

ALIENS, APOCALYPSE AND THE AFTERLIFE



TEN NEW TALES OF
EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES

Aliens, Apocalypse and the Afterlife

Ten New Tales of Extraordinary Adventures

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About the Author of Tomorrow Award

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

Awards go to the best published adventure novel of the last calendar year, the best unpublished adventure idea, and the Author of Tomorrow – an author aged 21 years or under who has submitted a short piece of adventure writing.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 2023 Author of Tomorrow award.

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Author of Tomorrow | 11 Years & Under

Crown of the Crows

Amber XinTi Wang

Winner of the 11 Years & Under Category

A cloaked figure slipped down the hill, her dirt-coloured wrap hiding her face and her hands clutching something small and white with lines of guilty grey emblazoned across it.

Elia Thundwoke was a traitor.

Traitor.

The word darted into her mind, sharp and clear, like hemlock's fatal poison.

Traitor.

She reached the bottom of the hill.

Traitor.

Running, swift as a stag, she entered the Norman encampment, her heart palpitating.

It was already too late; the guard posted at the entryway had spotted her.

“Oi!” he shouted, his voice rasping with a strange, foreign lisp.

Elia put her hands into motion - the way she had been instructed to do. One hand forward, the other fluttering around like a bird. A bird of prey.

The guard's posture relaxed. He reached out a hand. “Well, lil' girl, you best be runnin' along. I'll take that.” He gestured towards the piece of paper still clutched in Elia's hand. Elia nodded and, dropping the piece of paper, fled.

Out of the encampment, up the hill, nearer the Saxon flags heartily waving. Reds, golds, greens. Her heart voiced what her mouth could not. *Traitor, Traitor, Traitor.*

And then, sliding in, an insidious snake. *Redbeard*.

She had already used the dagger concealed inside her cloak too many times. It came with the job. First the farmer, then the foot soldier outside her city's gates, and now, maybe, definitely Redbeard, hunter, warrior, grandfather.

She could see his silver-red shock of hair just beyond the gates. He had been in so many wars, and was now to perish at the hand of a little traitor of his own blood. How heroic.

Not if you don't go back.

That voice again, reassuring this time. Elia paused. Her limbs froze, each wanting to go a different direction, a different fate. *The dagger or the road? The road. The road. Yes, yes, yes!* She would leave England, perhaps go somewhere beyond the green, sprawling hills of her country, carved like lover's initials into her heart. She would-

"Eh? Girl! Get over here." A Saxon.

She ran.

Faster than the battalions and the foot soldiers who now came on, clashing with the Normans she had just betrayed them to.

She crested the first hill beside her city. From there, she could see the men decked out in silver chain-mail, charging, foolish. They flashed black in her eyes. Crows. Crows with hungry beaks for a crown.

To Elia, staring into empty, empty sky, they became innocent crows, fighting for land they had ploughed. Their home.

You sold your own kind.

"Elia!"

Elia whirled away from the quickening battle, her hurricane of fear and grief and fury consuming her. It was her grandfather, striding, broad, confident. Elia's legs crumpled underneath her, and she lunged for the other side of the hill.

Redbeard did not pursue her.

He knew.

The cry of crows circling chased Elia into her feverish dreams.

It was 1066 and Elia Thundwoke was a traitor.

Fire Escape

Saalih Deen

Stepping out of his muddy four-wheel drive, Bilal pulled on his khaki backpack, pushed back his thick hair and headed into the dense eucalyptus forest. He remembered packing his things whilst assuring Zayd – his best friend – that bushfire warnings were completely normal for February. Now, with his slim, youthful shoulders straining under the weight of his supplies, he settled on a place beside a stony creek, where kookaburras laughed and water trickled through granite rocks. He felt exhausted but exhilarated. Alone in the bush, at the edge of dusk, he hammered in the final tent peg.

Across the midnight sky, booms of deafening thunder awakened Bilal with a jolt. As the countryman tossed and turned through the dry thunderstorm, he grew puzzled by the smell of smoke, clearly recalling dumping water over the last campfire embers. Far from any town, Bilal grabbed his headlamp and ventured into the unexplored night, causing a snuffling echidna to take cover in the undergrowth.

At that moment, a notification popped up on his old 3G phone. Bilal scornfully swiped away the message: ‘Bushfire Near You – Leave NOW’. Last time he’d received one of those messages the wind direction had changed, and his trip was needlessly ruined. But as the sky turned a glowing amber-red and a rope of sizzling fire rose over the hills, his face grew ashen, and he started hastily thrusting whatever he could into his backpack.

Sprinting for his Land Rover, Bilal caught his foot in a weed, fell onto the rocky ground and watched his keys fly out of his grasp as if in slow motion. They fell into a narrow gap between two boulders, and when he tried to reach for them, the rough beasts scraped his knuckles red. As scorching sparks shot into the crimson night and flames neared, koalas dashed to the treetops and countless birds took flight, blackening the red sky.

A lone, unnoticed ember flew across the creek into the nearby grass, which was dry as paper. Amongst it all was Bilal, who was still frantically reaching for his keys with smoke-stung eyes, oblivious to the crackling bonfires now surrounding him. He suddenly felt the clawing heat on his back, approaching him like a lion to its prey. Turning away from the blinding flames, he desperately searched for an escape route. If he couldn't get to his car, he was doomed!

In the blink of an eye, the flames reached his unpacked cooking fuel canister, sending a BOOM across the clearing. Bilal tumbled into his fishing rod. Howling as he unhooked it from his cheek, an idea formed, and he began vigorously winding the line down between the rocks. As the fire closed in on the terrified man, he finally retrieved his keys. Gripping them tightly, he weaved his way through flaming trees and emerged from the inferno, his vehicle coming into view.

Days later, the avid angler recalled his adventure and rubbed his wounded cheek whilst vowing to give up fishing. Poor little creatures!

Friend or Foe

Abigail Lee

Captain's Log, May 18th, 2238. I, Captain Jonah Smith, and my crewmates, Elizabeth Rodriguez and John Miller are responding to a distress signal. It is nestled between two suns orbiting a planet. We are fast approaching the signal now.

I closed the logbook and walked over to the rest of the crew, who were preparing. Grabbing a stun rifle, I put my suit on.

“What do we think – pirates or miners?” Elizabeth draped a gun over her seven-foot frame. She put her brunette hair in a bun before placing a helmet on her head.

“If they’re miners, we help them. And if they’re pirates” – John turned to Elizabeth and looked her in the eye – “we don’t kill them.” John squeezed his pudgy frame into his suit.

“Sure, they throw grenades at us and we smile in response.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes.

“Both of you, enough. Civilians we rescue, and pirates we incapacitate and disarm. Now, stay alert.”

I opened our airlock and we boosted ourselves towards the vessel in distress. As we got closer, I realised this vessel looked different. It was spherical in shape. “That’s no pirate-shaped ship,” I said across the radio.

“There’s no corporate mining vessel that looks like that, either,” Elizabeth replied.

We inched closer and closer before finding what looked to be their airlock. I took a peek inside to find a creature with twelve arms typing on a computer-styled device.

“Aliens. We can get out of here, or talk to these creatures.” Before anyone could reply, the creature previously on the computer turned into a copy of me. Space suit, helmet and all.

“We need to get out of here quickly. Shapeshifters,” Elizabeth radioed to us.

“They could be friendly and in danger. We’ll never know if we don’t try talking to them,”

John replied.

The door opened as the alien started coming towards us. We needed to make a decision, and quickly.

“Let’s go back to our ship. Hurry.” I boosted myself away before the creature could get any closer, but it followed us.

As we got back to the ship, I closed the airlock and took a deep breath. But before I could take off my gear, I heard a low-pitched rumble coming from somewhere inside the spaceship. I looked over to my crewmates to see Elizabeth grabbing a weapon.

“Calm down, we can’t tell if it’s dangerous yet,” John remarked.

The creature stumbled towards us.

“Kill it,” I ordered. I grabbed a weapon too, and we shot at the creature until it dropped to the ground. I looked over at John and, as we began to take off from the system, remarked, “Still want to befriend it?”

I looked back and pondered if this had been the right thing to do. Would it help the humans of earth or had I angered a whole species of alien?

Author of Tomorrow | 12-15 Years

Death & Co.

Luke Zhang

Winner of the 12-15 Category

I was shoved out of the void and into the light.

I stumbled, suddenly aware of being encased inside a clumsy corporeal shell again. The bright light stung and burrowed into my eye sockets, and I flung a hand over my face. Squinting, I turned round to face the darkness which I had been tossed out of so unceremoniously. There was only a brick wall. I staggered away and nearly tripped on the hem of my cloak. Since when did I have a cloak?

Sure enough, there was a long black cloak of heavy fabric slung over my entire body. I shuddered. It looked like something the Grim Reaper would choose. So did the scythe in my dry, skeletal hand. I had a scythe, too. Dammit.

I took a deep breath, rattling my empty ribcage. I wasn't standing before the pearly gates, nor in a pit of fire and brimstone. I stood on a waxed, tan-colored tile floor inside a bustling atrium, like the kind you would find in an old-fashioned mall. On the opposite wall was a banner printed neatly in flowing text: Welcome to Death & Co!

I hobbled away. There had to be somebody who knew what cosmic accident was responsible for this place. Someone *normal*, at least. At least half the people in the atrium wore black robes and carried identical scythes. Skulls grinned at me from under every hood.

I fell backwards through an arch, and suddenly I was sitting in a plastic chair in an old-timey café. I lurched and banged my knees on the table. The girl sitting opposite me grinned,

setting down her teacup. The little wings on her helmet winked in the light, and her olive-green eyes twitched over to me like a bird turning to investigate some curious object.

“First day, huh?” she said, leaning in over the table. I nodded, too dumbstruck to speak. “How was the death?”

I remembered. I was dead.

I thought back, trying to recall anything that happened to me before I tumbled into the atrium.

“Darkness. My whole life flashed before my eyes, and then there was a light, like at the end of a tunnel. Then I was here,” I mumbled.

She nodded. “Overly clichéd, then? It’s like that a lot. First day’s always brutal, but you’ll get over it. Name’s Cammie.”

“C-Cammie?” I stammered.

“Well, my full name is Celeste Augustus Morrison, but nobody calls me that. Being dead doesn’t suck so bad here. It’s a bit better than eternal punishment.”

“A *bit* better?” I asked incredulously.

“I hear the food’s fresher there,” she quipped.

I must have looked totally stupefied, because she laughed and nudged me. “That was a joke, silly. We still have those here. What’re you called?”

I thought about that for a second. “My name was Dan, but I don’t know that for sure anymore. What am I doing here? Who *am* I now?”

Cammie smirked. “Your name is supposed to be Grim Reaper 177013. It’s on your name tag. But that’s a stupid name, so I’m calling you Dan. I’m not allowed to explain any of the other stuff yet, but you’ll find out soon.”

I glanced down. Around my neck vertebrae hung a silver dog tag, like the ones soldiers wore in the army. Sure enough, it read *Grim Reaper #177013*.

Cammie stood up and stretched, shaking out a pair of shining bronze wings sprouting from her back. “My shift’s starting. Don’t get yourself killed again. See ya, Bones.”

Then she rocketed out of the café and was gone.

I stared at the floor, not trusting myself to move. The only rational explanation was that I would wake up and find I was wearing a straitjacket in a little padded room. Depressing, sure, but much more possible than dying, waking up as the Grim Reaper and then stumbling into a café where armored, winged girls hung out.

The shadows in the corner slowly grew into a puddle of darkness. *Just great*, I thought. *More magical mind-boggery. My head is going to explode.*

Without warning, a skeletal hand just like my own whipped out, grabbed a handful of my cloak and pulled me into the dark. For a moment, I was tumbling head over heels through nothing, and then I found myself seated in front of a polished mahogany desk. I flinched, banging my kneecaps against the bottom of the desk.

“I have got to stop doing that,” I muttered, rubbing my bones.

“Yes, yes. Everyone does it their first few times,” drawled the reaper on the other side of the table. He was indistinguishable from me, except he wasn’t wearing a dog tag.

The surface of the desk was empty but for a little brass plaque. It read *Joseph B. Grimm: Reaper High Management Officer*. I had been to the principal’s office enough to know I was in for a serious lecture.

From across the desk Mr. Grimm eyed me idly, like a lord looking down at his serfs. “You are here because you have been selected for a job as a reaper of souls by the DLA. No, I don’t know how you were selected.”

“The DLA?”

“Don’t interrupt. DLA stands for Death, Life, Afterlife. We work in the Death department, colloquially called Death & Co. Your job is to collect the souls of humans when they die and send them to Afterlife. No, I don’t know what happens to them there.” He sounded like he had gone over that little speech a million times before. “Your first shift starts in twelve hours. Your manager will explain the rest. Any questions?”

“I have thousands,” I said. “Most of them are variations of ‘Dear God, why?’”

“Spare me the theatrics,” growled Mr. Grimm. “You’ll get used to it. Do you have any *actual* questions?”

“Yeah, uh, actually—what’s up with Cammie? Who is she? What is she?”

I might have been imagining it, but Mr. Grimm’s stony expression hardened slightly. “Cammie is a Valkyrie. There are lots of death spirits. No one knows why there are so many, but we have Valkyries, angels, church grims, Stygian rivermen—you name it.”

I carefully filed away that information. If I tried to process it now, smoke would start billowing out of my eye sockets.

“Alright, well, how do I leave? Where do I go?”

“Take the elevator.”

“The what?” Sure enough, there was a pair of open elevator doors directly behind my chair. “Why would anyone make a whole floor just for one room?”

Mr. Grimm just shrugged. “Time and space are furiously unreliable here. You’ll learn that quick. Just press the floor that matches the number on your tag.”

A phone began to ring somewhere. “Oh, bother. I’m getting a call. I’ll see you later.” He picked up a touch-tone telephone that definitely wasn’t there before. “Hello? Cerberus again? Darn. Tell him not to do that. No. No, why? Ugh. I’ll send someone down.”

I slid into the elevator as unobtrusively as possible. The mirrored brass interior gleamed dully, taunting me with the reflection of my own pale, dusty skull. Wedged between 12 and 13 was a tiny button labeled *177013*. I pressed it, the doors slid shut and the easy-listening music began.

Half an hour later, I stumbled out and into a long dormitory hall. Steel-framed bunk beds lined the gray concrete walls. Harsh fluorescent light strips glared from the ceiling, buzzing like bees in a jar. It looked like a pretty depressing place to spend eternity, but maybe they wasted their budget on elevator soundtracks. How did they even *find* a harpsichord cover of ‘Fly Me to the Moon’?

A reaper shuffled into view from behind one of the bunks. Once again, he was entirely identical to me.

“I’ve been told we have a new reaper. You must be Dan. Welcome to your new residency.” He spoke softly, almost mumbling the words.

“My name is Charles Remington, and I will be your new manager for all eternity. Make yourself comfortable however you can, though accommodations are noticeably sparse.”

Another hooded figure sidled up behind him, grinning profusely.

“Oh, boy, a greenie! Came on the Elevator of Eternal Damnation and everything! We’re gonna have so much fun together, you and I!” he cackled, throwing his arms around me.

“Friedrich! Don’t you have somewhere to be?” growled the manager.

“Right, right,” snickered Friedrich. “Call me Freddy! We’re gonna be the bestest best friends in no time! I just know it!”

“Friedrich!” bellowed Charles.

“Buh-bye! Don’t be a stranger!” Freddy sauntered away, still giggling to himself.

“Is... is he okay?” I mumbled.

Charles rubbed the bridge of his nose. “He’s not entirely *sane*, if that’s your meaning. He’s still one of our most efficient reapers. Upper management insists on keeping him here. I’m not sure if they are still sane either.”

The prospect of running around through space and time until I went right off my rocker unsettled me, mostly because it felt completely possible. “So, I don’t have anything to unpack, but which bunk is mine? What do I do between shifts?”

“Whichever one takes your fancy at the moment,” said Charles. “On your breaks, you can wander about, speak with acquaintances, see what there is to do. Use the elevator until you learn your way around, and do remember to be back in twelve hours.”

I was bewildered at the lack of instruction. “So, that’s it? Go do whatever? You don’t seem real concerned about some newbie stumbling around in this metaphysical mess. What if I trip over something and tear a hole in reality?”

“If you mess up that bad, someone will clean up. It doesn’t really matter what you do. Just be back in time.”

“Great. Just wonderful! It’s time to ‘do whatever’ for twelve hours! Thanks for the *astoundingly* helpful introduction!” I groaned.

“You’re most welcome,” replied Charles agreeably.

I stalked back into the elevator and jammed the ‘close doors’ button. I pushed buttons at random, trying to get anywhere else. I paced the little room like a tiger in a cage. I growled obscene words under my breath and kicked at the walls distractedly. Finally, I sat on the floor and put my face in my hands. The frustration began to fade. My ribcage felt heavy. The tinny elevator tunes throbbed incessantly in my ears.

I had to see *someone* who could explain, but so far, my options weren’t great. Of the reapers I’d met already, two were jaded, bored and utterly apathetic. The other one wasn’t entirely sane. That left only Cammie.

Right on cue, the doors slid open with a musical *ding*. I rose hesitantly and grasped my scythe. The doorway looked out onto a sloped stucco roof and a brilliant blue sky. I inched outside and was immediately bowled over by a shining mass of bronze armor and wings.

“Oh, hey! Who’re you?” piped Cammie cheerfully. I frantically grabbed at her ankle to keep from sliding off the roof. “Wait—Dan?”

“That’s me,” I croaked. My feet bones scabbled on the orange tiles, knocking several loose. “Help?”

Cammie grabbed me under the arms and heaved me upright, holding me an inch from her face. “You took the Elevator of Eternal Damnation to see *me*? I’m flattered!”

Her clear olive-green eyes peered curiously into my hollow sockets. I would have blushed if I still had blood. I looked away instead. The quaint little houses and picturesque horizon were instantly familiar, somehow.

“Is this Venice?” I murmured.

“Sure is!” Cammie chirped.

“You can just head back up there after? We can do it whenever we want?” I breathed.

“Oh, yeah. How do you think we collect souls?”

“How does the elevator just do that? Can we just go wherever on Earth with the push of a button?” I looked back, but the elevator was gone.

“Any place in heaven, hell, and everywhere in between. But it looks like you’re stuck with me right now. Have a seat!”

I carefully lowered myself onto the tiles. “Well, I can think of a lot of worse people to be stuck on a roof with.”

She giggled and flapped her wings. “Oh, you big charmer!”

“No, I meant... That wasn’t...”

“Just messing with you, silly. I get it. These people—they’re more than enough to drive you crazy. They already *are* crazy.” Her face grew somber.

For a while we just sat, staring into the distance. The Grand Canal shimmered and danced in the summer sun.

“You know, there’s a reason we call it the Elevator of Eternal Damnation,” said Cammie abruptly. “It’s flippin’ *annoying*. In some messed-up, roundabout way, it only goes where you need to be, not where you *want* to be. If you have to report for your shift in two minutes, but you’re a little mad about something, it’ll leave you in a room full of pillows and Tylenol. That’s why nobody ever takes the elevator, because it just puts you somewhere you don’t want to be.”

“And yet...”

“And yet, you made it here. For answers? To see the living world again? Whatever it is, the elevator considered it important enough to bring you here, of all places. I wonder why.”

“Sounds more like the Elevator of Destiny.”

“I think Eternal Damnation fits better. Have you *heard* the music in there?”

“Good point.”

We continued to sit. My cloak rippled in the breeze and the sun sank towards the horizon.

“Is this my afterlife now?” I asked. “Running around for eternity, doing a meaningless job for bosses I’ll never see? I know everyone’s already asked that, but I have to hear it for myself.”

“Yup,” said Cammie glumly. “Might as well play along.”

“I guess that means I’ll have to make some meaning. If I’m going to be doing this job until the world ends, it’ll have to mean something to me, to be worthwhile somehow. If it doesn’t, I’ll end up all cold and detached like Mr. Grimm, or go bonkers.”

The kooky grin flashed back onto Cammie’s face. “Wow, we almost got serious there for a second! No more philosophizing! Let’s go see Cerberus!”

“*Who?*” I yelped.

Cammie grabbed my sleeve and flapped her wings, whipping up gales of wind.

“Hold on!” she chirped. And with that, we blasted straight up and punched through the stratosphere.

Many gut-wrenching accelerations and a copious amount of screaming later, the Valkyrie and I swooped into a cavern filled with the dead. Spirits milled about aimlessly, their foggy forms melting into an unending plain of mist.

“We’re almost there!” piped Cammie. I swung underneath her, fighting to hold onto my scythe and my non-existent stomach.

As we flapped further across the field, a squirming black shape began to appear on the horizon. Then an earth-shaking bellow rippled through the air like three boars wailing in concert. My teeth clattered and Cammie faltered for a second.

“Cerberus, no!” she yelled.

Sure enough, the blob in the distance began to take form. A colossal pitbull with three heads rampaged across the white field, howling furiously. Footsteps rocked the ground and the sea of spirits bubbled and roiled around his paws. An unfortunate reaper was grasped in its left jaw, struggling like a trapped rat. Foam frothed around every mouth. Off to the side, a band of hooded figures stood, watched, and did absolutely nothing.

“What are you doing?” cried Cammie.

“There’s nothing we can do,” replied one of the reapers dryly. His name tag read *Grim Reaper #000041*.

“There is everything you can do!” growled Cammie. “One of our own is in danger, and you’re just going to stand there?”

“We have to wait for help. There’s no way to stop this,” said the reaper mechanically. Cammie started to retort, but was cut off by a bone-chilling scream. Worst of all, I recognized the screamer’s voice.

“Greenie? Buddy! Buddy, you gotta help me!”

“Freddy?” I murmured.

“They sent Freddy?” gasped Cammie. “And they won’t save him?” I didn’t know if Freddy could die again, but I didn’t want to risk finding out.

The reapers on the ground stood stock still. No help was forthcoming. Then, Cammie and I proceeded to do a very stupid thing. Ten points if you can guess what it is.

Still toting me along like an oversized briefcase, Cammie flapped around Cerberus' three heads, shouting and kicking indiscriminately. Freddy struggled. Cammie hollered. I yelled. Cerberus snapped his jaws. Six sickly yellow eyes bored into us and the howls rattled my bones.

Finally, we got unlucky. The right head's jaws closed around Cammie's bronze wings. She screamed as they crumpled like tin. I fell to the ground and tumbled away like a piece of dropped luggage. Just like that, we were defeated. The reapers snickered.

My vision grew red. That couldn't be it. There was no way I would let my friends get eaten up by an overgrown mutt. Especially not while the other reapers giggled like high school bullies. My hands shook as I grasped the wooden handle of my scythe. I rose to my feet and glared right into Cerberus' faces, one by one.

We stared. Cerberus growled. Slowly, I pointed my scythe right at his middle forehead.

"BAD DOG!" I roared. Cerberus flinched.

"DROP THEM!" I commanded. Both jaws opened. A slobbered-on reaper and a battered Valkyrie slipped out onto the ground.

"GO!"

Cerberus turned and lumbered away, his tail between his legs, every head lowered in shame. I stood like a statue, watching him shuffle into the distance.

Freddy threw himself into me and began to bawl.

"Buddy! Pal! You came back! I knew you'd come for me!"

I gently disengaged myself just as Cammie struggled upright. Her wings were twisted and bent in every direction at once. I rushed over to her, but Reaper #000041 got there first.

“Ma’am, are you okay? Are you alright? Do you require medical assistance?” he repeated monotonously.

Cammie slowly staggered to her feet, ignoring him. She examined her crushed wings, then whipped round and punched the reaper’s face so hard his teeth flew like buckshot.

“C’mon, let’s go,” snarled Cammie. The reapers gaped in shock at the unfortunate one’s jaw lying on the floor. Freddy burst into hysterical laughter at the sight of them.

With the familiar musical *ding* the elevator manifested itself into existence behind me, and the three of us stumbled into the chamber. The elevator closed and we slid away into the unknown.

Some months later, I crouched by the side of a bed, feeling for an old man’s spirit. The dingy little apartment really wasn’t the most fulfilling place to die, but where else did he have to go?

I gently dug out the soul with the tip of my scythe and severed its connection. Cradling the little bubble in my arms, I stood, turned around and found myself face to face with a grinning skull.

I flinched and jumped back. It wasn’t often I was interrupted on the job, and yet, inexplicably, there stood a whole posse of reapers in their black uniform. Unusually, one of them wasn’t completely identical. His lower jaw was missing, like it had come unhinged. Then it came back to me. Reaper #000041.

“That girl will pay for what she’s done,” he growled.

“Come on, man, that was months ago,” I groaned. “Don’t you have anything better to do than gnaw on your grudges?”

He grinned with his cracked upper jaw. “One perk of living forever is that you never forget.”

“Listen, I don’t know where she is, okay?” I said, tucking the soul into my cloak. “Just let it go. We’re not coming back to finish you off.”

“Still trying to talk me down? Shameful,” he rumbled. “You should know there’s no hope for those like us.”

His lackeys melted into the shadows and reappeared to form a ring around me. I gulped. I still hadn’t mastered that darkness thing, and I didn’t like my odds.

“Especially not for you.”

Reaper #000041 stalked forward, and I prepared myself for the butt-kicking of an afterlifetime. But, right as he wound up for his first swing, the shadows flared and another reaper stepped through.

“Dan, you’re late,” said the soft voice of Charles, my manager. “We might have to talk.” The reapers all melted away, no doubt desperate to not be caught slacking.

I grabbed hold of Charles’ arm and he dropped me back in the atrium.

“Deposit your soul and come back to barracks. It’s about Cammie.”

“He’s gonna *what*?” I protested.

Charles held up his hand for silence. “I understand that Reaper #000041 wasn’t at all helpful in your predicament. I also understand that he is a bully who can’t let go of his resentment. Unfortunately, he was only doing his job, and it is impossible for us to take any legal action against him. Not even to ensure Cammie’s safety. She assaulted *him*, remember.”

“So that means we just sit here and let that egomaniac chop her up, or worse? There’s nothing we can do?” I argued.

“Relax, Dan. Don’t do anything rash.”

“No way. I’ve heard that before. There’s always *something* we can do.”

“41 won’t do anything if he thinks he’ll be caught. Cammie is completely safe.”

“I’m not betting my friend’s life on that.”

“I admire your stubbornness. Your hope, even. But there really is nothing we can do.”

“Well, *I hope* you know I’m not changing my mind.”

“I thought you’d say that. You are dismissed. Your shift resumes in thirty minutes.”

I stomped away, fuming. I wasn’t going down without a fight, but what could I do? There was no stopping Reaper #000041. Nor could I afford to sit and wait; he was too sneaky for that. That left only one solution. A diversion. What could I possibly do that would distract him?

I climbed a metal stairwell and exited from under a marble archway, still thinking hard. 41 had a single-track mind, and right now he was fixated on revenge. But that wasn’t all there was to him. I remembered how he mentioned we had no hope. He really, really believed that. In a way, it was true. We were slaving away for unknown masters for all eternity, but that didn’t mean we had to be miserable about it. That was the key.

Taking a sharp right, I found myself back in the atrium, under the welcome banner. As usual, it was crammed full. Robed figures, dogs, smoky specters and more flooded the room, flowing thick as the tide. A plentiful audience.

I strode up onto a little raised dais in the center of the room. I took a deep breath, gathering my nerve. I had to make this count.

“Friends, reapers, countrymen, lend me your ears!” I cried. The crowd shot me some weird looks, but barely slowed.

“All of us have died. Yet, in some perverse twist of fate, we can’t ever be truly dead. We are doomed to run around the living world forever, guiding fortunate souls to the rest that is denied us. We all wonder the same thing. Why? Why are we locked in this endless purgatory, striving away at a task that will never be complete?”

The mob was beginning to get restless. Time to get to the point.

“Most of us have accepted it. We’ve resigned ourselves to this fate, to grow jaded and cold until we become nothing but soul-sucking machines. Where is your hope? Must you damn yourselves to inhumanity? Believe! Without hope, you will wither away! Even if there is no certainty, believe! Even if there is no purpose, believe!”

I caught the eye of a smiling Cammie. She winked at me, and I remembered what I was fighting for.

“It will get better,” I avowed. The crowd was staring, dumbfounded.

“Believe.” It was almost a whisper.

Slowly, the mob began to disperse. I stumbled away, exhausted but satisfied. There. Let 41 chew on that.

“That wasn't your wisest choice.”

We were seated together on the patio of a fancy café somewhere. None of the mortals took any notice of my cloaked figure or Cammie’s slightly disheveled wings.

“How did you get so eloquent back there?” she asked.

I could only shrug. “I was on the debate team in high school. Not that I was any good.”

“But seriously, what possessed you?” she demanded. “Someone’s gonna kill you for that.”

“41 doesn’t seem like the sentimental type,” I chuckled. “That must have really ticked him off.”

Cammie smirked. “Like I said, not your wisest choice. I love it.”

A shadow began to loom overhead. I had just enough time to fling myself back before a reaper smashed into the deck, completely flattening the table.

He raised his head. “They’re coming!” he croaked. Then skeletal hands erupted from the ground and pulled me under.

The jarring shift hit me like a wave of murky water. I was in the dark again. The void between life and death. I never thought I could be back here, and yet, here I was. It was just as empty as I remembered, except for the polished mahogany desk and the reaper sitting behind it.

“Mr. Grimm,” I breathed.

“Yes,” he sneered. “We’re here to discuss that little rant you went on earlier. Now, I don’t mean to be threatening, but it sounded a tad rebellious, don’t you think? Almost as if you were urging the common grims to rise up and overthrow their tyrannical masters. Hah! Imagine that! I’m sure upper management will appreciate me weeding you out before you cause any more mayhem.”

“Did they ask you to do this?” I said.

“Well, uh, ah, not directly, but they’ll notice! I’m sure they will!”

“You won’t kill me. You don’t really want to.”

“No, but I know someone who sure does!”

He snapped his fingers, the darkness rippled and Reaper #000041 strode through. Even without a lower jaw, 41 wore the biggest smirk I had ever seen.

“You’re pathetic, you know that?” I growled scathingly. “Someone gets a little hope going, they find fulfillment in this purgatory, and you get so jealous you try to stamp it out.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t make it worse for myself,” sniffed Mr. Grimm loftily. “You’re not getting away with this one.”

“But I will. You know why? Because I have friends.”

Right on cue, a blazing lance of light ripped through the darkness and Cammie swooped in, flaming spear aloft. She let loose a battle cry and a jet of fire blasted Mr. Grimm’s desk to smithereens.

I turned to 41. “How many of your cronies would do that for you?”

Mr. Grimm’s face turned beet red, somehow. He rose to his feet, only to be locked into a stranglehold from behind.

“You sent me after Cerberus,” growled Freddy, his face a mask of fury. “You *wanted* him to kill me, didn’t ya? Huh? Didn’t ya?”

I grinned at 41. “Looks like it’s just us three now.”

With a guttural roar, the disfigured reaper threw himself at me.

I had never fought with my scythe before. It was quickly apparent that 41 had—many, many times. He barreled right into me, slashing and swinging wildly. I barely managed to dodge away before Cammie darted in. She stabbed low at his legs but was only swept aside for her efforts. 41 dematerialized and reformed right behind me, taking a swipe right at my neck. I ducked and felt the blade swish over my skull. I kicked him in the ribs and scrambled away just as Cammie descended on him, battering him with her impressive wingspan.

I needed a new plan. I wasn't going to win with fighting. Then I remembered that elevator. A moving, enclosed space? That might come in handy.

"Come on, ya stupid elevator," I muttered furiously. Then I realized I had no idea how to call it. The only thing I knew about that was that it came when I really needed it. I was depending on it now, but how could I possibly convince it to show up?

"41!" I bellowed. "Last chance! It doesn't have to be like this!"

He scowled. "Go preach to someone who's listening!"

"Don't spend your whole afterlife in hatred. It won't do you any good," I said, undeterred. "You can change!"

The defaced reaper threw Cammie aside once again. He lunged at me, blade high above his head.

The moment before impact, I dropped my scythe. 41 froze.

"I believe in you," I said, almost a whisper.

Ding! 41 whipped round. There, in the middle of the void, sat the open elevator doors, a startled reaper inside.

While 41 was distracted, I shoved him with all my might into the elevator. He tried to melt away, but the reaper held him fast.

"You're supposed to be working right now," frowned Charles. "You know there are consequences for this kind of behavior."

The doors slid shut and the two reapers disappeared. My manager and the one who hated me.

"What happened to Mr. Grimm?" I asked.

We were sat in the teashop where it all began, where I met Cammie for the first time.

“Rumor has it he got demoted. There was an inquiry and management found out he broke a few too many rules. I haven’t seen him since.”

“And what about 41?”

She frowned. “I haven’t heard from him. Seems like nobody’s seen him at all.”

“I wouldn’t worry about 41,” I said. “I have a feeling he’s out there somewhere, trying to put his afterlife back together. I hope he can do it.”

Just then, the elevator arrived with its signature *ding*.

I stood up. “I think we should call it the Elevator of Hope.”

Cammie chuckled. “The Elevator of Hope it is.”

I stepped in, and the elevator whizzed me away to the next soul. I would probably be doing this for the next few centuries, but at least now I could do it with a smile on my face.

Who knows? It might get better.

A reaper can always hope.

Everything 'Til the End

Rebekah Brown

His blood dripped on the white linen.

“Oh, Nova,” Autry cursed under his breath, pulling his bloody finger away from the needle.

“You need to be more careful, Autry,” Uncle Elijah scolded, getting up from his workbench across from Autry’s.

“Yes, I know,” Autry said, irritation building in his voice as he wiped the blood on a rag nearby. “I’ll fix it.”

Uncle Elijah sighed again, sitting down. “Just remember who this is going to.”

“I do remember. I’ll just bleach this section and be done with it.”

“It won’t work. It’s going to them, they can smell it,” his uncle said, now focused on his own work.

Autry looked back down at the linen. The blood hadn’t stained much, but the pain still throbbed in his finger where he had pricked himself on the needle. It didn’t matter though; he couldn’t use the linen anymore.

It was laid out on the workbench, a lantern scattering light on to it from its hanging place on the wall. Autry threw the linen in the bin under his workbench with a sigh.

“I’m sorry,” he said, grabbing a new piece of linen.

“It’s all right, just be more careful next time,” his uncle replied. He was working on the same dress, just a different part. They had to finish the creation by noon tomorrow, or else they wouldn’t be getting the Rosen they were owed.

Uncle Elijah signed, standing up from the workbench. “There’s another matter to discuss,” he said, a slip of urgency in his tone.

“And what would that be?” Autry asked, looking up from his work.

Uncle Elijah pulled out a sealed envelope from his brown work jacket, handing it to Autry. Autry held the stamped parchment in his hands, running his thumb across the blood-red seal.

He looked quizzically at his uncle. “What is this?”

Uncle Elijah sighed wearily, moving to sit on the faded red couch nearby, white flowers embroidered into its threadbare fabric. He gestured for Autry to sit down next to him.

“It’s the summons for the Convergence,” Uncle Elijah explained.

Before he could continue, Autry rolled his eyes, his expression souring. “I don’t even know why we work for those Pluto-senders anymore.”

“Don’t call them that,” his uncle retorted, his voice sharp.

Autry opened his mouth to respond, but shut it again. He didn’t like arguing with his uncle. It made Autry feel like he was disrespecting Uncle Elijah, and it wasn’t something he wanted to do after his uncle had cared for him for so long. It just felt... wrong.

“I know you dislike the Kosmi, Autry. But it’s our job. We’re merchants, you know that.”

“And?” Autry said, crossing his arms as he awaited a response. The Kosmi ruined his life. He didn’t care if they were special, or if they were the leaders, or their providers. They hurt him, and he would always resent them for that, even if he couldn’t say it.

“I’m too old to go to the gathering again, Autry. I know it only happens every half a century, but I can’t go this time. You’ll have to go in my place. Even though it’s hard, it’s something you have to do. It helps the business, and that’s what matters.”

Autry turned his gaze to the floor. He knew at some point he would have to do it. Autry wouldn’t force Uncle Elijah to go; it was his responsibility now. Besides, refusing a summons was illegal, and he didn’t want to ruin both his life and his uncle’s by neglecting to attend.

“I’ll go,” he sighed.

“I never said you had to like it. I’m not a fan of them either. They took your parents; you have a right to be upset.”

Autry was silent for a few beats too long, and Uncle Elijah stood up from the couch and went to his bedroom, leaving Autry alone with his thoughts.

He held the envelope in his hands, resisting the urge to rip it into pieces. He wanted nothing to do with them; he didn’t want to look at them and know that they trampled his life. But it was something he had to do.

After he’d sat silently for a few minutes, he opened the envelope, slipping out the piece of thin parchment inside. The ink was neat across its surface, which was unusual for most penmanship. Generally, most letters were crumpled and stained by the time they got to the recipient due to the rough seas, but this letter was in impeccable condition.

Autry stared at the letters, piecing together the articulate language.

Dear Mr. Elijah Kernaln,

As you may be aware, the annual ball and celebration of the Convergence, the day when all of the leaders of the land unite, is being held quite soon. Due to the tradition of this decorous event, you will attend in order to provide your merchant services.

Sincerely,

The Advisors

He almost scoffed at it. They were forcing him to do this, leaving him no choice whatsoever. It disgusted him that others admired the Kosmi. They were born from the stars and planets after all, yet they were crueler than the humans they ruled over.

But it didn't matter if it was unfair.

Because it was their world.

Soren sat on the cliffside of the Isle, his legs dangling past the rushing water. The cool night air was sweet, unlike the smog-filled alleys of the other Isles he'd visited. He looked down at the clean water beneath him, clutching the green glass bottle in his hand, which reflected the glimmering light of the silent stars above him.

Soren put the bottle in his lap, making sure his letter was safe inside. He sighed quietly, tossing the bottle into the depths below. There was a small *plink* as it hit the smooth black waves.

As the bottle bobbed in the water, floating to who knows where, Soren could feel the pressure of tears building behind his eyes. Maybe somewhere, somehow, that bottle would reach the coast of the Plutonian shore, and the one he'd missed for so long could finally read his letter. He'd sent a letter every day since it'd happened, wishing that, just once, it could be read.

Walking away from the cliffside, he swallowed down the threat of tears. He could mourn alone, but in the depths of the city people were watching, and he couldn't afford for them to see something they shouldn't. Moments like those at the cliffs were his and his alone.

Soren weaved his way through the empty, spacious streets, arriving at the large marble tower at the very center of the city. He opened the ornate door with the gold knocker and stepped inside, climbing the stairs to the floor where he resided. He stepped into his room, sighing as he sat on his bed. It was small, but it had what he needed. A desk, his maps and books, medicine, his bed, and a few pots of herbs and flowers sitting by the open window, offering what little color they could to the room.

“Soren.”

His eyes darted to the open door as a figure stopped at the entrance.

“Yes, Farrell?” Soren asked, looking up at his superior. Farrell walked into Soren's room, his polished boots clanking on the stone.

He didn't look pleased in the slightest. His icy silver eyes seemed to pierce right into Soren's soul, making a chill go through him. Even though he had known him for years, Farrell still intimidated him to the very bottom of his soul. Farrell was a tall, foreboding man with olive skin and black hair tied in a small ponytail. He was Soren's superior, meaning it was a grave mistake to make him angry.

“You cannot arrest merchants when they irritate you,” Farrell said, his voice sharp. Soren had gone to the cliffs to get away from this argument, but he knew it would come up.

“But—”

“No buts, Soren. I did not bring you in as an apprentice to sully my name as Kosmi.”

Soren felt the sting of that insult right to his core.

“This isn’t that bad of a mistake, just don’t make the error of doing it again. I don’t care if someone insults me, so you can’t let your anger get the better of you either, understood?”

“Understood,” Soren muttered.

“You’re also past curfew,” Farrell commented.

“Oh, gods, my apologies. I didn’t mean to stay out late.” Soren sighed.

“It’s not a problem. Were you by the cliffs again?” Farrell asked, his tone turning softer.

“Yes,” Soren replied, but that was all he said. Farrell was the only person who knew about Soren’s evenings at the cliffs, and the only reason he did was because he kept an eye out for Soren. Soren was training to be his Adjutant for a while now, so it was no surprise Farrell knew.

Farrell looked at Soren for a moment, observing him. Soren hid the grief on his face better than most, but Farrell still seemed to know.

“The Convergence gathering is tomorrow,” Farrell said, switching the subject.

“Really? It’s tomorrow?” Soren’s eyes lit up for a moment. He had been waiting for the gathering ever since he began his apprenticeship to Farrell. It was something that only happened every fifty years—a once in a lifetime event for most humans.

“It is. And you’ll be coming with me,” Farrell said, a hint of a smile on his lips, although he knew Soren already was aware of this plan.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Soren replied.

“Well, I must be going. But don’t worry about tomorrow, you’ll be a great Adjutant in time. This is just your first test, really,” Farrell said, beginning to walk away.

“All right. I’ll see you tomorrow,” Soren replied as Farrell disappeared into the tower.

Soren closed the door, lying down on the bed. He could feel his nerves buzzing from the excitement. It was his first real event as Farrell's assistant. And it might be the most important. His parents had worked for Farrell before he was born, although they were gone by now. Serving the Neptune Kosmi ran in his bloodline, and it had for centuries. Farrell trusted his family, which was something special to him.

And most things that were special to him were the things he lost the quickest.

Autry looked back at his workbench as the door chimed, signaling the leaving customer. He grabbed the pouch of Rosen on the desk, picking out one of the smooth gold coins, a rose engraved onto its surface. He slipped the coin back in, putting the pouch in his desk.

Autry was just about to grab another width of fabric, when his uncle's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Autry! You have the Convergence tonight!" he called.

Autry sighed, getting up. "Yes, I'll get ready." He had remembered the gathering, but he wanted to postpone it as long as possible.

He went to his quarters, sorting through his meager belongings. He grabbed his tailored dress shirt and slacks, as well as a nice brown vest he owned. He checked to make sure the fabric wasn't too threadbare. At least he looked professional, which was more than anyone could ask for.

Autry went out to the main room where Uncle Elijah was standing, holding a box.

"What's that?" Autry asked, looking at the box. Uncle Elijah handed it to him.

"Your sewing kit. You'll probably need it." Uncle Elijah smiled a bit.

“Oh. Right,” Autry said. He took the box, giving his uncle a hug. “I’ll be back in a few days.”

His uncle hugged him back. “Keep your head down and your mouth shut,” he said sternly. “I want you to come back home, and we don’t have the coin to pay if someone finds fault with your behavior.”

Autry nodded gravely, understanding the risks. “Goodbye,” he called as he left the house.

He made his way onto the streets, the clouds painted with a sherbet pink, the sun low on the horizon. Not many people were about, since the gathering was invitation only. It was only meant for the Kosmi. They had to complete the ritual to keep their planets alive, which lasted for days. As such, merchants and cooks were on duty to serve them. Which was why Autry was summoned.

He weaved through the cramped houses of the Isle, making his way to the docks. A few people waited nearby. The Isle which Autry lived on, the Isle of Venus, was slowly sailing nearer to the glimmering city in the distance, Syphor. And even further past that were the other Isles coming closer as well.

It was why it was called the Convergence—all the Isles finally united at Syphor for the gathering before they went their separate ways across the sea again.

Despite his reluctance to attend the Convergence, Autry’s eyes widened at the sight of the islands moving towards one another. He had to admit, it was something he was glad to finally see.

As Neptune’s Isle finally joined at Syphor, the deafening clank sounding through the open air, Soren looked across the landscape at the docks from slightly behind Farrell.

“So, what exactly do we do?” Soren asked, looking at Farrell for clarification. Soren’s brown hair tousled in the wind and his eyes caught the glow of the sunset as he spoke.

“Well, given it's your first time, you won't be running the ritual,” Farrell said evenly, not looking back at Soren. “You'll be on duty though, just like the other Adjutants.”

Soren nodded. “And what does that involve?” While Soren had been an attentive assistant, the details of the Convergence were never placed in print and Farrell was not the type to make time to explain anything until necessary.

“Staying near us. Going to the merchants when we require something. You'll figure it out,” Farrell replied.

Soren was quiet for a few seconds. “And do you think the Kosmi will actually believe I'm your Adjutant? I mean... I look a little young for this role, right?”

“Well, just wait. In thirty years, you'll look older than me.” Farrell smirked. “And if you're good at your job, they won't care if you look young.”

Soren exhaled. “Well, that sounds good,” he responded. “I just want to represent your house with honor.”

“Don't worry. Even if you do mess it up, which won't happen, there are several more meetings at which to redeem yourself,” Farrell said.

“Like what meetings?” Soren asked.

“Like the meetings about the Event. Don't worry about them, they're dull. The emperor's been talking us to death about it for years.”

“The Event? As in, the end of the world?”

Farrell nodded. “The classic myth about the encounter. Two people meet and the world somehow ends. It's vague, which is why I don't care about it, but the emperor's worried.”

Soren was quiet for a few moments. “Do the others believe it?”

“No. We know it’s not real, but the emperor’s young. He only took the throne three decades ago. I can’t blame him for thinking like that, but he’ll grow out of the obsession.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Most of us believe the myth started as a way to keep people on their own Isle, rather than relocating. It created fear in the humans so they would not try to leave their Kosmi rulers. In the past, some of the rulers were ruthless and I would not have blamed the humans for trying to emigrate. But with the myth, it scared people into staying where they were born.”

Soren nodded. His gaze drifted towards Syphor. It was a marvelous city, and the only one on solid land. The other Isles were floating cities, behemoths that sailed the seas. After the ramps had dropped, Soren and Farrell made their way into the ports, as did several other Kosmi from the other Isles. Soren recalled the names in his head, although he didn’t really care much. He generally only talked to Farrell, since the others made him a little anxious. Soren was never a full Kosmi, but nor was he one of Neptune, meaning all those others were... judgmental, to say the least.

He followed Farrell through the sunset-lit streets, shades of orange painting the towering marble structures in glimmering light. The Kosmi filtered in from all directions as they met at the palace. It was a feat of a structure, with its white pillars and golden domes, stained glass artworks and glorious murals; it truly was a sight to behold.

Soren walked into the palace behind Farrell, making their way to the ritual room. It was a circular cavern, cloaked in shade. The walls were crafted of ebony, and banners of the Kosmi’s symbols were draped on its paneling. Pockets of candles and incense sat on perches along the walls, and the floor was a mosaic of black marble and dark gems that were unknown to Soren.

The room had been an ancient cavern —just a stone cave—turned into a beautiful ritual room. And right in the center, it was there.

The Ehto.

The Ehto was a giant crystal structure, a ball of minerals reflecting all colors of light. At the top and bottom, roots made of diamond stretched into the ceiling and floor. The colors refracted across all surfaces, emitting a soft glow in the darkness of the room. Entrances to other places were located along the room’s walls, and some Kosmi stood nearby the Ehto, their faces catching its eerie glow.

Soren had never seen it before, not in his entire life. It was a thing of legend, only carried by word of mouth. Since the Kosmi weren’t on their home planets, they used the Ehto to keep them alive while they were away, offering a drop of their power to keep the system in check.

“It’s a marvel, isn’t it?” Farrell said, snapping Soren out of his trance.

“Certainly,” Soren replied, still caught in its gaze. “When do we start?”

“Not long,” Farrell responded. “Just stay nearby when we begin.”

Soren nodded. He couldn’t believe he was here.

How was Autry even here?

He sat in the corner of the merchant’s room. The other merchants bustled around, taking fabrics of all colors and lengths, embroidering and sewing them. The ritual room was nearby, but Autry would never be allowed to see it. One of the Adjutants came to take whatever they made, just like the pathetic errand runners they were.

Autry sighed. Being on standby for the Kosmi was a disgusting thing to him. The fact they had the audacity to think he would wait on them after they took his parents... Autry seethed about the mere thought of it.

He glanced back at the other merchants. Nobody was really making anything yet, but they were arranging what would be their workspaces for the next few days and talking to some of the other merchants. It was a nice way to meet people, since most never met others who came from different Isles than theirs. Autry had never traveled. Ferries to other Isles were expensive and tedious. The Isles always moved, so paths continuously changed. Autry did not have that kind of money, and probably never would.

Autry got up from his workbench, going over to the fabric racks. There were hundreds of different fabrics there, and in enough colors to make his business set for life. Just taking a few home would attract dozens of customers and earn him more Rosen than he could dream of. But he couldn't do that. As much as he wanted to, it wasn't safe.

He put his hand out and touched one of the orange fabrics. It was a silken textile, with white flowers embroidered on its surface.

“Odd choice.”

Autry turned round.

The man speaking was carrying a bolt of amaranth-colored fabric, his deep black eyes observing Autry. He was tall, and his gold skin complimented his deep red curls of hair.

“Usually, people go for more exotic colors,” he said, a unique lilt to his voice.

“I'm aware, that was why I was curious,” Autry responded.

The man gave a nod of approval before he continued. “So how long have you been a tailor?”

“Ten years. You?”

“Fifteen,” the man responded, seeming silently impressed. He stuck out his hand.

“Name’s Verelin.”

Autry took it, shaking it. “I’m Autry. Where do you come from?”

“Ouranos. It was a long journey to get here.” Verelin chuckled.

“I don’t doubt it. I’m from Venus, so it was a lot shorter for me,” Autry replied.

“Ah. People back home say the smog in Venus is enough to kill a fully grown Kosmi,” Verelin said. “I still have no idea how people can live there.”

Autry smiled. “Well, the people who live on Venus are strong, that’s for sure.”

A distant fanfare interrupted their conversation.

“The emperor’s speech must be starting,” Verelin said, looking in the direction the noise came from.

“Are we going to watch it?” Autry asked.

“No, no. We wait until the speech is over. After that the ritual starts, and then they’re fully preoccupied. Then we can go to the other side of the cavern to get meals from the dining room. They won’t even notice us,” Verelin said. “But for now, we should wait at our stations.”

Autry nodded, walking back to his workbench. This was going to be quite the night.

As the royal fanfare finished and a figure stepped in front of the Ehto, everyone in the room bowed; a signal of respect for their emperor.

When the emperor cleared his throat, they straightened up again.

Soren had only heard of him from Farrell, never fully seeing him. But there he was, in all his glory.

Emperor Lochless himself.

He was the epitome of power—someone you could just glance at and know he was to be eternally feared. His eyes, one of which had been turned a pure gold, were like ice against his pale skin and an aura of calculated intimidation emanated from his presence. The faint lines of burn scars trailed across his features, but his white-and-gold cloak masked them, and the Crown of Sun sat upon his dark-brown hair.

“My fellow Kosmi,” he boomed, his regal voice echoing across the room. “I welcome you all to the Convergence, where we will be participating in an ancient and honored ritual to keep our empire in its eternal cycle.”

“As you all know, this is a momentous occasion,” he said, lifting up his finger, which permanently glowed an incandescent yellow.

Soren glanced at Farrell, whose face was painted in the soft glow of the Ehto, like the other Kosmi. Soren could feel his heart beating rapidly, the nervousness coursing through him. If he did something wrong... He didn't even want to think about it.

“Thank you all for coming,” the emperor finished. “Let us begin.”

Farrell and the seven other Kosmi stepped towards the Ehto. The emperor put his hand on the crystal first, and its glow turned golden before reverting back to blue. Mercury was next, then Venus, Earth, and so on. Each time they placed their hand on the Ehto, it glowed a new color. Farrell finally put his hand on the crystal surface and all of the Kosmi's eyes turned to a silver white. The ritual had been officialized, and it would continue for at least three days.

Soren walked towards Farrell, silent so as to not interrupt Farrell's concentration.

Farrell glanced at Soren. “Can you check the merchant's room for me?” he whispered. “I just want to know if everyone's on standby.”

Soren nodded, walking to the side room where the merchants were.

Or he *was* walking, until he bumped into something. Soren was knocked to the ground, wincing in pain.

“Oh, my gods, I’m so sorry, let me help you up,” an auburn-haired man whispered, standing above Soren. The man’s eyes were a warm brown, and freckles dotted his face. He didn’t seem to be a Kosmi in any way, more likely a merchant. He held out his calloused hand to help Soren up.

Soren grabbed it, and before he could stand, an indescribable energy crackled through his veins, and he saw a golden trail of mist snake down the man’s arm and onto his. The man’s eyes were frozen in fear as their hands were entwined with the eerie glow.

And then there was a deafening crack. The sound of crystal shattering.

Soren’s head whipped to the Ehto, seeing it vibrate, a giant crack embedded in its middle. Several Kosmi stepped back, confused, as a dark black mist emerged from the crack and enveloped the Ehto, muting the light.

Farrell looked at Soren, seeing the glow on his hands. Everything calm and regal was stripped away from Farrell’s face. Gone was the cold master Soren had known for years. Left behind was the concern for a family friend. Farrell’s eyes were similar to when Soren had shattered his right elbow at age six. Similar to the look of pain when Soren’s lover had been taken. And now, the horror of what just happened was etched into every edge of Farrell, as he shouted. “SOREN! RUN!”

Autry was running before he could even think. Soren’s hand was clamped around his wrist, running in front of him.

Autry could hear footsteps pounding behind, and the voice of the emperor, yelling for guards.

“What just happened?” Autry shouted, his heart racing as he ran through the halls, still trying to piece together everything. A million thoughts buzzed in his mind.

“I think we just started the Event!” Soren replied.

Autry had hardly known the man for a single second and he could already tell how indescribably panicked he was.

“The what?”

“The end of the world!” Soren retorted, fear fraying the edges of his voice.

A pang of terror snaked through Autry.

“W-what do you mean ‘the end of the world’?”

“I don’t know! But I know that we just caused the Ehto to break!” Soren yelled, turning a corner with Autry.

“We did that? How?” Autry didn’t even know if this was real. Maybe it was just a dream, some horrid, lucid dream—but it felt so real.

“Because we met each other, and we just set the apocalypse into motion!”

“So, what—we just go our separate ways and everything’s fine, right?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Soren said, turning another sharp corner, still gripping Autry’s wrist.

“Then what do we do?” Autry could feel everything in him screaming, the fear consuming him.

“We run, that’s what,” Soren responded, turning another corner towards a back entrance.

“But shouldn’t we try to stop this?”

“It won’t w—”

Autry screamed as the sword slid through his ribs.

The pain seared his skin, and his voice died off in his mind. The blade was pulled out harshly and his blood spilled on the floor, the red soaking his hands. His vision was blurry as he looked at Soren, his eyes wide in horror.

His vision got hazy as he dropped to the ground. Autry heard the sound of metal clanging and then two bodies dropped to the floor alongside him. A bloodied cutlass fell from Soren’s hand.

There were two hands on Autry’s arms, and the feeling of being dragged followed soon after. His thoughts were jumbled, and the pain jumbled them even more. He could feel the edges of a corner pressing into his back, and he gasped as the pain from his wound snapped him back into his surroundings.

“Stay with me,” Autry heard the brown-haired man say. “Talk to me. I’m Soren. What’s your name?”

Autry began to talk, but choked on some blood. “I’m... Autry.”

“Okay, Autry. Just stay with me.”

Soren looked at him, but his face was distorted. Autry thought Soren might have said something, maybe that the apocalypse would stop now, but he didn’t know.

He could feel a pressure in his chest where Soren was trying to keep the wound from bleeding.

And it glowed.

Underneath Soren's hands, the wound immediately sealed up, and Autry's vision and thoughts cleared. Soren stumbled backwards, the glow fading from his hands. Autry gasped in relief as the searing pain trickled away.

"How..." Autry's eyes were fixed on where his injury used to be. How was he not dead?

"This is... It's so much worse than I thought," Soren said, looking at Autry. Soren's face was pale, his stormy blue eyes wide in terror.

"What do you mean?" Autry shakily got up.

"We can't die, Autry... This... there's no stopping this."

Autry could feel his knees buckling, his breath becoming shallow again. "So what now?"

Soren looked at him gravely "We... The world..." He started and stopped. "We are the Event. We have ended our world."

Born to Die

Neta Sayar

Chapter One

18 January 2123

“Commander Warne – you called me?”

“Jones, I told you to call me President Warne. Incompetence.”

“My apologies, *President* Warne.”

“Better. Yes, I did call you.”

“So... what do you need?”

The president’s chuckle fills the air.

“You never change, do you, Jones?” says the president.

“Well... I-I’m... I’m not sure I know what you mean...?”

“I mean this.” As fast as a lightning bolt, the president lifts up a silver gun and shoots Jones. Jones collapses, blood dribbling from the side of his head all over the once-white carpet.

“Take the body away and clean the floor,” says the president carelessly while slipping the gun back into his pocket.

“Of course, Your Honour,” says a guard and drags away Jones’s limp body, leaving a trail of blood on the floor. Not a minute passes before a young woman sprints into the president’s office, tears running down her face.

“You!” she screams, pointing at President Warne. “You killed my father!”

“Yes, Jones told me all about his daughter,” says the president calmly. “Your name is Miriam, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Don’t you *dare* say my name!” Miriam yells. “My father did nothing but serve you his entire life and you killed him! His blood is on your filthy, lying, deceitful hands!”

“Well, actually, your father was the one who lied to me,” says the president, his calm façade never waning. “He told me, he *promised* me, that he was not BT-Z.”

For the first time, Miriam’s anger subsides into shock.

“You found out?” she says in a hushed voice.

“Yes,” says President Warne. “And I *also* found out that BT-Z is inherited by genetics.”

Miriam gasps again.

“No, please, I swear I’m not! I swear I’m not BT-Z!” she cries out.

“Too late, I had your blood tested last week. Lying won’t help you this time,” says the president and draws out his gun again and shoots – but Miriam has already ducked, and the bullet soars over her head and rams into the wall behind her.

She darts out of the office and runs far away. Away from the guards, away from Warne, finally joining a group of other BT-Z in hiding. She is never heard from again.

Chapter Two

6 March 2141

A sickly sweet smell seeps into my nostrils. My head is pounding, my mouth is begging for water and my skin is dry and cracked. As my vision gets less and less blurry, I realise that I am

lying on some kind of hospital bed, in a plain white room with a bunch of wires connecting me to a beeping machine. I'm wearing one of those awful itchy white hospital gowns.

I lift my head and my neck aches. I try to sit up using my hands but they are tied to the bed with thick straps, and so are my legs. My mouth is covered with a white bandage – that's where the sweet smell is coming from.

Suddenly, a door that I hadn't yet seen opens and a young man – probably one or two years older than me – opens the door. He's wearing a khaki green suit like the ones worn by the army and he's carrying a gun.

"Follow me," he says. "Now."

"I'm tied down," I say. My voice is weak and it hurts when I talk. The boy tries to undo the first of the straps holding my arms in place, but it is stiff and strong. He looks anxious for a second, then grasps it with both hands and tugs, hard. It rips open.

"Who are you?" I say as he rips the other straps.

"I'm Aiden," he says. "You?"

"Nicola. Why are you here?" I ask. "Why am I here? Where *is* 'here'?"

"We're in a Tanten experiment facility," he says. "And we need to get out."

"What's a Tanten?" I ask.

"You're not going to remember everything immediately," he says. "None of them do after they've just woken up. But you need to follow me now, so that the Tanten don't catch us."

Following a random stranger is an awful idea, but Aiden grabs my arm and pulls me out of the room, into a long, empty grey corridor.

"Who doesn't remember everything?" I ask him. "Who's 'them'?"

"The BT-Z," he says. "Stands for blood type Z."

“So why am I here?” I ask.

“You’re a BT-Z. And the Tanten’s main aim is to eliminate all of you,” Aiden says, stopping at the split in the corridor and glancing both ways before pulling me to the left. “And to find out how and why you exist. When they find one, they take them to their experimentation facilities and do tests on them.”

“And you’re here because...?” I ask.

“Because on the other side of the war is Rammeria,” he says. “I’m Rammeria. Our aim is to rescue the BT-Z and defeat Tanten.”

“How come I don’t remember any of this?” I say. “Why can’t I remember anything?”

“This always happens when we find a BT-Z,” he says. “It’s because a Tanten’s given you an overdose of llyn. You’ll remember soon.”

“You said war,” I say worriedly. “What do you mean? Who’s at war?”

“The world,” Aiden says simply. “Split into Tanten and Rammeria. It’s World War Three – it started eighteen years ago.”

“*Eighteen?*” I say. “I’m not even eighteen years old yet. Have I been in the Tanten facility since I was born?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I was sent in with a group of other Rammeria to rescue as many BT-Z as possible.”

“I can’t walk anymore, I need water,” I say.

“I know – the Tanten give all subjects of their experiments a newly developed drug that keeps their hearts beating without food or water,” he says. “You’re going to be really thirsty, but you need to last without, just for a little while, so we can get outside, okay?”

My head feels like it's about to split open from the lack of liquid and my limbs feel dry and broken. We reach the end of the corridor and hear voices coming down the hall. Aiden pulls me into a nook in the wall and two guards dressed in black combat suits with guns pass us.

“Who are they?” I ask.

“Tanten soldiers,” he says.

We run down the next corridor and reach a large locked window. I peer out through the glass: outside, maybe ten feet below, is a grass-covered pavement. Aiden hits through the glass with the butt of his gun. An alarm goes off and shouts arise in the corridors around us.

“Jump,” he says.

“What?” I yell. “Are you crazy?”

“Yep, crazy,” he says. “That’s me. Now jump.” He leaps through the window frame and I scream. He lands, rolls on his shoulder and quickly gets back up to his feet. “I said jump!” he yells at me. Black-clothed guards are running at me from either side, pointing numerous guns at my head. I close my eyes, jump, and scream.

I land hard. A sharp pain darts through my leg but I don't have time to worry about it. The Tanten guards are climbing down the side of the large grey-brick facility.

Aiden lifts his gun and shoots at the guards, who are already reaching the pavement. More soldiers shoot at us from the window and I scream. Aiden runs and I follow him.

Once we're past the facility, I see that the other buildings are dirty, graffitied. Most are broken and crumbling. And suddenly, images of burning houses, screaming children, soldiers gunning down everything in their path fill my head.

I stop and stand still, frozen, despite the numerous Tanten guards running after us, firing and yelling.

“What are you doing? Run!” Aiden shouts. I don’t answer, and he grabs my wrist and pulls me across the road. I stumble after him and we run through the streets until we reach a large field full of dull grass and no flowers. I remember how, once, I saw pictures of what the world used to look like: full of colours, trees, plants, peace. At the edge of the field is a large iron fence, three metres high.

“This is the boundary of Tanten land,” Aiden says.

“The soldiers will still follow us, though,” I say.

“That’s why we have to be quick,” he says. Then he climbs the fence with ease, like he’s done it a million times, helping me over too.

After the fence, the neat, dull field fades into wild forest and greenery. It’s harder to run through, but after five minutes, we reach a trapdoor, concealed under the plants and dirt. Aiden hits the trapdoor with three short taps, three long ones and another three short ones.

It opens immediately, revealing a metal ladder, which we climb down and arrive in a dark corridor where there is one person standing: a woman with long black braids, wearing a grey jumpsuit.

“Are you a BT-Z?” she asks me.

“Aiden says I am,” I say.

“Follow me, you must want water,” she says. I nod and she leads the two of us down the corridor. “Are there soldiers coming after you?”

“Yeah,” Aiden says. “I had to break the window.”

“I told you not to do that,” the woman reprimands him.

“I know, but we were cornered,” he says. The woman sighs. At the end of the corridor she takes us left, into a huge room with multiple tables and chairs, and loads of people dressed in

grey jumpsuits milling around, sitting; some eating or drinking. They all turn and look at me sympathetically as we pass.

“Why are they looking at me like that?” I whisper to Aiden.

“Because you’re BT-Z,” he says. “The Tanten are hunting you down.” A shiver runs along my spine.

The woman leads us through the room until we reach three doors: one reading ‘female’, one reading ‘male’ and one reading ‘non-binary’.

“Change into a jumpsuit, Aiden,” she says. Aiden nods and goes through the male door. “What’s your name?” she asks me kindly.

“Nicola,” I tell her. “What’s yours?”

“Liliana. You can stay in dorm sixteen C,” she says.

“I don’t understand,” I say. “Why can’t I remember anything? Aiden told me that it’s because the Tanten gave me an overdose of llyn, but I want to remember.”

“There’s not much to remember, I’m afraid,” she says. “You must have been in hiding with a few other BT-Z, and the Tanten found you.”

Nothing makes sense anymore.

“Rammeria is dedicated to saving BT-Z and destroying the Tanten,” she tells me. “We’re all hoping that the war will end soon.”

“Is there even a plan?” I ask. She shakes her head.

“That’s yours,” she says, pointing to a small bed with thin sheets in the far right corner of dormitory sixteen C. There are three other identical beds, but they are all vacant. “Get changed into a jumpsuit and go back to the room we passed, join everyone else.”

I nod and she closes the door. I slip on the jumpsuit instead of my hospital gown and brush out my wavy brown hair.

I make my way back through the dorm corridor and into the huge room where Aiden is sitting at a table alone. I realise that I am starving as well as thirsty, so I grab a bowl of soup and a cup of water.

“Here’s a healing serum,” says the woman who is serving the soup. “It helps you regain your energy quickly after the llyn overdose.”

“Thank you,” I say and sit down next to Aiden.

“Okay, explaining time,” I say to him. “Where was I before the Tanten took me? And what is this place?”

“No one here would know where you were before,” he says. “Only the Tanten who found you. And this place is one of the few Rammeria bases outside of Tanten territory.”

“So what am I going to do now I’m here?” I ask.

“There are three choices,” he says. “One – nothing. You sit here and hang out with your roommates. Two – become a soldier and go fight the Tanten forces or rescue BT-Z. Three – become part of the Rammerian government. Our current leader is Rose Limm. Liliana’s in the government.”

“Which one should I do, then?” I ask.

“Well, BT-Z are known to be reckless and unstable, so your only option is doing nothing,” he says.

“I thought you were decent,” I say, glaring at him. “Why would you say that to me?”

“I was just saying that the government doesn’t let BT-Z become soldiers,” he says.

“Thanks for the honesty.” I scowl, then pick up my tray and go and finish my soup at another table. Not a minute passes before Liliana comes and sits down next to me.

“Isn’t there something I can do?” I say.

“I’m sorry, but no,” she says. “You need to relax after months of that llyn overdose. It’s not safe to have you as a soldier.”

“But—”

“I said no, Nicola,” she interrupts. “I’m sorry.” And with that, she gets up and walks away. I groan in frustration and stand up. I put my tray in the sink and stride to my dorm, collapsing on the bed and taking a deep breath.

Over the next few weeks, it feels like I never let out that breath. Wake up, eat breakfast, read through the exhausting manuals in the Rammerian library – the only form of entertainment available. Lunch. More boring reading. Dinner. Shower. Sleep. Repeat. Again. And again. And again – until it feels like I have become some sort of mind-drained zombie that does everything on autopilot. I never listen when people make half-hearted attempts at conversation with me. As I read through the manuals, I find that my eyes are skimming the words, looking at the long sentences, but not actually taking them in. Pure and utter boredom is devouring me, and I need to stop it.

I can’t sit still any longer.

I stand up and sprint out of the library, pushing past everyone else. I have no idea where I’m going, but I dash through the hallways until I get to a split in a corridor with an arrow pointing left reading, ‘RAMMERIA MAIN BASE,’ and an arrow pointing right reading,

‘GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ONLY’. So, obviously, I go down the government officials’ path.

It’s yet another long, dark hallway but this time with doors along its length. One is slightly open and I hear low, muffled voices coming from it. I press my ear to the door and listen.

“... Tanten took the north and west villages. We have about eighty survivors out of thousands of innocent citizens.”

“How many BT-Z are in the Rammerian bases?”

“Thirty-nine overall. We got another four today from Tanten’s Greenspark facility.”

Anger surges through me. Eighty survivors out of thousands of citizens? Only thirty-nine BT-Z safe? And they’re not even letting me fight! I’m a zombie, cooped up in the base with nothing to do. No goal. No task. A pointless life.

Well, I’m going to fight. With or without permission.

I can’t take much with me. Just essentials: a bottle of water, a few sandwiches, a spare change of clothes and a gun that I found in a storage room down the corridor. I pack all of this quickly in a small bag I found in the corner of my dorm room.

Sneaking out is easy enough, but what will I do once I’m on my own? I have no idea where the Tanten forces are, or how to fight them. So I go back to the corridor I was in before, to listen in on more conversation.

It’s not long before I hear someone saying, “The soldiers are ready for the front lines. Be at the helicopter pad in half an hour.”

I know where that is, so I grab my bag and sneak after a group of half a dozen soldiers to a big room with a landing pad in it, where, sure enough, a sleek black helicopter is waiting. The

soldiers climb in and strap into seats while I hurry to the space into which guards are loading crates of medicine and food. I haul myself up while the guards aren't looking, find a small space behind a crate and crouch down, trying my best to make myself comfy for the journey.

“Nicola!” I hear someone hiss. I turn and see Aiden standing in front of a crate. “What the heck are you doing?”

“Going to fight,” I say. Aiden groans.

“That’s the most stupid thing you could do,” he says.

“You said so yourself,” I say. “‘BT-Z are reckless and unstable’.”

“You don’t even know how to use a gun,” he says. “They’ll realise that you’re not a soldier in less than five minutes!”

“I need to do this,” I say. “I have to. Even if it gets me into trouble.”

“Ugh,” he says. “This is the dumbest thing I’ve ever done.”

“What?” I say.

“I’m coming with you,” he says. “I can at least teach you how to use a gun.”

“What makes you think I want you to come?” I say.

“You won’t last five minutes without me,” he says. Even though I’ll never admit it in a million years, he’s probably right.

“Fine,” I say. “Sit down and shut up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says teasingly and I glare at him. “What’s your plan?” I don’t answer.

“You don’t even have a plan? You’re lucky I decided to come. How about we take out the Tanten leader?”

“That’s an extremely reckless thing to say,” I say. “Especially someone who’s not supposed to be ‘reckless and unstable’.”

“Yeah, well, I took a leaf out of your book,” he says.

“Take off in five, four, three, two, one,” says a low, automated voice and a wrenching feeling pulls at me as the helicopter flies out of the base and into the sky.

“They’re going to notice I’m gone the second we get there,” Aiden says. “They’ll never forgive me.”

“You’re free to go,” I say. He doesn’t move.

The journey is an hour long. We find spare combat suits in a nearby crate and take turns changing while the other looks away.

“Prepare for landing,” the automated voice says. We brace ourselves as the helicopter lands hard on a field of concrete. The hatch opens and all of the official soldiers jump out, already shooting at the Tanten soldiers who are advancing on them. Aiden and I wait for the hatch to start closing before jumping out and shooting, like the rest. My aim is awful and I can barely fire.

“Come on, let’s take the back street,” Aiden says to me.

“Wait, what’s our plan?” I ask. “You weren’t serious when you said to take out the Tanten leader, right?”

“Yeah, I was,” he says. “Rammeria isn’t being bold enough to win the war. We need to be bold for them.”

“Do you even know who the Tanten leader is?” I ask. “Or where they are?”

“It’s Kyrus Warne,” he says. “And he lives in a maximum security building, protected from Rammeria.”

“He sounds like a coward,” I say.

“He *is* a coward,” Aiden says. “And we can make an estimate that it is right” – his eyes scan the broken buildings – “there.” And he points at a building with a bottom floor so broken that you can see the interior, but the top half still completely whole.

“Should we risk being wrong, then?” I ask him. He turns and looks at me.

“I thought *you* were the reckless one,” he says. I shrug. “Well, yes, I think we should risk being wrong.”

“All right,” I say. “Let’s go, then.”

Aiden leads me down the back street and we enter the lower floor of the building easily: there is no one inside. There’s also no sign that the level above is occupied.

“How will we get up there, anyway?” I ask. Then I spot a hole in the floor at our level – just large enough to squeeze through. “Look!”

“But that goes down, not up,” he says.

“Well – think,” I say. “Tanten soldiers need a way to get to their leader, but without Rammerian soldiers need knowing the way in. If there was a ladder, it would be really obvious and Rammeria could climb up easily.”

“So you’re telling me that we need to crawl through *that* tiny little hole?” he says.

“Yes,” I say. “I’ll go first.”

“What if you’re wrong?” he says. “It could just lead to the plumbing.”

“I think we should risk being wrong,” I say teasingly, doing my best impression of his voice.

“Ugh,” he says. “*Fine*. Climb in, then. I’ll come once you get up.” I lie flat on my stomach and lower myself in, slowly and carefully.

Once I’m in, it’s worse than I thought, climbing into solid darkness. It’s terrifying.

But as my eyes adjust, I notice hand and footholds in the tunnel, and that it has started to curve upwards. I'm in the wall!

But then, something unexpected happens. I start to hear Aiden yelling.

"What's wrong?" I shout down the tunnel, hoping he can hear me. He doesn't answer but continues shouting. Now there are two other voices shouting as well. There's a tiny chink in the tunnel wall and I place my eye to it, peek into the room. Two Tanten guards are grabbing Aiden's arms and dragging him out.

I'm about to shout his name but he shakes his head to motion for me to stay silent, as if he can see me; as if he knows what I'm about to do.

"Go kill the president," he mouths to me.

Then one of the guards hits Aiden hard on the head with a gun and Aiden goes limp as the guards drag him away.

I stifle a scream that is about to bubble out of my mouth. I hear the voices of Tanten guards walking down the hallway above me, in the president's base. *What should I do? I think. I can barely shoot a gun.*

Without thinking, I force myself up the rest of the tunnel and dive out, hiding in a cranny in the wall. The guards pass without noticing me.

Okay, so I'm doing this. I'm going to kill the leader of Tanten, alone. I start running down the corridor, gun held up. I may not be able to shoot, but the Tanten soldiers don't have to know that.

I see a soldier at the end of the corridor and duck behind a crate. He's talking into his walkie-talkie, and I listen.

"Come here, now!" someone yells through the walkie-talkie.

“Of course, President Warne,” the soldier says. I gasp. He’s going to Warne – I could follow. The soldier goes down the corridor on the left and I run after him, quickly and quietly. As long as I don’t pass other soldiers, I should be fine.

That thought hasn’t even finished running through my head before I see four other soldiers walking down the corridor towards us.

I leap behind a door. As the four soldiers pass, I hit the gun at the wall, hard. One of the soldiers notices and turns.

“You guys go, I’ll check this out a second,” she murmurs and turns back towards me. Now I just need to time this right...

I knock the soldier on the head with the butt of my gun, just as I saw the guard do to Aiden, and she crumples to the floor, unconscious.

“Everything okay, Sara?” one of the soldiers she was with shouts.

“Everything’s fine.” I try to make my voice sound identical to the soldier’s – Sara’s.

“Okay, see you outside,” says the other soldier.

“Yep,” I say, still imitating Sara’s voice. I unbutton Sara’s black uniform and slide it off. Thankfully, she’s wearing underclothes.

I slip on the uniform on top of the Rammerian combat suit. Then I pick up my gun and head in the direction of the first soldier, this time striding through the hallway like I own the place, copying the walk of the other Tanten soldiers.

Everything’s good until a different soldier, wearing a silver badge on his black uniform appears.

He walks by and looks at me suspiciously. I keep walking and try to ignore him.

“Stop, soldier,” he commands. I guess the badge is a symbol of high status. I grit my teeth and turn to him. “I don’t remember seeing you here before.”

“I’m Sara... sir,” I say, pointing to the badge on my uniform that states my name.

“And where exactly are you going?” he asks, his eyebrow raised in suspicion.

“President Warne called me,” I say. Fear is spreading through me like a disease that I don’t have a cure for.

“Why did he call you?” he asks.

“Because...” I invent wildly, “because he wants me to lead an attack on the southwest village.”

“The southwest village is already in Tanten’s control, liar,” he says.

Without a second thought, I duck under his arm and start sprinting through the corridor. I can hear him talking into his walkie-talkie. “There’s a girl running your way. She’s broken in. Get her.”

I look back and see him running after me. I speed up without looking forward, and plough straight into another soldier.

The soldier wearing the badge catches up, grabs my arms and starts dragging me away.

“You know, the last time I visited Tanten prison was a month ago,” he says. “Lucky for you, you’ll get to live there.”

I struggle to get free of his rock-hard grip. I may not know how to shoot a gun, but at least I can kick. I bring my leg up, hard, into his stomach and his hold loosens slightly as he bends over in pain. I grab my chance and twist away.

“Get back here, you lunatic!” he shouts as I dart down the corridor. I don’t stop running and running and running, and he is right behind me, and I can’t stop.

I make a left and duck behind a door. He follows me and I slam the door into his face. He lets out a scream of pain and collapses, dark red blood streaming from his nose and soaking his uniform. Then I regain my pretence of being a Tanten soldier.

“Someone get him a medic!” I call to a group of other soldiers who just turned the corner and didn’t see me attack. They nod and run off.

I take off sprinting again, down three more corridors and up twenty stairs. There are two Tanten soldiers standing guard outside a bolted iron door, and I can only assume that Warne is in there. I don’t have time to reason with the guards, so I aim at the bolts on the door, somehow manage to hit my target and the door opens. The guards scatter.

I run in and find a man with icy blond hair, holding up a gun.

“If you shoot, I shoot,” he says in a gruff voice.

“You’re Warne,” I say.

“What’s it to you?” he says.

“Well, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you’ve started a war and are hunting down my type,” I say with cruel sarcasm. “BT-Z.”

His eyes widen maliciously. “You’re BT-Z?” he asks me.

“What’s it to you?” I say in a taunting imitation of his voice.

“Cheek won’t get you anywhere,” he says. “The only reasons I have to not shoot you here and now is because, one – you’re precious BT-Z experimentation material. But that can be ignored. And two – because you’re pointing a gun at me. And I’m not in the mood for dying.”

“I’d rather sacrifice myself to end the war than keep you alive,” I say coldly.

“At least you’re brave, I’ll give you that. You’re the complete opposite of another girl I know – I tried to kill her eighteen years ago,” he says. “She was a coward – she lied to me and then ran away instead of accepting death after I killed her father. Miriam was her name.”

I don’t move. Another memory from before Aiden saved me has just whooshed into my head – this time of a person. Of my mother. I remember her name. She was called Miriam.

The world freezes and it’s just me and Warne and Warne and me. Recklessness is what got me this far; it’s the thing that no one else in Rammeria was able to do. But both Aiden and Liliana warned me about it, and I didn’t listen. I should’ve listened.

Then, in one swift move, he shoots me, and I shoot him.

Author of Tomorrow | 16-21 Years

Cold Moon

Tianna Maidens

Winner of the 16-21 Years Category

They were sent towards the border on the darkest night of the month, under the watchful gaze of the high-hanging cold moon. It peered down with bored indifference, barely illuminating the barren wasteland of the battlefield before them.

As always, Wilder had taken the lead, consideration and cunning etched into every inch of his expression, and that instinctive predatory stance in his gait as he carefully maneuvered his way over stray rocks and divots in the earth. Hayden, meanwhile, lagged behind, cautious yet clumsy, stumbling his way through Wilder's path with the gracefulness of a fish out of water. He cursed under his breath as his trouser leg snagged on a cutting of barbed wire poking out from the ground, ripping through the cloth and into his skin, causing droplets of blood to drip distastefully onto his shoe.

"You all right, H?" Wilder asked, turning back to his partner with a glimmer of mirth in his eyes, and a slight smirk twitching at the corner of his lips.

"I'm fine," Hayden murmured, rubbing softly at the cut. "Just snagged myself on a bit of wire."

"Aw," Wilder cooed, lips poking out in an exaggerated pout. "Do you want me to kiss it better?"

"Shut up," Hayden hissed, trying and failing to hide his own smile as it forced its way to the surface.

Wilder laughed, quieting it in his sleeve, but relented, looking away from Hayden to continue onwards towards the border.

Hayden felt a little bit lighter as he began to move after his partner, a familiar warmth blooming in his chest, despite the bitter cold of the night-time air around them. It was biting, leaving Hayden shivering and shaking more than he liked to admit. For once, he was grateful for the thickness of their gear which, despite its overbearing weight, was vital for protection against both the elements and stray shrapnel blasts.

They had been travelling for hours – from before the sun had even grazed the horizon to now, when it was well below it – and Hayden could feel the exhaustion starting to weigh on his limbs. Even Wilder, who usually showed no sign of fatigue or discomfort, was moving slower than usual, and Hayden couldn't miss the bags under his eyes. There was a treacherous journey ahead of them, and a night of interrupted sleep, followed by a day of constant near-death experiences, didn't exactly help, and Hayden couldn't blame him at all for being unable to pull on his usually perfect mask.

Still, they had to keep going; that much was obvious from the stakes of their mission. One wrong move, one moment of rest, one single miscalculation could snuff out the entire rebellion, and the soldiers along with it, leaving nothing behind but scattered weapons and half-decayed corpses, picked apart by the local wildlife.

Hayden shivered at the thought, and subconsciously picked up his pace, ignoring how his muscles cried out at the movements, focusing once more on keeping himself from stumbling. Wilder, noticing the increased pace, shot Hayden a grin over his shoulder, and while Hayden knew it was laced with joking sarcasm, he was sure that he saw a bit of warmth in there, too.

He opened his mouth to point this out, ready to lay into Wilder about his hidden affection for him, when a sharp crack sliced through the air. They both froze in their tracks instinctively, and Wilder grabbed Hayden's collar to pull him down to the ground.

"What was that?" Hayden hissed under his breath, pressing himself close to Wilder.

"I don't know," Wilder replied, voice just as hushed, but sharper, and laced with a certain venom that only came with the arrival of an enemy. "We're not close enough to Lesberg's borders to hear any target practice."

"Plus, it's too late for that," Hayden added, a bit unhelpfully, and Wilder shot him an unimpressed look.

Another crack rang through the air, this one much louder than the last, and Hayden flinched, biting his lip to muffle his cry of surprise. Wilder turned towards the source of the sound, dark eyes scanning the black night for any sign of movement, his hand remaining a gentle pressure on the back of Hayden's neck.

The following silence was deafening, filled only by Hayden's harsh, panicked breathing, and the quiet chirps of nearby crickets. Hayden hated silences – there was so much to be said in a silence, and so much to be left unsaid, and it hurt his head just to think about it. He opened his mouth to whisper something else, if only to stop the enveloping quiet, when—

"I think I saw something over here!" It was a gruff voice, definitely male, and seasoned with a certain cruelty that Hayden had only seen (or heard) in the Lesbergians. It was strange, being able to hear such a trait in a person's voice, but somehow, Hayden knew that this man meant trouble, and that he would not be as forgiving as some of their own patrollers.

Wilder seemed to notice this too, as Hayden could feel the exact moment his partner's entire body tensed, adrenaline spiking and eyes blowing wider as he stared, unseeing, into the

dark. They stayed silent and still, unsure what they were even facing – two men? Three men? Six? There was tall grass nearby, just to Hayden’s left, that could make for a good getaway if they could reach it, but it was a solid few metres from them, and Hayden was unsure if it was worth the risk. These men could be armed, with guns or bows ready to strike.

“Come on, man, you’re always saying there’s something.” Another voice joined in, dripping with poison and distaste.

“I’m telling you – I saw something!” the first man responded, just as hostile. “I swear I did!”

Hayden held his breath, pressing his face into Wilder’s uniform. The rough material drove uncomfortably into his skin, but he didn’t care, too wrapped up in his own fear to even consider the discomfort. Wilder’s hand tightened slightly, and Hayden relished the grounding pressure. He jerked his head slightly towards the grass, watching with satisfaction as Wilder followed the gesture, nodding slightly in understanding once he spotted Hayden’s plan.

The men continued to argue, their voices growing closer and closer; so close that Hayden could hear the soft clinking of metal – their guns, Hayden assumed.

Wilder’s gaze fell to the ground, scanning it ferociously for a moment, before it settled on a small stone nestled on the ground. His lips twinged slightly in victory, and he began to slowly inch his hand forward, not daring to lift it from the safety of the ground. The men were getting closer, the wretched *thud, thud, thud* of their boots sending vibrations through the ground and into Hayden’s bones.

He silently willed Wilder to move faster.

Wilder’s hand finally reached the stone, and he coiled his fingers around it firmly. For a moment, he stayed perfectly still, squeezing the stone once, before edging it back towards him.

He lay a gentle kiss on the cold surface, as if thanking it, and glanced to either side of him to see if he could spot either of the two men.

When he decided it was safe to move, he reared his arm back, and propelled the stone forward. Hayden held his breath as it soared through the sky and landed with a soft thud. The men went suddenly silent, and, for a moment, Hayden thought they were done for, but then the second man grunted, and a single pair of footsteps began to trudge in the direction of the impact.

“Let’s kill it, then,” he said gruffly, cocking his gun.

The sound of the metal clicking together sent shivers up Hayden’s spine, but he refused to acknowledge it, steeling himself and clenching his muscles to run. The first man seemed to hesitate, but then he, too, turned to follow his partner. Hayden fought his instincts screaming at him to run, focussing instead on Wilder, waiting for him to give the command.

It came a few seconds later, when Wilder’s grip on his neck slackened, and he took off running towards the grass. Hayden, as always, was right behind him.

The men were shouting, and shots began whizzing past Hayden’s head, but they were fast, and hidden by both the grass and the night’s blanket.

Wilder’s hand somehow latched around his arm, and began pulling him forward, urging him to run faster, but Hayden’s muscles were screeching in pain and fatigue. Despite his adrenaline rush, he wasn’t sure he could keep this up.

Before he could even attempt to voice this concern, a shot came too close, missing his safety equipment and slicing across his arm. Hayden cried out in pain, legs giving way under him. He likely would’ve collapsed then and there, if Wilder’s grip hadn’t tightened, forcing him upright, forcing him to keep running.

He had never wanted to both hug and kill his friend as much as he did at that very moment.

Then, agony like never before shot through him, erupting from his leg and shooting like a firework up his spinal cord. Despite Wilder's best efforts, that one did bring him down. He collapsed with a harsh thud, grunting at the impact. He curled in on himself, leg and arm throbbing dangerously. A gentle hand gripped his shoulder.

"Hayden," Wilder's voice echoed in his ear, but it was far away, as if it was coming from another lifetime. "We have to move."

He wanted to listen – God, he wanted to listen – but the pain was too much. He wasn't strong like Wilder was, and he knew that if he tried to run he would fail, and he would take Wilder down with him.

"Go," Hayden whispered, but Wilder just settled down beside him, wrapping his arms around his body and pulling him to his chest. "Go."

Wilder shook his head, "You know I'm not gonna do that, H."

"*Please*," Hayden gasped, nerves burning like wildfire, "I can't—"

"It's not even that bad," Wilder scoffed, but Hayden could see the worry in his friend's eyes. Sure, it wouldn't be bad for Wilder, not with his freakish tolerance to pain, but Hayden was weak, and he had never been shot before.

"Wilder—" he began, but then a discordant voice joined the fray.

"Well, well, well," one of the voices from before taunted. "What have we got here?"

Hayden felt Wilder's grip around him tighten, and he was pulled impossibly closer to his partner.

"Get away," Wilder growled, knowing full well it was a futile effort.

Hayden wished he could see what was happening so he could assess the situation, but the idea of opening his eyes right now was more than he could handle. The darkness that had seemed so terrifying just moments before now enveloped him so warmly, and he wanted nothing more than to sink into it.

Then a shot rang out, and awfully, horribly, Wilder's grip slackened, and he flopped to the side with a dull thud.

Hayden's eyes flew open, and he turned towards Wilder, finding nothing but lifeless dark eyes staring back at him. A new kind of pain flared in his chest, and the bullet wounds were forgotten. He pushed himself to a seating position, turning his hate-filled eyes to the two men, who were watching with sadistic smirks on their faces.

"You—" he started, but he didn't get to finish before another shot rang out. Hayden fell backwards, landing atop Wilder's body.

The men, satisfied with their work, strolled away casually, conversing on a job well done.

After all – what were two soldiers in a war worth a million?

Bear Country

Justin Schwab

McAlister didn't want to start a campfire because the smoke might attract bears.

"But you said they were hibernating," Elsie said accusingly.

"He's just being a darned fool," Butch said, patting her head. "Here, Darrus. Pass me them sticks and we can warm up."

McAlister gave him a grave expression but passed over the sticks anyway. "You be careful," he said. "Don't set the forest on fire."

The trees were beginning to fade into the darkness and the sky faintly glowed indigo. While Butch busied himself with the campfire, Elsie leaned back and stared through the branches. "Uncle, I can see the stars."

"Oh, there's a bunch of them out here," McAlister said. "Butch and me used to try and count them when we was kids. We sure did, Butch, didn't we?"

"Oh, yes," Butch said. "There was an old book back in the schoolhouse about constellations that I looked through all the time. I think I might've found one in the actual sky."

"I learned about the constellations in school," Elsie said. "About Ursa Major and Ursa Minor and all of them. Those two are bears."

A sputter, and then a small flame glowed under Butch's whiskered chin, illuminating his dirt-streaked face with orange light. "That feels right nice, it does," he said. "Here, Elsie, come a little closer and warm yourself up."

McAlister, resigned to the creation of the fire, scooted forward and held out his hands.

“Sure does feel nice.”

“Once we get to the tunnels, we won’t be able to start any more fires,” Butch said.

“Well, then – we better get through them tunnels before the day ends, huh?” McAlister said.

“Why can’t we have fires in the tunnels?” Elsie asked with a yawn.

“You notice how there’s smoke coming off this fire?” The little girl nodded. “Well, when you get in the tunnels, there’s no place for that smoke to go. So it just comes down on top of you.”

“That’s weird,” Elsie said. “Why doesn’t it just go out through the exit?”

“Sometimes it gets lost and it can’t find the exit,” McAlister said. “But we ain’t gonna have to worry about that.”

“I’m tired,” Elsie announced, a few minutes later.

“Well then, you get off to sleep,” McAlister said. “See you in the morning.”

The fire was dying. McAlister poked the glowing twigs with a long branch and raised his eyes to Butch, who was staring at him.

“What?”

Butch shook his head. “You’re a right bad man sometimes.”

“Bad? What’s bad about me?” McAlister gestured towards the sleeping form of Elsie.

“They was going to scoop her away if I didn’t do something. I’m paying your sweetheart a big favor.”

Butch shook his head. “Those days are gone, Darrus. Just call her your sister.”

“I hear you talking about her in your sleep.”

“You really got me.” Butch stared moodily into the fading light of the fire. “It don’t matter. They was going to take Elsie back, right when you came and snatched her. She could’ve been in a home by now and not have to sleep on the forest floor surrounded by bears and...”

McAlister tapped the twigs again, eliciting a flurry of sparks that burnt away to gray ash in the air. “She really do think they’re hibernating, don’t she?”

“If we’re lucky, she’ll keep thinking that,” Butch said. “You’ve made a big mistake, putting a little girl in danger. We’re not equipped to handle so much as a wild pig.”

“There’s gonna be no problems around here,” McAlister said. “We’ve made it this far. Once we’re through the tunnels it’s smooth riding.”

Butch shook his head.

“What?”

“You’re taking a little girl through the tunnels,” Butch said. “Stop and think about that.”

“What’s happened to you?” McAlister said, tossing away his stick in disgust. “I thought you was the adventurous one.”

“Darrus.” His voice was cold now. “Those days are gone.”

He rose, stamped the fire with his boots, and disappeared into the sudden darkness.

McAlister glanced at Elsie. Finally, he asked, “You’re still coming with us through the tunnels?”

“Not for you.” Butch’s reply came from deep in the dark. “But if you’re going to make her go in there I guess someone has to stay around to protect her.”

McAlister lifted his eyes to the black sky and found the faintest line of a slim moon. He remained that way for a long time.

“How much?”

McAlister fumbled around inside the small leather pouch as his three associates gathered greedily around him. “Five,” he said. Raising his hand, he allowed one of the silver coins to catch the light of the sun.

“That’s one extra,” Samson said.

“I’ll take it,” McAlister volunteered.

“Don’t be a fool, you didn’t do anything,” Eleanor said. Her nimble fingers snatched the pouch from her brother’s hand. “I’ll take the extra.”

The others grumbled, but they couldn’t protest that they had done any more work, so they allowed Eleanor to shake one coin into each of their hands.

“Let’s search for something worthwhile, why don’t we,” Grayhood said sourly. “Grand carriages and all that. This is pathetic.”

“If you want to go be the scout next time, go ahead,” Samson said. “Maybe your loud footsteps will attract something just as big.”

“There ain’t no problem with five silver dollars,” Eleanor said. “That’s enough for a drink each. And once we’re at a tavern there’ll be plenty more to take.”

“Christ, Ellie, you’re really going to hold up another tavern?”

“Yes I am, brother,” she said. “What, would you rather I didn’t? You’d all starve. You’d be bones in a churchyard without me.”

“Why don’t we wait for another traveler?” Grayhood suggested.

“No,” Eleanor snapped. “I’m getting hungry and we’re eating tonight. Come on.”

“Wait.” Samson was still. “Do you hear that?”

The others went silent.

“I don’t hear noth—”

“Shhh!”

Something was smashing branches and breathing heavily.

McAlister saw it first. The beast’s great, wet nose poked from the brush into the clearing, followed by its listless black eyes. For a moment, no one could move. Then Eleanor had her rifle in hand and Samson was screaming and the bear rolled onto its hind legs and roared a terrible roar and lunged forward.

The bear landed on top of Samson. Its claws sank into his chest. Blood spurted through his clothes like a punctured bag of grain. Then its jaws were around his shoulder.

“RUN!” Eleanor screamed. She did not run, though. She aimed her rifle at the bear and began to shoot.

Grayhood had fled into the bushes. McAlister wished he could. Instead he remained rooted in place, staring at the monster and the convulsing body of his friend.

A series of flashes, ear-shattering explosions, and an outpouring of smoke. The bear’s maw was bloody. Now its hide was riddled with gaping red wounds. A lucky shot from the rifle landed between its eyes. The beast slumped over.

Samson had stopped screaming. He had stopped moving entirely.

The clearing was quiet now. Eleanor was pushing the bear from Samson’s limp form. Both were clearly dead.

McAlister’s legs were too weak to move. He attempted to walk over and help Eleanor but instead sank to the ground.

“Stupid fool,” she seethed. She held up a torn sack. A pale blob of meat poked out from one of the tears. “Had an entire chicken on him. In bear country.”

“Elsie.” McAlister shook her by the shoulder. “Elsie, wake up. Today’s the day.”

Butch was standing by his side, scanning the area. “We’ve been here too long.”

Elsie lifted her head and rubbed her eyes. “I had a bad dream.”

“Let’s get moving and you can talk about it on the way,” McAlister said.

The three resumed their hike through the forest. Thick leaves shrouded their walk in green, generating a calming atmosphere. “So what did you dream?” McAlister asked.

“I was walking through a forest,” Elsie said. “But it didn’t look like this. All the trees were bare and the whole place was black. Have you ever seen a forest like that?”

McAlister glanced at Butch. “Nope.”

“There were big ridges in the ground,” Elsie continued. “Like claw marks. Remember when we saw some raccoon prints? It was like that, but a lot bigger. I could fit inside of one.”

“Sounds very scary,” McAlister said.

“And at the bottom of one of them was a sleeping bear. It didn’t notice me because it was hibernating, but then I noticed all of them had bears hibernating in them. And there was something else but I think I woke up before it happened...”

“Well, it’s a good thing that was a dream,” McAlister said. “Ain’t that many bears in the entire world.”

“Do you smell that?” Butch asked.

“Smell what?”

“Something foul.”

“Probably just you.”

“When are we going to get to the tunnels?” Elsie asked.

“Oh, they’re gonna be just around the corner,” McAlister said. “It ain’t too far now.”

“Darrus.”

Butch held up a hand. The sound of rushing water bouncing off rocks announced the approach of a creek.

McAlister took a few steps forward, peering through the trees. The daylight sparkled on the surface of the water. “Looks all right to me.”

Butch shook his head. “Why don’t we go this way,” he said, taking Elsie’s hand and turning to the left.

“I’ll get some water,” McAlister said stubbornly.

“And Elsie and me will go this way,” Butch said.

The two headed off, and McAlister rolled his eyes. Hopping over a few fallen trees, he approached the creek.

The minute he stepped out of the shade, the stench hit him like a train. Something terrible had happened. He gagged and covered his mouth and nose with his coat in an attempt to block out the nauseating odor of rotten, decaying meat.

There were lumps on the shoreline. Vaguely, McAlister recognized them as human forms. Empty canisters and looted satchels were scattered about, as if a flock of vultures had descended upon them and taken their valuables. One of them was missing a head.

McAlister hurried back into the forest. Butch hadn’t gotten far. “Looks like a skirmish,” he whispered.

“How fresh?”

“A day or two. Might still be around.”

“What’s going on?” Elsie asked.

“Nothing, pumpkin,” McAlister said. “We’re going in the right direction. Let’s play a game – how about it? Let’s make us even faster and even quieter.”

“Okay,” Elsie whispered.

“You’re a right bad man,” Butch said in a low voice.

“Don’t act like you ain’t too,” McAlister replied.

“Nothing.”

Eleanor spat on the ground. “Better to have tried than passed up a hundred dollars.”

“This ain’t right,” Grayhood said. “Look.”

The farm was thick with smoke. Goats and sheep screamed from inside the barn while horses in the field rolled their eyes wildly and stomped around the burning haystacks. The windmill had collapsed, the wheel still sitting on the ground, flames slowly consuming its form.

“Don’t be soft,” Eleanor said, but her harsh voice was less certain than it usually was.

“We could’ve used this,” Grayhood continued. “Them sheeps and goats. Would’ve made good meals.”

“And us carrying around ten goats and sheeps all the time?” Eleanor said. “Think real. Besides, there ain’t no such thing as wrong or right. If you want to start debating that then pick up a wig and go be a judge.”

McAlister and Grayhood followed her into the fields. “Now what?”

“We can still take these horses,” she said. “Here. Ridgeby’s right over the way. We can stop in and find a place to stay. Maybe trade in them rings.”

They rode the stolen horses seven miles to Ridgeby, proposing to tie them to the trees on the edge of town. But, upon the descent of their riders, the horses reared their heads and galloped off with frightened whinnies, vanishing into the woods.

“Guess we’re here now,” McAlister said.

“Never seen that before,” an amused voice said. A man was leaning against the side of the apothecary, watching them.

“They’re skittish things,” Eleanor said. “They’ll come back.”

“I recognize you,” the man said. “There’s talk about you all throughout the area. Thought there was four of you.”

They glanced at each other. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” McAlister said. “But we’re awful hungry.”

“They call you the Bleeding Bandits,” the man continued. “Did you know that?”

Eleanor drew a pistol. “You know what they call our acquaintances?”

“Dead?” the man offered.

“That’s right. We don’t want any trouble, now. So get out of here and don’t be an acquaintance.”

The man raised his hands, unconcerned. “All right. But I do know where you can get some scraps, if you’re hungry.”

McAlister waved for Eleanor to lower her gun. “You’re familiar,” he said to the man.

“I bet I am.”

“What’s your name?”

The man smirked. “You can call me Butch.”

“It’s very dark in there.”

McAlister pulled out a matchbook. “Don’t worry, I came prepared.”

“Isn’t that going to make smoke?”

“This little thing? Don’t you worry,” McAlister said.

“Are you really going through with this?” Butch asked.

“We’re here,” McAlister said. “You ready?”

Butch shook his head. “We’re right bad men, we are.”

The tunnel was very dark, and the light from the match was very small. They had hardly begun walking when Elsie tripped with a loud gasp.

“You okay?” McAlister asked, almost dropping the match in his hurry to help her up.

“I sound so big in here,” she said as she took her uncle’s hand. “Like a giant!”

“Let’s be quieter,” McAlister said. “Remember, we’re being fast and quiet. That’s the game.”

Most of the tunnel was difficult to discern, but the height and width appeared to be uniform.

“This place is huge,” Elsie whispered.

“They made it to fit trains,” McAlister said. “They built lots of new track for trains just now to get around better.”

“Why aren’t there any trains in here, then?” Elsie asked.

“They didn’t like the dark,” McAlister said.

The tunnel was getting colder the further they walked. “How long is it?” Elsie questioned.

“Oh, not that long. But we need to be quick, otherwise it’ll take longer than it should.”

“Do you know where you’re going?” Butch asked McAlister in a low voice.

“Of course I do. I’ve been here before.”

The match went out and McAlister had to light a new one. In the pressing darkness, he realized they had lost the light from the opening of the tunnel. He glanced over to check for Elsie by his side, but could see only darkness there. Feeling his heartbeat grow louder, he dashed the match against the side of the book. Nothing. He tried again and again, each time with more desperation. Finally the flame bloomed in the darkness. Elsie was still by his side.

“We’re making good progress,” he said. “Let’s go a little faster now, okay?”

“Grayhood left. Said it was good for his soul.”

Eleanor tossed a knife into the soft dirt. “Well, God bless his soul. Maybe next he’ll become a preacher.”

McAlister left the entrance of the hastily pitched tent and sat on a tree stump next to her.

“They say there’s gonna be a war soon.”

She snorted. “They say. It’s been looking like war the past twenty years now. It’s a miracle it ain’t already over.”

He sighed and began polishing his dagger. About ten minutes after her last comment Eleanor cleared her throat. “Brother.”

“Yes?”

“These last few days... I’ve got worse.”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I can feel it,” she said. “It’s on the way.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“I can’t be carrying around a baby,” she said. “It has to go.”

“How’re you gonna do that?”

“I’ll find someone. It won’t be but a second.” After a pause, she added, “Don’t tell Butch.”

“So it’s his?”

“Don’t tell him. He’s sentimental. He’ll want to keep it.”

“He’ll never know,” McAlister said.

“I know how you two are. Saying things behind my back. I don’t care if you grew up in the same dinky old town – if he finds out, I’ll have your neck.”

“He’ll never know,” he repeated.

There were two paths. “Well?” Butch asked.

“It would make sense to keep following the train tunnel, but we need to go this way,” McAlister said, gesturing down the sloping, jagged path to his left.

“Why is this one less nice than the other?” Elsie asked.

“They didn’t finish blowing it out completely,” McAlister said. “They left before the tunnel was finished, unlike the other one.”

The ceiling was getting lower. “This place is spooky,” Elsie said. “I would stop digging, too.”

“It’s just a little bit further,” McAlister said. “Don’t you worry.”

A small crevice was cut into the wall. McAlister stopped. “Now, here’s where the adventure starts.”

Butch shook his head. “Darrus. What are you doing?”

“It leads into the natural cave system,” McAlister said, shining the match into the crevice.
“See? It’s perfectly safe. And if the ground gets wet, I can carry her.”

“You’re crazy.”

“It looks pointy in there,” Elsie said, peering into the hole.

“Those are called stalactites,” McAlister said. Turning to Butch, he frowned. “If you ain’t gonna come, I ain’t bringing you.”

Butch bent his knees and slid down into the crevice. “Here, I’ll catch you,” he said to Elsie, holding out his arms.

Elsie hopped in after him. “It smells like a cellar in here!”

McAlister was crouching to follow them when he noticed something on the ground. Four deep gouges were carved into the rock, as if claws had bit into the earth and scraped out big ridges.

“You coming?” Butch called.

“Yessir,” McAlister said, climbing into the crevice.

He could see in the dim light that they had entered an expansive chamber. The stalactite teeth of the cave stretched down around them, poised in a still scream of death. McAlister kept his eyes on the ground.

“Careful, there might be snakes in here.”

“I don’t like snakes,” Elsie said.

“There were plenty of snakes when we were in the woods,” Butch said. “There’s no need to fear them any more now.”

They continued for hours. Occasionally the ceiling would lower, and they had to duck to pass. Other times, the stalagmites rising from the ground would become so thick they had to climb their way out of an earthy prison.

“I’m tired,” Elsie said at last.

“We should stop,” Butch said. “We’ve come far enough.”

The three sat down. McAlister laid out his coat for Elsie to sleep on. “How am I supposed to dream if I can’t see the stars?” she asked.

“The stars don’t give you dreams,” McAlister said. “Your head does.”

“I still miss them.”

It was silent in the cave aside from distant echoes of water dripping and Elsie’s steady breathing. McAlister blew out the match and the darkness covered them.

“I’ve always wondered what it felt like,” Butch said. “To look after a kid.”

“Don’t get too attached. We’re bringing her to Ferry and that’s all. He’s her pa and he’ll know what to do with her best.”

“You’re gonna miss her, ain’t you?”

“Of course I’m gonna miss her.” McAlister leaned against a stalagmite and closed his eyes. “She’s my niece. She’s all I got.”

“Why did she come and visit for so long?”

“Ferry didn’t want her down here. What with the fighting and all.”

“Stupid of him to send her your way, then.”

“Ain’t nothing bad happened a whole year,” McAlister defended himself. “She lived a perfect normal life. If Grayhood hadn’t shown his face around she’d still be living it.”

“You think? You really think she’d live a normal life with you? We’re right bad men, Darrus.”

“Save it, Butch. There’s no such thing as good and bad. Right and wrong. None of it.”

“Still living by Eleanor’s motto?” Butch let out a low whistle. “It’s still following us. Seven years later and it’s still following us. Christ, not even a little girl was enough to save us. Now we’re dragging her into this mess.”

“We ain’t dragging her nowhere. We’re getting her back to her pa and then we’re leaving her be.”

McAlister thought he could hear Butch shake his head. “Just a poor little girl,” Butch muttered. “We’re devils.”

“I thought you liked Eleanor. I thought you agreed with her. Or why else are you here?”

There was a long silence. They could hear Elsie’s slow breathing.

“That’s in the past,” Butch said at last. “I’m a better man now. I’m still not a good man. But I’m not about to let this girl die.”

“You think I would let her die?”

Another long silence.

“Well, do you?” McAlister demanded.

“Not on purpose,” Butch said.

McAlister sank against a stalagmite and stared into the darkness.

“You was going to walk her right into that creek with all the bodies,” Butch continued. “Without so much as checking first. And here we are in these caves.”

“It’s better than the alternative.”

“You think that. But I don’t know that you’re the best caretaker.”

McAlister shook his head. There was nothing left to say.

“Didn’t work.”

“Just fantastic.”

“What am I going to tell Butch?”

“Why not just tell him the truth?”

“He’ll lose his mind if he finds out I kept it from him so long.” Eleanor buried her face in her hands. “He’ll take the child and settle down. He’ll leave me if he knows it’s his. Oh, what am I gonna do?”

“He’s going to find out,” McAlister said. “Might as well tell him sooner than later.”

“He’s going to find out. Oh, he’s going to.” Eleanor sat up very suddenly. “No. I know what I’ll do. I’ll lie and say it’s someone else’s. This baby, it ain’t his. Oh, no, it ain’t his.”

“You’re gonna break his heart.”

“Oh, well. I don’t want him to break mine. Yes, that’s what I’ll do.”

“Whose baby is it, then?”

“I don’t care. Ferry’s – the baker in town. He’ll believe it. I’ll leave it with Ferry and then we’ll be gone.”

“You’re going to abandon your baby?”

“It’s Ferry’s now. Brother, be honest, do you see me being a good mother?”

“Ellie, this is your kid. This is your own flesh and blood.”

“You’re my own flesh and blood too, and sometimes I wish I could throw you to a pack of wolves.”

McAlister shook his head. “You don’t lie. But it just ain’t right.”

“Shut up. There is no right or wrong. Or do I have to remind you?”

“There is no right or wrong,” he murmured.

“Aye, and tell that to Grayhood,” she grumbled.

There were faint echoes in the air when McAlister awoke, and they were not of water droplets splashing from the stalactites.

He lit a match and shook Elsie awake. Butch looked as if he hadn't slept a wink. “Let's keep moving, now.”

“Do you hear that?” Elsie asked. “It sounds like men shouting.”

“It's just the echoes,” McAlister said. “They make right odd noises sometimes.”

It was undeniably the shouting of men, accompanied by occasional gunfire. The three remained silent and continued through the cave, holding their breath.

“I think it's getting further away,” Butch said.

“We're almost there,” McAlister said.

Eleanor screamed.

“Push!”

McAlister was standing outside the room, his ear glued to the door. The sounds of anguish coming from inside were making him nauseous. Across from him, Butch was pale as the moon, eyes wide.

“You're almost there, you're almost there.”

An awful, inhuman noise.

Butch sank to the ground and covered his head with his arms.

Later, the door would open and the nurse would invite the two men in. Ferry was clutching a bundle, with terrified eyes staring unblinking at the wall. Eleanor was on the bed. She was dead.

The shouting was gone.

“Now, we best be especially careful around here,” McAlister said. “There’s many paths that we don’t want to go down and get lost.”

The cave was sectioning off into smaller, cramped tunnels. Elsie clung to McAlister’s hand as he guided them further down the path. His supply of matches was running low.

“How much longer?” Elsie asked.

“We’re almost there,” McAlister said. “And I mean it.”

He stopped.

“Why did we stop?” Elsie asked.

He held a finger to his lips.

Butch picked Elsie up off the ground. The hair on his arms was raised. “Darrus...”

“Do you hear that?”

“What do you hear?”

He shook his head and held out the match. It was impossible to see beyond two feet.

“What is it?”

Then they could hear it too. A distant, low growling.

“I’m going back to Ridgeby,” Butch said.

“Where am I supposed to go?”

“I don’t care. Eleanor’s dead. It don’t matter much to me what happens now.”

McAlister shook his hand. “We’ll be dead in a month.”

“Maybe. Can’t evade justice for too long.”

“Well. See you, then.”

They saluted each other. Then Butch was on his horse and galloping off toward the line of trees.

“Stand very still,” McAlister whispered.

The growling grew louder.

Elsie grabbed McAlister’s shoulder.

They could hear heavy footsteps. Long claws dragged across the ground, their echo like the screeching of a saw. McAlister could envision the deep ridges left in the ground by the creature’s steps.

They were huddled together now, a statue of pure terror.

This is wrong, McAlister thought. There must be right and wrong, because it was wrong for me to bring a little girl down here. She will die in her father’s arms and neither will even know.

It was getting closer.

“Do not move,” he whispered.

Butch shook his head the smallest amount.

“Run straight ahead. There will be another path. Turn left. Then you’re out.” The two men locked eyes. “Butch, get your daughter out of here.”

His words were soft, rapid, almost indiscernible. He worried that they had not heard.

Then Butch nodded.

There was no time for him to say anything more. *Can't evade justice any longer.*

“About time.”

“Good to see you, too,” Butch said, stepping through the doorway of the rundown cabin.

“I got your letter. What is it?”

Elsie was clinging to McAlister's hand. “Elsie, this is a family friend,” McAlister said.

“Don't worry. He's nice.”

Butch raised an eyebrow. “Looks like you forgot to mention a few things in that letter.”

“Look here,” McAlister said. “I'm in a spot of trouble and I'm going to need some help.”

What justice was being delivered today? Punishment for thievery, arson, murder? Punishment for failing to lift a finger when Samson was attacked? Punishment for bringing an innocent child into the caves?

Elsie's eyes were wide in the darkness. McAlister could not decide if they resembled Eleanor's or Butch's more.

Then the match dropped from his hand and went out.

McAlister leapt away and began running. He could hear his boots slapping on the wet cave floor and knew that whatever was growling could hear them too. “HERE! I'M HERE! HERE I AM!” he yelled.

There was a roar, deeper and louder than what he had heard in the woods all those years ago. Then pounding, stomping feet, drawing closer and closer.

“RUN!” he yelled. Hopefully Butch and Elsie were gone. “RUN! RUN!”

His legs were flying. His thighs burned. He had never run so fast.

“FORGIVE ME!” he screamed. “OH, FORGIVE ME!”

His boot caught on a stalagmite and he slipped. The beast couldn't be more than a few feet behind. He curled into a ball and rolled away, his momentum carrying him down a small slope before landing him in a shallow stream. His ankle was on fire; he could not move.

He could smell the beast, smell its foul breath and many gory meals caked to its lips. Then the roar was on top of him and he could hear nothing else.

When he stared very hard, he could make out thin lines of light above him. If he had more time, maybe he could trace constellations, although he didn't know any. Butch did. He even found one in the sky once...

Down by the Riverside

Sara Thompson

*Well, I'm gonna put on my long white robe,
Down by the riverside,
Down by the riverside, down by the riverside,
I'm gonna put on my long white robe,
Down by the riverside,
I'm gonna study war no more.*

Of course, there ain't no such thing as ghosts, or at least not spooks in white sheets the way kids like to imagine. I think that if there is such a thing as ghosts, then they're just like you and I, except that they're already dead and don't know it yet. The past gets overlaid on the present in some places, like the rumpled edges of a folded blanket.

I'd been in prison six months before I made a break for it. I hadn't worked out much of a plan; I just decided one day that I couldn't take it anymore. The exercise yard was ringed with a chain link fence, and I was able to get up and over it before the guards had a chance to open fire. They sent dogs after me at first, but eventually they gave up the chase when I had gotten way down into the jungle proper. There's too many scents there to confuse even the well-trained hounds.

The jungle was what prevented escapes, not the fence. I can't tell you how big the jungle is if you haven't seen it— it's a trackless ocean of trees, and their branches sway and snap in the wind like waves breaking on a stormy sea. Though the leaves block the light, they also trap the heat against the earth so that you find yourself sweating through your shirt and gasping for breath just trying to walk at a comfortable pace. The warden had warned me that any inmates who ran away would never get out of the jungle alive. But eventually that was a risk I was willing to take.

I was going slow, following the Taratabaru upstream, walking along its winding banks, letting the cool green water lap over my feet. Unzipping my prison jumpsuit, I tied the arms around my waist and bent down to wash my sweaty face at the river's edge. When I looked down into the muddy bottom of the river, I saw among the darting minnows and clumps of dead vegetation a bright glint of metal. Curious, I pulled it out of the silt and examined it.

It was a soda can pull-tab.

Now sure, if you found a pull-tab on the ground you wouldn't think much of it, but here I was, out in the middle of the Guyanese jungle as untouched as the garden of Eden, so I had every right to take notice of this tiny giveaway of man's presence. I slipped it in my pocket and kept going, my pace quickening with the anticipation of coming across a settlement.

The river reached a little oxbow where watergrasses grew up through the shallows, capturing snarls of debris. Here and there, crumpled cans and chunks of painted wood mingled with animal bones and shards of broken glass and plastic bottles. The river must have carried them downstream, but they gave me the hope that I was traveling in the right direction. Skirting around the littered reeds, I climbed the washed-out embankment and took shelter in a thick copse, trying to get out of the midday sun.

The soft sound of a child crying rose above the gurgling of the rushing water, drifting up from a rocky outcropping on the far side of the stream. I thought at first it was a strange bird call or the wailing of a hurt animal, but the way the sobs broke into sniffles made it clear this was no critter.

“Hey?” I said, standing up. “Somebody there?”

When I spoke, the crying stopped. Cautiously, I stepped out of the cover of the tree line and walked down to the riverside, ears pricked for the cries of a child in distress. But all was quiet.

On the other bank, a little boy crawled out from between the mossy boulders. He was young but not a toddler, a child in the prime of his childhood, with dark red mud caked up his stubby legs and a fearful look in his eye. When he saw me, he broke into a run and charged into the water with his arms outstretched, almost getting unbalanced by the fast-moving river. I plunged in and grabbed him by the shirt collar, pulling his head above the water and dragging him back to shore with me, where we both sank down to our knees and sat for several minutes, taking each other in. When I looked up at him, I saw the boy staring me right in the eyes. In all my life, I’ve never seen someone stare like that. He stared like an adult; he had eyes that could burn through walls. When I blinked, the spell was broken, and his eyes welled up with tears and he hugged me tight.

“How’d you get lost out here, buddy?” I said, picking him up as I stood. I rocked him awkwardly as he sniffled into my neck. “Were you in a plane crash or something?”

“N- no,” he said, wiping his eyes. “I live up the river.”

“So you got lost?”

He nodded.

“If you can point me back towards home, I’ll take you there.”

I covered even less ground once I’d joined up with the kid, but I wasn’t going to just leave him. He rode on my shoulders when the ground became too uneven for him to keep up, and when we stopped for the night, I kept him close by my side as I gathered brush to make a shelter.

“Dad warned me to not walk into the dark by myself,” he said.

“Was he afraid of snakes or wild dogs?”

“No, strangers.”

I laughed a little, propping the sticks up against a tree as I worked on the side of the lean-to. It was so, so dark—, so dark that we were almost blind.

“It’s all right,” I assured him, “Your dad’s right, but I’m a good stranger. I promise.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

The rain came on with the night and we huddled together in the shelter, and I let him rest his head on my arm when we bedded down. I didn’t get much sleep between the rain coming down through the gaps in the roof of our lean-to and the way the kid kicked around all night. So by the time the sun began to come up pink over the treetops, I was right tired and had a bit of a headache.

We pressed on. The ground got flatter and little patches of grass grew up here and there, so I let him run ahead of me and scout for landmarks that would guide us back to where he lived. I walked along behind, keeping an eye on him for as long as I could, before he was lost to sight in the brush. He came back out of breath and grabbed my leg.

“There’s a crossing up there—” he said. “Come on! I’ll show you.”

I followed after him, crawling down through a thick briar patch that tore at my clothes and scratched up my sunburnt shoulders something awful. When we came out on the other side, the river had bottlenecked through a gully that was crisscrossed with a mess of planks forming a primitive bridge. He ran to the edge, and I shouted at him to stop.

“Don’t step out any further!” I said.

He turned around and watched me as I walked up to the bridge and knelt down where the boards were sunken into the muddy earth. I grabbed the boards and held them down to the best of my ability, keeping them stable as he ran across. Then, I followed after, and the plank bridge bent and swayed under my weight. I stumbled but caught myself, eventually making it to the other side where he was waiting for me.

“It’s up here.”

We walked more confidently now, and he held my hand as we headed along a dirt trail that emerged from the trackless jungle. A wooden fence sprung from the roadside, and the further we went, the more the trees transitioned into farmland. Fallow fields of cassava and sweet potatoes were overgrown with weeds and choked by vines. The path widened into a gravel road, and we emerged on a bluff overlooking a settlement.

Down below, wooden buildings lay in ruin, reclaimed by the rambling jungle. Trees sprouted from the cinder block foundations of cabins that slumped into the ground, rotting like bodies in the stifling heat. Doors swung loose on their hinges as a cool breeze wound between the buildings and up to the height where we were standing. There were no animals. There were no people.

“Oh, I know they’ve been missin’ me,” said the kid, and he smiled back up at me and then ran down the hill and into the village. I followed after him, shouting at him to stop, but he

either didn't hear me, or didn't care. We ran between two buildings, and he laughed and when he did, it was as though he was swallowed up in the shimmering waves of heat, and something a little off-kilter had settled back into place. I was alone.

Starved of the company of the living, I kept on down the road, passing under the dilapidated sign which read:

WELCOME TO
THE PEOPLE'S TEMPLE
JONESTOWN

The Panacea

Ahana Kanchan

1

The news had spread like *wildfire*.

A brand new white Chrysler 300 rolled up to the main gates of Werlington Research Institute and stopped suddenly.

“What’s wrong?” asked the man in the back seat, without bothering to raise his head from his files.

“Sir, there’s a riot of some sort.”

“What?” The man lifted his head to see a bevy of reporters quarrelling with the guard on the gate.

He got out, straightened his navy blue suit and marched up to the crowd.

“May I know what all the excitement is about?”

The pack of reporters, hungry for breaking news, pounced on him. A cameraman materialised from nowhere and a reporter launched into action.

“We are at Werlington Research Institute with the director himself – Mr James Dexter. Mr Dexter,” she said. “What do you have to say about the special research that is ongoing at your institute?”

“Well, we do research in numerous fields – there are botany, biomedical, animal studies—”

“Mr Dexter, I meant the Egyptian tablet that your team is doing research on. Is it true that it contains the formula for a panacea – something that can cure any illness? If so, have you deciphered it yet?”

Mr Dexter blinked. He had lost his tongue.

“Mr Dexter, can you please verify for us? It would be revolutionary in the world of pharmaceutical science.”

“Who told you this?” he demanded.

“We received an anonymous tip.” The reporter presented her mobile phone and showed Mr Dexter an image of a roughly rectangular-shaped gold tablet with engraved inscriptions in the form of symbols and shapes.

Mr Dexter flinched, but then he snorted and said, “That’s ridiculous. I’m afraid someone’s trying to mislead you. Er – I have a very important meeting right now. Must be leaving... my apologies.”

Questions followed the director as he made his way to the waiting car. Once inside, he ordered the driver to speed up.

2

The entire ninth floor of WRI was reserved for special research. Access to this floor was restricted to all except four scientists and Director Dexter himself.

The four scientists numbered Jake Holland, a twenty-six year old of average build with aqua-blue eyes, who was Head of Research and also Mr Dexter’s favourite employee. Gregor

Hopkins, a lab technician, assisted Jake in the chemical procedures of making the panacea. Riley Carter, Jake's university friend, had a dual background – he was a computer expert and also had knowledge of ancient languages. With both his skills combined, he had created a software that would aid the translation of the ancient Egyptian text. He had been working on it for the last few months and was now on the verge of deciphering the tablet. Then, finally, Jeremy Lingleton, a quiet young man with a meticulous mind, filed the reports of their research.

A pencil sticking out of his cinnamon brown hair, Jake watched a beaker full of swirling purple liquid with childish awe.

Riley entered the lab, his dark hair ruffled and rectangular glasses a little askew.

“You are late again,” remarked Jake.

“I know,” he groaned, putting on his lab coat. “Listen – something urgent has cropped up. Dexter wants you immediately.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Not sure, but his face forecasts there'll be a storm today.”

“Good morning, Sir,” said Jake, entering the cabin that housed the director's office, his dimpled smile wide.

“NOTHING is good about today's morning,” Mr Dexter replied. He slid his phone across the table. It showed the interview at the gate.

Jake was stunned.

Mr Dexter paced the room. “Who do you think is responsible?”

“Can't imagine, Sir. You hadn't told anyone apart from the four of us.”

“Exactly,” said the director, slapping the table. “And you know what? I even suspect someone in particular, but I need more evidence. However, the problem is – everyone will know about the tablet now!”

“Is it really that bad, Sir? I mean, they had to know someday.”

The director stared at the floor.

“Five years ago, I went to Egypt on an expedition, alone. It was there that I found this tablet.”

“Yes, Sir. I remember.”

“There is more to say. I knew that if my discovery were known to the public the tablet would be sent to a museum in Egypt. But *I* wanted to be the one to uncover its secret. So I dared to steal it and bring it to the United States.” He paused to drink water.

Jake stared open-mouthed.

“You do realise now, what the fuss is all about, don’t you? Now, I have become answerable to the American government and they to the government of Egypt.”

Jake frowned. “They will want the tablet back in Egypt, won’t they?”

“It's only a matter of time before the news reaches them... I’m screwed.”

“In the interview, you denied having the tablet.”

“They have means to verify that I do.”

“Well, what will you do now?”

“Inform the others that the panacea research is off. ”

Jake leapt from his seat. “But, Sir. We are so close to deciphering it. Only a few lines are remaining.”

Mr Dexter sighed. “It’s of no use now. I must flee while the coast is clear. Tell the others that I’ve gone on a vacation.”

3

Jake Holland jerked forward in his seat as the train halted abruptly, just as it was leaving Grand Meadows station. If he hadn’t grasped the pole in front of him he’d probably have shot off like a cannonball. Jake frowned. Grunts and groans came from every corner of the carriage.

Jake glanced at his phone to see the time but it was dead. Just then, the authoritative voice of a man came through the speakers: *Passengers, may I have your attention, please? There has been a minor power failure. We hope to resolve the issue within fifteen minutes. Thank you for your cooperation.*

Jake eyed the poster on the wall beside him ruefully. **EXPRESS RAILWAYS: Reach your destination in just a hop, skip and jump!**

As promised, the power was restored within fifteen minutes, but the train hadn’t started moving again yet, as the railway announcer had more to say: *We have received an urgent request. If Mr Jake Holland is on this train, he is required to disembark and report to counter five immediately.*

Perplexed, Jake grabbed his shoulder bag, hurried through the automatic doors and made his way to counter five, where a receptionist was seated.

“There was an announcement…” he began.

“Mr Holland?” she asked. “There is an urgent call for you.” She handed the phone to him and continued typing.

Today is strange, thought Jake, then, “Hello,” he said into the phone.

“Hello,” quivered a woman’s voice. “Mrs Walters here.”

It was his neighbour.

“Oh, Mrs Walters. What happened?”

“Jake, your grandfather is terribly ill. Please come fast. He’s at the South Hampshire hospital.”

Jake’s mind reeled as he returned the phone to the receptionist. *This was dreadful...*

South Hampshire Hospital, room 707. Jake opened the door. The strong antiseptic-like smell knotted his stomach with uneasiness. Walking over to the bed, he saw the familiar face of his grandfather, now pale and weak. The boy stroked the old man’s grey hair gently. Grandpa was fast asleep.

Jake barely noticed Mrs Walters on a nearby chair, until she touched his arm with a feeble smile. The boy sat down beside her. A minute or two went by in silence. Then he spoke.

“What happened to Grandpa?”

“I don’t know. In the evening, I rang your doorbell to give you some bread that I had baked. When there was no response, I looked through the living room window to see Mr Holland staggering through the hall to open the door. He was clutching his head like he had an excruciating headache. He never made it to the door – he collapsed midway...”

Shoulders sagging dejectedly, the boy held his grandfather's hand in his.

“How did you know where to reach me?”

“Your phone was off, so I called that lovely friend of yours – Riley? Remember how he helped me fix that fence in my garden one time? Anyway, he told me you took the train and were headed home.”

Footsteps approached them. “Mr Holland?” It was the doctor. He beckoned Jake outside.

In the corridor, the doctor took off his green mask.

“I’m Dr Grapewell. Please have a seat – you look dazed.”

Jake sat. “Doctor, what’s wrong with my grandfather?”

“I’m afraid it’s a rare type of disease – neurohypogenesis. It directly affects the brain cells and can cause memory loss as well.” He paused. “No cure has been found for it yet.”

Jake stared in disbelief. “What do you mean, no cure?”

“Sorry, Mr Holland, we are trying our best. But, like I said – it’s a *very* rare condition and the chances of his survival are extremely low. Possibly one in a million.”

The words pierced Jake’s heart. What use was modern science if it could not save his poor grandfather... the only family he had left.

He jumped to his feet, his blue eyes blazing. “Then my grandfather will be the one in a million who survives it!”

4

Riley waited near Meadowstone Park. It was midnight.

Finally, he spotted a familiar figure cycling across the lawn.

“Hey, Jake,” he whispered. “Over here.”

“Hi, Riley. Thanks for coming.”

Riley rolled his eyes. “You threatened me on the phone. Wasn’t like I had much of a choice...”

The cold January air blew past their faces. The faint rustle of the tree’s leaves could be heard in the distance.

“Riley, we need to decipher that tablet.”

His friend stared back in disbelief. “Have you forgotten that we are no longer working on it?”

“I know. But I need to complete the panacea for Grandpa.”

Quickly, Jake briefed Riley about his grandfather’s rare illness.

Riley pondered for a minute and then looked into his friend’s desperate eyes. “What if it’s not successful?”

Jake shook his head. “The Egyptians were some of the best doctors in the ancient world.”

“So, what’s your plan?”

“We break into the Institute.”

The white stone edifice towered before them, much later that day. The mighty gates were covered with spikes.

“Don’t tell me you are going to climb over that...” began Riley.

“No point. The turnstile gates at the main entrance aren’t going to open without our passes. Dexter took them away.”

Jake looked up at the sky. He spotted a bright flame of fire in the clear night.

“Is there an amusement park nearby?”

“Yes, Raymond’s Amusements – barely two kilometres away, but it’ll be closing soon.”

Jake's blue eyes shone. "Riley, how would you like a hot-air balloon ride?" he said cryptically.

"Absolutely not," said Riley. "You know I'm afraid of heights."

It had taken much effort to coax Riley but he finally gave in. The two cycled furiously to the park. When they arrived, most people had left and the workers were winding up for the day. One of them showed the boys the way to the hot-air balloon field.

A short, plump man stood there tying the rope of a huge balloon to a pole.

The boys went up to him. "May we have a ride?"

The man shook his head. "Sorry folks. We are done for the day."

Riley promptly turned to go back but Jake caught his arm. "We are willing to pay your price. Money is no object. You see, my friend here is very eager for the ride. Aren't you Riley?" said Jake winking at Riley. His friend scowled back at him.

The man pondered for a minute or two. "Alright," he said. "It will be fifty pounds." Jake paid the fee and they climbed aboard.

The pilot explained that he would turn on the flame that would cause the balloon to become lighter than air and float high in the sky. He did so, and the gigantic beast swallowed up more and more air and rose above the ground. Riley shut his eyes tightly.

Jake glanced in the direction of the institute. "Er – could we go westwards?"

"Well, you're in luck," chuckled the pilot. "The wind wants to go there too."

"How does the balloon land?"

"Simple. I just have to pull this yellow rope. It opens the vent at the top of the balloon, causing it to deflate slowly. On the ground, I tie the balloon with this other rope." He pointed to a large pile of loose rope lying on the basket's floor.

As they were approaching WRI, Riley distracted the pilot with non-stop chatter about the city landscape. Jake moved near the yellow rope and grasped it. Once they were close to the Institute's terrace, he gave it a firm tug. The balloon obeyed and started to descend.

Flabbergasted, the pilot swirled round. "What—?"

Riley grabbed the loose rope and firmly tied the man to the basket straps, while Jake guided the balloon to a safe landing on the terrace. Riley knotted a handkerchief around the pilot's mouth then the two friends secured the balloon to the ground with the rest of the loose rope.

"I'm sorry." Jake's earnest blue eyes were pleading as they looked at the perplexed pilot. "We have some urgent business to attend to." Then leaving him alone, they headed towards the staircase and climbed down to the ninth floor.

5

The door to the lab was never locked as Dexter wanted to avoid unnecessary suspicion among the other employees. Inside, test tubes, beakers and other scientific equipment lay on the cold, granite tables. The pungent odour of chemicals hung in the air. Jake dashed to one particular table which was near the window. He quickly pushed all the apparatus aside to reveal a portion of the granite that had slits on either side. On heaving it open like a trapdoor, a digital safe was revealed. The storage shelf beneath was a dummy.

As Head of Research, Jake knew the password to the safe. It was the location of the safe itself: building number 4 of the institute, floor 9, department 3 and platform 2. 4932.

ACCESS GRANTED appeared on the screen and the door slid across to reveal the ancient Egyptian tablet. He carried the heavy piece of metal to Riley, who placed it on the table and switched on a lamp light. They didn't dare to put on the main lights, in case the night guard noticed. The gold shone brilliantly, but the engravings were very faint towards the end.

"We will need dusting powder," said Riley.

Jake carefully dusted the last part of the tablet with a red powder which neatly settled itself into the crevices of the engraved letters, making them visible. Meanwhile, Riley turned on the computers and logged into his translation system. Ancient Egyptian language was written in rows without any spaces and manually figuring out the words would take ages.

"I'll get the camera," said Jake. He clicked a high-resolution image of the text and then sent it to the computer. Riley's software would take ten minutes to process the data.

As they waited, they heard a low noise behind them that was gradually increasing in pitch. Where was it coming from? Then Jake's eyes widened. Someone was coming through the vents!

"Quick! The tablet," nudged Riley.

Jake flew to the safe and returned the tablet.

The translation appeared on the screen but there was no time to read it. Riley snapped a picture on his cell phone.

They could now hear the person undoing the screws of the vent.

Jake grabbed Riley and ducked under the table. They shielded themselves with an armchair.

Thud... thud...

A pair of boots was visible and the cold voice of a man said, “Sir, Sapolsky here. I’m in the lab.”

There was a pause.

“No, there is no sign of the tablet.”

Jake’s heart thumped loudly.

“I’ll check the other shelves.”

The intruder walked over to the first table and began opening the shelves under them. Then he moved to the tables in the second row and stealthily opened each door until he reached the last table near the window. “Sir, this shelf doesn’t open- it has false doors.”

There was silence.

His voice now had a wave of urgency to it. “I’ve found the hiding place. But there’s a digital lock.”

Jake winced. The intruder waited for his boss’s instructions.

“I’ll use the fluorescent light...”

His boss is smart, thought Jake, approvingly. Fluorescent light would make fingerprints visible.

The man read out the digits. “9... 3... 2... 4... I can’t risk too many combinations. It can go into lockout mode.”

There was a pause again. Jake and Riley waited with bated breath.

“OK, Sir.” He pressed the buttons. A beep sounded.

“It’s wrong. I’ll try in the opposite sequence.”

This time, the safe opened. The intruder reported back his success.

Jake’s jaw went slack. *How did he guess?*

“Let’s get out of here,” said Riley. His legs were going stiff.

“No. Not without the vials.”

The vials contained the panacea that they had so far completed.

Jake glanced across the room. The vials were in the cold storage. He pushed the armchair away smoothly and peeked out to see the back of a stranger wearing black trousers and a black leather jacket.

Riley and Jake crawled to the other side of the lab warily. They took two vials each and closed the refrigerator door noiselessly. But Riley’s elbow knocked a test tube stand and it crashed to the floor. They stared at each other in horror.

“Who is it?”

Footsteps hastened in their direction and the two dashed for the exit. The chase was on.

At the top of the stairs leading to the terrace, Sapolsky caught hold of Jake’s collar and pulled him back. The man made a grab for one of the vials and took it. Before he could grab the others, Jake stamped on his foot, hard and Sapolsky yelled in pain. The boys sprinted away.

On the terrace, they released the tether rope and sprang into the hot-air balloon basket, jolting the pilot awake. They turned the flame up high. Sapolsky appeared and started to run for the balloon, but it was rising steadily. He managed to catch hold of the basket, but the boys pushed him off. His stone-grey eyes glared up at them menacingly as they rose higher and higher into the air.

Peace was made with the pilot as the two boys explained their actions on the way home. He said that they had given him a night he’d remember for the rest of his life. The boys didn’t know if he really meant it or was just being sarcastic.

“I’m famished,” groaned Riley once they were out of the balloon and back on the road. They stopped at a gas station and bought some chicken sandwiches. Then settling down on a bench, they munched away.

“I didn’t like the look of that guy,” said Riley. “Why do you think he wanted the tablet?”

“Sapolsky is only the puppet. The puppet master is someone else. Though I can’t imagine who. We must be careful now that he’s seen our faces.”

“Let’s see that translation,” said Riley, removing his mobile phone.

They poured over the image.

The final ingredient for the panacea is three crushed seeds of the Burwin plant.

Jake frowned. “Burwin plant?”

“Odd name,” said Riley, already surfing the net for it. “Here it is – the Burwin plant is scientifically known as *Apolska mendioderma*. It has heart-shaped, shiny leaves and purple flowers. It is an endemic species cultivated in Egypt five thousand years ago...” Stopping, he eyed Jake who looked shattered.

“It’s extinct!” he wailed.

“Hold on – no need to cry yet,” said Riley, taking out a crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket. “Here, look at this.”

It was an advertisement for a garden festival. “Visit Mrs Eboni’s one-of-a-kind garden festival,” Jake read aloud, “where she grows and sells exotic plants. Also, be a part of her seed auction...” He sighed. “What makes you think she will have Burwin seeds?”

“My uncle sent me this a week ago – he’s obsessed with gardening. Well, he said this woman doesn’t auction regular seeds. They are rare specimens that she and her ancestors have collected over the years. And guess what? She’s Egyptian.”

“Where is she now?”

“Cairo, Egypt.”

Jake leapt onto his bike. “I’m going there, then. I will take the next flight.”

“Seriously? You look like my aunt’s slippers – completely worn out.”

Jake didn’t care. “I have to. We are not the only ones after the Burwin plant.”

6

It was 4 a.m. when Jake climbed up the stairs of the Airbus A320. One glance at the deadly blades of the engines quickened his pace. Inside, he groaned when he realised that his window also had a view of the engines. Jake was not a happy flier.

The doors shut, the plane gathered speed along the runway and took off. Jake wore his earmuffs and for the next five hours of the flight, he was dead to the world.

His face was tilted towards the window when he eventually blinked awake.

“Huh?” In his sleepy haze, Jake was met by a dreadful sight. *The engine was on fire!*

Then the pilot’s sudden announcement jolted him. “This is your captain speaking. Our plane is experiencing some technical issues and we must make an emergency landing at Heathrow Airport, London. Thank you for flying with us.”

Jake bit his lip. “I’m never flying with you again.”

Once evacuated, Jake nudged his way to the help centre at the airport.

“Excuse me... How many hours will this flight be delayed by?”

The woman asked for his flight number. “Sir, it will be two days.”

“Okay...” Then it hit him. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Apologies, sir, but all the flights are overbooked. You will be entitled to compensation, however.”

Jake trudged back to the seat where he had left his luggage, feeling like a deflated balloon. He wouldn’t be able to make it to the garden festival in time. The advertisement said that the last day was tomorrow. The boy buried his head in his hands. The thought of his grandfather made him all the more miserable.

A tap on his shoulder pulled him back to the present. He slowly raised his head to see a pair of black leather boots, denim jeans that had guns strapped onto them and a black jacket that said: POLICE. The face smiling at him, framed by a blonde bob.

Emma Clarkson had attended university with Jake and Riley. “Don’t act like you don’t remember me, Jake.”

“Emma? You work here?”

“Yes. Heathrow’s got its own police force. What’s up with that forlorn face?”

Jake explained his tragedy. Emma contemplated for a while. “You know, Jake, there is another place you might get that plant. The Wedford Museum.”

Jake’s eyes grew wide. “You’re right. They have collections dating centuries back.”

“Would you like to go tomorrow? I have a day’s leave.”

His phone beeped just then. It was a message from Riley. After reading it, Jake looked up solemnly. “Can’t wait till tomorrow. The doctors said that Grandpa has only two more days to live.”

The Wedford Museum towered above them, looking majestic. Once inside, people lost track of time as they transitioned from one era to another. The modern world vanished for a while amidst all the fossils, prehistoric tools and sculptures of the long-gone.

Jake and Emma paused at the entrance to the botanical gallery.

“Too crowded,” Jake muttered. “We’ll have to wait until the museum closes. Half an hour more.”

“What about the night guard?”

Jake laid his eyes on a life-size model train from the 18th century. It would easily hide them.

Closing time came. The crowds moved slowly towards the exit. Jake and Emma followed a few paces behind and then stopped near the train. They ducked under the crowd-control stanchions and climbed aboard. Eerie sculptures of fake passengers greeted them. Bending low to the floor, they peeked through a window. No guard yet.

Heavy footsteps came around the corner. It was a pumpkin-shaped fellow who walked like he owned the place. He glanced left and right, then moved away.

Jake and Emma got out a minute later. The night guard must have retired to his office.

Rows of eyes seemed to follow them as they passed the portraits, heading to the botanical gallery on the third floor.

Jake’s hopes rose when he saw the wide collection of the herbarium. He and Emma divided the search. But, as he passed each shelf, the graph of his hope was declining.

“Not here,” he called out.

Then a shiver ran down his spine. In the reflection of one of the glass jars was the image of a rough-faced man. His thin lips bore a cunning smile. “Looking for this?” the man whispered.

Jake swung around. His eyes were transfixed on the jar in Sapolsky’s hand. There it was – *Apolska mendioderma*.

He made a grab for it but Sapolsky clutched his hand. His grey eyes penetrated Jake’s.

“Thank you, Holland,” he said. The words rasped out, as crisp as ice. “My boss wishes to give you a small present.”

Jake felt the cold metal of a gun pressed near his temple. Then he was dragged out of the room. Emma was nowhere to be seen.

Emma followed behind Sapolsky, staying in the shadows. It would have been foolhardy to confront him when he had Jake at gunpoint.

“Let me go!” Jake cried.

Emma peeked out. Jake was trying to wriggle from his captor’s grasp. They were standing right in front of a big statue of Aristotle.

Emma stealthily moved nearer to the statue, until she was right behind it.

“Time to give you your present,” Sapolsky said. He pressed the revolver harder into Jake’s temple.

Just then, Emma pushed the statue with all her might. Sapolsky didn’t notice it falling behind him but Jake caught sight of the movement from the corner of his eye and dived out of the way at the last minute.

CRASH! Aristotle fell on Sapolsky. Jake barely escaped.

Emma emerged. Swiping the gun from the floor, she pushed it into the back of Sapolsky's head. He was groaning and moaning.

"Looks like someone else got their present!" Emma said.

Jake's arms were folded. "Who do you work for?"

Sapolsky said nothing.

Emma repeated the question more fiercely, and this time, cocked the gun.

The man shook a little. "Lingleton," he snapped.

Jake gaped. "Jeremy Lingleton? My colleague from WRI?"

"No. His father – Richard."

Emma looked at Jake searchingly. He was stunned. "I'll explain later," he said.

Sapolsky was dealt with by the local police. Emma showed her credentials and twisted the story by saying that she was out in the street when she noticed an intruder in the museum.

Meanwhile, Jake drained the preservative solution in the Burwin plant jar down the museum sink. He observed the plant in his hands. The flowers were intact although they had lost their colour. He gently picked one of the flowers and then kept the jar aside. On plucking the petals, they revealed four oval-shaped seeds. Jake's heart leapt for joy. He crushed the seeds with Aristotle's broken arm. Out came the vial which he had taken from the laboratory in went the powder. Then he shut the lid and shook it. The concoction was a strange purple liquid that claimed to cure any disease...

Emma and Jake got into a cab.

"Come with me to the airport, will you? I can't let Richard Lingleton make another attempt."

“The name sounds familiar.”

“Lingleton Pharmaceuticals Ltd.”

Emma raised her eyebrows. “The billionaire?”

“Yes,” said Jake. “The fog is lifting. Lingleton and Mr Dexter were entrepreneurs in their younger days. Mr Dexter wanted to build a research institute while Lingleton wanted a company that made medicine. The dispute got deeper and finally, they split. There's been a cold war between them ever since and it only got worse when Jeremy wanted to work for Mr Dexter. Our director didn't mind though, since Jeremy was talented and hard-working.”

“So Lingleton took advantage and used his son as a spy?”

“Yes. That explains why Jeremy has been so reserved these days. His father must have wormed everything out of him. Then Lingleton must have realised that his pharmaceutical company would suffer if his rival came up with one medicine that cured all diseases. And that's how he also knew the combination to the safe!”

The cab drove up to the airport.

Emma grabbed her old friend's arm. “Be careful. A powerful man like Lingleton will not give up easily, Jake. He tried to kill you!”

8

After landing at New York airport, Jake received another text from Riley.

Your grandpa's back home. Doctors said it wasn't much use keeping him in the hospital now. Come soon.

That only meant one thing. The doctors had lost hope. Jake jumped into a cab. Reaching his house, he dashed to the door with the precious case that contained the panacea. Fumbling with the keys, he opened the door. Then he froze in his tracks. *Lingleton! And he has the tablet!*

Putting the tablet aside, the figure on the sofa got up. One hand laden with gold rings reached out to flatten his sleek black hair. “Holland, am I right?” The man spoke in a rich baritone.

“What are you doing here? And who let you in?” said Jake, clenching his fists.

Lingleton smiled menacingly as he pointed to a figure in the corner. Riley was bound and gagged.

Jake darted to his friend, but Lingleton pushed him back.

Jake felt his blood boiling. “How did your man follow me to London?”

Lingleton smirked and removed a miniature device from Jake’s collar. “It’s called a bug – it records audio.”

Jake’s mind whirled back to the struggle with Sapolsky in the lab the other day. He must have clipped on the bug then.

Lingleton narrowed his eyes. “If you want your grandfather and your friend safe, then hand me that case.”

Jake debated what to do. Lingleton was losing his temper by the second.

“All right,” said Jake. He unlocked the case. Out of the four vials, only one was the completed panacea. Jake took the unfinished one and handed it to Lingleton. The billionaire held it before his eyes. “Wait till Dexter sees this...”

While Lingleton was lost in his contempt, Jake undid another incomplete vial. He knew that one of its contents was citric acid.

In a flash, he threw it into Lingleton's eyes. Lingleton howled and danced around the room. Jake undid Riley and the two bounded up the stairs to Grandpa's room. The old man was unconscious. His heartbeat was feeble, while Jake's was thumping uncontrollably.

“Quick, give me the vial.”

Jake undid the lid of the completed panacea and dripped the medicine little by little into his grandfather's mouth. Then he handed it back to Riley. Jake knelt down, held his grandfather's hand and wept.

Then the miracle of the panacea happened. The wrinkled hand twitched and the old eyes fluttered. Grandfather managed a weak smile. “Jake?”

If there ever was a device to measure joy then it would never have a scale big enough for the happiness that Jake felt at that instant. He embraced his grandfather for what seemed like an eternity.

Lingleton would need dealing with, but for this one happy moment, Jake decided, he would just have to wait.

“I love you, Grandpa. And guess what? You're one in a million!”

Tears welling up in his eyes, Riley groped for his handkerchief. Even Mother Nature cried, as huge drops of rain started pelting outside.

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