



Robots, Rebels and the Resistance

Ten more tales
of remarkable
adventure

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About the Author of Tomorrow Award

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

Awards go to the best published adventure novel of the last calendar year, the best unpublished adventure manuscript, and the Author of Tomorrow – an author aged 21 years or under who has submitted a short piece of adventure writing.

The young writers are awarded prizes in three age categories: 11 years and under, 12-15 years and 16-21 years. This anthology includes the winning and shortlisted stories for the 2020 Author of Tomorrow.

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AUTHOR OF TOMORROW | 11 years and under

The Temple of Ometecuhtli

Rosie Shaw
Winner of the category

Rain lashed down mercilessly on to Dr Marc Joyce as he hacked tirelessly through the dense Amazon rainforest on Christmas Eve, 1965. The deafening roar of the creatures that lurked in every shadow echoed in his ears. Rain, dirt and sweat matted his dark hair and his eyes, although heavy and sleep-deprived, still shone with determination; he had staked his reputation on finding the golden Aztec Temple of Ometecuhtli.

Dusk turned into darkness, quickened by the thick canopy above. Guiding his way was a small smattering of stars, individually dazzling without the effects of pollution dimming their glare. Different, almost unearthly sounds now replaced the wondrous din of the day. Nonetheless, as the clocks neared midnight, Dr Joyce continued to arduously slash at the vegetation obstructing his way.

Morning replaced night. As dawn broke on Christmas Day he reached a clearing in the forest where the temple stood, the golden wonders of it hidden behind dancing layers of vines. Trancelike, Dr Joyce stumbled to the stone steps and, with trepidation, laid one dirt-caked boot on to the first step.

Nothing happened. Breathing heavily, Dr Joyce waited as long as he could bear and then ran up the stone staircase to the arched entrance ahead, the sun shining on his back.

Inside, Aztec writing littered the walls of the sacrificial chamber, saying:

Human blood shed here will unleash the full wrath of Ometecuhtli. Beware.

But the doctor, in his ecstasy, didn't notice. He marvelled at the idols that littered the room, taking notes on everything, and daringly took one of the models of solid gold the Aztecs worshipped so highly.

As the doctor continued on to the antechamber, darkness smothered him. He brought out his torch and flicked the blinding light on. Suddenly, tens of thousands of bats dropped from their perches, diving at Dr Joyce. His torch shattered on the floor, causing the darkness to envelop him once more. The doctor ransacked his backpack for his jar of ethanol. As he thumbed out the cork, the pungent stench was released and the bats flew over his head, diving at him and causing him to fall heavily onto the cold golden floor. His hand grazed badly against the glass from the torch and his blood smeared the holy ground.

A voice boomed out from the walls and echoed through the chambers.

'You have broken the sacred law. Human blood has been shed here. Now you and the forest shall pay.'

Dr Joyce tried to protest against this, but the voice decreed, 'Mankind has shown it cannot be trusted. Mankind will destroy the forest and the forest will destroy man.'

Dismally, Dr Joyce stumbled out of the temple and, with hope and joy now strangers to him, took the perilous path out of the forest. Day and night he travelled, and when he finally reached the edge of the forest, he could see the curse had already begun to take its toll. Mankind had begun its destruction of the rainforest and now its destruction would destroy mankind.

Tragedy and Triumph in Samburu

Oliver Wright
Highly Commended by Wilbur and Niso Smith

HAROOOOO!

The melancholy cry rang through the slumbering Samburu village. Labaru, a boy of twelve, sat bolt upright on his straw mat. His eyes scanned the room. In the dancing light of the outside torch, he spied Naserian, his sister, in the doorway.

HAROOOOO!

The cry came again. Labaru and Naserian exchanged anxious glances. Grabbing his hunting spear from a forlorn corner, he bounded after his sister toward the noise.

HAROOOOO!

The siblings darted through the boma, past the thornbush wall protecting the cattle, and up a worn, moonlit path. Labaru's pace was slowed only by a thorn that lodged into the ball of his foot. He removed it quickly with a small wince.

The boma was only a distant glimmer when they came upon the young elephant howling in anguish next to the deformed corpse of his mother. His trunk reached out and gently brushed her bloodied face where tusks and trunk should have been. Naserian gasped and Labaru shuddered.

This was the work of the poachers.

'Ai!' Naserian said mournfully.

Labaru took a deep breath. He squinted at a nearby acacia tree, behind which were what looked like two shiny anthills.

Wait. He peered closer. Those weren't anthills.

'Naserian, look!' Labaru said, 'They buried the tusks!'

They ran back to the boma, heading straight for the manyatta of elder Nkoko.

'Nkoko!' Naserian whispered.

The tired-looking woman lifted the blanket that served as a door.

'What can I do for you, children?' she asked, yawning.

'We found a dead elephant and the buried tusks! You must call the Kenya Wildlife Service!' Labaru exploded.

Nkoko's eyes widened with every word Labaru spoke, and in seconds she was fumbling for her phone.

‘They are on their way,’ Nkoko told them, after some minutes. ‘They asked about the baby. We must find it.’

Suddenly she halted.

‘This isn’t a prank, is it?’ she asked, eyebrow raised.

Naserian, utterly shocked, said, ‘Nkoko, do you think we would *ever* joke about something like this? Elephants are our family!’

Nkoko nodded solemnly.

The siblings worked until first light, digging up the tusks and burying them where the poachers wouldn’t find them. They gently led the young elephant home to give it some milk.

‘Let’s name him Ndovu,’ Labaru said.

As dawn colours filled the sky, they heard the rumble of an engine.

‘The KWS!’ Naserian exclaimed.

Instead, two raggedly dressed men jumped out of their vehicle and marched towards them.

‘Where is the ivory?’ one roared, his hand resting on the pistol at his waist.

Naserian quivered.

HAROOOOO!

Ndovu charged round the corner and headbutted the intruders, knocking them off their feet.

Just then, the olive-green KWS jeep rolled into view. Rangers tumbled out and apprehended the two men.

The driver smiled broadly. ‘Good job, watoto,’ he said. ‘Maybe one day both of you could join our team.’

Labaru and Naserian smiled at each other and walked over to Ndovu.

‘You’re the *real* hero of the day, Ndovu,’ Labaru whispered in his ear.

Ndovu’s trunk reached out and gently brushed Labaru’s face.

The Downfall of Darcidious Rambose

Noah Burns

Darcidious Rambose was an evil money-maker with a large, twisty moustache. The moustache was waxed and black and no one had ever seen it move. His body odour was so outrageously foul that it hung in the room for an entire week after he had left. As with most filthy rich people, he had an even worse problem: no manners.

Rambrose wanted to build another luxury hotel, this time in the luscious green countryside. Think of all the parking spaces for 4x4s! Only one thing stood in the way: Castle Deldare.

It loomed over the countryside like an owl looms over a rat. No one knew how long it had stood there. It was very large and made out of grey stone. It had tiny arrow slits instead of windows and one small, plain oak door. In front of the door stood two stone lions.

The castle was a master at protecting itself. The magnificent lions prevented good people from entering. However, if they sensed a black heart, the door would open.

It did just that for Darcidious Rambose.

Once inside, Rambose started checking around the walls when all of a sudden a faint sound of *clink clunk, clink clunk* came closer by the second. He ran towards the door, but the portcullis slid shut. He turned round and there before him stood a troop of empty suits of armour. They drew their swords. Swiftly Rambose found a shield and made a run for it.

He was quickly out of breath and stopped in a majestic looking hall with paintings hanging on the walls. He began to notice the paintings were of Civil War soldiers and their guns were all targeted on him! They seemed somehow to be alive because their eyes were moving. The smell of gunpowder wafted over Rambose. Suddenly the sound of loading guns rattled his ears. Before he had time to put up his shield he got hit by a dart. A sharp pain shot up his spine and he abruptly felt sleepy.

Sometime later Rambose woke up. He felt anxious about opening his eyes. He couldn't hear anything except his heart beating. Nervously he looked around to see sleeping animals had surrounded him. Carefully and silently he got to his feet. He began to realise they were actually rugs, just like the skins of animals he had once murdered. Tiptoeing

like a hundred elephants, he tried to escape. A drop of sweat fell on to the brown bear rug. It awoke with a jump and a snarl. At full speed it chased Rambose into a room that appeared to be a chapel full of ornate statues. He barricaded the door and began searching for an escape route, a secret passage perhaps. There was nothing.

What was happening? He couldn't understand.

Without warning, a beam of sunlight shot through an arrow slit and revealed hidden words on the wall:

Men of greed can only escape if they leave within one hour.

If they fail, they will be stone forevermore.

In the distance a clock struck the hour. Darcidious Rambose was doomed.

AUTHOR OF TOMORROW | 12-15 years

The Debt

Poem Schway
Winner of the category

I was born lucky, in many ways. I entered the world under the North Star, at a time where rain still fell and the food was plentiful. When I grew enough I learned of death, as all children did, but it was a distant thing – a cryptid wandering between the words of stories, not truly as one with the real world.

Mother would sit me on her lap at night and tell me of spirits captured in the stars, constellations mapping old and wondrous legends as ancient as the night sky itself, and she would whisper to me that there was *power* in tradition. That our blood was a hallowed one, lines running unbroken for millennia, thousands upon thousands of ancestors faithfully worshipping the old gods. She taught me how to kill animals in a way that was respectful, deft fingers guiding my wrist until the hand holding the knife no longer trembled. I was born of the sand, she made sure I understood, and eventually to the sand I would return.

Yes, the world had been kind to me. I should have been grateful.

Mother imparted three truths to my sister and I, the day that she left. The first: binds of blood are ever tied with sacrifice. The second: the old gods remember their debts, and one day they will be paid in full. The third: there is nothing else left for us here. We are each other's sole inheritance. We must take what we can and leave what we must and no matter the circumstance, keep walking west until we have found what we are searching for. That was the day we began chasing the sun, and we have not stopped since.

Red sand blankets the earth as far as the eye can see, shaped by a benevolent god's fingers into gentle peaking waves. A desert breeze passes, whistling across the dunes, and though it is docile and mostly playful I can feel its painful dryness seeping ever-deeper into my skin. That is not a good sign when the nearest marked village is still a day of ceaseless walking away, and at the thought, my sluggish heart gives a pathetic little flutter. I grip my water skin, turn to Sister, tip my head to the side. She can read the question in my eyes, and I can read the tired annoyance in hers. A shake of the head, so minute as to almost be nonexistent, and she continues marching ahead though the endless desert. She is right, of course. She always is. Stopping now would only mean

restarting our journey tonight, which would be dangerous for more reasons than the bitter cold. My sore muscles can wait. Water cannot.

Though I could not have fathomed it as a child, we have lived this way for the past few years. Traveling as nomads, carrying little but necessities and using Father's old jackalope-hide map find restocking points when the days grow too brutal. Coin has fallen out of favor: the drought has evaporated any pretense of civil society, and instead we barter with whatever is desired. Bits of salvaged scrap metal, shards of glass surrounding crater-sites, raw and tanned animal skins... We collect what we can to make ourselves valuable, but never so valuable that anyone would want us to stay overlong. We have molded ourselves into the shape of amicable wanderers, mysterious strangers, still half-children, with sleeves filled to the brim with any kind of trinket you could desire, but nothing ever free save for the fleeting smiles.

Time passes, fickle and slippery and falling through our fingers like so much sand. The sun is setting, but it is not the harsh, cold descent that I have come to expect from winter. Instead, the sky is blushing in nostalgic shades of dusky pink and orange, a swan song for long childhood evenings spent watching ever-shifting sunsets. Mother used to—

No.

I shake my head to clear away the stray thoughts, mentally chastising myself for getting off track again, and fix my gaze on the blistering horizon. At this distance, the sharp crests of sand all blend together into a blurry, ridged line that Sister says carries everything we are looking for. I do not know what that is yet, but she has ideas. A home, she has promised me under the cool canopy of night, a far-away land full of gold and adventure. A land so rich with treasures that no one will ever want for anything. A land where we can carve out a little place for ourselves – maybe a shop or a stand, where I can blow glass and she can tie together lengths of string and stone to make necklaces and bracelets.

Sister tells me of this mythical land every night before bed, half a prayer, and the tone is different than it is during the day. Softer. Everything about her is softer. The scratchy cadence of her voice wobbles as it tries to replicate irreplicable soothing; she skims calloused fingers over my forehead when she thinks I am sleeping, and lightly sketches the symbol for 'blessed', just the way Mother did. But she is not Mother, and I know this, and she knows this. I wonder if she ever gets tired of protecting me and

putting me first. I think I would. But then again, I am selfish. Duty did not beat it out of me the way it did to her.

The sun sinks below the horizon, the shadows lining the dunes turn strange, and we are transported to a world wrapped solely in shades of blue. I keep an attentive ear on our surroundings, waiting expectantly. It is not long before I hear it. It comes every evening, the melancholy song of the desert. It is part ululating cicada choir, part whipping breath of wind, and perhaps I fill in most of the gaps with my own imagination but it does not matter: it is still the most beautiful sound I have heard within the suffocating silence of a cloudless night. My own skin has shifted beneath the peering spectre of the moon – rough, tanned hands turning ghastly white, imperfections smoothed and sanded away like Father used to do to sculptures. I close my eyes and steal away just one moment, hearing the lizards and scorpions scurry through a desert that is as much mine as theirs, and I think it is the closest thing to peace that I have felt in a while.

‘We should set up camp,’ Sister says, frowning at the map held between her hands. ‘I must have underestimated our distance to the next town. I’m sorry.’ She pronounces the words like being wrong is a moral failing, condemnation drawing her mouth into a thin line and grim self-flagellation tightening her grip until the knuckles in her hand are as white protruding spikes.

I do not know that I could say anything to alleviate the crushing responsibility set upon her by Mother, so I do not try at all. Instead, I begin unpacking the sleeping bags strapped to my back and subtly slip my blanket into hers. I have always been better at keeping warm, so it is no great punishment to endure. Hopefully she will be too tired to notice that she has one more than she should.

The fire comes to life with a quiet roar, almost subdued as it licks at the tree bark we use for fuel. Sister shuffles a little closer, tossing me a piece of hare jerky. It is rubbery and salted generously enough to make me cough, but it soothes the gnawing in my guts well enough.

‘We are almost there,’ Sister says softly. She is staring into the fire with a certain furious intensity, as if she will be able to read our futures in the ash if she just tries hard enough.

‘I know,’ I reply, laying back on my bedroll with a sigh. The sky is absurdly clear tonight, the smoky tapestry of the Milky Way cutting through the sky alongside clusters of pinprick stars. Mother told us we were alone when she left, and right now,

under the crushing weight of the icy atmosphere, almost drowning in an endless sea of crimson sand, I cannot help but think that maybe it was also a blessing. Solitude takes the edge off, shifts the weight off my shoulders, makes me feel small and clean.

I reach into my pocket and take out the handful of cactus flowers I picked while walking. Red, orange, purple. It is a satisfactory assortment, all the petals unbroken and whole. Almost perfect. I spend another few heartbeats admiring the delicate shape and bold color before scattering them into the fire with a few words of whispered prayer.

Sacrifice. It is in our blood. The flames devour the buds hungrily and perhaps it is just my imagination, but the stars overhead seem to shine just a little brighter for us.

I do not remember falling asleep but I must have, because I am awoken abruptly by the sound of my name. My eyes flutter, groggy, still half-delirious with sleep, and through the hazy veneer of my lashes I see a crowd of masked men and women dismounting from komodo camels and hurriedly shoving our belongings into thick wool sacks. There is another shout, more panicked this time, with a frayed edge of desperation that draws deep from some hidden pool of energy inside me, and I have never been so scared in my life as when I realize that it is *Sister's* voice. I kick off the sleeping bag and look around frantically for her, unsheathing the carved bone knife at my hip with stiff, rigid fingers.

I hear a wet squelching sound, a choked scream, and when I turn my head, Sister has buried her scimitar in some man's stomach. When she meets my eyes she does not look scared, only relieved, so I turn my head to look over to where the other thieves are almost getting away. I do not have time to think about the decision I have unconsciously made, so instead I push energy into my legs and charge wildly toward the komodo camels with a vast fount of adrenaline where my fear should be. Quickly, too quickly, I am right beside one of them, and it is an easy thing to shove the knife into the beast's eye and *twist*. It screams violently, kicking off its riders in pained convulsions, and there is some part of me that is screaming along with it. *I am sorry*, I think, even as I yank the knife from its eye and run away from its spasming death throes and toward the surviving camels.

Adrenaline has burned through the cloudy film of sleep and tossed me into a freezing sea of hyper-awareness, the blisteringly cold night air causing a quiet, unsurmountable shaking in my bones that threatens to drop the knife from my grip. Behind any conscious thought I might have, there is an incessant undercurrent of prayer, panicked whispers on my breath providing lyrics to the song of violence raging around

me. Sand jets out in wide sprays beneath my pounding feet and I think I am faster than I have ever been before, but it is still not fast enough. By the time I reach the surviving beasts, everyone around me knows what I plan to do. There is a flurry of shouts, the clear ringing sound of an unsheathed sword, and suddenly the cold kiss of metal against my neck cuts clean through the red-hot fervor of panic stampeding through my skull. The verse of the prayer I have reached falls dead and silent in my mouth.

‘*Don’t touch him,*’ I hear and I think maybe that sentence contains the whole of human fury, every drop of rage that has ever been experienced, compacted into three short words. Another heartbeat passes, the air is saturated with the clashing sounds of violence, and then the sting of the sword disappears completely. There is the dull thump of a body hitting the sand, the frantic sound of approaching steps. When I turn around Sister is at my side, scimitar dripping an erratic droplet pattern of blood on to the ground.

‘Brother,’ she says roughly and maybe she meant to tell me to run but I will never know because there is suddenly a large hand clapped around her mouth and nose, squeezing hard enough to bruise, squeezing hard enough that she flinches in pain. The man presses his forearm around her neck, yells some order in a tongue I cannot understand and suddenly he and the rest of the thieves are swarming around the remaining komodo camels like ants to honey, mounting the broad leather saddles in movements too smooth to be unrehearsed. Another few seconds of utter confusion, of feral animal despair like I have never felt and they are racing away on slobbering beasts with everything and everyone I have ever known or loved. Panicked thoughts loop and tangle within each other, balls of yarn tumbling frantically around the recesses of my skull and I run run run toward them with legs that are numb and cold, I keep running because it is the only thing I have ever been good at. Running from home, running toward the sun, running to Sister.

I am not good enough.

At some point when I cannot see them anymore, something in me gives out and I fall to my knees like I have so many times before. I press my forehead to the cold sand and try to remember the exact pose and maybe I say the words to the prayer wrong, choking on my tongue between sobs, but still I *beg*. I beg the old gods, I pray to them and I swear to them that I am willing to do anything to make this not real, just please please give me my sister back, I will do anything. And I keep whispering the same mantras and the same praises over and over and I keep promising as many offerings as

they want and nothing is *happening*. Worship and sacrifice, the two faultless pillars of my life, have *failed* me.

I am out of ways to grovel and plead. I have submitted as much as I know how to, I have offered every piece of my life that there is to offer. I need – I need to do something else.

Mother's words return to me, like the tune to a childhood song just remembered.

What she said... it is blasphemy, of course, but what does that mean to me? I am willing to burn in hell for as long as it takes if it means Sister is still alive. For the slightest of chances.

‘One thousand years,’ I say hoarsely, and though my voice is splintering, I seal the cracks with more resolve than I have ever had before. ‘One thousand years of worship, of prayer, of sacrifice. Of *debts*. That is the equivalent of what you owe my family.’

Nothing answers me but the dead, all-encompassing silence of an endless desert.

‘I demand that your debts to my family be repaid,’ I continue, and I hate how childish my voice sounds so I force anger into it. ‘I know you are listening, gods, so listen well. We have given you unwavering faith and unceasing service, we have carried your banner proudly and we have carried it through the pits of hell. We have lived for you and we have killed for you and we have died for you. For that, we are *owed*.’

The air is heavy. I can feel it. I taste something as I breathe in, something charged with power, burning, acrid, on the back of my teeth, like crackling webs of static electricity. I am balancing on the fulcrum of two worlds; the gaze of something too ancient to comprehend has rested upon me, however briefly, and its weight threatens to splinter my resolve like so many twigs. But... no. I have not come this far, I have not done *this much*, only to fall to my knees and prostrate myself when confronted with the barest threat of resistance. Even if the threat has come from the gods themselves.

There is someone more important in this world than the architects of creation, I think with more certainty than I have ever had in my life, and she is my older sister.

I stand up, brush the sand from my knees. The world has gone very, very still; the air is thick with the bone-deep thrum of anticipation. Then I tilt my gaze to the sky, fix a hard glare to the coldly shining stars, and utter two very simple words:

‘Pay up.’

And they do.

On the horizon, the sun dawns with a quiet hush. Clouds gather, pulled as if from thin air, and in a matter of moments I can feel warm rain streaking through the pale sky and running down my face like a parent's loving hand. Seven flashes of lightning split the orange sky over the dunes, then silence and stillness. In the distance I can just barely make out the shape of a komodo camel trotting through the sand, carrying on its back an obscured figure limned in gold from the desert sun. The moment is fragile as freshly blown glass, and I do not allow myself to really, genuinely believe that my wish could've been granted, until Sister leaps off the back of the camel, races toward me and envelopes me in a painfully tight hug.

For a while, we do not speak. I like it like that. She breaks the silence, as I knew she would.

‘What did you do?’

I sigh tiredly into her shoulder, eyes fluttering closed, and though my next words are vague, I know she will understand perfectly.

‘Our debt has been repaid.’

The Voyage of Fate

Finlay Blair

I peered through a gap in the wooden panelling. The fire roared around the demolished huts; the rain beat down on the trampled crops and the scarred and bloodied faces of the invaders. The brutish warriors hacked down every shelter and fence, and slashed every soldier who crossed them. The corpses of the men I knew as my family were sinking into the marsh.

The invaders' leader, a man the height of two huts with shoulders just as wide, marched into the village. His tunic was torn, as was his skin underneath. From the ragged fur around his waist hung a needle-pointed sword, an axe as long as I was tall, and two blood-caked spears. His face was covered by a shaggy black beard. Atop a grizzled mane of hair was a worn metal helmet, and an equally battle-scarred shield was slung across his back. He swept a mop of slimy black hair from his sunken bloodshot eyes, which scanned the wreckage. I looked back at the packed hut of children behind me and raised my finger to my lips. All of them nodded silently in response. When I turned back, the chief invader's swollen yellow eyes were fixed on mine.

I slowly backed down from my spot at the wall, transfixed by the glare of the attacker. Through the gap, I could see his thin, almost hidden mouth twist into a devilish shape too wicked to be called a smile.

'The Garmr,' he snarled. I couldn't read any emotion from this command other than an ancient, unwavering hatred. I scanned my memory for the myths my mother had told me throughout my life, to which I had only vaguely listened. The name 'Garmr' reminded me of some weapon or evil creature. Either way, the children were in trouble.

Beyond our village, the thunder of a million drums sounded. Through the smoke and mist, I could see humungous silhouettes and realised the sound was not the beating of drums, but the stampede of paws. Through the fire leapt at least two dozen wolfish grey beasts; they had teeth as sharp as mountains and eyes as red as the dying sun.

'Ingmar,' I whispered to my brother, who was cowering in the corner. 'Open the door.'

The dogs were circling the leader. He grabbed two by their fur and pointed at our hut.

‘Run!’ I yelled. The dogs howled and charged at the wall. As the children fled from the back of the hut, I grabbed one of my mother’s cooking pots and struck the first dog with it. I bolted out after the children and slammed the door shut. I held it with one foot while I reached for a large fallen tree branch on the ground. I pressed it against the base of the door. A dog’s nose tore through the wood, its rows of teeth dripping with saliva. I smacked it with the branch; it wailed and shuffled back. A low growl came from inside.

I ran, occasionally glancing back. Both dogs tore through the wall in unison, charging towards me. My eyes darted between the path and a shallow ravine nearby. Hoping I could buy enough time for the children to escape, I slid down the muddy ravine wall, splashing into a pool of water. I rolled around in the water, then tore a sleeve off my dress to distract the dogs. To my horror, only one dog followed me, and I doubted the children could outrun the other. I sprinted away from the dog – which wasn’t tricked by my distraction – but tripped on the edge of my dress. I crashed into the stream and stumbled on a razor-sharp rock. The dog was inches away. I closed my eyes for the last time and braced myself...

Something warm and sticky brushed against my injured leg. The dog was licking it clean. Its eyes were no longer red and hellish, but glossy brown globes. I ran my hand across its back. Its skin was beaten and rough, and clumps of its fur were torn out. I stood up. I limped towards the ravine wall ahead, ignoring the pain in my leg, unable to process what had happened. I struggled to scale the wall and continuously crashed into the mud. Then the dog appeared and bent down beside my foot. I gently stepped on its back and pulled myself to the top. ‘Thank you,’ I whispered before stumbling towards the harbour.

Scores of women and children were boarding the boats, but I couldn’t find my brother or the others in the crowd. I slid down, and ahead of me were my parents. My father was a famous explorer, while my mother was less adventurous, and preferred the comfort of a well-made bed or comfy armchair. My father’s face glowed, but my mother’s dropped. ‘Ingunna!’ she called. ‘Where is my son? Where is Ingmar?’

‘We were attacked by dogs,’ I panted.

My father pointed to the hills. ‘There, Ingrid.’

A flurry of small children cascaded from the hill. They sped across the beach towards us. But when they were just metres away, a black shape appeared at the summit and charged towards them: the second dog, its crimson eyes hell-bent on bloodshed.

My father yelled a battle cry and sprinted towards it, his axe swinging faster than light. Then he collapsed to the ground, an arrow buried in his chest. I screamed.

The second dog leapt into the air, and time seemed to slow down. Its jaw unhinged to reveal five rows of fangs. It descended on my brother, his face mere inches away from the beast.

Then another creature sliced through the air and rammed the dog into the sand: the first dog, the one that had helped me. This dog gripped the other by its neck and viciously tangled with it, leaving a trail of red behind them, before the first twisted the second's head with a thunderous crack and a spray of blood.

I looked at my father, who lay on the sand. I sank to my knees and cried. He smiled at me, but I couldn't smile back through my tears.

'Ingunna, my dear daughter. Be brave. I know you can be, even if you don't think you can.'

I hugged him, and never wanted to let go.

'Where is Ingmar?' he asked, still smiling. Ingmar kneeled beside me.

'What happened to father?' Ingmar asked.

'They got me, son,' he croaked. 'They got me. Don't think about them. Don't run from what you fear, seek what you enjoy. Both of you – follow the horizon.'

His head sank into the sand. My mother and I loaded his body into our boat.

'What happened to the archer who killed him?' I blurted out to my mother.

'I think one of the younger men got him.' She continued to bustle about the boat for a few moments before she eventually saw my tear-soaked face. 'It'll be okay, Ingunna. He wasn't afraid. He wasn't sad. Don't feel afraid. We can escape them.' I helped Ingmar into the boat, pondering my mother's advice. As the men guarding us began untying our boat, I rushed across the beach.

'Ingunna!' my mother called. 'Come back.' I crouched beside the dog who had saved Ingmar and me. I could still feel a pulse on his swollen neck. I hauled him across the sand, limping back to the boat. 'Ingunna!' my mother yelled. 'Ingunna, leave that thing!' I heaved the lifeless creature into the boat, smearing its blood on the seats. 'Ingunna, it was with them!'

'It saved me, mother.' Ingmar smiled. I smiled back at him.

As the boats sailed out from the beach, I saw the invaders in the hills, their brutish leader glaring from the top of the cliff, a pack of dogs at his heels.

The flames whipped the sails, the tremendous golden light of the blaze reflected in the rippling waves. The clouds parted, and the full moon shone on the burning ship. My mother's arms were around Ingmar and me. We stood in silence and watched from the water's edge. The ice thawed from the rocks and plants as the flames spread across the horizon. Eventually, the fire died like an old candle.

The water lapped at our feet and, once the spectacle of the burial had worn away, I noticed how cold it was. Ingmar shivered – his clothes were more tattered than mine – and I broke free of my mother's grasp to rub his hands warm. In the month since we fled our village, we had sailed through a deserted archipelago, docking on the largest islands every few days. We had had no beds except our wooden boats or the harsh forest floor, no food except dying plants and insects, and no clothes except the rain-soaked tunics and dresses we scraped together before we left. Eventually, we found a small village on the coast of the final island in the chain, whose inhabitants had sheltered us.

We climbed back up the hill to the village. The wind grew colder still, and the already measly shrubs on the path from the beach had collapsed, frozen over. Winter was upon us, and that left the adults at a crossroads: we either had to continue sailing past the archipelago and freeze in the icy sea, or we could stay in the village, letting the invaders kill us *and* our new acquaintances. We knew our attackers were still close on our heels; we'd spotted one of their ships during our journey.

The adults from both villages assembled in one of the main buildings. Our mother invited Ingmar into the meeting, the first time the adults had granted a child that privilege. I stood at the door, trying to peer inside. I couldn't hear anything except the muffled voice of the other village's leader, Chief Gunvald, a man of few words who was clearly annoyed that we had interrupted his peaceful retirement. My mother whipped round and glared at me, even though I was sure I had been as quiet as a mouse.

Hoping to avoid further trouble, I slouched back to the cramped hut where Ingmar and I slept, and curled up on the pathetic 'bed' I had assembled from spare towels and rags I had stolen from the kitchen. I rubbed the scar on my ankle I'd acquired when I fell in the ravine; it still stung like a fire was bursting from it. I glanced over at the dog, who I had decided to call Birgir. He rarely left the vicinity of our hut, where he slept wrapped in a makeshift blanket made from the clothes Ingmar and I had worn when we fled our village.

I sobbed loudly, thinking of my mother's scowl. Before the invasion, it often accompanied her insistence I should listen to the myths she taught me more than my

father's stories of adventure, or that I should spend less time with Ingmar or Father and work with her in the kitchen instead. I understood she wanted me to do what she thought was best, but I don't think she understood me.

Birgir pawed his way into my lap. I ran my hand down his neck; his old scars were fainter, and his ragged hair was growing back, but the wounds he had gained from the other dog faintly glistened with congealed, encrusted blood. I had tended to them with water, but it would take a long time before they healed. He licked my tears away, and I embraced him, hoping mother wouldn't follow her first instincts and take him away from me.

Ingmar peered his head into the hut. 'Ingunna?'

I sat up and dried my face. Birgir slunk back into his bed and I left with Ingmar.

'So,' I smiled bittersweetly, 'what did they tell you?'

'They said I needed to be more like Father if we were going to keep going. They said I needed to learn to fight and kill. The men are going to start teaching me tomorrow.'

'Oh. Did they say what we were going to do next?'

'No. I had to go before they started talking about that stuff. Is Mother going to read us a story tonight?' he asked as we walked across the village.

'I don't think so,' I replied solemnly. Surprisingly, our mother had been telling us tales of our father's heroics each night. 'They have to decide where to go next.'

'Where will we go? There aren't any islands left.'

'I don't know. I don't think anyone knows what's beyond the island.'

'Will the bad men get us if we stay here? The men who killed Father?'

'I don't know that either. Maybe I could tell you a story tonight.'

'All right. I didn't know you could tell stories.' His cheeky grin returned. I hadn't seen it since the day the invaders arrived. We wandered over to the rocks that protruded from the cliff at the other end of the village.

'Careful you don't cut yourself,' I warned him as we clambered up the rocks, glancing at the scar on my leg as I did so.

I reached the top of the tallest rock first, the third time I had done so since our races started. I offered to help Ingmar up, but he refused. After a few moments of struggling, he reached the top. We dangled our feet off the edge of the cliff and stared into the sea for a moment. The moonlight looked like a thin trail of gold or silver was hidden beneath the waves, glittering despite the darkness. Down on the beach below us,

two of our 'guards' were casting fishing lines, presumably hoping to catch something before winter truly set in.

I thought through the many tales of my father's stories, of how he helped rehouse children from the flooded lands or discovered ancient relics forged by gods. Ingmar looked up expectantly at me, and I told the story of an old prophetess our father encountered long before I was born.

'When Father was exploring the remote islands, he met an old lady who said she could see his future. The people of her village called her a mystic and said she had an affinity with another world. She told Father he would live long and happy, as he had dedicated his life to aiding those in need.

'Then he asked her what she saw in her own future, and she replied that she didn't know. She said that she couldn't see her own future as that would influence her decisions in the present. Father asked her why the same didn't apply to all those whose fates she predicted – why she couldn't live her life in pursuit of a fantasy, yet she could tell others to do so.

'At first, she protested his queries; she saw no wrong in her actions. But then Father brought a grieving mother from the village to her. The mother had recently lost both her husband and son and had spent every day since following the counsel of the mystic. However, her pursuit of happiness led her not to joy or recovery, but more suffering. She wouldn't dare move a muscle if it interfered with reaching the future she had been promised. Father told the mystic to stop telling the village's fortunes, and that they should be allowed to follow their own paths.'

After a moment of silence, Ingmar turned to me. 'Could she really see into the future?'

'That isn't important,' I replied. 'What's important is that we don't let anyone else decide who we get to be. Do you see in the distance, at the end of the sea? That's the horizon. That's where we need to go. Not because the invaders are going to attack us again. Because that's where I think our future is. We can't go back now. We've got to explore, like Father. You shouldn't have to fight like they want you to.'

'Don't you think I can fight?' He smirked.

'I don't know. Like I said, you can choose. I don't want you to do anything stupid.'

'You said I'm always doing something stupid.'

'That's why I'm telling you not to.'

‘I think you would be a good warrior,’ he said. ‘Father was always teaching you how to do things like that when we were young.’

‘I don’t think Mother would be very happy with that.’

‘I thought you got to choose.’

I smiled and looked up from the sea. The sky was the clearest I’d ever seen it.

Ingmar shivered again. I pulled him closer towards me, and we both stared into the distance.

After ten minutes of silence, I couldn’t help but wonder what the adults were deciding, and with that, I returned to the reality of winter and the invaders. I stood up and began to climb down from the rock when Ingmar called me.

‘Ingunna? Who are those men on the beach?’ I scrambled back up. The two fishing guards were being gripped around the mouths by much larger men while another slid off their armour and tunics. Two of the new arrivals slipped into the armour and slunk off, while the other tugged the limp, naked bodies of the guards to the water and dumped them in. The two armoured figures scaled the cliff face with ease.

I sprinted back to the centre of the village, hardly noticing the rocks. I dashed into the main building, panting and coughing for breath.

‘Ingunna!’ yelled my mother, outraged by the intrusion. ‘What is the meaning of this?’

‘There are men down on the beach. They’ve killed two of the guards and they’re coming up in their armour.’

‘Good grief,’ muttered Chief Gunvald. ‘Ingmar,’ he called to my brother, who had caught up, also out of breath, ‘your training can begin now.’ Ingmar was shocked at this announcement, as was I.

‘You can’t send him to fight those men!’ I protested.

‘Ingunna,’ my mother said, ‘the chief is a well-respected gentleman and soldier. He knows what he’s doing.’

‘He’s my brother!’ I screamed. ‘And he’s your son. Don’t you care about him?’

‘I care about him enough to know what’s right for him,’ she snapped. ‘Perhaps you ought to grow up and learn that too.’

As I watched in silence, some of the guards rushed off to the cliffside, where they wrestled with the two stealthy brutes. It eventually took ten guards to pin down the barbarians, who still tried to shake free. Gunvald approached and stooped down to them.

‘What do you want?’ he growled, his voice the loudest I had ever heard it.

‘We came to take something of yours,’ one said. ‘A possession of the adventurer Igor.’

‘Igor is dead!’ Gunvald bellowed. ‘He died before we met his village’s refugees. We buried him earlier. Is that how you found us?’

‘We’ve been watching the refugees ever since they fled their village. Our chief thought they would lead us to an artefact. Igor owned a map which told of its location.’

‘You came here for a map?’

‘I think I’ve told you too much already,’ the man smirked. He pulled a match from his belt and struck it against a thin strip on his leg.

‘Run!’ Gunvald yelled, drowning out the sizzling of explosives. The brutes burst into flame and balls of blinding fire leapt into the air. The clink of swords and the thud of shields came from nearby and scores of warriors charged into the village. The invaders had returned.

At their head was the terrifying chieftain, his hair longer, his eyes angrier and his smile more wicked. ‘Ingred,’ he yelled at my mother. ‘Wife of Igor. I’m sorry – *widow*.’ His devilish smirk grew wider. ‘I am Chief Hellmar, and you have something I need. A map. I think you know where it is, my dear Ingred.’

‘Leave her alone,’ growled Gunvald. ‘Return to your homelands, invader.’

‘Invader?’ Hellmar sneered. ‘Is that all you think of me? We are not like the other marauders who voyage to the new world in search of gold and riches. We seek power. Not influence, not wealth. Pure, unbridled power, enough to match the might of the gods.’

‘You’re deluded,’ Gunvald spat.

‘No, I don’t think so. I’ve already imbued myself and my soldiers with powers beyond your understanding. How do you think my canine hunters became so aggressive?’ I remembered the crimson colour of Birgir’s eyes before he helped me. ‘The map will lead to me to something your late husband stumbled upon during his travels, Ingred. The basin of Urðr. Inside it lies a key to eternal power – fate itself – and he who wields that power will control both man and god until time and all the worlds die.’

‘I don’t think you realise that fairy stories aren’t real,’ Gunvald gloated.

‘Step aside, little man,’ retorted Hellmar. ‘I don’t think you realise that you are of no importance to me. But that doesn’t mean you aren’t useful. Ingred, you know where the map is. Tell me, and spare the life of your dear friends, your chief, your daughter, and your son.’ His eyes pierced the rock from behind which Ingmar and I watched nervously. It felt like he was reaching into my mind and slowly torturing it.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ my mother said, trembling.

‘Maybe your precious chief can make you think a little harder then.’ He kicked Gunvald on to a rock and gently placed the tip of his sword on the chief’s spine.

‘Let him go, or I won’t tell you anything.’ My mother quivered like a flag blowing in the wind. Hellmar leaned into the sword, and it pierced the skin on Gunvald’s back.

‘Let him go!’

He leaned into the sword more. Gunvald grunted in agony.

My mother wore a pained expression, her eyes flitting between Gunvald and the chieftain.

Another invader emerged from a hut carrying a large scroll. ‘I’ve found it, Chieftain.’

‘Excellent.’ Hellmar smirked. ‘We won’t be needing the chief any more.’ He slammed the sword through Gunvald’s back and into the rock, which splintered. My mother collapsed to her knees and cried.

‘I hate you!’ she screamed through her tears, her face as red as blood. She marched towards the chieftain, who struck her across the face, knocking her to the ground. Invaders lit the village ablaze and sliced through each of our warriors with ease. It was becoming a far-too-familiar image in my mind.

‘Leave them,’ Hellmar commanded. ‘Let’s not upset the widow more.’

When Ingmar and I returned to our hut, engulfed in roaring flame, we found Birgir with an arrow lying beside him. He was growling, raging like the fires around him. He limped towards us; the arrow had grazed his thigh. We helped him down to the shore and laid him in his filthy makeshift bed. The invaders sailed off into the mist in their majestic longships, and before long they were merely pinpricks in the landscape.

‘We’ll never catch up with them,’ I sighed.

‘We’re not trying to,’ my mother said. I had heard her reject my suggestions all my life, but for the first time, her voice sounded sad rather than angry.

‘We have to do something, Mother,’ I pleaded.

‘We can settle wherever we please now, Ingunna,’ she argued. ‘They don’t care about us now they have the map.’

‘But you heard him. He wants to rule the entire world.’

‘And we have nothing to do with that.’

‘I thought you wanted Ingmar to fight them?’

‘Things were different then, Ingunna. They’ve got what they want now. We can go back to the mainland and live a normal life.’

‘Are you joking?’ I asked, only half-expecting an answer. ‘We can’t go back there. We can’t wake up every day in a village that they burned to the ground, where they killed Father. It’s hard enough just knowing he’s gone, but seeing the place where he died, where he spoke to us, where he played with us... We need to stop them so he didn’t die for nothing.’

My mother was silent. I knew she wanted to argue back but also knew I was right. ‘Fine,’ she said. ‘We’ll follow their ships. I only hope we don’t freeze to death.’

I slept through the cold for the first night of our journey. When I woke, it was daytime, although the sky was not a brilliant blue, but a wintry white. All was silent, save for the whispering wind and the rippling of oars in the sea. The water was hardly visible – the mist carpeted it for miles, drifting ominously through the air. Everyone except the sailors seemed to be deeply asleep, although Ingmar sat curled in a ball, staring out into the mist, stroking Birgir. Birgir’s leg injury was less noticeable, but the scars on his neck were still prominent. I sat up, my vision flickering with the grunge that came with a lack of sleep. Ingmar turned round and Birgir stirred, in a similar state of half-sleep as I was. He stretched out on the wood between Ingmar and me and we both stroked his overgrown fur.

‘Where are we?’ Ingmar asked shakily, shivering from cold, fear, or both.

‘I’ve got no idea,’ I replied solemnly, noticing my tone was harsher than usual. I couldn’t help but feel my mother may have been right about returning to the mainland.

Eventually, Mother woke and was just as miserable as the night before.

‘Do you know how far away this basin is?’ I asked her.

‘It’s almost impossible to find. Your father discovered it by accident. He was so excited when he returned. He told me all about it. I never really believed his story, though.’

‘Why are they doing this in the winter?’

‘The key – the Urðrlykill – releases incredible amounts of energy in the winter, evaporating the water inside the basin. The water that spills over the side freezes, forming a barrier around the rim. It’s the only way to reach the key without drowning.’

We sat in silence for a while, and my thoughts wandered to my outburst the night before.

‘Mother, why won’t you listen to me? Why won’t you let me decide who I want to be?’

‘I’m afraid, Ingunna. Before you were born, your father would travel far and wide, and he loved it. But I never got to see him. You’re my first child, my daughter. I always knew that Ingmar would have to grow up one day, but I didn’t want you to leave – I love you.’ I hugged her like I had my father, and we both cried.

The mist cleared, and ahead the sky was a black demon, sprouting twisted golden arms of lightning. The water ran faster; we spun around and flew over colossal waves. I was about to throw up, and Ingmar already had. The lightning seared the sky and lit a massive stone structure ahead. It was cracked, and a gigantic wall of ice surrounded its top – it was the Basin of Urðr.

The invaders’ longships were tucked away in a narrow gorge, clearly meant for climbing. The massive waves propelled us up to the top, however. We all – Mother, Ingmar and Birgir – leapt from the end of our boat and grabbed handholds on the icy wall. Birgir scampered up with death-defying accuracy and landed just past the frozen threshold. The other boats splintered against the ice and many villagers fell into the sea. We were only feet from the top, but the ice was slippery, and our hands were already wet. I climbed up, ignoring my scarred leg. I pulled myself on to the rock floor beside my mother, but Ingmar struggled. I reached out to help, hoping he would accept it this time. I heaved him up as the surviving villagers arrived behind us. At the edge of the basin’s rim were the invaders.

The golden bolts of lightning congregated in the basin, and a small but bright light rose from it. Hellmar grabbed the light, and it morphed into a small glass orb. He spun round; he was wearing his signature devilish smirk.

‘I gave you a chance to live,’ he boomed, ‘but you came back to me. In my hand is the Urðrlykill, the might of all nine worlds. When the lightning strikes it, I will become one with the gods.’

The villagers fired arrows, but the invaders had their shields readied. The invaders’ cursed dogs charged at us, but Birgir leapt towards them like the lightning above us. He fought better than a soldier, clawing at one dog while kicking another across the ice. Soon, the other dogs attacked his neck and leg, but he slammed into the ice, cracking it and knocking them into the water.

One of the elder villagers approached Ingmar and gifted him a sword. With our mother, he and I approached the invaders.

Hellmar stared expectantly at the raging storm. ‘What do you want, fools?’ he sneered at us.

‘We want you to stop!’ screamed my mother.

‘Good luck with that!’ he spat and struck her. Ingmar raised his sword, but Hellmar kicked him into the ice.

‘No!’ I shrieked.

‘Step aside, girl. This key holds my destiny!’

‘There’s no such thing as destiny.’ I grabbed Ingmar’s sword and sliced off the chieftain’s hand. The orb smashed, and lightning struck the ice. A golden cloud threw me backwards, and I smacked my head with a thunderous thud. The ice beneath Hellmar cracked, and he fell into the basin.

Lightning spread across the ice and the entire structure crumbled. The cursed dogs transformed into black clouds and faded away while the invaders slid down the ice. I grabbed Ingmar, Mother, and Birgir. The stone beneath us fell. We hit the water.

I swept wet hair from my eyes and swam without purpose. Where the basin had stood, there was now a grassy island, littered with massive rocks. I sat on one of the boulders, and my family joined me. I stared into the clear blue sky. I wasn’t sure where we would go next, but I finally felt free.

A Trail in Time

Alexia Papageorgiou

Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.
T.S. Eliot

Chapter 1

The room seemed crowded, yet only one person was standing there. Twelve voices could be heard interrupting one another to the point where all you could hear was the buzzing of the microphones and the shouting of the participants. The tension was rising, the time was passing, and there were still no ideas about how to prevent the problem from being irreversible.

Mark Turner looked out of the window trying to calm down, but it was impossible. He was the one that had the last call and if the mission failed, he would be the one to blame. He decided that it would be best if everyone took a break to clear their heads. He pressed the ‘sign out’ button and sighed with exhaustion. A few years ago, those same leaders of the twelve most powerful countries in the world were the ones that helped him solve the global warming problem, but now they were facing the most severe crisis the human race has ever experienced – the absence of the three core virtues: love, courage and faith. With the domination of technology, people had stopped trying to create meaningful relationships and so, those values had just died away. People became selfish; they did everything for their personal gain. The common good wasn’t a priority any more and the consequences were now harmful for everyone, with severe mental health issues on the rise. Now, the twelve leaders had to find a way to bring the virtues back at all costs.

The teleconference started again.

Mark knew that virtues are attributes that only humans can feel, understand and share. They needed to think differently.

‘What if someone time travels and brings the virtues back from the past?’ he suggested in a loud and confident voice.

At once, everyone started disagreeing with this idea – it simply wouldn’t work, for although time travelling had already been invented, few had done it and returned alive.

‘Those virtues can’t be learned, they need to be seen, experienced and understood. By finding the right person to time travel as well as the right dates and places in history to send them to, we might have a chance of solving this problem,’ Mark continued.

After a long pause, everyone realized that there was no other option.

‘One question arises: who is the most eligible person to bring the virtues back?’ inquired Vladimir Smirnov.

‘We should ask PYTHIA,’ suggested Masaru Okamoto.

PYTHIA was a mainframe computer which the twelve leaders consulted when they had to make tough decisions.

The anxiety in everyone’s eyes was evident as the cursor of the computer searched for the right person. Finally, a name appeared on the screen: Jo Williams. Panic spread – no one knew who Jo Williams was, or what she was capable of. After an identity search, they discovered that Jo was a fifteen-year-old girl who lived in England. Her character description said she was smart and multilingual, shy and introverted. The trepidation and doubt in the leaders’ faces was crystal clear.

‘Mark, with all due respect, this is going to be a disaster. She is fifteen years old. We can’t rely on a teenager to save the world,’ remarked Abdul Ahmad.

‘She is shy and introverted,’ Marie Dubois added.

‘PYTHIA has proven that her calculations are never wrong. Jo Williams has the highest possible success rate in this mission, and she will be the one to time travel,’ said Mark before ending the teleconference. The truth was, this was the first time that he wasn’t sure at all about PYTHIA’s choice.

Chapter 2

At the break of day, the cloudless sky became a vibrant blue. Birds were chirping in the cool morning breeze as dew drops fell from leafy trees, adding to the smell of nature that hung over the more subtle scent of tree blossoms. Mud lay in uneven patches, scattered over the sloped concrete farmyard whose barn blossomed on the hill, overlooking this majestic sight.

Jo woke up to the sound of her alarm clock. She opened her eyes widely and observed her room, where rays of sunshine made the blue walls look brighter, creating a radiant atmosphere. She got ready, went rapidly down the stairs and started preparing

breakfast for the whole family. She called her father to join her, then headed towards her mother's room.

'Mum, I brought your breakfast,' said Jo.

Her mother didn't reply, she just nodded; she was going through a tough time. For the past year, she had been suffering with depression, refusing to leave her room. She was stuck there all day, trapped in her own thoughts. The lack of the three core virtues had really affected Jo's mum, and even though they had consulted many specialists, no one could do anything to help her.

Jo left the bedroom and rushed to her dad's office. She knocked on the door and entered cautiously. In the center of the room, she saw her dad sitting at his wooden desk completely absorbed by his work. A few pens were lying on the desk, along with some crumpled papers that were scattered all over the place. On the right, there stood a bookshelf bursting with books, and on the other side of the room was a floor-to-ceiling window that gave the room some daylight.

'Dad, your breakfast is ready. I have been calling you for the past ten minutes'.

No reply.

'Dad, come on. I have to leave for school,' Jo insisted.

'Do not disturb my circles.'

Jo groaned. Dad was doing the Archimedes thing again – the ancient Greek mathematician who said those words to the Roman soldier who was trying to kill him while he was studying a geometry problem.

Her dad was an archaeologist who was always occupied by his work: he rarely had free time, as he preferred to travel around the world meeting new people, experiencing new cultures and embarking on all sorts of adventures. He always said that the only way to really understand another way of thinking was to come across it and experience it.

Then, a boisterous noise echoed through the whole house. Jo and her dad ran outside. A gigantic aircraft was landing in the middle of their backyard. The leaves on the ground flew away instantly as the aircraft landed, and its silver color contrasted with the light blue sky. They couldn't believe their eyes.

Five men dressed in elegant black suits exited the aircraft and approached them.

'Good evening,' said one of the men. 'I am Edward Pierce and I'm here on behalf of the twelve world leaders. They have come to the decision that Jo is the right person to

save the world from the ethical crisis that we are facing. They believe that she can bring back the three core virtues by travelling to the past.’

Jo’s dad shook his head in disbelief.

‘She’s just a child! I’m not letting her risk her life,’ said Mr. Williams, irritated.

‘Mr. Williams, you have to understand—’ replied another man.

‘You’d better start searching for someone else,’ Jo’s dad interrupted.

The men in suits didn’t argue, they simply returned to the aircraft and vanished into the sky.

Later that day, as night fell and the blue haze of day lifted to reveal the stars, Jo couldn’t sleep. All day long, she had been thinking about what that man said. It was the thought that she was chosen to save the world, the promise of life in the darkness, a sense of warmth springing from the cold. She felt like it was her obligation to go through with the mission – after all, this might be her best chance to help her mum. Jo reached into her jacket pocket and felt something. She took it out and observed it carefully. It was a small device, with just one button and a timer that said ‘36 hours’. Where had it come from? Then, it hit her. One of the men in black must have slipped it into her pocket. Jo’s hand hovered for a second over the button and then she pressed it. A flashing light filled the room.

Chapter 3

When Jo opened her eyes, she was in a crowded, rambunctious street with farm animals wandering around, merchants selling every imaginable item, and beggars asking for a few coins. She saw a half-naked man shivering next to her. Jo felt sorry for him, so she took off her coat and gave it to him. The beggar put it on and handed her a small, damaged wooden cube in appreciation. Jo nodded politely and placed the object in her pocket. She kept walking without really knowing her destination.

‘Watch Titus Andronicus by William Shakespeare, played by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men.’

Jo’s jaw dropped as she heard the theatre announcement. She approached the man full of awe and surprise.

‘Excuse me, sir, do you mean the world-reknowned William Shakespeare?’

‘World-reknowned? Do you know him?’ the man asked.

‘Of course I know him. Is he around? Is there a possibility that I could meet him?’

Jo asked in amazement.

‘He is, I suppose you—’

Before he had time to finish, a boy sprinted out of the theatre. He wore hose and stockings that covered his legs, as well as leather shoes that were quite slashed. He also wore a plain white, voluminous shirt and a hat.

Not far behind appeared a man with dark brown hair, a carefully trimmed mustache and a receding hairline. He was wearing a padded jacket and a pair of elegant trousers.

‘Thief! Help me! Someone, please catch that boy, he stole my wallet!’ he shouted. ‘I shall beat thee, but I would infect my hands!’ the man continued.

Jo didn’t hesitate. She started chasing the thief, running as fast as she could. The man seemed to be following her closely, but he couldn’t quite catch up.

The boy turned abruptly to the left and caused destruction to everything in his path. All the fish, the fruits and the vegetables fell from the tables, and all the salesmen in the market started shouting and complaining angrily. Jo continued to run; she didn’t pay any attention to the chaos behind her, for all she cared about in that moment was catching the thief. She wasn’t going to let him escape, and it seemed like luck was on her side. When the thief took his next turn, he was trapped in a dead end, so Jo approached him slowly.

‘You shouldn’t do this. Stealing a wallet won’t help you. You know that one day they’ll catch you and you will spend your whole life regretting this decision. You have the opportunity to change before it’s too late,’ Jo said, trying to convince him to hand over the wallet.

The boy’s facial expression changed; he actually looked vulnerable for a while, as if sunken in remorse. After a minute, he threw the wallet into Jo’s hands and ducked around her, disappearing into a side street just as the man arrived. Jo handed him back his wallet.

‘Here, sir. The boy looked really regretful. I doubt he’ll ever do it again,’ she said.

‘Thank you indeed, young lady. Let me introduce myself. My name is William Shakespeare, and who art thou?’ asked the man.

‘My name is Jo Williams. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’ve read your work and I really admire you,’ replied Jo, still in shock at talking to the world’s greatest dramatist.

‘I shrift that you have, astoundingly, just retrieved my wallet from this knave. How can I treat thee?’ Shakespeare asked.

‘Thank you very much sir. There’s no need. I just acted on instinct,’ responded Jo.

‘Shall I take thee to the Rose Theatre to attend a rehearsal of my new play?’

‘Well, I suppose that would be great!’ replied Jo, unable to hide her excitement.

After a long walk in the soiled, splattered streets of London, they finally arrived at the theatre.

As they entered, they made their way to the stage after passing substantial rose gardens with ponds full of blossoming lily-pads and flower-beds. The stage, facing outwards towards rows of velvet seats, was the perfect place for actors to express themselves. The front was golden-hued stone and the rest of the walls were a brilliant white to compliment the ever-evolving art that blessed them with color. Once Shakespeare and Jo took their seats, the rehearsal began. Jo was fascinated by the emotions the actors showed and couldn’t believe how lucky she was to be able to see this play.

‘Are you writing something at the moment?’ Jo inquired.

‘Well, I am writing a new play which will hopefully premiere in a few months. It is a tragic love story that takes place in Italy. The characters love each other with a love that shall not die, till the sun grows cold and the stars grow old,’ said Shakespeare.

‘Romeo and Juliet,’ said Jo, almost jumping from her seat before realizing the terrible mistake she had just made.

‘How dost thou know that? Has thou seen the manuscript in my bag?’ he asked.

‘Oh, yes, I peeked and glanced at the title of the play, I’m very sorry,’ replied Jo, feeling relieved that he didn’t suspect anything.

‘If thou wishes, thou canst read it.’

‘I would love that!’ exclaimed Jo, full of enthusiasm.

Jo had read this same story countless times. But something about reading the raw, unfinished version in this original manuscript made her eyes tear up. ‘I bet that one day, this will be considered the greatest love story ever written!’ Jo remarked while trying to wipe away her tears.

Shakespeare grinned from ear to ear and said, ‘Jo Williams, thou hast a very kind soul.’ He took something out of his pocket and gave it to her. ‘My most humble apologies, but I have to attend an event at Greenwich Palace with Queen Elizabeth the First herself,’ he said, taking the manuscript back and bowing a farewell to Jo.

As Shakespeare started to vanish into the distance, Jo opened her palm to see what he had given her – it was a rectangular, wooden object that had something written on it. She couldn't make out what the letters said but a few moments later the letters started to glow, and the word became clear. It said LOVE. Jo beamed with satisfaction, took out the device the men in black had put in her pocket and pressed the button.

Chapter 4

Jo found herself in a hollow cube of concrete. No sooner had she turned her head to look around, a light flickered on. In the gloom, all she could make out was an barred iron door and a metallic bed without mattress or cushioning, just one thin, worn-out blanket. Over the bed, there was one small window next to which hung a wooden shelf filled with a few books. Was she in a prison? At that instant, Jo realized she wasn't alone: someone was asleep on the bed.

She felt anxious. Adrenaline started flowing all through her body; she tried to escape the hurricane of her thoughts, but she couldn't. All her muscles felt tight, a cold sweat dripping on her forehead. She had to leave this room immediately. She pressed the button of the device eagerly, but nothing happened.

'Are you all right?' The sleeping figure was sitting up on the bed. He was a middle-aged black man who spoke in a calm and confident voice. He had a genuine smile on his face even though Jo had clearly woken him.

'I really don't know what I am doing here,' replied Jo.

'Well, I've been here for a long time, eighteen years to be exact.' He said this as if the number didn't matter.

'Why were you imprisoned?' asked Jo nervously.

'I attempted to overthrow South Africa's apartheid regime. Let me introduce myself. My name is Nelson Mandela. I am pleased to meet you.'

Jo couldn't believe it. She looked at him wide-eyed. She was in a prison cell with one of the most important leaders of all time!

'I'm Jo Williams. It's nice to meet you, too. What are all these books on your shelf?' she asked, trying to overcome her awkwardness.

'In 1964, when I was first imprisoned, I was a class D prisoner, which meant I could get only one letter and one visit every six months. Four years later, my mother passed away and I wasn't allowed to attend her funeral. The same happened in 1969 when

my beloved son died in a car accident. Writing books where I can express myself truthfully has been my shelter in these difficult times,' he replied with a sorrowful expression.

'I'm really sorry that you had to go through that,' she said.

'What about you? What are you doing here?' he asked.

'I really don't know. I have to get out of here quickly, though. Many people are counting on me and I can't help them if I'm stuck in here.'

'I've been in this prison long enough to know that we are surrounded by water, so the only way to get out is with the supply boat that arrives at the island every morning. Every time it comes, I help in the kitchen where, along with other inmates and the accompaniment of some guards we unload the boat. Tomorrow morning, I will help you sneak to the kitchen, so when it's time to go to the supply boat, I will create a diversion and you will have the chance to hide in it. When the boat arrives in Cape Town port, you will be safe, and from there, you can go anywhere you want.'

'I hope this will work, I don't have much time,' said Jo.

'Don't worry about it right now. Get a few hours of sleep, because tomorrow there will be no room for mistakes,' he replied.

Jo tried to sleep, but every idea, notion and event from her day was replaying in her mind. When she finally let go of her thoughts and worries, her eyes became heavier and heavier until the moment when she fell asleep.

The next morning, Mandela was let out of his cell early for kitchen duty. They'd agreed that Mandela would leave the door ajar, so Jo had to stay in the shadows and then sneak after him when the guard had moved on. Jo held her breath as the guard's footsteps echoed into the distance, then she crept out of the cell and followed Mandela along an endless corridor with the same dark and unpleasant prison cells on both sides. Most of the inmates were still asleep and the silence made every sound echo through the whole prison.

When they reached the kitchen and everything seemed to be going fine, a guard stopped them.

'What is she doing here?' he asked in an interrogative manner.

Jo's heart started pounding. She hadn't thought of any excuses, but luckily Mandela was prepared.

'She's the Warden's granddaughter. The Warden asked if she could help me in the kitchen,' he replied without any hesitation.

‘Okay then, don’t forget that the boat arrives at 7:30,’ the guard reminded him while letting them pass into the kitchen.

Time seemed to be dragging on for Jo. She could hear the clock ticking and one hour felt like an eternity. Finally, the clock struck 7:30.

‘It’s time,’ Mandela said, looking incredibly calm. Everyone started heading towards the boat.

Jo shrugged. As everyone was going back inside to deliver the supplies and return for more, she hopped into the boat. There was plenty of space and she found the perfect hiding spot. As soon as the inmates came back, she whispered to Mandela, ‘You should come with me. There is enough space in here for both of us. We’ll be out of here in no time.’

‘I have faith that one day, justice will be served, and I will be released,’ Mandela whispered back and gave something to Jo.

Moments later, the boat sailed away and with it, the dreadful image of the Robben Island prison began to dematerialize. Jo opened her palm to see one more of those rectangular wooden objects. Only this time, when it started to glow, it displayed the word FAITH.

Suddenly, she heard the footsteps of a guard coming towards her. If he got close enough, he would be able to see her and then she would immediately be sent back to prison. Her mind started racing until she remembered the device a split second before the guard saw her. Fortunately, the button worked this time.

Chapter 5

Jo was shocked to find herself engulfed in fog. The trees were veiled in the lightest of mists and the haze stretched supine like a white blanket all around her as she stood there taking solace in the trees and absolute silence. She was caught in a moment when everything had stopped: feelings, memories, and even time itself. The silence caressed her skin like a cool summer breeze, taking away her worries. Then, she took the device out of her pocket and looked at it: she had twelve hours left; time wasn’t on her side.

Ahead, the trees were thinner – perhaps she was near a clearing? Then she noticed there was something on the ground. As she got closer, she gasped. The ground was covered with dead soldiers, their spears, crossbows and swords lying beside them. Jo felt terrified, but she couldn’t stop walking as she didn’t have much time.

Eventually, she started to see smoke coming from a campfire, and as she approached, she saw some soldiers sitting around it. Their heads were hanging low, their expressions were melancholic and all of them looked very tired. Jo hid behind a tree. She could hear the soldiers talking in French. Then, all of a sudden, a young girl climbed out of a nearby tent; she was Jo's age, was well armed with weapons and spoke French. Jo was amazed – she could understand every word.

‘We have to attack them, now,’ the girl said in a confident and steady voice.

‘Our army is tired,’ a soldier noted.

‘Some of our best fighters passed away today. If we lose another battle, this might be the end,’ another soldier remarked.

‘Well, if we found someone to sneak into the fortress with me and open the gate, the ambush would succeed. It's not only our army that is tired, but also our enemies’. An unexpected attack is our only choice,’ the girl replied firmly.

While Jo was busy trying to figure out where she was and what was happening, one of the soldiers saw her and started running towards her. Drawing his sword, he yelled to the others and she froze.

‘A spy in our territory! She is aiding our enemy, she is trying to learn our strategy!’ shouted the soldier while grabbing Jo by her shoulder and pushing her to the ground, pointing a sword at her back.

As the soldier lifted the sword to strike, the girl ran over and valiantly put her shield in the way, blocking the weapon from touching Jo.

‘We should let her explain,’ said the girl.

‘I don't have anything to do with your fight,’ Jo said. ‘I have my own battle to win. I am not a spy and I am willing to help you. I heard you say that you needed someone to sneak into the fortress...’ She didn't know what she was getting herself into, but somewhere inside her, she knew that this was the only way to succeed in her mission.

‘This is the enemy's uniform,’ the girl said, handing Jo some clothes. ‘Wear it. We will leave when the night falls and cross the Loire River. Then, we need to find a way to get inside the fort without anyone noticing.’ The girl held out her hand for Jo to shake. ‘By the way, my name is Jeanne d'Arc. Thank you for helping us.’

Jo was curled up in a boat while Jeanne rowed it slowly across the river in order not to make any noise. Jeanne was whispering to Jo, reviewing the plan over and over again. When they reached the shore, they docked the boat and started heading to the fort.

The place was full of enemy soldiers, so the two girls kept their heads low, not talking to each other. Suddenly, they heard an English voice calling them.

‘You two! Who are you and what are you doing here?’ asked the soldier.

‘We are messengers from Burgundy. We have to deliver an urgent message to John Talbot,’ said Jo in English, and that saved their life.

‘Okay. Do you know the way?’ asked the soldier.

‘Yes, thank you,’ replied Jo with confidence.

‘Open the gate for the messengers,’ he shouted as the girls looked at each other and smirked.

‘We made it!’ whispered Jo.

‘Now is the tough part,’ replied Jeanne as they walked through the gate.

The two girls rushed to find the war supplies storage room, which was in the farthest part of the fortress. When they found it, they cautiously entered, and Jeanne set it on fire while Jo was distracting the guard. At once, all the soldiers ran to extinguish the fire. Jeanne and Jo hurried to open the gate of the fort to allow the French soldiers to enter. It was the beginning of a brutal battle.

Jeanne hugged Jo. ‘I need to stay and fight for my people. You should go. I know you have your own battle to fight. Go forward bravely, fear nothing, and all will be well,’ Jeanne said, while giving Jo the final rectangular object. As soon as Jo grabbed it, it started glowing with the word COURAGE.

She was finally ready to return, even though she didn’t know if she was on time. If the thirty-six hours had passed, she wouldn’t be able to return. She searched in her pocket, but she couldn’t find the device. Had it fallen out? It didn’t matter if her time was up or not, she was going to be stuck in 1429 forever.

She started searching her pocket again. She touched something, but it wasn’t the device. She took it out and realized that it was the cube that the beggar had given her in London. She could barely read the faint letters on its sides. It was a word puzzle. She thought and thought, then she had a brainwave. She started moving the letters and when the words LOVE, FAITH, COURAGE were formed, a flaming light instantaneously covered her surroundings.

Chapter 6

She was in a pure white room with a ceiling-to-floor window overlooking a breathtaking view of the whole city from above. In the middle of the room there was a screen and a controller. She immediately realized that it was PYTHIA, the world-reknowned computer mastermind.

She approached it and saw a message on the screen.

I chose wisely. You were the only one who could succeed. Are you ready?

‘Ready for what?’ Jo asked.

To share your message with the whole world, PYTHIA wrote. You start in 3... 2... 1...

Jo cast her eye back to the window and looked at the world from above, she realized how important the message was and what a crucial role she had to play in order to spread it. People who had lost faith or courage or even love and didn’t have anything or anyone to keep them going would get a chance for a new beginning. Especially her mother. Everyone was counting on her and she wouldn’t let them down. Jo took a deep breath, stared at PYTHIA and started describing her epic journey through time.

Every single screen on the planet broadcasted Jo’s speech. Everyone stopped whatever they were doing to listen to her: the people walking in Times Square stopped walking and watched her, the factory workers in China stopped working and watched her, even the tourists in Fiji stopped sunbathing and watched her. Also, her mother finally came out of her bedroom and watched her.

Jo talked for hours about the fascinating people she met, her legendary adventures and all the precious knowledge she took from this journey.

Epilogue

The last sun-rays of the day reached the heathland as the red and purple color of the sky melted into grey under the moonlight. The wooden farmhouse burrowed into the upward slope of the land with the light disappearing from the windmill, the barns, the granaries and the fields.

Jo walked towards her house, passing the small lake where the air was pungent with the fragrance of jasmine. Then, next to the red rosebush, she saw them: her father, and, standing beside him, her mother. Her face was bright and she was smiling. Jo ran

towards them and they both welcomed her with a warm hug. From that moment on, she felt that everything would be better for her family, for herself and for the whole world.

AUTHOR OF TOMORROW | 16-21 years

Pearl Diving

Sarah Ang

Winner of the category

In the old pictures I've seen of the ocean, its colours are sharp and vivid. There is the golden carpet of sand, the brown jagged rocks, the white crests of foam, and the gleaming expanse of blue itself, stretching out to meet the horizon.

These are only pictures, of course. They might have been taken only a few decades ago, but they are remnants of the past nonetheless. The ocean I know is murky, difficult to penetrate. You can hardly swim any distance without encountering floating debris from abandoned ships, or the odd plastic waste from landfills. If you're not used to it, you can barely see in front of you. But years of swimming in these waters have accustomed my eyes to the dim light.

Still, even in its grey, clouded state, the ocean is comforting. It's all I've ever known, living as we do on its fringes, with tide pools literally on our doorstep. It beckons, it draws you under its spell. Now, however, most people keep away from the ocean. The small community we had in this town has largely moved inland, to the cities, and the beaches are desolate. There's certainly no one around today as I step into the water, slipping under the waves with practiced ease.

It's easy to forget things, in the ocean. To let the water sweep over you and erase your memories. Sometimes I forget that I'm human. There's just something about water that calls you to meld seamlessly with it. To lose your sense of self, becoming one with the waves.

'Cultures all over the world have been entranced by the sea,' my mother used to say. 'Look at the countless tales of sirens enticing sailors off their ships with their song; of mermaids luring fishermen to their watery lairs. Look at the legends of sea monsters across countries, from the Kraken in Norway, to Scylla and Charybdis in Greece, to the Umibozu in Japan. From the beginning of time the ocean has been revered as a deity in its own right.' Even now her words still resound in my ears. 'The ocean has power. It can choose to reward, but also to punish.'

My mother was a marine biologist. Growing up, our house always smelled faintly of the sea. Our living room was plastered with tide charts; maps detailing whale sightings; infographics enumerating various species of fish. Practically every corner of our house

contained bowls with specimens of some dried-up kelp, sea grass or coral that she was studying. My sister and I spent our afternoons drawing sea monsters while she drafted sketches beside us, or typed strings of numbers into spreadsheets on her laptop.

Other parents treated their children with weekend trips to the park or city; my mother took us out to sea in her dinghy, where she would make every effort to expand our education by showing us the true wonders of the ocean. Needless to say, her vision was far more acute than ours, and she was always the first to spot any creature. ‘Nurse shark,’ she would point out when a shadow passed under our boat, and we would clamber over each other to see more, almost capsizing the vessel in our excitement. ‘Parrot-fish school,’ when a flash of green and pink caught our attention. And our favorite, ‘Humpback whale family’, identified by black mounds breaking the surface, and spouts of water being expelled in the distance.

Every morning, she would get up before dawn, slip into her yellow wellingtons, and inspect the tide pools. She would come back once the sun had risen, bearing wonderful things in her arms to show my sister and I – rosy-hued shells; baby hermit crabs; spiny starfish. Bleary-eyed, we would stumble out to meet her, eager to inspect her gifts, to hear her regale us with stories about how they were found. I like to remember her this way: larger than life, her figure framed by the rising sun. Coming back to us, not leaving.

Even now, I try to preserve these moments in my mind, but they are fraying at the edges, trickling like droplets away from my grasp. I’m scared one day I’ll forget the exact shade of her hair, fanned out in the water as she paddled on her back, playfully splashing at us. The pattern of her brow furrowing while deep in thought about some new underwater discovery. The way her eyes danced when she laughed.

These memories are all I have left. Soon even they will dissolve away – and where will that leave me?

I suppose that’s not entirely true. For now, at least, I do have my sister. I say for now, because with each passing day, this once unshakeable fact seems more and more uncertain.

My sister is sick from a disease that has no cure. It took the world by surprise, emerging seemingly from nowhere. One second, everything was normal, and the next, people were falling sick left, right and center. The symptoms were harmless enough at first – just a cough, runny nose, headache. It seemed to be practically indistinguishable from the flu. But what started off as a common cold soon became more deadly. Coughs

turned more serious, and those afflicted began to have trouble breathing, began to feel weak and dizzy. The lucky ones returned to normal after a few weeks. Some, like my sister, lost all feeling in their legs and became permanently bedridden. Others simply succumbed.

When the disease first broke out, it drove governments around the world crazy. Flights were banned. Schools were closed. The number of cases skyrocketed, and so many people were getting sent to hospitals that there were beds pushed out in the corridors, then on the streets. Then people were turned away, told to stay at home to recover, to hope that they were one of the lucky ones, because there simply wasn't capacity to save them if they weren't.

The thing about this disease, though, is that nothing was clear about it. There were rumors going around that it came from wild animals at the heart of the Amazon, traded on the black market. Or that it started from toxic chemicals in the ocean – which would explain why so many in our small community were afflicted. To this day, they aren't sure of the cause. They aren't even sure how it spreads, or why some people are affected, and others aren't. Some people in close proximity to the infected didn't develop it, but there was nothing observable differentiating these people from the rest. Nothing in their genomes that scientists could pick up on, either.

With so many people across the world falling sick, governments ordered their citizens to stay at home. The seaside village where we lived beside the sea, usually bustling with tourists who came to see the whales, became a ghost town. Many moved out while they still could, seeking family in the city, trying to escape the illness that had so many in our village in thrall. And so the world became divided into two – the healthy and the sick. My mother and I on one side of the chasm, my sister on the other. Fighting desperately to bring her over.

Until my mother left me to continue the fight alone.

The sun hangs low in the sky when I emerge from the water's edge. I pad back into the house, trying to make as little noise as possible. My sister is in our shared room – asleep, judging by the slow rising and falling of her chest. Every breath is a battle in a war she cannot win. I pause by the door, assessing her condition. Curled up like a shell, her body looks even frailer. Her breathing seems slightly easier, though, and at least she isn't coughing. Perhaps the medication is working, although it's too early to tell.

My sister stirs, eyes fluttering open. A faint smile spreads across her lips when she sees me.

‘Hi, Pearl,’ she whispers.

I place a hand on her forehead. ‘No fever? How are you feeling today?’

‘Better,’ she lies. Always the optimist. Her hair lies in a limp, knotted mass above her head, and I smooth through the tangles.

‘Have our groceries come this week?’

I pause. ‘No, but I’m sure they’ll be here soon.’

I don’t tell her that the deliveries stopped two weeks ago, and I don’t expect them to resume anytime soon. After our mother left, as two minors living on our own, we had regular visits from concerned neighbors and social welfare officials who made sure we were okay. Then the neighbors left, so it was down to the weekly visit by a frazzled official who dropped off supplies for us, which morphed into a haggard deliveryman who just knocked once and left the food outside the door, and now that appears to be a thing of the past too. I don’t blame them – when countries collapse, their welfare systems are usually the first to go. But I am concerned about how we will obtain food from now on.

She frowns. ‘Okay. Want to read with me?’ The books *Robinson Crusoe*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *Whale Rider* lie untouched by her bedside. Before my mother left, she used to read to my sister, predictably books with an aquatic theme. I was far too old to be read to, but I would join in by making sound effects for the ocean, and mimicking dramatic music at certain key moments, much to my sister’s delight.

‘Maybe later. You should rest,’ I tell her.

‘How was the haul today?’ she queries weakly.

‘Not that great, but it’ll do,’ I reply. I step out of the room, and for a moment, my vision blurs.

Perhaps I should explain further. The haul my sister was talking about doesn’t refer to fish, in case you were wondering. She was talking about seaweed. Which also happens to be her only chance of survival.

Part of my mother’s research found that a particular type of seaweed, found in our waters, was resistant to certain pathogens. When the new disease emerged, she injected it into seaweed cells, and found that the disease simply had no effect. This seemed like a promising breakthrough at first, but there were a lot of complications getting it to human trials – the hospital wouldn’t allow their sick patients to undergo tests. Yet my mother

was determined to press on, for my sister's sake. So she struck an arrangement with a group of willing doctors and researchers – she would provide them with seaweed for their work on developing a cure. In exchange, they would give us medication for my sister.

Even after my mother disappeared, I honored this agreement. I drop off bags of the seaweed in a designated locker outside the research facility, collect the medicine in its place. Every morning, I go to the ocean and gather seaweed. When I return, I clean it meticulously, get rid of the salt and detritus clinging to it, pack it carefully away. Then I prepare food for my sister, give her the medicine, lay out her clothes, shower her while she perches on a stool, trying to exercise the parts of her body that haven't been paralyzed yet. Sometimes, I read to her, try to keep her mind from atrophying too. I haven't attended school, either physically or online – all classes moved online once the disease broke out – since my mother disappeared. It was too difficult to concentrate on my studies and take care of my sister simultaneously, and the authorities had too much on their plate, with the spread of the disease, to check on me. The few friends I had left for the cities with their families, and we soon drifted apart. I cling to my daily routine obstinately – it's the only hope I have of keeping my sister alive. Of keeping us both alive.

My mother named me Pearl after the old pearl divers, or *ama*, in Japan. Usually women, they would get up before the crack of dawn to dive into the sea and bring back oysters and other shellfish. Armed with no breathing apparatus except the strength of their lungs, and traditionally clad only in a white loincloth, they could dive for up to four hours at a time. The crown jewel of their pursuits, though, was finding a pearl in an oyster. Such a find would ensure their families were fed for weeks.

Pearls are fascinating things. When an irritant intrudes inside the oyster, the oyster coats it with countless layers of nacre, more commonly known as mother-of-pearl. As years pass, a glistening pearl is formed.

I think about this a lot. How an insignificant particle could transform into something so prized, after thousands upon thousands of layers. Refined by adversity, purified through pain. Of course, no one asked the oyster if it would like to have its tender inner layers violated. Or how it felt knowing its pain was insignificant, a sacrifice for the greater good. But I digress. Who thinks about the feelings of shellfish?

Like the *ama*, I rise before dawn to enter the ocean. The currents are weaker then, and it's less likely that I will be pulled out to sea. Once again, I slide under the waves, let the water envelop me. Kick once, twice, propelling myself away.

The seaweed in question isn't located far from the shore. There's a cluster that grows on a rocky ledge at the edge of the reef. As I approach, their leafy fronds undulate, dancing to the rhythm of the sea. I grab the knife I brought, begin severing them at their roots.

My mother taught us how to swim, of course. How to streamline your body so you slice through the water effortlessly. How to kick with just the right amount of force. And later on, how to dive like the *ama*, needing nothing but the air in our lungs. We would dive together, plunging into the ocean's depths while my sister kept a watchful eye above. Down, down, feeling the caress of water against skin, seeing the colour of the ocean change as the sun receded further and further away. Past around fifteen metres, buoyancy reverses – the pressure underwater changes, and instead of being pushed to the surface, the diver is pulled down. The ocean stops resisting the intrusion, welcomes us into her embrace.

My mother would point out strange and wonderful things on these dives – hedges of translucent sea anemones, schools of minnows which darted around our feet, brilliantly coloured coral rising from the sea bed. Even in its polluted state, the ocean was still beautiful.

What I liked most of all, though, was the feeling of weightlessness. The ocean folding us into her womb, defying the laws of gravity. My mother, opposite me, mirroring each stroke as we pressed deeper. Then, finally, the ascent, as we burst back to the surface to see the anxiety on my sister's face melt away. Lying on our backs, the three of us would paddle in lazy circles around each other, laughing at some joke my sister was telling. This is the one image I most wish I could freeze, preserve against the erosion of time. Our laughter, peeling like siren song, echoing against the waves.

I rip one of the seaweed fronds away from its base too furiously, and it slips from my grasp, spiraling into the depths below. My eyes sting, and I try to control myself from shaking.

The day my mother left was like any other. It was still dark when I heard her step into her wellingtons, getting ready for her usual dive to collect seaweed. For some reason, that day I stirred from slumber, opened my eyes. 'Don't go,' I murmured, still in the grip of sleep. Perhaps some sixth sense in me knew what she did not, could not. That the recent storm had made the tides much stronger, impossible to combat. That, ever defiant, she would try anyway. My mother smiled, making a soothing motion with her hands. 'Go back to sleep. I'll be back soon.'

She never returned. A search party was sent out for her body two days later, but they returned empty-handed. A part of me was glad. In my mind's eye I could still see her riding the crests of the waves, exultant.

When I return to our house, there's a strange car parked outside. As I walk up to the front door, a bespectacled man emerges from the car, followed by a younger woman in a white coat. 'Pearl?' The man queries, striding towards me.

'I'm from the Omelas research facility. I'm sure you're familiar with it?' He smiles, but there is no warmth.

'Why did you come here?' I respond, my skin prickling with apprehension.

He hesitates just a fraction. 'Let's go inside.'

I lead them into our house, watch them fidget as their eyes roam their surroundings, as they try to find their words.

Finally the man speaks. 'Are you aware of the arrangement we had with your mother?'

'Yes. I've been placing the seaweed in the designated area, and taking the medication placed there for months now. Is there an issue?'

The woman bites her lip, leans forward.

'Do you know how your mother passed away, Pearl?'

A lump forms in the back of my throat. 'She went diving for seaweed one day, and the current took her,' I state blankly.

Now the woman is shaking her head, gently but firmly. 'Pearl... your mother didn't go to the ocean that day. She came to our research facility. She had been coming to our research facility for months, as one of our test subjects. You see, we were making considerable progress with the cure, and your mother volunteered to have us carry out trials on her. When we did, we found something startling – your mother had contracted the disease as well, but it had no effect on her. We think she developed immunity somehow.'

My body is trembling violently; I make no attempt to conceal it. 'Is my mother still alive?'

They exchange glances. 'Your mother gave her life to the cause, Pearl. One of the trials was... unsuccessful, and we couldn't save her,' the woman murmurs.

The room spins, and I press my head into my hands. So, everything I knew about my mother's death is a lie. She didn't go to the sea that day. She didn't die in her element,

in the ocean she loved; she died in a clinical room with white walls, fighting to breathe. And me – how was I so blind to what was going on? How could she not have told me?

The man chimes in. ‘Your mother gave us your DNA samples, and you display even higher levels of immunity to the disease. Based on the levels of the virus present in your blood, you should be comatose, and yet you’re...’ he breaks off, gestures at me. ‘Completely fine.’

‘We believe we’re on the verge of a breakthrough, Pearl. But we need your help,’ the woman pronounces.

‘So you killed my mother by experimenting on her. And you want to kill me too?’ I retort.

The man shifts in his seat. ‘We want to be completely transparent with you. There are always... uncertainties in such research. We’ll take all necessary precautions, of course. But you have to understand that, as with every experiment, there will be at times be failures, as much as we hope otherwise. This is a trade-off we have to make, given the unknowns about the disease, and the desperate need for a cure. If we succeed, we will save countless lives, but along the way, casualties may be unpreventable.’

‘What’s in it for me? Why should I help you, knowing I could die in the process?’

‘Your participation could lead to a cure for the world. You would be doing mankind a great service,’ he blusters.

The woman interrupts him. ‘Perhaps more importantly to you, Pearl, we propose a new arrangement for your sister.’

I can feel my body tensing. ‘My sister?’

‘If you choose to come with us for testing, she’ll be housed in one of our recovery homes, and we’ll take good care of her. She’ll receive medication daily, and she’ll have other residents for company.’ The woman pauses. ‘And when we succeed in producing the cure, your sister will be one of the first to receive it.’

I’ve read about these recovery homes; they’re notoriously hard to secure a place in, but renowned for their gold standard of health care. It’s a bargain, then, similar to what my mother must have struck with them. A life for a life.

‘We can’t be the only ones who have developed immunity. Why are you choosing me?’

‘It’s rarer than you might think, actually. We suspect it has something to do with interaction with the ocean. You’re not the only one left, but...’ she hesitates, and I

understand. It's much easier to take someone with only an invalid sister and perform tests on them. No guardian to protect them, to protest the ridiculousness of it all.

Something shifts in the woman's face, and for a moment she seems younger, more vulnerable. Her breath catches. 'I'm a mother, Pearl. My daughter is sick as well.' I stare into her eyes, and I see this woman cupping her limp daughter's tiny hand in hers, tears streaming down her face. I imagine her bending down to kiss her daughter's forehead, vowing to do everything she can to save her daughter's life.

'Give me a while to think about it,' I say.

The man stands up. 'We'll come back in a day.'

A few weeks after my mother disappeared, I found myself besieged by strange visions. At night, I stared up at the ceiling, too afraid to allow myself to dream. When the inexorable pull of sleep finally won, I dreamt of myself swimming out at sea, but further than I had ever been before. This time, I didn't return. I saw myself landing on a distant island, bedraggled, exhausted. I saw myself taken in by small, bird-like women, wearing only white loincloths, but with smiles as dazzling as the sun. Then I saw myself, with no trace of fatigue, emerging from their huts, laughing with them. Plunging with them into the sea, as if I'd done it all my life. Emerging not with handfuls of seaweed, but oysters, brimming with pearls.

After these visions, I went into the ocean, remaining there for a longer time, treading water, trying to forget. Trying to get rid of the weight pressing on my shoulders, pushing me under. On multiple occasions, I tried to dive further than I ever had before, the pressure ringing in my ears, blotting out my eyesight; the pain mounting until it was almost unbearable. Each time, my reflexes kicked in, and I hurtled back to the surface, gasping for air.

On one occasion I've tried my hardest to erase from memory, I tiptoed into my sister's room, stood there motionless, just gazing at her. A thought flashed across my mind – how easy it would be to lay a pillow across her face, muffle her breathing. Like snuffing out a candle. I recall clutching the pillow to my chest, so forcefully I could hear my own heartbeat. Knuckles clenched, poised for action. Then she shifted, murmured while still asleep. 'Pearl. Pearl.'

I barely made it to the bathroom before throwing up all over the floor.

I relive these memories while watching the tide, perched on a rock at the edge of the ocean. My thoughts are whirling around in a frenzy. Like minnows chased by a shark,

my mother would have said. For as long as I can remember, my life has been here, by the ocean, with my mother and my sister. When my mother disappeared, I knew I had to assume her responsibilities, had to be both mother and sister. I've never considered any other option.

Once again, I slip into the ocean, let the water calm me. I swim slowly but resolutely forward. How easy it would be to fulfil my fantasy, I think. To swim far, far, away and never return. I could find a distant island somewhere, forage for food like the *ama*. Leave this life behind. Begin anew, alone.

I am farther out than I've ever been before when I hear a familiar sound, and see a black shape rising beneath me. It's a humpback whale – no – three humpback whales. A mother and her calf, and an older juvenile whale. They surround me, vocalizing gently. *Humpback whales are part of matriarchal societies, and the calf usually stays with its mother for about a year until weaned*, I hear my mother say. An older juvenile is an odd sight at this time of the year, hanging around the mother and new calf. I look at the humpback whales, and I see, once again, the dinghy floating in the middle of the ocean, three figures inside, pointing excitedly at the whales. I see the flash of their grins, hear their laughter pealing.

I think of my mother, taking her last breaths in an unfamiliar room. How she must have known, all along, what her decision would have entailed. Working tirelessly to harvest the seaweed, even as she journeyed to the research facility alone. Hiding her growing fatigue from the barrage of tests behind a ready smile, in an effort to spare us from the truth.

The juvenile inches closer, and I look into its eye, as large as a baseball. In it I see endless possibilities, dancing just within reach. For the first time, I also see, with perfect clarity, the only one I can choose.

I swim with the humpback whales for what seems like an eternity. When I feel my limbs growing weary, the whales escort me back to shore, humming in unison. I sense their presence, back in the ocean, as I clamber across the rocks.

Before dawn breaks the next morning, I climb out of bed, take one last look at my sister's face. She stirs from slumber, mumbles my name. 'Pearl?' I smooth her hair.

'Want me to tell you that story?' I ask.

I don't pick up any of the books by her bedside, though. Instead, I tell her about a family of female pearl divers. Who live on a distant island in the sea, and spend their days

plunging into the ocean, foraging for food and seeking oysters. I tell her about how their livelihood is threatened by pirates, who deplete the ocean of its stocks and dredge up all the oysters. About how the pearl divers rally together to stop them, chase them away from their island.

My sister yawns, indicating I'm putting her to sleep. 'I'm going out into the ocean, okay?' I whisper.

'Stay safe,' she murmurs.

'I will,' I reassure her, and turn away quickly, blinking furiously.

The car is waiting for me outside. As I get into the back seat, I look at the ocean. The waves are unusually violent today, rising in white crests, crashing on to the rocks. In the distance, I think I see the whales, raising their flippers in salutation.

I focus my attention on the waves, note the constancy of their motion. How the tide may go out, but always comes back in. How the waves always return to the shore.

As we drive away, the sun rises, a gleaming pearl ascending. Casting shadows on the sea's endless expanse.

Army of Shadows

Lucy Thynne

Rennes, 1942

She first finds out about the army from Léo, at school. The Germans have been in the city for two years now, and their presence is natural to her; she sees a swastika flag hanging from a window and it makes sense that it is there. The day Léo tells her, she is eighteen and the month is October, the air outside still warm from summer.

When he tells her about the army, her mouth makes an ‘o’ of surprise. She is careful in how she chooses her words, knowing that anything she says is forbidden and should be swallowed away again.

‘These people exist, then?’ she says.

‘What do you think?’ Léo whispers back, in his scornful way, and she feels stupid but at once curious. ‘Of course they exist. They work in the shadows. And they need more of us,’ he says.

They are sitting in the playground at school and around them, the younger pupils are running in circles, chasing a girl with pigtails. Louise and Léo are among the last of the eighteen year olds still left at school, a fact they feel keenly, with most of their friends either working in family businesses or no longer able to afford the full school fees. Louise finds that her boredom is becoming so acute, she now spends entire lessons trying to remember how it was before the war. It feels important to her to be able to reconstruct everything with depth and clarity: the buildings, the teachers... to even remember the exactitude of her own self – did she think differently? Look differently? She doesn’t know, and this – the not knowing – unnerves her.

‘Well, do you want to join or not?’ says Léo.

‘Are you a part of it?’

He laughs. ‘My family has been in the Resistance for a year already, Louise.’

She knows that his laugh is not from smugness. It is more one of amazement – that his family could have been in this army for a year, and that he is still here, sitting on a bench and having this conversation with her. But, for a second, Louise imagines what it would be like to hear the words ‘resistance’ and ‘army’ before the war. They are words that would seem so foreign, ones that someone had copied out from a history textbook

and never would have mentioned to her in conversation. She looks around quickly, and then asks him what kind of things his family does.

Léo scans the playground too. ‘My father and I take messages,’ he says, ‘and my mother delivers spare bread from the bakery to the men in charge. And Sophie sometimes slashes car tyres on her way to school, with a penknife.’

Louise nods. She has heard of these things happening, but they seemed to belong to a different life, one that would never cross over with her own.

‘We’re actually planning something bigger at the moment, though,’ he says, dropping his voice to a whisper. ‘To sabotage the arrival of the Nazi generals next week.’

There has been talk of this in the town. All that Louise wants, suddenly, is to lie down; the idea of discussing something forbidden is exhausting, and makes her tongue feel heavy and strange with the weight of it. She asks Léo what he means by sabotage, exactly.

‘No one gets hurt,’ he says quickly. ‘But we’ll blow up the tracks at the Gare de Rennes on Friday, half an hour before they’re scheduled to get here.’

‘And it’s just you doing this?’

‘Well, if you want to join,’ he says, ‘your help would be useful. But it can only be two of us. Too many people and then it’s more likely that someone gets caught.’

She considers this for a second and tries to imagine herself as a person who blows up railway tracks. It feels so far beyond her that she wants to laugh out loud hysterically, partly because the idea is so crazy to her, and partly because she knows she will agree. Ever since the Germans arrived in their city, she has watched them with an interest she does not know how to explain to herself, let alone to Léo. They are other people, different to the locals, but they are also the same. They joke with each other about the same things and keep pictures of wives and children from back home in their uniforms. They speak with a confidence and authority she cannot remember hearing in a French person, but to Louise, they are still the same. The fact that they must think and feel – or even just that the mechanisms of their body must work in the same way – angers her, and the intensity of the anger scares her: the idea that a person can see difference where she only sees similarity.

Maybe she has always wanted to blow up a train track, to reduce something to nothing. On the bench now, with Léo, she tells him that she will help him. Even when she thinks back on this moment, it will seem unimaginable that she said yes. Her mouth

says the words ahead of her thoughts, and now, her hands will shake and only become still again in the evening.

For the rest of the week, Louise can think of nothing but the plan. She will meet Léo after school on Friday and they will walk to the main train station, only slightly deviating from their normal route to their houses. The explosives will be waiting for them in the bushes behind the station, in knapsacks left there by the Resistance. They will climb the fence a mile down the railway and line up the explosives there, like organs under the ribcage of the tracks. And then they will make themselves into nothing, and tell no one where they have been or what they have done.

At home, Louise watches her parents at the dinner table and considers telling them what she is going to do. Somehow, she feels she owes them this. When she was younger, she used to think her mother could read her mind, but when she realised that this could not actually be true, she became obsessed with telling her mother about any thought that occurred to her, no matter how strange. It felt important to give the thoughts to someone else. Eventually her mother became so irritated with Louise's constant talking that she gave her a diary, and persuaded her to write them down instead.

'You can trap your thoughts here,' she'd said. 'It doesn't make them any less real.'

But Louise soon gave up with the diary – she couldn't articulate in writing what she felt, and she always felt slightly too self-conscious, writing as if it would be read by another person.

Now, the plan ticks through her mind in its logical order. She becomes annoyed at herself whenever she confuses the different stages, as if it has happened in real life and not just in her mind.

If she tells her parents about the plan, they will persuade her not to do it. Louise both wants this to happen and also knows she will regret it. Léo would feel let down. She imagines saying the words out loud – what she is going to do – and the thought is unbearable to her.

Sometimes, her mother catches her eye at the table, and she has to look away. The belief that her mother can read her mind is still there, at least partly, even though she knows this cannot not be possible. Instead, she says how good the food is and her parents smile.

When they finish dinner, she kisses them on both cheeks and walks upstairs to bathe before sleeping. In bed, her hair is wet and drips around her shoulders as if it is summer and she has just been swimming in the town river.

On Friday, she wakes up early before the rest of the house and pads downstairs to the kitchen. The whole situation she has got herself into feels accidental, like her body was possessed by another person entirely when she agreed. It occurs to her, suddenly, that Léo was probably not even thinking in this way – he had been part of the Resistance for over a year now. Louise thinks back on this fact and tries to remember seeing Léo in classes, searching for some kind of sign that he was different. If anything, he always seemed rule-abiding to her, even pious. *German-lover*, she would have called him in her head. When they were younger, Léo’s mother invited Louise over so that they could bake bread together in his family home – small white loaves that were easy to shape as children, kneaded and then put in the oven. Louise remembers not wanting to go, already self-conscious about herself as a girl going to a boy’s house, even if innocently. She had always preferred to play with boys than girls in her class – they were less complicated, easier to compete with – but lately she’d understood that it was strange to feel this way.

Her mother instead told her that she had already accepted the invitation, so bad luck, Louise. ‘Sometimes you have to do things you don’t want to do,’ she’d said. Louise thinks of all of this, but she has forgotten what Léo’s face looked like as a boy. All she can really remember is her mother’s voice.

The school day passes so slowly that Louise almost thinks someone has been playing with the clock. She does multiplication and division, solving equations in neat chunks down the page, and not for the first time, Louise feels she is learning a language that she will never use again.

Léo tells her halfway through their history lesson that her hands are shaking, and that she should control them.

‘What if I can’t?’

‘“Can’t” doesn’t even come into this,’ he says. ‘You have to.’

‘Léo, you could try being a little more sympathetic, you know.’

Her voice comes out more aggressively than she meant it to be, and she regrets speaking so loudly. The teacher is looking over at them, but she is surprised to see that Léo is not hurt, or offended. He looks genuinely sorry, and says he is too.

‘Louise, if you don’t want to today,’ he says in a lower voice, ‘I can get my sister to help instead. You can go home. I mean it.’

The ease with which he offers up Sophie, who is two years younger, and has been involved in this far longer than she, strangely calms her. ‘No,’ she tells him. ‘I’ll do it.’

The anxiety of the afternoon starts to leave her, becoming less loud in her head and more of a slow thud at the back of her brain. Her palms only tingle when she moves from lesson to lesson, and do not shake. All around her, the younger children chatter as they move into classrooms, their knapsacks so huge that they look like curious insects with shells. When the bell rings at the end of the day, she catches Léo’s eye and smiles, as if to say, ‘I am ready’ – a mantra she says both to him and for herself. He tells her quietly that he will meet her at the Gare de Rennes instead. It will be less suspicious than if they walk there together.

When Louise gets to the station, she finds the knapsacks in the bushes easily and waits. Everyone who passes is looking at her, she thinks. No. She is being paranoid, no one is really looking. She counts the bricks along the wall outside the station, drawing circles in the dust at her feet with her toes. The trees hang overhead like swaying lanterns, the light streaming through the green. For once, her city feels beautiful to her, more vulnerable.

Her mother will be beginning to wonder where she is. But she’ll have more sense than to call the authorities, Louise thinks. Or maybe she’s got that wrong, and her mother will, but it will be impossible to trace her to here; not even her mother would be able to guess.

Where is Léo? He is fifteen minutes late already, going on twenty. It will be dark in a couple of hours and the trees will look more like people than trees. Her eyes search as far as her vision can go for the shape of Léo, anything that will tell her that he is coming, and that she hasn’t made a mistake after all.

Twenty minutes have passed by now and Louise realises that she will have to do it all alone. She can’t leave the knapsacks in the bushes. What if someone finds them? She feels sure that they would be traced back to her – people have already seen her waiting here. They are just about manageable to carry, anyway, and she puts both of them on to her back quickly, making as little noise as she can. She feels too hot under her clothes and thinks about what it will feel like to slip into a cold bath at home. The image feels

possible to her, and not beyond reach. She keeps walking, cursing Léo in her head. She has never been so angry with another person until now.

At the tracks, she climbs a tree overhead and drops silently on to the other side of the fence. As a child, she was the best tree climber in all of Rennes, and it has come back to her naturally. Each foothold is made for her, presenting itself with an obviousness that would escape most people. Everything in the knapsack is there, and her hands are ready; she knows she needs to work quickly so that she can make herself scarce.

Her body knows what to do. The movements are so instinctual that she feels like a moving train, the sky ahead of her like a long blue arc – a spilled drink on paper. Her father is an electrician and has always taught Louise everything he knows, showing her from childhood how to connect fuses and change light bulbs, fix car engines and disconnect wires. *Take the lead, a voice says to her, and connect it to the other one.*

Wrap it around the main circuit. Make an incision here, for the current to flow. It is like gutting a fish, or an animal. Her fingers make knots between the wires as if she is her mother sewing at home, stiller than they have been all day. No one is out here; it is quiet. Louise knows she is not being watched, but still feels that she is watching herself. She has never made something so dangerous before – she can only think of holding a match when lighting candles at home; the first time it occurred to her what she could do with the flame. Now, there is the sense that she is doing this alone, but it is a moment she will remember long afterwards, and it feels strange to her that she is living through it.

The explosives are connected. She has finished.

Look at that, Léo, she thinks to herself. Look what you have left me to do by myself.

It won't be until Monday that she discovers the Germans have taken Léo. Only then will she allow herself to think back on what she has done – that she climbed down the tree, her house in sight. That very faintly, there was the sound of an explosion behind her and the city fell quiet again afterwards, as if unsure of what to do with the noise. That birds squawked, flying upwards and then settling. Now, Louise keeps walking and watches the length of her shadow stretching out ahead of her, made longer and thinner with the setting sun.

2020 marks eighty years since the beginning of the French Occupation.

Southbound Bison

Jared Israel

The trouble with a fellow set on finding fresh ground and new leaves to turn is that, nine times out of ten, he just cannot help but carry the old patch with him. That old patch of grass sticks to the feet, and it stains. One bad move left Henry Watson stained – so much so that he had a no-good debt to pay to a no-good man; that he had to get himself even more tarnished just to save what little skin he had; that every soul in the plains and hills below the great Rockies knew his name, and they all called him Hank.

He always thought earnestness and quiet reservation were virtues of a good man, and when he broke from the latter he found himself on the wrong end of what was meant to be a good deed – a good deed for a friend, and for a county in need of some good deeds. He never blamed Leonard for it, and he never would have been able to forgive him for it anyway.

Roclare County sat in the shade of big-headed outlaws living the fashionable way of evil, a way made walkable by a man called Conkler and his cunning way of ventriloquizing the county lawmen. Leonard brought his old friend along to ride against those bandits, and so they did, at the expense of Leonard's life and his friend's marked respect of quietude.

Hank had some trouble already – he was good at what he did. So much so that Conkler kept him from the coyotes and stuck him on his roster with the understanding that any misstep would earn him a bull-big price on his head. With this in mind, Hank went about the natural way of the wild western world, dog-eat-dog and all.

This path led Hank to a rocky railroad tunnel lined at its mouth with dynamite and men seeking plunder. He, being indentured and dispensable, was set at the tunnel's side with the blasting plunger. Marcus and Mallory, who stayed behind Hank to keep him in line, said the train would be coming soon. Hank knew well what he was meant to do, but he had a high hope of skipping town which he kept close to his heart, and with that he hatched a better idea.

The train came rolling along in the distant plains, the smoke rising higher as it drew nearer, the mountain silence breaking as it chugged forth. Mallory began to signal the countdown. On three, Hank grasped the plunger, and on two, he set his hand on his gun. When the moment was called to blow the charge, he remained still. 'Now, Hank, now!' they called to him, but the time had passed; blowing the charge at that point

would certainly destroy the train, but loot in wreckage seemed better than none at all. Marcus and Mallory charged toward him as the train came closer, and the wind whipped Hank around to meet their gaze with his pistol lighting off twice as he slapped the hammer and pulled the trigger. He stepped atop a high rock and halted two more bandits with hot lead before they could reach the plunger. Recognizing the perfect moment, if ever there could have been one, he leapt into a rear car of coal and took one more shot at a blur of a man before the car rolled into the tunnel's shade, before he felt the arm he had cracked on impact, before the dynamite crumbled the hillside and everything turned to utter darkness. The train still rolled, though, and the next light he saw would mean certain redemption.

Time and time again, Hank would prove himself to be a man of upstanding character, before his foray into the fracas of bandits and after. When he was in it, his idea of that upstanding character had to morph and fit the mold made by greedy men, so much so that he had nearly forgotten where his character truly stood, or rather, he refused to recognize what it had become – what *he* had become. The ceiling of the tunnel brightened, and soon an instantaneous flood of sunlight shocked him. With a grunt, he rolled up and rubbed his eyes with his coal-covered hands then steadied them on the pines of the great mountain ridges ahead. It was autumn, and one could hear the life of the mountains and plains preparing to head south for winter. On fresh, new ground came the chance to restore the man he made before.

Hank knew the train had reached the southern end of the range, and that if it kept on much longer, he would soon be sailing smooth over state lines into New Mexico. He twirled his speckled brown mustache, then blackened by the coal lining his fingers, thinking only of what he could do to get himself a horse; a horse, and what direction he would set off in to set himself up. Exactly what sort of life he would make, he did not know. He had been a logger, a crude carpenter, and a vigilante turned crook – reprising any of these occupations was out of the question. *Where could a man go, he thought, to just find a little peace of mind?* Before now, he had wandered from one town to the next wondering, and soon he came to set up with Leonard – Lenny Loose Law, they called him, on account of his being a bad bounty hound to the Roclare County sheriff. Giving Lenny a helping hand came naturally to Hank, and that natural knack ultimately led him to lay in a rocking train-car on a bed of coal. He always pushed west, but this time he felt something lucky about heading southbound.

Hank grew tired of mucking himself up in that coal car and resolved to move up the train. Steadying himself on two feet in the rushing winds, he dashed over a few cars of minerals while the train twisted through the brush-laden canyons, and he did so with little aid from his cracked left arm. Having found a car with an interior opening, he climbed down, slowly and with thought, so as not to roll the dice on his one good arm. Once inside, he rested on several bolts of dense cloth and brushed his face clean; his canvas trousers and leather jacket were soot-black, but his dark boots seemed just the same as always. He began to drift into a much-needed sleep, after a late night of warm whisky and having a newfound ease in his migration to that sought-after quietude of life. He slept for seven station stops; overnight, he had passed the state line and three settleable New Mexican towns before waking. By the bone-dry boondock plains and the western plateau, Hank knew he had truly gone south, and that he would alight as soon as possible. However, that proved more complicated than he had considered it to be, as the train came to a fairly abrupt stop in the middle of nowhere. The brim of Hank's wide hat poked out of the cargo hold, and he gazed up the train to find no town in sight, and no conductor to question. This seemed all too familiar to him. He checked on the lone bullet in his gun and then his boots thudded on to the dusty grass below. The clamor of ruffians could be heard ahead, and immediately Hank felt his heart pound; with an unprecedented panic, he wondered if Conkler's men could have caught up that quickly. He thought it to be impossible, but he knew no other explanation – unless that train was exceedingly coveted by the notoriously no-good.

With one bullet in his barrel, Hank had no intention of dealing with Conkler's men. He ducked into a cargo hold when he spotted their horses coming around the cowcatcher. Then, thudding out of the wagon, they sauntered toward the cars of interest. Whether they wanted gold ore or good furs, Hank did not know; he could never be sure what it was they were after, even when he was after it with them. His heart kept pounding like a steel drum off its kilter – if they got a hold of him, those men would end him, and he would die as the bandit rather than the man himself. Frozen in fear, a state so foreign to him, he stayed hidden away. He leaned against a crate and slid the top back, uncovering thick fur hides; another crate held some fanciful fabrics Hank never felt before, slick and warm to the touch with a velvety sheen. The car in which he stood would certainly be looted, and he would have to be, too. The sudden crack of a revolver gave him a start; he peered out to find those men doing away with the conductor, which meant that the train would never make it to its destination unscathed in any case, so

Hank hatched a plan as he heard the weighty spurs of bandit boots clanging closer and closer. He struck a match on his pouch and set the bottom furs ablaze, leading the flame rapidly upward, heating the iron framework like a skillet. Nonsensical ramblings in a circus-like clamor came from the bandits, and they dashed to the burning car as Hank slipped out the other side. With his pistol drawn, he ran to the engine in the hope of taking a horse from their wagon in the commotion, only to be halted by a burly, stubbled man of sharp-eye toting a Winchester repeater. They gathered around Hank, four of them in total, and he then knew well that they were no men of Conkler's roster, but instead seemed to be some rough drifters. One of them, a fair-haired lanky man with no front teeth, yelped a little laugh and pressed the barrel of his gun to Hank's head.

'Quit it, Pete,' another blurted, jumping back, 'you'll get us all messy.'

'Hold on, ain't that the fella from the poster in Albuquerque last night?'

'You done said it four times about the wrong fella now, Robert,' Pete chuckled, 'now shut it. You too, Polo – what you care about messing up them rags for anyway?'

'I'm serious, boys, this one's really the fella,' Robert insisted with urgency, obviously rarely earning the true attention of his cohorts. He seemed to Hank to be the only moderately sane one among them.

'This one looks more like it,' Polo added. Pete finally lowered the pistol.

'There's no bounty on me,' Hank declared, his voice gruff and determined.

'Oh, yes there is,' Robert retorted, picking a leaf of paper from a saddlebag on a mare. 'See, that's him – that's Hank Watson.' The goons looked hungrily at the sum on the paper, then up to Hank's mossy eyes, and grinned.

'That can't be,' said Hank, snatching the paper from Robert's rein-worn hand. It was true, it had his face on it and all. The Bernalillo sheriff had issued it, and it promised five hundred dollars for Hank Watson on account of armed locomotive robbery in Colorado. Conkler really knew how to work the law – how to pull the strings, and how to do it fast.

'Tie his hands, Reilly,' Pete said softly with a keen smirk. The big fellow with the Winchester readied his rope. 'What do you say, boys, bring him into Socorro and keep moving?' Together they uttered a mighty woot, and just like that, Hank had changed hands.

Luck favored Hank when he needed it most, but his current situation begged luck in all its forms and did not yet bring it. He lay in the wagon with the loot, lounging far too

comfortably in drape upon drape of fine fabric. The horse which Reilly rode caught Hank's eye – a beautiful Azteca of pale spotted chestnut with a dense mane and wide eyes. If he were to take one of the horses, if he should get the chance, he would take her and he knew it.

They rode for a day in the calm autumn sun and eventually camped several miles outside Socorro. Hank never thought he would be awaiting a jail cell, but as he lay in the tall sandy grass gazing up at the stars, he thought only of that. The drifters sat around the fire which they struggled like fools to start, and they drank. They drank and drank, drawing from the stash in their loot. Hank stayed quiet, watched the fire with the brim of his hat pulled low, and listened. They had come in from Kansas, that much was clear by the talk they led – the talk which made Hank chuckle silently at times, the times when they argued or debated something which they were all wrong about. He wondered how they had made it so far.

The drifters, being sufficiently drunk, began to lay hides out to sleep on while Hank rested against a tree. Pete, who must have been a fairly paranoid man, collected every gun and bullet in the camp before they slept. The rest of them seemed to run by his word. They began to speak in hushed tones, glancing occasionally at Hank, who kept his eyes shut but his ears open.

‘Shut it, Polo,’ Pete growled.

‘He's asleep, anyhow,’ said Polo, ‘just look at him.’ Hank lay still, carefully appearing restful. He began to breathe deeply, almost snoring but not quite – a nice touch.

‘Hand me that map, you pinhead,’ Pete went on, snatching some tattered paper from Polo.

‘We should be able to get to Las Cruces in a few days,’ Robert stated, ‘if we keep moving and don't stick around in Socorro, that is.’

‘How far out from Las Cruces is it buried?’ asked Robert.

‘It's not buried,’ Reilly grumbled, ‘it's hidden in a cave, ain't it?’

‘A'course it ain't buried,’ Polo jeered, ‘it'd get lost, washed away in the Grande – you think Cap'n Jack was that dumb?’

‘Polo, shut your mouth,’ Pete hissed over the crackling fire. ‘Map don't say specifically, we'll have to try any cave around the town.’

‘That'll take days to find,’ Polo whined.

‘But we'll find it,’ Pete assured, ‘and we'll be rich.’

Hank lay awake for a while after that talk, thinking about just how dumb it was. Captain Jack, the legendary Gulf pirate and card-sharp, probably never truly existed. His name passed in whispers through the tales of old and superstitious folks. He was the talk of bars, late-night ramblings – nothing to be taken with more than a grain of salt. Hank saw that these drifters, however, seemed to think they had a grasp on the captain's long-lost treasure. He was the only one awake at that point, and looking around at his captors, he pondered a plan.

Come morning, they were off in the same manner as the day before, Hank sprawled over the hides with his hat hiding his head. They were about half an hour out from Socorro when Hank finally spoke. He told them he had to share something important, just to prevent it from getting into the wrong hands. They listened lazily at first, but once Hank sparked the name Captain Jack through his teeth, they listened sharply. 'You know where it is?' they asked suspiciously, but upon Hank's cunning description of his ability to find the exact cave, and how he could not map it for them but rather had to show them, they considered what the most valuable path would be. Once settled, this path bought Hank some time.

The drifters dropped into Socorro to exchange their loot for some cash. They only sold it to the bad types and regular folks, so as to avoid any suspicious clerks who might have been tipped off about the robbery. Robert watched Hank on the outskirts and made certain that no one from town could see his face; they were keen to keep their treasure-hunting guide.

Being then stocked sufficiently, they rode for days. They headed south, riding most of the day, and once night fell, they would drink and play cards, or whatever suited them in the moment. Hank never said much and that began to bother the drifters. He tried to act more like one of them in the hope of convincing them that he was a scumbag, too. However, in attempting this, Hank came upon a realization he had never wanted to hit: he was a drifter, just like them. He never committed any crimes of his own volition, but he thought then that perhaps there was little difference between a man out for loot and those out to stop him from getting it.

Being a cunning man of good character, a man who had made the acquaintance of plenty of people in plenty of places, Hank won their trust within those riding days.

The drifters seemed to like him, so much so that they unbound his hands and decided to have a little fun on what was the last night they would have to camp before getting into Las Cruces.

A trading post lay at the riverside of the Grande, a quiet spot where folks heading into America traded with folks heading down to Mexico, where native people traded horses for those from the far south. It was peaceful, and the drifters wanted to rough it up for more cash, but mostly just to rob a thrill. Hank wanted to put a stop to it – to put a stop to evil once more before vanishing into a life of quietude. They camped near the post with the idea of hitting it the next morning, and with the sheer excitement of the prospect, they drank themselves silly. Hank had a few drinks with them, so as to fool them further and guarantee his easiness. The spot they picked was an old Union encampment, likely used when the Colorado regiments came to meet the Confederates on their way through New Mexico – the flanking maneuver which caused a battle bloodier than most of its predecessors and successors. They could tell by the busted crates and army-made coffee tins littered about. By the tent stakes left in the ground, they knew that the troop had never returned.

Hank thought that luck had well and truly abandoned him, where it once favored him in so many circumstances. However, after a decent dry spell of ill fortune, luck seemed to return to Hank, but it did not dawn on him until the dead of the night. It came back, and in a bashful reunion between a man and one loved so dearly, he swooned at the doorway which it opened for him. He felt the cool, dry breeze pushing him down to livelier lands; the coast awaited. He did not wish to be too hasty, however, and set about his plan. What he had found was a crate of bullets tucked in a ditch by the tent stakes, and he knew that there was only one reason why those soldiers, who knew well that they would have needed every single bullet they had, would have left them behind: they must have been duds. There was only one way that Hank could find out if they were or not, and he figured that he could win his freedom with them either way.

Hank returned to the campfire with a hopeful grin, and, raising a bottle to the moon, he drank and passed it on, passed it each time after, until he knew that the others were drunk. He knew that Pete was the one he truly had to subdue, so Hank blindly challenged him, saying he could out-drink Pete. Hank had no idea what he had bargained for, and ended up slipping off his log. Pete kept drinking, anyway, and was certainly not far behind. Hank saw this and figured he had done the trick, so he threw his hand down and forfeited. He handed five dollars over and extended a hand, to which

Pete scoffed and showed his braggartly self. Eventually, they all lay still in slumber, all save for Hank.

Polo, Robert, and Reilly lay passed out in their bedding skins on the ground, all of them huffing and puffing the heavy, cumbersome breaths of drunken men. Meanwhile, Pete slept on the bed of the half-sized hunting wagon which they towed, swaddled in furs with the gun and belt of each man tucked in with him. Hank moved as a mouse in a cupboard, angling himself above Pete so he could withdraw what he needed. As the drifter snored deeply, slack-jawed and drooling, Hank managed to lift the ammunition belts and sashes in a bundle, heavy with lead and gunpowder. When he dropped them down, Pete stirred lightly in his wagon bed, driving Hank below the wheel.

Once he heard the smacks of the crook's toothless mouth and the rustle of his throaty snores, Hank returned to his perch and retrieved his revolver. As always, he aimed to be a man of upstanding character, and this meant he was a man who knew not to shoot other men in their sleep; that is, he knew the fate of cowardly men – that they would face their own wrongdoings done unto themselves by another, doubly, in due time. However, there was only one way to decide his course of action, and this meant risking the dismissal of that principle. He loaded his gun with bullets from the derelict crate and aimed it at the sky. If the bullets worked, Hank would have to do away with the drifters to escape; if they did not work, then he would follow the path which he much preferred, the path of the honest man Hank knew himself to be. He cocked the hammer and steadied his hand. His heart pounded and his blood coursed until he finally pulled the trigger, and nothing happened. A few more tries just brought empty clicks; the bullets were duds, indeed. Hank grinned, and in the dead of the night, he silently loaded the guns, belts, and sashes with the duds and kept the good ones in his possession. All he would have to do come morning was mount the Azteca and head southbound, like the bison before winter.

The sun rose and the drifters shook off their hangovers and mounted up for their assault, unknowing of the impotency of their guns. Reilly was positioned on foot at the hill-top with the Winchester, while the others were meant to ride into the trading post, guns blazing. Hank hopped on Reilly's horse, then becoming his horse, and named her Itzel.

'All right, boys,' Pete shouted, 'last one before we're rich men!'

‘Yee-haw!’ they called, and struck their horses into a cold gallop. They rode in with their guns drawn, but no shots sounded. The traders gazed fearfully on their approach, but found themselves dumbfounded at the foolery of three men circling wildly without any fire. Hank gave Itzel a shove toward the river barges, and they dashed to the great Rio Grande. Hank could feel his heart shedding its dark coat of a crook, he could feel the wind dragging him to the river to wash him clean at last. He heard the shouts of those behind, but he never minded them. Itzel stood firm on a sizeable barge, and Hank dismounted her and pushed it off the moor with the paddle. The water rushed at his feet, the scent of sweet mountain run-off steeped with pine and loose grass tickled his nose, and he smiled as he watched the drifters being wrangled up by tradesmen. Once across, he moored the barge so that no one could follow, and he rode southward.

Hank had never laughed so hard in all his life. He laughed and grinned all the way past Las Cruces and onward, greeting the migrating animals as if they were his own kin. Itzel took him all the way down to Mexico, where he would restart. Upon fresh, new ground, Hank knew he would redeem the man of rectitude he had lost before.

The Greatest Creation

Avi Fox

From underneath the apartment door, you'd see flashes of colorful light spooking across the white vinyl tiles. Shades of pink, green, and blue danced wildly, with the occasional accompaniment of a loud crash or a high-pitched buzzing sound. If most of the neighbors weren't so hard of hearing, there would most likely have been complaints throughout the night about the loud clangs and sudden cuss words erupting through the walls.

If you were to walk in, you'd find all of the windows closed and several hundred parts and trinkets lying around. Most of these trinkets were kept in pristine shape, built and loved more than anything else in the house, which was filled with torn-up furniture and a lack of sweeping. If you walked in during the day, you would find an older gentleman, Duke, fast asleep in his bed until about 8.00 p.m. Once 8.00 p.m. rolled around, he was awake and loudly tinkering again, not stopping until late the next morning.

'You know, with a sleep schedule like everyone else, you would not have to cook for yourself. The nurses would do it.' This piece of advice came from a small robot sitting by Duke's bed. His name was Toby, and although he was programmed to help Duke through his final years, Duke would rarely allow him to do so.

'Oh, shut the hell up, you damned tin can.' Duke pushed him aside and fell into the support of his cane, making his way into the small kitchen the next room over.

'Sir, please, let me cook breakfast this evening. I know how to.'

Duke snarled at the robot, shooing him away. 'I can cook just fine too. If I can make *you*, I can make a damned egg.' This was an everyday battle, and Toby had learned not to argue with him. It was the same way with cleaning – Duke wanted nothing cleaned or moved unless it was a trinket, and that was only with explicit instruction given first.

'If you insist, sir. May I gather your tool-kit?'

Duke motioned for the robot to do so and grunted, favoring his arthritic hands as they gripped his cane and a spatula.

After a small breakfast, Duke sat down at his work table, Toby by his side. He stroked at his beard, peering into the jumble of metallic and wires sitting before him. 'I think I'll make you a hat, Toby.' Duke leaned back and chuckled, slapping the robot across the back hard enough that he nearly knocked him over.

Toby glared at him, completely unamused. 'I do not need a hat, sir.'

Duke raised his finger, smiling, 'Well, how about a—'

The robot turned to him sharply, ‘No, I do not need a dress either. Make a holographic watch or something.’ This harmless poking would continue throughout the night. Toby knew that Duke enjoyed Toby’s little robot logics. No matter how funny the joke, Toby would always answer with a professional response.

‘Do you know what day it is, Toby?’ Duke asked, his fun-poking smile falling from his face. His eyes moved to a picture sitting on the shelf next to him. A dusty little display case containing medals and badges sat back behind junk metal and draft papers. On one side of it was a picture frame, fully in view, and even cleaner than Duke’s precious trinkets. Inside it, sitting at a slight angle and measuring a little smaller than what the frame was meant for, was a raggy, bronze-colored photograph of a young girl in a simple white wedding gown. Duke brushed it off gently as a small grin lifted his cheeks. ‘It’s our anniversary today.’

Toby placed his hand on Duke’s back. ‘Here is your tool-kit, sir.’ Duke smiled at the little robot, blinking away the tears that were trying to escape him.

Duke continued to work late into the night, calling on Toby when he needed certain parts or paint mixed to a specific hue. Toby watched as Duke worked diligently, amazed at the intricacy his feeble hands were still able to achieve, splicing wires and soldering together circuit boards. Things that amateur inventors would require tweezers and high-focused glasses for, Duke only required his reading glasses and his fingers. But this wasn’t a normal creation. More often than not, Duke would end the night with a small, pointless machine. Something that was made only for the fun of it. On this night, however, he was fixated on his work, constructing something that seemed important and necessary – not only to him, but to the world itself.

‘You know, Toby, this might be the best idea I’ve had since I created you!’ Duke winked amusedly. There, standing before him, was an elderly woman in a soft white wedding gown, the silk and lace a pastel haze in the morning glow. ‘All she needs now is for me to flip the switch.’

Toby stood back, staring in awe at the creature Duke had managed to piece together. He looked down at his own body, made of stainless steel and unhidden wires. He felt old, retro; a simple test-run that had led up to this.

‘You know, my inventions can’t compare to stuff you find in the mainstream these days.’ Duke gently brushed the woman’s still face. ‘Teleportation stations, holographic interior-design – we’re probably only a couple years away from time travel. But this right

here' – he paused, relief tucking away years of worry lines and crow's feet – 'this is superior to it all.'

Toby watched in anticipation as Duke reached around to a pocket on the woman's back. A small click echoed across the room, and within seconds the light bulb began flickering inside her mind, sending out thousands of commands per second, firing off millions of artificial neurons.

Duke's eyes widened, showing a shade of blue that hadn't been seen through his corneas in more than a long time. The woman turned her head; she looked as real he did. His face seemed as though it may finally let a tear escape in front of Toby.

'Ruth? It's me, Duke.'

The woman looked up at him, pausing for a moment before a wide smile graced her face. 'Oh, my. You... you look just as handsome as you did when we got married.'

Duke quickly jumped to her, leaving his cane and wrapping his arms around her, kissing her softly on the cheek.

Toby approached the new machine. Even though she looked real and acted human, he was able to see the truth. No matter how complex Duke made her, Toby would still be able to tell – she was only a robot, like him. He looked up at Duke, who was still hugging the woman. 'She looks very real. How did you do it?'

Duke slowly pulled himself away from her, looking down at Toby, confused. 'What do you mean? This is Ruth. This is my wife.'

Toby paused, running through all possible responses, and deciding only to back away. Duke turned back to Ruth, holding her again, paying no attention to Toby.

The next few hours were spent for Ruth. Duke wanted to tell her everything – to teach her the world, to show her the world. Toby stood back, watching as Duke got lost in something no more human than Toby was himself. Ruth would look over every once in a while and smile at Toby, and no matter how hard he tried, he still couldn't see past what Ruth was. So he sat in the corner until Duke and Ruth fell asleep in Duke's bed, an old picture book lying open across their laps.

The next evening, Duke woke up at the same time, in the same house, and to the same small robot at his side. The sun was just beginning to set, and reds, purples, and oranges danced through the curtains and displayed themselves across the room. But there was something different about this evening, as he discovered when he rolled over and found Ruth, curled up next to him. Toby watched Duke kiss her as though she had never left his side.

Rather than getting out of bed, Duke only rolled over to the side of the bed.

‘Toby, would you go make us breakfast? Two plates, please,’ he said and then rolled back to Ruth.

Toby went into the kitchen and began making Duke’s usual. A cast-iron pan already sat on the burner, charred from years of bacon grease and broken egg yolks. Inside the fridge were very simple ingredients: eggs, milk, a few assorted types of meat, a block of cheddar. Toby opened the door and peered inside, grabbing the same things that Duke used every morning. He knew better than to try to feed Ruth, so he made what was needed – two eggs and four pieces of bacon, just enough for Duke.

‘Where is Ruth’s food?’ Duke asked Toby, a concerned and irritated look on his face.

Toby hesitated before pointing out what, to him, seemed so obvious, ‘Sir, Ruth does not require food. She is a machine.’

Duke glared at the small robot. He slowly rose out of bed, putting his weight on his cane, towering over Toby like a mountain about to explode. He peered down at him, eyes filling with frustration, and his jaw tightly clenched. ‘I don’t know where these crazy ideas are coming from. I made you better than this. Now, go make some food for Ruth.’

Toby looked up at Duke, reading his emotions but remaining calm in his approach. ‘Sir, she will not eat the food.’

Duke cupped his hand around Toby’s small head, tossing him to the ground and shuffling past. He scoffed at the little robot. ‘The one time I let you make breakfast and you screw it up. This is why I take care of myself. I should’ve never expected something useful from a damned tin can.’

Toby lifted himself off the floor and watched as Duke slowly left the room. His head hung toward the ground as he looked at his body like he had the night before. ‘I am only a robot. I am nothing more than stainless steel and wires. I have failed.’

A hand softly laid itself on Toby’s shoulder, and he turned to see Ruth sitting on the edge of the bed. She smiled at him. ‘I know that you claim I am not real, and quite frankly, I do not know if I am or not. But to that cranky old man, I am very much real, and that’s what makes him happy. And I can promise that you make him very happy too.’

Toby kept quiet, only looking at the ground as he listened to Ruth give her pep talk. After she was done, he felt her hand leave his shoulder as she walked toward the bedroom door, following the path that Duke had taken into the kitchen.

Toby was never programmed to be a sentimental being, and he definitely was not programmed to resemble a human. However, he was programmed to make Duke's final years on Earth easier and healthier. He knew everything about Duke, from his health records to his personality traits. He knew that he was stubborn, that there was PTSD from war, that Duke's blood pressure had to be checked on the regular, and that he had dementia that was worsening every day. More importantly, Toby understood the distress it would cause Duke if he, Toby, continued to try to convey the truth about Ruth. Duke's happiness would keep him healthy, and that was what mattered more, regardless of how it was achieved.

So, for the next few months, Toby went along with the existence of Ruth. If he did something for Duke, he did it for her as well. For the first time in forever, Toby was allowed to be a caregiver. The apartment was clean, and more importantly, Duke was constantly smiling from ear to ear. Ruth played her part in pretending to eat the extra food that Toby made, only because she knew it made Duke happy for her to eat with him. Life was different, but it was different in a good way.

Early one Saturday morning, Duke sat in his chair, tinkering away at some little flower for Ruth. She sat on the couch behind him, knitting a small hat that Duke had finally convinced Toby to adopt. Duke looked back at her, a small grin on his face.

'That little hat looks exactly like the one you knitted for Carrie.'

Ruth looked up, her eyes glassy. 'I'm sorry, I don't recall a Carrie.'

Duke walked over and sat down next to her, taking her hand, his face dressed in a concerned look. 'She was our daughter. She was early, but by golly, she was a fighter! And she fought very hard, but we lost her. She was four months old and it was spring. But, that hat looks exactly like the one you made for her when she was born.'

Ruth's eyes glazed over again, this time turning a strange, pixelated purple. 'No memory file available for: Daughter, Carrie.'

Duke squinted at her, his mind clouding with worry. 'Darling, are you okay? You're not making any sense. I'm sorry if talking about her hurt you. I didn't mean to.'

Suddenly Ruth began shaking, her joints twitching as her eyes continued pixelating. Her speech went from announcing a file error to simply blurting out letters,

and then nothing but ones and zeroes. The shaking escalated until it reached the point of an extremely aggressive seizure.

Duke began crying as he tried to calm her down. Confusion and fear attacked him, biting at his mind like rabid wolves.

Toby rushed into the room, an apron still attached to him from cleaning and cooking. He pushed Duke away from Ruth and climbed up next to her, trying to figure out what was happening. At this point, her eyes were turning a deep black, and her speech had stopped entirely.

Duke screamed at Toby, 'Do something! Do something, please! Please, she's dying, Toby!' He fell to his knees, unable to support his pain atop his aging joints. Tears were pouring down his face, salt water mixing with snot as it stuck to his skin and ran down his neck.

Toby continued to try and calm Ruth down, flipping her on to her side so that he could reach the wires under her skin. He tried flipping fuses, bending wires and tightening bolts – he had no clue if anything would work, but he had to try. He tinkered and fidgeted, fighting not only with his lack of mechanical knowledge but also with Ruth's worsening shakes and jerks.

Eventually, she began to calm down, and Toby thought maybe he had finally found the issue. But as he looked into her eyes, they slowly faded to complete black, and then to a reflective emptiness.

Duke screamed for hours, holding her, fighting back Toby, blaming him. Toby sat in the corner like an abused child, hiding from the insults and the feelings of guilt. Duke sat in his chair, holding Ruth tightly in his arms as he rocked back and forth, tears and pain still pouring from his body.

Toby waited for it to stop, only leaving his safe haven when Duke was so emotionally exhausted that he passed out. He walked over to Duke, placing a hand on his knee, eyes turned downward in disappointment. Duke felt icy, as if all warmth had left him due to the trauma.

Toby went into the bedroom, grabbing an orange patchwork quilt with little white patterns on it. He softly threw it over Duke, not moving Ruth and trying not to wake Duke up, then took the knitted hat from the floor and finished it off with a final knot.

The next evening, Duke awoke to see Toby sitting in the middle of the floor holding a picture book, scanning all of the black and white memories into his files.

‘If I recall,’ Duke said with tired sarcasm. ‘You said you would never wear a hat.’

Toby looked up, making sure Duke’s face was no longer angry. A pink knitted hat sat atop his head, dropping a little to one side. ‘I knew it would make you smile.’

Duke gave a soft chuckle. Tears began to fill Duke’s eyes again, and Toby prepared himself to run back to the corner as to avoid getting scolded.

‘You know what, little bud?’ Duke sighed, and gently laid Ruth down beside him. ‘I spent every moment since she died all those years ago, trying to figure out how I could bring her back. I bought these little robot memory cartridges. There were ten of them. Right after I bought them, the place shut down because of fraud or something. And I don’t know how this place did it, but these little tiny machines had unlimited memory space. You could program as much as you wanted into them. I promised myself I would only use them in the most perfect of situations.’

Duke went on. Nine of his cartridges went into trying to create Ruth, and one of them went into Toby. Duke paused to stop the tears from overflowing.

‘Every time, I would think I had everything. I’d finally coded in our entire life together while she was alive. But, I would forget things, and if I forgot to program something and brought it up in conversation later, it would fry Ruth, destroying the memory drive. It only got worse with each cartridge.’

Duke looked down at the broken Ruth; he’d used the last memory cartridge now.

Duke put his hand on Toby, ‘The only successful one was you.’

Duke looked down into his lap, letting a few more tears go. Toby sat and stared, his circuits racing with what he could do to fix this until finally, a solution burrowed its way into his mind. Toby placed his hand on Duke’s shoulder and looked into his eyes.

‘Take mine.’

Duke looked up, tears still inching down his face. ‘What do you mean?’

Toby didn’t hesitate. ‘Take my memory cartridge. Use me to fix her.’

Duke reached out and grabbed Toby. Toby closed his eyes, ready for Duke to carry him to his table and start tinkering, taking him apart and putting him to sleep. But Duke didn’t do that. Toby flung open his eyes in shock as Duke wrapped Toby into his arms, holding Toby’s small metal body tight against his chest.

‘I can never bring her back. Not really. I know that now. But you are too good, little bud, and you are too important to me. You are my robot, I am a proud inventor, and you are the greatest creation in the world.’

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