

CROWFALL

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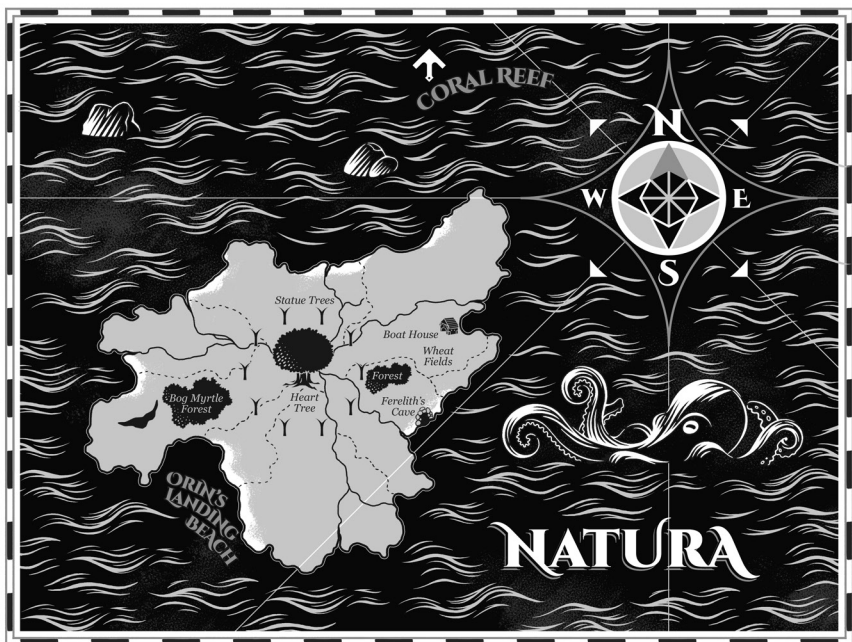
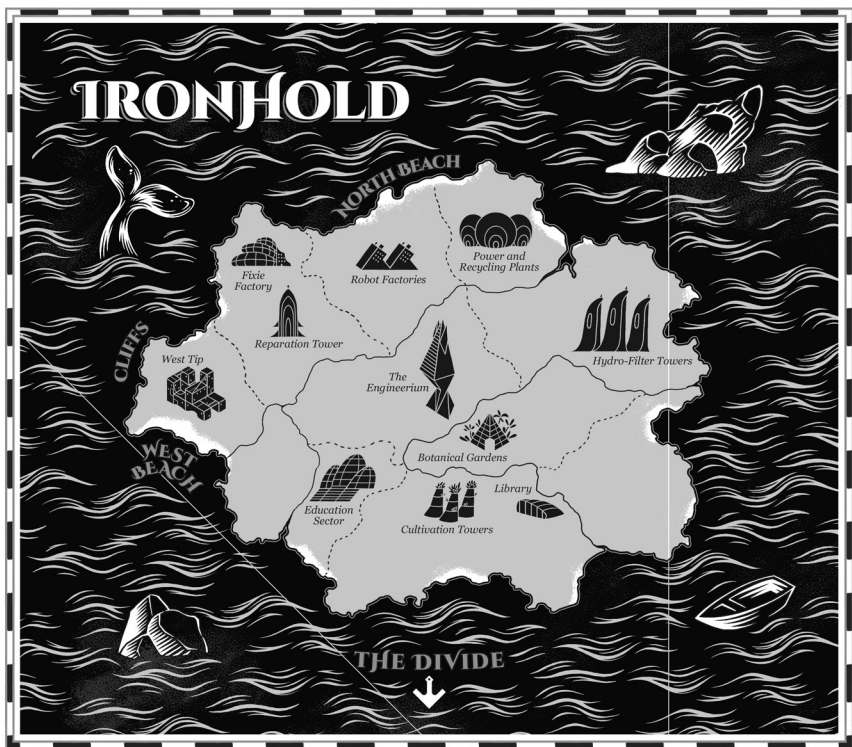
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FOR IMOGEN



IRONHOLD

IRONHOLD & BEYOND



THE DIVIDE



THE SILVER BENEATH



UNNAMED
ISLAND



THE SILVER BENEATH



THE SEA ROCK
ARCHES



CORAL REEF



NATURA

IRONHOLD TIME UNIT	EQUIVALENT
Day	24 hours
Deciday (1/10 th of a day)	2 hours and 24 minutes
Centiday (1/100 th of a day)	14 minutes and 24 seconds
Milliday (1/1000 th of day)	1 minute and 26 seconds



CHAPTER I

The storm appeared without warning.

Morbid clouds moved over the horizon, eclipsing the distant blue as though an enormous blanket was being pulled across the sky. One milliday Orin Crowfall was gazing at the cobalt sea, then it became muddy green, and in no time at all, it was an angry brown, and the breeze had become powerful enough to ruffle his cropped brown hair. The storm was heading towards Ironhold, and as bad luck would have it, Orin was currently clinging to the edge of the West Tip cliffs. Arms and legs slender as scaffold poles were pressed against the cold limestone, and one hand, strong for a twelve-year-old boy, clung on to a steel buttress, the other hand shielding his eyes from the sun.

Cody fluttered up from below. “Do you see that?” Her large robotic eyes shone out of her round face, black and serious. She was around a quarter of the size of Orin, standard size for a fixie, but different from other fixies in many ways. The orange glow of the late afternoon light reflected off her, tipping the silver of her double antennae, curved shoulders and flickering wings.

“You’d have to be buried underground not to see that beast,” Orin said, glancing back at the storm.

“We should head back.”

Orin looked down at the broken juniper sapling growing against odds between the metal fortifications that braced the crumbling cliff. There hadn’t been a natural juniper tree discovered on Ironhold in three years. Of course, they had some growing in the botanical gardens, but not in the wild. This tree wouldn’t survive another storm. Orin had been carefully digging it out for the past three centidays, which was delicate work due to the roots being tangled between rock and metal, but he was almost done. “We have enough time to save it.”

Cody frowned and glanced at the thin strip of beach far below them, which was still strewn with

the remains of an unfortunate West Tip box house, a victim of the last storm. “The clouds are only a centiday away if we’re lucky. I’d rather that wasn’t us.” She pointed at the wreckage.

“Then that’s a centiday we have to save this tree and get back up top.”

“You’re incorrigible, Orin Crowfall.”

“And you use big words for a fixie.” He grinned despite the chill now embedded in his stomach at the sight of the impending storm. There had been too many lately. “We have time,” Orin repeated, glancing at the waves now churning furiously. He wasn’t going to let this plant die. He blew out a long breath. His rope and harness were frayed and his safety would be more of a wish than a certainty if he found himself in trouble, but he was a strong climber. Since he was four, he’d scoured the edges of Ironhold, collecting extra scraps of food: limpets, seaweed, clams, sea lettuce – anything to supplement the sparse quota received by his family and other West Tippers. But mostly, this was where sometimes, just sometimes, a new plant could be found: a rare seed blown in on a distant wind, or a sapling fighting to survive, like this very juniper. He’d mend and nurture them for

a while, before taking the plants to be logged at the cultivation towers in exchange for credits, which his family could use for food. It was the way of Ironhold that everything had a system.

Doubling his speed, Orin carried on with the task of saving the tiny tree. Cody flew to the far side, flipped open one of her fingers and extended a small whirring tool to the rocks around the root.

“Be careful, too much vibration might snap it.” The main stem was spliced, meaning the small tree’s life hung in the balance.

“I am being careful. But we *really* shouldn’t be doing this now.”

It had been hot when Orin had left the Engineerium, the island of Ironhold drowsy with afternoon sun, but now the wind howled ominously and the chill air seeped into his skin and burrowed into his bones. He regretted wearing a thin shirt and not bringing his cape. The weather could change within a moment on Ironhold these days; sunshine to storm, mild to gale, blue to grey, warmth to frost.

Above, the small box houses of West Tip teetered precariously, wood and metal groaning in the breeze. Some of the buildings right on the edge

had been abandoned by the people lucky enough to have friends or relatives further inland, but many were still occupied, Orin's own home included, which was now only a few steps from crumbling into the ocean.

Things were harder in West Tip than the rest of Ironhold, being the poorest area of the island. Everyone in West Tip had either grown up there and never managed to move out or, like Orin's family, had committed some crime against the rules of Ironhold and been moved there. Built on a rocky outcrop, it was a maze of straight bridges and simple square buildings stacked on top of each other on any available nook, external stairways tracing the walls. West Tip was still in the orderly tradition of Ironhold, with precise lines and angles, but there was a precarious nature to the order of the buildings. Everything looked as though, if you were to take out one piece, it would all tumble like a child's toy building blocks, and that was without the threat of a storm.

Taking a deep breath, Orin pushed with his feet, then thrust his body around and underneath the juniper's mid-section. Ensuring he had a secure grip on one of the metal scaffolds, he reached to his belt

for some tape, pulled off a strip and began carefully wrapping the broken stem.

"I guess no crows will be returning today," he called to Cody.

"Seeing as there haven't been any crows on Ironhold since before both our lifetimes, I'd say the chances are still somewhere between zero and nothing."

With a quick glance below, Orin could see that the waves coming on to the small beach were already choppiest and the light had changed as though time were accelerating towards late evening. The storm was almost upon them, its thick, churning mass rolling hungrily their way. The chill inside of him turned to ice as he realized there was no time. A sudden fierce wind rushed at them, stealing the breath from Orin's lungs. The muscles in his hands and feet clenched, gripping rock and metal as the gust attacked them. A loud *clang* sounded as Cody was thrust into the cliff.

"Hold on to something!" he shouted.

"You too!" she called back, although her robotic voice snagged in the blast of air.

Distant wind chimes rang feverishly above.

Biting his lip, Orin pulled himself into the cliff, arcing his body around the juniper to protect it.

The wind abated.

He glanced across to Cody. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "A centiday was too optimistic. Orin, we need to get off the cliff, *now*."

"But the juniper is almost free. The credits will be good and—"

"—and you just can't help fixing things, I know."

Cody was right; it was about more than credits. He couldn't stand the thought of seeing something broken and not trying to mend it. He didn't know why; Cody said it was because he was a fixie like her at heart, but there was more to it. Somehow it made him feel more part of the world, part of nature. It made him feel like *someone*, not just a boy from West Tip who was destined to serve the engineers for the rest of his life.

Lightning lit the sky in a double flash, reflecting spectacularly off Cody's body and quad wing-blades. Thunder growled moments after. With renewed vigour, Orin released the last of the main roots.

"Orin, *now*," Cody urged. "I had you down as an intelligent human – don't prove me wrong."

“Here, you take the plant home and wait for me there.”

She fluttered in front of him. “I don’t think I should leave you.”

“I’ll be fine, only a milliday behind.”

Frowning, Cody clasped the young juniper tree between her small metallic hands. For a moment, she hovered uncomfortably, then, with a flicker, she flew upwards and Orin began his journey back up the cliff face, clipping in his carabiner to the next rope. He was barely halfway when the clouds drew in. The water below turned black and the sky opened, unleashing furious rain. For a moment, Orin clung to the rocks as he was pounded by the wind, and water splattered the metal poles and rocks around him, drenching his shirt and shorts. But he knew that staying here would mean certain death. Sirens punctured the thunder as messenger-bots flew the streets of Ironhold, alerting the population that it was time to shelter and batten down. Distant rumbling and grinding signalled the Ironhold storm shelters heaving into place, and great lightning rods whirled into the sky.

It was so dark now that Orin could barely see where to clip in, or the next hand- and foothold.

Sweat poured down his face, mixed with rain as he drove onwards. Fighting the wind was arm-wrenching work, and he was soon shaking with tiredness. Tiny flecks of ice within the droplets meant the rain bit when it hit him, as though he was being bombarded by grit. Unable to see, he grabbed at rocks and tried to rely on the familiarity of the route, but in reality he didn't know if he was still some distance from the top, or inches. He just had to keep pushing on.

With a boom that shook every cell in his body, thunder crashed directly overhead; lightning had hit the nearest rod. His heart leapt. The cliff shook violently, and the piece of rock he clung to trembled and began crumbling beneath his grip. Panic erupted hot and deadly as his hands fell away from the cliff along with the rocks. His stomach lurched as though it had been yanked to the top of his chest as he began to drop. But it was OK. There was the rope; he would be all right and his harness *would* hold. Flailing to grab anything he could, his hands found rope, then with heart-stopping realization, he knew it was loose and tumbling down along with his body.

He was falling.