

SURVIVAL, SPIRITS AND SUBMARINES



TEN TALES OF
REMARKABLE ADVENTURES

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Ten tales of remarkable adventures

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AUTHORS OF TOMORROW|11 years old and under

A RACE THROUGH TIME

Laksh Verma

The cool London air slapped me. The streets were deathly empty. It was nearly midnight, so foggy that it seemed as if someone had pushed down the clouds and laid them on the ground. I could hardly see ten metres ahead of me. There was an out-of-order telephone box on the corner of the street; something about it seemed odd. It was glowing, popping out of the dark. As I stared, someone stepped inside the box. I was near enough to see him dial a three, a zero, a one and a nine. And with a whoosh, he was sucked into the ground!

I rushed into the telephone box and quickly dialled a three, zero, one and nine. A blue hole appeared beneath my feet. Before I knew it, I was whirling through a long tunnel, slithering like a snake.

There were people to the right of me, but they were in a sort of ... fast motion, as if they were the Flash, my favourite superhero. My mind was about to explode. Wait. Let me correct myself. My whole *body* was about to explode. Swirls were forming on my skin. Stripes were forming. Suddenly, I saw ground and — thud! I landed. I checked my skin again. No stripes, no swirls, thank God.

The streets were empty, but the skies were full of ... of ... FLYING cars! Drivers were zooming around as if the sky was a highway. The houses were odd too. Some of them were skyscrapers, some were suburban houses, some were mansions. Some as huge as the giant's home in Jack and the Beanstalk, others like the gingerbread house in Hansel and Gretel, all side by side. One was decorated with pink swirls and candy floss, another had a

waterfall. One even looked like a burger with a bite taken out of it while another, like a zombie eating brains. The houses were changing their appearance from one to another, right before my eyes.

A lady wearing a neon top hat with a polka-dot dress was walking down the street. I asked her about the houses and she said, ‘David, tell this boy how the housing system works.’

A blue hologram of a man appeared. ‘All the houses are priced the same,’ the hologram said. ‘Once you buy the house, it will change depending upon your mood. Any other questions?’

‘Err ...’ I thought quickly. ‘What’s the date?’

‘It is the thirty-first of October, 3019.’

I staggered. ‘What?’

‘It is the thirty-first of October, 3019.’

I turned back and saw it. The out-of-order telephone box. What was it doing here?

‘Hey kid, are you lost?’ a policeman with weird glasses called. His glasses let out a red light. ‘You’re not on our system. If you’re here illegally, I have to arrest you.’

It was a couple of seconds before I realised he was scanning me with his glasses. I made a run for it. I slipped inside the box but I had no time to carefully press two, zero, one, nine. I jabbed at the buttons until the number seven thousand showed on the screen. In a second, I was whirling through space-time again.

THE MIDNIGHT ZONE

Ewan Hart

Clunk! As adventurers we were tasked with reaching the bottom of the sea, the Midnight Zone. In our submarine, all eight of us had travelled to the bottom of the ocean. A red light flashed on the wall; we had landed.

Suddenly, the sub lurched, and a huge shadow darted past the window.

Something strange was going on. I ran towards the heavy metallic doors and, heaving with all my might, pulled them open.

“Ahhhhh!”

Somebody was screaming. I ran in the direction of the terrified wail.
Creak!

The cabin was slowly collapsing in on itself as if a huge force was beating it down, crushing it. I knew I should run to the panic room, but I was determined to find the source of the ghostly screech. I peered through the window to see what was going on. What I saw both horrified and confused me. It was an enormous tentacle, for sure, but what did it belong to? A giant squid? No, not the right shape. Octopus? No, the sheer size dwarfed any octopus a thousandfold. Another scream brought me back to Earth. Whatever this tentacle belonged to was crushing our sub like a tin can.

Terror coursed through my veins. The scream was drowned out by the creaking of the hull. The idea of that metal crushing me gave me an extra boost of speed, and I ran down the corridor. Then, turning a corner, I saw it.

A gaping hole in the wall was being blocked up by a pulsating mass – the same tentacle I had seen earlier. I gasped. It slipped away from the large hole, and with nothing there to block it, water gushed in. A strong current pulled at me as I desperately clung to a railing. Instinctively, I fought against it, but I had no chance. I could feel my limbs growing tired, my breath slowly running out. All of a sudden, I was thrown out into the open sea...

My first impression was that it was dark, very dark. My second was that I was running out of air – fast. Then I remembered the small oxygen canister in my belt. I tried to insert the mouthpiece, but the current was too strong and wrenched it from my grasp. All of this had distracted me from the threat looming in front of me. If I hadn't looked up, it would have killed me right there. A giant tentacle came smashing down above me. I dodged it at the last second and came face to face with the biggest creature I had ever seen. It was an octopus but not just any old octopus. It was as tall as a mountain, as wide as a city block, and fearsome enough to scare even the bravest man. On my dying breath, I saw the legendary Kraken.

THE PHOENIX FEATHER

Clara Macdonald

There it lay, its blood red feathers folded over a sharp hooked beak. Its head and body letting off an illumination, a flaring orange glow. Its light screamed through the inky night, hitting my anxious brow. Even though the night was icy and my breath circled in rings around my head, the net gripped in my fingers slid on the small beads of sweat forming on my palms. Blood pounded through my head. My leather soles gently scuffed the path in front of me as I stepped towards the magnificent creature and its lair. The trees and bushes danced freely in the wind that was carrying my fearful breaths away through the wood. I stood gazing at the bird through the entrance to its den, net in hand. Ready to catch a phoenix.

My breath puffed out, short and raspy, as I approached the sleeping firebird. It gave off a wave of heat that washed over me but left a shiver down my spine. The cave I had entered was dank and musty, with drops of filthy liquid running down the walls like tears. Smoke hissed under the cave's ceiling and circled around the phoenix. My eye was drawn to a hole above my head, probably containing a few sleeping rodents, but my attention quickly returned to the bird, which nestled peacefully on its perch. I fiddled with the net in my hand before raising it above my head. I hesitated. I fixed my vision on the phoenix. Its feathers were truly beautiful, but as I admired them a howl from a passing wolf rang through the night air. The phoenix's eyes snapped open. They were round as saucers and glowed a bright vibrant amber, like fire itself. The firebird scanned over me before eyeing the net falling through my trembling fingers. It reared up like

a steed, crying and screeching before beating its angry red wings at me, sending little burning explosions of heat into my face. I clutched my cheeks in agony. The great bird lifted and soared to the exit. I found my feet and launched myself at the phoenix, my fingers brushing down its neck, its body, grabbing at its tail.

Its strength surprised me. My fingers took a firm hold of the phoenix's shaking tail-feathers, and as the firebird rose up toward the trees, my toes lifted from the damp earth and dangled above the ground. Wind whistled past me as the phoenix dragged me higher and higher through the velvet night. The firebird twisted its head back and its eyes met mine, furious, flashing in the moonlight like angry embers. The phoenix's wings started to slow. They seemed to be dying in the cold. The firebird began to descend towards the forest floor. My grip on its tail weakened. I could feel its feathers slipping out of my grasp. I snatched at the bird but at that, it became shrouded in flame, leaving me rushing towards the ground, holding nothing but a red feather.

AUTHORS OF TOMORROW|**12-15 years old**

A DROP IN THE OCEAN

Kay Richards

Darkness. Black as pitch. He cursed as the lights blinked out; it had to be a fuse. It *would* be tonight that the lights died... The sharp easterly wind bit his face and the rain pounded his little boat. No moon, no stars. He couldn't see a thing, but he was aware of the three tonnes of fish hanging pendulously above the winch. He was relying on his instincts and memory to guide him through this, praying that the swaying weight wouldn't tip the boat over. As he cautiously pulled the lever, he heard the machinery creak and he sensed the bundle swinging as it lowered. The bump of the net touching the deck brought a shuddering sigh of relief from deep inside him, but something still wasn't right.

Deciding that he couldn't investigate in the complete dark, he went below to attempt to fix the lights before taking a closer look. He slowly made his way back to the cabin where he kept his tools. He silently thanked Chelly, his wife, who had insisted he hung a torch right next to the doorway. He hoped she wouldn't be worrying. It was hard enough looking after the kids while he was away without her having to worry about him too.

Flicking on the torch, he looked around for his fuse wire and with a sickening dread realised that only this afternoon he had taken it home. He envisaged the spool of wire now, sitting on the kitchen table where he had helped Michael to finish off his school project – a beautiful three-dimensional model of the local shoreline, complete with tiny fishing boats and creels and even the recycling plant behind the harbour. It would be getting in Chelly's way – she would be finishing off her talk for her

presentation to the Marine Ecology Society. She only had two more days to prepare. Little Kyra would be reading to her soft toys in her bedroom upstairs. Only small but already a smart cookie. Andrew smiled, proud of his family, but was jerked back to reality as a wave washed over the stern.

Nerves jangling, he peered out of the window and with a surge of relief saw a glimmer of light to his starboard, almost certainly another small fishing boat caught in the storm. Armed with a torch, he skidded onto the listing deck. Before he asked for help, he needed to check his nets. But strangely, he couldn't hear the familiar sound of whipping fish. In fact, there was ominous quiet. His torch beam ranged over the nets – too high and irregular, all edges and shapes. He crept forward and reached out to touch hard, unforgiving plastic. Crates and tubs, sheeting and boxes, pipes and containers, a yogurt pot. Only a few precious mackerel were scattered dead among the debris.

Suddenly a bellowing, grating voice came out of the darkness and made his hair stand on end.

“Move it, you useless lot!” a voice shouted. “Unless you want a grave at sea!”

Without warning, a huge ship loomed out of the murk, a massive hulk in the raging waves. Andrew could make out the painted logo of the British Recycling Company, but why were they out here in the dark? He stilled his engines and watched. He could just about see an army of men running over the decks, swinging loaded nets down to the sea, again and again. With horror prickling his skin, Andrew abruptly understood that the ‘useless lot’ were hurrying to tip tonnes and tonnes of plastic waste over the side of the boat and straight into the sea.

Another bellow. “If you don't move it, I'll not be afraid to use this...” Andrew could pick out an outstretched arm and a gun through the driving rain.

Disgusted and sickened, Andrew watched. The major recycling plant for England was dumping plastic waste in to the sea. No wonder his catches had been so poor lately, no wonder his wife's research was suggesting environmental disaster on this coast.

One of the crew turned around and with a disbelieving glance yelled for his comrades. A searchlight flooded across Andrew's boat and blinded him. He heard screams and shouting and then that awful bellowing voice again.

"I know who you are, Andrew Huckle, and I'll find you!"

Andrew ran to the wheel room, turned the ignition and frantically threw the engine into full speed with no further thought for the dangers of the littered sea and the dark waves.

In a dream, Andrew edged into the harbour and tied up. He staggered up to the cottage in the early morning light and fell through the door. Chelly rushed to him as he slumped, sodden, into a chair.

"What happened?" she whispered.

Andrew told her with a shaking voice. Horror stole across Chelly's face.

"We have to do something. I'm going for Jeff."

Chelly rushed around, looking for her coat and some shoes. Andrew knew the comfort his oldest friend would bring. They had started together on the trawlers, straight out of school, but now Jeff had a job on the newspapers, a big car and plenty of money. But he was still Jeff, with his clickety cowboy boots and his kind, green eyes, always joking. Jeff would help them through anything.

Some time and much discussion later, Andrew's eyes fell on the papers of Chelly's speech and a tiny idea formed in his mind. He dragged Jeff and Chelly to the kitchen table.

"What if," he began to Chelly, "you were to tell the Marine Ecological Society about this? You could change your speech and talk about this instead."

A shadow of doubt flickered across Chelly's face before being replaced with a grim smile.

"That, Andrew, isn't a bad idea."

"I can make sure the conference gets the front-page headline," added Jeff.

They made plans: Michael would be at school, so they would take Kyra with them to the conference. Jeff would follow on in his own car to cover the story with a photographer from the paper. As they waved Jeff off, Chelly and Andrew noticed a bulky shadow moving in the trees at the end of the front garden. Had they been overheard? Firmly, Andrew locked the door and then quietly told Chelly about the boss on the trawler.

“I didn’t want to scare you, but those people will stop at nothing.”

The day of the conference started like any other, with a rushed breakfast then waving Michael off to school. Chelly, Andrew and Kyra climbed into the car, Chelly shaking with nerves, Andrew shaking with excitement and Kyra sleepily wondering what was up. Andrew sat stiffly in the passenger seat – they would expose this disgusting offence, whatever it took. He glanced behind to see Jeff’s car turning out of his driveway.

Suddenly out of nowhere, a monstrous black car roared towards them showing no signs of slowing. A massive crash, then a splintering cobweb of cracks across the windscreen. The stench of leather seats burning, the scream of tearing metal. A bellowing voice, “What do you mean there’s a kid? I don’t have time for a kid. Deal with it!”

Then, nothing.

When she woke up, Kyra was lying on a lumpy bed. She let out a whimper as an exceptionally wide woman peered down at her with a scowl on her face. This was the start of Kyra’s life in Gonelife Hall, a cold, dark institution with a tyrant Sister prowling the corridors. Every day was the same, with tiny portions of horrible food and no daylight, no laughter and no explanation. If Kyra asked about her parents, Sister snapped that they’d died in a car crash and she was extremely fortunate not to have been killed too.

Months passed and then years. A winter with snow, another with none. Gradually Kyra learned to keep quiet when Sister Beckley was around. An invisible girl. She smuggled food from the kitchen and shared it in the dorm at night. She tried to remember the stories she used to tell her soft toys to comfort the younger girls.

Finally, one day she was told to follow Sister Beckley to her office, where a lanky gentleman clutching a huge briefcase was sitting. He looked up gravely and fixed his pitying gaze on Kyra.

Kyra's eyes fell on the man's boots. Not shiny brogues or smart city shoes but cowboy boots with heels. Those heels would make a great noise on the flagstones outside. Shyly Kyra peeked up at the man and noticed his green eyes. Eyes with a flicker of a smile in them, despite his serious voice. He was explaining that he was a guardian of Kyra's and would pay Sister well for looking after her all these years. The chairs scraped and Sister shook the man's hand, her pink sausage fingers grasping his, then she turned her back and roughly jammed a wad of cash into her desk drawer.

And then Kyra was outside. She walked in a trance through the trees, birds singing and the soft spring air smelling delicious. They climbed into the man's car in silence and then they were gently bowling past fields of cows, villages and towns until there was a shimmer of the sea ahead.

Finally, the man broke the silence.

"Kyra... I was a friend of your parents. It's taken me so long to track you down, but I'm glad I've found you." Kyra could see a tear sliding down his cheek as he drove. "You know you were in a car crash when you were younger? Well your parents were taken to hospital, but the next morning their beds were empty."

Jeff told Kyra the whole story. How her parents had discovered the recycling scam, run by the notorious criminal Boomer Brown. "I'm afraid it looks like Boomer's gang came for your parents in the hospital. Kyra, I'm so sorry, but they never found the bodies... But I do have some good news for you. I found your brother Michael before the gang did. He lives with me now."

Kyra and Jeff arrived in a small coastal village, where Jeff parked outside a two-storey house and pulled out his keys.

Kyra followed Jeff into the kitchen and sat down quietly.

"Michael!" Jeff roared. "There's someone here to see you".

A tall, curly-haired teenager slouched down the stairs, looking as if there were any number of things he would rather be doing. Kyra had a fit of

nerves; he didn't look very pleased to see her, but a split-second later Michael gave a gasp of shock, ran forward and hugged her so close it hurt.

"How did you find her?"

Jeff laughed.

"With a whole lot of effort, my boy!"

Kyra was too shocked to say anything.

Now Kyra knew the full story about her parents, she was so proud she wanted to burst. She knew immediately that she would have to carry on their good work. Jeff worried that she was too young to get involved and that the gang might come after her, but, as a journalist, he knew when a great story was unfolding, and that the truth needed to come out, one way or another.

The next day, Kyra brushed her hair until it shone and put on new clothes that Jeff had bought for her. They whisked over to the newspaper offices and there, Kyra told her story. The office went quiet, nobody typing as they listened. They were entranced by this brave little girl with the steely glint in her eye who was telling her story. It was clearly front-page news and the photographers insisted on photos of Kyra and Michael to complete the article. Jeff thought of Chelly and could see her determination in Kyra's eyes.

Within a few days, the story had been picked up by newspapers around the world.

The 'Sea-Dumping Scandal' as one newspaper called it, brought the authorities straight to the British Recycling Company and Hugo 'Boomer' Brown was whisked away for interviews with the police.

Michael and Kyra watched as chains were locked across the gates of the recycling plant outside the village and 'Closed – No Trespassers' notices were attached to the chainmail fencing.

"Do you know what I'm going to do?" Michael said, squeezing Kyra's hand. "I'm going to get my degree and I'm going to take that plant over and run it properly."

Kyra looked at his glowing face and knew it would happen. She held his gaze and softly whispered,

“And I’m going to study Marine Ecology and restock our coast, like Mum was planning to do.”

Next morning a letter arrived for Jeff. It simply read:

Harbour Wall, tonight. 6 p.m. Bring the kids.

Intrigued but also scared, Jeff called the police. A sergeant agreed to come along, in case of any threat. At 5.55 p.m., Kyra stood with Jeff and Michael looking over the choppy harbour. Her father’s boat still bobbed there, as if waiting for his return.

Then she noticed a man and woman walking towards them. They then broke into a run, their arms flung wide.

“Kyra! Michael!” they cried as one. “How we’ve missed you!”

Kyra beamed brighter than the sun. She hadn’t seen them for years, but still, she knew who they were. She was folded into their arms and felt safer and happier than she could ever remember feeling.

Andrew and Chelly sobbed and laughed. They explained that they had fled from the hospital, fearing for their lives, and had immediately flown to Canada to hide, praying that Jeff would find Kyra and Michael and protect them. They’d heard from the newspapers in Canada about Kyra’s story and, hardly believing it was true, had caught the first flight home.

Chattering like monkeys, they all headed back to Jeff’s house. Kyra explained her plans to study Marine Ecology and her mother reached for her hand.

“Sweetheart, that’s incredible. But just wait until I tell you what Boomer Brown’s gang has been up to in Canada – – what happened here is just a drop in the ocean...”

A SCARRED WHITE STONE

Jonathan Clark

Wind on the hills and spray dancing up the cliffs; mountains in the mist and forests clothed in sunlight; stars to break a person's heart and the stare of moonlight on a lake. I have walked these, lived them, drunk them and now dream them.

My name is Derrin. They call me Roamer. For truly, I have wandered far across this world of ours. This Collo Reme, as it is called in the Old Tongue of priests and scholars. Let me tell you of it...

I was travelling up through the island of Albion. It was spring and the breeze was whistling over the northern hills, through which I was journeying. North of me was the River Bevin, which flows down from the great mountains of the Wild Northlands. The grey road beneath my feet led to a little town on the banks of this river called Brontingham. I say little – the place was a constant cauldron of merchants from the green south and shaggy huntsmen from the heathery north, not to mention all those who had fallen from favour in their home kingdom and found their way there.

I had a particular reason for wanting to go to Brontingham. An old friend of mine, Caladius, had settled there in his old age. In his younger days he had been a merchant and travelled far, seeing many strange and wondrous things. I was hoping he could direct me in search of some new place my feet had not walked before.

I was deep in my musings when I saw an old woman come round the bend of the hill towards me. Her clothes were worn and dirty and a ragged shawl was pulled up over her head so that I couldn't see her face. She was clutching her stomach and groaning.

“Are you all right, mistress?” I called to her. Still she groaned.

I drew closer. “Are you hurt?”

More groaning. I came to within touching distance.

Then the old woman threw back her shawl to reveal a bald and unshaven man leering snake-like at me, clutching a dagger.

Several other hooded figures carrying cudgels appeared from behind the trees along the edge of the road.

The bandit grinned. “Pay up, good sir. It costs money to help a poor old woman.”

“You scum!” I spat, in his direction. I reached down into my pouch where I had my few silver coins and chinked them in my fingers. But I had encountered bandits before, and ones slyer than these. I clenched my fist in such a way as to make it appear I was handing my coins grudgingly, I then struck the surprised scoundrel straight in the eye. He reeled back, allowing me to dart forward, pull out the long, thin, hunting knife I always carry with me and slash his knuckles, causing him to cry out in pain and drop his dagger. I could see his comrades dashing toward us, yelling and waving their cudgels.

I should have dashed away then. I didn't. I saw a tatty old bag hanging from the belt of the bandit. I swooped down low and cut it free from the belt. Then I turned aside, and, being fit and in my life's prime, outran the bandits. The bag I held tightly in my hands...

I entered the bustling town of Brontingham and made my way across to where the wall of the city overlooked the southern bank of the Bevin. Here, in a grey stone house built into the city wall, lived Caladius.

“Come in,” his voice wheezed in its customary manner, in response to my knocking.

I stepped into his house. What a place it was! Piles of vellum with ancient poems written on them, all coloured and illustrated with bright inks; gems set in jewellery made in the Dwarven realms of stone; harps of bards and swords of heroes; ghastly wooden idols of the heathen Afofarees who live in the desertlands; a wood sprite’s bow and a dragon’s claw; silks from the Great City of Danzalinbal and wool from the little village of Fronstead just up the road – all the belongings of one who has travelled far and gathered much.

He was sat down at a table, sipping something out of an ivory drinking horn.

“Derrin!” he cried aloud. “What fair spring breeze blows you up to us here? But come, sit down. You must be worn out. Have some wine. I got it thirty years ago on the Isle of Thesta. Thestian wine is famed across the world and you won’t get a sweeter cup from here to Havingdon.”

It made me smile to see his wrinkled old cheeks come so alive and his long white beard wag, almost like a dog’s tail. I sat down while he bustled around and brought not just wine but bread and some slices of yellow cheese and cold venison. When I had finished eating he turned to me and said, “Now then, what great adventure brings you here?”

I laughed. “I was rather hoping you could point me in the direction of one.”

“Was there not one brewing in the cattle-breeding markets of the south?” asked Caladius with a grin. My father and all my family line had been cattle breeders for as long as there had been fields to breed cattle on. My heart, however, was not in it.

“Precious little to satisfy my appetite,” I responded, warmly. “However, I did have some small adventure just four miles from here.” I proceeded to relay my encounter with the bandits.

He shook his head. “You’re not the first to fall foul of those filthy rats. Others haven’t been as fortunate or as gutsy as you.”

“Actually, it was me that came away with something. I snatched this bag off the wretch before I got away. Moment of impetuous stupidity I suppose.”

“It is moments which alter the course of history and lead to the rise and fall of nations,” he said, half-joking. But it was not, I think, all in jest. He was too wise for that. “Well, let’s see what you’ve got, then,” he suggested.

I tipped the bag upside down. Out came a gold brooch with precious stones set in it, then a bracelet of dubious quality as well as a handful of coins. “And what is this?” I cried, for my eye had fallen upon a rather unusual object which gazed back at me from the pinewood table.

It was a stone of pure white. Oval shaped and the size of a baby’s clenched fist. It had been engraved with lettering which was black as the darkest night. The lettering was unknown to me but it looked menacing and vicious. Cruel things could be contained in it. scarred white stone.

Caladius picked it up and looked at it thoughtfully. “This is not a common find in a bandit’s takings,” he said quietly.

“Do you recognise the writing?” I asked.

“Yes, yes I do.”

“What is it?”

He looked straight into my eyes. “Long ago, a different kind ruled this land. They were men, of a sort, but greater in size, strength and sorcery. They were giants in more ways than one. Some say they were the offspring of men and spirits. Whoever they were, they were a mighty race. They dwelt in this land alongside the shadowy people – people who we think of as dwarves, woses and sprites. They built great structures of stone and made great monuments to mark their dead. But like all great people, they couldn’t last forever. They were already in decline when our kind came with shining spears of metal and took possession of this land. In the mountains they built their fortresses and made war on . Many songs and tales come from these all-but-forgotten days. And songs and tales were not their only legacy. They left their blood. Some of their daughters married into the tribes. Many of the great families of today have the giant blood in them. But it was not just their blood they left. It was their sorcery.”

“Sorcery? And this stone?”

“This stone is engraved with the writing of the giants. Once I was washed up on an island in the North Sea.” He paused and gazed out of the window. Then he continued. “The island had just one inhabitant. One of the giant kind. He was over three hundred years old, for long life was another of their attributes. In a great tower on the island he was guardian over all the mysteries, secrets and enchantments of his kind. These were engraved on to pure white stones.”

“Then this stone could hold some of the secrets of the giants?” I said, my mouth dry from excitement.

“I don’t know. The black ink used to fill the engraving does not look as ancient as what I saw there. The giant, Cargai, he was called, allowed me to copy out the old script and told me what each character signified as best he could. He was not very fluent in our tongues.”

“Why did he let you do that?”

“He was old and lonely, and I suspect he rather liked me. My curiosity overcame my mistrust, you see. Besides, he told me on one occasion that he was worried.”

Again Caladius paused. It was a rather annoying habit of his.

“Worried about what?”

“Worried that when he was gone there might come those who sought to use the old lore for their own purposes. Use it in order to enhance their own power. And I’ll never forget that when he said that, he stared very hard at a bull’s head symbol on the wall. It is my belief that this stone may have something to do with those whom he warned me about. But it is easily proved.”

So saying, he rose and went into the next-door room to rummage around an old chest while I sat in silence and gazed at the scarred white stone. He returned after a few minutes with a parchment in his hand and proceeded to examine the stone carefully. I sat there, rubbing my face with both my hands, and waited.

At long last, he turned to me and said in a deep voice, “Come. There is a red dawn rising. The power is here. Assemble at the Place of the Stag. It is

time.” Then in his normal voice, “That is what it says. I think you may just have found your adventure...”

I looked up at the grey clouds brooding unhappily above and wondered if I could make it to the settlement ahead without being drenched. It was three days since that conversation with Caladius. We had been in no doubt that I must journey north to the Place of the Stag and see what was afoot. “The Place of the Stag,” Caladius had informed me, “is deep within the glens of the Wild Northlands. There is supposedly an ancient ring of stones there. It is a rather mysterious place and there are few who have been there and told of it afterwards. You must be well prepared.”

I left Brontingham with this advice ringing in my ears and crossed the river on foot. It is always easier to escape detection on foot, you see. Now I was deep within the realm of Virigor.

Virigor is not a pleasant land. Its people are not a particularly pleasant people. They are forever raiding cattle and falling out amongst themselves. I, however, had not encountered any difficulties, and would soon be across the Clyle Estuary, which eats into the heart of Albion. Then I was into the Northlands. I just had to spend one more night in the settlement I was approaching.

I entered the small town just as the rain started to fall. It only made the place look drearier. I walked down the main street between sadly lit wattle-and-daub houses with tired-looking thatch on top. In the centre of town at the crossroads, opposite a pair of stocks in which sat a sullen-faced, dripping-wet fellow, was an inn. The faded sign above the door proclaimed it to be ‘The Laughing Pig’. There was a harsh sort of cheering coming from within.

I stepped inside, blinking at the bright candlelight which filled the main hall. The smell of tallow smoke and beer rose to my nostrils. I shook the water droplets from my dull green cloak and wondered what all the commotion was about.

A sort of stage filled the main hall. It stood at about shoulder height and was surrounded by men drinking from ale horns and laughing. Dice rattled

on the table and there was the chink of money changing hands.

“Excuse me, what’s going on?” I asked a rather harassed-looking older woman who came past with a bowl of steaming broth.

“Dwarf Fight. Andun Thunderstrike against Dalcon the Dangerous, wagers being taken by my husband,” she answered over her shoulder.

A dwarf fight then. I heard of these though never witnessed them. The older kind, the stone folk, had been enslaved, in some cases for generations and for some the easiest way to win freedom was by competing in the dwarf fights. If you won enough prize money you could buy freedom from your master. Many masters encouraged their slaves to fight in order to make a small fortune.

But now a drum was being beaten and a mighty roar was going up – “Thunderstrike! Thunderstrike!” – as the evident favourite was hoisted up on to the stage, his black hair swishing around his neck in braids. He threw a number of pendants down on the table, each signifying a past victory, and beat his bare and hairy chest with a shout.

The other dwarf was also hauled up to the table, to a less than deafening roar, and tossed a couple of pendants on to the pile in the middle. He looked to the side and spat viciously on the palms of his hands, shaking out his shoulders slightly.

A horn was blown from somewhere in the crowd. The pair of them edged around the stage glaring fiercely at each other, then with a shout, Thunderstrike rushed at Dangerous.

Dalcon the Dangerous coolly stepped aside at the last moment. He looked down his sandy beard rather disdainfully at Thunderstrike, who had reeled round at him.

“Go smash him, Thunderstrike!” someone bellowed, as the two began to grapple. The dark-haired dwarf was evidently the stronger as he rolled Dalcon on to the wooden stage. He was about to pin Dalcon to the floor when Dalcon sent him a mighty kick with his leather moccasins which caused Thunderstrike to fall flat on his back. The crowd roared and I with them, for I was becoming oddly engaged in this struggle between the mighty champion and the plucky underdog.

Time and time again they went at it. Leaping and yelling, punching, kicking and rolling their way around the stage. I lost count of the number of times it appeared Thunderstrike had Dalcon at his mercy or was about to cast him over the edge of the stage, both of which would have given him the victory, but the elusive Dalcon ever evaded him or by some ingenious trick parried him away.

But Andun Thunderstrike was not called Thunderstrike for nothing. In an all-or-nothing charge he struck Dalcon full force in the stomach, winding him. Then he was at his throat. It was all over.

While the innkeeper presented the pendant to Thunderstrike, who acknowledged the cheering throng with a beating of his chest, I turned to see the battered figure of Dalcon staggering off the stage towards an angry-looking figure who was gesticulating furiously.

“Fine fighter, ye are!” he screamed. “Up to my eyes in debt and you lose the one fight that could have saved us.”

“Ach, hold your noise. It was a tough fight. I cannae help your gambling and boozing all night,” Dalcon responded wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Aye, but you’re not worth your price. If I cannot get a decent price for you I don’t know what I’ll do.” The man, who was short, unshaven and bulged about the middle, ended his speech with what was akin to a sob.

I thrust my way forward. “Excuse me sir, but are you looking to sell this dwarf?”

He looked up at me in surprise. “Why yes, if you’re interested.”

“Name your price.”

“Fifty pieces of the King’s Gold.”

“I can offer no more than thirty-five.”

He looked around himself, unsure but, accepting that he was unlikely to get a better offer that night, nodded. “So be it.”

I reached deep into the pouch inside my tunic which contained the money Caladius had given me before I set out. I had not intended it for this use, but an extra pair of hands and eyes might prove useful and I had been

impressed with dwarf's spirit and determination. Not to mention the fact that the Stone Folk know a thing or two about the Old Lore, things which might come in useful. Aside from all that, however, it was simply that it felt right to free a dwarf fighter. I have always had a habit of doing mad things and helping odd people. Life is never dull that way.

We stepped aside from the dispersing crowd and the dwarf hauled his tunic over his head. He looked me up and down. "You dinna look like the kind to own a dwarf fighter," he said.

"I am not that kind. I bought you for a different purpose. Do your job well and you have your freedom. Betray my trust and it'll be back on the stage having it out with Andun Thunderstrike for you."

He grinned. "What's the job...?"

The next morning we set out and took the ferry crossing over the Clyle Estuary. It was a cold morning, all damp and drizzle, and we were in a grim mood. It had not been the most restful night in the communal hall of the Laughing Pig, owing to the drunken ravings of a wandering vagabond. Besides which, it felt rather as if we were crossing the boundary between relative safety and the terrifying unknown. The Northlands and the tribes that lived in them were chancy, not to mention gathering at a place due north of us, seeking to bring back magic from ancient times.

Dalcon was feeling it too. "Some jaunt this could end up being. What possessed ye to come up here in the first place?" he muttered as we made our way along a muddy track past sheep and gorse bushes.

"Curiosity and a sense of danger," I replied, fingering the engraved stone thoughtfully. I had very little idea of what to expect or what to do when we reached the Place of the Stag and it was beginning to bother me. Dalcon's knowledge of the Old Lore wasn't as amazing as I'd hoped, either.

"Never paid much attention to that old stuff," he admitted to me one windy night in front of a flickering fire.

We were four days into the Northlands and had seen scarcely a soul. By Caladius's directions I judged us to be nearing our destination. It was growing dark and we were sat by our fire attempting to cook some grouse I

had shot. Dalcon was yawning and seemed about to say something when a troop of horsemen roared out of the woods, across the valley, straight towards to us.

There were about a dozen of them, all bearing long-shafted spears with iron tips and wearing the cloaks made from the pelts of wild beasts. The one in front bore a standard topped by the skull of a horse. We jumped to our feet. In an instant we were surrounded.

“Who are you? What is your business in the land of the Tribe of the Dark Horse?” asked their apparent leader. He wore a scarlet cloak which matched his fiery hair and beard. He was young and tossed his long hair in an arrogant manner as he spoke.

“For that matter, what right hae ye to come and seize honest folks? This is surely a free land!” Dalcon was evidently gearing up for a fight but with a dozen spear tips at our throat I judged that to be unwise.

“We come in peace and are but travelling through this land. Please—” But the red-haired warrior cut through my reply.

“Bind their hands, we shall bring them to my uncle’s fort and examine them there.”

“Ye foul scum!” Dalcon began, and would have gone on, had a spear prod not made him go quiet.

Very soon our hands were tied and we were stumbling on our way behind the horsemen.

After about an hour of staggering along in the murky darkness, we saw lights on a hill ahead, above what appeared to be a palisade.

We were thrust through the gates of what seemed to be a fairly large settlement. A crowd of people – men, women and children – stood staring at us by the light of a few flaming torches.

The young leader swung down from his horse and turned to face a figure who was striding out from among the gathered throng. The figure was tall, well-built, and in the smoky darkness I could see he had a thick beard.

The young warrior bent one knee and bowed his face down.

“Hail, Machra Mag Murdo, Great Chief of the People of the Dark Horse,” he said in a humble tone. “I bring you captives who have come into our territory without your leave”

“Hail, Adoig Mag Murdo, sister-son, you have done well. Let them be questioned and if they give a reasonable account of themselves, then have them sent on their way.”

The young warrior Adoig started at this. “But my lord, remember the instructions of the one who bears the bull’s head?”

At this, I raised my head. That was the symbol which Caladius believed may have been connected to those gathering at the Place of the Stag.

The chief shook his head. “You forget, sister-son, that it is I who rule these lands, not them.”

Them. We were close, very close.

Adoig frowned mutinously. “Sned disagrees.”

A murmur went up from the gathered throng at the mention of this name. Then slowly they shuffled to one side and forward came a figure at whose appearance Dalcon turned to me

and whispered, “Here’s one heck of a rum customer.”

He was dressed entirely in the skin of a red deer whose antlers crowned his head. He bore a staff which his fingers gripped with a menace, and he sidled along, stooped and muttering to himself.

“A shaman. Foul creature,” Dalcon whispered to me as he drew nearer.

The shaman came forward and our guard shrank back. He peered down into my face. I could feel his hot breath with the smell of heather ale lingering in it. His eyes gazed into mine. I wanted to close them but found I couldn’t.

Then with a sudden, hawk-like move he darted down to my pouch and pulled out the white stone which I had carried there ever since my journey began. He stared at it for several moments, wide-eyed. Then he turned round and addressed the chief in a respectful tone of voice, “On the contrary, I quite agree with the great chief. Let the travellers be given food and shelter for the night and then be allowed to go on their way.”

I heard Dalcon whistle with relief, then the chief barked out an order and we were led away. But I'd seen a look pass between Adoig and the shaman which I didn't entirely like. And of course, they had the stone...

We were put in a smelly little outbuilding away from all the other huts. From the odour in the air, it had been the habitation of animals in the not too distant past. Dalcon lay back on some straw and sighed. "They seem decent, these folks," he said.

I merely nodded, for at that moment, a lad of about twelve years old walked in. He was all tousle-haired and freckled and carried two earthenware mugs which, from the aroma steaming out of them, contained hot soup. I saw the shaman's outline against the door.

"Soup for you, good sirs," the boy said casually. But in the same instance he gave me a look which said, *Whatever you do, don't touch the soup*. This look was so strong that Dalcon, whose mug was nine-tenths of the way to his mouth, stopped.

The boy turned on his heels and walked out. "Whit was that about?" Dalcon whispered.

"Hush," I whispered back. And so we waited in silence.

An hour passed and then another. Then I heard a voice just outside our hut. It was the young warrior, Adoig.

"Are we wise meeting here? The travellers are in that outbuilding."

"Don't worry about them. I put nightmilk-berry poison in their soup. They aren't ever waking up." I tried to avoid a sharp intake of breath at the cold voice of the shaman. Dalcon was seething next to me.

Adoig laughed. "Very good, Sned. Now, about our revolt. What is happening with those who bear the Bull's Head?"

"They gather tonight at the Place of the Stag. There the Dark One will arise and the red dawn will break across all Albion. There will be no stopping its power." The shaman ended on a high-pitched note.

"Are you going, wise one?"

“Na na, I am not of their kind. But all who have shown loyal support will be richly rewarded. Machra shall be overthrown and you shall be chief over the People of the Dark Horse. And I, I shall have power such as I never dreamed of. But those travellers knew of this. They bore the message stone. That may explain why the allies from the south have not come up. The message never reached them.”

Their voices dwindled away.

“We must go to the Place of the Stag,” Dalcon whispered furiously.

“We’ve no idea of the way from here,” I whispered, “and it would be no good blundering around in the dark.”

Once more we sat in silence.

Then the door of the hut opened with a creak and in came the young lad bearing a flickering torch.

“I’m so glad you understood me. I was terrified you were going to die,” he said.

“Why did you warn us?” I asked.

“Because Cithra Mag Tachra is not one to stand by and let people be poisoned,” he said grandly. Then more quickly, “I saw him put the stuff in. And I saw him take your stone. And I don’t trust Sned or Adoig. They’re snakes, both of them.”

We hurriedly told him all we had just heard.

He nodded. “It’s common knowledge that Sned is in league with they who bear the Bull’s Head. But to take over the tribe? That is another matter.”

“Can ye take us to the Place of the Stag?” Dalcon put in.

“Aye.”

At this, we set off into the night. Cithra’s father, now dead, had been a huntsman and Cithra knew all the tracks in the region.

We emerged from some pine trees and Cithra put his fingers to his lips.

“Over this rise here is the Stone Circle.”

The first light of morning was just beginning to emerge as we wriggled up the rise and peered down the dewy grass into the circle. The sun was not

yet fully up. Numerous figures were stood in a semicircle in front of the ring of stones, gazing at a green mound on which a lone standing stone stood.

A figure stepped forward. He was wearing a bull's head, and he appeared greater in stature than a normal man. Then he spoke in a bellowing tone.

“It is the day long prophesied. The descendants of the Old Ones have gathered at their father's tomb. As the sun rises it shall break into the mound and at my word, our father, the Bull King, shall arise.”

A great cheer went up. “What shall we do?” Cithra whispered. But my throat was dry and I couldn't answer.

Then the figure began again. Hands raised aloft, he shrieked, “Arise! Arise! Arise! Let us rule this land once more!”

There was a rumbling, a sense of the earth vomiting something up. Then the solitary standing stone toppled over and the ground fell away and up stepped a figure, horned and eight-foot-high, who seemed to be robed in darkness itself. The Dark One had arisen.

I felt my stomach churn. This was evil of a greater kind than I had ever witnessed. Cithra had gone pale.

“What are we to do?” Dalcon looked at me. “We cannae fight that.”

I shook my head. “The only thing we can do. Prepare for war.”

“What about my tribe?” Cithra asked breathlessly.

“This is bigger than the tribe. This is bigger than the Northlands. The whole of Albion is about to be engulfed in a massive storm.”

I thought about the scarred white stone that had led me here.

Caladius's voice echoed in my mind. *The rise and fall of nations...*

We turned and scrambled away down the slope. There was a red dawn breaking. The real adventure was only just beginning...

THE LAMENT OF ORPHIA

Eshana Dasanjh

It's the first time I've been called into the Headmaster's office. It's not as sinister as I imagined. The chair I'm sitting in is lumpy, and damp plaster peels off the wall. I'll probably be suspended. It was worth it though, ripping that smug smile from Jenny Holfield's make-up caked face. My anger had boiled over, from years of her snide comments and cocky glances. I have a large grisly purple bruise over my eye, but Jenny is worse off, seeing as she's in the nurse's office instead of the Headmaster's. School's trying to contact my parents. They're not going to be here for a while. My parents are just bothered about work and money. Not bothered about their disappointing daughter. A few months ago, Gran would have been here in a heartbeat, a knight in shining armour, ready to fight for me. I would have been in a load of trouble, but nevertheless she would have had my back. Now I'm alone. Dad finally arrives, his eyes hard and unforgiving. I don't react, not even at the acidity in his voice when he hisses my name with such contempt: "Orphia". Instead of paying attention to the narcissistic drone of Mr Plotes, I focus on other things. Like the pathetic trophy shelf, unsurprisingly sparse from the lack of talent in my school. Or the strange odour hovering in the air. Yuck. I barely hang on to the thread of conversation, only hearing snippets of "suspension" and "disappointment" and "out of character" and "stitches". I'm eventually cast in shame from the office. The word "suspended" might as well have been printed on my back from the looks I get in the corridor. I stumble behind Dad to the car park, shivering against the feverishly icy wind. But I don't feel anything.

Remorse. Regret. Sadness. Embarrassment. Maybe a few months ago I might have felt all of those things. But when there's nobody to listen, there's only emptiness.

I'm banished to my room, unworthy of even a few words. I try to enjoy the silence, but I'm unable to ignore the emptiness growing inside me, a ravenous monster content on demolishing every bit of me. I check my phone and find no missed calls. A few months ago, I would have had at least 50 from Gran. I feel a wave of tears threatening to start a flood and drown me in it. I refuse to let them fall. I never knew that it could be possible to miss someone so much. I gaze at my bookshelf, laden with volumes of Greek mythology, one of them containing the tale of my namesake. Orpheus, the legendary musician and poet, was Mum's favourite when Gran used to read to her. Back when I was born, the novelty of a child hadn't worn off yet and my parents still doted on me. They gave me a female version of "Orpheus": "Orphia." Gran said it held so much potential, just like I did when I was born. Cringeworthy, I know, but she had a way of making you believe everything she said. I knew she would never lie to me.

In a way, she was right. I discovered an interest in music, and I immersed myself in all the lessons I could. Hungry for something to connect me to Gran, I pull out the heavy maroon book in the centre of the shelf and turn to the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus was married to Eurydice, but one day she tragically and unexpectedly died. Overcome with grief and unable to let her go, Orpheus travelled to the Underworld to get her back. He managed to persuade Hades, the Lord of the Underworld, to let Eurydice return with him, but Hades had one condition. Orpheus had to walk out of the Underworld without looking back. He needed to have faith that Eurydice would be right behind him. But he looked back before getting out, and he lost Eurydice forever. He made a mistake and paid the price. I sigh, gazing at the golden illustrated pictures in front of me, before it dawns on me. A talent for music wasn't the only thing that I shared with Orpheus. We had both lost someone we loved – someone without whom we would fall into a dark and dangerous spiral, with no means of escape. We both would be willing to do anything to get that person back. The only difference is: I won't fail.

It's strange how I seem to know what I'm doing. I'm in a trance, collecting candles and incense as I light them by the windows. I pry open my money box and place a pound coin in my mouth under my tongue. I cringe at the harsh and metallic feel of it. I turn off the lights and lie on the floor, letting the room fill up with the sweet scent of jasmine. I close my eyes and let the soothing calmness of the candles lull me into a heavy sleep. When I drift off, candles light the way to the Underworld. I know I'm not dead because I can still feel the rough and itchy carpet beneath my neck, and I can still smell the heavy, sticky scents of the candle. But as I walk up the path, getting further and further away from my own world, I feel colder and colder. It feels wrong that I'm here, and the very air seems to rebel against me, pushing and begging me to turn back. But I can't. I need Gran. I'll do whatever it takes to bring her back. I see the line, thin and misty, which marks the place between the Underworld and my world. It looks weak and unguarded, and I wonder if this is what really marks the territory between the world of the dead and the world of the living. My heart's thumping now, and I feel delirious. It would be so easy to walk away and go back. But go back to what? A life of unseeing parents and silent cries for help? A life of longing for the one person who could guide and help me? Before I can change my mind, I leap over the line. The world goes dark. And it's cold. It's so cold.

The air is different here. It feels thicker, more polluted. The ground is gravelly and rough, and the stones look as if they've been soaked in blood. There is no sky here, no light, but I can still see. A sense of unease lingers. In front of me is a river, but the water looks black and venomous. A rickety dock stands in front of me, and a hooded figure in a boat stares at me, his eyes so black that I can't see the whites. The heavy coin in my mouth anchors me to sanity, and I take a few wobbly steps forward, before pulling the coin out from beneath my tongue. I hold my hand out to drop it into his palm, unwilling to bring myself to touch that pale, scratchy skin. But he doesn't move. He just stares at me, black eyes boring into my soul.

"Are you Charon?" I ask, my voice squeakier than usual.

"I am." he replies, his voice unnatural and chilling.

"I wish for passage." He continues to stare. I wonder what's underneath that long dark cloak of his. If I peeled it back, would his body resemble a

human's, in the same eerie and unconvincing way that his face does? Or would it be deformed, otherworldly, demonic? He shakes his head. "Why not? You are Charon, Ferryman to the Dead and you have to transport me across the river. I have payment!" My fear of never seeing Gran again fuels my courage. He opens his mouth to speak and my stomach flips at the sight of those rows of sharp, pointed yellow teeth.

"I don't have to do anything, girl," he replies, his voice managing to carry so much anger without even changing slightly in tone. "I transport the Dead. You are obviously living. You have that... smell about you. The Living have no business in the Underworld. I advise you leave and turn around before it's too late." I gawk at him, unable to believe that this is where I fall and fail. At the first hurdle.

"But I need passage! You don't understand!" He pauses, as if realising something, but I wouldn't be able to tell anyway. Nobody can read those inky black eyes.

"You remind me of someone – someone I met a long time ago. What is your name?" An irrational part of me doesn't want to tell him, as if I'd be giving power to the monster beneath my bed.

"Orphia." I reply evenly, bewildered at the mild widening of his eyes and slight intake of breath. He reaches forward and unfolds my clasped fist to retrieve my coin. A shudder goes down my spine at the iciness of his skin. I resist the urge to scrub at my hand.

"Orphia. Synonymous with 'Orpheus.' I will grant you passage across the Acheron, if only to let you correct the mistake of your ancestor." Without another word, he shifts slightly, letting me aboard the boat. I clamber on and wait for Charon to pick up the oar, but he doesn't, instead looking out into the distance as if expecting something. I lean forward slightly, trying to catch a glimpse of what he can see, unable to prevent the squeak that escapes my mouth when I do. A soul. A member of the deceased. It glides instead of walking, no longer resembling a human. It's something that I couldn't even begin to describe. It hands over a coin to Charon and enters the boat, eyes taking me in. I shrink into the corner of the boat, unable to hide my fear. The soul seems to smile, but it's a smile of sadness. Finally, Charon picks up the oar and begins to paddle.

I stare into the lake water, if only to avoid eye contact with the spirit and Charon. My mind whirs as I realise which lethal lake we are crossing. The Acheron. River of pain. The water looks almost like treacle, thick and dark. I begin to notice that if I look too long, I feel all of the pain I felt when Gran died. So I tear my eyes away and force myself to look at the soul. It stares back at me, head tilted slightly to the side, more like a curious dog than a ghost.

“What’s your name?” I try to fill the deafening silence. It doesn’t answer, instead shrinking away as if I’ve attacked it. I feel my cheeks heat and I turn away. After about ten agonising minutes we reach the other side of the shore, but as I stand and look out, all I can see is darkness. I turn to Charon.

“Are you sure this is the right place? Where do I go to find a deceased soul?”

“This is the right place, Orpheusides,” I cringe at the name he gives me. *Child of Orpheus*. “You will struggle to navigate the Underworld at first, since you are not dead. Perhaps this soul here will guide you. But the help I give you ends here.” Charon rows away, leaving me stranded on the shore. I turn to find the soul only a few metres from me. It seems almost shy.

“Well?” I ask, trying to keep my voice as gentle as I can. “Will you help me get to Hades, Lord of the Underworld?” It freezes, as if contemplating what to do, before reluctantly nodding. I don’t fight the smile that spreads across my face. “Great. Thank you. If we’re travelling together, we should probably learn each other’s names. I’m Orphia.” I wait for a reply, but I hear nothing. Trying not to feel disappointed, I ask which way we should go. It points to the left, and as if by magic, I can see a little clearer; there are gates in the distance. I nod and make my way forward. As we walk, I’m not sure, but I swear I can hear a whisper of a name.

“Marcus.”

Marcus and I walk along, ginormous rocky cliffs looming over us.

“Why are you here? You are living. Who do you search for?” His confidence is gradually growing and he is beginning to talk more. I feel

myself tense slightly, but I decide to tell him. There's something about him that makes me want to trust him. He reminds me of Gran.

"I'm here to get my Gran. She died a few months ago," I can't see his face, or the thing that resembles a face, but I imagine a trace of surprise and confusion. "It wasn't of old age or anything. She was hit by a car. She should have lived longer." My voice becomes thick and shaky with tears. "Without her my life is empty. My parents don't pay attention to me. They never did. The people at school are all fake. Gran is the only person who I could talk to, the only one who attended all my concerts. I need her." I falter, overcome with pain. "It must sound really stupid."

"No. Never."

"I'm sure Gran will be in Elysium," I blurt, seized by an inexplicable urge to babble now that the silence had been irreversibly broken. "She was, is, was the best person I ever knew." I stumble, suddenly wondering how I should refer to her. Is? Is Gran living, a solid presence? Was? Is she no more than a ghost, a hopeless whisper like Marcus, whom I'm foolishly trying to save? We come to a stop as we pass a river. I know it's not the Acheron, because the waters are a soft milky white, steam gently rising off of them.

"What—" I begin, but suddenly the scent of lemony detergent washes over me, calming me and chasing away any worries I may have. I think I hear Marcus' scratchy and wispy voice behind me, but I don't listen. I edge closer to the river, hypnotised. A voice calls out to me. Whose voice is that? I kneel beside the lake, wanting to reach forward and cup my hands in the water, but a force, a spirit, a soul tugs back at my arms refusing to let me. I bat it away. It tries to drag me away, and I scream in resistance and defiance. I long to climb to the steamy edge and fall in and never come out. Forget the person I'm searching for. Who am I searching for? Who am I? Why is a ghost able to touch me? Maybe it has powers. This thought makes me giggle, and before I know it, I'm delirious, unsure of where I am and about to dive into the water – I feel a searing pain in my ankle, one that brings me back to myself. I sob as I see my ankle trapped under a boulder. I look out towards the river, but I'm farther away than I was before, and a soul is standing in front of me, its barely audible voice whispering the same word over and over.

“Sorry.”

It gradually comes back to me, the wave of madness I succumbed to, the danger I put myself in. Marcus trying to save me. Marcus having to save me by hurting me. I try to calm him and assure him I'm OK. I remember who I am. Orphia. Orphia. Orphia. I mutter the words like a prayer, my salvation and shield. I gaze out at the river, which suddenly doesn't look as pleasant anymore. I realise the danger I've narrowly escaped.

“The Lethe.” I mutter. The river that can make you lose yourself. Being near the river was enough to drive me insane with longing to go in. If Marcus hadn't saved me I would no longer be Orphia, but a person stolen by the goddess Lethe. Marcus and I glance at each other, our terror polluting the already dirty air. We don't stay for long, afraid of any more hidden dangers. I limp behind him, following him around a large boulder, a wall of defence between us and the Lethe.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my throat raw from my screaming. He says nothing and we stumble along in silence, still shaken from the risky encounter.

A few hours must pass before we reach the gates. They stretch up high, and seem to be cast in iron. As I continue to move forward, a wave of nausea hits me as I realise that iron isn't the material that made this gate. It's bone. Long cones of bone, blackened by either years of decay or just seconds of being in the Underworld. Maybe both. Marcus lets out a shrill breathy cry, trying to get me to turn my head to the left. I try to scream but there's nothing left in me apart from fear. How could I forget? Standing in the centre of the gate is Cerberus. The hound of Hades. It has a large body, with a scaled serpent's tail hanging off the back. There are one, two, three heads, each as furious and ravenous as the next. But that's not the worst part. The worst part are the eyes, beady and red and intent on ripping me apart.

“What should we do?” I whisper, careful not to make a single move.

“It won't attack me, because I'm a spirit?” he turns to me for confirmation.

I nod hurriedly. “Cerberus only guards the gates to stop spirits getting out. You'll be able to enter. As for myself...”

“You need to get to Hades to bring your grandmother back?” I nod, still afraid when his name is spoken. *“You said you were skilled at music. Why don’t you try to sing something to send Cerberus to sleep?”* I stare at him in disbelief. We’re facing a treacherous monster and he wants me to sing it a lullaby. My answer of ‘no’ is too loud, and it attracts the attention of Cerberus. I feel my heart leap into my mouth. This was it. I wasn’t going to get any further. It prowls towards us, stalking me like prey. Marcus moves forward, trying to distract Cerberus with gusts of wind, but he is batted off like an inconvenient fly. I run backwards, but trip and fall, causing my ankle to flare up in pain. I’m in no state to fight, and seeing as I have no other options – I don’t even know what happens to me if I die in this world – I begin to sing. It’s a simple lullaby that Gran used to sing, filled with spoons and moons and cows. Cerberus stops for a moment, but after a brief hesitation, continues to approach. I decide to switch tactics, going for a folk song that my parents would sing when they still had time to love me. My voice is heavier with emotion this time, with sorrow and wistfulness. Cerberus stops fully in its tracks now, grey eyelids beginning to droop over its bloodshot eyes. More confident now, I continue to sing until the dog falls to the ground, its throat emitting hoarse snores. I’m too afraid to stop singing, so I hum, skirting around Cerberus. I reach Marcus and we both turn to the eerie bone gate. With one final glance at each other, we step inside.

The noisy rumble of spirits stabs at the air. I look around. I can’t see anything, but judging from Marcus’ stillness he can.

“Is anything wrong?” I ask, but he shakes his head. He seems to be looking for something, or someone, but I decide not to press him any further. In the distance I see Hades’ palace. It’s not particularly grand, but it’s large and fills me with a sense of dread. We begin walking towards it, and it occurs to me that when we get there, Marcus will be judged to determine where he ends up in the Underworld. “Are you nervous?” He knows what I’m talking about but still pauses before answering, as if trying to craft his answer.

“Not exactly, I think I know where I will be placed. It isn’t ideal, but I’ll deserve it.” My throat closes up as an uneasy feeling settles in my stomach.

“You’re not going to the Fields of Punishment are you?” I ask, suddenly questioning whether I really know this spirit before me. My mind already starts cooking up crimes he may have committed.

“No,” he sighs, and if I could see his face, I imagine he’d have a bittersweet smile on his face. *“I will be sent to the Mourning Fields.”* The Mourning Fields are reserved for souls who wasted their lives on unrequited love. It becomes clear who Marcus was searching for. I open my mouth, but he cuts in. *“Don’t feel that you have to say anything Orphia. But at the risk of damaging our friendship, I have something to say to you, something I have been pondering this entire journey. Is it really wise to try and bring your grandmother back? I understand, more than anyone, what it’s like to long for something out of reach. However, I also learned that we shouldn’t waste our lives on it. Death is a barrier that should never be crossed. Take my advice. Go back home. Live. It will be painful to let your grandmother go, but don’t try to bring her back. It will only hurt both of you.”*

A hurricane of emotions envelop me, but I don’t reply. Marcus sees on my face that I won’t take his advice. *“Very well. This is where I leave you then. I wish you all the best, Orphia, but I also ask that you consider my words before doing anything rash.”* His voice is sad, disappointed almost. I look away from him to realise that we are at the doors of Hades’ palace. I turn around to say goodbye, but he’s already gone, nothing more than a whisper on the wind.

“Goodbye Marcus.” I mutter, sad to think that I’ll never see him again. But he’s not the one I came here for. I push open the doors of the palace. I am almost at the end – and I will see her again.

When I open the door, a guard is standing there, prim and proper in his uniform. I begin to stutter, trying to form some pathetic explanation or lie, but he motions for me to follow him. I’m unnerved, but I do as he says. We weave through countless columns of intricate hallways, all crowned with ominous Greek and Latin statues and carvings. We reach a room, the floor a smooth but scorched marble with flecks of gold. I keep my eyes trained on

the floor, because I know that if I look up I will see Hades, King of the Underworld and my last obstacle to getting Gran back. The guard turns to leave, and I am soon a vulnerable mortal in a room of gods.

“So this is the mortal who they say will correct Orpheus’ mistake.” A voice booms, sending seismic waves through me. “Look up, girl, if you wish for me to break the laws of death.” I pry my eyes off the floor and stare into the eyes of a god. He is tall, the size of a building tall. His hair is greasy black, and his eyes are grey, swirled into soot. He wears the legendary golden helmet, the helmet which allows him to turn invisible. I wonder if he uses it to reap dead souls? I swallow, eyes darting to the side. A goddess sits next to him, in stark contrast to his sinister appearance. She has long silky hair, with flowers – once soft and colourful but now brown and crisp – woven through. Her grassy green eyes are resigned and pallid. She might have been beautiful, but here she looked drained. Persephone. Queen of the Underworld. Stolen from her mother Demeter and forced to live here every winter. My eyes wander back to Hades.

“You wish for me to give you your grandmother back.” I nod, at a complete loss for words. “Why would I do that? Why would I alter the laws of the universe for you, mortal?” I decide not to babble. I think back to Orpheus, whose actions I have mimicked on this entire journey. He persuaded Hades to give back Eurydice through music. I was named Orphia for a reason. I open my mouth and begin my lament. The notes lift, then drop me, letting me glide. I craft and pair each note and word perfectly. Each note carries my pain and heartbreak and suffering. I sing of Marcus, a soul who will pay for eternity for actions committed in a heartbeat. I sing for all those souls. When I finish, Persephone’s eyes seem slightly sharper, as if she has grown stronger with my song. If I didn’t know better, I’d say that Hades’ eyes were glinting with tears. I wait with silent anticipation, my happiness riding on his decision. “Very well,” he finally says, waving his hand to cut a doorway for me to step into. I smell freshly mown grass and the ocean and every blissful smell that exists. My heart swells as I realise that Gran is in Elysium. She always was the kindest person I knew. “You are aware of the tale of Orpheus?” he asks. I nod, using all my restraint not to leap through the door at this very moment. “Then you know that when leading her out, you must not look back until you are back in the mortal

realm.” He plucks at the air and hands me a long, thorny branch, one that pricks my palm and makes my eyes water. “You must both also hold onto this when leaving. Now go. Correct Orpheus’ mistake.” I rush through the door, drunk on desperation and anticipation, ready to see Gran again.

The shift is instant. The damp smell is defeated by the wonderful ones. The sun is warm on my back and she is there, sitting by the river, humming to herself as she washes her hands in the water. Her wavy, silver hair is unbound, and when I call to her she turns. Her wrinkles are still there, formed from years of laughter and joy. Her intelligent, hazel eyes, which never grew darker all these years widen at the sight of me and she catches me as I launch myself into her arms.

“Orphia,” she whispers, stroking my hair, but her voice is resigned instead of happy. “What are you doing here?” I explain everything to her, too full of euphoria to register her face shuttering and changing. When I finish, she shakes her head. “I’m not coming with you.” My smile slips off my face, replaced with confusion.

“Why not? Everyone I’ve passed has said that I’m destined to correct Orpheus’ mistake! Come with me,” I motion to the branch, “I won’t look back; you won’t be lost. Trust me Gran, please. I can’t live without you. I’m so alone.” I don’t realise that the tears have started to fall until she wipes them away with her callused yet gentle fingers.

“You will correct Orpheus’ mistake, but not in the way you expect. Orpheus’ mistake wasn’t looking back; it was going to get Eurydice in the first place. Death is something that shouldn’t be messed with. It may be unfair and sudden, but it is final. I will always want more time with you, but my death has come and it cannot be reversed. I love you, and it hurts me to see you in pain. But you need to talk to your parents. Communicate. Orphia, you are talented and amazing. It doesn’t help to fixate on something that is gone. I am gone. Go. Live.” I know what she’s saying is right, but I don’t want to admit it. It’s suddenly clear how blind I’ve been. It’s like I’ve been living without sound and someone’s just pressed “unmute.”

“But Mum and Dad don’t listen to me.” Her eyebrows narrow in determination.

“Then make them.” After that, I stay for a little longer. We talk: I ask and Gran advises. When it’s time to go, I still weep, and she weeps with me as we embrace. She gives me a nudge. I close my eyes and focus.

I’m back in my room, the carpet still pressed against my sticky, sweaty neck. I’m in the same position I started in, but already it feels as if a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I walk around my room, tidying and blowing out candles but it’s soon clear I’m only trying to delay the inevitable. I take a deep breath and open my door, tiptoeing down the stairs. My parents are in the kitchen, discussing me in hushed and tense tones. Mum’s holding her head in her hands, and Dad is pacing. When I clear my throat, they look at me, eyes full of anger and confusion – but there’s something else I never saw before. Concern? Fear? I remember Gran’s words and decide to communicate. I make them listen. I open my mouth and begin my lament.

AUTHORS OF TOMORROW|**16-21 years old**

AN ADVENTURE AT SEA

Meg Lintern

The light wakes me up.

It turns my eyelids red as I squeeze them shut, blinding me briefly. I cast one hand to my eyes, shielding them from the torch. With the other, I reach for Hadeem in the dark. I find his pudgy cheek squished against the floor, fogging the matting with his quiet snores.

Mama's voice rattles as she swivels around and strokes my hair, whispering that we need to get up. That there's nothing to fear. That the journey's over now; we're here. Her cheeks are moist with sweat, her palms clammy. When I brush my fingers over the hair she touched, they come away damp. My tummy lurches towards the floor. I want to be sick.

Instead, I squeeze Hadeem's shoulder until he stirs. It's getting skinny; the angular ridge of his shoulder blade prods the palm of my hand. I guess it is time to leave, after all. I watch him blink awake and prepare myself.

The van doors are splayed open, letting in the first fresh air I've tasted for hours. It dilutes the stench of sick that has percolated this stagnant space. The combination of sixteen unwashed bodies is a rancid one.

"Everyone out," growls the man outside. His throat is a bristle of unkempt beard, and hairs sprout from his shirt buttons like mould spores. At his side skulks a rifle: its dull metal seems as taut as tensing muscles, primed to spring into action. Hurriedly, I drag my gaze to the ground as the hollow pound of my heartbeat thrums against my ear drums.

Bodies stir in the space in front of me as numb limbs unfold and stumble outside. Tugging Hadeem up like a rag doll, I shake the sleep from my muscles and do as I'm told. We follow our parents outside and, with a stagger, step on real ground again. Just as we pass the door, the man squares up to Papa. "Pay up," he hisses.

"We were told to pay as we board the boat," replies Papa. His words are strained, his fists balled at his sides.

The gruff man laughs. It sounds more like a snarl. "You think I care what you were told? Hand it over. No money, no boat. That's how it works."

Fishing into his pocket, Papa pulls out a wad of creased paper. As he passes it through the window, his hands tremble. This is the last he's got.

Up ahead, a crowd of shadows shifts in the dark. Some hold hands, others cradle children, and the rest cling to a solitary piece of luggage. All are stooped, their shoulders contorted to a curve. We are in an old dockyard, abandoned but for the dozens of figures drifting between shipping crates. There is something unsettlingly spooky about this place – or, maybe it's just the fear radiating from those who inhabit it.

Hadeem squeezes my hand anxiously. "Where are we?" he asks, eyes wide. We told him a story before we came here, we promised him the Faraway Lands and a beautiful new home. That is not what we've given him, and the mistrust is evident in the pout of his lips.

It's time for another story.

We're on a secret mission, Hadeem and I. We're going monster hunting. The objective? Make our way past the Shadowmen, kill the great Beast of the Dock, and run away in our rescue boat.

I pull Hadeem close to the ground and we perch on our heels, plotting our route. Craggy mountains of scrap metal and corrugated crates loom around us. Craning my neck, I can just make out their peaks, dark against the milky moonlight. Quick as thieves, we tiptoe into the shadow of a shipping container. Squinting in the darkness, I can see the stream of Shadowmen trickling through the maze of boxes. I can't see where they're going.

“Papa!” Hadeem bleats, waving a dimpled finger. I follow his gaze. A hundred metres ahead, our parents are filing into the queue and gesturing us over. We nod a wordless command. Three... two... one... go!

Hand in hand, we dart away from our cover, quiet as can be across the pockmarked tarmac. We zigzag from one container to the next, obscuring ourselves from the sickly moon. As we race to the next corner, we stumble into the view of the Shadowmen. “Go, go, go!” I whisper to Hadeem, stumbling over my own feet as I hurl myself in the opposite direction.

“Oh no! Are they gonna get us?” Hadeem whimpers, his face paling.

He can sense my fear, but I shake my head. “No, of course not! We’re too quick! We’re too brave! They’ll never catch us! Now, let’s have a race... who can get to Papa first?”

Hadeem giggles, buying into the game. He tears his hand from mine and pulls away, pulsing his arms like the sprinters on TV. I speed up to run at his heels, egging him on. Cold sweat dribbles down the back of my neck. I can feel the Shadowmen watching me.

“Look!” I murmur, glancing high into the sky. “The monster!”

“Wow!” Hadeem exclaims. It is a great beast of a thing: fangs tumble from its gleaming lips, salivating in the torchlight. It towers above our heads at five hundred feet – no, a thousand! – and I can hear it growling. It turns a beady eye on us, ever-watchful. Criss-cross patterns weave across its metallic hide. Sitting firm in its resting place, it surveys the dockyard, poking its head above the range of manmade mountains. Hadeem shrinks at my side, transfixed by its unnerving stare.

“You need to be quiet, Hadeem! Super quiet, or it’ll eat you up! Yum yum!”

I seize him by the shoulders and he startles, wriggling in my grasp and batting at my clawed fingers as he suppresses a shriek. I shush him with a smile and we are back in the adventure.

I crouch over to make myself as small as possible as I take silent steps across the tarmac. With each step, I lunge out as far as I can, like some sort of long-legged insect. I hold my wrist to my mouth; it’s a walkie-talkie. “Eyes on the target?” I ask Hadeem. “Over.”

Hadeem cocks up a sniper rifle, training the sight on the head of the monster. “I got it! Over,” he radios back.

We sneak closer to one another, keeping our place in the line of Shadowmen as we fix our aim on the beast. I peer through my own sight, matching it up to the eye of the creature. It blinks knowingly.

“It’s seen you! Mira, it’s seen you! Over,” Hadeem blurts. Ever the professional, he keeps his rifle trained on the monster, his fingers playing with the trigger.

“Okay, shoot on three. Ready?”

We count down together as the monster rears up, baring its jagged, grey fangs. It snarls, and a wave of cold air soaks both of us. The next thing we know, we’re shooting, spraying a stream of bullets across the otherwise silent dockyard. The beast roars in pain and blunders backwards, batting at its wounds, as we...

“Amira! Be quiet!” Papa commands.

The shriek dies in my throat and I lower my arms. My rifle fades into the dusk and the monster settles itself. It is nothing but a crane.

I can see where we’re going now – the gruff man is leading us down a rotting pier towards the churning sea. A worn boat bumps its nose against the planks of the dock, the inflated plastic rim screeching in protest. Inside, a dozen people have already gathered. They huddle at the far end, one atop another, as yet more people pile in.

Salt brine burrows its way up my nostrils and bites at the back of my throat. A cold sea breeze bowls over the waves and into my face. I tug my scarf up to my ears and press Hadeem’s cheek to my coat, covering his ear with the heel of my palm to block out the growl of the waves. The water below us writhes like a pit of snakes, with crests of foam darting about like milk-white vipers. The wooden planks protest with each step I take. I move more tentatively – nothing scares me more than the idea of plunging through the deck into the roiling waves below.

Another gruff man materialises from the night to block my way. He fixes a glare on Papa. “Money,” he barks, offering an open palm. His teeth glint hungrily.

“Money? But we already paid!” Papa exclaims, incredulous.

The man pretends not to hear. “Money,” he repeats more loudly, turning his unblinking gaze to mine. I stare at him, transfixed. The whites of his

eyes are cobwebbed with angry veins – too much time spent in this salty wind. In my peripheral view, Mama unhooks her watchstrap and hands it over.

“More,” hisses the man. “This ain’t gonna cost you cheap.”

Papa blanches. “What kind of...”

Before he finishes, Mama unhooks the earrings from her ears and slides the metal bands from her fingers. They shimmer gold and silver, beacons in the darkness. “That’s all I have,” she stammers.

With a wolfish snort, the man recoils into the darkness and leaves the path clear. We move closer to the boat. It is crowded with even more faces. They watch me with hollow eyes.

More rifle-armed men crowd around the edge of the dock, brusquely tossing more and more trembling figures into the rubber dinghy. The orange plastic recedes further into the black water with every new foot that steps into its shadowy depths. The queue ahead of us is shrinking as, one by one, other refugees are swallowed up into the belly of the boat.

Mama’s clammy hands are on my shoulders, guiding my steps across the wobbling pier, until suddenly they’re not. Blindly, I spin around in the darkness. I am trapped. Between Mama and I stands another bearded man. A knife glints at his side. It winks at me, mocking.

“Boat’s full,” grins the man. He leers at Mama, his toothless mouth a yawning chasm in the night. “Next one in six hours.”

It’s just like the fairy tale, “Three Billy Goat’s Gruff.” Here is the baby goat. There are the parent goats. Between us: the troll.

“What do you mean, the boat’s full? The boat was full ten minutes ago, but that didn’t stop you. Surely there’s space for two more. You can’t split us up!” Papa protests. His voice is panicked now. It sparks butterflies in my own tummy – not the nice kind, whose papery wings flutter with my pulse, but a hoard of grotesque moths that pummel my stomach until bile burns at the back of my throat. My breath comes fast and shallow, as if my lungs are trying to run away without me, to sprint home and leave my useless limbs behind.

But behind my parents, I see the queue lengthening with yet more sunken faces. In the distance, the rattling cough of an automatic weapon

splits open the sky. Hadeem wraps his fingers around my thumb. The choice is impossibly simple and simply impossible all at once. We're so close to the Faraway Land now, I can almost feel the earth between my toes.

We need to get out of here.

"It's okay, Papa, we'll see you on the other side," I say. My voice sounds as weak as I feel.

His ashen face fixes on mine. "No, Amira, we'll wait together. They can't split us up."

Between us, the bearded man's grin cracks wider. "Well, then, you'll have to move to the back of the line," he chuckles. "We're running a tight schedule here."

This is just another game. I know how to play games. *Six hours to the other side.* Papa's words ring in my mind. Six hours. That's not too long. "It's okay, I'll look after Hadeem," I assure him. "We'll be fine. We'll wait for you on the beach."

Papa's face bleaches white. "No, Amira, I don't think that's safe..."

"Let the girl be," interjects the strange man, with a smirk. As a fresh wave of panic overwhelms Papa, doubt creeps across my mind, but the lump in my throat blocks words from passing and leaves me mute.

Coarse hands wrap around my wrist, dragging me to the edge of the deck. "Time to go," snarls a voice in my ear. I feel my feet lift from the ground before I tumble down, down, down into the deep belly of the dingy. It smells of acid, salt, and something sticky. I push to stand but am barred by a mesh of human limbs. I push again, then again. Each time my cheek slips back down against the damp plastic, my chest squeezes tighter. I can't breathe. The air down here is rancid, thick with heat and brine and fear.

Somehow, I find a gap in the knotted mass of torsos and slip my head into the open air. I tip my chin up and gulp at the sky as salt spray flecks my tongue.

"Mira," something whispers, small and fearful. Crushed against the rim of the boat, Hadeem's wide eyes glimmer like beacons. "Mira," he calls again, waving a soft hand above the tide of necks and shoulders. I reach across and seize it.

It's time for another story.

We are adventurers on the high seas.

The colours of dawn leach across the horizon and set fire to the waves, sending crests of flame tumbling our way. There is nothing but me, Hadeem, and the endless expanse of emptiness.

“What can you see, captain?” I call over my shoulder. The wind snags at my ponytail, pulling strands into my eyes. It’s a good day for sailing.

Hadeem calls over from starboard, his telescope fixed far in the distance. “Over there, Mira! Over there!”

“What is it?” I ask, straining my eyes. Across the ocean is a black dot of movement, a skull-faced flag dancing atop a creaking mast.

“Pirates!” Hadeem shrieks. “Pirates!”

They are heading straight for us, the boards of their ship slicing through the waves like a knife through sand. The gusty breeze carries with it the throaty chorus of a sea shanty. I can hear the clatter of swords and a commanding cry to ready the canons.

I duck beneath the prow of our mighty ship. “What’s the order, captain?”

“Climb the crow’s nest!” Hadeem yells. His gaze stays fixed on the oncoming vessel as he stands stoically, one hand on his hip, the other testing the wind with a single raised finger. I dash across the deck towards the looming mast. Shielding my eyes from the sunrise, I squint at the ladder that leads to the sky. It sways with the waves. With a breath, I reach out to grab at the thick netting. One step lifts me from the plankboards onto the writhing ladder. One, two, one, two... I chant a rhythm in my head as I propel myself upwards into the gold-rimmed clouds. Rope tears at my hands as I urge them on, hauling myself higher and higher. The tossing of the waves is stronger here, so high above the deck; I am thrown sideways as the ship lurches over each wave. I’m jolted from the rope like a flea shaken from a dog. My feet lift briefly from the ladder, suspended in open air, one hundred feet above the deck. My sweating fingers tear from the coarse rope – but I yank myself up with two frantic lunges until my palm lands on the smooth, wooden railing of the crow’s nest. Heaving my aching limbs over the edge, I collapse for a moment, relishing the feel of the wood beneath my cheek.

“What are we up against?” Hadeem hollers from below. Around him, our crew members scuttle between stations, manning the cannons.

Focusing my spyglass on the approaching boat, I gulp down a wail. Twelve sturdy cannons swivel our way, each stuffed with a ball of merciless iron. “Twelve of ’em, Captain!” I relay.

“Fire in the hole!”

The ship reverberates as she spits out a globule of solid metal. For a breathless moment, the eyes of the entire crew are fixed on its arching trail across the sky. It cuts open the dawn, shredding through wisps of low-hanging clouds, until suddenly it bites down into the other boat. With a terrific crunch, it burrows its way into the chest of the pirate ship, tugging her downwards. The silence that follows is eerie: no singing drifts across the breeze now. Instead, a foreboding emptiness is suspended between us and them.

Then, with a roar, the rumble of foreign cannons splinters the quiet, preceded by the hiss of lit fuses. Squinting with one eye closed, I peer through the spyglass at the oncoming bombardment. Twelve glittering spheres careen through the open air towards us, diving down with practiced precision. I recoil, curling myself deep in the bucket of the crow’s nest, awaiting the inevitable destruction when – SLAM – the first cannonball strikes.

As the mass of metal shreds through her deck, our ship groans in anguish, tossing me against the railing as she rolls to the side. I lock eyes with Hadeem, down below on the deck. Despite the onslaught, his jaw is set in stoic resolve, his fingers coiled at the hilt of his sword. He is fearless...

But he isn’t.

This isn’t a game anymore.

The cannonballs fade, replaced by water. The ocean yawns towards us, threatening to swallow us whole with each new wave. Moans of terror accompany the crashing of the ocean, shaking me awake from the daydream. Hadeem has stopped playing pretend. Instead, he is staring into the black depths of water, stricken with fear.

The boat is struggling under our weight. It complains bitterly as it collides with the next wave, then the next, until saltwater starts to pool around my ankles. The cold seeps into my skin like acid, burning away my

flesh and chilling me to the bone as my teeth chatter uncontrollably and I grip the orange plastic with white knuckles. To my right, someone is sick, and their bile adds to the murky well at the bottom of the boat. We are thrown up and down and up again, soaring into the air with each wave-crest before plunging back down towards the water. We are the playthings of the ocean; it tests its strength like a god of ancient times, flaunting its power and taunting us with death. The mutterings of prayers do nothing to appease it.

As the next wave hits, the angle of the boat shifts. She turns to the side to shirk the next pummelling of water, instead hitting it side-on. Rather than gliding over the top, the dinghy thrusts its way inside the wave. I can do nothing but watch as the sea rushes forth to claim us.

It hits with the force of a freight train.

I kick out my feet but find nothing to stand on—only a shifting wall of water. It burns me like a flame, scorching my skin with its iciness and squeezing the air from my chest. It crushes me flat until my lungs surrender their oxygen. Bubbles escape my lips by force, before dancing through the darkness towards the air. I try to look, to open my eyes, but the salt stings them shut. I feel possessed, as if some great demon has crawled inside my body to manipulate my limbs – they jolt and spasm of their own accord, my fingers clawing at nothingness and my feet pushing against empty space. Breathlessness has never felt so painful; the absence of air eats me from the inside, its teeth tearing at my ribcage. I kick and fight and lash out at the water with everything I have until finally, finally, it releases me. My forehead breaks the water and I thrust out my chin, opening my mouth wide to gulp air. But then I am yanked back down, filled with seawater in the place of air; I am choking with all my might, convulsing with rib-splitting coughs. I open my eyes wide, oblivious to the salt-sting, searching for any glimpse of the way out.

Sunlight cracks through the water above me, and fresh resolve seizes my legs. I pulse and push with feverish strokes until I break through the surface again. I splutter the seawater from my lungs and feel the burn of stomach acid at the back of my throat as I gag uncontrollably. My head spins, oxygen filling me with cool relief. For a moment, I lie spread-eagled as air soothes my burning chest and the ache of lactic acid fades from my

muscles. The sun has risen higher now, the dawn progressing to the beginnings of daylight, the sky crisp and fresh with reborn colour. The horizon is as empty as it is broad. In the distance, a speck of orange.

A boat.

The boat.

Salt makes my voice hoarse as I yell, “help!” my arms screaming afresh as I drive myself forwards, cutting into waves with desperate strokes as I battle towards the dinghy. It is bobbing away from me almost mockingly, but I cannot – *will* not – stop swimming, because Hadeem must be waiting there for me.

As I kick my legs for the thousandth time, I realise I must be gaining ground. I can hear the survivors now, I can hear their desperate cries as they skim their fingers through the water, searching for the hands of their loved ones in the deep. They call out names, but I can’t hear my own.

“I’m here!” I call. The words scrape at my throat as I force out the sound. They come out weak, overwhelmed by the sea’s own sighs. I call again, “I’m here! Over here! Help!”

Each new shout is a little louder and a little more frantic. I alternate between swimming and shouting as a deep aching spreads through my arms. Pushing farther, kicking faster, I grind my teeth against the pain. As I come up for air, I am met with a hush.

On the dinghy, the refugees are silent. They are listening.

“I’M HERE!” I holler. I chant the words like a prayer, over and over until they hear me. Finally, they hear me.

And then, across the vastness of the ocean, I hear the voice that will carry me home.

“Mira!”

Strong arms haul me skywards. The water loosens its grip. I am saved.

Nestled at the bottom of the boat, sodden and shaking, I revel in Hadeem’s warmth. The dinghy is less crowded now – I was not the only one tossed overboard. The few who remain watch the water with blank stares. Hands fidget anxiously, bereft of another to hold, as the desperate round of name-calling starts up again. I was the third they pulled from the ocean. It will release no more.

Hadeem whimpers. Though wordless, he speaks for us all. Our hearts whimper with him.

Tipping his head closer to mine, Hadeem whispers something. He asks for a story. He wants an adventure, one to take us far away from here. But I only have one story left.

We are refugees.

Trapped in the middle of a boundless ocean, we are helpless. Behind us is nothing but water, in front is only the sea, and in between is an endless expanse of waves. But still, we're moving forwards, because nothing can be worse than what we left behind.

The sun is fully risen now. It lifts away the water from my cheeks, leaving behind a crust of salt. My tongue feels dry and swollen, my throat parched. I'm wracked with shivers from the cold.

There are roughly thirty of us here, all of us running away – or, rather, running towards. We are running towards the Faraway Lands, where there are hospitals and schools and acres of supermarkets. We are running towards streets that are free from the rattle of gunfire and rubble-filled craters. We are running towards the future.

“Mira,” Hadeem whispers, gesturing to the horizon. If I squint hard enough, I can just make out a black line at the edge of the sky, like someone's scribbled on the clouds.

The prayers have quietened now, replaced by dazed mumblings as we squint at the shape in the distance. We gasp as one, afraid to speak, holding our hopes close to our hearts before the ocean can dash them once again. But the closer it gets, the clearer it becomes. It's really there. Without thinking, I rise to my feet, clinging to the side for support as I wave one arm high in the air.

There it is.

“Land.”

In 2017, 5000 refugees died at sea.
Approximately 600 of those were children.

AND THEN THE RAIN WILL COME FROM THE MOUNTAIN

Innocent Ilo

For Papa, wherever he may be.

I

This is how Papa paints.

In the evenings, when air collects at people's feet in chilly, invisible spools, he gathers his painting things to the balcony and sits in front of a rotting canvas. The numb fingers of his right hand grip the paintbrush, and the aluminium paint tray sways on his quivering left palm. Papa starts by making a whorl at the top left edge of the canvas. He twirls and twirls the paintbrush, concocting a riotous mesh of colours. It does not make sense. It does not make sense at all. Mama has always warned me never to disturb Papa when he is painting but I still linger, hiding behind the torn brocade curtain in the parlour.

They call Papa 'Agozie' – 'the Finder'. Many years ago, before I was even born, people used to flock to our house and beg him to draw maps for them. Nobody comes to our compound anymore, unless you count Mama Odera, who comes to buy Mama's vegetables, and the fishmonger who haggles all evening with Mama until he decides to part with some fish for the paltry sum Mama can offer.

It was two weeks ago when Mama finally agreed to tell me about Papa's painting. 'We'd just got married then and those people came in and out of

this house as if they owned it.’ Mama had laughed and cocked her head sideways when she said this. ““Please draw me a map” they’d say. “I want to find my wife's box of jewels”, “my grandfather's favorite sheep wandered off last night”, “my husband needs to find a perfect seed-shop in the market, the planting season is around the corner”. Ahhhhh.’

‘How does the map work?’

‘You have to let the map guide you, see its destination with your heart and not your mind. Something like that.’

‘What?’ I was confused.

‘That's what your father used to say before gifting someone a map. I don't understand the man I married.’

‘Why did they stop coming?’

Mama paused and cleared her throat. ‘It was Mama Alo. She asked for a map to find her son who went missing on the night of the Great Whirlwind. When the map couldn't find Alo, something inside your father died. He packed up his things and stopped painting, even though people begged him to continue, that one failed map wasn't enough to blot out all the good work he had done. But when you came, he started painting again in the evenings. He would sweat on a work for a whole week and then scrub the canvas clean when he'd finished.’

Today, the painting is almost done. From my hiding place behind the brocade curtain, it is clear now that Papa is painting a mountain. He has perfected the blue of the mountain's peak and what looked like spilt milk yesterday are now snowcaps. He is darkening the brown-brown skin of the elephants and buffalos grazing at the foot of the mountain.

‘Papa, come inside and eat,’ I say.

‘Who are you?’ he asks, baring the remains of his chequered teeth.

‘I live here,’ I tell him because I don't have the muscle to remind Papa that I am his son.

‘So we are like neighbours.’ Papa sets down the paint-tray on the floor. ‘You remind me of my son, Zim. He’s thirteen. Do you know him?’

‘Yes. We're good friends.’

‘My boy has started making friends. They grow up so quick, you know.’

‘What are you drawing?’

‘Mmili Mountain.’

‘The same one as in the bedtime stories mothers used to tell little children?’

‘Yes. There is a wispy line between bedtime stories and reality.’

‘So it's real. Where is it?’

‘Not just where, *when*.’ Papa gestures me to come closer to the painting. ‘There was a time when the entire town used to go there when the rains failed to come. The rains have never failed to come in centuries so everyone has forgotten about it. Deep inside these peaks, an endless stream of water flows.’ He runs his right middle finger along the painting, carefully skipping the portions where the paint is yet to dry. ‘Come, touch it.’

I obey.

‘Do you feel the water strumming beneath your finger?’

I do not feel anything but I nod my head.

‘Let me tell you something.’ Papa's voice dims to a whisper. ‘The rains are going to flee from the clouds and they are going to take the waters away from you. When they do, this map will guide you to the Mmili Mountain.’ He pauses to scratch off the paint flakes in his hair. ‘You have to let the map guide you ...’

‘...see its destination with your heart and not your mind.’

‘Such a smart boy. No wonder you're friends with Zim.’

Papa grips my hand and pulls me closer to him. His pupils look like a swirling blue sea has been trapped in them.

‘Now, you must listen and tell Zim all I am going to say. The rains will retreat from the clouds in Selemku when the one who keeps it safe goes to the mountains for eternal rest. It is Zim's duty to seek for the rains at Mmili Mountain and convince them that he is worthy to protect them like I did.’

Midnight. Papa calls Mama and me to come and see his finished painting. He never shows anyone his painting when he's done, we normally wake up in the morning to find out that he has scrubbed the canvas clean.

Papa's face has a ghostly glow as he talks about dying and how, by morning, he will crawl into the painting and return to the mountain. Mama and I stand beside him, chewing our tears.

‘We all came from the mountain and must go back there someday,’ Papa mutters before he grows cold.

II

The drought sets in a week after Papa's funeral. By the end of the month, the horizon casts a dry purple hue on Selemku as all the rains evaporate from the clouds. Wells start to run dry, the River Bambu becomes a pool of ash mingled with cow dung, and Tutukele Spring reeks of scorching death.

Neighbours whisper to each other behind closed doors, ‘It's Town Council that is taking all the water away from us, they did something to the clouds. That's why they hiked the taxes for the new reservoir.’ Only people who can afford the one thousand buzas per day get daily water rations from Town Council.

Mama and I leave our water cans on the rooftop at night to collect morning dew. But we always meet them drier than before. We give up. Mama puts an extra lock on Papa's cellar where we hide our water tank. People have started burgling and ravaging other people's houses in search of water, so we can never be too safe.

‘Always have a ready excuse for why your lips aren't chapped – say you always smear them with groundnut oil,’ Mama's voice resounds in my ear. ‘And hiccup from time to time when you're in the midst of people. Once they know we have water, they'll come here and steal it.’

The dreams that come at night, just before the barn owls retreat into their nests, is the only thing I look forward to these days. The first dream was on the night after Papa's funeral. It began with soft music prodding me and tickling my feet until I see myself many miles away from Selemku and at the foot of Mmili Mountain where Papa is riding on the back of an elephant. The path to the mountain is so warped, I do not even remember it when I wake up.

‘It's time for you to accept your quest and bring back water to Selemku,’ Papa would say in the dream.

‘Papa, you know it's only heroes that go on quests,’ I would reply. Look at my hands and legs – very feeble, like twigs. Boys like me are not heroes.’

Papa would laugh, that same laughter filled with grainy warmth. ‘You don't have to be a hero, Zim. The map has chosen you.’

III

It is Mama Odera who raps on our door early in the morning to remind Mama and me about the meeting at Town Council Hall. Mama double-checks the locks on the front door and the cellar before we leave the house. Townsfolk have been talking about the meeting for days now.

The hall is already jam-packed by the time Mama and I arrive. We have to squeeze and push our way through sweaty bodies to secure a seat. Mama and I struggle to hear ourselves over the din. Everybody is talking at once, demanding that the members of the Town Council come speak to us. We wait and wait and wait some more. Mama fans herself with the loose end of her lappah and tells me not to let anyone push me to the ground should a stampede ensue.

You don't have to be a hero, Zim. The map has chosen you. Papa's words begin to echo at the back of my head, increasing their tempo with every new echo. ‘I know how to bring water back to Selemku!’ A voice thunders across the hall. The din dies off and everyone turns to where the voice is coming from – me! I can swear I do not know how the words flew out of my mouth. Yes, I can remember thinking it, imagining myself saying it, but never did I think would actually have said it. The voice is deep, like a thousand rushing mountain winds, something that is alien to my thirteen-year-old tongue.

‘It's a boy. A silly, little boy. What does he know?’ A man in the crowd bawls.

‘Let him speak, unless you know how to solve this problem,’ the woman sitting next to Mama snaps back at the man.

‘Tell us, boy. Tell us.’ The crowd begins to chant.

‘My name is Zim, the son of Agozie, the Finder.’ Again, the strange voice possesses my tongue. ‘Before my father died, he told me about Mmili

Mountain.’

‘Wait, isn't that the same man who couldn't help Mama Alo find her son?’ The first man who spoke snickers.

‘Mmili Mountain only exists in the bedtime stories women tell children,’ another person says. ‘Apparently, someone took it too seriously. How will you get there?’

‘The map has chosen me,’ I say, without thinking.

‘What map?’

‘The—’

At this, Mama grabs my hand and begins to drag me out of the hall.

‘Let the boy speak!’ Someone yells from the front.

‘What does he think he's talking about?’ The first man retorts.

Mama shoves and pushes people aside to make way until we are out of the room.

‘We are going home,’ Mama says as we get to the bottom of the staircase. ‘Stop giving people false hope with the things your father told you. Ah, I warned you not to bother him when he painted in the evenings. You don't ever listen.’

‘Mmili Mountain is real. I've visited it so many times in my dreams. Papa is there.’

A line of tears breaks out of Mama's right eye. She wipes them away and forces out a smile. ‘Just like Agozie, you don't know where fantasy stops and when reality begins. I don't want to hear of this nonsense again.’

People have started trooping out of the hall. It is way into the afternoon and they are tired of waiting for Town Council members to come and talk to them. They point at me and make snide comments as they walk past.

IV

Our front door is unlocked when Mama and I get back home. She dashes into the house, towards Papa's cellar. By the time I catch up with her, she is sprawled on the cellar's wooden floor, beside our now empty water tank.

‘Who could have done this to us?’ Mama asks no one in particular. ‘Where will I get one thousand buzas for Town Council's water rations?’

Wails are also emanating from other compounds. The reason is the same – their homes have been broken into and their water reserve has been stolen. Mama pulls herself together and reties her lappah. She storms out of the house and joins a crowd gathering at the end of the street. I follow her. Someone from Town Council is addressing the crowd. He is holding a megaphone above his head so that the woman in front will not snatch it away from him.

‘We have exhausted the water in the new reservoir. Town Council decided to collect water from people who are hoarding it, in order to refill the new reservoir. The real enemies of the people are those who are hoarding water while the rest of us die of thirst.’

‘Hear! Hear!’ Someone yells at the back.

‘And we must round them up. Now. Now.’

No sooner had the man from Town Council finished talking than men in forest-green uniforms circled the crowd and started making arrests. One of them grabs Mama’s arms and twists them backwards.

‘Run!’ A voice says before pulling me away from the crowd.

I am running without looking back, without pausing to breathe, teardrops dripping on to my dusty feet. Images of the men snatching Mama up flash across my eyes. Where will they take her to? What will become of her? *Mama* ... We turn left at the end of Onwuhafor Street and hide inside an abandoned warehouse.

Mama Alo sinks down on an empty wooden crate. ‘What you said at Town Council Hall today, is it true?’ she asks. ‘Did your father really draw you a map to Mmili Mountain?’

‘Y-yes ...’ I manage to stutter.

‘Then you must follow the map and save us all.’

‘You ... you believe me, how? I thought Papa's map failed to lead you to your son.’

‘Your father's map took me to Ana Mmuo, the Land of the Spirits, where I found my son. I came back to Selemku too heartbroken to say Alo is dead, and I told everyone that your father's map couldn't help me find my son.’

Tears well up behind my eyes. ‘Why?’

‘I thought I could trick my mind into thinking he is still alive. You're too young to understand, Zim.’

‘But you broke Papa. You made him a laughing stock. He stopped believing in himself—’

Mama Alo lurches forward and clasps my mouth. She pulls me down and, with her free hand, gestures towards the crack in the wall. One of the men in forest-green uniform is patrolling beside the warehouse. She releases her hand over my mouth when the man takes the left bend to the next street.

‘It doesn't matter any more. I did a terrible thing many years ago. Zim, and I am sorry for that, but please ... You can save us all.’

‘I'll go if you tell the whole town you lied about Papa's map.’

Mama Alo stands up and walks towards the door. She sighs. ‘We have a deal.’

‘Let's make a pact.’

The woman yanks a tuft of hair from her afro and ties it with one of the silver strings wrapped around her wrists. ‘Take,’ she says, throwing the tuft of hair on the floor. I pick it up and stash it in my back pocket.

‘You have my word.’

‘Gotcha!’ It is the guard.

‘Run ... Run! I'll keep him here as long as I can,’ Mama Alo says as she hurls the wooden crate at the man.

I escape through the back door.

V

In all the stories Mama has told me about people saving a town, they were always *special* and chosen at birth by a prophecy. A prophecy that sometimes dated back to long before they were born. Boys, girls, men, women, all dubbed *the chosen one*, set off on their quest fully prepared, their backs turned on a bunch of hopeful townsfolk they are about to save, a bag of food and a water flask slung across their shoulder, their palms gripping a sword or a magic wand. These people are certainly not a barefoot

thirteen-year-old boy wearing a khaki shirt and shorts, with nothing in his pocket save for a tuft of hair and a painted map.

I am outside the town's rusty gate now; this is the first time I have gone through it. Mama used to point it out, the few times she took me uptown. My legs hurt from all the running. My feet burn on the blazing ground. I wish I had worn my sandals when I left the house to join the crowd with Mama. I want to stop to find food or water but my feet keep on walking like they have a mind of their own. They stop walking when I get to an oak tree where a figure-like-a-human is hunched over some dried leaves.

‘Ah, it's you, Zim,’ the figure says, even before I can greet.

‘How do you know my name?’

The figure turns to face me. An orange scar runs along the length of its chipped nose. ‘He's inquisitive. I like this one.’ It giggles and the leaves on the oak rustle back. ‘It's been a long time Agozie sent someone our way. Why did he take so long? Did the people of Selemku forget the old ways? After we led Mama Alo to her son, we waited and waited for another person to come.’

‘Who are you?’

‘We're Nduga. We will guide you to wherever the map is taking you.’

‘I'm going to Mmili Mountain.’

The figure frowns. ‘That's not a place for a young boy. Agozie couldn't find someone bigger?’

‘He's ...’

‘I know he is dead. You think we wouldn't know? You're too naïve – how will you be able to pass the Trail of Voices without looking back? How will you know which of the roads to take when you confront Anansi at the Great Crossroads?’ The Nduga shook its head. ‘But the map has chosen you, so who am I to disagree? Come here, Zim, sit. We have a lot to talk about.’

Nduga makes a small fire and cooks mushroom soup over it.

‘Eat up. Eat up,’ it says, setting the soup down.

The soup bowl is small but refills itself after each scoop until I am filled up. We sit and talk.

By nightfall, Nduga and the oak have disappeared. A calm I have never felt before nestles beside me. It is so soothing I do not remember when I fall asleep.

VI

Noon. I can see the Trail of Voices before me. It is a winding path that seems to go on forever.

‘Walk through it, don't stop, don't take a step backwards, and don't look back, no matter who you think is calling you.’ Nduga's words replay in my head.

I brace myself before taking a step forward.

‘Zim,’ a voice behind me calls. ‘It's Papa.’ A warm hand rests on my shoulder. ‘Come, let me show you something I painted.’

I hasten my pace. The voice becomes insistent, gnawing at the insides of my ear. It is crying now and howling.

‘Don't you want to see my painting? Nobody wants to see my painting, Zim.’ The voice snuffles. ‘Just a look. It's right behind you. Do it for Papa.’

The distraction causes me to miss the tree stump in front of me. I slam my right foot against it and let out a scream.

‘Is that you, Zim? It's Mama.’

Mama? It can't be ... I feel a sharp pang of longing in my chest, then remember where I am.

I hear someone breathing heavily and running towards me. I have to force myself to not turn back to look.

‘Look, you're bleeding. Let me tend to it. Just stop for a minute, Zim and listen to your poor mother.’

‘I wonder where he gets this stubbornness from?’ the first voice asks.

‘We may never know,’ the second voice – not Mama – replies.

I ignore them and continue walking.

The end of the trail is so near now, I can almost touch the arched udala tree at its exit.

‘I won't tell the townsfolk that I lied about your father's map,’ a third voice says.

I stop frozen in my tracks.

‘And when you bring back the rains to Selemku, nobody will ever believe that you did it.’

I try to take a step forward but my legs are as heavy as lead.

‘You think I'm bluffing because I sealed our deal with my hair? Where is the hair, Zim?’

I rummage through my pocket. The tuft of Mama Alo's hair is gone.

‘Give it back,’ I say, without turning round.

‘I dropped it behind you.’

My head becomes a sea of voices.

Don't stop, don't take a step backwards, and don't look back.

Listen to your Mama.

It's right behind you, Zim. Just turn and pick it up. Don't you want the townsfolk to know I lied about your father?

The voice of the Nduga drowns out the others and I cross beneath the arched udala tree. I feel in my pockets again and bring out the tuft of hair and hug it close to my chest. The bleeding from my feet has ceased. I sit on the ground and burst into tears. When I have emptied out all the tears inside me, I dust myself off and continue my journey.

Evening. The clouds are darkening and a distant rumble of thunder looms above. I need to find shelter before it starts raining. Quickly, I begin to scour the area for a suitable place to rest. The rain is already pouring down from the sky. I can barely see but I continue running until I slip and fall, muddling up myself in the dirt. I am too tired to stand so I lie there, hoping the rain will stop.

But the rain does not stop. Its watery strumming lures me to sleep.

VII

‘Not many people have come this far. Welcome to the Great Crossroads, Zim. The rain has led you here.’

I blink twice to make sure the voice is not a dream. A man is standing beside me. He has jet-black skin and is wearing a shiny black suit, so it is hard to tell where the suit stops and his skin begins. His teeth glisten in the

warm morning light. The nails of his fingers are so long they are grazing the ground. I know who he is.

‘I am Anansi, the Trickster. Nobles would pay a fortune to have me riddle their guests in their castles but I've chosen to guard the Great Crossroads.’

He offers his hand. I grab it and pull myself up, carefully avoiding the fingernails. We are standing at the intersection of two roads. One leads to Mmili Mountain, he tells me, the other leads one back home. Anansi knows which road is which. But he cannot be trusted. Nobody knows when he is lying or telling the truth but everyone knows he tells the truth and lies alternately.

‘Zim, son of Agozie, the Finder, you may proceed to Mmili Mountain, but only by facing the sharp wit of Anansi. For only I know the way.’

‘I...’

‘You may want to think deeply before you ask any question, for Anansi can only grant one answer to each traveller he meets at the Great Crossroads.’

Nduga had not told me what to ask at the Great Crossroads. It had only told me not to be quick to ask Anansi the obvious.

‘Zim,’ Nduga had said that night, ‘think and think and think until your head hurts, before you pose a question to Anansi.’

Anansi chuckles. ‘Take your time.’

I thought long and hard. I remembered the riddle games I would play with my friends. I shouldn't ask the obvious. I shouldn't ask the ...

‘I want to know which road you pointed at for the last traveller going to Mmili Mountain.’

Anansi points right.

‘Thank you,’ I say and start walking towards the left road.

‘Wait, where are you going?’ The Trickster looks confused.

‘To Mmili Mountain.’

‘How sure are you that's the right way?’

‘Anansi,’ I say, ‘if you lied to the last traveller and you are telling me the truth now, that means the left way is the way to Mmili Mountain. If

you're lying to me now but spoke the truth to the last traveller, that means the left road is also the way to Mmili Mountain.'

'That's not possible ... How did you ...? How could you ...? Someone has rivaled Anansi. I thought I was the wisest. Go away little boy, I underestimated you.' He breaks down and starts sobbing.

I wave him goodbye and disappear up the left road.

VIII

I am at Mmili Mountain. It is as magnificent as Papa painted it. The mountain's peaks are almost nudging the clouds. I do not know what I am supposed to do now. Neither the map nor Nduga gave me the slightest clue to this.

'Zim, you made it.' The voice is Papa's. I can see him now, sitting among the elephant and buffalo at the foot of the mountain. 'Now you must go back and bring the rains to Selemku.'

'How, Papa?'

'You came here, walked through the Trail of Voices, beat Anansi at his own game. Zim, you *are* the rain. Now go.'

IX

Anansi is still sobbing when I get back to the Great Crossroads. I pay him no heed and follow the right road, leading me straight to the town's gate. The town is quiet as I walk through it.

'Where is everybody?' I ask the little girl sitting at the feet of an old woman in front of an unpainted bungalow.

'They are at Town Council Hall, the water in the new reservoir has run out,' the girl says. 'Mama says I'm too small to go with them, that I have to look after Grandma.'

'Thank you.'

'Who are you? Wait, I know ... You're the boy Mama Alo says will bring back the rain. She has been telling everybody, but no one believes her. You're back. Have you brought the rain?'

‘I need to get to Town Council Hall, and fast.’ I run off before the little girl can ask me more questions.

Town Council Hall’s entrance is besieged by a sea of bodies. The concrete stairs tremble under their feet. They bang their balled fists against the hall's closed iron doors.

‘Give us water from the reservoir we paid taxes for!’ The townsfolk shriek, with voices packed full of gravel.

I manage to wriggle my way to the front.

‘Stop,’ I say in the voice of a thousand rushing mountain winds.

A hush falls on the crowd.

‘That's him, that's the boy Mama Alo says will bring back the rain to our town,’ they murmur under their breath.

‘I have journeyed to the ends of the earth where no one has been,’ I continue, stretching my hands out to the sky. The voice comes from deep within me; it is not my own. ‘I have fought and overcome the trepidation in the Trail of Voices. I have unraveled the mystery of the Great Crossroads, a mystery Anansi the Trickster has guarded for centuries. I am Zim, the son of Agozie, the Finder. I am the rain!’

A bustle of murmurs rises from the great crowd like a tide.

The clouds darken and the sky begins to rumble. Within a moment rain pours down in quantities no one has seen since the beginning of time. It rains and rains and rains, softening the parched ground, filling the waterholes, the River Bambu, and Tutukele Spring. It rains so much Town Council put up notices on our doors saying they are willing to pay people to use the water at the new reservoir. It rains so much the months of drought wash away from our memory. And I smile each time I look to the sky because I know Papa is somewhere behind the blue horizon, smiling back at me.

X

This is how I paint.

In the evenings, when air collects at people's feet in chilly, invisible spools, I gather my painting things to the balcony and sit in front of the rotting canvas. The fingers of my right hand grip the paintbrush and the

aluminium paint tray sits in my left palm. I start by making a whorl at the top left edge of the canvas. I twirl and twirl the paintbrush on the canvas, concocting a riotous mesh of colours. It does not make sense. It does not make sense at all. No one can tell what I am painting until I am done. Mama peeps out from behind the brocade curtain in the parlour, although she never admits it.

‘You have to let the map guide you, see its destination with your heart and not your mind,’ I say, as I show the map to whom it has chosen in the morning.

COLD

Ryan Bridges

Malcolm loved the temple. Its grand image was one of his first memories. Large, intimidating towers watched over the city. Magnificent stained-glass windows, depicting a blue phoenix rising from its ashes, looked upon the citizens like the glowing eyes of a giant. It was a marvelous scarlet edifice, rightfully named the Red Star Temple. The temple could be seen from anywhere in the city. It even outshone the king's palace, Blackrock Castle, a rather dull monolith made of black stone.

As the capital city, Redhaven was often filled with citizens going about their day, but none more so than early in the morning. The temple was so revered that all of the city's residents would congregate at its steps every morning for the scarlet hour, a dazzling moment when the sun's first light hit the temple. The sun would bathe the temple in its light and in return, the temple would glow a brilliant blood color, like a giant red star. The citizens would watch in awe and pray to their god during this hour.

Today, the crowds were packed thick, but all made way for Malcolm. He smiled at the mothers with their children and nodded at the men at their work. When he reached the temple Malcolm took the obsidian steps two at a time. He was eager to see his adopted father.

Religion was held deeply within the heart of every citizen of Redhaven. It was also held deeply in Malcolm's heart. He was orphaned as a child and left at the Red Star Temple, where he was raised by the High Priest himself, Saint Jonathan Fireborne. The saint graciously taught him how to worship the Burned God, and Malcolm eagerly learned. Saint Fireborne was like a

father to him. So when he sent a message to Malcolm telling him to report to the temple, Malcolm immediately came.

The inside of the temple was just as impressive as the outside. Elaborate tapestries and paintings of the God of Flame setting his enemies ablaze hung from the halls. The god's righteous flames burned all that stood in his way and those who opposed him screamed in agony. This was Malcolm's home.

His surrogate father was kneeling at the main altar, silently praying. Crimson robes with gold trim pooled around his prone form. Malcolm didn't want to disturb Jonathan's prayer, so he respectfully stood aside and waited for him to finish. When he was done, the holy man struggled to rise. It was moments like these that reminded Malcolm of how old Jonathan was. He was sixty when he took in Malcolm, but Malcolm was no longer a child. Jonathan was eighty now.

Malcolm quickly raced over and took Jonathan's arm. Once the elder was standing under his own strength, he gently patted Malcolm's face in gratitude. 'Thank you, my child. It seems as though I need help with everything nowadays.'

Jonathan's voice was weak and hoarse. It pained Malcolm to see him like this. The Jonathan he remembered as a child had a strong, clear voice. He had a head of thick silver hair. He was a strong man who would often lift Malcolm on to his shoulders. Now, his hair was sparse and pale white. His skin was like translucent paper, revealing a spider web of blue veins underneath. His body was fragile and in constant pain.

'It is my duty as a knight,' Malcolm said, trying to hide his discomfort. His rose-colored armor clinked as he fidgeted with his feet.

'Yes, I remember the day you became a Knight of Flame,' the old man said with a nostalgic smile.

'You blessed me with the holy ashes yourself.' Malcolm remembered that day fondly.

'Never was a man more deserving of the honor and never a father more proud.'

As Jonathan spoke Malcolm bowed his head at the praise.

The saint's smiling face had now adopted a serious look. 'You've been a knight for two years now my son, it is time to prove your worth to the church.'

'What would you have me do, Your Holiness?' Malcolm asked.

'We have recently received disturbing reports of abductions and an unnatural presence settling over the village of Sparkhill. Villagers shiver in their sleep. Their own breath becomes visible at night. My son, I need to tell you that what they are experiencing is *cold*.'

Malcolm gasped. The threat of cold was only ever spoken of in legend. It felt alien and unruly to the mind of a child of Redhaven.

'This sensation is often a sign of the Followers of Frost,' Jonathan continued. 'Along with this, a total of twelve villagers have gone missing within two months.'

This too was surprising news. The appearance of Followers of Frost was a rare occurrence. They worshipped the Cold One, the sworn enemy of the Burned God. Malcolm had always been told that these heretics wished to bring down the entire country. They wanted to end the Age of Summer and bring the world into an Age of Winter.

'The rumors also say that they are trying to bring the Son of Winter into the world.'

This shocked Malcolm to his core. The Son of Winter was said to be the herald of the Cold One. The Cold One would lead an army and attempt to create an everlasting winter that would freeze the entire world. The legend also spoke of the Son of Summer, whose identity would be revealed upon the arrival of the Son of Winter. This son was the champion of the Burned God. These two champions would battle for the fate of the world and whoever won this fight would open the way for their respective god to rule.

Malcolm had always thought the Son of Winter was a monster, conjured up to scare children, but many people in Redhaven believed that Malcolm was the Son of Summer. Malcolm had secretly hoped that they were right.

'You do realize what this could mean if these rumors prove true? Don't you?' the saint asked, interrupting Malcolm's thoughts.

'Yes, sir,' Malcolm quickly answered.

‘If these fanatics are preparing to welcome the Son of Winter, we must stop it before it begins.’

Malcolm solemnly nodded at his master’s statement.

‘Kneel, my child.’

He hurriedly followed the saint’s command.

Saint Fireborne pulled a scroll from the sleeve of his gold-and-red robe. ‘Sir Malcolm Darkfire, I give you the task of investigating these rumors and abductions in Sparkhill and reporting your findings back to the church.’ The priest’s voice spoke of how important this mission was. It filled Malcolm with pride that he was trusted this much. ‘For this mission, you will speak with the king’s voice and act with the king’s power. Do you accept this task?’ Jonathan asked.

‘Yes, your holiness,’ Malcolm replied, without hesitation.

Fireborne gripped Malcolm’s head in his shaking hands. The elder’s pale hand contrasted dramatically with Malcolm’s bronze skin. Malcolm’s entire being was a contrast when it came to his adoptive father – his black eyes with Jonathan’s off-white, half-blind ones. His coal-colored hair with Jonathan’s milk-colored, thin locks. Youth with age. Strong with weak. Master with student.

‘Good luck, my son. May the Burned God guide you.’ The religious man then softly kissed Malcolm’s forehead and handed him the scroll.

It took about a week for Malcolm to reach Sparkhill. When he first left Redhaven, Malcolm had been finely dressed, adorned in the lively red, gold, and yellow of the church. He soon noticed that this provided him with far too much attention and he quickly decided to dress down. He stopped at a village about two miles south of Sparkhill and bought brown clothes of wool that were customary for a peasant. When he came to town he was just another poor traveler looking for work. This would make his investigation a lot smoother; for the past five years, the countryside had been full of men and women in hungry mobs looking for employment.

Sparkhill was a small mining town. Nothing about it stood out. Mediocre houses were randomly scattered around and small farms mundanely decorated the countryside. Sparkhill was nothing compared to

the behemoth that was Redhaven. There were only about a hundred or so people living in Sparkhill, while Redhaven had hundreds of thousands.

The first thing Malcolm needed to do was gain information on the missing twelve. His feet trudged along the dirt road as he made his way to a farmhouse just outside the town. It was a painfully simple structure made entirely of wood with two small windows at the front. As he got closer, Malcolm watched a small child poke his head out of one of the windows then quickly run off deeper into the house. When Malcolm reached the front door and knocked, he heard voices arguing. Malcolm had his fist raised to knock again when the door opened about halfway. A middle-aged man with brown hair and a grey beard blocked most of the opening with his body. He jumped when he saw Malcolm's raised fist.

'What do you want?' asked the man. Malcolm could hear the suspicion and fear in his voice. He was about to recite the lie he had been preparing during his trip when he was cut off by a shrill voice.

'Are you with the church? We told you people last time we got nothing left to give!'

Malcolm hadn't even noticed the woman standing a few feet behind the man. She was much older than the man, probably his mother. Her body was trembling but her green eyes stayed focused on Malcolm. In her shaking right hand, she carried a large kitchen knife. With her left, she was holding the boy that Malcolm had seen in the window behind her skirt. Malcolm was a little surprised to see that the boy had a crude wooden club clutched in his small hands. The man turned his head but kept his body toward Malcolm.

'I told you to keep quiet!' The man's hands were hidden behind the door. Malcolm realized he probably carried a weapon of some kind too. These people were obviously expecting trouble but Malcolm wondered why they were worried about the church. He cleared his throat. He didn't want this to spiral out of control.

'I don't mean to cause any trouble, sir. I just came into town and was hoping if you knew if there was any work going,' said Malcolm. The man looked conflicted and kept glancing at the sword Malcolm kept on his belt. It was as if he was trying to find the trick in Malcolm's question. His mother decided to answer for him.

‘There’s probably some work at the mine since those men disappeared.’

The man hissed at his mother without turning to look. Malcolm gave a reassuring smile and thanked them for their help. Before he was even a foot away from the house he heard the door slam and the arguing started again but much louder.

Malcolm spent the better half of a day questioning the other townsfolk in the same way. Not a soul had heard or seen anything strange on the days of the abductions. Farmers, shopkeepers, and miners alike all reported the same thing. Many had assumed that the missing had simply packed up and left for hotter fires without telling anyone. Not even family members of the missing could add more to the story. Each person Malcolm asked acted in the same suspicious and scared way as the first man and his mother.

Malcolm thought hard about his findings – for twelve people to go missing in such a small town without any clues meant two things, he realized. Firstly, that there must have been multiple kidnappers, possibly an organized group. This did point to the Followers of Frost as the culprits. Secondly, that the abductors were in high positions of power within the town. It would be the only way for the abductors to kidnap and possibly dispose of people without anyone knowing. He learned that the only people in Sparkhill with that kind of power would be the governor, Susan Brightflame, and the captain of the guard, Caleb Redstone. Those two had enough power and influence to do whatever they wanted. The only connection between the people who had been abducted was that seven of the missing twelve had been employees of the local mine. All seven had disappeared during their shift inside the mine. This added the mine’s owner, Rodrick Ashlife, to Malcolm’s list of suspects. One of the townsfolk mentioned an abandoned section of the mine that would be the perfect place for the abductors to stow away their victims.

Having theories and suspects was all good and well but it meant nothing if he didn’t have any hard evidence. Malcolm knew he would have to find something to link Susan, Caleb, and Rodrick to the abductions and decided that searching the mines would be the best place to start.

With a plan formed, Malcolm waited until night fell and headed down into the mines, a sword at his hip and a torch in his hand. After about a

minute of walking, his torch began to flicker and fade. He cursed when the fire was extinguished. No light entered the cave, so Malcolm was plunged into a world of darkness. He thought of Saint Fireborne and his milky white eyes, stumbling blindly around the cathedral. This must be what life was like for his adoptive father, he realized. The thought made Malcolm's chest ache but he pushed on deeper into the mine all the same. Knights of Flame know not how to retreat.

After an hour of searching through the dark, Malcolm's blindness was ended when he saw a faint blue light up ahead of him. Following the light, Malcolm finally found what he had been looking for. From a relatively safe hiding spot, he watched as ten figures in total, all wearing powder-blue cloaks trimmed with white that hid their features, stared at a shimmering sapphire light emanating from the hand of one of the group.

The cloaked figures lowered their hoods and began a chant that echoed throughout the dark cavern. Their chant was musical in nature and filled with desperation. Like someone longing for the embrace of a lover or a lost child calling for its mother. The beauty and sorrow of it all caused tears to well in Malcolm's eyes. He suddenly had the intense urge to go home and tell Saint Fireborne that he loved him. But he didn't. He wiped the tears away and bit the inside of his cheek. Malcolm forced himself to stay and watch.

The moment the hoods came down Malcolm's suspicions were confirmed. He could assume, from the descriptions given to him by the villagers, that three of the members were Susan Brightflame, Caleb Redstone, and Rodrick Ashlife. Caleb was a redhead in his thirties. He had a lean face and a hard jaw. Rodrick was much older and bigger than Caleb. A brown-haired man with a touch of grey in his beard and at his temples. He had a second chin that touched his chest. Susan had hair like spun gold and looked to be about the same age as Rodrick. In her hand she held the source of the sapphire light – a glossy, transparent rock with a sharp edge that reminded Malcolm of a shard of glass.

This changed the magnitude of the situation. It was clear now that Followers of Frost had established a foothold in the country, and three of its members had risen to the highest positions of power in this village. Sparkhill was small, but who knew how many other towns and villages the

Followers had wormed their way inside. They could even be within the walls of Redhaven.

As he watched, a strange feeling came upon Malcolm. His body began to shiver and his breath came out in white puffs. The small hairs on his arms began to stand on end and his skin pebbled. Malcolm had read books on this bizarre phenomenon. It was the same feeling that the villagers of Sparkhill had reported. Those reports were what started Malcolm on his journey. He was experiencing *cold* first hand.

Malcolm focused on the glassy rock. It wasn't a rock ... It was ice! An object he had never seen before, only read about. Was that where the horrid sensation was coming from? This was more than enough evidence. He moved quietly back into the darkness of the mine, away from the blue light and away from the *cold*.

When he was outside once more, he raced to the village's hawk coop. Malcolm wrote down his findings then tied the message to the thin legs of a messenger hawk. The bird swiftly took flight, back to the Red Star Temple.

His mission was done. All Malcolm had to do now was to wait for reinforcements. He should be content. He had succeeded. He had proved himself as a Knight of Flame, but desire gnawed at his being. He wanted more. He always wanted more. He wanted to be the Son of Summer. If he stopped the Followers of Frost now, that would prove that he was the Burned God's champion. Malcolm could already imagine the look of pride on Saint Fireborne's face. The way the crowds would cheer his name during his homecoming. It was all so vivid and within his grasp.

With ambition leading the way, Malcolm went back into the mine. This time he didn't bother with a torch. What would be the point? He paid no mind to the darkness around him, for he knew where he was going and he knew what he would do.

Malcolm felt the *cold* creep in around him before he saw the light. The Followers were still chanting their heartbreaking song but Malcolm felt nothing this time. His heart was awash in fire and no sorrow or beauty could reach it. Malcolm drew his longsword and marched toward the cloaked figures. The weight of the red handle of his sword was familiar in his hands. Before anyone could react Malcolm slashed at one of the figure's back. The figure's cloak split like paper as the blood poured from the

wound. The Follower turned toward his attacker as he fell and Malcolm saw that it was Ashlife. He screamed for only a moment before he went still.

While the other nine were staring dumbfounded at their dead comrade, Malcolm turned to his right and attempted to run the next enemy, Redstone, through the chest. The captain of the guard proved to be a better opponent than Ashlife. He was half the portly man's age and probably three times as fit. Redstone sidestepped the thrust with the instinct of a warrior. He shrugged off the powder blue cloak and revealed the black leather that he wore underneath and the sword at his hip.

Malcolm heard a female voice and assumed it belonged to Susan Brightflame.

'You three, get the others!' She barked out the orders with the confidence of someone used to command.

Three of the Followers ran past Malcolm without complaint. It hurt his pride to let them escape but he couldn't risk turning his back to Redstone and the others. There was an unnatural silence as no one moved. For a few moments, they just stared at each other. Malcolm gripped his sword with both hands, its tip pointed at the six remaining Followers. Redstone still had his sword sheathed but stood in a ready stance. Every now and then he would spare a glance at Rodrick Ashlife's body. A pool of blood was spreading underneath the corpse. There was restrained grief in the man's face. The four guards stood in front of Susan Brightflame. She stood tall and leveled a steady gaze at Malcolm but he noticed the hesitation in her stare. She stepped forward past the guards.

'You're not stupid. One of you. Six of us with more to come. Yield.' There was a little bit of desperation in her voice but it was eclipsed by the force of the command.

Malcolm's only response was to rush Redstone with the point of his sword. The captain ducked under Malcolm's swing and he could almost swear that he heard Redstone sigh before he drew his blade. All the others removed their cloaks except Brightflame, who chose to stay cloaked, holding the ice shard. The four guards, two women and men, all wore black leather, similar to Redstone. They unsheathed their swords and began circling Malcolm. He charged at the one to his left and clashed blades. Malcolm was staring into the eyes of a woman with a scar on her nose. He

saw another guard try to move in on his right side. Malcolm kicked at the knee of the female guard to his left and felt the bone snap. She collapsed on the ground with a scream.

Malcolm pivoted to his right, parried the other guard's swing and shoulder-tackled him. They both hit the ground but Malcolm found his footing first and stabbed the guard in the chest. He jerked violently for a moment before going still. Malcolm looked up and saw Redstone moving towards him with quick steps. Malcolm decided to run at Redstone headlong. The two started trading blows but it wasn't long before Malcolm realized that Redstone outclassed him by a large margin. Every attack was blocked without effort. But then it dawned on Malcolm that Redstone was actually pushing him back with nothing but parries. When Redstone would force open Malcolm's defense, one of the other guards would only make small cuts on Malcolm's arms and legs. It was like they were afraid to cause any real damage.

As the fight wore on, Malcolm's swings became more desperate and haphazard. His cheap peasant clothing ripped easily, the brown wool of his clothes soaking up his blood. The *cold* made his teeth chatter and he could barely keep his eyes open.

Malcolm never saw Redstone throw the final punch but he definitely felt it. He hit the stone ground hard and the taste of copper suddenly filled his mouth. His sword clattered on the ground, still within his reach until one of the guards kicked it away. In his daze, Malcolm heard Redstone speak. 'Pick him up. It's time to bring an end to this madness.'

Two guards each grabbed an arm and dragged Malcolm over to Brightflame. She still held the ice shard in her hand tenderly.

Held down on his knees before her, Malcolm expected to see hate and disgust strong enough to match his own, but he only saw pity and disappointment.

Malcolm's shivering became much worse now that he was so close to the glowing chunk of ice. The left side of his face was beginning to swell. It was difficult but he managed to speak.

'Do you plan to kill me like you did the others?' he asked.

Brightflame refused to meet his eyes, but the genuine emotion with which she spoke could not be denied.

‘All those that died did so to bring you here, Darkfire. Even if they didn’t know it, they all died for an honorable cause.’ She made a sweeping motion with her arm toward Ashlife and the dead guard.

‘And what cause is that?’ Malcolm spat.

Redstone stepped forward and answered for her. ‘The only cause worth the sacrifice of life. Freedom. Freedom from the church. Freedom from the church’s puppet king. Freedom to control our own lives.’ Redstone spoke without spite. There was only conviction in his voice.

Brightflame looked to Redstone and for a moment Malcolm was forgotten. ‘It’ll all be worth it in the end.’ Her voice was soft. It was almost as if it was a question.

Redstone placed a firm hand on her shoulder and nodded his head.

To be confronted with failure was something new to Malcolm. Despite the *cold*, sweat was collecting on his forehead and mixing with the blood. He was afraid to die here alone. He closed his eyes.

His eyes flew open again at a tearing pain in his chest, sharp and unfathomable. He looked down to see that Brightflame had stabbed the ice shard deep into his heart. No blood came from the wound. The once-blinding light of the ice began to fade and the world grew darker. Malcolm could feel a terrible sensation run through his body. Before he blacked out he saw tears in Brightflame and Redstone’s eyes.

When Malcolm came to he felt horrible. The bloody brown wool of his clothes stuck to his body and itched in a terrible way. The dozens of cuts that had littered his limbs were gone. He noticed that the ice that was stuck in his chest was gone as well. There wasn’t even a wound to prove that it had been there. The only evidence left was the deep pain that persisted in his heart. He felt the rough stone and smelled stale air and knew he was still in the mines. There was nothing around him but the darkness. It took hours of stumbling, but Malcolm eventually made his way outside.

Large plumes of black smoke filled the air as an inferno devoured Sparkhill. On unsteady feet, Malcolm walked into the burning village.

Yellow, red, and orange flames licked at the surrounding buildings and homes, charring them black, yet no matter how close to the flames he got, he could feel no heat. Malcolm saw villagers screaming and crying. He saw them looting and fighting. He saw them carrying burned children away from the fire. He also saw his fellow Knights of Flame setting any untouched structures to the torch and fighting figures in powder-blue cloaks. They must have received his message. If Followers of Frost were found in a town it was customary to burn the town to the ground.

Malcolm walked through the fire but was not burned. The only thing he could feel was a familiar sensation that he hated. Anytime a knight or Follower would see Malcolm they would stop and stare. The Followers would drop to their knees and bow before him. The knights would just look at him with mouths agape. Their eyes held nothing but fear edged with hate. Malcolm was confused – these people were his friends and brothers. Then he caught a glimpse of his image in the shattered window of a store. His fragmented reflection revealed a terrible truth.

His coal-colored hair was now white, his black eyes were now blue, and his bronze skin was now sickly and pale. Feeling the ground grow slick under his feet he looked down. It was icing over, and quickly. Strong winds blew as white flakes began to fall from the sky. Malcolm identified the flakes as snow. Snow hadn't been seen in the world for more than four hundred years, and, now that he thought about it, neither had ice. In no time at all, the fires were snuffed out and buildings were encased in snow and ice. The whole town was frozen.. All around him Followers of Frost surrounded him chanting their painfully beautiful song. Malcolm recognized Redstone and Brightflame within the melancholy choir, and it was then that he knew it was true. He would never be the Burning One's champion.

Malcolm finally figured out the sensation he was feeling. He was... *'cold'*. For Malcolm Darkfire was the Son of Winter.

ROT

Magdalena Deniz

The first thing I buried was a rabbit carcass, its bones still drenched in saliva.

It had been a messy kill, the knife too big in my unskilled hands and the poor creature too jumpy for me to get a clean slice across its throat. I'd clenched its ears in my fist, hard, and forced the knife right through its fragile neck. Blood, warm and sticky, spurted out from the wound and on to my fingers. I'd felt the warmth of life crust underneath my nails.

The men we traveled with were happy to feast on meat, but they weren't happy to hear I was the one who killed the game. They thought I was too young, that if I'd been older than my ten years, I might've come back with something bigger; if I was faster, I would've gotten a cleaner kill with more meat. Pa really got mad when he heard that one.

'My son is a man now,' he announced. He stood tall and strong like a stone wall, and I found myself clinging to the back of his shirt and peeking out from behind like a small child. 'And you will treat him with the same respect you show towards me.'

Even the crickets seemed to understand that no one was allowed to speak when Pa was talking like that. I tried to melt into Pa's side. The men stared at my dirty hands and face, my ripped clothes showing the blistering sunburn on my shoulders. Charles, our leader, spit into a tin before swiping another glob of snuff into his mouth, holding it in his cheek as he glared at me. The rabbit meat suddenly came alive in my stomach and bounced all

around my insides, scratching its way out. I understood exactly how the rabbit must've felt, its foot caught in the snare, trembling and waiting for something to happen.

'Fine,' Charles drawled. He always drawled. 'But yer son's gunna take them bones 'n bury 'em good 'n deep. Don't need no bears comin' round.'

'Course,' Pa agreed. He reached behind himself and pulled me away like he was separating tree sap from the bark of a maple. 'He can do that,' he said, but he was looking at me when he spoke, and the meaning was clear: I was a man now, and I had to do difficult things without complaining.

They dumped the tiny rabbit bones into a small burlap sack and tossed it into my arms with clear instructions to get rid of them somewhere else. All the talk about bears frightened me, so I walked until I could barely see the smoke of the fire in the sky before I picked a spot. The last time I had dug a hole was back in Missouri on the farm, to plant all the half-eaten apples and peaches and plums in hopes that they would become trees. Then all the pigs got sick and we no longer had any meat to sell, and a few days later Charles passed by and told Pa about all the gold out West and how if he wanted to find his fortune, well then he better saddle up.

When we left Missouri, a piece of my soul crumbled. But I couldn't say anything about it because I was still a boy, hadn't even killed a measly rabbit, and Pa talked about the gold like he used to talk about getting a new horse or fixing his daddy's old gun. His eyes got so big they sparkled like the top of a lake. I had never seen him look that way before. So when he spent the last of the money we had on a simple wagon to be drawn by our only ox, I climbed in. For the first few days, I was as enamored as Pa at the idea of gold and new beginnings. Then weeks passed, and everything that was once new lost its shine, and all I wanted was to go home.

I kneeled down on a hill covered in crab grass and looked for a spot to dig. I clutched the rabbit's rib, small enough to fall out through a tiny hole in the burlap. The bone had been scratched and gnawed at by large, rough teeth. Even the marrow, light and soft, had been sucked dry. Charles said he didn't want any bears coming into camp and eating us whole. I understood that. I felt that way all the time, nothing more than a sleeping nomad,

unaware of the towering predators that could pounce and devour me at any given moment.

Three weeks after I buried the rabbit, someone new joined our group. John Reynolds from Kansas was traveling to Oregon for the same reason as everyone else—to chase the promise of gold. He smiled wide with mustard-brown teeth and smelled like the stuff Charles always drank come nighttime, bottled amber like liquid sun. His blue eyes were buggy and tinted yellow in the corners, but no one said anything about it. After two days, I saw him cough up a glob of red into a stained handkerchief. He raised a finger to his lips and winked. I didn't mention it to Pa until we were curled up on the scratchy blankets in the back of our wagon.

'Don't say nothing 'bout that, now,' he told me when I whispered about the new stranger and how much he scared me. 'Men respect one another's business. He'll find his own course soon enough.' I nodded, but what I really wanted to do was shake Pa's shoulders and ask, *When will we find our course?*

Mr. Reynolds bore gifts. Plums, plucked from a tree he had passed on an adjoining trail. We had been slowly rationing the last of our food for days. He gave me three in secret and told me to hide them in my pockets until I could run off and eat them alone. When I told him I had no pockets, he chuckled and told me to stuff them down my trousers instead. I tucked the fruit into the waistband of my pants and pulled my rope-belt tight so they wouldn't fall out and roll away. Then I ran, just like Mr. Reynolds said, and he laughed until he coughed so loudly that it followed me up the entire hill.

I took bites so large and ate so fast that I had to lay down on the grass, rubbing my hand over my round, protruding belly in order to stop it from aching. I stared at the sun and the thin clouds spinning around it. For the first time, I considered myself in comparison to the whole world—the earth and sun and moon and all the little white stars I traced in the sky on nights when I couldn't sleep—and found myself staring at the plum pits piled up beside me. Chunks of fruit still hung on them and ants were already lining up. I was nothing more than the fiber of fruit left on the abandoned plum pit.

I woke up to shouting. The moon was full and bright above me as I stumbled up to my feet and looked down the hill. Embers still glowed in the camp-fire, illuminating two figures wrestling with one another, their hands scrabbling to grab necks and torsos—anywhere they could reach and maim. The horses were panicking, trying to tear themselves away from the trees we had tied them to; one had broken free. And then I saw Charles, gut sticking out and burly arms like thick tree branches sprouting from an even thicker trunk. In his hands, a gun.

I couldn't understand what was being shouted, but I knew everyone else in the camp was undoubtedly awake. Hurriedly lit lanterns helped me identify Mr. Reynolds by his stringy orange hair, and it took only one glance at the tall, lean man tackling and pinning him to the ground before I was screaming.

‘Pa!’

Pa looked up, wide, furious eyes meeting mine as I stumbled down the hill to him, and that's when Mr. Reynolds bit Pa, right on the wrist, and Pa screamed as loud and as wretched as the pigs back home. Charles grabbed me then and held me back, his thick hand curling over my entire shoulder, holding me tight against his side as Pa leaned all his weight down on Mr. Reynolds, who was trying to wriggle free. He shook and convulsed on the ground like a worm drowning in a puddle of rain, and when Pa wouldn't let go, he just dug his teeth further into Pa's wrist, blood bubbling up into his mouth and pooling around his yellow teeth. Pa had his large, worn hands circled around Mr. Reynolds' throat, and the soft, pale skin between his thumb and index finger turned white with how hard he pressed down, and the knees of his trousers slid around in the dust like it was water. I thought back to the coyotes I'd see sometimes on the trail, the pups rolling over each other in play. This was different. This was Pa, trying desperately to pin a wild man down. This was Mr. Reynolds smiling like he was about to eat Pa alive.

Without thinking, I ran forward and attached myself to Pa's back, trying desperately to pull him off of Mr. Reynolds, to get him away, but Mr. Reynolds had dug his teeth in good and deep, and he wasn't letting go. Looking over Pa's shoulder, I saw Mr. Reynolds, his thinning hair mangled

with the brittle dirt, the corners of his eyes bright yellow and his nose stained with blood and crust, pull away from Pa's wrist and spit out a piece of flesh, then bite right in again. He was an animal fighting to throw Pa off, jumpy like a diseased rabbit, all twitchy and wrong.

Behind me, Charles said, 'Get back, son.'

I kept pulling frantically at Pa. My whole stomach twisted itself into knots. I felt like that worthless piece of plum still stuck to its pit, clinging and clinging until the end of the world. Mr. Reynolds laughed like a mad man.

'Get back, I said!' Charles yelled. His meaty hand squeezed around my thin arm and he threw me to the ground. Charles spit and drawled, 'I don't much respect thieves.'

The tall grass prevented me from seeing, but I still heard the hefty crunch of Mr. Reynolds' skull caving in from Charles swinging the butt of his rifle down on to it. I saw the clawed fingers scratching at Pa's throat fall limply to the earth. Pa reached towards me with his hurt hand, a sizeable chunk missing from the inner part of his wrist, and I vomited up acidic plum and rabbit right in the bushes.

The second thing I buried was Mr. Reynolds.

In his possessions, hidden under the remaining plums that had begun to rot, was a debt collector's note, and various trinkets he had picked off of almost everyone in our company. Charles grumbled something about desperate men and the disasters they make, and then returned everything that Mr. Reynolds had stolen.

'He was a sick man,' Pa told me, 'but he's gone now, and we're okay.' His hand was wrapped in cloth, but that couldn't hide how he began to favor his left arm. He would turn restlessly in his sleep and wake up covered in sweat, thirsty for water that he would only throw up later.

Over the next few days, Pa began to cough. Finally, he pulled away his hands and simply stared at the speckles of red that coated his palms. He stared at me, shocked and stunned silent, and I recognized the yellow that had leached across the corners of his eyes. Before he could wipe his hands, Charles passed by, and then his gun was out. My ears rang like a hundred

angels were singing right inside my head, and nothing was okay. On the ground, Pa was unmoving, the hole in his head spilling blood on to the earth. Ants crawling over blades of grass marched by, and every time I blinked, I saw the rabbit, its small body lying crooked as I plunged the knife into its neck. I looked up at Charles and the gun that dangled limply at his side.

‘The last thing we need,’ Charles said to me, ‘is another livin’ man drove mad by a fever that’ll kill ’im anyway.’ And then he turned away.

The third thing I buried was Pa.

That night I crawled on to the blankets that were once ours but were now only mine. I closed my eyes and tried to dream of Missouri like I used to do during the nights when I missed home. But now I missed Pa more than anything I had ever missed before, and instead I dreamed about rotten rabbit flesh falling in clumps from the sky and landing as heavy as plum pits. I ate the rotted meat until my stomach bulged and my tongue turned gray and a lump formed in my belly that opened up and wriggled around like a worm. In the center of my chest, a tree began to grow, ripping apart my flesh and bursting out towards the sky, and all of the parts I had—my lungs and intestines and veins and arteries and plum-tree roots—weren’t there any more. I was just an empty shell.

Just another thing to bury.

About the Author of Tomorrow Award

Established in 2015, The Wilbur and Niso Smith Foundation is a charitable organisation dedicated to empowering writers, promoting literacy and advancing adventure writing as a genre. As part of our mission, we award the annual Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize.

The prize has three distinct categories aiming to find, recognise and support the best aspiring and established adventure writers today. Awards go to the best published adventure novel of the last calendar year, the best unpublished adventure manuscript, and the Author of Tomorrow – an author aged 21 years or under who has submitted a short piece of adventure writing.

All the stories included in this anthology were shortlisted for the 2019 Author of Tomorrow.

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