“War,” says Mayor Prentiss, his eyes glinting. “At last.”

“Shut up,” I say. “There ain’t no at last about it. The only one who wants this is you.”

“Nevertheless,” he says, turning to me with a smile. “Here it comes.”

And of course I’m already wondering if untying him so he could fight this battle was the worst mistake of my life—But no—

No, it’s gonna keep her safe. It’s what I had to do to keep her safe.

And I will make him keep her safe if I have to kill him to do it.

And so with the sun setting, me and the Mayor stand on the rubble of the cathedral and look out across the town square, as the army of Spackle make their way down
the zigzag hill in front of us, blowing their battlehorn with a sound that could tear you right in two—

As Mistress Coyle’s army of the Answer marches into town behind us, bombing everything in its path Boom! Boom! BOOM!—

As the first soldiers of the Mayor’s own army start arriving in quick formayshun from the south, Mr. Hammar at their front, crossing the square toward us to get new orders—

As the people of New Prentisstown run for their lives in any and every direkshun—

As the scout ship from the incoming settlers lands on a hill somewhere near Mistress Coyle, the worst possible place for ’em—

As Davy Prentiss lies dead in the rubble below us, shot by his own father, shot by the man I just set free—

And as Viola—

My Viola—

Races out on horseback into the middle of it all, her ankles broken, not even able to stand up on her own—

Yes, I think.

Here it comes.

The end of everything.

The end of it all.

“Oh, yes, Todd,” says the Mayor, rubbing his hands together. “Oh, yes, indeed.”

And he says the word again, says it like it’s his every last wish come true.

“War.”
IT BEGINS
“**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 notch on it, the road to where the battle was sposed to be.

   **Boy colt?** Angharrad’s thinking and I can feel spikes
of nerves all thru her body. She’s scared nearly half to death.

So am I.

“BATTALIONS READY!” the Mayor shouts and immediately Mr. Hammar and the later-arriving Mr. Tate and Mr. O’Hare and Mr. Morgan snap salutes and the soldiers start lining up in the right formayshuns, twisting thru each other in coils and getting into order so quickly it almost hurts my eyes to watch it.

“I know,” the Mayor says. “It’s a thing of beauty, isn’t it?”

I point my rifle at him, the rifle I took from Davy. “You just remember our agreement,” I say. “Yer gonna keep Viola safe and you ain’t gonna control me with yer Noise. You do that and you stay alive. That’s the only reason I let you go.”

His eyes flash. “You realize that means you can’t let me out of your sight,” he says, “even if you have to follow me into battle. Are you ready for that, Todd?”

“I’m ready,” I say, even tho I ain’t but I’m trying not to think about it.

“I have a feeling you’ll do well,” he says.

“Shut up,” I say. “I beat you once, I’ll beat you again.”

He grins. “Of that I have no doubt.”

“THE MEN ARE READY, SIR!” Mr. Hammar shouts from his horse, saluting fiercely.

The Mayor keeps his eyes on me. “The men are ready, Todd,” he says, his voice teasing. “Are you?”

“Just get on with it.”

And his smile gets even wider. He turns to the men. “Two divisions down the western road for the first attack!” His voice snaps thru everyone’s head again, like a sound
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 dispatch.”

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 center 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 toward 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—

\textbf{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 plows 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—”

\textbf{Spackle,} Acorn thinks. \textbf{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 toward the Answer, toward 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 burned 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, car-
rying her into what I thought was safety, but all I found
was the man riding by my side, the man who killed a thou-
sand 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, oh please be safe, please be
safe—the bandages he wound around my feet are good but
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 colt** 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 toward the center 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 A’s 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 toward 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 stopping in formayshun 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 armor 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 armor.

“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 oxcart, 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.”

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 lissen to me,” he says, but I can hear him thinking.
“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 toward the line of Spackle, guns out but—

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

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 yards 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 cross the clearing in front of me and the men behind ’em 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 yards 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 **WHOPMP!**

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 burning burning as they try to ride 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 lines of soldiers and as those soldiers are already turning and running but firing their
rifles as they go and as the first arrows from the Spackle bows
start arcing thru the air and as the other Spackle raise their
white sticks and flashes come outta the ends and the men hit
by the arrows in the back and in the stomach and in the face
start to fall and as the men hit by the flashes from the white
sticks start losing bits of their arms and their shoulders and
their heads and falling to the ground dead dead dead dead–

And as I grip Angharrad’s mane hard enough to pull out
hair–
And she’s so terrified she don’t even complain–
All I can hear is the Mayor next to me–
Saying, “At last, Todd–”
And he turns to me and he says–
“A worthy enemy.”

\{ Vi o l a \}

Acorn and I are barely a minute away from the army of the
Answer when we pass the first road and I recognize where we
are. It’s the road down to the house of healing where I spent
my first weeks in New Prentisstown, the house of healing
where Maddy and I snuck out one night.

The house of healing where we took Maddy’s body to
prepare it for burial after Sergeant Hammar shot her for no
reason at all.

“Keep going, Acorn,” I say, pushing the thought away.
“The road up to the tower has to be around–”

The dusky sky suddenly lights up behind me. I turn and
Acorn does, too, and though the city is far away and behind
trees, we can see a huge flash of light, silent from this distance,
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 have 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, burns all over him, and he raises his gun and fires—
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 armor cracking 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 zigzag 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 colt, 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, cooling 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 toward 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 oxes 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 ruddy 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 toward 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—


“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—
“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, graying at the temples, Bradley who was always my favorite on the convoy, who used to teach me arts and math, 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 anymore.

“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 center 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 toward 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 beaten 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 toward 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 rib cage—
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 center 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.

{Viola}

“You’re lying,” Mistress Coyle says, but she’s already turning, as if she could see over the trees and into town. She can’t, there’s just the shadows of the forest against the distant glow. The steam from the vents is so loud we can barely hear ourselves talk, much less anything from the town, and if she took off after the ship the second she saw it come in for landing, she wouldn’t have heard the horn at all.
“That’s impossible,” she’s saying. “They agreed, they signed a truce!”

Spackle! Acorn says, behind me.

“What did you say?” Simone asks me.

“No,” Mistress Coyle says. “Oh, no.”

“Would someone please explain what the hell’s going on?” Bradley asks.

“The Spackle are the indigenous species,” I say. “Intelligent and smart–”

“Vicious in battle,” Mistress Coyle interrupts.

“The only one I met was gentle and much more frightened of humans than the humans here seem to be of them–”

“You didn’t fight them in a war,” Mistress Coyle says.

“I also didn’t enslave them.”

“I will not stand here and have this conversation with a child–”

“It’s hardly as if they’re coming for no reason.” I turn back to Bradley and Simone. “They’re attacking because the Mayor committed a genocide of all the Spackle slaves, and if we can maybe just talk to them, tell them we’re not like the Mayor–”

“They’ll kill your precious boy,” Mistress Coyle says. “Won’t even think twice about it.”

My breath immediately stops as panic starts to rise from what she says, but then I try to remember that she’d like it if I panicked. If I was afraid, I’d be easier to control.

But I won’t be, because we’ll stop this. We’ll stop all of this.

That’s what me and Todd do.

“We’ve caught the Mayor,” I say, “and if the Spackle see that–”
“With all due respect,” Mistress Coyle says to Simone, “Viola is a girl with an extremely limited knowledge of the history of this world. If the Spackle are attacking, we’ve got to fight back!”

“Fight back?” Bradley says, frowning. “Who do you think we are?”

“Todd needs our help,” I say. “We can fly down there and stop this before it’s too late—”

“It’s already too late,” Mistress Coyle interrupts. “If you could just take me up in your ship, I could show you—”

But Simone’s shaking her head. “The atmosphere was thicker up top than we expected. We had to land in full coolant mode—”

“No!” I say but of course they did. Two vents open—

“What does that mean?” Mistress Coyle asks.

“It means we don’t fly for at least another eight hours as the engines cool and replenish their fuel cells,” Simone says.

“Eight hours?” Mistress Coyle says. She makes a fist, actually makes a fist in the air in frustration.

For once, I know how she feels.

“But we’ve got to help Todd!” I say. “He can’t control one army and hold off another—”

“He’ll have to let the President go,” Mistress Coyle says.

“No,” I say quickly. “No, he wouldn’t do that.”

Would he?

No.

Not after we fought so hard.

“War makes ugly necessity,” Mistress Coyle says. “And however good your boy may be, he’s one against thousands.”
I fight down the panic again and turn to Bradley. “We have to do something!”

He looks hard over to Simone and I know they’re wondering what disaster they’ve landed themselves in. Then Bradley snaps his fingers like he’s remembered something.

“Hold on!” he says and rushes back into the scout ship.

[ T O D D ]

I pull the trigger again—

All I get is another snick—

I look up—

The Spackle’s raising his white stick—

(what are those things?)

(what are they that causes so much damage?)

And I’m dead—

I’m dead—

I’m—

BANG!

A gun goes off right by my head—

And the Spackle with the white stick jerks to one side, a trail of blood flying from his neck above the line of his armor—

The Mayor—

The Mayor shot him from the back of Morpeth—

And I’m staring over at him, ignoring the fighting that’s going on all around us—

“You sent yer son to war with an EMPTY GUN?” I scream, shaking from anger and from having just about died—

“Now is not the time, Todd,” the Mayor says—
And I flinch again as the *whisk* of an arrow flies right past me and I grab the reins and try to turn Angharrad to get the hell outta here and I see a soldier stumble back into Morpeth, blood rushing out from a nightmarish-looking hole in the stomach of his uniform and he raises his bloody hands to the Mayor for help—

And the Mayor snatches the soldier’s rifle from him and tosses it over to me—

I catch it out of reflex, my hands instantly wet from the blood all over it—

**Now is also not the time for niceties,** the Mayor puts in my head. **Turn! Fire!**

And I turn—

And I fire—

**{Vi o l a}**

“Survey probe!” Bradley says, coming back down the ramp, carrying what looks like an oversize insect, maybe a foot and a half long, shiny metal wings spread open over a thin metal body. He holds it up to Simone as if asking her. She nods and I see that she’s Mission Commander for this trip.

“What kind of probe?” Mistress Coyle asks.

“They scope out the landscape,” Simone says. “Didn’t you have them when you landed?”

Mistress Coyle snorts. “Our ships left Old World twenty-three years before yours, my girl. We practically flew here steam-powered compared to what you’ve got.”

“What happened to yours?” Bradley says to me, setting up the probe.
“Destroyed in the crash,” I say. “Along with nearly everything else. I barely even had any food left.”

“Hey,” Simone says, trying to say it soft and comforting. “But you made it. You’re alive.” She moves to put an arm around me.

“Careful,” I say. “Both my ankles are broken.”

Simone looks horrified. “Viola—”

“Look, I’ll live,” I say, “but I’m only alive because of Todd, okay? If he’s in trouble down there, Simone, we have to help him—”

“Always thinking of her boy,” Mistress Coyle mutters. “Making it personal at the expense of the entire world.”

“It’s because no one and nothing matters to you that you’re willing to blow the world to pieces!”

Pieces, Acorn thinks, shifting nervously beneath me.

Simone looks at him, furrowing her forehead. “Wait a minute—”

“Ready!” Bradley says, standing back from the probe, a small control device in his hand.

“How does it know where to go?” Mistress Coyle asks.

“I’ve set it to fly toward the brightest source of light,” Bradley says. “These are just area probes with limited altitude, but it should be enough to clear a few hills.”

“Can you set it to look for a specific person?” I say.

But I stop because the night sky lights up again with the same glow I saw on my ride here. Everyone looks toward the city.

“Get the probe up!” I say. “Get it up now!”
[Todd]

I fire the gun before I can even think if I want to—

_BANG_!

I ain’t ready for the kickback and it knocks me in my collarbone and I grab Angharrad’s reins and we spin round in a full circle before I finally see—

A Spackle—

Lying on the ground in front of me—

(with a knife stuck in his—)

With a gunshot wound bleeding from a hole in his chest—

“Nice shot,” the Mayor says.

“You did it,” I say, turning to him. “I told you to stay the hell outta my head!”

“Not even to save your life, Todd?” he says, firing his gun again, and another Spackle falls.

I turn, gun raised—

They’re still coming—

I aim at a Spackle raising his bow at a soldier—

I fire—

But I pull it to the side on purpose at the last second, missing altogether (shut up)—

The Spackle jumps away, tho, so it worked—

“That’s not how you win wars, Todd!” the Mayor yells, firing his gun at the Spackle I missed, catching him in the chin and sending him sprawling—

“You have to choose,” the Mayor says, ranging his gun round, looking for the next thing to shoot. “You said you’d kill for her. Did you mean it?”

Then there’s another _whisk_ sound—