

## Children of the Forest

Em sinks into a felted seat and feels the train rock, hears the whoosh of a station stop. Doors open and close to a woman's voice. A mighty voice, thinks Em, to move us with such obedience. Look at us. We trust your faceless power. Each time the voice commands, figures spill as one into the carriage. They clump and tighten, a thicket of silent flesh, bound for the city. She wonders where they go, each in her own orbit or staring into his own space. They rock and sway and wait their turn to cleave from the other. Em feels her head sway in rhythm, closes her eyes and lets tiny sparks sweep from fingers, arms and legs, all the way to her core. A silent crackling, the faintest of burrs, begins below her skin and threads like a hum to her bones. She has stopped fighting the sparks; they no longer frighten her. They are a part of her now since the night dreams.

A building stretches to the sky. A lift blinks numbers to the very highest floor. A talking silver door slides shut to another woman's voice. Not the train woman, thinks Em; her sister, perhaps. They are everywhere. A voice detached from each of the bodies that rock and sway and wait their turn to cleave from the other. The lift halts and pings. Small soft apologies and a push through strangers' breath and warmth. Figures spill as one from the open door and ripple into emptier spaces.

Far below the tall building's windows, a city crawls and a river winds alongside. Em has an eagle's view. Sees through the salt and silt from above. From this eyrie, the river's floor is both light and dark from the tidal flow; a liquid map of deep, dark pockets and shallow bends full of light and sand. She hovers.

At night, Em dreams of quenda. They rock forward in her dark world and peer up with one soft question: why? She looks into the tiny eyes, shining black. She would explain everything, but in the way of dreams, no sound comes. And in the way of dreams, knows the small bandicoots want to stay. But this night has a big moon, and she can almost see their gentle shadows. Before owls come, they move into the undergrowth as one, and all that she keeps is the shape of their memory.

In the building's eyrie, clouds blow past the window and Em's face. Long as a mast, a polished table fills the boardroom. Em sinks to her seat and spins a slow circle to hear the buzz. Voices are jagged saws through dense words and oily figures. Her fingers touch the keyboard and spray numbers to a large screen. She speaks to the numbers; yield and

tonnage, plantations and harvest, regeneration and stakeholders. Words spill from her mouth like honey.

All high-value sawlog.

Growth and yield model.

Mixed jarrah-karri stands.

Ring count at the cross cut. Her head sways to the rhythm. *Just numbers.*

Biodiversity plan.

Management of adverse organisations.

The number of fatalities this year: zero.

Em's skin prickles. Soft spark's crawl to her neck. *No.*

*No more.*

At night, Em dreams of chuditch, and cockatoos as black as last month's moonless sky. They speak of a world beneath their forest floor. Constellations of white threads and galaxies of whispering trees. Stories, food and warnings shared between the oldest and the youngest stands. Soft fungal cracklings across a universe of tangled roots. This is the secret of the cool earth, say the quolls. Their underworld. The story of their home.

Em sinks into a felted seat and feels the train rock, hears the whoosh of a station stop. She feels her head sway in rhythm, closes her eyes and dreams of a different world. Not the one the train divides in this city of dead trees. She dreams of cool wind and a drizzling mist. She opens her eyes to soft drops blurring her window, and knows them as tears.

By day, Em sits in circulating air. She draws a strand of fine, pale hair to tuck behind her ear. Her fingers draw words from the keyboard: *adverse organisations*. The screen pops a list of those who obstruct the business of old growth; hinder the crosscut, get in the way. One name with a line marked, red as blood. Em wonders if this means "maximum adversity". She smiles and nods 'yes': Forest Friends.

She searches, and finds images of tall trees and plans to gather. An exhortation; *Be the change*. No rain is coming. A perfect time of crisp winter nights. Only anger to burn in the damp southern undergrowth. Campfires carefully tended and the sparks contained. A gathering of Friends to stand against the harvester and feller, and get in the way. Em

measures the risk and pushes tent and bag to the boot of her car. One weekend. Four hours of winding road. A new beginning.

At night, Lacey sits and watches her pack. Em cups Lacey's face and looks into eyes of black circles ringed with yellow. Sees wolf eyes for the first time. The bag is heavy, but she lifts the corners from the floor and tumbles sprawling balls of Lacey's food. It's all in hand. Lacey will wait. Em moves to the door, looks behind and meets the wolf eyes as for the last time. She feels the prickling warm and brush of her electric skin. A smile curls each corner of Lacey's panting mouth, nodding 'yes'.

Close to midnight, camp fires are beacons to the new Friends. Em's wheels crunch quietly near the other cars and her door swings wide. Outside is a cool fog of rich earth, like dirt turned with old bark. Mushrooms and rotting logs. She draws in crushed leaves and something older than memory. Her face tilts to canopies touching night sky. Em's air tastes of dark sand in the silent space between a boobook owl and soft drumbeats. Em moves toward the gathered, bathed in flickering gold. A single word spills from all the mouths like honey.

*Welcome.*

Em feels her buzz and tingle warm. There is nothing greater, she thinks, than to stand among friends. A girl, it looks to Em, rises to address the gathered. But when she speaks, a woman's voice rings out across the forest. There is a plan for the morning, before the harvesters arrive.

*There will be heavy chains and courage.*

*We will need them both.*

The fire flicks light across silent faces. Someone moves a glowing log and spirals gold dust up into the night. Em thinks she sees a chuditch in the undergrowth; pinpoints of white eyes reflecting fire.

*You have joined the final battle for this block.*

*Old logs already roll under dark's cover.*

There is quiet reflection and a shared imagining. Someone coughs behind, a damp sound not best in this cool place. A silent vigil for the quolls binds the gathering's resolve and readies them for harvester and chains. Em's breath marks the minutes before the crowd splits and allows the passage of one past the fire.

Em sees a woman's face etched thin by years of purity and plants. Wilful bones lift her jute shirt, brown as peeling bark. The woman approaches and her hands raise a cup to welcome the new Friend. Em's fingers circle rough clay while dark liquid curls steam into the cold night air. Her tongue rolls around a must of damp earth and old leaves, moves it down, buries it deep.

There is singing. A tremulous melody rises with sparks before others blend and join and branches ring overhead with a battle cry and calls for a kinder world. Em feels her eyes close against the light to sway in rhythm and spirit with brothers and sisters and it almost feels like home. When the song ends, it is time to rest before the harvesters, and the gathered move through undergrowth to swags and domes.

Em raises her tent by torchlight, smoothing blankets and bag. Her small hands scoop soil, and hammer pegs. By moonlight, she opens her eyes to white threads raised from the earth, and rolls them between fingers. Tiny sparks thrum and crackle, and Em's head lifts to a scuttle in the fallen leaves. She peers up at one who passes back to the undergrowth and domes. She looks into shining eyes, blue even in the fading fires. A smile pulls her lips around a warm *Goodnight*. A word spills from his mouth, *Welcome*.

At night, Em dreams that children run with bettong and wave goodbye. She stirs and wakes from the clay's dark liquid. In silence, she moves past saplings, over beds of sharp sticks and must. Lowering to the scattered leaves, bones burr and hum while warmth spills to her feet. Her heavy feet, taken as a gift. Cold earth covers and moves them down, buries them deep. She stands to walk away; cannot. A tangled universe of roots and threads holds her fast and shares her story to the quolls and the trees: *she is here*.

Long, deep toes are anchors in the loam and she rises to the stars. A silent climb to the chilled moon. Beneath a slow spiral, the ground falls away, a resolution and a coming home. Her skin, an epigraph of brown and gold and strips that peel and hang. A lightening, a leaving behind. Almost high enough to see the Southern Ocean, she reaches to the clear night sky. She hovers.

Her hands, or what they must be in this high place, creak and lift to feel her hair flutter, hear it whisper in a southerly wind. She looks down. Cold ripples sweep through canopies below nodding yes ... yes. The top of Em bends and sighs. She feels the crown of her dome, her magnificence. Countless tiny, shining planes. Connected as one, veined and drawing water from the deepest earth. Breath to the forest, sweet as life. Her crown whispers

to the tiny Friends below, nodding 'yes'. Her hair; a triumphant song in the cold night air. Flat and cool like polished stones, thin as wafers and a winter dawn. Green as the sea.