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Opening extract from

Tall Tales from Pitch End

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Ablaze

Bruno Atlas didn't speak, didn't scream, only thought with eyes shut tight and a mind full of crimson fireworks: *This is it and I'll be gone soon. I'll not be here any more. I'm going to die.*

He heard his mother –

'*Bruno!* I can't see or get to ye! We have to get out before the whole place goes up!'

Bruno dared his eyes open and saw smoke. He felt the dizzy orchestra of noise, the tearing like material being shorn in two, everywhere crackling, splintering, buckling, groaning like a dragon's insides. And just him, alone. On his floor under his bed with knees clutched to his chest, eyes transfixed by flames curling in far-off corners –

'Bruno? Where are ye? Please just shout out to me!'

His mother's voice, each word moving away –

But Bruno Atlas hardly knew where or who he was just then. If asked, he was four-going-on-five turns old (one week

from his birthday), and had a lot of nightmares so couldn't sleep much. Sometimes too he wet the bed. But more importantly, he didn't know what to do in this or any fire. Can't blame him then that he just lay where he was, grinding his forehead against the floorboards and wishing. Wishing just to be waking up soon, knowing that it had all been nowhere but in his head, another nightmare.

Something cracked close by him and flames raced like rats up and across his wardrobe, bed, shelves, leapt to his toy chest –

'*Bruno?*'

Her voice, closer.

'I'm—' he started. No more words. He gagged on darkness. But it was enough of a signal –

The door burst open under his mother's fists and in she came, batting away a torrent of smoke that almost defeated her. She staggered on with fingers blackened and twitching, searching for her son. Bruno watched her feet strike about, waver and then turn towards the bed. She didn't see him, didn't know he was there. He opened his mouth but still couldn't manage a word more, had to reach instead for her bare ankle, prodding the knob of bone there, seeing those feet recoil. Her face appeared, bruised with smoke, on the low and almost-safe level he'd discovered. She dragged her hair behind her ears and reached in for him. And he didn't go to her. Because moving would mean it was real. Not just play or another nightmare, but that they had to escape.

His bedside table lost balance then and fell forwards, the lantern on top smashing and the pool of oil in its base marrying with flame, chasing Bruno out and up into his mother's arms. Together they ran from the room, he with his eyes closed and hoping for the sudden cold of the outside, both of them quickly lost in the most familiar place in the world, home a prison.

Bruno mumbled into her ear: 'Me da, where is he?'

His mam didn't reply. She'd come to a stop, no notion of where to go to next, smoke too much to see past.

And then –

'This way! *Quick-smart!*'

Some new voice.

He felt his mother turn and bow her head and move with purpose now, past mounting heat ('This way!' went the voice again. 'Almost there!') and then out into sudden, steely night. Bruno opened his eyes and in the same moment his vision blurred with heat and light, the ground zooming upwards, his mother collapsing and him tumbling from her arms like a tender apple onto the lawn, onto his back, flattened lungs feasting on fresher air.

He looked up. Feathers of ash flocked across the night sky: their home migrating. He noticed that their house was the only one on their street streaked with fire.

'Ye okay?'

A face arrived above him, belonging to the voice that had shouted and guided them both to safety. Bruno couldn't make out who it was, eyes too keen on tears. But a man

anyway, his coarse thumbs pressing into Bruno's eyes, wiping them clear like two tiny panes.

'Ye okay?' the face said again. 'Ye're grand enough, aren't ye?'

The house burned on behind like a sideshow.

'Da—' Bruno started, but just finished the cough from earlier.

'No,' said the man, 'I'm not yer father.'

Of course he wasn't his father – his father was at his means-to-an-end (or so he called it) in the lighthouse. But in a moment of panic he'd assumed his da had appeared – summoned to save him.

'Ye are,' said this man, deciding. 'Ye're grand enough. Just a bit battered on it.'

Sharp whistles pierced the night. Howling too.

'*Enforcers*,' the man said, his breath reeking of smoke.

They sounded distant, the Enforcers, but fast approaching.

And the man was suddenly gone without a sound or bye.

Footsteps and cries filled his absence and Bruno sat up a little, seeing neighbours – in nightclothes, eyes staring and hair harassed, weighed down on each arm with buckets of water – rush forwards and try to douse the flames of the house. A woman's voice gasped in Bruno's ear the same words as the man: 'Ye're alright, aren't ye?' She took him under the armpits. 'Get yerself up now.'

No choice in the matter, Bruno was pulled to his feet. He saw his mother, head lolling, being supported too by

neighbours he'd usually only see during the day: discreet in their gardens, tending quiet lives.

Then the whistles and the large dogs arrived proper: Enforcers, all tramping in time, blowing on the slivers of metal between their lips and (only just) keeping a hold on those straining, massive hounds.

Still more of the neighbours clattered forwards with buckets of help. But there was no way to fight the fire now. The water hissed and dissolved in the face of it. Bruno watched his home falter and sink. He was surrounded suddenly by a blanket, tucked tight as a letter in an envelope; bundled away, further removed from the blaze, his mother alongside him soothing, 'Alright, Bruno. Ye're alright.'

Both were settled into the gloom cast by the vast oak in their front garden, its leaves tickled and set alight, the blaze a scorching breeze.

'Get back! Ye'll be dropping those buckets now or else! Be leaving that fire!' ordered one of the arriving Enforcers. His comrades snatched buckets from the neighbours and loosed the contents like quicksilver into the gutter. This Enforcer had a uniform of red and gold, the colour of it clear despite the deep night and the biased illuminations of the house fire; he was the Head Enforcer, the Marshall, and his voice was gravel mixed with gunshots.

'Return to yer homes!' he told them all. 'I needn't bother to be reminding ye it's past Curfew. My men shall deal with the displaced family. This fire is to be left as an example,

meantime. An example, terrible as it is, of the continuing presence of the Rebels in Pitch End, and of the Single Season War still ongoing. Back to yer homes, I say!'

People moved slowly, unsure. Too slowly – there were shrieks as the patience of the Enforcers vanished, suddenly drawing pistols or rifles and aiming them at Bruno's neighbours. The dogs bared their teeth, tongues furiously wetting curled-back lips.

'*Now* I say!' cried the Marshall. 'This is no game! And if I find out any of ye are harbouring what shouldn't be harboured, there'll be more bother than ye can think of!'

Everyone retreated immediately. Doors were closed, curtains whipped across. Bruno huddled closer to his mother as she said, 'Quiet now. Don't be speaking out of turn to the Marshall.'

But no matter what he'd told the neighbours about looking after the 'displaced family', the Marshall was taking little-to-no notice of either Bruno or his mother. His eyes were too concerned with scanning their street, ensuring everyone was where they should be. He beckoned to one of his subordinates with a creaking, leather-gloved finger: 'Station an officer outside each home,' he told him. 'No one to leave tonight. Not for any reason.' He paused, glaring at Bruno. 'I always thought this street had something suspicious about it. Something rightly-*indecent*.'

Enforcers scattered.

'Come here, boy,' said the Marshall.

Bruno looked to his mother. She nodded, detaching him.

‘Now,’ said the Marshall, quietly, with a face half in light, half in dark, but still a solid tower above Bruno. ‘How was this fire started? A Rebel hiding hisself in yer wee house?’

Bruno looked to his mother. He saw the rapid swell and fall of her chest.

‘*Well?*’

The Marshall’s nose was suddenly an inch from Bruno’s and his fingers were around Bruno’s chin. Bruno examined the Marshall’s face: from hairline to eyebrow ran a recent wound, open and livid and deep.

‘What’s yer name, boy?’ he asked.

Bruno could only tell him.

‘*Bruno Atlas* – ye know what *war* is, Bruno?’

Bruno nodded.

‘Ye do? Good boy. Then ye’ll be knowing too that only one thing matters in war: that’s the *winning*. Ye don’t want the Rebels to win, do ye? No, didn’t think so. Now tell me quick-smart – was there someone in yer house that shouldn’t have been?’

Bruno didn’t know the answer he was supposed to give. He felt cold and warm at the same time, his chest hurt, his eyes wouldn’t stop their crying. His finger strayed instinctively to his mouth to be chewed like a bare twig. But he was saved any further discomfort –

Beyond the Marshall, standing in the blinking shadow of the safe, unscathed house next door, Bruno saw the face of the man who had wiped the tears from his eyes, who

had called them to safety. And before he knew what he was doing, Bruno stared over the Marshall's broad shoulder, whose head snapped round like it had no bones in it at all. Bruno fell and buried his head in his mother's breast as gunshots snapped into the air and the Head Enforcer charged after the man who made his escape just as swiftly.

'A Rebel!' cried the Marshall as he ran on. 'Get him! Dead or alive unless it's Jonathan Bloom! Remember Temperate Thomas's orders!'

Like grains of sand, the Enforcers and their dogs funnelled as one yapping, yammering flood through the narrow space between Bruno's burning house and the next. They had him without trouble.

'This way ye scum! Ye can drag yer feet all ye like, won't be saving ye.'

Dragged, the man looked like he'd lost the use of his legs. The place where his head should have been was empty, as though it had been lopped off. Bruno shuddered, but kept watching. The Enforcers brought him closer, and Bruno was relieved when he saw that the man's head had only slumped forwards. But his face glistened black like new tar. He was let drop onto the lawn in front of Bruno and his mother.

Again, Bruno's mother told him, 'Quiet. Don't say a word.'

The Marshall approached the man from behind. The other Enforcers fell back.

'Name,' said the Marshall.

The man, this Rebel, didn't reply.

'One more time: *name*,' said the Marshall. He spoke slowly and quietly, but with perfect clarity. The scar on his forehead wept. The man began to stir, fingers clawing at the ground – small movements against large, the flames still rioting in the house behind.

Bruno ruined the stillness by crying out as the Head Enforcer descended suddenly with pistol in hand and jammed it into the Rebel's face once, twice, three times. Nearly a fourth.

Bruno could hardly breathe, his mother's arms tight around his chest.

The Marshall held the gun aloft again, hand steady.

'Don't make me repeat meself,' he said, chest heaving but with a voice so very calm. 'Yer name, yer title, and the location too of Dr Jonathan Bloom. *Now*.'

For the briefest moment, Bruno looked into the eyes of the Rebel – two cauldrons reflecting firelight. He had hoisted himself onto his elbows, looking upwards into the sky – then into the face of the Marshall.

'*Never*,' said the Rebel, his voice just as calm and clear as the Marshall's. 'I will never ever, never ever . . .'

The refrain went on and on – Bruno felt it would never cease.

'*Rebel*,' spat the Head Enforcer, as though he could think of no muddier insult.

He fired.

Bruno shut his eyes and cried, '*Stop!*' and without a

thought freed himself from his mother, scrambled to his feet and threw his body blindly against the solid figure of the Marshall, his small fists striking. But each weak attempt was in vain.

'Stupid child,' said the Marshall. He settled one hand across Bruno's face – the stench of leather like instant suffocation – and pushed him backwards onto the ground.

His mother pulled him close again, but not into an embrace. She pinched his arm and said, 'Never *ever* do that again, ye hear me? Just like yer father. It's not sensible to behave like that.'

'Ye need to watch that one, missus,' said the Marshall. 'He's got too much *fire* in him.' The Marshall grinned, the Enforcers laughed at the joke, and still the flames rose. Like the Rebel, slumped, a heap on the ground, Bruno and his mother's home finally folded, defeated, into the earth.