**Breathe.**

She inspired purposefully, drawing the air deep into her lungs, feeling her stomach sink as her chest expanded. She held her breath for what felt like an eternity. 3, 2, 1…….. She exhaled gently, willing her breath to take with it the anxious feelings that were building in her chest. She felt shaky but her hands were still. She focussed on the lines of her hands, wrapping down from her index finger, across the broad reach of her palm below her pinky. Lines that had grown with her for her entire life. She wondered which was her lifeline. Was it long enough? When would she die? Would she have regrets? She was regretting this. Regretting being here.

Another wave of nausea washed over her. She wiggled her toes and drew another deep breath. 3, 2, 1 ….. exhale. She hated this feeling. The stinging anxiety that made each of her nerves painfully sensitive. She could feel the cotton of her shirt clinging lightly to her slightly sweaty back. She felt the heaviness of her books resting on her lap, their sharp edges digging into her elbows. There was a tightness of her shoes across the ball of her foot, holding her toes just a fraction too close together. One toenail was too long. She felt it catch on a loose thread in her sock. She had been just about to adjust her laces when it all had…..

She stopped herself. Breathe in. 3, 2, 1….. exhale. She felt for her pulse, placing two fingers of her left hand firmly onto her right wrist. This was a habit she had developed years ago to help ground her in these moments of borderline panic. She felt her heart beat firmly. She was always surprised her that even when she felt her most nervous, her heart maintained a steady, strong rhythm. Rarely fast. Never slow.

She rolled her shoulders back, feeling her shoulder blades pull towards each other as she stretched her neck. She knew what she needed to do. Despite the panic. Despite the uncertainty. There was only one right way to deal with this. She needed courage, and honesty, and bravery. She needed to act with conviction, even though it felt hard. She imagined the heroines of the books she loved cheering her on.

Ellie had courage; so much courage. She coordinated a counter-attack to deal with a surprise war breaking out while she was camping in the bush. Katniss demonstrated bravery. She confronted death. She did what was right. And Hermione. She was always honest. Always acted with integrity. If she knew something had to be done, she did it.

She drew another deep breath 3, 2, 1….. exhale. She allowed herself to latch on to a glimmer of confidence. She loved those books. She had connected with those characters. She had seen and felt similarities between herself and each of them. The same strengths her heroines displayed were what she required now. She braced herself. It was time.

Dr Walton-Jones