

[T O D D]

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 *won*—

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

The left flank, the one away from the river, is the weakest, it's where the men are thinnest and the Spackle have seen that and a surge of 'em is pressing forward. "ATTEND TO ME!" the Mayor shouts and the soldiers nearest us turn and follow him—

Doing it immediately, like they don't even think about it—

And they follow us towards the left flank and we cross the ground way faster than I'd like and I'm just swamped on all sides by how *loud* it all is, the men shouting, the weapons firing, the thump of bodies hitting the ground, that effing Spackle horn still blasting every two seconds, and the Noise, the Noise, the Noise, the Noise—

I'm riding into a nightmare.

I feel a *whisk* of air by my ear and turn quickly to see a soldier behind me shot in the cheek by the arrow that just missed my head—

He screams and he falls—

And then he's left behind—

MIND YOURSELF, TODD, the Mayor puts in my head. WOULD'N'T WANT YOU LOST IN THE FIRST BATTLE, NOW WOULD WE?

"Effing STOP that!" I shout, whirling round to him.

I'D RAISE MY GUN IF I WERE YOU, he thinks at me—

And I turn—

And I see—

The Spackle are on us—

{VIOLA}

“You’re alive!” Mistress Coyle says and I see her face change, making one kind of astonishment into a different, lying kind of astonishment. “Thank God!”

“Don’t you dare!” I yell at her. “*Don’t you dare!*”

“Viola—” she starts but I’m already sliding off Acorn, grunting badly at the pain in my ankles, but I stay standing, just, and turn to Simone and Bradley. “Don’t believe anything she’s told you.”

“Viola?” Simone says, coming forward. “Is it really you?”

“She’s as responsible for this war as the Mayor. Don’t do anything she—”

But I’m stopped by Bradley grabbing me in a hug so tight I can barely breathe. “Oh, my God, *Viola*,” he says, deep feeling in his voice. “We’d heard nothing from your ship. We thought—”

“What *happened*, Viola?” Simone says. “Where are your parents?”

And I’m overwhelmed by seeing them, so much so I can’t speak for a minute, and I pull a little away from Bradley and the light catches his face and I see him, really *see* him, see his kind brown eyes, his skin the same dark shade that Corinne’s was, his short curly hair, greying at the temples, Bradley who was always my favourite on the convoy, who used to teach me arts and maths, and I look over and see the familiar freckled skin of Simone, too, the red hair tied back in a ponytail, the teeny tiny scar on the rise of her chin and I think, in all that’s happened, how much they disappeared to the back of my mind, how much the process of just surviving on this

stupid, stupid world made me forget that I came from a place where I was loved, where people cared for me and for each other, where someone as beautiful and smart as Simone and as gentle and funny as Bradley would actually come after me, actually want what was best.

My eyes are flooding again. It's been too painful to remember. Like that life happened to a whole different person.

"My parents are dead," I finally choke out. "We crashed and they died."

"Oh, Viola—" Bradley says, his voice soft.

"And I was found by a boy," I say, getting stronger. "A brave and *brilliant* boy who saved me over and over again and now he's down there trying to stop a war that *she* started!"

"I did no such thing, my girl," Mistress Coyle says, not looking fake astonished any more.

"Don't you dare call me that—"

"We are fighting a tyrant down there, a tyrant who killed hundreds if not thousands, who imprisoned and banded women—"

"You *shut up*," I say, low and threatening. "You tried to *kill me* and you don't get to say anything more about *anything*."

"She *what*?" I hear Bradley say.

"You had Wilf, kind, sweet, peaceful Wilf marching into town blowing up buildings—"

Mistress Coyle starts. "Viola—"

"I said, *shut up*!"

And she shuts up.

"Do you know what's happening down there now?" I say. "Do you know what you were sending the Answer into?"

She just breathes at me, her face a storm.

“The Mayor figured out your trick,” I say. “He would have had a full army waiting for you by the time you reached the centre of town. You would have been annihilated.”

But all she says is, “Don’t underestimate the fighting spirit of the Answer.”

“What’s the Answer?” Bradley asks.

“A terrorist organization,” I say, just to see the look on Mistress Coyle’s face.

It’s worth it.

“You are speaking *dangerous* words, Viola Eade,” Mistress Coyle says, stepping towards me.

“What are you going to do about it?” I say. “Blow me up again?”

“Whoa, whoa,” Simone says, moving between us. “Whatever’s going on,” she says to Mistress Coyle, “you clearly haven’t told us the whole story.”

Mistress Coyle sighs in frustration. “I haven’t lied to you about what that man did,” she says and turns to me. “Have I, Viola?”

I try to outstare her, but no, he really did do terrible things. “We’ve already *beat* him, though,” I say. “Todd’s down there right now with the Mayor tied up but he needs our help because—”

“We can sort out our differences later,” Mistress Coyle says over me to Bradley and Simone. “It’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. There’s an army down there that needs to be stopped—”

“Two armies,” I say.

Mistress Coyle turns to me, frustrated. “The Answer does *not* need to be stopped—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” I say. “There’s an army of Spackle marching down the hill by the waterfall.”

“An army of what?” Simone asks.

But I’m still looking at Mistress Coyle.

Because her mouth has dropped open.

And I can see fear move right across her face.

[T O D D]

Here they come—

This part of the hill is all rock and steepness so the Spackle can’t come straight down onto us but they’re surging cross the clearing towards the weakness in the line of men and here they come—

Here they come—

Here they come—

I raise my gun—

I’m surrounded by soldiers, some pushing forward, some pushing back, knocking into Angharrad who keeps calling **boy colt, boy colt!** in her Noise—

“It’s okay, girl,” I lie—

Cuz here they are—

Gunfire erupts everywhere, like a flock of birds taking off—

Arrows *zing* thru the air—

The Spackle fire their sticks—

And before I can even have a thought, a soldier in front of me staggers back with a weird fizzing sound—

Grasping at his throat—

Which ain’t there no more—

And I can't take my eyes off him as he stumbles to his knees—

And there's blood just everywhere, all over him, *real* blood, *his* blood, so much I can smell the iron tang of it—

And he's looking up at me—

Catching my eyes and holding 'em—

And his Noise—

My God his Noise—

And I'm suddenly *in* it, inside what he's thinking, and there's pictures of his family, pictures of his wife and his baby son and he's trying to hold onto 'em but his Noise is breaking into bits and his fear is pouring thru like a bright red light and he's reaching for his wife, he's reaching for his little bitty son—

And then a Spackle arrow hits him in the ribcage—

And his Noise stops—

And I'm jerked back onto the battlefield—

Back into hell—

KEEP IT TOGETHER, TODD! the Mayor puts in my head.

But I'm still looking at the dead soldier—

His dead eyes looking back up at me—

“Dammit, Todd!” the Mayor yells at me and—

I AM THE CIRCLE AND THE CIRCLE IS ME.

Thudding thru my brain like a dropped brick—

I AM THE CIRCLE AND THE CIRCLE IS ME.

In his voice and my own—

Twisted together—

Right in the centre of my head—

“Eff off,” I try to shout—

But my voice is weirdly quiet—

And–
And–
And I look up–
And I feel calmer–
Like the world is clearer and slower–
And a Spackle breaks thru where two soldiers have
separated–
And he raises his white stick at me–
And I'm gonna have to do it–
(killer–)
(yer a killer–)
I'm gonna have to shoot him before he shoots me–
And I raise my gun–
Davy's gun that I took from him–
And I think, *Oh, please*, as I put my finger on the trigger–
Oh, please, oh, please, oh, please–
And–
Snick–
I look down in shock.
My gun ain't loaded.