I AM WOLF



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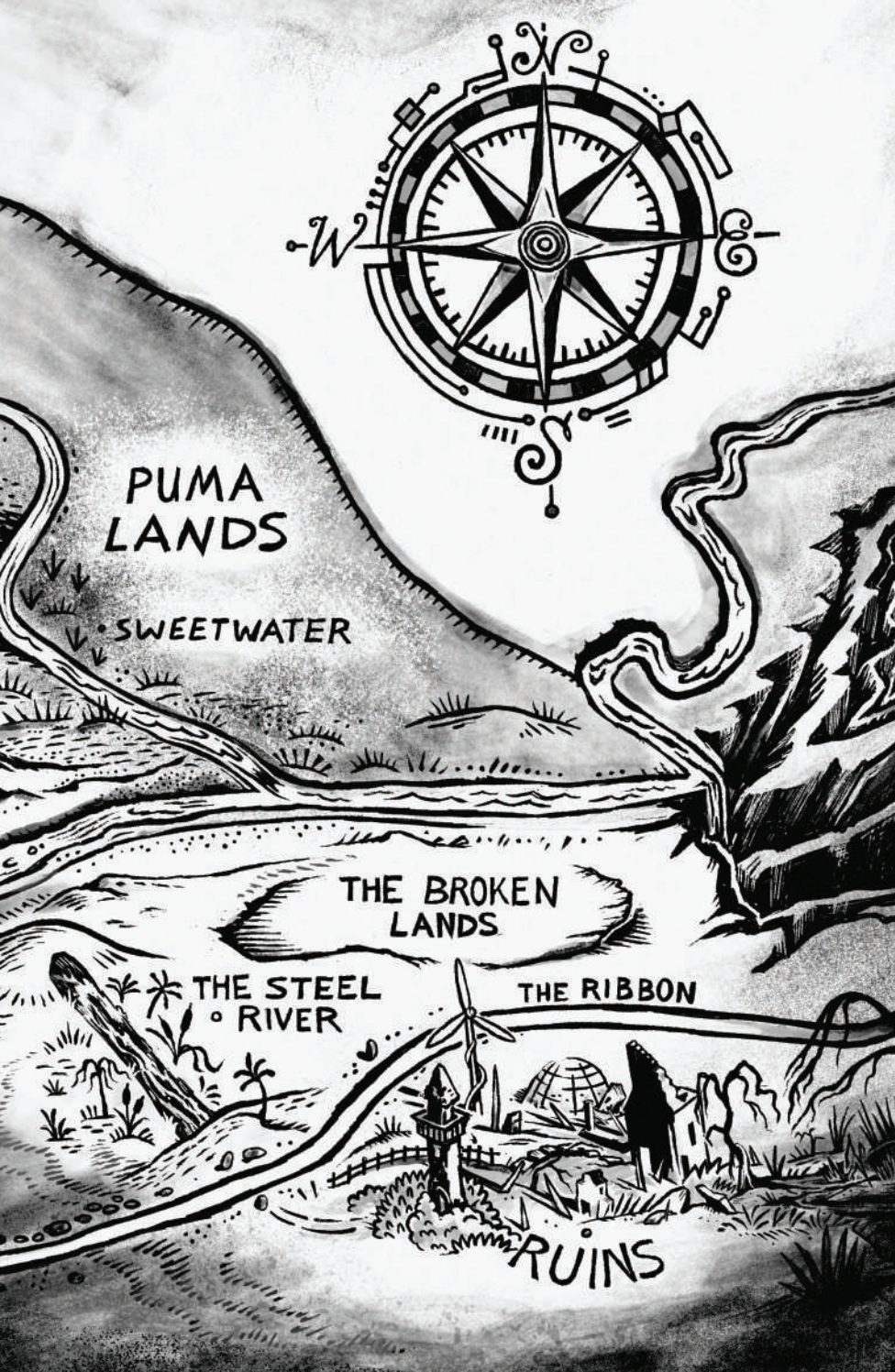
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For Sarah, who is a little bit Wolf
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THE RIBBON
RUINS



PROLOGUE

The great steel Wolf loped across the land, and death was in her eyes.

She was thirty metres high at the shoulder; each leg was as wide and tall as a tree trunk, and the barrel of her body was fifty metres end to end. Pistons and servos charged as she moved, metal sliding over metal, cables pulling, motors whirring, and upon her back her crew of humans cheered and roared. Her eyes glowed yellow and sharp, and her teeth shone silver.

Ahead of her, Hyena limped and struggled. Hyena was as large as Wolf, with a tough metal hide, and he was quicker than he seemed. They'd fought several times already, vicious snarling scraps that had left both damaged. Twice Wolf had closed her jaws round his neck, and twice he had reared, twisted, escaped. Once he had caught her between his own bone-crushing teeth and

nearly ended her.

But Wolf was clever, and lightning fast. Her steel claws were sharp as razors, her eyesight keen, her shoulders powerful. And her faith was strong. She was Wolf! Ghost of the forest, scourge of the tundra, lone destroyer, Wolf! Her crew were many, her will indomitable! Wolf!

She had chased the enemy Construct for days, through woodland, over hills, across plains. She was patient and careful, never letting her prey rest, never letting him get too far ahead. Now, as the sun set on the third day, they were nearing the end, and her crew knew it.

"WOLF!" they roared. "WOLF!"

Hyena clambered to the top of the next hill, gasping. Wolf sensed his fear. Her vast mouth opened and she laughed.

"WOLF!" she heard. "WOOOOOOOOOLF!"

Wolf felt her crew. She felt them. Every little human gave her strength, their energy feeding into her, beating through her silver veins. *We are Wolf*, she felt. *We are Wolf*. Her hind legs fired like springs, and she leapt! Her claws raked Hyena's back, her teeth fastened round his neck, and her huge spring jaws clamped shut!

Hyena kicked at her as they tumbled into the next valley. His weight crushed her, but she didn't let go. She felt his armoured hide buckle. She could see his crew now,

the tiny humans panicking and scrambling around, and, as their faith faltered, his strength drained away. He was growing weak, while she was still strong!

Then Hyena twisted and somehow loosened Wolf's grip, rolling until her jaws slipped from his neck to his shoulder. Wolf felt the crunch of steel and the spark of electrical systems exploding – but it wasn't the killing blow, and now she was off balance. She slipped, and the muddy ground collapsed beneath her, sending her reeling.

Furious, she scrambled back to her feet. Hyena was moving again. He was badly injured, limping worse than before; the sparks and fires on his shoulder lit up the night, and pieces of his casing lay scattered on the ground. Humans too – fallen from his deck, shaken loose from their harnesses, lying still or running for cover.

Wolf raced forward, feeling her crew's excitement. One more attack and he would be down, she knew. One more!

But Hyena was heading towards the end of a spit of land, and suddenly Wolf realised what he was trying to do. She snarled in fury and chased. She was only metres away from him! His right shoulder was ruined, he could barely move, his crew were weak, *he* was weak, he was prey!

"WOLF!" shouted her crew.

She leapt and her steel front paws stabbed at his hindquarters. She pressed down with all her weight and Hyena staggered once, twice, then his back legs collapsed – he was down!

And then he rolled, righted himself, tipped forward – and disappeared.

Wolf shook her head in fury, and then carefully stepped forward. Ahead, the ground vanished into a steep slope. Hyena was sliding and scrambling down, out of control. He rolled, then splashed into the river below. The sound of his fall echoed around the land, the water, the *boom* as he hit, the shriek of twisting metal and the shouts of his crew.

He lay in the river, motionless. For a moment, Wolf wondered if he was dead. But then he shook his head and got to his feet, and his lights glowed dimly in the dusk. He didn't try to climb out of the water. Instead, he stumbled forward and let the current carry him downstream.

Wolf growled. On board, her crew swore. Should she follow him? She wanted to. But the cliff was deadly, and the river too. And it marked the end of Wolf territory, and the start of Puma. She would not want to face both…

She shook her head and slowly regained her calm. Hyena was gone. Maybe Puma would get him. Maybe

he'd escape. But he'd never dare come back to her lands again. She padded back the way she had come, feeling the triumph of her crew, hearing their laughter. The scattered metal and parts of Hyena's shoulder were still lying around as a prize, and the humans…

The humans would either join her crew or be left on the ground as Worms. The parts would be used for her own repairs. Wolf padded up to the top of the hill and smiled a wide-mouthed grin to the night sky, her long metal tongue lolling.

"Wolf," her crew called. "*Wolf. Wolf! WOOOOOLF!*"

Wolf laughed, threw back her head, and howled at the moon.



1

COLL

The ground was always *weird*.

Coll could never get used to how it didn't move under his feet. On board Wolf, the decks were always shifting, swaying as she paced, even as she slept, and Coll's body swayed with her by habit. But the ground was hard and unmoving. It made him feel like he was about to tip over. And it was too low down, so the world seemed to curve up as if he was standing at the bottom of a bowl. And it didn't smell right. And it was *dirty*.

He scraped mud off his boots and looked around. It was early morning; Wolf was half asleep, stretched out on the ground with her eyes closed and her huge steel ears twitching. Coll could feel her in his mind, the giant mechanical Construct. She was enjoying the sunshine and paid no attention to the humans crawling over her, cleaning her, mending her, smoothing out her woven

metal pelt. As she breathed, her sides moved, and the deck moved, and her humans moved. Coll, from the ground, watched them enviously.

"Hoy, dozy!" He turned, and a canvas sack hit him in the face. Luna grinned at him. "Get to work."

Coll grinned back and they headed tailside. The remains of last night's battle with Hyena covered the hill and now all the youngsters were on salvage duty. Luna skipped ahead and Coll followed her. She was the same age as him but shorter; since his twelfth birthday, Coll seemed to have stretched like a telescope and now he was a clear head taller than her. She was still faster.

They got to work. Most of the debris was Hyena's, ripped away by Wolf's massive jaws. Huge thick hairs made of burnished metal, electronics, hexagonal carbon-fibre panels – it could all be reused. Most valuable of all were the tiny scraps and dribbles of anthryl, dark silver, glinting in the sunlight. Anthryl was the incredible, magical material that held everything together, gave them life. Panels and cables could be replaced, but without anthryl there would be no Wolf. It moved in Coll's hands like grainy liquid metal.

They worked for an hour, searching and scavenging, until Luna stood and stretched. "That's two sacks – let's head back."

"There's something in that tree," said Coll, pointing. "Give me a minute." He wandered across and started to climb.

"Are you OK doing that?" asked Luna.

Coll grunted. "Course I am." He heaved himself up to the first couple of branches.

"Do you want a hand?"

He felt her lifting his foot and shook her off. "No, stop fussing."

"You know what Alpha said—"

"I can climb a *tree*," he snapped, and she stopped. He clambered through the branches and found some casing fragments, nothing special. He knocked them to the ground and leaned against the trunk, catching his breath. Despite his bravado, his left elbow was aching, and his knee too, though he wouldn't admit it. The tree swayed and swished in the morning breeze. It was a little like being on Wolf. Coll smiled. He turned to come down, and then he saw it, lodged between two branches.

A tooth.

It was one of Wolf's, ripped from her mouth during the fight. A metre long, sharp at the tip and shimmering with anthryl. Coll knocked it loose and it landed with a heavy *thud*. When he scrambled down, Luna was examining it with delight.

"A whole *tooth*!" she exclaimed. "Nice find!"

Coll grinned. "Come on, let's go."

They dumped the sacks with the rest of the salvage and carried the tooth headside, finding one of the Tocks working on Wolf's shoulder. The Tocks were the ones who kept Wolf running. That's what they liked to say, anyway, although Coll had never seen them foraging for equipment or food, or taking part in battles. This one was Intrick, a dour old man who never said much. When he saw the tooth he grunted and jerked a thumb up towards the mouth, where a lone figure was working, peering at a device in her hand. As Coll and Luna approached, the figure turned and stared at them.

"Something useful at last, then," she said.

"Good morning to you too, Rieka," said Luna.

The girl ignored her and scanned the tooth. Coll and Luna exchanged glances.

Rieka was the same age as them but always gave the impression of being an old and crotchety adult in a young person's body. Her skin was brown, darker than Coll's, and her short black hair stuck up on one side. Her face was a sharp triangle. Everyone said she was a genius – she'd only joined Wolf a year or so ago, but already even the adult Tocks listened to her. She had a reputation for getting annoyed with idiots. Coll suspected her definition

of 'idiots' was 'everyone'.

She reached up to Wolf's ear and murmured something. Wolf stretched her mouth open in a wide yawn, and her huge steel tongue lolled out on the grass. There was a gap where the tooth should be, dark and rough as if torn.

"Come on, then," snapped Rieka.

Coll heaved the incisor into the gap and held it steady as Rieka tapped her device. The base of the tooth moved. The dark silver anthryl coating shifted and remoulded itself to fit, moving like a snake, or water, or both. It wrapped itself round the base, and within a few seconds it was as if the tooth had never been gone.

Wolf's mouth suddenly twitched, and Coll leapt away before the jaws closed with a *snap!*

"Argh!" he gasped.

Rieka ignored him. Intrick came along, and the two Tocks looked at their devices and talked the fast complex Tock speak that no one else understood.

"You're welcome," called Luna.

Neither looked up. Luna and Coll exchanged another look, and then shrugged and left. Coll rubbed his elbow.

"She nearly got you that time," said Luna, clapping her hands together. "*Chomp!*" She reached for a cable hanging down from Wolf's deck and tugged it twice, and it pulled her up. Coll followed. On board, the deck was a flurry of

packing and repairing, preparing to move. Rudy stood in the centre, shouting orders, giving advice and managing the chaos. Rudy was old, and his long thick hair was white, but his eyes sparkled. He still had the best eyesight of anyone, and spent his days watching the landscape for danger or opportunities. His skin was sunburned and battered by the weather into cheerful folds. He was Beta, second in command, and had been forever. He'd never tried to be Alpha, which was probably why he was still alive.

He nodded to them. "How's pickings?"

"Coll found a tooth!" said Luna.

Rudy grinned. "Good lad." He turned back. "Luna, got a job for you, with that lot." He jerked his head towards a group of other youngsters, who were pulling on cloaks and backpacks, chattering excitedly.

"What's going on?" asked Coll.

"Oh, just checking something out," said Rudy. "No need for you to bother. Take a break, you've earned it." He sounded breezy but he looked away as he spoke.

Coll frowned. "Wait, is this a scout mission? Rudy, you said *I'd* be on the next one."

Rudy turned back. "Aye, well…" He gave an embarrassed shrug. "Sorry, lad. Orders."

Behind Rudy, a boy laughed. "No trip for you, Faulty!"

Rudy whipped round. "Heel!" he snapped furiously. "You use that word again, Lyall, and I'll have you clearing exhaust for a month, understand?"

The boy Lyall scowled and shuffled away. He muttered something to his friends and they snorted. Rudy rested a hand on Coll's arm, but Coll pulled away.

"Rudy, it's not fair!" he said. "She can't keep doing this!"

"Doing what?" came a voice behind him.

Coll stopped. When he turned, Alpha was gazing at him.

Alpha was long-limbed and tough, and walked with a smooth confident grace. She wasn't the strongest on board, or the fiercest, but she seemed to pulse with hidden power, as if she was holding it inside and could unleash it at any time. Her senior crew stood behind her.

"What is it that Alpha cannot do?" she asked. Her voice was calm, but its edge carried on the morning air.

Coll's face flushed. He bowed, low enough to show the back of his neck in surrender.

"Forgive me, Alpha," he muttered.

"Oh, get *up*," she snapped. Coll straightened. "Give us a moment," she said, and the others moved away. Luna gave Coll a single embarrassed smile before following Rudy. When Alpha spoke again, her voice was a little

softer, but not much. "What's this about?"

Coll swallowed. "You promised me a scout trip. You said I could go, but you pulled me again!"

"It's hardly a scout trip," she said. "Rudy thought he saw something during the fight, wants to check it out, that's all."

"That's not the *point*," protested Coll. "You said I could go. You *promised*. I'm as good as the others! I can fight, I'm a good aim, I can—"

"Your arm's hurting, isn't it?" she interrupted.

Coll stopped. "What? No."

"You're rubbing it. It's hurting."

Coll scowled and forced his hand down by his side. "It's fine," he muttered.

"I just think you're not ready yet," said Alpha. "And some of the crew…" She stopped.

"Some of the crew what?"

She didn't answer, but Coll knew anyway. Some of the crew didn't trust him. Some of the crew didn't like how he was different.

Alpha sighed and looked away. "We're heading into Scatter," she said after a moment. "I'm going to talk to the mayor. You want to come with?"

Coll was still angry. He knew she was just trying to fob him off. But… He shrugged and turned away. "Fine."

"Coll." Alpha's voice was hard again. Coll clenched his fists and turned back.

"Thank you, Alpha," he said, loud enough for the others to hear. Behind him, someone sniggered. Coll's face burned. He stalked off to the side and found Rudy getting ready to leave. Luna and the others were already on the ground.

"Sorry, laddie," murmured Rudy.

"She said I could go," growled Coll. "She *promised*. She's never going to let me out of her sight!"

Rudy leapt up on to the deck rail and grabbed a tether. "You know how it is. She's just trying to protect you." He shrugged. "After all … she *is* your mum, eh?" He stepped off.

"Have fun in Scatter!" he shouted as he disappeared down the side.

Coll watched him go. As Rudy landed, Wolf stretched her forelegs out and clambered to her feet, lifting the deck thirty metres into the air. Huge pistons drove her legs up, motors hummed, and she arched her neck.

Coll held a rope and looked at his left arm.

His own arm ended just below the elbow, and the rest was metal and plastic. His left leg was the same; the bone and muscle stopped at the knee, resting on a metal lower leg. In the morning sunlight he studied the tiny threads

of anthryl that weaved in between the panels of his prosthetic lower arm and hand. They wrapped his stump in a sleeve that went up to his shoulder and across his back, holding it secure.

The anthryl powered his limb, shaped it, made it react almost as well and smoothly as his other arm. Sensors responded to his nerves, even his thoughts. Touch signals fed back to the base of his stump. He could do anything with his left arm that he could with his right. His leg was the same – he could walk, run, jump as well as anyone. It was a miracle. But still, it made him different.

And aboard Wolf, different was bad.

Down below, the figures on the ground were tiny. One, with a dash of silver hair, was Rudy, leading the others away.

Coll rubbed his arm and watched them until they were out of sight.