

The Metal War

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Prologue

Wes (age 7)

Years after war: 40

The musicians are always in perfect unison, both in form and harmony. They traverse the circus grounds in their red uniforms, the gold stitching overly ornate. Carnations of all colors top their tall, cylindrical hats.

Wes watches them with his hazel eyes, brushing his hair away from his soft freckled skin. He focuses his attention on a trumpet player who he thinks looks like him. For a moment, there's something about him that makes him look meek compared to the rest, but after a blink the young man wielding the trumpet blends back in with the rest.

Reaching into his pocket, Wes pulls out his crumpled ticket. It reads *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, tent 14, 2 o'clock p.m.

"When are we going to the play?" Wes tugs on his mother's thin tan coat. She stands beside him, her arms folded as she watches the band march by.

She checks her watch and ruffles her son's wild dark blonde curls. Wes scrunches up his neck, unable to conceal a smile. "Soon honey. We have to wait for the doors to open," his mother explains.

Wes recovers and, taking his attention off the musicians, looks toward the main attraction of the area: the Memorial Tree. He slips his ticket back into his pocket and rummages around for another folded piece of paper: a map. He unfolds it carefully, as if fearing it might snap within

the weight of his fingers. The Tree isn't particularly close to the Theater tent; in fact, it lies in the dead center of the circus. All of the cobblestone paths radiate out from it, connecting the innermost layers of colorful pastel tents with the rest of the cream-colored ones.

A smile sneaks onto Wes's face as he glances back up at the Tree. His father, on the other hand, doesn't like it. He thinks it's kind of creepy. "It's a shrine," he'll often say, and yet while they stand here, around the Tree run the flutes and the clarinets, their beautifully played chords cutting the somber tone in the air.

Wes shudders suddenly, as if the Tree had let out a wave of its foreboding nature as a hello. He turns toward it and walks closer. He's staring up at a ballet shoe hanging from a seemingly wilting branch when a little girl comes up beside him. She has eyes the color of ice.

"I have shoes like that," her voice is sweet, and her wispy auburn curls billow gently in the breeze. She wears a maroon button up raincoat despite the sun being the only thing in the sky. Like Wes and the other patrons, a bronze pin in the shape of an airplane sits upon her breast as a token of entry into the circus.

"Do you do ballet?" Wes's voice is rough in comparison.

The little girl nods. "Can't get my Saut de Chat right though."

"Your *what*?"

"It's a jump. That's what they call it in ballet school."

The boy makes a face. "Sounds fancy."

The girl looks around. Surrounding them are the tents in beautiful pastels – rose pink, eggshell blue, pistachio green. Lanterns hang from various other trees, all less ominous than the one they stand under now. Circus patrons mill about on the inner path that circles around the

demanding Tree like it's a reception area. "This place is fancy," the girl nearly mutters under her breath.

Wes nods, his hands in his pockets.

"I'm Emilia by the way. You can call me Lia." She puts out a hand.

Wes shakes it, "I'm Wesley. You can call me Wes."

"What do you think all this stuff is here for?" she asks, looking up at the items hanging in the Tree directly above them: an *Altoids* tin, a music box, a beret to name a few. Most of them are tied onto the Tree's branches with ribbons of all colors, yet each tell a unique story invisible to most of the passersby.

"My dad says it's a shrine."

"What's a shrine?"

Wes shrugs. "I think it has something to do with dead people."

"Oh. That's creepy." Emilia stretches her arm up to the ballet shoe but it's just out of reach. She looks at Wes expectantly. "Can you lift me?"

Something tells him this is a crazy idea, but another force- perhaps youthful curiosity- makes him reconsider. Wes looks around, as if checking to make sure no one was watching. He sees his parents are caught up in what he can only imagine was a stupid disagreement and with that, he gently clasps his hands together for Emilia to step onto like a platform.

Emilia scrunches up her face. "How about I climb on your back?"

Wes shrugs and turns around. Emilia leaps onto his back, her arms gripping around him. Wes winces. Emilia's feet dig into his legs and the nails on her right hand dig into his shoulder as she reaches with her left. She tugs at the shoe. It loosens. She gives another pull and the ballet shoe slides off the branch, the strings that had held it up falling gently around her hand.

Wes relaxes his muscles, Emilia hopping down to the ground. As if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened, she calmly studies the shoe for a moment. Finally, she reacts: “So some dead lady wore this once?”

“I guess. You really think you should be holding it?”

“It’s kinda cool if you think about it. Someone probably mastered her Saut de Chat in this.” Ignoring Wes, she puts the ballet shoe inside a pocket on her coat.

“What are you doing?”

She puts a finger to her lips. “Shhh!” She turns around just as her parents approach.

Her dad smiles at Wes. “Made a friend, Lia?”

Emilia nods, “His name’s Wes.” She says this in her sweet voice.