

# New York Comic-Con 2019

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***The Queen's Assassin***  
**Melissa de la Cruz**

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THE  
QUEEN'S  
ASSASSIN

MELISSA DE LA CRUZ

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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*Renovia*





## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Shadow*

*SOMETHING OR SOMEONE IS FOLLOWING* me. I've been wandering the woods for quite a while, but now it feels as if something—or someone—is watching. I thought it was one of my aunts at first—it was odd they didn't chase after me this time. Maybe they didn't expect me to go very far. But it's not them.

I stop and pull my hood back to listen to the forest around me. There is only the wind whistling through the branches and the sound of my own breathing.

Whoever is following me is very good at hiding. But I am not afraid.

Slivers of light penetrate the dense foliage in spots, shining streaks onto the blanket of decaying leaves and

mud under my boots. As I slice through thick vines and clamber over rotting logs, speckled thrushes take flight from the forest floor before disappearing overhead. I pause to listen to them sing to one another, chirping elegant messages back and forth, a beautiful song carrying warnings, no doubt, about the stranger stomping through their home.

Being out here helps me clear my head. I feel more peaceful here among the wild creatures, closer to my true self. After this morning's argument at home, it's precisely what I need—some peace. Some space. Time to myself.

My aunts taught me that sometimes when the world is too much, when life starts to feel overwhelming, we must strip away what's unnecessary, seek out the quiet, and listen to the dirt and trees. "All the answers you seek are there, but only if you are willing to hear them," Aunt Moriah always says.

That's all I'm doing, I tell myself. Following their advice. Perhaps that's why they allowed me to run off into the woods. Except they're probably hoping I'll find *their* answers here, not my own. That I'll finally come to my senses.

Anger bubbles up inside me. All I have ever wanted is to follow in their footsteps and join the ranks of the

Hearthstone Guild. It's the one thing I've wanted more than anything. We don't just sell honey in the market. They've practically been training me for the Guild all my life—how can they deny me? I kick the nearest tree as hard as I can, slamming the sole of my boot into its solid trunk. That doesn't make me feel much better, though, and I freeze, wondering if whatever or whoever is following me has heard.

I know it is a dangerous path, but what nobler task is there than to continue the Guild's quest? To recover the Deian Scrolls and exact revenge upon our enemies. They can't expect me to sit by and watch as others take on the challenge.

All the women I look up to—Ma, my aunt Moriah, and Moriah's wife, my aunt Mesha—belong to the Guild; they are trained combatants and wise women. They are devotees of Deia, the One Mother, source of everything in the world of Avantine, from the clouds overhead to the dirt underfoot. Deia worship was common once but not anymore, and those who keep to its beliefs have the Guild to thank for preserving the old ways. Otherwise that knowledge would have disappeared long ago when the Aphrasians confiscated it from the people. The other kingdoms no longer keep to the old ways, even as they conspire to learn our magic.

As wise women they know how to tap into the world around us, to harness the energy that people have long forgotten but other creatures have not. My mother and aunts taught me how to access the deepest levels of my instincts, the way that animals do, to sense danger and smell fear. To become deeply in tune with the universal language of nature that exists just below the surface of human perception, the parts we have been conditioned not to hear anymore.

While I call them my aunts, they are not truly related to me, even if Aunt Moriah and my mother grew up as close as sisters. I was fostered here because my mother's work at the palace is so important that it leaves little time for raising a child.

A gray squirrel runs across my path and halfway up a nearby tree. It stops and looks at me quizzically. "It's all right," I say. "I'm not going to hurt you." It waits until I start moving again and scampers the rest of the way up the trunk.

The last time I saw my mother, I told her of my plans to join the Guild. I thought she'd be proud of me. But she'd stiffened and paused before saying, "There are other ways to serve the crown."

Naturally, I'd have preferred her to be with me, every day, like other mothers, but I've never lacked for love or

affection. My aunts had been there for every bedtime tale and scraped knee, and Ma served as a glamorous and heroic figure for a young woman to look up to. She would swoop into my life, almost always under the cover of darkness, cloaked and carrying gifts, like the lovely pair of brocade satin dance slippers I'll never forget. They were as ill-suited for rural life as a pair of shoes could possibly be, and I treasured them for it. "The best cobbler in Argonia's capital made these," she told me. I marveled at that, how far they'd traveled before landing on my feet.

Yes, I liked the presents well enough. But what made me even happier were the times she stayed long enough to tell me stories. She would sit on the edge of my bed, tuck my worn quilt snugly around me, and tell me tales of Avantine, of the old kingdom.

*Our people are fighters*, she'd say. *Always were*. I took that to mean I would be one too.

I think about these stories as I whack my way through the brush. Why would my mother tell me tales of heroism, adventure, bravery, and sacrifice, unless I was to train with the Guild as well? As a child, I was taught all the basics—survival and tracking skills, and then as I grew, I began combat training and archery.

I do know more of the old ways than most, and I'm grateful for that, but it isn't enough. I want to know as

much as they do, or even more. I need to belong to the Guild.

Now I fear I never will have that chance.

“Ouch!” I flinch and pull my hand back from the leaves surrounding me. There’s a thin sliver of blood seeping out of my skin. I was so lost in my thoughts that I accidentally cut my hand while hacking through shrubbery. The woods are unfamiliar here, wilder and denser. I’ve never gone out this far. The path ahead is so overgrown it’s hard to believe there was ever anyone here before me, let alone a procession of messengers and traders and visitors traveling between Renovia and the other kingdoms of Avantine. But that was before. Any remnants of its prior purpose are disappearing quickly. Even my blade, crafted from Argonian steel—another present from Ma—struggles to sever some of the more stubborn branches that have reclaimed the road for the wilderness.

I try to quiet my mind and concentrate on my surroundings. Am I lost? Is something following me? “What do I do now?” I say out loud. Then I remember Aunt Mesha’s advice: *Be willing to hear.*

I breathe, focus. Re-center. *Should I turn back?* The answer is so strong, it’s practically a physical shove: *No. Continue.* I suppose I’ll push through, then. Maybe I’ll discover a forgotten treasure along this path.

Woodland creatures watch me, silently, from afar. They're perched in branches and nestled safely in burrows. Sometimes I catch a whiff of newborn fur, of milk; I smell the fear of anxious mothers protecting litters; I feel their heartbeats, their quickened breaths when I pass. I do my best to calm them by closing my eyes and sending them benevolent energy. *Just passing through. I'm no threat to you.*

After about an hour of bushwhacking, I realize that I don't know where I am anymore. The trees look different, older. I hear the trickling of water. Unlike before, there are signs that something, or rather someone, was here not long before me. Cracked sticks have been stepped on—by whom or what, I'm not sure—and branches are too neatly chopped to have been broken naturally. I want to investigate, see if I can feel how long ago they were cut. Maybe days; maybe weeks. Difficult to tell.

I stop to examine the trampled foliage just as I feel an abrupt change in the air.

There it is again. Whoever or whatever it is smells foul, rotten. I shudder. I keep going, hoping to shake it off my trail.

I walk deeper into the forest and pause under a canopy of trees. A breeze blows against a large form in the branches overhead. I sense the weight of its bulk, making the air above me feel heavier, oppressive. It pads quietly. A

huge predator. Not human. It's been biding its time. But now it's tense, ready to strike.

The tree becomes very still. And everything around does the same. I glance to my right and see a spider hanging in the air, frozen, just like I am.

Leaves rustle, like the fanning pages of a book. Snarling heat of its body getting closer, closer, inch by inch. I can smell its hot breath. Feel its mass as it begins to bear down on me from above. Closer, closer, until at last it launches itself from its hiding place. I feel its energy, aimed straight at me. Intending to kill, to devour.

But I am ready.

Just as it attacks, I kick ferociously at its chest, sending it flying. It slams to the ground, knocked out cold. A flock of starlings erupts from their nest in the treetops, chirping furiously.

My would-be killer is a sleek black scimitar-toothed jaguar. The rest of the wildlife stills, shocked into silence, at my besting the king of the forest.

I roll back to standing, then hear something else, like shifting or scratching, in the distance. As careful as I've been, I've managed to cause a commotion and alert every creature in the forest of my presence.

I crouch behind a wide tree. After waiting a breath or two, I don't sense any other unusual movement nearby.

Perhaps I was wrong about the noise. Or simply heard a falling branch or a startled animal running for cover.

There's no reason to remain where I am, and I'm not going back now, in case the jaguar wakes, so I get up and make my way forward again. It looks like there's a clearing ahead.

My stomach lurches. After everything—the argument and my big show of defiance—I am gripped with the unexpected desire to return home. I don't know if the cat's attack has rattled me—it shouldn't have; I've been in similar situations before—but a deep foreboding comes over me.

Yet just as strongly, I feel the need to keep going, beyond the edge of the forest, as if something is pulling me forward. I move faster, fumbling a bit over some debris.

Finally, I step through the soft leafy ground around a few ancient trees, their bark slick with moss, and push aside a branch filled with tiny light green leaves.

When I emerge from the woods, I discover I was wrong. It's not just a clearing; I've stumbled upon the golden ruins of an old building. A fortress. The tight feeling in my chest intensifies. I should turn back. There's danger here. Or at least there *was* danger here—it appears to be long abandoned.

The building's intimidating skeletal remains soar toward the clouds, but it's marred by black soot; it's been scorched by a fire—or maybe more than one. Most of the windows are cracked or else missing completely. Rosebushes are overgrown with burly thistle weeds, and clumps of dead brown shrubbery dot the property. Vines climb up one side of the structure and crawl into the empty windows.

Above the frame of one of those windows, I spot a weathered crest, barely visible against the stone. I step closer. There are two initials overlapping each other in an intricate design: BA. In an instant I know exactly where I am.

Baer Abbey.

I inhale sharply. How did I walk so far? How long have I been gone?

This place is forbidden. Dangerous. Yet I was drawn here. Is this a sign, the message I was searching for? And if so, what is it trying to tell me?

Despite the danger, I've always wanted to see the abbey, home of the feared and powerful Aphrasians. I try picturing it as it was long ago, glistening in the blinding midday heat, humming with activity, the steady bustle of cloaked men and women going about their daily routines. I imagine one of them meditating underneath the massive oak

to the west; another reading on the carved limestone bench in the now-decrepit gardens.

I walk around the exterior, looking for the place where King Esban charged into battle with his soldiers.

I hear something shift again. It's coming from inside the abbey walls. As if a heavy object is being pushed or dragged—opening a door? Hoisting something with a pulley? I approach the building and melt into its shadow, like the pet name my mother gave me.

But who could be here? A generation of looters has already stripped anything of value, though the lure of undiscovered treasure might still entice adventurous types. And drifters. Or maybe there's a hunter, or a hermit who's made his home close to this desolate place.

In the distance, the river water slaps against the rocky shore, and I can hear the rustling of leaves and the trilling of birds. All is as it should be, and yet. Something nags at me, like a faraway ringing in my ear. Someone or something is still following me, and it's not the jaguar. It smells of death and rot.

I move forward anyway, deciding to run the rest of the way along the wall to an entryway, its door long gone. I just want to peek inside—I may never have this chance again.

I slide around the corner of the wall and enter the abbey's interior. Most of the roof is demolished, so there's plenty of light, even this close to dusk. Tiny specks of dust float in the air. There's a veneer of grime on every surface, and wet mud in shaded spots. I step forward, leaving footprints behind me. I glance at the rest of the floor—no other prints. Nobody has been here recently, at least not since the last rain.

I move as lightly as possible. Then I hear something different. I stop, step backward. There it is again. I step forward—solid. Back—yes, an echo. Like a well. There's something hollow below. Storage? A crypt?

I should turn back. Nothing good can come from being here, and I know it. The abbey is Aphrasian territory, no matter how long ago they vacated. And yet. There's no reason to believe anyone is here, and who knows what I might find if I just dig a bit. Perhaps a treasure was hidden here. Maybe even the Deian Scrolls.

I step on a large square tile, made of heavy charcoal slate, which is stubbornly embedded in the ground. I clear the dirt around it as much as I can and get my fingertips under its lip. With effort, I heave the tile up enough to hoist it over to the side. Centipedes scurry away into the black hole below. I use the heel of my boot to shove the stone the rest of the way, revealing a wooden ladder underneath.

I press on it carefully, testing its strength, then make my way down. At the last rung I jump down and turn to find a long narrow passageway lined with empty sconces. It smells of mildew, dank and damp. I follow the tunnel, my footsteps echoing around me.

I hear water lapping gently against stone up ahead. Could there be an underground stream? The passage continues on, dark and quiet aside from the occasional drip of water from the ceiling.

At the end of the corridor a curved doorway opens into a large cavern. As I suspected, an underground river flows by. A small hole in the ceiling allows light in, revealing sharp stalactites that hang down everywhere, glittering with the river's reflection. The room is aglow in yellows and oranges and reds, and it feels like standing in the middle of fire. This space was definitely not made by human hands; instead, the tunnel, the abbey, was built up around it. There's a loading dock installed for small boats, though none are there anymore.

Then I see something that makes my heart catch. I gasp.

The Aphrasians have been missing for eighteen years and yet there's a fresh apple core tossed aside near the doorway.

That's when I hear men's voices approaching from the corridor behind me.

# ***A Cosmology of Monsters***

**Shaun Hamill**

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Exclusive Excerpt for Limited Distribution

*A Cosmology  
of Monsters*

*Shaun Hamill*



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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## The Turner Sequence I: Margaret

When Margaret enters the fluid waking dream of the City, that mix of memory and nightmare, she thinks she's in the tiny apartment she shared with Harry in the poorer part of Lubbock—that shabby one-bedroom affair with ratty carpet and wood-paneled walls, although you can hardly see the walls behind the stacks of boxes that line the room—boxes full of Harry's paperbacks and comic books and pulp magazines.

Harry's things are everywhere. The kitchenette table is buried beneath his typewriter and stacks of school papers and doodles of metropolitan skylines she never recognizes. He always promises to clean up the mess, but never seems to get around to it. It's a stressful way to live, tiptoeing around someone else's belongings, never truly comfortable in your own home.

*Thump.*

The sound seems to come from the bedroom, and Margaret leaves the overfull living room to investigate. When she opens the bedroom door and passes through, she finds herself in bed. Harry is asleep beside her, his mouth slightly open. He wears her sleep mask so she can leave the light on to read. The mask is lavender and fringed with frilly lace, but Harry never complains about using it, and Margaret loves him for that.

*Thump.*

This time it seems to come from somewhere inside the room, but she can't tell where. *Thump. Thump-thump.* As though the room itself is inside the sound. She sets the

book down on her belly and notices for the first time that she's pregnant. *Thump. Thump-thump.* Her belly big and round like an overinflated balloon, ready to pop. Is the sound coming from inside the room, or inside her? She places her hands on her stomach. *Thump-thump.* Her belly reverberates in time with the sound.

She shakes Harry's shoulder, but he rolls onto his side, away from her.

*Thump. Thump-thump.*

Her insides cramp with sudden, vicious force, and she gasps, drawing into a ball around her stomach. Something is wrong. She closes her eyes and sucks air through dry lips and gritted teeth. The pain slowly retreats to a dull ache in her middle. Maybe it's just digestive trouble. Maybe she ate something that disagreed with the baby.

She sits up and steps out of the bedroom. She means to head for the bathroom, but she must take a wrong turn, because she's not in the apartment anymore. She's standing in a long, dark, narrow hallway, lined with framed photographs. A single closed door stands at the far end. *Thump. Thump-thump.* The sound, so low it's more felt than heard, resonates through the old hardwood floors. She puts a hand to her stomach. The baby bulge is gone. Her stomach's not flat again, not exactly, but the mound and attendant cramps have evaporated.

She turns to look back at the door she came through, but finds herself facing a blank stretch of wall instead. *Thump-thump.* The hallway pulses, vibrates, and the door at the end unlatches to swing inward. A weak snuffling sound drifts out like a breeze. She doesn't want to go in the room, but she can't stop herself moving forward.

The room is dark. She reaches for the switch, and bathes the room in a dim pink light the color of nausea. The room is an empty nursery. There are no toys, no

changing table, no mobiles, no cheerful wallpaper—only a bunch of framed black-and-white photos on the walls, a single rocking chair, and a crib. She walks over to the crib, but the mewling sounds have ceased. The crib is empty, the blankets thrown back. How long has she been here?

She clenches the railing. *Oh god. Oh god.*

She looks around the room, sees nothing out of the ordinary. She lowers herself to her knees, groaning, and looks under the bed. No baby, but there is a framed picture, gathering dust. She picks it up.

It's a photo of Margaret and Harry at the courthouse on their wedding day. Harry wears one of his father's old suits, which doesn't quite fit—it's loose and baggy on his wiry frame, and he looks like a small boy playing dress-up. Margaret wears a simple green dress that Mrs. Johnson paid for (green, not white, because Mrs. Johnson wanted her to be able to wear it more than once). Margaret's parents aren't pictured because they refused to attend, but Harry's mother, Deborah, is there, wan and frowning at something off-camera. It's the most cheerful Deborah ever looks, like someone trying to feign happiness around a throbbing toothache.

The baby makes a noise, drawing Margaret's attention from the picture. The sound has moved into the hall. She braces herself against the crib and climbs to her feet. Her belly has grown round and hard again. The baby cries down the hall, and something moves in Margaret's womb, stirred by the sound. She leaves the nursery, photograph in hand, and finds herself back in the bedroom.

She finds Harry awake, sitting up in bed. Two small figures crawl over his body, snuffling and smacking. They're roughly human in shape, but they have no skin. They remind her of diagrams from her old high school anatomy textbook, the musculature of the human body

glistening, sinewy meat flexing and stretching with each movement. The little creatures' heads, though: long, skull-like faces, protruding snouts, and eyes the bright orange of traffic cones. These things crawl up and down Harry's body, taking bites from his flesh.

*Harry, she moans.*

*What do you have there?* He points at the framed picture. Margaret gives it to him, and they both examine it, the sound of the chewing babies pulsing like a migraine through her head.

He points to his mother. *She's a good person. It's not her fault she's this way.*

*Of course not,* Margaret says. She wants to touch him, comfort him, but she's afraid of being bitten by the little monsters.

*I'm not like her. I'm not sick that way.*

*I know,* she says.

*Get into bed,* he says.

*I don't think I want to,* she says.

He gives her a puzzled look. *It doesn't matter what you want.*

One of the babies climbs up his chest and takes a bite out of his cheek. He doesn't seem to notice. The baby inside Margaret stirs, kicks against the prison of her womb. *Thump. Thump-thump.*

*Harry, she says. Harry, we have to escape.*

*Escape?* he says.

Her stomach cramps again. No, not a cramp. It feels like rusty nails being dragged across her insides. She reaches for the side of the bed but loses her balance, lands on her back on the floor. She rolls onto her side and holds her belly.

*These aren't our babies,* she says, through gritted teeth.

Harry leans over so he can see her on the floor. He

might be trying to give her another puzzled smile, but there's not enough skin left on his face to tell. Jagged flaps of flesh dangle like curtains in a breeze. He seems impossibly far away.

*Margaret. Of course these are our babies.*

Their faces appear over the side of the bed, peering down at her with orange eyes. They coo and gurgle. They rock back and forth, gathering the momentum necessary to heave themselves forward, down to the floor. They're coming to help, to pull the third baby out of her womb and into the world with their sharp little teeth.

***The Return***  
**Rachel Harrison**

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*the*  
RETURN

Rachel Harrison

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# I

“What do you mean she’s missing?”

I watched frantic ants descend upon a nearby apple core and a facedown slice of pizza. A renegade splinter faction marched across the parking lot with tiny bits of food on their backs. The raccoons must have been in the garbage behind my office again, and I made a mental note to report it when I got back inside, but of course I would forget.

“She’s missing,” Molly said, her exasperation creeping through the receiver. “I don’t know how else to explain it to you.”

“She’s not missing.”

Above all else, I knew two truths about Julie. The first was that she was the most stubborn, most determined person I’d ever met. And the second was that she loved attention. Julie would never be missing. She might go dark, intentionally disappear for a few days here or there just to make sure someone noticed. A pop quiz: “Do

you love me?” That, she was capable of. That, I believed. But missing, as in milk cartons and posters and hounds in fields—no way.

I told Molly as much.

“What year do you think this is? Milk cartons?”

“That’s my point. People don’t go missing anymore.”

“What? What world are you living in?”

I’d been asking myself that question for a long time. I didn’t have an answer for her.

“She left her house last Friday morning to go hiking, and she never came back. Tristan filed a missing person report. They have a team out looking for her.”

“Looking where?”

“Acadia National Park.”

“How’d you find out?”

“He called me.”

“He called you?”

“I don’t know why me, Elise, so don’t start.”

Tristan was Julie’s husband. None of us had ever met him. They had gone to the same high school and reconnected when Julie returned to her gloomy Massachusetts hometown to take care of her sick mother. They got married before her mom died so she could be there. The ceremony and reception were held in someone’s backyard. We were sent two pictures from that day. One was of Julie and Tristan cutting a two-tiered pale yellow cake topped with sugared daisies. The other was of Julie standing in a patch of generous sunlight, smiling with her head back, as if she was midlaugh, or the weight of her happiness was too much for her neck. She wore a birdcage veil.

It was a shock to all of us. It might have been the shock of our lives, had she not gone missing.

*The Return*

“What do we do?” I asked Molly.

“I don’t think there’s anything to do. Just gotta wait. And prepare ourselves.”

I dug into my back pocket for my lighter. It was a white one. Julie once told me white lighters were bad luck. I cleared my throat. “It’s been how many days? Four? Five?”

“I thought you’d be freaking out.”

“Have you told Mae?”

“Are you smoking?” she asked me.

“No.”

“Yes, I called Mae first because I thought she’d be the calm, logical one. She was very upset. I know because she said she was very upset.”

Mae was hardwired to think showing emotion was bad manners. She had a sensitive nature, but she tried her best to suppress it. She never wanted to put anyone out by acknowledging she had feelings of her own.

An airplane groaned somewhere above the clumpy gray clouds. The rush of nicotine distracted me, and I missed something Molly said.

“Sorry?”

She scoffed. Molly was the funny one, so it was easy to forget that when she wasn’t being funny, she was being mean. She was capable of empathy, but on a case-by-case basis. Childhood bone cancer had taken her left leg below the knee, and sometimes she joked that was where all her patience had been.

“This is serious.”

“I know,” I said, the lie leaving a chalky residue in my mouth. She wasn’t missing.

This was classic Jules. She could fool Molly and Mae, but not me.

She and I were made of the same stuff. It was the special sauce of our friendship, and the curse that made it turn ugly sometimes. Molly described our passive-aggressive fights as “tangos.” Mae would frown and say, “There’s only tension because you two are so similar.” When things were good between us, we would brag about our similarities, say we were soul sisters. When they weren’t, we both knew it was like spitting at a mirror.

There were times when I fantasized about vanishing. Chucking my phone through a sewer grate and taking the train to God knows where with nothing but a stack of cash. Cutting my hair with dull scissors in a shitty motel room. And if I had thought about it, Julie had thought about it, too.

During one of our late-night dorm room confessionals, we had bonded over obsessively imagining our own funerals. Which exes would show? Would they cry? Who else would cry? Who would give the eulogy? What would they say about us? Would our parents ever move on?

“We’re so fucked-up,” she said, giggling into her beloved pufferfish pillow.

“If I die first, will you give the eulogy?” I asked.

“You know I will,” she said. “And I’ll make it all about me.”

The end of my cigarette was pure ash. I flicked the butt into a nearby puddle.

I didn’t know what else to say to Molly. In a few days, Julie would resurface and exonerate me and my lack of reaction.

“What do you think happened?” I asked.

“You really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“Honestly, Lise, I think she’s gone. I feel like she’s dead. I looked up the park, and it’s all woods and cliffs and ocean, and she was

*The Return*

there by herself. Alone! I don't want to be negative, but I have to say it out loud or I'll explode. Don't tell anyone. Especially not Mae."

"I won't," I said. "And Julie's not dead. Don't worry."

I told her I had to get back to work, said I loved her and would call her later. After we hung up, I walked around back to check the garbage bins. Raccoon ravaged. Trash everywhere. Possessed by some dormant Girl Scout goodness, I went to turn the bins upright. I leaned over with my hands outstretched, and beyond the tips of my fingers, I noticed movement. A wriggling. White spots. The spots swam in and out of the banana peels and half-eaten sandwiches, the fuzzy avocados and open containers of yogurt.

Maggots.

I thought I should scream, but I couldn't muster one. Instead, I backed up slowly, as if from a crime scene, until I was far enough away to safely turn my back. Still, I felt like they were on me. That maybe one had burrowed in through the bottom of my shoe, crawled up my leg, my spine, and was now perched on my shoulder, waiting to climb into my ear and, eventually, eat my brain.

What I remember most about that day is I was more disturbed by the maggots than I was by the news about Julie. I didn't think for a second that she could be gone.

I went back to my desk and let the day pass.

When the day bled into a week, I looked up Acadia National Park. I scrolled through images of sprawling nature, a lighthouse nestled atop a rocky bluff. A mountain called Cadillac, its slope etched with trails. It seemed awfully mild. Blue sea, blue sky. Pine trees. Piles of stones worn smooth by the ocean. I refined my search.

Acadia National Park—death.

Rachel Harrison

It was possible to die there. But people die everywhere. People die at Disneyland.

Acadia National Park—missing.

There it was.

Julie's face.

I closed my laptop and stuffed it under my bed, kingdom of dust bunnies and lone socks, among the other things I didn't want to deal with.

I woke up every morning forgetting. I would remember with my toothbrush molar deep, or while beating an egg, or on my third attempt to start the damn car. If I hadn't already, I would remember on my way to work, when I passed the roadkill, what was maybe once a deer? A large fox? An unfortunate dog? It was on the shoulder now, a pink mound of guts that refused decomposition.

One day the roadkill was gone, and when I got to work, I shut myself in a bathroom stall and tried to make myself cry. I told myself Julie was gone. Dead. Had died alone in nature.

"Ninety-nine percent of the time, it's good," she had told me during one of our last conversations, a few weeks before she had gone missing.

"Then what's the problem?"

"The one percent."

After years of practice, I had finally figured out how to deal with Julie's relationship drama. Instead of voicing my concern, huffing and puffing, disapproving, giving advice that went untaken, offering ultimatums, I was now relentlessly supportive. It disoriented her. She'd spin around in circles until the truth spilled out.

"I mean, you guys are so in love. And you're starting this bed-and-breakfast. It's really exciting! Not all couples can go into business together," I said. "You're super compatible."

*The Return*

“We’re not, though. He’s simple.”

“That’s bad?”

“He doesn’t understand me,” she said. “He’s my husband, and he doesn’t get it.”

“Did you end up making it legal?”

When she had sent us the pictures from the wedding—her way of telling us she’d had one—they were captioned “Don’t worry, not legal. For mom.” I figured it was a lie, an attempt to rationalize why we weren’t invited and diminish the gossip the three of us would inevitably engage in behind her back. She knew we would be talking about it, about her. She wanted to protect herself. But we knew the truth.

The wedding hadn’t been for her mom. The wedding was because she really did love him. That was how she loved. Hard and fast. Until whoever she loved loved her back, or until she got bored.

“He’s my husband,” she repeated, which could have been confirmation but maybe not.

“It’s not like with Dan. You’re not fighting all the time.”

“He doesn’t react to anything. Sometimes I want to push him into a wall just to see what he’ll do.”

“Healthy.”

“Lise.”

“Maybe you miss your mom. Maybe you need time to clear your head. To allow yourself to grieve.”

There had been no funeral. Julie’s mom, Beth, was a character. A chain-smoker, silk nightgowns with feather slippers at the supermarket, fake eyelashes and red lipstick. She’d been married three times. The first when she was seventeen, after legally emancipating herself from abusive parents. The second to Julie’s father at twenty-two. She’d had Julie’s sister, Jade, then Julie. Then, after something

happened that Julie never talked about, Beth married her third husband, a guy who did something with boats and had a lot of money. She got half of it in the divorce.

Beth's illness had been long and drawn out. She got to say all her good-byes. By the end, she told Julie, "Burn me and scatter my ashes someplace pretty, would you?"

"I was there every day," Julie said. "I grieved."

"Okay," I said. "I just think it's a lot all at once. You went from being a caretaker to being a wife, and now you're opening a business in a new state and doing a whole renovation. When did you have time to process any of this? Have you had any time for yourself?"

"No. I haven't. You're right."

"Take a few days. Get back to yourself."

"Right. I know you're right."

"I go crazy without my alone time," I said. That had been true at some point in the past, but then I was alone all the time, and that was bad, too.

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too."

"I want to get this place up and running so you guys can come. But I want you to come first so we get some one-on-one QT. I miss you most. Don't tell them, though."

"Secret's safe with me."

"We've got the great big porch that wraps all the way around. I keep picturing us out there, drinking whiskey under blankets and stargazing. I love Maine. The sky is so beautiful here, Lise. I don't understand how some patches of sky are more beautiful than others. How does that work?"

"Nature! Science!"

*The Return*

She laughed. "That stuff."

"All right, I should get going," I said, surrendering to sleepiness.

"G'night, love you."

"Love you. Talk soon."

I pressed down on the memory like a bruise and felt nothing.

At six months, Mae suggested we write Julie letters and bury them someplace special to us.

"My therapist thinks it's a good idea," she said.

"Since when are you in therapy?"

"Does it matter?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"What are we doing?" she asked me.

"What do you mean?"

"We're not doing anything. We have no control over the situation. It's not constructive. It's not good for us. Mentally, emotionally."

Yeah, duh. Of course our best friend's going missing wasn't good for us emotionally. But I couldn't say that to Mae. Besides, she had a point.

"Did you write her something?" I asked.

"Not yet."

I thought about what it would be like to give Julie the letters when she came back. How she would hold them in her hands, then up to the light like diamonds, then tight to her chest, as if they might absorb through her clothes and into her skin. The precious evidence of how much we missed her.

This vision was uniquely mine. By then, I was the only one who believed she was still alive. I was the only one who believed her

disappearance was a sham. I was convinced Julie was somewhere reveling in solitude and not willing to give it up just yet. She'd come back for us, though.

I'd committed myself to this belief. It was the only way I could function.

"I bought paper," Mae said. "This beautiful, expensive stationery from a shop in Soho. And a wax seal kit I'll never use again."

"I'm going to get a letter from you in a few weeks with a wax seal. Written in calligraphy pen."

"I bought one of those, too."

I laughed.

"It made perfect sense at the time."

"I'm sure it did."

"Elise," she said, "you should probably see someone."

"A therapist?"

"Yes."

"I don't do therapy," I said. "Julie doesn't, either."

Mae made a clicking noise with her tongue, signaling to me her displeasure. It was a habit she had picked up from her mother. I thought maybe it was a Southern thing. Mae had been raised in a suburb of Atlanta by two born-and-bred sweet tea come-to-Jesus Georgians. She had an accent she tried her best to subdue because it only provoked more of the "Where are you from?" and "What are you?" questions she was inundated with daily.

"I'm from China," she would answer. "I'm Chinese."

But it was never enough, because then they wouldn't understand the Southern accent, or because they were still wondering about her skin and her hair.

So, for a while, she ended up giving away her life story to satisfy obnoxious strangers.

*The Return*

"I was adopted from China. I grew up in Atlanta. I have albinism."

"It's exhausting," she told me once.

"Then don't do it anymore," I said. "Just don't say anything."

"Doesn't work that way."

She and Molly would talk, but with Molly it was different. Not many people asked about her prosthetic. They assumed cancer or combat. They tried to be polite. Not with Mae, though.

To think about it was a quick way to hate the world.

"I love you, Maebs. I'll think about the letter."

"It's an idea. You don't have to," she said. "But it's something."

A week passed, and I considered it. But then I thought, *Why write a letter? I'll just tell her when she gets back. Whatever I have to say, I'll tell her in person.*

At a year, their hope expired. They weren't looking for a body; they were looking for bones. Julie's husband decided to hold what he called a "memorial service."

"Funeral. It's a funeral," Molly ranted while we coordinated travel. "Why not call it a fucking funeral?"

"I don't know. He only talks to you. Why don't you ask him?"

"He doesn't talk to me. He only has my number."

"How?"

"No idea."

"Is he nice?"

"He's fine," she said. "I'm getting in at two p.m. I hate flying east. I'm going to be wrecked."

"That's what you get for living in Los Angeles."

"Don't city-shame me right now. We're going to our best friend's funeral."

“Don’t use our best friend’s funeral as an excuse to get out of being city-shamed.”

“Fair. But you live in Buffalo, so get off my ass.”

I wanted to remind her it wasn’t quite by choice, but that was a whole thing, so I decided it was better to change the subject.

“What are you wearing?”

“We’re dysfunctional. You know that?” she asked me.

“I’m aware.”

“Just checking.”

“When does Mae get in?” I asked.

“Three, I think. Let me see,” she said. “Oh, Tristan offered for us to stay there. At their house slash bed-and-breakfast or whatever.”

“Really?”

“I don’t think it’s, like, a functioning bed-and-breakfast. I think he still lives there, though.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“Do you think we should? Or would it be too weird?”

“I’m poor, so yes, let’s.”

“All right, all right.”

I spent the long drive with my hands clasped tight around the steering wheel, my knuckles ten pale hills. I looked down at my black dress, my black shoes, my black jacket crumpled in the passenger’s seat, the black road ahead going on and on like a cruel fate. She wouldn’t be there. She wouldn’t be stiff in a box, fenced in by flower arrangements and sniffing aunts. But I knew that didn’t matter to anyone else except me. They would all mourn her, anyway.

Even if her body was there, lying in an open casket with her hands folded, in a modest dress she undoubtedly wouldn’t have been happy about; even if I walked up and saw her, touched her cold

## *The Return*

cheek; even then, would I believe it? What was the proof I needed, and was I crazy for needing it in the first place? Not neurotic crazy, or crazy with grief, but clinically insane?

When I got to the house, I found Molly and Mae sitting on the great big porch Julie had told me about. The house didn't disappoint. A mammoth Victorian she had bought with her mother's money. A giant dollhouse. It was really something to see it in person.

"This house is just like her. A little too much," I said to them as we hugged. They both hung on too long, limp with grief.

I saw a man hovering nearby. I recognized him from the wedding picture. He recognized me, too.

"Hi," he said. "You must be Elise."

"Must be," I said. I shook his hand because he offered it. I could feel his calluses.

"Tristan. Thank you for coming."

He got called away by someone delivering food. As soon as his back was turned to us, we huddled.

"He's not her type," I said. He was too generic. All-American. Probably knew all the words to "Sweet Caroline." Drank a lot of milk.

"He seems nice," Mae said. "Genuine."

"He keeps messing with his tie," Molly said.

We had our suspicions back then. He had been the last person to see her. They had gotten married pretty quickly, and people always blame the husband.

When she had first gone missing, he sat through long police interviews, underwent questioning. They searched the house, his truck. They did an extensive background check. They called up his ex-girlfriends to ask about him. "Was he ever aggressive toward you?" Stuff like that.

Rachel Harrison

The cops never officially announced him as a suspect, but it wasn't enough to silence the speculation. There were people who thought, *Yeah, well, maybe he was just after her inheritance.*

Of course we wondered.

But as the day went on, he was so clearly distraught, all it took was one look among the three of us, and he was acquitted.

"I think part of me wanted to believe it was him, just to have an answer," Molly said, later that night when we were on the porch sharing a thick wool blanket and a bottle of whiskey.

"He's just so sad," Mae said. "It's so sad."

We stayed up all night, not wanting to leave one another's company. They swapped stories about Jules or cried or passed the bottle back and forth in time-bending silence. I stared at the sky, a dizzying display of stars that seemed to multiply in the blur of their own brightness, melting the darkness out of the night for shades of purple and evergreen, swarming up toward what might have been heaven.

A year and five months. I took a painfully long bus ride from Buffalo to Manhattan to visit Mae. She gave me the grand tour of her luxe new Tribeca apartment. Money had never been an object for Mae. Her dad was a successful lawyer and her mom a sought-after interior designer. An only child, she had wanted for nothing. Horseback riding and ballet lessons, multiple trips to Disney World, a miniature castle of her own custom-built in the backyard. She had been given creative freedom and a credit card, a combination that birthed a love of fashion. She worked as a stylist and, apparently, did well for herself.

I wasn't jealous. I skipped straight to shame. I thought of my sad

## *The Return*

studio apartment, with disgusting old carpet, kitchen cabinets loose on rusty hinges, a bum landlord who would never forgive me for that one time I paid my rent late. I thought of my dumb office job, the credits I had squandered abandoning my master's degree, the behemoth of student loan debt that haunted my life. I made all the wrong choices. Mae made the right ones.

There was a framed picture of the four of us on her nightstand. We stood on some street corner with water bottles full of vodka, on our way to a party that wouldn't be worth it. We smiled, our teeth white from the drugstore strips we used religiously, our cheeks fat and rosy with youth. Molly and Mae were in the middle, Julie and I the bookends.

Julie wore her favorite jeans with rips at the knees, a T-shirt too tight and too low, her bottle blond hair down and curly, and her ridiculous black heels. She always wore heels to parties. She was her mother's daughter.

"It's a good one of us," I told Mae.

She ignored me, shifted the conversation to our dinner plans.

She took me to a Mexican restaurant where we ordered prickly pear margaritas and overpriced tacos. After, we went barhopping in the West Village with her fancy fashion friends. They asked me minimal questions before veering the conversation to industry gossip. I had nothing to contribute so I drank excessively and excused myself for cigarettes.

"If Molly knew, she'd kill you," Mae warned me.

"But she doesn't know," I said.

Standing on the city sidewalk, drunk college kids stumbling past, good-looking couples holding hands and eating ice-cream cones, I wanted nothing more than to call Julie. She was the only one who would understand. She knew what it was like to feel so lonely you

could die. I wouldn't have to explain it to her, or how being in this city of millions of people was worse than being alone in my apartment. I could say all of that, and she would relate. Then I wouldn't be lonely anymore, because she was out there. She existed.

Looking back, I realize it was the first time I allowed her absence to panic me. Too much time had passed. How come she hadn't surfaced? I knew she wasn't in the park anymore. I supposed she had left, gone to Canada, subletted a room. But how long could she keep it up?

Mae came out to check on me.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I lied. "Tired from the bus."

"You want to go?"

I nodded. "Sorry."

"That's okay," she said. "I have to close my tab. We can get a car."

When we got back to her apartment, she pulled out the couch for me and made it up with clean sheets that smelled like the beach in a good way.

"We'll brunch in the morning," she said. "Thank you for coming. I like having you here."

"I like being here."

"We need to see each other more. The three of us."

"I know."

"Molly's a lost cause. But I keep faith I can convince you to move back to New York."

"I'd have to sell a kidney," I said.

"I'd find you a buyer."

"I hope you're kidding."

She raised an eyebrow. "Good night."

## *The Return*

. . .

A year and ten months, six days. A snowstorm on the first of April. Ha-ha.

It was apocalyptic snow. White as marshmallows but dense as cement. Cars swallowed. Roofs collapsed.

Work was canceled. Everything closed. Fair warning and a backup generator were my saviors. I moved my bed away from the window, piled on every blanket I owned, ate peanut butter sandwiches and drank hot chocolate I made with half-and-half. I tucked a jug of water in bed next to me. A tip I got when I first moved to Buffalo was to stay hydrated in winter, because the weather's so harsh it'll dry out your skin. It was advice I had ignored at first, only to watch my extremities turn to ash.

I witnessed the ascent of snow through my window until it took my window, and on the third day I couldn't remember what sunlight was like.

"Jules," I said. Talking to her out loud when I was alone was a habit I had developed after coming back from Manhattan. "Look, Jules."

Julie liked the snow. In college, she would drag me to the common room and make us "hot toddies" (microwaved water, contraband bourbon, honey, a splash of ginger ale), and we would watch the flurries shimmy their way down.

In the absence of light, time became something fun and elusive. I would guess. Midnight? Three p.m.? Had I slept past noon, or was it five o'clock in the morning? Did it matter?

I stalked the far reaches of my apartment. I cleaned out my closet, manufacturing a mountain of doleful clothes to donate to

Goodwill. I threw out two boxes of long-expired Pop-Tarts, stale English muffins, unsalted peanuts I had bought by mistake. I scrubbed my oven. I opened the record player Julie got me for my twenty-fifth birthday so I could play the only record I owned, *Back to Black*, Julie's gift for my twenty-fourth birthday.

I danced around in my socks.

"Julie, you're the best dancer," I said. "In general, but definitely out of the four of us. Mae would just find a wall to lean on and do that sort of swaying thing. She didn't need to do much. Her in her, like, satin bomber jacket and Ray-Bans. Molly doesn't really dance, either. She goes and plays beer pong or darts or whatever to get out of it. I figured it's pretty much impossible for me to look cool, so why not dance with you? You liked to dance. I acted like I hated it, but I always had fun dancing with you."

I paused for a response, and when I didn't get one, I said, "Yeah, yeah. You knew it, too."

I said, "You'd think after being stuck in the same room for days, the room would seem smaller, but it doesn't."

"You forget what it's like to leave. To be somewhere else."

"We're adaptable," I said with a definitive nod. Outside the wind howled like somebody dying.

"Stay somewhere long enough, it becomes your world."

"Actually," I told Julie. "I hate this place."

And I could see her beside me, rolling her eyes, chewing on a straw.

It was around then that it really started to eat at me, in a way I could no longer control. What if something had gone wrong? An unsettling amount of time had passed. What if she was chained up in

## *The Return*

some cult leader's basement, carving notches into the wall to mark the passing days, subsisting on pastelike oatmeal and brownish water and the occasional kindness from Mr. Discount Koresh, who was crazy but conflicted?

Children are taken from sidewalks. Plucked from bus stops by strangers in old, unassuming station wagons. You read stories. Ones that turn your eyes into magnets. It's almost like it's against your will, or that's what you want to believe. You don't want to admit that you're interested. That you want to know about the duct tape or the DNA evidence found in the trunk of the car when it turns up months later, even though the kid never does.

Women are kidnapped in parking garages, at Laundromats, from their beds, while out for their morning runs. It happens all the time. Taken by men who feel a sense of entitlement, a right to female bodies. Men who were dropped on their heads as babies or raised by mommie dearest.

Julie wouldn't have gone quietly. Julie would have screamed, thrashed around, bitten, scratched, gouged. Julie would have made things bloody. She wouldn't have vanished without a trace.

But she had. They never found anything. Not a scrap of clothing. Not a scent. Not a single witness.

Had she been abducted by aliens? Would I turn into one of those conspiracy theorists who put newspapers over the windows and hissed at the mailman?

Would I take the case into my own hands? Buy a corkboard and a bunch of red yarn from a craft store, stand in line at checkout among the disgruntled parents helping with science projects or costumes for the school play? Would I print out a map of Acadia State Park at a FedEx Office? Pay the extra few bucks for color? Tack it to my wall and stare at it, waiting for clarity?

Rachel Harrison

My friends thought I was in denial. They discussed it together and confronted me separately.

“I don’t know if you’re dealing with it well or not dealing with it at all,” Mae said.

“You have to accept the reality of the situation.” Molly said.

“I hear you,” I said, an acknowledgment to get them off my back. I lied and told them I would look into therapy.

I didn’t need therapy. I explored it on my own, this idea of denial. It didn’t feel like denial. It felt like I knew the truth and everyone around me was a skeptic. I wasn’t bothered by it at first because the truth was enough, but it wasn’t anymore. It was isolating.

It would have been easier to trade my truth for the ordinary Kübler-Ross, weekly sessions on a somewhat comfortable couch with a box of cheap sandpaper tissues. But I couldn’t. I clung to it.

Two years to the day she went missing, Tristan found her sitting on the porch swing. She was wearing the same clothes she’d had on when she disappeared. She did not seem confused or disoriented, but she had no memory of where she’d been for the past twenty-four months.

Her return was national news.

She was taken to the hospital. The doctors invaded her with needles and cotton swabs, attached her to sinister-looking machines that made unpleasant sounds. She was analyzed by psychologists and questioned by police.

Aside from the gap in her memory, she seemed to be perfectly stable.

“She’s doing great,” Tristan said. “She’s been very calm.”

## *The Return*

Calm? Julie? I'd never known Julie to be calm. She had caught the flu sophomore year, and I'd had no choice but to carry her to the school nurse for Tamiflu. She had cried like I was taking her to the gallows. She hate, hate, *hated* doctors. All doctors. She refused to get a physical. She had a severe phobia of needles. She was panic-stricken whenever there was a blood drive nearby. Seeing the Band-Aid on someone else's arm was enough to make her shriek. I didn't buy that she was "calm" about being confined to a hospital, at the mercy of doctors.

"Are you sure it's her?" I asked. A joke, kind of.

"That's not funny," he said. But then he added, "It's her."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Not yet."

"Who decides that?"

"The doctors. Not me."

I relented.

I expected more relief. Relief that she was back safe. Relief that I wasn't crazy. That, actually, I was very intuitive and should maybe consider an alternate career as an oracle. I thought relief would fill the vacancy of anticipation. The wonderings and what-ifs that had occupied my mind for so long.

But there was no relief, not really. Only more questions.

Her return disturbed my rituals. It created new ones. After work, I would run five miles, take a hot shower, a cold shower, drink an indeterminate amount of whiskey, put myself to bed and wait for sleep. When it eluded me, I would check the news to make sure I hadn't dreamed up her return. I would reread the articles about her coming back.

Sometime after I stopped reading but before morning, I would

notice a numbness in my fingers and toes. It spread slowly, and I would lie there helpless as I lost parts of myself to it, until I became completely paralyzed.

I couldn't move my head to see, but I felt like there was something there, at the foot of my bed, or maybe standing beside it. I imagined its breath, hot and rancid. And when I was so sure of its presence I thought I might scream, I would fall asleep.

I would wake up in the morning to a new truth. Dread.

"Elise?"

"Julie?"

"Hey, it's me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

The sound of her voice did it. Two years' worth of tears burst out.

"Don't cry," she said.

"Don't tell me what to do."

She laughed, and I was certain. It was her.

"I missed you, Jules."

"I miss you always," she said. "Before you ask, I have no memory. None."

"I wasn't going to ask."

"But you're thinking about it."

"I promise you I'm not."

"Good."

"Am I allowed to ask if you're okay?"

"Yeah. Yes, I'm okay. I've essentially woken up a lab rat, but overall, I'm fine. I feel fine. I feel good."

*The Return*

“Good?”

“I mean, a little freaked out. But good. I always knew I would be famous. I thought it would be for winning an Oscar or whatever. Not for this.”

“Marrying famous.”

“Yeah, meeting an A-list actor in rehab and walking the red carpet. Who’s so-and-so’s new mystery girl?”

“Five facts about Hottie McHandsome’s new girlfriend.”

“Right?” she asked. “But, yeah, I don’t know about this.”

“Mm.”

“I don’t want to be known for this.”

“You won’t be,” I said.

“I lost two years, Lise.”

“I’m sorry.” What else could I say? A mass of sadness lodged itself in my throat.

“The last thing I remember is waking up that morning, sitting on the porch, drinking coffee out of my favorite mug and thinking about the hike. Then nothing. Not until I was back on the porch.”

I wasn’t sure I believed her, but I was sure I didn’t care.

“I knew you’d come back,” I said. “M and M thought I was crazy. They tried to get me to see a shrink.”

“Did you?”

“Come on.”

“I wouldn’t have, either.”

“I know, Jules.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. So, so much.” And because I can’t resist ruining a moment, I asked, “You sure it wasn’t aliens?”

“Don’t even.”

Rachel Harrison

"I'm kidding. Kind of. When can I see you?"

She erupted into a coughing fit so brutal, I pulled the phone away from my ear. It lasted a solid minute.

"Julie?"

"Yeah," she said between coughs. "Sorry."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"Don't keep asking me."

"Okay."

"Can I call you right back? I need water."

"Yep."

She hung up. I took the opportunity to pee. Living alone, I had developed a habit of leaving the bathroom door open. I don't know why I did it. Because I could. Because I'm horribly lazy. Ever since I had moved into my studio, I peed with the door open.

I kept my phone faceup at my feet in case she called back right away, and I was looking at the screen when I heard the creak of hinges. I turned just in time to watch as the bathroom door crept forward, shutting itself almost completely.

I knew it was a draft. My building was old, decrepit. Still, what if it wasn't? What if there was someone in my apartment? My best friend had just reappeared after vanishing for two years. Anything was possible.

I wiped myself, flushed the toilet, locked the door and washed my hands. I checked behind the shower curtain, which I had failed to notice was pulled across even though I usually left it open to save myself the trouble of wondering what was behind it.

I couldn't tell what was worse. Feeling alone in my apartment or not alone.

*The Return*

I don't know what I would have done if Julie hadn't called back right then. Hid in the bathroom forever, maybe.

"Hey," she said. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay," I said. "I missed you."

"Just now?" she asked.

"Yeah, just now."

"Me, too," she said. "I want to see you, too. I need a few weeks."

"Oh," I said, pushing the bathroom door open and sticking my head out, scanning for something unusual. Coast was clear.

"Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad."

"You sound mad."

"I'm not. Cross my heart," I said. "Take all the time you need. Only not too much."

"I think I just need a good mope, you know? I'll get back to feeling like myself again. I'm not there yet, but I will be. Soon."

"I'll mope with you. If you want to mope, I'm happy to mope."

"That's sweet. But we'll see each other soon, I promise," she said. "We'll go somewhere. Do something fun."

It wasn't unlike her. Julie was never good at sitting still, but under the circumstances, it caught me off guard.

"Are you sure? I'll come to you, Jules. Just say the word."

"Tristan's been hovering nonstop since I got back. Not that I blame him, but it'd be good to get out of the house. Be back in the world again. But sorry. I've actually got to go. I love you."

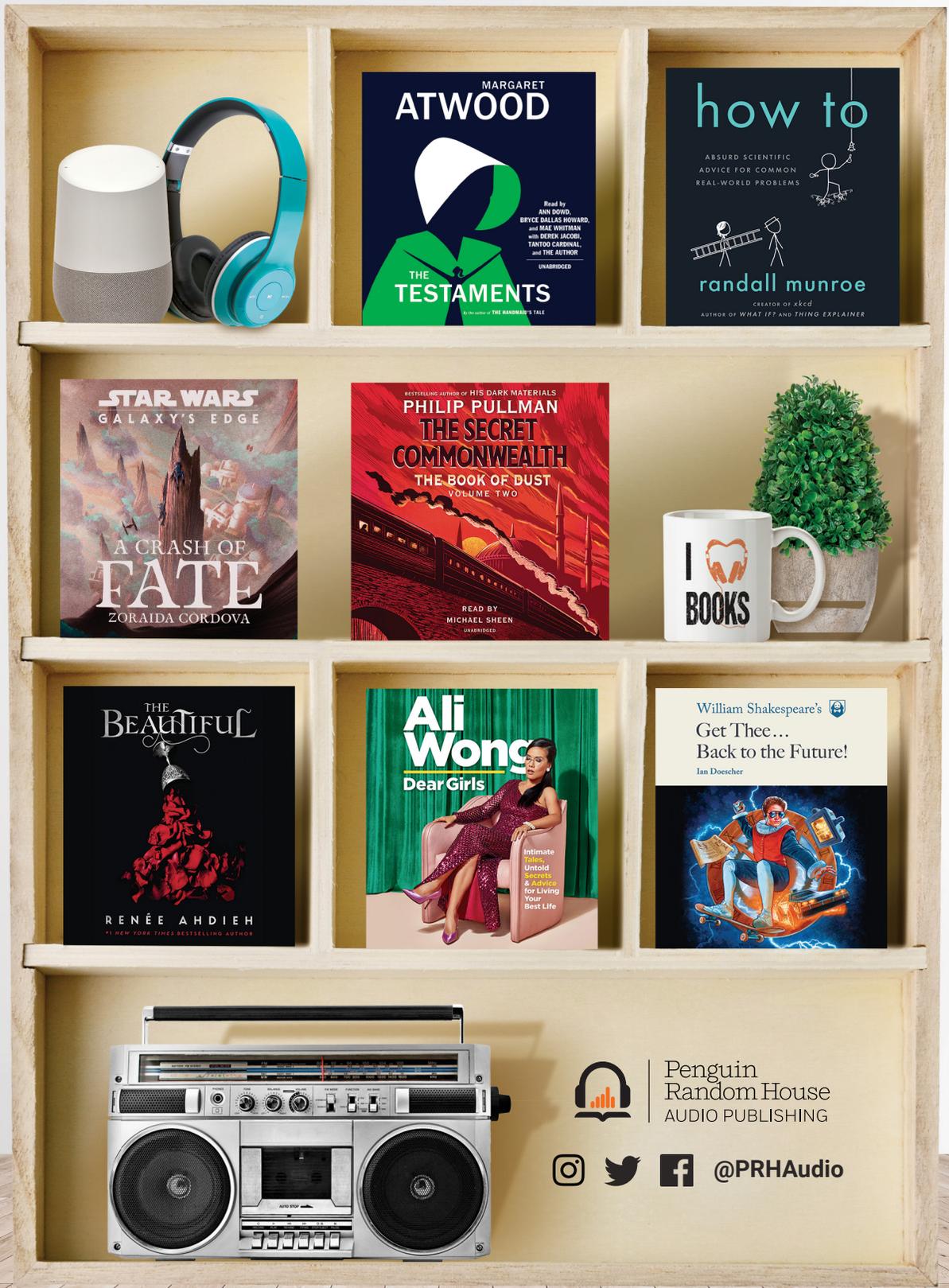
"I love you. I can't tell you how good it is to hear your voice again."

"Oh, darlin'. I'll call you tomorrow."

I couldn't stop myself from opening my laptop and searching for her name. Reading the articles for the thousandth time. A form of pinching myself.

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# *The Vanished Birds*

**Simon Jimenez**

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## Six Harvests

**H**e was born with an eleventh finger. A small bead of flesh and bone beside his right pinky. The doctor calmed the worried parents and told them the nub was a harmless thing. “But still,” he said, unlacing a small cloth pouch, “a farmer needs only ten fingers to work the dhuba.” He coaxed the child to sleep with the smoke of torched herbs, and sliced the nub from the hand with a cauterizing knife. And though the mother knew her baby felt no pain in his medicated sleep, she winced when the flesh was parted, and clutched him to her breast, praying that there would be no memory of the hurt when he woke, while her husband, unable to resist indulging in his hedonism even then, breathed deep the doctor’s herb smoke, and was spelled by a vision of the future—in his dilated pupils his son, a full-grown man, handsome and powerful, with a big house at the top of the hill. The new governor of the Fifth Village. To commemorate this vision, he had the finger boiled of its flesh, and its bones placed in a corked glass jar, which he shook on wistful days, listen-

ing to the clack of good omens as he whispered to his baby, “You are going to run this place one day.” The boy burred in his arms, too young to recognize the small and varied ways life was contriving to keep him put.

They called him Kaeda, the old name of this world.

Kaeda grew up proud of the scar on his right hand, the shape of it changing over the years. When he was seven, the healed tissue rippled down the side of his palm like a troubled river. He was happy to show the other children the mark when he was asked, and he giggled as they stroked the skin with furrowed brows, at once impressed and unnerved by its texture. Some children called him cursed; those were the children who learned from their parents to distrust the unusual. To them, he shoved his scar under their noses and confronted them with the fact of it, repeating the words of his father: “I’m going to run this place one day!” and through sheer force of will convinced them that the scar on his hand was a lucky thing.

He had a natural charisma. The caretakers doted on him, and the other kids played the games he wanted to play, believed what he believed. Everyone but a girl named Jhige, who never missed an opportunity to push back against his wild declarations, matching pride with pride as she countered his wild theories on why the sky was red, and why the smell of the air changed during the day; why everything smelled soft and sweet in the morning and sour as a kiri fruit at dusk. “And your scar isn’t special,” Jhige shouted. “It just means you were born wrong!” They wrestled in the yellow grass until the caretakers separated them. They fought like dogs most days, but despite the bruises he might nurse on the way home, he always emerged from the fights unbothered, certain that she was only jealous that it was he who was destined for greatness, and not her, though what greatness that was, he did not know, and would not, until the day the offworlders arrived.

Before that day, he was only familiar with the stories his parents shared: how every fifteen years the offworlders broke the sky with their cloth-and-metal ships and landed in the plains east of the village to collect the harvest of dhuba seeds. His father told him that this special day was called Shipment Day, and that on every Shipment Day, a great party was held for both the offworlders and the farmers. “A party you will never forget,” he promised.

His mother laughed from the other room. “Unless you drink too much.”

“The drink is half the fun,” his father countered.

Kaeda was unable to sleep the night before his first Shipment Day. His mind was too alive with the stories; the new faces he would see, the new hands not stained purple from the dhuba fields. He gazed through his small bedroom window at the black sky littered with stars, with no regard for the late hour, as he imagined what it would be like to leap from light to light. What places there were, on the other side. When his mother came to collect him in the morning he was exhausted, all his energy spent the night before, conjuring these fantasies. He dragged his feet into his sandals and complained loudly as they marched with the other villagers to the plains east of town, begging for rest until his father sighed and carried him on his back, where he drifted in and out, unaware of time or location, only the warm and thick smell of the man’s shoulder, like the embers of a dying fire.

He slept.

And then the sky cracked and he woke up with a shriek and his father laughed and pointed upward and he followed his father’s finger up to where, against the slate of red sky, twelve thin green lines arced above the horizon line, the end points gaining in size until, not two minutes later, the giant metallic beasts touched down on the carpet of grass with ground-shaking thumps, one after another, the vibrations attacking his heart, swollen now as it occurred

to him that he had never seen such large creations, nothing as intricate as their cloth wings and the hull panels that gleamed under the sun, or the sonic boom of their hangar doors that dropped onto the dirt like jaws mid-shout, or the people who emerged from within of every variant shade of skin, some lighter than his, others darker, dressed in clothing that seemed woven out of the stuff of starlight. With a nauseous rush the scope of his world telescoped outward to accommodate the breadth of these awesome quantities. His whole body shivered. And then he pissed himself. His father cursed and lowered him to the ground, cringing at the stain on his back.

The offworlders were shown to the banquet cushions in the center of the Fifth Village. Bowls of spirits and plates of dhuban pastries—long, purple, and flaky—were served on wide platters. Kaeda could not see the offworlders from where he sat—a minor disappointment, as he stuffed himself with sweet breads and bowls of juice, feeling warm and content between the motions of his parents' bodies, pleased by the sound of hard snaps when his mother cracked open nuts with her muscular fingers, and the bellow of his father's drunken, joyful laugh. He felt a satisfaction with the world so complete he even smiled at Jhige, who was with her own family on the other end of the long table, and she, startled, returned his smile with a small wave of her own before turning back to her uncle, who was in the midst of another tall tale about the Butcher Beast of the southern forest—horror stories with which the young would startle themselves awake later that night, and stare into the dark corners of their bedrooms, waiting to be devoured. The adults exploded with laughter.

After the banquet, when the hard drinking began, the caretakers and new parents brought the children back to their homes. But Kaeda wasn't finished with the night—he had yet to meet an offworlder—so he planned his escape from the group. He told his friend Sado to lie to the caretakers and say that he had run home

ahead of them, and before Sado could so much as nod, the boy was gone, hugging the side of the squat buildings, back to the bonfire and the harsh scent of liquor.

It was there, at the end of the alley, before the path opened up into the plaza, that he saw her: a woman, alone on a bench, silhouetted by the fire.

She held a wooden flute to her lips. Her fingers spidered up and down the length of the instrument, playing music that reminded Kaeda of the sound of wind whistling through a cracked-open door. He watched her from the shadows. Even sitting down, she seemed tall. She was black-skinned, her hair shaved to the scalp, and was dressed in an outfit simpler than her friends: a white top with a collar cut down to the chest bone and dark bottoms that hugged the curves of her legs. Each note she played on her flute made the bonfire ahead of them dance, or maybe it was the fire that was influencing the music, or the stars, or all of it, working in concert, together. The song was the night itself. It was in his people's laughter as they danced by the fire, and it was in the smell of fruit and smoke in the air; it was in the light, caught in the beads of sweat on her collarbone. It was everywhere. The woman's breath flumed through the wooden tube, and bellowed heat into his belly, gladly mesmerizing him, until her large eyes shot up and saw him.

The music stopped.

She spoke with two voices, one in a language he did not understand, and the other his own. It sounded as though she were haunted by her own ghost, she her own distant echo. He was too young to recognize the doubled voice as a quirk of her translator device, believing instead it was a kind of offworlder magic.

"Did you like it?" she asked, referring to the music.

He nodded. She stood up and approached him. Her shadow was long; it ran past him, into the dark fringe at the end of the alley. There was an instinct in him to run, as though some part of him

knew that if he should stay there would be no turning back, but he ignored this instinct and planted himself to the ground, stubbornly so. She crouched before him, eye to eye. Close enough for him to smell the flowered chemistry of her skin.

“Take it,” her doubled voice said, handing him her flute.

Their fingers grazed as he took the gift. He held the flute to his chest with a knuckled grip as she looked down at him with the smile that only adults were capable of—one both happy and sad—and he watched her turn away and stride toward the bonfire, while the shape of her branded itself to the back of his skull. He did not know at the time that the shape would remain there for years, only that he was at once pleased and frightened by the heat he felt when he watched her go.

He pressed the flute to his lips, the mouthpiece still wet.

In the morning, the fire pit was cold ash and the travelers were gone, taking with them the seed his people had harvested. The flute stayed by his bed. He told his parents that it was a gift, which, much like his eleventh finger, his father interpreted as a sign of good things to come and his mother accepted as yet another weary fact of the world. He played it when he was feeling lonely, lying on the stalked roof of their home, blowing into the mouthpiece until he was hoarse in the throat, never getting the notes quite right; filling his nights with clumsy, earnest melodies. Songs that repeated themselves, maddeningly.

First began the dreams of innocence; him showing her his land, teaching her the rules of the games he and his friends played—“keep one foot above the knee and a finger on your nose and sing the harvest night song backwards.” In those dreams, she was the listener, and never talked down to him. She liked his finger scar and told him he was very brave. Then came the other dreams; the quiet, wet dreams, of her sitting on the foot of his bed, a finger pressed against

his big toe, then sliding up the hill of his foot, up his bare leg, trailing a path of electricity, until the short circuit, the explosion.

And then he was fourteen.

Kaeda began to work the dhuba fields. He worked alongside his parents, who taught him how to squeeze the gelatinous purple seeds from the heart of the stalk, to cradle the fragile things inside the woven bowl, to hack the emptied stalk down with a machete, at the base, with three precise strikes. When he was more capable, he was assigned his own field farther down the road, where he worked alongside Jhige and others he knew in passing. The work whittled the youthful dough off his body, replaced it with hard and useful muscles that pressed against his skin like many little fists. Women noticed; some men. Jhige noticed. Their childhood rivalry had by then eased into a playful camaraderie. The jokes they shared tinged with something unknowable and exciting, as each would sneak glances at the other through the rows of stalks they worked, watching the way the other's body moved.

Late in the moisture season, on their way back to town, she asked him—quickly, as if to overcome her own nervousness—if he was attracted to her. He tripped over a knot in the dirt. He said yes. And he was. But that night, as they groped each other behind one of the storage shacks and sucked skin bruised, it was another woman that Kaeda kissed, the heat of the bonfire licking his face as she whispered with her doubled voice the burnt secrets of this world.

His relationship with Jhige was short-lived. It was obvious to both of them that his mind was elsewhere. He looked past her when they lay together, would hold her hand limply when they walked through the village to meet their friends, and when they fought, he would be the first to walk away, as if he could not be bothered to come up with a retort, much less a resolution. The end was quiet, and sudden. In the plaza he saw her holding hands with another

boy, who worked another field. Yotto. A kind boy, and, in Kaeda's opinion, a stupid one, with a clumsy blade swing. A poor choice for Jhige. But he said nothing to her about this, and walked past the two of them without comment. It would be years before they were on speaking terms again.

He had other lovers in the interim, none of whom he stayed with for longer than a month, always finding them wanting in some aspect; not tall enough, not strong enough, not clever enough, but always the true reason remained the same underneath it all: none of them were *her*.

Lying on the thatched roof of his home, staring up at the stars, he could convince himself that somewhere far away, she was thinking of him too.

They cracked open his first jug of spirits on his fifteenth birthday and poured the contents over his head, a sour baptism that shepherded him into the world of adults who drank at night and floated to the purple fields in the morning. "This is when your life begins," his father cried, gripping the boy's face in his callused palms, kissing him again and again on the forehead, drunk, along with the old refrain, "You're going to run this place one day." It occurred to Kaeda under his father's smothering kisses that all these good omens were always in some distant point in the future, never now.

"Just you wait and see."

He waited.

Kaeda was twenty-two when the next Shipment Day arrived. He was working in the fields, squeezing the last of the seeds from the stalk, when Sado elbowed him and pointed up at the sky. Twelve green lines cut across the clouds, disappearing behind the horizon of tall stalks to the east. "They're here," Sado said. Kaeda nodded, his hands now trembling as he stripped the skin off the next stalk, anxious to finish off his quota. They dragged the wheeled containers of seed back to the village. His friend warned him not to get too ex-

cited, that even if she was there, the chances were good that she would not remember him, to which Kaeda grinned and replied, “I hope she doesn’t,” for he did not want her to see the boy from years past, but a man worthy of her night.

“After she turns you down,” Sado said, slapping him on the shoulder, “come drink with me and all the other lonely bastards.”

Kaeda laughed. He let out the first holler of the song of homecoming, and smiled as the song spread down the marching line of farmers, their voices full-throated in anticipation of the coming celebrations. They brought the wicker containers back to the collections building to be weighed and stored, and once the last container was delivered, they ran to their homes and dressed in their good breeches and dress robes. The bonfire was well under way when they arrived. Kaeda picked up a jug from the long table and took a great swig that burned courage down his throat before he went in search of her. The shadows of the dancers by the fire made the whole plaza pulse, shifting the ground beneath his feet, and as faces flashed by, none of them hers, the fear gnawed at his stomach that maybe she had not returned—but then, in the corner of his eye, he saw the alley, thrown in light, and her, on the bench, watching the dancers and the fire with a calm smile.

He knew time moved differently for her, but still it shocked him how much she resembled his dreams of her—how little she had aged. He straightened his posture and pushed out his chest, a show of bravado that was undercut when he introduced himself and stumbled over the simple syllables of his own name. Still, the off-worlder smiled at him, the light caught on the curve of her soft lips, and his chest cracked open. Everything he had been holding in for the last fifteen years came tumbling onto the ground by her feet. A tangled mess of want.

“Hello,” she said.

Her name was Nia Imani. She told him it was an old name from

back when Earth was whole, but when he asked her if it was her mother or her father who gave her the name, she smiled and spoke instead about her work.

He already knew the basic nature of her travel. The governor covered the subject with every tired welcome speech he gave in the fields. But still he listened with rapt attention as she described the sensations her body experienced when her ship departed from this reality and folded into another. She told him it was called Pocket Space. The place where time moved differently. He imagined what she asked him to imagine: a black ocean, with currents and eddies and rapids that stretched the seconds into hours into years. Some currents stretched time infinitely, and other currents not more than moments. But always, there was an imbalance of time. “We can travel long distances this way,” she said, “but every time we return, things are different. The route we’re taking now, we arrive on the Assiduous Current and leave on the Diffident. These currents have a specific time differential. It takes me eight months to bring your harvest to its destination and to return here for the next shipment, but for you—”

“Fifteen years,” he finished, knowing the number well, having walked slowly through each of them. “And what is it like, when you go home and your friends are older but you are not?”

“Sometimes sad,” she said, then, smiling, “but sometimes good.” She told him she was hired by the Umbai Company for six shipment cycles; this was her second.

“So you will be back four more times.”

“Yes,” she said. “Just four.” Then, “Are you sure we haven’t met before?” and he assured her that yes, they most definitely had not, afraid that the truth would catch him; that the spell of the night would shatter and she would pat him on the head like the little boy he was and say good night. But she pressed no further, and instead asked him about the nature of his work. He puffed out his chest

again. "I'm the best on my field, fifth fastest in this village." He told her about the moisture seasons, when the barren fields were covered in a thin layer of white mist, the best time to replant the stalks, and how the roots fed on the wetness in the air and the sugar in the rutted dirt. "We harvest the seeds when the sky sucks up the moisture. A day of work will turn your hands purple." He showed her his palm, the mauve patina that stained it, and when she glided a finger across his hand, he shivered.

"You're proud of your work," she said. It wasn't a question.

"I am," he said, which wasn't always true. Most days he found the work mundane, sometimes tedious, never exceptional; but tonight, as she listened to his every word, the work seemed important; bigger than himself. He spoke until there were no more words to say, the topic exhausted, but the air between them still violent with energy. Her hand lay next to his trembling fingers on the bench. He swallowed.

"You are very beautiful," he said.

The words fell out of his mouth like rocks.

But she picked them up anyway, one at a time, and she told him that he was beautiful too, and there, in her eyes, he saw the same want. He followed her through the dancers, past the long tables where people ate, past Sado and the other single men who drank and comforted one another and who bit their lips in jealousy as he and the offworlder walked away from the party together. Past Jhige, who held his gaze for only a moment before turning back to her husband, twining her arm around his thick waist tightly.

They walked down the shadowed road, his feet drunk and stumbling on the ruts in the dirt, while Nia strode beside him, straight-backed and poised, eyeing him from the side with a beguiling smile. He wanted to stop, to take a moment to memorize her against the backdrop of his town, but she slipped her hand down the front of his breeches, gripping his erection, and pulled him down the slight

hill, behind a large rock, where she ground him into the earth with her hips, her hands pressed firm against his chest, forcing him to stay right there, his hands cupping her breasts, her waist, anything to keep him anchored to this dream, until it was over, and they lay together on the grass, naked and spent. She lay her head on his chest, a hand on his navel, her weight pinning him to the ground in a way that he liked. Both of them adrift on this moment. From a place of utter satisfaction, he began to hum a song. The song reserved for the end of a long day. When she asked him what it was he hummed, he told her about the song of homecoming. "It's what we sing on our way back from the fields when the work is done," he said. His fingers stroked the grain of her scalp. "The song of bargaining. *Take my day, but give me the night.*"

"It's pretty," she said with a sigh. "Sing it again."

And he did, looping the song onto itself like a string around his finger, a rope that hugged their bodies together, until she fell asleep. And as she slept, he listened to the night. The crackle of bugs. The breeze that whistled through the fields and lifted up into the sky. Her breath. The incoherent mumble of her dreams.

And he knew what it was he wanted.

He nudged her shoulder till she stirred.

"Can I come with you?" he asked.

Her eyes opened just enough to see the haze of him.

"Where?" she asked.

His heart galloped. "Anywhere."

She blinked once, and shut her eyes.

"Maybe," she murmured. She turned away, and pressed her back against his chest. "We'll speak in the morning."

"Okay," he said.

Kaeda listened to her snore in loud, rumbling breaths, but this too he loved. *They weren't just dreams*, he thought with pride. And

soon, he drifted off as well, with his hand on her hip, where it was warm.

He woke to laughter.

It was midday. The sun was hot on his naked body. Two farmers, both men he knew, kicked his feet and told him it wasn't healthy sleeping outside with no clothes on. "You'll get bugs up your crack," they said. More laughter. Blearily he looked around. She was gone, the only proof of her the depression in the grass beside him. He yanked on his pants and sprinted toward the fields—"Bugs!" the farmers cackled—and arrived just in time to see the last of the ships lift off. The crowd of villagers that had come to see the departure waved goodbye at this last ship as it faded to a prick of light in the sky, before disappearing. The children shouted "Goodbye!" in chorus, as Kaeda's hands dropped to his sides, his heart unspooling beneath him. He didn't see his mother approach, not until she knocked his bare shoulder with a baffled expression. "Where is your shirt?" she asked. "Go put on your shirt, you stupid child!" And the other families chuckled as she pushed him out of the fields, back to the village, while he stumbled forth, knuckling his wet eyes.

He disappeared into his work. Two thumbs choked the dhuba seeds out of the stalk's throat. A machete cracked against the spine of the stalk; the beam bent at an angle; body weight took it the rest of the way. One hundred kilos of dhuba seeds spilled into five containers, the containers wheeled back to town, half the number placed in cold stasis, the other half sent to the mill, where callused fists ground the jellied seeds for hours into fine paste in a vaulted room filled with the sound of wet smacking and volleys of dirty jokes. The broken stalks were shaved of their sharp ends and painted red, bound together, and used to build houses for new families, of which there were more every year.

***Bonds of Brass***

**Emily Skrutskie**

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## CHAPTER I

MY STOMACH DROPS when I see it. Not in horror—something closer to exasperation sculpts the feeling of my mess-hall-slop breakfast bottoming out. The hangar outside the equipment room rumbles with activity. Engines firing, boots on concrete, the crackle of announcements over the intercoms. I give the cacophony only dry silence in return, because Gal Veres has forgotten his helmet.

Again.

“One of these days, you’re not going to have me to cover for you,” I mutter under my breath as I cross the room and scoop it off the shelf. “One of these days, the officers are going to come down *hard* on your ass, and I won’t do a thing to stop it—I swear on the gods of all systems.”

But not today, and probably not tomorrow, either, and I’m already out the door with Gal’s helmet under one arm and my own under the other.

The hangar swallows me whole, folding me into the Umber Imperial Academy’s mad scramble. On a busy morning like this, at least three different flight drills are running simultaneously. The cavernous vault of the ceiling rattles at unsteady intervals as a line of ships passes overhead. People scamper back and forth—cadets, of-

ficers, mechanics—all of them moving with frantic purpose along the designated pathways painted between the spacecrafts.

This hangar plays host to every conceivable sort of ship, from narrow, sleek fighters to massive carriers that can skip between star systems at superluminal speeds. Every hull is marked with the obsidian and brass of the Umber Empire, shimmering in the low light. There's not a junker in sight—all of these ships are less than five years old, their metal fresh from the mined-out asteroid belts of the former Archon Territories. I'm forced to stop as a Razor taxis toward the hangar doors, a hungry promise in the thrum of its engines. My heart lifts as the vibrations rattle down my spine. *Soon*, the pump of my blood swears. Soon I'll be in the air. Soon I'll be nothing but the raw impulse it takes to pilot a fighter.

Just as I'm about to take off at a run, a hand comes down on my shoulder, yanking me to the side. "What the rut—" I choke, but already they're dragging me into the shadow of a skipship's wing. I twist out of the grip and find myself staring down the suspiciously perfect teeth of Tatsun Seely. Three of his friends hover behind him, blocking us from the main path.

"Ettian Nassun," Seely says, all charm and no sincerity. In the two and a half years we've been at the academy together, I think I've had about three conversations with the guy. Now he's smiling up at me like we share some secret, and I'm not keen on finding out what it is.

"We're gonna be late," I tell him. Not that it matters to Seely—his whole crowd treats exercises with willful disdain bordering on open resentment. Which I understand. Really, I do. Seely's an orphan of the former Archon Empire, like me. One of millions of kids whose lives were upended when Umber took our homeworlds seven years ago. Like me, his frame is stick-thin from half a life on Archon portions, barely rounded out from seven years of Umber abundance, though I'm a little taller and my skin is several shades darker. Like me, he was shuffled into the Umber military establishment once they opened this academy on the planet Rana, mere miles away from the former Archon Imperial Seat.

Unlike me, he's got a massive chip on his shoulder about it.

Which brings me back to his teeth and my suspicions. Because Seely's chompers are not your everyday set. They speak to years of good dental work—the *finest* dental work, stuff that must have started long before the Umber Empire's victory. You see teeth like his on governors, high-ranking officials, and probably even on imperials themselves.

And, presumably, on their heirs. At ten years old, Seely would have been far too young to be revealed to the rough-and-tumble world of galactic politics when the Archon Empire fell. If he was someone's next in line—maybe one of the planetary governors in an interior system—he would have been tucked safely in the shadows, raised in secret for a role his blood destined him to play. And when Iva emp-Umber won her war and claimed her spoils, she stole his bloodright out from under him.

It's a bit of a reach to explain why he half-asses everything, and it requires some logistical leaps to justify how he made it to the academy after the empire collapsed. But it's probably the most interesting thing about Tatsun Seely, so I entertain the notion.

"Ettian, hey—" Seely snaps his fingers in front of my eyes, and I fix him with a glare.

"Seely," I say coolly, "get to the tarmac."

I try to shrug his arm off my shoulders, but he clamps down tighter, pulling our heads close together. "Yeah, I'm not taking orders from you," Seely mutters, his voice dropping low and serious. His face contorts as he tries to maintain an amicable smile. "Doesn't matter what fancy call sign the higher-ups give you—you're one of us. And we need to talk about the company you keep." His eyes track an officer as she bustles past, but in the shadow of the skipship, we're off her radar.

"Really?" I snap. Now I get what this is about. I've caught the scornful looks Seely and his crew throw my way more than once. They know I was born right here on Rana. I come from the nearby city of Trost, the capital and heart of the former Archon Empire. Theoretically, I should be more pissed than any of them about the

Umber conquest, but instead I've thrown myself headlong into the new establishment. We've been at the academy together for two and a half years—I'm surprised it's taken them this long to confront me about it.

Archon is dead. It's gone. I can't carry it with me. The only productive thing I *can* do is latch on to the opportunities that rise out of the postwar reconstruction. That's what's kept me alive for the past seven years.

Seely's pride doesn't allow for that sort of thinking. It's a miracle he's survived this long. His lips curl up over those uncanny teeth. "Face it, *Gold One*, you've rolled right over for Umber. But we can help you fix that. There's a chance to regain a little dignity. A little honor."

His fingers start to fidget on my shoulder. To the untrained eye, it looks like a simple nervous tic, but every child born on Archon soil knows better. He's tapping a rhythm against my bones, one of the ancient beats that sculpted the old empire's culture. Some are soft and comforting, a resting pulse. Others scream of triumph in fast, emphatic strokes.

Seely's beat is urgent. Rising. A call to arms.

It freezes my blood. Seely feels me lock up against him. He leans close, his breath in my ear. "Remember the knights?" he whispers. "Remember how it felt to see one flying over a city? A single human in a powersuit that could tear the wing off a fighter craft? We're gonna be heroes like them."

And just like that, I'm unstuck. I duck out of Seely's grip, clutching the helmets uncomfortably against my hips. Sure, I remember the suited knights. The heroes of the Archon Empire, keeping the peace and fighting for justice across the systems.

They were the first thing Iva emp-Umber set her sights on when she decided to take our homeworlds and their abundance of metal-rich asteroid belts for her own. Thirty coordinated strikes destroyed every knight, their staffs, their headquarters. Not even a single powersuit remained in the aftermath. Knightfall, they called it. A decla-

ration of war, painted in the blood of every single person we were dumb enough to call our heroes.

“I like my head where it is,” I tell Seely sharply. Guilt prickles through me as his expression drops to a stony glare. Usually the choice to fall in line with Umber rests comfortably on my shoulders—and in my well-fed gut—but when a fellow war orphan is scowling at me like I’m dirt, it’s hard not to feel it. “Look, for your sake, whatever it is you think you’re going to do . . . Don’t.”

“Told you he wouldn’t bite,” one of Seely’s companions says with a sniff. She glances over her shoulder. “He’s a waste of time.”

“Agreed,” I tell her, plastering a false, cheery smile over my face as I back toward the marked walkways.

“See you in the black, Gold One,” Seely calls. “And for *your* sake, stay out of my way.”

I scoff as I dodge back into the flow of traffic out of the hangar. Seely’s all talk—anyone who thinks they can do anything for the old empire at this point is all talk. If the Umber victory wasn’t secure when they won the war and executed the Archon imperials seven years ago, it was rock-solid by the time they opened the academy’s doors. Now Archon-born children grow up with good Umber foundations that keep the drums from pounding rhythms into their hearts. Reliable supply lines run from the richness of the Umber interior to all-but-barren Archon soil, and hungry new governors—often second children with no bloodright claim in their home territories—have stepped in to bring order to the newly acquired worlds. The region’s finally stabilized after the war cracked it open, and gods of all systems help anyone who thinks it’s a good idea to disturb that peace.

I break from the hangar’s shadow and into the bright winter sun. A curl of wind from the east brings with it the dusty scent of prairie grass, and some of it settles the frayed ends of my nerves. Between getting Gal his forgotten helmet and my run-in with the other Archon brats, there’s a good chance *I’m* going to be the one on the receiving end of an imperial-level dressing-down from the officers.

I lengthen my strides as I hustle down the tarmac, making for the row of Vipers lined up in their staging zones like knives in a drawer. My focus locks onto the third ship in the row—and as a result, I nearly run headlong into a young officer on her way back to the hangar. It takes me an extra second to recognize Jana as I try to keep from tripping over my boots.

“Ettian, hey!” she says, her smile bright as she resettles the shoulders of her crisp black uniform. Her eyes drop to the second helmet I’m carrying. “Again, huh?”

Jana’s one of an entire cohort of upperclassmen Gal charmed into adopting him the second he arrived at the academy. Even though she graduated to the officer ranks two years ago, she still checks in from time to time, and it’s not uncommon for her to come knocking at our door for a conversation that usually devolves into mindless gossip about ten minutes in.

I return her grin, backpedaling to keep my momentum going. “Again!” I tell her. I wish I had time to stop and chat, but there’s fire under my heels. Knowing Jana, she’ll probably swing by our room later tonight anyway.

She tips an informal salute at me, and I turn around and break into a jog. As I run past, some of the other cadets call out greetings that I try my best to acknowledge with quick jerks of my head. A few of them are already perched in their cockpits, doing their pre-flight checks. It spurs me faster.

By the time I make it to the Gold Twenty-Eight Viper, I’m clawing for breath, both helmets dragging me down like twenty-pound weights. But when Gal Veres turns around and sees me, it’s easy to forget all that. His smile glows, the breath he lets out fogging in the chilled air. He’s unfairly handsome, his skin a warm golden brown, his hair perpetually perfectly tousled, and his frame sturdily built from a lifetime in Umber abundance. *How dare you*, part of me groans. I need to be in my Viper already, comfortably settled in my gel-seat so I can forget how a single look from Gal sometimes feels like it might take my legs out from underneath me.

Before he has a chance to get a word in, I pitch his helmet at him. He catches it with a slight *oomph*.

“You owe me one,” I tell him. It’s not true, strictly speaking—I’ve been carrying his ass in classes since day one, but he’s carried me through our time at the academy in ways I can never fully repay.

But it’s Gal, so of course he plays along. He leans casually against the ladder to his cockpit, settling the helmet over his unruly undercut. “Thanks for covering for me—knew you’d have my back. I would have commed you to make sure, but . . .”

And then his smile goes wicked, and he slips my earpiece out of his pocket.

Hollow exasperation hits me like a gut punch for the second time today. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” I groan.

Gal doesn’t toss it—he makes me come and pluck the device daintily out of his palm, his hooded eyes sparkling with delight. “Noticed you forgot to make your way to the comm station, figured you’d gotten distracted by something, you know the rest. And we’re supposed to trust you to lead us today?”

“Better me than you.”

“Rut off. I could be an *amazing* leader.”

“Your test scores say otherwise. And last week you couldn’t even get one other person in the cantina to try streaking the officer quarters with you.”

“No one was drunk enough. But it’s gonna happen someday. We’ll make academy history—first to make it to the head’s door and back.”

I knock my shoulder into his, laughing softly as I slip my earpiece in. Behind Gal, I catch a glimpse of Hanji, another cadet in our year, as she moseys toward her station in the control tower. She gives me a wave, then makes a suggestive gesture involving both of her hands and a wicked tilt of her eyebrow. I grapple with the urge to pull a face at her, keeping my stare pinned on Gal instead.

Hanji and Ollins, another member of her merry band of miscreants, made a bet where Gal and I are concerned. If Gal finds out the

terms of that bet, I might as well float my Viper into the path of an oncoming dreadnought.

“What?” Gal asks, and I realize I’ve stared a moment too long.

“Huh? Oh, just . . . I saw Jana on my way over,” I blurt. *Smooth, Ettian.*

“Yeah, she came by to say hi.”

I glance around at the tarmac, the line of Vipers, the distance from here to the hangar. “*Came by?*”

“Jealous? I can ask if she’s got friends who are into, y’know, all of this,” he says, gesturing from my head to my toes.

“Who isn’t?” I shoot back, setting my helmet over my head.

Gal snorts. “Got me there,” he says, and something skitters sideways in my stomach. Before the comment has a chance to settle, he claps me on the shoulder. “C’mon, Ettian. Big day. Let’s get these ruttin’ birds in the sky.”

I cuff him back, grinning, then lift a finger to my earpiece and flick my comms on. “This is Gold One. All units report in.”

As I jog to my own Viper at the opposite end of the staging zone, my ears fill with the noise of thirty rowdy cadets sounding off. At my back, Viper engines whine through their preflight checks, rattling my bones. I clamber into my own cockpit, dropping into my gel-seat as I will myself to focus. It’s just noise. No rhythm beneath it. No thoughts of the past. Only the wide-open future, the black above, and the sureness of the ship beneath my hands as I taxi onto the runway.

When the tower signals, I throw everything I have into the Viper’s thrusters. I rocket for the fringes of Rana’s atmosphere with the formation at my rear, begging for my heart to calm down.

But the frantic *thump-thump-thump* in my chest is a little too close to drums for my liking.

## CHAPTER 2

THE HUMAN MIND isn't built to process hurtling through a vacuum at skin-peeling speeds in a cockpit just big enough for a single pilot and all of his fear. The Viper around me is sleek and athletic, and the engines at my back roar as I urge a little extra speed out of them. The vast dark of space envelops me, the stars washed out by the daytime glow of Rana five hundred miles beneath us. I should be pissing myself.

And yet.

My mind goes a little inhuman in the cockpit of a Viper. My awareness pushes its limits, my body forgotten in favor of the ship around me. My eyes unfocus. My heartbeat steadies. Any residual anxieties vaporize in the void, yielding to the immediacy of flying, and instinct takes over the way my hands twist and pull the craft's controls. The readouts spit information about the vector my ship is sailing on, but I don't need it.

All I need is the *feeling*. That's what keeps me in formation as we sweep through the black. The distance between each ship is measured, but instinct is what holds us there.

"This is Gold One. Execute first maneuver," I announce to the comm.

I fire the attitude thrusters, pulling my nose up. My Viper's engine drives a frantic tattoo into my spine. The burn is silent outside the craft, deadened by the vacuum, but inside my radio goes live. Thirty Vipers fill with the howls and whistles of cadets being jammed down into their gel-seats by the vicious inertia.

The glowing curve of Rana eases into view and then slides back out as we complete our arc and level off. At the edge of my vision, I catch the shine of Viper noses as the rest of the formation follows my lead. "Gold Twenty-Eight, get that vector straightened out," I grumble as one of them lists off-track.

"Sorry, Ettian."

My teeth set on edge, but I can't help the smile that tugs the corners of my lips. I've given up on trying to get Gal to use call signs during exercises, and so has most of the senior staff—though they certainly won't cut me any slack for letting him get away with it. His Viper jerks in my periphery, settling shakily back into formation.

"No apologies, Gold Twenty-Eight. Get it right." It's hard to say with a straight face, and I can picture the way Gal's smirking in his own cockpit. "Rest of you, this is Gold One. Execute second maneuver."

I close my eyes and spin up my gyros with a twist of the controls. I could flip my Viper with a preset, but where's the fun in that? Pure instinct sends my craft end over end—540 degrees, for show—and pure instinct fires the engines at the right moment, the attitude thrusters locking the Viper straight along the inverse of its former vector as the main burn kicks, driving me into my seat with the force of a missile strike.

That pure instinct is why I'm Gold One.

"Ruttin' showoff," Gal mutters over the comm, and bursts of laughter snap through from the other pilots.

"Jealous bastard," I shoot back, and Gal chuckles.

"Keep it professional, Ettian," he warns.

"Cut the chatter, Gold Twenty-Eight," I reply, but he knows I'd rather he didn't. Even though this is technically *my* drill and I should be keeping things serious, these flight exercises are a formality. Ra-

na's Imperial Academy is a playground, a regimen of basic training that puts us in the shoes of pilots before we graduate for the leadership tracks. In true combat, none of us would be flying Vipers. We're destined for the command centers of a dreadnought, overseeing troops that will deploy from the cityships.

I wish it were otherwise. I prefer the Viper. In this cockpit, everything's under my control. It's simple and pure. I'm responsible for myself and myself alone.

Not today though. As leader of this exercise, I'm expected to keep all thirty cadets on my wing under control. Even with the Viper demanding my attention, a part of me pulses with constant awareness that the senior staff will be watching every move I make. They can excuse some friendly chatter, but if anything serious goes sideways, it's my hide on the line. I know for certain some of the officers aren't thrilled about an Archon whelp holding steady at the top of our class, and they're just waiting for an excuse to rip my command away.

"This is Gold One. Execute—"

"Wraith Squadron, detach," a familiar voice announces, cold and clear. A single fighter peels off the back of our formation.

*Wraith?* My gaze drops to the Viper's instruments. "Seely—Gold Eight, what the hell are you doing?" I snap. "This is Gold One, and I do *not* authorize whatever—"

A shriek of static cuts through the radio, and in my periphery, nineteen more Viper hulls fall away. Something goes fuzzy in my brain as I watch my control dissolve. My formation flies on, cut by two-thirds, holes torn in its former perfection. This can't be happening. *Why* is this happening? Sure, Seely hates me, but how in any system's hell did he convince nineteen of our classmates to ruin my drill? There's no way the bitter little rutter has that much clout.

My heart rate doubles, my mind reeling as I try to inventory which fighters have fallen back. At my left, I spot the glint of sunlight off a Viper's nose—Gal's Viper. He's still with me.

"This is Wraith One. Form up on me," Seely announces.

"Seely, what the hell is going on?" I shout, wrestling with my

controls. Another spin of the gyros flips my Viper around, pointing me at the stray flock as I continue to sail backward in what's left of my formation.

They're shifting into an arrowhead. An attack pattern. My mouth goes dry. This isn't disobedience. This isn't just to stick it to me. This is something more. Something worse.

"Gods," Gal whispers over the comm. "Not now. Not . . . Ett—"

Seely's voice overpowers the line, full of authority I never suspected him of possessing. "Wraith One, authorizing weapons free."

Every lesson I've ever had about leadership under pressure crystallizes in my mind. "Gold One, evasive action *immediately*," I scream at what's left of my fighters. The Vipers split like they've been cleaved by a knife.

All except for Gal, who bolts across the black with no regard for pattern, for order, for any sort of direction that might save his ass.

Something in his brain has gone animal. Not the pack-animal mentality you sometimes slip into when you're flying in formation. No, Gal's just doing everything in his power to run.

"Heavens and hells," I swear, twist out of formation, and take off after him. The comms go live with confusion, the other pilots uncertain whether they're supposed to follow me.

Above the chatter, Seely's voice comes through loud and clear: "This is Wraith One. Shoot to kill."

I throw everything I have into the engines as the vacuum around me comes alive with the flash of boltfire. Gal swerves erratically, and my heart leaps into my throat as one of the bolts skims his Viper's wing. I hazard another glance at my instrumentation. Watch as the twenty defectors point their arrowhead directly at Gal's retreating tail. Not at the remaining nine Vipers holding formation as they flee across the black.

Just Gal.

"What the rut do you think you're doing?" I seethe through my teeth. I watch Gal on the instruments, my face heating with fury as another burst to the engines drives me deeper into my seat. This isn't the Gal I know—the Gal I've known for years, the one who pranks

the senior staff, who struggles to keep even the most stalwart ships flying steady, who doesn't fear anything the way he should. Something's terribly wrong.

My calm evaporates into the vacuum.

I flip a switch on my radio controls, activating every distress beacon on my dashboard. "Base, this is Gold One. Twenty of my squad have . . . They're not following orders, and they've turned on one of my pilots. They're shooting to kill. Requesting—"

I hesitate. I shouldn't hesitate—the whole point of the academy is training me to *act* when the situation is dire. I twitch my controls to dodge another round of boltfire that streaks across my Viper's nose.

"Requesting ground support and awaiting further instructions," I conclude. The Viper rattles around me as my engines max out their burn. I flip the radio back over to the exercise channel, where Seely's still spinning orders to his mutiny. A note of indignation lances through my panic. It's bad enough Seely's trying to kill Gal, but with the single line available between our ships, everyone has to listen to him do it.

"Gold One, the rest of you go to ground," I shout over Seely's noise.

"Wraith One, split it. Let's cut him."

The drumming starts as a single beat, a single hand slapping a dashboard, the noise big enough to fill a single cockpit. One hand, then ten, then twenty as the defectors' formation cracks in half. Variations slip into the rhythm, and my vision goes fuzzy as I watch the nine cadets still under my command bolt for Rana's gravity.

I know this beat too. It's been seven years since I heard it last, but the rhythm of an Archon war cadence is etched into my heart. It's the rallying cry of our fallen empire, and for a terrifying moment, I forget every word I told Seely this morning.

The defectors cast their net wide, herding Gal, playing off the way fear is driving him. But fear's not driving me—not in the same way. As Gal swerves again, burning off his speed, I nose up along his wing.

“Gal,” I say, and his vector steadies. Even over the rumble of the drumming, he hears me.

“Ettian, I’m so sorry—”

“No apologies.” I try not to flinch as another scattering of bolts slices past us. Gal’s Viper jerks, and I’m forced to swerve, tipping my gyros enough to dodge him. Even in all this confusion, my reflexes are as sharp as they were in the years after the empire fell. That time taught me a lot of things, but above all else, it taught me to improvise.

“Hold steady. I’m going to try something,” I grunt.

“Easier said.”

“I know.” I twist my gyros, flipping my craft belly-up, and punch the attitude thrusters. My Viper slots neatly underneath his.

Gal’s voice is on the edge of panicked laughter. “Don’t you dare hump my ship.”

“Thank me later.” I yank my landing gear’s release and jam the button that spins up my electromagnets. These things are meant to hold a Viper to the skin of a dreadnought, but they work just as well on the metal of another light craft. My ship snaps against his with a dull thud, and Gal yelps.

“You’re going to get us both killed,” he mutters, but he’s already cutting his engine and stilling his gyros.

If he can’t fly his way out of this, I’m going to do it for him.

With a heavy burst from my thrusters, I pull us into an arc, taking stock of the defector formation closing in on us. Two lines of ships spread out in a V, meaning to herd and crosscut us with their fire. Already they’re adjusting course to follow where we lead. The drumming fades—the pilots need both hands now.

My vision goes dark at the edges as I tighten our vector. Vipers were designed to move around the pilot, keeping inertial forces on the body as minor as possible. Flying in curved lines is bad for biology, doubly so when the ship’s center of mass is no longer focused on your head.

“Gal, you with me?” I choke, leveling us off. “You gotta talk, otherwise I’m going to think you blacked out.”

“Or one of these bastards got me.”

“That too.” I glance up through my windshield, trying to pinpoint the academy on Rana’s vast surface. I don’t know if they’re responding to my distress call. It’ll take time for missiles to claw their way out of the planet’s gravity. I don’t know if I can keep us clear of the boltfire for that long. “Gal,” I warn as another violent twist of the gyros steals my sight.

“Remember that time we got leave and went to Ikar?”

I grin. “Not particularly.”

“You got so hammered, you started singing the Umber Anthem at the top of your lungs in an open market. In a former Archon territory,” Gal chokes out as we level off onto a new vector.

“I remember the bruises. I won the fight, right?”

“If you call being left facedown in a garbage can ‘winning,’ I’ll eject now.”

My flying’s working. With twenty of them and one of us, it’s child’s play to tease their formation into chaos—especially with our chatter covering up the orders Seely’s screaming into the comm. “At least I actually fight my battles,” I snap. It’s harsh, given our current situation, but Gal knows what’s in my head better than anyone, and he gives me exactly what I expect.

“And I talk my way out of them like a rational human being.”

“Couldn’t talk your way out of this?”

“That’s what I have you for.”

I appreciate the confidence, but I don’t know how long I can keep this up. Feinting around boltfire and messing with their formations is only going to keep us alive for so long. Getting to safety is another matter entirely. Vipers can’t trip past superluminal speeds, and our fastest isn’t going to be enough to outrun them with this many on our tail. I don’t see any way out.

And then I realize our escape has been looming over us the entire time. My eyes shift up to Rana—to my big, glorious, green homeworld. Nine specks of flame mark where the remainder of the squad is hitting the atmosphere, and those nine little flares set off one big one in my head.

Seely sees what I'm about to do the second before I do it. "Wraith One, close the net," he shrieks, and the formation shifts around us as I twist our Vipers through the mess. No time for feinting, no time for dodging the bolts—my vector is direct, and speed is my only concern. We plunge for the planet, my engine whining as I urge it past its limits. The metal of the Viper's hull creaks around me.

"Ettian, you *maniac*," Gal mutters.

"Keep talking," I tell him. Not because I need to make sure he's conscious—our acceleration isn't heavy enough for that to be a concern—but because I need his voice to keep me steady.

"What about?"

"You can start by explaining why there are twenty Vipers on our ass." At the edge of my wing, I catch the first wisps of the planet's outer atmosphere starting to drag at us. I kill the engines. No need for acceleration when Rana's mass is beginning to yank us in.

"I—I *can't* explain."

A vicious edge slips into my voice as the last of my patience dissolves. "No, that's a lie. Why the rut is this happening?"

On the instrumentation, I see the defectors locking onto our tail, some of them already oriented for reentry.

"Ettian—"

"Tell me, Gal, or so help me I'll keep you latched and burn us both."

As is, we're cutting it close. The Viper's heat shields are on the underbelly. If we hit the hard part of the atmosphere with our ships strapped together, we both go down in flames.

There's a sharp inhale on Gal's end of the line. A decision being made in the span of a breath. "I never wanted you to find out—not like this," Gal says.

We've got seconds. "Spit it out!" I yell.

"I'm the Umber heir."

I jam the button, releasing the electromagnets, and fire my attitude thrusters to break away from Gal's underbelly. He can't have said what I think he said. I have to put my ship right. I won't let my brain get stuck on what Gal's confessed and what it means. Another

twist of my controls reorients my Viper, my heat shield braced to hit the atmosphere the second it hits back.

I didn't hear it right—that must be it. I glance out the windshield to my left, where Gal's wrestling his own ship into reentry position. Through the plastics separating us, I spot the tense line of his jaw. His eyes are shaded by his helmet and goggles, but somehow I know they're closed. I know Gal. I know him inside and out.

Or I thought I did.

Heat flares around me, my flight suit's coolant struggling to combat it as we plunge into the atmosphere. I extend every drag fin on my ship, gritting my teeth as the deceleration yanks at the flesh on my face, pressing me so deep into my seat's gel that I feel the bracing board beneath it.

Gal is the Umber heir. The thought consumes me more than any worry I might have about the reentry, about the twenty Vipers plunging after us, about what might await us back at the academy base.

The Umber Empire has stood for thousands of years. It was seeded from the first settlements made on stable worlds as wandering generation ships roved down the galactic arm, founded on planets that took to crops with so little effort that the people who made a home there managed to twist it into some sort of divine right. Mankind delved deeper into the galaxy, discovering the metal-rich Archon worlds and the fringe planets of Corinth, but none took root and expanded so boldly and decisively as Umber. Nowadays, the empire spans at least a hundred systems. Their imperial bloodline has conquest in its veins, and Empress Iva and Emperor Yltrast are its pinnacle. Seven years ago, they shredded the Archon Empire and took it for their own. They're the most fearsome force the galaxy has ever seen.

And Gal—

No, it's impossible. There has to be some kind of mistake. It's another of Gal's jokes, like the time he pretended to be the youngest general ever promoted to impress a girl in a bar. A laugh builds in the back of my throat. He had me going there for a moment. Thinking he was the son of—

The cold shock of truth catches up to me. None of Gal's jokes have put twenty Vipers on our rear. None of Gal's jokes have left him turning tail and running like the gates of every hell have opened.

And he's never left me out of one.

"Rut me sideways, you're not kidding," I groan.

Suddenly my suspicions about Seely's teeth seem downright petty. I'd always figured there would be shadow heirs installed at the academy. The Archon territories are notorious hotbeds of opportunity for up-and-coming bloodlines. Governors on every tier of power—continental, planetary, and even system—would jump at the chance to place their kids in the heart of the former empire to train them for command. But this is another thing entirely. Gal's a rutting *prince*. The Umber heir is destined by blood to *own* these systems someday. And twenty of our classmates, including Seely, still hear the Archon drums in their hearts. No wonder they're raining boltfire on his rear.

"Someone must have found out," Gal chokes over the rumble of reentry. "Sleepers didn't stop them."

Of course he has sleeper agents. Of course he wouldn't be here without protection in a seven-year-old territory. And whoever organized this hit knew it—they waited until he was isolated. Surrounded him with more enemies than he could evade on his own. If it hadn't been for me—

The ground's coming up too fast. My hands are numb against my Viper's controls. I steal another glance out the windshield, through the flames wrapped around our hulls. Gal's focus is on his instruments, but his mind must be miles away. I try to picture him beneath his helmet and visor, try to see his parents in him. Iva's dark, hooded eyes. Yltrast's golden skin. The proud brow distinct to the Umber line. No, I just see Gal as I've always seen him. Gal, who's always been a bad liar and a good friend—except something in my darker spaces is urging me to say it's the other way around.

And from those dark spaces, an intrusive thought hits hard and heavy. *Fall back*, it demands. *This is the heir to the bloodline that*

*rained hell on your homeworld. That stole your life out from underneath you, broke you, and remade you in its image. You belong with Seely. You can redeem yourself.*

The fire dies around us as we slow into the atmosphere's cradle. My fingers tighten on the controls. Thirty seconds, tops, until the Vipers on our tail start chugging boltfire into our asses again.

*Fall back.*

*It's where you belong.*

*Fall back.*

*Redemption.*

I let out a long breath.

And a missile shrieks past my cockpit. Two seconds later, a thunderclap booms at our rear. On my dash, the command channel goes live. "Base to Gold One, watch for shrapnel," Hanji's voice announces, flat with raw horror. It's the most serious I've ever heard her. "Runway Three's been cleared for your approach."

Fourteen of the defector Vipers are gone. Reduced to nothing but shredded, heated metal that spatters across our backs like rain. A hollow, terrible feeling rips through me. They were assassins. Classmates. Archon kids like me.

Obliterated.

The clatter of debris on my hull shocks me back into reality. This is what happens to everyone who goes up against the Umber Empire. To suited knights and generals and even the imperials themselves. You don't become a hero.

You just get killed.

The six remaining Vipers scatter, pursued by a volley of heat-seekers that scream up from beneath us. We don't have time to see what happens to them. The ground's rolling up fast, and the spires of the academy's buildings are rising to meet us. I punch my thrusters and adjust my drag flaps, and Gal falls in at my wing. Our approach cuts wide across the plains and finally—*finally*—there's the tarmac of Runway Three.

I extend my Viper's landing gear. Pull my nose up. Yards. Feet.

Inches. The Viper hits the pavement hard, and I feel something snap. Hear the shriek of rending metal. Know without seeing that I've ripped my wheels off.

"Base to Gold One, you're dragging fire," Hanji chirps helpfully in my ear.

My flight suit's coolant isn't enough—the cockpit's cooking as my Viper skins its belly on the tarmac. Sweat trickles down the back of my neck. My fingers fumble on the controls, scrabbling for the release.

There. Grab. Pull. The cockpit pops open, my seat ejects, and I catapult into the mercifully cool air. A whoop escapes my lips as I watch my flaming ship skitter away beneath me, outstripped by Gal's Viper. He streaks down the runway unhindered, leaving me in the dust and ashes. My parachutes deploy, yanking me out of my fall. I try to twist, to direct my descent, but I have no control—I'm at the mercy of the cold winds blowing in off the prairie.

By the time I touch down, Gal's already out of his Viper. I land fifty yards away from him and immediately start tearing at my restraints. Farther down the tarmac, people are swarming Gal. First a doctor, for whom everyone clears the way, then a security team flanked by high-level academy officials.

I stagger to my feet. My legs shake beneath me. I have to get to Gal, have to *talk*, have to wrap my head around what's happening. Hanji chatters in my ear, but I rip my helmet off and tear out my earpiece before I can register what she's saying.

I stumble down the tarmac. A fire crew screams past me, bound for the wreckage of my Viper. As the siren fades, I start to make sense of the hubbub surrounding Gal. They're talking about putting him in isolation. Summoning the governor Berr sys-Tosa from his winter estate on Imre, an inner world of the system. Arranging for transport to the Imperial Seat in the distant Umber interior.

Gal stands in the middle of the storm, his uncertain gaze flicking from face to face. His eyes find mine, and he lunges toward me. One of the security officers clamps a hand down on his shoulder. "Your Majesty," she says urgently.

I try to push through the people, but someone grabs me. “Gal,” I wheeze, still trying to recover from the shock of the ejection and landing. None of this makes sense. I need him to *make this make sense*.

“Ettian, something’s—” Gal breaks off abruptly. “I . . . I’m so sorry.”

I’m so used to brushing those words off. So used to forgiving him instantly. But now, for once, as the security officers bundle my best friend away to whatever fate awaits him, I stand in the hollow silence left over and let him mean it.

# *The Golden Compass*

**Philip Pullman**

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Philip Pullman



# THE GOLDEN COMPASS

*His Dark Materials*  BOOK I

ALFRED A. KNOPF



NEW YORK

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1

# THE DECANTER OF TOKAY

Lyra and her dæmon moved through the darkening hall, taking care to keep to one side, out of sight of the kitchen. The three great tables that ran the length of the hall were laid already, the silver and the glass catching what little light there was, and the long benches were pulled out ready for the guests. Portraits of former Masters hung high up in the gloom along the walls. Lyra reached the dais and looked back at the open kitchen door, and, seeing no one, stepped up beside the high table. The places here were laid with gold, not silver, and the fourteen seats were not oak benches but mahogany chairs with velvet cushions.

Lyra stopped beside the Master's chair and flicked the biggest glass gently with a fingernail. The sound rang clearly through the hall.

"You're not taking this seriously," whispered her dæmon. "Behave yourself."

Her dæmon's name was Pantalaimon, and he was currently in the form of a moth, a dark brown one so as not to show up in the darkness of the hall.

"They're making too much noise to hear from the kitchen," Lyra whispered back. "And the Steward doesn't come in till the first bell. Stop fussing."

But she put her palm over the ringing crystal anyway, and Pantalaimon fluttered ahead and through the slightly open door of the Retiring Room at the other end of the dais. After a moment he appeared again.

“There’s no one there,” he whispered. “But we must be quick.”

Crouching behind the high table, Lyra darted along and through the door into the Retiring Room, where she stood up and looked around. The only light in here came from the fireplace, where a bright blaze of logs settled slightly as she looked, sending a fountain of sparks up into the chimney. She had lived most of her life in the College, but had never seen the Retiring Room before: only Scholars and their guests were allowed in here, and never females. Even the maid-servants didn’t clean in here. That was the Butler’s job alone.

Pantalaimon settled on her shoulder.

“Happy now? Can we go?” he whispered.

“Don’t be silly! I want to look around!”

It was a large room, with an oval table of polished rosewood on which stood various decanters and glasses, and a silver smoking stand with a rack of pipes. On a sideboard nearby there was a little chafing dish and a basket of poppy heads.

“They do themselves well, don’t they, Pan?” she said under her breath.

She sat in one of the green leather armchairs. It was so deep she found herself nearly lying down, but she sat up again and tucked her legs under her to look at the portraits on the walls. More old Scholars, probably; robed, bearded, and gloomy, they stared out of their frames in solemn disapproval.

“What d’you think they talk about?” Lyra said, or began to say, because before she’d finished the question she heard voices outside the door.

“Behind the chair—quick!” whispered Pantalaimon, and in a flash Lyra was out of the armchair and crouching behind it. It wasn’t the best one for hiding behind: she’d chosen one in the very center of the room, and unless she kept very quiet...

The door opened, and the light changed in the room; one of the incomers was carrying a lamp, which he put down on the sideboard. Lyra could see his legs, in their dark green trousers and shiny black shoes. It was a servant.

Then a deep voice said, "Has Lord Asriel arrived yet?"

It was the Master. As Lyra held her breath, she saw the servant's dæmon (a dog, like all servants' dæmons) trot in and sit quietly at his feet, and then the Master's feet became visible too, in the shabby black shoes he always wore.

"No, Master," said the Butler. "No word from the aerodock, either."

"I expect he'll be hungry when he arrives. Show him straight into Hall, will you?"

"Very good, Master."

"And you've decanted some of the special Tokay for him?"

"Yes, Master. The 1898, as you ordered. His Lordship is very partial to that, I remember."

"Good. Now leave me, please."

"Do you need the lamp, Master?"

"Yes, leave that too. Look in during dinner to trim it, will you?"

The Butler bowed slightly and turned to leave, his dæmon trotting obediently after him. From her not-much-of-a-hiding place Lyra watched as the Master went to a large oak wardrobe in the corner of the room, took his gown from a hanger, and pulled it laboriously on. The Master had been a powerful man, but he was well over seventy now, and his movements were stiff and slow. The Master's dæmon had the form of a raven, and as soon as his robe was on, she jumped down from the wardrobe and settled in her accustomed place on his right shoulder.

Lyra could feel Pantalaimon bristling with anxiety, though he made no sound. For herself, she was pleasantly excited.

The visitor mentioned by the Master, Lord Asriel, was her uncle, a man whom she admired and feared greatly. He was said to be involved in high politics, in secret exploration, in distant warfare, and she never knew when he was going to appear. He was fierce: if he caught her in here she'd be severely punished, but she could put up with that.

What she saw next, however, changed things completely.

The Master took from his pocket a folded paper and laid it on the table beside the wine. He took the stopper out of the mouth of a decanter containing a rich golden wine, unfolded the paper, and poured a thin stream of white powder into the decanter before crumpling the paper and throwing it into the fire. Then he took a pencil from his pocket, stirred the wine until the powder had dissolved, and replaced the stopper.

His *dæmon* gave a soft brief squawk. The Master replied in an undertone, and looked around with his hooded, clouded eyes before leaving through the door he'd come in by.

Lyra whispered, "Did you see that, Pan?"

"Of course I did! Now hurry out, before the Steward comes!"

But as he spoke, there came the sound of a bell ringing once from the far end of the hall.

"That's the Steward's bell!" said Lyra. "I thought we had more time than that."

Pantalaimon fluttered swiftly to the hall door, and swiftly back.

"The Steward's there already," he said. "And you can't get out of the other door..."

The other door, the one the Master had entered and left by, opened onto the busy corridor between the library and the Scholars' common room. At this time of day it was thronged with men pulling on their gowns for dinner, or hurrying to leave papers or briefcases in the common room before moving

into the hall. Lyra had planned to leave the way she'd come, banking on another few minutes before the Steward's bell rang.

And if she hadn't seen the Master tipping that powder into the wine, she might have risked the Steward's anger, or hoped to avoid being noticed in the busy corridor. But she was confused, and that made her hesitate.

Then she heard heavy footsteps on the dais. The Steward was coming to make sure the Retiring Room was ready for the Scholars' poppy and wine after dinner. Lyra darted to the oak wardrobe, opened it, and hid inside, pulling the door shut just as the Steward entered. She had no fear for Pantalaimon: the room was somber colored, and he could always creep under a chair.

She heard the Steward's heavy wheezing, and through the crack where the door hadn't quite shut she saw him adjust the pipes in the rack by the smoking stand and cast a glance over the decanters and glasses. Then he smoothed the hair over his ears with both palms and said something to his *dæmon*. He was a servant, so she was a dog; but a superior servant, so a superior dog. In fact, she had the form of a red setter. The *dæmon* seemed suspicious, and cast around as if she'd sensed an intruder, but didn't make for the wardrobe, to Lyra's intense relief. Lyra was afraid of the Steward, who had twice beaten her.

Lyra heard a tiny whisper; obviously Pantalaimon had squeezed in beside her.

"We're going to have to stay here now. Why don't you *listen* to me?"

She didn't reply until the Steward had left. It was his job to supervise the waiting at the high table; she could hear the Scholars coming into the hall, the murmur of voices, the shuffle of feet.

"It's a good thing I didn't," she whispered back. "We

wouldn't have seen the Master put poison in the wine otherwise. Pan, that was the Tokay he asked the Butler about! They're going to kill Lord Asriel!"

"You don't know it's poison."

"Oh, of course it is. Don't you remember, he made the Butler leave the room before he did it? If it was innocent, it wouldn't have mattered the Butler seeing. And I *know* there's something going on—something political. The servants have been talking about it for days. Pan, we could prevent a murder!"

"I've never heard such nonsense," he said shortly. "How do you think you're going to keep still for four hours in this poky wardrobe? Let me go and look in the corridor. I'll tell you when it's clear."

He fluttered from her shoulder, and she saw his little shadow appear in the crack of light.

"It's no good, Pan, I'm staying," she said. "There's another robe or something here. I'll put that on the floor and make myself comfortable. I've just *got* to see what they do."

She had been crouching. She carefully stood up, feeling around for the clothes hangers in order not to make a noise, and found that the wardrobe was bigger than she'd thought. There were several academic robes and hoods, some with fur around them, most faced with silk.

"I wonder if these are all the Master's?" she whispered. "When he gets honorary degrees from other places, perhaps they give him fancy robes and he keeps them here for dressing-up....Pan, do you really think it's not poison in that wine?"

"No," he said. "I think it is, like you do. And I think it's none of our business. And I think it would be the silliest thing you've ever done in a lifetime of silly things to interfere. It's nothing to do with us."

"Don't be stupid," Lyra said. "I can't sit in here and watch them give him poison!"

“Come somewhere else, then.”

“You’re a coward, Pan.”

“Certainly I am. May I ask what you intend to do? Are you going to leap out and snatch the glass from his trembling fingers? What did you have in mind?”

“I didn’t have anything in mind, and well you know it,” she snapped quietly. “But now I’ve seen what the Master did, I haven’t got any choice. You’re supposed to know about conscience, aren’t you? How can I just go and sit in the library or somewhere and twiddle my thumbs, knowing what’s going to happen? I don’t intend to do *that*, I promise you.”

“This is what you wanted all the time,” he said after a moment. “You wanted to hide in here and watch. Why didn’t I realize that before?”

“All right, I do,” she said. “Everyone knows they get up to something secret. They have a ritual or something. And I just wanted to know what it was.”

“It’s none of your business! If they want to enjoy their little secrets you should just feel superior and let them get on with it. Hiding and spying is for silly children.”

“Exactly what I knew you’d say. Now stop nagging.”

The two of them sat in silence for a while, Lyra uncomfortable on the hard floor of the wardrobe and Pantalaimon self-righteously twitching his temporary antennae on one of the robes. Lyra felt a mixture of thoughts contending in her head, and she would have liked nothing better than to share them with her *dæmon*, but she was proud too. Perhaps she should try to clear them up without his help.

Her main thought was anxiety, and it wasn’t for herself. She’d been in trouble often enough to be used to it. This time she was anxious about Lord Asriel, and about what this all meant. It wasn’t often that he visited the college, and the fact that this was a time of high political tension meant that he

hadn't come simply to eat and drink and smoke with a few old friends. She knew that both Lord Asriel and the Master were members of the Cabinet Council, the Prime Minister's special advisory body, so it might have been something to do with that; but meetings of the Cabinet Council were held in the palace, not in the Retiring Room of Jordan College.

Then there was the rumor that had been keeping the College servants whispering for days. It was said that the Tartars had invaded Muscovy, and were surging north to St. Petersburg, from where they would be able to dominate the Baltic Sea and eventually overcome the entire west of Europe. And Lord Asriel had been in the far North: when she'd seen him last, he was preparing an expedition to Lapland...

"Pan," she whispered.

"Yes?"

"Do *you* think there'll be a war?"

"Not yet. Lord Asriel wouldn't be dining here if it was going to break out in the next week or so."

"That's what I thought. But later?"

"Shh! Someone's coming."

She sat up and put her eye to the crack of the door. It was the Butler, coming to trim the lamp as the Master had ordered him to. The common room and the library were lit by anbaric power, but the Scholars preferred the older, softer naphtha lamps in the Retiring Room. They wouldn't change that in the Master's lifetime.

The Butler trimmed the wick, and put another log on the fire as well, and then listened carefully at the hall door before helping himself to a handful of leaf from the smoking stand.

He had hardly replaced the lid when the handle of the other door turned, making him jump nervously. Lyra tried not to laugh. The Butler hastily stuffed the leaf into his pocket and turned to face the incomer.

“Lord Asriel!” he said, and a shiver of cold surprise ran down Lyra’s back. She couldn’t see him from where she was, and she tried to smother the urge to move and look.

“Good evening, Wren,” said Lord Asriel. Lyra always heard that harsh voice with a mixture of pleasure and apprehension. “I arrived too late to dine. I’ll wait in here.”

The Butler looked uncomfortable. Guests entered the Retiring Room at the Master’s invitation only, and Lord Asriel knew that; but the Butler also saw Lord Asriel looking pointedly at the bulge in his pocket, and decided not to protest.

“Shall I let the Master know you’ve arrived, my lord?”

“No harm in that. You might bring me some coffee.”

“Very good, my lord.”

The Butler bowed and hastened out, his dæmon trotting submissively at his heels. Lyra’s uncle moved across to the fire and stretched his arms high above his head, yawning like a lion. He was wearing traveling clothes. Lyra was reminded, as she always was when she saw him again, of how much he frightened her. There was no question now of creeping out unnoticed: she’d have to sit tight and hope.

Lord Asriel’s dæmon, a snow leopard, stood behind him.

“Are you going to show the projections in here?” she said quietly.

“Yes. It’ll create less fuss than moving to the lecture theater. They’ll want to see the specimens too; I’ll send for the Porter in a minute. This is a bad time, Stelmaria.”

“You should rest.”

He stretched out in one of the armchairs, so that Lyra could no longer see his face.

“Yes, yes. I should also change my clothes. There’s probably some ancient etiquette that allows them to fine me a dozen bottles for coming in here dressed improperly. I should sleep for three days. The fact remains that—”

There was a knock, and the Butler came in with a silver tray bearing a coffeepot and a cup.

“Thank you, Wren,” said Lord Asriel. “Is that the Tokay I can see on the table?”

“The Master ordered it decanted especially for you, my lord,” said the Butler. “There are only three dozen bottles left of the ’98.”

“All good things pass away. Leave the tray here beside me. Oh, ask the Porter to send up the two cases I left in the Lodge, would you?”

“Here, my lord?”

“Yes, here, man. And I shall need a screen and a projecting lantern, also here, also now.”

The Butler could hardly prevent himself from opening his mouth in surprise, but managed to suppress the question, or the protest.

“Wren, you’re forgetting your place,” said Lord Asriel. “Don’t question me; just do as I tell you.”

“Very good, my lord,” said the Butler. “If I may suggest it, I should perhaps let Mr. Cawson know what you’re planning, my lord, or else he’ll be somewhat taken aback, if you see what I mean.”

“Yes. Tell him, then.”

Mr. Cawson was the Steward. There was an old and well-established rivalry between him and the Butler. The Steward was the superior, but the Butler had more opportunities to ingratiate himself with the Scholars, and made full use of them. He would be delighted to have this chance of showing the Steward that he knew more about what was going on in the Retiring Room.

He bowed and left. Lyra watched as her uncle poured a cup of coffee, drained it at once, and poured another before sipping more slowly. She was agog: cases of specimens? A pro-

jecting lantern? What did he have to show the Scholars that was so urgent and important?

Then Lord Asriel stood up and turned away from the fire. She saw him fully, and marveled at the contrast he made with the plump Butler, the stooped and languid Scholars. Lord Asriel was a tall man with powerful shoulders, a fierce dark face, and eyes that seemed to flash and glitter with savage laughter. It was a face to be dominated by, or to fight: never a face to patronize or pity. All his movements were large and perfectly balanced, like those of a wild animal, and when he appeared in a room like this, he seemed a wild animal held in a cage too small for it.

At the moment his expression was distant and preoccupied. His dæmon came close and leaned her head on his waist, and he looked down at her unfathomably before turning away and walking to the table. Lyra suddenly felt her stomach lurch, for Lord Asriel had taken the stopper from the decanter of Tokay, and was pouring a glass.

“No!”

The quiet cry came before she could hold it back. Lord Asriel heard and turned at once.

“Who’s there?”

She couldn’t help herself. She tumbled out of the wardrobe and scrambled up to snatch the glass from his hand. The wine flew out, splashing on the edge of the table and the carpet, and then the glass fell and smashed. He seized her wrist and twisted hard.

“Lyra! What the hell are you doing?”

“Let go of me and I’ll tell you!”

“I’ll break your arm first. How dare you come in here?”

“I’ve just saved your life!”

They were still for a moment, the girl twisted in pain but

grimacing to prevent herself from crying out louder, the man bent over her frowning like thunder.

“What did you say?” he said more quietly.

“That wine is poisoned,” she muttered between clenched teeth. “I saw the Master put some powder in it.”

He let go. She sank to the floor, and Pantalaimon fluttered anxiously to her shoulder. Her uncle looked down with a restrained fury, and she didn’t dare meet his eyes.

“I came in just to see what the room was like,” she said. “I know I shouldn’t have. But I was going to go out before anyone came in, except that I heard the Master coming and got trapped. The wardrobe was the only place to hide. And I saw him put the powder in the wine. If I hadn’t—”

There was a knock on the door.

“That’ll be the Porter,” said Lord Asriel. “Back in the wardrobe. If I hear the slightest noise, I’ll make you wish you were dead.”

She darted back there at once, and no sooner had she pulled the door shut than Lord Asriel called, “Come in.”

As he’d said, it was the Porter.

“In here, my lord?”

Lyra saw the old man standing doubtfully in the doorway, and behind him, the corner of a large wooden box.

“That’s right, Shuter,” said Lord Asriel. “Bring them both in and put them down by the table.”

Lyra relaxed a little, and allowed herself to feel the pain in her shoulder and wrist. It might have been enough to make her cry, if she was the sort of girl who cried. Instead she gritted her teeth and moved the arm gently until it felt looser.

Then came a crash of glass and the glug of spilled liquid.

“Damn you, Shuter, you careless old fool! Look what you’ve done!”

Lyra could see, just. Her uncle had managed to knock the

decanter of Tokay off the table, and made it look as if the Porter had done it. The old man put the box down carefully and began to apologize.

"I'm truly sorry, my lord—I must have been closer than I thought—"

"Get something to clear this mess up. Go on, before it soaks into the carpet!"

The Porter hurried out. Lord Asriel moved closer to the wardrobe and spoke in an undertone.

"Since you're in there, you can make yourself useful. Watch the Master closely when he comes in. If you tell me something interesting about him, I'll keep you from getting further into the trouble you're already in. Understand?"

"Yes, Uncle."

"Make a noise in there and I won't help you. You're on your own."

He moved away and stood with his back to the fire again as the Porter came back with a brush and dustpan for the glass and a bowl and cloth.

"I can only say once again, my lord, I do most earnestly beg your pardon; I don't know what—"

"Just clear up the mess."

As the Porter began to mop the wine from the carpet, the Butler knocked and came in with Lord Asriel's manservant, a man called Thorold. They were carrying between them a heavy case of polished wood with brass handles. They saw what the Porter was doing and stopped dead.

"Yes, it was the Tokay," said Lord Asriel. "Too bad. Is that the lantern? Set it up by the wardrobe, Thorold, if you would. I'll have the screen up at the other end."

Lyra realized that she would be able to see the screen and whatever was on it through the crack in the door, and wondered whether her uncle had arranged it like that for the

purpose. Under the noise the manservant made unrolling the stiff linen and setting it up on its frame, she whispered:

“See? It was worth coming, wasn’t it?”

“It might be,” Pantalaimon said austerely, in his tiny moth voice. “And it might not.”

Lord Asriel stood by the fire sipping the last of the coffee and watching darkly as Thorold opened the case of the projecting lantern and uncapped the lens before checking the oil tank.

“There’s plenty of oil, my lord,” he said. “Shall I send for a technician to operate it?”

“No. I’ll do it myself. Thank you, Thorold. Have they finished dinner yet, Wren?”

“Very nearly, I think, my lord,” replied the Butler. “If I understand Mr. Cawson aright, the Master and his guests won’t be disposed to linger once they know you’re here. Shall I take the coffee tray?”

“Take it and go.”

“Very good, my lord.”

With a slight bow, the Butler took the tray and left, and Thorold went with him. As soon as the door closed, Lord Asriel looked across the room directly at the wardrobe, and Lyra felt the force of his glance almost as if it had physical form, as if it were an arrow or a spear. Then he looked away and spoke softly to his dæmon.

She came to sit calmly at his side, alert and elegant and dangerous, her tawny eyes surveying the room before turning, like his black ones, to the door from the hall as the handle turned. Lyra couldn’t see the door, but she heard an intake of breath as the first man came in.

“Master,” said Lord Asriel. “Yes, I’m back. Do bring in your guests; I’ve got something very interesting to show you.”