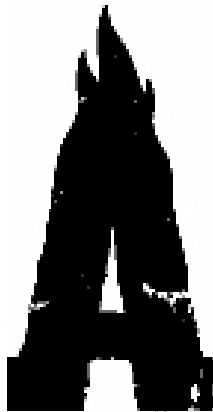


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THE AFTERBLIGHT CHRONICLES

**THE MAN
WHO WOULD
NOT BE KING**

SCOTT ANDREWS

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Arthur St John Smith sat at a desk in a bland air-conditioned office, pressed the return key on his keyboard and wondered where it had all gone wrong.

When the viral apocalypse wiped the world clean, he had been kind of excited. The terror, the wet beds and the months of self-imposed quarantine in his pokey flat living off cat food and, eventually, the cat, were a bumner, but he eventually came to see his survival as a grand opportunity to turn things around.

All his life he'd been in search of a calling. He was pretty sure that Data Entry Clerk (Croydon (South) Council) wasn't it, but he didn't know what was.

Maybe his new job as Survivor (End of the World) would lead him to his destiny.

His first foray into the devastated world beyond his front door was the most thrilling thing that had ever happened to him. He pulled on his gloves, stuffed his belt with kitchen knives, and bound his face and head with torn sheets, leaving just a slit for his eyes. Once he worked out that his glasses wouldn't balance

on a cloth-swathed nose, he sellotaped them to his bindings and strode from the house, ready to do battle. In his head it was a grand narrative – meek suburban wage-slave reborn as survivalist hunter-gatherer, stalking the ravaged landscape, calm and ruthless, ready to fight looters and feral dogs.

Maybe there was a damsel in distress somewhere, in need of rescuing. He reasoned that such a maiden may have been even more reluctant to emerge than he, so he checked every house on his street, hoping to find a lissom beauty cowering in terror, just waiting for him to hold out his marigold-gloved hand and tell her everything would be all right.

He especially held out hope for number 34, where that mousey woman from the library lived. She had smiled at him once, a year ago, on the tram. It had been a Monday. But in her house, it was the cats that had done the eating. So he struck out into the wider world.

His big mistake, he now knew, had been stealing the car.

Before *The Cull*, he had walked past the showroom on his way to work and every day, without deviation, he would glance at the car as he walked past. He'd never stop and stare at it, that would be ridiculous, but he snatched glimpses of it out of the corner of his eye and nurtured a hard covetous knot in his stomach at the thought of it.

Once he was sure his road was empty of life, his first thought had been for the car. He strolled down the familiar streets, retracing his old route to work, marvelling at the changes in the landscape.

There was Mr Singh's corner shop where he used to buy his wine gums – two packs every Monday morning, enough to last him a week. The shop had been looted and set on fire; a charred corpse dangled out of the upstairs window.

There was the bus stop where the hoodies congregated. They'd jeered at him once as he walked past. Arthur pictured them dying horribly. He wasn't imaginative enough to conjure anything really gruesome, but the thought of them dying of the plague was satisfying. He chuckled. Served the vicious little bastards right.

There was the primary school. He ignored it; he'd never liked kids.

Finally, there was the showroom. His spirits sank when he saw that the windows were smashed and the cars were all gone.

His brogued feet crunched over the glass-strewn tarmac as he explored the wreckage. Nothing there. Out the back, however, he saw a garage locked up with a heavy chain. He paused. Should he?

His colleagues would have described him as bland. Not timid, but not dangerous. But with no-one to tell him off, no social disapprobation to keep him meek and mild, he felt a sudden rush of reckless freedom. Licking his lips in anticipation, he scoured the garages for a crowbar, then returned and jemmied the lock away, opening the garage doors to reveal his heart's desire.

A Lamborghini Murciélago, abandoned with the keys still in the ignition. The dealer must have thought to hide it when he realised things were going to hell.

Half full of petrol, untouched, jet black bonnet gleaming in the sunshine, the car invited him to take it for a spin. It was like some magic gift, so improbable it had to be intended. He looked left and right before he got inside, instinctively wary of discovery. But nobody yelled at him, or took a shot at him. The seat moulded itself to his saggy rear, allowing him to recline in the low slung vehicle. It felt right; it felt like a throne. This car was his now and why not? Didn't he deserve it?

He closed the door and gently, almost reverently, turned the key. The car purred into life. He placed his hands on the steering wheel, considered taking off his rubber gloves so he could feel the real leather, but decided to play it safe, pressed his foot on the clutch and then gently depressed the accelerator, revving the engine. The car growled, roared, came alive around him.

In that plush seat, enveloped in that purring, eager metal beast, he felt a rush of something new and strange.

Power.

He was free and alive and it felt good. He released the handbrake and let her rip, tearing down the Queensway towards Croydon town centre, weaving in between ruined and burnt out wrecks. This must be what it felt like to be a rock star, he thought. Like Chris de Burgh going smooth at ninety, feeling good to be alive; or Chris Rea, on the road to hell.

His drive lasted for thirty seconds, and now, two months later, as he scrolled down the spreadsheet preparing for another dreary

morning of data entry, he looked back on that glorious half-minute and thought that probably it would be the most dramatic thing that had ever happened to him.

Because the men in the yellow hazmat suits had been searching the town for survivors, and he'd ploughed straight into a group of them outside Morrisons.

The ones he didn't kill were not happy with him.

He heard the office door behind him swing open, but he didn't turn to see who it was. No point; he knew already.

"You finished yet, Smith?"

"Ha ha, only just started, Mr Jolly." The fake laugh, perfected years before in the accounts payable department of Croydon (South) Council, came easily to him. It was his defence mechanism, a way of signalling that he wasn't a threat. If he were a pack dog, he'd be bowing his head, lowering his tail and whining.

Jolly was his supervisor, a whinging Wandsworth solicitor who'd landed himself a cushy little number running the bureaucracy in the main refugee camp for Kent. Supercilious, patronising and grey, he was identical in almost every respect to Arthur's boss at the Council.

"Be sure you're done by lunchtime," said Jolly. "The camp commander wants that list pronto."

"No problem, sir, be done in a jiffy."

Arthur's supervisor gave an oleaginous moan of assent and retreated. Arthur sniggered. Camp commander; that sounded gay.

He reminded himself to be grateful. The collectors could have killed him there and then, as he'd sprawled out of the Lamborghini, tearing at his bindings so he could empty the vomit from his mouth.

Instead, they'd thrown him into their van, with the corpses, and driven him here, to the camp. They'd been a bit rough with him at processing, but he was so terrified that he'd offered no resistance at all. Identified as a low level clerical worker, grade 5F, he'd been set to work in the offices, away from the barracks and the experimental wings, where all sorts of unpleasantness was visited on the survivors.

They were trying to find a cure, and they didn't care what it took, or who they hurt in the process. Who they thought they were going to cure, he didn't know and he didn't ask.

Barrett, the man who brought round the tea urn, reckoned that the government and royal family were all holed up in a bunker underneath Buck House, waiting for a cure so they could emerge and lord it over what was left. Arthur didn't really believe that.

Then he noticed the name of the next worksheet: Royal lineage.

He clicked it open and saw a list of all the people in line to the throne. It went through the obvious ones – the princes and princesses, the dukes and duchesses, but then it went further, into minor aristocracy and illegitimate offspring. The first column contained their names, the second their dates of birth, the third their last known addresses. And the fourth contained their blood type.

But when he scrolled all the way down to line 346 he gasped in shock. His hand shook and he felt momentarily dizzy.

Because it was his name. According to this, he was 346th in line to the throne of England. The fourth column contained a note: "Illegitimate offspring; unaware; unsuitable".

In a flash he remembered a snide comment his father had made to his mother over Sunday dinner, years before. Something about dallying with upper class twits. She had blushed.

Gosh.

He scrolled back up and started counting.

There were only eleven O Neg royals in the list above him.

He sat for a while, jaw hanging open, thinking through the implications of his extraordinary discovery. Then he came to a conclusion, sent the document to the printer, and stood to leave.

Finally, destiny was calling.

The King of England, John Parkinson-Keyes, knew damn well he was in line to the throne, and didn't care who knew it. It was why the boys at his private school had christened him Kinky - a bastardisation of King Keyes.

Not that he minded. He really was kinky and he didn't care who knew that either. Hell, it was practically a prerequisite for the job.

"Prince Andrew," he was fond of confiding to credulous hangers-on, tapping his nose as he did so, "has an entire wardrobe

full of gimp suits. And Sophie's a furry!"

He'd nod in the face of their astonishment and then glance knowingly at his empty glass, which they would invariably scurry off and refill for him.

He didn't have hangers-on now, of course. Not after The Cull. Now he had the real thing: slaves. And he didn't need to invent tall tales to get them do what he wanted.

"Where's my bloody dinner?" he yelled at the top of his voice, which echoed around the vaulted wooden ceiling of the huge dining room. There was no response. He drummed his fingers on the table impatiently, then cursed and reached for his shotgun. He'd teach these bloody proles to keep him waiting. He cracked the gun open, checked that it was loaded, then snapped it shut and took casual aim at the door.

"OI!" he shouted. "Don't make me come and find you."

Again, no reply.

Christ, this was annoying. He was hungry. Resolving to teach that tempting young serving lad a hard, rough lesson in master and servant protocols, he rose from his chair and swaggered in the direction of the kitchens, gun slung over his shoulder.

"Parkin, you little wretch, where are you?" he bellowed as he pushed open the kitchen door.

He never even saw the sword that sliced his head off. Well, not until his head was on the floor, and he blinked up at his toppling, decapitated corpse.

The last thing he saw as his vision went red at the edges was a chubby little man in a grey sweater leaning down and wiggling his fingers in a cheery wave.

"Sorry," said his assassin. "Nothing personal."

King Keyes tried to call for his mummy, but he had no breath with which to cry.

The last thing he thought he heard was the portly swordsman saying: "Three down, eight to go."

The Queen of England, Barbara Wolfing-Gusset, hungrily scooped cold beans from a can with a silver spoon. The juice dribbled down her chin, but she didn't bother to wipe it off, so it dripped onto the dried blood and vomit that caked her best satin party dress.

She'd been wearing the garish pink frock for two months now, ever since the night of her 19th birthday party. Her parents had suggested that maybe a large gathering of people during a plague pandemic was not the best idea, but she'd silenced them with a particularly haughty glance, and invited practically everyone she'd ever met.

Turnout had been low, but that just meant more champagne for everyone else. Plus, that hatchet faced cow Tasmin hadn't been around, so Barbara had a clear run at Tommy Bond.

It wasn't fair; it had all been going so well.

Yes, Tommy was looking a little green about the gills, but Barbara had assumed that was the champers, and she'd dragged him away from the ballroom for a quick shagette in the scullery. And quick it was. What a disappointment. Tommy came in about ten seconds flat and, as he did so, his eyes rolled back in his head, he began to spasm, and then he vomited blood all over her, fell to the floor – withdrawing in the process – thrashed about until he cracked his head on the stone step and twitched his last.

Ungrateful bastard.

Barbara finished the beans and tossed the tin into the corner. She swung down from the table she'd been sitting on and headed for the door, aiming a kick at the dog, which was still gnawing on Tommy's straggly bones; she didn't want it to have all the meat, she was still planning on making a stew of her beau when she had a mo.

For now, though, her priority was the next chapter of *In the Fifth at Mallory Towers* and the resolution of the poison pen mystery!

Kicking her way through the remains of her fabulous party – mostly disarticulated bones and dresses stained with bodily fluids now, but still the occasional scrap of discarded wrapping paper and tinsel – Barbara went to the drawing room, humming to herself.

She stopped and stared, her mouth hanging open, when she saw the man silhouetted in the French doors.

"Barbara Wolfing-Gusset?" Said the man in a bland Croydon accent.

She nodded.

"Baroness?"

She nodded again.

The man raised his arms and Barbara saw he was holding a shotgun.

As the pellets thudded into her she realised two things. First, that no dry cleaners in the world was going to be able to salvage her best party frock; and second, that she'd never find out who'd written Moira those beastly letters.

The man walked across the room and stood over her as she gasped for air.

"Sorry," he said. Then he turned and walked away.

Barbara pulled herself out of the drawing room, leaving a thick, slick trail behind her. It was agony, but she fought her way back through the hall and into the scullery. After tremendous effort, she reached Tommy's rotting skeleton and rested her head on his ribcage. She closed her eyes and prepared for death.

Then she opened them again and shoved the dog away.

For now.

The smoke curled upwards from the embers of the Old Schools. No-one left alive in there, then.

Arthur panned the binoculars left and surveyed the wider ruins. The cultists – at least that's what he assumed they were – had done their job thoroughly, but had made his infinitely more difficult.

The message painted on the wall of the (latest, only recently ascended, blissfully unaware) King's house had directed anyone who was looking for him to his school. He'd obviously felt that it would provide a refuge. Arthur supposed it was a sensible idea; if the boy were safely ensconced in a stable community environment, it would make him far harder for Arthur to pick off. For that reason alone it showed common sense. And anyway, where else was there for the boy to go?

On his way to the school, Arthur had decided he would masquerade as a teacher from a similar institution. Computer Science; useless now, so unlikely to have to prove his credentials. If he could convince whatever passed for staff that he was legitimate – and damn, wouldn't you know it, he'd not got a copy of his Criminal Record Bureau check on him right now and it was going to be hard to get a replacement wasn't it, ha ha – then he could infiltrate the school, identify the boy and wait for

an opportune moment to make his move.

Upon arrival, however, he'd discovered the school under siege by a ferocious band of naked, blood-daubed nutters led by some weirdo in a pinstripe suit and bowler hat. He'd stayed out of sight and let the siege play out to its inevitable conclusion – the complete destruction of the school and everyone in it. He was pretty sure there'd been cannibalism involved, but he'd avoided looking too closely once the gates were breached and the real savagery began.

Now, as he looked at the smouldering ruins of Harrow School, Arthur had difficulty deciding what to do.

If the boy king had made it to the school, he had almost certainly died in the massacre. But what if he'd been waylaid en route? What if he'd never made it here? There were too many variables, and Arthur had to be sure. He couldn't have a pretender turning up and causing trouble once he'd taken the throne.

Then a dreadful thought occurred to him: perhaps the boy had converted – he was pretty sure one or two of the boys had joined the cultists. Blimey, he hoped he wouldn't have to wade into that particular hornet's nest.

No, there was nothing else for it; he'd simply have to rummage around in the debris and entrails in search of identification. He might get lucky.

With a weary sigh, Arthur collapsed the binoculars, put them in the pocket of his coat, and stood up. He felt a slight nervous tingle as he broke cover and walked towards the wreckage. He might already be king, and he might find proof of that fact within the next hour. He could embrace his destiny by lunchtime. He felt lightheaded at the thought of it, and lengthened his stride.

Two hours later Arthur sat on a blood-soaked bench feeling deflated and nauseous.

Rifling through the pockets of half burnt – and in some cases half eaten – child corpses was not the best way to spend a morning. But, he told himself, if he was going to be king he had to earn the right, and facing up to difficult realities and making hard decisions was part of the job. Kings needed to be made of stern stuff. He was proud that he hadn't flinched in the face of such horror; he'd only thrown up twice.

But he'd found no proof of identity. A couple of bodies had been identifiable by library cards – held on to for what reason, he wondered? Habit? Some kind of totemic article of faith that one day there would once again be fines for overdue books? – but the majority of the bodies were anonymous.

This was not acceptable. He'd managed to find and eliminate ten obstacles with no doubt at all, but now, at the final hurdle, he was going to have to make a leap of faith. The boy was almost certainly dead but Arthur knew that scintilla of possibility, that maggot of doubt, would gnaw away at him for the duration of his reign. He'd never feel entirely secure upon his throne, he'd always be waiting for the day when the miraculously resurrected boy king, now grown up and riding at the head of an army, would rise up to challenge his rule and topple him from the throne.

Unconsciously, his hand rose to his throat as he contemplated Charles I's fate. Then he clenched as he recalled Edward II's.

No, he had to be sure. There was nothing else for it – he had to find the cultists. If he could talk to the boys who had converted they'd be able to tell him the boy king's fate. It was his final test, the last thing he must do to prove that he was worthy of his own destiny. He understood that.

But it really was going to be a pain in the neck.

The King of England, Jack Bedford, picked his way through the wreckage of his school.

Coming back to school had seemed like such a good idea when the world died. After all, if any school was going to survive The Cull, it would be Harrow, wouldn't it? As it turned out, only a few children thought of returning to school, so the community never had time to reach critical mass before their first big challenge.

When the Blood Hunters had turned up to kill and eat anyone who wouldn't convert to their mad creed, Jack and one of his classmates had escaped the slaughter by sheltering in a huge brick ice-house deep in the woods that made up a large part of the school grounds. They'd heard nothing in two days now, so Jack had emerged to scout the area.

He was shocked to see the school reduced to a pile of smouldering embers and a half collapsed stone shell. This was

Harrow, for God's sake. Was nothing sacred?

The Old Schools, chosen for a last stand in the event of attack, was still smoking, but he approached anyway. There had been twenty three other children and one teacher - the Head of English, who had proclaimed himself Headmaster - here when the cultists had arrived. Jack didn't hold out much hope of finding any of them alive, but he could at least bury any remains. There were no bodies here, though; everyone had been taken elsewhere during the bloodletting. Jack scrambled away from the still hot embers, ashamed at the relief he felt.

As he approached the dormitories he caught a whiff of cooking meat and a thick smoky stench of chemicals. He paused, thinking again. The sick feeling in his stomach hardened into a knot of fury and fear. He wanted to run as far as he could from this awful place, but at the same time he wanted to find a gun or a knife or a club, pursue the Blood Hunters and massacre the whole bloody lot of them.

He shook his head and sank to the grass, sitting down and wrapping his arms around his legs, resting his chin on his knees and staring blankly at the smouldering wreckage. Who was he kidding? He was fifteen, his arms were too long for his body and he kept bumping into things. Always the last to be chosen for rugby, Jack was not sporty or physically confident; he was gangly, awkward and beanpole thin. Give him a gun and he'd probably just blow his own foot off. He wasn't going to be massacring anybody, let alone a gang of heavily armed psychotic cannibals.

He sniffed and stuck his lower lip out.

Where could he go now? His family were dead, his school destroyed, the only friend he had left was that interloper Ben, who had remained in the ice house, asleep and unconcerned.

Jack sat there, disconsolate. He had no real friends, no family, no home, and nowhere to go. He was unwashed, hungry, tired and simultaneously terrified and furious.

He realise the simple truth of his life - he was prey, and that was all. A tasty morsel to be eaten up by whichever cult, gang or death squad ran him to ground. The best he could hope for was a squalid few months scratching a life in the wreckage and then a brutal and pointless death.

He felt tears welling up in his eyes.

Then he froze as he heard a noise. He held his breath and willed his heart to slow. There it was again. Sounded like someone behind him and to his left. He heard the faint sound of shifting bricks; someone was walking through the rubble of the Old Schools.

Instinctively realising that he had not been seen, Jack slowly raised his head and turned to look over his shoulder. A freestanding wall blocked the other person from view. He rose to his feet and moved away as quietly as he could, taking cover in the ruins of a classroom, peering out through the hole where a window used to be. He glanced down and noticed that his hands were shaking.

There was a sound of shifting stone and Jack saw the freestanding wall wobble dangerously. The unseen man must have destabilised it by accident. Jack heard him scrabbling to escape, but he misjudged it, because the wall toppled away from Jack with a slow, clumsy grace, and there was a loud cry of alarm and pain mixed in with the sound of crashing brickwork.

Unsure what to do, Jack stood there, stunned, watching the wreckage settled. After the sudden noise, silence fell again, for a moment.

“Oh... bother!” Came a voice from inside the rising dust cloud. “Damn and blast and buggeration!”

This did not sound, Jack thought, like the cries of a dangerous killer or a mad cultist. But still he did not move, waiting patiently for the dust to settle so he could see who he was dealing with. It took a minute or so, but eventually a silhouette hardened into the prone form of a chubby little man dressed in a v-neck sweater and a puffy green jacket. He was lying with his feet towards Jack’s hiding place, but his legs were buried beneath piles of fallen bricks.

The man was trapped.

The man watching from the tree line cursed under his breath.

“Don’t let me down now, Arthur,” he whispered. “Not when we’re so close...”

Then he reached into his backpack and pulled out a machine gun. Just in case.



Jack studied the prone man, trying to work out what to do.

The man didn't have a gun in either of his hands, and his bag had fallen beyond his reach. That left his coat as the only likely place for a weapon to be concealed. As he leaned forward and began trying to dig himself out, the coat fell open and Jack was pretty sure there was nothing heavy in any of the pockets.

Maybe this guy was friendly. He didn't look threatening. But what had he been doing here? Was he a looter, come to pick over the wreckage of his school, or something else?

He considered for a moment and then broke cover. He stood in plain sight but didn't move, waiting for the man to notice him. It took a few moments.

"Oh, hello, I didn't see you there," said the man, momentarily forgetting his predicament. He stopped trying to free himself and leaned backwards.

Jack licked his lips; he had a dreadful case of dry mouth.

"What are you doing here?" asked Jack, warily.

The man paused before replying, and Jack fancied that he could see cogs turning in the guy's head as he worked out his response. Subterfuge was definitely not this guy's strong suit. Jack did not think it would be wise to trust him.

"I'm on a sort of quest," he said.

"For what?"

"Not what, young man. Who."

"All right, for whom are you questing?"

"Oh very good. You must be an Harrovian, such good grammar." The man was eyeing Jack almost hungrily. Jack bit his lip nervously. What was this guy's game?

"I'm Arthur. Is there any chance..?" He waved at his trapped legs and smiled.

Still Jack didn't move.

"I asked you who you were looking for." He said.

"A boy. His name's Jack Bedford." The man's eyes were narrow, gauging Jack's reaction to this news.

And Jack was so astonished that he let a momentary flicker of that surprise show on his face before he said: "never heard of him."

Got him! Thought Arthur. He either knows the boy or – he looked him up and down; right age, at least – *is* the boy.

Arthur was good at subterfuge, though, and had played his cards close to his chest. There was no reason for this boy not to trust him. Plus, his legs hurt like hell, and may be broken, so he didn't think he presented an obvious threat. If this was the king, he could lure him forward by playing the helpless victim. His reached his right hand down, as subtly as he could manage, and wrapped his fingers around a brick.

"Oh, that's shame," he said. "I've got good news for him. Anyway, first things first, can you please help me free my legs? They really are rather sore."

"What news?"

Oh for god's sake, this boy was skittish.

"I'm sorry, I can only tell that to him. I promised." He was pleased with that last flourish.

The boy considered for a moment and then said "I can take you to Jack. I know where he is."

"You mean he's alive? Oh that's wonderful!" *Now help me move these bricks you snot-nosed whelp.*

He let go of the brick, and the boy moved forward at last, reaching forward to help release him. The poor idiot child had no idea he'd played right into Arthur's hands.

It didn't take long for Jack to uncover Arthur's legs. He worked in silence, unsure whether he should be doing this. He'd been shocked to hear his own name, and he couldn't pass up the chance that this man might be able to help him in some way. But he didn't trust him.

The best plan he'd been able to come up with was to take Arthur back to the ice house where Ben was waiting. He'd introduce Ben as himself and pull faces at Ben behind the guy's back to get him to play along.

Ben was more confident than he was, good at handling confrontations and problems. If anyone could turn this situation to his advantage, it was Ben. He just had to hope that he was feeling sharp today.

Jack heaved the last brick away and Arthur's legs lay exposed at last. There were spatters of blood on his trousers, but he cautiously flexed his legs and then shakily got to his feet.

"Well fancy that!" he cried. "No bones broken."

Jack also stood up, and kept his distance as Arthur hobbled over to his bag, picked it up, and slung it over his shoulder.

“Right then,” he said. “Lead on... sorry, you didn’t tell me your name.”

“I’m Ben,” said Jack.

Arthur reached out a hand, smiling insincerely. “Please to meet you Ben, and thank you for helping me.”

Jack reluctantly shook Arthur’s clammy, limp hand.

“S’this way,” he murmured, and slouched off towards the woods. Arthur followed close behind.

“So, do you know Jack well?” asked the man, feigning small talk.

“He was in my house, but he was in the year below. So not really.”

“Then how...?”

“We were just lucky. We’d been sent off to collect some firewood when the cannibals attacked. So we just hid in the ice house until they’d gone.”

“Nice lad, is he?”

“Don’t you know?”

“Oh no, never met him. I’m just running an errand.”

“He’s all right, I suppose. Bit annoying when you’re cooped up in the dark with him for three days.”

“I think maybe everyone is.” Arthur gave a short, nasal laugh, which irritated Jack intensely. His fear had largely faded, now he was only curious.

The ice house was a small brick dome with a door that you had to crouch to get through; it looked like a brick igloo, sitting incongruously among the school’s woodlands, swathed in ivy, better camouflaged than any pill box.

As soon as it came in sight, Jack stopped.

“Better stay here, let me warn him you’re coming,” he told Arthur. “He’s kind of nervous and he’s got a knife. We don’t want you to get stabbed do we?”

Arthur gave another of his nervous, snorty laughs. “Heaven’s, no!”

Jack walked towards the ice house, only just resisting the urge to run. As he stooped to enter, he glanced back over his shoulder

and saw Arthur standing where he'd left him. The man smiled and waved.

The ice house smelled of damp leaves and dirt. It was dark inside, only a tiny chink of light penetrated the canopy of ivy that covered the small hole at the apogee of the dome. Designed to keep ice frozen throughout the year in the days before freezers, the majority of the ice house lay under ground; almost immediately you were inside, the ground opened up into a cavernous, brick lined hole. In the half-light, Jack could just about make out the sleeping figure of Ben. He was exactly where Jack had left him, curled up on the carpet of detritus that had accumulated at the bottom of the ice house in the hundred or so years since it had last been used.

Jack scrambled down into the hole and shook the sleeping boy awake.

Spotty, unkempt and decidedly common, Ben Wyman didn't deserve his place at Harrow. The Headmaster had insisted that the school should open its door to any refugee children they dredged up, and Ben had been the first. He claimed to be the middle class son of a school teacher from the local comp, but Jack had his suspicions about that. Ben had been wary of the Harrow boys and the haughty ease with which they carried themselves. He'd not been bullied, exactly, but he was ostracised by the other boys, including Jack. But he'd been appointed Ben's 'shepherd', which meant it was his job to show him the ropes and help him find his feet, so they'd ended up spending a lot of time in each other's company.

Even though Ben didn't much like Jack, and Jack didn't much like Ben, they were both too scared to be alone, so they'd stuck together.

Ben sat up quickly and rubbed his eyes. "What?" he whispered urgently, confused and still half asleep. "What's going on?"

Jack leaned in close and spoke quickly and quietly.

"Ben," he said, pressing his library card into his sleepy friend's hand. "I need you to do me a favour."

Arthur's incipient euphoria was enough to make him forget the pain in his legs. Even this close to his destiny, he chided himself. His ascent to the throne wasn't supposed to be easy, but

he'd been so annoyed at the prospect of having to infiltrate the cultists that he'd felt himself to be unlucky. He realised that the wall had been a warning, a reminder not to be ungrateful. This was a test, he understood that, a baptism of sorts, and it was all to a purpose. Fate had plans for him, but it was not to be taken for granted.

So he stood, chastened, and waited patiently for the boy king to emerge from the ice house. He caressed the revolver in his jacket pocket lovingly. Soon, now.

He cocked his head to one side suddenly alert. The snap of a twig. Slowly, he spun through 360 degrees, scanning the surrounding woods, but saw no movement and heard no other sound. Must have been a deer.

His suspicions were instantly forgotten as he saw two boys emerge from the small brick dome. The King, Jack, was smaller than Ben, but carried himself with a confidence sorely lacking in his friend. It was obvious which of the two was of royal blood. It showed in his bearing as clear as day. Arthur was sure that was how he must look to others and wondered how it could be that no one had ever noticed his inherent regallness while he was working at the council. He decided that people lowly enough to be working in such mindless jobs were too stupid to notice such things.

The two boys stopped in front of him. The king stood slightly closer, his friend hanging back, timid.

"Hi, yeah, I'm Jack," said the boy, grinning as if he'd just said something incredibly clever or funny. "What can I do for you?"

And Arthur froze.

Here it was. The moment of his ascension. He stood there, transfixed by the enormity of what was about to happen.

"You had a message for me, you said?" continued the boy, his brow creasing in puzzlement.

Still Arthur couldn't move or speak. Unconsciously, his eyes widened and his mouth shaped itself into an idiot grin.

"Um, sir?" Now the king looked uncertain, and turned to his friend, pulling a funny face and shrugging.

Arthur withdrew the gun from his pocket, still grinning, and shot the King of England, Jack Bedford, in the head, believing him to be a useless commoner.

All the confidence of the boy standing before him evaporated

into terror as he saw his friend fall to the ground, and found himself staring down the barrel of a gun.

Arthur was about to pull the trigger again when he hesitated.

"No," he said to the cowering, whimpering child. "Let's talk first."

The man Arthur believed to be the King of England, Ben Wyman, sat on his hands on the soft forest ground and tried to control his bladder. The madman sat opposite him, cross legged, gun in hand, regarding him curiously.

If he looked past the madman, Ben could see Jack's body. He was lying with his eyes open, staring at him in silent reproach.

"I never talked to any of the others, but there's one thing I kept meaning to ask them. Did you feel it?" asked the madman. "The moment you ascended to the throne, I mean. It was about a week ago, at two in the afternoon."

Ben didn't know what the correct answer might be, so he said nothing. Happily, the madman didn't seem to mind.

"I imagine you didn't," he continued. "It's not really your throne. You're not destined to remain King, you see. I am. I'll feel the moment of destiny because I'll make it happen. You were passive. Didn't have the guts to go out and seize your power, not like me. I've proved myself, you understand? Not like you, cowering here in this dungeon waiting for slaughter."

Still Ben said nothing. All those years in the care home had taught him the value of silence.

Suddenly the madman tutted, as if annoyed with himself. "Why am I wasting time?" he muttered, and raised his gun.

"Yeah, I felt it," said Ben.

The madman paused.

"Kind of like a hot flush, sort of thing," he elaborated.

The gun stayed where it was, neither lowered nor raised.

"Made me feel all kind of powerful and stuff," he added, unsure whether this was what the madman wanted to hear.

"And did you know?" asked the madman, his eyes narrowed, intensely focused on his answer.

"Of course," said Ben. "'Course I knew."

The madman nodded. "Interesting." He stayed sitting there, gun half raised, nodding pensively.

Beneath his right buttock, Ben made a fist, scooping up leaves and dirt, ready to throw them into the nutter's face if the chance presented itself.

"Did the other boys notice it, the change in you?"

"Oh yeah, natch."

"That's good. I'll need that, I think."

Ben cursed inwardly. Why had he agreed to go along with Jack's stupid plan to switch identities? It had seemed funny at the time. Jack was scared of his own shadow, and even though he resented Ben's confidence, he wasn't afraid to use it to his advantage. Just like a toff, thought Ben, not for the first time wondering why he'd thrown his lot in with these spoiled Harrow kids, refusing to admit to himself that he had been so scared of being alone that even a bunch of pampered prats had seemed like an attractive peer group. So he'd tried to adopt the accent and manners of the boys around him; he was good at blending in. He'd even begun to think maybe he'd found a home, until the cultists arrived.

He wondered if there was any point in protesting that he wasn't Jack. Probably not. The madman had killed Jack without a second's thought. Ben knew the only reason he was still alive was because the madman thought he was someone else. If Ben told him the truth, and if he was believed, he'd end up just as dead. Better to play along, to try and find some advantage. That was another thing he'd learned in the care home - if silence doesn't work, keep them talking, sometimes you can deflect them.

"Tell me about the others," asked Ben.

The madman shook his head briefly, forcing his attention back to the here and now.

"Oh, they were nothing, really," he replied. "Spoilt brats. Trustafarians. I should have realised that the lower down the list I got, the better they'd be. You're almost normal, like me. It'll be good to have a normal king, don't you think?"

Ben nodded. "So, let me see if I've got this right," he said cautiously. "I'm King of England, yeah? You're next in line to the throne after me. And you've gone around killing everyone in line before me. Now you've just got to off me and you become King. That about it?"

The madman's eyes narrowed, suspicious again.

“You know that,” he said.

Ben nodded. “Oh yeah, just wanted to be absolutely sure we were on the same page.” He was gobsmacked; he knew Jack had been posh, but he’d had no idea he was bloody royalty. “So, how many Kings have you killed?”

Could he persuade the nutter of the truth - that he’d got the wrong person, that he’d already killed the king and was in fact already the monarch? He cursed himself for speaking without thinking; no, he couldn’t, because he’d gone and reinforced the madman’s belief that you felt the moment your predecessor died, that becoming King was some sort of massive supernatural head rush.

There was nothing else to do. He was going to have to try and fight this guy. Ben knew he didn’t have much of a chance, but if he didn’t do something he was going to be shot dead at any moment. And he was damned if he was going down without a fight.

He clenched his handful of dirt and prepared to make his move.

“Kings and Queens,” corrected the madman. “Ten in all. You’ll be number eleven.”

Ben ignored the nerves and the insistent pressure on his bladder, and rolled to his right, releasing his arms and flinging the forest mulch into the face of the madman.

“Like fuck I will!” he yelled, and then he was up and running.

Arthur wiped the muck from his eyes as he rose to his feet. The boy had already vanished into the undergrowth, but he was hardly stealthy and he could clearly hear him blundering away to his left. With a weary sigh, he gave chase. It was his own stupid fault. He should have just shot the boy when he had the chance. Then he would have fulfilled his destiny and ascended to invincibility. As it was, his legs hurt, his eyes stung, he had a stitch from running and he was starting to get really cheesed off. Time to kill the boy and be done with it.

He held tight to his gun as he ran.

Ben knew the madman wasn’t far behind him, so he put his head down and concentrated on going as fast as he could. A

bullet pinged off a tree right beside him, and he put on an extra burst of speed.

He was so focused on his pursuer that he didn't see the man who stepped out in front of him, only becoming aware of his presence when he ran smack into the heavy log the man was wielding.

He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

Arthur saw the boy lying on the ground and stopped dead. Had he tripped, or hit his head on a tree? He was pretty sure his hopeful shot hadn't found its mark.

He approached the boy carefully. Maybe he was playing possum, waiting for him to get closer so he could spring some trap. Arthur told himself not to be paranoid; there were no traps here.

Which was why he was so surprised when Mr Jolly stepped out from behind a tree and shot him in the gut.

Arthur stood there for a moment, his face a mask of stunned surprise. Then his gun dropped from his hand and he fell to his knees, clutching his stomach. He remained kneeling as his supervisor from the camp walked towards him shaking his head ruefully.

"And you were so close, Arthur" said Mr Jolly as he approached. "So close."

Arthur didn't understand. He was so shocked and confused that he couldn't even form a question. He just stared, baffled, at the man who had shot him.

Jolly knelt down as well, so he was facing Arthur.

"Of all the people I showed that spreadsheet too, you were the unlikeliest candidate," he said. "I'd almost given up."

Arthur registered that his accent had changed. The glottal stops of his Wandsworth accent had gone, replaced by round, plummy RP.

"I really didn't think you had it in you. The one before you, now he was a go getter. But when he saw his name on the list he just laughed. In all, you were the sixth person whose name I added to the spreadsheet, and by far the least promising. Or so I thought. Just goes to show, doesn't it? You never can tell about people."

"I..." gasped Arthur. "I don't..."

"Understand. Yes, I know. You've gone quite round the twist, haven't you? Poor love. I knew you'd finally lost the plot when you killed that reprehensible parasite Parker. Making him a paper crown, painting it gold, then setting him up in a tableau, in a big chair with a roll of silver foil as a sceptre... well, it was inventive, I'll give you that. But a bit bonkers, don't you think?"

"What are you... doing here?" Arthur was beginning to feel lightheaded, as if the world was spinning around him. Gravity suddenly seemed to be on the blink. He saw spots before his eyes and found it hard to draw breath.

"Oh do keep up, Arthur. I replaced my name on the line of succession with yours. Simple plan, really. Convince someone else that they're the rightful heir, they traipse off and kill everyone who stands in their way, and I sit back, watch the show, then pick off the hapless patsy at the end. That way I only have to kill one idiot, rather than eleven."

Arthur's head swam. Was this another test? Surely what Jolly was saying couldn't be true. No, it had to be a test. It was his destiny to be King. He knew that, more certainly than he'd ever known anything in his life.

"You used me?" he groaned.

"Well of course I did, dear boy. First rule of being King – delegate the nastiest jobs to the most expendable serfs you can lay your hands on. And you, Arthur St John Smith, are the most entirely expendable person I've ever had the good fortune to meet. Plus: murderous, delusional and now, very dead indeed."

Arthur laughed.

"Funny," he said, his voice little more than a whisper. "You see, I really am the king. I can feel it. You wouldn't know what I mean, of course. But it's in my blood. Don't you realise who I am?"

"Go on, surprise me."

"I'm the once and future king. Arthur, you see? My name isn't a coincidence. My parents must have known. Don't you realise? This is the moment of England's greatest need and I am come again!"

With that final pronouncement, Arthur's eyes rolled back in his head, he toppled sideways and lay motionless.



The King of England, Jolyon Wakefield-Pugh, tutted affectionately.

“Nutty as a fruitcake,” he laughed.

He rose to his feet and turned to deal with the last bit of unfinished business.

But the boy was nowhere to be seen.

“Oh,” groaned Jolyon. “Oh bugger.”

Ben was woozy and concussed but he still had enough presence of mind to slip away quietly the moment he regained semi-consciousness. Once he was out of earshot he increased his pace, half falling forwards with every frantic step. He made for the school buildings, which seemed to offer the best chance of cover and safety.

The bump to his head had only made the events of the morning seem even more surreal and dreamlike. Had he really been attacked by two men who thought he was king? Had Jack really been shot down in cold blood right in front of his eyes? Could any of this be real?

He broke cover at the tree line and made for the ruins of the main building. There was a cellar there where he could hide.

But when he made it to the bricks he lost his footing and fell, sprawling on the ruined masonry. As he lay there he could feel consciousness slipping away again. The fear of death overwhelmed him, and he whimpered “Mum” before succumbing to the darkness.

Lieutenant Sanders, late of the SAS, now barracked at Salisbury with the remnants of the British Army, had all but given up hope. Six months spent chasing royalty, and all he'd found were corpses. Each time he found a new one he'd contact his superior officer and break the bad news. And each time he was ordered to go find the next person on the list.

Sanders wasn't much of a monarchist, but he had to concede that a figurehead would be a useful rallying point for the scattered survivors of post-Cull Britain. A heroic king

or a stern but comely queen would provide a focal point for patriotism and a sense of allegiance that could help rebuild the nation.

It helped keep the army in line too, if they had someone they could swear an oath to.

So he'd scoured the length and breadth of the British Isles with a list of names and last known addresses, trying to find the rightful monarch. And each time he arrived, they were dead. He wasn't stupid, after the third body he'd realised that someone else was using the same list for a different agenda. A radical republican, maybe?

He skipped to number five on the list, but was too late. Then seven. Again, too late, and the body too long cold. Now he'd jumped to eleven. He had to get ahead of this bastard, whoever he was.

When he got to Harrow he went in cautiously, weapon at the ready. The school was still smoking, and he got a familiar sinking feeling. There was no-one alive here.

But just as he was about to give up and go on to the next name, he caught an impression of movement through the wisps of smoke. Moving cautiously, he stalked his prey.

Jolyon Wakefield-Pugh stood over the unconscious body of the boy he believed to be king and considered his next move.

More specifically: knife, gun or brick?

He eventually plumped for brick, reached down and grabbed one, enjoying its heft and solidity. He raised his right arm, ready to bring the brick crashing down on the boy's skull, ready to seize his destiny.

With his arm raised, the man presented a perfect target. Sanders knew nothing of his grievance or motive in wanting the boy dead, but he knew a murderer when he saw one. Martial law gave him the right to take action, and he was not afraid to do so.

He put three rounds into the chest of the King of England, killing him instantly, and he felt satisfied that he had done right.

Then he ran to offer aid to the fallen boy.

Sanders turned him over and felt for a pulse. Strong and steady. He was alive, but he had a nasty head wound that needed some attention. He had a medical kit in his jeep, so he leaned down and grabbed the boy's hands, lifting him into a sitting position, ready to throw him over his shoulder. As he did so, something fell out of the boy's pocket on to the ground.

He let go of the boy's right arm and reached down to pick up the library card.

He read the name on the card.

Then he looked down at the boy.

Then he looked back at the card.

"Well fuck me sideways, Your Majesty," said Sanders, grinning fit to burst. "Pleased to meet you."

He threw the child over his shoulder and walked back to his jeep, singing the Sex Pistols' God Save The Queen at the top of his voice.

Arthur St John Smith sat in the bottom of the ice house, pressed hard on his stomach wound and wondered where it had all gone wrong.

He had crawled away from the scene of the shooting, instinctively seeking a quiet sheltered place in which to die, like a mortally wounded cat. Now he sat on the soft carpet of moss and leaves, feeling his life seeping out through his fingers, waiting for the fair folk to come and carry him back to Avalon, to wait for the call to come again.

He knew they would find him. It was only a matter of time. He just had to be patient. His destiny was calling, he could hear it on the wind.

A fox peered in at the doorway, sniffing the air, drawn by something else the wind carried – the enticing tang of fresh blood.

Arthur heaved a stone at it, and it ran away.

For now.

Look out for Scott Andrews' Afterblight novel,
The Children's Crusade. Coming 2010...