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opening extract from

Lydia's Tin Lid Drum

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Lydia's Tin Lid Drum MENU

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her land, and finish off their bloodthirsty sorcery for good.

And so, with her satchel wrapped safe in her robes, Elixa fled the cruelty of her home, her glassy mocassins splashing through the *dash dash dash* of coffee rain. The girl inhaled the tastes of the forest—its syrup saps, citrus layers, and musky mocha notes; Elixa gave herself to the forest. On what was meant to be her Night of Sweet Initiation.





One
Master Chef

Thunderous sounds like a rumbling kettledrum erupted in Lydia's slumbering mind.

The little girl raced at a terror-stricken pace—kicking litter, crisp packets, wrappers—along the alleyway behind the flats. And behind her: frightening sounds. Junk being crunched in metal teeth.

Lydia ran, hand in hand, with a man who looked just like her daddy Petro; and though he was older and stronger than she was, he could barely keep up with the nine-year-old girl. 'Lydia—*Lydia*,' he called. 'Don't let me go. *Please*.'

But as Lydia scampered ahead, her grip slipped. The man stumbled over a tumbling dustbin. Lydia looked back frantically; she could hear, so near, the munching and crunching of unseen machines. Then, amidst the trish-trash of packets and bottles and discarded cartons, the little girl noticed this silvery container. She

rummaged through the rubbish and dug out a rectangular tin; Lydia prised its lid. Nuggets of toffee lay inside.

She turned back and shook her father's arm. '*Daddy, Daddy!*' Lydia cried. '*It's toffee!*'

Daddy Petro lifted his head, and Lydia watched in horror as he began to turn to tin: his hands became metallic gauntlets; his whole body covered in dull grey tones. Soon there was nothing left of the man but an emotionless robot in armoured clothes.

Meanwhile, a mechanical *clunk* and *clank* came closer and, an instant later—

Lydia saw these canine contraptions lurch into the alleyway. Two robot doggy guards, ears twitching, seeking the truant child. The brutal metal hounds bolted towards her. Opened their jagged jaws, ready to bite—



Lydia jarred herself awake, and she stirred from the depths of the nightmare. Even in sleep there was no respite from the sadness that overshadowed her life. Lydia didn't like to go to bed some nights; this was the time when the fears that lurked at the back of her mind would bubble up as bad dreams. Night after night. Nightmare after nightmare.

The girl sat up, in the gloom of her bedroom. Tired and tearful, she thought for a moment; there had been

something different about this latest dream: the added torment of the tin. The tin with the toffee in. For Lydia, finding a real tin of toffee would be like discovering a trove full of treasure. To her, toffee was the most wonderful thing in the world. But Lydia wasn't allowed her toffee any more.

She hadn't been allowed toffee for over four years. Ever since Stannic, the man who ruled her land of Likrishka, had introduced rationing and prevented children from eating sweets. And by taking toffee from her life, Stannic had taken away Lydia's drum, for the little girl used to use the tin as an instrument. And, when she hit its lid, weird things would happen to metal objects nearby.

The first time this occurred was when Lydia was nearly three, and she'd received a gift on Midwinter's Eve: a tin of special toffee, all the way from the country of Tangiya. (That was where Auntie Elixa came from. Mummy had told her that Elixa was a toffee-chef who lived in a faraway village called Karamesh.)

Lydia could still recall the pattern printed on the tin: exotic birds and forest trees in shiny pink and purple. She still retained the memory of mummy opening the tin and taking out the inner packet with all the chunks of toffee in. And Lydia still cherished that very first

taste, her very first piece of Karamesh toffee: *mmm* that unique treacly tang, buttery smooth, chewy and rich—

Her little fingers had started to twitch. Instinctively, Lydia had pounded at the tin lid, let her hands make a satisfying *thud-a-dubbadum*. And as she had done, all the metal nails had shuddered loose from the walls, making a clock and a couple of picture frames clatter to the floor. And yet Lydia hadn't found this unusual at all—it was as if, through the tin, through the lid of the tin, she felt somehow magically magnetically connected to the world around her. To her startled parents though, it must have seemed as if there'd been a miniature earthquake.

It had been like that for the next few weeks. Toddler Lydia touring her home. Stomping up and down stairs, with the tin under her arm. Drubbing it with her fingertips, or a rock-hard stick of liquorice. And as she'd gone by, all the metal objects mysteriously misbehaved: clockwork watches would start winding backwards; taps in the bathroom would splash on and off; mantelpiece candlesticks would somersault into the air, and cans in the pantry would rattle topple roll; cutlery in kitchen drawers did jingly acrobatics, while the woks and pots and pans, in the cupboards, clashed like bickering cymbals.

Then, as months passed, Lydia taught herself a range of percussive gestures: purry rolls, crisp tattoo tip-taps, repetitive ruffle riffs, snarey rhythmic snaps, faster

tempo hammer bam slams or slower softer skiffle scuffs; thus she'd learned to play a variety of musical phrases, full of rolling vowels and bongo consonants.

And, with the 'tin lid drum' channelling her thoughts, Lydia had discovered she could bend metal to her will: agitate it, animate it, make it obey her drummy commands.

It was the eating of the toffee though that determined her ability—'Must be something special in the recipe'—because without the confection from within the tin, Lydia's drumming became a dull dud *dunk* which seldom made a paper clip jump.

All this was a distant memory now, and thoughts of presents no longer entered her head. Lydia's life had changed so much since her early childhood—indeed everyone's life changed after Stannic came to power. Mostly for the worse too.

Stannic had been ruler of Likrishka for as long as Lydia had been alive. And since she was five, not long after her mummy died, Likrishka had been overrun by Stannic's robot army.

The Likrish ruler had always been famous, a Master Chef celebrated throughout the world; he had a metal tongue with enchanted taste, and was often referred to as 'Stannic the Tin Man'.

Lydia had accepted all this as normal, and it was only as the years had passed that she realized how odd Stannic really was: his face (in fact, the whole of his body) was made entirely of tin. A flexible kind of living tin. But how he got that way, she couldn't say.

What Lydia did know was that Stannic made everybody do what he wanted them to; he even told mummies and daddies what to do. The Tin Man had taken everything from Lydia. He'd taken everything from all the other children too.

But at least there was one person Lydia knew who seemed to lead a better life: that was her elder half-sister Celine, a top dessert-chef for Stannic's regime.

Lydia never saw Celine. Not properly. Not in person. To speak to. To listen to. Sometimes she would see her on the TV in official news bulletins. The last time that happened, though, was months ago and showed Celine in her luxury house in the district of Muesli. She was Head of Desserts at a trendy restaurant, the *'Mint Julep Mill'*, and she served her exquisite sweets to its select clientele, those of the wealthy Dinner-Jacket Class.

'I miss Celine *so* much,' Lydia wept to herself. 'Miss her as much as I miss mummy.'

Her mummy Mari. The loveliest kindest person Lydia would ever know.

Every day, Lydia thought of her mother and their times together, moments so precious for their rarity and never-to-be; the girl's mind would wander back—*Remember when Mummy and me, remember when*

Mummy, her train of thought travelling to a motherly stop.

Maple Syrup, swimming, shopping, Redberry, trip-a-day, story-time, birthday. Then that out-of-the-blue day when Mummy had gone to the hospital. That day when, in Lydia's mind, her mother had boarded a never-ending sleeper train—and her life was soon to pass away. And so, Lydia's world derailed around her, leaving her stranded, sad and confused.

It was only a few days after that when robot soldiers suddenly appeared and took control of Likrishka. An unexplained state-of-emergency had been declared, and all the power and communications had been shut down across the land. Soon giant tin soldiers blocked the streets, wielding weird yellow weapons resembling bottles of cloudy lemonade. And with these robots came orders for the people to pack.

Near her home on Redberry Common, a big orange double-decker bus pulled up. Then five-year-old Lydia was hustled aboard with the other local kids.

Lydia had only a vague recollection of the crowded noisy bus ride to the seaside. The children were told they were going to Peachbourne, one of Likrishka's nicest resorts.

But Peachbourne resort had been turned into Tinport. Tinport Detainer Zone: a town patrolled by robot soldiers; all the infants were to be isolated in detainer flats, and educated in the ways and tastes of the State.

For the last four years or so, Lydia had lived in Tinport town, locked up in one such ground floor flat. And now she had no tin to drum. No toffee. No Mummy to help her unwrap it.

After her nightmare, Lydia sat up in bed. She squinted at her bedside cake-clock; it was almost a quarter portion past dawn. Daylight began to glow through the curtainless window and, somewhere above the town, there came a bizarre buzzing noise like an enormous food mixer chopping up the sky. The blender-blade *chudder chudder chudder* came closer. Lydia sprang from her bed and went to the window, glimpsing a wasp-shaped helicopter rasping through the air overhead.

A helicopter was a very rare sight. The Likrish people never travelled anywhere—and Lydia's last trip was the seaside bus ride. Everyone had orders to stay inside; only a fool would disobey anyway, as metal hounds now prowled the streets. These were the same mechanical hounds that stole into Lydia's nightly nightmares. She sometimes saw them from the flat's front window, dustbins on legs with dog-shaped heads. That was their original use, after all: litter collectors designed to scoop up packets in their paws, or scrape up wrappers with their claws, or even scrunch larger junk in their jaws.

Now their computer brains were programmed to attack, and it was people who were treated as trash.

Lydia continued to peer through the window while the helicopter circled circled descended—suddenly *scritscratch!* She jumped as claws scratched at the glass; an animal had appeared at the pane, tapped with its paws to get inside.

'*Ooh*, it's only Smokey.' Lydia opened the window a little, and a thin black tomcat leapt through into the room. 'You do know there's no food for you, Smokey. Not that you'd want the muck Mater D cooks up.'

Mummy had bought Smokey when he was a kitten; Lydia adored him, the lovely little fluffy thing, even though he had this strange forked tongue. Lydia had brought Smokey with her to the seaside, but pets were confiscated here in Tinport, and so she'd let him escape outside. He did keep coming back to the flat, though sometimes Lydia didn't see her cat for days; he must have lived on plants or mice, and she was always afraid a robot hound would catch him.

The helicopter-wasp had landed now and with the racket from the rotor blades cutting out, Lydia could hear an electronic *bark-bark* echo in the alleyway behind the flats.

'Rotten robot dog,' she whispered, stroking Smokey's night-cold back. 'This isn't a nice place for a nice kitt-cat.' Smokey half-closed his big green eyes and

gave a contented mew. 'Sh-hush. No *miaow*. Don't want Mater D to hear you. Mater D doesn't like animals, does she? Mater D doesn't like anybody.'

Mater D was the bitter old spinster appointed as Lydia's nanny. Mater D wasn't her real name; it was a title such as 'Ms' or 'Madam' and stood for 'Mater Detainer'. (Lydia had nicknamed her *Mater Doggy-Bag* but that was something she would never ever say out loud.) The Mater Detainers were women of retirement age that Stannic had assigned to raise the infant under-tens; and while the threat of robotic police would keep the women and children in line, it was left to custom-made interactive televisions to teach the Tin Man's cookery lessons to the luncheon-age youngsters.

Likrish children had been given these mealtime labels according to how old they were: babies were '*brekkers*' (who grew up so fast), toddlers were '*brunchers*', infants '*lunchers*', and when children reached the age of ten they took taste-tests, the results of which determined their future once they passed the '*elevenses*'. Those who failed these exams would most likely be expelled to work camps, while those who showed promise as potential chefs would go on to study at Stannic's academies.

Hence Mater D was meant to be there to cook and clean for Lydia; however, as the old crone often moaned: '*I never snot ask to snot be no slavey to some wuz else's lazy brat.*'

On one occasion, Mater D mentioned she much

preferred her previous job, at some pseudo-wood recycling plant, feeding the munching machines with sugar-paper.

Poor machines, Lydia had thought, being fed by Mater D.

Mater D, you see, was an awful cook, and in Likrishka—which, after all, was *ruled* by a chef—it took unusual stupidity for a person to stink at cookery. Each meal Mater D made was revolting (she even ruined instant soup) and Lydia had to eat whatever tummy-ache-making fare the detainer prepared; while she'd never dare complain about the nasty taste, Lydia couldn't help but pull 'unsavoury' faces.

'*My cookings not snot good nuff for Lidl Mess Silver Slimy Spoons?*' Mater D would say in snide reference to Celine. (Lydia's beloved half-sister had been the youngest-ever winner of the prestigious Likrish Silver-Spoon, and so Celine had got stuck with the title '*Silver One*'.) Mater D also insulted the two of them by saying they were '*dirty Deli leftovers*' because, while Celine and Lydia were born in Likrishka, Mari, their mother, had first lived in Delisha, a province to the north.

They both had different fathers too: Lydia's daddy Petro was definitely a local man, but she knew nothing about Celine's dad.

'Anyway, what did it matter where she come from?' Lydia would answer back in her mind. 'Celine is still the best sweetie-maker in the land.'

Celine had indeed been Stannic's star academy

graduate, and a role model to all Likrish cooks; not only was she extraordinarily talented, she was chic and beautiful too, and in recent years Celine had been sent around the country as a confectioner-ambassador, and the media-frenzy dinners she'd attended provided good publicity for Stannic. Lydia never questioned her sister's involvement in the Tin Man's schemes; Celine *had* to serve him, and if she didn't do as she was told, he—he'd probably whack her with a big tin frying pan, just as Mater D hit Lydia with her rotten wooden spoon.

'Someday soon, Celine, someday soon—' Day after day, Lydia would inwardly say, 'Someday soon Celine's going to take me away to live with her. Away from mean old Mater Doggy-Bag.'

Every day, she'd hoped for this, ever since she was packed off to this poky flat. But each detainer-day her hopes grew fainter; nearly half of Lydia's life had gone by without seeing or hearing from her famous half-sister. Maybe Celine had forgotten all about her.

Perhaps that's what happens when mothers die. Families disintegrate. Sisters forget.

But Lydia would never forget. And while Mater D didn't let her keep any personal belongings (*'Don't snot want none o' your junk cluttin' up my flat,'* she'd said) Lydia *had* saved a single photograph and managed to hide it from the old detainer: there were five people in this picture, including herself as a baby cradled in her mother's arms (Mari, in the centre, with a lovely wide smile); on Mummy's left was her younger brother (silly

Uncle Terri, hardly looking at the camera); and on her right was their own mother Rosé (Grandpa Pyrus had died by that time). Celine was there too, about ten years old, half the age she would be now; holding on to Granny's pinny, Celine stared rather stern as though the fate of the world weighed upon her childish shoulders. Behind them all was a decorative wall, the wooden wall of some old place where Mummy's family used to live.

Here in Tinport though, Lydia's room had no decor; it was bare and as boring as an empty cake box. Now, her only preoccupation was gaining a cookery qualification. (She wasn't allowed any toys or games, although her favourite pastime had involved playing with the toffee tin, making metal move around and drumming it to do things.)

For more than four years now, Lydia had endured a daily diet of televised luncheon-lessons. The cookery course had gone way beyond the basics; she had to learn complex recipe variations and dinner combinations—whether to boil, to braise or roast, to fry or grill, to poach or toast. There were menus to memorize, and she had to work out difficult calculations, cooking rates, temperatures, ingredient quantities, all the important formulae for meals. It wasn't that learning how to cook was so bad; but maybe if the lessons had included the actual baking of cakes or something nice—*Oo*, Lydia often daydreamed about going to stay with her Aunt Elixa, living in her kitchen in Karamesh, cooking and eating toffee all day—But the television lessons were so

long and dull, and Lydia wouldn't have access to a proper stove to prepare proper food until she was older. And only then if she proved worthy enough to join the next generation of Likrish chefs.

For those who met Stannic's highest standards, there might be the honour of serving in the Sweet Elite: a group of only half-a-dozen top government cooks.

Anyway, Lydia didn't fancy going to one of Stannic's *queasy academies*; she wanted to go to a normal school with friends her age. With playtime, painting, sports days, storybooks, dancing and music, different subjects to keep her interest.

But for children belonging to her class, there were no normal schools any more.

