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The Accord

Keith Brooke

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Extract

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The following is an excerpt from *The Accord* by Keith Brooke..
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Elector Jack Burnham emerged from the Council of Electors, aware that he had sampled a tiny fragment of heaven itself, or at least, the heaven that was being constructed under his authority.
He opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw was the back of Tate's square, shaved head. His bodyguard was looking out of the window of the sixth-floor apartment in Aldgate. Beyond him, Burnham could see the half-built needle tower he had approved the year before.
Tate turned, nodded, went to pour a cup of white tea for the elector.
Burnham closed his eyes. Elector al-Naqawi was still there, in the meetspace, a fragmental reality constructed just for today's meeting.
Burnham was curious…

Al-Naqawi, of all electors, is the most fervently sceptical. And yet he waits in the meetspace, as if he had known Burnham would return. He dips his black-turbaned head in acknowledgement as Burnham steps through the sideways-scrolling doorway and reappears before him.
"My condolences," he says.
Burnham nods. "My thanks, Sayyid," he says.

“They have found the man who did this thing?”
Burnham doesn’t allow his expression even to flicker. He looks evenly at al-Naqawi. “Barakh killed himself,” he says. “He shot my wife and then he killed himself with an overdose.”
“Forgive me,” says al-Naqawi, “but they live on. Or at least their recorded images live on in the abomination they call the Accord.”
“We do not know that,” says Burnham. “The Accord had not yet reached consensus two weeks ago. There is nothing to say that they successfully transferred to a reality shard that is now part of the Accord.”
“There is nothing to say that they did not.”
There is silence between them for a while.
“It would be entirely understandable if you wished to pursue an investigation,” says al-Naqawi. “This unhappy incident has raised concerns about the nature of the Accord: that it was created by a criminal who may, for all we know, currently be using it for refuge, is a significant concern. If you desire backing in pushing for such an investigation then I would be honoured to assist in coordinating the campaign.”
Burnham nods. “Thank you, my honourable friend,” he says, although al-Naqawi, while an honourable man as far as Burnham knows, is not a friend, and his motives for pledging support are nothing to do with those he has stated. “Support from you and the Front is always welcome.”
Al-Naqawi and his followers have opposed the Accord project from the outset, arguing that it is an abomination, that man has no right to try to build his own heaven; that

on the one hand there can only be one true heaven, and on the other it is blasphemous to even try to build an alternative.

Al-Naqawi is on shaky ground, and he knows it: he cannot argue that Barakh is fleeing justice by hiding in the Accord if he also argues for the unreality of the Accord – that it is a blasphemous shadow world, occupied by simulacra and soulless echoes. But al-Naqawi will take any opportunity to challenge the Accord, and so he could be a useful ally if Burnham chooses to pursue Barakh, or the ghost-Barakh.

Burnham bows his head. “I am still grieving,” he says, and this is true. There is a cavernous hole at the heart of his existence that was once occupied by Priscilla. He loves her with a startling intensity, despite her betrayal. “I am still grieving, but I appreciate your support. We will talk again?”

Because now al-Naqawi has planted the seed, Burnham is hooked, and he knows he is hooked. Barakh is out there, somewhere. In the Accord. Whether the true Barakh really does live on in virtual heaven or it’s a mere fragment of the man, an echo, he is there.

With Priscilla.

Burnham feels the ache with renewed intensity, a chill in his gut that spreads up his body, his neck, tightens his scalp. He is quite disturbed by the physicality of his emotions.

Elector al-Naqawi nods, and places a hand softly on Burnham’s arm. “We will talk again, my friend.”

We don't make it as far as your childhood home in Deanmere Gap, or even nearby Eastbourne. Reality intervenes. Or rather, un-reality intervenes…
We have an electric car, and there are so few other vehicles on the road that I can almost drive manually down the A22 without looking. There are many millions of personae in the pre-consensus Accord, but they are distributed right across its many fractal shards. The place is deserted. We have our own private world. Our own private worlds, for there are other instances of us uploaded, other Noahs, other Priscillas; I am the man who built heaven, who built heavens; the duplication was an inevitable result of us taking over an experimental phase to pursue our personal agenda. I ran us in parallel. All contradictions will be resolved when consensus is reached.
We find the first anomaly a few miles past Forest Row.
"What is it? What is it?" you ask me, as I pause in mid-sentence.
I stare across to the left, hands off the wheel as I let the car cruise in automatic.
"See?" I point. "The trees?"
We pass through woodland, but the trees… the detail is gone… at a glance all is fine, but stare hard at one spot and they won't resolve themselves into branches, leaves, trunks. Blocks of dark green and brown shift under scrutiny, resisting the eye's attempts to distinguish form, detail. We pass a cottage set back from the road among the trees. It is little more than a few blocks the colour of red bricks, no features visible.

“Consensus is incomplete,” I say. “The warp and weft of its fabric are showing. But not to worry: it is not so much failing as unfinished. We are still in a coherent reality shard. Consensus is close, my love.”

Ahead, the A22 is a smooth, featureless grey band, rough at the edges, cutting through blocks of forest colours that shift and flow. The road looks as if it has been daubed on with a palette knife. My pulse races. I understand what we are encountering, but still it is hard to control basic animal reactions to the unknowable.

We continue, and by the time we reach Wych Cross reality has returned in glorious technicolour.

A short time later, we turn off the main road, looking for a pub for lunch.

“Will there be anywhere open?” you ask, leaning forward in your seat like a little girl.

“Who knows? We might have to end up cooking for ourselves.”

The Old Bull is open. We stop the car at the back in a high-walled parking area. Once out in the open we pause, embrace, your face against my shoulder. Your scent is almost overpowering, the smell of your hair, your skin.

I want the moment to last.

Instead… the trees… the limestone wall… blocks of colour, shifting, reorganising.

You gasp as I hold you tighter.

“It’s okay,” I tell you. “Just another anomaly. Consensus settling around us.” I hope my uncertainty isn’t explicit in the tone of my voice.

We enter the Old Bull through the beer garden door. We order drinks and baguettes from the barman who otherwise sits on a stool, watching the stories on a tabloid news-sheet; we find seats by the window, looking out over the empty village high street. A black and white cat prowls; a dove looks, ponders, rises in a flurry of wing-beats.

"Noah?"

You take my hand and kiss it, tenderly, slowly. We have kissed in these reality shards before; many of us have kissed many times. But this is different. This is new. We are here. We are here waiting for consensus to happen around us.

I look down. I don't know what to say at this moment. I am unaccustomed to this kind of intensity, even now.

We eat. We talk. We laugh. We hold hands across the table.

We pass through the beer garden, clinging onto each other. We pause in the car park, pull each other close, bodies pressing hard, suddenly urgent. I press you against the car, my hands exploring… hips… breasts… nipple… the curve of your waist. You pull me tight against you.

A lull, cheeks pressed together, breathing ragged.

"Noah… I love you. I love that you have done this for me, for us. I… I struggle to find the words for what you've done."

"I love you," I say. "Just those words."

We step back from the car, kiss again, softly, barely touching.

"Tell me you'll always be mine, Noah."

And then I feel the ground shift, a deep slow movement like an earthquake.
The tremor passes right through my body, resonating with my bones, making me feel as if my skeleton is about to be shaken to dust.
You clutch my arm.
“It’s okay,” I say. “It’ll be all right.”
“But what will be all right?” you ask. “What in fuck’s name was that?”
“I think…”
Another heaving beneath.
I stumble, your hand snatched from my arm.
“I think… Priscilla? Priscilla?”
But you have gone.
I turn around and I am in a wasteland, heaps of rubble all about, great gouges in the ground, dust thick in the air.
I am alone.
Priscilla?
Priscilla? Where have you gone, my love?

Burnham emerged from meetspace again, opened his eyes, saw a pot of tea and a filled cup sitting on the walnut dresser to his right. He reached out. The tea was barely lukewarm to the touch.
“Tate?” he called.
While his bodyguard refreshed the tea, Burnham wandered out onto the small roof terrace. To his right, the gherkin-shaped Swiss Re building towered over the surrounding cityscape, to his left, Tower Bridge peeked through a gap between buildings.
Tate appeared with the fresh tea.

Burnham smiled. “Don’t you just love this city?” he asked. “The contrast! Shabby back streets, a bridge out of Walt Disney, and that,” – he waved towards the Gherkin – “an enormous sex-toy of a building! I fucking love it.”
Tate nodded. “Shall I pour, JB?” he asked.
“Someone has to,” said Burnham, “and it sure as fuck ain’t going to be me.”
He sat on a lounger, stretched back, hands on either arm of the seat. As soon as he closed his eyes, messages scrolled, but he blinked them away. He realised he was gripping the seat tightly, so he forced his muscles to relax and then put his hands behind his head.
So up and down! These last two weeks… his mood could swing second by second. The anger and grief he could understand – he had just lost his wife of close to twenty years, for fuck’s sake – but the manic side, the amplified lust for life, it disturbed him, it seemed inappropriate, indecent. It was him, but it was a magnified version of him, almost a different instance of him, in Barakh’s parlance, and he didn’t like it.
Priscilla… why had she betrayed him? He loved her still. He missed her with every breath that he took.
He hadn’t planned it. Hadn’t gone there to kill her. He believed that, even though he could not explain why he had taken her gun from the dresser instead of simply snatching his own from the shoulder holster he always wore. There was nothing premeditated about that; he had not done it in order to avoid detection; it was simply the irrational act of a mind deranged by passion and rage.

Back then…
The car, rolling backwards out of the driveway, Tate at the wheel, Burnham in the back more furious with himself than he had ever been in his life – for having kept control, said nothing, behaved as if all was dandy when he knew it was not. He had evidence, damn it!
He was a master of control – anyone in his position had to be – but in private… Priscilla had always said she loved the spark, the fire, the private passion that only she saw. But this time he had remained in control, desperately in control, not let anything slip.
"Stop."
The car came to a halt in the drive.
Burnham stepped out, crunched through the gravel back to the front door, let himself in, climbed the stairs, pushed at the bedroom door, suddenly tentative…
She was wearing a white robe, towelling her hair, fresh from the shower, getting herself ready, washing her husband off her hair, her body. They had screwed only an hour earlier, and she had been convincing. If he had not known otherwise he would never have guessed it was just a performance, an act. He had been performing too. He had shown passion where passion was demanded, said the right words, carried out the act… with manic control over his every action, every response.
Afterwards, they had lain in each other's arms, said nothing, as they had so often lain in each other's arms and said nothing in the past.
He looked at her now. She was still a striking woman, one who might be unkindly termed handsome rather than pretty. Slim and strong, with a firm jaw, piercing blue

eyes, a sheen of copper in her dark brown hair, a sinuous, almost indecent, grace to the way she moved. As a young woman her manner had been less confident, her vitality constrained, her looks awkward and mismatched; now, she was beautiful. She really was beautiful. For a moment, Burnham forgot why he was here.

She turned, opened her mouth as if to speak, then stopped, then said, "Jack… I thought…?"

"You thought I was someone else?"

She knew. Straight away she knew. It was in her eyes. They had always communicated so well, had always seen through to the one no one else saw.

"No. I just thought you had gone. What do you mean, Jackie?"

"You thought it was Barakh. How long have you been screwing him?"

How long? The mails implied it was a recent thing, weeks at most, but the words had been ambiguous, implying far more… Months? Longer?

"He has never laid a finger on me, nor I on him."

"That's a lie. Don't take the piss, Priscilla. I've read the mails…"

"Jackie… I'm telling the truth."

Just for a moment – an instant – he believed her, wanted to believe her. They had always communicated so well. They had never lied about anything that mattered.

One time, years earlier, she had asked him if he was having an affair with one of his researchers – Kelly or Shelley or something – a nobody, a kid he could barely picture now, let alone remember her name. It had been

nonsense and they had talked it through, analysed the hints and signs that had led Priscilla to suspect, demonstrated that it was coincidence, trivia, happenstance.
He wanted that to be so now. He wanted Priscilla to gently explain how he had misinterpreted the signs, the evidence, the unspoken truths.
But no.
Jackie… I'm telling the truth.
It was a tired defence, a defence heavy with omission.
"Jackie?"
He didn't know how it happened, but suddenly she was on the floor, lying awkwardly, and he was pulling at the top-left drawer of her dressing table, fumbling for her small handgun.
And then she was dead.
He had seen people die violent deaths before. He had worked with aid agencies after the Mexico City 'quake and the dirty bombs in Paris. Before that he had served with the pacifying forces in Algeria, Libya, Turkey. He had killed six men and one woman in the line of duty. The flashbacks would haunt him for the rest of his life.
But this was different. So different.
Priscilla's chest looked as if it had exploded. There was blood everywhere, soaking her robe, the carpet. Wet flecks had spattered Burnham's face.
She looked surprised, and it was when he saw this that he slumped to his knees and started to sob, and it was moments later that Tate appeared in the doorway, gun braced, ready to shoot.

Burnham straightened, shook off Tate's helping hands, gave his bodyguard the gun.
Outside, a sliver of sun had broken through the heavy clouds, and Burnham saw that Tate had turned the car and reversed it back into the drive, ready to depart.

Now…
"Fucking boat people!"
Elector Burnham blinked out of the message, a low-res newsfeed showing another overloaded tub crowded with people. It could have been any boat, anyplace. They were all the same. This one was a small fishing smack, straw-thin people lining its flanks, peering out at the promised land. The refused land. At this moment there were forty-six vessels classed as large enough to carry fifty or more passengers scattered along the south coast, and God knows how many more smaller boats. The Navy was keeping them at sea, but how long could that last? Most of Europe's border integrity forces were concentrated around the Mediterranean rim, where the problem was on a far greater scale than this.
Tate stood impassively by the windows as Burnham sat on his lounger, sipping at a cup of tea and feeling powerless. The sun soothed him, a break from the relentless rain of the past month. Burnham remembered when this kind of day had been the norm, when Britain didn't have a regular rainy season in early summer. Days like today, he felt the burden.
How was he to stop the flood of humankind flowing around the planet in search of somewhere to eke out an existence? How could a mere politician feed the world?

“They’re all going to die, aren’t they?”
Tate raised an eyebrow.
“The boat people. Most of Africa. Most of the Med, for fuck’s sake. We’ve gone past the point where we could stop any of this.” His fellow electors had been arguing over this for years: they were living through a time when humankind was being forced to scale back. Large losses were inevitable. “It’s all about survival now, isn’t it?”
“I’d say it always has been, JB.”
The rain started, and for long minutes Burnham sat back, eyes closed, enjoying its delicate touch on his skin, relief from the muggy London air.
“Tate?”
“Sir?”
“I want to find Barakh. I want to find out if he’s hiding in the Accord. I want to find out how to get my hands on him.”
Silence.
Burnham looked at Tate.
“It’s okay,” he said. “I’m not expecting you to hack into the system yourself. Find someone on the project team, someone who could be leaned on. I want answers. I don’t care how you get them.”
“Sir.”

It is a wasteland. I walk through the rubble, staggering as aftershocks tug at the ground beneath my feet. The plain appears to go on forever. There is no variation, no distant hills, no trees or buildings, no vegetation at all. Just rock, dust, great chasms in the ground.
“Priscilla?”

My throat is sore, dry, raw from calling.
The sky is a thin grey, stained ochre by the dust, the sun veiled, harsh.
Consensus is asserting itself. The countless shards of ur-reality are drawing together, becoming integrated, becoming one.
But I am an anomaly. We are anomalies. We have multiple instances, something the protocols cannot allow. I have anticipated this though: consensus should draw my shards together, integrate me, make me one, just as it should do for Priscilla.
But…
Priscilla?
I am alone.
And I am lost.
I do not know where this is. Will all shards be integrated, or will some be cast adrift, abandoned? In the mathematics of complexity and chaos it is not possible to pin down the specifics of such an event. I do not know.
I fear, though. I fear that I am in a virtual cul-de-sac. That I am in lost space. Or that you are.
Priscilla?

The ground heaves again. My legs go from under me and I clutch at the rocky ground, face in the dust… in the grass.
I turn, sit, and dizziness cartwheels my brain.
The sun is bright, the sky blue drifted with white.
Still dizzy… Falling through space, even though I am sitting here, not moving.
Falling.

Falling.
Falling.

Priscilla?
I climb to my feet. I am home again, in the garden, looking down the grassy slope towards the seawall. The tide is high; it looks like a spring tide, topping the saltings, silvering the great mats of vegetation.
I am alone.
I breathe deep.
Alone.
I remember the tender touch of your lips on mine, the urgent pressing of our bodies.
Alone.
I close my eyes, reach out, feel netspace around me. Find her.
I wait, patient. I walk along the seawall, my regular haunt. Redshanks fly up ahead of me, shrilling their sentinel cry.
She is gone. She is dead. She was not consolidated when consensus struck. She was an anomaly. She is no more.
Priscilla is dead.

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