

Border Control

A Short Story

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I push my way through the gate and trip across the lawn towards the main house. It's a charmer.

They don't build walls that thick anymore – too expensive. The brickwork is traditional. Norfolk Reds are absorbent, which lets the old girl breathe and keeps the damp at bay. But what I like best is the way the salt catches in the creases. It's like the bricks are smiling.

What else can I tell you?

It's not a family home, though it should be. A high brick-and-flint wall surrounds a good-size lawn – character and privacy. Perfect for careful parents looking to intern independent kids.

It's not a business premises, though it could be. There's plenty of storage space in the outbuildings, all of which are in good nick. They'd make ideal studios for artists who craft best in company.

It's not a holiday home, though it would be ... if someone dolled it up and advertised in on Airbnb. The coastline is near enough that if the windows were open you could smell the salt and hear the surf breaking.

The problem with this gaff is the view.

Look forward and you'll see wide skies and open water. The battle between sand and sea never ceases. The dunes don't stand a chance without the wooden groynes that punctuate the shoreline.

Look right and take in the offshore windfarm at Scroby Sands. The blades slice through the light breeze with a soundless grace. The seals don't seem to mind and the little terns keep coming.

Now look left. It's a tangle of pipes and pylons. The gas terminal stretches along the coast road for a kilometre. The complex never sleeps and at night it has a kind of Bladerunner majesty. During the day, though, it's a retinal assault.

You couldn't rent or sell this place if you tried. No one comes to Norfolk expecting anything less than three hundred and sixty degrees of Mother Nature's premium eye candy.

Which suits us fine.

Our visitors don't get to enjoy the garden or the outbuildings because we don't let them outside.

They don't hear the surf or smell the salt because we don't open the windows.

They don't look left, right or straight ahead because the doors are always locked.

I'm part of the security detail. At any one time there are thirty of us on duty. We're all field veterans who know how to keep our mouths shut and our muscles toned.

Each of us is an Expert-level practitioner of Krav Maga. Grade 3 minimum. Our tech might malfunction but our strikes, takedowns, throws and groundwork are powered by training and discipline, and don't.

We're armed too, of course. Between us we have more blades than Scroby's turbines, and it's an offence to cross the perimeter without a firearm. Initially, we each carried a SIG Sauer MCX rifle and a Glock 19, though these days it's a whole new ballgame.

And talking of the perimeter, it extends well beyond the brick-and-flint wall, a good 500 metres. Cross it without invitation and we'll be on you in seconds. This is private property, after all.

Having the gas terminal close is handy. We bump up against its heavily barbed borders. Accidental interlopers assume they've trespassed on the property of Shell, Eni or Perenco, and leave without fuss.

I can hear the cogs whirring. Maybe you're thinking this is some ghastly interrogation centre – Guantanamo with windmills.

Or a halfway house to facilitate extraordinary rendition. Honestly? It's more about water-skiing than water-boarding around these parts.

How about safe-guarding witnesses set to testify against perps of organized crime? That could work.

Or perhaps you've gone leftfield and think we're harbouring aliens. Greens and greys. Roswell on Sea.

If only.

The problem we're managing here is more complex.

The manifold. Twenty-seven cubic metres in which everything you thought made sense goes to shit.

I'm just a guy with a blade and a gun so the physics is a stretch, but the way I understand it, it's basically an arrivals lounge for those who live in universes that might have been ours but aren't.

Our visitors are us.

Sort of.

It comes down to proximity ... of experience not geography.

The Near-bys' lives are uncannily similar. They come because they can, because they're curious. They want nothing from us, just to say hello.

The Midmosts fall into two camps. Category 1s live an existence that for us is conceivable but as yet unachievable. Mainly because of their tech. Category 2s are struggling, but with obstacles that can be overcome. If we can help, we do, but more often it's the C1s chipping in.

Last but not least, the Yonders. You've probably worked it out. They're in trouble. Knocked sideways by some planet-wide horror the likes of which we can only invent in our dreams, our books and our Hollywood blockbusters.

Too far gone for C1 assistance, they want out. Or in, depending on how you look at it.

Most would be harmless if we let them through. They want nothing more than to survive, to make a home, to live a life. But we can't even look after our own, never mind several billion refugees from a sister Earth. Think about what you see on the news, how people start throwing their toys out of the pram when it comes to immigration.

And there's more than one Yonder universe. The science of collapsing probabilities allows for expansion with every what-if.

That's where the security detail comes in. No one leaves the manifold until we're certain of their status. And even then, no one leaves the house.

Most Yonders are brazen. Fair play – their clocks are ticking. We have a zero-tolerance policy. Just a sniff of a breach and we act. Thanks to the C1s, our defence upgrades are stand-out. No more bullets; it's all about protons. Our response is swift and clean. Visitor to vapour in a flash.

Shrewder Yonders pretend to be Midmosts and Near-bys. Identification isn't as hard as you might think. They press too fast, too hard, and lack the enthusiasm that genuine C2s show for home-centred support. And they have a certain disposition – haunted and hunted. That's what usually exposes them.

All in all, we have the situation in hand. Still, this is border control that bends the mind.

I try not to think about the Yonders too much, about the unthinkable burdens borne by other versions of me.

As for here – home – maybe if everyone knew about the manifold, and the nightmare plight of some who assemble there and the centillions they represent, we'd work a little harder to look after each other.