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Opening extract from **Lorali**

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Lorali

PROLOGUE

*There was a storm in my heart.
There was a war in my heart.*

They had promised me everything on my tapestry. I would wear it forever. I was going to change. Transfer. From the white – translucent – slip I wore now: the tail that looked as though it belonged to any nameless fish in the underbelly. And I was going to *realise*. Become. I was going to *resolve*. I was to be cleansed as *something*. For real. I would have an identity. A form. And not just any. They said. It would be beautiful. *Beautiful*. They said. The best of any kind. I was royal. My tapestry would reflect that. They said. They said. In the development. During the resolution. That the colours and textures would be so vibrant that they would shine through the surface and project on to the clouds of the sky. The *sky*. That's how beautiful they would be. *That's how special* I was. It would be royal. Shine. Glow.



Illuminate. Violet. Purple. Green and sprawling like sea moss.
Sea ivy. Rose. Like the coral. Silver. Like the chipped seashell
that spirals up when I dance. Pearl. Oyster. Gold. Ink. And I
would wear it. They said. And everybody would know about it.

Everybody.

There was a storm in my heart.

There was a war in my heart.

Because they had lied.

New air. For the first time. Rummaging. Like hands. In my
lungs. It feels. Tugging. This new air. Overwhelming. Burning.
Freezing. Fresh. On flesh. Stinging. Ripping. Muscles. Tearing.
Scratching. I am dead. I am dead. I have to be dead. I have to
be dead. From this pain. I am – not dead. No. Too much feeling
to be dead. Filling. Instead. New. Oxygen. Heat. More burning.
Lots. Blowing. Expanding. Gulping. Swallow. Do I swallow? I
am exploding. I am exploding. My eyes. They are drying. This
can't be right. This can't be. Can it? They didn't tell me about
the eyes. They are drying out. Regret. Too fast. What have I
done? Take me back down. Can't I? Blink. Blink. Stinging. New.
Ripping. Blink. It's dry. This air. Like knives. Cutting. Salt. I feel
the salt. I taste it. Now. My nose. Is it broken? Hydrate? I can't.
Raw. Raw. Blister. STILL BURNING. My chest. Throb. My heart.
Beating. Cold. Cold. Hot. I don't – I – my nose. I can't. Swallow.
My mouth. My tongue. It's dry. It's . . . HAVE I MADE IT?
WAIT, DID I MAKE IT? DID I MAKE IT? I DON'T KNOW.
HELP. I DON'T KNOW. Swallow. Air. Tight. Tight. My – ears.
The noise. Cracking. Cracking. Get out. All loud. Big. Churn.
New noise. Deep. Big. My brain. The sea. The sea. Squashing.
I can feel it. Every move. Crashing. Smashing. Freezing. Big

heavy head and skull. So heavy. My lungs. Still. In. Out. In. Out. Calm. Calm. Calm. *You can't go back. You know you can't.* Be still. New bones now. And every bone. Dragging. Heavy. Bold. Lift. Shhhhhh. I can't. Struggle. Considerable. Wait. Are they? Mine? Legs. Oh. Oh. It's happened. The wave. The wave. I am not forever now Lorali. I have to swim. Or I'll drown. Swim like a Walker. Swim like I can walk. Walk. Heavy. Move. I can't. Move. Bulky. Drag. Like metal. Let go. Let go. I look down. I have . . . I do. I've got them. Two of them. Legs too. Legs. Feet. And toes. Toes. Toes. Feet. And heels. And ankles. Bone. Bone. Skin. Like they said. Forbidden. Mother. New. Skin. Veins. Blue lines. Purple. Red. Blood. Flowing through. Squeeze. Stretch. Flex. Step. Out of the wave. Out of the Whirl. Away.

I have made it.

I have made it. And then I fall.

RORY

THE EDGE

It's my birthday today. My chest faces the sea, my back against Hastings. My home. My dad and I started this tradition. Every year, on my birthday, even if it was raining, he'd skip off work early and we'd get a massive bag of fish and chips. My mum can't cook. She can bake, but can't *cook*, so we'd go, just us, and sit right on the cliff side looking over the water, right here where I stand now, watching the sea hitting the rocks. It was our thing. He would get himself a bottle of Carlsberg and me a can of lemonade and we'd say cheers and eat the chips and talk a bit. Sometimes we didn't say anything at all. That's how you know you're comfortable with a person. On my twelfth birthday he got two bottles of Carlsberg and one can of lemonade and he mixed the beer with the lemonade to make me a shandy. On my thirteenth birthday he didn't buy the lemonade at all. That night Mum smelt beer on my breath but she didn't moan because she knew I'd been with my dad. That was before he left for Spain. When he was still with my mum. When he was still being my dad.

I still like to do this on my birthday. I even get the Carlsberg too if Susan is working at the offy but if her dad's there I don't because I don't have fake ID. I don't buy a beer for him, like how people do sometimes when somebody's dead. Because my dad's not dead; he just doesn't give a shit.

For some reason, the air feels tight. The clouds feel like they have joined up to make a pillow, which is now suffocating our tiny town. Summer is over but there is still this trapped atmosphere. It's like the sky is holding its breath, waiting to blow its guts on us. The edge is the best place to sit because if you look straight ahead and if the weather is right, the sea and the sky merge perfectly together, seamlessly, so you can't see where the sky ends and the sea stops. Right now it's just a blotchy thick mass.

The seagulls are right knobheads round here too, but proper jokes if you've got the patience to mess about with them. You can throw the black ends of your chips to the sea as fast as you can and watch a seagull swoop it up seconds before it hits the water. A moment later and the chip would belong to the fish. Not the bird. Just like the view of the sea and sky, the line of separation is almost invisible.

Flynn and Elvis, my two best mates, had jobs lined up for them when they turned sixteen but that's because they are not expected to go to college like me. I'm the youngest by a few months and it felt weird them both being sixteen and me not. It was like they were in some private club that I wasn't invited to. But I didn't say that obviously. I'm meant to be starting college in two days' time and I am dreading it. I don't want

to go. It's not that I want to start earning for myself or that I don't want to learn – I want to get out of Hastings altogether. Move to London. Or *anywhere*. I feel like the world has so much more to offer.

This can't just be *it*.

Can it?

Course, I never say that to the boys about wanting to get out. Elvis's parents, who are casino and Elvis Presley fans obviously, own the arcades down on the seafront and the big one on George Street, so Elvis has been stuffing the teddy bears in the glass boxes for a bit now and it suits him. He also earns extra cash at the weekends at the market, spraying the smell of 'leather' onto plastic fake-leather handbags, wallets and belts. 'Cow in a can' is what he calls it.

Elvis is a hustler. An alternative kind of smart. Street-smart. He never passed an exam in school but he could pick up a dead car off the roadside and fix it up. He always finds the little glitches in life and hacks his way in, like outsmarting the staff in every shop into somehow giving him a free pair of trainers, headphones, vouchers. I can't remember the last time I paid for a cinema ticket when I've been with Elvis. He has this town wound round his little finger, so why would he ever want it to unwind? Mum calls him a 'mover and shaker' because he has his fingers rammed in loads of pies but I think that's Mum's gentle way of saying she thinks he's a wrong 'un. Them two have never really seen eye to eye exactly, but that's only because she thinks he introduced me to *everything* that she doesn't want me to meet. Like fags and alcohol and, well . . . life in general. He will end up owning the arcades himself one

day. We've grown up together. Since school. And no matter how cocky he is, for all the hustling and scheming he does, he always has my back.

Flynn, like me, is smart enough to go to college, but he just doesn't want to. Flynn lives in a converted lighthouse on the seafront with his nutty old granddad Iris. They turned the bottom of it into a wild little shop where they deal in antiques. Iris is as old as Hastings; everybody says he is mad but I don't mind him. Flynn does what he does. He feels much more comfortable around objects than people anyway, and although I sometimes worry about the idea of Iris influencing Flynn 24/7, I kind of don't blame him for keeping his head down and working at the shop. Chairs can't piss you off like people can.

They both finish work around six and then we're going to go out for my birthday. I say 'out', I mean, 'see how many sips of beer we can drink before we get thrown out of The Blue Anchor'. Or 'how much J.D. we can smuggle into The Serpent before grumpy Barry kicks us in the balls' – when really I think he should promote our mischief. Hastings got its bloody name thanks to smuggling. He should be supporting us keeping the tradition alive!

It's a wonky town, Hastings, built on cobblestone and disfigured brick. Sometimes it feels so sleepy but you know it's sitting on these secrets like roots under paving slabs. The weeds will soon start shooting through the cracks in the pavements like little worms of sprouting truth.

George Street is the main shopping street in the Old Town. People say it's *charming* but that's just a blanket word for

crappy and *small* and *falling apart*. Mum says I don't appreciate it properly. The road is cobbled together with misfitting odd ends of stone; the shops are dinky and twee with old-fashioned fronts, beams and wavy glass windows. Other than the antique shops, teahouses and pubs, which seem to make up the majority of Hastings, there really isn't much on the strip for a teenager. If you walk up, which is the only way other than the sea, there are winding weirdo alleys, all bent like crooked teeth, and steps and houses shoved next to each other – too close, like overstuffed bookshelves. Slanted roofs, pokey chimneys, crumbling brickwork and windows and doors all weather-beaten and nibbled on by the hungry mouth of the sea air.

I live at the top of the hill and that hill, I swear to god, is so steep, it feels like you could kiss your shoes when you are walking up it.

But that's Hastings all over. Where I live is a curveball. It reminds you that the globe is round.

But it feels like the only place that exists on it.

I am throwing the black chip-ends to the gulls when Elvis texts me *Jack's coming*, which means he's managed to get the whisky, probably nicked from his nan's cupboard. Still, I'm not complaining. It's my birthday and I'm looking to get drunk; I collect the vinegar-and-oil-drenched wrapping paper of my bag of chips and walk along the stones back to the front.

And then, out of nowhere, as my mum would say, the heavens open up. Big swirling, rolling clouds, so grey and dense and heavy, and it's mad, like the sky is about to explode, and then thick marbles of rain begin to pelt from the sky. I start to run

but running on pebbles is like running on porridge. My face is getting ripped off by the wind, my eyes are gushing with tears and the air has basically sucked all moisture out of my mouth and left me with a tongue like a lizard tail.

Just when I think it can't get any worse it begins to thunder. Hailstones now. The size of dice. *What?* My hair is a complete state already and I look like a bedraggled tramp. I pull my Nike jacket over my head and run under the legs of the dead pier for protection. It's got hazard tape all around it but I ignore it and duck underneath. I need a moment. I can text the boys, save my skin from being separated from my body, and stop myself from being turned into a human kite.

Under the pier it's wet too, but a lot drier than being out in *that*. I sit down on the pebbles and catch my breath, panting. I don't like it under here though, none of us do. Somebody burnt the pier down a few years ago and so now it just stands ancient and charcoaled like the skeleton of a giant mosquito. It's also not safe. It could crumble down on my head at any second – I can hear the creaking cries of its old aching, rotting body groaning in the wind. *Imagine if I died here.* Like this. All alone. Then again, I think I nearly had my heart vacuumed out of my chest in that weather, so it beats that.

There's something so weird about the ghostly memories that linger round the dead pier. I try not to think about it and reach for my phone. No signal and my battery is low. Stupid weather and stupid shit phone.

I can see the sea going crazy, the water slamming against the brittle legs of the pier, foaming and fizzing and spitting like a rabid dog. This is nuts. Where has this come from?

I decide to wait for the storm to pass. I start to read the graffiti on the worn wall behind me. I recognise some of the handwriting because I've grown up with these adolescent tags my whole life, the same anarchic angry scrawls that now mean nothing. I keep getting distracted by the angry sound of the sea though. It's rioting, wrecking itself like how a child hits itself in the face when it's upset. That is when I notice what looks like an elbow.

It has to be an elbow. Pointy and fleshy and human. It can't be anything else . . . a knee maybe? No, it can't be – why would a person be here? I start to frighten myself; I am not up for finding some dead person here today. Then again the pier is desolate . . . it would be a perfect place to commit suicide. Or it could be someone who went too far out alone and got scooped up by the tide?

I think I'll leave it: go now, face the weather and pretend I never saw it. But what if it's a *person* person? With a family. Or worse still, a child. *What if it's a kid?* I take a closer look: it is a small elbow. Shit. Poor thing. I don't want to find some dead *kid*. Not here. Not like this. Drop me out. I'm leaving. I'm going,

Arrrrrrrr, but what if it's *not* a suicide but a *murder*? Nope, can't deal with this. It could be *anything*. Say somebody's missing? Then what? I'll have to live with knowing what I saw and not saying anything for the rest of my life. Like a coward. I am proper paranoid now. Oh please let me get some phone signal so I can call somebody and ask for help!

But then the elbow moves. It's *alive*. I am scared now, trembling. I gulp. Decide to move closer. I take my time, stepping

carefully and cautiously. I slowly pick up a wedge of driftwood and hold on to it. I've practised this before, self-defence, with my baseball bat at home – hold the wood high, take a step, and then another and another and then another and –

It's a girl, about my age, completely naked. I drop the wood and let her eyes carry me towards her.