Margaret's feet dangled over the edge of her world.

"Don't lose your wellies," her brother said.

She glanced down at her boots. The blue one certainly hung looser than the green one, but they still fit well enough. Clumps of dry mud sailed into the abyss as she theatrically kicked her heels against the side of the island, exposing more of the flaking rubber underneath.

"I'm serious, Margaret. There's none going spare. Poor old Gabin's been working the fields in a pair of clogs. Hasn't he, dad?"

Their father sat behind them on a little wooden stool, the sunrise glazed across his heavy brow. "You're the only pair of clogs I've seen around here," he chuckled, without shifting his gaze from his binoculars, fixed keenly on the marmalade-washed sky.

Margaret scooted away from the edge and cozied up beside the stool. "Seen anything?"

"Geese. Pigeons. Couple of sparrows. Thought I saw a buzzard. Could've been a kite…"

"Oh, piss off." She gave the man a playful nudge. "You know what I mean."

The hulking silhouette of a city loomed from across the abyss. It was very close this morning — less than a mile of sweet, breezy nothingness between them now. Margaret had never seen an island so large. Great spires and clock towers stabbed at the heavens like raised swords. Beneath them, squat black masses rose to form a blunt wall in a vain blockade against the sun. Light slipped through the seams where it could — mostly between chimney pots, posted like soldiers along the rooftops. The earth they rested on rose from a point — a kind of upside-down mountain, the peak only just visible from where she sat. But she could make out no more detail, no colour — just mass, shape and silence, drifting ever nearer with the quiet certainty of another passing cloud.

"No sign of anyone," said her father. "But she's coming in a bit high. If it was floating a bit lower, I'd know for sure."

"I wouldn't worry, Margaret," said her brother, "It'll be another ghost island."

Margaret tried to remain unfazed. She knew better than either of them what could happen when it *wasn't* a ghost island. She'd learned that lesson before Louis was born — with a different family, one that wasn't around anymore.

"Shame," she said, "I was hoping for slavers. Then I could swap you for a new pair of wellies." She beamed at her brother.

Louis scrunched his upper lip, clearly at a loss for a reply. After a few moments of awkward deliberation he settled for an ironic “Har har,” pulling a bit of a face. Margaret giggled — it was, admittedly, quite a funny face.

“Know what that is?” She pointed at a tree twenty or so yards down the way. It looked half asleep, all slumped over the side of the island, its bronzing fans waving lazily in the wind.

“Horse chestnut.” Louis said, quick and certain — he knew every tree on the island by name. Then it dawned on him. He snapped his head towards her like a spooked deer. “No, Margaret. We’re not about to play conkers.”

“Oh yes we are.” Her fingers fumbled about in the pocket of her dungarees until they found that familiar smoothness. Her chestnut champion. She tugged the seed out by its string and swung it in front of her brother like a hypnotist. “Loser mucks out the chickens.”

Hardly a gruelling forfeit these days — there weren’t many chickens left.

“I didn’t bring any string. Anyway, aren’t we a bit old for conkers?”

“Never too old for conkers, boy,” said their father. “Use this.” He pulled a lace from one of his work boots and tossed it at his son’s feet. It was stiff with old mud, woven deep between the frayed fibres, but it would do. Louis let out a defeated huff, pocketed the lace, and plodded over to the tree with the gait of a child sent to bed without supper.

Margaret sat for a moment in silence. The gentle autumn wind tickled her cheeks. It had an earthy smell to it, like the island was slowly exhaling, bracing itself for the cold months to come. She pressed her hands into the turf, letting the grass mingle with her fingers. It almost felt dry, which was unusual, especially at this altitude.

In the absence of mortal peril, this could have been a very nice day.

A faint oink called out from the wheelbarrow beside her. Her father had packed it with some of the island’s harvest: carrots, oats, a couple of the smaller piglets — the sort of foods he didn’t much care for himself — just in case the city wanted to trade. And between the tattered sacks, Margaret had hidden his shotgun. Just in case it didn’t.

A heavy arm wrapped around her shoulder.

“Your brother’s in a fine mood.”

“Oh, he’s alright really.” She met his ugly mug with a forced smile. His eyes were hard and sunken, like flint in a furrow. “The harvest’s been tough on him. On all of us. And collisions are never easy — least of all when it’s with a chuffing great city.”

He grunted. Margaret's father made great use of an extensive vocabulary of grunts. This particular grunt, as she had come to understand it, roughly translated to: *You're telling me*.

"I wouldn't expect much," he said, returning to his binoculars. "Can't imagine anyone lasting too long in a place like that. These chunks of the old world — they're all tarmac and cobbles. You'd be hard pressed to grow a patch of grass, let alone a barley field. Might've had some bits and bobs once — petrol, cigarettes, that sort of thing — but that'll have been picked clean donkey's ago."

He leaned back and scratched at the stubble on his jaw, the binoculars resting in his lap. "Mind you, my old man told me that, back in his youth, living in a place like that was all the rage — before the Tearaways, that is."

Before the Tearaways. Margaret still struggled to comprehend such a world. A world where the islands didn't fly, but sat together, resting down below, surrounded by all the water you could drink. A world where you could walk in a straight line for days without falling off an edge. A world where you didn't need binoculars to spy on your neighbours — you could just drive over to them on enormous roads that stitched the land together like thread through cloth.

A world where anyone could go anywhere at any time. That sounded like the sort of world that would eat you alive.

"Let's have a peek, then."

Reluctantly, her father gave up his binoculars. The rims were warm, having spent the better part of an hour pressed right up against his face. Through the lenses, the black mass sharpened. What had been a distant smudge now took on uncomfortably vivid details: windows, doors, the odd tree here or there. Right on the edge, Margaret could see inside the ruptured elevations of a building — torn clean through by the Tearaway — its interior laid bare like a dilapidated doll's house. A crooked weathervane perched atop what remained of the roof. Margaret spied on it for a moment, waiting for it to twitch in the wind, if only to prove that something *could* move in this city. But it refused to budge, remaining yet another stubborn witness to the stillness.

Then the scene changed.

"Wait."

A shadow flickered — just for a moment — between the silhouettes of two chimney pots. The motion was blurred and brief, but a touch too deliberate to be a machination of the wind.

"We've been waiting all morning," her father replied.

"No. Dad — shut your face — I think I saw something."

She kept the binoculars trained on the chimney pots, breath shallow, her gaze combing the gaps where the shadow had slipped through.

“A pigeon, I reckon. I must’ve seen about a dozen pigeons.”

“I dunno, Dad. It looked more like a—”

She heard it before she felt it. That telltale *thwonk*— the all-too-familiar sound of her brother pelting a chestnut at the back of her head.

“—Wanker!”

“Found my conker,” Louis announced, holding the nut above her. “And it sounds like she’s a winner.” He began threading it with his penknife, sporting a nauseating grin.

Margaret subtly rubbed her crown, trying to ease the pain ringing at her skull. Surprise conker assaults had been a staple threat throughout her childhood, but they weren’t quite as endearing when your assailant was practically a grown man.

“Just in time, Louis. Your sister’s spotted a pigeon,” said their father, who’d somehow reclaimed the binoculars during the kerfuffle.

The boys shared a thuggish giggle at her expense — not that it bothered her. She knew exactly how to put Louis back in his place. She rose, planted her wellies firmly into the earth, and dangled her conker in front of him.

“Go first, if you want.”

Louis accepted the challenge with a bow steeped in sarcasm, sizing up Margaret’s conker as he descended. He had a confident glint in his eye, and when she saw his own conker, she knew why. Just looking at the thing reignited the stinging at the back of her head. It was an absolute beast of a nut — brazen and bulbous, the outer shell burnished with a sherry red sheen reminiscent of the stock on their father’s Westley Richards. Louis hoisted the nut over his burly shoulder, pulling the shoestring taut — straight as a springtime plough line. The enormous nut dwarfed Louis’ dirty fingertips as he took aim; this was a conker bred for war.

He let it fly.

The conker swung down in an arc, splitting the breeze with a menacing woosh. Margaret flinched with excitement. A crisp clacking rang out as his conker clattered into hers, before promptly fading out into the surrounding nothing.

She checked for injuries: No chips, no cracks, no worries. She smirked. This little nut was ready to go again.

Reluctantly assuming the defensive stance, Louis clutched his father’s shoestring and let the big bastard hang, clearly baffled he hadn’t won on the first try.

“You’re a lucky bugger. That was a perfect-”

Margaret lashed her conker forwards. The swing lacked the same graceful trajectory as her brother’s, but found its target all the same.

“Like shelling peas,” she quipped, pointing to the crack before Louis clocked it.

Louis stared down at his seed as its violent pendulation came to a rest, solemn and dejected — like he was watching a lover swing at the gallows, like he’d staked any potentiality of happiness on the well-being of his fractured little chestnut.

Then the grief melted from his face, only to curdle into something more sour. He glared at Margaret’s conker victorious, slapped it from her hand, and set upon it with a thunderous barrage of wellington heels. After his one-man stampede, he crouched and inspected the wreckage. Not a dent. Margaret’s champion appeared to be immortal.

“Cheat!” He cried, pointing at her, as if some invisible tribunal for regulation conker-conduct were watching over them. “It’s been tampered with! What have you done to it?”

“Passed it through a pig.” The confession leaked through her slightly upturned lips, as every other muscle in her face laboured to restrain her glee.

“You passed it… through a *pig*?” His incredulous stare retreated behind tired eyelids.

“I passed it through a pig.” she confirmed. “The stomach acid dries the conker out and makes it go all hard. Dad told me.”

The man on the stool grunted.

“So *this* is what you do all day? Rummage around in pig shit? No wonder we’re all going hungry.”

“Come on Louis,” Margaret giggled. “It’s only a bit of fun.”

“This isn’t the time for fun, Margaret. This is serious reconnaissance. I thought you of all people would understand that. But oh, no! You brought a toy to play with. A lump of bloomin…” He gawked angrily at the subject of his indignation, struggling to find the words best used to describe its material composition. “*...tree matter* that’s probably still caked in disease and God knows what else. All so you can cheat at a *children’s game* — which, if you’ll both remember,“ Louis hurled Margaret’s conker towards the city. “I didn’t even want to fucking play!”

Margaret took a deep breath, revising her brother’s tantrum for quotes that she might repeat later to make him feel a bit silly. It was true, the island was going hungry, but this little

outburst was a rich harvest indeed. Perhaps she would comment on Louis' referring to their father's bird-watching session as 'serious reconnaissance', echoing the phrase with that dumb baritone throatiness that she'd been employing to great effect ever since his voice had broken. Or maybe she'd opt for a more mature approach, pointing out the fact that Louis would receive far fewer invitations to play children's games if he wasn't so hell-bent on acting like an actual infant. Regardless, it seemed clear that 'tree matter' was going straight into the family lexicon.

She turned to her father, hoping to catch his eye and provoke a burst of laughter that might ease the tension. But, as could have been expected, he had returned to his birds, head quite literally in the clouds, as it often was whenever conversations grew delicate. Margaret got the feeling that, in his mind, any problem that couldn't be fixed with an adjustable spanner was a problem that could fix itself.

Margaret then turned to her mismatched wellies, and was confronted by a nasty feeling that told her the teasing could wait. Not an unfamiliar feeling, but one that, especially in recent years, she found difficult to bottle up. There was a word for this feeling, but Margaret was strongly opposed to the labelling of affections. Her refusal to give names to feelings was much like her father's refusal to let Louis give names to the livestock. If you gave it a name, it became more than just a passing thing, and the upkeep of one's emotional discipline became unnecessarily complicated.

But as her brother looked out at the city on their doorstep, unsure if he should be angry or scared, Margaret was reminded of a little girl. A little girl who had stood on the edge of a very different island, and looked out at this one, terrified of how her life might be changed in the hours to come.

Margaret decided she couldn't stomach the feeling any longer. That perennial bane of gaiety: *responsibility*.

"You're right, Louis. I do understand — that we might be looking at a collision with raiders, killers, or worse. But I've also come to understand that, in any case, there's really not much I can do about it. That's why I like mucking about with you. Because when all's said and done, we can either sit here shit-scared until the end of the world does or doesn't arrive, or we can have a game of conkers."

Louis huffed and sat cross-legged. "I s'pose that's fair enough." He plucked at the turf and tried to toss a bundle of grass over the edge, but the breeze intervened and dropped it at Margaret's boots. "But you're still a cheat."

"I'm sorry I cheated." Margaret lied.

For the next hour or so, the family played a different game. It didn't have a name, but the rules were clear and unyielding: the first person to make a sound lost. Margaret did not enjoy

this game. Listening to nothing but her own thoughts always proved to be both frightening and incredibly dull. She found herself longing for her cornet, which she had taken up as a girl, precisely to escape situations of this nature.

Their father, by contrast, seemed to relish the contest, his victory all but guaranteed. He had his binoculars, and was therefore impervious to distraction — until, much to Margaret's horror, he was the first to forfeit.

"Fetch the others," he said.

"What's wrong?" Margaret asked, already knowing the answer.

"Blokes. Blokes on the roof."

Louis sprang into action. "How many? Let me see!" The boy snatched the binoculars and pressed them to his eyes, masking the panic alight in his gaze. Then, for the first time that morning, Margaret's father vacated the stool. The old man snatched the binoculars back with one hand and slapped Louis across the face with the other.

The nasty feeling had returned, and it hadn't come alone.

"Do as you're told, boy!" he shouted at his staggering son, who didn't yelp or whimper or scream. He only stared back, eyes wide, mouth slack, a thin trickle of blood forming on his lip. Margaret was always astounded by Louis' propensity to totally lose his rag — and even more by his refusal to do so in situations when it would be entirely justified.

"Well?" the man said, returning the stare. Their eyelines were locked and level; the last time her father had slapped Louis, he'd had to reach a fair bit further.

"He's right, Louis. We need to go back. Now." said Margaret, trying to channel their rage towards what was, in her silly-woman's opinion, the more immediate threat. They ignored her; her father looked ready for a fight, and Louis looked ready to be punched. Margaret then spun on her heels and fled towards the village. If they had their hearts set on battering each other before the collision had even begun, she was quite happy to leave them to it.

And so she ran across a naked field, every other stride marked by the dull slap of her blue wellington against her calf. After a few bars of this rhythm, the loose rubber started to burn against her ankle.

Just focus on the pain, she thought. *Focus on the pain until you forget what you're running from*.

Developing her rhythm further, she added ragged breaths on beats two and four, synchronised with the step of her green welly. She counted in her head, wincing each time her blue welly struck the clods beneath her: *one*-and, two-and, *three*-and, four-and…

Then her rhythm was sabotaged by a most jarring syncopation: a distant, half-yell, half-scream, from a singer who had entirely missed their cue, followed by a ghostly crack that hung in the air like a far-away cymbal.

Margaret stopped in her tracks. Looking over her shoulder, she could see her father lying on the other side of the field, with Louis standing over him. She briefly entertained the possibility that Louis had actually shot his father — not ideal, but better than the alternative.

But even from here, she could see Louis was tragically unarmed, and she wasn't sure if he'd ever been taught to shoot the Westley Richards. Besides, Margaret was certain she'd heard the yell before the bang.

Ergo, the worst.

Looking back towards the village, she planned her next move by considering the facts:

1. Men with guns were coming to her island.
2. The village was just three fields away.
3. She did not wish to die.

Her conclusions were interrupted by a second gunshot. Instinctively, she turned to face it. The city seemed so very near, and in full colour now, lit by a mid-morning sun that had once meant elevenses. Louis was still standing over his father, and she couldn't understand why he wasn't moving.

Then, an epiphany.

Another fact. A fact so blatantly obvious, she couldn't believe it had escaped her mind:

Her father was dead, and before long her brother would be too.

Margaret hared back towards the edge. Double-time.