



STARS STORMS AND SANDWICHES



Ten new tales
of remarkable
adventures



THE WILBUR &
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AUTHORS OF TOMORROW|11 years old and under

Cedrych's Journey

Marni Pedrick

Cedrych yawned as he realised it was morning. He stuck his feet into his perfectly positioned slippers and began the slow hike downstairs. He lived in a hollowed-out tree trunk on the banks of a river, and he had done so for forty years. He'd had the same routine for ages now, and it suited him.

As he went down the stairs, he absent-mindedly rubbed a speck of dust off the window sill, and, reaching the bottom of the staircase, carefully rearranged the rug. It was time for his morning cup of tea.

Cedrych shuffled into the kitchen, making sure he had turned on the light first. He went to his tea supplies, took out his usual china mug and turned the kettle on. Then he took the sugar bowl down from its position on the shelf and looked inside. He did a double take, which wasn't like him. There was *no* sugar.

He cursed, another thing that he hadn't done in years. Every month, he ordered sugar from a trader on the southern banks of the river, and every month, the trader delivered it. Yet he had run out of sugar two weeks early! Cedrych was shocked; this had never happened before. Now, he thought logically, there were only really two solutions. Solution one was to go without sugar in his tea for an entire two weeks (this thought alone made him shudder) and solution two was to go and fetch the sugar himself, in person, from the trader.

It was no contest in his mind. He fetched his hat, stick and other things that he used when he went walking. Then he consoled himself with a small

chocolate biscuit and stumped out of his door. The journey wouldn't take him long, but Cedrych found exercise difficult and tedious, and he tried to avoid it most of the time. He began walking.

The ground was dewy and his shoes were soon soaked, which meant, he thought irritatedly, he would have to clean them later. However, the grass eventually started to dry out, and Cedrych found himself whistling. Yet another thing that he didn't usually do.

It took him the best part of thirty minutes to walk to the river, and another twenty to find the bridge by which to cross. Then he had to battle his way through a small forest which took yet more time. As he slashed and swatted away branches, he reflected that this, too, didn't normally happen to him. He began wishing he hadn't come.

Finally, after what seemed years, he emerged on the other side, drenched in sweat and panting. There, barely ten metres ahead of him, was the trader, standing next to a blanket. There were several beautiful items arranged on it and, to Cedrych's horror, he couldn't see any sugar. He hurried up and asked if there was any in stock.

"Last packet," replied the trader shortly, handing Cedrych a small, plump bag.

"Thank goodness!" Cedrych said with relief, allowing himself a small smile.

The Great Firefighter of London

Georgia Pendrill

The fire blazed red-hot as I ran towards St Paul's Cathedral. Figures rushed around me in the darkness, frenziedly fetching water from the Thames and throwing it onto the burning building to douse the flames. Smoke, light and warmth burned through my body as I entered the holy place that the immense fire had now reached. The fire's hands kept on stretching out and clasping more and more of London, my beloved city. It hadn't let me rest for days; I had been battling the beast for what felt like an eternity.

Shouts and screams cut through the night and squeezed my heart in terror.

"God keep my wife and son safe from this monster," I whispered as I raced inside the furnace.

As I pushed my way in, a bishop came wandering through the thick air, muttering prayers to God in Heaven as he passed me by. I saw prayer books lying scattered around a man in robes who was choking violently on the floor – a holy preacher who had not managed to escape the conflagration. I flung him over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and raced out into the night air, gasping for breath.

I turned round to see the fire was raging too fiercely to go back inside, so I began flinging water on the hot, glowing body of ignited stone and wood. No matter how many homes it consumed, no matter how many lives it destroyed, the fire's hunger was never satisfied.

I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore the uncomfortable warmth which was squeezing sweat out of me like I was a lemon. A flame licked the length of my arm as I emptied my bucket of river water onto the dancing inferno. I still persisted, wanting the fire to be put out by dawn.

CRACK!

I cried out a warning, but it was too late – a chunk of wall tumbled from above with a deafening crash. Racing over to where it landed, my heart pounding, I lifted up the skeleton of the stone building to find a mother and child crouching, wide-eyed, underneath. The mother crawled out and I tried desperately to hold it up for the child, but my strength had a limit. I dropped the stone back down and darkness enveloped me.

It might have been night outside but there was still light from the stars and the reflection of the moon. I groaned under the weight of the stone, knowing that I had only enough brawn for one of us to get out. He was young, a boy of about five years, whereas I was very nearly thirty – an old man. I lifted up the rock with the last of my strength and the boy crawled out. I caught a final glimpse of the distinguished shadow of the grand building St Paul's once had been before my arms gave way and the stone came crashing down.

My last thought was of my son before black filled my sight and silence wrapped itself around me like a blanket.

Jeremiah's Revenge

Caleb Indhivan Victor

Winner of the category

It was April 1773. A grim-faced young man hobbled onto a weather-worn ship, his eye burning with determination. He was Jeremiah Barker, a renowned sea-monster hunter and harpooner. He was a well-built man with a whale jaw-bone peg-leg. So far, his pursuits had been uneventful, but his latest had cost him a leg.

“This monster,” he muttered, “has given me this accursed stump which I now stand upon.” He continued, his voice turning into a shout, “I shall have my revenge!” The words faintly lingered in the frosty evening atmosphere.

The ship was stocked with brutal weaponry. It slowly set off, leaving a sea-sprayed crowd on the dock.

The cry of a gull was the only thing that stirred the misty air the next morning. Jeremiah leaned against the railings on the bulwark, keeping watch for the monster. But the water was calm.

That afternoon, while the ship's crew were eating lunch, a rough-looking sailor burst in through the door.

“Storm's comin'! ” he exclaimed. “It's gettin' wild.”

Jeremiah leaped onto deck. “Everyone to the hold except those on watch!” he yelled above the noise of the storm.

The wind was howling and moaning with all its might and the waves were frothing and foaming. The sky began to get violent and storm clouds started to gather, dark and intimidating. Thunder raged in the distance, rumbling and angry. Lightning streaked across the sky, splitting it in two. Rain lashed down unmercifully on the gloomy crew.

Suddenly, a flash of lightning revealed an alarming sight – a huge spiralling whirlwind was heading right towards the ship. A dark shadow appeared in the whirlwind, and then without warning, the sea burst open. It was the monster! It writhed about, trashing the sea and creating enormous frothing waves. It had a long, snaky body that seemed to trail on forever. Its giant fins sliced the water as it headed straight for the ship, revealing its hideous head with huge gaping jaws full of bloodstained teeth. The monster shot forward, smashing the bow. It repeatedly crashed into the hull, creating a huge hole, and the ship started filling up with water.

“There it is!” shouted Jeremiah, pointing at the huge snake-like figure. “I’ll get that monster if it’s the last thing I do.”

Jeremiah grabbed a poisoned harpoon and took aim, a grin of triumph forming across his face. He flung the harpoon with all his might and it stuck fast in the monster’s eye. The monster roared and howled, throwing its great body at the ship, immediately reducing it to splinters of wood. A great pool of black blood spewed from the monster’s eye.

The crew, anxious about the ship, hurriedly hauled up lifeboats. Jeremiah and all those crew who could, got into them, and they rowed away. The rest of the crew perished together with the ship, but what mattered to Jeremiah was that he finally got his revenge, an eye for a leg.

The monster was still out there and sometime, somewhere, it would return.

AUTHORS OF TOMORROW|12-15 years old

The Rajdhani Express

Rafi Ahmad

Commended story

At the young age of seventeen, my mother was married off to a man in Sagala – my late father. He died during the influenza pandemic of 1918, however, despite his death, the train service on which he worked, the Rajdhani Express, offered me a position. Being from a not particularly affluent family and my mother a widow, it was either that or the tanning factories.

So, on the day of my fifteenth birthday, I found myself waiting at Samjhuata station, sitting on a weathered bench, keeping away from all the commotion on the platform. Specifically, I was waiting for a certain Mr Ujjal, the Rajdhani's conductor, whom I had met twice before: once, briefly, when waving my father off, and again at a wedding, where I came to learn he was a meticulous man.

From the bench, a line of thin wispy steam became apparent. The shrill screeching of the train braking filled the surroundings as the Rajdhani pulled into the platform in its blue and gold livery. I began making my way towards the first compartment. The intricate Sanskrit covering the train's exterior led me to the very front, where there was an inconspicuous blue door, just behind the engine room.

Opening it revealed a room filled with life: waiters holding plates stacked high, bell boys carrying trunks by the dozen. However, what caught my gaze was Mr Ujjal's mint green turban. As I approached him, he thrust upon me a cerulean blue uniform before quickly saying, "*Jaldi, beta*, get changed out of your clothes."

He pulled me along to a door labelled "servants' quarters", the inside of which being a short corridor with a warm ochre hue, lit by a few bulbs. "Sorry, *beta*, please be quick – we need you for the dinner service. Your room's the last one at the end."

Walking out of the room in my full, slightly oversized uniform, the fabric felt scratchy and stiff. I hoped it would wear in with time. I began to walk around, feeling lost, until finally I spotted Mr Ujjal carrying stacks of plates in a gentle balance on each arm.

He began speaking to me. "*Beta*, come here and take some cutlery; Monsieur Allaire has arranged a very special event for the most honourable guests in first class."

Quickly, I replied, "*Ji*, sir, is there anything else I can do?"

"Of course there is, *beta*. Grab a pair of white gloves for each of us – left cupboard, right at the top." Fumbling around at the top of the cupboard, I plucked out two pairs of fresh gloves, immediately giving one to Mr Ujjal.

"Remember to keep them clean, otherwise Mr Mellow *Saab's* wife will send everything back that she sees you touch."

"Yes sir, but *who* is Mr Mellow Saab?"

"Oh, Mr Mellow Saab is a very particular man. He comes from a respectable South African diamond-mining family and is a good friend of Monsieur Allaire, but, *beta*, please, when you serve Mr Mellow lower your gaze. Many years ago, I looked the man straight in the eye and he took his wine glass and threw it straight at me." He lifted his turban, revealing a faint white scar that retreated past his hairline. I could only let out a soft gasp.

“Don’t dawdle, go and fetch the good crystal – the chef keeps them right at the back – and when you are serving, try to keep the drinks away from Monsieur Allaire. His daughter’s constant demands keep his blood pressure high enough, so give him the tonic water only.”

“Should I lay any more plates?”

“Just one, for *Pandit Deva Ji*, a brilliant priest and a lovely man, and please let the chef know not to serve him any beef and none of the goat curry. He does not like eating earth signs during Venus in retrograde.”

I muttered back, “Umm – of course, sir.”

The guests soon began to stream into the dining car. I was instructed to wait by the door and usher them in. Waiters came out of the kitchen holding steaming platters and fresh *naan*. I moved forward to ask for drink orders.

Overall, the dinner was a success. Afterwards, Monsieur Allaire stood to give a toast with a glass of champagne in one hand. Above, a chandelier rocked back and forth with the train’s movement.

Mr Mellow had a pallid complexion, staring blankly out of the train’s window as he, too, shook with the train’s shuddering. He remained silent as the rest of the party laughed at the toast.

His wife seemed to take notice of his quietness. “Darling, are you all right? You’re so silent this evening; it’s so unlike you,” she said with a laugh. However, she was only met with mutterings from Mr Mellow.

“Darling, what’s happened?” she asked again, her tone more worried now as she placed a hand across his head. “Oh, you’re burning like the June sun!” She began to look around for the nearest servant, staring directly at me. “Boy, take Andrew to our room. At least then I will be able to have some drinks.” I looked round for Mr Ujjal’s confirmation but was quickly interrupted by Mr Mellow’s wife. “For crying out loud, I will have you fired from this establishment if you don’t come right this instant.” Considering the fact that the owner of the Rajdhani was in the same room as me, I made my way over with haste.

“Of course, ma’am,” I replied. Hooking my arm under Mr Mellow, I led him out of the dining car and towards the first-class suites that were only a few carriages away. By the time I reached them, a small bead of sweat was rolling across my forehead and I was breathing heavily.

Walking down the corridor, I had to ask Mr Mellow, “Sir, which room is yours?”

He replied in a harsh tone, yet his voice was straining, struggling to make out each word. “The second... one... boy.”

I quickly pushed the door, hoping it would have been left unlocked. Thankfully, it gave way, opening into the Mellows’ room – a world away from my humble servant’s quarters, almost making me forget the choking man propped on my shoulders. I began pulling him over to a green velvet armchair not knowing quite what to do – leave or stay.

“Sir, I’m just going to get some water from the kitchen, is that—”

“For God's sake, just get me some pills from Allaire,” he said, violently coughing into a handkerchief between each word.

I turned and began running back to the dining car. Then I heard it: a thud. I slowly turned and gingerly walked back to the room. He was slumped on the floor, his eyes open and dazed, froth spilling from his mouth and his handkerchief soaked with blood. I could only stand there, paralysed. I had never thought that a person could be stopped by fear, but there I was, standing still, the blood drained from my face. Then, from behind me I heard a knock.

“Mr Mellow, may I come in?” It was Mr Ujjal. While he was a good man, I doubted he would believe that Mr Mellow just died right in front of me. I tried to lift Mr Mellow back into the armchair, banging his head against the wooden frame and instinctively saying “sorry” before remembering I was apologising to a corpse.

Awkwardly throwing a blanket over him and running to the door, I took a deep breath and opened the door just enough for me to fit through while still obscuring the body. Speaking in almost a whisper, I greeted Mr Ujjal. “Hello, sir. Mr Mellow is just resting right now. I do not think it would be wise to disturb him.”

“Are you sure, *beta*? Mrs Mellow seemed adamant that he was very ill.”

“No, no he is perfectly fine he might need to rest,” I said, speaking slightly too quickly. “I’ll go back to clear up then, thank you sir.” I closed the door behind me and walked away before I could get a response. Inside I was screaming, my thoughts a mess; even if Mr Ujjal believed me – that Mr

Mellow had just coincidentally died right in front of me – why would I have lied through my teeth? That was no ordinary death, either – no one looks perfectly fine before dinner, then an hour later coughs up a pint of blood and dies.

I went back to the dining car, passing by the guests enjoying after-dinner drinks. They all had alcohol apart from the pandit, who had a glass of what seemed to be cranberry juice. Out of the three, none of them seemed like killers: a holy man; a respected, wealthy man and, well... Mrs Mellow might have reason to kill her husband, but even then, I had no proof, no evidence that he was even murdered. But, there was only one way he could have died: poison.

Everything in the dining car had been cleared, all moved to the kitchen. I assumed the rest of the servants were annoyed at me as I hadn't played my part.

I spotted the chef and asked him if anyone strange had come through the kitchen.

“*Ulloo*, what type of question is that? Are you calling me strange?” he shouted back at me.

“Umm...” I stuttered, “Mr Ujjal told me to ask because someone complained about the food.”

“It was that *gori*, wasn't it? No, there wasn't anyone strange in the kitchen, just me, Mr Ujjal, and the rest of you lot,” he said with quite a lot of profanity mixed in.

I quickly walked away, trying to escape from being shouted at. I knew at this point it was hopeless; I would be arrested. I was more worried for the sake of my mother – she would have no one to support her, no income. I went back to the first-class suites to see if I had missed anything. Back to the second room, to the mahogany door. But, opening it revealed something quite different: Mr Ujjal, with two fingers under the dead man's neck, checking for a pulse. I knew I had one thing left to do. Run.

If I could reach third class, right at the back of the train, I could get lost in the crowd, wait for the next stop and escape. I ran through two more carriages, finally reaching a door separating first and second class. I pulled

it with full force. Locked. I paused momentarily to see if there was a key anywhere, and the soft glint of brass caught my gaze.

Looking behind me, I could see Mr Ujjal running in my direction. I scrambled to open the lock, my hands trembling, clumsily fitting the key just in time. The door gave way. I bolted through, slamming it behind me. There was no time to stop and lock it on the other side.

I continued running breathlessly through the train, passing the second-class guest rooms and a deserted dining hall. Seemingly, everyone had retreated back to their rooms. Going through the last service carriage, this one separating second and third class, I reached a thin wooden door held in place by a flimsy latch. I tugged the stiff rusted latch up and entered somewhere a world away from the first-class suites at the front of the train.

A familiar smell of spices overwhelmed my senses as I entered the carriage. A woman, wrapped in a rich red shawl, stared at me. Dozens of people were sitting on the floor, covered with thin blankets and damask shawls. I walked on, towards the back of the train, towards the last carriage. All the luggage was piled on each side, and settled between the two piles of luggage was a rusted door, leading to the exit from the train. A final safe haven. A way out.

"*Beta*, where are you going? Stop." Mr Ujjal was panting heavily. I turned round slowly. "I'm not going to do anything to *you*." I remained silent, too confused to respond. "Come, *Beta*, sit down," he said in a surprisingly calm tone, motioning to a small wooden stool in the corner. I did not know quite what to do. So I took the seat.

He let out a large sigh. "*Beta*, I know it is a horrible truth, but I killed Andrew Mellow. I know it is no excuse, but he was a despicable man. My sister's eldest son, my only nephew, was taken at just thirteen, even younger than you. Forced to work day and night, treated like a *kutta* for the Mellow family in their mines. These *farangis* hold the dirt with more respect than our lives. His death was one of thousands; lambs to a British slaughter."

I was at a loss for words. I had heard of the horrors of working in the mines, but did Mr Mellow deserve to be killed?

I stood up, barely able to speak. "Sir, no one would even believe me if I told them that *you* had killed him."

I walked back to the servants' quarters, staring at the floor, my thoughts entirely muddled.

I awoke the next morning startled by the train's whistle, the train jolting once before coming to a halt at its final stop, Multan station. I looked out of a cracked window with mildew creeping at its edges, the only source of daylight in my cramped quarters. As the train's doors were opened by two servants, both as young as me, two more men came out of the train holding a stretcher that held within it a corpse covered by a thin white tarp.

It was only later that I learned that Mr Mellow had died in the middle of the night from a "heart attack". An autopsy was performed; he had passed away from natural causes.

Mr Ujjal clearly had friends in remarkably high places. He truly was a meticulous man.

His Lady, Extraordinary

LaVie Saad

The long line to the golden gates of hell was moving absolutely nowhere. Quietish chatter filled the stone-floored courtyard, the occasional sound of collective laughter rising and falling away again. The darkened sky, spotted with small white specks, forced the guests to rely on light from the candles placed down the sides of the wide carpeted pathway and the elaborate golden gates. Hand-held fans were fluttered quickly by women in an attempt to cool themselves in the humid air, but softly to still appear ladylike and flirtatious. It seemed the night was feeling flirtatious as well; the wind tickled faces and played with long dresses, and the air settled for a warm temperature that was somehow slightly romantic.

Though the courtyard was spacious, with so many people in waiting the humid air it grew stuffy. Fans fluttered harder and small hats were removed. The chatter grew louder and impatient, with one couple in particular was beginning to feel the heat more intensely than anyone else.

Said couple, a man and woman both dressed in very elegant attire, snuck glances at each other when the shuffling and chatter began to noticeably rise. The woman, wrapped in a ball gown of dark green silk, began to tug on her skirt – a secret code used to alert her accomplice that the guests were becoming restless.

“My lady, I highly doubt we’ll be heard in the midst of all this noise,” the man said, keeping his gaze forward but allowing a smirk to emerge across his lips. “In fact, keeping so quiet would seem abnormal when everyone else is chit-chatting, no?”

“Fine,” the woman said. “What do you think is taking so long?”

“I’m not sure,” the man replied, “but I do know that this man we’re after never keeps his victims waiting for long. We should be let inside any minute now.”

The woman gave a firm nod and picked at the tips of her black gloves. Her partner sighed and she looked up at him, questioning.

“You know, Tabitha,” he started, “don’t kick me, but you look gorgeous tonight.”

The woman frowned and then raised a red brow, although the motions weren’t visible thanks to the thin mask she was wearing.

“What is that supposed to mean, Claude?” she asked him skeptically.

“Exactly what it sounds like, my lady,” Claude replied with a boyish smirk.

Tabitha rolled her eyes and quietly scoffed. She was used to the teasing from him by now. There was no more conversation between the two of them for a while, until Claude looked down at Tabitha and saw her messing with her gloves again.

“Someone’s nervous,” Claude said, only just loud enough to be heard over the noise.

“This is a suicide mission,” Tabitha mumbled. “The man we’re after – he’s killed hundreds. He’s good at what he does and he gets away with it every time. What makes you think two rookie agents can find, maybe chase, and catch a well-known mass murderer who, after five years still hasn’t been caught?” She looked up at Claude from under her lashes, their natural red and the mask’s artificial silver fighting each other to be seen first.

“Well, we may be rookies, and we may be attempting to catch a psychotic murderer...” Claude paused. “But this psychotic murderer hasn’t met the incredible spy duo, Claude and Tabitha!”

Claude struck a clichéd superhero pose, legs spread wide and hands on hips. Tabitha stared at him, forcing away a smile, but the grin peeked through as she rolled her eyes at him again. She was suddenly thankful for Claude’s carefree nature. She knew he was probably a little worried as well, but, as always, he put on a brave and charismatic face for her and concealed his panic.

After a while, a large bell began to ring. The bell couldn't be seen, but its deep, resonant chimes seemed to surround the guests and intoxicate them with thrill. The night was finally about to begin. Tabitha moved a little closer into Claude's side, and in reassurance Claude softly brushed back her curls. The golden gates slowly began to open. No one proceeded forward, but each guest was itching, *dying* to be let in and dying to let fun and pleasure wash away the worries and stress of their daily lives. Tonight, they just wanted to live. After all, when offered the invitation to spend a night away from adulting, all two hundred fifty of these gathered guests snatched up the opportunity, no questions asked.

A figure appeared, confidently walking towards the guests at a steady pace. The figure was a man who wore an interesting eye-mask resemblant of a jester's hat, with distinctive red dominating one side, gold the other, and white acting as a balance color. Gears and odd shapes were the major element of the mask's design. It was a strange pick, but arguably elegant. The man was holding a black card, which led Tabitha to believe that he was going to escort them to the party area.

"Good evening, all!" the man said, gracefully spreading his arms. "You will address me as 'Joker'. I'd prefer to keep my true name a secret for the night." He smiled. "Now then, I think you've all been patient enough! Shall we go inside? I must warn you, however: you've never seen anything like this venue in your lives. Are you ready?"

The crowd answered in cheers and cries.

"Off we go then! The ballroom is straight ahead."

And they began to move, starting slowly at first but then picking up the pace. The guests began to spread out so that there was plenty of space around each couple; most had come in pairs. Arm-in-arm, ladies whispered sweet little things to their gentlemen as they walked. Their gentlemen in return gave them light forehead kisses and slightly tightened their grip around their dates.

Claude and Tabitha stepped up the small row of stairs and entered. They were met with a truly breath-taking sight. Gigantic chandeliers swung from the ceiling, and warm orange light illuminated everyone's faces. To the right, tables with flower-filled vases on top awaited them, with chairs empty and ready to later seat sore-footed dancers. Straight ahead, a massive,

empty floor glistened with shine and was clear enough to see your reflection in. More tables dressed in silky white cloth and holding covered silver platters aligned the walls of the ballroom, indicating a buffet was hiding beneath. It was magnificent – so magnificent that Tabitha forgot for a moment she was merely acting as one of the guests, and, for a second, just enjoyed the sight.

“This, lovely guests, is the host’s ballroom! You will only be allowed in here tonight, but we will entertain you, nonetheless,” Joker explained.

Claude looked around at the large space. It would be strategic to confine the guests to one area. If the killer really was here, it would be sensible to make sure his prey wouldn’t have a chance to escape. Claude turned and looked to the double doors, which were now closed. He was near to them, so he attempted to pull them open. *Locked*. He caught Tabitha’s eye and nodded his head to the locked doors. She gave him a shocked look once she understood.

Tabitha looked for a visible second door, but the ones they had just entered through seemed to be the only exit. They were trapped. *Well, no backing out now*, she thought to herself.

“There are only a few rules, so please pay attention,” Joker said. “Number one, you may eat and dance as much as you’d like, but do try not to make too much of a mess. I do, after all, have to help clean up spills and droppings. Number two, there will be no leaving this area. You are a guest on the host’s private property, but this ballroom was built specifically for his parties. It would be rude to leave such a place that was built for you especially. And, there is going to be a special prize at the end of the night that I can guarantee you don’t want to miss!”

These words confirmed the agents’ suspicions – they were in the ballroom of their murderer. Why else would they be locked inside a room and told they could not leave?

“Lovely guests, with the rules out of the way,” Joker said, “have a magical evening!”

“All right, everyone! Now that you’ve had a while to socialize and maybe take a serving of food from the tables, we are going to begin the entertainment!” Joker said to the crowd. “The first activity of the night is going to be a dance. You’ve all been asked to dress elegantly for a reason; the music will be similar to music played at a Victorian ball. You will be dancing to classical waltzes, but I’ll help you figure it out! Find a partner and form a circle!”

Already mainly in pairs, the guests formed a circle around the middle of the ballroom. Claude held his hand out to Tabitha.

“May I have this dance, my lady?” asked Claude. Tabitha rolled her eyes as she took his hand.

“Let me show you how to dance! First, the lady will put one hand on the gentleman’s shoulder, and the gentleman will put one hand on the lady’s waist,” Joker explained.

As Tabitha turned to face Claude, her eyes suddenly landed on wooden pillars in each corner of the room. She had noticed them before, but didn’t question them. Now she realized that wooden pillars were an odd accessory for a ballroom... She looked closer and noticed there were torches right above the pillars that were lit with fire. Then she spotted a switch that could possibly let the torches loose, and that was when she realized a potential plan.

Tabitha looked up to find the chandeliers were on fire. The chattering of the guests made the crackling noises hardly audible, but the lit chandeliers were quickly becoming engulfed with flames. They spread swiftly across the glass, indicating to Tabitha that a flammable substance had been sprayed on it.

Squinting her eyes at the ceiling, she could see that the chandeliers were being held up by a thin rope. This rope hadn’t been touched by the fire yet, but the flames were rapidly approaching. And, even worse, the guests were now gathered under the largest of the chandeliers, whose circumference was easily larger than the circle the guests had made. All it had to do was fall, and everyone would be set ablaze.

Tabitha’s heart began to race. It seemed the murderer’s plan was to burn everyone alive, but what would he do if there was no fire to burn with?

Tabitha searched for something that could be used to stop the flames. She did not want to warn anyone for fear of mass panic. Her eyes, disbelieving, found a small box on one of the walls. It was painted over to match the walls of the room, but it was the exact size for what she thought might be inside. She took off at a sprint and kicked the box so that glass, hidden behind layers of paint, was shattered. A fire extinguisher was revealed. Tabitha yanked it from its spot and ran back to the burning chandeliers. The guests were mumbling in confusion, and she caught Claude staring at her with a bewildered look on his face.

Tabitha aimed the extinguisher and let the white clouds rip loose from the bright red can. Once everyone realized what she was doing, they looked up and screams filled the ballroom in a symphony of terror. Joker, who looked completely unsurprised, instead had a mad look in his eye, rage and anger contorting his face in odd, maniacal ways that could be seen even from under his mask.

Once the chandeliers were fire-free, she sprinted again to each of the four corners of the room, putting out the flames of the torches. While she did this, Claude ran to the door, beginning to pick the lock with a bobby pin from his pocket. The rest of the guests hadn't stopped panicking, and were running around in fear. Joker hadn't moved, and was still contorted with anger. Tabitha knew what she had to do.

"Claude!" Tabitha shouted. He'd just managed to open the double doors. She charged at Joker, and Claude did the same, from where he was standing.

"Go! Out the doors, hurry!" he exclaimed to the guests as he ran. The guests didn't have to be asked twice, and hurried outside as quickly as they could. Heels flew and party hats were tossed.

"Belt!" she yelled to Claude, who was already undoing the silver buckle at his waist. He threw it to Tabitha, who was almost upon Joker. But, just as Tabitha was about to wrap the belt around him, Joker bolted away and headed towards the doors.

"Tabitha!" Claude yelled.

Tabitha grabbed the fire extinguisher again and pulled the trigger so that more clouds of fire repellent were sent flying through the air. Joker, now

surrounded by the clouds, suddenly dropped in a coughing fit and tried crawling his way to the exit. Tabitha easily caught up with him, and, holding her breath, wrapped Claude's belt around Joker's wrists as makeshift handcuffs. For good measure, she sprayed the fire extinguisher again, causing him to cough even more.

"Okay, okay, Tab!" Claude complained, swatting the clouds away. "He's not going anywhere!"

"Get back-up," said Tabitha. "I think we've caught our criminal."

"Any news?" Claude asked as he handed Tabitha a cup of water. They were leaning against one of the many parked police cars surrounding the venue.

"All of the guests made it out safely with no injuries, but they're being examined by the ambulance over there. Joker, of course, is under arrest. As you know, no one knew what the murderer looked like, but Joker was identified as an inmate who escaped from jail a few years back, which is when the massacres began to happen. His name is Heckleson Bane, the youngest son of very wealthy parents who are well-known in the criminal underworld. Agent Saskia said he'll most likely be thrown behind bars for life," Tabitha explained.

She took a sip of her water and watched as Joker, now in proper handcuffs, was tossed into the back of a police car. The wind softly blew, as if sighing in relief that such a deadly man was finally being taken off the streets. Claude, though, was watching Tabitha, and sighed along with the wind.

"How did you do that?" was all he asked.

"I questioned what my eyes were seeing." She smiled. "It helped that we were about to dance."

Claude smirked but rubbed the nape of his neck in embarrassment, a little ashamed that he wasn't able to hear a fire burning right above him.

"What was a fire extinguisher doing in the ballroom?" he asked her. "He was trying to burn us alive, right? That was a rookie-murderer move if you

ask me.”

Tabitha laughed. “No wonder he looked so angry when I found it. Maybe he kept one hidden so he could escape himself. But since I had already grabbed it, his plan was ruined.”

“You know, my lady...” Claude started. Tabitha was already rolling her eyes.

“What now, Claude?” she asked, preparing for something silly to come out of his mouth.

“You really are amazing,” he said. “I’ve never quite met a woman like you, so brave and fearless and smart. If someone asked me to describe you in a single word, I wouldn’t have to think for long. You are a lot of things, but in simplicity, you’re absolutely extraordinary.” With that, he leaned towards Tabitha and softly kissed her cheek. She flushed, which made Claude chuckle with pride. “I think that’s enough adventure for one night, don’t you? Shall we go?”

Claude once again held out a hand, and she took it willingly, smiling to herself as he led her away to the comfort of heated seats and safety.

Brother, Bear

Ellie Karlin

Winner of the category

The people of the furthest village of Greenland stood in silent sorrow, heads bowed. Tears streaked every face, but none so much as the black-haired woman standing a little in front of the rest. She was hunched and shaking with grief; unreachable, inconsolable. They couldn't help but remember her as she had been only a few days ago – tall and proud and strong. That person already seemed long gone.

A little to her left stood a group of ten or twelve young people wearing thick brown coats with badges on the sleeves that said "PATROL" in red letters. They carried rifles slung over their shoulders. Their youthful faces were haggard with loss and their eyes were bloodshot. They looked older than they were.

There were only two young women in the group. They stood side by side, leaning against each other. One, who was shorter, had dark-brown hair and was overcome by sobs. The other was taller and long-limbed; she did not cry, forcing back the tears like a boxer pushing against a punchbag.

She shook out her fringe to cover her eyes and detached herself from her friend. She could feel her heart in her ribs like someone pounding at a door.

Thud thud thud thud thud thud...

On and on and on. Unrelenting.

Thud thud thud thud thud thud...

The others stepped back as she moved towards her mother, the thrum of suppressed emotion filling the silence.

“Suusan...” began the shorter girl, Atuat, but Suusan ignored her friend, her throat splitting.

“Anaana,” Suusan whispered, shoulders quivering. “Mother, it is time.”

The hunched woman raised her head and looked at her daughter as if she hardly knew her. But at last, she nodded. She pulled Suusan close and clutched onto her. The girl breathed in her mother’s scent, mixed with something unfamiliar. Perhaps it was grief, if grief had a smell.

They watched the rest of the group lift the coffin and carry him past; he who had been one of them. He who had been son, brother, friend, villager. He who was now gone.

The villagers stood motionless as mother and daughter stumbled after, still holding onto each other.

It was early summer, and the ground was soft enough to dig. They stood by his grave as the coffin was lowered and the shovels lifted to cover him with earth. Without being quite sure why, Suusan raised a hand for them to stop.

She tiptoed forward and bent over the box that hid her twin, her brother, her partner in crime, her worst enemy, her best friend. Trying not to remember – remember his round face before they’d even known what polar bears were, and his bloodied remains after they had pulled him from under the bear’s claws.

She whispered his name. It felt like a promise. A desperate promise to herself and the children they had been that she would make things right.

“Anik... Anik...”

Her voice wavered like a lost bird-call in the cold air. Like a mountain climber clinging to a crumbling ledge, she felt that terrible, unfaceable reality below her, inviting her closer. It was right there, devastatingly unavoidable – too real, too big; far, far bigger than her.

She had no choice. She let herself fall.

“Size of a god it was. Bigger than any folks round here have seen, for I don’t know how long. Scared me stiff,” said a rough-spoken man in the village’s only pub that evening.

Murmurs of agreement. They spoke of the massive paws... shivers running through the ground... the children not sleeping.

“And white as the snow... Polar bears were only found in old wives’ tales when I was a girl. And this one came bounding into our village, bold as anything!”

This came from a watchful old woman rocking back and forth in a chair by the fire. She had grey hair and grey eyes and grey skin, but had maintained a fierce, youthful intelligence.

“All due respect, Mrs Olsen, but it wasn’t snow-white by the time I’d done with it,” said a muscular middle-aged man sitting with a beer and a grim expression.

“He’s right!” said the first man with a triumphant grin. “Not going to be so hard to find the monster again – what with a big bloody gash running down its eye!”

“It wasn’t as big as the gash it put in young Anik,” murmured Mrs Olsen, and the pub fell silent.

“Yes,” someone said at last. “And he could have killed it. He had his rifle. But no, he wanted to save it. And in return... Would’ve dragged him off too, if Yutu’s hunting knife hadn’t given it something else to think about.”

Yutu looked even more grim. “How’re we supposed to protect our families if the bears keep on coming?” he said. “More and more of them every year. Never used to bother us. Sea ice is melting and driving the bears out. My little boy, Pilip, saw one a few months back, came tearing in like the gods were after him. And now, Anik dead. We... we can’t go on like this.”

“And what would you suggest, Yutu?” asked the woman behind the bar. “The Patrol lot do everything they can but look at what happened to one of their own!”

“Ahh, I don’t know.” Yutu paused, then went on cautiously, “Some families may want to... go elsewhere.”

An instant storm broke out.

“Leave the village?”

“How can you say that?”

“What would we do?”

“You can’t be serious...”

“My family’s always been here!”

Yutu took a swig of his beer and thumped the glass down onto the table. His voice was tinged with fear. “I don’t want to, you know. But we may not have a choice. That monster may be wounded, but it’s still out there...”

“You needn’t worry about that, Yutu,” said a deep voice.

Every head swivelled. A young man of twenty-two or twenty-three was leaning against the doorframe. The sun had barely set and the light fell on his face, which had something both cocky and weak about it. Suusan stood a little behind him, but she didn’t come in. Brittle tension filled the room. Only Mrs Olsen, having scanned the man thoughtfully for a moment, looked unaffected, grey eyes returning to the flames as she rocked back and forth.

“And why not, Tarkik Bjerre?” Yutu growled.

“Because the beast will be shot,” came the crisp reply. “Given its size and ferocity, it has been decided to... remove it. The strongest of us on the Patrol will set off by nightfall. For the safety of the village.”

“A brave mission indeed, bold Tarkik,” crooned the old lady mockingly, before anybody else could speak. “You must kill the bear then, must you?”

“Y-yes,” said Tarkik Bjerre, looking disquieted by the question. He continued with the air of a man trying to get the conversation back into his own territory. “It killed one of our own and could’ve killed many more. Who is to say it won’t come back?”

He looked around appealingly, evaluating the impression his words made.

“Who is to say indeed,” said Mrs Olsen quietly. “But do not forget, Tarkik, what everyone here well knows – that that polar bear is a monster human-made. Would it have come if it had enough ice to hunt on? We have driven a powerful animal to harm us when it would never have come close before, and now we face the consequences.”

“So Anik deserved what he got, did he then?” the young man retorted.

“Of course not,” said the old lady calmly. “You don’t like to hear this, any of you. But do not let vengeance for poor Anik stop you from doing what is right. *Whatever* is right.”

“The lad’s got it right, Mrs Olsen,” Yutu grunted reluctantly. “It’s too dangerous to let it live. All of us are at risk.”

Approving noises echoed around the room. Tarkik hung there awkwardly for a moment, his troubled gaze resting on Mrs Olsen. Finally, he gave a nod to nobody in particular and stomped out with a self-conscious swagger. He and Suusan set off walking down the road without a word.

On the morning of the third day, Suusan awoke in the early hours, sweating and gasping. She clawed desperately at her head as the horror slowly faded, then let her arms drop, breathing heavily.

“Just a nightmare,” she said to herself, “just a...”

But she couldn’t make herself believe that. Because it had happened, hadn’t it? She had been there, running through the streets with her friends, had seen Anik, shouting and waving, trying to get it to leave, his rifle on the ground, and then it charged and he was fighting it off with his bare hands and it was tearing at him . . .

Her first playmate, the one who’d found her hiding in the cupboard after she’d been scolded by their father, the one who she’d raced against on sleds till they were blue with cold. The one whose hand she’d held when he scraped his knee and cried for their mother. The one she’d pulled up when the world pushed him down and who’d pulled her up in turn.

The one she'd understood like no other and who'd understood her just as well.

When they'd joined the Patrol they'd been so excited, full of hopeful thoughts of protecting the village – *and* the bears. She could remember him pacing up and down in his little room, laughing with excitement, talking of glory and good deeds.

“Just think of them, Suu!” he'd said. “Grander and more majestic than any human. And humans are hurting them, destroying their ice. 'Member how horrified we were when we found out why they were coming closer? When Mrs Olsen told us about the sea ice melting and we learnt about climate change at school? We don't have to be helpless any more, we can protect them as well as the villagers!”

She'd smiled at his earnestness then... she agreed with him, caught up in the rush of the training and the bears and the people and the bears and the people... and now hope and drive and desire for good had been torn apart by that same animal. The bear slamming into him. The look in its eyes – desperation? Hunger? That was unthinkable...

Suddenly, fury flooded her heart, into her blood, pumping through her body and making her shake uncontrollably. Unable to remain in the tent any longer, she grabbed her coat and rifle and burst outside, finally feeling those big shameful tears spilling from her eyes. She stumbled away and looked out across the ice, throat catching, rage and sorrow mingling. Childish rage, like when she and Anik were little...

“It's not FAIR!” she cried and her voice echoed back at her. Sitting slumped, sure that nobody was listening but wishing deep in her heart that they were, Suusan almost didn't see it.

Almost.

Far away, the tiniest glimmer of red against all the hateful white. She raised herself slowly to her feet, eyes locked on it, hardly daring to breathe.

A small shape, tiny in the distance. It would be huge and hulking up close. Coherent thought returned with a jolt, and with it, a hate she hadn't imagined possible.

“Anik...” she whispered.

Slowly, she raised the rifle to her shoulder, squinting through the telescopic sight. The bear was lying on the ice, panting. It turned its head sluggishly. She could see the dripping wound on its eye, carved by Yutu's knife. The massive paws that had ended her brother's life were motionless.

Suusan realised that the bear was exhausted. It had not fed for days, maybe weeks. It had lost a lot of blood. It was done for. It was at her mercy. She could go right up to it, as close as she liked, and kill it.

"Tarkik!" she screamed, not knowing whether to go forward without him. "Tarkik, it's here! TARKIK!"

The indistinct shape stirred. She looked through the sight again. The bear had raised its snout and was sniffing the air.

A few minutes that seemed like hours passed before Tarkik stumbled out of the tent. He didn't have his rifle but was carrying a pair of powerful binoculars. She pointed shakily and he looked, and she saw him stiffen. Again, she squinted into the distance.

The bear was moving! It was hobbling painfully, but it was moving! It was getting away!

Tarkik just stood there, watching. Suusan turned and looked at him.

"We have to chase it," she said. "I want to shoot it. I want to shoot it for what it did to Anik."

He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again.

"What's the matter with you?" Suusan burst out. "You're the Patrol leader! We need to get everyone up, we need to chase it, we're wasting time, come on! That thing killed your friend."

Tarkik's face was clouded by an indecisiveness she couldn't understand; in herself she found only pure certainty.

"Yes," he said slowly. "Yes, I know it did."

Suusan was incredulous. How could he just stand there? They had to move, they had to chase it! Her mind was crowded with image upon image of her brother's blood coating her hands as she held him.

"Tarkik, please!" she begged. "It k-killed m-my b-b-brother. It needs to DIE!"

Some of the anguish with which these last words escaped from her chapped lips must have awoken Tarkik from his reverie. He nodded shakily, patted her on the shoulder in his awkward way and turned hastily back to the tent.

Suusan stood watching him, half tempted to run away without the Patrol, right there, right then. She was overwhelmed with the need to just do it, kill it, for this to be over so she could mourn her brother in peace.

Closing her eyes tight, memories flooded her mind. Memories of playing together on the living-room floor as snow storms raged outside, laughing and bickering over snacks and drinks. Memories of running about with the other children, breath cloudy in the cold air. Memories of sitting at the table together, working through pages of maths problems and him groaning aloud, “When I grow up, I’m gonna live with the polar bears and my children will *never* do maths!”

“Mine neither!” she’d declared, and they’d put down their pencils and run about the room shouting, “When I grow up!” until their mother declared she wished they *did* live with polar bears.

Each memory twisted the knife. But suddenly, out of the ice, something new and unexpected came over Suusan. Not sorrow, not rage... Hope, the childish, instinctive hope she’d always teased Anik for having. The hope that somehow... in the end... everything would be OK.

If she could just... kill it.

For the next few days, they hunted the polar bear, pushing the dogs and themselves to the limit. Suusan could see the same anger and determination glinting in the eyes of her friends, Anik’s ghost hanging in the air between them.

Tarkik was the most skilled tracker, directing them with utter confidence.

“No, look,” he would say, “it can’t have gone that way – there’s all that blood over here; it must have doubled back.”

“Listen, that’s not a polar bear’s tracks,” he’d tell them, impatient at their ignorance. “Follow me, it must be this way.”

They caught sight of the bear in the distance several times, but it always seemed to disappear. Each time sent Suusan’s heart racing, only to be crushed by disappointment again and again.

“We can’t keep chasing it like this,” Tarkik said at last one night. “We’ll get lost.”

“He’s right, Suu,” said Atuat, looking straight at her. “If we are to get it, we must get it soon or we’ll run out of supplies too.”

Suusan nodded jerkily, noting how all but Atuat seemed to skirt around her, as if she was a ticking bomb that might go off at the lightest touch. They were afraid to speak to her, yet their glances never strayed far. She knew they were upset about Anik too; she saw their pale, distraught faces and tried to feel pity for them.

But he wasn’t their brother, came the angry, selfish thought at once. They didn’t have to watch their birth companion bleed to death.

Taking a steadying breath, she felt Atuat’s hand squeezing her own; the others’ eyes were all meeting hers, for once. Bitterly, she wondered if they’d first discussed this without her.

“I know,” she said, calm as she could. “We’ll have to make a move soon. And it would be better to do it by stealth than a confrontation. I don’t want anyone else getting hurt.”

They all nodded, seeming relieved, and drifted away.

Atuat stayed, still holding her hand, and whispered, “Talk to me, Suu. Talk to me, please.”

“Atuat, I... I think I’m going mad!” Suusan burst out, unable to contain it any more.

“You’re not, Suu, I swear you’re not,” Atuat replied.

“I am! I must be! I have such dreadful thoughts and all I can think about is pulling the trigger! Killing that polar bear. *He* would have hated that. He thought polar bears were wonderful and that it was all humans’ fault they were bothering us. But I can’t let it go. I can’t.”

Atuat shook her head. “Don’t talk that way. It killed a man; you know we must kill it.. He would have known it too. It’ll be better – once we’ve done it. You don’t have to shoot it, someone else can, but it’s the right thing to do. I swear Suu, it is.”

Tarkik looked up from where he was petting one of the sled dogs.

“Is it?” he mumbled to himself, that troubled look flickering over his features. Then he raised his voice to the rest and said, “Get some sleep – I’m going to have a quick look to see if it’s out there. Won’t be long.”

They all nodded and crawled gladly into the tent, lost in their own thoughts.

When they awoke the next morning, Tarkik was nowhere to be found.

“Taaarrrrrrkkkiiiiikkkk?”

“TARKIK?”

“Anyone out there?”

“Where is he?”

“You think the bear got him?”

At this Suusan turned sharply and exclaimed, “No! It can’t! I won’t let it get another.”

A silence followed, then someone asked quietly, “So... what do we do, Suu? Our leader’s dead or lost somewhere, and the bear’s still out there.”

It was late afternoon and they’d spent the entire day searching for Tarkik, but there was nothing. Suusan didn’t understand how he could’ve just disappeared like that. If the bear had got him... well, they would’ve found traces, but there was nothing. And surely he couldn’t have got lost? They would’ve found him by now!

She looked about in frustration. The thought that another person had been lost to this bear was intolerable, but they were weary and hungry and the unexpected length of the expedition was taking its toll. They’d all expected to be near home by now, leaving the bear dead behind them. After all, it was supposed to be bleeding so much they could just follow a trail of

red. But now Tarkik was gone, and she knew the Patrol couldn't keep going much longer.

"I don't know," she said. "We can't search any more today. I suppose we'll have to try to get the bear tomorrow and find Tarkik too."

"And if we can't?" the same person asked.

"If we can't," she repeated, then stopped. What if they *really* couldn't? Could she just let her brother's death go unavenged? Could they go home in failure, having lost both Tarkik and Anik?

"I don't know," she said again.

They ate a frugal, silent dinner from their remaining supplies. Lying in her sleeping bag, Suusan listened to the others tossing and turning until she was quite sure they were all asleep, then sat up cautiously and tiptoed out.

She walked in circles around the tent, rubbing her temples and trying to think. Where in the world was Tarkik? Anxiety gnawed at her insides as she thought about what could have happened to him and quickened her steps until she was running. She felt a shameful pleasure in the anxiety, if only as a distraction from grief, and kept running and running and running, round and round, until she was steaming inside her coat.

When at last she was standing still, panting heavily, she heard a noise that made her heart stop-start. It was a growling sound, but there was something plangent in it. It was the kind of noise that might be made by an animal – a large animal; an animal that was hurting...

Outside the lights of their camp, the edge of the world was very dark. Suusan went back inside the tent and reached for the big torch they always kept by the entrance flap. She shone it out across the ice. Blinked. She hardly believed what she was seeing, but there it was, clear as day.

Tarkik was standing about twenty feet away, his back towards her. Not far from him, the massive bear sat on its haunches. Its head was lowered. The blood around its wounded eye had caked into a dry, swollen mass. Suusan walked towards Tarkik, very slowly. She understood now. He had gone out, and he had found the bear, and he had brought it to her. With a shock, she realised that Tarkik had not taken his rifle with him.

She stood beside him. Neither of them spoke, The bear made its whimpering growly noise. She could kill it in an instant, yet, even now,

with one last effortful leap it could kill them just as quick.

Now, she could see it more clearly. The bear was a gigantic male. Its body was enormous, on a scale she couldn't have begun to imagine. It had stocky, powerful legs, a long, curving snout and a short tail. Its fur was the purest snow-white, lusciously soft. The wound from Yutu's knife stood out, cruel and ugly.

Her brother's excited voice floated into her mind, talking about polar bears this and polar bears that, on and on and on. She could almost see him, face lit with passion, and, despite everything, she smiled.

But no sooner had she done this, another emotion took over, like a fire that had once been quenched rising out of the ashes. All of her anger and confusion came roaring back. She wanted to scream, to run, to rage at the animal that destroyed everything.

Instead, she reached for her rifle. Cold, hard fury flowed through her veins, holding her trembling hand still as a clammy finger brushed the trigger. Here it was, right in front of her, right here, at her mercy! She could have her vengeance, make the villagers sleep soundly again. She could kill this bear who had killed her brother.

But she hesitated.

She heard her brother's voice once more, going on and on about how selfish humans were, causing global warming, and how it wasn't the fault of the polar bears. She heard Mrs Olsen telling Tarkik the same thing, telling him not to be blinded by vengeance, to do what was right, *whatever* was right.

She heard Yutu's scared voice as he spoke of the dangers of polar bears. She heard her mother's uncontrollable sobs, ripped from her throat and wailing through the air.

She saw this very beast tearing at her twin, disfiguring her handsome, kind brother, taking him away from her. The pain of this shuddered through her anew and she could no longer hear their voices. She could only see the blood and the brother and the bear, and so she could only do one thing.

Holding the gun before her with a trembling hand, she prepared to pull the trigger...

... but before she could, Tarkik whispered from beside her.

“Please, don’t...”

Suusan turned to face him, astonished.

“Why not?” she demanded. “Isn’t this what we’ve been trying to do this whole time? Kill the bear? Wasn’t that it?”

“Listen to me, Suusan,” he moaned. “I know it killed Anik, I *know* you’re devastated – I am too. But the bear’s wounded, tired, hungry. On the slim chance it lives the night, it’s not going to come back to the village. How’s this going to help anyone, killing it now? Just more cruelty to polar bears by humans. This isn’t *right*.”

“So why did you come? Why come with us if it’s so wrong?”

He was silent. Something clicked in her mind.

“You!” she said, voice rising uncontrollably. “*You’re* the reason we could never get any closer. *You* were leading us in the wrong direction, again and again!”

“Not at the start!” Tarkik protested, shivering. “But as we got further and further along... I just couldn’t, Suu, I couldn’t do it and call it right. I thought you would have given up by now but you hadn’t and... Please, please put down the gun. We can go home and you can grieve your brother in peace. You don’t have to do this.”

Suusan’s whole body shook. On one side was her brother’s mangled corpse, her vengeance for her broken world, a way to make things right for her and for him, for what had been taken from her. On the other was something so much bigger than herself, something that extended to people in every corner of the world – humans, wasteful humans, worsening global warming bit by bit, melting the sea ice. They had ruined these animals, driven this bear to what it would never have done a century ago.

This bear had murdered her brother. Humans were the reason why.

“Please, Suu...” Tarkik whispered again.

Should she shoot?

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

Climbing Cold

Ihsan Sim

Yared gritted his teeth as the frosty wind sliced through the thin air. With his right hand on a narrow ledge of stone, he relieved the cold ache in his left shoulder, rotating it thrice over in an anti-clockwise fashion. He grunted, partly in pain and partly in relief as he returned the free hand to the narrow piece of rock.

Now with both hands on the ledge, Yared looked over his shoulder and down at the gaping ravine below. Misty white snakes swirled the cavernous depths, taunting Yared with death every time he looked down.

A fall from this height would kill anyone, surely. People had died falling from less. Yared deftly placed his left foot onto another slippery outcrop of stone, as his powerful arms reached up to pull himself northward.

His coat was thin and so were his gloves. Every time Yared removed his hands from a piece of rock, bits of cloth would be stuck fast, wearing his gloves down thinner and thinner. Wisps of fabric clung onto each rock Yared placed his hand upon, like some sort of accursed trail of crumbs. At this rate, he would have no gloves by the time he reached the top.

Out of the corner of his eye, Yared spotted another ledge higher up from where he was now hanging precariously. This one was cut tall into the rock. Not very wide, but good enough to stand on. Without a moment's hesitation, he swung his way towards the ledge, taking good care to remember his father's advice.

“Eyes up, back straight, light breaths. Eyes up, back straight, light breaths.”

This was the way Yared stopped himself from falling off of cliffs and it had served him well over the years.

By the fourth round of recitation, Yared found himself standing on the exposed ledge of rock with his back to the mountain. He breathed a sigh of relief and thanked God the ground beneath him had not given way. Yared knew more than a few who had perished in that fashion.

Raising his hands, Yared wiped the snow off his goggles before removing them completely. Snow blindness was always a risk, but up here, where it was mostly rock and the odd patch of frosty lichen, that risk became just a bit lower.

The sun was beginning to set over the horizon, and the ground below was blanketed by a thick layer of mist. How far down it went, Yared knew not, and he felt it best to vanquish such thoughts for now. They would only slow him down and make him fear the mountain. Where he was from, *one must never fear the mountain*. It only took a moment of hesitation, a moment of fear, for the winds to send you tumbling down to the rocks below.

Unscrewing the cap from a flask, Yared quenched his thirst as he stared beyond the puffy white mist and towards the horizon. The sun had turned a brilliant red with streaks of gold paintbrushed at its periphery as the twilight’s first splotches of purple began to make themselves known to the world.

Beautiful though it was, Yared had no time to rest. Stuffing the flask back into his coat, Yared then reached for the goggles and placed them over his eyes. He rubbed his cold hands together and shot a breath of hot air between them, fogging up his vision. Then he placed one tattered glove over the large bulge in his left pocket as he readied to lift himself up and over the ledge.

Yes, still there.

Yared began to swing. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. *On the count of three*, he told himself, *I will find myself over this ledge and on solid ground.*

One... two... three!

Yared released his hold on the ledge and swung himself up towards the section of the mountain with a gentler gradient, twisting his body through the untamed air as he manoeuvred himself against the frigid wind with the grace of a swan.

With a thud, Yared landed with both feet on the ground, bending his knees as his father had taught him.

Not today, mountain, he thought.

Now the worst was over, and Yared began his steep climb towards the peak of the mountain. It may have been easier to travel now, but the danger was by no means gone. The rocky ground was shiny with dew, and scattered patches of moss meant that Yared was only one fall away from disaster. His well-worn boots did him no favours in that regard.

For the first time since his climb started, Yared realised he was tired. The air was getting thinner now, and he took great care to regulate his breathing. If a fall didn't kill him, the lack of air would. The path ahead continued to grow steep, and Yared could just about make out what looked like another rocky cliff. This one would be too steep to walk. Cursing silently, he quickened his pace and prayed that his eyes deceived him. He had taken this path through the mountain many times before, but it was the first time he had encountered this particular cliff.

Upon getting closer, Yared realised that what he thought was a solid cliff was really a mass of collapsed boulders. A landslide was the likely culprit. He frowned. Approaching the nearest boulder, he glanced upwards and sighed.

Just one more climb and you're there.

Yared rubbed his tattered-glove hands together and exhaled another hot breath of air into them. He placed his hand on the bulge in his left pocket again.

Still warm. Still there.

He began to climb.

The boulders were draped with a sheet of ice, and Yared grimaced every time he placed his hand on one to lift himself higher. The rubble of boulders was becoming steeper, and it was becoming harder and harder to climb. The

entire formation rumbled ominously every time Yared moved, and he muttered a silent prayer for his safety.

Spotting a narrow outcrop of rock higher up, Yared reached out with his right foot to gain some leverage. He tested the rock's surface, wriggling it with his foot ever so slightly.

No movement. That was good enough for him.

With no hesitation, Yared tilted, hoisting the weight of his body onto his foot.

He froze. Something was terribly wrong.

For a moment, there was silence... and then the rock crumbled beneath his foot, disappearing into the mist below.

Blood pounded in Yared's ears as he cautiously looked up. In spite of the cold, a bead of sweat trickled down his forehead.

A small boulder grumbled from above as it came ricocheting down towards where his ankle now drooped. Yared had a brief moment to register the falling blur of grey and a deafening snap before pain shot through his leg. He screamed in anguish and his hands very nearly slipped off their ledges.

He maintained his grip. But only just.

Three of his contact points now held firm, but Yared's right leg swung precariously over the edge as his ankle, bent downwards at an unholy angle, began to throb. He glanced up and could just about make out the summit. It was only a few steps away. Yared closed his eyes as his grip on the slippery ledge tightened, ice biting into his exposed fingers.

Eyes up, back straight, light breaths. Eyes up, back straight, light breaths. Eyes up, back straight, light breaths!

He cried out, fingernails drilling into the stone as his arms pulled him upwards one last time.

Yared's shoulders burned as he clambered and crawled onto higher ground, his ankle pulsating with the steady rhythm of snapped tendons. Yared turned so that he now lay facing the sky, taking care to mind his ankle as he manoeuvred his way around. Breathing a sigh of relief, he licked at his sore, bloodied fingertips, taking a moment to gather his thoughts.

The last tatters of a crimson sky hung at the edge of the horizon as a faint sliver of a moon began to make its nightly ascent. Yared stared blankly towards the heavens, thankful that the pain had numbed for now.

Was this what he travelled so far for, then? Was this really all worth it?

A shrill cry shattered his concentration and Yared smiled weakly.

Yes, yes it was.

“Coming, coming.”

Yared gingerly got to his feet and hobbled towards a large patch of mountain shrubs, where the thing cried out to him again. He got to his hands and knees, beginning to gently push leaves and branches aside. Being careful not to damage the shrubs, Yared inched forward in the direction of the noise.

“I’m coming...” he called, ignoring the pain in his ankle. The edge of a branch caught itself in Yared’s hair, while the coarse, rocky ground pressed through his thin trousers, cutting into his knees.

As Yared pushed the last branches out of the way, he found himself in a small clearing, at the centre of which sat the source of the noise.

The bird stood at about the height of a man’s knees and was about as wide as a small boulder. Striking red feathers adorned its neck and back, blending into a dark mocha-brown torso that ended in snowy white wingtips. One of its wings was a misshapen mess, bent at an awkward angle as a cluster of ruffled feathers gathered around a scarred patch of flesh. Greying bandages swathed the broken wing and a large twig used as a splint stretched the distance from the bird’s shoulder to the tip of its wing. Golden, primal eyes betrayed its intelligence and sparkling pupils suggested a world of earthly wisdom hidden within the caverns of its soul.

Amassed around the bird to form a makeshift nest was anything and everything Yared had been able to lay his hands on. Sticks, tattered cloth, pebbles, soft moss, chunks of metal and even an old parka; nothing went to waste.

Yared stopped to admire the graceful creature as he had many times before, when he was snapped back to reality with another impatient cry.

“Yes, it’s good to see you too, Buru,” Yared said, reaching for the lump in his pocket.

The bird began to flutter its one good wing excitedly as Yared removed his hand from his coat to reveal a large chunk of raw veal.

“Stop fussing, or else I’ll have to set your wing all over again!” Yared chided sternly.

Buru, perhaps understanding, ceased fidgeting and looked on expectantly.

Yared tossed the veal to his friend, who sunk its beak into the meat in one fell swoop. It ripped apart a chunk of flesh and guzzled it down with an audible *gulp* as watery blood began to trickle from its bill. Buru let out a brief chirp, showing Yared its gratitude before greedily attacking the veal again.

“Easy, Buru. Easy...” Yared coaxed, gently stroking the back of the bird’s head with the tip of a throbbing finger.

His eyes turned to Buru’s broken wing before he looked down at his own twisted ankle, now turning from bright red to a disconcerting shade of purple.

He gave a half-hearted chuckle. “I guess you and I are not so different after all.”

Yared gave his back a much-needed crack before carefully setting himself down next to Buru’s nest. He looked up while massaging his pulsating ankle.

The fingernail of a moon had risen high in the sky, illuminating the distant sea of mist far below. Another frightful journey down the mountain awaited Yared in the morning, but that was a problem for another day. Buru, meanwhile, had fallen fast asleep, exhausted from its meaty exploits, belly full and satisfied for now. The wing would not be flight-worthy for another three weeks or so, and until then, these visits would be a regular affair.

Yared lay with his back to the ground, prickly branches digging into his spine and his coat now soaking wet from the remnants of melted snow.

Happy and content with the world as it was, Yared breathed in the cool mountain air as he was soon overcome by a restful slumber. The last thing he saw before sleep conquered him was the sky. It was starting to turn a deep shade of obsidian, welcoming the twilight as the last vestiges of violet bid the day farewell.

And in a distant corner of this world, the North Star began to shine.

Alone With a Legacy

Tasmin Engelhard

I

On his fiftieth birthday, King Eaton of Nemeth decided he needed to die heroically.

Legacy had been on his mind since boyhood, woven into its very fabric, so this decision did not spring from nowhere. For the past two months, his mind had spiralled around the possibility of starting a war – a war for love. She would be beautiful, charming, and, most importantly, trapped. Unfortunately, King Eaton was not easily charmed, nor was he particularly inclined to go to war (it was rumoured that he could not hold a sword). Regardless, this had seemed the most promising avenue, until now.

Alfred was the first to know. He was bundling the heavy draperies out of the morning's way, hair glowing like sunlit snow, when King Eaton called to him from the bowels of his bed. Alfred came quickly. He always came quickly, driven by a loyalty no one could understand, and which King Eaton, like most of the good fortune in his life, took entirely for granted.

“Alfred,” King Eaton began in his grandiose baritone, “I need to die heroically.”

“Sire?” There was no tone of shock in Alfred's voice, merely curiosity and – not that King Eaton noticed it; he would never notice it – a shiver of concern.

“It is time for me to meet my heroic end. It is time for me to travel to the tombs of my ancestors while my legacy flies on, unbridled,

luminescent.” King Eaton spoke slowly, his whole countenance seeming to glow. “And a year from now, the people of Nemeth will walk the streets with candles, sobbing, wailing, bemoaning the loss of so *great* a king... so great a king...” He trailed off with misty eyes, lost in these glorious imaginings.

“Sire?”

“Hmm?”

“Happy birthday.”

“Oh, yes, thank you, Alfred.”

His ever-attentive manservant gave a curt bow and then sailed off to prepare the bathwater.

The first stage of any good plan is research, and so, after bathing, King Eaton turned to his library. It was unquestionably the most beautiful room in the castle. Grand oak bookcases soared to the high domed ceiling. Their dark polished wood was carved with an assortment of nymphs, knights and dragons, so finely detailed that they had freckles, individual scales and curling locks of hair. The shelves were packed with books bound in the finest red leather, their titles burned carefully into their spines, and pages adorned not with science, warcraft, or even law, but rather with folktales, myth and legend.

The vast majority of King Eaton’s time was spent in this ornate library, poring over his books. Sometimes, when he looked up from the dense scrawl after hours of reading, his vision fuzzy and mind dazed, he would experience a delightfully disorienting moment where, awestruck by the carvings, he would be overwhelmed by a notion that he was within the pages of the stories. And that was all he had ever wanted – to belong in such stories, to be remembered as King Eaton the Heroic¹.

II

After two months of dedicated, studious research, King Eaton's plan had barely advanced. He knew he wanted to die at the moment of sunrise, to be lit from behind by the dawn's glory, and he had mapped out the carving they would make of him, sword raised, hair flying, horse rearing. But the broader, practical details remained entirely hazy. It was as if he was making battle plans but had only focused his attention on the cape clasps his soldiers would wear. This was not unusual. He never made any *actual* progress on anything – a fact he found highly upsetting.

Alfred had found him crying, curled into a foetal position under his bed, blubbering and hiccupping.

“Sire?” Alfred got to his knees and peered under the bed. “Can I help you with anything, sire?”

There was a long pause and then King Eaton's sobbing suddenly intensified. “What am I going to do, Alfred? I will fade into obscurity!”

Alfred watched with discomfort, wondering what to do. After a moment of uncertainty, he set off to find some biscuits.

As Alfred slid the laden tray under the bed, receiving an embarrassed “thank you”, there was a knock on the door. He rose automatically.

“Goodness, no! Don't answer it!” a desperate, shout instructed him.

“Of course, sorry.” Alfred bowed to the four-poster bed.

But the Lady Genevieve was not one to wait for answers. The door swung open and she strode into the room, shoes clicking and long chestnut hair streaming out behind her.

“Alfred, where is my uncle?”

“His Majesty is not here at the moment, Lady Genevieve,” Alfred stammered uneasily. Unlike his employer, he was not a good liar. “May I be of assistance?”

“I suppose...” She surveyed the bedroom suspiciously with her storm cloud eyes: the gilded wall mirror; the sagging, monstrous bed; the immovable pine desk. Her eyes came to rest on the bolted library doors. She hated that library – the way her uncle holed up in there, doing nothing that benefitted anyone, leaving his kingdom in the hands of a manservant.

Eventually, she turned back to Alfred, countenance blazing with a frightening mixture of determination and acrimony. “I’ve come about the market – my market. He needs to fund it.”

“I will do what I can,” Alfred said briskly, listening tensely for a sob.

The intensity of her gaze immediately softened, and her delicate features curved into a smile. “Thank you, Alfred, thank you. We both know he has no use for the money.”

At that, there came a whimper. It was a snivelly little whimper, the sound a child would make during a nightmare.

Alfred stiffened.

For a moment Lady Genevieve looked confused. Then she gave a curt, disgusted laugh and walked slowly from the room, her footfalls heavy and deliberate on the polished stone floor.

A humiliated silence descended while master and servant replayed the preceding scene over and over, each time freshly immersed in a wave of embarrassment.

Alfred composed himself first and turned to face the bed, hands behind his back, ready to pretend that the past half hour had never occurred.

Eventually, King Eaton came crawling out. His dark hair (which stubbornly refused to grey) was flattened on one side, making his head look lopsided. He sheepishly brushed biscuit crumbs from his sleeves, keeping his eyes on the bearskin rug. And then, he suddenly straightened. His chin rose to a lofty position and his features fell into a well-practised look of pompous grandeur. The shift was so abrupt, so thorough, that the past half hour seemed as if it had not occurred, or rather, that it had belonged to another man. *King* Eaton, the man who now stood before Alfred, did not know shame or failure.

“I must say, Alfred, I did not find her particularly persuasive today.” King Eaton strolled over to the window and leaned against it. He crossed

one foot over the other and brought a hand to his chin. “What is this market, anyway?”

“She’s been talking about it for some time, sire. She plans for the stallholders to be exclusively female, selling the wares they have made.”

“Female craftsmen? *Craftswomen?*” King Eaton scoffed.

“It is a very popular concept.”

“Surely only among the women?”

“They *are* half the population, sire.”

King Eaton sighed, defeated. “And they *all* love *her*.”

Alfred paused, considering his response. “Yes, the Lady Genevieve is universally loved.” It was true. He always strove to insert little nodules of truth into King Eaton’s bubble; without them the bubble would have flown away.

King Eaton did not respond. He had frozen at Alfred’s words, eyes now focused on the knotted, lonely wood behind the castle. Then his face came alight. Alfred knew the look well; there was a sparkler just lit inside the king’s head – a glittering, blazing idea.

“Brilliant,” he announced, turning from the window with a wide smile.

III

A week later, Lady Genevieve was kidnapped. It was an undeniably odd affair, perfectly silent, entirely unnoticed. Looking at her sunlit room the next morning, there was little evidence that something was amiss. A toppled vase and sheets tangled and pulled onto the floor surprised but did not distress her maid; the Lady Genevieve was a woman on a mission, and sometimes the world was left a little askew in her tumultuous wake.

Her maid did *not* notice the rope, coiled sloppily in the grass under the window, or the four menacing words scribbled on the piece of paper lost amongst the dresser’s clutter.

The Lady Genevieve’s chamber was veiled in a fuzzy twilight by the time the alarm was finally raised.

The Council, one key member short, streamed down the echoing corridors and rapped noisily on Lady Genevieve's door before thrusting it open.

“*We will kill you!* You didn't think that was a problem? You didn't think that was worth reporting?” General Harrington roared at the maid, pointing an appalled finger at the death threat ignored on the dresser.

She dipped her head, shrinking to the floor. “I am sorry, sir, so sorry sir. I cannot read.”

General Harrington tore a distressed hand through his corn-coloured hair².

But the frustrating conundrum only got stranger, for at that moment a most unexpected person strode through Lady Genevieve's door.

“Your Majesty?”

The Council dropped to their knees, bowing their heads as if they were sheltering from an explosion.

King Eaton spotted General Harrington across the crowded room and marched towards him, sending the humped council members scuttling out of his way.

“I have been informed that my niece is gone.” His voice was angry, full of disdain. “On your feet!”

The room rose, cautiously. Many of them hadn't seen their king in years.

General Harrington was the only one who met his fierce expression. “Yes, I am afraid that is so. At the first light of dawn I will ride with my

most trusted—”

“Trusted!” King Eaton took a step closer to General Harrington.

The maid, cowering behind him, began quivering with fear. General Harrington, however, remained composed. He stared back resolutely, unmoved by King Eaton’s displeasure.

“Amusing, is it not, that you choose to mention trust at this time? I trusted you with the safety of this kingdom, and you couldn’t even ensure the safety of the castle! Now, tell me, how can I *trust* you to bring home my niece?”

General Harrington did not respond. His face had adopted its cold, passive look, the look it always adopted when King Eaton addressed him.

“I think there is only one person I *can* trust with this quest...” King Eaton paused for dramatic effect, and then declared loudly, “... myself.”

The room stiffened.

King Eaton surveyed his subjects, daring someone to challenge his authority. Then he coughed, adding quietly, “Alfred also, of course. I have always been able to trust Alfred.”

Half-hidden in the doorway, Alfred dropped his gaze to his shoes. No one saw the small smile flicker across his face, or the bashful blush touch his cheeks.

King Eaton stood up straighter and, returning to his grand voice, proclaimed, “We will go alone.”

General Harrington’s apathy evaporated and his eyes widened. “Your Majesty, I do not think that is wise.”

“I don’t care what you think. I am incredibly capable. Did you know that at the meagre age of fifteen I won Camelot’s tracking competition? That’s right, I tracked a hare for forty kilometres—”

“And then you killed it. Yes, Your Majesty, we know.” General Harrington sounded panicked now. “But you will need more than tracking ability. Who knows how many men you will come up against. Please, all I ask is that my officers and I are allowed to accompany you.”

The room held its breath while King Eaton studied his uncharacteristically earnest general.

Finally, he responded in a mild tone. “You interrupted me.”

IV

The next morning, under a murky slate-grey sky, King Eaton of Nemeth left his castle for the first time in twenty years.

General Harrington watched the two horses trot stiffly from the castle gate, misting the frigid air with their breath. He watched King Eaton shifting around in his saddle, trying to acclimatise his backside to the moulded leather, and Alfred, his riding posture perfect from the Great Wars, coaching his employer with unwavering patience. The general did not feel the castle quiver or the frantic pull of the breeze. And when the sun rose from the Earth, he did not notice it was red.

They rode slowly, skirting the town. King Eaton grumbled incessantly from under his hood. He was tense and tired, too hot and then too cold. He wished they hadn't come and then grew frustrated they weren't moving faster.

Alfred travelled behind, the view ahead largely obscured by the giant white stallion King Eaton had chosen. He paid little attention to the torrent of discontent, focusing instead on what was to either side of him – on the tall, tangled trees and matted underbrush. The restless wood had scared Alfred at first, had caused him to sit straighter, to cast his vigilant gaze left and right until his neck had grown sore. But as the wood thickened and sounds receded, he began to recognise things: the rough, peeling bark of the trees, the pools of dancing sunlight on the ground. A smile touched his lips when he noticed the star-shaped flowers. He had spent hours³ watching his mother braid them into her hair, gold on gold. He imagined that suddenly the trees would thin and he would be back there with her, at the lake. He would see his house reflected in its calm waters, notice the ruby tomatoes and ruffled lettuces of their garden, hear the dog's bark and his mother's call. He felt happy and, erroneously, safe.

Their destination was Caldaver Bridge, once a bustling, lively landmark on an important trade route. But the Great Wars had changed many things. Now the bridge lay empty, its worn, moss-painted stones wistfully echoing with the tramping of feet, the jokes of merry voices and the jingle of wares. It was haunted by the uneasy hollowness of abandoned places, which had driven the remaining travellers and traders to other roads. Eventually, even the river had rerouted.

They arrived with the long afternoon shadows, taking up their places among a spray of birches. As the sun slid from the sky, King Eaton rehashed the plan.

“At dawn, we ride over to the bridge.” He gestured proudly at the hulking mass of stone. “You dismount, walk along the riverbed and enter under it from the left. The kidnappers will then run out with the Lady Genevieve. I’ll leap down upon them from the bridge. We’ll clash swords and then one of them will kill me.”

Alfred tensed and looked away. He always tensed at this part of the plan.

King Eaton did not notice. He never noticed. “Remember, the important thing is that the Lady Genevieve sees me die. Alfred?”

Alfred was still looking away, staring through the dark trees at the bridge.

“Alfred?”

“You should get some rest, sire,” the manservant said with a smile, melancholy pooling in his eyes.

But neither of them slept much.

The next morning, King Eaton leaned over the side of the bridge, watching Alfred disappear under its worn stones. A light fog hung about the riverbed, an extension of the dusky sky. It was too early, but Alfred's increasingly desperate reminders of this fact had barely been heard, let alone absorbed. Now, however, King Eaton listened eagerly, his ears humming with anticipation.

The dry leaves rustled, an unanswered birdcall wailed through the trees, the river stones crunched quietly under Alfred's feet. And King Eaton waited, quivering slightly, rotating his sword around and around. Then he heard it, the signal, a little too late and much too quiet.

"Genevieve? Lady Genevieve?" Alfred's voice was hoarse and frail. He sounded sad, not searching.

But it was enough, they heard him.

King Eaton listened to the scrambling of feet and the muffled cries of his niece. He looked over the bridge's edge. It was a fair fall, his height at least, more than he should attempt to jump. But he had to fly down upon them, he knew he had to, and so he readied himself. One, two, three...

And then, there they were.

The Lady Genevieve looked bruised and exhausted, stumbling and flailing as she was dragged backward by her dress. Her hair was askew, her shoes were missing and her hands were bleeding.

But King Eaton didn't notice her, didn't feel a twinge of remorse; all he felt was the wind. It poured through his hair as the ground flew up towards him, filling him, invigorating him. He didn't feel anything as he landed on the round, shifting stones, his left ankle cracking sideways. And he didn't feel anything as he began to run on it, limping slightly. In fact, it felt to him like he had not touched the ground at all. He soared forward, tingling all over.

Lady Genevieve was discarded into the dust as the kidnappers turned and started towards him, two broad-shouldered shadows, tearing the fog with their swinging arms.

King Eaton struggled to raise his sword in time and an icy knife grazed his shoulder, but it was not time yet; he still had so much to prove. His ears identified a pounding sound as he shoved the knife away. A sword swooped down upon him. He raised his own by reflex and a horrible metallic clash echoed down the riverbed. A pair of anxious, hooded eyes watched him from behind their crossed swords. With a burst of strength he didn't know he had, the king drove their swords apart, sending his attacker falling backwards. The pounding intensified. Suddenly he realised what it was – footsteps. Someone was running at him from behind. He turned quickly, losing his grasp on his sword. A panicked cry burst from his lips. *Had they hired three kidnappers instead of two?* He lurched frantically towards his fallen sword. And then he saw who it was.

Alfred was running towards him, his eyes wild and forehead furrowed. He looked so desperate, so afraid.

Why? King Eaton wanted to ask, staring in confusion, hands hanging limply by his sides. *What's wrong? Everything I've worked for is coming to pass.*

He did not feel it when the sword sliced up and into his left ribs.

Alfred... Why are you crying?

V

“Alfred? Are you not coming?” Queen Genevieve paused in the doorway, her gaze concerned.

Alfred looked up from his writing. “I am sorry, your majesty, I am not.”

Hurried footsteps echoed along the hall and then General Harrington was alongside her, pulling gently on her arm. “My queen, your market is waiting for you.”

She gestured towards Alfred, her concern imprinting itself onto her forehead.

“Oh...” General Harrington studied the hunched form, scrawling furiously at the desk before them. “What is he writing?”

“I do not know. I am afraid to ask.”

Alfred did not hear their whispers. He pulled his pen hastily from its ink, scattering dark droplets across his page and hands. He did not pause.

“Do you think he’s gone mad?”

Queen Genevieve stared at General Harrington, dismayed.

He placed a conciliatory hand on her arm. “I only mean... he has changed, hasn’t he?”

She gave a long sigh, then straightened and quietly closed the door behind her. “I never knew him as King Eaton did.”

Alfred did not hear their footsteps receding down the hall. He did not hear the music and laughter of the market. And he did not hear Queen Genevieve's revolutionary speech about the working rights of women, or her tearful side-note about her mistaken judgement regarding the heroic King Eaton. He was completely absorbed, consumed by his desire to give King Eaton the only thing he had ever really wanted, to provide one last paramount service for... his friend.

Alfred’s book would be finished exactly three years later, in a cottage. He would look up from his work, eyes fuzzy, and gaze out of his window at the ruby tomatoes and ruffled lettuces of his garden, and at the calm, glassy lake. Then he would look back down, flick through the pages that would begin as myth then morph into legacy, and read from the beginning.

King Eaton of Nemeth, harbinger of peace and hero extraordinaire, died in the arms of his manservant as the first light of dawn touched the sky.

Terra Avenging

Andrea Viveros Mendoza

Part 1: Emer

The spaceship was about to enter the Milky Way. After one year of traveling to reach her, she was finally here.

Commander Emer was in the cabin, which had a huge window that allowed him to see the galactic landscape. A multitude of stars were scattered across a sea of darkness. Lonely planets spinning in their orbits, some galaxies merging, and others destroying each other. It was beautiful to see the thousands of supernovas created daily, the thousands of natural satellites, planets, and galaxies that disappeared or grew every second. Emer was by no means a man of science, and he was not a brave man either. But he was a man who admired the beauty of space, and who respected it.

Emer was a decent commander. He wasn't the kind of commander who helped conquer planets and galaxies for the Empire, nor was he the kind of commander who was sent to spy on and infiltrate rebellions or rebel planets. He was the kind of commander who was sent to investigate what no one else wanted to. And not because it was difficult, but because it was so boring and simple that no one wanted to waste their time doing it.

His crew was perfect for those jobs. They had been together for almost seven years. The crew was small, but efficient. Emer would never admit it, but he was beginning to think of them as his family.

“Commander, we are approaching the Milky Way.”

“Thank you, Yujin. Keep us on course.”

Yujin was the pilot of Crew 66. She was twenty-nine, with an excellent sense of direction. She could be in complete darkness and still find her way. Talent, that's what she had.

“Of course, Commander,” Yujin said.

The ship shuddered, and an emergency message came up on the monitor.

“Mateo!” Emer shouted, “What did you break now?”

A head of tight curls poked out of a vent. “Commander, why is it that every time something goes wrong on this ship, you blame me?”

Emer raised an eyebrow. “Because whenever something goes wrong, you're there.”

Mateo tried to speak but Emer raised a hand to silence him. “Go and be a mechanic. Fix whatever you broke.”

Mateo left as fast as he arrived.

“I think it would be a good idea for the rookie to come. It's been a long time since anyone has traveled here. We need the Browser,” Yujin said.

“Rookie!” Emer yelled.

His crew was made up of eight people: Yujin, pilot; Mateo, mechanic; Dune, computer scientist; Kizz, chef; Doc, the ship's doctor (not exactly original, but her name was really “Doc”); Atlas, in charge of the armament; and Inna, beloved AI who helped with paperwork, cleaning, and many other things.

They had been relatively fine with their boring missions for the past six or so years. They had never needed a Browser – a navigator. Inna did a good job. Yes, they had gotten lost now and again, because space moved and changed all the time and every day. It was easy to get lost when there were no signs saying “Turn here to reach Andromeda”, and even more so when three years ago, the turn had been next to N65 and now it was next to an unnamed moon.

It had been years since the School of Navigation had produced any graduates. The problem of the Browsers been dealt with by the creation of sophisticated artificial intelligence. But of course, it became obvious that AI couldn't replace a living brain, so the school started preparing navigators once again. Why the problem in the first place?

Well, because Browsers tended to be a little... how to put it...

“Well, old *uss*. Have you already realized that you can't live without me?”

Emer rolled his eyes at the disrespect as a headache began to form at his temple.

“Eli, you must ask permission before entering the cabin.”

“And you must send a message through Inna to call a crew member, not shout as if you were in a market.”

... annoying. *That* was the problem with the Browsers.

“Inna is busy cleaning up whatever Kizz burned.”

Eli laughed. “Wow, what a great crew. Such a disgrace.”

“Hey, rookie. Remember your place.”

Eli threw up his hands in surrender, but the little smile on his face was still there.

Spoiled child, Emer thought as Eli observed the sky and sketched something in his notebook using a compass and ruler.

“Well, it seems that we are lost. Why did you come in here?”

Yujin frowned. “This is the Milky Way. Atlas said it was twenty clicks away from that meteor shower.”

“And Atlas has been a navigator since... when?” asked Eli, irritated. “You entered from the opposite side; now we have to go all the way around to get to Earth.”

“How long will that take us? We're already late,” asked Emer.

Eli got up from the monitor. “I don't know, why don't you ask Atlas? Apparently, he knows everything.”

“I'm asking you.”

Eli rolled his eyes. “And I'm refusing to answer.” He addressed Yujin, “Keep going that way until the light starts to get brighter and the temperature starts to rise.”

Eli turned and left.

“I did not give you permission to leave,” growled Emer after him.

“Commander, may I offer some advice?”

“Go ahead, Yujin.”

“Eli may be a” – she searched for the word – “he may be very annoying but he's part of the crew. And if we expect this crew to work, we have to be tolerant with him.”

“Tolerant with whom?” Atlas asked. Yujin turned red and started to stutter. Atlas’s good looks and charismatic presence had that effect on people. Emer looked at Yujin and laughed.

“The rookie,” Emer said.

Atlas snorted. "With all due respect, Commander, it is impossible to be tolerant with someone as stubborn and annoying as the rookie.”

“Yes, well, not asking him about the location beforehand has just cost us a few more days of delay before we reach our destination.”

Atlas usual happy face turned serious. “What do you mean? We’re already in the Milky Way.”

“That's correct, Atlas, but we entered from the opposite side, apparently,” Emer said, annoyed.

Atlas looked down and Emer immediately felt guilty for making him feel bad. “It's not your fault, soldier. Space is a complicated place. We are still on course and we will arrive sooner or later.”

Atlas looked up and smiled at him, showing his lovely dimples. He patted the commander on the shoulder and said, “Okay, Commander.” Then he turned and walked out of the cabin, crossing paths with Eli and leaving Emer flushed and awkward.

It was Yujin's turn to laugh.

“So, where should we turn?”

Eli looked at the sky and drew some lines on his notebook. Then he pointed to the right. “It's that planet, the one with blue and green.”

Emer nodded and Yujin headed towards the orbit of said planet.

“What is all this junk?” Kizz asked. Yujin slowed down to better study their surroundings. They were all observing a whole lot of garbage.

“It's not junk, it seems to be...” Mateo observed the hologram that was projected into the center of the cabin; he moved the 3D image, zooming in and rotating it. “... It seems to be a satellite.”

“A satellite? Are you talking about... a space satellite, like the Empire's?” Emer asked.

Mateo nodded as he looked with a mixture of praise and confusion at the image. "It definitely has a different design to ours; it seems to be made of a different material, and it sends its information through a different type of wave as well, but... it's very well done."

"What civilization lives in this galaxy?" Dune asked.

"None, this is a young galaxy. Only about 13.61 billion years. It has had no intelligent life for approximately 66 million years," Inna replied.

"But then what is this satellite doing here? Who sent it?" Doc adjusted her glasses as she watched Inna.

Emer pursed his lips; he was wondering the same thing. There shouldn't be any kind of technology up here.

"Dune, Mateo. I want you to take pictures of the position of this satellite. We'll send word to the Empire and proceed with whatever they say."

Dune and Mateo nodded and began to record.

"Wouldn't it be better to take the sample now?" Kizz asked.

"We already lost enough time; we must finish our mission and then deal with the satellite."

"Understood, Commander."

"Old *uss*, I have a question."

Emer rubbed his eyes at the sound of Eli's voice. "No, we cannot."

"I haven't even asked my question yet."

"Whatever you want, the answer is no."

Eli ignored him and asked his question anyway. "Why is an entire planet being used as a prison for two life forms? Isn't that a waste of space and air?"

Emer felt like he might explode. But Atlas answered before he could. Of course, the rookie had no idea what this mission was about.

"Those two individuals were banished from the Usslin Empire when they tried to overthrow it many years ago. They are the most destructive and savage of any species in any world, Rookie. They were sent here to be left to die alone."

"But they were sent together? Why not send them to different planets?"

"The planet is a ball of infertile terrain; nothing could have survived there," Doc interjected.

“The Empire waited all this time to make sure that their remains were already very much destroyed and make certain there would be no way that the species could be reborn.” Atlas crossed his arms. “We are fortunate that the two of them were the last of their kind.”

“If they were so dangerous, why send such a pathetic crew to check them?” Eli said.

“You are part of the pathetic crew, Rookie,” Kizz said.

“It is almost certain that they are already dead. Two hundred thousand years have passed. Not even the Usslin can live that long, let alone humans,” Inna said.

“Ah, yes. But that doesn't answer my question as to why they sent *you* to check on this species.”

“Because it's just that – checking. Now shut up,” Emer spat.

When they were in position for the scan, Yujin stopped the ship.

“In position, Commander.”

“Thank you, Yujin. Inna?”

Inna walked over and opened the compartment on her chest, where Emer placed the two blood samples from the prisoners, taken before their banishment. Both samples were necessary to make the scan without any error. Otherwise, Inna could detect only if remains were there, or even mistake them for some other sign of life. Impossible, as Doc had said – it was a dead planet. But still, better to take precautions.

“Scan the status of the prisoners, Adam and Eve,” ordered Emer.

Inna logged on to the ship's scanner and began processing the order while the crew waited patiently.

“Atlas, please prepare a message for Control Central about the satellite we found.”

Atlas nodded and took out his tablet to start the message.

Inna made a weird noise and quickly disconnected from the scanner, falling to the ground. It was hard to interpret the features of an AI, with their round white bodies and black screens with blue pixels to resemble eyes and mouth. Even so, Emer could swear that her face reflected fear.

“Inna, what's wrong?” Mateo said, pausing his recording of the satellite.

“It's... it's...” She shook her head. “It's impossible.”

“Inna, what did you detect?”

“My Commander, this... must be a mistake. It's possibly my operating system crashing... there's no way that's the result.”

“Inna, I checked your system a few hours ago, as indicated by the protocol. You are okay.” Mateo said.

“Inna, what did you see?” Emer said firmly.

Inna was quiet for a few seconds while she did the scan again. The entire crew held their breath. Even Eli was silent.

Emer began to fear the worst. His heart started beating so fast that he was sure everyone could hear it. They had never faced a situation where their AI was afraid. Never.

“They are alive.”

Alive? How is that possible? Emer thought.

“And not only that. Commander, there are 7.753 billion other life forms down there.”

“What kind of life forms, Inna?” Emer asked with a trembling voice.

“There are 7.753 billion humans.”

Part 2: Eli

Emer was pacing from one side of the cabin to the other. He had been pacing for twenty minutes, and Eli was surprised that he hadn't made a hole in the floor. The entire crew was in shock.

No one had said anything when Inna revealed the results of her scan. All apart from Eli, who had sworn before collapsing into a chair.

7.753 billion life forms. Billions... of HUMANS.

Humans...

Eli had heard about humans. Everyone had heard of humans.

All children in the Empire grew up listening to the stories. About how humans were greedy and selfish. They did not know how to live in a world without war. They were wild, to the point of killing each other.

“The self-extermimating species,” intellectuals used to say. The only species whose enemy was themselves. There was no hope of the Usslin and the humans living in peace. Humans could never be trusted; there was no way to guarantee their loyalty, it was so changeable.

And Adam and Eve had been the leaders of the Homo-Usslin War two hundred thousand years ago. The war that almost destroyed the Empire. Chills began to spread throughout Eli's body. He looked up and met Emer's eye.

"This is bad," Yujin said.

"Really? I hadn't noticed," Eli replied sarcastically.

"Your sarcasm doesn't help at all, Rookie," the commander said.

"Eli, are you sure this is Earth?" Yujin asked.

"Of course I am sure!"

Kizz spoke up. "Humans are supposed to be extinct! What should we do?"

"Kill them, that's what we should do!" Eli exclaimed.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but the rookie is right," added Atlas. Dune agreed.

"But... they are living beings. How can we kill them just like that?" Doc said.

Everyone started talking over one another. There was so much noise that the voices of each crew member became indistinguishable.

"SILENCE!" Emer yelled.

They all fell silent and looked expectantly at Emer. Eli couldn't help but think that the commander had no idea what to say. Emer took a deep breath and spoke hesitantly.

"We can't... kill them." There were noises of both anger and agreement from the crew in reply, but Emer put a stop to it, raising his hand. "Not without the authorization of the Empire." He drew himself up to his full height, his blue skin glowing in the cabin light. "Remember that we are an extension of the Empire. Therefore, Empress Izanami's will is law."

They all nodded at this. Eli had to stifle a laugh; the poor Usslin crew were now sweating and swallowing.

"Inna, I need you to send an urgent message to Control Central Send your scanner report." Inna nodded and began to work. "Atlas, continue sending the satellite report." Atlas swallowed hard and took out his tablet to continue. "Dune, I want eyes on the surface of the planet. Get me the best view you can without being detected. If they have sophisticated satellites they may have the technology to detect galactic attacks.

“Doc and Kizz, I want you to get me all the information you can find about these humans. Their anatomy, their chemistry, their tastes. We need to know everything. The rest of us will wait for news from the Empire. Go to work.” Eli was surprised. He had never seen Commander Emer be, well, commanding. And the commander seemed just as surprised about it as Eli was.

Yes, of course, Eli still believed that his position was the best course of action, but he’d go along with Emer’s approach for now. Besides, he was sure Empress Izanami would agree to the idea of blowing up the planet.

“Looks like you’ll finally see what it’s like to be a true Imperial crew,” commented Eli.

“If I hear one more word from you, I’ll use you as bait,” Emer said through gritted teeth.

Eli laughed.

Part 3: Gabie

She was running late. Again.

Nothing new really.

She had arrived late to the United Nations headquarters three times in a row already, and the fourth was probably going to get her fired. As she climbed the steps to the main entrance she prayed that the other US delegate hadn’t arrived yet.

She hurriedly made her way to the committee meeting, where delegates were already discussing the last points of organization for the annual general assembly.

“What are we going to offer delegates during break?” asked Canada.

“Fruit?” suggested France.

“Maybe everyone could bring a dish to share?” said India.

“Too much work,” complained Gabie’s US colleague.

The catering debate continued. This was not the type of discussion Gabie had expected to have after she became a delegate to the UN, but at least it was showing how different countries could really be civilized with each other.

“What if we each ordered something once the break begins?”

“Are you sure about that? Try doing the math on that check.”

They all laughed.

And then they gasped.

A horrendous sound was blasting through all the speakers inside the building. The delegates rushed to the nearest window, to be met by a gigantic shape, covering the sun.

“Attention, humans. This is a message from Crew 66 of the Usslin Empire.”

The delegates began whimpering.

“On behalf of the Empress Izanami Hillarm II, we come to demand the delivery of the two war criminals that reside on your planet.”

People were starting to flood into the streets. Beneath what looked to Gabie like a massive spacecraft was a hologram of two young people, one male and one female. Gabie could see the TV in the restaurant across the road was broadcasting the same hologrammatic image.

“We demand that the criminals Adam and Eve be delivered to us. They have many crimes to atone for, according to Usslin law, and are considered enemies of our galaxy. The failure to deliver them to us will result in the complete extermination and destruction of your planet.”

As the message played on a loop, the same chaos on the streets broke out in the UN headquarters.

Gabie was frozen to the spot, listening to the cries of people in the street and the panic of the delegates around her. Then the message stopped and a chant began in its place.

“Give us Adam and Eve. Give us Adam and Eve. Give us Adam and Eve.”

Part 4: Francis

The Visitors arrived yesterday.

Francis had spent most of the twenty-four hours since their arrival in the chapel, praying to God and wishing for it all to be a dream. Unfortunately, God was not a wishing machine, and when Francis emerged, the ship was still there. Not that he could actually see it, he was in the Vatican and the ship was over the United States of America. But there was a continuous live broadcast on every TV and cellphone in the world.

Now, Francis was standing in front of the Pope.

The Pope covered his face with his hands and breathed heavily. “This is a problem,” he said.

“Yes, your eminence.”

“I mean, this is a problem for us, specifically for us.”

“I’m sorry, your eminence, what do you mean?” asked Francis.

The Pope sighed. “They are looking for Adam and Eve. *The Adam and Eve...*” The Pope swallowed heavily.

“Your eminence?”

“They are looking for the first man and woman on earth. Adam and Eve.”

“But... how...?”

The Pope stood up and faced the window, seeing the bustling plaza.

“I’ve had news from New York’s UN headquarters. NASA researchers have tapped into the same frequency that the Visitors are using and are going to make contact with them. I want you to be my emissary. You’ll leave with the Italian delegates and our president. And while you make contact, I will worry about Adam and Eve. Understood?”

Francis swallowed. He was just a lowly priest. But when the Pope asks, you don’t refuse.

“Understood,” he said.

Part 5: Izanami

The news came at the worst time possible.

Empress Izanami had to admit that she had totally forgotten that Crew 66 existed.

Blast! She had forgotten they were even on that mission. How stupid of her. How could they even be alive? The Homo-Usslin war had been something she had never worried about. Humans were extinct. Her ancestor, Orna Hillarm, had made sure of that. And punished Adam and Eve in the process.

How could this be happening?

“Your Majesty, do you have any other orders you wish to provide the crew with?” asked Ahren.

Ahren was the Captain of Control Central. He had delivered the news some hours ago. Or was it minutes? Or days? Izanami couldn’t tell any more. He kneeled next to her throne, reaching out to try and comfort her. Izanami

raised her hand and struck Ahren's face, a sharp sting caressing her palm as a drop of blue blood rolled from his mouth.

"Why would you send the most incompetent crew on such an important mission?"

"Your Majesty, I apologize. This was supposed to be a control mission. Crew 66 always does them. They involve no challenges at all," stuttered Ahren.

"Well, clearly not this time. See the situation we are in!" answered the irritated empress.

"I know, My Empress, this... this was not something we expected. No human is supposed to live this long. It's... impossible."

Impossible. What a stupid word. Nothing was impossible. The Usslin had proven this over and over. When they succeeded in creating humans in a lab, they thought it was impossible for them to become intelligent, let alone have offspring. But they were proven wrong when they turned against their creators and began the Rebellion. Humans were the strongest enemies the Usslin had ever encountered, and so the war lasted years and killed many Usslins. That the Usslin Empire won the war at all was truly a miracle.

Izanami was still dealing with the unfinished business her ancestors left behind. Because the humans had also taught Usslins how to be independent. How to speak up. For the last five years, Izanami had been struggling to contain the growing Green Guard, ancestors of the traitorous Usslin who had aided Adam and Eve all those years ago.

On top of that, now she had to deal with billions of humans.

She knew that if people in Usslin heard about the human threat, chaos would erupt. And the Green Guard would rise, to try and save the criminals Adam and Eve.

No. She wouldn't allow it. The Empire was not falling on her watch.

She was going to exterminate every single little one of those traitorous beings. She was not letting any of them see the light of day ever again.

"Ahren, tell the crew to give them two days. Even if they hand over Adam and Eve, Crew 66 have orders to annihilate the planet. I don't want any survivors this time."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Consider it done."

“If they fail, know that it is your head I’ll have hung as a decoration in my throne room. And I’m not known for my mercy, Ahren.”

Part 6: Eve

The message still rang through her bones. Her name, repeated alongside his, a constant song.

The last words they spoke to each other clawed their way to the front of her mind.

“I wished I never saved you from the butcher’s block.”

“I wish I never loved you.”

Trying and failing to stop the memories. This is what happens when you’ve lived so many lives. You forget some. And when you suddenly remember them, they hit you like a thousand meteorites all at once.

Her hands shake as she opens the front door to her house, backpack in hand and cap on her head. There’s a gun hidden beneath her clothes.

“I’m disgusted by everything you represent.”

She walks the empty stone path, down to the city. Head held high, hidden by the night. God forbid that she uses any technology; she can’t allow the Usslin to track her with. She grabs the necklace that hangs at her throat and feels its coldness. But as, she aligns herself in the right direction, she also feels its soft thrum, so faint she has to touch it with both hands to feel the pulse.

And then she takes the road that will lead her to him.

To Adam.

Ketchup on Eggs

Grace Bailey

Winner of the category

Red is always the “first” color. It’s always been the first Skittles I eat or the color of the notebook for my first period class. I just figure that if it’s good enough for the rainbow, it’s good enough for me. So, I grab my red button-down off the hanger where it’s nestled between my other red shirts. It just feels right to wear that color for my first date with Florence.

I look down at myself. It’s actually a rusty sort of red because a bright red is a bit too “salsa” for me. Most of my shirts used to belong to my grandfather, so a lot of them are either faded or bland.

Bland. That’s what Bea had basically called me.

“You’re just... boring. Kind of like oatmeal,” she had informed me when I had asked why she broke up with me. Bea had a ready answer—as if it were obvious. “Some oatmeal has cinnamon or bananas or even raisins. You’re just... tasteless. Generic.”

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, drawing my eyes to the mason jar full of buttons standing next to it. Most nights I just stare at the jar, but on bad nights I empty the jar. It’s the eighth thing to do on my list—right after reciting the lyrics to “Yellow Submarine”. The list stays in my pocket at all

times. If I'm not here at my grandmother's house, I just count the three buttons I keep on a string right next to the worn piece of paper.

I haven't completed the list in months. I haven't needed to. The meds are working and I'm fine.

Picking up my phone, I'm almost sure it's a text informing me that Florence is cancelling. But it's just another GIF from Grandma—Dwight from *The Office* giving me a thumbs up. At least it was classy.

I decide to exit my room and flop on the living room sofa, trying not to think about buttons or Bea or bad nights. My head is tilted back, watching the fan slowly spin. It's mid-July so, naturally, our crappy air conditioning is broken.

Shifting my head to the side, I can see the multiple family photos my grandmother keeps on the mantel. Ten pictures actually, each framed in polished brass. There's one with Grandma and Grandpa graduating high school together, one with me and my little brother with new backpacks and toothy grins, and one with a picture of Mom and I mid-scream on a water ride. I hate looking at that picture.

So, instead of looking at it, I return my attention to the fan. I pick one of the blades and follow it with my eyes. I'm trying to trick myself into feeling confident, but I am terrified of going on this date with Florence. It feels less like butterflies in my stomach and more like electric eels. She's the new girl in town, beginning her senior year in the fall like I am, so she doesn't know about my quirks just yet. Just thinking about it makes me reach into my pocket to touch the string of buttons. I pinch each one with my thumb and forefinger—ten times each—and try to think about something else.

Instead, my thoughts wander again, and I'm thinking about *The Golden Yolk*—a greasy spoon I worked at for a year and a half. I quit last December when I couldn't balance my midterms with double shifts. The owner, Felicity Paris, said I could still come back and get the employee discount and the Golden Treatment™ whenever I wanted, since I was basically the employee snitch. It was basically perfect. Valorie didn't work there anymore, so neither did her stupid boyfriend.

I jump as the front door slams open.

“Hey, kiddo!” Julian exclaims, arms wide. “You ugly son of a biscuit! Let me see ya, big bro.”

Rolling my eyes, I stand up for inspection.

“My guy,” Julian says, clicking his tongue. “Ya need a tie. A double Windsor knot would do the trick.”

“No, Julian.” I sigh, exasperated. “I can’t look desperate.”

“It’s pronounced fashionable, and why not?”

“You’re in ninth grade, how do you know what’s desperate? Or fashionable?”

He gasps and throws his backpack dramatically to the floor. “How dare you, sir? You take that back this instant! Who do you think designed Grandma’s special macaroni necklace seven years ago?”

“You made it with cooked pasta, Julian.”

“And it was glorious.”

I sigh again. There is no getting around this unless I do some sly negotiating.

“Close the door. I’m not wearing a tie—but I’ll make you a fluffernutter.”

Julian solemnly puts his hands on my shoulders. I suddenly realize my little brother will be taller than me before long.

“Joseph,” he says gravely. “Have I ever told you what a beautiful son of a biscuit you are?”

“All the time.”

I smile while making him the sandwich in the kitchen. But, when I walk back into the living room, Julian isn’t there. My smile evaporates.

I find him in my room, holding the button jar.

“Hey,” I protest. “I make you a sandwich, and you go through my room?”

Julian looks up. “I thought you got rid of this,” he says softly. “You said you grew out of it.”

I try to hide my embarrassment with anger. “Get out, Jules.”

“Fine. I was just looking for a tie, but you don’t even own one, do you? You’re hopeless.”

He puts the jar down and stomps out, channeling his infinite well of melodrama, but not before snatching the fluffernutter out of my hands. He slams the door behind him with an indignant huff. Julian has never been one for the subtle things in life.

I stand there silently for a moment. One hundred moments. Then I reach into my pocket to grasp my buttons on their nylon string. I know without looking that one is pale yellow, one is a brass Army button, and the last is covered in cornflower-blue cloth. They belonged to my mother. Pinching each one with my thumb and forefinger, I immediately feel a mixture of relief and shame. Okay, I’m not all the way better, even if the meds are helping. These stupid buttons are a crutch.

Mom always told me to trust my brother, and I do. I just can’t stand knowing that he knows. I don’t want to talk about this with him. I want to talk to Mom.

I take out the button string and put it on my nightstand. Placing the jar of buttons in the closet, I tell myself it’s only for a little while. Perhaps, if the night goes well, I’ll consider throwing it away for good. I shouldn’t need the list; I might just go cold turkey. But it’s going to stay in my pocket for now. I’m not that reckless.

When I go to the kitchen to put away the fluffernutter ingredients, the clock makes me realize I need to leave soon—no—right now to meet Florence. Checking myself over in the bathroom mirror one last time, I head for the door.

My little brother is back and lounging like a cat on the sofa.

“Have your wallet?” Julian asks.

“Yup.”

I’m one foot out the door when I hear Julian shout for me to wait. I look back.

“Just in case.” Julian tosses me the button string.

Looking at it in my hands, it feels so natural. Like I shouldn’t have even thought about leaving without it. Shoving it back into my pocket, it rests in

its normal place next to the list. I shouldn't press my luck without it, especially tonight. I should say thanks but I don't.

"Stay out of my room, dweeb."

"I expect you home by eleven, young man!" Julian calls after me.

I laugh despite myself. Luckily, I only have to buckle up three times before it feels right to pull out of the driveway.

The familiar drive to The Golden Yolk feels like going up the first hill of a rollercoaster. I keep telling myself I'm not nervous, but when I get to the top, I am regretting ever getting on the ride. Those electric eels in my stomach are merciless.

The button string burns a hole in my pocket, but I ignore it.

I pull into the parking lot, and I see her, immediately on the bench right outside the doors. She's wearing a blue knee-length dress—the upper half covered in glitter. She looks like a princess.

Julian was right—I should have worn a tie. Now, I'm seriously underdressed. She'll think I'm not taking this seriously. Or that she's not worth the effort. Or I can't afford dinner, much less a nice tie. Or— ah, hell, we make eye contact. It's too late to turn back.

I get out and walk to her, thinking about each step I take. Don't trip. Pick up your feet. Don't smile weird. Am I swinging my arms weird? Just fold them. Wait, no, that's even weirder. Ah, hell—

"Hey there, Joseph," she says, standing up and smoothing down her dress. "Ready?"

"Been ready," I say. Confident. Be confident.

Then, like an idiot, I bow and extend my hand.

"M'lady," I say in a horrible English accent.

There is a pause where I'm pretty sure I'm dead for at least three seconds, but then Florence laughs and takes my hand.

"Is my dress too much?" she says, giggling. "I knew it!"

Relieved, I laugh, too. "No! It's... beautiful. But I'll just have to convince people I'm not your butler."

Florence laughs again. "Lead the way, Lord Joseph."

"Gladly, m'lady."

She takes my arm, and I lead her into the noisy, delicious-smelling diner. Right there at the front is the one and only Mrs. Paris.

“Hello, sugar.” A wide smile blooms across her face. “You here to get your job back? I’m just kidding, baby. Come here—I got a table for you, don’t you worry. Oh, and who are you, sugar? Aren’t you just darling in those blue frills!”

I smile, happy to remember the good times I had at The Golden Yolk.

Mrs. Paris seats us in a corner booth and places sticky menus in front of us. “For privacy.” She winks. “Can I get something started for you kiddos?”

Of course, I could list every single meal on the menu along with all their individual variations. The wonderful perks of working here for so long. I look at Florence, and she shrugs.

“Um, yeah, we can order now,” I say.

I order eggs and hash browns, and Florence orders pancakes.

The diner gets steadily busier as we sit there. It’s been twenty minutes, and I’ve run out of things to talk about. I hope that isn’t a bad sign. But the awkward pauses seem to be getting less awkward. It is just... happy silence? And—I might be reading into it—when the food arrives, we both seem to eat slowly... like maybe we don’t want the date to end yet. I’m hardly thinking about the buttons in my pocket at all.

Florence puts her elbows on the table.

“You know why I like you, Joseph?” she says, leaning forward. “Your name.”

The fork I’m bringing to my mouth suspends in front of me.

“What?” I ask.

“Your name. It’s not weird. Everyone in this town has super weird-ass names. Even mine! I mean, come on, ‘Florence’? What an old-lady name. But yours?” She sighs, suddenly dreamy. “It’s plain and simple. Nothing extra. Just Joseph.”

I try to smile. Nothing extra. Boring. Bland.

“Guess I’m just a regular Joe,” I say.

Florence winks. “Yeah, you are.”

I point my fork at her. “And what do you mean by that?”

“You literally look like Jake from State Farm.”

I laugh, attempting to ignore the unintended sting of her words. Florence isn't Bea. Florence likes normal, not Bea's idea of what's bland and what isn't. But small doubts bloom in the back of my mind as we continue to eat. If she's into “normal”, what's she going to think about my weird habits? I can't hide it forever.

I want to be normal, and I also don't. I'm a walking contradiction.

This is getting too complicated, and it's just a first date. I'm overthinking all of it, so I stop that train of thought right where it's at.

The rest of our meal goes nicely. She laughs at me using ketchup on my eggs, and I laugh when she accidentally flips butter onto the floor with her knife. After telling me about her three annoying little brothers, I successfully avoid talking about my own home life. Instead, I tell her about Julian and that I'm thinking about going into business. She nods her head, actually listening to everything I say. It's all going well.

Until I feel a hand on my shoulder.

“Hello there, freak,” says a voice behind me.

No.

Florence is looking over my shoulder. “Friend of yours?” she asks, squinting her eyes.

I turn awkwardly in the booth to face him.

“Hey, Apollo,” I say tightly.

I hear Florence scoff and mutter something about weird-ass names.

“You on a little date?” Apollo asks, smiling ear to ear. He looks strange, although he always had those buggy and paranoid eyes that never could never settle on one thing for too long. I used to think it was normal for aspiring poets to have that mysterious, crazed look about them—but now I see him for what he actually is. A sorry loser who's as fake as his name.

Apollo moves his hand to the back of my neck and leans close to my ear. His breath smells like tobacco and spearmint.

“She's cute,” he whispers in my ear.

I stare at my plate. I knew I shouldn't have come here.

“Excuse me, Apollo,” Florence sneers. “But I’ll have you know I’m drop-dead gorgeous—so, how ’bout you do that. You know. Drop. Dead.”

I slowly inch my hand towards my pocket. Maybe if I can reach the button string, it’ll calm me down.

“Not very original, your princess,” Apollo murmured.

I feel the edge of my pocket with my fingertips. I need to get to the buttons.

“Yeah?” I say, trying to cover up the shake in my voice. “And where’s your... princess?” Forget being tough. I just need to survive this with a little dignity.

Apollo’s face darkens. “You know Valorie got two years for that little stunt you pulled last summer?”

“Apollo, she stole so much money...”

He interrupts me with peals of laughter.

“I’m just kidding, freak. You did me a favor. Women be crazy, right? I’m only here for the grub. Working here was hell, but the food was tight.” Apollo puts his hands on the edge of the table to lean on it.

“But,” he says, looking between me and Florence, “I am wondering if this pretty thing knows what you are.”

My heart is pounding. I look at Florence and feel shame bubbling up in my gut.

Mrs. Paris is walking over. “Apollo, is that you? Leave Joseph alone.”

“Ah, Mrs. Paris,” Apollo croons, standing up to face her. “Here to protect your pet employee, as usual. I’m not causing no harm, am I, Joseph? Just catching up with an old pal.”

I stand up, unwinding myself from the booth. So does Florence.

“Leave, Apollo,” I say firmly.

Except I don’t. I don’t say that. I just stand there and stare at him, pinching the buttons in my pocket like a lunatic. Apollo just laughs.

Florence speaks instead. “Okay, Apollo. You need to go.”

“You ain’t welcome here, boy,” Mrs. Paris says, hands on her hips. “You and Valorie were stealing honest money, and Joseph was brave enough to tell me. You can’t fault him for doing the right thing.”

“I’m not here for that, Felicity,” Apollo says, still laughing. “I came in here for a malt, but forget it—I’m not giving a dime to a penny-pinching hussy like you.”

Ignoring Mrs. Paris’s spluttering, he turns to Florence and looks her up and down. “Whenever you decide to dump this boy just come and find me, sweet thing.” Then, Apollo turns to me. “Don’t be surprised when your girl leaves you for a real man.”

He heads for the exit, cackling all the way.

“I’m not ‘his girl’!” Florence shouts after him. “It’s not the eighteenth century!”

The happy jingle of the bell as Apollo leaves is suddenly the loudest sound in the diner. Florence sits back down in the booth slowly.

I don’t sit.

“Come on. Let’s finish our food,” Florence suggests. She’s looking at me strangely. I recognize it for what it is—pity.

“I’ll try to keep the butter on my pancakes this time,” she says, attempting a smile.

Instead of responding, I just pinch the buttons in my pocket obsessively. I look like a complete idiot. And a coward. So much for dignity.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

After shoving a wad of bills into Mrs. Paris’s hand, I leave The Golden Yolk.

It takes me fifteen times to buckle my seat belt before I can begin the drive home.

When I pull into the driveway, Grandma’s bronze station wagon is there, too. Maybe I can get to my room before breaking. I can’t let her know I’m spiraling. They’ll up my meds or send me to even more therapy.

Opening the door, I’m prepared for Julian and Grandma’s barrage of annoyingly personal questions about the date, but I catch a break. Julian is sleeping on the sofa, mouth wide open, and I hear the shower running in Grandma’s room. That means she’s going to bed, and I won’t be noticed.

Rushing to my room, I’m careful not to slam the door, even though my heart is racing and my lungs feel like they’re filled with cement. I unfurl the

list from my pocket. Mom's curly script is as familiar as my own hands. I already did the first five things on the way home.

I read them all out loud. The familiar letters try to keep me grounded, but my breathing is labored and raspy. "Count to one hundred. Take ten deep breaths. Name three things you can see. Name something you can smell. Name five things you ate today."

I drop the list and get to the ground. "Do twenty-five push-ups," I tell myself. When I'm done, I collapse on the floor, still panicking. I reach for the list and read the seventh entry.

"Recite the lyrics to... 'Yellow Submarine'," I gasp. And I do. Lying on my back and looking at the popcorn ceiling, I recite the stupid, repetitive words to my mom's favorite Beatles song. I almost can't finish because I can't get enough air to make sound. It's like my lungs won't inflate.

There's a tiny voice in my head that just gets louder with every second. Why are you trying? You know you'll never finish the list. It's useless, just like you. Boring and useless and freakish and scared and boring and useless and freakish and scared and boring—

I bang my fists into my head. "Stop, please," I beg to nothing. I know the eighth thing to do without reading it.

"Organize the buttons," I say to myself. Crawling to my closet, I unscrew the lid and dump out the contents. It doesn't take me long to sort them, even with trembling hands. By color, then by size. Red first, always first. Small to large. A total of one hundred buttons. A good number. It feels right and so horribly wrong. A walking contradiction.

Then, I'm done with the list safely back in my jacket pocket. I begin to sob because I know what's about to happen. But I try to do the final task anyway. I take my phone from my back pocket and call the number.

"Hello? Who is this? I recognize this number, stop calling here—"

I hang up.

I can't finish the list. I shouldn't be shocked, but it still hurts every time. I'm going to throw up. Scrambling to my feet, I dash for the bathroom down the hall. While I hug the toilet bowl, I empty the contents of my stomach and cry. I'm a blubbering mess.

But then I start calming down. I don't throw up again. My heart and my breathing slows, and I stand up on shaky legs. I go to wash my hands, feeling tired and gross.

That's when I really mess up. I thought it was over. I let my guard down.

I just wash my hands like normal. Ten seconds under the sink. Three pumps of soap. Rinse. I don't even notice that I'm in a loop until the third time because the water is getting a little too hot. Then I realize what I'm doing.

I'm stuck. My panic starts all over again. It's like my feet are glued to the floor, even though I'm telling myself to move. Just move. It's not that hard. I do it all the time. But, right now, I can't. I place my hands under the faucet again, tears streaming down my face as hot water burns my skin. I can't change the temperature because I can't break the loop.

"One, two, three," I whisper, counting all the way to ten. Then my left hand darts for the hand soap.

"One, two, three," I say under my breath. Three pumps of soap.

Then I viciously scrub at my hands, right hand sliding over left then left hand sliding over right. I scrape my fingernails in the palm of my hand, biting my lip as they dig into similar scratches made just seconds before. God, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

As I rinse the soap and begin a twenty-second count, I glance up at the person in the mirror. Dull, watery eyes. Pale complexion. Greasy hair. An ugly version of myself in an ugly red shirt is staring back, judging me as I continue to ignore instinct and embrace an ordered chaos.

Boring and useless and freakish and scared—

My panic grows. I'm trying to call out, but my tongue is frozen against the roof of my mouth so that I can't even whisper my numbers anymore. I watch as my blood mixes with the water disappearing down the drain. I can't finish the list. I can't complete it, and I'm paying the price.

Boring and useless and freakish and scared and boring and useless and freakish—

I begin the process again. And again. I do it seven more times.

Then, I stop. My body is released, my muscles do as they're told, and I dry my hands gently with the hand towel.

I had reached twenty-six total hand-washings.

A good number. Not the best one, but it's fine enough. It's divisible by two, and there are twenty-six letters in the alphabet. That's good number-material.

The bathroom door bangs open behind me. I meet Julian's eyes in the mirror.

"I knew it," he whispers. "You didn't grow out of it."

"I'm sorry," I say because I don't know what else to say.

"Where's that list you carry around? Why didn't you do the list?" he asks. The inevitable question.

"I tried," I choke out. "I tried. But I can't finish it. Every time I get to the end, I can't. I want to, but I can't."

Julian just looks confused, and I know I'm not making sense.

"It's worked in the past..." he begins.

"Yeah, I know!" I shout at him. He flinches, and I hate myself even more. "But now people are dead, Julian. I can't finish the list because nothing stays the same—except for me. I'm always the same. I do everything the same way, every time—but the world doesn't care. It just keeps changing anyway. She's dead, Julian, and now I can't finish my list."

"Joseph," Julian says, eyes full of sickening pity. "Give me the list."

His eyes drain the fight out of me.

"In my pocket," I whisper hoarsely.

Julian reaches into my right pocket. I watch him, his lips moving silently as he reads the list that governs my life. I watch his eyes freeze on the last entry.

"Call Mom," he says softly.

"And I do," I hiss. "I call her every day. And the same clueless stranger answers the phone."

We just stand there. Julian stares at the floor, my list limp in his hand. My palms are burning, and my chest hurts. I've got a heartache that feels like it's crushing me.

“I miss her, too, you know,” Julian mumbles.

I don’t say anything... can’t say anything. I feel selfish and scared and embarrassed and so utterly lost.

“Let’s fix up your hands, okay?” Julian says, still not looking at me.

I nod, and we shuffle to the kitchen.

Julian turns on the sink, running cool water through the faucet and motioning for me to put my hands under. Keeping a careful eye on me, he pulls out the first aid kit from under the sink and sets it on the counter.

“Well, I don’t really know what to do now,” he says. “I’m only in ninth grade, you know. What do I do—slap a Band-aid on it?”

“I need some Advil. And I need some bandages for the places I broke skin,” I tell him. “Then gauze around all of it.” That’s what Mom did the last time. I hold my breath and attempt to hold back tears as he begins to work on my hands.

“Ugh, you can’t be seen in public like this. Giant marshmallow hands don’t match anything.”

I try to smile. “Yeah. Maybe I can wear a cape.”

“You wish you could pull that off.”

When Julian finishes helping me wrap my palms, we sit at the counter with two glasses of orange juice. He puts a crazy straw in mine.

It’s silent for a while. The hum of the fan in the living room is the only sound.

“Hey,” Julian says. He takes out my list from his own pocket and picks up a pen from off the counter. “We have to be there for each other, okay? It’s okay to need help.”

He doesn’t scratch out Call Mom.

He doesn’t throw away the list.

He doesn’t suggest replacing the tenth thing to do.

He just adds to it in big letters.

Call Mom. Or Julian.

I tried to blink back tears, surprised I had any left.

“Thanks,” I say quietly. He folds it back up for me.

“Can you take my phone out of my pocket?” I ask. He does, and I bite my lip when I see my phone light up with a lengthy text and three missed phone-call notifications. All from Florence.

When he sees my face, Julian leans over to look at the screen and winces. “Oh, man. You better fix that. Let me open your phone.” I open my mouth to protest, but he interrupts. “I won’t look, okay? Jeez.”

He puts the phone down so I can read.

Hey, remember me? I’m the girl in the stupid blue dress you left at the restaurant. She’s got stuff to say to you, so CALL BACK. Mrs. Paris told me about you. She said you saved her diner from going bankrupt. She also told me to give you another chance. I’m sorry about your mom and all, and I know that doesn’t fix anything, but just let me say it. She says you got problems, but I won’t judge you for it. Don’t get me wrong. I am SERIOUSLY TICKED at you, but you owe me another date. I promise I won’t laugh too much when you dump ketchup all over your eggs. Call me when you can.

“What’s the damage?” Julian asks. “Does this mean we need to go into hiding?”

I’m smiling like an idiot. “It means I need to go buy a tie.”

Footnotes

1. King Eaton spent the first four years of his reign overseeing the creation of these bookcases. In fact, the project was so enormous that at their completion a festival was held. King Eaton did not attend the festival, and no one was allowed to enter the finished library except himself and his manservant.

Go to note reference 1

2. It took the Lady Genevieve six months of persistent haranguing to be given a place on the Council. King Eaton was fundamentally opposed to the idea, but Alfred had been attending the meetings for many years in his master's stead. Once the Lady Genevieve leapt upon this point, the debate was won. She always won. And until her kidnapping, her seat in the council chamber had never been empty.

Go to note reference 2

3. More accurately referred to as the Great Wars of King Tiberion, these battles raged for the majority of Tiberion's thirty-year reign (501–531). The exact cause behind the fighting remains uncertain, but it is believed to be associated with a small strip of contested woodland bordering Nemeth and Escetir. Regardless, the only significant outcome of these wars occurred domestically. The women of both kingdoms were liberated by the conscription of their husbands and in Nemeth their freedoms persisted due to King Tiberion's outspoken granddaughter.

Go to note reference 3

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 2022 Author of Tomorrow.

www.wilbur-niso-smithfoundation.org

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