

2nd – Rodrigo do Ó Barbosa (Original in English)

The summer sun poured through the grove, hitting Marta's eyes. She plunged her bare feet into the fresh earth and felt the roots of birches, oaks, and beeches, hugging her like childhood friends. Above, the birds' morning songs quieted her runaway heart. She was hiding from the future. The future her parents wanted, where all was chosen, carved into stone, or worst, recorded in the digital chain. As her tiredness caught up with her, she sat under an oak, letting her hair fly on the cool breeze. Squirrels cleared the ground of acorns while doe peeped from the sea of grey and brown boles. None paid attention to her. Marta closed her eyes and let the tree's rustle and the smell of warm grass take her into an uneasy dream. She was home, and her parents were at the table. As she sat, they resumed their questioning. 'Good morning sweetheart, have you thought about last night? We researched some courses in your brother's school. You could become an AI supervisor or a spacecraft mechanic? Your father says interplanetary trade, but you can also have a chat with my proton medicine colleagues.' Marta wanted to scream, rage, cry, but her lips were shut. They were not listening. She wanted none of those options; something was wrong with them. Her parent's eyes glowed with curiosity, but she dashed outside of the house. The door opened to a world of green, where the sound of people was indistinguishable from the sound of nature. Electric vehicles bustled between air and ground, blending with the roaming animals, unaware of what was man-made or nature born. Marta ran across the quiet streets, skirting the city's life, and headed to the old woods in the town's heart. When the forest's shade cooled the air, she removed her shoes and ventured into the wooden land. She waded brooks and creeks, turning the soil underneath her into leaping mud. She smiled as her extended arms touched the hanging leaves. When her legs finally caved, she was by her favourite grove, surrounded by beeches, oaks, and birches, with roots below and birds above. She woke from her breathtaking memory to find she was not alone. Hussein had received her message. He was her oldest friend, a man of prose and poems. A dreamer of worlds beyond our system, planets where the space trade had yet to reach. Marta seldom understood him. For her, the world of aw was right there, between the forest's trees or the ocean's salty waves. 'Your parents again?' asked Hussein, sitting under the friendly oak. 'They worry, you know. As my Bibi says, a mother's word is a candle in the night.' Marta turned and gave him a hug. 'I know that, you uncurable wise man.', she smiled, 'But I don't want their dreams, I just fear I'm letting them down.' Hussein nodded, 'Then, what do you want, Marta? I have known you since I remember, but apart from these woods, I don't know what makes you tick.' Marta stared at the groove, waiting for help, but like always, none came. They remained in silence for a brief eternity when a small black bird with wings of blue sapphire landed at their feet. It was her magpie. The singer of golden tunes that she and her grandmother loved. 'Did you know this land was barren?' Marta asked as the magpie leapt to her hand. 'From soil to trees, brooks to beasts, my grandmother rebuilt it, even this beautiful bird. She belonged to the first Nature Guardians, protectors of the earth and all living things.' 'I know our history, smarty pants' he joked. 'I know you do, silly. I'm just trying to say that I admired her. And I- I wished to be brave like she was. To care for the land and its children.' 'I don't see the harm in that.' Replied Hussein. 'There's none, but I know my parents wouldn't understand. They have forgotten the Guardians' valour. For them, they are just memories, like my grandmother.' A slow tear fell through Marta's face, and the magpie

released a call. It echoed through the grove like a water drop in an empty cave. The forest stirred and roared. The branches brushed, the beasts shook, and the birds raved with the gale. Hussein jumped as the woodland erupted into life. Marta remained seated, staring into the magpie's eyes. Then, a second magpie arrived, and her friend flew to its kin. The forest quelled, the beasts soothed, and the wind became a breeze. The two loving magpies skipped along the grass, pecking with tenderness. Marta rose as if awakened from a trance. 'What's up with you?' she asked, staring at Hussein. 'Have you seen a ghost? Or was it an elf?' 'Don't laugh!' he retorted. 'How come you are not terrified? I've never seen a forest behave like this.' 'Like what? Hussein, you are being weird. Did a bee sting you?' The boy stared at the quietness like an empty room after a nightmare. 'We should go, Marta. I don't want to stay here.' 'Alright, you strange man.' She laughed. 'Goodbye, miss magpie, a good day to you and your partner.' she bowed, and the birds took flight, singing a peaceful tune. The sun stood above them as they returned. Marta wore her shoes and skirted the streams burying her hands in her pockets. Hussein remained silent until they left the trees' shadow. 'I am glad we're out.' He shivered, 'If this morning was a book, it would have been an adventure or a horror, nothing short of thrilling.' 'You dream too much, you lovable silly.' She hugged him. 'I must go. My parents are waiting, and I barely have streets to decide what to tell them.' The friends departed, but Hussein shouted from a distance, 'I think you already know what you will be!' The walk home did not solve her life's riddle, even if Hussein thought it would. She entered the house, and her family was at the table. Their eyes gathered, and she froze like the morning's nightmare had returned. Then, a magpie with brushes of blue sapphire landed on the windowsill, and Marta smiled.