



IT BEGINS

TWO BATTLES

[TODD]

“*WE HIT THE SPACKLE HEAD ON!*” the Mayor shouts at the men, aiming his Noise right in the middle of everyone’s heads.

Even mine.

“*They’ll be gathering at the bottom of the road,*” he says, “*but that’s as far as they’re going to go!*”

I put a hand on Angharrad’s flank beneath me. In under two minutes, the Mayor had us up on horseback, Morpeth and Angharrad coming running from round the back of the ruins of the cathedral, and by the time we’d hopped up, stepping over the still unconshus bodies of the men who tried to help me overthrow the Mayor, there was the army taking messy shape in front of us.

Not all of it, tho, maybe less than half, the rest still stretched up along the southern road to the hill with the

not to mention the road to where the battle was supposed to be a
boy colt? Angharrad’s thinking and I can feel spikes

you can't ignore. "Captain Hammar's division at the front, Captain Morgan taking the rear! Captains Tate and O'Hare will round up the rest of the men and armaments yet to arrive and join the fray with the greatest despatch."

Armaments? I think.

"If the fight isn't already over by the time they join us—"

The men laugh at this, a loud, nervous, aggressive kind of laugh.

"Then as a united army, we will drive the Spackle back up that hill and make them regret the day they were EVER BORN!"

And the men give a roaring cheer.

"Sir!" Captain Hammar shouts. "What about the army of the Answer, sir?"

"First we beat the Spackle," says the Mayor, "then the Answer will be child's play."

He looks across his army of men and back up the hill to the Spackle army still marching down. Then he raises his fist and gives the loudest Noise shout of all, a shout that bores right down into the very centre of every man hearing it.

"TO BATTLE!"

"**TO BATTLE!**" the army cries back at him and sets off at a fierce pace outta the square, racing towards the zigzag hill—

The Mayor looks at me one last time, like he can barely keep from laughing at how much fun he's having. And without another word, he spurs Morpeth hard in the sides and they gallop into the square after the departing army.

The army heading off to war.

Follow? Angharrad asks, fear coming off her like sweat.

“He’s right,” I say. “We can’t let him out of our sight. He’s got to keep his word. He’s got to win his war. He’s got to save her.”

For her, Angharrad thinks.

For her, I think back, all my feeling about her behind it.

And I think her name—

Viola.

And Angharrad leaps forward into battle.

{VIOLA}

Todd, I think, riding Acorn through the mash of people crowding across the road, each of them trying to run away from those awful horn blasts in one direction and the bombs of Mistress Coyle in the other.

BOOM! goes another one and I see a ball of flame coughed up into the sky. The screaming around us is almost unbearable. People running up the road get tangled with people running *down* the road and everyone gets in our way.

Gets in the way of us getting to the scout ship first.

The horn blasts again and there’s even more screaming. “We have to go, Acorn,” I say between his ears. “Whatever that sound is, the people on my ship can—”

A hand grabs my arm and nearly yanks me off the saddle.

“Give me the horse!” a man screams at me, pulling harder.

“Give it to me!”

Acorn twists around to try to get away but there are too many people in the road crowding us—

"Let go!" I shout at the man.

"Give it to me!" he screams. "*The Spackle are coming!*"

This surprises me so much he nearly gets me off the saddle. "The *what?*"

But he's not listening and even in the dying light I can see the whites of his eyes blazing in terror—

HOLD! shouts Acorn's Noise and I grip even harder on his mane and he rears up, knocking the man away and leaping forward into the night. People scream to get out of our way and we knock more of them over as Acorn ploughs up the road, me holding on for dear life.

We reach a clearing and he charges on even faster.

"The *Spackle?*" I say. "What did he mean? Surely they couldn't be—"

Spackle, Acorn thinks. **Spackle army. Spackle war.**

I turn to look back as he runs, back to look at the lights coming down the distant zigzag hill.

A Spackle army.

A Spackle army is coming, too.

Todd? I think, knowing that I'm getting farther away from him and the tied-up Mayor with every hoofbeat.

The best hope is the ship. They'll be able to help us. Somehow, they'll be able to help me and Todd.

We stopped one war, we can stop another.

And so I think his name again, *Todd*, sending him strength. And Acorn and I race up the road towards the Answer, towards the scout ship, and I'm hoping against hope that I'm right—

Angharrad runs after Morpeth as the army surges down the road in front of us, brutally knocking down any citizens of New Prentisstown who happen to be in their way. There are two battalions, the first led by a screaming Mr Hammar on horseback and a less shouty Mr Morgan leading the second behind him. It's maybe four hundred men in all, rifles up, their faces twisted in screams and yells.

And their Noise—

Their Noise is a monstrous thing, tuned together and twisted round itself, *roaring* as a single voice, like a loud and angry giant pounding its way down the road.

It's making my heart beat right outta my chest.

"Stay close to me, Todd!" the Mayor shouts from Morpeth, pulling up to my side as we ride on, fast.

"You ain't gotta worry bout that," I say, gripping my rifle.

"I mean, to save your life," he says, looking over. "And don't forget your end of the bargain either. I'd hate for there to be any casualties from friendly fire."

And he winks at me.

Viola, I think right at him, sending it to him in a fist of Noise.

He flinches.

And he ain't smiling so much now.

We ride after the army thru the west end of town, down the main road, past what can only be the wreckage of the original jails the Answer burnt down in their biggest attack before today. I only ever been down here once, when I ran thru it the other way with Viola in my arms,

carrying her down the zigzag road when she was dying, carrying her into what I thought was safety, but all I found was the man riding by my side, the man who killed a thousand Spackle to start this war, the man who tortured Viola for informayshun he already knew, the man who murdered his own son—

“And what other kind of man would you want leading you into battle?” he says, reading my Noise. “What other kind of man is suitable for war?”

A *monster*, I think, remembering what Ben told me once. *War makes monsters of men.*

“Wrong,” says the Mayor. “It’s war that makes us men in the first place. Until there’s war, we are only children.”

Another blast of the horn comes roaring down at us, so loud it nearly takes our heads off and it puts the army off its stride for a second or two.

We look up the road to the bottom of the hill. We see Spackle torches gathering there to meet us.

“Ready to grow up, Todd?” the Mayor asks.

{VIOLA}

BOOM!

Another explosion just up ahead of us now, sending smoking debris flying high above the trees. I’m so scared I forget the state of my ankles and I try to spur on Acorn like I’ve seen in vids on my ship. I curl forward from the pain. The bandages that Lee – still out there somewhere, trying to find the answer in the wrong place, on please be safe please be safe – the bandages he wound around my feet are good but

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the bones are still broken and for a minute the agony flashes all the way up my body, right to the throbbing burn in the band around my forearm again. I pull back my sleeve to look. The skin around the band is red and hot, the band itself still just thin steel, immovable, uncuttable, marking me as number 1391 until the day I die.

That's the price I paid.

The price I paid to find him.

"And now we've got to make it worth it," I say to Acorn, whose Noise says **Girl coll** back to agree with me.

The air is filling with smoke and I can see fires burning up ahead. People are still running past us in all directions, though fewer and fewer as the town starts to thin out.

If Mistress Coyle and the Answer started at the Office of the Ask, marching towards the centre of town from the east, then they'd already be past the hill where the communications tower used to be. Which is the most likely place where the scout ship landed. Mistress Coyle would have turned around and taken a fast cart to get there, to be the first one to talk to them, but who would she have left in charge?

Acorn presses ahead, around the road as it curves—

And **BOOM!**

There's a flash of light as another dormitory goes up in flames, reflecting the road for a shining second—

And I see them—

The Answer.

Lines of men and women, blue As written across their

fronts and sometimes even painted on their faces.

And every one with guns pointed out—

In front of carts loaded with weaponry—

And though I recognize some of them (Mistress Lawson, Magnus, Mistress Nadari), it's like I don't know them at all, they look so fierce, so focused, so scared and brave and committed and for a second I pull back on Acorn's reins, too afraid to ride towards them.

The flash of the explosion dies and they're plunged into darkness again.

Forward? Acorn asks.

I take in a breath, wondering how they'll react to seeing me, wondering if they'll see me at all and not just blow me right out of the saddle in the confusion.

"We've got no choice," I finally say.

And just as he readies himself to move again—

"Viola?" I hear from out of the darkness.

[T O D D]

The road outta town reaches a wide clearing bounded by the river on the right, with the massive crashing of the falls and the zigzag road down the hill directly in front of us. The army roars into the clearing, Captain Hammar in the lead, and even tho I've only been here once, I know there were trees here before, trees and small houses, and so the Mayor musta had his men clearing it all this time, making it ready to be a battlefield—

As if he knew this was coming—

But I can't stop to think about that cuz Mr Hammar is

shouting "Halt!" and the men are stoppin' in their tracks and looking across the clearing—

Cuz there they are—

The first troops of the Spackle army—

Fanning out into the open ground, a dozen, two dozen, ten dozen of 'em, surging down the hill like a river of white blood, torches held high, bows and arrows and some weird long white stick things in their hands and there are Spackle foot soldiers swarming round other Spackle riding these huge white creachers, built wide like a bullock but taller and broader and with a massive single horn shooting out from the end of their noses and the creachers are covered in heavy armour that looks like it's made from clay and I see that a lotta the Spackle soldiers are wearing it too, the clay covering their white skin—

And there's another horn blast so loud I swear my ears are starting to bleed and you can see the horn with yer own eyes now, strapped to the backs of two of the horned creachers up on the hilltop and being blown by that huge Spackle—

And oh, God—

Oh, my, God—

Their *Noise*—

It comes tumbling down the hill like a weapon on its own, cresting across the open ground like foam on a raging river, and it's coming right for us, pictures of their army cutting us down, pictures of our soldiers being ripped to pieces, pictures of ugliness and horror that you could never describe, pictures—

Pictures that our own soldiers are sending right back

to 'em, pictures rising from the mass of men in front of me, pictures of heads torn from bodies, of bullets ripping

Spackle apart, of slaughter, of endless endless—

“Keep your focus, Todd,” the Mayor says, “or the battle will take your life. And I, for one, am more than curious as to what sort of man you’re going to turn out to be.”

“FORM A LINE!” we hear Mr Hammar shouting and the soldiers immediately behind him start spreading out. “FIRST WAVE READY!” he shouts and the men stop and raise their rifles, poised to rush forward at his command as the second wave lines up behind ’em.

The Spackle have stopped too, forming an equally long line at the bottom of the hill. A horned creacher parts their line in the middle, a Spackle standing on its back behind a u-shaped white thing that looks like it’s made of bone, half-again as wide as a man and mounted on a stand on the creacher’s armour.

“What *is* that?” I ask the Mayor.

He grins as if to himself. “I think we’re about to find out.”

“MEN READY!” Mr Hammar shouts.

“Stay back with me, Todd,” the Mayor says. “Keep out of the fighting as much as you can.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say, heavy feeling in my Noise. “You don’t like to get your hands dirty.”

He catches my eye. “Oh, there are going to be plenty of dirty days ahead. Don’t you worry.”

And then “CHARGE!!!” Mr Hammar screams at the top of his lungs—

And the war is on.

“Wilf!” I yell, riding over to him. He’s driving an ox-cart, out in front and off to the side of the first line of the Answer, still marching down the road in the smoky gloom.

“Yer *alive!*” Wilf says, hopping down off the cart and scooting over to me. “Mistress Coyle tol’ us yoo were dead.”

Anger fills my stomach again over what Mistress Coyle tried to do, at the bomb she intended for the Mayor and how she didn’t seem to mind that it would take me with it. “She’s wrong about a lot of things, Wilf.”

He looks up at me and in the light of the moons, I can see the fright in his Noise, fright in the most unflappable man I’ve ever met on this whole planet, a man who risked his life to save both me and Todd more than once, fright in the one man around here who’s never afraid. “The Spackle are comin, Viola,” he says. “Ya gotta get outta here.”

“I’m riding to get help, Wilf—”

Another **BOOM** rips through a building across the road from us. There’s a small blast wave and Wilf has to hold on to Acorn’s reins to keep standing up. “*What the hell are they doing?*” I yell.

“Mistress’s orders,” Wilf says. “To save the body, ya sometimes have to cut off the leg.”

I cough from the smoke. “That sounds *exactly* like the kind of stupid thing she’d say. Where is she?”

“Took off when that ship done flew over. Riding fast to where it landed.”

My heart jumps. “Where did it land, Wilf? Where exactly?”

He motions back down the road. "Yonder hill, where tower used to be."

"I *knew* it."

There's another distant blast of the horn. Every time it goes off, there's yet more screaming from the townsfolk running everywhere. I even hear some screaming from the army of the Answer.

"Ya gotta run, Viola," Wilf says again, touching my arm. "Spackle army is bad news. Ya gotta go. Ya gotta go *now*."

I fight down a flash of worry about Todd. "You've got to go, too, Wilf. Mistress Coyle's trick didn't work. The Mayor's army is already back in town." Wilf sucks in air over his teeth. "We've got the Mayor," I continue, "and Todd's trying to stop the army, but if you attack head on, you'll be slaughtered."

He looks back at the Answer, still marching down the road, faces still set, though some of them are seeing me and Wilf, seeing me alive on horseback, and surprise is starting to dawn. I hear my name more than once.

"Mistress Coyle said to keep marching," Wilf says, "keep bombing, no matter what we heard."

"Who'd she leave in charge? Mistress Lawson?" There's a silence and I look back down at Wilf. "It's you, isn't it?"

He nods slowly. "She said Ah was the best at follering orders."

"Yet another mistake she made," I say. "Wilf, you *have* to turn them round."

Wilf looks back at the Answer, still coming, still marching.

"Other mistresses won't listen to me," he says, but I can hear him thinking.

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“Yes,” I say, agreeing with his thought, “but everyone *else* will.”

He looks back up to me. “Ah’ll turn ’em round.”

“I have to get to the ship,” I say. “There’ll be help there.”

Wilf nods and points his thumb back over his shoulder. “Second big road up back yonder. Mistress Coyle’s got twenty minutes on ya.”

“Thank you, Wilf.”

He nods again and turns back to the Answer. “*Retreat!*” he yells. “*Retreat!*”

I urge Acorn along again and we ride past Wilf and the astonished faces of Mistresses Lawson and Nadari at the front of the Answer line. “On whose authority?” Mistress Nadari snaps.

“Mine!” I hear Wilf say, strong as I’ve ever heard him.

I’m already passing through the Answer and pushing Acorn as fast as he’ll go and so I don’t see Wilf when he says, “And hers!”

But I know he’s pointing at me.

[T O D D]

Our front line sprints across the clearing like a wall falling down a hill—

Men running in a V-shape with Mr Hammar screaming on horseback at its tip—

The next line of men sets off a split second later so now there’s two rows running at breakneck speed towards the line of Spackle, guns out but—

“*Why ain’t they firing?*” I ask the Master.

He breathes out a little. “Overconfidence, I should say.”

“What?”

“We’ve always fought the Spackle at close quarters, you see. It was most effective. But...” His eyes play over the front line of Spackle—

Which ain’t moving.

“I think we may want to be back a bit farther, Todd,” he says, turning Morpeth down the road before I can even say anything.

I look back to the men running—

And the Spackle line that ain’t moving—

And the men getting closer—

“But why—?”

“Todd,” the Mayor calls, now a good twenty metres behind me—

There’s a flash of Noise thru the Spackle—

A signal of some kind—

Every Spackle on the front line raises his bow and arrow—

Or his white stick—

And the Spackle on the horned creacher takes a lighted torch in each hand—

“READY!” Mr Hammar calls, thundering forward on his horse, heading right for the horned creacher—

The men raise their rifles—

“I really would get back if I were you,” the Mayor calls to me—

I pull a little on Angharrad’s reins—

But my eyes are still on the battle and the men running

across the clearing in front of me and the men behind me
ready to do the same and more men behind *them*—

And me and the Mayor waiting at the back of the pack—
“AIM!” screams Mr Hammar with his voice and his
Noise—

I turn Angharrad and ride back to the Mayor—

“Why ain’t they *firing*?” I say as I get close—

“Who?” the Mayor says, still studying the Spackle. “The
men or the enemy?”

I look back—

Mr Hammar’s not fifteen metres from the horned
creacher—

Ten—

“Either one,” I say—

Five—

“Now, *this*,” says the Mayor, “should be interesting.”

And we see the Spackle on the horned creacher bring
the two torches together behind the u-shaped thing—

And **WHOOMP!**

An exploding, spilling, tumbling, churning flood of fire
looking for all the world like the rushing river beside it
comes *whooshing* out of the u-shaped thing, *way* bigger than
looks possible, expanding and growing and eating the world
like a nightmare—

Coming right for Mr Hammar—

Who pulls his horse hard to the right—

Leaping outta the way—

But too late—

The fire swoops round him—

Sticking to Mr Hammar and his horse like a coating—

And they’re ~~burning~~ ~~blazing~~ ~~burning~~ ~~blazing~~ as they try to slide
away from it—

Riding straight for the river—
 But Mr Hammar don't make it—
 He falls from the burning saddle of his burning horse—
 Hitting the ground in a jerking pile of flame—
 Then lying still as his horse disappears into the water—
 Screaming and screaming—
 I turn my eyes back to the army—
 And see that the men on the front line don't got horses
 that'll carry 'em outta the way—
 And the fire—
 Thicker than normal fire—
 Thicker and heavier—
 Cuts thru 'em like a rockslide—
 Eating the first ten men it touches—
 Burning 'em up so fast you can barely hear 'em scream—
 And they're the lucky ones—
 Cuz the fire spreads out—
 Sticking to the uniforms and the hair—
 And the skin—
 And my God the *skin* of the frontline soldiers off to each
 side—
 And they fall—
 And they burn—
 And they scream like Mr Hammar's horse—
 And they keep on screaming—
 Their Noise rocketing up and out over the Noise of
 everything else—
 And as the blast of fire finally dissipates and Mr Morgan
 is yelling "FALL BACK!" to the front line soldiers and as
 those soldiers are already turning and running but firing their

no rumble of an explosion, just a bright, bright glow that grows and grows before dying away, lighting up the few people on the road who've reached this far out of town, and I wonder what could possibly have happened back in the city to make a light like that.

And I wonder whether Todd is in the middle of it.

[T O D D]

The next blast of fire comes before anyone's ready for it—

WHOOMP!

Shooting across the open ground and catching the retreating soldiers, melting their guns, burning up their bodies, laying 'em to the ground in the worst sorta heap—

"We gotta get outta here!" I shout at the Mayor, who's watching the battle like he's hypnotized, his body still but his eyes moving this way and that, taking in everything.

"Those white sticks," he says quietly. "Obviously a ballistic of some sort but do you see how destructive they are?"

I stare at him wide-eyed. "DO SOMETHING!" I shout. "They're getting slaughtered!"

He raises one eyebrow. "What exactly do you think war is, Todd?"

"But the Spackle've got better weapons now! We won't be able to stop 'em!"

"Won't we?" he says, nodding at the battle. I look, too. The Spackle on the horned creacher readies his torches for another blast but one of the Mayor's men has risen from

where he's fallen, dums all over him, and he raises his gun and fires—

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And the Spackle on the horned creacher drops one torch and slaps a hand to his neck where the bullet hit him, then falls sideways off the creacher to the ground—

A cheer goes up from the Mayor's men as they see what's happened—

"All weapons have their weaknesses," the Mayor says.

And quick as that, they're regrouping and Mr Morgan is riding his horse forward, leading *all* the men now, and more rifles are getting fired and tho more arrows and white flashes are coming from the Spackle and more soldiers are falling, Spackle are falling, too, their clay armour crack-ing and exploding, falling under the feet of other Spackle marching behind 'em—

But they keep coming—

"We're outnumbered," I say to the Mayor.

"Oh, ten to one easily," he says.

I point up the hill. "And they've got more of those fire things!"

"But not ready yet, Todd," he says and he's right, the creachers are backed up behind Spackle soldiers on the zig-zag road, not ready to blast unless they want to take out half their own army.

But the Spackle line is really crashing into the line of men now and I see the Mayor do a counting moshun with his hands and then look back down the empty road behind us.

"You know, Todd," he says, taking Morpeth's reins. "I think we're going to need every man."

He turns to me.

"It's time for us to fight."

And I know with a stab in my heart that if the Mayor
himself is gonna fight—
Then we're *really* in trouble.

{ VIOLA }

"There!" I shout, pointing at what has to be the road up the hill to the tower. Acorn flies straight up the incline, bits of foamy sweat flying from his shoulders and neck. "I know," I say between his ears. "Almost there."

Girl **coll**, he thinks and for a second I think he might even be laughing at my sympathy. Or maybe he's just trying to comfort *me*.

The road is incredibly dark as it curves around the back of the hill. For a minute, I'm cut off from absolutely everything, all sound from the city, all light from what's happening, all Noise that might tell me what's going on. It's like Acorn and I are racing through the black beyond itself, that weird quiet of being a small ship in the hugeness of space, where your light is so feeble against the surrounding dark, you might as well not have a light at all—

And then I hear a sound coming from the top of the hill—

A sound I recognize—

Steam escaping from a vent—

"Coolant systems!" I shout to Acorn, like they're the happiest words in the whole world.

The steam sound gets louder as we near the crest of the hill and I picture it in my mind: two huge vents at the back of the scout ship just above the engines cooking them down after entry into the atmosphere—

The same vents that didn't open on my own scout ship when the engines caught fire.

The same vents that caused us to crash and killed my mother and father.

Acorn reaches the top of the hill and for a second, all I see is the vast empty space where the communications tower used to be, the tower Mistress Coyle blew up rather than have the Mayor use it to contact my ships first. Most of the metal wreckage has been cleared away in huge scrap heaps and when Acorn races across the open ground, at first I only see the heaps in the moons-light, three big ones, covered in the dust and dullness of the months since the tower fell—

Three groupings of metal—
And behind them a fourth—
Shaped like a huge hawk, wings outstretched—
“There!”

Acorn puts on a burst of energy and we race towards the back of the scout ship, steam and heat pouring out of the vents into the sky, and we get nearer and I see a shaft of light on the left that must be the bay door open under a wing of the ship—

“Yes,” I say to myself. “They’re really *here*—”

Because they really *are* here. I almost believed they’d never come and I can feel myself getting lighter and my breath start rushing faster because they’re here, they’re actually *here*—

I see three figures standing on the ground at the bottom of the bay doors, silhouetted against the shaft of light, their shadows turning as they hear Acorn’s hoofbeats—

Just to the side I see a cart parked in the darkness, its oxen nibbling on grass—

And we get closer–

And closer–

And the figures' faces suddenly loom up as Acorn and I enter the shaft of light, too, juddering to a stop–

And it *is*, it's exactly who I thought it would be and my heart does a skip of happiness and homesickness, and in spite of all that's happening, I feel my eyes get wet and my throat start to choke–

Because it's Bradley Tench from the *Beta* and Simone Watkin from the *Gamma* and I know they came looking for *me*, they came all this way looking for my mother and my father and *me*–

And they step back, startled at my sudden appearance, and then take a second to see past all the dirt and the grime and the longer hair–

And I'm bigger, too–

Taller–

Almost grown–

And their eyes get wider as they realize who I am–

And Simone opens her mouth–

But it's not her voice that speaks.

It's the third figure, the one whose eyes – now that I finally look at them – open even wider, and she says my name, says it with a look of shock that I have to say gives me a surprising flash of pleasure.

“*Viola!*” Mistress Coyle says.

“Yeah,” I say, looking right into her eyes. “It's *Viola*.”

I don't even think when the Mayor and Morpeth run after the soldiers into the battle. I just spur Angharrad and she trusts me and leaps right off after 'em—

I don't want to be here—

I don't want to fight anyone—

But if it keeps her safe—

(*Viola*)

Then I'll bloody well fight—

We ride past soldiers on foot still charging forward, and the battleground at the bottom of the hill is heaving with men and Spackle and I keep on looking up the zigzag road which is still pouring down with more and more Spackle soldiers and it feels like I'm an ant riding into an anthill and you can hardly see the ground for writhing bodies—

"This way!" calls the Mayor, peeling off to the left, away from the river. The lines of men have pushed the Spackle back against both the river and the base of the hill, holding 'em there—

NOT FOR LONG, THOUGH, says the Mayor, straight into my head.

"You don't *do* that!" I shout at him, raising my rifle.

"I need your attention and I need a good soldier!" he shouts back. "If you can't do that, then you're no good in this war and you give me far less reason to help you!"

And I think to myself, how did it turn into *his* choosing to help *me*, I had him tied up, I had him at my mercy, I

But there's no time cuz I see where he's heading—