

ITSS: Book 1

ITSS

Book 1 – The Penguin Poachers

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Try before you buy!

The Penguin Poachers

Prologue

8 Years Ago

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Chapter One

The bitter Antarctic wind swirled and howled, lashing against the tight huddle of emperor penguins. Even though these bitterly cold nights were commonplace in this unforgiving, snowy wasteland, the colony were still suffering from the dramatically low temperatures.

In amongst the colony was an intruder so inconspicuous that the penguins themselves were unaware of her presence, mostly because she looked just like them. More than that, she *was* one of them! Or at least, she was in her current form. Standing at a metre tall, and with the black-and-white tuxedo look – and yellow feathers around the neck – so commonly associated with these birds, the only ways to identify her from the other birds was to either look for the missing tips of her left flipper, which to the uninformed observer would appear nothing more than an injury sustained in the wild, or notice that she was clutching a rock in her right flipper, almost like a human would hold something in their fist.

A sudden rush of icy wind whipped across the heads of the group and many of the birds brayed loudly in frustration at the worsening conditions. Lavanya – the spy amongst them – had trained since a child for missions like this though and despite her hatred of the cold, she was not going to radio to pull out.

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It had been hard enough to convince the commanders to allow her to infiltrate this group in the first place. Being only twenty was already an aspect that made the high-ups reluctant to allow her to go solo on a mission, but the biggest reason was the one which had frustrated her since she had been recruited at age six. In her human form, she had three missing fingers on her left hand, which were the reason for her missing flipper tip in her penguin form. Lavanya had always been determined to never allow this to hold her back and yet, it still felt like many operatives, commanders, and fellow agents wanted to wrap her in bubble-wrap.

No. She would not give up. She would see this mission to the end. She knew she could manage this cold for as long as it took and would show everybody how capable she was as an agent. More importantly, if the information Owen had received during his own mission was accurate, they could shut down a major smuggling ring of exotic animals.

“That’s what this is all about,” Lavanya muttered to herself for motivation. Of course, as a penguin, this speech only came out as a rhythm of chirps. “Protecting these beautiful creatures. I can do this.”

Her self-assurances were suddenly disturbed by a beam of light which whipped across the huddle from behind the storm’s fog. The thin beam was accompanied by another, and then a third before the dark silhouettes of three people started to appear at their source. The real penguins had begun to notice the intruders and a loud warning call began to ring out from those closest to the men. Despite it being a common misconception of new recruits, animal agents couldn’t ever

actually translate the sounds of other creatures. They did somehow get the gist of the speech though and Lavanya knew all too well that the calls were panicked. They had seen these men before.

Each of the men wore fluorescent orange coats lined with fur down to their long, baggy snow pants and boots. They had their hoods drawn up and wore large, black goggles to keep out the snow. Two of the men were clean-shaven but the first had a thick, ginger beard and moustache – an identifying feature that Lavanya made a mental note of.

The intruders strode towards the huddle and scanned their torches across the frightened birds. The smaller of the men – although due to their thick layers of clothing, none looked especially small – stepped out ahead, pointed his light into the huddle, and called something back. The two other men nodded before stepping forward with him and following his gaze towards something to Lavanya's right.

“Radio base,” the man with the ginger beard called through the howling wind to his companions, pulling down his hood. “Tell them we’ve found them and to get ready to get us all out of here.” The smaller man nodded and pulled out a radio remote.

“I’ll get the truck,” called the third man before hurrying away into the dark.

As the two remaining men continued to talk and point to different members of the frightened huddle, Lavanya felt her nerves begin to rise. No amount of training could prepare any agent for the raw emotion of critical mission moments like this

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one. It was terrifying and for the first time since the operation had even been suggested, Lavanya began to realise that she was in real danger. There was no telling how this would go down. She could get hurt or perhaps even worse!

As the fear began to take hold, she thought back to her last moments before the start of the mission. Owen had walked her to the edge of the snowbank near the colony. He hadn't said anything, but they had gone through so much together that she could tell that he wanted to ask her to reconsider the mission. A small part of her now wished that he had asked her, and that she'd agreed, although she knew deep down that she'd have rejected any such suggestion out of hand.

She'd knelt by the snowbank and focused on her breathing techniques as he'd stood watch. As she calmed herself and began to call to her inner animal, a soft, golden glow had begun to envelope her body and within a few seconds, the transformation from human to penguin had been completed.

"Keep it simple," he'd said once she was fully transformed. "Get captured. Activate the tracker. Then hold tight and wait for the king of the jungle to come to your rescue, Princess Lavanya."

He'd been playfully teasing her as he often did, but she wasn't about to let her friend off easy. Unable to speak human anymore, she'd pushed her flippers back and pecked at his shins. He'd jumped back but tangled his legs and fallen into the snow. "Ok! Ok! I'm sorry!" he laughed as she waddled round to loom victoriously over him. "But seriously, be safe."

She'd nodded as best as a penguin can nod, before letting him get back to his feet. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small rock, handing it to her. "The tracker is inside," he told her, even though they'd both attended the same briefing and tested it together. "Split it and the tracker will turn on."

A thought crossed her mind. In the wild, penguins sometimes give rocks to their partners, almost like an engagement ring. Although she and Owen were just good friends, they did often get teased on campus for their closeness. She hadn't found it very funny at first, but Owen had hated it and that had suddenly made the joke funnier to her and their group of friends. Owen was usually the first to tease people but, in his defence, he was quite relaxed about taking some stick too.

She realised that she couldn't wait to get back to base and tell them all that he had penguin-proposed to her. She could picture the scene now: in the cafeteria sat around the table. She'd tell them all the story and laugh as his face turned redder and redder until his voice started to accidentally slip into his loud lion's roar – another factor which caused him great embarrassment.

The thought of getting home to campus gave Lavanya a glimmer of brightness in the darkness that the fear was creating. Seizing on it, she began to breathe deeply and focus on her mission.

Get captured. Activate the tracker.

She kept repeating her objectives in her mind until she started to feel calm enough to think straight. The situation was

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dangerous, but then she realised something crucial: nothing had actually gone wrong. This was the plan! She just had to see it through, and she'd strike a major blow to this group of criminals.

Steeling herself for the next step of her plan, she lowered her head so that her beak was touching her chest. Trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, she began to slowly make her way through the crowd and towards the men, pausing if their flashlights turned towards her. Using her flippers to push between the other birds, it took several minutes of waddling to close the gap between the agent and her targets.

Before she could reach the edge of the colony though, a twin set of lights appeared through the storm, followed by a loud, mechanical sound which fought over the howling winds. First, a wide, black disc appeared; attached to a long, horizontal strip of metal. Lavanya recognised it from her briefing as a crevice probe, designed to go ahead of a vehicle to ensure that the snow is safe to travel on. Next came the truck itself, a large metal box with powerful tracks instead of wheels. The yellow paint was barely noticeable in the poor conditions and looked to have been chipped away over many years of service. Towed behind the truck by ropes fastened to the front corners, there was a much smaller metal box, no more than two metres wide, deep, and tall. The side of this box had a grey metal shutter, which was open wide, and as it pulled into view, Lavanya saw a small drinking bowl and a few dead fish stacked in a corner.

If the men hadn't scared them enough, the arrival of the enormous vehicle had spooked the colony and Lavanya had to fight not to get caught up in the panicked pushing as the

penguins closest were desperately trying to scurry away to safety. Unfortunately, the same tight-knit strategy which had helped to keep them warm was now a hindrance, since the panicked birds closest to the intruders could only press into a wall of their fellow penguins, all pushing and shoving to get away.

“Hurry up!” the man with the beard shouted to his colleagues. He and the man who had been speaking into the radio ran forwards through the snow and wrapped their arms around the nearest penguin. As the terrified bird flapped and scabbled, they pulled it away from the huddle and started to drag it towards the metal box.

Lavanya was meant to be hidden but the shocking sight of the helpless creature being dragged away overcame her. With a howl of anger, she threw back her flippers and began to rush towards the men. She was only a few metres away when another two aggressors hopped out of the truck and began to make a move on the colony. For a brief moment she paused, unable to decide which pair to try to fight. The decision was soon made by one of the men who had just left the truck. Spotting her separated from the group, he pointed and shouted something to his partner. In an instant, both men began to move quickly towards her and with a sudden flash of panic, Lavanya started to fearfully back away, instinctively trying to raise her flippers like fists.

The men got to her much faster than she expected and had they been prepared; they could have surrounded her. Luckily, they didn't press their tactical advantage since they were naturally expecting to face a helpless bird and not an agent who

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had scored top of her class in 'Bird Combat 101'. As the first man dived forward, Lavanya's training kicked in and she spun to the side, dodging the clumsy grab and putting herself on the other side of opponent number two. She gave the first man's arm a savage peck which even through his many layers of clothes caused him to cry out in pain. As he pulled his arm back, she clamped down harder and used the momentum from his yank to dive towards him, slamming him square in the face with her large body.

A flicker of triumph flared as she watched as her target fall backwards, but this was short-lived as, a moment too late, she noticed his partner dive forwards. The assailant knocked the wind out of her and as she fell backwards, her right flipper opened, and the disguised tracker rolled away into the snow. With surprising force, he landed on top of her and quickly tried to force his hands onto her face, pushing her down into the snow.

With panic rising, the young agent tried desperately to wriggle free or peck out at her opponent, but he was far too heavy to budge, and his huge, gloved hands were pressing her down to the ground. "Give me a hand," the man roared before nastily grunting to her. "We've got a right little fighter here."

Lavanya tried desperately to keep struggling but it was no use, and soon her tired body could battle no more. After a few seconds – which felt like hours to the scared penguin - she felt several more pairs of hands grab her. The man lifted himself off her body and helped as the group dragged her painfully upwards. Despite the last-ditch efforts of her weakened struggles, they manhandled her with ease through the snow

and threw her into the metal box next to the penguin she had tried to save and another who had been captured.

In the cramped space, she struggled back upright and spun around to see a fifth man, who must have got out of the truck later, dragging a hatchling by the scruff off its neck. With no care for the poor baby bird, who still had his brown down feathers, he tossed it into the box and at Lavanya, before the man with the beard grinned and slammed the lid down, leaving them squashed in the darkness.

Chapter Two

“You’re gonna wear out the deck if you keep pacing like that.” Owen Carter heard the soft, friendly voice from behind him. He could barely contain his feelings of nervous energy, but he stopped and tried to look nonchalant by leaning on the metal railing at the edge of the deck.

Owen and the rest of the team were waiting on an old fishing boat that had anchored a few hundred metres from the nearest mass of ice and snow. The boat itself was relatively small – no larger than a bus – and consisted of a covered cabin at the back, with an open deck at the front. Its paint was chipped across the hull and the revolting smell of fish somehow seemed to still hang in the air, even when outside.

Despite its decrepit looks, the old vessel had actually been recently outfitted for espionage by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, and contained some of the latest technology, including sonar (for detecting underwater objects) and a new engine which could make it one of the faster ships in the world. Like the rest of the team, Owen wasn’t keen to find out about its top speed from first-hand experience. When he and Lavanya had boarded, the crew had told them stories about how the ship seemed to bounce across waves when the engine was active. In fact, the helmsman had proudly displayed

a large vomit stain on the hull which he claimed couldn't be washed away despite attempts by both man and machine.

Getting the use of this expensive, yet disgusting, ship had been easy enough. The International Therianthropy Secret Service (ITSS) were well connected in Canadian Intelligence as one of their primary training facilities was located near the small Inuit village of Tikirarjuaq (Whale Cove in English). The base primarily served as a school for agents and trainees who could transform into animals suited to winter conditions. In fact, Lavanya had spent some time there after she and Owen had finished basic training.

"I'm worried," Owen said shaking his head and turning to face the source of the voice. "She should have checked in by now."

Stepping onto the deck was a small woman with a slight hunch, who was wrapped up in an orange coat. It was Tuva, the mission handler, and a living legend of the ITSS. Now in her 60s, Tuva was semi-retired and spent a lot of her time in her native Norway looking after her grandchildren. As the first ever ITSS narwhal agent – a type of whale native to the northern arctic regions – Tuva had spent many missions in cold locations and although she was at the wrong side of the world, she knew more than enough to make a great choice of commanding officer.

"She could be still waiting for them to arrive and lost track of time in the huddle. Penguins don't have watches, you know?" she chuckled softly and came to stand at the railing next to Owen. She reached out a gloved hand and placed it on

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his shoulder reassuringly. “I wouldn’t have agreed to send her in if I didn’t think she was capable.”

“I know, Ma’am, and I’m sorry. I just... I just...” Owen swallowed back the thought that kept crossing his mind. The thought of Lavanya getting hurt. He sighed. “It isn’t like her to miss a check-in. She’s meticulous about everything. She even writes her name in her socks just because some manual once suggested labelling your clothing on campus.”

“So, I’ve been told,” Tuva laughed again, projecting a sense of casual ease.

The morning sun was beginning to rise and sparkle across the calm waters, which was at a great contrast to the stormy night they had endured. The reflections were causing the snow and ice to sparkle like the ground itself was made of millions of tiny diamonds. The experience could have been beautiful if not for the risky reason behind their visit.

“Then doesn’t this all seem out of the ordinary? First, we spot that large ship heading straight towards the last sighting of the colony, and now she’s missed a check in.” Owen turned to face his senior officer, lowering his hood, and revealing his short blonde hair and the concerned look in his sky-blue eyes.

“I am suspicious, yes,” Tuva nodded collectedly. “But there is nothing really that we can do other than...”

“Of course, there is!” exclaimed Owen, his eyes widening. “We could investigate. We could pull her out. We could at least check that the tracker is still online.”

“Mister Carter,” the stern tone in the older woman’s voice stopped him in his tracks and reminded him of Mrs Williams – his terrifying, old nursery teacher. She had removed her arm when he had spun to face her but still stood calmly, looking up at the young man. Her eyebrows were raised slightly, and her lips pursed, as if contemplating what to say next. After holding her gaze for a few moments more, she continued, “Mister Carter, I know this is hard for you and I know that you Miss Jha are close. That said, you are both agents on an active mission and I expect you to act like it. Understood?”

“Yes Ma’am. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” her face and toned relaxed. “We have no reason to think that Lavanya is in any sort of trouble. She hasn’t asked for help, and I’ve already checked her tracker. It isn’t activated but it’s still receiving our signal.”

Owen sighed to himself. Perhaps he had been a bit rash. He thought of how angry Lavanya would be if the mission was interrupted for no reason. He knew how determined she was to prove herself, especially in front of a living legend like Tuva. “You’re right, Ma’am,” he acknowledged before a thought crossed his mind. “What about that large ship though? It seems odd for a ship to be sailing in such a storm.”

The old woman smiled at him with a youthful glint in her eye. “That’s what I came to talk to you about,” she said. “How do you fancy looking after an old-timer on a bit of a side mission?”

Chapter Three

With orders given to both the ship's captain, and Lieutenant Mills - the assault team leader - in case of emergency, Tuva and Owen were soon ready to depart. They sat in what was once a small life raft, which had now been outfitted to contain an almost silent engine and a wedged forward hull to break the waves like a speed boat. It reminded Owen of one of the small boats that explorers used to traverse the Amazon rainforest, except that it was bright orange and contained a small antenna for long-range radio use.

The boat had been lowered from the main ship and under Tuva's instruction, Owen was sat at the back navigating the engine and propellor. Tuva sat at the front, staring out ahead of them as they made their way quietly towards the ice and snow where he had landed with Lavanya not long ago. She had her bare hand dipped in the freezing water and Owen could only imagine that she was able to bare the temperature thanks to the abilities she possessed from her animal form. With her gloved hand, she suddenly pointed right, and Owen adjusted his course until she was satisfied.

They continued for a while in this manner; Tuva occasionally pointing and Owen changing course to match her direction despite having no idea how she was navigating. The white sun was beautifully bright yet seemed to do nothing to

raise the temperature in this bitterly cold environment. Born and raised in the north of England, Owen was no stranger to cold weather, but this was something entirely new. He sometimes wondered if his inner animal had something to do with his need for warmth – his lion form had loved lounging in the Savanna during the animal specific part of his training. He and Lavanya had always laughed that he loved the heat, but was born in a cold location, whereas she preferred the colder weather, yet was born in India.

By now, they had navigated several bodies of water between ice sheets and icebergs, and the fishing boat was long out of sight. The sun was directly above them, and he knew that it wouldn't be there to guide them for much longer as the winter season was fast approaching this part of the world. He had blindly followed Tuva's directions and was becoming more and more aware that he had no idea how to get back to ship. The only thing which gave him some confidence was that the old lady certainly seemed to be focused and acting with purpose. Either that, or she was a very convincing actor.

Suddenly, Tuva shot up the palm of her gloved hand and spun to face Owen. Immediately, he cut the engine and opened his mouth to ask what was happening. He was stopped in his tracks by a quick finger to the lips of the mission leader, who had withdrawn her other hand from the water and looked gravely concerned. She carefully shifted over to him and pointed to the largest mass of land by them. "They're over that ridge," she whispered in a hushed tone. "The ship is docked by the snow, but I don't know what else is happening."

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Owen stared and craned his neck as their boat glided slowly forwards. He couldn't see any ship, people, or anything that made this lump of snow and ice look any different to all the other ones that he had passed. "How do you know?" Owen asked, matching Tuva's quiet voice.

"Echolocation," she explained before seeing his confused look and clarifying further. "A bit like a bat can sense things in a cave by sending out a noise and receiving the sound vibrations which bounce back. I can sense things in the water."

"Wow. That's really cool! Can I learn that?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. You're a lion, aren't you? They can't do it but us narwhals are very good at it."

Tuva made a brief glance around their location and squinted hard in the direction of the snowy land she had identified as the base of the mystery ship. After a few moments, she reactivated the engine and using its silent motor, guided the boat to the shore and anchored the forward section softly into the snow.

"Ok, Mr Carter. Here's the plan for now. Take this," the older woman took a small watch out of her pocket and handed it to him. As he accepted it into his hands, he noticed that she suddenly seemed much younger and more energised. "Do you see the numbers on it?"

"Yes, they look like coordinates. Is this our location?" Owen asked.

"It is. I'm going to do some scouting and see what they're up to. I'll be back in fifteen minutes at the most but if I'm not,

radio our location to the captain and update him of the situation. Do you understand?”

“Yes Ma’am, though can’t I come with you?”

Tuva shook her head and despite the freezing cold air, she unzipped her orange coat, which like Owen’s on this mission, was reversible to a camouflaging white. “I’m just doing reconnaissance work. I’ll get you if there is anything exciting happening.” She winked and begun to take off her snow boots and coat.

Owen knew that Tuva was right. She was far more experienced and at home in this sort of climate. In fact, Owen was only on this mission as a compromise between Lavanya and the higher ups who felt she needed backup on her first mission. A lion in the middle of Antarctica would be fairly useless and incredibly suspicious. A narwhal would also be suspicious to some since they inhabited the artic, but Owen supposed that not many people would necessarily know that well enough.

He swallowed hard. “If anything has gone wrong... If she’s...”

“I’ll get you if there is anything you can do,” Tuva nodded with a reassuring gaze. Her relaxed and grandmotherly features were now gone and replaced by a steely focus that only the most experienced professionals have. She held his gaze for a moment longer, as if to make the point that she was in control of the situation, before turning and executing an elegant dive into the icy water.

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Owen rushed to the edge of the boat but couldn't see Tuva anywhere below the boat. After a few seconds, he caught a glance of a small ball of golden light a few metres from him and quite deep. Suddenly, it began to expand rapidly. Once it was the size of a van, the glowing light stopped and was replaced by a large, dark shape. The big mass began to expand as it rose to the water's surface and despite Owen knowing that it was his ally, he couldn't help but feel a bit scared at the ominous creature moving towards his small, fragile boat.

The long, white horn of Tuva broke the calm surface first, followed by a large brown whale's head. The narwhal turned so that its horn hovered above the boat, dripping water onto Owen's hood. Although narwhals probably can't smile, the creature next to him certainly seemed to be trying and Owen couldn't help but feel a little bit honoured to be in the presence of such a hero of the ITSS agency. Lavanya would be so jealous when she found out that he had got to see the famous Tuva Pedersen in her animal state. With a final puff from its blow hole, the whale turned in the direction of the open water and dove down until she was just a small blob of darkness. Like a rocket, she suddenly sped off into the distance and out of sight for Owen, who was left to twiddle his thumbs and wait for news about his closest friend.

Chapter Four

The box was cold and stuffy and filled with an air of panic from the other penguins. They were squashed together in the pitch black and despite her best attempts, Lavanya had been unable to find any sort of give to the metallic box they were imprisoned within. She could feel the taste of blood in her beak from the fight and a large bruise starting to form on her shoulder, where she had tried to force the shutter door to bend or break.

Despite that pain, the only feeling she had now was one of utter failure. The failure to complete her mission. The failure to protect the colony and the penguins trapped with her. The failure to hold even one lousy tracker – her only job in the entire mission. Without it, she was done for. The mission was over, even if she was the only operative aware of the fact at that moment. She could picture Owen sat on the deck of the fishing boat which had brought them here. He'd be laughing along with the crew – he'd always had a gift for making friends – and he'd be telling them all stories about how great she was. He always built her up and she had always appreciated his support, even if she did sometimes find it embarrassing.

She could picture him now as the hours went on. The others might be getting worried, but he'd not falter. He believed in her. Even when their mission commander, Tuva -

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her personal hero - began to question the success of the mission, he'd refuse to give up. A warm tear rolled down her feathers. She was such a disappointment.

In the darkness, the other penguins had stopped braying and trying to find an escape route. They were huddled together by the back whilst the box was being dragged noisily along by what Lavanya had imagined was the same large vehicle which had brought it here. Despite instinctively wanting to huddle for warmth, she was crouched away from the others. Alone. Just as she deserved.

She thought back to all the obstacles she had faced, even as a child when she first came to the ITSS. Her family had agreed to send her to an elusive boarding school after she had mysteriously won a scholarship. It had turned out that she had been selected due her hidden talent of animal transformation and that other children like her were brought to one of a few international campuses to learn to control their abilities, and even put them to good use fighting international crime.

Not Lavanya though.

Not the girl with the missing fingers on her left hand. She couldn't possibly become an agent with such an impairment, as others seemed to see it as. Yes, she had to attend the campus to keep her secret abilities from coming out in public, but it was clear from day one that the adults thought she was far too delicate and incapable of ever becoming an agent.

Finishing top of her class wasn't even enough to convince the campus trainers when it came to applying for basic training. She had worked and worked to become the most capable, most

athletic student and at thirteen, which was the first time a student could enter basic training due to the lack of agents, or indeed the lack of people with the gift of therianthropy, she had applied. She had the best grades; had completed extra work experience in mission control rooms; and held the record for the fastest time for a child under eighteen on the 100 metres. Still, she was rejected.

The instructors never admitted that it was her hand which held her back – just that they *'couldn't see her as an agent'*. In fact, it was only on her third attempt, aged fifteen, when she was finally accepted onto the course after her favourite teacher had made a fuss on her behalf. She'd been paired with a scrawny, blonde boy called Owen, who had just turned thirteen, and was still so young looking that he hadn't even started shaving. Despite Owen being English, and Lavanya having spent most of her time on the English campus, both were sent to the training course in the United States of America, which held a reputation as being the toughest place to graduate.

She and Owen had struggled through the first part of basic training, and it was clear that he was by far the weakest potential trainee. His gift had only been identified a year earlier and he had been on campus for barely six months before being accepted onto the course. He was doomed to fail, and a part of Lavanya had wondered if he had been accepted onto the course just to pull her down with him.

The young man had more determination and grit than his soft features suggested though. With Lavanya's help, they had both begun to turn things around in training and passed phase one with flying colours. Phase two required trainees to form a

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squad and such was their new reputation, that they had been spoilt for choice. That was how they'd met the rest of their friends - nothing bonds a group better than months in the mud being roared at by an angry drill sergeant who had seen far too many army movies.

They had all passed basic training, but Lavanya and Owen had done so with style. In fact, they were personally handed their certificate of completion by the Director of North American Operations. She'd shaken their hands and told them that they both had very bright futures in the organisation. Despite this, and her continued success on the next stages of training, she was still regularly overlooked for missions and if she wasn't, she was usually in a supporting role. This had been her first ever solo mission and her big chance to prove everybody wrong.

"This was my chance," she chastised herself, although the noise was still just chirping. "And I blew it." She tried to close her eyes but all she could see was the disappointed look that she could imagine would form on Owen's face when he found out she was gone.

The trip in the box was frustratingly long as the vehicle had to keep backing up and finding a new route. With hidden crevasses, Antarctica could be a death trap and whoever this criminal gang were, they were certainly professional enough to have the right skills and the expensive equipment for the job. Of course, exotic animals could sell for a lot of money and since most people saw penguins as cute toys, there was surely a huge market for them amongst the unethical billionaires who were looking for their spoilt child's next birthday present.

After what seemed like an eternity, the movement of the box finally stopped for good, and Lavanya heard the truck's engine turn off. There was a worried chirp from the hatchling – a cry for his parents - and Lavanya wished she could communicate with him in a way other than just a reassurance chirp, although she didn't know if her penguin was up to that standard. Not that any reassurances she could give it would be true. She had no tracker and no plan. The best-case scenario for this little bird was that it would be in a private collection somewhere in a cage too small for it. Worst case, Lavanya realised with a shudder, was that it would end up as an entrée at a party of the world's richest exotic food tasters.

Abruptly, the shutter was pulled up and Lavanya had to force her eyes together to stop the sudden glare of the sun from blinding her. She heard a squeal as one of the penguins was grabbed and pulled from the box. As her eyes adjusted, Lavanya could start to make out the hatchling being forced up a small, metallic plank towards a medium-sized vessel with a single shipping container secured on its deck.

A familiar, but unwelcome, face suddenly appeared in front of the now open door. It had a thick, ginger beard and up close, Lavanya could see the man's dark eyes and scarred, rough skin. He smiled nastily, showing a set of surprisingly white, straight teeth, before shouting, "Oi! Lads, get over 'ere. Get this one with the bad flipper. It's a right old monster; gave Sammy a black eye."

"What'cha get one with a bad arm for? That's not gonna sell" a voice grunted. Two other men in thick orange coats

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came into view, one of them from the direction of the ship, and stepped forwards to help the bearded man.

“You wanna go out next time?” the man with the orange beard spun around angrily and squared his body up to the new arrival. “I didn’t see you getting off your fat behind and off that boat until we’d done all the hard work.”

“Say that again and see what happens,” the new man threatened, pulling down his hood to reveal a buzz cut hairstyle and facial tattoo of a Chinese dragon around his eye socket.

The two men were so close to each other that their chests and foreheads were touching. Both were shouting angrily and looked ready to fight at any moment. The third man, who was tall but lanky, was trying desperately to push himself between the two rivals and trying to calm them both down. “Hey, we’ve all had a long trip. Let’s calm down, OK?” he pleaded. “Worse case is that it sells for meat and that’s still a good amount of cash.”

As the three continued to bicker about the value of her to customers, an idea came to Lavanya. There was no way that she could outrun the men, but she could certainly outswim them. If she could make it to the water, she’d be safe! She began to calculate her route to safety when a horrible thought struck her – if she swam away, then there was no one to help these penguins and the hatchling. She had no idea where her team were and even if she could find them, it would be too late the track the boat.

There had to be another way!

Lavanya realised with frustration that she needed to contact her team to have any sort of chance of saving all the birds. Thankfully, another scheme started to form in her mind. Each ship would have an emergency flare and if she could get it, and turn back into a human to use it, she could signal for help. The fishing boat with Owen, Tuva, and the rest of the team couldn't be too far away and surely one of them would notice. At the very least, this plan was worth a go.

Making sure to move quietly, she stepped out of the side of the box and slid past the men, who were far too close to a full-on brawl to pay any attention. Spinning her head, she could see only two other men, who were busy working on the vehicle which had kidnapped her. The plank to the boat was about twenty metres in the other direction and there was no sign of the crew above deck. Pushing her flippers back, she began to waddle as quickly as possible to the metal plank, hoping that none of the five men on the snow would look up.

To her incredible relief, her wish was answered, and she reached the plank with ease. With a quick glance up the walkway to check for any crew members who had come out, she began to make her way upwards towards the deck and her last hope of getting rescued. She was halfway up when she began to hear the squawking of the other penguins, who were beginning to become more frightened by the rising tension between their human capturers.

“Hey!”

Lavanya froze and turned her head. Sure enough, the noise of her fellow birds had attracted the attention of the men, who had spotted that she was missing.

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“She’s on the plank! Get her!”

Urgency and panic filled Lavanya. She saw the three men begin to run towards her, so she quickly turned back to try and scurry up the plank. She took another two steps before her foot slipped and she hit the metal with her belly, sliding down it by a precious meter. Pushing her flippers to the floor, she forced herself back onto her feet and rushed to continue to climb.

The loud clanking of boots hitting metal suddenly filled the air and the plank began to violently shake under the weight of her pursuers. She was so close to the boat, but the footsteps were getting closer and closer. Finally, with a last push of effort, she reached the end of the walkway and hopped over the small step onto the floor of the vessel.

Her eyes quickly scanned the scene in front of her. The deck was a mess of equipment from frayed ropes, to piles of clothes, to empty tins of food scattered across the stained floor. There were some small plastic boxes attached to the outside of the cabin, but they were labelled with a language that Lavanya couldn’t read. Wait! The one in the middle! It was fluorescent orange and had an image of a flare on it. She just had to reach it!

No sooner as she began to move her feet, she felt a huge force strike her in the back and send her sprawling across the deck. As she lifted her head from the floor, she saw the man with the beard rounding on her, flanked on either side by his two accomplices. The man with the facial tattoo had manoeuvred between her and the cabin wall. He had his arms outstretched and was slowly advancing.

Lavanya managed to get to her feet, but she was surrounded by her assailants. As they approached, she tried to back away but could go no further than a few metres before she felt the feathers on her back press against the ship's tall outer wall. The men were seconds from grabbing her when suddenly, a noise filled the air. The noise wasn't one you'd expect to hear in Antarctica, but it was a noise known around the world and one which caused the men to freeze in their tracks.

It was an almighty roar!

Chapter Five

Nearly thirty minutes had passed since Tuva had swum away on her scouting objective and still Owen had heard nothing. Fighting his ever-growing urge to follow her, the young agent had followed his orders and radioed to the crew with his coordinates. The captain, an experienced sailor and long-time ITSS serviceman, had decided that since there was still no sign of success from Lavanya, he'd take their ship to come and offer their help. He too had instructed Owen to stay put and wait for help to arrive from either himself or Tuva.

Owen had agreed to the order, remembering Tuva's reassurance that she'd look after his friend. The longer he had to wait though, the more he was becoming sure that something terrible had happened to Lavanya, Tuva, or perhaps both. But what could he do? He wasn't trained in winter conditions and unlike other agents, his lion form would be next to useless in this environment.

Sitting on the bench by the engine, Owen hung his head and started to wriggle his legs to try and work out some of the tension that was building. He felt his bottom lip begin to bleed and realised that he'd been biting it quite roughly. It had now been twice the length of time that Tuva had said she'd be and he had to believe that she'd surely not be this late to check-in.

Something had to be wrong.

Owen lifted his head and scanned the water for the hundredth time. No shapes and no signs of disturbance at all. He turned to the snow-covered land that Tuva had mentioned the other ship was docked behind. The snow was flat and undisturbed for what he estimated was two or three hundred metres. After that, there was a sharp rise which blocked his vision. The area looked incredibly beautiful and serene, yet Owen knew that it could be a death-trap filled with crevasses. Walking across it without a rope or the correct equipment would be foolish, he could fall without notice and no one would ever find his body.

Despite the danger, if he could just make it to the large, snowy hill, he could maybe see over. "At least I'd know," Owen mumbled to himself, trying to justify what he knew deep down was a reckless decision. He put his head into his hands and his knees began to shake even more as he wrestled with his options. Scout on the land, or wait and hope? With warning, an image of a smiling Lavanya flashed into his mind. He couldn't leave her in danger!

He quickly rose to his feet and confidently grabbed the radio transmitter, pulling it to his mouth. "This is call sign T-cat. Base, do you read?"

There was a moment of silence followed by some static. Finally, a gruff voice came over the speaker. "This is base. We're closing in on your position. What's your status?"

"No word yet," Owen replied. "I've spotted a good viewing position and I'm gonna take a look."

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“That’s a negative, T-cat,” the voice replied firmly. “Your orders are to hold position and await assistance.”

Owen hadn’t really expected any other response, but his mind was made up. Not bothering to reply, he sheathed the radio microphone back onto the device and turned to grab his binoculars. He removed his coat, bracing for the wicked cold, and turned it inside out so that the white exterior was showing, camouflaging him with his environment. With a last look across the water for his mission commander, he turned and stepped out the boat, feeling the crunch of the snow beneath his boots.

“T-cat, come in,” the radio continued. “Your orders are to stay where you are. We aren’t far away.” The thought of waiting for help was tempting but the thought of Lavanya in danger was too powerful a motivation to overcome. The captain continued with more urgency in his voice now. “T-cat! Owen! Don’t do anything stupid, boy. Pick up the radio and acknowledge. You can’t help anyone if you get yourself hurt or worse.”

Owen was already walking away though, carefully treading through the soft snow. He could hear the captain’s warning fading into the distance behind him, but he wasn’t listening anymore. His focus and energy were focused firmly ahead and to the bank of the snow that was obstructing his view of the situation. The ground felt like quicksand as every step caused the ice and snow to wrap around his foot and lower leg, but still, he persevered forwards.

Finally, after far longer walking than he had realised, he reached the top of the bank of snow and could begin to make

out a large vessel with a shipping container on top, only one hundred metres from him. Dropping to his stomach and pulling out his binoculars, he scanned the scene in front of him. The ship was tied by its stern and aft to ropes, which themselves hugged large mounds of snow on the land. The boat was also connected to the snow by a metal plank, on which a man wearing an orange coat stood smoking.

The snow in this part of the world was usually mesmerizingly flat, like a smooth carpet. By the ship however, there was a lot of disturbance, as if something big had churned up the ground like an eggbeater. The disturbance seemed to form a trail which led towards another snowy bank to the far left of Owen, and he wondered if it was the result of some sort of convey of vehicles. The water by the ship was calm, though Owen could make out a small brown shape below the surface. He breathed a sigh of relief. It looked identical to the shape which Tuva had made when she had departed nearly an hour earlier.

Relieved that his commander was OK and still monitoring the ship, Owen was about to turn back and make the journey to his boat when he heard a faint mechanical sound. The sound started to get louder and louder before a long horizontal pylon with a sensor disk appeared over the top of a snowbank at the other side of the clearing. This was quickly followed by a large, rusty tractor type of vehicle with thick treads to move smoothly through the snow. A small slither of smoke was winding its way into the air from the bonnet of the vehicle, though the passengers either hadn't noticed, or were ignoring

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the problem. As the monstrous machine approached the boat, Owen spotted a small, metal box being pulled behind it.

The truck pulled to a halt near the metallic plank and five unfriendly-looking men climbed out. Three of them made a beeline towards the small box at the rear whilst the other two began to open the smoking bonnet and investigate whatever mechanical problem was occurring. Owen watched with bated breath as the lead man approached a shutter on the side of the box closest to him and began to fiddle with a padlock on the outside. After a few attempts, he lifted the door to reveal - to Owen's horror - a small huddle of scared penguins.

Immediately, one of the men rushed inside the box and pulled out what Owen realised was a very young hatchling. Grabbing it roughly, he dragged the helpless creature towards the ship and up the ramp, passing the man on the ship who was rushing toward the box and gesturing wildly. Owen checked quickly to see if Tuva was watching but couldn't see any sign of her where she had been a few moments earlier. Turning his attention back to the box, he peered intently through the binoculars to see if Lavanya was amongst the captured birds. The darkness of the box against the penguins' outer feathers made it all but impossible to identify any of them, though Owen had a worrying feeling that she must be in there. "Why else wouldn't she have reported back in?" he thought to himself.

Owen had assumed that the ship and the new men were connected, though to his surprise, the man from boat seemed to be quite angry with the situation. He and the criminal who had unlocked the box were suddenly face-to-face like two

boxers waiting for the bell to ring and the bout to start. The third man, who was thin and lanky, was desperately trying to push his way between the two stocky, furious opponents, though his peacekeeping efforts seemed to be fairly futile.

As the three men continued their battle, Owen spotted movement behind them. One of the penguins had escaped the box and was scurrying not to safety of the water, but towards the boat's boarding plank. A glimpse of the bird's shortened left flipper sent Owen's heart into his mouth. It was Lavanya!

"What on Earth is she doing?" Owen hissed to himself. "Get to the water!" He was sweeping his eyes over the land and water now, desperate to see if anyone had noticed her escape, or if Tuva was back and ready to save the day. To his relief, the man who had taken the young penguin had disappeared from view inside the container and it certainly appeared as though no one else had noticed her. Owen breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe she had the tracker and was going to hide it? Then she could sneak into the safety of the water and get away.

After what felt like an eternity, his closest friend made it to the plank and began to ascend onto the ship. It was at that moment though, that the remaining birds began to fight between themselves, squawking loudly. Owen tensed as he waited to see if the men would notice. They did! With a whip of their heads, they quickly spotted her and began to run to recapture their prey. Owen desperately made one last sweep of the sea in hope that the legendary agent would suddenly appear and help.

Nothing! No sign of help!

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Owen watched as the men quickly caught up to Lavanya, who was having problems on the wet and slippery boarding plank. A sense of anger suddenly started to take hold of him. Nobody was going to hurt her if he had anything to say about it.

Surrendering his body to the glowing gold aura that was beginning to engulf him, Owen began to feel his limbs stretch and change, and become more powerful. He felt his teeth sharpen into daggers and his fingers stretch into long, vicious claws. A thin tail started to quickly grow and soon, the power of the transformation forced Owen to his hands and knees. No – not hands and knees – onto four muscular legs.

The second his body had finished glowing, Owen launched forward using all his anger and desperation to propel himself towards the ship as fast as he could. He slipped and struggled to the cover the snowy ground with any elegance, but his sheer determination carried him on and soon he was able to leap onto the metal plank. Letting loose an almighty roar, he flung himself up to the deck and towards Lavanya's attackers.

Chapter Six

Initially, Lavanya was as frozen as everybody else when she saw a fully-grown lion dive onto the ship from the snow and bare its teeth menacingly. Its fierce eyes swept quickly across the deck and with a shake of its thick, brown mane, it suddenly sprung towards the man with the tattoo. He had barely a moment to register the oncoming attack before the lion had covered the ground between them and swiped its muscular arm across the man's face.

As blood spurted from the once threatening figure, his companions snapped into life. Both turned and sprinted away as quickly as possible, the lanky man towards the cabin and his bearded partner to the ramp back to the snow. Sensing its victim was already dead, the lion turned and stared at the shocked penguin, but instead of attacking, it briefly bowed its head.

“Owen?” Lavanya asked, though it came out only as a chirp. The lion snarled in response and raised its head to the lanky kidnapper who was desperately banging on the ship's locked door. Suddenly, the shock of her friend's arrival was gone, and she snapped back into the focus. The baby!

With a quick waddle for momentum, she dived forward onto her chest and slid across the floor towards the area where

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she remembered the container was. She could hear Owen continuing his roar and saw him charge towards the lanky man, who immediately dropped and cowered. Leaving him to his fate, she turned her attention to the container and effortlessly slid across the deck towards it. The entrance was on the side furthest from her and she had to give herself another waddle and slide to spin around to reach it.

The door to the container was still wide open and as she hurried back to her feet, she could see the hatchling cowering inside the corner. As it saw her, it let out a howl, which Lavanya could sense was a cry for help. Instinctively, she moved towards the open door to grab the innocent bird before pausing. A quick glimpse to her right revealed to her a boot between the gap from the door and the deck. It was a trap.

Realising that this unusually intelligent penguin had spotted him, the door was suddenly slammed shut by the man who had first stolen the hatchling. He stood facing Lavanya; his eyes glowing with rage. In an instant, he launched forward to grab at her, but instead swung his arms around empty space as Lavanya dived below and under his grasp. As he hit the deck, Lavanya quickly got to her feet and spun around to peck at him, but the man was clearly trained in combat himself and had already flipped himself over. As Lavanya's beak advanced, he lashed out a leg. His boot struck Lavanya hard in the mouth and sent her sprawling backwards.

Lying supine, Lavanya's body screamed with pain, and she felt truly dazed. The expression '*seeing stars*' crossed her mind as she struggled to keep her vision from being overrun by thousands of flickering dots of colour. Writhing on the floor,

she saw the man rise back to his feet and stand over her. He brought his knee up to his chest, ready to stamp down on her face. Suddenly, there was a large bang which caused the boat to rock violently to the side, sending the man rolling across the deck.

Both penguin and man tried to get back upright but before they could, another smashing noise caused the boat to shake again and throw them back to the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, Lavanya saw an enormous brown whale-like body leap out of the water and above the boat. The creature, which seemed to have a long horn, suddenly began to glow bright gold before shifting into the shape of an average sized woman. With the grace of a gymnast, the semi-retired Tuva landed on the deck next to the hatchling's abductor.

"Stand down, sir," the legendary agent ordered with a calmness that showed her class under pressure. Her feet and hands were bare, and she was lacking a coat, but apart from that her clothes were bone dry. Lavanya wondered if that was some sort of skill in itself. Her clothes were normally soaked after swimming as a penguin, and she never knew why since they disappeared during transformations.

Not to be apprehended by an elderly lady, the man immediately tried to get back up but was met with a swift kick for his trouble. As he fell back down, Tuva placed a foot on his chest and raised her eyebrow like a librarian shushing a noisy child. "I told you to stand down."

Before he could make another move, there was a cacophony of shouting and footsteps. A man and two women in khaki suddenly appeared and pointed their sub-automatic

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rifles at the criminal. The first woman, who Lavanya recognised as Lieutenant Mills from the ITSS assault team, turned her attention to Tuva.

“Ma’am, the vessel is secure, but we have a situation on land that requires your attention,” the lieutenant reported quickly, keeping the barrel of her weapon trained on the beaten man as one of her soldiers placed her handcuffs on him.

“Let’s go!” Tuva called with an air of authority. She quickly looked over to Lavanya as the lieutenant turned to take the lead. “Transform and move out!”

Transformation to an animal was usually quite easy and could often happen quickly when the gifted individual was feeling any sort of strong emotion. In contrast, transforming back to a human required incredible calm and focus, neither of which Lavanya had in this current situation. As Tuva and Lieutenant Mills disappeared from view past the shipping container, she closed her eyes and tried to take deep breaths. After a few moments, she started to feel her body grow warmer, a sign that the golden glow had begun, but it was interrupted by the sound of a roar in the distance.

She opened her eyes for a moment and looked around. Both officers were still with her, and the male was trying to enter the container as quietly and softly as possible to rescue the hatchling. The female soldier had her knee on the back of the assailant and was using her hands to pin his face to the deck. “You can do it,” she nodded assuredly.

Lavanya tried again to close her eyes and took several deep breaths. She thought of the picture on her bedside table of her,

Owen, and their friends at Owen's twenty-first party. He hated birthdays in general, but they had worked for weeks to throw him the best surprise party possible. Even Owen had admitted that it had been a great day.

The memory of the picture and the fun celebration worked perfectly, and Lavanya started to glow like the sun. Her body began to stretch and soon she was back to her human self. She had olive skin and was neither tall nor short yet had an athletic build from her many hours in the training facilities. Her left hand was missing three fingers including her thumb and her black hair had remained tied into a messy bun so that it stayed out of her eyes.

"Thanks," she nodded to the supportive soldier, pleased to be able to speak again. Rushing around the corner of the shipping container, Lavanya sprinted across the ship for the exit ramp. There were multiple soldiers securing the ship but no sign of Owen anywhere, as either human or animal.

Reaching the ramp, she looked up across the snowy plain and paused for a moment to take in the scene. A number of soldiers had secured most of the remaining criminals by the box containing the remaining penguins, but the tractor-like vehicle was missing. Tuva and the lieutenant were running in the other direction though and a quick glance told her why. Far ahead of them, chasing down the escaping truck, was a golden-brown lion.

The truck had managed to create enough of a gap ahead of them that no one else could catch it foot. Despite the slippery ground though, Owen was making great progress. As he closed to ten meters, he began to pull to the left in an effort to get

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ahead of his target and force it to stop. He got his wish sooner than he imagined as the truck suddenly screeched to a halt.

Owen tried to halt his sprint, but his front paws slipped on the ice, and he barrelled past it, sliding sideways into a small bank of snow. The door of the truck swung open, and a single man stepped out. Lavanya could see the man's ginger beard from where she was, but that wasn't the main detail that she and the other noticed. In his hands, and pointed at the sprawled-out lion, was a large shotgun.

As the man rounded on Owen, Lavanya desperately turned back the ramp in a futile attempt to run down and get to him. She made it no further than halfway when a large bang filled the air, followed by a second gunshot a few seconds later. Her head snapped up and she saw her lion friend fall back to the floor. The man with the ginger beard turned back to his truck and pulled himself back inside, before driving away as fast as possible across the snow and ice and into the distance.

Running as fast as possible, it took Lavanya several agonisingly long minutes to reach her friend, whose body was obscured by Tuva and some of the other soldiers who'd made it there first. As she came closer, she could see his lion form laid on its side with a pool of blood-stained snow surrounding him. Despite the two shots, the soldiers were working hard with medical kits and Lavanya breathed a sigh of relief as she realised that he must be hurt, but somehow still alive.

As she approached the scene, Tuva looked up and for the first time since Lavanya had known her, she looked her true age. Her skin was taut and pale and she looked as if she was carrying the weight of the world on her narrow, fragile

shoulders. Her eyes met Lavanya's who stopped in her tracks. Time seemed to stand still as the two women looked at each other.

Tuva shook her head.

Try before you buy!

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Try before you buy!

Part 1

Modern Day

Try before you buy!

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Try before you buy!

Chapter One

“Tyler! If I have to shout you one more time, I’m throwing your breakfast in the bin and you can go to school hungry!”

Tyler lay in his small, single bed with his eyes closed and one leg hanging out of his scrunched covers. He groaned in frustration as he heard his grandma shout up the stairs but knew that she wasn’t kidding about throwing his toast away. “I’m up,” he called out before dragging his body to a sitting position and daring to open his eyes.

“It’s still dark. Why do I have to get up for school before the sun?” he thought grumpily to himself, even though the Spring sun was beginning to rise and shine through his bedroom curtains. With another exaggerated groan, he stumbled over to his light switch and flicked the room into brightness. The room felt like the inside of a small box and was still painted a childish baby-blue colour from when he had first been sent to live with his grandma. The walls were covered in various scuffs and marks, and his floor was completely hidden under piles and piles of clothes and other rubbish.

“Tyler, did you hear me?” his grandma called up the stairs again.

Pushing open his bedroom door, Tyler called down again. When he didn’t hear any reply, he decided to hurry down

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quickly to make sure there was still food. He hopped down the stairs, sliding down the banister for the last few steps, pretending he was one of the parkour athletes he often watched videos of online. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned and rushed into the kitchen where his little sister was already sat at the table in her uniform. She looked him up and down when he entered and seeing he was still in his pyjamas, gave the kind of little, annoying smirk that only a younger sister can truly master.

“I’m up, Nan, and starving,” he announced to the room.

His grandma was stood at the kitchen counter with her back to him, buttering the toast. She was dressed in her favourite pink cardigan and her hair was now somewhere between grey and white, which she wore in a messy bun. She had floral pattern skirt and tights down to her fuzzy pink slippers that she insisted on wearing around the house, even in the middle of the hot summer.

“Good. I’ve got your toast here but we’re out of chocolate spread so you’ll have to make do. Eat quick because I’ve got to see Sonya’s teacher this morning, so I’ll have to drop you off a bit earlier than usual,” his grandma turned around with two plates of toast for them, before looking him up and down exactly as Sonya had done moments earlier. “You aren’t even dressed yet! What on earth were you doing up there?”

“Sorry, Gran,” Tyler said grabbing the plate and sitting at the table. “I’ll be quick, I promise.”

“You’d better be because if you’re not ready, I’m leaving without you and you’ll have to walk it,” she scolded as she sat

down to her own toast. “And I’m sure you mean to say, ‘thank you for the toast’, don’t you?”

“I said it, Nanny,” Sonya chirped in sweetly as Tyler wolfed down his first slice. She was only three years younger than Tyler, and nearly finished with primary school, but she was very good at knowing exactly the right thing to say to keep adults happy.

“I know you did, my little angel-pie,” their grandma smiled as she bit into her own food.

Tyler, who had wolfed down most of his breakfast already, stood up with the last piece of toast in his hand. He leant forward and gave his grandma a little kiss on the cheek as he passed towards the door. “Thank you for breakfast, Nan,” he said in his own sweet voice, sticking out his tongue at his sister as he slipped out of his grandma’s view. “It was delicious.”

Placated by his grandson-level charm, their grandma chuckled softly and shooed him away to get his uniform on. “Five minutes though, Tyler. I mean it.” Of course, Tyler knew she didn’t mean it. She was stern on the outside but a real softy really. He reckoned he had a good fifteen minutes to have a quick shower, pull on his uniform, and get his hair looking its best.

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