

Prologue

From this height, it looks so perfect that it could almost be a simulation. The slant of the sunlight at this time of the morning, the shimmer of the coastline, the dipping of the horizon, the feel of the abstracted wind separated by panes of perspex – it feels surreal. Bucking on wind above the world, she will never tire of flying.

The carbon is not visible, yet her eyes seek it out. The ships below spew it silently into the particles that break and swirl. The heat building, the water surging, the clouds forming. She thinks back to the meeting, not long concluded. Could she make this work? It feels like a cover-up. It feels like a fake. But this is the path she chose. This is what she wanted. This is the price of success.

She imagines packages and parcels flying around the world like so much data, systems tagging, tracing, and logging, information provided via files, endpoints, and applications, ping ping ping, and the endless firing of datapoints like neurons, like stars. Far below, a large waterway slices through the lower flatlands from the northwest down through Kent towards Sandport Bay and the English Channel, separating the island from the mainland as it has for thousands of years. Large, long bridges can be clearly picked out against the sparkling water.

Despite her noise-cancelling headphones, she strains to hear the audio against the sounds of the engines. The words clatter away in her ears. She smiles to herself as she hears her employer described.

“Gerbach, the famous American logistics and distribution conglomerate, established itself in the once sleepy port town of Sandport in 1964. Utilising local labour for its warehouses, it attracted professionals from London and around the world to lead its global

administration centre. Plentiful energy from the nearby power station, ready access to the sea. Room for expansion into almost limitless mud flats. It offered a glimpse of the future for this quiet part of Kent.”

The message was clear. Learn from this place. Make it personal. Do your homework. She checks the name of the historian on this podcast. Bob Sawtrees. His steady, whispery drawl continues.

“Later, commercially available wind power brought an extra dimension...”

Her eyes rest on the massive offshore wind arrays north of the coastline.

“Demand soon outstripped capacity. New, imaginative ways of generating electricity were needed, not all with very green credentials.”

Perhaps Bob Sawtrees is an agitator? She smiles to herself. The voice continues in its faint Kentish burr.

“But where did Gerbach come from? Why here? And what happens next for this old site and its employees?”

She inhales sharply and then sips her gin and tonic. Hears the shift of the ice against the glass. It had been another tough meeting. A reminder that the work was only getting started. Gentle encouragement to redouble her efforts wouldn't stay gentle for very long. The boss had made that clear.

The music takes on a sinister, swirling sound.

“Sandport was once one of the five or ‘Cinque’ Ports, but the flood of 1287 caused catastrophic silting in the south and the north of the region. Sandport grew; its waterway widened by Mother Nature. It became the primary port for the region.”

She looks down at the curve of the coastline on this bright morning. So close to London but so far in many ways.

“This enormous storm did the same to the Dutch coastline, aligning Vlissingen (“Flushing” to the English) and Sandport. Trading partners, the two grew in tandem. Their populations mixed.”

She's seen the coat of arms. The heraldic figures. The history. The Dutch-built, timber-framed houses of the town.

“During the world wars of the 20th Century, Sandport was a target for foreign eyes. Hitler's doodlebugs and V2s wrought great damage. These attacks tried to bury the port town and its ancient past in the alluvial Kentish mud.”

The music clashes and swells again, mimicking the sound of

bombs falling into the soft landscape.

“Modern Sandport celebrates its Dutch ancestry and makes no bones about its fractious past. This southerly, ancient port is now connected to the Isle of Thanet by a major bridge completed in 1964. Gerbach still works this important waterway with a small fleet. Perhaps the Wantsum will rise once again?”

Despite everything. Still an anomaly. Still an also-ran. Mainly staffed by parochial idiots, misfits and whoever they can find to accept their pitiful wages. These people didn't understand anything. Too relaxed, too disengaged. None of them understood what they were trying to do here. None of them. She would have to work hard and fast.

Cinque Port. Sandport. The Dutch connection. She looks at the notes she made earlier. Before she'd stepped on that plane, she knew the next move. Now it was just a case of making it happen. Just a case of making the people dance.