
THE GIRL WHO SOLD TIME
VS NELSON

THE GIRL WHO SOLD TIME

VS NELSON

Copyright © 2025 V S Nelson

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, this publication may only be reproduced, stored or transmitted, in any form or by any means, with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the publishers.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

ISBN 978 1836280 989

REVIEW COPY ONLY
NOT FOR RESALE

For Violet

For the adventures you'll have and the friends you'll make.

Hello, reviewer.

If you've decided to review this book, then it's safe to assume you're a clever sort. However, on the off chance that this book falls into the wrong hands, I need to include the following warning:

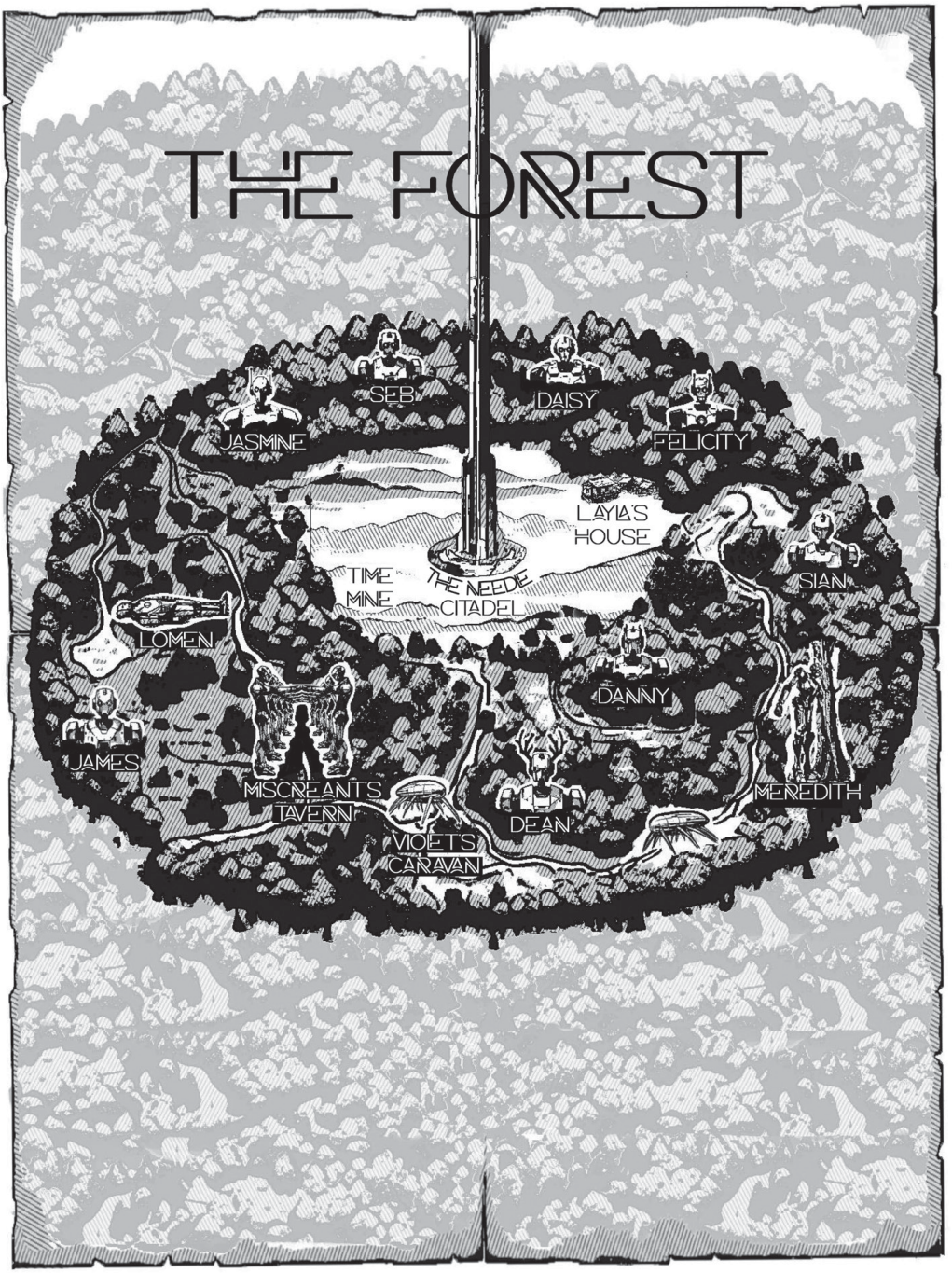
DO NOT PUT MARBLES IN YOUR MOUTH!



Yes, it seems obvious, but you'd be surprised the things people put in their mouths.

There you go, I've warned you.

On to the story…


THE FOREST
SEB
DAISY
JASMINE
FELICITY
LAYLA'S HOUSE
TIME MINE
THE NEEDE CITADEL
SIAN
LOMEN
DANNY
JAMES
MISCREANTS TAVERN
MEREDITH
DEAN
VIOETS CARAVAN



CHAPTER ONE

Violet gathered another handful of dirt, the grains hot and sharp against her palm, and looked out over the time mine. The brilliance of the sun made finding anything impossible, leaving Violet to traverse the sandy hills with a perpetual squint.

It had been a long day with little to show for it. She hadn't eaten since morning, and lost her water when she'd tripped over an exposed root. Worse still, Jackdaw was cranky and had stormed off hours ago, the mechanical creak of his legs fading to nothingness until Violet was left with only silence for company. He'd be out there somewhere, she knew, hiding behind a hillock and sulking, leaving Violet to do all the work.

She threw the dirt, watching as it arced across the air. Nothing. She threw another handful. This arc was less graceful; she was growing frustrated. The last four days in the time mine had yielded scarcely more than a few minutes. When was the last time she'd found anything longer than an hour? Minutes were worth little, and Violet expected people traded for them because they pitied her. An hour, five hours, a day: that's what Violet needed.

The more frustrated Violet grew, the more manic her throw, until the soil was all around her, in her hair, her eyes, her mouth. She coughed, tried to suck up enough saliva to spit out the dirt, but her tongue remained as dry as a crispy fallen leaf. In a rage, she threw her bag to the floor and jumped around, shouting words her father would not approve of.

'How about now?' piped a voice from behind her. 'Ready to go home? Or do you want to keep throwing dirt over yourself and swearing?'

Violet sat heavily on the hot earth, reached over to her satchel and pulled it onto her lap. Two marbles, that was all she'd found. Even without checking them, she knew they'd be worthless. Seconds, at most.

'You're supposed to encourage me,' Violet replied.

'I was sulking,' Jackdaw said. 'It was a very good sulk, actually. I think I've mastered it.'

'I'm so proud.'

Jackdaw sat. Violet lowered her head onto the padding

she'd attached to his metallic shoulder. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. She was stuck in a loop, repeating the same day over and over again. It would pass; it always did. But, boy, was it annoying to live through.

'Fine,' Violet proclaimed. 'We go home. But we're back here tomorrow. Even earlier.'

'How wonderful for us.'

'I hope you're not going to complain the entire time.'

'I suspect I will,' Jackdaw said.

'I should probably fix that,' Violet said. She stood, banging the dust from her skirt.

Jackdaw scooped up a colossal mound of dirt and launched it into the air.

'You know I don't like it when you do that,' Violet protested. She hesitated. 'So, anything?'

Jackdaw looked at her. 'I thought you didn't like me doing it for you.'

'I don't, but you've gone and done it now. So?'

Jackdaw pointed. 'About ten metres that way.'

Violet set off down the hill, the ground soft beneath her heavy boots. Before her lay the brown mounds of dirt left over during the Needle's construction; beyond that, the forest, a green mass stretching to the horizon. Violet and Jackdaw's home. The forest gave them everything they needed to live: shelter from the heat of the sun, a place to conceal their home and the food that Violet ate. But there was something wrong with the forest that only a few dared

speak of. It was mutating. Areas where once delicious fruits had grown now yielded berries and drupes that appeared identical by eye but were, in fact, poison.

At the forest's edges, unseen even from the hills of the time mine, the trees grew so massive their roots could not support them. The crashes they made as they fell to the ground became so frequent that Violet had begun to record them. A tree fell every three days with little care for what lay beneath it. The only home Violet had ever known was dying and, sometimes, it felt like she was the only one who cared.

Violet pushed those thoughts aside and gathered another handful of dirt. She tossed it. She waited. She watched. Then it happened, a place where the dirt particles weren't falling right. She walked over, ready with another handful, and sprinkled it over the ground.

Violet crouched, studying the dirt as it fell. Three seconds, four seconds, five seconds. Everywhere else, the dirt was already on the ground, but here, its descent was slower, the tiny stones appearing to float in the air.

Her hands were already in the ground before the final grains had fallen. Perhaps it would be something she could trade for the parts she needed and, if there was enough left, maybe even some food.

Her fingers touched the object's smooth surface, but when she looked down, her hands were already wiping it clean on a fold of her skirt. Next, she saw herself holding

it to her face while simultaneously feeling her hands pulling it from the ground. This was time confusion, where messages sent to the brain didn't arrive when they were supposed to. Some messages were too slow, while others looped repeatedly. The trick was to only rely on what must be the newest information, as the brain couldn't receive a message from the future.

For some reason, Violet was the only person in the forest who had mastered this. Time confusion made everyone else feel sick, with prolonged exposure leading to death. That was why no one else but her dared venture into the time mine.

The object was perfectly spherical and about the same size as a human eye. Inside, whorls of colours collided, producing a rainbow of light that danced over Violet's cupped hands.

A time marble. And already Violet could tell this was a long one.

Violet slipped it into her satchel. Then, with her hands still feeling and eyes seeing everything simultaneously, she jogged back up the hill to Jackdaw, who sat watching her, looking infuriatingly smug.

'I helped, didn't I?' Jackdaw said.

'Yes,' Violet said, the relief from finding a decent marble hiding most of her annoyance, 'but I could do without the gloating.'

'You're just jealous because I'm faster than you and

execute every movement with an impressive panache that leaves you feeling inadequate.'

Violet shook her head. 'Let's go home,' she sighed.

Violet set off down the hill, gazing up at the Needle, the name the villagers had given to the space elevator in the centre of the time mine. Violet craned her neck to take in its immense height, following it as it climbed into the sky, through thin wisps of cloud and far beyond her sight. Her father was up there somewhere. He had raised Violet, as her mother had died of time confusion before Violet could even crawl. But the pull of science eventually grew too strong for him to stay on the surface. Amid much heartache, her father had told Violet that he must ascend the Needle to work with the scientists there and save their dying planet. Promising that he would return soon, he had left Violet in the care of Jackdaw, who, to Violet, was far more boy than robot. Every day that Violet and Jackdaw came to the time mine, she would think of her father, working far above the clouds, and wonder if perhaps this would be the day of his return.

They were partway to the fence that surrounded the time mine when Jackdaw tugged at Violet's hand.

'Stop,' he said. 'Pinschers.'

Violet tensed. 'Where?'

Rumoured to be from a war that lost its relevance before getting started, the pinscher was a twisted mass of steel in the shape of a dog. For those unlucky enough to behold one, it was usually the last thing they ever saw.

'Close,' Jackdaw replied.

'How close?'

Jackdaw shrugged. 'Quite close?'

A blur of polished metal, sleek and vicious, burst into view.

'Make that exceptionally close,' Jackdaw corrected in a panic.

With one foot behind Jackdaw's knee, Violet leaped onto his shoulders. 'Think of it this way,' she shouted. 'It's the perfect opportunity to try out your new legs.'

Another pinscher, this one with a matte-black body and a mouth filled with razor sharp teeth, appeared next to the first. Jackdaw looked down at the various mechanical protrusions that Violet had recently added to his legs. 'They look a little shoddy, are you sure they're finished?'

'Finished? No. But I've started them,' Violet said.

Short of body and large of head, Jackdaw was not built for speed. His motion was more frantic waddle than run, and Violet had to hold on with all her strength or be thrown off and devoured by hungry jaws.

A pinscher rounded on them, kicking up a cloud of dust as it rapidly changed direction.

'Those new legs would be really useful about now,' Violet called.

'How?' Jackdaw cried. 'You've not told me how to use them.'

'Ah.'

'What does *Ah* mean?' Jackdaw panicked.

'It means you might need to give me a minute.'

Violet removed the hatch from the back of Jackdaw's head, struggling to hold on with one hand as he bounded down the hill towards the fence. The control unit that interfaced with Jackdaw's central processing system booted, throwing off an electric blue light. Violet typed as fast as she could, clamping her legs tightly around Jackdaw's neck so she could work with both hands. A glance behind her revealed the dogs were nearly on them, legs twitching and ready to pounce.

'Faster would be good,' Jackdaw cried.

He lurched to the right with the grace of an uncoordinated penguin, just managing to outsmart the dog but nearly throwing Violet off. She pulled herself up and hit enter on the final command.

Reinforcement struts shot out from hidden compartments in Jackdaw's underside. They attached themselves to his thighs, providing an instant burst of speed. More followed in silver tendrils that grew along his legs and past his feet. They built length every time the foot left the ground, increasing Jackdaw's height with each stride. Riding on Jackdaw's head, Violet was pushed into the air as her friend grew to over twice his original size. In seconds, he was easily outpacing the dogs.

'Oh! These I like!' he cried. 'Now, is there any chance you can close my head? I'd rather my processors didn't fall out.'

Violet deactivated the control interface and sealed the access hatch. Turning around, she watched the receding forms of the dogs, almost hidden among the billowing clouds of dirt thrown up by Jackdaw's new legs as he pelted down the hill.

Then something caught her eye. One of the dogs disappeared. It was as if reality had glitched. The dog was there, barrelling towards them with hunger in its eyes, then it was gone. Not obscured by the dirt or caught in a rut. The dog vanished. Three seconds later, it reappeared.

'Wait!' Violet shouted. 'I saw something. Go back!'

'What, *back* back?' Jackdaw cried as he ran for all he was worth. 'Are you sure that's a good idea?'

'There was something there, Jackdaw. Another marble.'

The fence loomed before them, over five metres tall and covered with blades made from superfine carbon nanotubes that would slice a person's hand clean off before they even registered the pain.

'No more marbles.' Jackdaw declared. 'We're going home.'

'User override!' Violet shouted. 'Run up the hill to where the matte black dog was seven seconds ago.'

Jackdaw turned so quickly that Violet's hands slipped from the sides of his head, leaving her hanging on with only her legs clamped tightly around Jackdaw's neck.

'I *hate* it when you do that,' Jackdaw protested as he felt his new legs fall under Violet's command.

Violet pulled herself back on, climbing partway up Jackdaw's head to see over the top for a better view. 'Put me down there.' She pointed to where the dog appeared to glitch. 'Then go distract the dogs for me.'

The dogs had already changed direction and were charging up the slope towards Violet and Jackdaw, churning great clouds of dirt in their wake. There were three of them now, running in tight formation. Each dog knew what the others knew, saw what they saw. They were not three dogs, but three aspects of the same dog, their viciousness and intelligence multiplied. Violet stared at their jaws, remembering stories of people whose legs had been severed with a single bite.

Jackdaw set off, running at the dogs. 'Just so you know, I'm not happy about this!' he yelled.

Violet scooped up handful after handful of dirt, trying to find what she was certain she'd spotted.

It was a time effect bigger than any she'd seen before.

'Not so fierce now, are you!' Jackdaw cried.

Violet turned and caught the moment Jackdaw's new legs kicked one of the dogs clear across the time mine. He turned on another, the pinscher seemingly unsure what to do next, and careened after it with his arms windmilling, shouting, 'Don't run from me, doggy. I only want to play.'

He might be annoyed with her, but at least he was having fun.

Violet tossed the dirt. She managed to catch the effect right at the edge: a few grains suspended in the air. She gathered the next handful, ready to throw, still watching those few motionless grains. Releasing what she held, Violet created a wall of dirt that refused to fall – a hemisphere where time appeared so slow that nothing moved at all.

Violet fell to her knees, digging blindly. The time confusion was stronger than she had ever experienced. She would feel the marble in her hands only to look down and find them empty; then she would see herself holding the marble, only to feel nothing but the arid earth moving like water through her fingers.

This was something big! More than minutes and hours, more than days. This was weeks, months! Surely the longest time marble she had ever found. With this, she could trade for whatever she wanted!

Desperately trying to shut down her senses, Violet dug faster. She felt herself kneel to begin the search, while simultaneously seeing herself running away. Then she was standing, seeing and feeling everything at the right time. A memory fell neatly into place with all senses aligned as Violet placed the time marble into her satchel. Unfelt and unseen, it would not affect her in there.

More pinschers had arrived. They crested the tiny hillocks dotted across the time mine, their red eyes already locked on to Violet. She needed to get out of there.

'Jackdaw!' Violet yelled.

'I'm not talking to you!' Jackdaw complained as he ran to Violet, reached out and tossed her onto his back. 'You know how user overriding makes me feel. It's like I'm nothing more than a machine to you.'

'You know you're more than a machine to me, Jackdaw,' Violet said, trying to hold on as Jackdaw ran. 'You're everything. Now, don't you want to jump that fence with your fancy new legs?'

Jackdaw thawed a little. 'I guess I have been kinda dying to jump it.'

They tore down the hill. The dogs went for Jackdaw's legs, ferocious jaws stretched wide open. They missed, and Jackdaw's metallic foot sank into the nearest dog, which distorted and curled its body around his ankle, clamping on tightly.

'Argh!' Jackdaw cried in frustration as he ran with a mangled pinscher wrapped around him like an oversized shoe. 'Brand new legs, and now I've got dog all over them!'

In the next moment, they were flying, a serene interlude of calm. Then they landed hard, Violet's head smashing into the back of Jackdaw's skull, momentarily causing her to lose her grip. With a spare hand, Jackdaw supported a suddenly floppy Violet before they came to a stop.

With her head ringing, Violet slid off Jackdaw's back and landed on the forest floor. The pinschers watched them

silently from the other side of the fence while Jackdaw attempted to scrape the body of their fallen brother off his foot using the trunk of a nearby tree.

'We should take that home,' Violet said. 'There's useful tech in there.'

'It's not even dead!'

Violet approached the ruined dog. It tried to stand, but the best it could manage was kicking up a few leaves. It growled, then whimpered as if it understood that Violet was its only chance of salvation.

'It's very heavy,' Violet said as she hefted the pinscher and swung it onto her back.

'It would be a lot lighter if you tossed it into a bush and forgot about it,' Jackdaw muttered.

Violet admired her find as the broken pinscher twitched. 'You're just jealous I've made a new friend.'

'You're going to harvest it for parts,' Jackdaw pointed out. 'That's hardly friendly.'

'True,' Violet said. She grinned. 'The tail looks intact. What do you say?'

Jackdaw pulled a face. 'A tail? On me? I most certainly think not!'