguring. Actually, he liked it. It meant people gave him a wide birth sometimes, instead of spoiling for a fight. It had the effect of putting the words *I'm tough* in front of everything he said. No bad thing on the playground.

Cassian's hair was ash-blond, spiked with gel so it stood up. His eyes were pale; a sort of ghostly green. But his skin was dark, as though there had been a drop or two of gypsy blood in his family at one time. His school didn't insist on a uniform, so he dressed casually most of the time. Jeans. A T-shirt. A rugby-top in the winter if it got really cold.

He didn't bother with labels. He wore whatever felt good against his skin. He didn't make much of an effort at all really. Fitting in just didn't matter to him. Except once, and that once changed everything...

He was in the middle of an old, overgrown tennis court, behind the tramlines near the back of the park. It was a Wednesday afternoon, after school and Cassian was tired. He'd had a rough day. He just needed to feel like one of the gang for a while. Today, that meant not asking questions. So here he was. Somewhere he'd never been before. The abandoned tennis courts.

Mitchell Turner had decided they should hang out there. The tarmac was riddled with potholes and weeds. The nets were long gone. There was no way you could play tennis here, even though here was in the heart of Wimbledon.

Cassian's step-dad said it spoke volumes about the Government's approach to sports. 'That tennis courts in a part of London synonymous with the game could be aloud to get into this state was a national scandal.' He commented on it every time he saw them from the main road.

Everyone seemed to be scuffing their feet in piles of dead leaves blown against the tattered green fencing. Or dropping pebbles down the holes where the net posts used to rest. What were they doing? The courts were a wash out.

Then, Mitchell produced something from his jacket pocket. A cigarette lighter. Someone else, someone Cassian didn't know, revealed a can of deodorant from beneath the folds of his lumpy jumper. And Cassian's mind began to fill in the blanks.

He could have viewed the two objects in isolation. A lighter. A spray can. Two random household items. But somehow, he knew they were connected. They'd been brought here for a specific purpose. Drawn together for one, clear goal.

'Not a good idea,' Cassian said, guessing what would happen if he let things play out. 'I don't need this.'

‘Don’t need what?’ Mitchell confronted him. He had one of those faces you knew wouldn’t stay in your mind, no matter how long you stared at it. He fanned innocence, even as he took the lighter in his left hand and the aerosol can in his right and drew them up to each other.

There was no time to act. Cassian was a few feet away from Mitchell. *Safe enough for now*, he thought. *He didn’t have to duck or run for cover just yet.* Neither did anyone else. No one even bothered to shout ‘Stop!’ or ‘Don’t!’ Instead, they watched and waited to see what happened.

The flint at the head of the lighter sparked. Everyone stood perfectly still, their eyes fixed on it. The butane in the purple, plastic vial beneath the flint evaporated and flowed upwards. No one recoiled or raised their hands in front of their faces. The propellant in the aerosol can was activated and an invisible, flammable vapour poured out. And still, no one said anything.

Then, suddenly, fire shot forth from the hands of the boy in control, Mitchell Turner. His lips curled into a guilty smile. Blue flames tumbled over each other, arcing forwards, away from him in tight, hot rings. He dropped his left hand to his side. The lighter went out. But the deodorant burned on and on.

The smell of it reached Cassian. It was like boiling tar mixed with strong, cheap aftershave.

LEON read the label on the side of the can. Cassian could just make it out through the heat haze around it. That is, until Mitchell changed his grip. He seemed almost to be juggling with it. What was he doing? Trying to show off? The can rotated through 180 degrees, completing one full rotation over his palm.

Flames continued to pour forth from its white plastic nozzle. Cassian didn’t understand. Mitchell should have burned himself horribly when the jet of fire had swung in front of his face. But he seemed completely unharmed. He realised at once what must have happened. He had taken his finger off the trigger for a second or so, while the can was in motion. He must have done. Then, he’d reapplied it, as it swung back up to meet his thumb. The air around had obviously been hot enough to ignite the gas again. It was a neat trick but stupidly dangerous.

Cassian scowled and turned away. He’d seen enough. He had better things to do. This was crazy and someone was going to get hurt. He nodded to a few of the silent faces dotted about the tennis court, the ones he knew best, and stepped carelessly onto the parched, yellow grass around the edge.

He hadn’t gone two yards when he felt a wave of intense heat push him to the ground.

‘What the heck was that?’ he choked. He rolled over, onto his back, expecting to see... what? He didn’t know. Not what he did see, that was for sure.

The sun was in his eyes but he could still make out what was going on. The tennis courts were on fire! A terrifying inferno of orange, red and yellow flames had completely enveloped them. And his friends were caught right in the middle of it.

It was as if the aerosol can had exploded with the force of a small atomic bomb. Yet, he could still see it, clasped firmly in Mitchell’s hand. Mitchell himself just a cardboard cut-out now, engulfed in fire. What had happened? Cassian had no idea. Nor did he know what to do next, what to do for the best.

The fire didn’t seem to be making any noise. That struck him as odd. It should have been roaring and crackling like an out-of-control incinerator, but it was horribly silent. It didn’t seem to be tied to

the ground either. He should have seen ivy leaves, vines, leaves and blossoms wither and blacken in the heat but they didn't. The fire seemed to hover above them.

At last, Cassian woke up to himself. Without thinking, he rushed back onto the tennis court. Mitchell was stood like a statue in the middle of a sea of flames. He was obviously in pain but seemed too shocked to show it. Cassian pulled him away, prising the can out of his fist, hearing it clatter onto the tarmac at his feet. They staggered into the shade of a nearby willow. Mitchell was shivering, probably in shock. Cassian knew he would need an ambulance but he had to rescue the others first.

He immediately went back for them. They were all lying down, apparently knocked to the floor by the initial blast, as Cassian had been. He ferried them, one by one, to safety. Five minutes had passed by the time he sat the last of them in a bed of dandelions under the umbrella of the willow tree.

The fire raged on, silently. It reminded Cassian of a possessed man, writhing about inside an invisible straight jacket. It seemed to have arms and legs that were pushing and kicking at the clear blue sky above it. Plumes of flame bulged out on one side and then the other. It seemed to shrink and grow as the wind changed direction, then it would suddenly and unpredictably swell to twice its size.

From some angles, it was hard to see. It was as though parts of it were transparent while other parts were constantly changing colour. And it burned on and on and on, as though it had a life of its own.

Cassian called an ambulance on his mobile and it arrived in no time. Everyone was ferried to the burns unit of the local Accident and Emergency ward. Eventually, their parents came to take them home.

The boy who'd brandished the aerosol can so confidently an hour ago was hurt the worst. Mitchell Turner had suffered some first and second degree burns on his face and neck. Cassian knew that face, the one that simply refused to register in his mind before, would always be remembered now. Mitchell's hair was a mess too. It had to be shaved. He would be scarred for life but even so, the damage should have been much more severe. No one at the hospital could explain it.

Cassian bought a can of Coke from a vending machine in the hospital foyer. He looked at his watch. He'd better get home too, before his step-dad missed him. He set off at once. But as he passed the Park, he couldn't resist returning to the thicket, which concealed the tennis courts, the crushed patch of dandelions and the sheltered willow tree.

The fire was still burning. It had grown to encompass most of the embankments below the tramlines and the overflow carpark for the station now.

'What was burning?' Cassian thought. 'Was there a gas leak in the area? An underground pipe expressing something volatile into the atmosphere?' He had no idea. 'Whatever. It was a matter for the authorities. Where were they?' He was surprised to see the site remained unguarded.

He shrugged and drifted home. It never occurred to him that he should have been the most badly burned person of all. He had stood upright in the very centre of the fire. He should have been scarred but he wasn't. He was fine. He'd felt almost nothing inside the flames. No. That wasn't true. Actually, he had felt something, he'd felt *in control*...

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‘Hi!’ he shouted as he pushed through his own front door. ‘Anyone about?’

‘Upstairs!’ shouted his step-dad in reply. ‘In the Study. Where’ve you been?’

‘Nowhere,’ Cassian helped himself to a snack from the fridge. He walked through to the Living Room and flicked on the TV. His step-dad stayed silent. He didn’t come downstairs to check on him. He’d probably hide up in his study until Cassian’s mum came home. Cassian would be more than happy if he did. They didn’t get on.

A camera crew had obviously been sent to Merton Park in the last few minutes, to film the unearthly fire burning there. Live pictures flashed across Cassian’s TV screen. Unfortunately, the flames didn’t show up very well. It looked more like a mass of bubbling clouds than a fierce firestorm. It was slowly drifting over the evacuated playground now, heading for the cricket pavilion and beyond that, the motorway. Cassian wondered where it would all end.

‘From here of course, it’s only a hop, a skip and a jump to Heathrow Airport,’ the reporter was saying. ‘If this phenomenon continues to grow, and if the wind fails to change direction, we could have a disaster on our hands.’

Cassian cringed. He could see the reporter’s point. If the body of flames drifted into an airplane hanger or enveloped the airport’s main control tower, who knew what might happen? Presumably, Heathrow Airport was home to several million gallons of highly explosive Kerosene. The majority of it would be buried deep underground but there must be enough on the surface to cause untold damage if it were ignited.

Cassian didn’t want to guess at the cost of such an explosion. What if the airport had not been closed and evacuated first? The consequences could be appalling...

‘No one understands the cause of this floating island of fire,’ the reporter was in shot now, pointing over his head at the ripples of colour in the atmosphere behind him. ‘London has never seen anything like it. As we speak, scientists are trying to position weather balloons in its path, to study it. It is also being tracked by a recently launched satellite. Hopefully, we will know more soon. For now, this is Tim Montgomery in Merton Park, South Wimbledon, handing you back to the studio.’

Cassian switched off. *What on earth did LEON put in their spray cans? Cemtex?*

‘I know it says on the side *Do not use near a naked flame*,’ Cassian muttered as he sipped his coke. ‘But it doesn’t make it clear you’ll spark a national disaster if you do...’ Cassian considered phoning the police, telling them what he knew. But he eventually decided against it. There had to be more to this than a bunch of kids mucking about on an abandoned tennis court. He would sleep on it.

If the situation hadn’t improved by the time he got up for school the next morning, he’d tell. Until then, it was up to the scientists and their weather balloons to figure out what was going on and put a stop to it. Cassian always imagined scientists were a lot cleverer than they let on. They’d soon have all this straightened out. He was sure there was nothing to worry about.

## The Ministry

And he was right. The next day, the fires had gone out in Wimbledon. Cassian hadn't slept well; the sound of sirens wailing across the city had kept him awake. Every now and then, he'd got up, pulled back the curtains at his bedroom window and stared out into the black night. An eerie glow played over the horizon somewhere to the west. He knew the fires were still alight at 3 a.m. He'd looked at the digital alarm clock in his room. But when it went off at 6.30, they'd vanished.

The radio news was full of references to the birth of the Beckham's latest child and the nominees for this year's Oscar awards ceremony. Not a single second of airtime had been set aside to explain where the Wimbledon fires had gone or what had caused them in the first place. The whole event seemed to have been airbrushed out of existence.

As Cassian got dressed and made himself breakfast, it seemed everything was just about as normal as it was possible to be. John, one of his best friends, phoned. He had been on the tennis court yesterday. He had gone to hospital and received treatment for some minor burns on his back. Yet, he made no mention of it during their brief chat. He only wanted to know whether their English assignment was due in today or tomorrow... That was all.

Cassian shrugged. Before he left the house, he caught sight of his mum, getting ready for work. She smiled and waved from the top of the stairs but clearly had no time to talk. He'd see her on Friday he supposed, her day off. Until then, a wave and a smile would do.

She was beautiful, with long, mousey hair and a size-12 figure she was very proud of. *Far too good-looking for Derek*, Cassian thought, *his out-of-shape step-dad. Never mind, other than that, they were a good match. They both liked antique fairs and red wine anyway...* Cassian's real dad was in the Air Force. He didn't see very much of him. He was rarely in the country and when he was, he was always busy.

He had a house in Cornwall where Cassian had been to stay, once or twice. But there wasn't much to do there and the phone never stopped ringing. It didn't matter. He was happy, getting a card and a cheque in the post every Christmas and birthday. It was all for the best really, living with his mum and step-dad, here in Wimbledon. Nothing else could possibly work. He understood...

Cassian left for school. The mood on the street outside was light. No one was talking about the fires. Something terrifying had reared its ugly head the night before. It had frightened the living daylights out of everybody for five minutes, then it had gone away again. And that was all there was to it. Life went on.

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At school, Cassian made time in a break period to visit the library. He sought out the reference section and looked up *ball lightning* in a chunky encyclopaedia. It made mildly interesting reading but didn't seem to fit the bill. Whatever it was that had threatened Heathrow Airport only nine or ten hours earlier, it hadn't been any kind of lightning.

He waited until a girl who'd bothered to book time on one of the library's PCs left her workstation for a moment. Then he snuck over. He typed the words *Wimbledon* and *fire* into a search engine and waited for the results page to compile. There were 104 matches to his query. He even found a picture of himself on one site, stepping out of the back of an ambulance with some of his friends, the one's he'd so miraculously rescued. But he didn't find anything that shed any light on the mysterious flames.

The girl came back from wherever she'd been and gave him a ticking off for stealing her seat. Cassian shuffled away, unconcerned, and drifted into his next class.

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The rest of the day dragged slowly by. Cassian didn't dislike school. He wasn't shy of a bit of hard work and occasionally found himself scribbling feverishly in his exercise book like a proper swat. But today's schedule seemed to be crammed full of all the most boring bits his teachers had to offer. He just about made it to the bell without falling asleep.

On the short tram journey home, Cassian sat behind a couple of girls a few years older than him in smart, private school uniforms. He overheard them talking. They were moaning about the parking restrictions near their school that had prevented their parents from picking them up.

Parking was always a touchy subject at this time of year. The situation wouldn't improve for a fortnight, until Wimbledon's world famous tennis tournament had finished.

'That's why they've suppressed those stories on the News,' one of them was saying in a faintly foreign accent.

'What stories?'

Cassian shifted round in his seat so he could listen to them without being too obvious about it.

'You know. The stories about the fires in the sky last night. Didn't you notice it had all gone quiet on that front?'

'Mmm,' the taller one nodded. 'I suppose you're right. It did all die a bit of a death.' She had goofy teeth and blotchy skin.

'Because, if it got out Wimbledon was being swept by unexplained, floating clouds of flame...' A look passed between them. 'The powers that be, would be left with ten tonnes of strawberries they couldn't shift and a truckload of programmes worth nothing, wouldn't they?'

The one by the window cupped her hand over her mouth and spoke in a whisper. 'I heard...' she began, '...from a friend of a friend, that there's been another one... today... in Stratford.'

'Stratford?' Her friend stood up. She must have decided she wanted to get off at the next stop. Their conversation edged towards the automatic doors. 'Who the Hell do you know in Stratford?'

Cassian followed. He pretended he'd made up his own mind to get off at the next stop too. He wasn't worried about the long walk home. His step-dad wouldn't miss him. For a moment, their voices were drowned out by the sound of the tram's braking system. Then they returned.

'A much bigger one this time,' the first girl was saying. 'Near a housing estate.' The tram doors hissed open and all three stepped out, onto the deserted platform.

‘Something’s crackin’ off,’ insisted the one with goofy teeth. ‘I reckon it’s part of an Al-Quaida plot to destabilise the big sporting events of the West.’

‘Al-Quaida?’ the other one scoffed. They were heading for the high street now, down a nettle-choked footpath. ‘Have you gone soft in the head? Why on earth would Al-Quaida want to start fires in London? Fires that burn for hours, can’t be controlled and can’t be put out and...? Hey...’ She suddenly seemed to have realised something. ‘Maybe it’s Al-Quaida?’ Her eyebrows disappeared under her fringe.

They laughed but as their fear subsided and they began to relax, they caught sight of Cassian close behind them. Cassian felt immediately ashamed of himself. He pretended to drop something and fell back. He was glad when they finally rounded a corner and lost sight of him.

He wouldn’t hear anything more of the Stratford fire for several hours.

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Cassian stuck to the main roads. There were lots of short cuts home, but he was hoping a bus, maybe the number 94, would pass him. Unfortunately, the number 94 had other plans; perhaps it was running late, or perhaps it wasn’t running at all. Either way, it never came anywhere near him. As a result, it took him much longer than he’d anticipated to reach the green, gloss-painted front door of his mum’s modest semi on Willmore End.

He dug his hand deep into his pocket and found his key. But the front door was already ajar. He stepped inside. He could hear rumbling voices coming from the lounge, as though someone had left the TV on low. As he rounded the occasional table in the hall and entered the oblong room leading off it, he saw his step-dad talking to two men in their late forties. He didn’t recognise either of them. They looked hot and bothered in matching shirts, ties, jackets and trousers. Neither of them had so much as undone their top button, which struck Cassian as odd on such a hot day.

‘Hi,’ he greeted all three men simultaneously. ‘Something wrong?’

Their conversation ceased at once.

‘These men are from the Ministry of...’ Cassian’s step-dad began a clumsy introduction. ‘The Ministry of...’ he seemed to want one of the men to finish his sentence for him but they wouldn’t, or couldn’t... The silence grew painful. There was a lot of meaningless nodding, particularly from Cassian’s step-dad. Then an outbreak of patronising smiles all round.

‘The Ministry of something, anyway,’ his step-dad finally concluded. It amused Cassian, to see him struggle for the right words like that. He didn’t come unstuck often enough, he was such an arrogant bluff, it should have happened to him all the time. ‘They’re asking for witnesses,’ he went on. ‘Anyone who remembers seeing anything unusual the other night, when those fires wafted over the playing fields, narrowly missing the gasometer, isn’t that right gentleman?’

The men nodded mutely. Their smiles were now looking tired and forced.

‘So, I told them I didn’t see anything. But...’ for the first time, he caught Cassian’s eye. ‘Perhaps you did Cassian?’

Cassian sniffed and shook his head. The men were obviously ready to leave. It wouldn't take much to get rid of them. He pretended to think for a moment, then said, 'No. Nothing,' and looked idly out the window. The tubs in the garden badly needed watering. The bedding plants his mum had chosen were looking limp and dry.

The men didn't even ask him where he'd been the night before. They simply sidled into the hall and within seconds, were climbing back into their car across the street.

Cassian was relieved. He was surprised too, that he hadn't noticed their beefy, black BMW sat on the faded, double yellow lines opposite their house. It was the sort of car a drug-dealer or a mobster might own. Not really the sort of car he imagined the Ministry of whatever-it-was-called would pay for. He did accept though, that that depended on exactly *what* that ministry did...

Cassian's step-dad, standing beside him in the porch, put his arm around him. Apparently, he thought this was what people did when officials from a nameless ministry left their home. Whether it was the right thing to do or not, it made Cassian want to throw up. He shook him off and shut the door.

Now they both felt awkward and embarrassed. Sadly, that was how Cassian and his step-dad felt most of the time. If they were in each other's company, they were on edge.

Cassian went upstairs to his bedroom. His step-dad passed his open doorway a few minutes later on his way up to his study. They didn't see each other again all night.

~

It was an X5. The car the men from the ministry had climbed into earlier. And it was in Cassian's street again. The time was almost 12.30. Half past midnight. 'Funny time to be asking the residents of Willmore End about a fire,' Cassian thought. 'Funny time to be asking them about anything really.'

As he sat there, on his bed, wondering what it could all mean... the starched collars, the fake smiles, the pretend manners and the posh car, the doorbell rang. Cassian waited for someone to answer it. His mum was a fairly light sleeper. He'd probably hear her footsteps treading past his door at any moment. He strained to pick up the sound of her open-heeled slippers on the thin carpet just the other side of it.

The doorbell rang again. But outside his bedroom door, on the moonlit landing, there was only silence. Cassian jumped up. A pair of jeans and an old T-shirt lay dead on the floor, crushed by an avalanche of magazines and books he'd accidentally triggered earlier. He dragged them out and put them on, hurrying downstairs as his arms found the right arm holes.

The front door was dead-bolted but he knew how to open it. He slipped the security chain on and peered out. 'Who's there?' he whispered.

'Cassian Prey?' someone asked. Cassian half recognised the voice. One of his teachers perhaps? Or the father of a friend from school? No. One of the men who'd interviewed his step-dad before tea. That was it, he was certain he remembered the continental twang that coloured the sound of their vowels. He strained to see a figure, standing on the drive, in the middle of the breathless night. But no matter what Cassian did or where he put his head, he couldn't.

He asked again, 'Who's there?' but this time, no one responded.

Unaware of the danger he was in, Cassian slid the chain out of its clasp and carefully opened the door. The BMW had its lights on across the street. Maybe whoever it was had given up trying to raise someone in the Prey household and decided to try again in the morning. A cigarette end on the gravel in front of Cassian was still glowing. He hadn't imagined it then. Someone had been there, a moment ago.

Suddenly, a hand was forced over his mouth. It smelt of smoke and petrol. Cassian gagged. He felt like someone was trying to push him forwards and fought against the motion, instinctively. Whoever it was tried harder to unbalance him (they were strong enough not to have to try too hard) and gradually, he felt his feet slip in the glittering pea shingle beneath him. His mum praised the stuff for keeping the weeds down, but it was useless at stopping people from abducting you in the middle of the night! Whoever it was wanted him to collapse into their arms and he knew, suddenly, there was nothing he could do to prevent it. He had lost.

'Who are you? What do you want?' Cassian mumbled through the fingers of his captor.

The man pushed his hand harder into Cassian's jaw and kicked his legs from underneath him. Helplessly, Cassian was dragged towards the boot of the BMW estate, which opened on its own, like a giant's mouth, ready to swallow him whole. He was thrown in and the boot door was slammed shut.

Inside, the car was decked out with flat-screen monitors and leather seats. It looked more like a plush office than a car. Two men, barely distinguishable from the two Cassian had already met, watched him pick himself up off the floor. He squatted on his knees and coughed.

There was a woman in the front passenger seat. She turned round as he rolled his head off the rear window.

'Hello. I'm Sylvia,' she said. She was tall and thin with a ludicrously strong, public-school accent. 'I gather your name is Cassian?' She paused. 'Look Cassian,' she seemed the sort to come straight to the point, 'I'll be honest with you, we've got a few problems in Stratford right...' she looked at her watch, '...right now. And we wondered if you might be able to help us.'

Cassian frowned. He was scared. Not only did he object to being bundled into the back of an X5 by a sweaty meathead, but he hadn't the first idea why *Sylvia* thought he could help her either. 'I doubt it,' he said, flustered. 'Unless you're struggling with Year 8 Maths?' he prompted her. 'Look, if that's all, I mean if there's nothing else,' he tasted blood in the back of his mouth, 'I'd like to go now?' He tapped the tinted glass behind him. 'I'm supposed to be asleep you know?'

Sylvia ran her fingers through her silver hair. She was quite attractive despite being a good few years older than his mum. Her tone was business-like, almost sharp, but her eyes were warm and soft. 'Actually, you can,' she said. She flicked a switch on the dashboard and the boot door clicked open again. 'But I'd really rather you didn't,' she added. 'And it's not quite Year 8 Maths we're struggling with.' She nodded to the man sat across from her. He produced a red folder from underneath his seat. 'It's a bit more involved than that. Actually, we're trying to control another crossfire on the edge of an industrial park ten miles from here. And we thought you might like to see it.'

A moment earlier, Cassian would have taken any opportunity to escape the car. He would not have stopped to think twice. Now though, he sat perfectly still and went over Sylvia's last sentence in his head.

‘A *crossfire*?’ he whispered. ‘What’s a crossfire?’ He wasn’t sure whether he’d spoken the words out loud or not.

‘The red folder explains everything,’ Sylvia gestured towards it. ‘Take it,’ she offered, ‘you’ll be surprised how interesting government work can be.’

There was a spare seat to Cassian’s left. He took the folder from the man holding it and sat down. He looked at Sylvia openly, without saying anything. She seemed to understand. At once, she rolled down her window and called the car’s driver in off the street. He spoke briefly into a walky-talky, then got behind the wheel and started the engine.

‘If you’re sure,’ Sylvia said to Cassian before they pulled away.

Cassian was already several pages into the dossier on his lap. He knew he should be frightened. He knew he shouldn’t trust Sylvia or the other blank-faced men in the car. He knew he should get out at once. Go home. Fix himself a hot chocolate downstairs if he really couldn’t sleep. But he didn’t. He strapped himself in instead, licked his index finger and turned the next page.

As they swung round in the cul-de-sac across the way, he caught the briefest glimpse of his mum’s bedroom window, before the angle got too steep and his headrest blocked his view.

‘Don’t worry,’ Sylvia reassured him. ‘If they wake, we’ll explain what’s going on.’

And that was that. The car picked up speed. Soon, they were on the A24, racing through Wandsworth and Central London towards Stratford. Cassian buried his head in the red folder again. He’d been fast asleep not twenty minutes earlier but now he was wide-awake. The crisp, A4 pages of the folder, each embossed with an official-looking portcullis, looked like something out of a cheap spy novel. *Never mind what sort of novel it was*, Cassian thought, *this time he was in it!*

He wondered casually whether they were going the right way. Wouldn’t it have been quicker to nip round the M25 a few junctions, rather than try to drive straight through the centre of town, crossing the Thames via Tower Bridge. But the Ministry didn’t seem to take any notice of traffic lights or road signals or one-way systems. Perhaps that explained it.

The term *crossfire* was explained to Cassian on page four (there were an awful lot of caveats and disclaimers before that which took a while to read but didn’t really get him very far). The atmospheric conditions that brought them about were explained on page five. Soon, Cassian would know as much about them as anyone.

The taxis leaving Fenchurch Street Station melted into the eerie districts of Whitechapel and Spitalfields and the X5 topped 50mph through the sparsely populated streets. They would be approaching a real crossfire very soon and Cassian couldn’t wait. There were pictures in the red folder of crossfires hovering over several large cities, a patch of tropical rainforest and even an ice flow, but nothing could prepare your eyes for the shock of a true, face-to-face encounter...

## Olympic Park

When Cassian stepped out of the BMW, he stepped into a completely surreal landscape. Cranes and scaffolding towers soured above him. Great mounds of earthworks hemmed him in on either side. In the distance, high-rise apartment blocks stuck up through the broken soil like thorns on the side of a giant cactus. And behind him, the sky burned a phosphorous yellow. It was enough to make him think twice about leaving the litter-strewn car park they'd pulled in to.

'We're on the site of a future Olympic Stadium,' Sylvia explained. 'They've just finished demolishing the post-war industrial units that used to squat here, to make room for it.' She pointed towards the churning clouds in the sky to her right. 'But that's what we've come to see. The biggest crossfire the UK's ever experienced.'

Cassian's heart sank. 'It's huge,' he said fearfully. 'It's twice as tall as that tower block next to it. And it stretches away over those bulldozers down there, way into the distance. It must be a mile across.'

'Quite possibly,' Sylvia agreed. 'But it's not the size of it that's really got *us* worried.'

'Why?' Cassian asked, his voice hollow with dread. 'What is it that's really got you worried?'

'It's the fact that it's so damn close to the ground,' Sylvia sighed. 'Just hovering above that line of pylons you can see over there.'

Cassian *could* see a line of pylons in imminent danger of being swallowed by the fire. 'And what,' he said, 'happens if it touches them?'

'All the lights go out,' Silvia looked soberly at the area of East and Central London below them, 'in Westminster, Kensington, Chelsea, Hammersmith and Hounslow. Just imagine,' she continued, 'that lot, cloaked in total darkness.'

'Very 9/11,' Cassian pursed his lips. 'So what exactly are you going to do about it?' He looked back at the crossfire. 'How do you plan to stop it?'

'We don't,' Sylvia half-smiled to herself. 'We can't,' she admitted. 'We're just going to hope it burns itself out, like all the others. If it pops the fuses in half a million of the richest properties in Britain, well... we'll deal with it, somehow.'

'And what about me?' Cassian turned sharply away from the spectacular skyline to look straight at Sylvia. 'What do you want with me?'

'We just thought you might like to have a bit of a nose around. Tell us what you feel, what you see... Anything that could help us understand these things, these crossfires better.'

'Because I'm the only person you know who can walk through them,' Cassian guessed.

'Precisely,' Sylvia seemed quite at ease acknowledging this simple fact.

'Because somehow you saw me standing in the middle of one yesterday. Maybe you even managed to take a photo of me, dragging my friends to safety across that scorched tennis court...'

'Uh-huh,' Sylvia nodded.

'And you reckon if I didn't die then, I won't die now...'

'Uh-huh,' Sylvia was now wearing a stupid, pantomime grin.

'Care to let me know how you photographed me?' Cassian was looking archly at her.



‘Nope,’ she shook her head.

‘Care to tell me anything else at all?’ Cassian shrugged.

‘Nope,’ Sylvia’s nose twitched, as if she were tickling the belly of her favourite dog.

‘Then sure,’ at last Cassian exhaled, releasing the tension in the moment. ‘I’ll have a look for you. I can’t promise anything of course. For all I know, I’ll feel my hair start to frazzle and my skin crack a hundred yards from it. But so long as you remember when it’s all over... when all this is done and I’m horribly scarred, I am going to sue you, then I’m willing to give it a try. If you think it’ll help... Don’t expect too much though, that’s all I’m saying... I doubt I can do anything.’

‘You’re all we’ve got,’ Sylvia handed him a hard hat, a torch and a two-way radio. ‘We just thought you might be better than a remote control car with a camera strapped to it.’

‘Thanks,’ Cassian said sarcastically.

Bravely, he left the glow of the car’s internal lights behind and set out on his own across the scorched landscape.

~

Over the first rise, Cassian got a better view of the Stratford crossfire. It was on a completely different scale to the one in Wimbledon but it shared many of the same characteristics. Watching it expand and contract in the sky above him, Cassian was reminded again of the motions of a mad man inside a straight jacket. It seemed as though it was locked in some kind of deadly battle with the air around it. The fire would bleed into a fresh part of the sky, then be chased out of it again by some unseen force.

Cassian trudged on, over the rutted soil, losing his footing every now and then but never daring to take his eyes off the *thing* floating a hundred and fifty feet over his head.

He began to wonder what he was doing, stumbling around on a building site somewhere north of the Thames, several hours before dawn. He could smell the flames dancing between the ugly tower blocks now and hear the crackle of electricity in the bear pylons. What could he do against such violent forces? What advice could he offer Sylvia and her shadowy ministry of ghosts?

He thought about turning back. He could tell them whatever he liked he realised at once. He could tell them to go and have a look for themselves if they didn’t believe him. Somehow, he doubted they would. But it wasn’t the right thing to do, and he knew it. He just couldn’t stop himself setting one foot in front of the other, over and over again until he stood at the foot of the central pylon, separated from it only by a rusted barbed wire fence and a weathered sign saying ‘Keep Out – High Voltage’.

Cassian couldn’t remember ever being so close to a pylon in the dead of night. The tensioned wires and ceramic insulating rings seemed to glow from within. Over his shoulder, he could see a distant clutch of much brighter lights twinkling in a perfect circle against the dark sky. He guessed he was looking at the London Eye several miles away.

‘Still working then,’ he said to himself. Obviously, it wasn’t too late to divert a black out, if he could only figure out how.

A helicopter swept over Stratford at high altitude. Cassian figured it would be trying to monitor the situation on the ground from a safe distance. 'Has the boy stepped inside the ring of fire yet?' he could almost hear its crackly radio saying. 'Has he sucked all the heat out of the flames with his bear hands and controlled its spread with his incredible aquamarine eyes?'

Cassian laughed at the ridiculousness of his situation. What exactly did anyone think he was going to do tonight? There was no way he was going to turn the colossal tide of fire in front of him around with a torch, a hardhat and a determined stare!

He moved cautiously around the pylon. The dry smell of the weeds skirting its legs wafted up his nose. The two-way radio Sylvia had given him stayed stubbornly silent. To his left, he noticed an ice-cream wrapper and a plastic cup caught in the updraft of a mini-cyclone. The force of the cyclone seemed to increase as he turned his attention to it. The pieces of litter rose effortlessly into the air.

There was a sharp crackle above him as they brushed the cables extending into the next valley and bounced off them again. But they didn't burst into flames or anything. They weren't in any kind of danger from the thousands of amps being pumped round the city. Instead, they were sucked onwards and upwards, destined for the heart of the giant crossfire.

It was clear the fire liked the air inside the cyclone's funnel. If it had been an animal, a living thing, it would have been fair to say it preferred the *taste* of it. But it wasn't. No one knew exactly what it was.

Cassian stepped closer, disregarding the danger. He felt the updraft rush over his naked palms and face. The swirling column of air was all around him now. He stuck his arms out at right angles to his body, like a scarecrow, and waved them up and down. It felt better if he shouted 'I'm a lunatic! I work for the Ministry!' so he did, at the top of his voice.

And for a moment, he felt like he'd actually achieved something. *Maybe that would be enough*, he thought optimistically. The ice-cream wrapper came back down to earth with a gentle *slap* and bounced through his legs. The plastic cup dropped into a tiny puddle, stirring up the mud at the bottom. Somehow his efforts, feeble and confused as they were, really did seem to have disturbed the grumbling beast looking straight down on him.

'Phew,' he wiped his brow. 'That was lucky.' The crossfire began to retreat steadily into itself, shrinking like a burst balloon. 'Never come across a Prey before eh?' Cassian yelled. The fire growled something back, a low, guttural sound like two steel-hulled ships grazing against each other. The plastic cup stirred in its oily pool of water. And instinctively, Cassian held his breath.

Was that it? He waited to see what would happen next. Had it really all come to an end, that quickly? In a flash, the ice-cream wrapper and the plastic cup rocketed back into the sky. And Cassian had his answer. Something new was brewing high above.

Another cry erupted from the heavens. This time Cassian thought it sounded like a child screaming in agony. Dust all around him flew into the air, stinging his eyes. His ears popped, as though the air pressure had suddenly dropped on the deserted building site and a tendril of fire wriggled its way towards the Earth. He was in trouble now and he knew it!

He watched, open-mouthed as the finger of flame came closer. It seemed to be feeling its way through the air like a snake slithering through a field of tall grass. When its fingertip touched the brown

soil, it shivered visibly and filled out. Its footprint began to grow, gradually covering more and more earth, creeping closer and closer to the base of the nearest pylon, Cassian's pylon...

Anxious not to be anywhere near it when it finally engulfed the industrial grade electric cable knitting the steel structure together, Cassian stepped back. He had a second, a fraction of a second maybe, to escape this experience with his life. He didn't care if he was *gifted*, the combination of fire and electricity around him wasn't going to take prisoners! He started to run and knew, whatever happened, he must not stop.

Something tugged at his shirt, his fringe was blown into his face, his torch went out but refusing to let the pattern of his long strides break, he ran on, and on. There was a massive explosion as the power cables were consumed behind him. Then, total silence. Eventually, his muscles aching, his breath coming in short, sharp bursts and his heart pounding like a kettledrum, he eased off the pace. He turned around at last and lifted his face from his mud-caked ankles to see exactly what had happened.

The fire was just fifteen feet away from him, its outer walls still pulsing, reminding him of a jellyfish floating in the surf. He was too scared to move. He tried to lift the short-wave radio to his lips but his hands wouldn't do as they were told. A mechanical thrashing sound rose from the distant housing estate.

It was the helicopter, circling round for a second, slightly lower sweep of the area. Was the fire disturbed by its presence? For some reason, it seemed to pause, relinquishing a few square feet of its vast territory. Cassian was sure he hadn't done anything this time.

He let his weight fall back onto his heels. The helicopter roared across the sky, its downdraft buffeting the fire. Finally, it disappeared behind a factory chimney and the roar of its twin rotor blades gradually faded away. What would the fire do now? The batteries in Cassian's torch rallied themselves, spitting a feeble light onto his chest. He flashed it over the ground, making sure he knew roughly where the biggest rocks and ditches were, in case his limbs decided they'd like to obey his will again, any time soon.

The fire neither shrank nor grew in this time. In fact, its size didn't change so much as an inch in the next five minutes. Cassian relaxed a little, feeling the heat of the flames on his face, remembering why he was here, to understand this thing, if he could.

Inside it, shapes and colours flowed into one another. It was hypnotic, like staring into a hearth, watching the glowing coals of a real fire on a winter's evening. Gradually, the instinct to run left Cassian. His face became a picture of innocence and trust.

And then, without realising how it had happened, he was inside the crossfire. That feeling of calm he half remembered from the day before came back to him. He was swimming in a sea of neon light. Waves of raw energy were crossing him like ripples in a bathtub.

The composition of the air around him was changing all the time. He could taste it. Concentrations of Nitrogen, Oxygen, Argon and Methane were being stirred up. Trace elements of Iodine and Lead were colouring pockets of fire blue and white. There was a whole chemistry lesson exploding right in front of his eyes.

What happened next left him trembling, feeling empty and lost. The fire just rolled itself up and snuffed itself out, in an instant. It could have vanished up Cassian's nose for all he knew! The dark

night flooded back in to fill the void, knocking him over. And suddenly, it was exactly as if it had never existed. Only a faint, acrid smell suggested something out-of-the-ordinary had happened on Stratford's Olympic Park.

Reeling, on his knees, Cassian felt his heart shiver under his ribs. He took a minute to settle himself. Then, when he was sure he could stand again, he got up and trudged off in the direction of the ministry car and Sylvia. 'I'm OK,' he said, looking at the radio like it was an unexploded bomb in his hand. 'I'm coming back.'

'Well done,' the radio hissed at him. 'You were terrific.'

'Really?' Cassian wasn't sure he deserved much praise. 'I'm just glad it's over,' he said soberly. 'Anyone up there got a Coke?' his mouth felt as dry as a bone. 'I'm bloody thirsty,' he admitted.

'Sure,' Sylvia's voice rose over the static. 'We'll sort you out.'

Cassian knew the night was glad to have the pylons, tower blocks and waste ground all to itself again. He didn't feel bad about leaving any part of it behind. He staggered towards what he thought must be the car park on the horizon. Climbing back into the comfortable leather seat waiting for him, he took a hand towel from Sylvia and wiped his face.

It was clear the city north and east of the river still had power; its bright lights beckoned and for a while, he was glad to see flashing signs and glowing petrol forecourts rushing past them. The conversation was surprisingly stilted as they headed back to Willmore End.

*The next time someone asked him to check out an active crossfire, Cassian thought quietly to himself, he might just say No...*

~

Back in his bedroom, Cassian listened to his mum shouting at the men from the Ministry downstairs. She was quite hysterical. She had already threatened to take them to court, right to her MP, insist on a public enquiry and extract revenge on their loved one. In short, she was not happy, not happy at all, that they'd put her son (her only teenage son it was important for them to grasp) in mortal danger. They had pointlessly sent him somewhere *choice* to observe some stupid natural phenomenon; rather than send in a remote control car with a camera strapped to it. They were guilty of gross recklessness.

Cassian understood. What they had done and why they had done it made sense to him. But then, he had read the contents of the crossfires folder in the back of the BMW. He supposed his mum had not. Presumably, the Ministry weren't at liberty to show it to her. They probably didn't show it to very many people. He heard Sylvia now, arguing the Ministry's case.

'We had to find the right balance,' she was saying. 'Try to do what we could to protect the public at large, without threatening Cassian's safety. We'd had him under close surveillance for over 48 hours. We knew he was immune to the effects of the crossfire. Otherwise, we'd never have... I mean we just wouldn't have dreamt of...'

'Having him incinerated on a week night?!' Cassian's mum finished her sentence for her.

‘Not the words I would have chosen,’ Sylvia said calmly. She obviously understood how the woman opposite her felt. Maybe she had children too.

‘So what did you find out?’ Cassian’s step-dad asked now. ‘Or can’t you tell us that? Was Cassian able to help you? Or did you kidnap him for nothing?’

‘Cassian proved he can walk through these fires unharmed. He also described what it was like to be inside one. More than that, I’m afraid I can’t say at this time.’

‘And will you be kidnapping him again any time soon?’ his mum snapped. ‘Or have you got other people’s lives you’re dying to put in jeopardy?’

‘As far as we know, Cassian is unique,’ Sylvia’s voice was measured and clear. ‘We may need his help again. But the next time, you can be sure we’ll ask your permission first.’

‘Well don’t be too sure we’ll give it,’ his mum scoffed. ‘I could live the rest of my life quite happily not knowing whether he’d withstand the next *crossfire* you decided to throw him into.’

There was a noise outside. Cassian crossed his room to the window and looked out. The sun was just creeping over the rooftops to his right. A flock of starlings swept into the street, alighting on a telephone cable that ran from one end to the other. Their liquid green and black feathers glistened in the dawn light. A milk float trundled past. A garage door opened and a car pulled onto its owner’s smart, brick driveway.

The starlings took off again, but to Cassian’s amazement, they didn’t drift into the gardens at the back of Hillsbrook Avenue, or glide over the sycamores pushing up the paving slabs between Cartnam Drive and Morpath Way. Instead, they flew straight into the double garage at number 26.

Mr. Jacobs, the commercial letting agent who lived there (and who had just finished adjusting his seat and mirrors before his long drive to work) obviously hadn’t expected them to do it either. His driver door opened, he stepped out and walked towards the brown up-and-over door behind him.

For a moment, he just stood there, staring at the birds huddled around his Black&Decker workbench. There was a bird for every perfectly laid brick in his driveway. He went to fetch his wife from the kitchen. She stood beside him as he gave them a good *shoo*! But not a single feather moved.

Now Mr. Jacobs was late! He danced about like an angry leprechaun but try as he might, could not persuade the starlings to leave. At last, in frustration, he got back in his car. His wife was clearly given instructions through the driver-side window to get rid of them before he came home again and he sped off.

Mrs. Jacobs did her best. She pottered about for a few minutes in her pink, chiffon nightie. Then the phone rang, she nipped inside to answer it, and never came out again.

Cassian decided to go downstairs. It had all gone very quiet in the house. Either his mum had bludgeoned Sylvia and her aides to death with her signed copy of the official secrets act, or they’d left. The stairwell was empty but from the kitchen, Cassian heard the sound of the kettle coming quickly to the boil.