

MYTHS, MYSTERIES AND MAVERICKS

TEN TALES OF EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE



WILBUR & NISO SMITH FOUNDATION



AUTHOR OF TOMORROW ANTHOLOGY

MYTHS, MYSTERIES & MAVERICKS

TEN TALES OF EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE

Published by The Wilbur & Niso Smith Foundation and Worldreader

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 are for the best published adventure novel of the last calendar year, the New Voices editorial programme for aspiring writers, and the Author of Tomorrow award for young writers aged 21 years or under who have 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 2025 Author of Tomorrow award.

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AUTHOR OF TOMORROW | 11 YEARS & UNDER

Deep Dive

by Mei Lau

Winner of the 11 Years & Under Category

Three... two... one... Jump!

The cold slapped me rudely in the face as I propelled myself into the darkness, descending deeper. The ocean in the Bermuda Triangle seemed bottomless. My heart was thumping in my chest like a gremlin pounding on the bars of a cage. I sank for what felt like hours. The pressure was unbearable. Suddenly, I sensed solid ground beneath my feet - the ocean bed!

Something penetrated my thoughts, abruptly. Something off. Eerie.

I squinted through the inky water. I could make out a faint silhouette. Then I saw it. My blood froze.

It was hideous. Writhing grotesquely in the watery chasm, coiled amongst bones and scattered carcasses, jagged teeth like daggers glinting menacingly... A sea serpent! Its eyes were closed, but it was twitching its nose, sniffing the air. Fear gripped my throat with its murderous hands. I didn't dare advance.

The monster's eyes flickered open.

I was trapped. Could it see me? The monster was surveying its surroundings for prey. It felt like an eternity. I remained hidden, but not for long. I trembled. The beast loomed above me, gnashing its teeth, poised for the kill. It was going to be a brutal fight. I scanned around frantically for a weapon. Bones! Selecting the sharpest and clutching it in my hand, I waited. The beast bellowed. The battle had begun.

Hurling myself towards the sea serpent, I sunk my weapon into its tail. It roared furiously, thrashing in agony. It lunged towards me, launching venomous harpoons which were deftly

dodged. Each time I struck the creature, it would lash out, yet I was not deterred. Summoning all my energy, I thrust my bony spear into the monster's heart. It let out a deafening shriek and collapsed to the ocean bed, to lie there forevermore.

Triumph flowed through my body, but it was only temporary.

The water started churning around me violently and the seabed began to tremble. I was being sucked into a void. I tried to fight it, but my strength was drained. Limp and feeble, I succumbed to my destiny.

PITCH BLACK.

"Quite a fall you had back there."

The world adjusted back into focus. Crouching over me was a woman with ruffled locks tumbling around her face. She looked familiar. Like she'd jumped out of a history book. Besides her was a battered, vintage plane. I was speechless at first.

"What's happening?" I stammered. "Where am I? Who are you?"

She chortled at the baffled look on my face.

"Welcome to Atlantis."

Complicated Farewells, Unspoken Goodbyes

by Eleanor Lodewijks

Blood. Sweat. Millions of tears. That was Mia's life, described in five words. She didn't know why she was doing this – understanding it was beyond her grasp. It wasn't about logic; it was a raw, unexplainable compulsion, something she owed to herself – and to her father.

With a sigh, Mia pushed her tangled apricot curls back into a rough ponytail. Her wild hair had always been her father's favorite feature. Now, with him gone, it was just her and Diesel. In a way, it was liberating. And strangely, in the midst of her grief, she felt free.

Taking a steady breath, Mia inhaled the cold, crisp scent of the snow. It smelled like wilderness. It felt like freedom. Just her and her canine companion – no distractions, no burdens. Together, they would climb the mountain, say their final goodbye, and finally leave behind the weight of the past few weeks.

Gritting her teeth, Mia grasped the rope, hauling herself up to the platform, with Diesel, ever faithful, bounding after her. Slowly, she took a step up the precipitous cliff. Then, one step at a time, Mia pressed onward, her breath steady and her gaze fixed on the summit. The path loomed ahead, a predator pouncing upon its prey. Every step was potentially Mia's last; the avalanches, the bone-chilling cold, the taunt of tumbling off the jagged precipice – all carried a risk of fatality.

The steep incline was a daunting challenge, but nothing in the world could deter her. Each rocky foothold was a victory, each stride a testament to her resolve. Even the harsh winds and brutal chill of the weather was nothing compared to the heart-wrenching trauma of her beloved father's death just that month. She had experienced much worse than the feeble wrath of Mount Cerro Torre.

The air grew thinner with each step, and the unforgiving wind tugged at every layer of Mia's thin clothing, gnashing and snarling at her determined face. Finally, after hours of scaling the perilous ledge, the summit finally emerged. Seeing it was like a burst of color after years of grey – bright and full of life, as if the world itself had suddenly come alive in a way that Mia had deemed impossible. She was here, in the very same spot that her father had stood only months before.

Hugging her husky, she took in the breathtaking view. Below, the landscape stretched in every direction, a vibrant patchwork of valleys, forests, and winding rivers, all shrinking into the distance. The peaks of the surrounding mountains rose like jagged sentinels, their snow-capped tips glowing as Mia stood at the pinnacle of the earth, feeling so tiny in the vastness of it all.

Mia's eyes brimmed with tears, neither happy nor sad... just complicated, as life so often was. Running a tender hand through her friend's soft fur, she wept quietly into the bittersweet tomorrow. As hard as it was, she would go on.

The Raindrop

Sharvil Jadav

Elara was born with a raindrop on her wrist, a symbol so common it was practically invisible. In a world of symbols blazing with power – a phoenix for healers, a sword for warriors, a constellation for navigators – Elara's raindrop signified nothing of great importance.

She worked in the Archives, organizing scrolls that detailed the wondrous abilities of others. In her life, a tranquil hum of parchment and ink played against the vibrant symphony of powers all around her. She accepted it: she was a simple raindrop in a world thirsty for storms.

Then it began: small fissures in the raindrop; lines of silver threaded through the blue. Initially, she attributed it to a trick of the light, yet those cracks couldn't be ignored. The raindrop began to get bigger and to gain definition.

The lines multiplied, branching out like silver lightning. A simmering fear in her mind melded with budding curiosity. She delved into the ancient books, searching in vain for anything one could call information related to "The Unwritten Symbols". She knew that transformations indicated that an important change in her fate was coming, yet the texts refused to reveal anything concrete.

One day, it was completed. She no longer wore a simple raindrop – instead, on her wrist had appeared a sprawling set of intricate patterns: a flourish of rivers and whole flowing bodies of water.

When people saw this, they gasped. Every step she took spoke with the resonance of the very earth. Crops sprouted from the soil in her footsteps. Surging rivers flowed much more vigorously. The Archives turned from blown dust into a garden, bursting into full bloom.

Elara, the girl with a plain old raindrop, found she was the essence of their very world and its vital energies.

It was not a grand battle, nor was it an act of miraculous healing, but it was somehow something much more profound: the very source of life itself. What used to be indifferent to her was now turning to her – not for power, but for sustenance.

Raindrop had turned to running water, and at last, Elara found purpose.

AUTHOR OF TOMORROW | 12-15 YEARS

The Newfound Voice

by Amena Dato

Winner of the 12-15 Years Category

Chapter One: The Hidden Page

BANG. BANG. BANG. The door rattled beneath her mother's fist.

"Sarah Opal Harrison!" came the sharp voice, muffled by the thick wooden door. "Up. Now. Breakfast doesn't make itself."

Sarah jolted awake. She looked around her. Her candle had burned out sometime in the night, the wick curled like a sleeping spider. Pale morning light leaked through the cracked shutters, dull and unforgiving. She moved fast. The book she'd fallen asleep reading was still open beside her, its pages slightly crumpled from where her cheek had pressed against them. She grabbed it and shoved it under the blanket, tucking it into the hollow between the mattress and the wall. But the rustle was too loud, the delay too long. The door creaked open. Her mother stood in the doorway like a shadow carved from stone, arms crossed, jaw tight, eyes already searching.

"What is that under your blanket?" she snapped.

Sarah looked up, heart racing. "Nothing, Mother."

"Don't lie to me, girl."

In a single motion, the blanket was yanked away. There it was. *The Tales of the Silver Grove*. Its spine was cracked, the corners worn down like river stones, the cover soft from too much love. A ribbon bookmark, frayed at the end, peeked from between its pages.

Her mother's face went still. "You fell asleep reading again?" she whispered. There was no gentleness in it. Only fear. And fury. "Do you want to be dragged away in chains? Is that what you want?"

Sarah swallowed the lump rising in her throat. "No, Mother."

"You know the law. Girls are forbidden from learning. From books. From anything that doesn't involve stitching or stirring. Reading is defiance. Reading is danger. You read, you get caught, you disappear. Just like—" She stopped herself.

But the silence around that missing name said more than any scream.

Sarah's fingers curled against the mattress. She dared to whisper, "I didn't mean to fall asleep. I just—"

Her mother snatched the book, holding it like it might infect her. "Where did you get this?" she demanded, voice shaking. "I took the others. I burned them. I watched them turn to ash."

"I found it at the market," Sarah mumbled. "The old cloth-seller had a box beneath her stall."

Another silence.

To most, they were just stacks of parchment bound together by leather. But not to Sarah. To her, books were her friends. They didn't shout. They didn't strike. They didn't tell her she was less. They took her away – to distant lands; to skies filled with dragons; to castles on mountains; to forests that whispered her name and let her dream. They helped her forget the smallness of her world, the ache of silence, the weight of being unwanted.

"You're lucky I'm not telling your father." Her mother said, quieter now, more dangerous than before. "He'd do worse than burn your books, Sarah. He'd—" She stopped herself

again. The pause said more than the words could. Then, quietly – her voice almost hollow – she added, “You’re not a baby anymore.”

Her gaze shifted.

“Dreams don’t keep a roof over your head. Obedience does.”

And she turned. The book was still in her hand. The door clicked shut behind her. A deafening silence settled like dust in the corners. But it wasn’t peaceful. It never was. Sarah sat motionless, staring at the place where her book had been. Her chest was tight, her hands curled into fists at her sides. With every ounce of strength, she held back her tears and brought herself downstairs, praying that one day her fate would change.

Chapter Two: The Corner Between Worlds

By mid-morning, the house had quietened. The clatter of pans had stopped, and the foul smell of coal smoke and boiled onions hung in the air like a heavy curtain. Sarah stood at the sink, scrubbing the last of the chipped plates with red-raw hands. The water was cold, and the cracked window above the basin let in more wind than light. She dried her fingers on her cotton apron, worn thin and patched at the waist.

Outside, the world was grey and heavy. Soot-black rooftops leaned against each other like old drunkards, chimneys belching smoke into a sky already thick with fog. The trees in the distance – those half-dead things near the edge of the woods – were barely visible through the industrial haze. But just beyond them, if you knew where to look, was Sarah’s secret corner. Not much to it: a broken bench in the remains of an old estate garden long forgotten, half-swallowed by ivy and neglect. The stone crumbled, the soil damp and sour-smelling. But it was quiet. Hidden. Hers. There, for a little while, she didn’t feel watched.

She touched the fogged glass, her breath fogging it further.

If I finish quickly... I can go before the sky darkens, she thought.

By early afternoon, the market was crowded. The air reeked of wet wool and rotting cabbage. Cart wheels splashed through filthy gutters. Ragged children darted between stalls with muddy feet and sharp fingers. Sarah kept her head low, her basket clutched close to her chest. Her shoes squelched with every step. She picked up what was needed – bread a day too hard, onions soft at the edges, a scoop of lentils in a paper twist. The egg-seller's prices were cruel as always, so she skipped them altogether. She turned down the narrow lane behind the tannery, where the walls were stained dark with grease and smoke.

There, tucked between two crumbling shops, was the cloth-seller's stall. An old woman was hunched behind it, her shawl heavy with soot. She didn't speak as Sarah approached. Just nodded once, slow and knowing. With a sharp toe, she nudged a wooden crate beneath her bench.

Beneath a velvet rag – stiff with age – lay treasure: books.

Sarah's fingers skimmed over them like they might break. Her heart fluttered. She chose one: *The Wind Beyond the Wall*. She had no idea what it was about, but the title whispered of other places. Other chances. Escape. She tucked it inside her coat and pressed a coin into the woman's hand. Their eyes met for a brief moment – Sarah's wide with gratitude, the old woman's heavy with warning.

Fields gave way to weeds as Sarah neared the woods, her boots slick with mud and frost. Her secret corner sat just where it always had, hidden behind a crumbling stone wall, where a chunk of broken statue – once a lion, now just paws and moss – guarded the space like a forgotten sentinel. She laid her coat across the damp stone bench and settled down, pulling the book free. The trees above were bare, skeletal fingers scratching at the low grey sky.

Somewhere, a crow called once and went quiet. The wind didn't whisper – it groaned through the trees like something too tired to sing.

She opened the book, the spine creaking like an old floorboard. But before she could read a single word, a voice tore through the stillness.

“Oi!” She froze. The voice was rough. Male. Close. “Don't you know books are banned, girl?”

Her heart was racing. Her breath caught in her throat. Her legs moved before her brain could tell them to. She dashed into the trees, boots slipping through the wet undergrowth, the book clutched tightly to her chest. Behind her, the man shouted again – closer now, angrier.

“Stop! Girl!”

But Sarah didn't stop. The wind howled in her ears. Her breath came in sharp bursts, each one louder than the last. The book thudded against her chest with every step, wrapped tightly in her arms like a life belt in a rising sea. Her lungs burned. Her legs screamed. Her heart drummed like a warning bell in her ears. And then she felt a cold hand squeeze her, terror releasing the book from her grasp.

Chapter Three: The Unspoken Name

“Got you.”

Sarah kicked, squirmed. “Let me go!”

“If I was taking you to the police, you'd already be gone,” the man said.

That stopped her.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, face shadowed by a hood. His voice had softened. Not angry. Almost... familiar.

“Then where?”

He looked down at the book, lying in a patch of wet leaves. Carefully, he picked it up, brushing dirt from the cover with his sleeve.

“To your grandmother.” He sighed.

Sarah stared. “My grandmother’s dead.”

“No,” he said. “Just hidden.”

They walked in silence, the forest closing in around them. Deeper and darker with every step. Sarah didn’t speak. Her thoughts spun like wheels in mud.

Eventually, the trees thinned. Smoke curled from a chimney tucked into a moss-covered roof. A small crooked cottage sat in the clearing, almost swallowed by vines. The man knocked once.

The door creaked open.

An old woman stood there, tall and straight despite her years. Her silver braid hung over one shoulder. Her sharp blue eyes landed on Sarah – and widened.

“You brought her!” the woman exclaimed.

“She nearly outran me,” the man replied, handing her the book. Then, with a nod to Sarah, he turned and vanished into the trees.

Sarah stared at the woman. Her throat was dry. “Who are you?”

The woman stepped aside. “Come in. It’s about time we met.”

The cottage smelled of old paper and dried herbs. Books were everywhere – stacked, shelved, open on tables. A kettle hissed on the stove.

“You’re not supposed to be alive,” Sarah said.

The woman’s smile was tired. “Neither are stories. But we’re both still here.”

“My mother said you disappeared.”

“I did. But not the way she thought.”

Sarah lowered herself onto a worn bench, the warmth from the fire thawing her fingers as she tried to let the new information settle in her mind. She opened her mouth.

“But-”

The woman crouched beside her, giving her a comforting squeeze. Her voice cracked with emotion. “It is okay, darling. My name is Sarah Harrison. Your mother named you after me – though she doesn’t say so anymore.”

Sarah remembered her mother telling her, “*Reading is danger. You read, you get caught, you disappear. Just like—*”. She always stopped herself there.

“I was caught,” her grandmother said. “Reading and teaching – breaking the law. They gave me a choice: burn my books and beg for forgiveness, or die. So I vanished.”

“Why didn’t you let her know you were alive?”

“I did. She was thirteen. She cried, begged me to stay. But your grandfather burned every letter I sent after that. Told her I’d betrayed them. By the time she was old enough to question it, the lie had hardened.”

Sarah looked down. “She’s terrified of books. Of what they take away.”

Her grandmother’s face hardened. “And what they give. Power. Memory. Truth.”

She stood and grabbed a thick cloak from a hook on the wall. “Come. There’s more you need to see.”

Outside, the wind had stilled. The old woman led Sarah to the base of a great oak, gnarled and hollow. Her fingers brushed away moss, revealing a rusted iron ring. With effort, she pulled open a hatch.

A staircase spiralled into the dark.

Sarah peered inside. “What is this?”

“The place they tried to erase.”

The air was dank and full of dust and ink. Lanterns lined the earthen tunnel. Shelves were carved into the walls, lined with books of every kind: history, poetry, science, stories of old kingdoms and stolen voices.

Sarah stepped slowly into the space, wide-eyed.

“This is a library,” she breathed.

Her grandmother nodded. “A rebellion. I built it. Others carried it. Girls come here to learn. Some return to teach. Others... plant new libraries of their own.”

Sarah turned in place, taking it all in.

“You saved all of this?”

“We saved *you*.”

Her grandmother placed a book in her hands. Its cloth cover was soft and worn. Inside the front cover, a name was written in faded ink.

Sarah Harrison.

Sarah looked up, her voice barely a whisper. “Yours.”

“Now it’s yours,” her grandmother said. “The world wants you quiet. But this place – these stories – will teach you to speak.”

Sun-Born

by Oluwatumininu Akinwande

“There was once a goddess. Her hair, a lion’s mane, and as untamed as a wildfire, reached down to her toes, scorching the very ground she walked on. With striking blood-red eyes, she stunned whomever she locked eyes with, searing the encounter into their minds forever. Her hair was not the only fiery thing about her. Her love for life, her devotion to everything she did caused her to shine brighter than the sun, as she radiated light, even in the darkest of nights, and her people could always look to her for guidance.

And with this goddess was her dear friend, the guardian of the Sea. A more reserved person by nature, the guardian preferred to lie in wait, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike. Calm like a lagoon, yet ruthless like a tsunami. They were complete opposites, both in looks and personality, but that’s also what made them so compatible.

Until the prophecy came. *Unless two can join as one, the world will face its ruin. The phoenix and the mermaid will rise forevermore, subjected to the tortures they forced on others.*

Now, one thing both water and fire have in common is that they are uncontrollable. When something goes wrong, all in either’s path can be demolished. Fire is passion, love and hope, but it is also destruction, anger and judgement. Water is life, adaptability, and wisdom, but it is also fear and turmoil. That prophecy evoked such an irrational and deep-rooted fear, that both the goddess and the guardian refused to trust anyone – not even themselves. Once confronted with something that seemed even the slightest bit out of their control, they showed their ugly sides...”

Grandma’s voice filled the room like a soft melody, as she told her granddaughters the story. Each page of the book she turned left the girls more and more engrossed, her words and the subtle crackling of the burning logs in the fireplace the only sounds that could be

heard.

“What happens next?” Dynamene interrupted, eyes gleaming with anticipation. She was quite literally on the edge of her seat, her legs swaying from side to side in time with the trees that danced to the whispering wind outside the window. Her sister, Hestia, had to hold her back a few times to stop her from completely falling off her chair, her concentration slowly slipping as she tried to focus more on stopping Dynamene.

“Well—” A fit of coughing erupted from Grandma, causing the sisters to look at each other in concern. Without discussion, Dynamene scurried to the kitchen to get Grandma a glass of water, while Hestia began closing all the windows to keep in the heat. All Grandma could do was give a defeated smile, as she sat in her rocking chair under the crushing piles of blankets, watching her grandchildren grow up too quickly.

The crackling of the fire got louder. Or at least, everything around it quietened down until it was all Grandma could hear.

Returning with a slightly overfilled cup, Dynamene set it down on the side table beside Grandma, before running back to her seat and making herself comfortable. Hestia soon followed, adding another blanket onto Grandma for good measure, then cosying up to Dynamene to feel her warmth.

“Well, the two never saw eye to eye again. Fear clouded their hearts, and they both ended up hiding away for the rest of their lifetimes. But, every two thousand years or so, their reincarnations are born. *The phoenix rises from the ashes, and the mermaid awakens from sea foam.* The more reincarnations are born, the worse the world will become, until one day, we will all cease to exist.” Grandma closed the book, looking at the antique clock on the wall that she was so proud of when she first brought it home. “Now, it’s bad to end on a sour note, but it’s bedtime. I’ll finish the rest tomorrow.”

The girls looked at each other in anticipation, excited for tomorrow to come.

Hestia felt the heat flow from the palm of her worn hands, the light from the untamed flame that burned so radiantly brightening her older, tear-stained face. She sat alone, leaning on a surviving tree, knife by her side in the middle of the war-torn forest, her breath accelerating by the second. Eyes darting around, she looked for something – anything – to help her. All she could find was the winding pathway to the rundown cottage, but the chances anyone would actually be in there were slim.

She would have to deal with this by herself.

With a few deep breaths in and out, the flames diminished, until all about her seemed relatively normal – all except the glowing veins in her hands, that is. Whether they were noticeable or not, she needed to carry on as soon as possible. If what she thought was true, she would need to find the one person who could bring an end to all of this. All the pain, all the suffering.

But first, home.

Like a feather, she drifted along the pebble pathway, briefly greeting any animals that managed to cling to life after the ravaging. At the front door, she waited for a brief moment, listening for someone inside. Maybe she had come home? But alas, the cottage remained empty and stagnant.

Manoeuvring her way through the dusty mess, she finally reached Grandma's bedroom – somewhere she hadn't visited for a long time. Cautiously, she stuck her hand underneath the bed, careful to not touch any rouge cobwebs. Redbane spiders were common in this forest specifically, and she refused to die from poison, something so trivial.

Then she found it.

The book Grandma read to them many years ago. Skimming through the worn pages, ignoring the dust settling around her, she finally landed on the words she was seeking. *The phoenix and the mermaid will rise forevermore.*

The phoenix had risen again, in her, and she could use that to aid others too. But she needed the mermaid. The mermaid, who hadn't been home for years. If she wanted to end the suffering in the world, she would have to find her first.

Hestia packed some clothes, and the book. There wasn't much else left in the cottage that she wanted to keep. As she was leaving, she made the mistake of glancing at herself in the hallway mirror. Piercing blood-red eyes had replaced the honey brown she'd had before. Dirt and dried mud flakes clung to her worn face, refusing to budge, no matter how hard she rubbed. Her hair, blazing with shades of red, orange and yellow, no longer felt like hers.

She could feel herself tearing up, watching as small droplets of fire rolled down her face and body, onto the rug underneath her, spreading as fast as a rumour. Hestia cried and cried and cried, the cracks and thumps of the cottage crumbling all around her was all she could hear. She cried until she was standing in just the ashes of the house that raised her, millions of memories burned in an instant.

Hestia had wandered for so long. Out of the cottage, out of the forest, fading in and out of consciousness. Like the phoenix, she was born again, the destruction of the home she experienced so much in, a testament to that. She had left everything behind. But, she felt so empty. She had no real plan, no idea of how to survive or how to reach Dynamene.

The wandering carried her into the Grasslands. Wading through the tall bushes, she took a moment to admire the pink sky and the cacophony of wildlife, from birds to insects to nature itself. For once, she felt at peace, but then *they* showed up.

Hades' soldiers. No one knew their actual name, if they even had one, Hades' soldiers

had been given to them by the first few towns they had ransacked. Wherever they went, death followed like a shadow that clung to life, stealing what made it precious like a leech that refused to let go. They fought for 'freedom' yet imprisoned others. They marched for 'opportunities' yet kept people in poverty. They spoke for a 'better world' but wherever they went they left destruction and despair in their wake. To her, they were monsters – monsters who had separated her from one of the last people who was on her side.

“Hey, you!” one soldier yelled, emerging from behind a nearby tree, “Come join us, you look like you’ve got some muscle to you...” He smirked.

“Leave me alone.” Hestia muttered under her breath, anger rising.

“I’m not sure I quite like being told what to do...” The soldier grimaced, voice trailing off. He began to edge closer. Like a pack, devoid of any original thought, his buddies moved closer too.

Hestia met them with a wall of fire.

Frenzy was painted on her face, and as she raised her hands, more and more fire was accumulating in her palms. It did not take the soldiers long to realise they were outmatched, and they turned to run as quickly as they had picked the fight. Slowly, but surely, that scarlet fire turned into something more mesmerising than the sun. It was lustrous with whites, yellows and deep reds, reminiscent of a watercolour painting. Then, she released it, obliterating everything in its wake.

From the singing birds and insects to the wild, tall grass, everything was gone, reduced to nothing, the residue as fuel for the ever consuming blaze. Hestia watched, a glow in her eye caused by the scarlet vividness, a pang at the back of her throat when thinking about the creatures whose lives had been cut short in the process. But she had no choice, the soldiers were too big of a threat to have not been erased. A necessary sacrifice for a greater cause.

The more the fire spread, the more engrossed she became, a wave of euphoria washing

over her. She had done her part to rid the world of Hades' evil.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see pressurised water coming closer and closer to her. Instinctively, she blasted another jet of fire, resulting in a shield of steam.

"Are you mad?" a familiar voice roared.

Eyes darting about, Hestia scanned the area. She couldn't have been imagining *that* voice, could she? What a cruel joke that would be. This time she was met by a bombardment of water arrows, the force of each jet so intense that it not only put out the spreading fire, but ripped at her skin.

"I leave you for a while, and you end up a homicidal mess." The voice had a scowl in it now, attacks of water coming in every direction. Hestia could barely stand without being knocked back down, each and every one of her senses frazzled. "Don't you want to greet your sister, Hestia?"

It was really her. Dynamene. She had been gone for so long.

Tears swelled in Hestia's eyes as she slowly made her way towards the location of the voice, each tear falling onto the grass, melting whatever was left.

"You were gone for so long," she choked, using her fire to block Dynamene's attacks. The relentless battering stopped and the wind gradually began to quicken, sending her hair flying in her face, blocking her eyes. She babbled on, hoping to find her sister. "Everything was so different without you... I was so lonely by myself. Do you remember that story? The one Grandma told us before everything happened?"

"*The phoenix and the mermaid will rise forevermore.*" Dynamene whispered, a long pause before she spoke. She seemed cautious, weighing out her options, observing every detail of Hestia. Every word she spoke, every action she made, everything was under scrutiny.

"We are the phoenix and the mermaid! You know, Dynamene, we could stop this war.

We could stop everything that has plagued us for so long; we could change the world.” Hestia became passionate now, her voice louder than ever before. Her words became emphasised now, a smile on her face as she began to explain her plans.

“You’re different.” Dynamene whispered, a stair of bubbles forming underneath a tree. She began to slowly drift down, the bubbles popping on contact, until she was face-to-face with Hestia. Dynamene’s hair resembled ocean water, as long and flowy as always, but transformed to symbolise her ‘rebirth’ as the mermaid. Now they both looked how they were supposed to.

“I’ll be the same with you,” Hestia smiled, opening her arms. “This is our destiny – to exterminate evil. We’ll get back what we’ve lost, even more than we’ve lost! Please, join me.” Eyes determined, she waited for an answer.

Peace is Nine Worlds Away

by Hanako Hiroma d'Aronville

I heard a single high-pitched beep, and the world exploded. Into fire. Into nothing.

The silence was deafening. I could hear the blood roaring in my ears.

Everything hurt. The darkness smothered me, daring to crush every organ and squeeze them out of my body.

Warmth.

Heat from the flames slammed into me – fierce, blistering, relentless. My skin recoiled beneath its assault. Smoke tore at my throat and filled my lungs, each breath more painful than the last.

The air was thick and my thoughts were fogged.

I had to run. It was the only way to survive. To save the nine worlds.

My shirt, once a bright colour, was darkened by sweat and grime. Everything around me was spinning as I struggled to keep my balance on the ground. I kept telling myself to move, to push forward, but the fatigue was overwhelming, every step feeling like it was my final one. My knees buckled, sending my body crash landing into the moss and dirt.

I laid there for a moment, staring into the vast sky which had turned red and cloudy.

“Castilia, do you copy?”

A cold rush ran through me. I yanked the radio from my belt, pressing it against my lips.

“Castilia here. Injured but clear. Go ahead.”

My aching hands desperately squeezed the sand-specked radio as the high-pitched beep rang in my ears.

“We’ve got movement in the surrounding area. Confirming more than two Sphinxes in our view.” The radio crackled.

I blew out a shaky breath and stood, drawing a dagger from my scabbard. I scanned the perimeter. *There it is.* It had the body of a lion and the head of a human. At that very moment, its eyes locked with mine.

The radio slipped out of my hand as I stood frozen, unable to move. The portal was open. Mythological creatures were spilling into other worlds. This would cause mayhem.

A single scream split the air. Though I couldn’t tell whose it was, I knew it came from someone I loved.

“Thaddeus down! I repeat, Thaddeus down, everyone retreat!” I could hear the person on the radio shouting the instruction over and over again.

It couldn’t be. Thaddeus was the strongest person you could imagine. He was the noble defender of our group.

Only three of us remained.

A sudden rush of adrenaline kicked through my veins. If these monsters were going to mess with my friends, they had to get past me first. Coming through those gates was bad enough, but harming my friends was out of the question.

“C’mon Sphinx, leave my friends alone and come fight me!” I yelled as loud as I could before throwing my dagger. It flew over the Spinx’s head and landed straight in its back. The Sphinx snarled and leaped from tree to tree, coming towards me so fast that the ground trembled.

I quickly grabbed my bow and an arrow from my quiver and shot the Sphinx in the throat. It gurgled blood until it collapsed onto the forest floor. But there was no time for relief. Two more were advancing.

I didn’t wait.

I came up on one knee, grabbed another dagger from my boot, and flung it with the remaining power I had. The blade hit true, digging into one second Sphinx's shoulder and sending it staggering back to the bushes. Now for the other monster.

Persefoni's voice rang in my ears from the radio, sharp and frantic.

"Castilia! Where are you? Atreus is trying to find you."

I clumsily picked up the radio from the ground.

"I'm a bit *busy* here, Persefoni," I growled, my body shaking with fury and shock.

Then, I realised the Sphinx had stopped charging at me. *Something's not right*. I tucked the radio into my belt and grabbed another arrow from my quiver. Indeed, the Sphinx spread its wings wide and lifted off the ground as dirt swirled around it. Just before it came swooping in to rip me apart, I slid under its body and released the arrow, straight at its heart. The Sphinx let out one last cry as I rolled to safety. It landed on the ground with a *thud*. I stood there staring at the monster's body, realising that I had taken its life.

There was rustling from the bushes. I turned to see a Sphinx I wounded earlier emerging.

This time, it wasn't running at me. It just stood there.

Before I could gather my thoughts, the Sphinx bolted deeper into the woods.

"What the—" I knew there was no time to waste. I sprinted after it.

The trees blurred into dark shades of green, branches scratching my bare arms as I chased the monster through the curtain of leaves. I could hear a faint sound in the distance ahead. Stone grinding, rumbling, like a door opening inside a mountain. The Sphinx leaped into a clearing, and I skidded to a stop just in time to see it vanish through a stone arch carved into the side of the cliff.

The Umbra Gate.

I pressed against a tree to rest for a second, frustration clawing at my neck. I could feel the strong force of magic coming from that doorway. A single tear rolled down my cheek. Thaddeus was gone. His laughter always brought light to the darkness.

Thunder rumbled in the blood-red sky and the radio crackled again.

“Castilia, this is Atreus. We’ve located the gate. Repeat, we’ve located the gate.”

I pressed the comm button with my weak fingers.

“This is Castilia. I’m already at the gate. One of them went in.”

I exhaled sharply.

“Inside?” Persefoni’s voice, sharp. “We’re not ready! We haven’t secured the perimeter—”

I threw the radio on the ground and smashed it with my foot. Why did I have to listen to them? They knew we had no time.

I ran to the gate.

Stopping in front of it, I took a breath, and I stepped through.

It sucked me in like a black hole. All kinds of colours swam in my eyes; my stomach dropped, as if I’d jumped off a cliff. Before I knew it, I’d hit the ground hard with a thud. *Where am I?* I wondered.

Stygian walls stretched out in all directions, ancient symbols glowing in green. The Sphinx was nowhere in sight.

I stood up slowly, a stiletto knife in both hands, heart pounding.

Then I saw it. Not the Sphinx, but something more powerful.

A shadow, tall and void-touched, stepped out from the darkness. Its silken voice slit the air – smooth, but cold as midnight. The Harrowshade.

“So... the Mortals dare to follow.”

I raised both of my stilettos and squared my stance. “You’re gonna regret saying that.”

The Harrowshade let out a hollow laugh while he raised his gloved fingers, causing the symbols on the walls to glow even brighter. A section of the wall split and more monsters spilled out: a centaur with deformed obsidian bones, a serpent made of blood-red ruby, and a minotaur with horns sharp as blades, his upper body masked with molten gold.

I was alone; I should have backed down.

Instead, I took a step forward.

Then another.

But I wasn't alone anymore.

I could feel the Umbra Gate humming behind me. I turned to see Persefoni bursting through, sliding across the floor with a sword in her hands. Without a moment of hesitation, she leapt straight for the serpent, her blade leaving grey streaks of energy in the air. She had every movement calculated in her head.

Atreus came next, landing hard and releasing a blast from his gauntlet that knocked the centaur down, temporarily.

"I said to *wait!*" he barked at me.

"Something could have happened while I was waiting!" I shot back, weaving between the minotaur's legs.

Persefoni moved with light feet, every strike precise and fast as lightning. Her reflection danced in the serpent's ruby scales, like there were many of her.

Atreus traded brutal hits with the centaur, every punch sending rippling shockwaves in the air around us. Atreus was a tank, every move bold and determined.

And me?

I ignored the minotaur and went for the Harrowshade.

I lunged, my blades swirling in my palms. I struck every bit of his body, but every time the daggers connected, he shimmered into mist and reappeared behind me.

"You think courage is enough?" he hissed.

“No,” I said between gritted teeth, “I’ve got rage.” And *that’s* enough.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a crystal — it was one of Thaddeus’s inventions. I jammed it into the hilt of one of my stilettos, twisted it, and threw the weapon high into the endless void above us.

Light exploded with a thunderous *crack* and dust flew in the air. The Harrowshade screeched, its body fading in the light. That gave me enough time to drive my second blade into the minotaur’s back.

“Now!” I yelled.

Atreus curled his fingers into a ball and aimed his gauntlet at the serpent, its beam going clean through the creature. The serpent hissed before it fell.

“Your skills are improving fast.” Persefoni said, panting.

“You too, Persefoni,” I replied.

Behind us, the centaur roared, but before it could move another muscle, Atreus blasted one more beam into its chest. The force sent it flying in the opposite direction. It landed and slumped on the ground, unmoving.

Four enemies. Three of us.

I could feel Thaddeus’s presence with me. As if he was never really gone.

Dust swirled, so thick that it looked like falling snow. It was peaceful.

“Is that it?” Atreus asked, wiping sweat and blood from his cheek.

“No,” I whispered. “This is just the beginning.”

We turned to the centre of the darkness. The portal through which the unknown lay beyond. One more step.

“What happens when we cross it?” Persefoni questioned, staring at me with her big caramel eyes.

I looked back at her and smiled. “Something unimaginable.”

I retrieved a knife from the ground and threw it into the portal. It vanished without a sound.

“We finish what we started,” I stated. Silent nods passed between us.

Then we stepped through to what lay beyond.

And in that moment, we weren't just survivors.

We were going to protect Earth from the nine worlds.

AUTHOR OF TOMORROW | 16-21 YEARS

The Dividing Line

Abbie Englund

Winner of the 16-21 Years Category

“This land is ours. Our people’s! You shall not conquer it. Here I, Lord Neville, lift my sword and strike! For the English and our king!”

Having raised his voice above the clattering of horses’ hooves and clashing of armour, Neville rode out to meet the Scotsmen, his own men following behind as the corporax cloth of Saint Cuthbert, that crimson flag so imbued with defiance, billowed above them in the wind.

Suddenly, his sword, striking the armour of a Scot, was severed in two. For it was not a sword at all, but merely a stick...

The Scot, meanwhile, seemed strangely unmoving. But then, trees often are.

Lord Neville cursed the stick-sword and threw it to the ground. His voice was oddly high, and his stature, for that matter, was oddly short. For, alas, he was but a mere fourteen year old, and a girl at that.

Mary sighed. The adventure was over. Not that the Lord Neville of her imagination had only ever been the product of a dream. He *had* once ridden out, sword in hand, on that very spot in which Mary was then standing. And he *may* have spoken the words she gave him, for all she knew.

The year 1346 seemed like an age ago to Mary, born three years afterwards, but to her parents, the memory of the Battle of Neville’s Cross – when the Scots came down from the borders and the hills ran red with blood – still haunted them at night. Now the field lay quiet, but Mary did not stop to mourn those who had fallen, whose shadows one could fancy still danced about at dusk.

She was racing, racing over desolate hill and dale, spurred on by nothing other than the allure of the wild, drunk with the freedom of youth. Through the tall grass of Crossgate Moor she sprinted, her brown hair flying in the wind, her bare feet lightly skimming the rich, soft earth. It was not until she reached the waters of the River Wear that she at last stopped running. For here was a sight worth looking at. Out of the morning mists came rising the outline of the city of Durham, like the peaks of some jagged mountain range.

It was a slower meander that brought her down to the banks of the river. Somehow, the walk made her thoughtful, gazing at the women washing their clothes in the icy water and the merchants who were setting up their stalls upon the bridges, the great wooden watermill churning the river to foam and the heron perched on the opposite bank who alone was gazing back at her.

A drowsy peace was hovering over the town, but it would not last long. One cry from a vendor, one hammer on an anvil, one screech of a seabird would suffice to wake the city up with a jolt. But for now, there was a tranquillity in the slowness by which these movements were unfolding before her, a gentleness in their hushed collective murmur, like the musings of one emerging from slumber – asleep enough to dream, awake enough to ponder.

It was the yawning of daybreak.

“Oi, you there! Yes, you!”

Mary whipped her head round to see a short, broad-shouldered man, with flaming red cheeks and scruffy black whiskers surrounding a pointed set of black teeth which poked out of his mouth like the rabid grin of a hunting dog. It was a face all too familiar to Mary.

“You get here this moment or I’ll throw you in the river.”

“What? A lady like me? Good Knight of the Round Table, are dragons really so hard to come by nowadays? You’ve got it all wrong – you’re supposed to save the ladies from the beasts, not the beasts from the ladies!”

“Ha, you’re no lady. You’re a thief, that’s what you are.”

“Though I don’t think there’ll be a shortage of dragons in this kingdom,” continued Mary, ignoring his comment, “whilst you’re in it.”

As though in homage to her insults, he stopped snarling and began to snort.

He had leapt down from his cart and looked, given his generally bovine appearance and teetering stance, as though he was about to charge. In that moment, the seriousness of the situation dawned upon Mary. But it did not remove the smirk from her face. Few things could do that.

It was a thrill, not fear, that began to run through her veins. Mary was a poor and lonely girl – the only child of a widowed tanner – and her life was often monotonous. Danger – the riveting type – was hard to come by, and so, to fill her glory-seeking spirit she did her best to come to it instead.

“Don’t think you can get away now.”

But alas for the irate man, Mary *did* think of it. And such was Mary’s personality and habit that, as a general rule, the second she thought of doing something would be the same second in which she did it.

He had begun to run towards her. She didn’t stop to wait for him. In a flash, she bolted towards the westernmost arch of Bishop Flambard’s bridge. It was a cunning move. He would have to wade through the watery sludge whilst she, lithe as a water rat, scurried along the scarcely perceptible cracks in the arch’s stone.

All this fuss, she thought to herself, for one onion! And it wasn’t theft anyway, it was retribution. So what if I knocked over his basket yesterday? Of course I did, I was in a rush, and of course I was in a rush, I was King William the Conqueror, and of course he was in a rush, he was fleeing from Durham for his life, and of course he was fleeing from Durham, he had just discovered that Saint Cuthbert’s body was intact though he had been dead for four hundred years, and of course he had been dead for four hundred years, he— Oh, hang it all. Intact, after four hundred years! Fancy that. Ha, I’m sure I don’t believe a word of it.

She was under the bridge now. The dark coolness was refreshing but she wasted no time in scrambling madly through it.

A great splashing noise and spiteful curse was to be heard as she pelted back up to the bridgehead. If she was to cross it, as she had every intention of doing, it was imperative that nobody should see her. One wrong movement would alert the man at the toll gate. But few could slip into the air as easily as Mary. None saw her jump into a passing cart laden with vegetables or crouch inside, quite hidden between two baskets of beans. Over the bridge it rattled, past the eastern tower it crept, through a gate in the towering city walls it crawled. Like an arrow, Mary leapt out from her hiding place and in a moment had disappeared up the old winding passage of Moatside Lane.

Only when the little path had sufficiently twisted did she slow down to think. In her mind's eye she could see the train of pilgrims that would follow in her footsteps up the lane that very day. She could hear the jingling of their amulets, their gleeful cries of "almost there!"

Perhaps the monks themselves had passed this way, all those years ago in 995, when the peninsula of Durham was but a river and a hill. She fancied she could see their silhouettes: the pointed hoods of their cloaks, the creaking wagon carrying the one treasure that the fury of the Norsemen, which had so mercilessly swept up their gold and jewels, could not succeed in severing from them: the body of Saint Cuthbert.

Suddenly, the path veered sharply to the left. Her heart racing, her mind aflame, she scurried up the steep incline of Saddler Street and stood motionless on the grass of the palace green. She had lowered her head upon entering, but she raised it now and through blazing eyes saw her destination.

There, before her, loomed the five towers of Durham Cathedral.

Majestic, commanding. Beautiful and immense. She quaked beneath its size, rejoiced before its radiance. She was enraptured.

It was no more than twenty meters ahead of her, but not until half an hour had passed did she find herself standing, her fervour of awe yet undimmed, in the Lady Chapel. It was the only place of worship that she, as a female, could enter; inconspicuously, it poked out of the West side of the Cathedral like the little muzzle of some gigantic dog.

Wherever she looked, her heart leaped in wonder. The paintings of Christ and His disciples, the mighty oak door made from a single tree. At the eastern end, the monks were singing and their ethereal melodies made Mary shiver. She bowed her head in prayer.

There was one object that filled her with contempt. Not a nagging displeasure or half-hearted dislike, but a raw, intense, burning loathing. As she stepped into the nave, it was there in all its ugliness.

A little black line.

A pathetic, inconspicuous little black line.

She looked down at it and grimaced.

Disdainfully, she placed her foot at the boundary. Suddenly, a voice rang out.

“Mary, Mary, lass. Won’t you remember!” It was Ezekiel, the bedesman, whose job it was to wander the aisles, muttering prayers for his benefactors. An old man whose simplicity rendered him insignificant to the adult world, but whose timidity and sincerity strangely complemented Mary’s audacity. They had been friends for as long as she could remember.

“That is the second time this week I have had to stop you. You know a lady isn’t allowed to step across the boundary line.”

“But I’m not a lady!” she replied indignantly. “My father is only a tanner. He is quite poor.”

“And that is why you are so lovely. Those ladies with their jewels, they don’t even notice poor old Ez. No, they don’t! They think they’re too important for little old Ezekiel Podge. But not you, Mary. You don’t ignore him. You like him! Always treat him as if he was a real person and he thanks you Mary, he does. But, still, you are, alas, a lady. And a lady cannot cross this line.”

“What would happen if she did?”

“Oh, well, how would I know? Something bad. Something very bad, I’m sure. Maybe the whole nave would just crumble in on top of her, who knows?”

“But why, Ezekiel, why?” Her voice trembled.

“Cuthbert’s orders.”

“What?”

“He doesn’t like women.”

“But he’s dead!”

If one of the stones above Ezekiel had fallen at his feet, he would scarcely have been more shocked.

“No, Mary, you must not say such things! You will stir up Cuthbert’s ire!”

She was hardly afraid. “Have you forgotten who it was who went to Jesus’s tomb and was the first to see Him alive? *Mary Magdelene*. You wouldn’t have stopped that Mary. Why do you stop this one? If a lady can go to heaven, why can’t she go to the Cathedral?”

“Stop it, stop it. If you keep saying such things something terrible will happen. And then who will they blame? Mary Tanner? No, not her! Only silly, soft-hearted Ezekiel Podge. *He’ll* get thrown out, he will. And he’ll *die* of cold. And they won’t hear *his* cries as he bangs on the sanctuary knocker!”

She was about to speak again when her eyes fell by chance upon a tear in his garment. Suddenly her anger seemed to dissipate and a strange expression came and took its place.

“You know something, you’re right. Oh, look at your torn garment!”

“It’s only a small tear.”

“No, Ezekiel, it is a blight on the Cathedral. The pilgrims and monks will certainly stare.”

A frantic worry overcame the poor man.

“Don’t look so afraid. I can fix it for you! Just change into your other clothes and leave these at the door of the Lady Chapel tonight at sunset.”

“Why, thank you, Mary.” He smiled, but in his tone was a trace of distrust. “But wait, what if someone steals them?”

“Ezekiel Podge. It is the Lady Chapel. What *lady* would want to steal your clothes?”

With a wry smile that inexplicably unnerved the simple bedesman, she curtsied and strode haughtily out of the Cathedral.

The darkness was deep and the winds restless when the lone figure of a young girl, flitting through flickering shadows, dashed up to the door of the Lady Chapel. With a furtive push, it swung upon its hinges and engulfed her in the blackness of its gaping mouth.

Few eyes could have discerned the secrets of that dark room, unravelling in the dense, gloomy hour of midnight. None had seen her go in, and none saw her come out.

She had vanished.

Or so it seemed.

For surely none would have mistaken so innocent a girl for the old man who staggered out some minutes later, wrapped in the clothes of a bedesman. Only the bats, with their keen, penetrating gaze, dove at her head, as though screeching in their own dissonant choral harmony the words, “Mary Tanner!”

But she little heeded them. As she stepped through the great wooden door, the moonlight, pouring through the stained-glass windows, fell like a colourful mist into the nave. A silence had settled on the sleeping cathedral. And yet, she felt distinctly that the building was deceiving her.

It was not sleeping. It was watching. In the shadows of the great vaulted ceiling, invisible eyes were following every movement; behind each pillar, unseen ears heard her very thoughts. She remembered her father telling her that during the Battle of Neville’s Cross, monks had climbed onto the roof of the tower and chanted *te deums* as the fighting unfolded. She fancied she could hear them still.

She shivered. But just then, her eyes fell upon that immovable black line, that stoic, insensible barrier etched in the ground. She could have scaled the walls of Durham, and yet here was this pitiable marking freezing her in her tracks.

The words of Ezekiel echoed in her ears, first a whisper then a roar.

A lady cannot cross this line... cannot cross this line... cannot cross... cannot... cannot...

With inexorable firmness, with blissful pleasure, with scornful satisfaction, with haughty vengeance, with a sardonic smile and an earnest prayer of thanks, she ran up to the line...

And crossed it.

Suddenly, a gnarled hand, emerging from behind the nearby pillar, latched onto shoulder.

"Let go of me!" she screamed. But the icy grip held firm. From out of the shadows stepped a man, clothed in a long black cassock as dark as the shadows from which he emerged. His face, stern in the best of times, was rendered hideous in its ire. His arched eyebrows and fiery eyes fell upon Mary like a red-hot branding iron. It was the prior.

"What... do... you... think... you... are... doing?" Each word scalded her.

"I am a friend of Ezekiel!"

"Oh?" How short, yet how terrible a word, spoken with a patronising cynicism that made Mary shiver.

"Your friend, is he?" Having said this, he turned his head, and Mary, following his gaze, gasped to see the outline of Ezekiel slinking through the door under the great clock. She could not see his face, but he seemed to be frantically shaking his head, and she fancied she saw him wringing his hands. In a moment, he was gone.

"You shall come with me."

"No! Let me go. I have done nothing wrong. Before God, I have done nothing wrong!"

But his hold only tightened. Suddenly, her eyes fell upon the floor, and she noticed, with a rising elation, that she was still standing on the forbidden side of the line.

Then, the walls of that vast nave were echoing with a laugh they had never heard before. It was a joyous laugh. A grim laugh.

The sound was still ricocheting down towards the Chapel of the Nine Altars as the prior led her away.

Hopelessly captured.

Yet strangely and wonderfully free.

The Smuggler's Apprentice

Eliana Abrams

They burned the last library when Ari was six, but sometimes, when the wind blew just right, he could still smell the ash beneath the concrete. Ari was seventeen now, working long hours in a crumbling tyre shop owned by an old friend of his father's. The job was far from home, gruelling and mindless, but it paid just enough to keep Ari and his mother fed. That was more than most could say.

The streets of Velmora were grey with soot, the walls covered in vines with multi-coloured petals that seemed to be the only thing that dared to bloom. When Ari crushed them in his fingers they would leave faint luminescent specks on his fingertips. He liked the glow because light was precious. The state said electricity shortages were a necessary sacrifice. Just as they said books made the weapons that caused the old wars, that stories were dangerous, and imagination was a crime.

It was the fifth day of the week, so Ari stopped in Sector 5 on the way home to visit Teren. They were meeting at a tavern near the Government sector. Fahrenheit was an Upper-Tier tavern, where no one had sooty clothing. Ari didn't belong there, but Teren did. Teren always belonged.

They had been friends since before the world split into workers and watchers. Before uniforms. Before checkpoints. Back when they used to race along the irrigation canals and dream of building gliders from spare parts. Teren said wings were freedom. Ari thought wings were escape. Teren's family was Upper-Tier – officials and administrators.

Ari's parents had both been English teachers before books were banned. His father read to him before the police took even the private books away. His mother still whispered the novels

she had memorized to him. As the son of English teachers, Ari had been beaten regularly by the officers of the Mechanical Hound division and eventually kicked out of school.

Teren didn't talk about that part much. He tried to avoid discussing hard topics with Ari altogether.

Teren looked nervous; his shiny black boot banged against the aluminium tavern stool in a steady rhythm.

"I'm graduating soon and it's time for me to decide what comes next," Teren said, while picking apart the piece of bread in front of him. "My dad wants me to train to be an officer – in the Mechanical Hounds. He thinks it'll set me up for a pretty good life," he said, not meeting Ari's eyes.

Teren wanted to join the same group that had beaten Ari.

"So," Teren said, "I just wanted you to hear it from me first. I'm not like them."

"You think you're not like them? The badge won't remember who you were when you're burning books. Books don't just tell stories, they teach us how to recognize cages – then pick the lock."

"Cages? Come on. Life's better when it's ordered. People stay safe when rules are clear," Teren said.

"Safe isn't free. Without pages to remind us, the rules rewrite themselves overnight," Ari replied.

"Maybe, but a full belly beats an old poem," Teren exclaimed.

"Those poems warned us what hunger feels like before it comes. Burn them and we forget the warning."

Teren opened his mouth, then closed it. Ari stood, left his half of beer untouched and walked out into the soot-coated street. Teren followed him.

"Ari, let me at least show you the safe way home."

Teren led him off the main streets and deeper into the dead veins of the sector. Past shuttered shops and defunct vending stalls, past graffiti too faded to read and vines growing all over abandoned buildings. The alleys here were tighter. Quieter. Less patrolled. They parted ways without a word.

Good.

He needed to be alone.

But he wasn't.

At the corner where Teren left him, where the buildings sagged inward, squeezing out the light, Ari caught movement – a figure, cloak pulled tight, head low, slipped out ahead of him. Something was wrong. The cloak was dark green – an unauthorized colour. And the figure was carrying something. A book. The figure knelt, pressed their hand against the wall. A click. A large metal panel swung open, perfectly disguised. The figure vanished inside. The wall sealed shut behind him.

Silence.

Ari's heart hammered. He moved to the spot. The seam was nearly invisible, but the metal was cold against his palm.

He pushed.

The door groaned open just wide enough for him to slip through.

Inside, the air was stale and musty. Ari stood still, adjusting to the dim light.

It wasn't much of a room. Concrete walls and a low ceiling supported by rusted beams. In the middle, standing like a shadow pulled loose from the wall, was the figure.

A man. Tall. Wiry. His cloak brushed the top of his battered boots. His face was a blade of angles sharpened by two whetstone eyes.

"Who are you?" the man hissed. "And why are you following me?"

Ari's mind raced.

“I didn’t mean to,” he said quickly. “I just... I was curious. I saw the book. I haven’t seen one in years.”

The man’s mouth twisted into a grim smile.

“Curious,” he repeated. “That’s a dangerous thing to be these days, boy.”

Ari’s shoulders locked tight. He met the man’s gaze. “So is carrying around a book.”

The man’s face flickered – first with respect, then with a friendlier smile. He jerked his head toward a narrow staircase in the corner. “Come on,” he said.

At the top of the stairs, the man turned and said, low and hard, “What you see up here – it *stays* here.” He opened the door.

The room beyond seemed to stretch wider than it should have. Shelves were stacked to the ceiling, lined with hundreds of books and punctuated by ladders that climbed to the top rows. Desks were littered with reading glasses, microscopes, and other scientific tools Ari hadn’t seen before.

There were all kinds of books, old and new, in the room. The smell caught Ari by surprise, like meeting someone he’d known before but hadn’t seen in a long time.

“This,” the man said, “is the last remaining library in all of Velmora.”

Ari stopped, a wave of disbelief washing over him. He stepped to the nearest shelf, running his fingers over the spines – each one a forbidden story, a piece of the world erased. They were numbered in the Dewey Decimal System his mum had told him all libraries used: 822.33 on a book on Shakespeare, 180.9 for a book on Greek philosophy, 954.04 for the History of India.

“And you’re the librarian?” Ari asked, his voice cracking slightly.

“Well, a few of us are,” the man replied. “But we’re more than that. We smuggle. We are responsible for the entire district’s knowledge. We protect what’s left of the old world.”

Ari turned back to him. “Smuggle?” he repeated. “You mean... you go around the district and lend books out?”

The man's lips curled into a tight smile. "Not just books. Knowledge. Truth. This is the only place left where you can find them. People are desperate for it all – more people than you'd think – and that's where we come in."

"I want to help," Ari said.

The man turned, his smile now cutting across his face. "Why should I trust you?"

Ari hesitated, then said quietly, "Because I've got nothing left."

"Come back tomorrow. Two rules: don't tell anyone..." Then his smile finally reached his eyes. "And no fruit – the seeds get everywhere and ruin the bindings."

For a month after that first night, Ari returned to the hidden library again and again. Sometimes late at night after his shift, sometimes slipping away during the grey hours of morning when the streets were still empty. Each time, he stayed longer, losing himself among the worn pages and half-forgotten words. The library had a hierarchy – he could only touch the new books on the first level. He didn't listen. The old books made him wonder about their previous owners. These books were so old, their parts so loose, they sometimes rattled when he took them off the shelf. Were their owners the same?

The man, who eventually told Ari to call him Granger, rarely spoke. He showed Ari how to sort shipments, repair bindings, memorise drop points without leaving a trail. They never talked about the future, or what would happen if Ari got caught. It was a quiet understanding, hanging heavy in the dusty air between them.

Ari learned to wait. To listen. To disappear.

Then, one night, Granger walked in holding a slip of paper.

"I have your first mission."

Ari's breath caught.

"You're delivering a book," Granger said, pulling one from the shelf – thick red spine, gold-laced cover.

"Industrial sector. Someone's been waiting a long time for this."

“Who's the contact?” Ari asked.

Granger handed him the book.

“Doesn't matter. You'll know her when she says the code. Keep it quiet. Get in, get out. No mess. No questions.”

Ari took the book, the weight of it heavy in his hands. He pocketed the piece of paper, hid the book in his coat, and left the alleyway.

It was colder than usual that night. Ari waited by the crumbling fountain at the centre of the Industrial sector, scarf covering his face, coat pulled tight. One hand curled around the leather-bound book hiding inside.

The mission was simple. She would find him. No names, no questions, no second chances. Lamps flickered, casting long shadows over the cracked pavement. A siren wailed somewhere across the city – a reminder that even when the streets seemed abandoned, someone was always watching.

He shifted, glancing over his shoulder.

A figure emerged, walking briskly. A woman in a patched coat, a cloth bag slung over one shoulder. She murmured, “Old paper is good paper.”

Without looking at her, he slipped the book from inside his own coat and dropped it into the open mouth of the bag as she passed.

She didn't slow.

Ari let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. But as he turned to walk away, something caught his eye: two men, stepping out from behind a stalled cargo van across the square. Dark uniforms. Shiny black boots.

Officers.

Panic clawed at him, but he forced himself to keep walking, steady and casual, heart hammering against his ribs. *Just another kid going home after a shift*, he told himself.

Head down, he turned the corner without breaking stride.

Only when he was two blocks away, swallowed by the maze of side streets, did he let himself run.

And that's how the meet-ups went – quick, stressful, but successful. One after another, Ari smuggled books all across Velmora's broken streets and rusting sectors, slipping past officers, nosy neighbours, and the ever-present eyes of the government. To crumbling apartments, abandoned factories, even secret rooms hidden behind false walls he delivered pieces of the old world to those brave enough to keep it alive.

Over time, the fear settled into a sharp edge he carried with him, but it didn't paralyse him anymore. He became a regular among the smugglers – part of their invisible network. At the library, Granger introduced him to a few others: grim-faced men and women who spoke in hushed voices and never used real names. Some were as young as Ari, others were old enough to remember when books weren't a crime.

They taught him tricks – how to hide a book inside a bag of tools, how to forge a ration slip if he needed to cross sectors, how to read a person's body language to spot an informant before it was too late. Every meeting, every mission stitched Ari deeper into the fabric of their secret rebellion.

It was dangerous work, until there wasn't any work left. One night, Ari smelled the smoke before he saw the burned-out shell of the building, and before he felt Granger's tap on his shoulder. Granger was covered in soot.

"They found it. We knew it was only a matter of time. We made it work for as long as we could." Granger sighed. "Now, I've got the last book for you. But this one is not like the others... It's going *inside* the Government sector. The code is: 'books don't grow on trees'." The Government sector was a different world. The streets were clean, the lights bright, the vines manicured, the air almost sharp with cold control.

Ari moved carefully, his steps measured, his face blank. Every doorway was guarded, every corner watched.

The meeting point was supposed to be the old observatory near the central tower – a place long abandoned, a crack in the otherwise perfect façade.

He waited for a few minutes, anxious when the contact failed to appear. This wasn't usual. Meetups were always exact, designed to the moment. One second extra could mean death.

Ari fiddled with a loose string on his coat. He couldn't wait much longer.

As he was about to leave, he heard a shout.

"There!"

Ari spun to see guards pouring out of all three surrounding side alleys – black uniforms, polished boots, weapons drawn. Leading them was someone Ari knew too well.

Teren.

For a frozen moment, they locked eyes.

"Get on the floor!" Teren shouted.

Ari bolted.

Boots thundered behind him. He darted down an alley, heart hammering, breath tearing his throat raw, dodging between broken carts and crumbling walls. He almost made it, almost, but a guard slammed into his back, driving the breath from his lungs. Rough hands wrenched his arms behind him, forcing him to his knees.

Teren stepped forward, his expression flat and official. His eyes went dark, he looked Ari in the eye as though they had never spoken before. Like their past was a dream half-remembered.

"You should have stayed out of this," Teren said.

Ari spat blood onto the cracked pavement, glaring up at him. "You should have stood for something."

Ari's head pounded; he couldn't believe it was all over.

Teren knelt, opened Ari's coat, reached in and drew out the red volume. The squad straightened up – a book destroyed meant a commendation. Teren cracked the spine with a snap like a wishbone splitting in two, and something small and striped – maybe the possession of a long-ago owner – fell out. Teren held it aloft with his right hand, pinched between thumb and index finger, and with his left passed the broken book to his men.

A rookie struck a flame and held it to the pages. The book – the final book – blazed. Smoke filled the street.

Teren yanked Ari upright, mouth brushing Ari's ear as he whispered, "Books don't grow on trees. Run!"

Ari staggered, then bolted into the rising smoke. Some men gave half-hearted chase, but Ari was too fast. When the smoke cleared, he was already sprinting toward the dead factories.

Night draped Velmora's rooftops in soot-coloured silence. Teren knelt by a rusted vent, pulling out the small tiger-striped seed he had wrapped safely inside a tissue. He pressed it into a pot of roof-moss, covered it with ash, and whispered, "Endure." He cracked a leaky pipe just long enough for one silver drop of water to emerge.

Green would come. He would wait.

Epilogue

Ari became a ghost, surviving among ruins and broken factories. Word had spread fast: the book smugglers were all dead. Erased.

One cold morning, scavenging near the old water plant as he did every day, Ari spotted it – a red flame symbol circled by broken chains, smeared on a crumbling wall. Beneath it, a single word: Endure. He pressed his hand to the symbol – and Granger stepped from the shadows.

He was singed, limping, but alive. From a satchel, he produced a dented microscope, set it on a cracked drum, slid a violet leaf beneath the lens, and tilted his head. *Look.*

Ari bent to the eyepiece and saw tiny fluorescent dots.

Still saying nothing, Granger opened a crate Ari hadn't noticed. He saw dozens of colour-coded seeds, each labelled with numbers. The first was labelled 451.0 to 451.8. They were Dewey Decimal numbers.

Finally, Granger spoke. "Those dots you saw are lining the seed's DNA loop. We overwrite spare code in the chloroplast, encrypting information in each plant. Each seed holds the information of fifty thousand different books." He held up one of the seeds. "This one represents the last set. Dewey 998.1 – History of Antarctica – to 999 – Extraterrestrial History. We are able to *encode* – we just can't *decode* yet, but everything is here for the next generation when they can work out how. Teren said he showed you the second to last seed. He sent you to us in the first place, and he saved you – but he also said your friendship saved him."

Ari smiled. "So the books were just decoys. The stories are inside the plants!"

"People still got to read. The government knew we were trying to save books. We knew we could make them think they were winning. We just made sure there were seed copies everywhere. Almost every vine in the city is a child of these forbidden seeds."

Granger pressed the peppercorn-sized seed into Ari's palm. "The final chapter," he said. "Keep it alive."

Ari knelt in rusted dirt at the wasteland's edge, planted the seed, and waited. Days passed. Nothing. Then a shoot speared upward, defiantly green.

Far across Velmora's roofs, a second patch of green crowned a battered tower – Teren's garden. Two fires of knowledge, alive, wind-spread, impossible to stamp out.

The libraries weren't in ashes. They were in seeds. And Velmora had just begun to bloom.

Salt In Her Lungs

Madeline Arcaro

They say the sea is cursed.

They say that women cursed the sea.

Sand shifting under her feet, Maren walked the shoreline at dusk, knowing she was too close to the sea for her mother's liking. She'd heard the warning far too many times: "Maren, stay away from the ocean!" So much so that her mother's parrot had started repeating it back to Maren.

Time after time, she'd heard stories of the women who came before her – the women who had the same ache for the sea, their desire to dip just a toe into the water greater than any desire in the world. The women weren't strong enough to fight back – or at least that's what the ladies in the tea-shop in Morrow's town centre had whispered last time Maren went to buy tea for her mother. She'd heard rumours about each and every one of them: some whispered about, some mourned. Some, she assumed, had been forgotten. Lost to the sea in more ways than one.

The whispers have surrounded Maren for as long as she could remember – all of the stories about the girls who had been taken by the sea. When Maren was a kid, she was allowed to go in the water. Her mother dressed her in a small pink swimsuit, only for it to be completely covered up by life vests and arm floats. Her mother would watch from a distance as Maren bobbed in the waves, entranced by the love the young girl had for the water. Maren's mother had never seen her daughter's smile so big.

When Maren was eight, her mother sat her down to have the conversation that her mother had had with her, and her mother's mother before that. The stories of the women, all taken by the tide.

“The day you turn twelve, you must never enter the water again.”

Maren had cried and cried in her mother's arms, already dreading the day that was yet to come. And once it did come, four years later, the spark in Maren's eyes had dimmed, and hadn't ever returned.

Now, at seventeen, as she walked along the coastline, narrowly avoiding the water, the desire to dive in hadn't diminished.

As the ocean slowly made its way up the beach, waves threatening to pull Maren under, her mother's voice called her back. She took one long look out to sea, then turned towards her house.

The same way she did every night.

The same way she had done every night since that day when she was twelve.

That night, Maren dreamt of the ocean. It was not unusual – when you grow up next to the sea, it's inevitably going to show up in the occasional dream, or the occasional nightmare. But this time, a woman called to her. A woman she did not know. Her voice was muffled by the sounds of the ocean, but Maren could make out her name when she introduced herself.

She woke up with a gasp, knowing that the woman in her dream would never be able to gasp again.

“She went too far. That's what happens.”

Though she tried not to eavesdrop on the women who talked in the tea-shop, Maren couldn't help the way her ears perked up whenever they spoke of the Lost Girls. This wasn't what they were called, but Maren didn't know any of their real names. So they were the Lost Girls in her head, forever stuck in anonymity, gone in the waves. And it seemed like there was a new one.

“Her name was Adela,” Maren's mother said from behind her, sternly. Her mother never partook in the conversations about the Lost Girls.

Maren shot her a glance, blonde eyebrows high in surprise at the interjection.

“I went to high school with her mother,” Maren’s mother continued. “Sweet woman. Sweeter girl.”

The ladies in the shop looked anywhere but at Maren’s mother. They glanced at the clock on the wall (it was nine minutes after three), at the green parrot sitting on her shoulder (Henry, who didn’t like to be home alone, and especially loved the tea-shop), at the selection of teas in front of them (Maren was sipping on her favourite, Pink Cherry Blossom). But their eyes didn’t meet the blue irises of Maren’s mother’s; they didn’t search for answers.

For the first time, Maren realised there might actually be answers. But when she asked for them later, her mother declined to give any.

So Maren went to the sea again, the same way she did every day at dusk, and walked along the shore. But this time, the tides rose faster than usual. This time, Maren couldn’t walk back fast enough before the waves lapped at her feet, bit at her ankles.

Maybe she wouldn’t try. Maybe this time she wouldn’t try to escape.

Then the cold water brought her back to her senses, accentuating her footsteps as she hurried away, feeling her heart race.

She had never felt so alive in her life. Five years had gone by without her touching the ocean, despite its call. Now she wasn’t sure she could go another five seconds without feeling its cold embrace.

As she stared out across the water, looking at the oranges and pinks that sat in the sky, reflecting on the waves, Maren felt like her soul was rising out of her body, threatening to pull her deep – a warning. But before she could follow the instruction of the voices in her head screaming at her to dive, her mother’s palm touched her shoulder. She felt human again, back to normal. It devastated her.

“It called for me too,” her mother’s honey voice said. Maren turned to her left, expecting to see matching eyes looking back at her. Instead, her mother’s were facing the water, and Maren saw them glimmer.

“What?”

“The ocean. It called for me too.” She swallowed. “But you have to make the choice to stay. I made that choice. You have to make it too.”

The sound of her mother’s voice breaking sent a shiver down Maren’s spine.

“What if I can’t?”

“You can.”

Maren spent that night with her head on her mother’s shoulder, their blonde hair knotting together in the wind. They passed three silent hours there, as the pinks and oranges faded out into night, dark blues and black following in their wake.

They woke up at around midnight, and Maren’s mother calmly pushed her towards their house, like a herd dog pushing its cattle.

That night, Maren dreamt of the woman again. She saw her red hair swirling in the ripples of the ocean. She saw her turn round, never to return.

When Maren woke up in the morning, her hair was damp with salt water. It was dawn, the sun still rising slowly over the horizon, glimmers of yellow a stark contrast to the deep blue of the water. The world was caught between breaths, like it was pausing for her as she slipped out the door and stepped closer and closer to where the golden sand met the sea.

Maren’s mother watched from the window, sipped her tea. She didn’t say anything, just closed her eyes and exhaled in a nearly silent prayer.

And then Maren stepped into the ocean, the water embracing her legs, dragging her deeper – not by force, but by quiet begging. When it reached her collarbone, it stilled. It stilled like it recognized her. And when it covered her head, when she inhaled, there was no drowning.

There was no pain. There was a breath, the first one Maren ever took that made her lungs expand all the way. It was a breath like she had never taken before.

And the sea folded over her like a second skin.

She sank. Or maybe she was carried. Down past the tangled seaweed, past the schools of silver fish, past the weight of what she used to be. Light moved differently here: softer, like candlelight flickering through silk. Creatures circled her like stars. Coral rose from the ocean floor, arching like cathedral domes. Everything felt paused, like the sea itself had a heartbeat that had stuttered.

A curtain of seaweed parted before her, opening into a chamber. There was a glow like firelight. And it was full of life.

This was Selamara, a city of thresholds. Doorways were veiled in seaweed, pools opened like mirrors, revealing rooms beneath rooms. Staircases of bone-white shell led not upwards, but deeper in.

The buildings shimmered and swayed as if they were whispering to each other.

Some said that the city dreamed. Others said it listened. But the one thing they all agreed on was that Selamara, the underwater city, did not forget.

There were women there. Dozens of them. They were floating, drifting, kneeling on moss-covered stones. Young, old, scarred, radiant. Some that Maren recognized. They didn't speak – not out loud – but Maren heard them anyway. The words landed inside her chest like echoes.

“You came.”

“She heard us.”

“She remembered who she used to be.”

They welcomed her without ceremony, just with their presence. One by one, they greeted her.

There was a woman with deep laughter lines and eyes like a storm cloud who'd once been called a witch for knowing which herbs would stop a fever. A girl Maren's age who signed her name with the grace of a current, fingers dancing in silence, trails of bubbles following. A woman who looked almost familiar touched Maren's cheek and said softly, "You look just like your mother."

They told their stories like songs. Not in any language that Maren knew, but through gestures and music and the movement of light in the water. Maren understood them all.

Each of them had been told that they were wrong. Either they wanted too much, or felt too deeply, or loved the wrong person, or said no. They laughed too loudly. They cried in public. They survived.

Here, no one flinched. No one hid their laughter behind folded hands, no one folded in on themselves. Their softness was their strength. Grief was named, and it was honoured. Rage was not buried, it was listened to. Who they were and who they loved wasn't whispered about. Love was worn like jewellery – open, and unapologetic.

Maren didn't realize how tight her body had been until it finally relaxed. Her shoulders dropped, her breath evened out. For the first time, she didn't feel wrong. She felt vast. Alive.

At the heart of the city was a pool of black water, darker than the ink that Maren used to write with. No one went near it, not without an invitation, but Maren was drawn to it anyway.

A woman with red hair braided with kelp grabbed Maren's arm before she could get too close. When Maren turned around, she recognized her. She recognized the woman's hair, her deep, knowing eyes. This was the one who had come to Maren in her dreams. She had said her name was Isla, and Maren grinned at the familiarity.

Her voice was soft and slow, like the ocean floor. "The sea gives to those who ask nothing of it," she started. "But it remembers. It remembers what was taken."

Maren peered into the pool and saw hands slipping beneath waves. She saw final gasps of oxygen taken. She saw what were once vibrant curls weighed down by dark water. But then she saw more. She saw women diving, not falling. She saw their becoming.

They were not lost; they were not gone. They had chosen the waves as their sanctuary.

“The sea did not take you. It called you. And you came,”

Some say that Maren vanished into the waves just like the others. Some say that they still see her walking the beach at dusk, hair salted and windblown. The townspeople don't speak her name anymore, but they sweep the sand off their porch more carefully, wary of the curse. They teach their daughters to listen when the wind changes.

The girls don't tell their mothers, but at night they all dream the same dream: a girl standing on the edge of the world, waiting.

No one knows where Maren went, only that something still waits at the water's edge — and it's still calling. The sea does not forget its own: it sings to the girls in their sleep, a low, tidal murmur braided with promises. Sometimes, they wake with sand on their sheets or salt on their lips. They walk to the shore barefoot at dawn, eyes wide and unblinking. They listen. The ocean knows their names now. And though their mothers teach them to stay inland when the sky turns, to lace their boots tight and keep their hearts shut like storm shutters, the girls still dream.

And the ocean still calls.

The Island of Echoes

Isabelle Mugford

Sunlight drips through my window like honey, and dust sits stagnantly in my stuffy bedroom. It's summer – the air is thick with it.

I hear my eight-year-old brother, Robin, downstairs, playing with his pirate ships. The sound of battles and his shout of "Man overboard!" echoes around my head as I trace my fingers over my grandfather's journals, imagining his weathered hand sketching the maps while his boat swayed on the waves, fishing nets trailing behind.

Two days ago, as I came through the front door and kicked off my shoes, the smell of smoke and burning paper hit me. My mother was crouched by the fireplace.

"What're they?" I asked, trying to sound disinterested.

"Your grandfather's maps and ship's logs," my mother said, distracted. "They were recovered from the shipwreck a few years ago, found in a dry box."

"I want to read them," I urged. "I want to know what happened."

"But—" My mother objected as I lunged for the papers, scooping them out of the fire with a pair of tongs and stamping out the flames.

I knew why she wouldn't let me have them.

The memory of that night lingers more as a feeling than a moment – I was barely old enough to understand what the coastguard's call meant, but I could feel the quiet weight that hung in the air, the way the adults stopped talking when I entered the room. Ever since we learned they hadn't found my grandfather, but instead a scattered shipwreck, strange things had begun to happen. Boats had disappeared, not a trace of the ropes lashing them onto their moorings left. The town hall burnt down. People began to talk of a curse...

I wondered what answers to Grandfather's mysterious death had already been lost to the flames. What could I discover from these journals?

I remember vividly the day I began to wonder what had really happened to my grandfather. The wreck of his boat had been hauled from the sea a few years previously, and though the search for him had ended, the whispers easily flickered back into life. People didn't talk about my grandfather anymore – at least, not out loud - but that day, for the first time, I heard his name again.

It was a crisp winter's morning as we walked to the Sunday church service. I clutched my mother's warm hand, my red welly boots clunking on the wet Tarmac as we walked up the steep slope towards the church. I was entranced by the sea, watching it crunch onto the black cliffs below with a frustrated energy. The same kind of energy that gathered grey clouds around the church's tall spire, and looked down menacingly over the small huddle of houses that formed my town, Drift Valley.

I followed my mother into a pew, and she clutched Robin in her lap. Fumbling in her handbag, she passed me a sketchpad and colouring pencils, which I opened eagerly before dissolving into silent concentration. There was a buzz of conversation in the air; my mother chatted animatedly to a near-deaf gentleman in the row behind. Her eyes sparkled like the sun on the waves as she talked, her laugh brighter than stars. Snippets of their loud conversation drifted through my absorbed mind; now my mother sounded angry.

"Don't bring it up here," my mother hushed, "not in front of the children. They're only little."

I froze and listened hard, surreptitiously. My attention faded from my drawing, and I began to absent-mindedly colour out of the lines.

"But Adam, the children's grandfather has been gone for years." My mother was persisting.

“Yes, Marie, but I thought you ought to know—”

“Don’t! We haven’t heard anything for a long time – we’re not going to find him now. You know about the” – my mother was whispering now – “curse.”

A hush fell as the service began. I didn’t listen to the vicar – my mind was racing, processing what I’d just heard.

What curse? And why had they been talking about my grandfather? I thought he’d died, but the way they talked made it sound like he’d merely... disappeared.

I sat in silence, imagining a sea monster devouring him. But should I use red or purple for the monster’s body?

I look at my childhood drawing of the purple monster, taped to my white wall. My mind is hot and I’m struggling to concentrate. I skim my grandfather’s journal again.

15th March 2016

The sea is disturbed today, that much is clear. We are not conquerors out here on the ocean – we are at her mercy, and today she has allowed us safe passage. But the crew are nervous – tension is rising and change is coming.

The wind’s picking up again, and we’ve passed through some sizeable squalls today. What’s more, there’s a phosphorescence under the hull of the boat tonight, and I’ve just spotted an unfamiliar shape out on the horizon. It could be nothing. But I’m not so sure. What if

I can’t read any further – sea water has smudged the ink. I feel myself about to catch the answer to what may have caused my grandfather’s mysterious death, and then it slips through my hands like a dropped ball. Frustration stings my body and tears threaten, but I fight them. Instead, I stand up and angrily toss the journal against the wall.

There's a clunk as a small, gold key falls out. I pick it up, tentatively, and feel the cold metal against my fingers – salt-encrusted, rough, a little green in places. There's an elaborate swirl of gold at the top, like thin tentacles.

I take the key to the window to examine it in the sunlight and look out at the deep blue sky and the small harbour. Boats are strung across the glassy surface of the sea.

Boats!

I stuff the journal into an old rucksack and secure the key round my neck on a piece of cord. Running downstairs, two steps at a time, I hear my mother call my name before I slam the front door shut.

In the heat of the early afternoon sun, I run across the harbour bridge to the north side of town. The key thuds heavily against my chest with each step, like a heartbeat. I reach a large, paved square, where the grand building of the library casts a welcome shade. Once inside, I ask at the desk for Finn. He works there, and we've been best friends since primary school.

He saunters over, calm and confident as always. Seeing my flustered face, he looks quickly down at the contents of the half-open rucksack I'm clutching in my hand.

"What's up?" he says, his voice quiet and concerned.

"I know something about my grandfather," I blurt, breathless. "I read his journal. I think he's still out there..."

Finn looks sceptical. "There's no way he's alive after nine years.'

"You have to listen to me!" I shout, angry at myself for sounding so childish. More quietly, I begin again. "I have to get a boat. You can help me sail it, can't you? You practically grew up in the boatyard."

The harbour is quiet, a heavy, stifling heat in the air. We reach the harbour master's office and knock. The door opens with a loud and friendly, "Eliana! What a pleasure!"

The harbour master is red in the face, and he spreads open his arms.

"I'm in a bit of a hurry," I say. "I need you to help me borrow a boat."

"Whatever's you wantin' a boat for?" he asks.

"I just want to do a bit of wildlife spotting," I lie. "It's humpback season."

Finn looks at me. I catch his eye and warn him not to say anything with a glare.

"You tried Old Jimmy?"

"No."

Old Jimmy runs the only boat rental business, but I've been scared of him since I was small and he told me a story about a wreck.

Finn catches *my* eye this time and smirks.

"My niece is goin' away for a few weeks," the harbour master says. "She got a small engine boat you could 'ave. I'll ask her."

One long phone call later, he tells me the boat is mine.

"You look after it, mind," he says, lowering his glasses and peering at me. He picks up a key from one of the hooks behind him and I string it around my neck, next to the other key. The harbour master eyes it, but doesn't say anything. I wonder if he knew my grandfather.

Outside, Finn turns towards me. "You're really doing this, aren't you? Going off to find your grandfather? Why do you never think things through?" he asks, angry.

"I have to go!" I say, surprised at his lack of understanding. "I have to go, for my family. I have to know what happened. I have to stop all these terrible things happening to our town!"

"It's still reckless," he remarks.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I say. "Five a.m. You can come or you can stay."

There's a slight chill gathering in the air as I walk home from the harbour alone.

I sit quietly all through tea, wary of my mother's strange gaze.

"What did you do this afternoon?" she asks.

"Went to the library."

She grunts; I know she doesn't believe me.

After tea, as it begins to grow dark, I check the weather forecast. Areas of high pressure for a week. That should hold. Satisfied, I switch off my bedside lamp, and lie back, staring at my dark ceiling, eyes wide open. Sleep doesn't come. It won't.

Tomorrow is the day I could get answers.

The next morning, the words from the note I left on the kitchen table echoing around my head, I walk down to the boat.

It's small and has two engines. The harbour master filled it with fuel yesterday, and there are two spare tanks inside. I climb aboard carefully, standing on the seats at the stern to get in. I lift the seats up and see some lifejackets and emergency equipment. The cockpit is fitted with basic navigational screens, none of which I have any idea how to use. The cabin has a small stove and two bunk beds fitted into the bow.

Should do nicely – as long as Finn turns up.

As I'm dropping my rucksack onto a bunk, I hear the hollow thump of footsteps on the deck.

"Still going, then?" Finn says, peering into the cabin.

"Yeah," I say, as if daring him, "and you can't stop me now."

"Chuck me the key then, and let's get going."

He jams it into the ignition, and the engine splutters into life with the rumbling noise of combusting petrol as the boat pulls out of its mooring and heads into the open sea.

The morning passes serenely, but a dull gloom descends in the afternoon.

By evening, the sky is dark and brooding – a reflection of what I feel inside. I stand alone on the deck in the darkness, a dull wind whipping my thoughts away, into the low and heavy clouds. For the first time, I start to feel a seed of doubt spreading its roots in my head. I allow it

to grow, each leaf springing into life accompanied by a plunging feeling in my stomach and a fleeting image of my mother's face. I wrench it out; it's just a weed.

And that's when I feel the heavy raindrops, splashing hard on my face with wild power. The wind is whipping up white spray on the tips of large waves that I hadn't noticed before.

"Conditions are changing," Finn shouts, over the rumble of the engine and the groaning of distant thunder. "There's been a sudden drop on the barometer and a low pressure system is moving in."

"Let's just close the cabin up and secure all our stuff," I say, sounding more confident than I feel. "We'll wait it out and see what happens."

The night drags on as the boat is hurled around and pounded by waves. The cabin light goes out and what little comfort I had is gone. I try to lie still in my bunk, confused about which way is up, as water covers the portholes around me. Then I see flashes of lightning in the heavy sky. I smell stale seawater swilling around in the bilges, and fresh seawater working its way in around the cabin door. I feel my stomach churning, plunging up and down on the rising swells. I feel shivers of cold fear running icy fingers along my skin. I feel there's a supernatural power to the waves – anger, revenge, sorrow swelling up as they rise and crash over us.

Finn whispers frantically – to himself, or to me? My ears are ringing. I am so scared of dying. So scared.

It's still night-time when the storm subsides. The change is strangely sudden: one final lashing of cold and water and wind, then silence and stillness. We stagger onto the deck.

"Look," Finn says, grabbing my arm and pointing to a steep mountain rising out of the sea in the distance – a pinprick of concentrated darkness in the mass of deep shadows.

Land! I think. *The storm led us here. It knew.*

A glimmer of pearly blue light begins to form around the boat's hull. Phosphorescence. It illuminates a memory in my mind – an entry from my grandfather's journal. Excitement rises in

me like a tide, bringing with it other emotions: fear, curiosity, connection, like pieces of driftwood or seaweed, rushing onto the shoreline with a foamy wave.

A strong current pulls us towards the mountain. I can make out huge stone pillars rising into dense black jungle on the island. They are columns, white in the moonlight; dancing lights leading up a stone path; a small white beach, laced with a delicate fringe of glowing turquoise water. I have the sense of being in the past, and my fingers move unconsciously to touch the key. What does it unlock?

“This is it, isn’t it?” Finn asks, seemingly enchanted. “Your grandfather is here, isn’t he?”

I nod.

I search for an anchor. There isn’t one. Realisation makes my heart beat faster; I draw breath rapidly.

Finn looks at me curiously, eyes catching the brilliant blue glow of the sea as he watches the emotions flit across my face.

“I’ll stay,” he says, quiet but certain. “I’ll keep the boat here and wait for you.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head, fighting back tears, voice catching, “No. You have to come with me.”

We’re whispering now.

“Eliana, *you* have to do this. This is your journey; you have to make it alone.”

“But—”

“I’ll be right here,” he says, his voice rich with tenderness. “I’ll wait for you, I promise.”

I turn my back on him and jump overboard into the warm water, wading towards the shore before I change my mind. Tears of fear flow – the fear that I’ll be left here, alone; that I’ll never see anyone I love again.

The moment I hit the beach, I feel something I’ve never felt before: familiarity, connection, tranquillity. Out of the thick jungle fringing the shore stands a wooden door, framed by an archway of mossy stone and trailing vines. My eyes flick down to a golden lock,

embedded in the rotting panels. I wrench my grandfather's key free from the cord around my neck and try it in the lock.

It's stiff, but it turns.

I force the door open, leaning against it with my body weight. Beyond, a cobbled path retreats into the jungle. The air around me is still, thick, dank and humid as I take a trembling step forward, leaving the door behind me open. I pause, waiting for something to happen, then take another. Fires burn in stone pillars along the path, scattering dancing sparks, lighting my way, guiding me. Sounds of animals leap out at me – cicadas and insects grating their wings in a rising cacophony. The jungle is hot and sticky in the night-time air; a layer of darkness is coating the trees like tar.

I hear distant voices, edging me on, pulling me forward. I look back over my shoulder, but the bright firelight has swallowed up all sight of the boat. The voices grow louder, a melancholy call from the fire-crackling spirits of long-dead ancestors, a roar of pain and terror that seems trapped, like there's a pane of glass between me and them. Loneliness and longing bottled up in a hollow, futile echo that penetrates deep into my skull. It calls me, and I hear my grandfather's voice, frozen in time like an insect in amber.

Intrigued, I wander on, footsteps clunking on the uneven stones.

The voices reach a crescendo and I fall to my knees, hands over my ears, trying to block out the sound.

I scream as stone pillars fall down ahead of me, blocking my way as a burning wall of fire erupts from the torches.

I can't go any further.

From somewhere deep inside, I hear my own thoughts, and I know that it is time. I should destroy the key, and end the curse imprisoning Drift Valley – but what would that mean for the spirits on the island? Or, I could join my grandfather and stay trapped for eternity on this island, a gatekeeper. My mind races like a pinwheel in the wind.

I hear my grandfather; he's calling my name, and I'm beginning to walk forward into the fire, feeling the heat prickle on my skin. When his voice calls again, I am about to take one step further, when I realise it's not him. It's just an echo, a distant hollow voice, a shadow of reality.

I have to make my own decision.

Facing the fire, I wrench the key free. It sits heavy in my hand for one final time, then I thrust it into the flames, which surge forward with heat, blazing in searing anger.

The voices rush away from me, through the trees, through the open door, through the waves on the shore. And finally, the echoes cease. After all this time, the spirits of the island are free.

There's the sound of rushing water, from somewhere in the distance. A huge wave of seawater rises above the island, illuminated with fire and phosphorescence, and crashes over the beach, rushing up the steep slope towards me. A final act of rage from the sea.

Finn! I think, and sprint down to the boat. As I run through the wooden door, I hesitate. With my last remaining strength, I pull it shut behind me, closing the door on the curse. I splash through the shallows and see Finn waving feebly. He hauls me over the side of the boat and I collapse into his arms, shaking.

"It's done," I say, "I destroyed the key. The curse can't harm us again."

Finn smiles at me, weak and tired, and I sit down. He steers us out of the small bay, and when I look back over my shoulder towards the island, there is nothing there.

When I wake after a deep sleep, my skin is tingling with saltwater and sunlight, and, beneath us, the boat surges across the waves. I see the harbour in front of us, a welcoming sea wall enclosing the sheltered bay, where my family is waiting. I climb out of the boat, wearily pulling Finn up behind. Robin runs towards us.

"Why did you go without me?" he whines, clinging onto my arm. "I wanted to be a pirate too!"

My mother silently hugs me, and I know that relief is pulsing through her. She's been spared the loss of another family member. The little seed of guilt and regret sprouts a new leaf, but then, from safety and comfort, love and friendship, a pale and beautiful flower blossoms.

First published in 2025 by The Wilbur & Niso Smith Foundation and Worldreader.

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