

THE STAR

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*Even when all is lost,
there is ever a glimmer of hope.*

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THE BOY

Like a beast devouring its prey the mysterious fog descended on the village, stealthily engulfing it. Night had fallen unannounced, without dusk or moon, accompanied by a dense veil that shrouded everything in bewildering darkness.

"My son! My son has disappeared! Please, help me find him before the Quietude breaks", sobbed a woman plaintively, while her neighbours, hanging their heads, vanished into the mist like phantoms. "You cowards! He's my little boy. You all know him", she cried, seeking their pity.

The mother, wiping her tears, made for her best friend's house.

"Naya, I implore you, don't you forsake me too!", she begged, pummelling on the door.

A cluster of shining Particles began to hover around the woman, sparking fear in her, and she quickly drew her scarf over her nose and mouth.

"Please help me!", she pleaded again.

Eventually, the door opened. Naya was holding a lantern, and she too had protected her airways with a piece of damp cloth.

"Come inside".

"NO!", screamed the mother hysterically. "I won't

abandon my son!"

"Come, you must get to safety, like the others", insisted Naya, suffering at her friend's plight.

"I'm not going to lose him, you hear? I'm not going to lose him!"

Naya felt sorry for her friend and hugged her tightly. Then, not having the courage to hold her gaze, she said sharply:

"The Particles are here. Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do. I'm sorry, it's too dangerous".

The woman pushed her friend away and began to tremble.

"He's ... just a child", she said, her face streaked with tears. "He was playing in the Forest of the Thousand Lakes and didn't get back in time. Help me, Naya, please. You and your daughter know that place better than anyone. I'm begging you, you must find him!", she pleaded again, nervously wringing the folds of her skirt.

A young girl with black hair and big, golden eyes appeared inside the house. She had witnessed the scene and was clearly sorrow-stricken.

"Papa would never have let that poor little boy get lost", said the young girl.

"Lan, your father ..."

Before her mother could finish, Lan dashed down the narrow stairs that led to the first floor, soaked a large handkerchief in a pitcher of water and wound it around her mouth.

"Lan! I'm not going to let you get lost too!", shouted Naya angrily. "Lan! Laaan!"

Her daughter ignored her completely, lit a lantern and jumped out of one of the windows overlooking the

forest. She ran swiftly, dodging tree trunks, treacherous thickets and lagoons of quicksand. She knew the terrain like the back of her hand, but the dense fog was making her rescue mission more difficult.

Lan looked around everywhere, searching desperately for the child.

"Ivar! Ivaaar!"

She ran on through the undergrowth, determined to find the little boy before he was lost forever.

"Ivaaar!", she shouted again, at the top of her voice.

The forest, however, was pervaded by a sepulchral silence. Whenever the Quietude was about to shatter, every living creature fled for safety.

Suddenly, she saw a flash of metal amongst some bushes. Lan moved closer and immediately recognised Ivar's belongings: the typical glass jar that Salvian children used for catching insects, and a strange amulet.

Not wanting to waste any more time, Lan picked up the jar and tied Ivar's amulet to the leather thong around her wrist. The girl ran on, moving from side to side, making her way across rugged terrain, checking the treetops, and looking around the edges of the lakes to make sure the child hadn't drowned. Then she slowed her pace —she was getting to the village's Safe Limit and knew she could not cross it. She continued forward slowly, avoiding contact with the clouds of Particles, and finally chanced upon a trail. The lantern light was too dim but, even so, she managed to follow some tracks until they suddenly disappeared, quite inexplicably, as if the boy had vanished into thin air or been swallowed up by the forest.

"How strange...", she murmured worriedly.

Lan carefully observed her surroundings and then

noticed that the plants were suppurating a kind of viscous fluid. They looked as if they were bleeding. At first, she thought it might be resin and that this drainage was some sort of side-effect, but on brief examination she discovered that the substance was of a very different consistency. The girl was thoroughly familiar with the forest flora and had never seen anything like this before.

All of a sudden, the earth trembled violently and the trees began to topple, one after another. Lan tried to anticipate where the next one would fall, but that was quite impossible, so she ran to seek safety beneath a rocky outcrop.

She was scared to death. She closed her eyes to try and calm down and take stock of the situation, but with the thunder of the trees crashing to the ground, and the grinding of the earth beneath her feet, she could not think clearly.

"The plants are bleeding, the Quietude is shattering for the second time in a week, Ivar's trail is disappearing ...", she went over the situation again. None of it made any sense.

Everything around her continued to shake, more and more violently. If the earthquake did not let up soon, the village would be razed. The girl plucked up all her courage in order to face the horror of a forest that was decomposing, but, when she opened her eyes, the image before her was quite different from what she had expected. She managed to discern the silhouette of a child in the midst of the fog.

"Ivar!", she exclaimed, full of hope.

Although at first she thought she was hallucinating from fear, the little boy's responding gesture confirmed that he really was there. Lan made an effort to stand up and

took a couple of steps forward with difficulty, dodging the numerous rocks falling all around her, as well as the cloud of Particles, which was constantly gaining in density, vibrating like sharp shards of glass that threatened to asphyxiate her.

By the time she reached the little boy, he had disappeared.

"Ivar?"

Lan wondered if she had lost her mind, and made firm the knot in the handkerchief that covered her face up to her eyes, to protect herself from the barrage of Particles. Just then, gale-force winds began to blow and she knew they heralded the imminent rupture of the Quietude. For the first time she was alone in the midst of a rupture, without her mother's protection or the safety provided by the village. A gust of wind buffeted her about like a leaf. Any moment now the planet was going to change form. The girl realised that she would never find Ivar and that she, too, was probably going to die.

A huge tree almost fell on top of her. The quaking of the ground was becoming increasingly turbulent. The Particles were emitting a buzzing sound, like that of a wasps' nest. The girl thought everything was lost, until she heard the little boy whimpering on the other side of the Safe Limit; then, without thinking twice, she battled against the wind to get to him.

At that very instant, Ivar realised he was not alone.

A shiver coursed through his entire body. The boy was crying disconsolately, as if the stranger who had grasped him by the shirt were hurting him. The girl's blood froze. The figure seemed indifferent to what was happening, as if he had everything under control. His eyes

glowed through the fog, like a cat's when it hunts at night. He was a dangerous sort, there was no doubt about that.

"A kidnapper!", concluded Lan, remembering the countless legends about child-snatchers that parents in Salvia used to tell their children to keep them from crossing the Limit.

The girl knew that crossing the frontier meant risking not being able to get back, getting lost like her father did, and leaving her mother all alone.

The darkness was turning solid. Everything was still falling to pieces. She had to make a decision. She looked at Ivar; the child, on seeing her, tried to run to her, but the abductor caught hold of his hand and stopped him before he could reach her. Lan couldn't face leaving him, he was only five years old, so she closed her eyes, took a deep breath and ... leapt across the forbidden Limit.

Once she was on the other side the forms began to lose shape; the image of the forest became diluted like a water-colour painting. Lan lost her balance and fell on the stranger, who quickly took hold of her arm and shoved her aside. In that brief instant, their eyes met, and the girl saw that the kidnapper had the features of a boy not much older than herself, clean-cut and serene; his inscrutable gaze might just as well be expressing sadness as pleasure and, as she had noticed previously from a distance, his iris shone bright silver.

The wind buffeted the two of them so fiercely that it almost knocked them over. Lan felt an electric tingling where the kidnapper was holding her. Her whole body tensed and became racked with the pain of wrenching spasms. She tried to break free from him, but he had hold of her very tightly. Then she saw a small, star-shaped tattoo

on the back of her adversary's hand, just at the base of the thumb. The girl was certain she had seen that symbol somewhere else, but was incapable of thinking clearly. Her head was spinning and she was dazed. She opened her mouth to try and say something ...

And then everything changed.

Light broke through the darkness, the Particles ceased to sparkle and went out, and the fog disappeared like a mere cloud of dust blown away by the wind. Lan saw that the landscape was changing fast in front of her very eyes. In a single instant she witnessed two sunrises, a sunset, deep night and a beautiful summer's day. The temperature rose and dropped in a matter of seconds. She saw an ocean that promptly vanished to give way to a long mountain range. Then, on the horizon, there appeared green plains and arid deserts, quagmires and extensive ice sheets. A volcano bubbling like boiling water. Snow. Night. Day. Everything was changing at a vertiginous pace. Lan saw the world she lived in take shape again, as if it were a complex jigsaw puzzle.

In an instant, everything was still. The girl closed her eyes, got her breath back and just listened to the silence: the Quietude. When she opened her eyes again she was afraid she would find herself out in the middle of nowhere, with no map to help her find her way back home, but, to her astonishment, she was right there at the entrance to the village.

Lan dropped exhausted to the ground; beside her lay Ivar, unconscious. She grabbed him firmly by the hand, fearing he might disappear again, and then looked back at the forest with misgiving. There was nobody there, only fallen trees and the calm that follows the storm. Her body

shook with another spasm, reminding her that they had almost got lost. People slowly began to emerge from their houses, thanking the gods for allowing them to survive another terrible rupture. Relieved faces and incredulous muttering. Suddenly, Ivar's mother recognised her son lying next to Lan and, on seeing him come round, her face lit up with a beaming smile.

"Ivar!", she shouted excitedly.

Lan still did not understand what had happened. She remained as motionless as a statue, thinking that perhaps she was dead and that all this was just a figment of her imagination; but it was real. She had crossed the Limit, and yet she was still here.

She saw the child hugging his mother tightly, and knew it had all been worth it. She was tempted to smile but somehow, inexplicably, she was still afraid. She was confused.

Everyone flocked around her and began to cheer her like a true heroine. She was now the most revered young girl in Salvia, and yet she could not get that disturbing, glittering gaze out of her mind.

What had become of the kidnapper?

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