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Opening extract from

The Roar

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For Jake and Molly

'All that glisters is not gold;
Often have you heard that told.
Many a man his life hath sold
But my outside to behold.
Gilded tombs do worms enfold.'

The Merchant of Venice – William Shakespeare

1

The sun was setting over the Atlantic and as it ran like molten gold into the waves, a girl in a Pod Fighter ripped through the scene, like graffiti sprayed across a landscape painting, and for a few startled moments, the sun and the sea trembled.

Ellie flew fast and low with her eyes fixed on the northern horizon. In the gunner's seat behind her was a Capuchin monkey called Puck, whose brows fidgeted while he ate popcorn and admired the gun controls. Puck was glad to be out of his room with new things to look at. He didn't know they were running away or how much danger they were in. But there was no doubt in Ellie's mind; when Mal Gorman found out they were gone, he would want to slice them like

Parma ham, then mince them to space dust.

'But I won't let him,' Ellie whispered. 'And anyhow, he's got to catch us first.'

As they flew north into darkness, leaving the warmth of the sun behind them, Ellie wondered whether her parents had kept her clothes. It was over a year since Mal Gorman had kidnapped her and she knew he'd told them she was dead.

No, she thought sadly, they've probably thrown them away.

For a moment she wondered whether they'd recognize her. Perhaps they'd be frightened to see her. Maybe she'd knock on the door and they'd look at her as if she was a stranger and tell her to go away. As Ellie considered this end to her journey, she felt panic rise like vomit in her throat and she accelerated until she was flying so fast she saw nothing but ribbons of half-light reflected on the water. The Pod Fighter ripped through the air, leaving sonic scars in its wake, and as she blinked away a tear, it dipped slightly to the left and a wing tip clipped the crest of a wave and reacted as if it had hit a rock – boom! For a split second, she thought she had lost it as the Pod Fighter threatened to spin off in horizontal cartwheels into a megaton wall of water.

'Frag!' she cursed, hot in the face as she struggled to correct her mistake. Another lapse of concentration like that one and she really was dead. She should know by now that crying didn't help; she'd cried a lake of tears since Mal Gorman kidnapped her that

hadn't spirited her home, only cool logic and determination would do that.

She slowed down, exhaling her panic and checked the coordinates in her visor. Then, with a roar that sliced chunks out of the waves, the Pod Fighter shot across the equator and into the turbulent sky of the northern hemisphere.

'We're going home,' said Ellie. 'And not even Mal Gorman can stop us.'

* * *

It was three o'clock in the morning in London when Mal Gorman was awoken by the news that Ellie had escaped. He was supposed to be on holiday; the first holiday he'd taken for over a year, but instead of having a relaxing time in his expensive hotel, he was pacing up and down with his slippers on the wrong feet and his temples throbbing. He felt too old to be chasing a twelve-year-old girl across the planet in a stolen Pod Fighter. The circular com over his right ear glowed while he talked to one of his men.

'What time did she go?'

'We don't know, Sir,' the man replied sheepishly. 'Nobody seems to know *exactly* when she left.'

'Why not?' Mal Gorman bellowed, his pale grey eyes threatening to pop out of their bony sockets. 'What was going on up there? Were you all doing the Can-Can in the Officers' Mess? Having a slumber party?'

'No, Sir,' the man replied. 'She just . . . slipped out without anyone noticing.'

'Slipped out of a locked room on a space ship?'

'Yes, Sir.' the man replied. 'We've been trying to figure out how she did it, but we don't even have any security footage because she destroyed it before she left. Somehow she managed to break into every Pod Fighter on the strip and plant a virus in their flight systems so we couldn't follow her.'

'Unbelievable,' Gorman snarled. 'You bunch of bumbling cretins! How could a twelve-year-old child escape from several hundred soldiers on a space station in orbit around Earth?'

'I don't know, Sir,' mumbled the man. 'But we've got the programmers in the Pod Fighters and half are working again. We're ready if you need us. We can be there in ten minutes.' The man hesitated, then asked, 'Does she know The Secret?'

'Yes,' Gorman replied, heavily. 'But I don't think that's the reason she's run away. I told her recently her parents believe she's dead. I think that might have upset her. Did she take the monkey?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Oh no.' Gorman felt a pain in his chest as he considered the consequences of Ellie reaching home with a live Black Tufted Capuchin monkey. He sat down heavily on the bed and fumbled around under the lamp for his Everlife pills. He was a hundred and eight years old; he needed them.

'What do you want us to do, Sir?'

Mal Gorman thought for a moment, running his papery hand over the last strands of his brittle grey

hair. He didn't want to kill Ellie; after all, he'd spent a year training her, and the other two children he'd kidnapped had died. And he liked her; she was sulky and difficult, but so bright, what a waste it would be to kill her now. But if they couldn't control her on an orbiting space station like the Queen of the North, they couldn't control her anywhere. Ellie knew The Secret and she was going home with a live animal. She was as dangerous as a nuclear bomb.

Gorman leaned over and pressed an icon over the hotel room bed so the curtains swung back to reveal a wall of glass and a five star view over London. The new Golden Turrets, plucked from the pages of Arabian Nights, glowed seductively around him, reminding him of all the sightseeing he'd planned for the following day. He huffed irritably and turned his back on the view.

'At least we know where she's going,' he said. 'She'll be heading for that hole of a town she comes from, Barford North, to see her family. Organize patrols across the south coast of England and get the police involved. Tell them she's got an animal with her. They'll be so scared of catching the Animal Plague they'll be fighting each other for the biggest guns. You must kill them *both* before they reach home and she talks to anyone.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'I mean destroy them,' Gorman said. 'I want them pulped, pureed, minced, diced and buried somewhere under a ton of concrete. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'And do it quickly. I'm supposed to be on holiday. Call me back when you've got a sighting of her.'

Gorman pulled the com from his ear and threw it on the bed. Then he shouted for his butler, Ralph, and ordered him to make tea. He had a feeling he was not going to be sleeping again that night, or spending the next day sightseeing.

You silly girl, Ellie,' he said. 'You'll never make it.'

* * *

Ellie remembered every detail of the night Mal Gorman kidnapped her, and as she flew towards home the memories ran like poison through her blood. She remembered what they'd eaten for dinner and that her mother was wearing blue, that she'd yelled at her brother, Mika, because he messed up her hair, and that she didn't even say goodbye when she walked out of their fold down apartment. She ran down the stairs because the lift was broken and never saw her family again.

It was the perfect night to kidnap a girl. The clouds rolled low over Barford North, smothering the light of the moon, and there was a ground-hugging, Thames Valley mist, which made the hundreds of refugee towers look as if they were hovering off the ground like tombstones in a spooky, giant graveyard. There weren't many people out on the walkways that twisted around the towers like a tangle of concrete snakes, and eager to be with her friends, Ellie ran as fast as she

could, half aware that something wasn't right, that there was something hiding in the shadows. But when Gorman's men melted out of them, dressed black as ninjas with slits for eyes, she had no time to realize what was happening. Of their hands upon her, the bright sting of a needle in her neck, she remembered nothing – one moment she was wondering if she had enough money for a strawberry milkshake, the next her mind was sinking into a place like death.

When she awoke, her head was aching and she felt sick, but she didn't understand what had happened to her for several minutes. Everything around her was white and hard and smelled of toilet cleaner. It was like waking up in a horrible heaven when you can't remember dying. But it wasn't until she put her hand to her head and realized her hair had been cut that she began to feel fear. Her beautiful long, dark hair was gone. Shocked out of her stupor Ellie sat up with a jolt, her black eyes burning. She looked down at her body and saw that her clothes were different too; her new sneakers and jeans had been taken away and she was dressed in a white suit with these horrible shoes that looked like socks with rubbery pads on the bottom. She yanked them off and threw them at the wall, then stood up and staggered to the window and the shock of what she saw felt like boiling water on her skin. She could see Earth glowing in the distance and it looked no bigger than a tennis ball. She blinked and it was still there, small and insignificant. She rubbed her hands over her butchered hair. She turned round a couple of

times wondering what to do. Then she exploded; wept and yelled and banged on the door, demanding they let her out and gave her back her clothes and let her go home. But nobody came. She banged until her hands were swollen and purple with bruising, then she curled up on the hard bed, stricken by horror and confusion.

Several hours later, an old man in a suit came in and sat on the end of the bed. He was so thin, Ellie could see his skull through the papery skin on his face and every brittle bone in his hands. His eyes were calm and grey and smiling a little as he told Ellie how special she was and that he'd chosen her from thousands, as if she was supposed to be pleased that he'd kidnapped her and cut off her hair. And when he realized she wasn't, because she threw a plate of food at his head, a darkness emanated from his eyes more hostile than the gulf of space separating her from her family, and when he told her that if she didn't behave herself, she would never see them again, she trembled with fear.

For a year she worked hard and tried to behave, motivated by the painful longing she felt to be with her family again, to be kissed by her mother, to feel her father's arms around her and to sleep in the tiny bedroom she shared with her twin brother, Mika. But the day Mal Gorman told her The Secret, Ellie knew he'd never intended to let her go home; she could never go home with a secret like that.

'I hate you, Mal Gorman,' she said, 'and I wish you'd kept your bony mouth shut.'

But some things he'd taught her were useful. At the very least he'd given her all the skills she needed to escape him and it had been much easier than she'd thought it would be. The Pod Fighter she flew was a sliver of curved black metal and glass, with hundreds of brightly lit icons covering every surface of the cockpit. She couldn't have flown that a year ago. A year ago she had problems finding her hairbrush.

At last, a thread of light appeared on the northern horizon, which quickly morphed into the salt-licked concrete of The Wall. For a moment her spirits soared. Behind The Wall was her family. Behind The Wall was the south coast of England and home. She was nearly home. But her happiness was quickly smothered by fear. Being so close to the people she loved made her long for them even more.

Shielded by darkness she hovered over the sea, which heaved beneath her like a black beast pitted by rain. Looking at the towering mass of concrete made her stomach tighten. The Wall had been built during the Animal Plague, long before Ellie was born, but she had grown up hearing its story until it was as familiar to her as the ones her mother read at bedtime. But this story wasn't half so much fun as *The Wind in the Willows* or *Winnie the Pooh*, because instead of friendly animals having happy adventures, it involved insane animals on a murderous rampage; animals that ripped the doors off cars to kill the people inside.

When Ellie was small, every time The Wall was mentioned, she burst into tears, not because she was

frightened of animals but because she felt sorry for them.

'You're not supposed to feel sorry for *the animals*,' her mother corrected her. 'You're supposed to feel sorry for *the humans*.'

'Poor bears and tigers and birds and moles!' Ellie sobbed. 'They're all dead! We killed them all!'

'Of course we did,' her mother replied, exasperated. 'We had to kill them before they killed us. But now we live behind The Wall so we don't have to worry about those nasty animals any more. Now lie down and go to sleep.'

Ellie was good and lay down and went to sleep, but she never stopped feeling sorry for the animals.

The Wall was the largest man-made structure on the planet. It towered fifty metres above sea level and looped all around the top of the world, enclosing Northern Europe, Northern Russia and Canada. Where the sea licked it, the concrete was rippled like ice cream by salt, and above this it was streaked by rain. Where it protected the people on land, The Wall's foundations met bedrock so no burrowing animals could get under it. And on the top were three rows of electrified razor wire that would cut a rhino to ribbons. Every seventy-five metres were guard towers manned by Ghengis Borgs: three metre battle borgs with the temperaments like wasps and laser guns powerful enough to blow a herd of elephants to biltong.

Through the windscreen, Ellie watched the closest Ghengis Borg swing its massive gun. In the darkness

its eyes of red light looked like those of a demon. But Ellie wasn't scared of Ghengis Borgs; they would never consider the possibility that she had an animal in her Pod Fighter and that she was willing to take it over The Wall. What scared Ellie lay beyond The Wall. Gorman's men would be waiting for her on the other side, hovering over the hotels on the Brighton sea front, and they would have gunners in their Pod Fighters, not a monkey with a bag of popcorn. She breathed deeply.

You can do it. You know you can.

She had a pretty good chance, she thought, if she flew via London, because she'd be able to travel through the darkness of the first level, The Shadows. Then she'd follow the Thames Valley flood plain to her home town, Barford North, just south of Oxford. The new, refugee towns were built on stilts to keep them above the floodwater, so she'd be able to fly under them and use them for cover. It would be very dangerous but not many of Gorman's men would dare to follow her.

She took off her headset and had a drink of water. Then, with difficulty, she undid her harness and twisted round to make sure Puck's harness was tight enough. Puck had been a birthday present from Mal Gorman.

Or a bribe, more like, she thought, to make me work harder. I bet he's regretting giving me an animal now.

'Everyone's going to be surprised to see *you*,' she whispered. 'And absolutely terrified.'

She bit her lip, imagining her mother's scream when she arrived home with a live Capuchin monkey, and made a mental note to get in the apartment and close the door before she revealed him. Asha was even afraid of pictures of animals. Even forty-three years after The Wall was built, there was still a huge yellow plague siren on the tallest building in every town, just in case an animal got over. Puck was their worst nightmare, but Ellie couldn't have left him behind on the space ship alone, no way. None of this was his fault.

She was relieved to see the monkey was sleeping. She smiled. He didn't look very dangerous. His bag of popcorn had spilled in his lap and his face was peaceful as if he too was dreaming of home. She took the bag, folded over the top and tucked it down the side of his seat.

'Sweet dreams,' she whispered, glad he didn't know what was happening. His fingers twitched and she touched them gently.

What a miracle he was. So beautiful. Every time she looked at him she felt her heart swell with wonder. His brown face was framed by a mist of golden fur. His arms and legs were black to the elbow as if he'd dipped them in a bucket of ink. Over his body his fur was longer and a darker shade of gold and he had a black Mohican – a strip of tufty black fur over the top of his head – that suited him perfectly. He was Puck by name and puckish by nature, the most dreadful pet imaginable. But Ellie didn't blame him. She knew Puck missed his family just as much as she did and the only

way he could communicate his sadness was by being vicious and destructive. Poor Puck hadn't been allowed out of his tiny room for six months. She tightened his harness.

'They just didn't understand you,' she whispered. 'But I do.'

She prepared to fly again. Her body felt weak just from the exertion of turning round in her seat and she realized how exhausted she was. She hadn't been able to eat or sleep during the days leading up to her escape.

I need to be careful not to lose concentration, she thought, but not long now, half an hour, maybe less, and I'll be home with my family.

She put her headset on and wriggled back in her seat so she was comfortable. She locked her harness, checked over the control panel and then fired up the engine, feeling waves of nervous energy ripple through her as it roared. The Pod Fighter rose vertically, and its power vibrated through her hands. The nearest Ghengis Borg turned and its red eyes watched as she flew over The Wall and crossed the strip of sea towards land. She reached Brighton in less than a minute, and like a swarm of black flies, Gorman's men fell out of the clouds.

'My welcome party,' she whispered sarcastically. 'How nice of you to meet me.'

She felt her stomach flip with fear, but she flew towards them with gritted teeth, and with a lightning quick twist and turn, shot sideways through a gap

between two hotels with centimetres to spare.

'Beat that!' she yelled, as she came out the other side and banked quickly to avoid hitting a block of apartments.

She found herself in a narrow walkway behind the hotels on the sea front. It was lined with refuse containers and parked hover cars. There were two fighters waiting for her at the end, and above she could hear the rumble of a police freighter. She couldn't go up and she couldn't go forward, so she veered sharply to the left, narrowly missing the corner of a balcony as she shot into the lightless crack between another two buildings.

This is the only way, she thought, emerging in a shopping mall and immediately cutting between two stores to avoid the swarm of police pods coming towards her. She knew if she spent more than a second in an open space they would kill her. But she had played this game before in training, weaving through a lightless maze full of ravenous monsters in a flight simulator. The only difference being, when she played the maze game, she had three lives, but doing it for real she had only one.

* * *

'She's using the buildings for cover.'

'Well, of course she is,' Mal Gorman snapped, with a force that cracked his dry lips. 'She's not going to fly above them so you can all take turns at target practice! Which way is she heading?'

'Towards London.'

'She's going to fly through The Shadows.' Gorman predicted. 'Try to force her up on to the second level where there's more light. Get every man there, now!'

2

By the time Ellie reached the outskirts of London, she wasn't thinking, only reacting to the maze of concrete and dozens of monsters coming after her. She and the Pod Fighter had become one, like an experienced rider on a well-trained horse, and although she was mentally and physically exhausted, she was flying better than she had ever done before and gradually she gained a strong lead. They simply weren't good enough to keep up with her.

London looked like a monstrous, two tiered cake from a distance, the bottom layer dark and foreboding, and the top layer glittering with a frosting of gold and diamond light. She soon realized her path into The Shadows was blocked by a line of police freighters, so