

WE ALL
FALL
DOWN

ROSE SZABO

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
NEW YORK

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*For my beloved,
who knows that words are not enough*



WE ALL FALL DOWN



BEING AN ACCOUNT OF
THE LIVES OF FOUR YOUNG PEOPLE
OF RIVER CITY

As told to R. L. Emblem

In the Year of Queen Zara 42.

PROLOGUE

In the secret city at the hub of the world, the revolution was over. King Nathan the Giant was locked in his own dungeon, waiting to stand trial. But the heavy rains would not stop falling in cold sheets as Astrid made her way to the palace.

People wanted to be in the streets, but the pounding rain drove them back, and so they huddled in archways and under awnings. Yellow squares of light stained the water that pattered ankle-deep in the street as Astrid scurried along. On a wide porch, teenagers in palace livery sang the city anthem in four-part harmony. They stopped as she passed, and some of the boys gave her ragged salutes. She dipped her umbrella forward, a kind of nod, and kept going. No matter who saluted her, she was alone out here in the middle of the street, as she sloshed her way through the puddles. Nobody else had any reason to venture forth tonight. Nobody else's life was coming apart in their hands.

At last, she came to the palace. Its front gateway was unguarded, and the iron gates lay crumpled in a slag heap on the cobbles, so she traveled uninterrupted through the sentryless double doors into the atrium with its great mural of Otiotan fighting the serpent with his flaming sword. Here there was a party. And when they saw who stood in the atrium shaking the rain from her umbrella, the crowd let up a cheer. Astrid, the small brown witch they'd known since they were children, who was now their champion. Astrid,

who had blown the gates off the palace with her powerful witchcraft. Astrid, with a sprig of wild mint pinned to her coat, to signify that she was one of the people. Astrid, whose pager was always on to answer the calls of the sick and the needy.

She had to be careful. This was supposed to be a people's revolution. She didn't want to draw too much attention to herself. Didn't want to risk becoming a Hero. She almost laughed at the thought: a flaming sword in one small hand. Any blushing Maiden would have to bend down to cling to Astrid.

Still, it was useful that no one would stop her. Why would they? She was on their side. They'd let her go wherever she pleased.

Where she wanted to go, of course, was the dungeon.

She picked her way through the clusters of revolutionaries who cluttered the halls and vaulted rooms of the palace, stripped to their underwear or wrapped in towels made from torn-down banners. They'd broken into the vintage, and now they were getting smashed on wine older than their grandparents. She made her way down through the winding levels of the palace, past the kitchens, where a bunch of drunk ten-year-olds were trying to roast a pig on a spit under the direction of the palace's old cook, who winked and grinned at her as she passed.

The guards at the edge of the dungeon saluted her. Kyle and Pete, of course. They'd joined the revolution for the same reasons they'd joined baseball games and bar fights: They liked to feel part of something. They were sloshed, too, but trying to hide it behind good posture.

"What of the prisoner?" she said.

"He hasn't spoken or taken food this past day."

"I'll try to get him to eat," she said. "We need him to be strong enough to stand trial."

They nodded fervently.

"Will you execute him, Astrid?" Kyle asked. "It would be fitting."

"No, dummy," Pete said. "It has to be all of us. We'll throw rocks at him or something."

She tossed her head. "Leave me."

They glanced at each other briefly, and then hurried out of the corridor and up the stairs. She knew she'd find them in the kitchen when she was done, drinking with the kids.

The king was in the last cell at the far end of the hallway. Of course he was. It was almost laughable, how things always went exactly the way you would expect. On the table just outside the cell was a dented plate with a few slices of stale bread on it; no wonder he hadn't eaten. She slid back the iron partition that covered the little barred window. "Nathan," she said.

He stood up perfectly straight, his arms folded behind his back as though he were examining a piece of art. His red beard was streaked with blood from his chin, and more blood was crusted on his eyebrow. He smiled when he saw her. Oh, they'd broken his front teeth. She winced, and tried to hide it.

"Astrid," he said. "It's good to see you."

Astrid's heart swelled in her chest. Her king, now and forever. A great thinker, an inventor, big like a tree. Thirty now, with wrinkles blooming at the corners of his eyes. A man with a voice that could lead armies. She had to steady herself against the door to stop her knees from buckling, seeing him like this.

"There's no need for your bluster, tyrant," she said. "We're

alone.” She hoped he would take her meaning: that they were alone, but to still be careful.

“My apologies, old friend.”

“Hardly friend to you these days.”

He shook his head. She knew what he meant, so he didn’t have to risk saying it out loud. They’d always been like this, even after Marla. Always knew the other’s mind.

“Where’s Marla?” he asked.

“The people blame her,” she said. “They are saying that without her, your excesses would not have been possible. She has fled.”

Nathan’s brow furrowed. “Is she hurt?”

“Rest assured,” Astrid said. “She’ll be found.”

He put a hand to his mouth.

“Please,” he said. “You have to do something about the baby.”

“That’s up to me now, isn’t it?”

He managed a smile. She smiled back.

He mouthed to her through the bars: *Come here*. She took a step closer to the grate, and he approached it from his side. Then: *Shut your eyes*.

In the darkness behind her eyelids, Astrid stood close to King Nathan the Giant. She took her hands off the cold door so that she could pretend there was nothing between them but air. He was right in front of her, so tall that her head only came up to his chest. She could smell his cologne from here, and behind it his breath, sour from hunger and tinged with blood. And something else, too: a metallic smell.

He’d been standing when she approached, she realized, because he’d been standing all day.

She opened her eyes.

"It's getting worse, isn't it?" she said.

He laughed a little, and she could see him flinch when the air hit his broken teeth. "It's bad today. I can't bend my knees."

Astrid's stomach dropped. "But you're not king anymore."

"We knew there was a chance it wouldn't work that way."

Astrid's heart sank. Everything they'd done to make things different, and it still wasn't enough.

Astrid tried not to let her fear show on her face, although they both knew what would happen to him soon; what happened to every king. She'd need to do something about that, and soon, but she wasn't sure yet what. She had no plan. She—

"I really thought it could be different," he said. "I thought *I* could be different. But I'm like all of them, aren't I? I can feel myself going mad. And now—" He looked down at his legs.

"Stop that," Astrid snapped. "This isn't over yet."

He was looking at her again with those clear eyes. Astrid had a hard time with his eyes these days. He was right. He was entering his madness. But he wasn't there yet.

She'd been working on this spell without telling him for some time. He wouldn't have approved, would have told her that they should focus on their plan, that if it worked, they'd both be free. But Astrid was never one to count on a single plan. And now she was frightened, but relieved.

She quietly said a word or two, and felt a little ping on her scalp as one of her braids undid itself. It would take a few minutes to work, if she'd done it right. And by then she'd be long gone. She looked at Nathan, trying not to cry.

"You should eat something," she said.

He nodded, looking weary. "I will," he said. "Just make sure this is over."

She fled from the dungeon. In the kitchen, she told the spit-turning guards to fix the prisoner a plate, a good one this time. And then she went upstairs, through mazes of corridors, stole a raincoat, and let herself out through a side door into the rainy night.

As soon as she was out of sight of the palace, she said the four words that would release another spell she'd braided earlier. It came undone, and she was no longer walking but skimming low across the ground. It was faster this way, and she needed to be fast. She needed to get to Marla before it was too late. Luckily, she knew the queen well. She knew exactly where she'd go in a crisis.

She slid over the wet streets, the rain quickly soaking her skirt, and over the edge of the hill that led down to the riverbank. When she reached the river, her heels dipped just below the surface, soaking through her worn-out boots. She swore and skidded on. The water was raging tonight, and the magic that kept her just above it could barely keep up with it. She stuttered along the waves, picking up her feet to avoid logs that were tossed as easily as kindling in the torrent. She kept her eyes ahead as she ran, on the island that loomed ahead, and the crude stone castle built directly into the island's cliffside. The summer palace. No light came from it that she could see. Good. Marla had enough sense to hide.

When she reached the island, she found herself running sideways up a wall of debris: churning logs and branches that battered against the palace's battlements with every surge of the river. Her

foot got caught and she heard something snap. Before she could feel it, she unleashed another spell she'd saved in a braid, the one that killed pain completely. This was too important for her to be distracted. She cleared the wall and floated down into the courtyard beyond. She glanced down only briefly before deciding that pain or no pain, she didn't want to look at her foot just yet.

When Astrid opened one side of the great double doors, she spotted the heap in the corner immediately. A Black woman was huddled under a plaid blanket against the far wall of the great feast hall, next to a battery-powered lantern draped with a scarf. Her legs were splayed out in front of her and she clutched her belly with both hands. As Astrid got closer, Marla looked up at her with those wide, lovely eyes that swayed everyone who saw them.

She was beautiful, Astrid had to admit. Even with rivulets of sweat running down her forehead, even with her mouth locked in a grimace, she was the most beautiful woman who had ever lived. And more than that, she glowed from the inside, a font of living magic. It drew people to her; everyone wanted a little bit of what she had.

"You came," Marla said.

"Of course I did," Astrid snapped. She didn't like the implication that she might not. "Them turning on you was a surprise. What happened here?"

"I was running, and I fell," Marla said. "I think something's broken. And they're not coming."

Astrid let go of the spell that held her aloft, and even with the numbing, she instantly regretted putting weight on her foot. "Let me see," she said, and dropped to her knees. She realized the floor

wasn't slick with water, as she'd thought, but with blood. A lot of it. Oh no. "Are you in pain?" she asked.

"Not anymore," Marla said. And then, seeing the look on Astrid's face, "That can't be good, can it?"

"It's not." Astrid put her hand on Marla's thigh, and it came back red. "How long have you been bleeding like this?"

"I don't know. A while."

Marla was a problem, Astrid thought as she worked. The most beautiful woman who had ever lived, a living fountain of love and magic, wife of the king, and she was so—so passive. How long had she been lying there while her life ebbed away, without doing anything, without tearing rags, without trying to save herself? Maybe that was why people lined up to do what Marla wanted. Maybe that was—

It was then that Astrid felt what Marla had already known. There wasn't one baby. There were two. And something else was wrong, too.

"Marla," Astrid said. "They're twins."

Marla smiled patiently. "I know."

"One of them is . . . wrapped around the other. It doesn't feel like the cord. It feels like—"

"One of them is special."

"I'm not sure—"

"Do whatever you need to do."

She made Astrid feel stupid. Damn her. Astrid worked by the light of the lantern until time grew hazy. She talked to Marla the way she'd talk to any laboring mother: making jokes, getting her to tell stories, keeping her awake. She undid spell after spell,

feeling the braids burst loose on her aching head: a spell for more blood, a spell for a weak heart.

Everyone loved Marla. Even Astrid, who could barely stand her, loved her. It was impossible not to love her. Astrid fought back tears; she had to work.

“What do you think about names?” she asked when Marla fell silent for too long, when her breathing got too shallow.

“I don’t know about the girl,” Marla said. “But the boy’s name is David.”

“David,” Astrid said. “That’s a good name. How’d you think of that?”

She felt Marla’s breathing change, and then stop. “Shit,” Astrid said. She hated this. She undid a braid she’d been saving, one that was probably a bad idea: a spell to separate things that were stuck.

And then, all at once, there was a bundle of sticky flesh in her arms. One baby, and one tangle of boneless red snakes wrapped around it. She should have saved the spell. The baby wasn’t crying, and his—his!—face was turning blue. Astrid screamed and dug her fingernails into the shape that wrapped around the baby’s neck, and the thing made of snakes hissed and fell backward onto the floor in a heap. And then in the light from the lantern, Astrid saw it plainly.

It had a body like a child: two arms, two legs, a head of dark hair. A face that already looked like Marla’s, wide-eyed and innocent. But it also had eight horrible long arms like an octopus, longer than its body, growing out of its back and sides, lined on the underside with rows of red suckers. Its hissing mouth was filled with rows of tiny teeth like a piranha. Astrid clutched the wailing

baby to her chest and stared down at the thing lying on the floor in the puddle of Marla's blood.

It was horrible. Horrible, horrible. And Marla—Astrid looked down.

Whatever force had animated Marla, that had drawn witches and street sweepers and kings to her, had deserted her. She was dead. And Astrid's heart sank. If Marla was dead, they had no Maiden. And without a Maiden, no magic.

Astrid could feel it receding already, that current that she had always dipped into to make order in her world. To heal and to hurt. With Marla gone, it was like the tide had gone out and left her stranded.

There was nobody here to see her cry, so she let herself cry while she wrapped the baby in Marla's old scarf. David. He looked so much like Nathan. Beautiful. What would he become without parents?

The other thing was trying to drag itself onto its belly. Astrid hated to look at it. She shuddered, and limped away. She had to do something with this baby. She had to keep him safe.

For a moment, she had a vision of keeping him. Astrid the revolutionary and her beautiful son. But she shook the thought from her head. It would raise too many questions, her going off into the night and coming back with a baby. She swallowed the lump in her throat. He wouldn't be safe anywhere in this city, not with his mother dead and his father locked up. They'd want to kill him, too, just to make sure that the whole business didn't start up again. The son of a dethroned king and a dead queen was a good bet for a Hero.

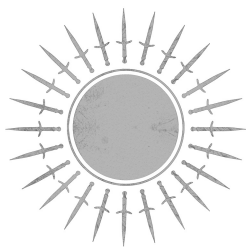
A tiny, desperate hope bloomed in Astrid. She tried not to think of Nathan saying *You have to do something about the baby*. Surely, he didn't mean it like that. And even if he did, he was in his madness. And Marla was gone. There was no one here to make a decision but her.

So she had to get him out of here. She'd need to get him to the mainland, somewhere no one would recognize him. And maybe if she was lucky, he'd be back before Nathan was dead. Before the last of the magic had ebbed from the world like blood from a wound. Heroes always came just in time.

She staggered from the summer palace, into the driving rain. She undid one last braid. She hoped it would be enough. She tried not to think of Marla dead. There would be plenty of time in the coming days and weeks to feel the losses of tonight.

The baby in her arms wriggled, and for a moment, she thought of the other thing, the thing she had left on the floor. But between the pain blooming in her foot, the driving rain, and the warm baby sleeping in her arms and breaking her heart, Astrid blotted it from her mind.

THE FALL



ONE

It was still August when Jesse ran away.

He'd been a good son, stopped asking questions about where he was allowed to go or when, looked down when Paul called him faggot, and mumbled *yes, sir, yes, ma'am* at the dinner table. He'd given his paychecks to Paul, and had hidden an envelope of tips, skimmed a dollar or two at a time, in the gap between the floor and the baseboard where he'd kept the postcard his best friend had sent him when he was eleven. He'd turned eighteen and sat quietly through the argument where his mom said he was just a kid and Paul said he was a man and should be fending for himself, and he'd waited for them to go camping for their anniversary, and he'd bought a ticket to the place on the postcard: a gleaming jeweled island city, like the Mont-Saint-Michel, with a great iron suspension bridge connecting it to the mainland. *Greetings from River City*, said the postcard. And on the back, in crabbed tiny boy handwriting, a note.

One by one, all Jesse's other secret places had been found: the shoebox in the back of his closet where he kept a girl's black T-shirt and a pair of soccer socks. The loose floorboard under the bed where he'd hid a magazine or two for a while. One at a time, like fortresses under siege, those hiding places had fallen. But the gap in the baseboard hadn't let him down yet. It had saved him \$200 and that postcard. And so that was what he had when he left his house

at 11:45 p.m. on a clear night, right at the end of summer when the heat was starting to break. He walked to the bus station, his big backpack heavy with packed sandwiches, clean underwear, and library books he felt a little guilty about planning to never return.

He'd done some research on the internet about River City. It wasn't supposed to be real; he'd only found it on old message boards, most of which were full of random nonsense about ghosts and games you could play with elevators and time travel. They'd said that to get a ticket, you had to go to a bus station at midnight on a clear night with a breeze in one of a handful of towns, and get on the bus that pulled up, and pay them whatever they asked for. Some of the older stories said that they'd ask for weird things, like blood, or hair, or a sigh, or the name of your true love. Other people said that was bullshit, that they'd been on the bus this year even, and all they'd wanted was cash. Jesse wasn't sure, but he was ready to give them whatever they asked for. It couldn't be worse than staying where he was.

The bus station was closed, so he huddled outside against the wall, hiding in his sweatshirt. He hoped that nobody would see him; Paul drank with cops, and they'd ratted Jesse out before. He pulled his hood over his face and folded his arms across his chest, hoping he looked tough. Tough was hard for him. He was too skinny, his face too soft and round for it to really carry off well.

From outside of him, we can see how beautiful he is. A little bit lanky and awkward, but with a good gentle face. A scar on his forehead, usually hidden by a soft shock of hair, that he got from Paul, with some help from the sharp edge of a coffee table. Until he was fifteen, he'd told people it was a witch's mark.

He checked his watch. Midnight. No bus. He waited. Buses were late, right? But minutes wore past, and he started to feel like an idiot. Maybe he should just come back in the morning, get on a bus to New York, or wherever it was that kids like him went when they ran away from home. Not that he was a kid anymore. Paul said it often enough.

He was about to shoulder his backpack and go home when he saw a bus coming down the road.

It wasn't a bus like the kind he was used to. It looked like a silver bullet trailer, with red trim, and windows set on an angle, giving the impression of speed, and big wide headlights and a wide front fender that looked like a cartoon mouth. He laughed out loud when he saw it. This was more like it. This was a magic bus to a city that only people on the internet knew about. One hundred percent.

It came to a halt, and the shadowy bus driver pulled a lever to hinge open the doors, and Jesse shouldered his backpack and stumbled up the steps. "Hi," he said. He looked around. There were only a few other people on the bus. A mother sitting near two girls wrapped in a blanket, falling over each other to press their faces to the window. A middle-aged couple and a dog. Jesse grinned wildly at all of them. And then the bus driver, an impossibly jowly and warty man, stuck out his hand.

"What do you need?" Jesse asked.

"What you got?"

Jesse rummaged around in his wad of cash. "I can do . . . fifty?" he said.

"Looks like more than fifty."

"What's the price? Is there a price?"

"Give me all of that."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"Do you want on the bus or not?"

Jesse felt a stab of fear. Every bit of money he had seemed like a little too much, even for a journey into a magical world. But what choice did he have?

"Or I'll take that postcard," the bus driver said.

Jesse wondered for a second, fearful, how the man had known about the postcard. And then he realized he'd gotten it out with the money. It wobbled in his trembling hands.

"Uh," Jesse said. "Why?"

"Maybe it's valuable."

Jesse swallowed. "I'll give you the cash," he said.

The driver took the wad from him. "Sit wherever."

Jesse stumbled to a seat and fell into it, dazed and panicking. This wasn't at all what he'd planned for. Now he was on a bus with no money. He clutched the postcard for a while before stuffing it into his backpack. Nobody was taking that from him.

The bus rumbled along for hours, through small towns. Jesse wondered vaguely why the lore said the bus came at midnight, when it was clear that it was on a regular damn bus schedule, picking people up between something like 11 p.m. and 4 a.m., and late to each stop by the impatient, desperate looks of the people getting on board. The bus driver extorted all of them, although some people managed to talk him down to something reasonable. One guy didn't have any money, and Jesse watched the driver barter with him for his hat and his jacket and eventually his pocket

square. The man sat down in the row opposite Jesse, looking lost and bereft. He kept putting his hand to something under his sweater that jerked periodically. Jesse watched, fascinated, until they stopped in another small town and a woman got on with a scarf wrapped so tightly around her throat that it almost hid the lump bulging from the side of her face.

As the bus filled up, Jesse realized that about half the people who got on had something they were hiding. He started scoping out the people who'd been on when he'd boarded, and realized that the girls sitting by the window were fused at the hip: two girls, one pair of legs. They were fighting over whether the window was going to be cracked open or shut.

Eventually, Jesse drifted off to sleep in the warm darkness of the bus, knocked out by the hissing of the hydraulic brakes and the rumble of the engine. He rocked from side to side, his legs tucked up and braced against the seat in front of him, his head propped on his knees for a pillow. The murmur of voices talking quietly entered his dream in dribs and drabs. *What if it doesn't work? This hospital is the best—they'll know what to do. Girls, stop hitting. I'm hungry.* Snores. The sound of the girls hitting each other and giggling while their mother shushed them angrily. He felt a kind of vague kinship with all of them. After all, there was something wrong with him, too.

He had to go now because he had to get away. He had a feeling that if he stayed, he was going to die. Not of sickness or accident, but because he would get himself killed. Maybe wanted to get himself killed. That feeling had been building in him for months.

It'd hit a peak in the last few days of junior year, when a kid he

kind of knew—a starter on the football team—had been in the bathroom at the same time as him. Jesse usually got out of the way of guys like that; he was skinny, they were big. But for some reason he'd stared at him, and the guy had seen him staring, and before Jesse knew what was up, he'd been against the wall, the guy's palms grinding his shoulders into the cinderblocks, the guy's hips against him, too. Jesse wasn't sure in that moment if he was about to kiss him or murder him in cold blood, but the bathroom door had started to open, and the guy had let him go, and he'd escaped, for now, the fate he seemed to be courting. He had to fix himself, before something worse happened.

The sun slanting through the window woke him up at last. It was morning, and they were rumbling along an empty, straight country road, corn on both sides, waving in the breeze, as far as he could see. Trees behind the corn. It was like a corridor of nothing, a long, empty drive.

The man sitting opposite him saw that he was awake, and winked at him. Jesse realized it wasn't pocket square guy, who had moved several seats back and was eyeing them warily. This was a massive white guy wearing a greasy black raincoat, with a wild white beard like a feral Santa Claus. He was younger, though, than most of the men Jesse had seen who had beards like that. He also had a milky right eye, like a cataract, under which his pupil swam, just barely visible. Something about the guy looked familiar to Jesse, but he couldn't place him.

The man fished around in his pocket, and Jesse winced, until the man pulled out a hard candy in a crinkled yellow wrapper. "Want one?" he asked.

"No," Jesse said. "Thanks."

"This bus used to be faster."

"You taken it a lot?"

"Not in a long time," the man said. Jesse realized he smelled vaguely of piss, and also something else: a coppery smell like corroded metal. The guy took out a bottle from somewhere inside his coat, and uncapped it, and took a swig. He was missing a few teeth in the front. "I like to ride it now and then. Scope out what's going on."

"Huh."

"Here's a history lesson," the man said. "People used to come to River City because it was where they could be the way they are without attracting much attention. Then the hospital opened. Now they come here to get themselves cut up and put back together in the shape of ordinary people." He tipped the bottle in Jesse's direction; Jesse shook his head. "Is that what you're here for, girl? To get yourself cut up and sewn into something that makes sense?"

Jesse looked around to see if anyone else had heard. No one else appeared to be listening at all. The mother with the twin girls was checking her phone, over and over again, while the twin girls slept tangled in each other's arms. The middle-aged couple was petting their increasingly nervous dog. He'd sometimes had this happen before, people mistaking him for a girl. He didn't like how happy it made him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said to the old man.

"I don't have time for your feelings," the man said. "I got on here to warn you about something."

Jesse felt a prickle, like he might have to sneeze, or like he might be about to explode. And something else, too. The thrill of impending adventure.

"Tell me," Jesse said.

The man looked somber, like he was about to say something. And then he twitched, and his expression buckled. "Oh, shit," he said, groaning. His voice changed, and so did his demeanor, and all at once he looked stupid, helpless. He looked down at the bottle in his hand. "Fuck," he said, and took a big gulp of it, spilling some of it into his beard. Jesse had thought earlier that it was all white, but now he saw it was streaked through with red. The big man swallowed, wiped the back of his mouth with one hand, and tried to focus his one good eye on Jesse.

"I have a hard time," the old man said. "I have a hard time staying present."

Ah, okay. This was the kind of guy who always tried to talk to Jesse. It was something about his open face, he guessed. He had one of those faces that said, *Please, tell me everything bad that's ever happened to you.*

Jesse sighed. "It's okay," he said. "You called me a girl. How did you know?"

"I said that?" Jesse started to give up, but the man chewed on a fingernail. "No, I wouldn't call you *a* girl. I would've said *the* girl."

"What's that mean?"

"Ugh." The old man clutched his head. "Fuck. Okay. Important question. What time are we upon?"

"What?"

"Have y'all killed the monster already?"

“What monster?”

“How about the Hero? Have you met him?”

“Uh . . . no? I don’t think so?”

“Do you know you’re the girl?”

“You just told me.”

“Jesus.” The man shut his eyes, and took a big sniff, like he was trying to swallow a booger. He popped his eyes open and the milky one rolled around in his head. “You got anything I could eat? That helps.”

“You’ve got some hard candies.”

“Right on.” The man dug around in his own pocket. “Huh, maybe I don’t have them yet . . .”

“River City ahoy,” the bus driver called out.

Jesse looked away from the old man, and up through the bus’s bulging windshield. They must have been slowly climbing, because now they were cresting a hill, and below them, spread out, was a great and winding river.

It was called the Otiotan, he knew from the forums. They’d placed the river’s origins somewhere in Virginia, or Tennessee, or Kentucky, but no one could say where it met the ocean. It lay across a valley, wider than any river he’d ever seen, like an unknown Mississippi. And in the middle of it was the island, shaped like a great teardrop, low at the upstream end, with a great hill on the downstream side. Gleaming with great silver buildings, and covered in trees. Jesse had never imagined a city could be so green.

“Wow,” the old man across from him said.

“I thought you said you’d been there before.”

“What are you talking about?” the man said. He glanced over

at Jesse, and smiled, showing a mouthful of perfect teeth. Jesse blinked, not sure what he was seeing, or what he had seen before. “You going there, too? Maybe we can seek our fortunes together.”

“Uh,” Jesse said. “Look, man, I—”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” the man said. “More fortune for me.” He propped his arms behind his head, flipped his hat down over his face, and appeared, to Jesse, to be getting ready for a quick nap.

Jesse studied the man. Even with his face covered, there really was something familiar about him that was hard to place. Something about his large square frame, the elasticity of his smile, even his weird way of talking, reminded Jesse of someone he’d known before, a long time ago. Or maybe it was just because they’d both called Jesse a girl without meaning it as an insult.

But Jesse lost the thread of that thought as the bus descended the hill and hit the bridge that led to the city. The wheels switched from a low rumble to a sharp staccato. The wind rushing through the metal bridge sounded almost like a harmonica, and below them in the river was a smaller island with a ruined castle on it, and Jesse lost himself in imagining being down among those rocks. And then, before he could breathe in to will it away, he felt that prickle again, and then a sharp *pop*.

It hurt, like having all your joints dislocated and jammed back in at new angles, like growing new organs, like a total bodyectomy, and the accompanying dizziness as his inner ear tried to compensate and the cramps, good god, the cramps. And Jesse sat there stunned. She knew without looking exactly what had happened to her, even though it was impossible, or at the very least, unlikely.

The old man in the seat glanced over at her. “Huh,” he said. “I thought so.”

Jesse widened her eyes at him. “Don’t say anything,” she hissed.

“I’ll be quiet,” the old man said. “But will you?”

They’d crossed the bridge, and were suddenly on a long boulevard with low old buildings on one side, and on the other, towering new ones. The bus was slowing. The old man jerked a thumb at the bus driver.

“He’s gonna sell you to the hospital if you stay on this bus,” he said, not bothering to keep his voice low. “They’d pay great for someone like you.”

The bus driver turned in his chair as the bus stopped for a light. “Who said that?”

The old man winked his blind eye at Jesse. “Go find the baker’s on God Street. Tell Astrid I say hello.”

“Astrid,” Jesse repeated.

“Yup. Watch your back.”

The bus driver put on the hazard lights, and stood up. “Huh,” the driver said, looking at Jesse. “Good tip, old man.”

The old man stood up and blocked the bus driver’s path. “Run,” he said. And Jesse snatched up her backpack and ran for the back of the bus.

“Stop that kid!” the bus driver yelled. Stunned passengers stared, doing nothing, as Jesse sprinted past them. She ran for the back of the bus, found the emergency exit door, and flung it open. An alarm went off. Behind her, she saw the driver shove the old man out of the way. And she leaped.

Jesse had always been good at thinking on her feet, but now she

was off of them, and careening toward the hood of an old Cadillac. She bent her knees, like they learned in track doing the high jump, and let them buckle under her as she rolled off the hood backward and hit the ground. It hurt, but adrenaline had her up in a second, backpack still on, sweatshirt hood flapping as she ducked through the next lane of traffic. Stunned, she noticed it was mostly bicycles and mopeds that flew around her, riders screaming at her, as she flung herself at the far sidewalk, where she scrambled away into a park on the far side. She glanced back just long enough to see the driver hanging out of the back door of the bus, yelling at her to get back there.

Jesse had always liked running. She wasn't the fastest in track, but she showed up and ran and liked the feeling of being alone, just her and her feet and the wind.

As she sprinted away, she thought briefly that this was the first time in her life she'd run quite like this. Running into the unknown, with no idea what was on the other side to catch her.

TWO

When Astrid closed up the bakery that afternoon, she stepped out the back door and found Nathan waiting for her. He was upright, his legs stiff under him, in the alley behind the shop. He had an urgent look about him. It was going to be one of those days, then.

“I saw her,” he said.

Astrid pursed her lips. “Saw who?” she asked.

He sighed in exasperation. “You know who,” he said. “The Maiden.”

“Where is she, then?”

He looked around. “Lost her.”

Astrid resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She reminded herself that he was doing his best. It was not a great best, but she could hardly blame him.

“Are you sure it was her?” she asked. “Could it have been someone else?”

“Well, it *was* a boy,” he said.

She stepped up to him and gave him a once-over. He was looking the worse for wear, one hand dangling limp and heavy from his shoulder. She reassured herself that he wouldn’t stay that way. The next time she saw him, he’d be as young as he was the day she met him, most likely.

“I have an errand to run,” she said.

“I’m serious,” he called after her. “He’s here. It’s time!”

“Then hurry it along!” she called over her shoulder. “If you find him, bring him straight to me.”

She kept walking, hoping she’d make it to her stop in time to catch the last bus bound downtown. But when she got there, it had already left, or maybe it wasn’t running today—she could never master this new bus schedule, and she was sure that was on purpose; the hospital had bought out the bus lines, and they didn’t run regularly between the Old and New cities the way they used to. Now she’d have to hoof it.

Long walks weren’t good for her foot. It had never quite healed right, two bones fusing. If this were the old days, she’d break it and reset it with magic. Her friend Didi, whose nephew was a hospital orderly, had suggested that she go to their free clinic and see if they could arrange a surgery. But the idea of going downtown to those horrible white towers growing like mushrooms out of her landscape filled her with unspeakable dread. They might be willing to help out an old lady, and maybe take her picture for an advertisement, but they killed people down there. She wanted nothing to do with them.

She managed to hitch a ride; Astrid Epps standing on the side of the road with her thumb out was a compelling sight. The cop who picked her up was, of course, Pete McNair. He made his partner, a younger man, climb into the back to let her sit in the front. She appreciated it. Pete was a bully, but he respected witches, and her in particular.

“How’s your mother doing, Pete?” Astrid asked.

“She’s hanging in there,” Pete said, his eyes fixed on the road in front of him. “I’ll tell her you asked after her.”

“Hanging in there doesn’t sound so good,” Astrid said. “She still living on Pine?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll talk to Didi and have her swing by with some Saint John’s wort.”

“Preciate it.”

“It’s no trouble,” Astrid said. “Who’s this young friend of yours?”

“That’s Officer Mannering,” Pete said. “He’s a good kid. Right, Matthew?”

Matthew looked up from the back seat. He was a lanky white boy with soft eyes. He wasn’t from around here, Astrid realized, because if he were, she’d know that last name. She’d be able to place him in a genealogy, name his grandparents, extrapolate his likely address based on how much money his father made and how protective his mother was. It was uncanny to her, sometimes, to meet people from the New City. Like the feeling when you’d just had a tooth capped, and it didn’t yet feel like a part of your mouth.

“You must have come here for college,” Astrid said. “What’d you study?”

He looked unnerved by the question. “Uh, biology,” he said. That was the other thing. They were so cagey, these out-of-towners, when she asked them questions. As though they didn’t understand that she was trying to place them, figure out how they fit into her cosmology, so that she could be more useful to them. Didn’t he understand that now that she knew that, she knew also that he’d dropped out of school to join the police? That meant that either his grades were bad or he’d run out of money. A few more

questions and she'd be able to set him up on dates, refer him to an appropriate witch for services, bake him a cake for his birthday. He didn't know what his suspicion was cheating him out of.

"Astrid's the mayor," McNair said. "She just likes to know who all her constituents are."

"Thank you, Pete," Astrid said. The boy looked even more confused, though, so she added, "Not a real mayor. People just call me that because I'm in everybody's business."

The boy relaxed. "Oh. Okay," he said. "My mom's like that back home."

"Where's back home for you?" Astrid said. "If you don't mind my asking."

"Kansas," he said.

She nodded. "That's a long way to travel."

"I really wanted to go to school here," Matthew said. "It was the best program."

Probably money, then, or something else beyond his control, had made him leave. Maybe he was born under the star of scattering, or melancholy. Astrid made a note of that. As long as she was having Didi brew some Saint John's wort.

"Where are you getting out?" Pete asked.

"If you can just drop me at the Boulevard, that's fine."

They let her off where God Street intersected with the Boulevard of Bells. That was a fine enough walk. She had to let Matthew out of the back of the cop car, and he got back into the passenger's seat with just a little bit of attitude she didn't like. She'd want to watch him. He had a lot of authority for someone who didn't know the city. She hoped Pete wouldn't get him into any trouble. Pete was

fine by himself, but bad news when he had someone egging him on. She'd been relieved when he and Kyle had gone their separate ways.

She was definitely late as she headed for the bridge that led off the island and toward places she didn't particularly care about. The underside of the bridge was her aim. She veered off the sidewalk and onto the dirt track that led to a steep incline. The city had sunk logs into the side of the slope with rebar to make a kind of rough staircase, but it was often half-covered with eroded dirt, and it took all her concentration to pick her way down it. When she reached the bottom and finally looked around, she realized that the boy she was waiting to meet was already there. And when she focused on him, she gasped in spite of herself.

It was him. She almost couldn't believe it.

He was a young light-skinned Black man, as spectacularly tall as young Nathan had been, and with that auburn hair, those freckles, that square jaw, he could be no other man's son. But he looked like Marla, too: a little chubby, and with deep, serious-looking eyes behind smudged, wire-rimmed glasses. He wore a blue Oxford shirt that strained across his broad shoulders, and khakis that had red dirt on one leg. He must have slid, coming down the slope. He stood hunched in his clothes like he was embarrassed about something. She felt the bottom drop out of her life.

"Hi," the boy said. "Are you okay?"

Astrid squinted. "Sorry," she said. "You reminded me of someone."

He gave a single, bitter *hah*. "I haven't heard that one before."

She put her hand out. "I'm Astrid," she said.

He shook it. "David."

So whoever had taken him had kept his name. He looked down and scuffed one of his boat shoes into the dirt. He was so New City, she thought. Amazing that he could be born here and still look so out of place.

She thought maybe she should give him the book for free. But no, if things were starting back up again, she needed to buy herself some time to think about how she was going to react—she couldn't have him getting suspicious. So she said, "Do you have the money?"

He pulled out a wad of cash from his pocket, held together with a binder clip. She undid the clip and riffled the money with her thumb before sticking it into her dress pocket. She took the book, wrapped in brown paper, from her bag, and passed it over to him.

He was the Hero. He had to be. He was the son of the last Hero and the city's king, taken from his home, and he'd found his way back. He fit into the slot like a coin. And look at him. Tall, powerful, the spitting image of his mother and father. He'd look good in the crown of freshwater pearls that was gathering dust in the museum downtown. She tried to keep the pride off her face, the triumph of knowing that he was alive because of what she had done.

"All right," she said. "Good luck with it. I'll see you soon."

"Wait," he said. "Who are you, really?"

"Nobody important," she said. "And if anyone asks, you didn't get that book from me."

Her foot sent shooting pains up through her calf as she climbed back up the steep slope. But she ignored it. A part of her was worried. But a part of her was filled with boundless joy.

If it was starting up again, and David was going to be the Hero, maybe things could be different this time. After all, they'd nearly won last time, would have if Marla hadn't—well. Astrid could help him. Especially, she thought, if they had magic to work with.

She stuck out her thumb again and caught a bike cab belonging to Laurie, whose mother was prone to migraines. As the wheels jostled along the cobbles, she thought about finding a moment to talk to David again. But not now. She needed to get home, and not be too late. If the girls found out she'd sold a book to a university student, they'd have opinions. And of course, they couldn't know about David.

She'd have to do it just right. The cycle could be capricious, latch on to any old nobody. Like King Frank, who'd only been the Hero because, on Carnival Night, he happened to smash the right guy over the head with a beer bottle. A terrible choice, but he'd right-place-right-timed his way into history. Astrid would have to be absolutely sure she set David up to win. It was the least she could do. For him, for magic, for Nathan, mad and wandering. Maybe with David's help, she could get him back.

She had Laurie drop her off outside her shop—if anyone was early to her house, she didn't want them asking questions about where she'd come from. As she turned from waving goodbye, she spotted Nathan a little bit down the street. He was waving his arm at some white boy in a sweatshirt. And then he looked up and caught her eye and mouthed obviously. *Found him.*

Any other day, Astrid would have waved him off. But today she'd seen David. Today was a day for coincidences—and coincidences, as every witch knew, were the harbingers of fate.