

STRENGTH, SACRIFICE AND SEA MONSTERS



**TEN FURTHER TALES OF
REMARKABLE ADVENTURES**

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Strength, Sacrifice and Sea Monsters

Ten further tales of remarkable adventures

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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.

Awards go to the best published adventure novel of the last calendar year, the best unpublished adventure manuscript, and the Author of Tomorrow – an author aged 21 years or under who has submitted a short piece of adventure writing.

The young writers are awarded prizes in three categories: 11 years old and under, 12-15 years old and 16-21 years old. This anthology includes the winning and the shortlisted stories for the 2021 Author of Tomorrow.

www.wilbur-niso-smithfoundation.org

AUTHOR OF TOMORROW | 11 years old and
under

Burning

Aaron Ding

Winner of the category

Flames.

They're the only thing I can see through my visor – red, blazing limbs flailing wildly through the ash-choked air, a suffocating, warping mess of scarlet. I crawl through thick plumes of smoke, my sight blurred to red spots and faint black silhouettes vaguely outlining my surroundings.

'Is anyone here?' I yell above the relentless roaring of the fire.

No response.

The house groans and shudders, its foundations being eaten by unforgiving jaws. I stumble through the searing heat, sweat dripping down my face. Another flaming beam of wood crashes down beside me. My oxygen tank beeps, a warning of the dwindling amount of fresh air I've got left.

I need to get out of here.

As I'm about to turn back, I hear something. A faint, but terrified cry.

I run towards the sound. Indistinct silhouettes of a table and chairs appear then disappear around me. Through the smoke, I see the hazy outline of a doorway, blocked by rubble and wood. With all the strength I can muster, I ram the debris, my shoulder pushing through.

A girl appears, huddled in the corner of her room. A layer of soot blankets her face.

'Mummy?' Her teddy bear hangs sadly from her tight, trembling hands.

I shake my head. 'Are you okay?' I say, crouching next to her. She shrinks away from me, and I wonder what I look like; a monstrous, ash-coated figure emerging from the fire.

I move closer, patting her bear on the head. 'What's he called?'

'It's a she. She's called Abby.'

‘Okay. Well, we’re going to have to get Abby out of here, do you understand?’

She nods. The house groans again, and fragments of plaster fall from the ceiling.

‘Hold my hand, and get ready.’

Then, suddenly, the roof shakes and my shoulders crumple. I yell in pain as a beam of wood smashes on to my arms. The girl watches in horror as I hold up the collapsing ceiling, barely managing to keep it from falling on her.

‘Go,’ I manage to croak, my arms streaking with pain.

But she can’t. I see fear and terror in her eyes. The girl holds Abby tighter and sobs, not moving.

A memory flashes through my mind. Me, screaming as my parents thrust me out of the window, into the arms of a fire-fighter. Me, yelling my parents’ names as I watched the roof collapse over them and they were wiped from existence.

She has the same look in her eyes.

‘Hey,’ I whisper. ‘Do it for Abby.’

‘But...’ she begins, glancing at the fire behind me.

‘You can do it,’ I say. ‘Run, and don’t look back.’

As the house gives one last dying moan, the girl ducks under my shoulder and out to safety.

I smile, relieved, as the weight of the wooden rafter crushes my shoulders and I have to let go.

Lost and Found

Noah Burns

Far from the Tubes of London, John Douglas felt a sudden lurch and the plane dropped. With no windows, he stumbled over and banged on the cockpit in earnest. The polished steel door swung open and crimson-red lights and ear-piercing sirens flooded the cargo hold.

Through the vast windshield, a foreboding canopy of trees drew ever near, impaling the low-hanging clouds.

The pilot, frantically flicking switches, called for John and the co-pilot to strap on parachutes. They wasted no time, grabbed two crates of vital vaccine each and staggered towards the slowly lowering cargo door.

Their hearts were beating like drums and when the door had fully lowered, the overpowering stench of fuel filled their lungs. The pilot scrambled to his orange parachute and all three bailed out.

The plane became engulfed by flames as it was swallowed by the ominous jungle below.

As John tumbled and twisted towards the ground, he caught a glimpse of his watch – five hours until the vaccines became unviable.

Pulling on a rough black strap, John felt a sudden calmness and serenity as his mind cleared for a moment. There was an eerie silence, one he had only heard in his sleep.

Slowly, the sound of the rattling vaccines and wind rushing past like it was in a hurry to get somewhere became present. Below was a thick mist, shrouding the jungle like a vulture hiding a carcass from its rivals.

The men pierced the mist and crashed into the treetops. The sound of breaking and snapping branches alerted the birds, who took off in all directions. The parachutes became snagged and yanked the men's shoulders upwards. After a couple of excruciating minutes, they slammed into the hard ground. A lonely bead of sweat trickled down John's cut and bruised face. He struggled to unstrap, then sprinted over to help the others.

John was keen to begin the search for the stricken tribe. A cacophony of animal calls filled their eardrums. Moisture was dripping from their skin. The dung was pungent on the rotting ground, moving with every step.

Soon they reached a blockade of lush, razor-edged leaves on daunting, scabrous trees. John and his crew managed to push through to reveal heavenly flowers. Elegant parrots swooped and swirled whilst plucking exotic berries with their colourful beaks. Putrid flowers sat unwanted in the corners.

As night fell, the jungle was plunged into darkness. John and the pilot settled down whilst their partner agreed to take first watch, sharpened stick in hand.

John found it hard to rest, with chattering monkeys and squawking birds overhead. Eventually, tiredness overwhelmed him and he drifted into a deep sleep.

The men were awoken abruptly by a bloodcurdling scream. John leapt up. The pilot was frantically searching for his absent friend. There was just enough moonlight for John to see something disappear deep into the undergrowth.

Birds fled the branches, the wind from their wings howling past. A fierce assembly of tribesmen, wielding ferocious spears, thundered forward.

The next step would not be easy.

The Pilgrim's Crossing

Malena Sievers Mayo

Wolves howled and the wind wailed as Carolina stepped through the crisp snow, her boots leaving deep footprints, her breath coming out in mists. She stumbled up the mountainside, every part of her body shaking with cold. Her tangled dark hair fell like a curtain down her back and her eyes sparkled with determination. She knew that crossing the Pyrenees in mid-winter via the ancient pilgrimage route to Compostela was a dangerous challenge. Hemmed within the disguise of her coarse pilgrim's cloak, she carried an extremely important letter. If she didn't get to Spain quickly enough, more people would get sick, more people would die.

Crossing France's rural roads had been the easy part. She had successfully played damsel-in-distress, travelling merchant's wife, knight's squire and nun's maid. She was now a pious pilgrim, clad in reeking brown robes, face hidden behind a broad-brimmed hat, gloved hand clutching a wooden staff.

She had spent a day in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, attending mass, begging for alms and generally giving the sense that she was in no rush. She suspected she was being followed and wanted to distract her potential foes before attempting the crossing. Now, two thirds of the way up, she thought her biggest enemy was the mountain. She kept tripping and the air tasted of her own fear. The darkness felt like a protective mantle, yet the cold bit into her cracked lips and sudden sounds sent shivers down her spine.

At the top, relief began to creep into her body – she was nearly there. The stars sparkled like diamonds and seemed to be filled with promise. As she stopped to gaze at them her arms were suddenly yanked backwards and she was thrown into the freezing snow.

A man was staring down at her through menacing eyes and Carolina immediately recognised him as the evil alchemist who had discovered the cure to the Black Death but didn't want it to be used. The letter within her cloak contained his findings. She needed to get it into the hands of someone

who would turn it into a medicine to be shared. That someone was on the other side of the border. She was so close.

‘Give it to me,’ said the alchemist slowly.

‘What?’ she answered, trying to sound innocent. ‘I’m a pilgrim. What do you want?’

He grabbed her satchel and scattered its meagre contents on to the ground. A disappointed, puzzled look appeared on the alchemist’s face as he examined them. He eyed her up and down. Was her disguise convincing enough? She hoped so.

He tested her. ‘*Ultreia.*’ The pilgrim’s greeting.

‘*Et suseia,*’ she replied confidently. She knew what a real pilgrim would answer.

The man, still suspicious, helped her up. Carolina could feel his eyes burning into her back as she carried on, beginning her descent. She stared into the distance and saw the village of Roncesvalles, its rows of houses becoming steadily clearer in the breaking dawn. Soon, she would be there. Soon, she would be home. Soon, the Black Death would be vanquished.

AUTHOR OF TOMORROW | 12-15 years old

The Fisherman

Heather Chapman
Winner of the category

He grew up on a diet of fish pie and village legends. His father told him stories in the evenings, after he came home from the sea: fishermen's legends of sirens and blood-red seas, of sailors' bones littering the ocean floor. They were never neat and tidy fairy stories, wrapped up with a happily-ever-after. They rarely ended happily at all. But they were the only time he and his father ever talked, so he learnt to weave conversations around the tragedies.

His favourite story was of a huge fish, larger and more ruthless than any that would come before or after. His father told him it fed on the best of sailors, killing whoever had a chance of one day defeating it. Everyone wanted to be the exception, the one it couldn't kill. It was every superstitious fisherman's dream – bringing the monster home, laying it across the beach and saying you killed a legend.

The story changed with his father's mood: on the worst days, the fish would have a specific taste for little boys who got in their father's way. His father described the endings in detail, voice cold with tragedy, painting the dying characters with his son's face. He wasn't meant to be a hero, his father told him. Other fishermen's sons were built for a life on the sea. He was built to live and die in the kitchen, gutting fish and staying out of the way.

He learnt to accept life by his father's will. He helped his mother prepare the fish, scraping their scales into the sink with a potato peeler. Left to his own thoughts, the huge fish became an escape, and then an obsession. He would leave the house at night, chase rumours around the village, write down details of sightings, names of the killed, dates of the killing. He cut his life into pieces: in the house, he was what his father expected of him; at night, in the village, he was a hunter. And one day, on the sea, he would be a hero.

He passed his days quietly, sharpening knives, gutting fish. His fingers grew quick and nimble; soon he was faster than his mother, faster than anyone. He would forget about it all, standing by the sink, hands moving almost without noticing. He would picture himself out at sea, the fish towering over him. The smell of salt, the taste of blood.

Some days, his mother used to work in the room with him. Occasionally he would turn around, hands covered in blood and heart racing, to find her watching him. She would be leaning against the doorway, barefoot, eyes wide. The look of shock on her face always took him aback. He asked her what was wrong, but most of the time she wouldn't answer. The explanation finally came one day around his eighteenth birthday, when at last she told him in whispered halting words.

There was something disturbing about watching him do it, she said, a cruelty to how he handled the fish that she found horrifying. She told him he was becoming a monster. She told him he was never a boy to begin with.

He realised, with a calmness that surprised him, that he agreed with her. The fish had become his everything. But there are side effects to devoting your life to ending something else's. He wondered if he would ever be able to put names to what he had left behind, or if he would just get used to the empty spaces, the ghost of his humanity, scattered behind him like a breadcrumb trail in one of his father's stories.

As he got older, the stories faltered and stopped. He could still pick out the pieces of them from his father's appearance: a hero lost at sea inside his eyes, a guarded castle in his chest, the eye of a storm in the palm of his hand. And as time went on, the story became darker still. His father stopped going out to sea, spending his days in the local pub.

One night, his father came home early. He staggered into the kitchen, leant on the counter beside him. His words were messy, slurred together from a day swimming in alcohol instead of sea water. He was talking to himself, muttering something stupid the boy couldn't pick up. He turned to look at him, knife pausing next to the fish he had been preparing. His father looked back at him, eyes grey and clouded over. The next sentences came out clear.

'You were never a son of mine. And you've no hope for a life on the sea. You'll be lucky to live and die within these four walls.'

In a flash, he was on the ocean, the fish before him. He could sense himself, years later, could trace the choices he made; he could imagine how it would all end. In that moment, he knew the choice he would have to make to breathe life into it. He could live nameless or die a legend. It was all too easy to decide. He ached for the blood of a monster. His fish, his father – it all was the same.

The boy moved too quickly for his father to react. He snatched up his father's hand and slammed it down on to the cutting board. His father gave a grunt of surprise, and tried to pull away, but the boy held him still, picking up the knife with his other hand. In one smooth movement, he brought it down. He listened in silence to his father's screaming, watching him trail blood along the kitchen tiles as he staggered out of the room and up the stairs, savouring the knowledge of the road that stretched ahead of him.

After that, no one stopped him from going out to sea. He took his father's boat, one of the best. It started as revenge but began to feel more like self-inflicted torture. He could see his father's fingerprints all over it, and it was impossible not to think of him.

You have made me into this, he wanted to say. *You taught me by example. You can't give me a knife and tell me not to do what I need to. What did you expect,* he wanted to say. *Was I ever meant to be anything but a monster?*

The first few trips were difficult. He had watched the fishermen enough times to know what to do. Still, the sails were hard to control, flapping wildly against the wind. His arms were strong from years of carrying baskets of fish, but the sea and the wind were stronger. He gritted his teeth, facing the storm and bracing his feet against the wooden boards of the ship.

For now, he told himself, *for now, the sea is stronger.* One day, he would get the better of it. His only choice to be something good was to kill the one thing worse than him. Only once he spilled its blood across the golden sands, when he saw the look on his father's face when he saw what his son had done, only then would he be something more than evil. He knew his destiny. This was the way his story would end.

He went out every day from then on. His father avoided him, clutching his bandaged hand to his chest and muttering curses when he walked into rooms. His father was scared. It was so simple and so surprising it made

him smile. So backwards and so exactly what he wanted. He heard him once, his father's voice carrying out of the local pub. He was talking to some of the other fishermen, thoughts loosened by one too many rounds of sour beer. He was still as good a storyteller as he was before, the boy thought, watching the fear in the other men's eyes, how they drew their coats tighter around themselves. Still, he had never expected to be a part of his father's tales. Not like this.

He caught thousands and thousands of fish, tipping them on to the blood-slick cobblestones to rot under the summer sun. He left them for whoever got there first, but in the end most of them went untouched. Rumours had spread quickly, and nobody wanted something he had caught.

Some said he was cursed. Cursed to live a villain. Cursed to live without a heart. Some said he was blessed. Blessed to die a legend. Blessed to die without a heart. He wondered which was worse.

Time disappeared, taking the fish with it. The other fishermen were forced to sail further and further to find anything at all, and eventually they stopped trying. No one else was as dedicated as him, no one else willing to go to further waters, ride faster currents. He risked everything and still came back untouched, as if something more than human was keeping him alive. Sometimes people would watch him from safe inside, walking up the sand, dragging writhing nets behind him. They would double-check the locks on their doors, go to sleep facing away from the ocean and pray they didn't dream of stormy seas and boys with empty eyes.

He knew he would find it eventually. The legend. He was its equal; it must exist, if only to balance him out. They were destined to kill each other from the beginning.

He knew it would come for him eventually.

And one day, it did.

On the final day, the skies were ink dark, and the sands looked almost grey in the early-morning shadows. He could almost feel that it would happen today, in a way he couldn't explain. He looked out of his window, preparing himself, trying to taste the future in the salt-soaked air. He hoped the dark skies could add some poetry to his ending. For it would be his

ending, whichever way it went. If his bones ended up scattered across the sea floor or if he came home with its body.

He took the boat out early. He packed a harpoon – his father's, something he hadn't used before. His father had been proud of it, kept it mounted above the fireplace. If he survived this, he told himself as he left, he would hand it back himself.

The waves were fierce and high, but after an hour or so, they almost seemed to die down, as if the very sea itself had given up resistance. He didn't go far from the coast, cutting a line along the edge of the village. *Come and find me*, he thought. And when thinking wasn't loud enough, he screamed it into the wind. 'I'm ready for you!'

He could see people gathered across the beach, dark shapes on the horizon, as if they somehow knew this was the ending. But when he looked closer, searching for a familiar face, they seemed to waver and disappear. He wondered if they were there at all or if it was wishful thinking: his imagined audience, come to watch his fight.

He circled round, back and forth and round again, and still, the waters were calm.

He searched the horizon, looking for any sign, anything strange. At first, there was nothing. He was turning to adjust the sails when something caught on the edge of his vision. A mark at the seam joining sea to sky. A mark that grew, becoming a line that cut across the water, drawing towards him.

It tore closer, spraying waves of surf into the sky. He braced himself against the front of his boat. He had nets and rods, but in the moment, these didn't seem anywhere near enough. Taking a steadying breath, he picked up the harpoon from where he'd set it. By now, the dark mass under the water was growing until it was impossibly big. It only broke the surface of the water when it was right in front of him. And then, all he could do was stare at it. It was huge, huger than he'd ever thought possible, with bulging yellow suns for eyes and glistening dark scales. Vast fins ran down its back, sharp enough to tear the sky apart, and its gaping mouth was full of teeth like broken glass, hollow and endless. He discovered his hands were suddenly shaking, so much that when he threw the harpoon, it barely glanced off of the fish's scales. It was then that he realised, truly realised,

how this would end. He could see himself reflected in its eyes, standing there, helpless. He imagined the other sailors that came before him, foolish enough to think they could defeat the sheer force of the ocean. He wanted to say something, wanted to laugh and cry and admit that this all had been for nothing. That he'd wasted his life on seeking death. He could imagine its answer, in its huge eyes of sunlight. Would it apologise, he wondered hysterically, thoughts frantic and stumbling. Would it wish things could have ended a different way? Or would it kill him quickly and be glad of it?

Before he could move, the fish drove into the front of the boat, tossing it up. It shattered on impact; the broken pieces of wood were flung into the empty air. He scrambled to catch on to something, but everything was too fast and its mouth below him was too wide. He tried to scream, but it swallowed his voice and the rest of him with it.

His thoughts as he fell came in desperate, furious pieces, latching into his brain like fishing hooks.

I will die like the rest of them, he thought, their beautiful golden heroes. I am more than them. I was more than them. But now and forever, we will be the same.

Already, his breathing was sluggish, his limbs unsteady. Still, something inside him fought for a different ending. He would live to be someone different. He would fight, fight until his last furious breath.

He lashed out at it, desperately, furiously. He had a harpoon – somehow it had found its way into his hands – and he drove it into the fish's flesh, forcing it through the tough layer of muscle and blubber that separated him from the cold comfort of the sea.

I won't leave you any reward for what you did. Let them pick my bones out of the surf, piece me back together on their golden sands. Let them bury me far, far away, let them tell everyone I was evil and ruthless and desperate. Let the ocean remember me. Let me teach you who I am, the only way I know how, through blood and salt and darkness.

The fish's blood filled the water, thick and red and drawing endless spirals around him. He forced himself through its flesh, out into the water. He could see its eyes, staring out of the water and up at the sun. Inside them he could read pain and anger, but stronger than that, sadness. And for a

second, he could almost hear its final thoughts, as if their minds were so equal, so intent on the other's destruction that they had almost become one.

Let it be known the ocean never forgets that your bones are that of a human, and your name will one day fade to nothing. Let it be known you are a hero, a legend, that you have killed what they call a monster. Let it be known that some stories have no lessons, no heroes, no happy endings. Just desperate men waging war against things they don't understand.

He looked into its vast yellow eyes, at its bloodied teeth and golden scales. And as one, his and the fish's hearts slowed to a stop.

It took the villagers three days to find them. Some suggested sending boats out to look, but no one wanted to follow the ribbons of blood; to see the dark shapes, one large, one small, carried on the surface of the water.

They washed up on the beach. The seaside wind carried the villagers' whispers across the sands.

Is it over? Is he dead?

It was quiet, almost a funeral, almost a celebration. They walked down to the sand to look at the bodies.

The huge fish, carved open from the inside, the end of the harpoon still lodged into it, eyes shut, mouth closed.

And beside it, the boy.

One day, they would write stories about this moment. The town would heal over, the people forget his name.

But for now, the two figures lay on the beach. The waves lapped at his ankles, the sand dusting his hair in gold. Days passed but their bodies lay untouched, the sea seeming to pass over them.

The days turned to months turned to years, and eventually their story faded away with their bones – their ghosts lost to the tide, their stories living on in the waves, forever.

Killing Cold

Freddie Cowling

I got out of my dusty red pick-up truck and walked quickly to the front door of the Northern Trucking Service headquarters. My face was blasted with warm air from the heaters in the reception – a stark contrast to the frigid night outside.

My boss leant in the doorway to the meeting room, nervously biting his fingernails. He noticed me and stood up, walking into the neighbouring room, gesturing for me to follow. My friend Emily, and a man and a woman I didn't know, stood waiting in there. I shot a quizzical look at Emily, who shrugged in return.

The man had auburn brown hair that was swept to one side. He was tall and had dark brown eyes, his expression hard to read. On the other hand, the woman was a complete contrast. Her blonde hair fell down to her shoulders. She was fairly short, and energy and kindness seemed to beam off her like a beacon.

'Please, sit,' said the boss, gesturing at the four seats around the table which commanded most of the space in the small room.

'OK, so first I'll introduce you all to each other.' He gestured to the man and woman, who sat on the other side of the table to Emily and me. 'This is Dr Jack Ross, and Dr Amy Rawlington.' He then gestured at us. 'And this is Mr Sam Maxwell, and Miss Emily Wolfe.'

We all shook hands across the table, while the boss continued.

'Right, um, so Jack and Amy both know what's happened already, but I'm going to go over it again for your benefit,' he said to Emily and me. 'I presume you're all familiar with the northern fishing village of Winpar? Well, they have a big problem. Remember the Covid-19 pandemic?'

We all did – only three years had passed since the vaccine had been deployed worldwide, and things still weren't the same as they had been before.

‘Well, this tiny village now has a far more potent strain of the virus, and we need you to deliver the antibodies, which Jack and Amy will administer when you get there.’

‘OK, that doesn’t sound so difficult...’ said Emily.

‘Ah, yes. Well, you see, there is a blizzard coming, and, whilst we have no way of really telling yet, it looks like it might be the biggest in history, as well as the fact that Winpar is miles away... There is a road, but we can’t use that because it would take too long – a whole day too long – so we have to use the old dirt road.’

My eyes widened and I looked at Emily, only to see her already staring at me, my expression reflected in her own features. I ran a hand through my sandy blonde hair.

We had both been in the trucking industry for a while now, and remembered when the dirt road to Winpar was closed due to a truck plummeting off the edge of a cliff.

We went home to prepare and after a few hours, headed back to the depot so that we could leave as quickly as possible. The boss had gone over the plan, including the truck we were going to be driving.

It was an older vehicle, an International Paystar 5070 that had been updated and improved for this very task, and as I walked up to it I felt dwarfed. Even by trucking standards it was a beast, with raised suspension and big off-road tyres. A small cabin sat on the back with sleeping and living quarters, where we’d be spending the next two days on this trip. Attached to the back of it was a trailer, with contents like nothing I had seen before. It was big and had a door on the back, and inside were rows upon rows of syringes, filled with the vaccine for all the inhabitants of Winpar.

I climbed up into the living quarters, insulated to protect from the killing cold, and put my bag on one of the two bunk-beds; we’d be sleeping in shifts.

It was winter, so the snow would be thick and the mud below it frozen and uneven, not to mention the fact that it was dark at all times, even during the day. Emily sat in the driver’s seat, making the final checks before the long drive; it would be critical that the headlights and the heaters worked, otherwise we wouldn’t survive long. The cab’s back had been removed, so

we could move straight from the cab into the living quarters. Four seats dominated the front of the compartment.

Emily turned round in the seat and smiled at me, her emerald-green eyes shining in the light.

‘What do you think?’ she asked, her breath clouding up in front of her face.

‘Cramped,’ I replied, simply.

She smiled again. ‘Oh, by the way, the boss said he wanted to speak to you. We spoke earlier...’

I left Emily to her checks and headed towards the building. I passed Amy and Jack on the way.

‘We’re just going to make sure the vaccine is secure,’ Jack said.

‘OK,’ I replied. ‘I’m all set – I need to speak to the boss, but other than that, I’m ready to go.’

I entered my boss’s office, and he smiled when he saw me.

‘Ah, Sam, I trust Emily sent you?’

‘Yeah. What did you need me for?’

‘I just wanted to warn you – obviously this is a critical job, and lives are at stake, but nothing is more important than your safety. If at any point you want to call it off, I am trusting you with the power to have the final say.’

‘Thanks, but I don’t intend to call it off, no matter what – those people need their medicine!’

‘I knew I could trust you, I’m glad we have drivers like you out there,’ he said, and I could tell he really meant it.

‘We’re planning on leaving in ten minutes, at ten-thirty,’ I told him.

‘Ah, good, I’ll be here in the office and on the radio 24/7 until you get there.’

‘Thanks, boss, that means a lot.’

I returned to the truck and found the others in the living quarters, talking amongst themselves. Emily was explaining why the route was so dangerous.

‘Right,’ I announced as we entered. ‘Let’s get this job done! Emily, do you want to drive first?’ She nodded and we all got into our respective seats: me and Emily up front, Jack and Amy sitting behind. She turned in her seat to look at us, asking, ‘Are you ready?’ We gave her the thumbs-up; she removed the handbrake and pressed the accelerator down.

We were off.

It took us an hour to reach the entrance to the dirt road – a narrow turning that had not been used for five years. We hadn’t passed another truck, and wouldn’t for the next two days. We would be completely separated from civilisation, apart from the CB radio link to the boss and all the other trucks, which would give support.

‘We are turning on to the dirt road now,’ Emily said into the CB.

‘*Good luck, guys,*’ came the crackling response. Almost all of the other trucks on the ice road would be able to hear us whenever we talked on the CB.

‘Well, so begins the real part of the journey. Emily, do you want to switch? I can take the first part while you rest,’ I asked.

‘Yeah, do you mind? Why don’t you guys sleep as well? You’ll need it,’ she replied, gesturing at Amy and Jack. They looked at each other.

‘You go ahead and sleep,’ Jack said to Amy. ‘I’m going to get myself a drink. Anyone else want anything?’

We all said we didn’t and started to move into our respective positions. Jack came up front to sit with me and we pulled the curtain across the cab, giving the girls a bit of privacy. I put the truck in gear, and we started moving again.

Snow blanketed the ground in an endless sheet of white. Small bushes and trees stood leafless, trying to appear inconspicuous from fear of being swept away by the cruel wind. Snowflakes flew across the windscreen. The blizzard hadn’t even begun and the conditions were already treacherous, with the temperature at -26°C and falling. I reckoned that the worst would hit in about an hour.

Soon, we started to climb; the incline would be no problem for the truck, that I was certain of. After a while, it levelled out and the road stayed

flat.

I kept the headlights on full, but the visibility was poor and I couldn't see either side of the truck, only a few metres in front.

'You OK?' Jack asked.

'Yeah, fine for now. I'll swap with Emily in thirty minutes or so.'

The temperature outside had dropped even lower and was now at -35°C.

Amy appeared through the curtain. 'Can't sleep – how do you live with the constant movement?' she asked.

I shrugged. 'You get used to it.'

Suddenly, the whole world started tipping to the right. Jack grabbed hold of something to hold himself up as Amy stumbled and fell. I yanked the steering wheel hard over to the left, hearing things sliding off the shelves in the back and thudding as they hit the floor. I heard Emily yell out. My mind flashed with visions of our truck sliding down into the black abyss below.

After a minute, everything finally turned back the right way. I stopped the truck.

'Is everyone OK?' I asked.

Jack and Amy replied that they were.

I didn't hear Emily.

I got up and ran through into the living quarters. Emily lay on the floor, her face splattered with blood. I called for help and began lifting her on to one of the beds. Jack and Amy came through, Jack helping me to lift Emily, as Amy got some water and some bandages.

Amy started to wash off the blood. Before long, it became clear that Emily had fallen off the top bunk when the truck tipped.

I felt horrible. It was my fault. Darkness surrounded me. The silence was only broken by the accusing howl of the wind. Eventually, Jack spoke.

'Sam, we have to keep going. We *have* to get to the town. Amy and I can look after Emily, OK?'

I took a deep breath and went back to the driver's seat. I radioed in on the CB, reporting the whole accident, whilst remaining adamant that we should keep going.

Once again, I put the truck in gear and we started moving, the big tyres working in perfect unity with the powerful engine, driving it forward into the darkness ahead.

Something loomed to my left: a solid black mass, rising into the sky. I knew where we were now, and realised how lucky we'd been that the earlier situation hadn't been worse. The cliff.

When the dirt road had been operational, this had always been seen as the most dangerous part, the place where the freak accident had happened to one of my colleagues. A deadly hundred-foot drop to the right and a two-hundred-foot barrier to the sky to the left.

I knew that as long as I kept the cliff in my sight, we wouldn't fall into the abyss. Even then, it was risky, but we had no other option but to push on.

I kept driving for who knows how long. Time seemed to combine with the endless sheet of snow, the outside world hidden from view by an insurmountable whiteness.

I could have been driving for a day, or an hour, when the next challenge came upon me, looming out of the blizzard.

I swore under my breath as I stopped the truck.

'What?' asked Amy and Jack, putting their heads through the curtain, wide-eyed.

'Look, up ahead,' I replied, pointing. 'See it? Where the road turns down and to the right, it's horribly cambered, and we're top-heavy with the suspension and the living quarters.'

'What does that mean?' Amy asked, frowning.

'It means that the road is at a sharp angle, and there's a chance we could tip over.'

I put my foot down gently on the accelerator. I turned the wheel to the right, aiming to take it slowly. Once again, the whole world began to shift in that same direction.

'Stand on the left side!' I yelled. The others hurriedly moved over to the left.

We were going to tip, I knew it. This was it, we'd failed. I closed my eyes, expecting the worst, but it didn't come. We evened out again and eventually returned to normal. I looked at Jack and Amy and gave a short astonished laugh.

'Great call, getting us to stand over here!' Jack exclaimed, sitting back down.

'Yeah,' Amy added.

I shut my eyes again and exhaled, realising that I'd been holding my breath.

The wind howled around the truck, the cold trying to seep in through every possible crack and entry point. I was reminded of just how small we were amid the natural elements around us, this dominant force of nature, determined to rip us off the face of the earth.

The next few hours were fairly mundane, the road zig-zagging down the mountains, descending at a rapid rate. My guess was that we'd reach the ice plains in about four hours, and after that it would be a long drive across the frozen bay to our destination. Jack and Amy took turns to watch Emily, who had a fever and kept slipping in and out of consciousness.

We'd been travelling for a day and by now, the blizzard was at its maximum strength, tearing at us with invisible hands, trying to roll us over and drag us down the mountainside.

We eventually made it to the beginning of the ice plains. I needed to put on snow chains in order for the truck to retain any grip on the ice, but it was way too cold to go outside. We'd have to wait. I updated Jack and Amy and then headed to bed, telling them to wake me up if the weather improved.

A few hours later, Jack woke me to say that the wind had dropped slightly and that they could distinguish a clear horizon in the distance. I got up and changed into my Arctic clothes. There were many layers, and I would need all of them to survive the extreme temperatures outside for more than a few minutes. I quickly opened the door, climbed out and shut it again.

I had put on snow chains many times before, and yet, the cold always shocked me. Little knives dug themselves into my face, attacking like a

savage monster from all directions and without mercy. I had long ago switched from the childish way of viewing wind as a puff of air going in one direction, and I now viewed it as a physical being, something that could think and react, and was always one step ahead of you. No matter what you did, where you went, the wind always followed, and brought the cold and the dark; an all-consuming force that would kill without hesitation.

I lay the chains down, got back in the cab, and drove over them slowly, making sure they were in the right position. I clambered back out and locked them in position. As I made my way back into the cab, I saw something that made me falter.

Mountains towered into the crystal-clear sky – the jagged outlines of black rock that epitomized the harsh nature of northern Alaska. The mountains themselves were beautifully evil, a predator waiting to pounce on any mistake by its prey.

Stars formed the backdrop to the stunning scene, a sea of pinpricks of colour and light as they twinned with the aurora borealis. Flowing elegantly through the sky, a myriad of colours danced together in a rare show put on by the most incredible performers nature had to offer.

I urged Jack and Amy to get changed and come outside with me.

‘I promise it’ll be worth it!’ I told them as they reluctantly dressed themselves in the never-ending layers of clothing. They climbed out of the truck and looked up. I watched their expressions. They were both grinning madly.

We continued driving for the next few hours, the vast wasteland seemingly endless.

‘Guess who’s up?’ Amy eventually said, grinning as she broke the silence.

I stopped the truck, and clambered into the back. Emily lay on the bed, her emerald eyes glinting, her face pale with fever.

‘Hey,’ she breathed.

‘You scared me!’ I replied, quietly. ‘How’re you feeling?’

‘Not great.’

‘Don’t worry, we’re on the ice plains now – we can get you airlifted to hospital when we get to Winpar. I’ll get the truck back using the road, and then visit you as soon as I can, OK?’

‘OK.’ She smiled.

I could tell that she was slipping back into sleep, so I returned to the driving.

We were getting to the place that I had been most worried about since reaching the plains. Here, the road strayed dangerously close to the shoreline, and I had no idea what the ice conditions would be like. If it wasn’t thick enough, the truck would fall through and into the watery depths below.

An hour later, I became concerned. The ice started to creak beneath us, and I could feel the cracks widening.

I was suddenly reminded of a scene from my favourite childhood movie, *The Polar Express*, when the train nearly falls through the ice, and I felt just like a child again. I stopped and turned to Jack and Amy.

‘OK, look, the road here strays *very* close to the edge of the shore. The closer we get, the thinner the ice, and... you get the idea. I have no clue what the conditions are like out there, and we have no way of telling, until it’s too late.’

‘So, what do we do?’ Amy asked.

‘We have to go for it, no way we’re turning back now,’ Jack replied.

I nodded at both of them, confirming the go-ahead.

We continued onwards without a word, listening to the ice creaking beneath us.

Suddenly, Amy pointed to the left, and I saw a huge crack reach out, its fingers intertwining, before water started flowing through the fissures.

I put the pedal down hard and the truck shot forward. I looked in the mirror and instantly regretted it. The cracks followed us, searching for their first meal in years. And they were closing. Suddenly, the shoreline appeared, about four hundred metres away, but the road was nowhere to be seen. I frantically searched for it, but couldn’t see anything. The only option

was a slight incline, the only part that wasn't jagged with black rocks. I looked at Jack and Amy.

'See you on the other side.'

I focused again. The cracks were closing behind us, but we were so close.

The truck hit the embankment, rising up as the wheels bounced, spinning in the air before landing hard on the ground. The tyres tried to dig in, straining against the weight of the almighty truck. I looked in my mirror to see the rear end of the trailer submerged in the icy water.

Snow flew into the windscreen, attempting to push us back to our doom in the frigid sea. The wheels were losing grip, we were slipping back.

Come on, we're too far in to fail! I thought to myself.

Suddenly, I remembered something I'd learnt years ago, but had never fully needed to use. I took my foot off the pedal slightly, and this time the truck responded to the command. We gained traction, the wheels finally digging into the ground and pulling us away from death.

Once we were clear of the water, I turned to Jack and Amy, a massive grin on my face.

I got out to check the damage. Ice had clumped around the wheels and one of the tyres had blown. I spent a while hacking at the ice, assisted by a portable heater, then I inspected the wheel carefully and finally found out the full extent of the damage. One of the axles had been almost completely sheared through.

I stood up and climbed back into the cabin.

'Wheel axle is busted. I can drive but extremely slowly, and I'm not sure even if that'll work.'

'What about ice?' Amy said. 'If we can somehow carry water to the axle and get it to freeze over the gap, would that work?'

I thought about it before replying, 'It's worth a shot!'

Amy found a bucket in the medical equipment and together, we got as close to the water as we dared.

'Make sure you don't touch it, you'll get horrendous frostbite.'

She carefully submerged the bucket, and we carried it back to the damaged axle. Slowly, we poured it over the wound, allowing it to freeze, layer by layer.

Soon, the process was complete and we got back into the cab. Gingerly, I edged the truck onwards.

Eventually we arrived in Winpar, the glowing lights of the log cabins emerging from the gloom.

We'd been driving for two days straight, through a blizzard and some of the roughest terrain I'd ever encountered, and yet, we'd made it. We pulled into the town centre and were greeted by the mayor. His face expressed all the gratitude, happiness and overjoyed excitement that I would expect from a child who'd been given a new, expensive toy for Christmas.

Amy and Jack got out and instantly set about the long process of unloading and distributing the medicine, which had thankfully been saved from the merciless water. I used the town radio to call an air ambulance.

Then I got back into the warmed interior of the cab and picked up the CB.

'Just wanted to let everyone on the road know that we have arrived in Winpar and the medicine is being distributed as we speak. Thanks for the support, guys!'

The responses flooded in. There were cheers and celebrations from as far away as Deadhorse.

I walked into the back, where Emily lay asleep on her bed, bandages covering her head. She woke up to the sound of my footsteps. I grinned.

'We made it! And there's an air ambulance coming as soon as it can,' I added, kneeling beside her.

Her ear-to-ear smile and her gentle laughter said it all.

We'd gone up against Nature.

And won.

Ivory Boy

Tara Khan

He lay in the soft glow of the lamplight; it ebbed from bright to flicker as it formed dancing illuminations on the mud walls. Outside it was peaceful, just the constant hum of mosquitoes and a cacophony of crickets. To some their orchestra was a bother, but to him it was the bush, the only life he had ever known.

He had always lived isolated from the burning bowels of the city, the deafening haze of smoke, dust and people. The cars rattled along. The dust flowed in turbulent eddies along the cracked paths. The throng of people dressed in all attires – some seeking a living, others simply dissolving into the night. It was an alien place to him, and a place he wanted no part of. All his friends went there and never returned. Their minds became too polluted with the corruption and promise of riches, they ceased to remember their origins. Those who were once the bush people became city scum. But he knew of this trap, so he remained.

He was Ivory Boy.

As he rolled over, he heard the crunching of heavy boots against the red earth. His father was home. Lucky? Most likely not. He got up, awaiting the news; he turned out of his room. What he saw then would change his life forever, what he saw then would make him what he once thought he would never become.

His father.

Eyes swept with tears.

Arms.

A body hanging from them.

Alive?

Dead.

Who?

His brother.

His eyes scoured the blood, the wounds – gashes, deformed.
Every sense was tingling with something he could not understand.
His eyes remained dry but all he could imagine was the end.
Who would do this, who would do this, who would do this?
No gunshot wound.

There could be only one to blame. The elephant.

He glanced down and saw the gun which lay at his father's feet. There was only one thing left to do. Kill it.

Ivory Boy was now two years older, two years wiser, since the death of his brother. He was now the prime age to begin his new career. His family depended on it. In his brother's absence, an extra hunter was needed.

Ivory Boy *was* weak, but now his eyes shone like steel, and his heart formed into stone. From that day, when his brother was ripped from his world and thrown into a pit, his goal had become more detailed. He was ready. There was a fire which began in his heart and went up to his mind, and clawed out of his mouth in fighting tendrils. But his father would not acknowledge it. For this life was something he never wanted for his son. To kill to stay alive was not really living. It would be an action that would pollute Ivory Boy's mind for all eternity and his father knew it.

The day of his first hunt drew nearer. It loomed on the horizon like a flaming sun. All Ivory Boy could think about was that. All he thought about was how his brother's death would be avenged, and the great satisfaction that would come with it. He felt no guilt for what he was going to do. No sense of wrong lingered in his mind. It was right. It was necessary. It was inevitable.

His father had taught him the way of the guns; the way of the journey; the way of the kill, until in his mind he had a crystal-clear vision of the event that replayed, over and over. Go. Find. Poison. Wait. Kill. The poachers shared one common enemy – not the elephants, they were the prize. The rangers. The people who hunted the poachers down, who felt the need to protect the elephants.

The Hunt. The Hunt. The Hunt. The day had arrived. But they had to wait for dusk, when the elephants arrived to bathe in the moonlight. That

was when they were least visible, but the most vulnerable. It would be perfect.

‘Are you ready, son?’

His father entered his room and sat on the end of the bed. He looked down at his son, who lay there, shaking in anticipation.

‘Ready.’

‘Joseph will meet us at six. You know the rest.’

‘Like my own name.’

Joseph came, exactly on time. There was no conversation, just silence. They all knew what had to be done. Not just for profit but for vengeance.

As the sun pulled itself over the horizon, leaving a pale sea of light in its departure, they left. A group of elephants had been spotted near Lion’s Rock at the bend of the Zambezi river. But that wasn’t their target. Their target lay further south. A bull. A great heaving mass. With tusks that almost swept the ground. He was Ngozi. Danger. The epitome of peril. Ruthless. He was the one who took the life of Ivory Boy’s brother. He was the one who ended a future. He had to go.

The bull lived a lone life in the bush, roaming place to place, victim to victim. Five had been killed by Ngozi. Five. Five had been crushed to the ground. This further fuelled Ivory Boy’s ambition as he set off, no fear blocking his vision.

They arrived in the real bush; the soft glow of the lights from the village could be in the distance. The sky now held true darkness – even the moon seemed strangely ominous. The stars were sprinkled amongst the navy blue. And as Ivory boy looked up, he saw his brother. His brother’s eyes in the glistening light.

Just as he was bringing his head down from the stars, a flicker of light entered his vision. The rangers had arrived. He could hear their mumbling voices.

‘The poachers are here. Of course they will be. Why would they miss this bull?’

‘Come on, look, listen.’

Silence.

Torches shone, hitting the ground a few feet next to Ivory Boy.

They couldn't catch him.

They wouldn't catch him.

The rangers walked slowly, weaving their way through the bushes. Closer. Closer. Closer. The poachers were silent. Their blood ran cold. Their bodies were pushed against the ground, close with the dusty earth.

The rangers caught Joseph. His eyes were blinded by the light.

'Stop, stop. I am a friend of Michael's.'

Ivory Boy's father got up, went over to them.

'Where is our money?' The ranger demanded.

'Here.' My father pulled out a wad of cash; the ranger counted it warily.

'It is enough. Let's go.'

'Thank you, my friend,' my father said to the ranger.

'It's the last time.'

That's when Ivory Boy realised. *Everyone is corrupt.*

They continued walking, every sense alert.

In front of him he saw Lion's Rock. It was eerily beautiful. Its curvature towered up into the night; it was even darker than the sky. At the top, the rock formation seemed to mimic a lion. It was quite extraordinary. The lion prowled up there; he could almost see its stone eyes.

My father lay down on the ground near the undergrowth. The group had gone, but the bull should have remained. Bulls didn't usually like to move from place to place at this time of night.

Ivory Boy could sense the bull coming closer to him, edging nearer. He could feel its mighty presence. As he pictured its body and its milky white tusks; and leather skin; and beetle eyes; and eyelashes like tassels; and ears so wide and chipped around the edges, he couldn't help but be in awe of the creature he was going to kill. But it didn't deserve to be alive – not after what it had done.

His mind was filled with glorious visions. The bravery he would possess. The action he would take. It was a tingling sensation. Adrenaline.

His father held his arm out to one side.

It was here.

His father moved, taking caution, twisting his body through the foliage as if the bull could hear them breathing.

Then Ivory Boy saw it.

Behind the tree.

It was stunning.

The backlighting of the moon at the horizon engulfed the edges of its massive body.

The tusks, the trunk, the ear. All visible.

It was so crystal clear you could see the dents in the ear, the wrinkle of the skin.

It was beautiful.

Yet, Ivory Boy was going to be the one to bring this moment to an abrupt end.

His father held up some dirt to the breeze. The wind was blowing in the opposite direction. The bull would not smell them. Then he looked around for the best position. A rock, smooth and angled ever so slightly upwards – it was ideal.

He signaled to Ivory Boy, who crept behind him. Knelt down against the rock. His father handed him the gun.

‘My son, you only have one chance.’

And that was it.

All the build-up seemed to fade away as he positioned his elbows, his hand against the clasp, caressing the trigger. He could feel the indent dig into his fingers.

His hand was ready.

His finger pressing down.

Then he looked directly in its eyes.

They were burning balls glistening in the moonlight.

The bull knew.

There was a connection.

It was like its thoughts were passing into his.

It wasn't the one.

It wouldn't kill so ruthlessly.

It would have a motive, it was protecting something.

Like Ivory Boy was now.

His family.

And those he loved.

We are the same.

It is no different.

Everything ceased – the gun, the plan, the accomplishment, the satisfaction.

It all evaporated in the night.

But then he remembered.

It killed my brother.

But how could I live, knowing I've killed another being?

This final step, this final push. He didn't know what road to take.

The emotions he felt before, flooded his mind again.

He felt what he felt that day his brother came home in his father's arms.

He felt it, all too real, again.

His mind was saturated with two such extremes, he didn't know which to trust.

There was no middle.

There was only life and death.

His finger squeezed, and squeezed, a millimetre at a time.

He could feel the bullet being dispatched.

He saw its track in the sky.

He saw it reach the belly of the beast.

He heard the bang.

He heard the life ebb away.

And with the elephant, Ivory Boy's life left him, too.

He had killed an innocent being. *He* was the elephant. He was just as ruthless. He was the animal. His father was the animal. They all deserved to

belong in this place.

Ivory Boy, Ivory Boy, where did you go?

AUTHOR OF TOMORROW | 16-21 years old

The Paths We Thread Together

Charis Odoki
Winner of the category

Stratford, London, UK

17:46

Central Line

Shuttling down the rickety London Underground line was Francis Akech. Mr Akech was a black man, a Christian man and a Ugandan man. Mr Akech was on his way to the front lines.

Between his feet lay the greatest weapon of all, the weapon that bought meaning to the tongue: the speaker.

Once at the battle, he would put down the speaker, power up the microphone and join the fight for faith at the stairs of Westfield Stratford shopping centre.

These battles were often religious debates that arose even when Akech and his friends did not intend to be controversial, and then the crowds, who were like soldiers, would rally their own tongues like swords and surround them: Akech, Dongo, Oyet, Harris, Nigel and Caleb.

Yet, even with their protest the Stratford soldiers could produce nothing more striking or more dominant than Akech's speaker. The police would watch as these wars waged but with amused indifference, so Akech and his friends were never bothered.

Akech's friends were all African. They had migrated from their birth countries and come to Britain for 'a better life'. Akech was from Uganda, grew up in Kenya; Dongo was from Nigeria; Oyet from Uganda – and grew up in Uganda; Harris was smuggled from Sudan; Nigel, trafficked from Congo, wound up in Egypt, took to the seas, and just about made it to London; Caleb moved from Zimbabwe and was forever missing 'Zim'.

Dongo would not say that he felt his life was any better, shovelling mail into little mouths of houses before they snapped shut, then hopping into his red van which would take him back to the Royal Mail office, then fetching more white letters, putting them into the red van and then arriving at more mouths that snapped at his hand like a crocodile, though thankfully, minus the teeth.

‘It just don’t end. People send all this mail, and we in a first world country: Britannia. They should use their phones – send the messages on iPhone, isn’t it?’

‘I’m telling you! Ay, Caleb, have you finished Psalms, sir?’

By way of agreement, Caleb gave Akech a thumbs up and passed the microphone to Nigel.

An Anglican priest, born in Shropshire, and who led a successful Stratford parish, was passing. Upon hearing the speaker of Akech, he stopped walking. Bursting from the speaker was Nigel, who described with great melancholy being packaged in a box with lots of other people, arriving in Egypt after being paid for, not being sent to the right address which should’ve been here – London – and then packaged and bundled up again; this time over the sea, which he had a great fear of, but no choice over, and after this, made it to the correct address, and was delivered to London, alone, to make something of himself. This was his Exodus story, and God had provided his safe delivery; he was a letter with a message – like one of Dongo’s – that had come as a testament to God’s goodness. Suffering was hard, but suffering was necessary for growth, and the crowd in front of him should do likewise. Thank you Jesus! Amen and hallelujah!

At this moment, the Anglican priest walked over. Akech watched the crowd who had listened to Nigel, and were subsequently deliberating over their own ‘sufferings’ or more likely preparing rebuttals, when he saw the man cut neatly through the crowd and toward the microphone. He was square, dressed in a white collar, slightly red with a look of exasperation; a look that all the pastors were acquainted with – he had something to declare.

They gave him the microphone out of courtesy, and the priest began to tell Nigel that suffering is a heavy topic that shouldn’t be pressed upon those that haven’t asked, and he then addressed that same sentiment to all of

the pastors and then to the rest of the crowd. And so, another religious debate ensued, which Akech watched unfold as Nigel gathered the men to him and began to oppose the preacher while the crowd buzzed in suspense like bees wanting nectar. Akech, seeing the priest didn't agree with their Exodus description, acknowledging he knew nothing about the reasons for their faith – for *his* faith – began to pick at a memory; faint, but still apparent.

For the Anglican priest, Jesus was a pretty picture on the wall he sang to on Sunday morning, but for the street preachers, Jesus was hope.

Jesus had spoken to Akech one evening in Jinja, at the age of twelve, as the bombs came down.

Jinja, Uganda

00:21

Home

Initially, when he awoke, Akech assumed he was still dreaming about the fight he had the day before, as a loud sound like a roar echoed about him. The roar resembled part of his collision with Joseph, a boy from the neighbouring village, which ensued when Joseph read Akech's book without asking.

He peered into the darkness of his mother's hut and waited to see what had occurred. Whilst he waited he thought back to yesterday, in the school playground.

Akech had glared when he felt other eyes creeping over his shoulder. He stopped reading because he could feel another set of eyes behind him. Akech took a look. Sure enough, behind him was a boy whose eyes were also upon the book in his hands.

The eyes looked back unapologetically when they were caught, and merely acknowledged their failed espionage with a candid indifference, before resuming their reading.

Well, that was just not right with Akech. So, in a way of defending his honour, he had put down the book, jumped up and into an attacking stance, just as a Maasai warrior would – the ones he had heard his friends talk about in reverence and fear – and on his face he wore a fierce expression, like a lion or a tiger.

'Ay, Joseph, get your eyes from my book, get your own,' demanded Akech. His hands were flat palms ready to chop, and one leg was behind the other, ready to swing up and kick.

Joseph's face was wide-eyed and inquisitive, attached to a body of smaller limbs than Akech's, with scuffed elbows, all woven together by the Jinja School for Boys uniform. The uniform was their only similarity. Akech knew Joseph lived in the opposite village and he saw him sometimes in the playground, yet they hadn't spoken until now.

Joseph looked upon Akech, whose warriorlike stance did not intimidate, but rather made him all the more curious. Akech seized his moment and kicked Joseph's side so that he landed on the dusty red ground. For fear of being caught by their teachers and excluded for fighting, Joseph reasoned profusely and quickly with Akech to refrain from any more violence.

Admittedly, Akech saw some truth in Joseph's case, and therefore he dissolved his poised hands and legs and instead put them to use in helping Joseph up, undoing what he had originally intended.

After exchanging words, they agreed to settle their dispute with a handshake, as this was what sophisticated men might do, or at least that is what the teachers did when new teachers came, or when old teachers left – non-verbal handshaking; another art yet to be learned. So, in this way, Akech had told Joseph that he better come play with him tomorrow, seeing as he had read his book without asking, and Joseph had replied with his hand still shaking (unaware of how long handshakes were supposed to last) that he would definitely be there, if he could read his book again, and if Akech would show him how to look as fierce as had with his warrior stance? Akech agreed, and each boy, upon hearing the call of the teachers, took their leave of one another, ready to embark upon the art of defence-by-extremely-fierce-intimidation after they had finished lessons, succumbed to sleep and awakened the next day.

Excited, Akech picked up the book from where he had laid it upon grass so it was safe from the dust, closed it carefully – the Bible was a book to be handled with care and he could finish Exodus tomorrow.

Jinja, Uganda

00:35

Mama's Hut

After the roar came a flash, and then another sound so thunderous Akech cried out and put his hands to his ears, shaking. Taking his ears from his head was Mama Akech, shouting inaudible instructions in her own grief, apparently pointing to what he needed to take, as they were leaving, and it was not safe.

Seeing that it was not the right time, Akech did not ask whether he and Joseph would still be able to meet tomorrow for their 'lesson', and began to grab whatever his mother's finger indicated: soap, rice, pot, rags, money, kerosene, lamp.

All of this was bundled into bags and tied to their bodies for a better journey. Another bang echoed outside and Akech began to hear the rise of cries and gunfire.

Now they would need to flee, as the chaos was rising and brewing outside. Mrs Akech prepared to step outside and expose them to danger, which was necessary if they were to have any hope of escaping. Akech watched his mother put her hand to the door and turn to him to follow, and Akech was about to when he remembered his father's Bible. Before Mrs Akech could protest, he went for the holy book that lay on the wooden stool beside his bed, which he and his mother had shared, turned back, and followed her through the door.

Outside, the chaos was evident: fire had licked up the school and was hotter than any days Akech had ever seen in the equatorial country. Mrs Akech held fast to her son's hand.

Husbands were running away from families as their wives cursed them for abandoning them, children were refusing to leave their homes, and over in the next village those responsible were swarming the villagers and overwhelming them.

Akech watched and then had a sudden realisation: Joseph.

They needed to leave, as the rebels would look to them once they had finished in the neighbouring village. Luckily, the cover of night made it easier to move about without being immediately discerned, though they would need to use some of their kerosene once they went beyond the village and the light of its burning houses.

That was when he saw him. He stood thirty metres or so away, under the guava tree; one of the few not on fire.

Akech peered at the man, who was tall and thin, with a face so resolute he didn't seem to be connected with the violence and ruin around them. As his face looked down upon Akech's, Akech saw lines at his temples light up, the flames from the huts reflecting in the thoughtful countenance.

In the chaos, though the man's lips did not appear to move, in his mind Akech heard, *follow me*, as the man indicated to the square pages tucked under Akech's arm that were surrounded by the last of their belongings that clung to his body.

At that moment, Akech knew it was the Jesus in his father's Bible, and that to escape death would mean trusting His guidance.

Akech led his mother with determination, as the Messiah was shining like a candle in white, soft compared to the red and orange that roared about them. Mrs Akech didn't protest, and once at Jesus's side, she allowed him to come forward, take both their hands in his and walk them through the coming massacre, as if it were spring and they were off to enjoy the harvest with some friends around a dinner table.

The journey out of Jinja was long, longer than it should've been, and Akech could not remember it sequentially.

They ran from road to road, crouched from bomb explosions, hid behind trees when men passed, and all the while the Messiah never showed any fear; not once did he speak but for those lines that Akech had heard: 'Follow me'. These were the paths that many others were probably taking, different but for the same reasons, the ones known individually but all bound by suffering; the roads as tributaries to a wider river that was this woe. Akech did not know how many villages they passed, couldn't recall when night consumed day, as the moon ate the sun as quickly as light would

appear again, flashes upon flashes, like the village flames; and the land they once knew soured like rust, weakened from being cooked with fire.

Eventually, after two days but what felt like months, they came to the main road that led out of Jinja, and would take them to the border of Kenya. Upon coming to the road they were stopped by several soldiers in a truck. Akech panicked, but Mrs Akech stilled him, and she began to approach them. Akech waited with Jesus, who still held his hand and said nothing.

The soldiers were nodding, and Mrs Akech walked back to Akech unharmed, to his surprise, claiming that these men were friends of his late father and would help him escape to 'a better life'. Before Akech could protest, he was being led by Jesus again, toward the truck. The soldiers however, took no notice of the Son of God and finalised their agreement with his mother. By the time Akech was aware of what was going on, the soldiers were coming for him, and he turned to his mother to refuse.

'You must go, Francis,' she whispered, as his body was lifted into the Jeep; the men around him, apparently his father's friends, took a few notes from his mother's hands before they went for his own, giving him what he presumed to be millet porridge. Around them, crickets chirped in the bleak night as mournful cries came from somewhere, and the men began to remind him that he was very lucky, that his father was a good man, and if it weren't for him, he would be stuck on the road with nowhere to go but to be caught by the 'freedom fighters', and probably burned or tortured.

Akech nodded, confused – confused that his mother couldn't go with him, especially if father was such a good man – couldn't Mama also come too?

Mrs Akech shook her head and assured him she had a place to go, as the soldiers began to ready the Jeep. Upon his hands came hers, the palms warm, tender underneath worn callouses, enfolding her child's fingers for perhaps the last time.

Then Akech was thinking of Uganda – of the red dust that stained everyone's shoes, that Teacher Otara told him was due to iron and aluminium; of the ripening of the bananas for plantain; of running from their village to the neighbouring villages (aunties loved cheeky Francis) and staying for tea, then being told off by Mama, with cassava in his belly (*so* warm) – and bringing some back for Mama to try – then spending the day

looking at men fishing at Lake Victoria; of splashing other kids with the water, cool water in the dry heat of a burning sun; of getting told off again.

Gunfire rumbled somewhere nearer.

With both hands still on his, Mrs Akech put them on Father's Bible. He only felt this, not saw it, because the soldiers had moved away with their lamps, but now a soldier came back and warned it really was time to go, and so Mrs Akech stepped back.

As the truck pulled away, Akech, just then realising he would be alone, and so would his mother, looked out on to the receding landscape. The sun was leaving and so was he, and with his mother's tear-streaked face and the Son of God watching him go, his fear and grief blinded him with sleep and his mind went numb.

Two days later he would be in Kenya, with his uncle, in Kitui, where he grew to become a man who walked with the spectre of a ruined childhood.

Ten years after that, he went back to Uganda and found his mother, who, as Akech bent down for the ceremony, kissed him on the head when he arrived at the bus park, before she took part of his luggage and walked him home. Mrs Akech asked many questions about Kenya; Akech responded, she returned, 'I'm very glad for you Francis,' and they left it at that.

It would only be another four years before Akech travelled again, with Father's friends, to Britain, to thirty years later, to today.

Stratford, London, UK

18:50

Westfield Shopping Centre

The Anglican priest continued, ‘So, yes, God is holy, and Jesus is our Lord, but we must let people decide for themselves.’

‘That’s what we’re saying, sir: we are telling people the good news, isn’t it?’

‘Well, I rather believe you’re *shouting* people the good news if anything,’ returned the priest to Dongo, who had attempted reasoning with him. ‘Christianity is about peace and harmony, not trying to berate others for their transgressions on the street; it is a personal decision to keep to oneself.’

This didn’t sit well with Akech. Just as Joseph’s eyes upon his page of his Bible didn’t sit well, nor did this priest’s ideas of peace and harmony.

‘All right, sir,’ began Akech as he cut in between Oyet, who was both patting a perplexed Dongo and trying to take back the microphone.

‘We have gathered to preach the good news, yes. Maybe our approach is not what you’re used to. Perhaps it is loud and out of your zone of comfort. But you know, a lot of these people here, they really, really need this. Not because we think they’re going to Hell, but because most of their stories, a lot of their lives, are messy.’

Akech saw Mama: grabbing broken pots, choked sobs.

‘And that can’t be cleaned up in pews. They won’t see their poverty reflected in those windows of glass with a lot of colour. Their pain can’t be silenced by your best British hymns. We all live within the same story, sir, but we experience it differently. Our way of doing things may be intense and strange to you, but the Bible and its message is not confined to one set of eyes only. It is a verbal, and active hope – for all people, for all eyes, for all stories, and that’s why we preach to everyone, not only to ourselves.’

Many people clapped and cheered, others went back to their phones and walked on, some called:

‘Yeah, preacher!’

‘We hear you, preacher!’

‘We all been sufferin’. All of us!’

Dongo, Oyet, Harris, Nigel and Caleb all began to sing; singing for whoever was going to listen and needed to sing too – this was catharsis, the battle with the Stratford soldiers and the Anglican general had been won. The priest listened until Akech was done, then with a disgruntled and confused sigh went back to continue his original journey. And that was that.

Once it was too cold to remain any longer, one by one most of his friends began to make their goodbyes and leave, with blessings and prayers. Akech felt that the temperature was dropping significantly, and so was their crowd, so he began to unplug the microphone and pack away his speaker into its bag. Finally, he took up his Bible of forty years and placed it in his palm.

With its weight he thought of Joseph – Joseph who he had not thought of for a long time, who should have been battling enemies in the red dust of the Jinja School for Boys, alongside Akech, throwing kicks, wearing expressions of lions and tigers; not seeing their childhoods torn apart by war.

He didn’t know what had happened to Joseph, whether he escaped or not, whether he lived. But Akech would like to think that Jesus had been with him, held his hand, given him the strength to hope, like He had given Akech.

With that same hope in his heart, Francis Akech took up his speaker, closed his Bible and took his path back to the station, toward a place called home.

In the Night We See Miracles

Meadow Evans-Bardowell

Most mothers told their kin tales of foreign creatures and fairy godmothers. In Ceyrai City, the children were put to bed with strange stories of people not too far from their homes: an old woman who could yield the wind into storms, and a man with the strength of an elephant with an especially wide girth, and his wife who could create rivers from nothing. At the sight of their offspring's frightened faces, the parents would tuck away their fear with the reassurance that these strange people would never hurt them.

Koracre was a mile-long field encased by an electric fence. It was where the 'damaged' humans lived – the ones who possessed abnormal abilities that normal people were afraid of. When couples birthed new spawn, the offspring were tested. If they were normal – like Caius was – they grew up in Ceyrai City.

Ceyrai was a disgustingly beautiful place. It virtually screamed 'privilege' if you so much as trekked by. It was a place rid of Mother Nature's simplest creations; Caius had never inhaled the sweet dew of a rainy meadow at night. The broken white wisps of a breath in winter were lost to the forged smell of fake evergreens and baked goods kept fresh with chemicals that people didn't realize they ingested every day.

Everyone believed that Ceyrai— with its gated houses and diamond glass windows, was crafted by the hands of their ancestors through ancient knowledge and dexterity. Caius disagreed – he thought that Ceyrai made its citizens. He thought that people yearned to look like they belong here, even if their hearts knew they didn't. So they plastered their faces with layers of powders and paints, they donned too-tight tuxedos and absurdly tall shoes whose heels could shred a man to ribbons.

The city seemed to melt away once you reached Koracre. The smell of fake nature and false perfection faded into something worse. The scent of scorching electricity, dried-out weeds that were once flowers. Koracre was where the 'strange' people lived. Eleven in all.

Caius had to traipse through the city, down the dingy alley that led to the electric fence that ran around Koracre's perimeter, and flash an identification card to the guards patrolling the fringes. All this to see the only people he'd ever seemed to fit in with.

The armed guards used to unnerve Caius – the freshly furbished rifles that warped the moonlight they reflected into alarming visions would make his core quiver and his legs threaten to run as far away as he could. No one was allowed in Koracre and no one was allowed out. But it turned out that being the president's first and last child had its benefits. The guards only granted Caius access because that choice didn't lie within their grasp. Even so, he could see the question they'd never ask as dark pools at the bottom of their eyes, the parting of their lips when he greeted the eleven people of Koracre like old friends – like family. *Why? Why would you ever come here, of all places?*

He asked himself the same thing today. The electric fence around Koracre was menacing as ever; the threads of electricity snapped in and out of one another, beckoning to Caius's thick curls that stood high on his head. He slipped his identification card from his pocket and briskly presented it to the guard stuck manning the control pad of the electric fence; the young man already knew who he was – Caius often visited Koracre; he could even argue that he spent more time there than at home in Ceyrai. The young guard nodded absently and the gate started to pull away from the other half of itself, the prickling strands of static clinging to each other before being ripped apart. The heat of the fence lingered as Caius walked through; a single strand of static slashed the tip of his finger and his hand curled in on itself awkwardly. He examined his finger briefly.

Almost everyone was perched on unevenly cut birch logs. They welcomed Caius when they saw his face. All except Jude, a boy Caius's age who had always been sceptical of his presence. Jude declared that he 'reeked of Ceyrai and the privilege we'll never have'. Caius supposed he wasn't wrong but he couldn't help that he had been born into a life he hadn't chosen.

Beyond the outgrown mop of Jude's hair were the other ten citizens of Koracre.

Sylvie – a woman with thin wisps of silvered hair and still enough power in her seemingly frail limbs to raise storms in the sky. Jacque – the man with the elephantine strength of ten of Sylvie’s storms (though he preferred to keep his gift at bay), and Ingmar, who made both raindrops and oceans from nothing at all. Jacque and Ingmar would sacrifice themselves and their abilities for their baby Ellory. Then there was Samael, a boy not much older than Caius who mostly kept to himself and his limited stack of steadily decaying books; Tomas, and Trio – fifteen-year-old twins who only communicated via the invisible string that tied their minds together.

And Asha, who was tending to a dying fire with her friend Diya and brother Isidore by her side. Asha’s lips suddenly parted into a small ‘o’ of gratification when the fire screamed at the night sky, placing some small pocket of warmth in her dark eyes. Her fingers were less than an inch from the fire and Caius could see the flames licking against her nose. *She can’t feel it*, he had to remind himself as another small stream of fire filtered through Asha’s fingertips, expanding the circle of light.

She looked up when she spotted Caius’s silhouetted figure through the waltzing flames and raised an eyebrow. ‘Took you long enough.’

Caius carefully avoided the flames Asha had summoned and dropped to the ground beside her. She was stretched out on the grass, ignorant to the fallen November rain soaking her jeans that had faded years ago. He handed her a folded map from the back of his pocket. It was protected by a plastic covering, and for the best too; it was so old that the color had faded to the deep brown of a decaying oak, the edges frayed and shapeless.

The natural mocking glint in Asha’s eyes blinked into a genuine gratefulness as she accepted the map. Her finger gently brushed Caius’s and he cringed at the lingering heat in her hands. He knew that Asha had a near-immaculate grip on the fire she could create, even so, he couldn’t help but fear that the ancient map would go up in flames at her touch.

‘You have about an hour to either memorize it or trace it on to another surface,’ he told her.

‘As you so frequently reminded me yesterday.’ Asha rolled her eyes but was still smiling at the aged paper.

Asha, Diya and Jude transferred the image of the map on to a large patch of dirt, protected by the bare branches of an enormous oak tree. Caius's gaze eventually drifted away from Asha and the map in her hand once Jude's steely glare intruded.

The words of Tomas and Jacque's conversation started to stretch into one another, their voices turning into a high-pitched drone in Caius's head. He turned back to Asha and Jude; a hushed conversation carried to the campfire in the intertwining locks of winter breeze.

He caught Asha's eye without meaning to and smiled back sadly at her when she grinned. They'd been working on this grand escape from Koracre for close to a year now. They hadn't dared to put it into action yet and Caius just didn't have the heart to tell them the chances of it actually working were meagre. None of the residents of Koracre had ever lived a life outside the electric fence. It was why the lack of enthusiasm from Sylvie and the young couple, Jacque and Ingmar, surprised him, regardless of the low possibility of them ever making it out of Koracre alive. They had never felt the rays of a sun unmarred by static, never smelt air that didn't carry the scent of polished gun metal and freshly pressed guard uniforms. They'd never *lived* the way Caius had, and all he wished was that they could.

Surely it would be better than this. A mere mile of dead grass and three miniscule cabins, the lack of care they were built with made clear by the steadily decaying wood of the walls and the dirtied windows. Beyond the cabins was a small collection of pine trees, a wicked illusion that the electric fence ended where the tiny forest started – that there really was a way out of Koracre.

Caius had once asked Ingmar why she seemed so uninterested in what was originally Asha and Jude's plan to ditch Koracre forever. Diya and Isidore naturally followed Asha anywhere, the twins Tomas and Trio had been drawn to the hope of real life and even Samael was willing to depart with his books to offer what little he could.

Ingmar had twirled her finger. Immediately, droplets of water from the nearby stream rose to eddy around her hand, stretching out into a stream that ran through her fingers and around her wrist. *A mini river*, Caius had thought. Ingmar smiled sadly at her river, still drowning her fingers in its depths.

‘Because, Caius,’ she started, ‘where you live, there is simply no place for people like us.’

Ingmar released the river and it splattered against the grass, wavering uncertainly until the mud soaked it away forever.

The metal rail could have been ice, had our eyes never been born to decoy the illusion. Caius’s hand cringed away from the stair rail, leaving his fingers to drag slack against the diamond glass wall instead. He’d traipsed home from Koracre reluctantly, and now, peering through the window in his mother’s office, he longed to be back behind the electric fence with everyone. The office seemed to be always caught in a time lapse; still and barren when his mother wasn’t working – and ignoring Caius – behind the desk.

He sighed and peered out of the diamond glass again. The city far below him appeared as a loosely painted canvas. The street lanterns and bedroom lamps were an array of miniscule dots, flung over the city by a careless hand. It was still beautiful and evoked thoughts of Asha, and the only time he had spent the night at Koracre.

Lying beside Asha, Caius had realized that the girl never seemed to rest. She swayed in and out of sleep all night, sensitive to the sound of a splintering twig, the low hoot of an owl. Between the scarce minutes in which she dozed, her slender form was silhouetted against the dim moonlight outside. She was always coherent, expectant almost. Even when she had slept, Caius never felt the muscles in her arm relax. At the time, he longed for nothing more than for Asha’s fists to unclench, for her to experience the wonders of sleep the way he did.

The next morning, when Caius woke, Asha was already up and humming an old song Caius didn’t recognize to herself. When he asked why she hadn’t slept, the girl only shrugged and said, ‘When we sleep – when we only exist in the light – we never know the night’s miracles. What we see now, what the sun allows us to see’ – Asha gestured to the sky – ‘this is only half of the story. This is only half of the world.’

Now, Caius could see what Asha had meant – as scary as it had seemed as children, when our heads only just brushed our father’s knees, the night was beautiful and Caius found that he preferred the city this way. The

darkness blanketed the gated houses, sang a soft lullaby to the diamond glass and false illusions of perfection. The city lights were like particularly bright stars, so similar to the night sky that the horizon was indistinguishable. It was hard to tell where the world stopped and restarted.

Caius slipped his mother's ancient map he'd stolen back into its rightful place on her office wall and made to leave the room. But something beckoned to him, hooking his eye and yanking him round. A single ray of moonlight played along his mother's desk and over a lone white sheet of paper. It might as well have been a tap-dancing whale for how strong the pull to observe it became. He didn't resist the urge.

He scanned the paper lightly, only half-aware of the printed information scuttling through his mind. It was about Koracre and its eleven citizens, as so many documents were. Caius was not concerned. It was only once he flipped the paper that the muscle in his chest started to slam against his ribcage, begging to leap right out of his body. It read:

KORACRE EVACUATION: NOVEMBER 19TH, 2:30 A.M.

Evacuation? To where? And why today, as opposed to the three hundred and sixty-four others?

Caius continued reading.

LOCATION: CEYRAI BAY

A captive breath hurtled out of him. Ceyrai Bay wasn't a beach at all; the name was simply a mask for what really happened there. Executions – for people who were different or defied the system. People like Asha. Ceyrai Bay was the reason only eleven people lived in Koracre – the others had been brutally murdered years ago, leaving a random selection of people to subsist behind an electric fence. Caius had always wondered why Ceyrai's government – led by his mother – had built Koracre in the first place; he was sure that eleven more lifeless bodies wouldn't budge his mother's conscience to be even remotely moral. But it didn't matter now. An alarming stroke of midnight announced that today was November 19th

Meaning Asha and the others didn't have time to plan a majestic escape from Koracre. They had to leave tonight.

Their lives quite literally depended on it.

Despite his jacket, the winter bite still gnawed at Caius, scarring his brown skin a raw red. He ignored November's claws, yet still the breeze insisted on yanking his hair, scratching unforgivably at his exposed ankles.

He doubted even he would be granted access to Koracre tonight. But at sixteen, Caius was nimbler and more astute than any guard patrolling the perimeter of the grounds.

As he'd suspected, the guards on duty seemed more vigilant than usual. From a distance or through a faulty eye, the two uniformed men standing before the electric fence would appear as they always did – ice cold, as though they had been dissected and had every ray of sunlight permanently removed from their DNA. Fortunately, Caius had a good eye. He saw details no one else did. And even from behind the bulk of an oak trunk, his eyes were able to latch on to the men's death-like grip on their rifles. The way their teeth worried at their lip. They were nervous, and nerves only held you back. Caius saw this as the upper hand it was.

He darted into the booth serving as a control room for the electric fence and all electricity in Koracre. He needed to somehow find a way to open the gate unnoticed. The man lazing on a plastic chair was slight, with freckles that had been sprinkled blindly over his skin by a generous hand. He started at the sight of Caius and cast about the wall for a weapon of some sort. But Caius was faster. He held two fingers to the man's throat and exercised pressure to the 'special spot' on his neck, the one that would make him go 'night-night' for a while. It was a trick the president – his mother – had taught him as a child. Simple and painless – a way to steal time, not lives.

Caius's eyes grazed over the control board, searching for something – a lever, a switch, *anything* to open the damn gate before someone noticed an unconscious man and a sixteen-year-old boy together in a control booth in the dead of night. A weighted sigh from the unconscious guard shocked Caius and his fingers splayed awkwardly over the control board to stop himself from falling.

Then he watched, amazed as the gate started to swallow itself, opening for him to enter. The two armed men before the gate jumped at the beep announcing it was opening and instinctively peered into the control room.

Before the guards caught sight of him and their unconscious colleague at the control board, Caius lodged a sharp elbow into the pressure point on one guard's neck, then submerged his fist into the stomach of the other. Their bodies dropped to the ground and he felt the guilt and shame running circles though his head, tugging persistently at his shoe, trying to pull him into a non-existent abyss in the ground. He gnawed at his bottom lip as he stared at the three comatose bodies before him. *At least unconsciousness reached them before the pain did.*

That was the easy part, Caius told himself. Getting eleven people out of a country unnoticed was going to be far more difficult than a few well-aimed punches.

At this hour, Koracre's electric fence was hardly visible. The pine trees in the distance were silhouetted by the moon and the outlying twigs and leaves danced ferociously with one another against the sky.

The fire from earlier on had died long ago; all that remained was bestrewed ash and smoke that constricted Caius's lungs. He fought to hold back a frenzied cough; the night seemed too tranquil to disturb.

Caius shook his head. A dizzying reminder that tonight he had a job. And he intended to see it through.

One knock at Asha's cabin window was all that was required for her head to turn. He could tell she had been awake already. Though she seemed exhausted, her eyes were so very alive. They flashed a question at the sight of Caius. His look back at her told her how little time they had. Asha nodded solemnly.

Caius thought that by whispering the truth, it would come as less of a shock to the eleven citizens of Koracre. But it turned out that whispering to someone that they'll be executed very soon was hardly better than outright saying it.

Everyone stared at him, blinking, completely dumbfounded. Surprisingly, Samael was the first to speak.

‘T-tonight?’ the boy stuttered out. ‘When? How?’

Caius glanced at his watch. ‘Less than two hours. We still have time.’ Despite Samael’s two years on Caius, the boy had always seemed, well... fragile – as was everyone who lived in Koracre. Jude had once said that *none of us are whole*. But Samael had clearly been broken by Koracre more than the others, with only nine frayed books to keep him standing through each day.

Jude rose to his feet. ‘Then help us make the most of it.’ He held out a hand that Caius guessed he was supposed to shake but coming from Jude, he instead cocked his head in silent question. Jude rolled his eyes, massively exaggerating the time his pupils spent skyward. He sighed, releasing every last strand of air his lungs had to offer. ‘It’s your choice, Caius. But we don’t belong here.’ He took a step forward, taking advantage of his height to look down on Caius, then gestured a finger in the direction of the city. ‘And you don’t belong there, either.’

An invitation? From Jude? Caius’s thoughts went to war, hurling grenades of reasoning and stabbing blades of hope through the membrane in his head. He’d never liked the city, no. The false living was what made him back out of playdates and dinner parties when he was younger. But he’d never actually considered leaving. He’d never considered a life with the eleven people before him; he’d never contemplated the prospect of a life with Asha.

Caius took Jude’s hand and felt the callouses on the other boy’s palm; each one was a coarse reminder of the sixteen years Jude had been forced to endure here. Caius suddenly understood how much this opportunity meant to these people. They’d been forced behind bars, been constantly taunted with the illusion of hope every time that electric gate parted. Asha was right – the moon and the sun birthed a tale that changed every day. But the only tale she’d ever known was Koracre and Caius wanted to give her something more, he wanted to give them all a new story, a new life far from Koracre’s menacing fence. They had little time left and Caius vowed that he would not rest until his friends – no – his family read the first pages of their brand-new story.

They moved in a tight, snake-like formation. They were silent— or as silent as a group of twelve people could be. Caius winced each time Isidore trod on a twig or let out an irrepressible squeak and was forced to remind himself that the boy was only ten and possessed an unusual amount of energy, even for his age.

They vaguely knew where they were going. It was agreed somewhere on the other side of the ocean was a safe place, and Caius knew just how to get there.

It was only once the sea was in sight that something called to Asha's sharp gaze. Caius knew something was wrong the moment they locked eyes — he had come to learn to read her like a book with a tantalizing plot.

Asha said one word, and it was all she needed to say. 'Guards.'

Caius studied the ensemble of uniforms and rifles. They were far, but near enough for Caius to recognize the three young men he'd guided to unconsciousness earlier amongst the herd. By now, they no doubt had discovered the empty grounds of Koracre and had linked the face of a sixteen-year-old boy to the disappearance of eleven prisoners. And they weren't very happy about it.

Caius knew it was no use praying into his palms or waiting for a sprinkle of luck to dust their shoulders. He gestured for the group to board a boat that wasn't in use and apparently hadn't been for a while — a wild guess forged from the rotten deck and sickly green color of the wood. There were ferries and enormous shipping containers which Samael had immediately declined, reasoning that they would attract far too much attention. Jacque had pointed out the small boat, which was powered by an electric motor but otherwise silent and hard to care about if it went missing.

Caius was last to board the boat, and started at everyone's expectant faces.

'What?'

Asha placed a hand on her hip and rolled her eyes. 'Well, when would any of us have ever learned to drive a boat?'

Right...

Caius mimicked Asha's stance. 'Just because I had access to boats, doesn't mean I used them.'

Jude and Asha rolled their eyes in tandem. ‘Then what’s the point in being the president’s kid?’ Jude taunted.

Caius opened his mouth to retort despite the nearby guards.

Sylvie cut him off. ‘I can drive the boat,’ she croaked out. ‘What?’ The old woman glared at Tomas and Trio’s twin expressions of surprise. ‘I’m old, not useless. Now close your mouths, you look like fish on a hook.’

The twins turned to one another, likely having a rapid telepathic conversation.

Caius turned to Sylvie. ‘You can get us out of here?’

The old woman nodded. ‘But the power’s dead – this old thing hasn’t been used in years.’ Sylvie examined the control board, gnawing at a nail that was already half-bitten-off.

Diya raised a hand like a child making a suggestion at school. Jude smirked. Asha snorted. Diya ignored them, then said, ‘I can get the boat running.’ A lonely string of static began to circulate her finger. It was Diya’s ability to summon electricity, but after a failed attempt to deactivate the electric fence and Koracre, the guards had forced her to subdue her abilities with the consequences of death. It had been years since Caius had seen Diya show her ability. ‘But it’s been a while since I’ve done this,’ Diya continued. ‘I’ll need a distraction.’

Ingmar stood uncertainly, struggling to not disturb the sleeping Ellory in her arms. ‘I can help with that.’

Asha reached out for Ingmar’s gaze and held it there. ‘*We* can help with that,’ she amended.

Before Caius could say a word, Baby Ellory was thrust into his arms and Asha and Ingmar were out of his reach.

The guards were less than twenty feet away but Asha and Ingmar showed no worry or fear as they exited the boat to step towards them. Caius wanted to call Asha back, pull her into the safety of the boat. Because, although he knew she was strong, she was still a sixteen-year-old girl against a stampede of oncoming guards with only one ally by her side.

The world seemed to still for a moment – just one.

Then an explosion of flames burst from Asha’s outstretched hands at the same time as Ingmar poured a river directly at Asha’s inferno. Caius gasped

in awe as the two elements bound one another, never touching but close enough to send off waves of steam into the sky. As they eddied round each other, Asha's words became crystal clear. *This* was the other half of the world, the miracles that he'd never witness if he closed his eyes. He understood now. This was why Asha never slept the way most people do. For all her sass and general air of sarcasm she'd always had hope that this moment would one day exist. That they would one day escape Koracre. And she'd wanted to be awake to see it all.

Caius's eye caught the slight twitch in both Asha and Ingmar's hands. At their command, Asha's fire and Ingmar's water slammed into one another, exploding into a thick sea of smoke that split the world in two. The guards were no longer visible and they wouldn't be for a while. Even the violent gusts of wind weren't able to budge the impenetrable smoke.

A laboured groan from the boat pulled Caius's gaze from the crack of smoke in the landscape. The boat started to shudder beneath him. It lurched forward without warning, only to yank itself backwards a half second later. Diya had managed to recharge the boat's electric motor but something was still holding them back. Caius looked into the murky water. Even in the dark, he could see the metal link-chain harbouring the boat to the shore. Without hesitation, he handed Ellory to Jacque and dived into the water. He would make sure they would leave this shore tonight.

Caius was quick. He was smart too. But strength was not one of his actual strengths. He pushed every ounce of energy into his arms and the metal chain groaned an awful lot, but absolutely refused to undo itself. Caius felt a new body enter the water – no, two – and looked up the see Tomas and Trio's near-identical faces. The three of them nodded in tandem and tugged at the link-chain until it burst into hundreds of thick metal hoops.

The boat was free to sail.

Caius couldn't help it. His face split into a boyish grin and he yelled madly for Asha and Ingmar to get back on to the vessel.

The two girls looked exhausted yet exhilarated all the same. Thick sheens of sweat coated their bodies like a second skin, but their bright smiles could have powered people for a lifetime.

Ingmar reached for Baby Ellory in Jacque's arms and cradled the child against her chest, whispering a mother's comforts into her ear.

Sylvie let out a loud whoop as the boat raced into the ocean, flinging clumps of salty water at the shore. The guards were now visible though Asha and Ingmar's lingering smoke. It didn't matter. The boat wasn't a fast thing, but it carried them far enough from the shore that the smoke appeared as a foggy horizon, the flares of distant gunshots cast as the rising sun.

From everyone's lips escaped a laboured sigh, held in their lungs since they'd been born into Koracre.

The sun wouldn't show itself for hours but Caius had now grown to like the night. *Now I've seen both halves of the world*, he thought to himself. *We all have.*

The sun started to poke its head over the horizon a few hours later. Caius woke on the boat's deck to Sylvie steering, humming a soft tune beneath her breath. The twins and Isidore were bent over the sides of the boat, using their quick hands to grab nearby fish to eat. Caius hadn't realized just how hungry he was. Asha was gazing at the sun, and her ability made her oblivious to its glare. When Caius sat beside her, she turned to him.

'Thank you.'

It was all she said, yet Caius could hear the billions of thoughts she'd never be able to put into words. Asha leaned into Caius's chest without warning and the boy began to blush violently.

Caius scanned the group, this ragtag team pieced together with the broken parts of one another. He had lost so much in one night and the others had so much to gain.

None of us are whole.

They weren't, but soon, they'd start to find the missing pieces to the puzzles in their hearts. They'd find a way to nurse these hidden hurts and the memories of Koracre into something manageable. They'd manage.

They'd manage.

The Graves on the Mountain

Joseph Dodd

A year after I graduated from Bordeaux University as a scholar of physical anthropology, one of my lecturers came to me with a letter he had received from a certain professor of archaeology.

Professor Angus MacArthur Heyward had been a respected academic until his most recent investigation, in the pursuing of which he had requested a recently graduated anthropology student to join him in Egypt. Popular opinion was that Professor Heyward was at best a madman and at worst a liar. My lecturer thought the opportunity would let me 'see just how deluded scientists can become'. He hoped I could avoid going down the same path. I accepted the post.

I arrived in Cairo in the September of 1910 and chartered a boat south down the tranquil, abundant Nile to Aswan. There, I met a camel train which transported supplies to Professor Heyward's camp in the Gilf Kebir region, to where they were to escort me. I shall never forget the searing vastness of the desert, as I swayed in the saddle of a horse tethered at the rear of the column.

After almost a week, our water supply dwindling, we entered the baked red sand and scree-sloped mountains of Gilf Kebir. Finally, in the afternoon of the seventh day, we came in sight of the professor's camp.

With the prospect of a long-awaited rest and a decent meal, the camp looked more like home than any French village I'd known. There was a long clay hut with a thatched roof, a large square tent beside it, and a few small lean-tos several yards away.

Some Egyptian men ran to meet us from the lean-tos. They helped my escort unload the baggage, while I dismounted and rubbed the life back into my legs.

At that moment, from behind a rocky crag to the north, another group of camels trotted into view, suffused by a dust cloud. Bellowing and clanking,

they swept into camp. The man at the head of the group swung to the ground and strode towards us. He called to my guides in fluent Arabic and then came towards me.

He towered over six feet tall, his skin tanned brown by the sun. His army boots shed dust at each step. He wore plain trousers and a loose white shirt, unbuttoned at the neck and rolled up at the sleeves, exposing his deep chest and thick, hairy arms. A bristling salt-and-pepper beard framed a set mouth, with a broken nose and enormous black eyebrows above it. The sharp attention in his eyes was alarming.

‘Professor Heyward!’ I said. ‘I am your new assistant, sir.’

For answer he grabbed the lapels of my jacket and rocked me backwards, as if testing my strength. I was astonished at his.

‘What’re you wearing, lad?’ he said, his words coloured by a Scottish accent. He snorted. ‘You’ll cook inside that fine suit in this sun!’

He barked an order at a nearby man, who scuttled away, and turned back to me.

‘Name?’

‘Henri Theroux.’

‘French?’

‘Yes, but my mother is Indian.’

‘You’re an anthropologist, yes?’

‘Yes, sir. These are my credentials,’ I said, pulling a leather folder from one of the saddlebags on my horse. As he took it, the man he had just addressed returned, handing the professor a bundle of white fabric.

‘Get changed into these,’ said Heyward. ‘Then meet me back here.’ With that, he walked away.

‘May I see my quarters first?’ I called after him.

‘My men will see your things moved in,’ he shouted over his shoulder. ‘I’m taking you to see the sights.’

‘Sights? What sights?’ The idea of another journey made my knees weak.

‘The reason you’re here, Theroux. Now, get changed!’

There was no protesting.

Ten minutes later, dressed in a light white shirt and trousers, I was leaving camp with Professor Heyward, astride a camel. I was woefully inept at controlling the beast, and eventually Heyward haltered my camel to his, growling irritably, as if, in his opinion, any man should be able to ride a camel as easily as walk.

We moved from the open land into the mountains. The smell of the hot rocks and dust overwhelmed me. Falcons circled, their whistling calls echoing in the canyons.

After a while, we began to climb a narrow path which ran like a scar up one of the taller slopes. I clung to my reins whenever pebbles showered down, taking progressively longer to hit the ground. The dust, stirred up by the wind, coated our skin and choked our throats. The sun glared with an intensity that almost made my ears ring.

The track ended in a plateau of pale, fine gravel, perhaps thirty feet across. At the opposite end, a shallow cave burrowed into the mountain's shoulder.

'Here we are,' Heyward grunted, as we dismounted from our camels. 'I want you to see what I'm doing here. I know the stories they tell about me.'

He was a mysterious man, his mind like a machine. I felt on the back foot, unsure what question would be appropriate.

'Who is "they", sir?' I asked lamely, following him towards the cave.

'The so-called scientific community,' he answered. 'Men who claim they're after the new and ground-breaking but cower when they see it.' As if reminded of something, he turned.

'What have you heard about my work?'

I hesitated. He seemed proud, quick to anger. I had heard the stories 'they' told about him and repeating them did not appeal to me.

'Just as you say, sir. Merely stories.'

'Don't tell me what I want to hear,' he snapped.

I took a deep breath.

'That... you are convinced that thousands of years ago, an advanced humanoid species coexisted with mankind on Earth.'

It was impossible to gauge his reaction. He turned and kept walking.

‘At least the imbeciles could grasp the gist,’ he muttered. I exhaled.

The shade in the cave was complete. My eyes widened at the sight within.

In a line to the left-hand side were three rectangular pits cordoned off with rope. They were deep, but only about five feet long.

‘Graves?’ I asked.

‘Graves.’

The back wall was a mass of carvings.

‘Take a look,’ said Heyward.

The carvings were ancient and faded. The longer I looked, the more I made out.

Low down on the wall was pictured a knot of dwellings. Higher up were people and camels. Next came a series of zigzags and swirls, which suggested to me elemental imagery, like a storm.

Above this were some figures shaped like the people, only horizontal, and from their sides protruded long elliptical shapes.

These characters recurred often. Sometimes they were seen alongside crowds of ordinary men. There were a few instances of them pursuing figures that were clearly fleeing.

Finally, I came to the highest image on the wall.

It was not of any living thing. Jagged at the edges, of indistinct shape, with points all over it like steeples. Straight lines sprang off it, indicating luminescence.

Perhaps it was the way this image dominated the others, or maybe the sheer uncertainty of what it represented, but I turned cold inside.

Heyward was watching me.

‘Professor... what does it mean?’ I murmured.

He beckoned me away.

‘Have your rest first, lad. We’ll talk later.’

I spent the remainder of the afternoon in my tent, which was on the opposite side of the camp to Heyward’s. I slept most of the time, until late evening when I was invited to see the professor.

The walls of his tent had been rolled up and tied, leaving it open to the air. It was well-lit by oil lamps and the bonfire the men had built in the middle of the camp. An elegant Persian carpet was spread on the ground inside. There was a polished rosewood table, a fringed chaise longue, and a mighty leather armchair. There was a drinks cabinet complete with ice, a crammed bookshelf, and on smaller tables stood framed pictures, statuary and a gramophone.

Heyward was reading thoughtfully in the armchair. He saw me waiting and motioned me inside.

‘Thank you, sir,’ I said. ‘May I sit?’

‘If it pleases you.’

I positioned myself on the chaise.

‘Drink?’ he asked, crossing to the cabinet.

‘A little wine, if it can be managed,’ I said.

‘You’re entirely too polite,’ he observed. I wasn’t sure how to respond, but my ‘thank you’ as he handed me my glass felt awkward.

‘I read your credentials this afternoon,’ Heyward said, dropping into his armchair with a large brandy.

I was glad he was moving towards business.

‘Your thesis interests me. “Cranial Developments in Homo Erectus”. You’re a skeleton specialist.’

‘The skeleton is the beginning for understanding man, sir,’ I said.

‘Good. That is what I need.’ He nodded, then fixed me with his eyes.

‘The summary you gave of my theory today hit the nail on the head. My discoveries point to an ancient, perhaps advanced, coexistor to humanity.’

My lecturer’s warning about Heyward’s delusion flashed in my mind, but I humoured him.

‘Could you tell me what you have actually discovered, Professor?’ I asked.

He sat back, sipping thoughtfully.

‘I have spent years in Egypt, as soldier and scientist. *My* thesis dealt with the pyramids, and my studies under Julius Antonine. Seven years ago,

I came upon a scripture, in the tomb of Ton-en-Amen, a scribe of Pharaoh Aarehotep Sa-Set. Are you familiar with the Atfal Hawris?’

‘No, sir.’

‘They were a tribe indigenous to this area who worshipped the Egyptian sky god, Horus. Ton-en-Amen’s writings described a day in 2000 BC, when the Atfal Hawris performed a ceremony the Egyptians had never seen before, and ritualistically buried three individuals at the top of a mountain.’

‘Was ritualistic burial not commonplace then?’ The pyramids seemed to me proof positive of this.

‘These people never buried their dead. They left them for the vultures.’

‘I see. Then why did they bury these three?’

‘That is what I sought to find out,’ Heyward replied. ‘Following directions detailed by Ton-en-Amen and my knowledge of the tribe’s range, I located the site you saw this afternoon.’

‘Did you find anything?’

His eyes gleamed.

‘Skeletons, Theroux. And those skeletons are why you are here. I am an archaeologist. My knowledge of bones serves my needs, but an anthropologist can understand a bone’s owner better than I.’

‘In that case, sir, why did you request a student? Why not contact an expert?’ That question had puzzled me since I accepted the appointment.

The gleam in his eyes turned steely.

‘I intended to when I showed the skeletons to the Royal Society. Do you know what they said?’

I did.

‘They called me a fake, and none would entertain the truth.’

His glass was shaking in his hand, so much that I feared he would hurl it in anger.

‘Even Julius Antonine. I took a bullet for that man!’

Heyward drew a deep breath and swigged his drink.

‘I recently decided I can go no further without help, but I wanted an assistant whose mind was uncluttered by their own scientific agenda. Namely, a student.’

‘I see.’ I was hardly flattered by his answer. I prided myself on my personal ideas. What he meant was he wanted someone with no vested interest in proving him wrong.

‘Well, what was so strange about these skeletons?’ I asked, after a moment.

He grinned.

‘Come with me, Theroux.’

Despite my uncertainty, I felt a touch of excitement. My assignment had been a mystery for so long. Finally, it would be explained.

Heyward led me from the tent to the clay hut beside it. He unlocked the door and I followed him into the dark interior. A metallic scent mingled with dust in the air.

The professor lit oil lamps around the walls. To one side stood a workbench. There were other benches with archaeologists’ tools strewn across them. On the other side of the room were three wooden trestles, on each of which rested a rectangular crate.

Reaching under the tarpaulin covering one of these crates, Heyward took out a round object, which he handed to me.

‘What do you make of that?’

I turned the skull over, and frowned.

‘It’s finished developing,’ I said. ‘But... it’s so small.’

He nodded and drew the tarpaulins off the crates.

Lying at the bottom of each was a near-complete skeleton. Immediately, I saw that every bone was fully formed, suggesting adulthood. But these figures were short; not above four feet tall.

Then, my eyes fell on the third skeleton. There was a strange structure on its back – an L-shaped bone that adjoined its shoulder blade and protruded out at a right-angle from the main skeleton. A ball-and-socket joint joined the two halves.

I stared at the professor. He was looking levelly at me.

‘Well? Are they fakes?’

I thought of my lecturer’s warning. But the longer I looked at the skeletons, the greater my conviction that they were real.

‘No. What... what are they?’

‘That’s for you to work out, Theroux,’ he said. ‘Let me show you what else was in the graves.’

On the workbench were three bronze plates. They were roughly circular, about a foot across. The surfaces were engraved with shapes, outlines and curious reliefs – raised squares and angular lumps of bronze. All three were identical.

‘Each grave had one,’ said Heyward, ‘but as for what they are, I have no idea. There is also this,’ he added, and turned one of the plates over.

The back was also engraved. At the top was a notch, and a short way around the edge, anticlockwise from the notch, a semicircle. From the middle of the semicircle, a line bisected the diameter, and in the centre, a hole had been bored through the bronze.

‘What does it all mean, Professor?’

‘Whoever, or whatever those skeletons were,’ he said, ‘the Atfal Hawris must have found them significant. Why else would they have undergone a wholly new death ritual for them? The cave carvings also have something to say. What did those mean to you, Theroux?’

I thought.

‘I suppose they depicted the tribe themselves. Then some strange creatures appeared. And somehow they all link to...’ A chill ran down my spine as I remembered that nameless monolith at the top of the picture. ‘To that... thing. Whatever it was. A building?’

‘Here is my thinking,’ said Heyward. ‘The carvings travel upwards on the wall, wouldn’t you agree? The Atfal Hawris worshipped the sky, so their religious carvings are read upwards, the most significant image taking the highest spot. So, clearly, that strange shape was paramount to their relationship with those they were burying.’

‘Of course.’

‘They would only bury those individuals if they merged with their beliefs. Those creatures must have had some connection with the sky,’ he said. ‘Theroux, I believe that monolith is some sort of airship.’

‘An airship?’ My incredulity could not be hidden. ‘In 2000 BC? Now, Professor, really...’

I faltered under his glare.

‘You’re starting to sound like one of those doubters,’ he rumbled. ‘I would not hesitate in packing you off home, Theroux.’

Outrageous though his claims were, I had seen the skeletons, and I wanted more than anything to be given the chance to study them.

‘You think I don’t know how bizarre it sounds?’ he said. ‘I follow what I know to understand what I don’t. A building would have been meaningless to the Atfal Hawris. They lived in tents. Whatever that thing was, it was important to them. So were the bodies. And what could be more natural than for a people who worshipped the sky to hail strange beings with flying technology as gods, and change their traditions of death to honour them? It is a theory, Theroux. And scientists pursue their theories until they are proved.’

I was silent. Despite all the fantastic things I had heard, I couldn’t deny Heyward’s passion. And the skeletons were the most fascinating specimens I had seen.

‘Indeed, Professor,’ I said. ‘I will be proud to work with you.’

He did not smile, but I felt my words were appreciated.

‘Good lad,’ he said. ‘Now, get some sleep. You start work in the morning.’

Over the following three days, the professor and I worked in the laboratory, the professor on one side, bent over the bronze plates, and me on the other, examining the skeletons.

Heyward’s eyes never wavered from the plates or his tools. It was as if his whole world had shrunk to accommodate only them. Not once did he look up at me, and he never spoke a word.

I was left largely to my own devices. I might leave to take a break any number of times, and Heyward would hardly notice. He never questioned my methods or actions.

Heyward always stopped working promptly at five. Afterwards, he might go for a camel ride or listen to his gramophone. For myself, I took to finishing when he did, and would write up the day’s observations, or read. Occasionally, the camp attendants would give me badly needed lessons in

camel riding. Indeed, in those three days, the professor and I barely exchanged a word, even after we had finished work.

It was on the fourth day when everything changed.

The professor's oil lamp had gone out. Frustrated, he rose, hefting the plate with him.

'What time is it, Professor?' I asked. He glanced at his watch.

'Almost eleven,' he said, and strode outside.

I resumed my labours. After examining the skeletons, I had found that all of them had once carried the strange L-shaped bone on their back, one on each shoulder. Moreover, I had begun to grasp an unexpected fact about the skeletons. I had only one final test to make before I felt I could confirm my discovery.

Right as I was about to carefully saw one of creature's femurs in half to see the interior, the door flew open.

Heyward stood on the doorstep, flushed with some overmastering emotion. He struggled to find the words, until he simply cried, 'Get out here!' Dropping my implements, I hurried outside. To my amazement, Heyward grabbed me around the shoulders with one arm, cackling with delight, almost lifting me towards where the bronze plate lay on the sand.

'Theroux, you're brilliant!'

The back of the plate was facing up, with the line and semicircle exposed.

'What is it, sir?'

'You, asking me what time it was! Why did I never see it before?'

He pulled from his pocket a slender wooden needle that he used for picking grime from his artefacts. He wedged the wide end of this spike into the hole in the middle of the plate.

'Watch!'

The sun was beating down on us. We stared at the shining plate, and at the shadow of the needle cast along its surface. With each passing minute, the shadow crept around.

'It's a sundial!' I breathed.

‘When you asked me the time, I realised...’ Heyward trailed off, staring with burning eyes as the needle’s shadow finally lay straight along the line.

‘Turn it over!’ he gasped suddenly. Falling to my knees, I hauled the heavy disc on to its other side, careful to replace it exactly where it had been. My eyes widened.

The sun was casting shadows from the reliefs, angles and crenulations on the engraved surface. New black shapes were falling across the plate, reshaping the image.

‘Wait!’ Heyward shouted. He charged into his tent, emerging with a map of the area which he spread beside the plate. Involuntarily, I cried out.

The shadows, combined with the areas still in the light, and the graven shapes, had turned the bronze plate into an exact map of the Gilf Kebir region and the desert north of it.

Our eyes scanned the bronze. With a series of oblong outlines arranged end to end, the carver of the plate had created a path that snaked from the mountains out across the desert, until it arrived at a destination marked by a large ring.

Wordlessly, I handed Heyward a pen. He drew the line on the paper map, rapidly transposing locations and bearings. Just then, the sun moved on, and the shadows shifted, distorting the shape.

Heyward sprawled on his back as if he had reached the end of a long race.

‘By George, I’ve cracked it!’ he gushed.

‘Where does it lead, Professor?’ I asked breathlessly.

‘No idea, lad,’ he said, and started laughing again. ‘No bloody idea!’

Heyward made up his mind to follow the map as soon as possible. I think he was reluctant when he agreed to let me go with him, which I resented. He was impossibly narrow-minded. But eventually I secured his approval, and he did warm to the idea. The next two days were spent preparing for the journey, and each night we would sit up late in his tent and discuss where we might be led.

Heyward’s knowledge of the desert was extensive, from both his time as a scientist and a soldier. Judging the distance between the locations where

the line on the map swerved and deviated, he surmised the journey would take three days. I still remember what he said when I asked what we might find at its end.

‘The Atfal Hawris forged secret maps that can only be read at a certain time of day, leading to something linked to perhaps the most significant moment in their history. Trust me. We’ll know it when we see it.’

Early on the third morning, we set off on heavily loaded camels. The professor’s attendants remained behind to watch the camp, as Heyward believed the two of us would travel faster.

Nothing could have prepared me for the desert. Even my ride from the Nile to the camp paled in comparison.

First was the sheer vastness of it. It blanketed the Earth for hundreds of miles in every direction. I could have walked into it with my eyes shut for days and never met an obstacle; it was featureless. We just had the line on the map to guide us, and our understanding that it ran almost perfectly northwards. And second was the silence. The tread of our camels, the rattle of our baggage and our voices were absorbed by the sand, and barely carried. It was like crossing a huge, quiet room.

Heyward built fires at night, and we would ration our water and food. One glance showed that this was the life for him. I thought of the medals framed in his tent. The tough outdoors was home enough for the soldier he was.

As evening on the third day drew on, we were following the crest of a vast dune, when suddenly we passed the shoulder of another, and looked down upon a gargantuan crater.

It was like a bowl in the sand, a few miles across. Heyward claimed it had penetrated the rock beneath. It was an oddly warped shape, with the deepest point not being in the middle, but at the far end, where we could see a cave.

I asserted we should wait until morning to investigate, but a strange alteration had overcome Heyward. His movements became static and precise, his eyes wide, and his voice strangely husky.

‘No. We’re going in now,’ he said.

Try as I might, I was powerless to protest as Heyward led the way down into the crater. The heat was intense at the bottom, but Heyward pressed on, leading my camel. Night had properly fallen before we reached the cave.

Up close, it was enormous. I could not guess how tall or wide it was. The tunnel inside did not shrink but ran gradually down into the ground.

Heyward lit a pair of torches.

‘Leave the camels here.’

‘Professor, I really think it’s unwise—’ I began, but quite suddenly, Heyward’s torch was directed at my face.

‘If you’re a coward, Theroux, stay where you are. But I’ve been chasing this for seven years. I am not waiting a minute longer.’

He meant it too, because he didn’t even wait for me to respond, just trudged into the cave as if he had forgotten all about me.

I dithered on the threshold. The desert night is impenetrable, and the darkness made my fears grow.

I could not let him go alone. Finally, I tethered the camels and hurried after him.

Together we progressed downwards. The gradient of the tunnel was steady, and it completely dwarfed us. I felt no bigger or more significant than an ant. The ceiling and both walls were lost beyond the glow of our torches. It was like moving through an ocean of dark inside a bubble of light. Our footsteps echoed on forever.

I could hear Heyward’s breathing beside me. It was stifled, tense. I was not sure I was breathing at all.

There were no bends in the tunnel, and we kept going straight until, suddenly, it came to an end.

We could only see a fraction of the wall facing us. We strode back and forth, stretching our torches higher to get some idea of what it was.

Gigantic jagged spikes jutted out of every inch of the wall, like the back of a monstrous porcupine. They varied in length and width, but none was shorter than a tall tree. The light of our torches was reflected in the wall, and somehow, it smelled cold.

We came back together.

‘This isn’t stone,’ I said.

‘No,’ muttered Heyward. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was... metal.’

‘What’s that?’ I gasped suddenly. We turned our torches to a darker shape in the blackness, between two of the spikes.

It was an opening in the wall, shaped like a door.

Without a backwards look, Heyward strode inside.

‘Professor!’ I hissed. ‘Heyward!’

He ignored me, and I ran after him.

We were standing in a narrow corridor, and our torches illuminated pipes running like veins over the walls. Heyward prowled on, with me scampering in his wake.

‘I knew it,’ he was whispering. ‘I knew it.’

‘An airship?’ I asked.

‘Clearly. It’s a machine.’

The corridor turned right and sloped steeply upwards. Heyward followed it, until it ended in a round space.

Heyward’s torch found a switch on the wall. He reached for it.

‘No!’ I shouted.

With a metallic crash, light flooded the room, forcing us to shield our eyes until they adjusted.

The opposite wall was a bank of windows, which faced into nothing but the rock into which the machine was embedded. In the centre of the floor was a tall plinth, with a bronze metal dome resting on top of it.

Heyward dropped his torch and moved into the room.

My skin was crawling with dread. I could sense some unknown, creeping doom in the very air of the place.

‘Professor...’ I begged. ‘Professor...’

‘An airship,’ he breathed. ‘It must have crash-landed. Been stuck in the ground ever since.’

‘Please, sir, let’s—’

‘And the pilots...’

As he said that, his fiery eyes were caught by the dome on the plinth. He approached it.

‘The pilots escaped, and the Atfal Hawris...’

‘Sir, no!’ I saw his intention, but I was frozen to the spot.

He placed his hands on the dome.

From the very heart of the ship, a deep, mechanical moan began to build. The lights brightened, and the walls were filled with a hissing, like steam. The bronze dome began to vibrate, gently at first, but finally growing to a furious buzzing tremor.

‘Professor!’ I cried over the noise. ‘We must go!’

He struggled. He stared at his hands. He fought wildly.

‘No!’ he yelled. His hands were stuck fast.

The whole room was shaking now, and from outside I could hear the crumbling of rock.

I ran to him, grabbed his arms, tried to drag them away from the dome, but it was hopeless. I looked him pleadingly in the eyes before the floor bucked and sent me sprawling.

Struggling up, I saw him gazing down at me. His face was white.

‘Run, Theroux,’ he said. ‘Run.’

‘Professor...’

‘GO, NOW!’

As the whole ship began to tremble, the roar of the engine growing louder, I scrambled for the corridor without looking back.

Outside, I pounded up the huge tunnel. Behind me, light was beginning to chink out of the hull of the ship. The whole tunnel was quaking, rocks falling from the ceiling.

I dived out of the cave mouth. The camels were bellowing and rearing. I managed to untie them and drag them a few feet away when a soundless explosion blasted me off my feet.

The next thing I remember, I was lying on the crater floor, my mouth full of blood, my ears ringing. I turned over and looked up.

The great hill above the cave mouth was gone, blown away.

Above the ground drifted the ship, in all its terrible glory. Jet black, coated all over in spiky spires, shafts of blue light lancing out of it. It pitched and turned in the air as if balancing. I could feel my mouth screaming, but I could not hear the sound.

Then, the ship angled itself upwards. There was another shattering blast, and the ship became a beam of blue light arcing into the night sky for a fraction of an instant, before it vanished utterly.

Taking Professor Angus MacArthur Heyward with it.

I do not know how I got back to camp. The weeks that followed are a haze. The professor's men got me back to Cairo, and then on to France.

This is my first attempt to tell the full detail of my experience. I know most readers will not credit it. *Doubters*, as Heyward called them.

But I know the truth. Maybe now I understand how Heyward felt to be an oasis of truth in a desert of blissful ignorance.

I am a scientist. And scientists pursue their theories until they are proved.

Ghosthood

Emma Riva

Reva's only wish when she was alive had been to travel the world. She had perused travelogues advertising Icelandic and Danish fjords and icecaps, the glittering skyscrapers of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the jungles of Malaysia and places like Singapore where supposedly you could be arrested for chewing gum because the streets were so pristine. Those pamphlets were eventually cut up into wrapping paper for holiday presents or Bar Mitzvah gifts, or used to cover the tops of jars to safely trap spiders and waterbugs and then deposit them out the window without touching them. The pamphlets never went anywhere other than her measly apartment in outer Minneapolis where every surface developed a layer of dust, tortilla-chip crumbs, and snags of hair she swore weren't hers which materialized in the drain.

She longed for the sanitized staleness of the inside of an airplane, but instead what she got was the stench of old incense and rotting kale she'd forgotten to eat. She had a way of buying groceries, then getting take-out until her groceries went bad. Rather than binge-eating, Reva was more partial to binge-spending, spiralling down frequent online-shopping rabbit-holes on Depop or Taobao or eBay and ending up with piles of first printings of vinyl records, limited edition Breaking Bad Funko Pop! figurines, or homemade earrings shaped like plastic octopi. She would say to herself that money wasn't real, that she was allowed to buy whatever she wanted. But none of that mattered when she first realized she was dead, in her apartment.

Reva looked through her own translucent hands. Her phone was lying on the coffee table, and she attempted to poke the screen with her finger and unlock it. Her fingernail passed right through the material, that black quasi-metal undoubtedly obtained through some unethical means in Central Africa. She poked at the screen again, just to watch her own finger trail through the screen. She would never have to tell anyone where she was

again. Never have to answer another automated text message from her medical billing system, never waste another afternoon reading her most recent ex-boyfriend's social media or see targeted advertising for his awful emo band. Never see her bank statement and feel immense shame for buying three packs of Choco Pies from the Korean grocery around the block, then spend the next day counting calories and cooking miserable fried rice and drinking kombucha.

She had no reason to care why or how she died. Maybe she'd left the gas on. A sudden heart attack? An intruder in the house could have knifed her. An aneurysm? Pulmonary embolism? Someone in her family would find out somehow. And of course, people would mourn – she'd had a life, and every life had some mourning at its tail end. But she figured her family wouldn't be too sad. Her student loans would have to be paid off by somebody, but she kept thinking to herself how that was no longer her responsibility, no matter how guilty she felt at leaving them behind with it all. Overthinking seemed far away now. How funny to be able to think while you're dead. She hadn't figured on that. But she was able to go wherever she pleased.

This was how Reva began to haunt the outgoing flights of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport. She spent her first few hours there standing on the black moving walkway, floating back and forth. Her feet did not touch the ground, so at first, she was stationary on the walkway despite it moving below her. Then she curled her translucent toes and found that when she dug her spiritual self into the ground, she could move along with the belt.

She laid her whole body down on her back. The feet of passersby phased through her. It felt like nothing at all. The ceiling of the airport stretched above – a gaping, grey maw. Slowly the sun went down and the airport lights gleamed fluorescent in the dark that cloaked the city. The first flight she saw was to Fargo, the line crowded with pink-cheeked Midwesterners.

Once on the plane, Reva learned that ghosts are unaffected by altitude sickness or that dreadful ear-popping that made flying so unpleasant under ordinary circumstances. She had studied physics a long time ago, and wondered to herself whether she, on a technicality, was really just floating

in the air, rather than inside of the plane. She floated through the aisles, across sleeping passengers' laps. An elderly woman watched *The Fast and the Furious* on the airplane screen, illuminating the dark with piercing pixels of white light. Next to her, a boy in a backwards baseball cap had gossamer drops of drool around the corner of his mouth on his salt-and-pepper unshaved face. The city was a cluster of amber lights below, the flight a short, sleepy confirmation that she could do whatever she pleased.

Fargo airport was a beige space, with long hallways and tired, polite people chattering to each other about the planes being late from defrosting. From Fargo she flew to Seattle, only because Nirvana's *Incesticide* was her favorite album. The Peet's Coffee in Seattle airport made her wish she could still taste, and she phased her way through the coffee counter to stick her face underneath a coffee drip. But to no avail.

She spotted a line to Anchorage, Alaska. The frontier of the United States, one of the last states to join the union. That had to be worth her time. She relished the feeling of smugness as she cut the line and floated on to the plane – entirely empty but for the flight attendants.

Each flight was more pleasant than the last, and she found that in her new undead state, wake and sleep were no longer distinguishable from each other and there was only a sort of warm, content consciousness. She would simply slump against the wall on the plane and watch as passengers' feet passed through her. She loved to feel how far from home she was, how unfamiliar the world was and how no one would ever know her again. Never hungry or tired again.

Anchorage airport was small and cold, full of tourists and scientific researchers. Maybe after this she would go somewhere warm – Los Angeles, San Francisco. She wandered into the airport bathroom, a sterile, eerie room of gray tiles. The intercom announced flights in a staccato, Canadian accent with accentuated o's. As she stared into the mirror, she heard a flight for Los Angeles being announced and was dully aware that she was missing it. But upon looking into the mirror, she saw nothing. No shape. She would never know what she was wearing when she died.

After wandering around Anchorage for a bit and wishing she could hug the Siberian Husky plushies sold at the airport kiosk, she saw the line to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, which she soon learned was a remote airport in

eastern Russia. She realized that she had been restricting herself to domestic travel because as a living person, one needed a passport, but another perk to undead existence was the lack of documentation needed for anything.

Not quite Los Angeles, but the malaise in whatever remained of her consciousness led her to just want to get away.

The passengers were mostly what she assumed to be Siberian – women with tightly wound black braids and elaborately designed mittens. Men with bushy red beards read books in Cyrillic lettering and sipped pungent airplane borscht. When she disembarked in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, she found it to be a quaint, melancholy city dwarfed by eerily majestic white mountain ranges.

When she listened to living people talk to each other she wondered if she had gone to hell, that her fate was to be alone.

‘Where’s the bathroom at, do you think?’ a girl in a puffy winter hat asked a dark-skinned man with shoulder-length hair who held a bright orange Thermos in his hands. They were the only two speaking English she could identify in the airport.

‘Probably by the fast food place,’ the man replied. ‘Jeez, it’s so cold.’

People called that kind of thing small talk, and in the expanse of the Siberian mountains words really did seem small, meaningless. Of no consequence to a dead girl. But they still made a pang in whatever was left of her heart.

‘Thanks for letting me sleep on your shoulder on the flight,’ the girl said. The man planted a kiss on the top of her head.

The fast-food signs advertised reindeer burgers and heavy stews for prices much lower than anything in Minneapolis. As a ghost, there was no money. No statehood. No marriage licenses. No Tinder. No visas. No taro tapioca bubble tea or dates at dingy college bars by the University of Minnesota campus in Dinkytown. There was only what was left of her. She recalled once reading a travel brochure called *The Lonely Planet*. This was the loneliest a person could be, she thought. In Judaism, you were supposed to reunite with all of your relatives upon your death. As she sat in an empty row of seats in the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky airport, in front of a wide window looking out into a sheer, unfathomable inhospitable climate, she

wondered if perhaps her family hadn't wanted her, and this was why she had come here. She could see clouds wrapping around the peak of the mountain. The sunrise made the snow sparkle radiant white.

Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky loomed ahead of her. The air smelled like ice and dirt. She found herself looking behind her translucent shoulder, and there was a feeling like a stitch in her side. It was the only real physical sensation she'd felt since her death, a peculiar type of tingling in what would have been her gut. It was a big plus to no longer be corporeal. No more period pain or defecation. That wasn't so bad.

Hey, she heard someone say, and at first she thought it to be something going on in the background. Some more conversation among the living English speakers. But she felt the words passing through her, as if the very breath particles of the one who uttered them were tangible. It made her shiver.

She thought she heard herself make a squeaking sound of surprise but noticed her mouth did not move. Was it possible that this was somehow all in her head? Did ghosts hallucinate? Reva spun around, feeling her translucence lift her through the air as she turned.

There was another figure behind her, as translucent as she was.

I thought I saw you get off the plane, the figure said. It was a young man around her age, his form adorned with baggy clothes and a beanie hat over his hair. His shape was light blue, translucent but just slightly colored. As if someone had done a stencil of a person on a piece of wax paper and stuck it in the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky Airport. She had to admit, if there was an eternity, dying young was not so bad. At least you stayed hot for your immortality.

How are you talking to me? Her mind made the same motion of bringing a thought forward into her mouth, but her mouth did not move. It was as if she heard their two voices inside of her brain, in absolute clarity, no earwax or headache in the way to distract from the purity of the speech.

Like, the normal way. I'm guessing you haven't been around so long.

What do you mean?

The figure moved closer to her. It dawned on her that ghosts could not touch. She'd had so many dismal romantic encounters as a living person,

and she was not particularly looking forward to repeating that experience as an undead. The string of men she had invited to her apartment and then regretted it when they did things like leave the toilet seat up. Her boyfriend in high school, a sweet, dopey hockey player who hadn't known how to spell the word 'definitely'. So maybe it was for the best that she now lacked the capacity to touch. It wasn't as if she'd used it with any sense of good judgment when she was alive.

We talk like this. We don't have bodies any more, you know? And there's no language. To me, you're speaking Russian. It's great. Much better than life, where there's all that noise in the way. His face seemed to smile, though it was a bit hard to tell with the non-corporeal forms.

Hold up, I'm speaking Russian? She watched as living people's forms passed them by, rolling suitcases behind them on the marble-patterned floors.

To me, you are. Despite the lack of real speech, something about the blip from his mind to hers had a vaguely flirtatious quality. She wasn't opposed to it, per se, but she wasn't exactly sure how to show a response without a corporeal form. He floated closer to her.

I'm Andrey, by the way.

Reva, she said.

You're not Russian?

As she watched his outline, she realized the difference between this form of speech and the living's speech. Instead of seeing expressions on his face, she felt them in his words: an eyebrow-raise or a smirk came off in the very feelings in her.

I'm Jewish. Or I suppose I was Jewish. Does it matter what religion you are now? Anyways. Reva's from Hebrew.

Sounds Russian. Or Yakut. I'm from Yakutia. His ghostly form was beside hers now. A family of four passed through them, and she wondered why it didn't feel like anything when living people moved through her.

Where's that?

Siberia. I hate it. Don't go there if you're getting any ideas that it might be nice. I ended up like this because I killed myself there.

She was shocked at the cadence of those words, the flatness, as if he were telling her the morning news.

Excuse me?

It's a long story. I won't bore you with it. That same flat tone. A pretty girl like you doesn't need to hear that kind of crap. I'm much happier now.

Reva thought of her younger brother, how he'd been sent to a string of therapists for suicide ideation. How she'd sent him so many text messages to which he simply love-reacted or like-reacted, saying 'fine' when she asked him how he was doing. She knew he had never actually tried anything, that he was lucky in that respect, but that he had expressed it enough for psychiatric help to be invoked. How her mother had cried on the phone and her father had gone for multiple hour-long motorcycle rides through the city, his way of evading stress.

I can't accept that that's true, she said, ignoring Andrey's flirtatious comment. That somehow if you kill yourself you're better off.

Oh, that's not true. I don't think anyone should kill themselves. Please, don't misconstrue it. But all things considered, I'm fine.

I don't know how I died, she said.

You're probably better not to. I don't like to think about these things. They're sad. I made the mistake of visiting my family home after it all. Don't do that. Just a tip.

Despite her thoughts racing with all of the new realities to accept, she couldn't muster anything to say to him just then. She wanted to reach out and touch him the way she might have done as a living person, but she knew that she could not.

I hear you, he said.

What? I didn't say anything.

I can feel that you're upset, and that you feel bad for me. I'm sorry I brought it up. I know it's new for you, so maybe I shouldn't have said anything.

Reva felt her form shake in the ghostly equivalent of startlement.

I don't like that you can hear my every thought, she said.

I can't. I can just feel it. Can't you feel me?

I don't know.

Close your eyes, or our version of that – like, turn your vision off. Just listen.

She closed her eyes. But instead of darkness – the blank thing which the living associate with death – there was a sharp focus, as if she were watching a heat map. There were no living people passing through her now. If there were, they were of no importance behind her eyes. The material world didn't matter. There was only the suggestion of Andrey, where his shape was. His essence. It was sharp, tight, pained. Rocky. She could feel the image of a deep, stony hole, a coal mine in the middle of a tundra in Yakutia – she knew it was Yakutia somehow, even though before just now she had not known such a place existed. The icy banks of the Lena river, fresh fish wriggled out from under the ice by calloused hands. The scarlet of their flesh against the snow. Cranberries with whipped cream for breakfast: *kuorchekh*. She felt the word as a transcendence of language, tasted the cream and the fruit from the brittle bushes in the snow and the comfort of steam rising up from coffee and tea at the breakfast table. Andrey was cold, prickly, an ice sheet on a river underneath a pale Siberian sun. She felt a stinging at her eyes, as if she were about to cry.

Kuorchekh, she said.

Huh?

You ate kuorchekh. The berries and whipped cream.

His words felt startled now, softer. She felt his ice shift, the warm core that might have once been a heart a gentle pulsation beneath the tangles of coldness around him.

Yeah, I did, he said.

How long have you... been around? she asked.

Since 1989. As a Russian, I picked a bad time to off myself, I know. I missed the fall of the Soviet Union. I was really looking forward to that.

I remember it, she said. *Barely, though. I was just a little baby.*

She thought about how Andrey, a Siberian twenty-something in the late eighties, was stuck now as a twenty-something. About whether it was strange for her to find him somewhat attractive in her undead loneliness, given that if he lived he'd have been twice her age now.

Lucky you, he said. I think I missed out on a lot of the good stuff. The new millennium seems alright. Those little handheld things people talk into look cool.

You mean cell phones?

Yeah, those. Those iPhone things. There was a playfulness to his thoughts now.

I don't really care about when I was born, but I think I really got unlucky with where I was born. It had to be in the most boring state in the US, where there's nothing but malls and bad food and big public colleges.

Even if you had bad food, at least you had food. That's a blessing.

All I want to do now is travel, she said. She turned to him, or configured her energy so that it seemed the warm cores beneath their ethereal shapes were facing each other. I could use a companion.

You know, in Russian, we call that word companion 'tovarishch'.

I thought I was speaking Russian to you.

You are, but in English there's no word as good as tovarishch.

Well, if you're going to be my travel tovarisch, where would you like to go?

He considered it.

Minneapolis, he said.

What?

I want to see the place where you're from. I messed things up at mine, but I don't think you did. I'd like to do the things you wanted to do there when you were alive.

Reva thought of the Hmong neighborhoods in Minneapolis with the best noodle soup for the cheapest prices, where elderly aunties hawked jade jewelry in storefronts. The Mall of America, the GAP outlet she'd worked at during the holiday season as a teenager and how droves of people snatched hangers off the racks on Black Friday. How many people there were she would never know the name of. Crawling under the Hennepin Avenue Bridge to hook up and getting mud on all of her clothes. Dinkytown, secondhand clothing stores, past lovers' bands whining on dive bar stages, fluorescent green drinks she'd downed in fits of loneliness.

I don't think you'd like it much there.

It's better than here, he said. I've never left Russia. I want to see the life you had.

You've never left Russia? You're a ghost, you know. You can go wherever you want. And you're in the airport, for crying out loud.

I guess I just never thought about it. I just like to watch people in the airport.

Well, we have to go somewhere then.

The white sky loomed above them. Reva watched out the wide windows as a single cloud floated through the blankness in the sky. The luminescence of the pale tundra sun reflected in glimmers off the top of the aircrafts. Andrey floated beside her. She said nothing at all but felt the expanse of the mountains, the chill of the air, the life that Andrey had ended and the nebulous ghosthood that now made up eternity. Perhaps she had been wrong that no one would ever know her again.

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