



## ‘WATCH IT!’

**A**dam zigzagged through the crowd, his violin case clutched against his chest. The soundtrack in his head was so dazzling, he could only dream of being good enough to play the solo himself. Ever since he heard the melody at last year’s concert, he had loved it.

‘Not so fast!’ gasped Leila. She struggled to stay close to her brother as they entered the Great Gate but he didn’t hear. Even when they emerged in the noisy marketplace inside the Stone City, he was in such a hurry to turn into

the cobbled side street that he didn't see the Permitted policeman on horseback until too late.

'Adam!' Leila grabbed the grey canvas schoolbag on his shoulder. His violin case swung backward, narrowly missing the horse's front shin, and collided into her flute case. For a moment, Adam saw his own fright mirrored in the shining eye of the horse. The policeman's eyes were hidden behind dark glasses.

'Watch it!' barked the Permitted, tugging sharply on the reins. He steered the huge stallion round the children. Its body was midnight black except for two white shins and a white arrow down its forehead. For a moment, Adam felt sympathy for the harnessed creature until he remembered seeing a woman's foot crushed by a horse like this one.

A second mounted policeman now appeared from the side street. With their backs against a stone wall, the children watched people move aside. Most were Nons like themselves. There were also tourists with their cameras, bags and hats, some smiling at the police on horseback as if watching a quaint custom.

'You won't say anything, will you?' Adam's voice hovered between plea and demand. He fixed his eyes ahead, not wanting his sister to see he was still shaken. Almost thirteen, he was two years older than Leila. How many

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times had he been told not to be such a dreamer? *You need to be more practical like your sister.* What could he say if asked why he hadn’t looked before dashing into a Permitted police horse? How could he say that he’d been playing Vivaldi’s ‘Spring’ in his head? Or that he’d been imagining himself, like his grandfather in the Time Before, riding freely through valleys and over hills on a chestnut horse?

‘Of course not!’ Leila combed her fingers through her jet-black fringe and deliberately widened her eyes, as if to say, *Who do you think I am?*

They both knew that there was more than enough to worry about at home. It was always in the weeks leading up to Easter that Dad began preparing to apply for Mama’s annual permit to remain with them. Without her permit, Mama would be sent back to the other side of the Concrete Wall . . . back to the town where she was born. She might never be allowed back again. This certainly wasn’t the time for other complications, like their son being accused of injuring a Permitted police horse!

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Adam slowed down to Leila’s pace. It was only ten minutes to walk home through the narrow back alleys rather than the main thoroughfare. Either way involved

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climbing up uneven steps of stone, furrowed from centuries of use. The limestone walls on each side changed colour from soft browns and greys to pink, yellow, and even white in bright sunlight. Sometimes Adam would think of a piece of music that invisibly shifted in mood from dark to light or light to dark. But today, after nearly crashing into the police horse, he just listened to Leila go on about her flute class and answered her questions about the junior orchestra.

They avoided using the alleys where Permitted flags hung out of windows in houses that not long ago had belonged to Non families.

At least there weren't any flags yet in the alley with the little yellow parakeet. Now that it was spring, the parakeet's owner hung the cage in an open window, and Leila insisted on stopping for a 'chat' through the bars. The parakeet's squeaky 'allo-allo' made them both laugh. They were still mimicking it when they reached the steps below the stone doorway of Grandma's house. Home.

They were greeted by the smell of freshly baked cookies, still in the pan on the counter that separated the small kitchen from their living room. Grandma rightly described the design as 'cosy'.

'Welcome,' Mama greeted them. 'Perfect timing!' Steam

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rose from two cups of mint tea on the table in front of her and Grandma in the living room. It was Mama’s day off from her voluntary work at the library, and they had been baking.

‘Come. Sit.’ Grandma began to push herself up, but Mama gently restrained her.

‘I’ll see to the children,’ she said, before turning to them. ‘Only two cookies each now. It’ll soon be dinner. Your father’s coming home early.’

They didn’t need to ask why. The reminder was right in front of them. Mama’s bright red shoebox sat perched at the end of the kitchen counter, near the pan of cookies. Dad had left it there this morning, brimming with papers. A gas bill and a water bill were still missing to complete the papers he needed to present at the Permitted Department of Interior. The Department officials insisted on seeing *every* item, *every* year. They wanted to see new documents and also old ones that Dad had shown many times before, like Mama’s birth certificate, their marriage certificate, and the lease agreement for Grandma’s house in the Stone City, which was now in Dad’s name.

The red shoebox had once housed Mama’s wedding shoes. Using it for his ‘filing system’ showed how ridiculous Dad found these Permitted checks on Mama’s right to be

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with her family. But on the day of the interview he would transfer all the papers into his tan leather briefcase. It wasn't worth testing an official's sense of humour.