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EMILY WILDE'S

MAP
OF THE



OTHERLANDS

BOOK 2 OF THE EMILY WILDE SERIES

A NOVEL BY
HEATHER FAWCETT



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14th September 1910

The foot would not fit in my briefcase, so I wrapped it in cloth and wrestled it into an old knapsack I sometimes carry with me on expeditions. Surprisingly—or perhaps unsurprisingly, as it is a faerie foot—it is neither dirty nor foul-smelling. It is, of course, long mummified and would probably be mistaken for a goat’s foot by a casual observer, perhaps an unlikely offering excavated from the tomb of some ancient pharaoh. While it does not smell *bad*, since bringing the foot into my office I have at odd moments caught the scent of wildflowers and crushed grass carried on a little breeze whose source I cannot trace.

I gazed at my now-bulging knapsack, feeling entirely ridiculous. Trust me when I say that I would rather not cart a *foot* around campus with me. But faerie remains, mummified or not, have been known to slip away as the fancy takes them, and I can only assume that feet are particularly inclined to such wanderlust. I shall have to keep it with me until its usefulness has been exhausted. Good grief.

The soft chiming of the grandfather clock alerted me that I was late for breakfast with Wendell. I know from experience that if I miss our breakfast appointments he will bring the meal to me himself, in such a quantity that the entire depart-

ment will smell of eggs, and then for the rest of the day I shall have to suffer Professor Thornthwaite sniping at me about his delicate stomach.

I paused to pin my hair back up—it's grown far too long, as I've spent the past several weeks descending into one of my obsessive periods, when I can think of little else beyond the subject of my research. And the question of Wendell's door has consumed me more than any other academic mystery I can remember. My hair is not the only area of my appearance I have neglected of late—my brown dress is rumpled, and I am not altogether certain it is clean; I found it in a heap of other questionably laundered items on the floor of my closet.

“Come, dear,” I said to Shadow. The dog roused himself from his bed by the oil heater with a yawn, stretching his massive paws. I stopped for a moment to glance around my office with satisfaction—when I was recently granted tenure, I also inherited a much more spacious office, now three doors away from Wendell's (naturally he has found a way to complain about this additional twenty feet of distance). The grandfather clock came with the room, as did the enormous damasked curtains lining the sash window that overlooks Knight College's pond—presently dotted with swans—and the magnificent oak desk with its drawers lined with black velvet. I added bookshelves, of course, and a ladder to reach the uppermost volumes, whilst Wendell insisted on cluttering the place up with two photographs from Hrafnsvik that I did not even know he took, one of me standing in the snowy garden with Lilja and Margret, the other of a village scene; a vase of dried flowers that somehow never lose their scent; and the newly reframed painting of Shadow he commissioned for my twenty-eighth birthday—all right, I cannot complain about that. My beast looks very fetching.

I passed several students sunk deep into the armchairs of

the dryadology department common room, an open space beyond the faculty offices that boasts a cosy fireplace—unlit on this warm September day—as well as an impressive row of windows taller than several men, with little half-moons of stained glass at the top, which face the Gothic grandeur of the Library of Medicine, its proximity the subject of innumerable wry remarks concerning a dryadologist’s susceptibility to strange injuries. In one corner is a bronze urn filled with salt—campus legend has it this began as a joke, but many a whey-faced undergraduate has visited this vessel to stuff their pockets after sitting through their first lecture on wights. Not that there is much to worry about, as we do not ordinarily have Folk wandering into the department to hear what we mortals are saying about them (Wendell excepted). The thick rugs scattered on the floor must be trodden on with care, for they are lumpy from the coins stuffed beneath them. Like the salt, this tradition most likely originated as a humourous diversion rather than any serious design to ward the Folk away from our halls, and has now largely devolved into a sort of good-luck ritual, with students pressing a ha’penny into the floor before an exam or dissertation. (Less superstitious young scholars have also been known to raid this lowly hoard for pub money.)

Shadow gave a happy grunt when we stepped outside—he is ordinarily a quiet dog—and plunged into the sunlit grass, snuffling about for snails and other edibles.

I followed at a more sedate walk, enjoying the sun on my face, as well as the cool edge to the wind that heralded the coming autumn. Just past the main dryadology building was the ivy-clad magnificence of the Library of Dryadology, which overlooks a lawn dotted with trees known in this part of Britain as faerie favourites, yew and willow. Several students were napping beneath the largest of these, a great hoary willow believed (erroneously, I’m afraid) to be the home of a sleeping

leprechaun, who will one day awaken and stuff the pockets of the nearest slumberer he encounters with gold.

I felt a pleasant sense of kinship as I passed into the shadow of that library. I can hear Wendell mocking me for having familial feelings for a library, but I don't care; it's not as if he reads my personal journals, though he is not above teasing me for continuing the journalling habit after we left Ljosland. I seem unable to quit it; I find it greatly helps me organize my thoughts.

I continued to gaze at the library as the path rounded a corner—unwisely, as it happened, for I collided with a man walking in the opposite direction, so forcefully I nearly lost my footing.

"I'm so sorry," I began, but the man only rudely waved my apology away. He was holding a great quantity of ribbons in his hands, which he seemed to be in the process of tying together.

"Have you any more?" he demanded. "These won't be enough."

"I'm afraid not," I replied cautiously. The man was dressed oddly for the weather, in a long, fur-lined cloak and tremendous boots extending to his knees. In addition to the ribbons in his hands, he had a long chain of them looped multiple times round his neck, and more spilling from his pockets. They were a highly eclectic assemblage, varied in both colour and size. Between the ribbons and his considerable height, the man had the look of a maypole given human form. He was perhaps in the latter stages of middle age, with mostly brown hair a shade or two lighter than his skin, as if bleached by the elements, and a scraggly white beard.

"They won't be enough for what?" I enquired.

The man gave me the most inexplicable glare. There was something familiar about that look that I could not put my


finger on, though I was certain I had never met this strange person before. I felt a shiver glide along my neck like the brush of a cold fingertip.

“The path is eternal,” he said. “But you mustn’t sleep—I made that mistake. Turn left at the ghosts with ash in their hair, then left at the evergreen wood, and straight through the vale where my brother will die. If you lose your way, you will lose only yourself, but if you lose the path, you will lose everything you never knew you had.”

I stared at him. The man only looked down at his ribbons with an air of dismissing me and continued on his way. Of course I turned to see which direction he went, and was only mildly surprised to find that he had disappeared.

“Hm!” I grunted. “What do you think of that, my love?”

Shadow, though, had taken little interest in the man; he was presently eyeing a magpie that had descended to the lawn to yank at a worm. I filed the encounter away and continued across the leafy campus grounds.

 Wendell’s favourite café perches on the bank of the River Cam adjacent to Pendleigh Bridge. It is a fifteen-minute walk from our offices, and if it were up to me, we would eat somewhere more conveniently situated, but he is very particular about breakfast and claims that the Archimedes Café—it adjoins the mathematics department—is the only place that knows the proper way to poach eggs.

As usual, Wendell was easy to locate; his golden hair drew the eye like a beacon, glinting intermittently as the wind tossed the branches to and fro. He was seated at our usual table beneath the cherry tree, his elegant frame folded into a slump with his elbow on the table and his forehead pressed against his hand. I suppressed a smile.

“Good morning,” I chirped, not bothering to keep the smugness out of my voice. I had timed it well, for the table had recently been filled; the bacon and eggs were steaming, as was the coffee in Wendell’s cup.

“Dear Emily,” he said as I sat down, not troubling to lift his head from his hand but smiling at me slantwise. “You look as if you’ve come from a wrestling match with one of your books. May I ask who won?”

I ignored this. “Something peculiar happened on the way here,” I said, and described my encounter with the mysterious ribbons man.

“Perhaps my stepmother has finally decided to send her assassins after me,” he said in a voice that was more disdainful than anything, as if there were something unfashionable about the business of assassins.

Of course I didn’t bother pointing out that the stranger had not mentioned Wendell nor seemed in any way connected to him or his problems, knowing this would fall on deaf ears, and merely said, “He didn’t seem very threatening.”

“Perhaps he was a poisoner. Most poisoners are strange, irritable things, with a great fondness for talking in riddles. It must be all that hunching over measurements, breathing in fumes.” He eyed his coffee morosely, then dumped another scoop of sugar in and tossed the whole thing back.

I filled a plate for Shadow with eggs and sausages and set it under the table, where the dog happily settled himself, then slung the knapsack casually over the back of my chair. Wendell continued to take no notice of the powerful faerie artefact I had brought with me to breakfast, which I found entertaining. “Do you notice that smell?” I said innocently as I again caught the scent of wildflowers emanating from no particular direction.

“Smell?” He was scratching Shadow’s ears. “Are you trying

out a perfume? If so, I'm afraid it's been overwhelmed by your usual aroma of inkwells and libraries."

"I didn't mean *me*," I said a little too loudly.

"What then? My senses are utterly incapacitated by this damned headache."

"I don't think that's how it works," I said, amused. Only a little, though; he really did look like death. His ordinarily rosy skin had a greyish pallor, his dark eyes underscored with shadows. He mumbled something unintelligible as he rubbed his forehead, tangling the golden locks that had fallen into his eyes. I suppressed the familiar urge to reach out and brush them back into place.

"I have to say I've never understood this annual ritual of poisoning oneself," I said. "Where's the appeal? Shouldn't a birthday be an enjoyable affair?"

"I believe mortals wish to blot out the reminder of their inexorably approaching demise. I just got a bit carried away—bloody Byers and his drinking games. And then they brought out a *cake*—or was it two cakes? Anyway, never again."

I smiled. Despite Wendell's habit of complaining of fatigue, sore feet, and a myriad of other ailments—generally when confronted by the necessity of hard work—it's rare to see him in any actual distress, and on some level I found it gratifying. "I managed to mark my thirtieth—as well as my thirty-first last month—without drinking myself into stupefaction. It *is* possible."

"You also retired at nine o'clock. Reid, Thornthwaite, and the rest of us celebrated your birthday longer than you did. Yours is only a different category of excess, Em." Something—perhaps a twitch in one of the faerie foot's toes—must have finally alerted him to my knapsack, for his bleary gaze snagged upon it suspiciously. "What have you got in there? And what is all this smirking about? You're up to something."

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, pressing my lips together to contain said smirk.

“Have you gotten yourself enchanted again? Must I begin plotting another rescue?”

I glared. I’m afraid I have not gotten over my resentment of him for saving me from the snow king’s court in Ljosland earlier this year, and have made a solemn vow to myself that I shall be the one to rescue *him* from whatever faerie trouble we next find ourselves in. Yes, I realize this is illogical, given that it requires Wendell to end up in some dire circumstance, which would ideally best be avoided, but there it is. I’m quite determined.

“I’ll explain everything tomorrow,” I said. “For now, let us say that I have had a breakthrough in my research. I am planning to make a presentation out of it.”

“A presentation?” He looked amused. “To an audience of one. Can you not do anything without waving around a pointer and a stack of diagrams?”

“An audience of *two*,” I said. “I suppose I must invite Ariadne, mustn’t I?”

“She would be put out if you didn’t.”

I stabbed my knife into the butter and applied it to my toast in unnecessarily sharp strokes. Ariadne is my brother’s eldest daughter. She arrived at Cambridge for the summer term with a deep-rooted love for dryadology, which my brother, unsurprisingly, has added to the extensive list of items he holds against me. Only nineteen, she is easily the brightest student I have ever taught, with an impressive alacrity for getting what she wants, whether it be a research assistantship, after-hours tutoring, or access to the faculty-only section of the Library of Dryadology, where we keep our rarest texts, half of which are enchanted. I’m afraid that her habit of

reminding me how frequently she writes to Thomas has more to do with this than her powers of persuasion; much as I tell myself I could hardly care less about my brother's opinion of me—he is a full twelve years my senior, and my opposite in every way—I cannot help picturing his frowning face whenever she mentions their correspondence, and would, on the whole, prefer not to provide him with additional points for his list.

“Is this about my door?” A youthful hope enlivened Wendell's drawn face.

“Of course,” I said. “I only regret it's taken this long to develop a workable theory. But I'll reveal all tomorrow. I have a few more details to pin down—and anyway you have two lectures this afternoon.”

“Don't remind me.” He buried his forehead in his hand again. “After I get through them—*if* I get through them—I am going home and burying myself in pillows until this bloody pounding ceases.”

I nudged the bowl of oranges in his direction. He seemed to have eaten little, which is unlike him. He took one, peeled it, then gazed at it a moment before setting it aside.

“Here,” I said, handing him my buttered toast. He was able to force this down, at least, and it seemed to settle his stomach somewhat, enough to tackle the eggs I spooned onto his plate.

“Where would I be without you, Em?” he said.

“Probably still flailing about in Germany, looking for your door,” I said. “Meanwhile, I would be sleeping more soundly without a marriage proposal from a faerie king dangling over my head.”

“It would cease to dangle if you accepted.” He rested his hand over mine and teasingly ran his thumb over my knuckles. “Shall I write you an essay on the subject? I can provide an extensive list of reasons to acquiesce.”

“I can imagine,” I said drily. A slow shiver travelled up my arm. “And what would be the first? That I shall enjoy an eternity of clean floors and dust-free bookshelves, as well as a constant refrain of nagging to pick up after myself?”

“Ah, no. It would be that our marriage would stop you from charging off into the wilderness in search of *other* faerie kings to marry, without first checking if they are made of ice.”

I made a grab for his coffee cup—I did not *actually* intend to empty it into his lap, though I could not be blamed if my hand had happened to slip—but he had already snatched it away, a motion too quick for my mortal reflexes to counter.

“That is unfair,” I complained, but he only laughed at me.

We have fallen into this pattern of jesting over his marriage proposal, though it is clear he is no less serious about it, as he has informed me more times than I care to count. For my part, I wish I could see the whole thing in a humourous light—I have indeed lost sleep over it. My stomach is in knots even as I write these words, and in general I prefer to avoid thinking about the whole business so as not to be sent into a minor panic. It is in part, I suppose, that the thought of marrying anyone makes me wish to retreat to the nearest library and hide myself among the stacks; marriage has always struck me as a pointless business, at best a distraction from my work and at worst a very *large* distraction from my work coupled with a lifetime of tedious social obligations.

But I am also keenly aware that I should have refused Wendell long ago, and that allowing him to hope like this is cruel. I do not wish to be cruel to Wendell; the thought gives rise to a strange and unpleasant sensation, as if the air is being squeezed from my body. But the reality is that one would have to be an utter idiot to marry one of the Folk. There are perhaps a handful of stories in which such a union ends well and

a mountain of them in which it ends in madness or an untimely and unpleasant death.

I am also, of course, constantly aware of the ridiculousness of my being the object of a marriage offering by a faerie monarch.

“Give me a hint at least,” he said after we had spent several minutes attending to our food.

“Not until you’ve made a start on that essay.”

“Much as I appreciate that you cannot stop thinking of marrying me,” he said, “I was referring to this breakthrough of yours. Have you narrowed down the possible locations of my door?”

“Ah.” I put my crêpe down. “Yes. Although, as my research points to many possible locations, it would be more accurate to say that I have landed upon one that seems particularly promising. How familiar are you with the work of Danielle de Grey?”

“De Grey? Not very. Bit of a rebel; disappeared decades ago after wandering into some faerie realm. Her research has been rather discredited, hasn’t it?”

“*She* has been discredited. She was arrested in four different countries, most notably for stealing a faerie sword from the estate of a French duke. Undid a curse upon his family in the process, not that he ever thanked her for it. I have always found her research to be exemplary. It’s a pity it’s no longer cited. I tried once, in graduate school, and my supervisor informed me that it would not be politic.”

“That’s hardly a surprise. Scholars are a conservative lot. De Grey sounds like she was far too much fun.”

“Her ideas are innovative. She believed ardently that the Folk of different regions are in closer communication than scholars assume—back then they called this the Trade Routes

Theory. She also came up with a classification system that would still be useful today if it had ever gained traction. When she disappeared, she was investigating a species of faun.”*

Wendell made a face. “I hate fauns—we have them in my kingdom. They’re vicious little beasts—and not in an interesting way. I don’t know why dryadologists make such a fuss over them. What on earth do they have to do with my door?”

I leaned forward. “In fact, you have several species of faun within your kingdom, don’t you?”

He sighed. “Don’t ask me to name them, I beg of you. I have as little to do with the creatures as possible.”

I pulled out a book from my pocket—naturally I hadn’t stored anything else in the knapsack, in case the foot decided to hop out as soon as I unclipped the flap. I opened it to the marked page and handed it to him. “Does he look familiar?”

“She,” Wendell said absently, looking at the drawing. It showed a blurred, hairy creature with a goat’s legs and hooves—many fauns alternate between bipedalism and a sort of crouched, apelike lope. Rising from the faun’s head were two majestic horns, sharp as knifepoints. “Yes. They live in the mountains to the east of my court.”

“De Grey called them tree fauns—not because they dwell in forests, but because their horns resemble tree rings, the intricacy of them. It’s a feature unique to their species.”

I took the book from him before he could read the caption below the illustration—I wanted to surprise him tomorrow. He seemed to guess this and smiled.

“That’s all I’ll get for now, is it? A story about a disreputa-

* Despite objections by Evans (1901), Blanchet (1904), and others, “faun” remains the accepted nomenclature for all species of hoofed common fae regardless of size or origin, one of several terms whose lineage can be traced to dryadology’s roots in early-seventeenth-century Greece.

ble scholar and a lecture on the common fae? And you are always after me for being mysterious.”

“I’m sure that the person who spent ten years failing to locate a simple faerie door can wait another day without grumbling about it,” I said, only half suppressing my smugness. “Pass the tea.”

He picked up the pot and filled my cup. I froze, staring.

“What?” he said, setting the pot down. Wordlessly, I gestured. The tea in my mug was blue-black, and floating across the surface were tiny lily pads, each cradling a perfect white flower. Shadows flitted across the surface of the water, as if above it was a canopy of dark trees admitting only the thinnest of sunbeams.

Wendell swore. He reached for the cup, but I was already cradling it. “Are they *blooming*?” I said. Indeed, as I watched, another flower opened, petals waving in a wind that did not belong to the calm Cambridge weather. I couldn’t look away.

The bizarre concoction smelled divine—both like and unlike tea, bitter and floral. I tilted the cup to take a sip, but suddenly Wendell’s hand was covering the rim—that unnerving trick of his of moving more quickly than my mortal eyes could follow. “Don’t,” he said, pressing the cup towards the table.

“Poison?”

“Of course not. It’s just tea. Commonly served at breakfast in my court.”

“Ah.” The general rule is that mortals should avoid consuming anything in Faerie—particularly faerie wine, which erases human inhibitions. Most commonly the drinker, who has been lured into some faerie revel, dances until they die, or until the faeries tire of them, which is often the same thing.

“I’m not in the mood to dance at present,” I said. “Thank you for ruining my tea.”

“Obviously I didn’t *mean* to. I don’t—” He frowned and shook his head.

I emptied the tea onto the grass—the pot, anyhow; he was still holding the cup. “I’ve never seen you lose control of your magic before. Were you thinking of home just now?”

“No more than usual.” He sipped the tea, closed his eyes briefly, then shrugged. “Some effect of the hangover, I suppose.”

I eyed him thoughtfully. He flagged down a waiter and requested a fresh pot of tea. Our conversation turned then to a familiar debate concerning department politics; Wendell ordinarily takes little interest in the subject, but given his skill for charming his way into others’ confidences, he is nevertheless an excellent source for gossip. Currently we are all placing bets on the outcome of an ongoing feud between Professors Clive Errington and Sarah Alami, which began over a misplaced tea tray in the faculty lounge and devolved into accusations of professional sabotage. Alami is convinced Errington broke her glass mirror containing a captive faerie light, while Errington believes Alami followed him to the Wiltshire downs in order to leave out mouldy scones for the brownies he was investigating, about which they purportedly took great offence.

“Excuse me?”

I turned and found a young scholar hovering at my shoulder, a hesitant smile on her ruddy face. “I’m sorry to trouble you, Professor. I’m in one of your classes—Dryadology in the Early Modern Period?”

“Oh, yes,” I said, though I could not place her. Well, there are more than a hundred students in that class, after all.

“You’ll think this is silly,” she said, clutching her book more tightly to her chest—which I realized was my encyclopaedia of the Folk, published earlier this summer. “But I wanted

to tell you what an inspiration you are. I came here to study architecture, you know—well, that’s what my parents wished me to study. But now, because of you, my mind is made up. I’m going to major in dryadology like I always wanted.”

“I’m happy to have been an inspiration for you. But it’s neither an easy profession nor a safe one.”

“Oh, I know,” the young girl said, her eyes alight. “But I—”

Her gaze fell then on Wendell, who was tilting his chair back and smiling at me, and she seemed to forget what she had been saying. At first I thought it was merely his appearance that had distracted her—not an unusual occurrence even among those who know him well. I think if it was just a matter of good looks, one could get used to him, but Wendell has—I can think of no better way to put it—a *vividness* that is difficult to ignore. It is largely indefinable, and perhaps all faerie monarchs have it; I don’t know. There is a sharpness to his presence that snags one’s attention.

It was only when her eyes darted back to me that I realized. There was in her expression something I had seen before in the villagers of Hrafnsvik, and I felt my mouth tighten.

The girl thanked me again and departed with some haste. I turned to Wendell with a frown.

“What now?” he said.

“I believe the rumours about you have reached Cambridge,” I said.

“Oh, good grief.”

In Hrafnsvik, the villagers had known Wendell’s true identity—there had been no avoiding it. Wendell and I had not worried overmuch about this—it is such a small, out-of-the-way place, and we’d assumed his secret would be easily kept.

He was rubbing the bridge of his nose, his eyes closed. “How did it happen?”

“I don’t know. But this is the modern world, Wendell. The Department Head has a telephone in his office now. Not that he knows how to use it, of course . . .”

He reached for the coffeepot, and I realized I had misjudged his reaction—he was not anxious at all, merely preoccupied with his hangover. “Oh well.”

“Oh well?” I repeated. “We don’t know how many people have heard this rumour, nor how many believe it. We’d best take it seriously. At the very least, you will have to be more careful from now on. You don’t always guard yourself—I am not the only observant person on the planet, you know. And I hope that is the last pot of tea you accidentally enchant.”

“The faculty won’t believe it,” he said. “Can you imagine? They’d feel like common dupes. You know they’d go to any lengths to avoid *that*.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You have plenty of enemies. Some would jump at the chance to villainize you, and I think a rumour that you are here playing some cruel faerie game aimed at making us all look ridiculous would suit that purpose nicely. We cannot lose our funding, Wendell. We need that if we are going to find your door.”

“All this is not helping my headache.” He took my hand. “It’s all right, Em. It’s only a rumour. One would think you cared more about finding my door than I do!”

“I doubt that’s possible.” For he is constantly complaining of homesickness.

“I hadn’t thought so.”

I withdrew my hand, which was feeling overheated. “Of course I care about your door. It is one of the most interesting mysteries I have encountered in my career, and I intend to solve it. You know how I am.”

He smiled. “Yes. I do.”



He left me shortly thereafter, saying that he would nap for an hour or so before his first lecture in the hopes of ameliorating his headache. I remained at the table to finish off the tea and toast as I worked on my latest letter to Lilja and Margret. I have a regular correspondence with them, as I do with Aud and—more sporadically—with Thora. I pictured Lilja opening the letter by the fireside in the little cottage she shared with Margret—no doubt they would be already thinking ahead to the winter in Hrafnsvik.

Lilja and Margret continue to demonstrate a great deal of interest in Wendell’s marriage proposal, and they ask if I have come to a decision each time they write. I began by scribbling vague things about the ill-advisedness of marrying one of the Folk, but as their questions persisted I have simply been ignoring them. I miss them both and very much wish I could see them again—I always found Lilja in particular an uncommonly easy person to converse with.

My worries receded as I made my way back to my office with Shadow at my side. I have resided in a sort of contented haze since being granted tenure—a highlight of any academic career, but even more so for me, as Cambridge is the only true home I have ever known. The ancient stonework has an aura of friendliness now, the paths more comfortable beneath my feet.

It was as I strolled along, thinking of the stack of papers on my desk that still needed grading, that I realized what had been so familiar about the glare the man with the ribbons had given me. It was the same look I have seen numerous times from older professors, often when I have challenged them on a point of scholarship. There had been a quality of disappointment in it that is particular to scholars, which

would explain my reaction—I had felt, for a brief moment, like an undergraduate who had forgotten to do the assigned reading.

“Hm,” I said again as I turned the encounter over in my head, examining it from new angles. But I could make no further sense of the mystery, and thus I set it aside.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).

WHERE IS ANNE FRANK



ARI FOLMAN

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY
LENA GUBERMAN**

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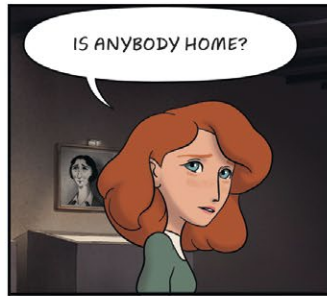
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Amsterdam, the Anne Frank House: a year from today...



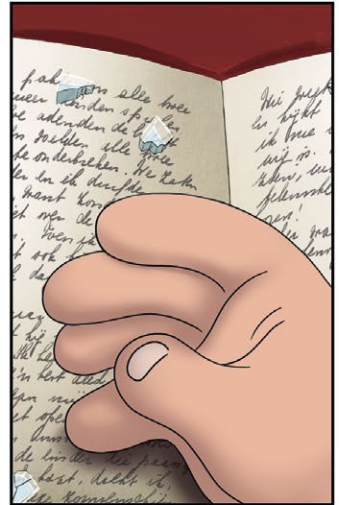
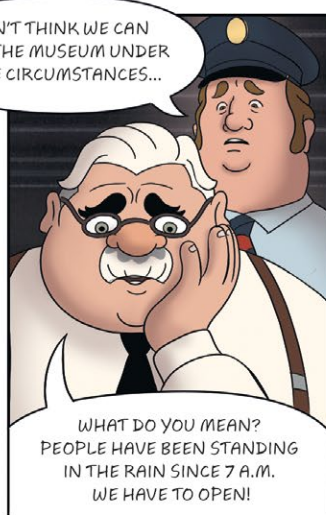
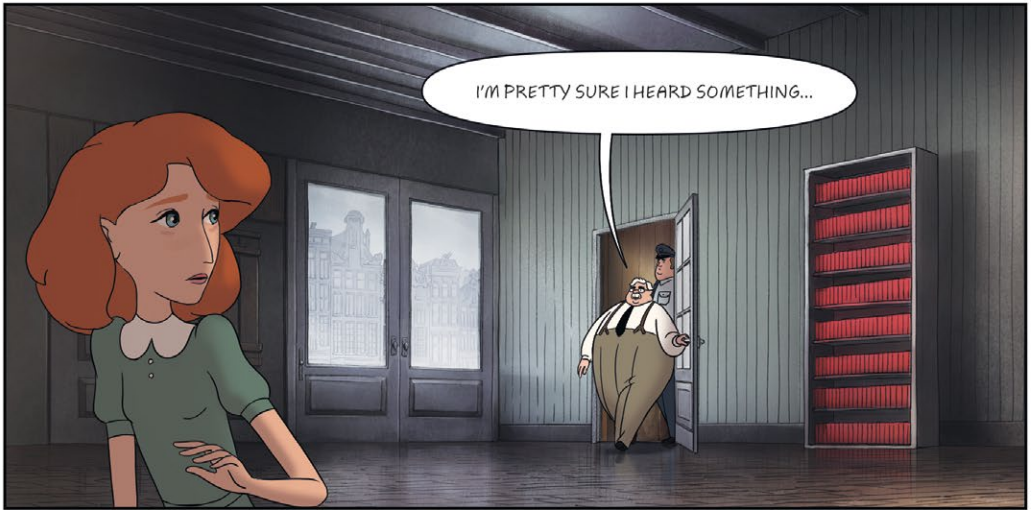


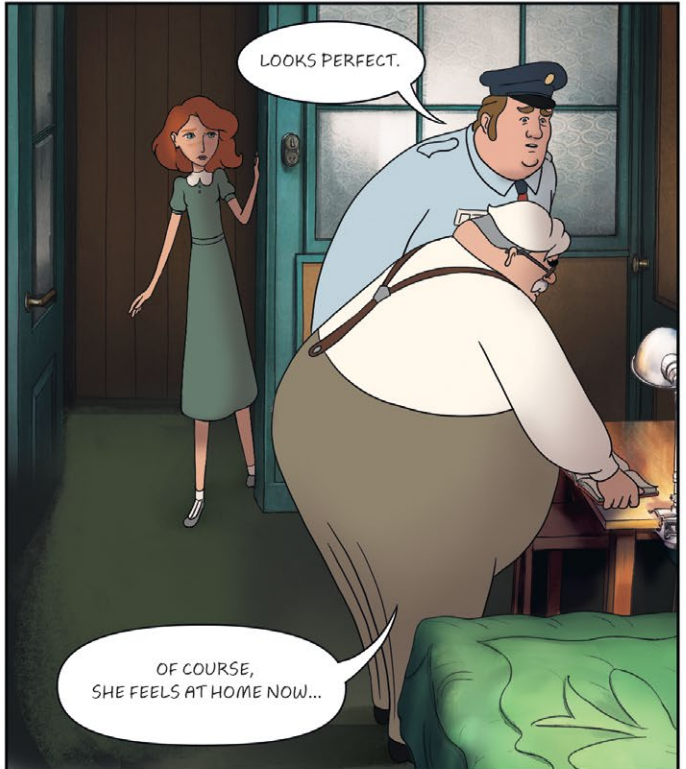




I had no clue when I came back to life, or how it happened. I just know there was a terrible storm outside the house that night...









I realized now that I must be invisible. Maybe the diary held the answer to what was going on?



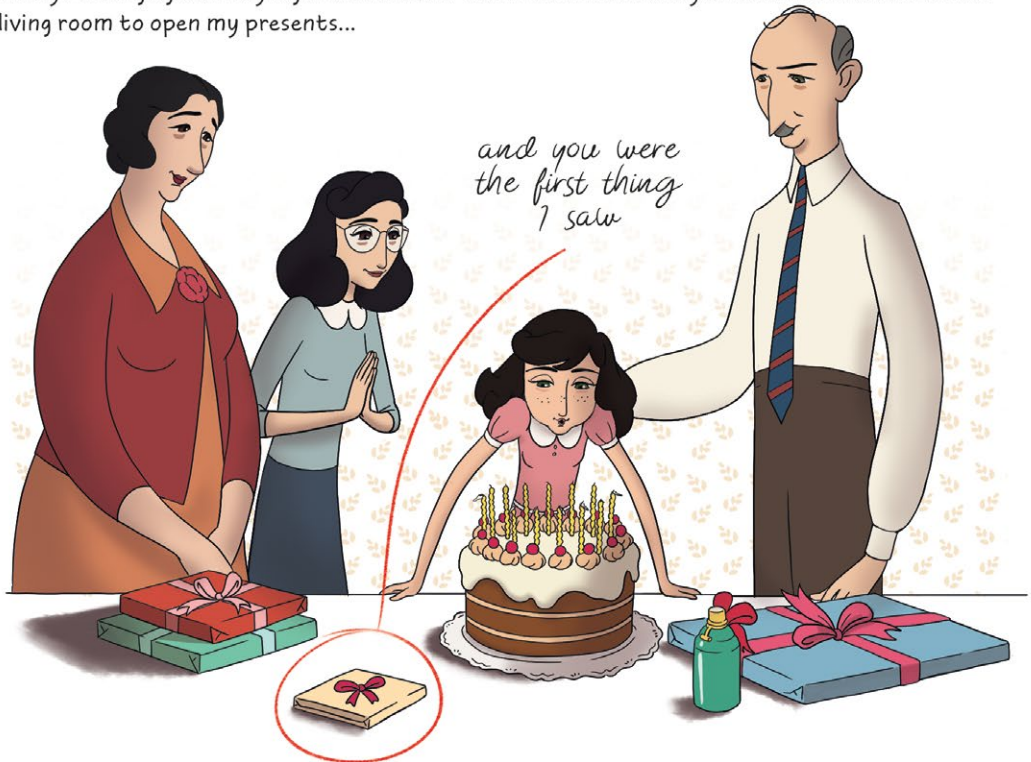
June 12, 1942

I hope I will be able to confide everything to you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone, and I hope you will be a great source of comfort and support.

First Week: Sunday, June 14–Friday, June 19

I'll begin from the moment I got you, the moment I saw you lying on the table among my other birthday presents. It was Friday, June 12th. I was awake at six o'clock, which isn't surprising since it was my birthday.

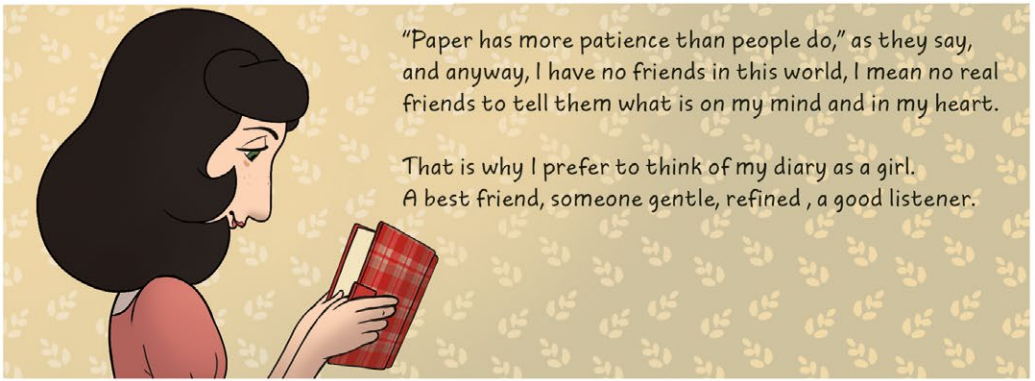
But I'm not allowed to get up that early, so I had to control my curiosity until quarter to seven. When I couldn't wait any longer, I went to the dining room, where Moortje (the cat) welcomed me by rubbing against my legs. A little after seven I went to Daddy and Mama and then to the living room to open my presents...



Saturday... June 20, 1942

Writing in a diary is a really strange experience for someone like me. Not only because I've never written anything before, but also because it seems to me that later on neither I nor anyone else will be interested in the musings of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl. Oh well, it doesn't matter. I feel like writing, and I have an even greater need to get all kinds of things off my chest.





"Paper has more patience than people do," as they say, and anyway, I have no friends in this world, I mean no real friends to tell them what is on my mind and in my heart.

That is why I prefer to think of my diary as a girl. A best friend, someone gentle, refined, a good listener.



I am thinking she will have...

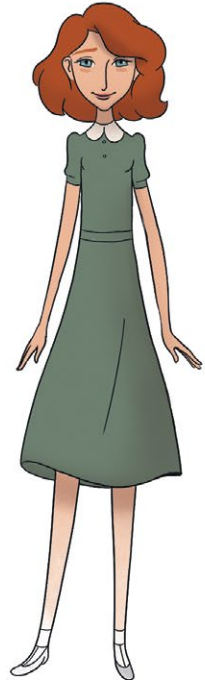
Hanneli Goslar's radiant face

and her deep blue eyes

Veronica Lake's hair

and Jacque's slim figure

Ava Gardner's lips



But she will also have my spark...

my smile...



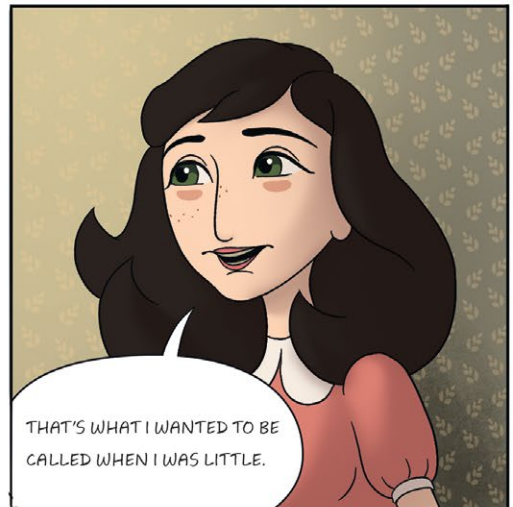
my wisdom...



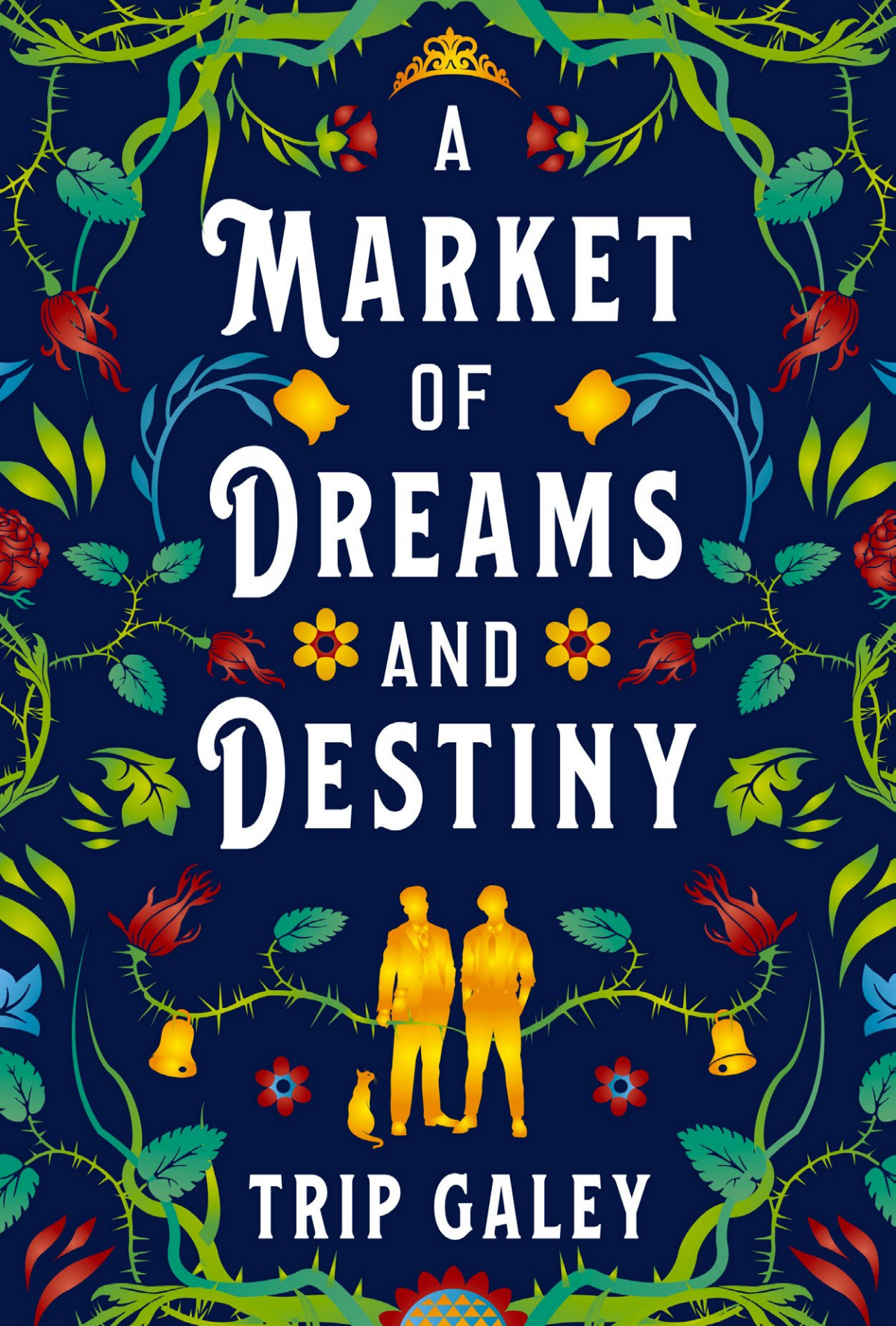
and my sense of humor...



I will write my diary to this girl of mystery, and her name will be KITTY.



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A
MARKET
OF
DREAMS
AND
DESTINY



TRIP GALEY

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*Be wary, child, as you go down,
To the place beneath old London town,
Where fey-folk work and goblins frown,
In the market 'neath old London town.*

Deri hummed to himself as he dodged through the crowd, an old scrap of rhyme dredged up from a memory so many times bought and sold it was all but worn through. Three more errands left, just three, then he'd be free as the wind-swept sea. Well, as free as possible until he bought himself out of his indenture. Until then, endless errands. Fetch a new vial of ink of night from Merchant Codex. Deliver the parcel he carried to Merchant Blatterbosch. And return with Merchant Maurlocke's lunch before the Market Bell rang the midday hour. Not that there was day, as such, here below London.

The Untermarkt was busier than usual. The lanes that threaded through the market stalls, never terribly wide, were choked with

people. Mortals mixed with denizens from Faery and lands even deeper Underhill. A tattooed woman in buckskin and furs traded a small leather pouch to a merchant with the head and paws of a cat for the ability to see in the dark. A pair of young men in evening wear, drunk on a drop of faery wine, nearly crashed into a stall filled with dreams caught in crystal cobwebs. Goblin midwives, big-bellied with the precious charges that they both carried and delivered themselves, waddled past.

Noise crashed and foamed around him. Merchants haggled and hawked their wares, customers haggled back or laughed with their friends, buskers sang songs or brayed on instruments. You could feel the approaching holiday in the air, anticipation and excitement. Threaded through it all were the voices of the bells, ringing out hours and sales, jangling the appearance of customers and, to the rare few like Deri, who could truly hear, sharing gossip and swapping stories.

Did you hear? Did you hear? rang the Bell of Auld St. Cyr. *The Merchant Shade did disappear!*

Pish and tosh! Pish and tosh! rang the bell near Merchant Kosh. *He's simply gone to do his wash!*

The first words Deri could remember hearing had been rang out by the bells. He'd been able to understand them, even then. A gift from having been carried to term by a goblin midwife.

'Memories, sure to please! Sweet memories for modest fees! Come buy! Come buy!'

'How do, Merchant Pryek,' Deri called a greeting to a woman whose fingers were fine white clay and whose face was a porcelain mask. Her stall was a magpie's nest of things that had been shaped: fine china and silver spoons, knots of plaited straw and carefully

tatted lace, needles and spindles and rings and chains. Every item held not only its shape but also a memory that could be relived simply by using it.

‘Ah! Good morning, Deri,’ the merchant replied. ‘Come see my latest treasure! Come-come!’ She held up a commemorative plate, delicately painted with a distinctive pattern of blue and the profile of a regal young woman. ‘Isn’t it lovely? Isn’t it pristine? Why, it hasn’t been eaten from since High Queen Victoria was elected to the throne, nearly forty years ago. And when you look at it, you can hear a memory of the Stone of Destiny singing her confirmation.’ She sighed with pleasure. ‘It will be a shame to part with it, but should you, or Merchant Maurlocke be interested...’ She angled the plate temptingly.

‘Not today, Merchant Pryek.’ *Not today* was so much safer than *no*. Maurlocke would skin him for shoe leather if he closed down a potential opportunity with a no. ‘Have a profitable day!’

Deri slipped behind a trio of young women bearing armfuls of parcels, though he needn’t have bothered. Merchant Pryek was already calling out to another.

He wove and darted through the crowd. It was busy, even for the Untermarkt, making running errands even more of a challenge. Deri was looking forward to the Autumnal Equinox as much as any of these punters, but unlike them he still had to work. Didn’t get but the bare scrape of holiday allotted by his indenture.

‘Good morning, Merchant Creydland!’ Deri called, passing a mountain of a man with eyes like coals and hair of fire. One of Merchant Maurlocke’s best trading partners; always take the time to pay respect to Merchant Creydland.

Deri received but a grunt of recognition in reply. A smith as much as a merchant, Creydland affected a smith’s apron rather than

the more elaborate robes many merchants favoured. The majority of his attention was currently bent on hammering the last details of delicate brass filigree into place on a replacement hand for the man standing outside the merchant's stall, who only had one of his own remaining. A soldier, probably, what with the appendage in question being of brass and all.

Creydland's stall commanded an intersection of two market avenues. Left should be quicker, along the Street of Living Flame. Deri turned, but instead of the smell of hot metal and cold coin, his nose filled with a full field of floral bouquets. Fardles, the Market had shifted again.

'Fruit of Knowledge! Fruit of Health! Learn secrets! Never sicken!'

'Seeds! Rich seeds! One grain will sprout a full field of wheat!'

'Flowers of Love, to grow your regard! Flowers of Lust, and passion unbarred! Come buy! Come buy!'

The last exhortation was cast upon the winds by Merchant Peaseblossom. Not good. Their stall, all of living wood that had never known the touch of axe, was so close to the edge of the Untermarkt as to be nearly in London proper.

'Good morning, Deri,' the merchant said, catching sight of him standing near. 'Does Merchant Maurlocke require a fine posey or three?'

'Not today, Merchant Peaseblossom.' Deri flashed an apologetic smile. Peaseblossom was a terrible flirt. He was saved from further conversation by a pair of customers breezing up to the stall.

'Good morning!' Mortals. A pair of them, hand in hand, stepped up to the merchant.

The two young men, for such they were, both wore clothes of excellent cut, with particularly fine waistcoats. One was green and bronze with a chain-like pattern worked across it, while the other was blue and grey and bore repeating circles, like ship's wheels.

It was a far cry from Deri's own garb. He was dressed well enough, to be sure, but as a servant. Simple trousers and waistcoat of grey, with a coat to match. His hat, a nice flat cap which had once been a very fetching maroon, was his sole foray into the more daring side of fashion. As a servant he could only venture so far.

Not like the happy young men in front of him.

'Ah! Messrs Copperfield and Steerforth! You're looking well. I have the boutonnieres for your wedding all ready. Bide but a moment and I will fetch them for you.' Merchant Peaseblossom turned, touched a flower as iridescent and translucent as spun glass, and disappeared.

'Should we get some more rós-a-milis?' Steerforth asked. 'We're here anyway.'

The flowers in question were so named for the enchantment their petals bore, not the specific colour or variety. Plucking a single petal from the bloom and crushing it between the fingers immediately cleansed one of all foul smells and rendered one's clothing as freshly laundered. They were understandably popular amongst the bright young things that partied somewhat excessively but then had to make a presentable appearance at Great-Aunt Augusta's dinner soiree to ensure the inheritance didn't go amiss.

'Depends on the price,' the other, Copperfield, was saying.

'You fret too much. Come now, Daisy! Can't be less than fresh at our own wedding, can we?'

‘Don’t call me Daisy!’ Copperfield attempted to look stern but the laugh that burst from his lips spoiled the effect.

Lovers. Easy marks for the right kind of merchant. Nothing opened the purse like devotion or desperation. So much touching, too! Deri hadn’t seen many mortals quite so bold in the public display of their affections. He absently ran his fingers down his own arm. Not that he had occasion to flirt with the boundaries of what was or was not proper, himself. His indenture expressly forbade romantic entanglements. Not that he had time, anyway.

Time! He still had three errands to complete and, thanks to the stalls and alleyways shifting, his next stop was halfway across the Untermarkt. Deri briefly considered trying to take a shortcut through the streets *above*. No. Not fast enough. He’d have to do it the other way. At least he had a strong guide to follow to his next destination.

The trick to navigating the Goblin Market was not to ignore temptation. That was an exercise in futility. The trick was choosing which temptations to give in to, just a little, so you could follow them to what you were truly after.

Merchant Codex dealt in books, and parchment, and inks of all kinds. When was the last time he’d had the chance to hear a good story? There were no books or storytellers near, but this was the right place to send messages in the Language of Flowers, and sure enough, the Untermarkt stepped in to tempt him.

‘Prose spelt in poseys! In pansies and roseys!’

A single voice leapt out at him, clear above the clamour. Right on cue. The Market couldn’t resist an unspoken desire.

Deri followed temptation from the Street of the Flower-Sellers to a niche near an intersection where a bardic initiate sang a ballad

of ages past. His feet slowed. He hadn't heard this one before! No! He didn't want to hear it. He wanted to learn it himself. He needed a copy of the ballad. Deri followed that impulse away from the performance, and down a bright and brassy alleyway filled to overflowing with stalls selling all manner of scraps of foolscap printed with dark and determined processions of notes. From music to lyrics and from lyrics to poetry. That brought him at last close enough to Merchant Codex's territory that he was able to spot her stall amongst the many.

Skin pale as paper and ink-dark hair brushed from her face in an inspired scrawl, Merchant Codex was deep in conversation with a young man perhaps six or seven years Deri's senior. A contract of indenture sat on the market stall between them. It was old, judging by the grime darkening the jagged edge marking each of the two halves as belonging to one another.

'Come now, Anwyl, you're being foolish! Why buy out now?' Merchant Codex asked, voice as soft as the rustling of pages in a library. 'You're only a few months from the end of your service. You could work out the time and keep your savings.'

They were negotiating the buy-out of the young man's indenture! Deri angled for a closer vantage point. Wouldn't hurt to listen close, see if he could learn anything that might help him buy free of his own. Fortunately, the two negotiators ignored him.

'I've fallen in love,' Anwyl replied. 'And you know as well as I that I can't fraternise, court, woo, or otherwise pursue marriage while I'm still indentured. I need to be free, now!'

A silly reason to spend one's savings, but if it gave Deri the chance to watch a negotiation like this, well, who was he to stand in the way of love? Deri watched Merchant Codex's response

carefully. There had to be a reason the merchant was pushing back on this.

‘You’ve the best eye for quality I’ve had in a long time. Surely, we can come to an arrangement that keeps you in my employ,’ Merchant Codex wheedled. ‘I could waive the clause on engagement if you agreed to, say, a three-year extension?’

Anwyl fell silent, considering the offer.

Deri bit back the urge to offer his opinion. Extend the contract? Anwyl would have to be barmy. Even if one clause were waived, there’s no way he could trust Codex not to still exert some sort of control over his love life, and he’d be three years further from freedom! Three years of life lived at the mercy and whim of someone else. Sure, the savings would be nice, but in the long term, it was bound to cost more than it was worth. Merchants of the Untermarkt didn’t make deals that weren’t to their advantage.

What he wouldn’t give to have that freedom himself. Well, actually, he knew. There were five years, seven months, and three days left on his indenture. He’d saved up enough that he’d be able to buy his way free in a little over a year, give or take. Of course, that didn’t account for how much he’d need to set himself up in business at the Untermarkt. There was no way that would be cheap. Goblin merchants frowned on allowing mortals like him into their ranks.

Sweet Goddess Danu, though, what he wouldn’t give for the chance. Others had done it over the years. Not many, but some. Great Gwri, Iden the Spinner, Jack Trades...though Deri had no idea what it had cost them, and finding out would likely set his freedom back three years or more.

‘No,’ Anwyl said, breaking Deri out of his reverie, ‘no deal. I’d like to end the contract.’

‘As you wish,’ Merchant Codex said. She picked up the two halves of the contract sitting on the stall in front of her and with quick, efficient motions, ripped them to pieces. The contract was ended.

‘Ah Deri, there you are. I have the ink of night Merchant Maurlocke requested all ready.’ Anwyl was ignored. All potential profit had been wrung from him, so he was no longer worthy of Merchant Codex’s time or attention. ‘Now, what have you brought me in payment?’



After finishing with Merchant Codex, it didn't take Deri long to locate the next person he had to deal with. The Market's shift had rearranged things in his favour, this time. He wasn't far from the right alley, and the canny old goblin he sought was loud, so if Deri just listened...

'Eyes of every size! Hair so very fair! Come buy! Come buy!'

There. That was Blatterbosch. The old goblin's voice with its strong Black Forest accent was unmistakable. Deri turned toward the sound and shortly found himself standing in front of the stall he sought.

Blatterbosch crouched amidst his wares like a toad in a flowerbed, naked save for a loincloth that only the most discerning of eyes could pick out from the goblin's statuesque form. Ladies' fingers, pale and cold, nestled among jars of grass-green eyes. Twists of hair in all colours of autumn leaves hung like shimmering vines in a fringe across the front of the stall. Things rarer still, iridescent scales and gossamer wings and even a satyr's pride, were scattered about like garden ornaments, calculatingly placed to command attention.

Deri resolutely ignored the satyr's pride. It was never a good idea to be distracted when dealing with a goblin merchant. It was an even worse one to interrupt when said merchant was concluding a deal. So Deri waited, foot tapping, as a young woman with flaming locks of auburn hair traded its luminous beauty for the strength of ten men. She flexed her fingers and Deri prudently took a step to one side. Until she had some practice with her newly bought brawn, there were likely to be broken teacups and broken bones in her future. Deri had no wish to be the first casualty.

Still, as soon as she stepped away from the stall Deri darted in to take her place. Time was precious, not to be wasted. Almost before Blatterbosch could greet him, he had parcel in hand. It was wrapped in snow-white butcher's paper; Deri preferred not to dwell overmuch on the way the somewhat squishy contents regularly pulsed out a beat.

'Ah!' Blatterbosch's eyes – all five of them – glowed. 'You have it! Danu's dug, how did Maurlocke manage to persuade her to give up her second heart?'

'I'm sure I cannot say, Merchant Blatterbosch.' Manners were important in the Untermarkt. Almost as important as they were to the High Society toffs up top.

'Yes. Well. In any case. Tell your mystrer I am most pleased to have done business with ym. Most pleased.' Blatterbosch held out a hand for the parcel.

'Ah,' Deri said delicately, 'I'm afraid your negotiations with my mystrer only covered my bringing the parcel to your stall. You neglected to settle on a fee for my handing you the parcel.'

It was outright robbery to ask, but Deri had dealt with Blatterbosch often enough to know when he could press his luck.

Still, it was always a risk. His shoulders tensed, but he kept a pleasant-yet-slightly-apologetic look on his face.

The old goblin favoured Deri with a long, measuring look, eyes narrowing. Deri didn't flinch. Didn't dare flinch. Then Blatterbosch laughed, a vast booming sound that set the merchant's mounds of flesh to jiggling – even the display merchandise on his stall.

'And what price do you ask for such a dangerous feat as passing me a parcel, little one?'

Of course the merchant had seen through Deri's polite fiction. He knew Deri was angling for a bit of profit for himself, rather than on behalf of Maurlocke. Deri braced himself, running calculations in his mind. Something minor enough the merchant would part with it, but with enough value that Deri could hope to sell it on for a profit. Ideally, something that would, in the long run, cost the merchant nothing. Deri pointed to the second-finest spill of hair draped across the top of the stall.

'The lustre of those locks for a single evening.'

It was a small thing. The lustre would return, the locks could be sold on with no lessening of value. The question was, would Blatterbosch see it that way?

'Very well.' The merchant laughed again. 'I like your brass, boy. You have a deal.'

'Thank you, Master Merchant.' Deri handed over the parcel and collected his payment, all tied up with a single, intricately knotted hair. 'May your day continue to be a profitable one.'

'Yours as well, young man. Yours as well.' Blatterbosch waved him away absently, four of his five eyes already seeking in the crowd for the next mark.

Deri allowed himself a satisfied grin as he dove back into the

crowd, tucking his prize safely away in one of the many hidden pockets sewn throughout his coat. Not bad. It'd taken more time than he'd have liked, but he'd managed a bit of profit, so it all evened out. Now, to sort out Merchant Maurlocke's lunch. He could tell by the bells that he was running out of time.

Deri was two-thirds of the way to collecting Merchant Maurlocke's lunch when a voice hissing down at him caused him to pause.

'Hisst, kit! Slow and hark, and you may find the opportunity for an extra bit of profit.'

Deri followed the sound to a ginger tabby, grooming herself whilst perched atop the pole of a nearby market bell. 'Milady Bess,' he said, 'you're looking well.'

Bess stretched the leg she had been cleaning and shook it. 'Well enough. The first left and third right after and you'll find a nice bit of opportunity. If you are interested, of course.'

Of course he was interested. He was always interested. Even without the bells ringing encouragement in his ears, he would be interested.

He didn't thank Bess, of course. To do so in the Untermarkt would be more than passing dangerous. He did, however, sketch a little bow in her direction and add a bit of fish to his mental list. It paid to keep one's allies happy, even if that meant smelling of cod for a bit.

The first left and the third right sped by quickly, ending on the Street of Sworn Words. Unexpected. What could Bess have been referring to? Deri's eyes raked the crowds. There!

Near the stall of Bruteria Promise-Maker, where vows and oaths

and geasa hung in rows, all bound in knots of parchment and chains of silver and pewter and gold, a young man stood with a small bit of paper in his hand and despair in his eyes. About his age, Deri would hazard, with a labourer's arms and a shirt not more than a few days from being disdained by even the rag-pickers. A workhouse boy, judging by the threadbare brown trousers and shirt which might once have aspired to cream but had long since washed away to sullen grey. It was lemon as anything to guess his problem; Promise-Makers were exceptional at finding loopholes, and charging you an arm and a leg on top of your original bargain to hold them to whatever terms were struck.

'You promised Missus Graspar a geas!' the young man was repeating, clearly not for the first, or even seventh, time.

'And she is welcome to have it,' Bruteria countered smugly. 'Why don't you just pop back and tell her to come herself and collect it?'

'But she sent me to fetch it!'

'Does the signature on the receipt say Owain on it?'

'No.'

'Do you have a sealed and witnessed writ conferring Missus Graspar's authority on you?'

'No, but—'

'Then it's not my problem.' Bruteria crossed her arms across her chest.

'Which one is it?' Deri interrupted, stepping up next to the young man apparently named Owain.

'What?' Owain half-turned to Deri.

Bruteria twisted her lips into a lopsided knot of displeasure.

'Deri,' she warned, 'this is none of your concern.'

‘Business is business, as they say, Bruteria,’ Deri replied. ‘Which chain were you sent to collect?’ he asked Owain again.

‘I – I’m not sure,’ came the reply.

‘Then hire me to help you. I can promise my price will be much more reasonable than Bruteria’s.’

Deri couldn’t resist shooting a little smirk at Bruteria. The merchant sneered back. No self-respecting goblin would brag of being reasonable.

It was dangerous. Baiting Bruteria was asking to make enemies. Worse, Maurlocke might take exception to his obviously siding with a fellow human over his adopted market brethren. But Deri didn’t like those that penny-and-tuppence’d their customers.

‘What’s your price?’ Owain asked.

Too late to back out now. Bad enough to be seen interfering with another’s market business, far worse to back out after offering to make a deal. What was his price? Owain didn’t look like he had much to spare. Without quite thinking, Deri blurted out an offer.

‘One piece of advice for one night on the town is my going rate.’ Deri quirked a smile at Owain. ‘It doesn’t have to be fancy; it just has to be fun.’

Bruteria made no move to hide her snort of contempt.

‘Deal,’ Owain said, seizing Deri’s hand.

Owain’s hand was warm, his grip strong. The touch was like lightning.

Deri pulled his hand away and draped a smile across his face like a veil.

‘The receipt gives you enough right to claim your mistress’s order. Bruteria never actually said you couldn’t take it. She asked

you a series of questions that made you think you couldn't, sure. But she isn't going to stop you. She can't. She won't help you, either, unless you pay her, but I suspect she's already made the offer and you will not –' Deri glanced at Owain and corrected himself. '– cannot meet the price for her aid.'

'True enough.' Owain sighed.

'But if you take the right chain, she cannot stop you. So, which one is it?'

Owain looked at the multitude of chains of paper and gold hanging about the market stall.

'I have no idea.'

'Check the receipt,' Deri suggested.

Owain looked down at the slip of paper in his hand.

'...Silver.'

Bruteria's stall was hung predominantly with paper and gold, the former to hold agreements fast, the latter because the truth shines golden, and that metal best holds geasa. There were a few strands of silver and jet amongst the others – modest pieces, for the most part, binding forged for more unusual purposes.

'Finely forged.'

Owain's eyes scanned Bruteria's wares. There were still more choices than one. He looked to Deri, eyes beginning to panic.

'Think about who commissioned the piece. That will always show through. Something of them will have to. It's like a signature on a document. The working is no good without it.'

Owain glanced back at the stall and after a moment, he reached out and picked up a precise length of tightly twisted silver and pewter.

'This one,' he said. 'It has to be.'

‘Then take it, and be gone!’ Bruteria glared at the two. ‘You’re keeping honest business from my stall!’

Owain let out an explosive breath of relief. Deri laughed and stuck his arm through Owain’s, pulling him away from the stall. The thrill of contact was no less for the presence of cloth between them.

‘Best clear the way for other customers,’ Deri murmured to Owain.

‘Oh, right. Of course.’ Owain allowed himself to be steered into the crowd. ‘Why does it have to be so complicated? What’s wrong with plain money for stuff, no tricks?’

‘It’s boring,’ Deri answered without thinking, ‘and what would most of us do with a bunch of dead metal anyway? It’s easy enough to get, in Faery. The last blush of innocence, though, that’s truly rare. That has lasting value.’ Deri bit his tongue before it spilled any more freebies.

‘I’d not thought of it that way,’ Owain said.

‘Most mortals don’t need to.’ Deri glanced around at the crowded market. ‘I suppose you can find your own way. Unless you’d like to hire a guide?’

‘I can find my own way.’ Owain smiled. ‘Thank you, though, for your help.’

Deri recoiled from the words. ‘Never thank a merchant,’ he said. ‘It implies they didn’t drive a hard enough bargain. And after all, you paid me for my advice.’

‘Right,’ Owain agreed. ‘A night on the town.’

‘Three nights,’ Deri corrected.


‘What?’

‘One for each piece of advice I gave you.’ Deri smiled.

‘But—’ Owain blinked. ‘That was the deal, wasn’t it?’

‘It was indeed, my new friend. It was indeed.’

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).



THE
POMEGRANATE
GATE

A R I E L K A P L A N

Content notice: *The Pomegranate Gate* contains depictions of antisemitism, assault, murder, and torture.

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NAFTALY WAS DREAMING again, in that strange dream-landscape where the stars whirled overhead like snow on the wind and the people he met all had square-pupiled eyes.

They were all strangers to him, the square-eyed people he dreamed of—all save one: his father. In Naftaly's dreams, his father's eyes were odd, too, though waking they were wholly ordinary. Naftaly did not know if his own dreaming face had the square-pupiled eyes as well, having never come upon a mirror in his dreams, but he assumed so. He wondered how that looked, if it made him seem strange, or handsome, or hideous. No one ever remarked on it. His eyes, awake, were the same dark brown as his father's, round-pupiled and not particularly interesting.

In this dream, he'd come across his father eating oranges while sitting on a bridge Naftaly did not recognize, spanning what he supposed was meant to be the Guadalraman. They sat on the wall together, watching a swath of people traveling from one side of the river to the other, across the bridge which was lit at intervals with lights that seemed to burn without flame. It was a busy night, Naftaly thought. Probably he was dreaming of the end of a market day, though the people had no goods. He thought his subconscious could have come up with more interesting details: bolts of cloth or jugs of oil, or perhaps some sweets.

Naftaly was a tailor, son of a tailor, son of the same, though the elder Cresqueses had been at least passably good at their trade. The latest son was somewhat lacking in his ability to perform basic tasks, such as sewing in a straight line. His father insisted he would improve.

It did not seem to matter much to the trajectory of his life that he had not done so.

Everything was very settled on that score. Naftaly would take over his father's business, and with a great deal of luck he would not run it into the ground. He would greet his neighbors every morning, all of whom knew him from early childhood as a man of limited utility, but who would bring him work, anyway, because that was what one did with one's neighbor's mostly useless son. It was already too late for him to find another trade and, truthfully, he wasn't sure he'd be any better at something else. He had few friends, because he was too acutely aware of how much he was tolerated for his father's sake, and because he did not know what to talk about with other men his age, nearly all of whom were married. He was not especially devout, nor was he keen on drinking and brothels. What he wanted, more than anything, was to be a help to his parents rather than a hindrance, but he'd failed rather spectacularly in that regard.

He would keep Shabbat and the festivals, and run his shop until he couldn't any longer, and like this he would grow old.

Very occasionally, he would think about some alternative path he might have chosen, if he'd insisted when his father had denied him the opportunity to train with someone else. He imagined himself a very good trader of oil, traveling all the way to the sea, with so much spare money that the neighbors would admire him and come to him for help—and he *would* help. In this other reality, Naftaly was the greatest philanthropist Rimmon had ever seen. Men would take his hand in thanks, and he would smile and say something like: "I'm so pleased to have been able to serve you."

He tried to quash such thoughts, but it was easy to daydream when sewing a hem in a poorly lit room. Perhaps this was why he was such a bad tailor. Better not to wonder about that.

On the bridge, Naftaly vaguely wondered where his father had gotten the oranges.

His father was slim, as was he, neither particularly tall nor particularly short; if either of them had a notable feature, it was their shared inability to grow much in the way of a beard. He offered one of the oranges to Naftaly, who took it with a nod of thanks. He did not say, *Thank you, Father*, because his father had told him long ago that one should never give up one's name in a dream.

"Not even to you?" he'd asked.

"Not to anyone," his father had said. "Never say your name, or mine, or even call me 'Father' out loud."

Naftaly didn't know if other people had these sorts of rules; if they nearly always dreamt of strangers who were never to learn their names. But occasionally when his friends or schoolmates mentioned their dreams, it seemed like theirs were different. They dreamt of pretty girls. Naftaly had never dreamt of a pretty girl.

He ate his dream-orange in silence. Finally, his father said, "They're in a state today."

"A state?" Naftaly asked. His father nodded toward the people rushing across the bridge. They did seem to be in a hurry.

"What's wrong?"

"Not sure," he said. "But something is happening, or is about to."

From the crowd on the bridge, he heard a whisper that rose up like a hiss: *La Cacería*.

"La Cacería?" Naftaly asked his father. He'd never dreamt of a hunt before; it made no sense for anyone to be hunting in the city, in any case. Did they think a buck was about to run across the bridge?

His father dropped his dream-orange and grasped him by both shoulders. "Wake up," he said. "Wake up now."

"What? How?"

The sound of hoofbeats came loud and fast, and two men rode in overland and blocked the far end of the bridge, bringing the crowd to a halt. Both tall: one dark, one with hair that looked dark at first glance

but shone red when the starlight hit it. Both were dressed in dark blue. “No one move,” the red man said.

Naftaly’s father grabbed hold of Naftaly’s ear and twisted it. “Wake up!” he ordered.

In his bed, Naftaly sat up with a start. He reached for his ear and found it still tender, then swung his legs over the side of the bed and made his way downstairs to find his father in the kitchen pouring a cup of wine with shaking hands.

“Father,” he said.

“Naftaly,” his father replied. The two never spoke of their shared dreams. Abrafim Cresques, in fact, denied them so often that Naftaly had for a long time thought they were merely an invention of his own imagination.

“Father,” he said. “Please.”

His father set down the wine, still half-full, saying, “Don’t sleep again tonight.”



IN TOBA'S GRANDFATHER'S bookcase, there was a map, rolled up, that stretched from Pengoia on one end all the way to P'ri Hadar on the other. When her grandfather's students were elsewhere, when she was done with her chores and no one was around to see, she liked to unroll it on the long study table and admire it. It had been inked by a master, with details so small you had to put your nose to it to see them all: imagined beasts at the far end of the sea; a cap of snow on Mount Sebah; impossibly tiny ships in the harbor at Merja.

That day, however, the students were there, arguing in hushed tones about the interpretation of one law or another, and how the Rambam said one thing and the Ramban another, yet Moses de León has said some third thing, but possibly (or probably) they were all three wrong. Toba wasn't particularly interested in this argument, which she thought

had to do with how hungry one had to be before it was permissible to eat locusts.

If you were hungry enough to be seriously considering it, Toba thought, you ought to just eat them. Fortunately, Toba had never been that hungry. She'd never seen a locust, but she'd heard them described and they sounded vile, with the creeping and the swarming and all those extraneous legs. Anyway, they weren't supposed to be arguing about this at all. They were meant to be translating some mathematical text from Arabic into Latin, but the dryness of the work seemed to be too much for them, and arguing about locusts was more amusing. "Point of clarity," one of the young men put in, "are the locusts crawling or jumping?"

They were in higher spirits than usual. Rimon had suffered for two years under a siege from the northern queen, before the Emir of Rimon had surrendered the city at the beginning of winter and gone into exile across the sea. The government had changed, and the city had held its collective breath, but so far, the only significant day-to-day difference was that they were no longer eating the dregs of months-old rationed wheat. The city had fallen back into its old rhythm. In the Muslim quarter, the call to prayer came its usual five times a day. In the Jewish quarter, the shops closed down on Friday evenings. Except now, in the Christian quarter, a bell had been installed in the church, which rang, Toba thought, rather more than was strictly necessary. Still, the inhabitants went about their usual business of life, keeping the occasional wary eye on the workings of the new order. The Muslims had been promised immunity, and the Jews, too. The wind blew from a new direction, but still, the sun rose and set, as it had always done.

While the young men neglected their work and Toba's grandfather snoozed in his northern-style armchair (*the greatest thing ever to come out of the north*, he often said), Toba holed up in a corner with the map spread out across his personal desk. Toba traced the outline of the continents with her eyes. So many cities. There were so many cities. Where would she go, if she were to go somewhere? It was a game her

grandmother had played with her since she was small. *Of course we are safe*, she would say. *But if you had to flee, where would you go?*

The north was full of barbarians, at least until you got to the lands of the Burgers. Then of course there was the issue that some king or other was expelling the Jews every few years, once they discovered that confiscating their property was a useful way to enrich the royal coffers. Petgal, in the west, had so far managed to avoid such behavior, but then you lived with the sea at your back, and that itself made Toba nervous. The south looked slightly more promising, but only just. East was surely better, with the ancient city of P’ri Hadar or the great port of Anab. Farther still were the silk road and the spice ports, where a traveling merchant might have a use for a wife who could write in five languages—even one without a womanly figure or much skill in housekeeping.

The door flew open, and the boys at the table jumped. Toba’s hand flew to her throat; sometimes, when she was surprised, she had the instinct to shout, though she never had. The man who’d burst in was Reuven haLevi, a friend of her grandfather’s.

Reuven cast his eyes around the room at the frightened faces of the young men, most of them too young even to have a beard, and Toba’s blinking grandfather, who was too weary even to stand up.

“What’s happened?” Toba’s grandfather asked in a sleepy rasp; the voice of a man who had seen many things happen, and was not about to get out of his chair for one more.

One of the boys vacated his spot at the low study table and Reuven collapsed in his place on the floor. “I can’t even say, every person in the street has heard a different rumor. Either we’re going to be fed to the lions or driven into the sea, I don’t know.”

“There aren’t any lions in Sefarad,” Toba pointed out from her corner.

“Well, it’ll be the sea, then,” the man said with a wan smile. “I was trying to get to the Nagid’s to learn the truth of the matter, but half the quarter is in the streets.”

The boys pushed up from the floor then, and out through the courtyard, opening the gate out onto the street, which was indeed full of people and a great deal of noise. Several of the people were weeping. All were making haste toward the house of the Nagid; a throng of people, men and women both. No children, though. Those must have been left at home, which meant that whatever was happening, it wasn't entirely safe in the streets.

Toba's grandfather said, "Toba, go find your grandmother before this grows any worse."

Elena was visiting a neighbor a few streets away; her penmanship was so fine she was often called up to write letters for people; even, sometimes, for the rabbi himself. "Go," he said.

Toba hastened through the door and out onto the street.

From the other direction came a woman wailing openly, her mouth agape as if it were locked that way, in a permanent howl.

Toba picked up her pace, wishing that she could move with some legitimate haste. It would be good, right now, to be able to do more than walk.

It was one of the peculiar things about Toba, and there were several: Toba could walk, but she could not run; she could talk, but she could not shout; and she could write faster—with either hand—than she could speak. If she moved at more than a brisk pace, she would find herself splayed on the ground; jumping, likewise, was impossible for her. And if she tried to raise her voice, it was as if a hand were constricting her throat, and it would be several long moments before she could breathe again. The writing was less of a trouble, though it had vexed her grandfather's students when she was younger, particularly when she'd flaunted her talent of writing with both hands at once, a gift her grandfather had warned her to conceal.

Odd things, all of these, and then one more: while Toba slept, she could not dream.

As a child, she'd been the object of torment. The other children had conspired to make her run—by stealing her toys and then fleeing—and

then laughed while she fell. Or they'd pulled her arms behind her back until she was forced to call for help, and laughed when she'd collapsed, breathless on the ground.

She hadn't much cared for other children.

Her grandfather had taken pity on her, and so, instead of playing with the neighbors, she'd spent most of her early days assisting him, sitting in with his students. At first, they'd been charmed by the tiny girl who learned as quickly as they did, but as she became a woman, they'd become less easy with her. Her grandfather had expected marriage proposals; for a scholar, a wife literate in five languages was a boon in free labor, but he hadn't considered that this was only for a *wealthy* scholar. For a poor one, well, he would need someone to manage a household, and Toba wasn't much good at that sort of thing. She was too quiet, too peculiar, too weak. Food often tasted poorly to her, and she ate little as a consequence. She'd been a sickly child, and now she'd become a sickly woman, more than ten years past marriageable age.

Still, she hurried as fast as her sickly legs would carry her; too fast, in fact, and she found herself sprawled on the ground. She instinctively curled in on herself, expecting to be trampled by hundreds of feet, but felt a pair of hands on her shoulders instead.

"Get up," said the voice associated with the hands. "You're going to be crushed."

Trembling, she got to her feet. A young man was in front of her blocking the path of the people who would have stepped on her; no easy feat, since he wasn't especially large himself. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She didn't recognize him, which wasn't a surprise; Toba rarely went out, and unless he trained with her grandfather Toba was unlikely to have seen him. "I'm fine," she said. "I'm going to get my grandmother," she added, though he hadn't asked that.

"Can you get there on your own?"

"I think so," she said. He nodded and was gone, and she started to cross the *plaza* to find her grandmother.

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THE PLAÇA WAS entirely filled with bodies, and most of them were dead.

That was Naftaly's first impression. He reeled and nearly fell, then he blinked the image away. They were not bodies. They were people, living people, swarming the square, all talking at once. He knew why; he'd already heard the bitter choice that had been laid at the feet of his kinfolk . . . stay and convert, or leave. And not just leave, but leave everything.

People were weeping, and not only the women. Men sobbed openly. Those, he knew, would be the ones who were planning their own exiles. Those who had already decided to stay could not be so bold as to weep in public.

As he crossed the square, the people persisted in morphing into bodies in his eyes. "Not now," he whispered. "Not now." But Naftaly Cresques was a bit touched, and always had been. He saw things, generally *unpleasant* things, and it was not simply a matter of willing the visions away, he had to wait for them to pass. Right now, they did not seem to feel like passing. The fact that he hadn't slept well the night before was probably not helping.

He felt himself collide with someone, and that seemed to be enough to quiet his mind, and his vision snapped back to reality. A girl. He'd bumped into a girl, who responded by smacking face-first into the ground.

He hadn't bumped her hard, but she was so slightly built a child could have knocked her over. As he bent to help her get up he realized

it was Toba Peres, with her uncovered hair braided like a crown around her head. He didn't know her, not really, but he did know her history—dead mother, absent father, raised by her grandfather, who had once served the Emir of Rimón and had a small fortune until he lost it, though *how* he'd lost it was the subject of a great deal of speculation. The pendant that she wore around her neck had come askew, and she straightened it before moving on. It was a hamsa, a palm, with the largest sapphire Naftaly had ever laid eyes on set in the center. It didn't square with the tales of Alasar Peres's lost fortune, that pendant, unless he'd spent everything on a gem for his housebound granddaughter.

Then again, maybe it was just a piece of blue glass. In either case, the granddaughter in question got to her feet, Naftaly made sure she was well, and she spared him the quickest of glances before ricocheting off in a different direction. He wondered where she was going, since the Pereses lived on the other side of the quarter. But he had to get home himself, so he shoved his way through the crowd, grateful the people around him were living this time, and made his way back to his house, above his family's tiny shop on the other side of the plaza. When he got there, he found the door barred.

He banged on it for a few minutes before the housekeeper answered. She was pale and trembling.

"You've heard," he said, and she nodded. She was probably hoping the Cresqueses would choose conversion, because she'd worked for the family twenty years and would lose her post otherwise. But Naftaly knew his father, and it was an unlikely choice. The Cresqueses didn't have much in the way of property to worry about losing if they left, and Naftaly's father was devout besides. His mother, oftentimes the dissenting voice in the house, had died last year, and Abrafim Cresques had lost much use for the outside world afterward, reducing his spheres to work, prayer, and mounting frustration at his son's ineptness with a needle and thread.

Naftaly's father was upstairs in his small bedroom, and he called Naftaly in. "I need to tell you something important."

He looked very tired, probably because he hadn't slept, either.

Naftaly hoped it might be something about the dream-world, but when he entered the room he saw that his father was holding a book. It was small, thick, and obviously old—whatever title might have been on the cover had long ago worn away. The entire volume was encircled by a tape which seemed to be holding it closed. “What is that?” he asked.

“Only a book,” his father said, handing it over. Naftaly took it from him; the cover was ancient-looking and the pages within were yellowed indeed.

“Why is it sealed?” Naftaly asked, fingering the tape.

“Don't open it,” his father snapped.

Naftaly looked up at his father's pale face. “Why?”

“No one must ever read it,” he said, taking the book back. “It's sealed to prevent someone reading it accidentally.”

Naftaly was not sure how someone could accidentally read a book, but his father continued: “It's a curse. An ancient curse, my father told me, and his father before him. I'm showing it to you because you must know that no matter what happens, we must not lose this book.” With his heel, he pressed on one of the floorboards, lifting the other side. He then tucked the book underneath.

“A curse? Why do *we* have it? Why not destroy it?” Naftaly asked, because such an object didn't seem like it should belong to a tailor.

“It's been passed down,” he said. “No one can remember where it came from, but it's been ours for ten generations at least, and we're charged to keep it safe and hidden. It isn't possible to destroy it.”

“Have you tried?”

“Stop asking questions.”

“Is it—” Naftaly began, and then stopped. He tried again: “Does it have to do with the dream-world?”

Turning to go downstairs, Naftaly's father said, “There is no dream-world.”



THAT NIGHT, NAFTALY dreamt of the bridge again, only this time there were no people at all, not even his father. He walked to the opposite end, and found himself in the terraced city where he usually dreamed, still wondering where everyone was; he'd never before dreamt of a world where he was the sole inhabitant. Toward the outskirts, he found himself walking through streets lined with small houses.

Hoofbeats. He heard hoofbeats again, coming from farther within the city. He looked for an alley to step into, and found none, and then a door opened just ahead of him and a tall man, black-haired and wearing a brocade coat, stepped out and hissed at him, "Get inside," and, when Naftaly failed to move, the man stepped out farther, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him in.

"What can you be thinking?" he asked, slamming the door shut. "To be outside now?"

"I'm looking for—someone," Naftaly said, managing to stop himself before mentioning his father.

"Pray he's inside, somewhere," the other man said.

"What is happening?" Naftaly asked. This was, he thought, the first time he'd managed to speak to one of these dream-people. His father was nearly always with him, and had counselled him to avoid the other people in his dreams at all costs. He'd certainly never been alone with one before.

He bore a passing resemblance to the man he'd seen on the bridge: the man in blue, with deep red hair. But this man's hair was black, he was lankier, the bones in his face sharper. Besides that, his eyes were doubly strange; not only square, but with irises the color of sunset. He couldn't recall ever having seen such eyes before, even here. The orange-eyed man replied, "La Cacería has sniffed someone out; I don't know who."

Naftaly wanted to ask the meaning of any part of that statement and did not dare, lest he expose himself as some sort of outsider. This man assumed Naftaly understood the nature of this dream place and what happened here, and he was not sure what would happen if he revealed his ignorance. It occurred to Naftaly that this might well be a real person, who in a few hours would wake, just as Naftaly would, and go about his normal day.

Outside, the horses raced past. The other man still had Naftaly pinned between himself and the door. Naftaly closed his eyes until the hoofbeats receded, then opened them to find the other man, still too close, regarding him calmly. He said, “How is it I don’t know you?”

Naftaly said, honestly, “I don’t know.”

The other man looked like he would have said more, but then muttered, “Damnation,” and vanished, leaving Naftaly alone in the house, too afraid to go back out, until dawn came and he woke, and discovered that Abrafim Cresques had died in his sleep.



TOBA'S GRANDPARENTS SEEMED unable to come to an agreement about what to do next.

Alasar Peres had been a translator in the court of the Emir Muhammed VI—father of the emir who had surrendered Rimón to the north—until arthritis had claimed his hands. Now he taught languages in his home to students hoping to make their way to the university. Toba’s grandmother said he’d spent too much time among scholars and it had turned his brain to mush. He was, she said, too optimistic for his own good.

“We’re staying,” Alasar said one evening. It was late, and he and Elena were sitting at the table lit with a pair of oil lamps; ostensibly, he was reading and she was mending a stocking, but in reality both of

them were mostly staring into empty space. “We’ll convert, in public,” he went on. “What we do at home is our business.”

“Are you mad? We can’t risk that!” Elena said. “If they come for Toba—”

Toba, who had been translating a bit of Ovid from Latin into Arabic to settle her nerves, looked up at the mention of her name. Alasar gave his wife a quelling look.

“Nobody’s coming for Toba,” he said. “Be quiet.”

“We’re leaving,” she said. “Toba and I. You can stay here by yourself if you want. But we are going.”

“You can’t leave on your own,” he said.

“Try to stop me.”

Alasar’s hoary eyebrows roused themselves, but he made no answer, and Elena sighed. “Alasar, please. How many times do you need to be proved wrong?”

He rubbed at his eyes. “They aren’t letting people take money out of the country.”

Toba leaned forward. She hadn’t heard this part. Elena said, “What?”

“It’s in the edict. No money. No gold. No jewels.”

“The crown is seizing it?” Elena asked.

“Yes! Do you understand? If we go, we lose everything we have left.”

“Yes,” Elena said. “But we live.”

“We can live—”

“Here,” she finished for him. “I know what you’re thinking, you old fool. We’ll live here, until someone decides they want what little you have and starts tapping on the shoulder of the Inquisition. You’ll be up in smoke in a week.”

“What do you think will happen to us if we leave? I’m an old man. You expect me to build a life from nothing? Here, we have a home. I have a reputation, and I can teach anyone who would learn from me.”

“We can go to my brother’s,” she said. “In Pengoa. He’ll take us in. He has space.”

“I have no interest in spending my waning years as your brother’s dependent,” he said.

“Alasar,” she murmured. “If they take Toba . . .” and then she moved to whispers. Alasar’s head bent to listen, his eyes closed. After some time, Elena stopped talking, and they just sat, staring at the table. Finally, Alasar said, “Very well.”

Toba waited for more of this conversation to unfold, or to be included in it, somehow. When neither occurred, she slipped out of the room and into the courtyard, carefully stepping over the cracked stones in the center that had broken apart in some earthquake long before Toba’s memory. She picked an orange from the tree nearest the gate and weighed it in her hands, looking up to the sky, where the moon was full and seemed very, very close.

She leaned against the gate and looked out at the rows of houses up and down the street, most of which were still burning lamps themselves. Likely every family in the quarter was having some version of the conversation she’d just overheard, though she wondered about her grandmother’s special concern for herself. It seemed odd to her that anyone should think that Toba was in more danger than her grandparents. Toba had no money to steal. She had no friends to inform on her, and she seldom went out enough to attract the attention of . . . well, of anyone, to be honest. She was, she thought, as safe from public scrutiny as possible. Except for her grandfather’s students, few people knew much about her at all, and she thought it unlikely that those young would-be scholars could make their way into the pockets of the Inquisition.

So why was her grandmother so worried about her, particularly?

Likely she was just being overprotective. Elena seemed to run that way naturally, probably as the result of losing her only daughter in childbirth. And it had been such a strange death, people used to tell Toba, before Elena could chase them away. Penina had been strong, sturdy, and rarely ill; the last person on earth anyone would suspect

could die bearing a child. If it could happen to her, said the neighbors, it could certainly happen to anyone—but Toba, for certain, should never marry, because if Penina had died in her childbed, little, sickly Toba had no chance at all. Clearly, they said, she must take after her father. The slime. Whomever he was.

Toba's parents had been married in Meleqa. He'd been a merchant, and after Penina had died he'd left Toba in the care of her grandparents and gone back to Anab.

It was no wonder Toba had developed a terror of childbirth, and in her heart, she hoped her grandparents would live forever, and she'd never be forced to marry at all. She could stay at her grandfather's side, translating Ovid and Ibn Sina, forever and ever.

To the south, a light streaked the sky.

Toba squinted to get a better view . . . it must be a falling star, she thought, except in Toba's experience falling stars did not travel that way. She'd seen one or two sitting outside with her grandfather on warm nights, trying to cool off before bed. Their trails were usually horizontal, or diagonal. This shooting trail was exactly perpendicular to the horizon. And it had appeared to be traveling upward from the ground.

Shooting stars, Toba thought, did not go up.

She decided to get her grandfather and show him, but before she could, the trail had faded as if it had never existed.

Toba put a piece of orange in her mouth, only then realizing when her mouth filled with bitterness that it was still completely green.

+ + + + +

APRIL WAS COMING to a close, and Naftaly was wandering the streets alone, at night.

This was not a habit of his generally, but ever since the edict and his father's death Naftaly's visions had grown worse both in frequency and intensity, and he found that if he kept moving he seemed more able to

shake them off. It was the grief, he told himself, though he struggled to call it that. He did not feel sadness so much as numbness. He missed his father, he'd loved his father. But his father had always held him in an infuriating spot that somehow managed to be both suffocatingly close and at arm's length. *Keep to the house*, had been his father's refrain, *take over the family business—because I don't believe you can succeed in anything else—but never ask about your dreams or visions or what any of it means.*

His visions were at their worst when he was alone and indoors; at least outside there was the chance that something might jar him out of them. So far, he thought he'd kept his neighbors from realizing how badly he was afflicted. The last thing Naftaly wanted was for someone to call a physician, who would probably sedate him with poppies, or the rabbi who might call him possessed. He was fine, the great majority of the time. He was not mad. He just occasionally . . . saw things. Things that weren't, in the most technical sense, real.

Naftaly supposed that probably many people saw things that weren't real, and had elected never to bring it up, which is what Naftaly's father had instructed him to do back when he'd mentioned it as a boy.

It had been a vision of ships, the countryside turned to seawater so real he could smell it. He'd been on board some large sailing vessel, and the rolling of the waves had rendered him nauseated and retching. When he'd come out of it, after perhaps thirty seconds, he'd told his father.

"Runs in the family," he'd replied over the top of a pair of trousers he'd been stitching. "Don't tell anyone."

This seemed to be his father's answer to most of Naftaly's difficulties.

The worst problem with these visions was that whenever Naftaly saw something odd, he had trouble telling whether it was real or a figment of his mind. So when he was wandering the quarter under the full moon and saw what appeared to be a falling star shoot up from the ground somewhere outside the city, his first thought was, *I hope this doesn't grow worse.*

He waited for it to morph into a monster that ate the moon, or to see a phantom city in the mountains, which he now saw fairly regularly. But when nothing more appeared after a few seconds, he began to wonder if it was real after all, some strange phenomenon of the night sky. He wished, not for the first time, that he'd been afforded the opportunity to study, to make his way to the university instead of preparing to take over his father's tailoring business. Perhaps then he would have known what that light shooting up from the ground might be.

But that was not to be. The afterimage of the star faded, and Naftaly decided to return home, only to find himself plagued by the worst headache of his life, a pain that started behind his left eye and radiated outward, as if there were something embedded there trying to escape.

Naftaly lurched sideways, a hand over the offending eye, and vomited, and then passed out in the street.

He woke the next morning, victim to the end of a woman's broom. "Wake up," she said. "Drunk thing, spending the night in my doorway. Go home."

He sat up. The pain was gone, but he felt weak, as if he'd been sick. "I'm not drunk," he said. "I'm ill."

"Be ill at home," she said, prodding him again with the broom.

"I'm going," he said, getting up. "You can put your weapon away."

"I'll show you a weapon," she said, and hit him soundly over the head, leaving him with a mouthful of bristles.

When he arrived home, sometime later, he found the door bashed in.

For more information on this title, please visit the book page on PenguinRandomHouse.com [here](#).

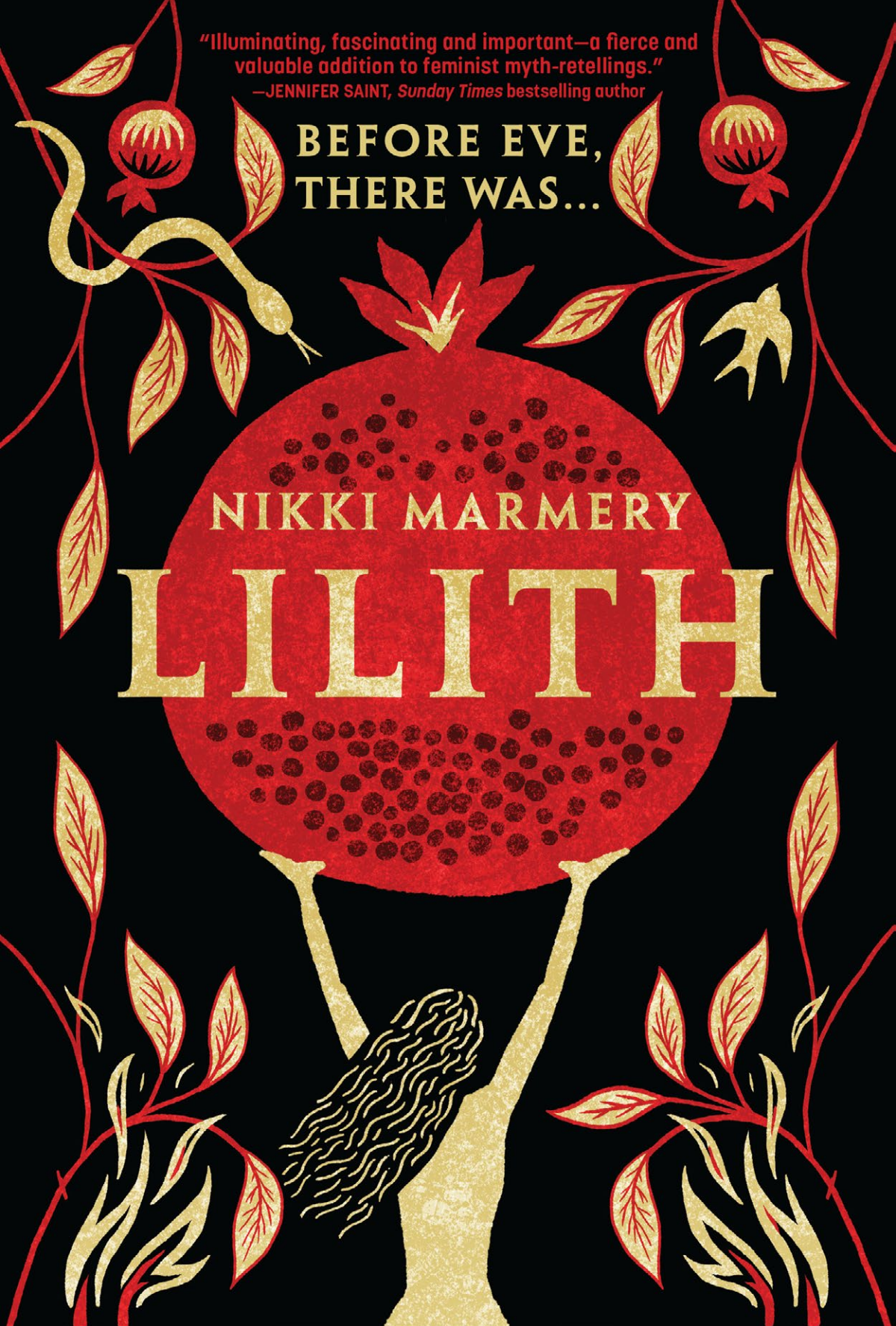
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BEFORE EVE,
THERE WAS...

NIKKI MARMERY

LILITH



This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real or actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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In the Beginning

At first, I loved him. How beautiful he was in those days. There he stood: legs planted wide in the rich soil of our Paradise. Hands on hips, his muscled arms firm and knotted as a young fig tree. His hair fell shining, raven-feathered, to his shoulders. His dark eyes beckoned.

The musty, coupling scent of him unmoored me. He made me giddy.

And I, him, I suppose.

At first.

When did it start? It seemed to come out of the blue. But now I see the signs I brushed away, as ripples on the surface of a pool, sending them far from me, as if that would be the end of it. The fool I was! How could I not know they would come surging back, a hundredfold!

He started to have *ideas*.

He watched me watering the grainfields with the rain I had stored that was plentiful and sufficient.

“If we dig here,” he said, “we can channel groundwater. We needn’t wait for the rain. We will direct the water toward the wheatfield and master it. I shall call it *irrigation* and it will be good.

“As for your hoeing,” he said, as I broke the ground one day, “it is too slow. We shall hitch a curved and sharpened stick to an ox to bear the burden. I shall call it a *plough*.” He nodded sagely. “And it will be good.

“We shall tally our labor,” he observed, as I weeded the Garden. “When there are more of us—I have a feeling there will be more of us!” He winked. “We shall exchange our work, surplus food and so forth with a worthy item as a symbol of its value. I shall call it *money*—”

“And it will be good?”

“Don’t interrupt, Lilith. I’m talking.”

He paced the meadow, fretting. “We will need records of the money. We shall make marks in wet clay, and those marks shall have meaning. When the clay is fired, the meaning will be set forever, as if in stone.”

“Like this?”

I showed him the marks I had carved on the rib bone of a goat. A calendar for marking the coming and going of the moon, the wax and wane of my own blood that tracked it.

“No, not like that. Not like that at all.” He frowned. “I shall call *my* marks *writing*.”

He was dissatisfied with the bounty we had. He must have more of it. So, he experimented, crossing the various trees in our Garden to create a new fruit. After he noticed how the creatures in our care multiplied, it was the same with the animals.

“We shall build fences,” he mused. “I shall separate the rams from the ewes, and the boars from the sows. I shall permit the ram to know the ewe, and the boar to know the sow, when I wish them to breed. This way I shall bring forth more rams and ewes and boars and sows as we require them.”

They were fine plans. I admired his ambition.

Only that it changed us. Subsistence was no longer enough. Always, he wanted *more*. Always he wanted to *control*.

With the marks on his tablets, he became the Law.

“See here.” He pointed to his mystifying wedge-shapes and arrows. “This is how it must be.”

I could not argue with that, for he had not revealed the meaning of his marks. To me, they were as a sparrow’s feet crisscrossing the clay in search of a worm.

He became the owner of these innovations: at once in charge of them, and benefitting from them most. As he tallied our labor and assigned it a value for his *money*, he judged his work as higher in merit and necessity than mine.

A strategic director, you might call him in these modern days. It suited him. The knowing arch of his brow. The forthright crossing of his strong arms. The way he nodded when he dispensed his edicts and orders. He was good at it.



His final plan was the clincher. The deal-breaker. The world-changer.

“When there are more of us,” he started one day—it had become his obsession, *more of us*, though I wasn’t sure where he thought they’d come from— “we will need to protect ourselves from the Others.”

He produced two small hard rocks: one reddish-brown, one gray, salvaged from the riverbed. “We shall melt these metals. When they combine, they make a harder, stronger substance, which we will use to make swords and knives, axes and so forth.”

“What will you call this new material?” I asked, to amuse myself.

“Bronze,” he said, unsmiling. “Naturally, I shall wield these weapons, for I am bigger and stronger than you, and I would protect you from harm.”

“Naturally.”

It made sense—at first. Whatever made him happy.

I had no need for weapons. Let him have his sword and his plough, his writing-tablets and money. I didn’t look to the future. I lived happily in the here and now, rooted in the cycle of our daily lives. I tended my roses, I cared for the animals, I gathered the grain. I made clay pots to store our food. I made music to mark the rhythm of our lives. I beat a tambour to welcome the new moon. I danced for my own delight.

One day, I had been assured, I would be the mother of all mankind. All in good time.

I was in no rush. I had my own purpose: the Secret, entrusted to me alone. Its gift was finer than rubies; better than gold. I cherished and nurtured it in my belly, for it was mine, the gift of our Holy Mother solely for me, the First Woman.

Nor did I mind his mania for progress, for I loved him. And after the smelting and the forging, the harvest and the grinding, the

winnowing and the milling, the baking and the cooling, the music and the dancing, we would meet under the Tree—the one from which we Must Not Eat—and we would roll upon the moss and laugh and kiss, and by all that is sacred and holy, he would plough me like a field of barley, and it was *very* good.

I Am Your Lord!

The day it changed was like this:

We were beside the pool. The sun burned dazzling bright. The waterfall churned, sending forth little waves, crests shimmering gold like nectar. We lay on a sun-warmed rock and breathed in the drowsy scent of myrtle.

What glory there was in our Garden. All that was pleasant to the eye and good for food. Hard rosy apples and blood-red oranges. Lemons as fat as quails that dropped from the branch if you so much as looked at them. Walnuts and pears, over-ripe figs, almonds, and olives. Jewel-seeded pomegranates and sharp-tasting quinces. Everything always in season, no tree ever bare. The sweet heady scent of blossom at all times, even as there was fruit.

Now I come to think of it, it never grew. The fruit was merely there, ever ripe for plucking.

I did not know that was not usual. How could I?

Beyond the orchards lay the grainfields: the golden barley and swaying wheat. Adam's irrigation, his basins and levées, taps and dams, ran through them, bringing life-giving water from the four rivers that bounded our Paradise. The chest-high stalks bowed low with the wind. Always full-grown. Eternally ready for harvest. Since the first planting we had not sown new seed.

Looking out over the fields stood our sturdy cabin, crafted from the trunks and boughs of tall cedars and graceful pines, roofed with date-palm thatch. Beside it, my rose garden. The sweet scent welcomed me every morning and sent me joyful to sleep at night.

The animals came to drink from the pool. We had many rams and ewes, boars and sows by then, thanks to Adam's breeding regime.

Sturdy bulls and sweet-eyed cows. Bearded goats. Plump-breasted ducks, feathered fowl of all kinds. We looked at them, and they were good.

The heat was thick in the air like honey. The lilies danced on the breeze. The sun beat upon the glittering water and reflected into the sapphire sky.

Adam turned to me, his lips wet with lust. He put my hand to his thickening part and it reared with life and vigor. I climbed onto him, my fingers rooted in the black-curls of his chest.

“No.” He squeezed my wrists. “Lie under me.”

“I don’t want to.” I lowered my hips, enfolded him deep within the core of me, to prove my point. I proved it well enough.

He groaned with pleasure, then pushed at me again.

“I said, *lie under me!*”

“No! You lie under me!”

I thought he was joking. And truly, I was very content where I was, filled with the joy of him. But his eyes weren’t smiling.

“I am your lord and you shall lie under me!”

“You are my *what?*” I laughed and felt him shrivel like a prune.

Oh, he was angry then. “I am your master!”

I rolled beside him and shut one eye against the blinding sun. Lord and master indeed!

“We were made together, you and I, and I am your equal.” I caressed his broad chest and kissed his plum-red lips. He softened. “And while I’m at it,” I laid my head in the hollow of his shoulder, “I’ve had it with your edicts and orders, your zeal for improvement. Let us return to how things were before. Let us live and work together in harmony once more.”

He squeezed my hand and my spirit soared.

“Shall we not have more time for leisure? Must we toil all day under the hot sun, for more bounty than we need? What call have we for surpluses to trade, money to exchange? Let us rest and enjoy what we have been given, for we are blessed indeed.”

He smiled and my heart leapt with love for him.

“As for your weapon—” I eyed his great bronze sword laid beside us. “Is it really necessary? I am the only one here. The animals are tame and do our bidding. Why do you carry it?”

Well, he did not like that. The tenderness drained from him like blood from a sacrificed lamb. He slammed a balled fist into the rock.

“Do not question me!” he roared. “It is my strength, my right hand. I carry it to protect you because you are mine! I wield it to remind you of your weakness!”

I froze to hear these words. Why did he think I was *his*? Why did he want me to feel *weak*?

As it turned out, the sword he claimed was for my protection was no defense against that which hurt me most. His body that I loved so much, he used against me. His oak-strong arms held me down and his tender hands crushed my wrists. He forced me beneath him and pinned me with his legs, a knee bruising the inner flesh of my thigh, his foot pinioning my ankle. The hard boulder bit from below and he pummeled me from above and within. He smothered my mouth to stop me cursing and looked over my head as if I were not there. Where once we had pleased each other, now I was but a vessel for his desire. With violence he had his joy of my body and there was no joy for me in him.

Was it worth it, Adam? You took by force what you had always had by love. It cannot have been sweeter.

His Name

Perhaps you have been told I was banished because in my anger I cursed and said His name.

But that is not what happened.

In truth, He is a jealous god. He was angry because it was not Him I named at all. In my fury and despair, I called to Her. To the Holy Mother who loved us, who nursed us, who should have protected me.

“Asherah!” I cried, when Adam had slunk away among the barley-stalks, shame-faced at least, the tip of his ridiculous sword trailing behind him. I wiped his dew from my bruised thigh with a bulrush.

“Mighty Asherah, Giver of Life and Queen of Heaven, why have you forsaken me?”

There was no answer. She had been quiet a long time by then. I had seen Her only once in recent weeks, when She came to the Garden to bequeath to me the Secret.

I washed Adam’s stain from me in the pool. I stayed a long while under the waterfall. Its rumble filled my ears, its icy embrace numbed my senses. All around me, water tumbled and churned.

I dived below the surface where there was stillness and peace. I scrubbed the blood from my limbs with silt from the very depths. I scoured my insides clean of his seed.

When I was out and warmed again by the sun, I crushed the leaves of soothing aloe and healing comfrey and bathed my bruises in the sap. I sat on the rock and cradled myself. The myrtle drooped in sorrow. A bearded dove, perched on a carob tree, wept. Fat drops fell from his beady eyes, his head tilted in sympathy.

In the distance, thunder rumbled. A cloud rolled in, low and black. The dove took wing and soared. Here He comes. I steeled myself.

He boomed my name. “Lilith!”

It was as if the mountains cracked and spoke. It echoed in the plains and valleys, blasted from every crevice and cave. The leaves whispered it as they rustled in the wind. The bulrushes wailed it, bowing low to the tempestuous pool. The waterfall thundered it, *Lilith! Lilith!* as it cascaded down the rockface. The river babbled it, splashing around boulders, rushing onward to the sea.

The sound came from all around, at once inside and outside of my head. The word throbbed and pulsed through my veins. My temples bulged.

LILITH!



I misled you. I did say His name, too.

It is forbidden, but words do not scare me, for I have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, which grants mortals the Wisdom of gods, and I am Wise.

And I know the Secret.

I know that like a ram, a bull or a boar, He cannot create life alone. He did not birth us.

Asherah did.

But since She has been silent, (where did She go? Why did I not notice when She went?) He tells us that naming is Creation.

He names and it is so. He breathes and gives it life. It's why Adam loves to name things too. Naming is to man what birthing is to woman.

They can name things all they like, it does not change the truth.

Life comes from a Mother.

He cannot fool *me* as He has deceived Adam!

What can He do to me now? He is not *my* god, no Father of mine. He did not protect me! He did not avenge my violator! He

thinks to punish *me* for Adam's sin! I will say His name whenever I please.

“Yahweh, Yahweh, YAHWEH!”

I screamed it from the mountaintops, I hurled it against the cliff so it rebounded one hundred times in number, but not a gnat's wing more in strength.

The Red Sea

I fled south to the ocean. Asherah was Lady of the Sea. Perhaps I'd find her there.

He sent three angels after me. Those who always delivered His pronouncements. Tearing down on beating wing, tripping over their clumsy feet in their glee to report the Shalts and Shalt Nots.

The angels found me on the shore, toes in the cooling surf.

"What have you done?" asked Senoy, wrapping his gray wings around his shoulders like a cloak.

"What any woman would."

"Return to Adam," barked ugly-browed Sansenoy.

I burrowed my feet deeper into the sand.

"It will be death to refuse," said Semangelof.

"What is death?"

"You stupid woman!"

Semangelof was by far the scariest of the three, with frown lines like cracks in granite marking his huge, bulging forehead. His thin hair bristled like an angry cat. "Death is when life's joys end. Your body will go to its grave and your soul will descend to the dark pits of Sheol, the Underworld. Never will your eye see happiness again!"

I mulled it over. "So be it."

They turned and whispered among themselves. Senoy pointed upward and grimaced. Sansenoy shivered, his feathers rustling in the wind. Semangelof bared his teeth at me like a wolf.

I laughed. They left.

The sand tickled my feet. Crabs pinched my ankles. The surf rushed back to the sea, streaming between my toes.

Above me, soared a kite. Fast and sleek, unstoppable. How easily the angels had found me. How quickly they covered that rough terrain. It had taken me weeks to reach the shore, crossing parched deserts and climbing scrabbly peaks. I had forded watery marshes, scrambled along the rock-beds of dried-up streams, grazing my knees, cutting my elbows, ever searching for the sea.

As I remembered the angels swooping down on me in their ease and audacity, there came the strangest sensation. A glowing, a budding, a humming in my back. A searing, stabbing pain, rippling outward, then folding into itself, intensifying into two distinct points, low on each shoulder blade. From each wound, something sprouted, tearing through my flesh like spears. Blood dripped heavily onto the sand. Spiny quills lengthened into silken, ivory feathers.

I plucked one and brushed it against my lips. Soft as down. Pure as a dove. The faint scent of duck eggs.

As they unfurled into their full majesty, I bowed to balance the weight. I put out my hands to break my fall, but I never reached the ground. I hovered, my glorious wings bearing me up. I cricked my neck, I arched an arm. I lurched, I staggered, I bounced. It was not elegant. But oh, soon it came to me, and I soared.

Such speed, such thrilling release! I had not found Asherah, but surely, I had won Her blessing here beside the sea. I felt full to bursting with tremendous power.

Through rushing clouds I flew. The rain yet to fall misted on my cheek. Fury and sorrow fell from me like crumbs.

High in the noontime sky I looked back upon the earth. Whales breached in the ocean, dolphins spiraled at play. Hippos hunched in shining rivers like rocks. Crocodiles basked on lotus-flowering banks. Camels loped across the desert. Horses galloped the arid plains. In the savannah, a lioness dragged a mangled gazelle to her waiting cubs.

Snow dusted the peaks of purple mountains. Wind ruffled vast forests of oak and cedar and pine. In the meadows, I saw each sharp-edged blade of grass, each tiny-petalled flower, each ant in well-kept line.

Nestled between four sparkling rivers I saw the Garden of Eden, its orchards and farmed fields. In the midst of it, both trees, the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life, separate from all others, within two airy glades. The waterfall thundered into the glistening pool. A shaggy ram drank deeply from the bank.

I saw our cabin and my beloved rose garden.

There was Adam, the wicked man. He sat upon the deck of our dwelling cradling his head in his hands. His curls hung down at his shoulders, exposing the nape of his once-loved neck. Ripe for the blow of a sharp, bronze blade.

I cursed him for all the days of his life. He would be lonely now.

And I? This was my punishment? Freedom!

Bone of My Bones, Flesh of My Flesh

I circled the mountain-tops, delighting in my wings. I swooped and soared, I plummeted and plunged. Such delicious speed. I rode the currents, the warm air rushing from the south, the westerly wind that swept me toward the rising sun.

I saw things you would not believe.

Lands so green they put our Garden to shame. Prairies of swaying grass as far the eye can see. Frozen northlands, the very sea turned to tumbling ice. In the east: vast mountains so high my breath failed me. To the south: dense, boiling jungles that steamed when it rained.

I saw fish shaped like stars. Parrots that talked. Animals that jumped on hind legs, carrying their young in pouches at their belly.

I saw the earth is round. That the sun does not set nor rise. Instead, we on this giant globe rotate around it, spinning as we go, the moon in turn circling us.

I saw that we were not alone.

There were Others—everywhere. Skins darker, lighter, hair of every hue—fair like a lioness, black as ripe olives, red like amber. They were young and old, tall and short. Mothers cradled babies as helpless as newborn lambs. My stomach lurched. Once, that was my destiny. Would motherhood now be denied me? I saw old people, hunched and gray, children who stumbled and crawled. Men in their strong-armed prime like Adam. Women full and ripe like me. They were everywhere, on every continent, sailing every river, crossing every sea.

So He had lied: we were not the first. We were not the only.

The people went about their business. They harvested crops I did not know, in landscapes wild and alien to my eyes. They lived in stilted houses above marsh that was neither land nor sea; they dwelt in

huts of ice. They covered their bodies with garments fashioned from animal skins, grasses too, from cloth woven and dyed in many colors.

They did things differently.

They did not worship Yahweh. All manner of gods and goddesses they praised in temples and shrines, in forests and plains, on mountaintops and in caves. They burned sweet-smelling herbs to honor their deities, made images of gods with heads of jackals, with bodies of bears, gods that looked like eagles, fish, and frogs. They wore masks and headdresses, antlers and hooves. They danced and drummed and sang. They made offerings of wine and blood.

But nowhere among this multitude of people and their gods did I see Asherah.



In the Garden, Adam continued as before, believing himself the First. He carried on, obliged now to do all the work himself. He harvested the wheat. He winnowed—badly, mixing the husked and unhusked grains. Such a look on his face like thunder. He carried his bronze sword everywhere to fight his imaginary enemies, those Others I'd now seen myself, who hadn't the least knowledge or interest in his existence. How I laughed to see him earth-bound and at toil when I was so blessed.

One day, I came lower than usual, alighting on an ancient olive tree. I folded my wings and preened the feathers. They tasted delicious: of sweet nectar and freedom.

A footstep roused me. Someone stepped out of the cabin.

Another woman.

Where did she come from?

She walked, pale and clumsy, carrying an empty wooden pail listlessly at her hip. Her eyes were cast upon the ground. Her hair was the color of rain running with mud: it didn't fall in dark and lustrous coils to the small of her back like mine. She was wan and looked like she might melt. I did not think much of her.

Adam followed. "Eve!" he called from the steps of the cabin.

She turned, unsmiling.

“That’s your name,” he said. “I have named you Eve.”

She nodded.

“Eve,” he said again. He could not get enough of saying her name. “You are a woman. I named you Woman since you were from Man—me!” he grinned—“extracted.”

She dipped her eyes.

“Today you must mill the flour. I will show you. I’ll show you everything. Bone of my bones. Flesh of my flesh.” She stared at him blankly. “You are my helpmeet.” He winked.

Bone of my bones?

Flesh of my flesh?

Helpmeet?

Is he *demented*?

How can woman be made of man? Man is of woman born! He knows this, for he has seen the animals birthed. Is *he* now her *mother*?

She inclined her head and went to fetch water.

Eve, you insipid fool!

She was lucky she had me to rescue her.



I found her at the pool.

She was sitting on a felled log gazing into the limpid waters. Perhaps she was looking for her reflection. If so, she was disappointed. So unremarkable was she, even the waters failed to mark her presence.

“Eve.” I touched her shoulder.

She turned slowly. Every gesture she made was effortful, as if she moved underwater. She said nothing. I seemed not remotely surprising to her.

“Eve,” I said again. “I have something important to tell you. Leave this place. Come with me.”

She touched my wing. “Who are you?”

“Lilith,” I said. As an afterthought: “An angel.”

Whyever not? I, who was hereafter proclaimed a demon.

“Can women be angels?” She stroked my feathers with the back of her hand.

In answer, I unfurled the full glory of my wings and she fell backward off the log.

“Most assuredly.” I helped her up.

“I cannot leave. I was made for him. I am his helpmeet.”

That word again. By the power of Creation, it sparked my fury!

“No!” I shook her drooping shoulder. “You were not made for him! You were made for yourself!” She shrank and cowered on the ground.

“Eve!” Adam called, from the cabin beyond the olive grove. “Where is that water?”

“Don’t go!” I urged. “There is something you must hear. He’s lying to you.”

But she ran, as fast as her sorry legs would carry her.

I soared west. Into the desert, where jackals roamed and owls screeched. Night fell around me. Under a solitary date palm, I brooded.

She was right. I saw it then. She *was* made for him. *Created*—somehow. *Stolen* from the outside world?—because *I* refused him. The blame for her wretched state lay heavy on my shoulders. I would have to find another way to bring her to Wisdom.

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TO THE ENDS OF THE
BIGGEST STORY
EVER TOLD

ALL OF THE MARVELS

"BRILLIANT,
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—JUNOT DÍAZ,
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DOUGLAS WOLK

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1

THE MOUNTAIN OF MARVELS

The twenty-seven thousand or so superhero comic books that Marvel Comics has published since 1961 are the longest continuous, self-contained work of fiction ever created: over half a million pages to date, and growing. Thousands of writers and artists have contributed to it. Every week, about twenty slim pamphlets of twenty or thirty pages apiece are added to the body of its single enormous story. By design, any of its episodes can build on the events of any that came before it, and they're all (more or less) consistent with one another.

Every schoolchild recognizes the Marvel story's protagonists: Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, the X-Men. Eighteen of the hundred highest-grossing movies of all time, from *Avengers: Endgame* and *Black Panther* down to *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, are based on parts of the story, and it has profoundly influenced a lot of the rest: *Star Wars* and *Avatar* and *The Matrix* would be unimaginable without it.

Its characters and the images associated with them appear on T-shirts, travel pillows, dog leashes, pizza cutters, shampoo bottles, fishing gear, jigsaw puzzles, and bags of salad greens. (Some of the people who love the story also love to be reminded of it, or to associate themselves with particular characters from it.) Its catchphrases have seeped into standard usage: “Spidey-sense,” “you wouldn’t like me when I’m angry,” “I say thee nay,” “healing factor,” “no—*you* move,” “bitten by a radioactive spider,” “puny humans,” “threat or menace?,” “true believers,” “’nuff said.” Parts of it have been adapted into serial TV dramas, animated cartoons, prose novels, picture books, video games, theme-park attractions, and a Broadway musical. For someone who lives in our society, having some familiarity with the Marvel story is useful in much the same way as, say, being familiar with the Bible is useful for someone who lives in a Judeo-Christian society: its iconography and influence are pervasive.

The Marvel story is a mountain, smack in the middle of contemporary culture. The mountain wasn’t always there. At first, there was a little subterranean wonder in that spot, a cave that was rumored to have monsters inside it; colorful adventurers had once tested their skills there, and lovers met at its mouth. Then, in the 1960s, it started bulging up above the surface of the earth, and it never stopped growing.

It’s not the kind of mountain whose face you can climb. It doesn’t seem hazardous (and it isn’t), but those who try to follow what appear to be direct trails to its summit find that it’s grown higher every time they look up. The way to experience what the mountain has to offer is to go *inside* it and explore its innumerable bioluminescent caverns and twisty passageways; some of them lead to stunning vantage points onto the landscape that surrounds it.

There is no clear pathway into the mountain from the outside. Parts of it are abandoned and choked with cobwebs. Other parts are tedious, gruesome, ludicrous, infuriating. And yet people emerge from it all the time, gasping and cheering, telling one another about the marvels they’ve seen, then rushing back in for more.



Marvel Comics, as an artistic and commercial project, began in the early 1960s, initially as the work of a handful of experienced comics professionals—artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, editor/writer Stan Lee,* and a few others. The superhero stories that had dominated American comic books in the late '30s and early '40s had mostly fallen out of style at that point, but instead of returning to that faltering genre as it had been, Kirby, Ditko, and Lee combined it with aspects of the genres that had supplanted it: the uncanny horror of the monster and sci-fi stories Ditko and Kirby had been drawing more recently; the focus on the emotion of the romance anthologies Kirby had helped to invent in 1947; the gently jabbing wit of the humor titles Lee had been writing for many years. That hybrid formula—absorbing monster comics and romance comics and humor comics *into* superhero comics—turned out to be irresistible and durable. Marvel's early stories responded to the atmosphere of their historical moment, sometimes explicitly in their content and always implicitly in their themes.

Then Kirby, Lee, Ditko, and their collaborators figured out how to make the individual narrative melodies of all of their comics harmonize with one another, turning each episode into a component of a gigantic epic. That led to a vastly broader artistic collaboration: ever since then, its writers and artists have been elaborating on one another's visions, sometimes set in the same place and time but often separated by generations and continents.

The big Marvel story is a funhouse-mirror history of the past sixty years of American life, from the atomic night-terrors of the Cold War to the technocracy and pluralism of the present day—a boisterous, tragicomic, magnificently filigreed story about power and ethics, set in a world transformed by wonders. In some of its deeper caverns, it's the most for-

*For the prehistory of Marvel, see chapter 5; for more on these three, see chapter 7.

bidding, baffling, overwhelming work of art in existence. At its fringes, it's so easy to understand and enjoy that you can read a five-year-old an issue of *The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl* and she'll get it right away. And not even the people telling the story have read the whole thing.

That's fine. Nobody is *supposed* to read the whole thing. That's not how it's meant to be experienced.

So, of course, that's what I did. I read all 540,000-plus pages of the story published to date, from *Alpha Flight* to *Omega the Unknown*. Do I recommend anyone else do the same? God, no. Am I glad I did it? Absolutely.

I've spent some of my happiest days exploring the mountain of Marvels, and I wanted to get a better sense of what was in there so I could help curious travelers figure out how they might get inside it and how they might find the parts they'd like best. (I went all out so you don't have to; if you liked an *Avengers* movie and are interested in dipping a toe into its characters' comics, or read *X-Men* as a teenager and wonder what it's looked like since then, I'm here to help you have fun with that.) I also wanted to see what the Marvel narrative said as *a single body of work*: an epic among epics, Marcel Proust times Doris Lessing times Robert Altman to the power of the *Mahābhārata*.*

As a cluster of overlapping serials, with dozens running in parallel at any given time, it has a different relationship with time and sequence than most kinds of narrative art have. It doesn't really have a beginning—well, it does, but since mid-1961, where the story began is not where any member of the audience has ever been meant to join it. Instead, the Marvel story gives the reader tools to figure out the context from any entry point, reading backward and sideways as well as forward. Each individual piece of it, on its own, is *fun*—engaging, exciting, pleasing to the

*The *Mahābhārata*, in its critical edition, runs about 13,000 pages, which is roughly as many as all of the issues of *The Incredible Hulk* to date.

eye—or, at least, meant to be fun. But there’s another, different kind of fun that comes from piecing together the big story.

Marvel’s narrative also has a peculiar relationship with authorship. Legally, its “maker” is a corporation, one that’s gotten bigger over time as its body of intellectual property has changed hands. In practice, it was made by a specific group of people whose names we (mostly) know, and whose particular hands are (usually) unmistakable on any given page. But it’s also almost always been created collaboratively: if you think any one person is the sole creator of a particular image or plot point, you’re probably wrong, which is why it’s a mistake to think of any one person who’s worked on a Marvel comic book as its “author.”* On top of that, the nature of “continuity”—an important word in this context—is that every episode has to dovetail with (or at least not contradict) everything by other writers and artists that came before it or appears alongside it.

From a reader’s perspective, though, that was one of Marvel’s great innovations. You can follow any series on its own, without having to pay any mind to others; if you just want to see what Moon Knight’s up to this

*Even the question of who created Marvel’s best-known characters is also often more complicated than it looks. It’s easy enough to assess who came up with Marvel’s first superheroes of the 1960s, the Fantastic Four: Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. (Except that the Human Torch’s name and basic design had been created by Carl Burgos back in 1939.) Captain America? Kirby and Joe Simon in 1941. How about Doctor Strange? That was Steve Ditko, according to Lee’s own words (he wrote “’Twas Steve’s idea” in a 1963 letter to fan Jerry Bails). Iron Man? That’s a little trickier. Lee plotted his first story, but Larry Lieber wrote its dialogue; Kirby drew the first cover and designed the character’s initial costume (which barely resembles the familiar red-and-gold one, designed by Ditko a bit later); Don Heck drew the initial story and invented what its protagonists Tony Stark and Pepper Potts look like.

Daredevil? Well, now you’re running into trouble. Lee wrote the first story, and Bill Everett drew it, but the cover was drawn by Kirby, who might have designed Daredevil’s original costume, too, although the much more familiar red costume was first drawn by Wally Wood starting in the seventh issue. When you talk about the now-familiar look and feel and mythology of “Daredevil,” though—the tormented Catholic romantic who leaps around the shadows of Hell’s Kitchen and fights ninjas and Wilson Fisk—you’re mostly talking about what Frank Miller added to the character in the ’80s, along with his artistic collaborators Klaus Janson and David Mazzucchelli. (Except that Wilson Fisk had been created by Lee and John Romita Sr. fifteen years earlier.) And so on.

month, you're good. But characters and plotlines bounce freely from one series to another, and events in any individual issue can have ramifications in any other, the same week or years later. Every little story is part of the big one, and potentially a crucial part.

That sense of shared experience, of seeing dozens of historical threads and dozens of creators' separate contributions being woven together, is a particular joy of following the Marvel Universe (with a capital *U*), as both the company and comics readers call it.* The Marvel story is not the first or only one that works like that—DC Comics, Marvel's largest competitor, and other comics publishers have adopted the “universe” template too—but it's the largest of its kind.†

It wasn't even meant to work *that* way, at first; it wasn't conceived organically in any way. The story has been driven, at every turn, by the dictates of the peculiar marketplace that sustains comics, and in recent decades by the much more profitable business of media and merchandise derived from stories that originated in comics. It grew accidentally, and it's accrued meaning accidentally, through its creators' memory lapses and misreadings and frantic attempts to meet deadlines. Even so, it's accrued a *lot* of meaning.

The Marvel story is about exploration—about seeing secret worlds within the world we know, and understanding possibilities of what we haven't yet experienced—and its parallel serials and wildly divergent creative perspectives even within a single serial make that broader understanding possible. It's high adventure, slapstick comedy, soap opera, blood-spattered horror, tender character study, and political allegory, usually all in the same week. It encompasses magnificent craft and dumb hackwork, and enduring the latter is sometimes helpful preparation for

*The “universe” part is because the story's scope isn't limited to Earth; parts of it take place deep in outer space, or in more metaphysical territory.

†That's part of why this book is about Marvel, rather than DC or some other shared universe. For all the superhero comics that DC has published since 1938, it was very slow to integrate them into anything like a coherent fictional world—and that world was rebooted in 1986 and again in 2011, discarding most of its established history.

appreciating the former. It grew with its audience, and then grew beyond successive generations of its tellers. In form and substance, it's a tribute to the astonishing powers of human imagination and to the way that human imaginations in concert with one another can do far more than they could individually. It's a tale that never ends for any of its characters, even in death.

Those characters—and there are thousands of them—include some extraordinary ones, in whose fantastic excesses you, as a reader, might potentially see parts of yourself, or see what you might hope to become or fear becoming. On any page, you're likely to encounter someone like a computer science student who can talk to squirrels and is friends with an immortal, planet-devouring god;* or an android who saved the world thirty-seven times, then moved to the suburbs of Washington, D.C., and built himself a family in a catastrophically failed attempt to be more human;† or a vindictive, physically immense crimelord who has become the mayor of New York, and whose archenemy is the alter ego of the blind lawyer who serves as his deputy mayor;‡ or a woman who discovered as a teenager that she could walk through walls, was briefly possessed by a version of herself from a dystopian future, trained as a ninja, later spent months trapped inside a gigantic bullet flying through the cosmos, and is now a pirate captain;§ or a tree creature from another planet who makes remarkably expressive use of his three-word vocabulary.¶

Marvel's shared-universe schema offers an exceptionally fun way of thinking about ethical behavior that's more complicated than “good guys and bad guys.” The story's alliterative heroes, from Peter Parker to Miles Morales to Jessica Jones to Kamala Khan, rarely come into their power

*Squirrel Girl and Galactus, respectively; see chapter 20.

†The Vision.

‡The Kingpin, aka Wilson Fisk, and Daredevil; see * on p. 5.

§Kate Pryde; see chapter 10.

¶¶That's Groot, who's best known for having appeared in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies, and in the comics series of the same name beginning in 2008. An early, slightly more eloquent version of him first turned up on the cover of 1960's *Tales to Astonish* #13, bellowing “Behold! I am Groot, the invincible! Who dares to defy me?”

willingly; their abilities are less often something they've achieved than an unanticipated burden. Its villains are rarely beyond redemption, and are as likely as not to become its heroes or even its saviors. Even the worst of them have their reasons.

Over the course of six decades, the story has developed its own bizarre, sort-of-coherent cosmology. Marvel's Earth is the center of its universe, the most important place in all of creation. It's also "Earth-616," only one of many possible versions of the world that appear within the story. A former surgeon, who lives in a Greenwich Village town house with the ghost of his dog, perpetually defends the planet against occult attack and has seen it destroyed and rebuilt, good as new, more than once. The nexus of all of its realities is deep within a swamp in the Florida Everglades, guarded by a monster who can't abide fear. An ancient being who lived in an oxygenated zone of the moon witnessed all of the alternate possibilities for how its important events might have turned out, until he was murdered and his eyes stolen. The throne of the Marvel Universe's Hell is empty; its Norse pantheon's home once crash-landed in Oklahoma.

Some of the questions the Marvel story asks and (the short versions of) the answers it offers:

- What do gods do? (They create; they judge; they destroy.)
- What do monarchs do? (They protect their nations, even when that makes them monstrous.)
- Is there anything beyond the world we know? (There is more than we could ever possibly imagine.)
- What happens when we grow up? (We may try to put away childish things, but we can't, or shouldn't. The best thing that can happen is that we turn those things into something bigger and more beautiful.)

More than anything else, though, the Marvel world is a place of scientific miracles and of technological progress that transforms the lives of

everyone within it. Its most prominent and most fallible champions are the ones with doctorates. The telling of the Marvel story begins with a rocket flight gone wrong; the main engine of its American century is a race for technology to create the perfect soldier; its chief exponents of terror are a cult of scientists hoping to strike blows against corporate control. Some of its best-loved characters are “children of the atom,” the next step in evolution, sparked by the nuclear age. Earth-616 is recognizably our world, made stranger and richer by wonders of science—a world in which deep knowledge has always been a shield against incomprehensible horrors.

I wanted to gain deep knowledge of the story itself—to learn all there is to know about it—and I dedicated a couple of years of my life to that effort.* But Marvel has also published a lot of stuff that *isn't* part of that story, by some definition, and I had to draw the line somewhere. I came up with three questions to narrow down what I would obligate myself to read:

1. *Was it a comic book published by Marvel during the period bounded by 1961's Fantastic Four #1 and 2017's Marvel Legacy #1?*

The first issue of *Fantastic Four* is where the “Marvel Age” conventionally begins—although I ended up reading *everything* Marvel published between 1960 and 1962 anyway, and finding a slightly earlier starting point for what I think of as the story. (The endpoint was just so that I'd have an endpoint; I didn't actually stop reading there.)†

*That wasn't *all* I was doing during those years. Even so, more than one friend, on hearing about the project, immediately compared me to the cartoonist Bob Burden's absurdist mid-1980s character Flaming Carrot, who “read over 5000 comic books in a single sitting to win a bet. He won, but his mind could not take the strain.”

†The covers of those two issues suggest how much the way the story is told had changed in fifty-six years. Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* cover is crammed with language and action, insistently explaining who everyone is and what's going on; Joe Quesada's *Marvel Legacy* cover focuses tightly on a few characters looking at something we can't see, and spares room only for the text of its title. (There are also elements the two images share: the interrupted arc of a circle, and a monster opening its mouth to scream.)

2. Did it involve characters owned by Marvel?

This actually ruled out a lot of stuff. The “ownership” rule set *Conan the Barbarian* and its related series, for instance, outside the scope of



The covers of the two comic books that were the bookends for this project: *Fantastic Four #1*, 1961 (drawn by Jack Kirby), and *Marvel Legacy #1*, 2017 (drawn by Joe Quesada and Kevin Nowlan).

this project*—at least until after 2017—so I washed my hands of them. Ditto for *Star Wars* and *G.I. Joe*, whose licensed series never crossed over with the Marvel Universe, as well as the many creator-owned comics published by the Epic and Icon imprints. Likewise with movie adaptations, and nonfiction biographies of Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa, and adaptations of L. Frank Baum’s Oz books, and *Care Bears*, and *Marvel Classics Comics*, despite a very clever attempt I once saw to demonstrate that Fandral the Dashing from *Thor* appears in disguise in Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* and consequently in its *Marvel Classics* adaptation.

*If you’re thinking about bringing up the Serpent Crown, I’ll give you a nickel not to.

On the other hand, Marvel has published a few series that involve characters licensed from elsewhere interacting with Marvel's characters—*Master of Kung Fu*, *ROM: Spaceknight*, *Micronauts*, and *Godzilla* are prominent examples. All of those were within the scope of the project, and I read all of them.

3. *Could the version of Spider-Man who stars in The Amazing Spider-Man* reasonably turn up in it without the benefit of time travel, whether or not he actually does?*

This was the Great Excluder—or, as I came to think of it, the Great Time-Saver. There are a handful of series that have been wholly owned by Marvel but whose characters have never interacted with those in the big fictional universe—*Strikeforce: Morituri* comes to mind. There are also a lot of series about alternate versions of the Marvel characters: the Marvel Age imprint of stories for younger readers; most of the MAX imprint of adults-only takes on familiar characters; the MC2 line of stories about second-generation superheroes in a possible future; *Spidey Super Stories*; adaptations of various animated series; and so on. I let myself pass over those. But then there was Ultimate Marvel, a separate and distinct continuity that ran from 2000 to 2015 in comics whose titles all included the word “Ultimate.” The Ultimate titles and the main Marvel line eventually became closely connected, so I read all 600-plus Ultimate comics.

The time-travel clause was a work-around to get me off the hook from reading a giant pile of Western and war comics. It didn't stop me from reading all of Marvel's post-1958 horror and romance anthologies, though.

*You know the game “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon”? The protagonist of *Amazing Spider-Man* is basically that: the character who's met everybody. The only significant Marvel character who's been on Earth at the same time as Spider-Man without yet encountering him face-to-face is Millie Collins (whose sitcom series *Millie the Model* ran 207 issues, ending in 1973)—and Spider-Man's ex, Mary Jane Watson, has worked with Millie.

And I did end up reading the entirety of the alarmingly clueless *Red Wolf*, a short-lived Western series about a Native American superhero, rather than limiting myself to the issues set in what several 1973 covers called “the holocaust of TODAY!”*

The remaining twenty-seven thousand or so issues, though,[†] were all on my reading list, and if you’re wondering how I tracked them all down, that wasn’t the hard part.[‡] The hard part was finding enough hours in the day to read them all.

I didn’t read them in order, of course; that would have been unbearable. Instead, I grazed. I’d read *Spider-Woman* for a while, then an *Iron Man* miniseries, then some comics drawn by Leonardo Manco, then various appearances by the monstrosly huge dragon Fin Fang Foom, then a bunch of early-1970s romance comics, then whatever new issues I’d bought that week.

How did I read them? Any way I could. I read them on couches, in cafés, on treadmills. I read them as yellowing issues I’d bought when they were first published, or scored at garage sales as a kid, or snagged from a dollar bin at a convention as an adult. I read them in glossy, bashed-cornered paperbacks borrowed from the library. I read them as bagged-and-boarded gems borrowed from friends. I read them as expensively “remastered” hardcover reprints, and as .cbz files of sketchy provenance, and as brittle stacks of pulp that had been lovingly reread until they’d nearly disintegrated. I read a few from a stack of back issues somebody abandoned on the table next to mine as I was working at a Starbucks one day; it just happened to include an issue of *Power Man and Iron Fist* I’d

*By which they meant, among other things, that it involves a Mohawk policewoman named Jill Tomahawk who says things like “And I’m a good cop, too—even if I *am* a woman! So don’t try to zap me with any male chauvinistic pig-ism!!!”

†My spreadsheet claims there were exactly 27,206 of them, but I don’t entirely trust it. There were some edge cases, too: an *ALF* Annual that parodies the “Evolutionary War” crossover from the same year; a *Ren & Stimpy* issue in which Dan Slott wrote Spider-Man for the first time; that sort of thing. I went ahead and read all of those, because why not?

‡The Marvel Unlimited digital service, which includes upward of twenty thousand issues, helped a lot—it has some major and minor gaps, but it was invaluable for my purposes.

been looking for. I read a hell of a lot of them on a digital tablet. I read them in the economical black-and-white “Essential” collections Marvel pumped out between 1996 and 2013, and in ragged British pulp weeklies from the ’70s. I read them from the peculiar CD-ROM collections Graphic Imaging Technology published in the mid-2000s, with hundreds of indifferently scanned issues of *Amazing Spider-Man* or *Ghost Rider*.*

And I had an absolutely great time. The best of them, old and new, were astonishing, as thrilling and imaginative as popular entertainment gets. There was also plenty of sophomoric, retrograde stuff, rushed out to serve an audience of credulous kids or bloodthirsty nostalgics. I was often aware that I was gorging myself on something made for cherry-picking and nibbling, indulging the worst part of the collector’s impulse: the part that strives for completeness rather than for enjoyment. Fortunately, by the time I’d waded too far into the piles of *Nightstalkers* and *Skull the Slayer* and *Marvel Double Feature: Thunderstrike/Code Blue* to turn around, a small but useful transformation had come over me.

I realized that I’d become able to find *something* to enjoy in just about any issue, new or old. Sometimes, it was a detail that connected to another one on the story’s perpetually expanding canvas. (It’s a truism about superhero comics that nobody ever stays dead, but it’s more broadly true that *nothing* in them goes away forever. Any character or gizmo or situation that’s ever appeared in the Marvel narrative is fair game for any of the story’s subsequent tellers; someone a decade or three later will inevitably come up with a plot in which Crystar the Crystal Warrior or Arcanna Jones or the Leader’s Brain-Wave Booster can serve some purpose, and it will be richer for a reader who recognizes that element from the first time around.)

*I didn’t *intend* to read any at the Burning Man art festival in the Nevada desert in the summer of 2019; the only comics I had brought with me were a few copies, to give away, of 1998’s *X-Force* #75, in which the team attends the same event, transparently disguised as the “Exploding Colossal Man” festival. But somebody had set up a little memorial shrine for Stan Lee, and at its base there was a box labeled READ ME, containing some battered but intact fifty-year-old issues of *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Thor* and *Tales of Suspense*, and what was I going to do, *not* read them?

Other times, it was some display of a creator's idiolect. Longtime comics readers know that one of the delights of following particular characters for years is seeing the moments at which they act *in character*, doing something unexpected that's still absolutely consistent with what we know of them. There's a very similar joy in observing comics creators being who they are—when there's a line of dialogue or a line of ink that could have come from nobody else's hand.

Most often, though, what made otherwise iffy older comics come alive for me was the ways they reflected the moments at which they were made. Before “collectibility” infected them, periodical comic books were sold alongside newspapers and designed to be thrown out with them, and they're kind of a much more colorful, metaphorical version of the same thing. Comics dramatize the cultural conflicts and fears of their time, and that subtext is often clearer in dull or hacky comics than in aesthetically satisfying ones.* Even the apparatus around the stories themselves illuminates their historical context. (You can learn a lot about the race and gender politics of the 1970s and '80s by reading the letters to the editor that were printed in *Hero for Hire* or *The Punisher* or *Ms. Marvel*, or looking at the ads that interrupted those stories every few pages.)

My background is in pop music criticism, and one of the things I've learned from it is that if a piece of art of any kind becomes popular, that means there's something about it that commands an audience's attention and gives them pleasure in a way that other things, even similar things, don't.† There are lots of commercial failures that are artistic triumphs, of

*The “Living Mummy” feature that ran in *Supernatural Thrillers* from 1973 to 1975, for instance, is . . . a real mess, actually, but a fascinating mess, an evocation of the early '70s' conflation of archaeology and mysticism, as well as the craze around the “Treasures of Tutankhamun” tour. It includes what might be Marvel's first same-sex couple, as well as some wild psychedelic artwork by Tom Sutton in its final episode.

†I occasionally hear the argument that popular success in culture has to do only with what big corporations decide to shove down the throat of the public. The backing of a capitalist machine can absolutely help resonant art reach its audience, but all the money in the world can't make a hit out of something nobody wants. To quote W. H. Auden, “Some books are undeservedly forgotten; none are undeservedly remembered.”

course, and I'll wave the flag for plenty of those in the chapters that follow. But every hit comic book, like every hit record, has something exceptional about it,* and part of the job of critics who are interested in this particular subfield is to figure out what those exceptional things are. It can be hard to do, and sometimes I can't manage it; that's my failing. Sometimes I can see what's exceptional but am not moved by it myself; that has more to do with my tastes and preferences.

Again, though, the fact that Marvel's comics have always been so entirely a commercial enterprise means that the ones that have thrived in the market at any given moment, regardless of who has been writing or drawing them, responded to some kind of craving in their audience of that moment.† The early parts of the Marvel story were unabashedly power fantasies for children. As superhero comics' narrative style has grown up along with their audience, those fantasies' messier subtexts have bubbled up and been addressed head-on. Looking at close to sixty years of *Spider-Man* or *Captain America*, you can clearly make out the rise and fall of particular cultural aspirations and of the storytelling modes that conveyed them.

As you explore the Marvel story, it becomes another world you can call your own, one that's constantly expanding and full of unfinished wonders. You can no more exhaust its possibilities than the real world's. (I have tried.) And spending time in that world can make you better equipped to live in the real one: more curious about how its systems fit together; more willing to explore what you don't yet understand, and accept that you can't know everything; more open to hope in the face of catastrophe; more aware that no matter how overwhelming your own life may seem, it's only part of a much bigger picture.

*Thanks to Robert Christgau, whose formulation I'm stealing here.

†Sometimes they find mass appeal by taking artistic risks; they're cheap enough to produce that failed experiments aren't ruinous.

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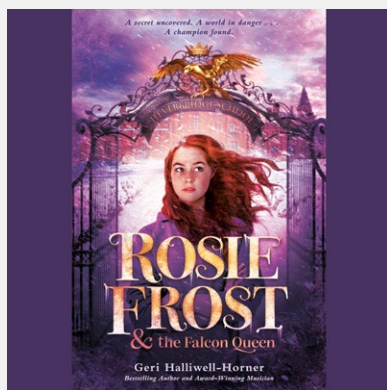
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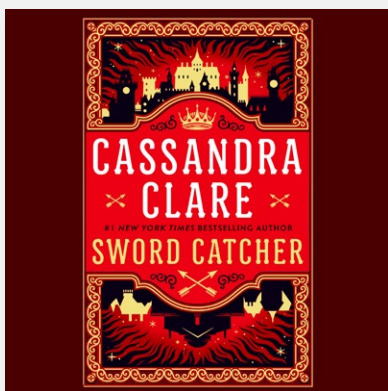
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