

THE KEYS TO THE ICE PALACE

By Lynda Waterhouse

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“Pearl, I’m leaving.”

Her mother’s voice floated up the metal staircase. Pearl put her hands over her ears, closed her eyes and continued to enjoy her late morning snooze.

“Pearl!”

Her leg must be hurting. That is why her voice sounds so harsh. Pearl sighed. It was over two months now since the hunting accident and the bite was taking its time to heal. Everyone knew that carrying an injury made you vulnerable. Besides, her mum was worried about grandmother. Yesterday Tomos had brought the news that she was sick again and running low on supplies.

“Come down and collect the keys!”

The voice was higher and louder this time. But Pearl only snuggled down deeper into her blanket. She needed a few more moments to savour the warmth and to delight in some private thoughts. Tomos had sneaked a sweet cake into her pocket when he had delivered the firewood and the bad news, ‘I will come back to keep you company,’ he had whispered.

Her mother trained her to notice the way that animals move so that you could pick out the weakest and the easiest to kill and avoid the young impetuous ones. When Tomos had first pitched up at the trading post she had been struck by his purposeful stride and the effortless way he carried his pack as if he didn’t care whether he lost it or not. It was only when he had removed one of his outer coats that she realized he was not much older than she was. And those green eyes!

“PEARL!”

The metal ladder creaked.

If only her Mum would trust her a bit more. She was thirteen and tall and strong for her age. She could hunt and since her mother’s accident she had even ventured out to

fish alone. She was not a child who needed to be protected from the past. She was a woman with a bright future. One day she would leave the Ice Palace and set out to explore. She dreamed of travelling to the The Carrib.

Her mother never spoke about the past and would dismiss all Pearl's questions with a shake of her head.

'The past can make you snow-blind. When your head's looking backwards you don't see what's in front of your nose. No dreaming of the future either. Stay focused in the present. That is the only way to survive.'

But Pearl liked to think about the past and clung on to her one precious relic: an ancient image called a photograph. When her mother wasn't looking she liked to take out the relic and look at the girl with skin that was the same warm brown tone as hers. The girl who licked a curl of white snow and smiled into the sunshine. The very first Pearl.

Two centuries ago the first Pearl was named by her five times great-grandfather when he had come from a sunny place called The Carrib to a settlement in the North of England. It felt good knowing that she was a part of a chain of women linked by a name.

She could not wait to find out about Tomos's past. When he returned she would brew up some of her mother's special green tea for him. He loved tea and the drink would loosen his tongue. He had already told her in confidence that his uncle was one of The Top Officials and that was why he was allowed to travel.

She breathed deeply and conjured up the delicate tang of the tea in her nostrils. She would use one of the precious china bowls to serve it to him. The green liquid would match the colour of his eyes. He would smile at her and say, "You make beautiful tea and you are so brave and strong to manage everything by yourself," as he threw a scented log on the fire and they would naturally lean in together to soak up the warmth...

All of a sudden the blanket was pulled from her face.

"PEARL, PLEASE!" Her mother's breath on the cheek stung and left an icy film as if it had been hit by a miniature snow blower. She sat down on the bed so hard that it made the metal frame creak. "If I'm going to reach grandmother's bunker before the

light fades, I have to leave now.” She put the blanket back over Pearl’s shoulders, the softness of her fingers contrasting with the harsh tone of her voice.

“I’m taking her my special tea,” she added.

Pearl blushed. Had her mum read her mind? She was strong and smart and could skin a rabbit in seconds but she could not rip her thoughts out of her head, could she?

Her mother held her hand. She stretched out each of Pearl’s fingers and tenderly pressed the large bunch of keys into her palm.

The familiar scent of apples and straw from the inside of her mother’s pocket made Pearl’s pulse race with panic and her blood run cold. She had been so wrapped up with the thought of seeing Tomos and spending some time by herself that she had lost her grip on reality. How would she manage without her mother? Since her father’s death they had never spent a day apart from each other.

Down to the last sinew and fiber of her body Pearl did not want her mother to go. She wanted to hurl the keys on the floor and scream ‘I am not ready to be a Custodian, not even for three days! Don’t do this to me!’

She curled her fingers around the keys. The jagged shapes pressed themselves into her palm. Ever since word had come through about her grandmother this moment was inevitable. Her mother would not be here. But the routine of checking on the Ice Palace had to be maintained. Ice Palaces contained secret powers. Pearl would have to take on the role.

Every day, for as long as she could remember, she had joined her mother on the walk down the pathway from their bunker to the Ice Palace. It was her mother’s job to visit every day and to let The Officials in, if they turned up. She had watched her mother go through the unlocking process many times but it had never been left up to her before.

“You know I wouldn’t ask you to do this if it wasn’t an emergency.”

Pearl’s heart beat faster.

“Listen carefully,” her mother began.

A panic cloud formed in Pearl’s brain. Would she be able to do it? She swallowed and tried hard to listen but the clouds kept on gathering.

“The main entrance door key needs three turns to the left and one to the right.”

Pearl's fingers twitched as her brain tried to hang on to the information. *Three turns to the left and one to the right. Three turns to the.. it is the left isn't it? I haven't got it the wrong way round?*

"Now you use the next key for the outer door. It's the one shaped like wolves' teeth. You need to waggle it in the lock until it settles and then give it one firm turn and then push the door."

Pearl tried so hard to look like she was listening that she wasn't sure she was taking anything in. Her mouth felt dry. All she could visualize was a pack of hungry wolves baring their blood-stained teeth at her. Her father had been killed by these creatures and she feared and hated them in equal measure.

Her mother continued in a slow and steady voice, "The inner door is the tricky one. It has two locks that you have to open simultaneously and before you remove both keys you have to listen for them to catch. What does that sound like Pearl?"

For a second the panic clouds cleared and Pearl replied, "Like bones cracking?"

Her mother nodded and then stood up, "I must go. I have left you my old gun in case of ...danger."

The panic inside Pearl's brain knitted together into a thick fog. She wanted her mother to explain it all again or, better still, she wanted to cry and plead with her to stay. She was not ready for this responsibility of being the temporary Custodian of the Ice Palace. She would go to Grandmother's instead of her mother. At that moment not even the thought of a visit by Tomos could comfort her.

Her mother turned in the doorway and smiled, "You will be fine. It's very unlikely that an Official will call. Just do the daily patrol and sit tight and if the worst comes to the worst, never forget that it is better that the keys are lost forever than they fall into the wrong hands."

A wry smile played across Pearl's lips and cut through the panic as she said sarcastically, "If the worst comes to the worst! How very comforting, Mum!"

They both laughed.

"It is the first rule that a Custodian is taught, as well you know," her mother grinned.

Pearl sighed. The visiting rituals by the The Officials were probably nothing but a meaningless exercise to make them look important. Certainly, they never seemed to do anything once inside the Place except look around and nod before leaving again.

She and Tomos would laugh about it later.

The sound of barking and a rattle of a sledge outside startled her. Her mother picked up her backpack and carefully put it on.

“That’ll be Tomos. I have asked him to come along with me. And there’s a large pot of stew by the fire – that should keep you going.” Her mother gently stroked her cheek before she left.

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It felt colder now that she was alone with no prospect of a visit from Tomos. The tea did not warm her and she found that she had no appetite for the sweet cake so she tore it into pieces and ground them into the table. She took her mother’s finest fur blanket from her bed and dragged it back to her own room. Why was *she* the Pearl chosen to have been born when most of the earth was in perpetual winter? It was so unfair.

She would be trapped here just like her mother, opening doors for The Officials or monitoring the temperature for the rest of her life. What if Tomos never returned and she had missed her only chance to spend time with him? She closed her eyes and tried to sleep off the gloom of self-pity that overwhelmed her.

She woke with a start as the pale blue morning light leaked through the narrow slits of reinforced glass in the roof. They gave the plain white walls a silvery sheen. Pearl rubbed her eyes and yawned. All night long her dreams had been peppered with a voice repeating the key drill for unlocking the Ice Palace. Her eyes were drawn to the small photograph that she had placed on the wall beside her bed. It was the only decoration.

She brewed herself a pot of honey tea and set about cleaning the gun. The process of cleaning the weapon calmed her. She scraped up some of the pieces of Tomos’s cake and added them to her daily ration of stew.

She carefully added the extra layers of clothing that were required, making sure that her face was well covered. As she tightly tied up the straps to her white outer jacket she hoped her mother had arrived safely and all was well. And Tomos? Why had he not told her of the change of plan? She placed her outer gloves on and sighed. She was not going to waste any more time brooding about him. The wind had died down a little so she decided to set off early to The Ice Palace.

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She had been walking for about fifteen minutes and had just reached the gates of the Ice Palace when she realized that she had not brought the keys with her. She cursed. She had not done the most obvious thing.

‘First of all Pearl – PICK UP THE KEYS!’

She decided to take the short cut back by the Old Bunker. At least there was no one around to witness her stupidity. She looked at the sky and sniffed the air. It was probably for the best that she was returning early as there was a warm front moving in which would bring a storm with it.

It was a rustling sound that caught her attention first. Pearl stopped and attuned her ears as her mother had taught her to do. She stood still, thankful for the camouflage that her white outer layers gave her, altered her body in line with the wind direction, and listened intently. She could make out the sounds of two voices. She edged closer. There were two people and a sledge by the Old Bunker.

The first, a woman’s voice: “Tomos will deal with the Custodian on the return journey two days from now. She is carrying an injury so should be easy to handle.”

“Tomos is a fool. He should have killed them both already and taken the keys,” a high-pitched voice added.

“He has taken a fancy to the girl,’ the woman countered. ‘He likes to keep his cover when he’s operating in an area. It’s our job to go to the trading post and gather as much information as we can. If Tomos thinks he can keep the girl he is in for a shock. She knows too much. He has too much time on his hands to indulge in foolish dreams.”

“He won’t have once we get the keys to the nuclear reactor.”

“Ice Palace, please call it by its official name!”

They both laughed.

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Pearl knew there was precious little time. Only enough to swallow down any panic and keep moving. She walked backwards, reusing her previous footprints. She made a determined effort to slow down both her breathing and her movement whilst at the same time her brain was firing thoughts as fast as bullets. Who were these people? What was a nuclear reactor? How long would it take her to reach grandmother’s house on foot?

After about twenty minutes she returned back home. Like an automaton she forced herself to eat up all the remaining portions of stew. She gathered up the gun and carefully zipped the keys into the inner pocket. She was never going to forget them again. She burned the photograph. The image was imprinted on her brain. She had another Pearl to worry about. Her mother.

If she was going to reach her mother in time she had to leave now. It was going to be a long hard walk to get to her grandmother's but she was traveling light – the only excess weight came from the stone crust of hatred that had encased her heart.

She secured the gun to her backpack. She felt the muscles in her jaw tighten. In fewer than five hours she was going to have to face Tomos. And if it came down to a choice between his life and her mother's, it was a simple enough decision.

On the way she stopped by a ravine but something stopped her from throwing the keys away. Her mother was right: she did not need protecting from the past; she desperately needed to do something about the present. She needed the keys. They would be a useful bartering tool. They gave her power. The keys to the Ice Palace were going to unlock a new life for her mother and herself.