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LEGENDARIUM

JENNIFER BELL



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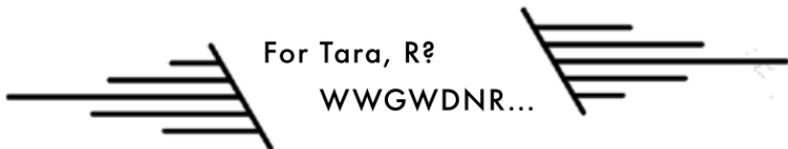
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For Tara, R?

WWGWDNR...





The hotdog-eating contest was going badly.

“It’s not funny,” Arthur whinged, clutching his bloated tummy. “It feels like my stomach’s about to explode.”

His friend Ren laughed and slid another hotdog across the picnic table on a plate. “Ready to forfeit?”

She was much smaller than him, but dressed in her ripped black jeans, hooded tank top and massive combat boots, she looked ready for battle. Her silky black hair was fixed in a high ponytail with a thick fringe covering half her face. Arthur doubted that his baggy shorts and *The Mandalorian* T-shirt were as intimidating, so he adopted his most threatening game face as he pulled the plate towards him. “No chance.”

They’d wagered that if Ren ate the most hotdogs that afternoon, Arthur would be her spotter every time she went rock-climbing during the rest of the summer holidays; but if Arthur ate the most, Ren would give him her copy of the latest *Spider-Man* game on Xbox – something he’d

need five weeks of paper-round money to be able to afford otherwise.

“Can one of you *please* puke already? This is getting ridiculous,” their friend Cecily complained beside them. If Ren had dressed for battle, then Cecily had styled herself for a photo shoot with a fashion magazine. Her amethyst-purple braids had been twisted into an impossibly intricate up-do, and she was modelling a vintage denim jacket and floaty maxi-dress. Sat in her lap was a scruffy white terrier, who yapped excitedly as Cecily unfastened the lead from around his red collar, and then scampered off to the pond at the bottom of Ren’s garden. “See – even Cloud’s had enough.”

“It’ll all be over when Arthur admits defeat,” Ren promised, lifting her hotdog to her lips.

But as she opened her mouth to take a bite, a splash sounded at the end of the garden. Arthur glanced at Ren’s pond and spotted the tip of a stubby white tail disappearing below the strangely misty surface...

“Cloud?” Cecily sprang to her feet. “Cloud, be careful! You might not be able to swim!” With the dog’s lead flapping in her hand, she raced towards the bottom of the garden.

Arthur felt way too full to run anywhere, but Cecily was right to be concerned. Although Cloud looked like a typical West Highland terrier – with a fluffy white coat, round face and pointed ears – he was, in fact, a very advanced robot, or *mimic*, from four hundred years in the future. He’d been

entrusted to their care by a twenty-fifth-century inventor named Milo Hertz, and there was still so much they had to learn about him ... including whether or not he could swim.

With a glance at the back door to check all their parents were still inside, Arthur pushed himself up and hurried after Ren and Cecily. When they all got to the pond, the mist had dissolved and the water was still. A dragonfly darted over the surface, but there was no sign of Cloud anywhere.

“I don’t understand,” Cecily said. “I saw him fall in.”

Arthur knelt down and thrust his arm in up to the elbow. Wiggling it around, he could only feel slimy weeds. “Maybe he jumped out and we missed it?”

“Couldn’t have,” Ren said, nudging the pebbles at the water’s edge with her boot. “These are all dry.”

Cecily surveyed the rest of the garden. “So, then, where is he? Cloud!” she called. “Here, boy!”

Arthur waited for an excited ball of fluff to come bounding out of the bushes, but it didn’t appear. His gaze drew nervously to the abandoned cottage behind Ren’s garden, where, last year, the three of them had accidentally followed Cloud through a portal to the year 2473. After getting trapped in an in-reality adventure game, or I-RAG, called the *Wonderscape*, they’d barely escaped with their lives.

With a growing sense of unease, he searched the pond again. Buried in the silt at the bottom, he saw something glinting and reached towards it...

“Arthur, look out!” Ren yanked on the back of his T-shirt, just in time, as a jet of mist shot out of the pond with a loud hiss, narrowly missing Arthur’s head.

“What’s happening?!” Cecily cried.

Arthur’s pulse quickened as he scrambled to his feet and saw that the mist had swirled around them, caging them in a spinning vortex that obscured Ren’s garden. He grabbed his friends’ arms and pulled them closer. “Stay together!”

There was a thunderous *boom* and the vortex rippled. Arthur felt a stab of brain freeze followed by the stomach-lurching sensation of ascending in a fast-moving lift. “Werrrr—!” As he spread his arms and legs for balance, the taste of fried onions burst at the back of his throat and before he could do anything to stop himself, he leaned forward and vomited. He briefly hoped the vortex wouldn’t function like some kind of puke-nado and hurl the contents of his guts right back at him. “Ren?” he croaked, watching the mist curl around his toes. “Cecily?”

He flinched as something brushed his arm.

There was a high-pitched bark and Cecily yelled, “Cloud!”

Staring at his trainers, Arthur tried to steady his breathing. The vortex seemed to be moving slower and the mist was thinning. He could almost see the ground. He wiped his mouth clean on his T-shirt sleeve, lifted his head ...

... and let out a small yelp.

Ren's garden had vanished. They were all now stood on the floor of a vast concrete warehouse, filled with industrial-sized shelving units. Dim spotlights dangled from the ceiling, illuminating hundreds of coloured metal crates, organized in rows of blue, green and red. Several nearby crates had toppled over and a trail of sooty footprints led away from them, into the shadows. As the residual mist faded around Arthur's feet, he rubbed the sides of his face, convinced he was hallucinating. This couldn't be real.

"What happened?!" Cecily spluttered, pressing Cloud tightly to her chest. Strands of pondweed clung to the dog's damp fur, but his tail was wagging. "Where are we?"

Arthur shook his head, lost for words. He scanned the perimeter of the building, checking for whoever had made the footprints. At one side of the warehouse, stairs climbed up to a balcony with doors leading off into other rooms, but there was no sign of movement anywhere. Goosebumps prickled along his forearms as his skin adjusted to the cold. The place had to be a storage depot, although there were no clues on the walls or crates to indicate who it belonged to.

Shaking, Cecily fastened Cloud's lead to his collar and lifted him to the ground. "Hello?" she called. "Is anybody here?" Her voice echoed several times, but there was no reply.

"Never mind *where* we are," Ren muttered, rubbing her mouth on the shoulder of her tank-top. (Arthur guessed

she'd suffered her own post-hotdog-eating misfortune.) "I'm more concerned about *when* we are. I got brain freeze. Did either of you?"

Arthur went rigid. The dull headache you sometimes get after eating ice cream too quickly was also a side effect of time travel. "For a split second," he admitted. "But there's no way we've time-travelled."

"No," Cecily said. "I mean – yeah, I felt brain freeze, too – but we *can't* have time-travelled."

They all looked at each other uncertainly.

"Maybe we should check our phones," Arthur suggested. "When we time-travelled before, they stopped working." He slipped his Samsung out of his pocket and his blood went cold. The screen was blank.

Cecily frantically pressed the power button on her dead iPhone. "But this makes no sense! We haven't walked through a Wonderway."

It was an excellent point. The portal they'd time-travelled through last year, a Wonderway, was opened using a small obsidian prism called a time-key; and Arthur hadn't seen either device in Ren's garden. He replayed the details of everything that had just happened, searching for an explanation. "When Cloud fell into the pond, there was mist on the water," he remembered. "It might have been the same fog spinning around us. Maybe when we thought we saw him sinking under the water, what we *actually* saw was him disappearing through the same portal we have?"

“So, it wasn’t a Wonderway,” Ren said. “It was a portal made of ... gas?”

“You can only get into the Wonderscape through a Wonderway,” Cecily reasoned, starting to pace, “which means if we’ve travelled here through this ... this *mist-portal* ... we must be somewhere else in the future.”

Arthur cast a nervy glance around the warehouse, knowing they could be anywhere – a different planet, a different solar system, a different galaxy... His chest tightened as the true horror of their situation hit him.

They were lost. In space *and* time.

“Great, and now we’re facing the prospect of being turned into slime again,” Ren grumbled, jamming her phone back into her pocket.

With a jolt, Arthur realized what Ren meant. When they’d time-travelled before, they’d upset the balance of the universe, triggering a sort of astrophysical autocorrect mechanism. As a result, if they hadn’t returned home soon enough, their bodies would have broken down into a gloopy substance called protoplasm. “Oh no...” He fumbled to set the stopwatch on his Casio. “We don’t know when it will happen.”

Cecily stopped pacing. “What do you mean we don’t know? We had fifty-seven hours to get home last time.”

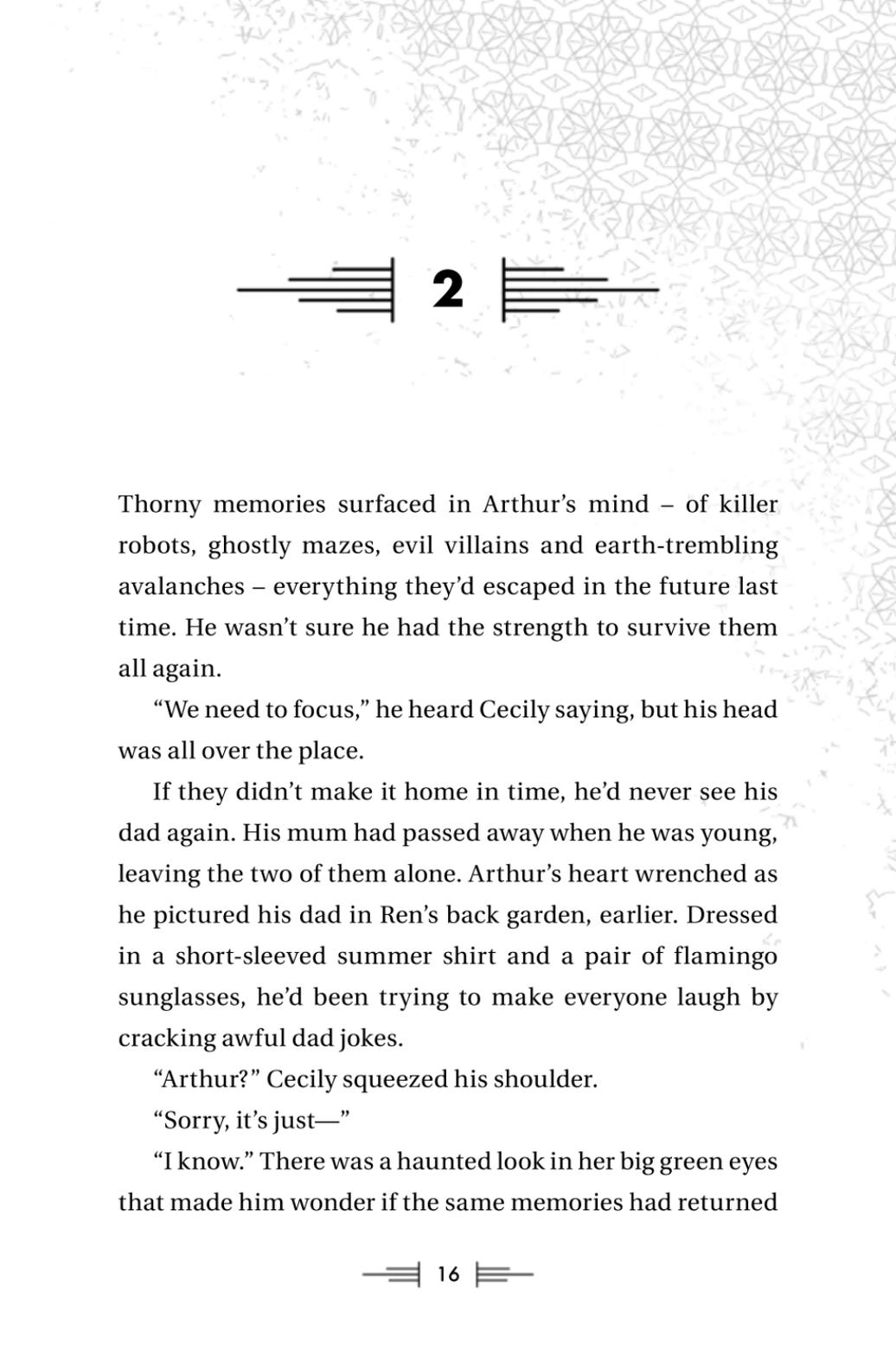
“Yes, but some of our variables will have changed, so it’ll be different now.” Arthur wished he’d paid more attention to the formula Sir Isaac Newton had used to make the

calculation. The famous scientist had been one of many real-life heroes they'd met in the Wonderscape. "All we can measure is how much time has elapsed since we arrived – that's why I've set a stopwatch."

"So then ... it could happen at any moment," Cecily realized. "One minute we'll be standing here, and the next we'll be *you-know-what*."

Arthur tried to think of something positive to say, but there was no silver lining to this nightmare. He didn't know where they were, how they'd got there or how long they had to get home. The truth was, there was only one thing he knew for certain:

... a countdown had begun.



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Thorny memories surfaced in Arthur's mind – of killer robots, ghostly mazes, evil villains and earth-trembling avalanches – everything they'd escaped in the future last time. He wasn't sure he had the strength to survive them all again.

“We need to focus,” he heard Cecily saying, but his head was all over the place.

If they didn't make it home in time, he'd never see his dad again. His mum had passed away when he was young, leaving the two of them alone. Arthur's heart wrenched as he pictured his dad in Ren's back garden, earlier. Dressed in a short-sleeved summer shirt and a pair of flamingo sunglasses, he'd been trying to make everyone laugh by cracking awful dad jokes.

“Arthur?” Cecily squeezed his shoulder.

“Sorry, it's just—”

“I know.” There was a haunted look in her big green eyes that made him wonder if the same memories had returned

to her. “But we don’t have time to freak out, OK? If we want to get home, we need a plan.”

“And quickly,” Ren added with a scowl. “I argued with my mum before the barbecue and I don’t want that to be the last time we ever speak. It can’t be.”

Arthur felt a swell of gratitude that at least he had his friends with him. He tried to organize his thoughts. They had no control over when they might turn into protoplasm, so they should probably concentrate on something they could change. “We need to learn more about the mistportal that brought us here,” he said. “If we can find out how it was generated, we might be able to create a new one to return us to the twenty-first century.”

Ren’s ponytail swung as she crouched down. “Maybe these scorch marks are a clue?”

Arthur examined the concrete. A powdery black starburst covered the entire area where the three of them were standing. The footprints had probably been made by someone walking through it. He noticed a small, black object by his trainer and picked it up. It was the same shape as a hockey puck, but smooth and shiny, like glass.

“What’s that?” Cecily asked.

Rubbing the object clean on his shorts, Arthur discovered it had a bevelled edge with tiny notches on it, like the dial on a kitchen timer. As he twisted it clockwise, he heard a satisfying clicking noise ...

... and a hole *vaporized* in its centre.

“Whoa!” He staggered back, almost dropping it. Solid matter didn’t behave that way, at least not by the rules of physics he knew.

“We’re definitely in the future,” Ren muttered bitterly. “Do you think that doughnut is connected to the mist-portal?”

“Possibly.” Hoping to learn more, Arthur rotated the dial anti-clockwise. This time, the centre of the object *reappeared*. He briefly considered experimenting with it – twisting the dial in different directions to see if it produced any mist – but without knowing where it might whisk them off to, it was too dangerous.

“Look – a way out!” Cecily said, over Arthur’s shoulder.

He turned to find a set of large metal doors in the wall behind. They stood at least three metres high and were secured by a complex system of bolts.

Ren ran over and shook one of the bars fixed across the doors. “They’re locked. Whoever owns this place obviously doesn’t want anyone getting in – these are the kind of doors you’d have on a bank vault.”

Arthur eyed the gloomy warehouse warily. Now he thought about it, the concrete walls did give off an end-of-the-world-bunker type vibe and the cold air probably indicated that no one spent much time in there. “But these footprints prove that someone else has been here recently,” he said, studying them closer. They looked like they’d been made by someone wearing heavy boots

like Ren's. He and Ren followed them a few paces until they abruptly stopped.

"I don't get it," she said, craning her neck to look above them. "Where do they go? It's like whoever made them disappeared into thin air."

Arthur considered the toppled crates and the scorch marks, trying to piece everything together. Had the owner of the footprints summoned them there? And if so, for what purpose? There were only a handful of people in the future that knew them...

"Hey, I've found something!" Cecily called, excitedly. "Look on the crate lids!"

Arthur stretched up on tiptoes to examine the top of the nearest red crate and spied a tiny gold arrow inlaid on the lid. As he reached for it, he heard a soft *hiss* and a cloud of glittering grey particles burst out. They promptly massed together and transformed into a paper-thin glass screen with images projected onto the surface.

He blinked. *Nanotechnology*. They'd come across it before in the Wonderscape. He swiped his finger across the screen, scrolling through a photographic inventory of items stored in the crate. The text was written in a language he didn't understand. And yet...

And yet as he skimmed the pages, the letters and words *became* English. His mind boggled trying to understand how it all worked. It seemed more like magic than technology.

He shuddered as his gaze moved through the list:

Shrieking Shuriken

Rock Blaster

Rex-Claw

Gamma Grenade.

The shrieking shurikens were razor-sharp throwing stars; the rock blasters looked like scope-mounted grey stalactites; the rex-claws were daggers with dinosaur-claw handles; and the photo of the gamma grenade showed a small glass bauble filled with writhing blue flames. He quickly checked the inventory of the next crate along, and swallowed. “Bad news. I think the red crates all contain *weapons*,” he told the others.

Ren poked her head around the corner of a shelf. “The green ones are full of different gadgets – strange goggles, armoured jackets, expanding shields – there’s even a pair of boots with hover-engines in the soles.” She flipped around the glass screen. “And then there’s these *evaders*, but I don’t understand what they do.”

Arthur squinted at the image on screen. The evaders looked like large silver pebbles, as reflective as mirrors. *Weapons, armour, shields* – he could only think of one type of organization that used those. “Perhaps this is some sort of military building? The mist-portal could be top-secret military technology.”

“I’m not so sure,” Cecily said, over by some blue crates. “There are bars of precious metals in these, as well as jewels

and minerals. Why would soldiers need those? Oh, and this is interesting.” She patted one of the toppled crates nearest to where they’d been standing when they’d first arrived. “This one has a hole burned in it.”

Curious, Arthur and Ren went over to investigate.

“I can’t see anything inside,” Cecily told them, peering through the fist-sized opening, “and the nano-screen isn’t working.” She demonstrated by swiping her hand over the arrow on the lid, but nothing happened.

Arthur ran a finger around the melted edge of the hole and it came back streaked with charcoal. Testing a suspicion, he held the hockey-puck-doughnut up against it.

They were a perfect match.

“It must have contained *this*,” he realized, with a buzz of excitement. “If we can get the nano-screen working, we might be able to figure out what it is and how to use it.”

Right at that moment, Cloud made a strange whirring noise and went rigid. He looked like one of those stuffed-toy puppies that do back-flips in toy shops.

“No, not now!” Cecily pleaded, tugging on his lead. “He’s been freezing like this for the last few weeks. I don’t understand what’s causing it.”

Cloud’s right ear snapped up and a beam of light shot out of it, coalescing into a 3-D hologram. The hologram showed a burly, scruffy-haired man in a white lab coat. He was sat hunched over a desk strewn with multiple whirring, bubbling and hovering pieces of apparatus. As he leaned

forwards, a pendant fell from a chain around his neck; it matched the red colour of Cloud's collar exactly. "Arthur?" the man cried, almost falling off his stool. "Cecily! Ren!"

Arthur jerked his head back. "*Milo Hertz?*" The inventor had a lot more wrinkles than when Arthur had last seen him, but Milo's kind grey eyes and gorilla-like size were instantly recognizable. Arthur felt some of the tension of the last few minutes dissipate. Wherever they were, and whatever had happened to them, Milo would help sort it out. The man had designed Cloud and the Wonderscape. He was a genius.

"What in Newton's name are you doing *here?*" Milo hissed, checking over his shoulder in case anyone was listening. "You should all be in the twenty-first century!"

Cecily started. "Don't you know? Isn't that why you're speaking to us?"

Milo frowned and lifted his pendant closer. Arthur saw tiny specks of light whizzing under its surface. "Cloud is linked to this device I'm wearing. I programmed him to open a direct transmission to me if he ever moved through time again. *That's* why I'm speaking to you – Cloud contacted me."

Arthur glanced at Cloud, still frozen in position. "Then, you *don't* know why we're here?" His insides tightened as all his anxiety rushed back.

"You need to tell me *exactly* what's happened," Milo said, grabbing a pencil and notepad off the desk beside him.

As Cecily sped through the events of the last half hour, Milo jotted down various details. “If you really are in a high-security military building, it might make it more difficult to get a fix on your location,” he warned, tapping several commands on a holographic keyboard next to him, “but I’ll try my best. In the meantime, show me this mysterious device you’ve found.”

Arthur reached into his pocket and pulled out the hockey-puck-doughnut he’d collected off the floor. Milo snatched a pair of black sunglasses off his desk and pulled them on. “Let me take a peek inside,” he murmured, adjusting a dial on one side of the frames. The lenses went from being matt black to transparent green with blinking red dots. Arthur could only imagine what they allowed him to see.

After only a few seconds of scrutiny, Milo’s jaw went slack.

“What is it?” Ren asked.

“I don’t understand...” Milo’s voice faltered. “What you’re holding is a *time-key*.”

“*What?*” A thousand questions spun through Arthur’s mind, making him feel dizzy. He steadied himself against the nearest crate, resting the device on top. “But it doesn’t look anything like a time-key! And anyway, we thought they’d all been destroyed.”

“They *were* destroyed,” Milo told them worryingly. “And not just the devices themselves, but all the designs, notes and recordings I created when I invented them. As you

three know better than most, time travel is too dangerous a power for anyone to possess. That's why I went to great lengths to erase every possible trace of the time-keys' existence." He pushed up his sunglasses with a shaky hand. "The device you've found is an exact copy of a time-key, with a few added updates. That's why it looks and works differently to the time-keys you've used before."

That explains the mist-portal, Arthur thought.

Cecily rubbed her temples. "So, it's like a time-key 2.0?"

"Exactly," Milo said, his brow fraught with worry. "The question is: who engineered it? It's inconceivable to think that someone could have built this *without* using my old designs, because they include an incredibly unique time-compressing coil, which I developed in secret. The problem is I can't fathom how anyone would've got hold of them. Nobody else knows about the time-keys or about you three being time-travellers."

"Maybe your brother had something to do with it?" Ren grumbled, folding her arms. "He could have boasted to one of his prison mates about the time-keys."

Arthur remembered Milo's stone-hearted brother, Tiburon, with a shiver. Not only had he repeatedly tried to kill them, he'd also stolen one of Milo's time-keys in order to travel back through history and make digital copies of the consciousnesses of famous heroes. Later, he'd rebuilt them as mimics and cruelly enslaved them to play roles in the Wonderscape.

“I don’t think so,” Milo said. “It isn’t in Tiburon’s interest to say anything. He’s still serving a prison sentence for kidnapping me and if he ever divulged the truth of his *real* crimes, his jail term would be extended. No, this has to be my doing. I must have slipped up somehow when I was destroying the time-key designs...” He took a regretful sigh. “I’m so sorry you’ve been caught up in all this again. Just sit tight. Once I pinpoint your location, I’ll come to you and configure this new time-key to send you back to the twenty-first century.”

Arthur gave the others a forced smile. Sure, they might have found a way to get home, but it was difficult to feel relaxed when anyone in the Known Universe could soon have the power to reshape the path of history. “Are you going to look for this new time-key engineer?” he asked anxiously. “You don’t know how many devices they’ve built or who they could have given them to.”

“That’s what troubles me,” Milo admitted. “I need to find out how they know about my design. Whatever’s happened, it’s my responsibility to set things right. Inventing the time-key was my mistake.”

Cecily started pacing again. “Maybe the engineer is someone who works for you in the Wonderscape? You could interview all your staff—”

“The Wonderscape is closed,” Milo interrupted. “It’s 2493 now, twenty years since you were last here.”

2493! It was no surprise Milo had more wrinkles.

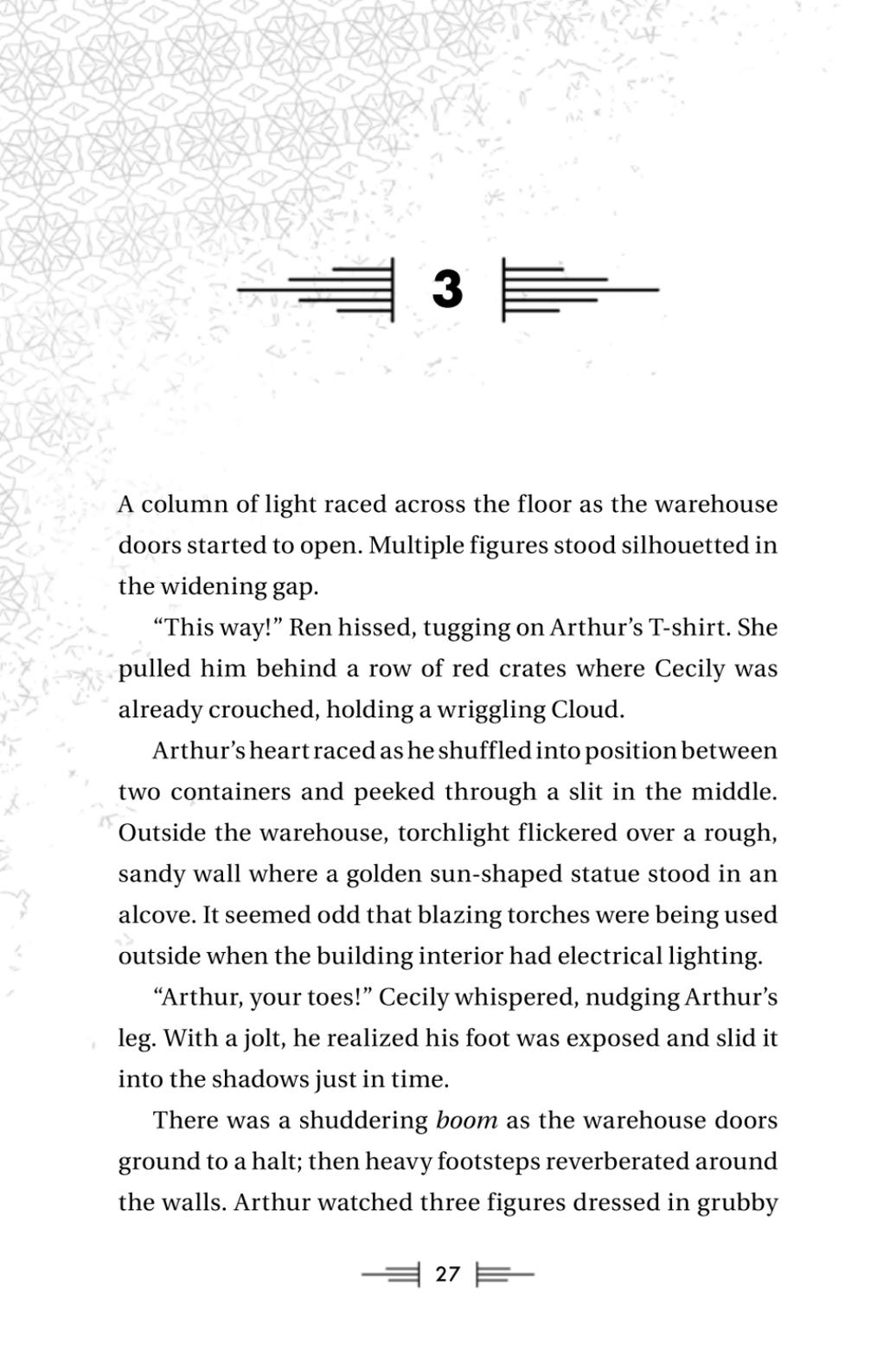
“What’s making that noise?” Ren asked, as a creak reverberated around the warehouse.

Cecily spun around. “I think it came from the doors...”

The creak sounded again, followed by a long groan, like a heavy object being dragged across concrete.

“Stand aside so I can take a look,” Milo suggested, pulling down his sunglasses.

He immediately tensed. “No, it can’t be.” He tapped his pendant and his hologram began to dissolve. “It’s *raiders*,” he told them, his voice thick with fear. “They’ll kill you if they see you. Hide!”



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A column of light raced across the floor as the warehouse doors started to open. Multiple figures stood silhouetted in the widening gap.

“This way!” Ren hissed, tugging on Arthur’s T-shirt. She pulled him behind a row of red crates where Cecily was already crouched, holding a wriggling Cloud.

Arthur’s heart raced as he shuffled into position between two containers and peeked through a slit in the middle. Outside the warehouse, torchlight flickered over a rough, sandy wall where a golden sun-shaped statue stood in an alcove. It seemed odd that blazing torches were being used outside when the building interior had electrical lighting.

“Arthur, your toes!” Cecily whispered, nudging Arthur’s leg. With a jolt, he realized his foot was exposed and slid it into the shadows just in time.

There was a shuddering *boom* as the warehouse doors ground to a halt; then heavy footsteps reverberated around the walls. Arthur watched three figures dressed in grubby

brown trench coats and tall leather boots trudge into the clearing. As their faces passed under a spotlight, he saw they could have only been a couple of years older than him. At the head of the group strode a stout boy with cold, dark eyes and a shaved head. He was followed by a red-haired girl carrying a clunky backpack, and a tall youth with a small barrel-shaped contraption attached to his right shoulder.

Raiders, Milo had called them. Arthur distrusted them instantly, and it wasn't just because of their shady name. As their coats flapped open, he saw they were wearing harnesses equipped with rock blasters, shrieking shurikens and gamma grenades.

"How'd that job go last night, Vorru?" the red-haired girl asked, grinning. She had an unusual, lilting accent that Arthur couldn't place. "I heard you faced a bit of *resistance*."

The tall youth tapped the contraption on his shoulder, which Arthur was beginning to suspect was another weapon. "Nothing I couldn't handle. And it was worth it. Twelve rex-claws and two vats of firebrew – they'll fetch Deadlock a decent price on the Dark Market." As the boy scratched his neck, Arthur spotted a tattoo poking above the edge of his collar. It looked a bit like a skull and crossbones, except the bones were actually a pair of rusty spanners. He noticed the same motif on the girl's wrist and wondered if it was a gang symbol, the mark of a raider.

"With any luck, Deadlock will give you another mod,"

the girl said, slapping Vorrú's empty shoulder. "Perhaps a second shoulder-cannon, or even a new leg?"

Vorrú's face paled. "But ... I like my leg. I don't want a new one!" He turned to the dark-eyed boy, walking ahead. "Rultan, did you hear that? Tide thinks Deadlock's going to take my leg!"

Tide burst into laughter, making Vorrú flush. As they both drew closer to where Arthur and the others were hiding, Arthur realized what Tide had meant by "mod". The base of Vorrú's shoulder-cannon was joined to a lumpy mound of flesh that poked through a hole in his coat – the weapon was *fused* to his body. The mods had to be some form of cybernetic modifications.

And it wasn't just Vorrú who had one. As Tide turned her shoulder, Arthur saw her rucksack was, in fact, a smoke-stained jetpack bonded to her spine.

"Don't be a baby, Vorrú," Rultan growled, scuffing the toe of his boot through the sooty footprints on the floor. He narrowed his gaze on the damaged blue crate that had once contained the time-key. "And be careful what you touch, both of you. It looks like something volatile was being stored here, and one of the others set it off and did a runner. We must have only just missed them."

Tide's eyes sparkled as she saw the hole. "Oh, Deadlock is *not* going to like this. I bet it was that annoying brat in the other crew – the one with the skull-launcher mod. She's always knocking stuff over."

Ren nudged Arthur's knee and murmured, "So we're here by accident?"

Arthur shrugged, although he understood what she was getting at: if the time-key had been triggered by a clumsy raider, then maybe it was just bad luck that the three of them had been sucked through the mist-portal. Still, there had to be a reason why the portal had opened at their specific time and location – that couldn't be a coincidence. It left Arthur with the unsettling feeling that someone, somewhere, knew all about them and had programmed the time-key to seek them out.

Rultan peered through the hole in the damaged crate. "You two had better search the area. Whatever was inside here is missing."

"What are we looking for?" Tide asked.

Arthur held his breath as her gaze passed over where they were hiding. Milo had said the raiders would kill them if they saw them...

"Not sure yet." Rultan swiped his hand above the arrow on the crate lid. When no nano-screen materialized, he rolled back his sleeve to reveal something *embedded* in his forearm.

Arthur tried not to retch. What looked like an oversized penknife was sardined into the cavity between Rultan's radius and ulna. With practised ease, Rultan slid free a cylindrical silver attachment and pointed it at the arrow. A puff of glittering dust escaped, and a glass

screen solidified in mid-air. Rultan read the inventory with interest.

“Well, well.” He whistled through his front teeth. “This must be something Deadlock’s been working on in secret, ’cause I’ve never heard of it before. Says here it’s one of a kind, too. Pity we can’t take a peek at what it looks like – there’s no photo.”

So, the time-key is one of a kind? Arthur felt a momentary wave of relief, knowing Milo would only have to destroy the one they had. He slipped his hand into his pocket, reaching for the smooth feel of the device...

But it wasn’t there.

Heat rushed to his cheeks as he patted his other pocket.

Also empty.

No! How could he have been so careless? He’d left the time-key resting on top of that crate!

Cecily poked him in the arm and he gingerly showed her his empty pockets.

WHAT? she mouthed.

Ren must have been following their silent exchange because she started gesturing wildly.

Arthur lifted his hands. *I know, I know!* Unless they wanted to end their days as puddles of gloop on the warehouse floor, they needed to retrieve that time-key. It was their only ticket home.

With the raiders nearing, they didn’t have much time to formulate a plan. Arthur peeked through the gap and

spotted the time-key sitting on a green crate in the next row. It was the one containing those weird silver pebbles – evaders. “Think you can snatch it?” he whispered to Ren, who was closest.

Rultan’s footsteps came to an abrupt halt. “What was that? I thought I heard a voice.”

Arthur went rigid.

“Probably just Vorru humming,” Tide muttered, checking down another aisle, further along. “I can’t see any important-looking gadgets around here. Think this thing was stolen?”

Rultan scoffed. “Steal from *Deadlock*? Even Vorru’s not that stupid.” He skimmed the crates with a scowl. “Let’s just get what we came for and clear out of here. We’re already running late and I don’t want this blamed on us.” He tinkered with his arm-mod and a small panel of light projected out of it. There was text written on the surface, but Arthur was too far away to read what it said. “Our job is to deliver an evader to one of the isports champions competing in the Irontide Tournament. Search the green containers – there’s bound to be a stash of them somewhere.”

Vorru’s shoulder-cannon rattled as he plodded towards the nearest row of green crates. “What does an evader look like again?”

“Small, shiny, intelligent,” Tide snapped. “Opposite of you, you big lump.”

As the two of them began studying nano-screens, panic

seized Arthur's chest. The time-key was only three crates away from them!

"We've got to do something," Cecily hissed. She rotated Cloud's collar so the silver tag that dangled from it was at the top. It was etched with the words *Cloud. West Highland Terrier. Male.*

But not always.

Cloud had a secret ability. Two beads – one on either side of his tag – could be twisted to transform him into one of eleven other animals from the Chinese zodiac. It was a trick that had helped them escape several dangerous situations in the Wonderscape.

Cecily fiddled with the right-hand bead, changing the text on the tag:

Cloud. Corn Snake. Male.

Cloud. Breton Horse. Male.

Cloud. Capuchin Monkey. Female.

Arthur signalled to the tag. A monkey would be useful. Cloud could swing between the shelving units to the other side of the warehouse and knock something over, diverting the raiders' attention long enough for Arthur to dash out and retrieve the time-key.

But before Cecily could activate Cloud's transformation, Ren squeezed Arthur's knee and pointed through the gap. Vorrु had reached the crate of evaders. Arthur felt a spike of dread as the raider reached for the time-key with his meaty fingers...

“Small, shiny, intelligent,” Vorrु mumbled, turning the device over in his hands. He scanned the crate’s nano-screen and gave a goofy smile. “Rultan, I’ve found an evader!”

Arthur gave a silent cry of frustration. There was no point monkey-Cloud creating a distraction now. Vorrु had the time-key in his clutches, and he wasn’t going to put it back while he thought it was an evader.

“Good work!” Rultan called over from another row. “Let’s get out of here and see it delivered. We’ll have to travel there directly or we’ll be late.”

Arthur wasn’t sure what Rultan meant until the warehouse doors started to slide closed. As the raiders drew back together, Rultan entered a few commands into his Swiss-arm-mod and a three-metre-tall column of red light rose out of the floor near the warehouse door.

Tide tapped her boot against the concrete. “Red *again*. Why is traffic always this bad getting into Atlantis?” She waited until the light changed to green and then, with a satisfied grin, stepped forward ...

... and *evaporated*.

Cecily stifled a gasp.

“It must be another kind of portal,” Ren whispered, shifting her weight. “If we lose track of that time-key, we’re done for. We’re going to have to follow them.”

Arthur didn’t know what would happen if they went into that light. It was entirely possible that their

twenty-first-century bodies might not survive. But as he watched Vorrु and the time-key disintegrate into the green haze, he knew they had no choice. There was no other way to leave the warehouse, and if they remained there, they'd be slime before they ever found the time-key again.

As Rultan followed his colleagues into the portal, Cecily stuffed Cloud under her armpit like he was a rugby ball. "Come on, it's now or never!"

She sprang to her feet and ran out from their hiding place. Arthur and Ren were hot on her heels.

"Hurry!" Ren yelled, her boots pounding the concrete. "It's closing!"

As the pillar of light started to fade, Arthur willed his legs to go faster. Cecily and Cloud reached the portal first, vanishing as soon as they touched it.

Arthur was next. As he drew closer, he hesitated.

"Go!" Ren said, shoving him from behind. "You'll be OK. Just try not to die."

Londoner **JENNIFER BELL** worked as a children's book-seller at a world-famous bookshop before becoming an author. Her debut novel, *The Uncommoners: The Crooked Sixpence*, was an international bestseller. She is also the author of *Agents of the Wild*, an adventure series for younger readers, and *Wonderscape*, which was selected as a Waterstones Children's Book of the Month and is inspired by some of her favourite heroes from history (there were too many to fit in the story) and her love of gaming. *Legendarium* celebrates incredible legends from across the world. Find out more about Jennifer at jennifer-bell-author.com.