



Act III Scene 3

“Who are you?” the man asked, bluntly.

His breath rotted the very air. Lara, who was closest, gagged.

“Travellers,” said Attila, cautiously, “and we don’t know why we’re in here.”

“Not many do.”

“How do you mean?”

“The authorities here, they don’t exactly...” He broke off. A shadow passed over his face and he assumed the aspect of a small child weighing his second attempt at walking, having collapsed painfully the first time. But his standoffishness was not directed at Attila or at Lara in particular, but at the world with its myriad injustices.

Lara interrupted the silence. “They don’t exactly what?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Please tell us.” Her tone had notes of both pity and entreaty, somehow harmonised.

“I don’t know who you are,” he said dejectedly.

“We want to help.”

“Is that right?”

“We really do!”

“We really do,” retorted the prisoner in mocking high-pitched imitation.

Lara was out of breath.

“Rubik sent us,” interjected Attila.

There was a pause.

“I see,” said the prisoner, “I stopped believing that you would come years ago”.

He gathered himself together. “I am Henry,” he said.

Attila and Lara introduced themselves, in turn.

Henry then told them about the place, some of which they’d already gleaned; the endless minefields,



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the intermittent deaths of children at play — a game of soccer had become an act of courage — and the extraordinary droughts, which were only compounded by the isolation and danger engendered by the minefields.

There had been a war... long ago. No one remembered who with, what for, or if it were right or wrong. Details and morality have a way of fading with time. The mines had, originally, been a remnant of this war. But soon the authorities discovered that vast fields of explosives enhanced their influence, their control of where people went and what they did. Far from removing mines, as had been promised, they planted more and thus tightened their grip on power.

“We saw a battle,” interrupted Lara, “a tank exploded and people attacked it.”

“Yes, people resist. Even me—”

The man paused in his anecdote and glanced around at his surroundings.

“Well, I used to at least. I actually worked out how to move mines without setting them off — put them on roads, wait for government forces to arrive, et cetera. Sounds like you saw that trick in action. But it’s a perilous business.”

“And of course,” he added, for good measure, “I was caught in the end.”

He sank into a brief melancholy, pondering this inevitability.

“How long ago?” asked Lara.

“Lost count after six years, but even on that I’m not sure, torture has a tendency to distract from timekeeping.”

Pain was inscribed on his face, but in a moment his eyes brightened a little.

“I did try to escape... many times. But it’s hard. It really is...” He tapered off, returning to his gloom.

“Surely it would be easier with three of us,” suggested Lara, rather optimistically.

“Right you are!” exclaimed Henry in another sudden mood swing. Apparently, he was now in an Enid Blyton novel.

“It’s hard to find allies here,” continued Henry, “half the prisoners are a front for the government.”

“Not those poor buggers,” said Attila wryly, nodding out the window towards the piles of bodies.

“No, I suppose not... They came in earlier today. May well have been insurgents from the attack you saw... I probably knew some of them...” Henry’s melancholia had returned.

“So, escape?” prompted Attila, not willing to dwell on the moment.

“Yes, absolutely,” he replied, heartened once more.



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Slowly, Attila and Lara managed to prise the pertinent pieces of information from Henry's repressed memory: the front gate was heavily guarded, with at least five wardens, twenty-four hours a day; the remaining walls were punctuated by guard towers every hundred metres and cloaked in barbed wire; mines littered the ground outside the compound, apart from the main road... And you had to get out of the cell first.

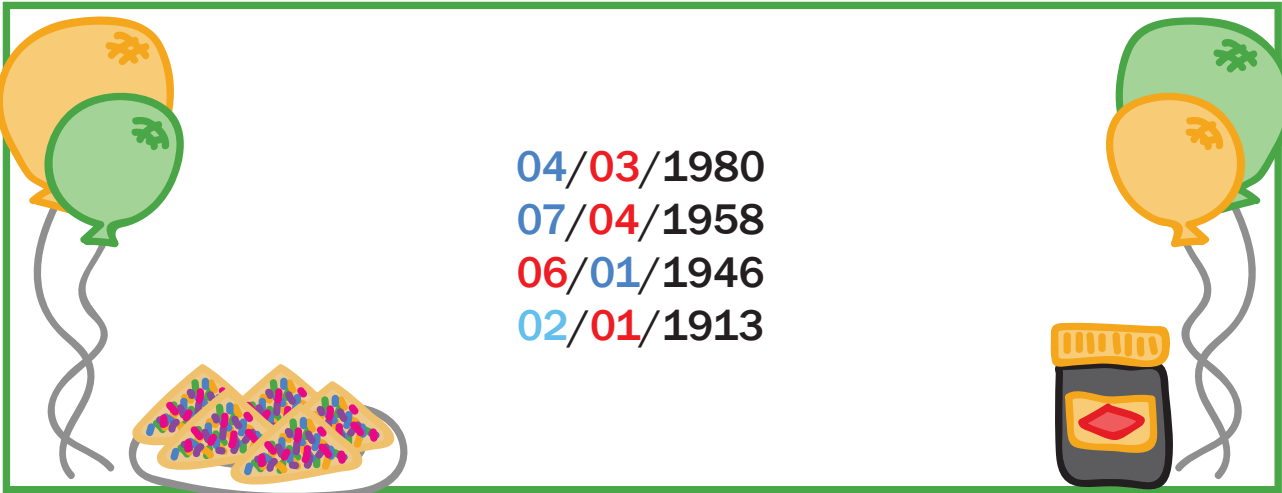
In his most recent attempt, he simply broke down the door with brute force, but they had strengthened all of them since. Attila sensed that Henry had taken a somewhat ad hoc approach to his escape attempts, and, characteristically, resolved to be less improvisatory this time — everything had to be planned down to the minutest detail and nothing left to chance. Before long it was. They scheduled it for the following night.

Darkness brought a deep cold to the desert. The wind died and the swirling dunes froze into their impressionistic shapes. The dead stopped their decay. And the foul rot of bodies staled.

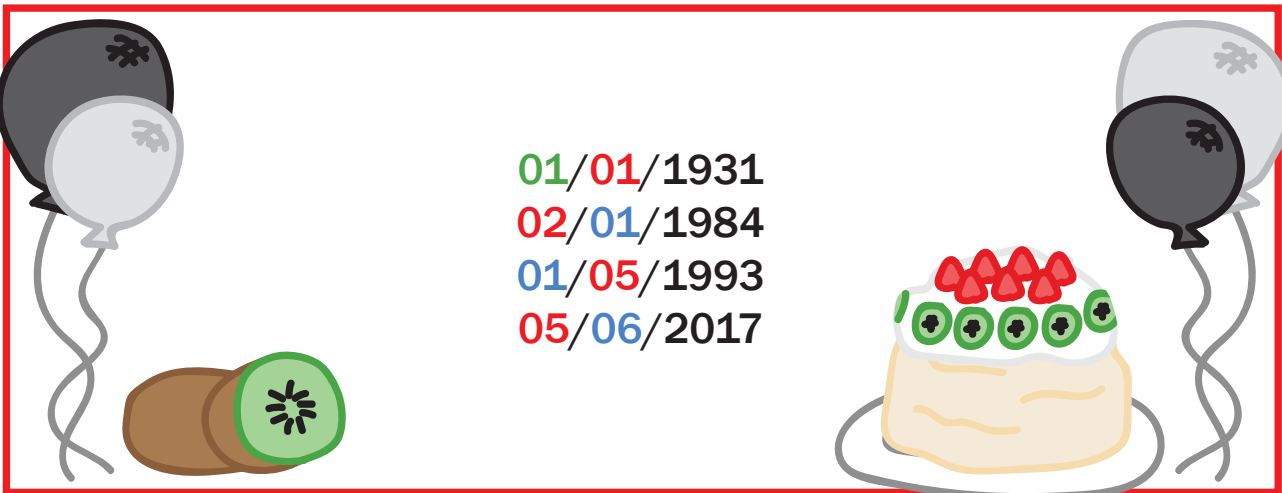
The wardens had left the cell complex for warmer quarters. But right before dawn, they returned and awoke the prisoners from their icy comas and marched them out to face the row of bodies. Shovels were handed out and, with guns in their faces, some fifty prisoners began to dig a mass grave. Few efforts were as self-defeating as the digging of holes in this water-like sand. For every shovel scooped out, an equal volume seemed to flow right in again. Henry seemed particularly depressed by the work. But, eventually, by some collective triumph of human tenacity, the hole was completed and the bodies were hauled in. The sun seemed to stand in serene judgement above them — an orb of justice condemning the war crime below, and blasting its perpetrators with the heat of damnation. But evening soon came and it fell down, impotent, below the horizon.



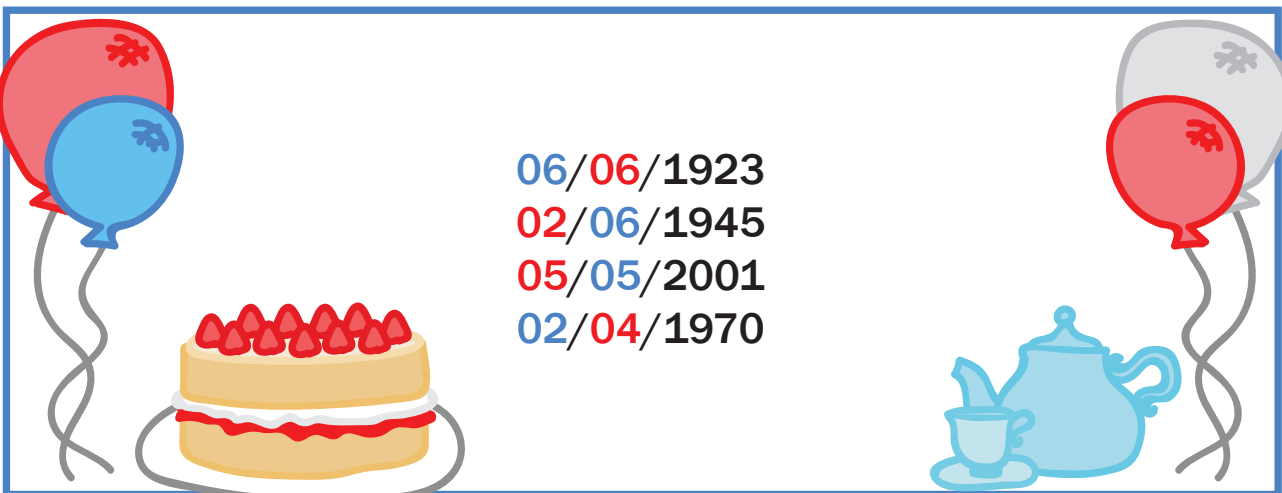
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04/03/1980
07/04/1958
06/01/1946
02/01/1913



01/01/1931
02/01/1984
01/05/1993
05/06/2017



06/06/1923
02/06/1945
05/05/2001
02/04/1970