

## **The Girl with all the Gifts: Secret Chapter**

The children have lessons on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. On Saturday they hunt, and on Sunday they disappear to do esoteric things of their own. To loot the city's remaining libraries for books, to play games and build nests and experiment with love and loss and longing, and all the other things they'll need when they're older.

Saturdays and Sundays are the worst days for that reason – because Justineau is left so much to her own devices. Melanie comes when she can, but she has children of her own now and they take up a lot of her time. There have been expeditions, too, that have taken her away for weeks at a time. One of these was to the base, where the other children from Melanie's class were found safe and well in their subterranean bunker. There were happy reunions, and a great round of storytelling.

Another of the expeditions was south, to Beacon. Melanie has refused to tell Justineau what they found there, so she knows it must have been terrible. They brought back no children that time.

At first, Justineau delivered all the lessons herself. She'd put on one of the environment suits, pick up books and markers and paper (all rustled up for her by Melanie and the ruthless, virtuoso band of scavengers she's dubbed the 'classroom monitors') and walk through the airlock into the world. The world that she can never touch again except through this thick, unyielding plastic-polymer skin.

But now, increasingly, the children from the first few cohorts are delivering the lessons themselves. When Justineau teaches, she's aware of satellite lessons going on all around her in the parade of gutted shops that have become both

the children's school and the seat of their loud, raucous, free-form government. And when she stops, when she goes back inside, the lessons go on through the evening, even into the night.

They learn so quickly, she can't keep up with them. The benign monster that lives in their brains accelerates the uptake and retention of knowledge, with each cohort benefitting from connections and shortcuts made by the class before.

The third generation, Melanie tells her – including Melanie's own children – don't even have the hunger. They eat very sparingly, a bite or two of raw meat lasting them a day. And they don't need to sleep! They're actually less beholden to their physical bodies than their predecessors, humanity 1.0.

Justineau has started to think of herself as the monster, and her students as the norm.

The culls of first-generation hungries which had been common practice before the advent of Melanie have long since stopped. The unfortunates are humanely trapped and penned (there's no shortage of old buildings that can be adapted for this purpose), fed regularly and allowed to live unmolested until the fungus inside them fruits. Sometimes, even now, they continue to breed. The babies are taken away and raised communally.

A world is growing up in front of Justineau's eyes. She takes pride in it, happy that she's had a part in its birth. By teaching the children to read and write and count, by assembling and disseminating the knowledge of the world that existed before, she's made this time of transition easier and less painful than it could have been.

If she's lonely, in her cell, that's not so hard to bear. Melanie has brought her pictures, for her walls, and books to read.

One of the books is *Tales the Muses Told* by Roger Lancelyn Green. It's not the copy she gave Melanie, all those years before: it's a battered paperback with the stamp of the Berkhamsted Public Library on its inside cover. She often picks it up and turns the pages, remembering.

Thinking that Pandora was made the way she was for a reason.