



THE  
SPECTACULARS



# For my family



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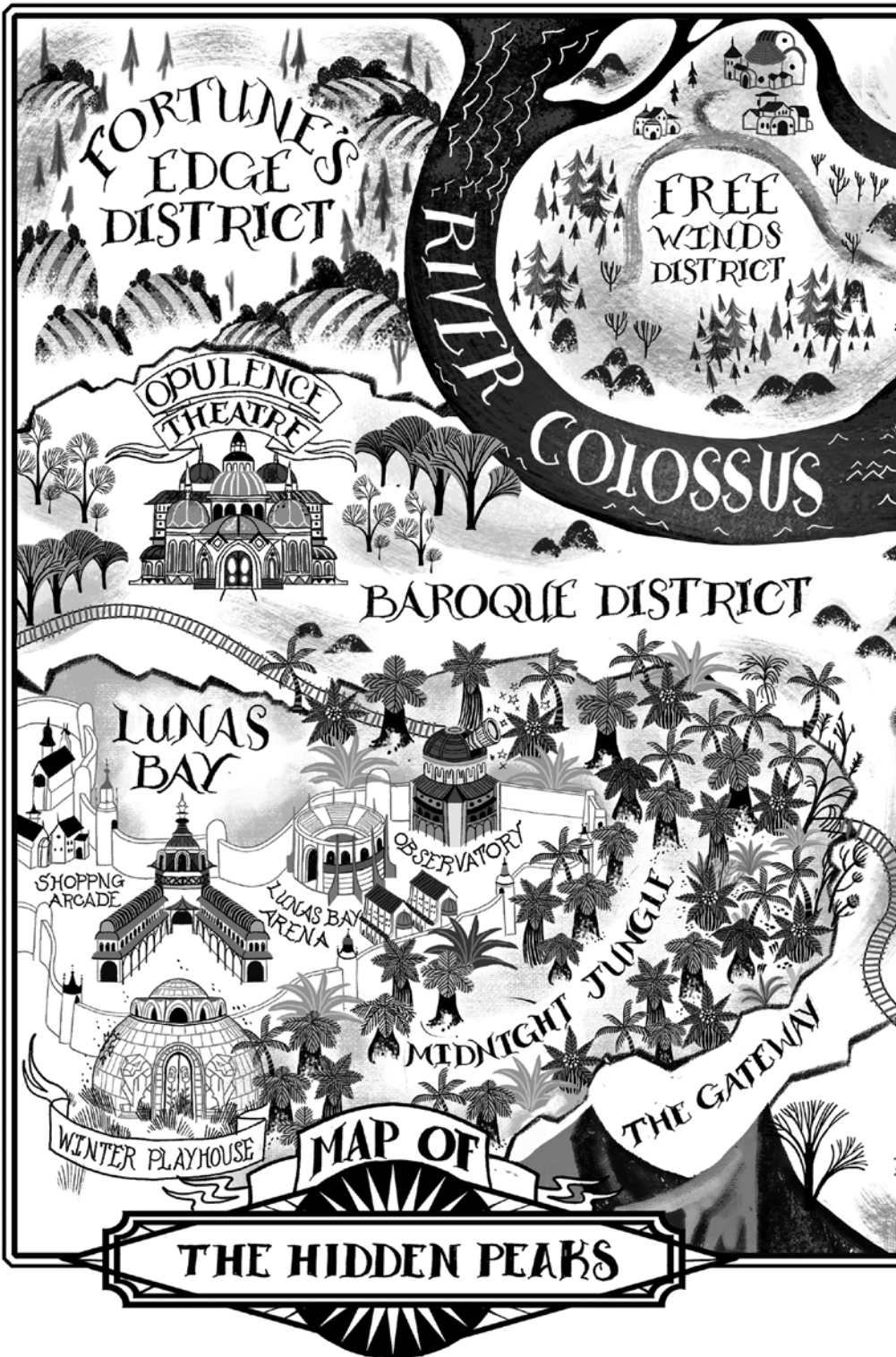


# THE SPECTACULARS

JODIE GARNISH



USBORNE



FORTUNE'S  
EDGE'S  
DISTRICT

OPULENCE  
THEATRE

FREE  
WINDS  
DISTRICT

RIVER  
RIVER

COLOSSUS

BAROQUE DISTRICT

LUNAS  
BAY

SHOPPING  
ARCADE

LUNAS BAY  
ARENA

OBSERVATORY

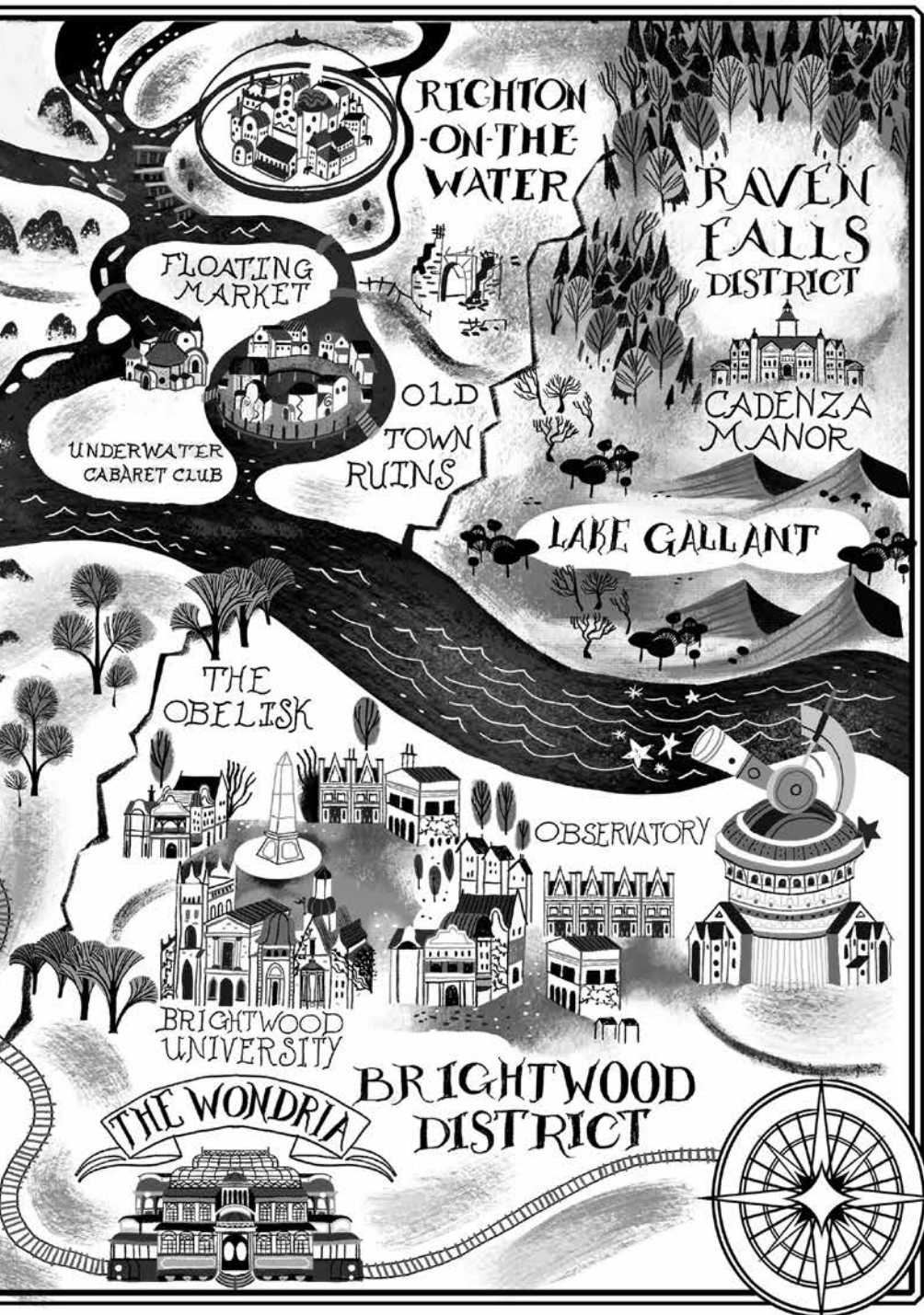
MIDNIGHT  
JUNGLE

WINTER PLAYHOUSE

MAP OF

THE GATEWAY

THE HIDDEN PEAKS



RIGHTON  
-ON-THE  
WATER

RAVEN  
FALLS  
DISTRICT

FLOATING  
MARKET

UNDERWATER  
CABARET CLUB

OLD  
TOWN  
RUINS

CADENZA  
MANOR

LAKE GALLANT

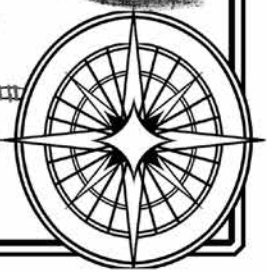
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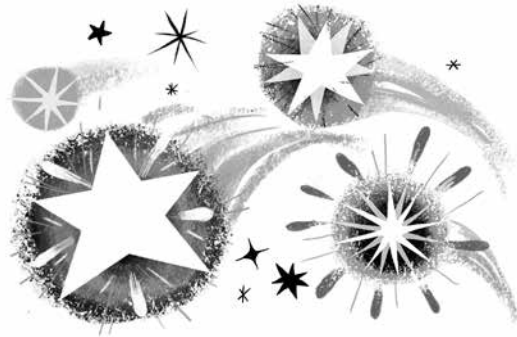
BRIGHTWOOD  
UNIVERSITY

BRIGHTWOOD  
DISTRICT

THE WONDRIA







## PROLOGUE

# *A Most Daring Escape*

**A**s a government-owned locomotive, the tram was *not* supposed to be careering wildly up a steep mountainside, rattling noisily along a set of rusty tram tracks and scaring the wits out of several unsuspecting sheep. Then again, it also wasn't supposed to be being driven by three runaway rebels with a backpack full of mysterious light at their feet, and zero driving experience between them.

“Can't we go any faster?” a man with long, black locs called to the two other figures inside the driver's cab. “Lahiri?”

Nadia Lahiri, a woman with dark hair and sharp eyes, scowled back at him. “In case you hadn't noticed, we're trying to drive a stolen eight-carriage tram up a rather steep mountain,” she snapped. “We'll get there as fast as we can, although you're obviously welcome to go and push the wretched thing yourself.”

The man, whose name was Morgan Fletcher, chewed his lip. He was a tall, broad figure, clothed in a royal blue coat and black leather boots. “We need more light,” he said, first to himself, then calling across to the third figure, “Roper! We need more light!”

Georgina Roper, a short-statured woman with a mass of blonde curls, nodded and ripped open the backpack at her feet. She rifled through it, throwing out a harmonica, a singing biscuit tin and a fat book entitled *101 Uses for Stardust in Musical Theatre*, before coming up with a single, tightly sealed jar. Within the jar was a silvery light, swaying gently in long, shimmering tendrils.

“Is that all that’s left?” Fletcher looked at the jar disbelievingly.

“That’s it,” Roper confirmed.

Behind them – far too close behind them – a sound echoed, bouncing around the mountains they were hurtling through. A klaxon. A warning.

*“TRAM THIRTEEN. STAND DOWN. BY ORDER OF THE MINISTER OF THE SUNLESS PROVINCES, STAND DOWN.”*

Every eye in the driver’s cab turned towards the window, looking back at where a stream of shiny black sledges was speeding after them, pulled by sleek hounds and gaining on them with every second.

“Fletcher,” Roper said urgently, glancing towards the engine that sat before them, sending out silver sparks. “We still have the astral flare. We can use it.”

“Are you joking?” Lahiri hissed. “It’s far too dangerous!”

Fletcher shuddered slightly as he recalled packing the astral



flare. Unlike the light shimmering gently in the jar before him, the flare had hummed and pulsed, vibrating with power. He'd had to wrap it in several layers of cloth, not to mention his woolliest jumper, just to keep it from shaking the tram carriage apart.

"We don't have a choice," insisted Roper. "It's the only thing that will get us out of this alive!"

Fletcher glanced back at the sledges again. He was the leader of the rebels who'd planned this escape. It had been his idea; it was his responsibility to keep everybody safe.

"Fletcher, don't be a fool," said Lahiri. "We should only be using approved Star-Stuff: dust and light. Astral flares are a restricted substance for a reason. We don't know what will happen!"

"Well, we *do* know what'll happen if they catch us." Roper gestured backwards towards the sledges. "I'd rather risk the flare."

Fletcher held up a hand to silence them both. He took a breath. "Fetch the astral flare."

Roper nodded and dived back into the backpack. This time, she retrieved a jar with a label taped across it:

*ASTRAL FLARE. HIGHLY EXPLOSIVE. VOLATILE.  
EXTREMELY DANGEROUS. ONLY USE IN CASE  
OF EMERGENCY. THAT MEANS YOU, McCUBBINS.*

Roper carried it towards the engine.

Fletcher pressed his hands to his forehead and sent up a silent plea. *This has to work*, he thought. *Please let this work*. He leaned back

against the door that separated the cab from the rest of the tram carriages and closed his eyes.

Unbeknownst to him, directly on the other side of this door were two children engrossed in an equally important conversation, whispering between themselves in a serious fashion. The girl, whose name was Harper Woolfe, bobbed her head decisively.

“Mr Grinwart. Definitely,” she said.

The blue-haired boy next to her snorted. “Nah. When we took that bend earlier, he barely blinked. It’s going to be Hattie Dwight; she’s already looking green.”

“You’ve forgotten one very important thing.”

“What?”

“Grinwart had second helpings of beans at dinner.” Harper nodded, satisfied. “That’s definitely going to be coming back up.” She opened the book in her lap and carefully wrote down the wager:

*Harper Woolfe: Mr Grinwart. Trick Torres: Hattie Dwight.*

*Winner gets seven chocolate plums.*

Another klaxon wailed out from behind them, and Harper looked over her shoulder. They’d been instructed to stay seated during the escape, but no one had listened to that. Instead, everyone was crowded around the windows, watching the mountains flash past and craning their necks to see the black sledges speeding after them.

“What’ll happen if they catch us?” Harper whispered to Trick.

“Fletcher said we wouldn’t want to know,” Trick replied.

Harper twisted a lock of coppery hair between her fingers. “I don’t understand. Why can’t they just let us go?”

“*STAND DOWN. STAND DOWN.*” The booming voice came again.

“I think they need a cup of tea,” Trick suggested. He believed very strongly in the healing powers of tea.

Harper closed her eyes and tried to pretend that she wasn’t sitting in a stolen tram, being chased by the police forces of the Sunless Provinces. Instead, she pictured home: the city of the Smoke, the largest – and dirtiest – city in the Provinces. Specifically, she pictured the borough that she’d grown up in: a borough lined with grand theatres and music halls, lit up by neon lights, rich with the smell of buttered popcorn and roasted nuts. She could practically hear the sounds of the ushers as they tried to attract people into their venues...

*“Adriana Phillips – she can sing up a storm! No, literally – watch as she conjures thunder and lightning with her repertoire of tempestuous tunes! Half-price tickets for seats in the ‘Splash Zone’, complimentary rain ponchos provided.”*

*“The Utterly Un-Royal Theatre Troupe presents ‘Lost in the Jungle’, complete with immersive scenery – watch as the theatre around you transforms into a real-life jungle! Patrons enter at their own risk; compensation not offered for tiger bites.”*

*“For one night, and one night only, presenting Buster Yang and his reflection – the greatest comedy duo in town! Tickets on special offer, six bob each!”*

Harper's reminiscing was cut off by a huge shudder that suddenly rocked the tram. A blinding flash burst out from the driver's cab, and Harper and Trick both threw themselves away from the door as a roar of triumph rose up from the crowd gathered around the window. Harper and Trick glanced at each other, then ran towards them, elbowing their way through the mob to get a look outside.

As soon as she did, Harper felt a bit sick. The mountains were now flashing past at blinding speed. Twisting around, Harper could see the police sledges quickly disappearing out of sight, becoming no more than a line of tiny black dots, unable to keep up with the speed at which they were now moving.

"Three...two...one...YEESSSSSSS!" Trick threw his hands up as Hattie Dwight turned, ran to the corner, and was promptly sick all over the floor.

"*What?*" Harper yelled as Mr Grinwart carried on staring out of the window, unperturbed.

"I win!" Trick cheered. "Seven chocolate plums, please!"

Harper huffed. "Well, don't blame me when all your teeth fall out and the Tooth Raven comes and steals them for his child-chomping machine."

Trick blinked. "That isn't what the Tooth Raven does."

"That we know of," muttered Harper.

"Oi, shut up, you two!" An old man leaning by the window scowled at them. "I'm trying to hear the radio!" He turned the volume up, and a broadcaster's voice came echoing through Carriage One.

“...Going live now to the latest in several major security breaches across the Sunless Provinces, concerning the so-called ‘Spectaculars’. Categorized as beings with ‘unique performance abilities’, these Spectaculars have been growing in numbers ever since they first appeared at the turn of the last century, with large communities emerging all over the Sunless Provinces. The great city of the Smoke has seen a particular upsurge in these Spectaculars, converging in the Theatre Borough in the underskirts of the city. Despite our great Minister graciously allowing them to practise their abilities peacefully over the years, their powers have increased exponentially, leading the Minister to regretfully deem them a Grade Six Dangerous Species last year...”

“‘Dangerous species!’” the old man exclaimed. “As if we ain’t even human!”

“Because of our ‘unique performance abilities,’” another muttered. “What does he think we’re going to do – lead a tap-dancing revolution? *Pas de bourrée* him straight out of office?”

“That’s how they turn people against each other, you see,” the old man said darkly.

Harper looked down. It wasn’t pleasant to remember the Minister’s sudden campaign against the Spectaculars – the curfews, the restrictions, the suspicious looks from neighbours who’d always been perfectly friendly before.

*“This morning, in a series of planned revolts, Spectaculars all over the Sunless Provinces hijacked multiple public transportation vehicles, from commuter trams in the Smoke, to the Minister’s personal turtle-drawn submarines in the Cragg Islands. Citizens reported ‘scenes of*

*chaos' as they were 'strongly encouraged' to remove themselves from the vehicles...*

"That was funny," guffawed the old man. "Remember that woman with all the poodles? The look on her face when we told her to get off the tram!"

"She threw one of them at me!" a woman said indignantly. "Literally *threw a poodle at me.*"

*"The stolen vehicles appear to be heading north, although their destination is as yet unknown. The Minister's police forces are giving chase as we speak..."*

"Don't you worry, kids," said the old man, noticing Harper's anxious face. "We're not the first to have this happen to us. The Sunless Provinces have never been able to tolerate those with magic in their bones. They drove out the Witches centuries ago, the Fae-Folk, the Goblins and Kobolds. They were bound to do the same to us sooner or later. But you know where they all went." He winked. "Through the gateways, where no one could find them."

Harper felt a shiver run down her spine at the mention of the gateways. At six years of age, they hadn't been party to the rebellion plans, but she and Trick had eavesdropped on enough conversations to have picked up the gist; a series of secret gateways that led to a hidden land – a place of refuge for magical folk. A date had been set: one day for Spectaculars across the Sunless Provinces to make a break for the gateways. They'd boarded the trams with whatever possessions they could carry, dodged any flying canines, and turned their attention to the mountains. Harper didn't want to think

about what would happen if they failed.

To distract herself, she turned back to the matter of Mr Grinwart. He was still standing at the window, and was starting to look a little peaky...

“Ooh. You’ve got your plotting face on. What are you thinking?” Trick demanded.

“Let’s bet again,” Harper suggested. “Double or nothing?”

Before Trick could answer, the door that separated Carriage One from the driver’s cab opened, and Fletcher – their leader, and Trick’s uncle – strode through.

“Everyone, I appreciate that this is an exciting and nerve-racking time. However, we are almost at the gateway, so could I please ask all of you to return to your seats until we’re safely across.”

Harper groaned. Her seat was next to her parents’, all the way back in Carriage Eight – the very last carriage of the tram. She’d snuck up to Carriage One to see Trick as soon as she could – after all, if you were going to see a new world for the first time, you wanted your best friend beside you.

“Do we have to?” she wheedled, trying out her most endearing expression as she looked up at Fletcher. (“What’s wrong with your face? You look like you’ve got gas,” Trick muttered next to her.)

“It’s just till we’re on the other side of the gateway,” Fletcher assured her. “Trick – back to your seat.”

Trick rolled his eyes, then jumped up. As he stood, he suddenly swayed slightly, stumbling and putting his hand against the wall for support.

“You all right?” Harper frowned.

“Just – felt dizzy.” Trick blinked.

“You’re not gonna throw up too, are you?” Harper asked. “*That* wasn’t part of the bet.”

Trick seemed to shake himself, then grinned at Harper. “I’m fine. Anyway – see you on the other side!”

Carefully avoiding the puddle of sick on the floor, Harper set off, making her way down the long aisles, until she finally got back to Carriage Eight.

Harper’s dad glanced at her as she stepped into the carriage. “Betting game?”

“Yep,” Harper sighed. “Trick won.”

“Harper, come look at this!” Her mother gestured to Harper. She lifted Harper up so she could see out of the window, where a blue light was shining on the horizon ahead of them.

“It’s the gateway! We’ve made it!” Her dad punched the air.

Harper’s father was a Spectacular musician. He and his band played stardust-infused instruments that filled people with so much joy it literally levitated them off the ground. Harper had seen an old lady float out of her seat at one of their concerts and dance a sprightly two-step in mid-air. Her mother, on the other hand, wasn’t a Spectacular at all, but a mechanic – but had anyone suggested that she allow her husband and child to escape without her, they would have received a firm bop to the nose.

The tram gained speed as it approached the blue light. As it did, however, Harper suddenly felt something strange: a clunking



beneath her feet, like something had fallen.

“What was that?” she asked.

Her mother frowned. “I don’t know,” she said. “Michael...”

The rest of her sentence was drowned out by a huge shudder that had them all tumbling against the wall. The whole tram tilted sideways, and Harper assumed that the first carriage must be passing through the gateway. For a moment, everything was screeching brakes and screaming, and a strange blue light that now seemed to surround them all. Then, with an almighty bang, something beneath them seemed to give way. Looking out of the window, Harper saw with horror that their carriage was still moving very fast – only now they were going *backwards*, falling away from the rest of the tram, which continued to speed through the blue light.

“What happened? What’s going on?” Harper yelled. Her dad grabbed on to her and pulled her away from the window, just as one of the frames juddered and detached, glass shattering into the carriage.

“Harper, hold on!” he yelled.

There was a shrieking of metal, and Harper was vaguely aware of the sensation of a collision before she was catapulted across the room, and everything turned black.



Later that evening, Fletcher sat in the driver’s seat, staring out of the window. They’d brought the tram to a halt for the night alongside a mass of gleaming trees (were their leaves *blue*, Fletcher thought,

or was he just exceptionally tired?). Most of the Spectaculars were already at work, harvesting Star-Stuff to replenish their stores and making plans for the conversion of the tram.

For all intents and purposes, the day had been more successful than they could have dreamed. Fletcher had already received messages from the other hijacked vehicles – the Spectaculars of the Cragg Islands had driven the turtle-drawn submarines through a gateway behind a waterfall, while those from the southern coastal cities had commandeered an airship and passed through a gateway hidden within a storm cloud. They were all safely in the Hidden Peaks, the place that had been a refuge for so many magical folks before them.

However, Fletcher couldn't concentrate on any of this. He sat with a tumbler of honey water, slowly swilling the liquid around as one singular thought echoed around his mind. *I failed. I failed them.*

He had no idea what had happened with Carriage Eight. If there had been any indication that the carriage was faulty, that it was coming loose... But the crossing had been so loud, so chaotic, that they were through and racing out the other side by the time anyone had realized that an entire carriage – and the four families inside it – had been lost in the process.

There was a sudden smell of smoke from a battered toaster that sat on the floor at Fletcher's feet. Fletcher looked at it expectantly, and a moment later, a piece of paper popped up. Fletcher seized the slip and scanned it, then yelled at the door.

“Lahiri!”

Lahiri popped her head into the cab. “What?”

“I’ve just heard from the Spraggs – they’ve found the gateway, they’re on their way.”

Lahiri sprang into action. “Right. I’ll send a canoe to pick them up.” She pulled out a notebook and flicked through it. “So...the McCubbins and the Ruizes are through already. With the Spraggs heading across... That just leaves the Woolfes.”

Fletcher frowned. “And nobody’s heard anything from them?”

Lahiri shook her head. “Nothing. And with the mother being a non-Spectacular...We’re a bit worried about them, to be honest.”

“Well, keep looking.” Fletcher rubbed his eyes. “I should go and speak to Trick; he’s good friends with the Woolfe girl...”

“He’s outside,” said Lahiri. “Maybe give him a bit of time. It’ll be all right, chief. We’ll find the Woolfes. And once we do, we can start actioning the plans for converting the tram!”

“Sounds good.” Fletcher gave a huge yawn.

“Get some sleep, Fletcher,” Lahiri said firmly. “It’s been a hectic day.”

“I might take a quick five minutes,” Fletcher agreed, his eyelids already drooping. “But if there’s any word from the Woolfes, wake me up straight away.”

“I will.” Lahiri nodded. “Straight away.”



When Fletcher woke up, the Woolfes had not arrived. It was midnight, and the stars were falling.



## CHAPTER ONE

# The Exploding Storeroom

*Five years later.*

On the day that it happened, there was nothing to suggest that it was going to be anything other than an ordinary September afternoon in the Smoke. It was drizzly and cold, and a mixture of bikes, sledges and trams packed the streets, their owners apparently having competitions as to who could Shout the Loudest and Almost Kill the Most People. Rain splattered down in sheets, and tall chimneys belched out clouds of the dark purple smoke that had given the city its name.

On this very ordinary day, Harper Woolfe was hurrying down the street towards a tram stop, holding on to a red umbrella as though her life depended on it.

Seeing her tram come into view, Harper picked up speed, accidentally splashing through a puddle and earning a dirty look

from a passer-by. The tram pulled up, and Harper managed to leap on board and grab a seat at the front. She dropped her backpack on the floor and began squeezing water out of her hair.

“...that’s right, we’ll be having dinner at ours before the parade.”

Harper rolled her eyes heavily as the Carver twins and their loyal followers walked past her on their way to the back of the tram. Lawrence and Laci Carver were in Harper’s year at school, and placed joint first on her list of people she *heartily* disliked.

“Father’s been cooking *all* day,” Lawrence declared.

Apparently, they’d also invited most of the kids in Harper’s class round for dinner before the Parade of Progress tonight. Despite her dislike for the twins, Harper couldn’t help feeling a slight pang at not having been included. The Carver twins lived up the hill in the Ivory Borough, in a house shaped like a wedding cake. Harper was surprised they’d deigned to get on the tram at all – they were usually picked up from school in a golden sledge pulled by two sleek white dogs.

“He’s a four-star chef,” Laci chimed in smugly. “He’s made salmon bouillon.”

This made Harper feel a little better. Bouillon, in her opinion, sounded like something that had been thrown up – and sick was still sick, even if it was four-star sick. Besides, Harper’s mum had promised to take her to the parade *and* make apple crumble – a far superior choice of cuisine as far as Harper was concerned.

The tram pulled up at Harper’s stop, and as Harper made her way off, she heard the mutterings of her fellow students.

“Creepy...”

“Those buildings...”

“Who would *ever* choose to live here?” Lawrence Carver said from the back, and this time Harper knew it was for her benefit. She supposed she couldn’t blame them: the deserted streets and boarded-up buildings of the Theatre Borough looked like something out of one of the horror novels that Harper sometimes sneakily checked out of the school library.

For as long as Harper had lived here, she’d heard rumours that these streets had once teemed with life, lit up by neon lights, bustling with people that performed in the theatres. People whispered of singing voices that summoned thunder, instruments that lifted you off your feet, stages that transformed into cities or jungles or entire, glittering oceans. Only whispered, mind: open discussion of such things was strictly forbidden.

Like everyone in the city, Harper knew the story of the night when, at the turn of the last century, the citizens of the Smoke had awoken to find stardust raining down like a soft covering of snow, and starlight trickling in shining fronds that crept down chimneys and seeped through open windows. Reports had flooded in from all over the Sunless Provinces, rumours that the Star-Stuff had come to bestow magic on their citizens.

Things had turned a tad awkward when it became clear that the Star-Stuff hadn’t come to everyone: it had come to the undershirts of the cities, to the winding streets where, from the Smoke to the Cragg Islands, theatres and playhouses were hidden away from

*civilized* society. It had been gifted to the people who played accordions and sang shanties and danced, who were looked upon as riff-raff by the rich and elite. With the arrival of the Star-Stuff, their abilities were lifted to a fantastical new level – and when they had children, those abilities were passed on. But those people were gone now – they’d been driven out by the Minister, leaving nothing but streets of deserted theatres and the ghosts of singing voices.

Harper hurried past Gulliver’s Café, which sold the best hot chocolate in the Smoke, and drew level with Flora’s Fix-It Shop. A small, sandy-coloured cat with a diamanté collar sat outside the door, glowering at everyone who walked past. Harper scowled at it.

“Oh, go away, Truffles.”

Truffles belonged to one of Harper’s neighbours and was her mortal enemy. She liked animals on the whole, but Truffles hissed at her whenever she walked past and, on one memorable occasion, did his business in her new pair of sandals.

Once Truffles had slunk away, Harper pulled open the door to the shop, only to be stopped short by the unmistakable feeling of someone’s eyes on her back. She glanced over her shoulder to find herself being watched intently by a woman across the street. The woman was short and pale, with tumbling blonde curls. Harper met her gaze, and something seemed to shift in the woman’s eyes. Harper wasn’t sure what it was, but she knew the city’s rules about talking to strangers (generally a bad idea), so she tore her eyes away from the woman and stepped inside the shop.

The bell above the door dinged as Harper let the door swing shut behind her. She waved to her mother, who was dressed in her customary hot-pink boiler suit, her hair tied back with a rag. She shared her daughter's copper hair and freckled, lightly tanned skin.

“Hi, Mum.”

“Hi, sweetheart.”

Harper loved the shop: the smell of oil and metal, the random jumble of machinery littered about, the buzzing and whirring of tools. It was the only home she'd ever known.

Or, at least, the only one she could remember.

The first six years of her life were a whirl of confusion for Harper. If she tried very hard, she could just about remember being involved in some sort of accident (“a crash between two commuter trams”, her mother always said firmly). Harper and her mother had survived, but her father had been lost. Shortly afterwards, they'd moved to a tiny flat in the almost-deserted Theatre Borough. Harper sometimes had dreams about these places – in her mind, she saw bright lights and dancing figures and the sound of thunderous applause – but her mother always brushed them off.

The boy was somewhat harder to explain.

“He had blue hair,” Harper told her mother repeatedly.

“I've told you, Harper,” her mother would always reply. “He must have been an imaginary friend.”

Harper supposed this was possible – after all, she spent a lot of time alone – but despite her mother's protestations, she couldn't



shake the feeling that the boy hadn't been imaginary. He felt too real to her: she could imagine his voice, his laugh, his eyes glinting with mischief.

The door to the shop suddenly banged open again, and a scowling man in a frankly outrageous gold fur coat strode into the shop. He slammed a pocket watch on the counter and barked, "I need this looking at. Quick as you can."

Flora glanced over with a frown, but she was already dealing with a customer. Despite the fact that the man had not said please, or even hello, Harper decided to make herself useful and picked up the pocket watch.

"The clockwork is completely fried," she said to the man after a short inspection. "You should get a new watch."

The man sneered. "Oh, that's your advice, is it?"

"Yes." Harper blinked. "That's why I just gave it to you."

"Well thanks, but I'm hardly going to trust the expertise of some little girl," the man scoffed. He yelled over to Flora. "Oi! I haven't got all day here."

Harper sighed. It was somewhat galling to have her expertise sniffed at by a man who was now attempting to fix his watch by banging it repeatedly against the counter, but she bit her lip and kept quiet. Flora finished with the other customer and made her way unhurriedly over to the counter.

"What appears to be the problem?" she asked pleasantly.

The man picked up the watch and shoved it under her nose. Flora examined it for a moment before looking up at him.

“Well, I’m afraid you’ve gone about this in a rather roundabout way, because my daughter had it right the first time. It’s dead. Get a new watch.” Flora smiled sweetly. “That’ll be ten bob for the consultation.”

The man glared between them both as he slapped a ten-bob note on the counter. Harper glared back fiercely and was pleased when he looked away first.

“I shouldn’t have expected any better from this part of town,” he jeered, before turning and storming out of the shop.

“My word,” said Flora mildly. “What a strange man.” She turned to Harper. “Good day at school?”

“Actually...” Harper hesitated. “I have a detention note for you to sign.”

“Do you now?” Her mother raised an eyebrow. “What for?”

Harper sighed. The detention had been a *complete* overreaction. She’d already got into trouble that morning for staring out of the window in a manner that her teacher had deemed “suspiciously dreamy” – so when he saw what Harper had done to her worksheet later that afternoon, he’d practically passed out on the spot.

“What in all the Provinces is that?” he’d asked, his eyes bulging.

“Oh...” Harper had looked down at the sheet. They were meant to have been labelling a diagram of some boring, beige contraption designed to suck dirt from the floor (and, presumably, the joy from your life). Harper hadn’t taken to it, so she’d turned her page over and started designing something a bit different.

“It’s a dragon,” she said. “A mechanical dragon.”

“A – a mechanical dragon?” Mr Gorgon spluttered. “Why would you want a mechanical dragon?”

“Um...” Harper had struggled to come up with an answer to this that wasn’t simply, “Why *wouldn’t* you want a mechanical dragon?”

“I just imagined it. For fun,” she’d said eventually.

Mr Gorgon looked like she’d just told him that she ate puppies for breakfast. “You imagined it? For fun?”

“Yep. I think I could make it fly.”

“Harper,” Mr Gorgon had sighed. “You need to be concentrating on your lessons. You children are the future of the Sunless Provinces, the future of our progress!”

“Really?” Harper had wrinkled her nose. “All of us?”

“Yes.”

“What about Gavin Grundell?”

“What about him?”

“Yesterday I saw him put a caterpillar up his nose,” Harper informed her teacher. “I’m not being funny but if he’s the future of the Provinces, I think we might be in trouble.”

That’s when Mr Gorgon had given her detention.

Harper’s mother laughed as Harper relayed the story. “When’s your detention?”

“Tomorrow after school. It would’ve been tonight if it wasn’t for the parade.”

Flora’s expression turned guilty. “Harper – I’m so sorry, we’ve had an order for a new batch of submarine engines from the

Minister himself. He wants them ready for tomorrow, so I'm not going to be able to take you to the parade after all."

Harper's heart sank. *Everyone* went to the Parade of Progress. It wasn't an especially fun event, but it was about as good as life got in the Smoke. Still, she knew her mum couldn't ignore a new order, especially if it had come straight from the Minister.

"All right," she sighed, swallowing her disappointment. "I have a lot of homework anyway. At least there's apple crumble."

Flora twisted her hands together. "About that..."

"Mum."

"I was going to make it in my lunch break, but it got so busy that I didn't end up having one! I'm sorry."

"Don't worry," Harper sighed. "I'll fix something else to eat."

"Next week, I promise," Flora said firmly. "There'll be so much apple crumble you'll be eating it for breakfast!" She kissed Harper on the forehead, then hurried off to greet another customer. Harper took herself off to the back of the shop, where she'd made herself a little reading nook, complete with a nest of blankets and a *big* pile of books.

"Hello," she greeted them. "Have you all had good days?"

The books didn't reply. Harper sighed. Books were nearly a substitute for people, but they never talked back. Harper ignored the first book on the pile – a tale about a dashing Sir Something-Or-Other slaying a dragon, something that always made her slightly sad, as she tended to prefer dragons to knights in shining armour – and opted instead for a pleasingly terrifying novel about a group of

zombies attacking the local knitting circle and being fought off by a group of old biddies. Settling down into her nook, she opened the book and began to read.



Miles away, across mountains and valleys and through a magical gateway, a woman was running down a corridor, out of breath. She burst into a cluttered office, rather surprising the man who was bent over some papers at an oak desk.

“We’ve found her,” Lahiri panted. “The missing Woolfe child, we’ve finally found her!”

In the corner of the office, a blue-haired boy who was sat by the window, sketching, looked up sharply.

Morgan Fletcher stood up. “Where?”

“She’s down in the Smoke,” Lahiri informed him. “I just had a toast post message from Roper. She saw her.”

Fletcher frowned. Over the years, they’d sent out multiple search parties to look for the missing Woolfes and combed every inch of the mountains surrounding the gateway, with no results. He’d been reluctant to dispatch a party down to the Smoke, sure that the Minister’s police would be lying in wait for any who dared to show their faces again – but with Intake Night rapidly approaching, he’d allowed a small, stealthy group to infiltrate the city.

“Fletcher, she – from what Roper overheard – she doesn’t appear to know anything about us,” said Lahiri hesitantly. “Apparently she attends an ordinary school, and as far as we can

tell, she seems to have little or no memory of all of this.” She gestured around them.

“But – why wouldn’t Flora tell her about us?” Fletcher frowned. “She knows that Harper will need to come to us to train.”

“I don’t know.” Lahiri shrugged.

Fletcher thought for a moment. “Prepare the canoe.”

“Fletcher – Roper’s there already; she can do the pick-up...”

Fletcher shook his head. “I don’t want them staying there any longer than they need to. Besides, the girl will be confused – I think it’s best I explain everything to her.”

“All right.” Lahiri nodded. “Which canoe do you want?”

“Whichever is the fastest. I’m leaving. Now.”

In the corner, Trick grinned widely, his brown eyes glinting.

It was time.



Harper had been reading in her nook for an hour or so when she noticed the first unordinary thing happening. A low humming sound began to fill the air around her, growing steadily louder by the second. Harper looked towards the source, only to find herself staring at the door to the storeroom.

The storeroom, as far as Harper knew, had not been opened since they’d moved in. When they’d first arrived, Flora had carried in a box containing the few of her dad’s possessions that they’d salvaged from the crash, closed the door and padlocked it.

Not once in all the time since, however, had the room *hummed*.

“Do you mind?” Harper asked the room. “I’m trying to read.”

At this, the humming grew louder.

Harper closed her book. Rising from her nook, she edged across the room until she stood in front of the storeroom door. Hesitating only briefly, she raised her hand and placed it against the wood.

There was a pause; then the door promptly exploded.

More specifically, it felt like something *inside* the storage room exploded, and the force jolted the door from within. Harper was propelled backwards, falling gracelessly into a wooden chessboard. The pieces clattered around her as she hit the floor, skidding several feet. She looked up to find sparks bursting out of the storeroom keyhole like fireworks.

“Harper?” Flora came running from the front of the shop to find her daughter wild-eyed and surrounded by pawns. “What happened?”

“I – I –” Harper spluttered. She pointed towards the door, but the sparks had disappeared. The humming noise faded back to a low drone, like a distant tram.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” Flora pulled Harper to her feet, checking her over quickly.

“No,” Harper managed to reply. “But there was – something in that room. It...”

“What?” Her mother peered down at her. Harper bit her lip, trying to think of how to say “the storeroom exploded” in a way that wouldn’t immediately convince her mother that she was dangerously ill and needed confining to her room for the rest of the night.



“Nothing,” Harper said eventually. “Just...tripped.”

Flora ruffled her daughter’s hair affectionately. “Why don’t you head upstairs?”

She steered Harper firmly towards the steps that led up to the flat. Harper peeked over her shoulder to where the storeroom door stood looking perfectly innocent, as though it would never dream of doing something so undignified as exploding.

As she climbed the stairs and let herself in to the flat, Harper couldn’t help mulling over the explosion in her mind. There was something about the silver sparks and the low humming noise; something that seemed familiar somehow, although she couldn’t quite put her finger on why.