



EARTH, AIR, FIRE, & WATER

TEN TALES OF
EXTRAORDINARY
ADVENTURE

THE WILBUR & NISO SMITH FOUNDATION



AUTHOR OF TOMORROW ANTHOLOGY

Earth, Air, Fire & Water

Ten Tales of Extraordinary Adventure

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About the Author of Tomorrow Award

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

Awards go to the best published adventure novel of the last calendar year, the best unpublished adventure idea, and the Author of Tomorrow – an author aged 21 years or under who has submitted a short piece of adventure writing.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 2024 Author of Tomorrow award.

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Author of Tomorrow | 11 Years & Under

The Girl With the Red Umbrella

Nina He

Winner of the 11 Years & Under Category

Yes, it might be rainy and sad today, the gloomy skies casting a luminous look on the whole city. But still, I told myself, everything was going to be fine. Perfect. Perfectly normal, at least.

I was trudging along on my morning walk when someone caught my attention. It was a girl carrying a blood-red umbrella.

Now, when I say blood red, I mean *blood-red*. It was the color of the heart of a blazing fire, of a movie star's lipstick. It was scary—a warning.

The girl rushed past me, muttering, “I can't believe it's happening again!”

This piqued my curiosity, but I couldn't decide if I should follow her. Grandma always said, “follow no one.” But then again, she'd also said people should eat makeup so they'd be prettier on the inside. (Grandma got that one *really* wrong...) So I followed the girl with the red umbrella into the city as she wove through crowds like she owned the sidewalks.

The rest of her outfit was all brown and gray, like everyone else. But her umbrella. That deep crimson.

Umbrella-Girl wafted into the library, wiping her boots off on the “Welcome In!” carpet. She tossed her umbrella on a rack. Inside, she was easier to see with less people around. I followed her, zigzagging deep into the shelves.

She slipped through a door partially concealed beneath a staircase. I followed.

The room was dimly lit, filled with old furniture and stacks of books. I ducked behind an ancient armchair.

In the center of the room, surrounded by flickering candles, an old man sat at an even older desk scribbling on a piece of parchment.

“Crimson,” he said without looking up. “Can I help you?”

Crimson. A deep red color. I shivered.

Crimson’s black eyes gleamed as she approached the desk. “The *Book of Blood*,” she said, her voice pleasant. Too pleasant.

“Ah.” The man got up and took a ring of keys from the desk. He disappeared behind a stack of books. He returned a moment later with a rough wooden box.

“Be careful,” he warned. “It’s very... well, hungry.”

Crimson smiled. “Don’t worry. This one here has been following me since morning.”

I froze. They knew. I threw the door open and ran. Behind me, I heard a laugh, high-pitched and evil. I ran as fast as I could, wishing I’d signed up for that fitness program at the YMCA...

I barely registered all the people I bumped into as I ran—out of the library, down the street, around a corner, into an alleyway, and...

Into Crimson, red nails scratching the surface of the wooden box.

“Hello, Ms. Berneth,” she said, her voice pleasant and eerie. “I don’t believe we’ve officially met.”

I turned to run, but it was too late. There was the creaking of the box opening. A roar.

Crimson closed the box, turned, and walked off, her coat swaying in a breeze that carried the iron tang of blood.

The Quest for Zeus's Thunderbolt

Aksh Goel

Perseus stood at the entrance of a dark and foreboding cave, gripping his sword tightly in his hand. The air was thick with the stench of decay, and dread seemed to hang heavy in the atmosphere. The cave echoed with the sinister hissing of the Hydra, a fearsome creature with multiple serpentine heads that slithered and twisted in the darkness.

As Perseus advanced across the threshold, his heart pounded in his chest as he prepared to face the monstrous Hydra. The creature's eyes glowed with malevolent intent, its venomous breath sending shivers down Perseus's spine. Each of the Hydra's heads snapped and lunged towards him, razor-sharp teeth gnashing hungrily in anticipation of the kill.

But Perseus was not one to be easily intimidated. With a battle cry that echoed off the cave walls, he charged towards the Hydra, his sword slicing through the air with deadly precision. Each head that came within range of his blade was swiftly severed, only to sprout two more in its place. It seemed like an endless battle, a never-ending cycle of death and rebirth.

But Perseus fought on, his determination unwavering. Sweat beaded on his brow as he danced around the Hydra, dodging its venomous strikes and striking back with all of his might. The ground was slick with the blood of the fallen heads, the air now filled with the stench of death.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Perseus saw his opportunity. With a swift and powerful blow, he decapitated the Hydra's final head, its lifeless body falling to the ground with a heavy thud. The cave fell silent, the only sound the ragged breaths of the exhausted Perseus. With quick reflexes and strategic thinking, Perseus had managed to slay the beast and could now continue on his quest.

Guided by the wisdom of the goddess Athena, Perseus finally arrived at the dark depths of the Underworld, where Zeus's legendary thunderbolt was

rumoured to reside. Amidst the shadows and echoes of lost souls, he faced the cunning trickery of Hades, god of the dead, who sought to thwart his mission at every turn.

Undeterred, Perseus pressed on, determined to retrieve the thunderbolt and return it to Zeus. With each step he took, the very fabric of reality seemed to warp and tremble.

At last, Perseus reached the chamber where the thunderbolt lay hidden, guarded by a fierce dragon with scales as black as night. With all his strength and courage, he engaged in a fierce battle against the beast, each strike of his sword bringing him closer to victory.

But just as Perseus was on the brink of seizing the thunderbolt, a deafening roar echoed through the chamber, shaking the very foundations of the Underworld. A new challenger emerged from the shadows – a figure cloaked in darkness and wielding a weapon of divine power. Stood in front of Perseus was Zeus himself, both ready for a battle of strength, power and knowledge. The fight was on.

Nature Speaks

Cian Patel

Under the scorching sun lies a serene country. Kenya.

Kenya was the abode of a nine-year-old boy, Bokang, who came from a city called Mombasa. He lived with his parents, Neyo and Nala, considerate people who raised him well.

Bokang walked to school every day, his eyes glimmered in the phenomenal Kenyan sunlight, dark brown hair shaded his sun-kissed face, protecting his head from the formidable heat.

One day, when the sun was at its lowest point in the sky, nimbostratus clouds showered rain on the city of Mombasa. The sky flooded with a shade of pink; darkness stole the colour as the sun wound down.

Moonlight welcomed the animals and citizens to the night. Elephants trumpeted; owls hooted as they swayed around. Ocean waves splashed on boats that were ashore.

Bokang slept. Invisible winds opened his window, lightning struck, and people were frightened. Bokang woke up, as did the whole neighbourhood, sleepy and filled with ire. Shouts echoed as people panicked; Bokang realised some of the shouting was familiar. It was the voice of his best friend Nawan. Nawan was intensely loyal, and the pair enjoyed spending time together.

Bokang was perturbed – his friend was in danger. Then he decided: he had to save Nawan! He leapt out of bed, ready for an adventure.

Departing the house without his parents knowing would be hard, but he owed it to Nawan. He swung open his door and fled swiftly past his neighbours' home, where crowds were standing outside.

Bokang's parents suddenly felt his absence. His dad yelled, "Bokang!" He heard no response. They searched the house. No Bokang...

Bokang was in the forest. He was surrounded by towering trees, which stood tall and elegant.

He ran. He was a sprightly cheetah as he moved further into the woods. He fell. Thick red blood seeped out of Bokang's knee. Exhausted, he wished he'd stayed in his bed, but he pushed ahead. As the sun rose, Bokang reached the place where Nawan was last seen. Searching the area from top to bottom, he spotted him! Bokang hurried forward, giving his friend an emotional hug. The pair settled down to rest.

Swiftly, Bokang fell asleep.

Suddenly, Bokang awoke to a sound never heard by humans before – nature stood before them. Unique plants, vibrant flowers and colossal trees grew eyes, ears, noses and mouths. Bokang and Nawan's jaws dropped.

Conversation flowed between the boys and their new forest friends throughout the day. It was nearly sunset when Bokang hurried home. On his entry, an awkward silence permeated the house. Bokang explained the speaking trees, however, his parents did not follow.

A day later, after Bokang returned from school, he had the urge to go to the forest.

No trees. No plants and warm atmosphere. Bleakness. Desolate tears dropped from Bokang's eyes. It was deforestation.

Bokang sprinted home with Nawan, filled with anger.

A month later, Bokang and Nawan started a charity to protect the natural world in Kenya. Neyo and Nala were immensely proud of the boys. They chose to take a stand against deforestation.

Author of Tomorrow | 12-15 Years

Journey of *The Ark*

Elise Sankey

Winner of the 12-15 Years Category

With a puff of steam and a screech of metal, the ancient iron machine hauled itself laboriously forwards along the rusted tracks, only a phantom of the shiny engine it must have once been. At the sight of the movement, a wholehearted cheer came from the meagre crowd behind the barbed-wire fence.

Sat on a throne of junk metal, a teenage boy with scruffy brown hair and tanned skin proudly surveyed his masterpiece. Many, many years ago, the engine was painted a glossy red, but weather and time had gradually worn away the colour, leaving only a rusty brown hulk of dented metal behind. On its side, graffitied in the messy scrawl of a child, was the engine's name: *The Ark*. Five boys hung onto the side of the machine, while another perched on the top, grinning and waving at his elated audience.

“Welcome to *The Ark*!” shouted Rome, the boy on top of the engine. The crowd gave another cheer, and then they were running alongside the fence, trying to keep up. From his junk-pile throne, Alp scrambled down to the ground, clambered haphazardly over the fence, then sprinted along the track, easily overtaking the crowd. When he caught up to *The Ark*, he leapt onto the back and hauled himself up, grinning. Even if most of the other boys took all the praise for Alp's achievements, at least there was no question of them beating him in a race.

“It works, Alp, it works!” cried Chase, Alp's closest friend – a fitting name, seeing as he spent a significant amount of time trying to catch up with Alp.

“I know!” Alp replied, elated.

“Ain't it lucky I found this old wreck in the first place, eh?” Rome chimed in.

Shut up, Rome, Alp thought to himself, wishing he had the courage to speak it aloud. Not like you did anything other than yell at the rest of us the whole time we fixed up The Ark, while you sat around scoffing your face with Mrs Jenson's best cakes.

By this point, The Ark was far ahead of the crowd, speeding along the track, through dried-up land. Alp crouched on top of the engine, his back turned on Rome. Gazing out at the ruined landscape, the wind whistling through his hair, he prayed that The Ark would be enough to save his clan. After many years of trial and error, had he finally proved himself?

Later that day, as the blazing sun ducked beneath the burnt-out horizon, the seven boys sat together on a rocky patch in the middle of a dusty, grassless field behind the cluster of mud huts that they called home. Alp and Chase perched a few paces away from the other boys, who were tossing a pebble between each other.

“So, d’you think we’ve done it?” asked Chase, digging a small hole in the dry dirt with a stone. The dim light from the houses made his blond hair glow a little, and it looked ghostly in the near darkness.

“I sure hope so,” replied Alp. “We don’t have too much time left.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Chase dejectedly. They could all sense it – the pressure of the looming time limit, the worry shared by the whole clan... the heat growing with each passing day. The two friends fell silent for a while, deep in thought.

Eventually, Alp looked up at the sky – it was jet black now, with tiny flecks of stars like the dying embers of a fire.

“We should go back,” he said. “Your mum’ll be getting worried.”

Grunting, they clambered to their feet.

“We’re goin’ back now,” said Chase to the other boys. A few of them stood up, leaving only Rome and Jack behind. Alp rolled his eyes. Rome seemed to think that staying up late in the field – which they called the Yard – made him more grown-up. Really, it just made him too tired to help in the morning, so he got an extra hour of sleep while everyone else worked.

Chase, Alp, and the three other boys – Oli, Luca and Indi – trudged back towards the huts, tired after a long day of hard work. It had taken them two whole moons to fix *The Ark*, and they had spent all morning preparing it for the big reveal. As some of the most capable, strong and healthy people in the Arker Clan, everyone was relying on them. If the engine didn't work on the day they revealed it to the clan, there was no way that anyone would ever trust it to fulfil its true purpose.

At the huts, the boys split off to go to their separate families. Alp asked if he could come to Chase's house for a few minutes, and Chase agreed with a sympathetic smile. When they shifted the planks that served as a doorway, the familiar scent of baking washed towards them. Alp smiled. Chase's mum, Mrs Jenson, was the clan's cook. She was a baking genius, and despite the significant lack of resources in the barren wasteland that was their home, she always managed to find just the right ingredients.

"Hi, Mum!" called Chase, kicking his old, torn trainers into a corner. A moment later, Mrs Jenson hurried in from behind a cracked mud wall, and pulled Alp and Chase into a tight hug.

"Well done, boys! You know how proud I am of you all? You've done it!"

The two boys laughed, and Alp wished that he could have the same greeting with his own parents. Out of his whole family, he was more likely to be praised by his dog, Loki, than any of his other relatives.

Releasing them, Mrs Jenson said, "I'll get you both a cake for your hard work. I've just taken them off the fire, but they'll be ready in a couple minutes."

As Mrs Jenson hurried back into the tiny kitchen, Chase and Alp sat down on the worn leather sofa. They were silent for a moment, until Chase looked at Alp.

"Y'know what we've said, and it's still true. If it gets too much for you round there, you're welcome to stay over here. There ain't much room, but we'd have you all the same. You only got to ask."

Alp bit his lip, frowning. As soon as the Jensons had found out how little welcome and love Alp's parents gave him, they'd offered for him to stay in their hut. As much as Alp was extremely grateful for their kindness,

he wished they would realise that he couldn't just leave his family. Yes, his parents never congratulated Alp on his work – but maybe they were just being fair. Maybe Alp didn't deserve as much encouragement as Mr and Mrs Jenson gave him. After all, it had taken him seven years to help the other boys find just the right vehicle, and design a mechanism that would be strong enough to carry the whole clan, if necessary. Alp was putting in as much effort as he could... but maybe that just wasn't enough.

When Alp didn't reply, Chase tried again, talking gently, his arm around Alp's shoulder.

“Come on, mate. For all the hard work you've put into fixing up *The Ark*, you deserve better. Surely you know that.”

Alp swallowed, still not replying. He wished that Chase would drop the subject.

“Just remember, you're always welcome here,” Chase said, just as Mrs Jenson came back into the room with two cakes in her hands. She passed one to each of the boys. Alp bit into his, savouring every moment.

When they had both finished, Alp stood up.

“Well, I'd probably better get back,” he said, taking a deep breath.

Chase gave him a pitying smile. Mrs Jenson patted him on the shoulder. “Remember, if it ever gets too much...”

Alp nodded, not wanting to start that conversation again, then turned and stepped out of the door.

It was so dark now that he had to rely on his memory of the terrain to find his way back to his own hut. When he reached the familiar shallow incline, and the rough, cracked wall, Alp stopped. He took a long, deep breath, clenched his fists, and stepped inside. To his immense relief, he was first greeted by Loki, who ran over to Alp and gazed up at him.

Loki was an Alsatian, with sandy fur and a wet, black nose. He was a very large dog, and on his hind legs he was taller than Alp. Chase, Alp and Chase's dad had found Loki just over a year ago, while they were exploring the dried-out fields behind the Yard. He was curled up in the shade beneath a large rock, with nothing on or near him to suggest where he came from. Chase and his dad had immediately let Alp have Loki, knowing that Alp

would appreciate at least one companion in his family who wasn't openly hostile towards him.

Crouching down, Alp buried his face in Loki's fur, and tried not to think about what would inevitably happen next.

Round the corner came Alp's parents. Alp stood up and closed his eyes. He could almost predict what his father would say. *So, your friend Rome got it finished, did he? Shame you didn't put some effort in – paint it or something.* Predicting his dad's words had become a sort of bittersweet game to Alp.

“Took you lot long enough to get that finished, didn't it! At least I got the chance to congratulate that Rome kid, though – said he was the one who found it in the first place. Anyway, s'downright lucky it's done now. It's coming, boy! The Fire's coming!”

Alp cringed. The Fire. He knew it was coming! Why else would he have put so much effort into building *The Ark*, if not to save his clan from the raging inferno that was slowly heading their way? It was unstoppable and would soon destroy their home, just as it had destroyed those of so many other clans.

Loathe to listen to his dad any longer, Alp barged past his parents and hurried to his tiny bedroom, Loki close at his heels. He sat down on his worn sleeping mat, trying to ignore the muffled shouts of his dad through the thin wall. He gazed out of the window into the darkness. From far off, he heard a wolf howling. The noise made him shiver.

Then he saw it.

Far in the distance but nearing by the second.

The Fire.

Stricken with panic, Alp jumped to his feet and ran back out of his room.

“The Fire is here!” he yelled to his parents, but he was out of the hut before they could respond, screaming out the terrible news. Sensing his terror, Loki began barking, and within five minutes the clan had gathered their belongings and were hurrying towards where they knew *The Ark* was kept. Alp and the other boys sprinted ahead to start the engine.

When Alp and Loki reached *The Ark*, about twenty seconds before the others, they leapt up onto the footplate, Alp grazing his shin on the rough metal. Gasping in pain and clutching his bleeding leg, he used his free hand to flick the switches needed to start the engine. Although it was Oli and Indi who had made the mechanism and controls, Alp knew exactly what to do. After a moment, with a thunderous roar, it growled into action just as four other boys clambered onto *The Ark*.

“Where are Chase and Luca?” Alp asked frantically.

“They’re just coupling the carriages,” Indi replied. “Do we have enough food and water provisions?”

“Yes. They are spread between each carriage, including this one.”

Alp heard a *clunk* as the other carriages attached, and then saw the rest of the clan being led onto each one.

And finally, when the whole Arker Clan was aboard, *The Ark* sped away into the night, away from the fast-approaching Fire...

The Solitude of the Forgotten Canyon

Sophia Clegg

In the heart of the bustling city, where neon lights paint the night sky, delightful smells flood the air and the cacophony of traffic drowns out whispers, there lived a boy called Ethan. He was a weary soul, trapped in the monotony of his corporate job, the sterile walls of his apartment and the relentless rhythm of city life.

After a long, harsh day of work, Ethan stumbled into his apartment and threw himself onto the sofa. Ethan's eyes drooped, heavy with exhaustion. The city's pulse had drained him, leaving only a flicker of life within. As he lay there, the muted glow of streetlights seeped through the curtains, casting elongated shadows on the floor. The aroma of takeout containers lingered – a blend of soy sauce, garlic and fleeting dreams.

But that evening, something shifted. A forgotten memory stirred within Ethan - a whisper from the past. It beckoned him to escape the concrete jungle, to seek solace beyond the glass and steel. He remembered tales of a hidden canyon his grandma had told him when he was a young boy – a place untouched by time, where nature's breath still danced among ancient stones.

Driven by an inexplicable yearning, Ethan rose from the sofa. His heavy legs took him to his room, where he pulled out an old box laced with dust. His fingers traced the edges of a faded map he'd tucked away years ago – a relic from his adventurous childhood. The Forgotten Canyon – the name alone held promise. He grabbed a worn backpack, stuffed it with essentials (food, water, the map and his phone), then cautiously stepped out into the night.

The city's clamour faded as Ethan followed the map's cryptic symbols. The route started beyond the forest; he'd have to get there first. Neon signs gave way to moonlit trails, and the scent of exhaust fumes surrendered to

pine and earth. Each step carried him deeper into the dark forest. The walk there was not so bad – no lions, hippos or very angry birds on this occasion (though that’s a story for another time).

As dawn painted the sky, Ethan reached the heart of the forest. The air hummed with ancient wisdom. Birds sang melodies he’d never heard and wildflowers nodded along. He sat on a log covered in mud, gazing at the horizon – a canvas of pastel hues. He was considering turning back. It was now or never.

In that stillness, Ethan found what he’d lost – a connection to life beyond spreadsheets and deadlines. He slowly walked towards the tree where the route seemed to begin. The tree was nothing special; it was just like any other. He took a final look at the map, only to notice an arrow pointing upwards from the roots of the tree to its top. Ethan had to climb.

He placed his left foot onto one of the roots that bulged out of the ground, then his right foot onto a flimsy branch that was holding on for dear life. He continued his ascent with the same pattern. The thin branches quivered at his touch, unlike the thick ones, which put all their might into keeping Ethan up. Ethan was a couple of branches away from the top of this deciduous tree when he noticed a hole above him.

Ethan’s heart raced as he poked his head into the mysterious hole atop the tree. The wind, now a coercive force, seemed to push him in further. The hole widened, revealing a twisting slide that spiralled downwards. Without hesitation, he lowered himself into the dark chute, the cool air rushing past him.

As he descended, the walls of the slide transformed – no longer rough bark, but smooth stone. The light dimmed until he was enveloped in shadow. The slide seemed endless, and as he spun down its swirls, Ethan wondered if he’d ever reach the bottom. His mind raced with questions: *Where am I? What secrets lie hidden beneath the earth? Why me?*

Finally, the slide spat him out into a vast cavern. He was in the middle of two caves. The left was a very open space with a few rocks; it seemed easy to walk through. That wasn’t what Ethan was looking for – he wanted something wild and adventurous, something that would stay as a memory in his head. Besides, he’d already travelled this far.

He looked to the right of him. There stood a tall, narrow cave with two large stone plates blocking the entrance.

“This looks interesting!” Ethan murmured as he began to squeeze himself through the tight gap between the easy and the unknown.

He fell, as if he had just been forcefully thrown to the floor. Ethan picked himself up, brushed the dry mud off of his dirty work trousers, and proceeded into the tighter hallway. He stood at a crossroads of ancient whispers. The cave walls held tales etched in enigmatic strokes – a language beyond words, a chronicle of forgotten epochs. Each drawing pulsed with life, as if the very stone held memories of the people or even things that were here before him.

Ethan, disoriented and breathless, found himself in a narrow passage – a threshold between realms. The stone pressed close, its rough surface scraping against his skin. He had squeezed himself through the tight gap and, even though he couldn't tell whether he could get out or not, he knew he stood on the precipice of something profound.

The air within the cave tasted ancient, like that time ten years ago when his mum bought expired milk. Ethan's heart still raced from the fall, but a new anticipation replaced his fear. The enigmatic drawings on the walls seemed to beckon him forward, their lines pulsing with energy. They depicted scenes of otherworldly beings, their forms half-human, half-something else. Eyes glimmered in the shadows, watching him, but Ethan was too entranced by the art of the cave walls to notice.

He traced the engravings with trembling fingers. Here, a figure with wings outstretched, there, a serpent coiled around a celestial sphere. Symbols danced across the stone – glyphs of forgotten languages, mathematical equations and constellations. Each stroke held a story, a fragment of knowledge waiting to be deciphered.

So many thoughts ran through his head – all tales from the gods themselves to the ancient Egyptians – but he was too interested to think them aloud. If he never came out of this cave would he be on there too? Ethan shimmied across the intriguing sketches to find the thing he came here for – The Forgotten Canyon.

After around five minutes of shuffling around, the crumbling remnants of an old staircase appeared before him. Using his common sense, he realised this was the only way out – he couldn't climb the never-ending slide or get back down the ever-green tree and he couldn't call for help.

Ethan took off his backpack and rummaged through it, taking out all the necessities. He took a sip of water. Using his high-school knowledge (although he hadn't listened very often in class), he knew that carbohydrates and sugar creates energy. After engulfing an entire bag of Skittles and a slice of bread, he was hyper and energetic. He did not care what would happen next.

Ethan bolted up the stairs, each one breaking off behind him. Nothing could stop him now. He could see the top... he was so close. Ethan's heart pounded as he ascended the crumbling staircase. The wooden steps groaned under his weight. The air grew thinner, and he could feel the altitude in his lungs.

His mind raced. *What awaited at the top? Was it salvation or something more sinister?* The walls of the narrow passage closed in on him, and he wondered if he was climbing towards freedom or deeper into the labyrinth of mystery.

As Ethan climbed, he noticed faint markings etched into the walls – symbols he couldn't understand. Were they warnings left by previous explorers, or perhaps invitations to a hidden realm? He traced his fingers over the ancient carvings, hoping they held answers.

The Skittles-induced energy surged through him, propelling him upwards. He no longer felt exhaustion or fear. Only determination. Then, with a final burst of strength, he emerged onto a platform above a canyon. He glimpsed down at the map that lay within his sweaty palms. He was here.

Ethan stood on the precipice, his breath stolen by the grandeur before him. The canyon yawned wide, its walls etched by time and weathered by ancient winds. Each layer of sediment told a tale. The canyon's palette was an artist's dream. Rust reds and ochres blended seamlessly, their hues shifting with the sun's passage. Shadows clung to crevices, revealing hidden alcoves where life hung on tenaciously. Narrow ledges clung to the

rock, adorned with delicate ferns and defiant wildflowers whose roots burrowed deep, seeking sustenance from hidden springs. Water dripped from overhead, creating miniature oases – a lifeline in this arid expanse.

Ethan cupped his hands, tasting the purity of liquid that had journeyed through millennia. These were the beautiful veins of life, just above the heart of the earth. He would've explored deeper into the earth but he was too tired. He walked towards the platform's edge to see what this beautiful canyon would look like from all angles, but without warning, he stumbled off the platform and into the lake that sat at the bottom. He could only see darkness for a few seconds until he was seized by an unseen force and flung out of the forest, landing back on the city sidewalk.

Ethan was clueless about what just happened, but figured he had work in the morning and had better get some sleep. As he walked through the bustling city he realised how nice it was to get peace and relieve some stress; it felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off of his shoulders. He really did love adventure.

Ethan walked up the ten stairs to his apartment – number fifty-three – and opened the door. As he closed the door a painting caught his eye, a housewarming gift, from his grandma.

It resembled a cavern with crystal clear waters, where sunlight beams against the rough obsidian and Lilly pads sit upon the water. Ethan had thought nothing of this artwork until now, but was drawn to hieroglyphs at the bottom that looked oddly similar to the ones at the cave...

Mark of the Star

Caleb Indhivan Victor

It was dark. An ominous cloaked figure was perched on a stone-cold throne. A pale, shrivelled, inhuman hand gripped the armrest with surprising strength. On the crumbling brick floor a wretched form lay, spreadeagled.

“This is good. This *is* good,” the cloaked figure hissed.

Calvin stared at the letters, piecing together the hastily scrawled message.

We need your help. The Dark Lord has risen. See you in the garden tomorrow.

And now, here he was, waiting in the garden for something to happen. He spotted a flicker in between the trees. It expanded and translated itself into a powerful beam of pure white light. Then all was stilled and there stood an owl.

Before he could protest, Calvin was seized roughly by the owl. Then its soft glimmer of light became a powerful enveloping beam. The next thing he knew, he was being released carelessly from the owl’s grip.

“We have arrived at Mason Manor,” the owl proclaimed, with a flourish.

Calvin gave the owl a dirty look and picked himself up, brushing dirt from his clothes. Then he looked up. A stately old house rose from the ground, towering above them. But there was a strange, ominous sense of doom about the place. Calvin approached the house, the owl following behind. He took one look at it and his jaw dropped open. It was a wreck. The front door had been knocked down and was now groaning as it swung on one of its hinges. Letters and papers were strewn everywhere.

But something stopped Calvin right in his tracks. Lying on the floor was a framed picture. Its delicate gold frame was cracked, and shards of glass

were scattered around. It showed a quaint house standing in a dark and mysterious forest.

Miles away, an old man was being hauled roughly across a crudely paved path. His captor, a wicked werewolf, was revelling in his suffering. They stopped in front of a huge fort shrouded in mist. A cloaked figure was guarding the heavy iron gate.

“What have you got there?” the figure asked in a rough, grating voice.

The werewolf sneered. “I have completed His orders.”

The heavy iron gate slowly came to life. Groaning and rasping, it lifted open. The captive was dragged along, grunting in pain. They descended a few steps and reached the dungeon.

Inside, the dungeon was dark and filthy. It was only illuminated by the few thin rays of light that made their way through the window grill. Rats scuttled on the grimy, dusty floor. The prison walls were cracked and bloodstained, revealing signs of torture. And on the ground, crouching in a corner was a man, bony and ragged. His bloodshot eyes looked up.

“Kolm, you’ve arrived.”

Back at the manor, Calvin woke with a start, and saw the owl looking down at him.

“You were talking in your sleep,” it said. “Something about your father.”

Calvin got up and grabbed the owl. “You owe me an explanation,” he demanded.

The owl fluffed its feathers with an air of superiority. “Indeed, I do,” it replied honestly. “Well, you have been called into a different world. A realm by the name of Ceadrulan. A world ensnared in bitter peril. I am known as Ajax, envoy of Kolm, leader of the Guild of the Flame.”

“You mentioned that this world is in peril – can you explain what you mean?” Calvin questioned.

Ajax's expression darkened. "Shrak the Strange," it spat. "The reason monsters roam the land. The reason some of us have no mind of our own. He has captured many of our people for his experiments—" But the owl was cut off by a scuffling noise at the door.

"Werewolves," it said grimly, after looking out of an upstairs window. "Quick, hide! It's you they want."

"What do you mean?" Calvin asked the owl, at a total loss after its revelations.

"Just hide!" the owl commanded, frustratedly shoving him into a cupboard. "I'll distract them!"

The werewolves had now reached the top of the stairs. Then there was a squawk of agony and something thudded against the cupboard. Calvin, thrown backwards by the impact, hit something on the cupboard wall behind him. He turned to look. It was a picture frame. As he steadied himself, he caught sight of the framed image and realized, with a jolt of surprise, it was the very same picture he had seen before, of a little house in a forest. But instead of bumping against hard glass, the frame it gave way as if it were just a liquid reflection. Suddenly, Calvin found himself being absorbed into the picture. And the very last thing he heard was the dying cry of an owl.

In the secret hideaway of the Guild of the Flame, sparks were flying as its members debated the meaning of an ancient prophecy:

*Two will come from the same seed,
One broken, the other whole,
One of this world, one of another,
One evil, the other good,
One shall perish, the other shall rise,
But both shall share the mark of the star,
And the two shall become one.*

The age-old words were etched in flowing script on the wall of the hideaway.

“Two will come from the same seed’,” a centaur quoted. “We need to find these siblings.” He jumped to his feet. His mane bristled with anticipation and his hooves drummed the floor.

“No, you pathetic beast, we don’t even know who they are!” an old warrior roared, slamming his fist on the table, his beard shaking with indignation. “These siblings need to share the mark of the star. Whatever that is,” he muttered.

At that moment, Calvin arrived. He appeared out of thin air and crashed into the marble table, wincing as fractures appeared on it. Shrieks rent the air. Warriors leapt to their feet, drawing their swords.

Calvin raised his hands, “I come in peace,” he said. “I’ve seen this place before, in a picture. I was transported by the power of that very picture.”

“Turn round,” a wizard commanded, and when Calvin hesitated, he repeated his command.

There, on the back of Calvin’s neck was a small star-shaped birthmark.

“The mark of the star!” the centaur cried. “So, the prophecy is true! But where is your sibling?”

But Calvin, yet again, did not understand a word of what he was hearing.

“So Kolm knew...” the wizard murmured, drumming his fingers on the table.

A few representatives of The Guild grouped in a small huddled bunch, discussing Calvin’s role in this prophecy. Then they turned round again.

“Your role in this prophecy yet remains unknown,” the old warrior told Calvin regretfully. “However, one thing is for sure – Shrak’s tyrannical rule over our realm has gone on long enough. Tomorrow, we gather our forces to storm Fort Doom.”

Shrak the Strange was alone in a stone room. There was a knock on the door. A werewolf entered.

“My lord,” he whispered fearfully. “I have news.”

Speak, a voice thundered into the werewolf’s brain.

“An army is coming to overthrow you. They are about a day’s march from here. They bear the mark of the Guild.”

Ha! the voice scoffed. *Then let us build our own army. Rally the monsters and release the prisoners. Soon they will be fighting on our side.*

The werewolf smiled to himself as he exited the room. The Dark Lord knew exactly what to do.

Pale rays of light heralded the morning. The tension hung thick in the air, like the oppressive heat of the midday sun. Everything was holding its breath for the word that would decide the fate of Ceadrulan. Then the command came like a rushing waterfall. “Charge!”

Calvin, now wielding a sword of his own, rushed forward with the others.

Monsters and humans stood defiantly in front of them. But when the warriors saw the enemy, something made them stop right in their tracks. The people they were about to destroy came from their own villages! And, though they marched forward like people in a dream, they swung their weapons with deadly accuracy.

The warriors hesitated, their eyes darting from one familiar face to another.

Calvin stared in horror at the strange happening. *What had possessed these people?*

“I need to get to the bottom of this,” he whispered to himself.

As the villagers pressed forward unrelentingly, their movements synchronized, as if guided by an unseen hand, Calvin darted around them. He ducked under swinging swords, pushing on to Fort Doom, propelled by a purpose.

Shrak the Strange was satisfied. His army was doing well. Soon, they would be victorious. But yet, he had felt an odd disturbance in his control. He could feel a strange, powerful magic getting closer to him all the time. Then the door banged open and Calvin stepped into the room.

The first thing Calvin saw was a cloaked monster. Its yellow, alien-like head stared out at him from the folds of the garment. It grinned, revealing rows of crooked blackened teeth.

We meet at last, a voice boomed in Calvin's head.

Calvin stared in horror at the terrible spectacle in front of him. *This* was Shrak the Strange. But something distracted him. He looked around the room and gave a start. "Father!" he cried.

There in front of him, in an iron cage, was his father and another man, ragged and dishevelled, but alive.

"Release them at once," he commanded Shrak.

Shrak merely scoffed. *Ha! I will never release your precious father nor Kolm! Take care you don't join them,* the voice echoed in Calvin's brain.

A werewolf stepped out of the shadows, growling maliciously. Calvin was in a desperate situation. He felt a surge of hopelessness and closed his eyes as before, willing the werewolf to retreat. He opened his eyes and found the werewolf turning away and retreating. Calvin stared in shock. *Was he controlling the werewolf?*

For the first time in his life, Shrak's expression betrayed fear. But it was gone in a moment. *So... You think you can control my army?* the voice mocked.

Shrak turned his back on Calvin, and then Calvin saw it: *the mark of the star.*

His head reeled. *Shrak was his brother.* The sibling that the centaur had asked him about.

This was greater than all the things he had faced before. As loathsome as Shrak was, how could Calvin attack his own brother?

Calvin turned to his father and saw a pained expression on his face. "Yes, son. Shrak is your brother," he said.

Brother, Shrak's voice sounded, spewing the word as if it tasted foul. *Let's settle this. Remember: one shall perish, the other shall rise,* he sneered cruelly.

Then Calvin felt a great force trying to invade his brain. Foreign tendrils of darkness snaked into his mind. It would be so easy to give in. But he could not. He summoned all his strength, shoving those unknown commands out. Then he felt the presence of another being. He rallied his commands, forcing them into another mind.

So, the war of two minds began. Kolm and Calvin's father looked on anxiously. The two combatants started glowing with a strange radiance. Then, all of a sudden, the light surrounded them.

They were brought back to a scene of a mother delivering two children. One was whole and hale; the other was broken and frail. Both bore a special birthmark. A star was imprinted on each of their necks. Shrak looked on the scene with intense displeasure, but Calvin with admiration.

Then they were brought back to reality. The light that had enveloped them shone brighter and brighter. Then it exploded, sending shock waves throughout the realm.

Dawn brought about new changes. Fort Doom had transformed into a magnificent castle. On the throne sat a new ruler, heralding the beginning of a new era for Ceadrulan. The two had become one. The fate of the realm now hung in a delicate balance of good and evil, right and wrong, the future remaining to be seen.

The prophecy had been fulfilled.

Author of Tomorrow | 16-21 Years

Doldrums

Atlas Weyland Eden
Winner of the 16-21 Years Category

Leith Harbour, Edinburgh, 1880

Between the water marks, Dullrum hesitated, neither on land nor on sea, lingering in the pirates' grave. On the ship, his cousin waved his hat. *We are leaving*, declared the hat. *It is now or never*.

Dullrum kissed Rose's cheek. The bairn in her arms blinked, eyes like sea-foam and stars. 'You think he'll miss me?' he asked.

She managed a smile. 'He's still figuring out who you are, love. The boy's barely a month old.'

One month. Would he even recognise his son in a year's time? He wanted to say *I wish I could stay*, except all these weeks he'd done nothing but wish, and here they stood, and the ship was about to set sail. As he trudged up the gangplank, Rose called out, but the wind stole away her words.

His cousin, Captain Richard Ross, slapped him on the back. 'That wasnae so bad, eh? Welcome aboard the *Perseverance*, Charlie boy.' Dullrum looked back, but with a lurch, the ship untethered herself and his family faded into fog.

'A landlubber on board a whaler?' remarked a man leaning on the bulwark: the balmy ease of a Jamaican with the rugged tones of a Scot.

'My family are seafarers,' said Dullrum with a touch of pride. 'My father was master mariner at Trinity House.'

'If you're a seafarer, then I'm an Englishman.'

Dullrum took a breath. He offered a sweaty hand. 'Charles Dullrum.'

‘Second Mate Agwe Spencer.’ The ship swayed and Dullrum clung to the mast. A shout came from the captain.

‘We’d best get to it, Mister Doldrums,’ said Agwe.

‘It’s Dullrum.’

‘Oh, aye. If you say so.’

Since birth, the sea stalked him. It was there in his mother’s tales of sirens and shipwrecks, and in his father’s storm-ravaged soul. It was there in folklore and hymn and the reek of ripe salmon, the sight of the waves off Port Leith drawing near and then retreating, as if debating whether to come ashore.

The sea was an old unfailing friend, unageing yet ever-changing, until the day his father’s ship – the *Jacobite’s Joy* - sailed over the horizon into the starlit north, never to return.

As a lad, he took comfort in scripture. In God’s kindness and a merciful afterlife. He turned from the shore, spent his days at the cathedral in prayer. God lived in the land. The sea – fickle, treacherous and deadly – was the devil’s domain. Since boyhood, he believed he’d be a priest. Then Rose came along and spoiled his celibate plans. But though he knew both Testaments off by heart, he couldn’t work a forge or stitch a wound or shoe a horse. He found no work and his son screamed through the night, while his wife wasted away.

Then one day, his cousin put an arm around him and gestured to the sinking sun. ‘You ken how much an adult sperm whale is worth? Meat, blubber, oil – they’re mountains of singing gold. Just one voyage. One wee whale.’

So here he was. In the devil’s domain.

The wind wailed; the sails swelled. He gripped the mast and uttered a prayer. ‘Eyes on the horizon, Mister Doldrums,’ said Agwe.

‘Dullrum,’ he managed.

‘Dinnae worry. Give it a couple of days and you’ll soon get your sea legs.’

Dullrum envisaged two green crab legs sprouting from his waist. He put a hand to his stomach. Swallowed. The crew were busy with their tasks under First Mate Murdoch's hardened gaze. With a wobble, Dullrum slipped below deck, to be met by a blinding black. He fell to his knees. Hand on his crucifix, he prayed like his life depended on it.

After breaking his fast and losing it overboard, the Netherlands drifted by. His cousin strode up beside him. 'Damn Dutch,' said Captain Ross. 'If it wasnae for them, there'd still be whales in the north. But we'll beat them yet, eh? The Dutch will never make it south of the equator.'

Dullrum closed his eyes. From Scotland, to where the waters of South America crystallise into the wilderness of Antarctica. A year at sea, there and back. A year of salt, sweat, lime juice, dried meat, hard labour, hellish storms, maddening calms, and all the malice of the open ocean.

God give him strength.

The day stretched and the sun submerged. As the ship slipped into the English Channel, the crew started to sing.

*On we go, through wrack and toil, we won't be home ere long,
On we go, in search of oil, singing the whaler's song,
Through ocean old and ocean cold, though the storm may be
severe, With oaken hold and timbers bold, the Perseverance shall
persevere.*

It sounded like a hymn, though to what god he couldn't fathom.

France fell behind. Spain met the mirage of Africa. At night, he lay perspiring in his hammock; the ship swaying around him, the world swaying beneath. In his dreams, the *Perseverance* flooded and he floated, drowning in his own sweat.

'Why does he squat in the dark all day,' growled Murdoch, 'vomiting into barrels and muttering prayers, as if Latin will keep the sails strong?'

'He's a tender soul,' said the captain, 'but there's salt in his blood. The sea will harden him.'

One morn, Dullrum staggered above deck to find no land anywhere. All he saw was his reflection in the water, a haggard wraith of a man. ‘Lord, I beg of thee...’ But could God hear him, way out in the abyss? Was he still Christian after so long without confession and communion?

‘You’re nae looking too barry there, Mister Doldrums.’

‘It’s Dullrum.’ He steadied his breath. ‘Tell me, Agwe... Who do *you* pray to?’

Agwe raised his brows. Men consulted him on navigation, not religion. ‘My mother loved Mami Wata, who’s all the seas and oceans. A serpent woman, kind-hearted and cruel.’

‘Do you believe in such things?’

Agwe chuckled. ‘She also said there are tiny people who live in rum bottles and grant wishes, but I ain’t never got a wish.’ He studied the aching distance. ‘Still, nothing seems impossible out here.’

Dullrum followed his line of sight. ‘Aye. I suppose you’re right.’

At midnight, he awoke to an almighty clamour. Above deck, rain raged down, the clouds black and blazing. The ship thrashed, knocking Dullrum off his feet. He slid towards the bulwark. The waves rose and crashed.

They were under attack: they were being boarded by the sea.

Sobbing, soaking, he held on, fingers fumbling on glassy wood. Murdoch’s voice hollered through the storm. The first mate ran over as another wave reared. Dullrum clung tight. The wave fell upon them, filling his eyes and hair, and then retreated.

Taking Murdoch with it.

Lightning struck the sea and burned the night. Behind him, men ran to and fro, slipping and sliding, yelling and labouring. While he lay there, unmoving. It made no difference, young or old, wise or foolish. It meant nothing once the sea took you. ‘How are you so cruel?’ he screamed. He’d been asking the same thing ever since his father was swept away.

But this time, the ocean answered. ‘*In the same way God is cruel. With a smile.*’

When the storm passed, east was north, and west was south. Agwe studied the sun. When evening fell, he scrutinised the stars. He uttered a sigh. ‘We have drifted into the Atlantic’s breathless heart.’

And it was there the doldrums claimed them.

The sails hung limp, the air a moist heat clinging to their skin. The storm left them work enough at first: they bailed water, took stock, treated injuries. But their wounds were deep. Saltwater had spoiled the lime juice, the sea had claimed several of the crew, and the captain had broken his leg and fallen with a fever.

It was beyond even a master mariner’s skill to move a ship through becalmed seas. They waited. They paced, ate, played cards, slept, awoke, paced, counted clouds, carved birds into the bulwark, tied and untied knots until their fingers bled.

Day one of the doldrums was the first day Dullrum kept his supper down. *It’s the stillness*, he thought, yet the ship still rocked and swayed. The days died and decayed. On a morning of clear-skied madness, the cook and the cooper tried to kill each other. The crew stood by; the captain retched in his cabin. Dullrum forced the men apart. ‘You want to fight, you can take it outside!’ And he pointed overboard. They stared. Trading a bewildered look, they staggered away.

The captain summoned the crew to his bedside. ‘Charles.’

‘Captain?’ said Dullrum.

His cousin swallowed a cough. ‘We lost so many to the storm, but *you* seem to have found yourself.’ A weak smile. ‘I knew you had it in you, First Mate Dullrum.’

It took a moment to sink in. The men inclined their heads. In the shadows, Murdoch’s wraith raised a briny brow.

Come evening, Dullrum stood swaying on the deck. Agwe approached. ‘You hear that, Agwe? Singing. Someone’s singing!’

‘It’s the sea, sir.’

‘It’s the whales. Agwe, wake the crew, the whales are singing!’

‘There’s nae any whales. Nae for a while yet.’

‘Then... could it be sirens?’

Agwe held out a bottle. ‘Drink your rum, First Mate Doldrums.’

Dullrum took the rum. This time, he didn’t correct the name.

If the doldrums sent them mad, the first wind made them deranged. When the sails stirred, the crew ran in circles, waving their shirts, rolling on the deck. The *Perseverance* opened her eyes, and in a silver moment she parted the blue, the wind caught in her hair. He knelt and put his head against the mast. He didn’t say, ‘Thank you, Lord.’ He said, ‘Thank you, O terrible ocean, fairest of all monsters, for bearing us on your scaled back and permitting us to pass.’ In his mind’s eye, he saw Charles Dullrum, clean-shaven, hand on his crucifix, staring with undisguised dread. And Doldrums laughed, raucous as a gull, laughing all the louder as Dullrum turned away.

Half a world later, ice rose before the bow. He unfurled the map and found only white. They were beyond the margins now – they’d sailed over the edge of the earth.

There was a dark beauty to this pale land, a silence in the rising mist. Old sailors recalled the Arctic, the play of colours in the sky, the groans of bears from afar. But no whaler had ever braved the Antarctic before.

Doldrums lowered his voice. ‘Agwe?’

‘Aye, sir?’

‘How long before we find one?’

‘Who can say? They love the deep places where they hunt giant squid. Still, they must surface to breathe.’

Doldrums searched the waves, staring through the fathoms to where sperm whales battled krakens and mermaids played dice in the gloom. Without warning, he remembered Rose. A phantom, flaming, holding to her heart an ageless faerie boy, the vision so bright he had to turn away. He ate with the crew. The daily special: lukewarm gruel with weevils. Peering into the bowl, he thought, *I have forgotten her eyes.*

Despite their searching, there were no whales to be found. The drinking water was all but gone. They'd eaten nothing fresh in weeks and their teeth ached in their gums.

The door creaked. A lamp sputtered. 'Captain,' said Doldrums, 'we're low on provisions.'

His cousin lay abed. A beached turtle on its back. 'Where are we?' he groaned.

'The Antarctic, Richard. We just need to find the whales.'

'Dead. All of them. Dead.' He coughed. 'Damn Dutch.' And with that, he fell still.

The crew gathered on deck. They removed their hats as Doldrums and Agwe carried the captain's body and hoisted it overboard. The sea claimed him, as was her right. In a low voice, Doldrums sang.

*On we go, through wrack and toil, we won't be home ere long,
On we go, in search of oil, singing the whaler's song,
Through ocean old and ocean cold, though the storm may be
severe, With oaken hold and timbers bold, the Perseverance shall
persevere.*

When he turned away from where his cousin wasn't, Agwe handed him the captain's hat. *What now, Captain Doldrums?* said the hat. He looked on at men weary and wretched, stone-faced and sea-fearing. His gaze fell on the horizon. '*There!*'

A whale. Sleek as a bullet and grey as winter, a lonesome giant on the starboard side.

'Harpoons!' he shouted, and a storm broke out onboard – weapons readied, boats lowered, Agwe leaping to the helm. Then a second shape resolved into sight.

A ship, loosing clusters of rowboats, swarming about the whale. Harpoons pierced the water and blood spread into the blue. From the mast, a Dutch flag waved.

The crew quieted. Agwe whispered, ‘That may be the only whale in the entire Antarctic.’ Doldrums said not a word. Even if they survived the journey home, they would have nothing to show for it. Nothing for their families. Nothing for Rose and his son.

The sea is beautiful and bitter. She washes away morality until you become a spirit of the moment, calm and then wrathful, at ease and then at war. Doldrums put on the hat. ‘Make sail for the whale.’

Agwe frowned. ‘Captain?’

‘We’ve endured storms and doldrums and sea-madness. We came to this frozen circle of hell to hunt, did we not?’

Nods among the men.

‘Will we let them steal our prize before our eyes?’

Shouts.

‘The sea is cruel. She takes what she will. We will have our reward, even if we must strike down those who stand against us. The *Perseverance* shall persevere!’

A cry went up from the crew. Agwe swung the wheel and the ship rolled to face the whale. Perhaps they’d succumbed to sea-madness after all. But by all the deities of the deep, he wouldn’t return home empty-handed.

‘Land ho!’ called Agwe.

Leith unfolded before them. The ship moored with a shiver and a sigh, and a freshness brushed his face.

‘Captain Doldrums?’

‘Aye, Agwe. Tell the men to unload.’

Anyone would think it was solid gold, the way the crowds cheered – barrels brimming with oil, bones heavier than grown men. But this treasure was mightier than gold, and harder won.

On the end of the gangplank, Doldrums hesitated. He closed his eyes, drew a salty breath. He stepped off the ship and the earth roiled beneath him, ancient and alive.

‘Charles?’

With a gasp, Dullrum opened his eyes. ‘Rose!’ he cried, her face consuming him so utterly, he almost missed the second one frowning at him. ‘Who’s this then?’ The boy in Rose’s arms blinked, returning the question. She handed him over and the two considered each other. A curious wee creature, brow furrowed, as if the world was some grand question yet to be gleaned. But at last they reached a truce, and his son smiled.

‘Welcome home, love,’ said Rose.

The words struck him like a storm. He was home, but only half of him. Charles Dullrum turned round, and on the prow of the *Perseverance* stood Captain Doldrums, lips cracked and eyes bright, holding a harpoon dripping with blood. Waiting. Impatient to return to the wrack and the toil and the joy.

Dullrum stood on the land as Doldrums floated on the sea, and across the unbridgeable waters, their eyes met.

In the Forest of the Night

Archie Maclean-Bristol

The shuttle rumbled gently as it descended towards Selver. Through the small porthole in the side, I could catch a glimpse of the world – a forest-green ring, spinning silently in space, surrounding a small artificial sun.

The shuttle was cramped – large packs cluttered the back section, and seats lined the walls. To my left were Kern and Gibarian, whilst across the shuttle were Blake, our security expert, and Joseph. Dr Kelvin's seat was unoccupied.

Standing in the front of the shuttle was Dr Kelvin himself. Behind him, a large window looked into the cold expanse of space. No stars lit the sky here – we were right on the edge of the galaxy. Beyond this system lay billions of light years of emptiness – a gulf which humanity would never cross.

Kelvin was a short, thin man, dressed in the neat light-grey uniform of the Galactic Expeditionary Force. Over his breast pocket sat a bronze pin that displayed his rank – captain.

His small rodent-like eyes peered over his round spectacles as he cleared his throat to speak.

“As you well know” – his voice barely filled the room – “we are nearing Selver. We're landing at a small lake – the only access to ground level for a thousand kilometres. This is the closest the shuttle can get to the wreck of the *Santiago*. We will land, walk there, locate any survivors, and then return. We'll travel on foot – the trees are too dense for transports.

“The wreck is over one hundred and twenty kilometres from the lake. We know very little about Selver, and even less about the terrain below the trees. We *do* know Selver was built millions of years ago by a prehuman civilisation, and since their extinction, has been completely taken over by

the forest. The rotational gravity is slightly weaker than Standard. At surface level, there will be almost no light. The atmosphere is oxygen-rich, but still breathable. Ground temperature is thirty degrees.”

“I still think a rescue mission for a ship that crashed twenty years ago is ridiculous,” Gibarian said. “And we’re trekking a couple hundred kilometres for what, Kelvin? A long-dead crew? Who knows what’s in that forest...”

“I’m sure there are survivors,” I countered. “The *Santiago* was well-equipped. Besides, the gravity’s weaker, so it won’t feel like hundreds of kilometres. And the ship only technically crashed three months ago, but we can’t help time dilation, can we?”

Kelvin nodded. “Marlow’s right – and we’re well equipped too. The expedition should only take us a few days.” With that, Kelvin sat down.

Over the next few hours I watched as the sea of green grew closer. As we descended, our small lake came into sight, a great hole in the leafy surface. I could make out the shapes of some gargantuan creatures swimming through the air, but my view was broken by the shuttle descending hundreds of metres, drowning in the shadow of the great trees that stood silently watching as we slowly lowered to the water’s edge. We landed on a small sliver of land between the lake’s shore and the forest, the ring arcing overhead – a stripe of green illuminated against the black of space. We disembarked the shuttle and, suddenly, we were alone.

The silence on the surface was palpable. Behind us, the lake, bathed in eternal twilight, was completely still. No wind disturbed the trees – no rustling in the branches or the leaves. The air hung around us: muggy, warm and stale. Before us, the forest loomed, stretching upwards into the thin mist that masked the sky, and outwards into darkness. Darkness of a kind that I had never seen before – inky, complete, like the trees were swallowing up the few rays of light that had made it down this far. Vines and creepers hung from the branches, reaching downwards.

“We should get going,” said Kelvin. We turned on our torches, which did little to illuminate the darkness. Without another word, but plenty of nervous glances, we started walking.

Progress was slow, the forest floor a jumbled mess of gnarled roots and broken branches dimly lit by our torches. After a few hours, we stopped – floating lazily through the sky, between the knotted wood and leaves, were small jellyfish-like creatures. They glowed with dim phosphorescence – reds, greens, blues – and drifted on the still air in schools of hundreds; a mass of creatures twisting and swirling. Their gentle radiance broke the oppressive darkness, so we continued through a world of fairy light and ethereal beauty.

Pressing on, I watched as some leaves on a branch shook. A long appendage, like the tongue of a frog, shot out and snatched one of the glowing creatures from mid-air. Within an instant, the rest of the schools' glow was out, and the forest was dark once again.

We had made it twenty-five kilometres before we stopped for the night. Blake watched the forest while the rest of us huddled down into our sleeping bags.

I slept restlessly and woke with a start. I looked around at the other members, all asleep, lit dimly by the warm glow of our lantern. I hoped to see Blake holding her energy rifle, but there was no sign of her. Getting out of my sleeping bag, I made my way towards where she'd last been and tripped – her energy rifle was lying on the floor. I picked it up, still groggy from my sleep, and looked around.

I turned back towards my fellow expedition members. What I saw caused an involuntary gasp to escape my lips. An enormous hand reached from the darkness between the trees towards Gibarian's sleeping body. Three fingers, long and slender, carefully wrapped around him. I was too stunned to do anything; my hands gripped the energy rifle, forgetting what it was.

The creature sidled out of the darkness, further into the light. It looked like an ape, but must've weighed five tonnes at least. Muscles the size of barrels lined its chest. Its legs were squat, like those of a frog, adapted for leaping in the low gravity. Its face was terrifying; its eyes were huge – empty and black as night. It looked at me and seemed to smile, with its mouth that nearly stretched around its entire flat, rugby-ball-shaped head opening in a grimace, displaying rows of razor-sharp teeth.

It picked up Gibarian, who had now woken and was shouting and flailing desperately, trying to break free, and slowly brought him up towards its gaping maw.

I dropped the rifle. I couldn't move, trapped inside my body like it was a sarcophagus. I tried to scream but made no sound.

I suddenly felt something coil around my leg. I had a split second to react, but before I could I was hoisted a hundred metres up into the trees. The forest flew past in a great grey blur, getting lighter as I went higher, before I stopped, hanging upside down.

I looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever had caught me. Instead, I was surprised to see a humanoid, dressed in rags and squatting next to me on the branch. I opened my mouth to shout, but the thing clamped its hand over my mouth and put one finger to theirs.

“*Shhhhhh...*” it said.

I obeyed. Below me, I heard shouting. The light that filtered its way through the trees danced across the branches as the lantern moved. I could hear a terrible crashing, the *swish...pop!* of the energy rifle. One by one, the shouting voices went quiet. I heard Joseph, now alone, shout a battle-cry, before one last *crunch*. The light from the lantern suddenly disappeared, and all was quiet once again. A gurgly clicking rose from the forest floor.

I looked again at the creature beside me. It eyed me sadly – as if mourning the others. I studied it more carefully now, in the half-light that trickled down from the canopy. It *was* human! It was small, looking only about twelve or so. I couldn't tell if it was male or female – thick, uncut and greasy hair flowed down its back. It wore a necklace of bone; some kind of primitive charm. Clearly, this was a poor child of the wrecked *Santiago*, who knew not the civilised galaxy outside and had instead grown up in this savage forest.

“Are you from the *Santiago*?” I asked. It looked at me again, cocking its head. It tried the feel of the word on its tongue. “San...ti...a...go...?”

I was puzzled. “Yes – the ship that crashed here. Twenty years ago, for you.” It looked at me again, and shook its head before swinging off into the forest, leaving me suspended.

“Hey! Let me down!”

It turned back, and put its finger to its mouth again. “*Shhhhh*.”

I heeded its advice. I tried to free my foot, but the rope was surprisingly strong and my knife had disappeared. And even if I could have freed myself, I would have fallen to my death – so I waited.

After what felt like an eternity, I heard the rustling of leaves. I struggled again, but to no avail. All I could do was wait as the creature in the branches grew nearer.

I saw as they approached that it was the child from before, jumping between branches in a simian manner, with larger individuals behind.

The oldest of the group stepped forward, a man of around forty: skin tight, dry and pale from a life lived in the twilight. He was also dressed in rags, and a sort of headdress fashioned from leaves.

“Hello,” I said, forcing a smile.

The man looked puzzled for a second. “Hello,” he responded, his voice coarse.

“Finally! Someone who can speak! Can you please let me down from here? You must be from the *Santiago*.”

“*Santiago*... Yes!” he replied, nodding.

“We’ve...I’ve come to rescue you.”

“Rescue?”

“Yes, take you home.”

“No... home,” he said, shaking his head. “We... belong forest.”

I tried to recall everything I knew about the *Santiago*. The ship had come from an English-speaking planet to research Selver. There should be no reason for his primitive use of the language. And his voice – he didn’t speak with an accent, as though words were unnatural to him.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

The man gestured around. “Forest.”

“No, what planet were you born on?”

“Important...? No. I... from forest.”

Far off, I heard whooping, carried across the stillness. The two people nearest me held me up while another removed the rope, ripping it with his teeth. They set me down on a branch and then all scurried off into the mist that hung in the air, suffocatingly warm.

I assessed my position, deciding there was no course of action other than to find the *Santiago* and hope to be able to contact the shuttle with its radio. Luckily, I still had my compass.

I jumped cautiously through the thick tangle of branches. A hundred metres above me was the canopy, and a hundred below, the floor. I had lost my torch, and so was forced to stay in the dim light of the treetops.

I travelled for hours, steering clear of any noises I heard deep in the mist and twilight. When I slept, I did so squeezed between branches. I completely lost track of time – there was no cycle of day to night, just continuous, gloomy light. I almost lost my footing on various occasions, but managed to remain in the branches.

Over time, I grew more accustomed to getting from branch to branch. To prevent myself from thinking about my lost expedition members, I focused on the feeling of being in such a primaeval world – the whooping of the local fauna, the feeling of the warm air moving sluggishly over my cheeks and through my hair as I leapt. I found myself almost enjoying the feeling of returning to the ways my ancestors, hundreds of thousands of years ago, would have traversed the jungles they called home.

As I moved, I saw, obscured by the mist, what looked like a tree trunk moving. Cautiously, I approached – scientific curiosity overriding my innate survival instinct. Getting closer, it looked to be a great mass of tentacles that were slithering over the branches. Upon further observation, I could see that many of the creepers and vines surrounding me were part of this gargantuan snake-like creature.

My curiosity satiated, the survival instinct that had been nagging at the back of my head took over. I looked at the scene around myself with fresh terror – I had willingly walked into the grasp of a predator!

I started to run the way I had come, but found that the branches had been blocked by the monster. One of the individual tentacles lashed out at

me, knocking me off-balance. I managed to grab at the branch, where I hung. I looked down, seeing if there was another branch I could fall to, but was instead greeted with the face of the creature.

It was long and thin, eyes set back far along its head. It opened its mouth, revealing jagged teeth set inside a jaw split into three triangular parts. In the middle a fleshy purple tongue flashed out to guide my helplessly dangling feet into its mouth. I kicked, but it was not to be deterred.

I tried to let go of the branch above me, to let myself plummet to the darkness of the forest floor, but one of the tentacles had wrapped itself around my wrist. I was desperate now – letting my internal savagery take hold, I hauled myself up to the tentacle and bit down on it. The soft flesh gave way, but still it held me. I tore at the tentacle with my mouth, kicking back the head of the monster as it approached, until I felt a *snap!* The tentacle broke, and I fell, crashing through the leaves.

I hit almost every branch on the way down; luckily, they broke my fall. When I landed, there was a metallic *thud*, like a gong. The *Santiago!*

I checked myself for injuries, and finding nothing save some bruises, I strained my ears, listening out for any animals that may be waiting in the forest. Far off, I could hear the rustling of the trees, and the whooping noise I had heard before.

I was proud of myself for finding the *Santiago*, but I had accepted my fate – I was never getting off Selver. I tried to calm my anxiety while listening to the sound of the approaching fauna.

Feet clanged along the metal, getting closer. There were multiple of the things – it must be a pack of some sort. My heart was in my throat.

“Just get on with it!” I shouted.

Silence echoed back.

“*Shhhhh...*“ was all I heard back. Suddenly, I was blinded as some kind of lantern was lit. I was surrounded by the survivors of the wreck.

There must have been at least twenty of them – I recognised the child from before, and the older man I had spoken to. They all waited in a circle,

the dim light illuminating precious little. I noticed the “lantern” was in fact a small wooden cage, containing five or so of the small jellyfish.

An elderly woman stepped towards me from among her tribe. She must’ve been in her late sixties – her muscles were pronounced, but her grey hair and wrinkling skin showed her age.

“Hello. I hear you come to rescue us?”

It took me a second, still recovering from shock, but I managed to choke out some words. “Uhm... Yes – I’m here to bring you home.”

She shook her head. “No use.”

“What do you mean, no use?”

“We live here now. We wild. We cannot return to stars.”

I pondered that for a moment. The idea of returning to the neat and ordered world in the galaxy above seemed futile. I had experienced the true wilderness – it had unearthed something primitive deep within my heart. It was not something I could bury again.

“Let us show you,” the woman said.

She took my hand and helped me down. Around her, the other savages ran to light torches – real fire torches that illuminated the skeletal remains of the *Santiago*.

I could see where it had crashed, but the trees it had smashed on its way down had long since regrown, leaving no scar on the forest. The wreck showed signs of activity – long ago, people had tried to weld it, build shelters, get the machinery working again. In the dirt lay mounds, marked with large chunks of metal – graves.

The woman stood next to me. “We tried cling to civilisation,” she said, her grammar awkward from years of disuse. “It made death. We embraced the wild, the wild in our heart, and we lived. We come here to remember. That is why we not go back.”

I felt something inside me shift – I could see myself as I truly was. A wild animal. Born to live in the wilderness, the forest. I recalled the dull metal interior of the shuttle, and the eternal night of the forest, dangerous and exciting.

I surveyed the *Santiago*, long abandoned, the guts of the ship spilling into the forest. The last lanterns were lit, showing what had happened to the ill-fated vessel. A massive skeleton lay beside it – that of a monstrous fishlike creature, adapted for life in the atmosphere. Its nose was long and sharp, ripping through the hull like a sword through flesh, the bones of a spiny sail digging into the ground nearby.

I walked through its ruins, coated in moss and vines, and found the radio. It was dead. But I no longer cared.

An Appearance

Aidan Ooi

May all sentient beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.

A large brass bell stood in the middle of the temple corridor, suspended from the mosaic-decorated ceiling by a single chain. It swung back and forth as a young monk of slim stature struck it with a mallet larger than his abdomen.

May all sentient beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering.

The bell reverberated across the whole of the land, beginning from the top of the hill upon which it was situated and stretching out across the valley that stood at its mercy.

May all sentient beings have happiness free of suffering.

Monks in their robes of burgundy, red and yellow alike lined the hallways of the temple's main altar. A massive porcelain statue depicting the Goddess of Mercy on an elevated platform, stretching all the way up to the ceiling. Behind it was a mural that spanned from wall to wall, telling the stories of various Chinese legends. Warriors and epics, frozen and captured in tiles of various colours. Tiles of pure emerald, amethyst and sapphire.

May all sentient beings live in equanimity, free from attachment and aversion.

The temple's courtyard was filled with foliage. Monks knelt on either side, debating and meditating on various topics to do with the world, and what was beyond it. Some sat facing the walls, eyes shut firmly in pure, undisturbed focus. Great trees peeked behind the ceramic-tiled roof of the temple, where birds and squirrels had made their nests and burrows. Huge cranes with wingspans longer than the diameter of the largest rice sack sat serenely on lily-pads in the ponds. Lotus flowers bloomed and inhaled the fresh air. Cattails danced in the wind like the finest dancers in China.

A monk with a weathered face, darkened and decorated by moles and freckles, sat with a handful of youthful disciples. His long white beard stretched from his chin to the tip of his breastbone. Around his neck hung a rosary strung with giant tiger's-eye stones. Rumour had it that the rosary was at least a few centuries old, and that the first emperor of China had worn it on his coronation day.

Far away in the valley below, the noises of business swarmed the streets. Farmers who had gathered to sell their produce in the marketplace yelled out loud, announcing new promotions and sales every passing moment. They stood by the fortified walls of the city – the first to welcome visitors and hoping to get some spare gold coins in exchange for a day's worth of crops.

The monks at the main altar, their hands pressed together at heart's centre, bowed gracefully, showing their respect and affiliation to the Goddess of Mercy. Their bald heads displayed their faith as they chanted over and over again. The low drone of the mantra almost induced drowsiness, potentially putting any weak-minded commoner to sleep – like the works of a devious witch.

A teenage monk stood at the back of the whole procession, his eyes tightly shut, just as his masters had taught him. He followed the rest of his seniors, repeating each word clearly. He focused on the sounds of the mantra, each word possessing importance and meaning. One mispronunciation would completely change the whole thing.

Yet, his mind was wandering elsewhere. Even though he knew he should not let it.

It all happened too swiftly.

The chanting stopped. Immediately, he blinked his eyes open in confusion. Something was wrong. The monks had stopped chanting at a completely inappropriate time. The entire temple had fallen silent, which it never did. There was always the sound of the birds. Or the debaters. Or the children. Or the ringing of the bell, if all else was quiet. But this time, the temple had descended into complete silence. Complete and utter silence.

It might have been tranquil, had it not been for the slow but growing noise that then seemed to erupt from every wall and every tile. The cranes

and the squirrels began chirping furiously, scrambling from their nests and burrows and taking to the skies and the forest. What was supposed to be a serene, holy place exploded into cacophony. A low grumbling sound began shaking the ground and it was no surprise that soon, the monks in the courtyard started scrambling and running for the exit, their rosaries and ornaments rattling and clattering as some stumbled and fell.

But amidst this stampede, the monks at the main altar remained in their respective positions, standing still in pure horror and disbelief at what they were seeing. As cracks appeared in the mural and a faint green light started emerging rapidly, the monks seemed frozen in time. But then the head monk in the front began shaking uncontrollably, not out of anger or dread, but out of fear. A great and terrible fear.

The walls burst into a mixture of ceramic, gemstones and green light. Its brightness was enough to blind any one person. The monks at the front were too slow to shield their eyes and so began their eternal staring: eyes fixed open but not seeing anything at all. Yet, this was short-lived as flames of lime green enveloped the altar and its occupants, pulverising them within mere seconds. A powerful blast further worsened the destruction, sending cracks and fractals through the earth and the land.

Market vendors looked up to the mountain, eyes squinting as they wondered what in the world was going on. Horses and carriages halted in place as the land trembled like the hand of an amateur calligrapher. Green light blanketed the sky for a split second, before disaster struck. It looked like the trees were moving, slipping downwards to the foot of the mountain.

Landslide.

It was a matter of seconds before the devastating impact pounded the walls of the city, sending many of the scrambling citizens and vendors face-first into the earth.

After what felt like about five hours, the ground settled and people swarmed to the casualties. Doctors raced to help, carrying crates of ginseng root and herbs alike, grappling for teapots and starting fires to prepare medicinal tea.

The main altar now stood empty, dust and particles coating the floor like spilt rice grains. A shard of the porcelain statue's face lay shattered on the

floor. The walls of the heavenly temple were no more. The murals were replaced with a symbol. A single black symbol, swirling and emanating with green light that pulsed like a beating heart, solid and strong.

The teenage monk peeked from behind the only pillar which was not blasted to bits. His breath was shallow as he inhaled fear and exhaled all positive emotion. His eyes were wary as he heard not only his breathing but the breathing of another entity. There was no way *that* snorting came from a human being. His curiosity overcame him and he trudged out into view. Immediately, he regretted his decision.

A single dark figure was stooped over the platform on which the statue had once stood. The figure was no larger than that of an average male. It had hair so long and unkempt that it reached its knees in tangled frills. It seemed to be giggling softly, like an innocent child, yet in no world was this... *being* a child of any sort.

“W-who are you? What do you want?” exclaimed the monk.

But there was no response. The figure continued to giggle, seemingly unaware of the teenage monk who had grabbed a plank of shattered wood from behind the pillar and was now approaching, arms ready to wallop this unknown thing. Its grin radiated pure psychosis, teeth bared like a savage hunting dog, slobbering endlessly with its lips stretched as far as they could go.

The teenage monk stopped in his tracks two paces behind the creature. He shut his eyes for a brief second, apologising to his ancestors and his now-deceased masters. He was going against everything he had learned over the course of his life.

This is the way of men, he could hear his master nag, as if he was whispering into his ear. *Fear drives many to do unthinkable, unforgivable things.*

In one swift movement, the monk swung the plank at the creature like a seasoned butcher. There was a booming crack which resonated through the already dismantled temple. The monk peeked his eyes open, trembling: he had surely killed the poor being ruthlessly, mercilessly. Tears began filling his eyes and flowed down his cheeks like the great Yangtze.

A hand gripped his neck. Its grip tightened with each passing moment, slowly crushing the cartilage that helped keep the monk's windpipe sturdy. He could feel the air escape from his throat as a searing pain shot through his entire body. His vision blurred as he was lifted off the ground. There was nothing he could do. No matter how hard he struggled, he was like a helpless deer, his life fading.

"You dare defy me?" cried the being in its distorted voice, its wicked smile now transformed into a fierce yet pitiful scowl. "You dare defy *me*?"

The monk wanted to cry out, plead for mercy. But then again, he had not shown any mercy himself.

"Oh no, disaster! There's nothing you can do," it cackled. It tightened its grip even more, crushing whatever breath was left in the monk's throat.

With that, the monk was hurled across the hall. He knew he was going to die. His eyes bulged, yet he could still see the features of the being. Its smile had returned, sick and devastating. But where its eyes were supposed to be, there lay two empty orifices filled with a thick black liquid, seeping from behind green irises. Its face was striped with blue-black tattoos. On its forehead was the same symbol that decorated the walls.

It read *gui*.

Devil.

The Last Performance

Emma Strutt

“Stage-plays...are sinfull, heathenish, lewde, ungodly spectacles, and most pernicious corruptions; condemned in all ages, as intolerable mischiefes to churches, to republickes, to the manners, mindes, and soules of men.”

Histriomastix by William Prynne

ACT I

SCENE I – 1642. *Long Parliament has ordered the closure of London Theatres. The First English Civil War has begun.*

The flames shivered, violent when reflected upon the gentle crawl of the Thames. The night was bitterly cold but, from across the river, Robin could feel the flush of the fire’s heat. Or perhaps that was the heat of the hopeless anger coursing through his blood. He thought those feelings had been snuffed out, burned up by the encroaching war and ban on the theatres, but these Roundheads knew how to add insult to injury.

His whole world was going up in smoke. The theatre burned ferociously, as if built to be a pyre rather than a playhouse.

Robin kicked the river wall aggressively, stubbing his toe in the process. A high little laugh met his ears. It was Frances, sat curled on the wall, one foot trailing down. She was dressed in boy clothes, blonde wisps curling out of her cap – a false halo illuminated by the flames.

“So dramatic.” She jumped from the wall. “It is just a building. Just a pile of wood and straw.”

Robin spluttered, his rage collecting itself like a dagger wedged in his chest. Where did she get the right? He’d lived half his life in that theatre,

whereas she'd only been there a couple of years, crawling in like a stray cat. Moreover, employing Frances had put the place in jeopardy; if anyone found out they had a real girl acting, there would have been hell to pay.

He opened his mouth to hurl these thoughts at her, but his eyes caught a great part of the theatre collapsing in on itself. There *was* hell to pay, anyway.

With the words choking in his throat, he sank back against the wall. He couldn't watch anymore.

"She's right, you know, Robin."

Robin looked up. Richard had been watching the scene silently, despite it being his playhouse, his company, his life's work.

A smile danced across Richard's lined face momentarily. "All is not lost."

Even Richard was talking like a fool.

As if on cue, Robin heard a voice cry out: Simond, their actual fool, rushed to the waterside. Bryan and Peter followed, out of breath, wobbling like spinning tops after their evening on the ale.

"Roundhead scum!" Simond launched himself so vigorously against the river wall Robin thought he might topple in. "Oh, I'll make you pay! I'll make you pay!"

Robin leapt up again. Only the fool had any sense; this was an injustice! The Parliamentarians had taken away their right to perform, accusing them of degeneracy. But surely the true depravity lay in the men who had put the torch to the wood, who had risked lives, destroyed property to stamp out supposed "degeneracy". They had expected a warning, a fine, even an arrest. Not this, not their theatre burned to a hollow husk. It would be labelled an accident, of course, but everyone knew the truth.

"Careful, Simond." Richard interrupted the fool's rage. His voice was gentle, like the hand that came to rest upon Simond's shoulder. "We've done well to not get arrested so far, don't you think? It would be a shame to go out for a few hurled words."

It was the same calm voice that had ended countless arguments about roles, lines, costumes and pay over the years. A silence descended upon the company. Richard carried his authority quietly, but Robin had spent enough years in his troupe to know when an idea was surfacing.

The company gathered around Richard. Even the stumbling drunks Bryan and Peter fixed their hazy eyes on their leader.

“We don’t know where this war is going.” Richard seemed to gaze through them, through the burning theatre, to somewhere very far away. “Our theatre is gone; our art is illegal. You’re going to have to make your own choices. To stay and fight this war, to stay and keep your head down low, or to leave while you still can.”

Leave. The word echoed around Robin’s head. From Richard’s lips it did not sound like defeat; it sounded like hope. *Leave.* So many of the plays he’d performed in had been set in Spain, Italy, or even further climes, yet he’d never dreamed of laying eyes upon these places.

“I propose” – a smile flickered on Richard’s lips – “one last performance. We may have to part company soon, but we shall not go without a proper goodbye.”

ACT II

SCENE I – *A grand London residence. Night draws in.*

Lady Millicent always had an expression of bored amusement: brows raised, and the corner of her mouth slightly curled in a wicked little smile. It was the same expression she wore when she’d married her first husband, the wealthy Lord Ingham, and the same expression she wore when he’d died shortly after.

Millicent occasionally still donned her mourning garb since she felt it suited her – the black really drew out the green in her eyes. This did not concern her latest husband, Lord Ashbourne, who was conducting too many affairs on the Continent to take note. Meanwhile, Millicent used too much of Lord Ashbourne’s money on her hobbies to notice his affairs. One of these hobbies was the theatre.

The troupe piled into her house. They looked out of place amongst the Ashbournes' finery, yet Millicent insisted they must make themselves at home. She was draped over an armchair – not in complete dress, as they had interrupted her toilette. This did not appear to bother her in the slightest.

“One final performance?” she said. “That can certainly be arranged. Yet, my husband is back from France tomorrow evening...”

“He would disapprove?” Robin asked. Her husband was a regular at their performances and their patron. He was also known for his recklessness.

“He's trying to be careful.” She yawned. “He's become awfully tedious with these Roundheads always peering over his shoulder. The performance shall have to be tonight!”

“Tonight?” Frances asked, curious.

Millicent must not be in her right mind, Robin thought. There was no way they could stage a performance so quickly.

“Yes!” She clapped her hands together. “I shall send messengers out to my friends, who are – if I may flatter myself – numerous. We should get quite a crowd tonight.”

“Hurrah!” Bryan and Peter cried, clinking two delicate wine glasses as if they were tankards.

Simond's eyes narrowed. “How do we know we can we trust your friends?”

“Oh, we can't. Traitorous scoundrels, the lot of them!” Millicent smiled. “But they certainly don't have Roundhead sympathies.”

Richard stood. “Tonight it is, then.”

“But what shall we play?” Robin asked.

“My latest script, of course.” Richard replied. “The one where you're finally the hero. It doesn't have to be perfect. You and Frances deserve to finally lead.”

Richard's latest play followed a prince and his bride escaping their country after the fall of the king. Along the way, they meet a multitude of characters who do not recognise them in disguise, resulting in the amusing misunderstandings that the audiences so loved. It was a comedy, but to Robin it suddenly felt desperately tragic.

He glanced at Frances, who had been uncharacteristically silent. Her eyes were glistening.

"Do not say a word." She glowered at him. "Perhaps I will miss this a little, once it is gone."

He did not say a word; for all their bickering, right now he understood Frances perfectly.

Meanwhile, Millicent sat tall in her armchair. "Use what you like! My clothes are your costume, my dining room your stage, my friends your audience."

SCENE II

The chandelier had been lit and candles had been placed in a circle around the "stage", dripping wax and casting the room in a golden glow. The dining table had been upturned and draped in a tapestry of a rocky landscape with a castle high on distant mountaintops. Chairs had been dragged in from all over the house to accommodate Millicent's guests: dark wooden dining chairs, sumptuous armchairs, a chaise-longue and even upturned apple crates from the cellar – since, despite the late hour and notice, many had piled in for the performance. Her husband's wine was poured generously into glittering glasses, dark red droplets spilling over in the guests' mirth. Another guest played the lute, the music spilling through the scene like the laughter of the ladies that fawned over him.

Robin stood in the makeshift wings behind the upturned table, Frances beside him. They were dressed heavily in the Ashbournes' finery, though underneath they had their "disguises" – the clothes they came in. Fresh flowers were woven into Frances's hair.

Richard entered. “How are my prodigies?” He lay a hand on each of their shoulders. “The crowd is getting hungry. It’s almost time.”

“You’re not acting?” Robin asked.

“I did not write myself a role.” For the first time all evening, there was sadness in Richard’s voice. “I always knew you’d succeed me, Robin, ever since you were a boy.”

Robin couldn’t accept the compliment. “I could never.”

“When a tree falls in a forest it will eventually decay back into the ground it grew from. You were raised in the theatre, Robin. You’ll always return to it.” Richard rarely talked poetically, outside of his scripts. His voice became quiet. “I was a soldier when I was your age.”

“You mean—” Robin was cut off as Peter began the prologue.

Richard dropped his hands from their shoulders. “It’s time to go.”

ACT III

SCENE I

The play was going terribly. Everyone knew the plot, but no one entirely remembered their lines. Robin and Frances were midway through their marriage scene, which, somewhat offensively to Robin, Frances seemed to find amusing. The lute player was enthusiastically providing music for the scene but was so drunk it was entirely out of tune. Bryan and Peter kept getting their roles mixed up and were trying to settle who was who with a fight, which Simond was trying to break up. It was chaos.

Yet Robin had never felt so glorious upon the stage. The audience was loving it. The revel-loving rich had been so deprived of late that they were nearly clawing at the stage in glee, laughing and howling, clapping and cheering. Millicent had clambered up onto the mantelpiece and, for once in her life, did not look bored, just amused. She was grinning, in fact – drinking straight from a wine bottle and chucking flower petals on the stage when the scene pleased her.

If this was his last performance, Robin could die happy. The marriage scene was closing; soon the wedding would be besieged, the king killed, and the not-quite-newlyweds would flee in disguise. It was a brilliant play, Robin thought, and would've been a great success before the ban. This did not make him feel hopeless, though; rather, glad that he'd had the chance to play its perhaps only performance.

The officiant, a very tipsy Peter, was stumbling through the marriage rites. Robin looked at Frances, trying not to laugh, flowers circling her head. Any moment now, Bryan would barge in, brandishing one of the audience's rapiers to kill the "king".

Through the laughter, the clinking of glasses, the performers' voices, the out-of-tune lute, thudded three heavy knocks.

"Let no latecomers in," Robin heard Millicent call out to her valet.

Bryan was supposed to enter any moment now. A red flower petal fell from Frances's hair.

Then a splintering crash sounded from the hallway. Robin hoped Bryan hadn't drunkenly stumbled into one of the servants carrying a tray of glasses. Cries ensued, drowned out by the cheers of the hopeful crowd.

The door burst open. Richard surged in; his calm eyes were wild. In one hand was a rapier, in the other was a pale and confused-looking Bryan. Dripping down Bryan's arm was a trickle of bright red blood.

The audience cheered; the siege they had been promised was finally here. Robin dropped Frances's hand and their eyes met. This wasn't how the scene was supposed to go. Richard was not acting in this play.

Richard looked directly at them through the cheers, crashes arising behind him. He mouthed, "Run."

Robin's eyes travelled desperately around the room. There was nowhere *to* run.

Frances was tearing the heavy dress from her body, revealing her boy clothes. Still completely oblivious, the audience cheered in glee at this peculiar act at the altar. Richard was whispering in Millicent's ear. She beckoned to Frances and Robin, and pointed to the propped-up table that backed their stage.

“They’re here!” she yelled, like a captain warning his crew of the tempest ahead, high and shrill enough to pierce the ruckus.

Panic descended upon the room: glasses shattered as they hit the floor, ladies screamed and men drew their weapons at each other in confusion. Footsteps pounded up the stairs, echoing with cries of fury. A few men tried to barricade the door with furniture, but it was futile –the wood was already splintering.

Frances and Robin weaved through the fray, dragging Peter and Simond behind them, their eyes fixed on where Millicent had taken Richard and Bryan. They slipped behind the upturned table. Millicent and Richard were crouched on the floor, pulling up the carpet, then the floorboards. It was a trapdoor.

“It leads to the cellar. There are two exits to the street there; I doubt they’ll have them covered. Everyone get in.”

One by one, the troupe clambered into the dark cellar. The room above was beginning to curl with smoke as well as screams. Robin cast a look behind him; the candles had been kicked over and a fire was starting to crawl slowly along the carpet. Roundheads and audience alike crammed through the door, out into the hall. It seemed every stage they performed on was doomed to go up in flames.

Richard sent Millicent and Frances down, finally extending his hand to Robin. Rung by rung, Robin began to descend into the black.

“Look after her, Robin.”

Robin looked up at him. “Frances?”

“I know she can take care of herself, but the world is harsh on girls like her. You’ve got to have each other’s back.”

“Of course.” Robin halted his descent. “Wait. What do you mean? Won’t you be looking after her?”

“Not anymore.”

“No. You don’t mean...”

The smoke plumed behind Richard. He let go of Robin’s hand and drew his sword. “Once a soldier, always a soldier.”

“At least escape with us.” Robin begged.

Richard shook his head. “A war is here, Robin, and it’s only going to get worse. I’m going to pick my side before I’m forced to.”

“Then let me come with you.”

Richard shook his head, firmly. “You are not built to be cannon fodder, Robin. You’re an artist. Your acting, your writing – it would be lost in this war. You need to run. Run to Europe, and take Frances. Promise me, Robin.”

“No!” he cried. “I can’t!”

“I have no children, Robin. If anyone’s going to continue my legacy, it will be you. I don’t want it to be a legacy of conflict – I want it to be a legacy of art. Take my work to Europe, Robin. Take it as far as it will go.”

Robin nodded, a tear crawling down his face.

“Go then, before this fire becomes too great.”

Still Robin did not move. Richard began to peel his fingers off the edge of the trapdoor, one by one.

“Good luck, Robin. Take our art far.”

“Thank you,” he whispered.

With that, Richard dropped the trapdoor shut. Robin was enveloped in darkness.

SCENE II - *A London dockyard downriver. The early hours of the morning.*

The wind was high at the dockyard; it had dragged most of the flowers out of Frances’s hair. The ships looked like great shadowy gargoyles against the night sky. Millicent was ghostly, her skin silvery in the night, as she bargained with a captain that her husband knew.

Meanwhile, the troupe was saying goodbye.

“Won’t you come with us?” Frances asked Peter and Bryan. They were stone-cold sober now, in both their manner and expression.

Bryan shook his head. "I've got children at home. Wouldn't be fair on them, or the wife."

"We'll keep our heads down." Peter said. "I'll go back to my father's trade and try to keep out of this war."

He patted Frances awkwardly on the shoulder, but she pulled him, then Bryan into a hug.

Robin was silent. He knew if he spoke, more tears would come, though the troupe had kindly not pointed them out – not even Frances.

"I'll find Richard." Simond may have been their fool, but he also had a fighting background. "Oh, stop with your gloomy faces, I know that man. He'll be just fine."

Robin nodded. Dreams danced in his mind of many years in the future... Maybe Richard would find them one day. In some far away country, as they put on the most glorious performance of their lives.

Millicent floated over to them. "I have a passage for us. The ship leaves just after sunrise."

The sun was already a pale glimmer; an uncracked egg resting upon the water at the horizon.

"Thank you. I hope..." Finally, words escaped Robin as he looked at his troupe. "I hope we'll meet again soon."

The first red ray of the sun broke upon the water. The ocean stretched out in front of him, an unwritten page, an empty stage. Waiting for him.

It was time to go.

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