

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

The
STARLESS
SEA



ERIN
MORGENSTERN

AUTHOR OF *The Night Circus*

'A mystical adventure in an enchanted universe' *TIME*

ERIN MORGENSTERN

Erin Morgenstern is the author of *The Night Circus*, a bestseller that has enchanted readers around the world and has been translated into thirty-seven languages. She has a degree in Theatre from Smith College, an ever-growing collection of jewellery made from skeleton keys, and a cat on her lap. She lives in Massachusetts.

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ALSO BY ERIN MORGENSTERN

The Night Circus



THE STARLESS SEA

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20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

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Penguin
Random House
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First published in Vintage in 2020
First published in hardback by Harvill Secker in 2019

penguin.co.uk/vintage

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781784702861

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



The Starless Sea

BOOK I



SWEET
SORROWS



SWEET SORROWS

Once, very long ago . . .



There is a pirate in the basement.

(The pirate is a metaphor but also still a person.)

(The basement could rightly be considered a dungeon.)

The pirate was placed here for numerous acts of a piratey nature considered criminal enough for punishment by those non-pirates who decide such things.

Someone said to throw away the key, but the key rests on a tarnished ring on a hook that hangs on the wall nearby.

(Close enough to see from behind the bars. Freedom kept in sight but out of reach, left as a reminder to the prisoner. No one remembers that now on the key side of the bars. The careful psychological design forgotten, distilled into habit and convenience.)

(The pirate realizes this but withholds comment.)

The guard sits in a chair by the door and reads crime serials on faded paper, wishing he were an idealized, fictional version of himself. Wondering if the difference between pirates and thieves is a matter of boats and hats.

After a time he is replaced by another guard. The pirate cannot discern the precise schedule, as the basement-dungeon has no clocks to mark the time and the sound of the waves on the shore beyond the stone walls muffles the morning chimes, the evening merriment.

This guard is shorter and does not read. He wishes to be no one but himself, he lacks the imagination to conjure alter egos, even the imagination to empathize with the man behind the bars, the only other soul in the room beyond the mice. He pays elaborate amounts of attention to his shoes when he is not asleep. (He is usually asleep.)

Approximately three hours after the short guard replaces the reading guard, a girl comes.

The girl brings a plate of bread and a bowl of water and sets them outside the pirate's cell with hands shaking so badly that half the water spills. Then she turns and scampers up the stairs.

The second night (the pirate guesses it is night) the pirate stands as close to the bars as he can and stares and the girl drops the bread nearly out of reach and spills the bowl of water almost entirely.

The third night the pirate stays in the shadows of the back corner and manages to keep most of his water.

The fourth night a different girl comes.

This girl does not wake the guard. Her feet fall more softly on the stones and any sound they make is stolen away by the waves or by the mice.

This girl stares into the shadows at the barely visible pirate, gives a little disappointed sigh, and places the bread and bowl by the bars. Then she waits.

The pirate remains in the shadows.

After several minutes of silence punctuated by the guard's snoring, the girl turns away and leaves.

When the pirate retrieves his meal he finds the water has been mixed with wine.

The next night, the fifth night if it is night at all, the pirate waits by the bars for the girl to descend on her silent feet.

Her steps halt only briefly when she sees him.

The pirate stares and the girl stares back.

He holds out a hand for his bowl and his bread but the girl places them on the ground instead, her eyes never leaving his, not allowing so much as the hem of her gown to drift into his reach. Bold yet coy. She gives him a hint of a bow as she returns to her feet, a gentle nod of her head, a movement that reminds him of the beginning of the dance.

(Even a pirate can recognize the beginning of a dance.)

The next night the pirate stays back from the bars, a polite distance that could be closed in a single step, and the girl comes a breath closer.

Another night and the dance continues. A step closer. A step back. A movement to the side. The next night he holds out his hand again to accept what she offers and this time she responds and his fingers brush against the back of her hand.

The girl begins to linger, staying longer each night, though if the guard stirs to the point of waking she departs without a backward glance.

She brings two bowls of wine and they drink together in companionable silence. The guard has stopped snoring, his sleep deep and restful. The pirate suspects the girl has something to do with that. Bold and coy and clever.

Some nights she brings more than bread. Oranges and plums secreted in the pockets of her gown. Pieces of candied ginger wrapped in paper laced with stories.

Some nights she stays until moments before the changing of the guards.

(The daytime guard has begun leaving his crime serials within reach of the cell's walls, ostensibly by accident.)

The shorter guard paces tonight. He clears his throat as though he might say something but says nothing. He settles himself in his chair and falls into an anxious sleep.

The pirate waits for the girl.

She arrives empty-handed.

Tonight is the last night. The night before the gallows. (The gallows are also a metaphor, albeit an obvious one.) The pirate knows that there will not be another night, will not be another changing of the guard after the next one. The girl knows the exact number of hours.

They do not speak of it.

They have never spoken.

The pirate twists a lock of the girl's hair between his fingers.

The girl leans into the bars, her cheek resting on cold iron, as close as she can be while she remains a world away.

Close enough to kiss.

"Tell me a story," she says.

The pirate obliges her.

SWEET SORROWS

There are three paths. This is one of them.



Far beneath the surface of the earth, hidden from the sun and the moon, upon the shores of the Starless Sea, there is a labyrinthine collection of tunnels and rooms filled with stories. Stories written in books and sealed in jars and painted on walls. Odes inscribed onto skin and pressed into rose petals. Tales laid in tiles upon the floors, bits of plot worn away by passing feet. Legends carved in crystal and hung from chandeliers. Stories catalogued and cared for and revered. Old stories preserved while new stories spring up around them.

The place is sprawling yet intimate. It is difficult to measure its breadth. Halls fold into rooms or galleries and stairs twist downward or upward to alcoves or arcades. Everywhere there are doors leading to new spaces and new stories and new secrets to be discovered and everywhere there are books.

It is a sanctuary for storytellers and storykeepers and story-lovers. They eat and sleep and dream surrounded by chronicles and histories and myths. Some stay for hours or days before returning to the world above but others remain for weeks or years, living in shared or private chambers and spending their hours reading or studying or writing, discussing and creating with their fellow residents or working in solitude.

Of those who remain, a few choose to devote themselves to this space, to this temple of stories.

There are three paths. This is one of them.

This is the path of the acolytes.

Those who wish to choose this path must spend a full cycle of the moon in isolated contemplation before they commit. The contem-

plation is thought to be silent, but of those who allow themselves to be locked away in the stone-walled room, some will realize that no one can hear them. They can talk or yell or scream and it violates no rules. The contemplation is only thought to be silent by those who have never been inside the room.

Once the contemplation has ended they have the opportunity to leave their path. To choose another path or no path at all.

Those who spend their time in silence often choose to leave both the path and the space. They return to the surface. They squint at the sun. Sometimes they remember a world below that they once intended to devote themselves to but the memory is hazy, like a place from a dream.

More often it is those who scream and cry and wail, those who talk to themselves for hours, who are ready when the time comes to proceed with their initiation.

Tonight, as the moon is new and the door is unlocked, it reveals a young woman who has spent most of her time singing. She is shy and not in the habit of singing, but on her first night of contemplation she realized almost by accident that no one could hear her. She laughed, partly at herself and partly at the oddity of having voluntarily jailed herself in the most luxurious of cells with its feather bed and silken sheets. The laugh echoed around the stone room like ripples of water.

She clasped her hand over her mouth and waited for someone to come but no one did. She tried to recall if anyone had told her explicitly not to speak.

She said "Hello?" and only the echoes returned her greeting.

It took a few days before she was brave enough to sing. She had never liked her singing voice but in her captivity free of embarrassment and expectation she sang, softly at first but then brightly and boldly. The voice that the echo returned to her ears was surprisingly pleasant.

She sang all the songs she knew. She made up her own. In moments when she could not think of words to sing she created nonsense languages for lyrics with sounds she found pleasing.

It surprised her how quickly the time passed.

Now the door opens.

The acolyte who enters holds a ring of brass keys. He offers his other palm to her. On it sits a small disk of metal with a raised carving of a bee.

Accepting the bee is the next step in becoming an acolyte. This is her final chance to refuse.

She takes the bee from the acolyte's palm. He bows and gestures for her to follow him.

The young woman who is to be an acolyte turns the warm metal disk over in her fingers as they walk through narrow candlelit tunnels lined with bookshelves and open caverns filled with mismatched chairs and tables, stacked high with books and dotted with statues. She pets a statue of a fox as they pass by, a popular habit that has worn its carved fur smooth between its ears.

An older man leaning through a volume glances up as they pass and recognizing the procession he places two fingers to his lips and inclines his head at her.

At her, not at the acolyte she follows. A gesture of respect for a position she does not yet officially hold. She bows her head to hide her smile. They continue down gilded stairways and through curving tunnels she has never traversed before. She slows to look at the paintings hung between the shelves of books, images of trees and girls and ghosts.

The acolyte stops at a door marked with a golden bee. He chooses a key from his ring and unlocks it.

Here begins the initiation.

It is a secret ceremony. The details are known only to those who undergo it and those who perform it. It has been performed in the same fashion always, as long as anyone can remember.

As the door with the golden bee is opened and the threshold crossed the acolyte gives up her name. Whatever name this young woman was called before she will never be addressed by it again, it stays in her past. Someday she may have a new name, but for the moment she is nameless.

The room is small and round and high-ceilinged, a miniature version of her contemplation cell. It holds a plain wooden chair on

one side and a waist-high pillar of stone topped with a bowl of fire. The fire provides the only light.

The elder acolyte gestures for the young woman to sit in the wooden chair. She does. She faces the fire, watching the flames dance until a piece of black silk is tied over her eyes.

The ceremony continues unseen.

The metal bee is taken from her hand. There is a pause followed by the sound of metal instruments clinking and then the sensation of a finger on her chest, pressing into a spot on her breastbone. The pressure releases and then it is replaced by a sharp, searing pain.

(She will realize afterward that the metal bee has been heated in the fire, its winged impression burned into her chest.)

The surprise of it unnerves her. She has prepared herself for what she knows of the rest of the ceremony, but this is unexpected. She realizes she has never seen the bare chest of another acolyte.

When moments before she was ready, now she is shaken and unsure.

But she does not say *Stop*. She does not say *No*.

She has made her decision, though she could not have known everything that decision would entail.

In the darkness, fingers part her lips and a drop of honey is placed on her tongue.

This is to ensure that the last taste is sweet.

In truth the last taste that remains in an acolyte's mouth is more than honey: the sweetness swept up in blood and metal and burning flesh.

Were an acolyte able to describe it, afterward, they might clarify that the last taste they experience is one of honey and smoke.

It is not entirely sweet.

They recall it each time they extinguish the flame atop a bees-wax candle.

A reminder of their devotion.

But they cannot speak of it.

They surrender their tongues willingly. They offer up their ability to speak to better serve the voices of others.

They take an unspoken vow to no longer tell their own stories in

reverence to the ones that came before and to the ones that shall follow.

In this honey-tinged pain the young woman in the chair thinks she might scream but she does not. In the darkness the fire seems to consume the entire room and she can see shapes in the flames even though her eyes are covered.

The bee on her chest flutters.

Once her tongue has been taken and burned and turned to ash, once the ceremony is complete and her servitude as an acolyte officially begins, once her voice has been muted, then her ears awaken.

Then the stories begin to come.

SWEET SORROWS

To deceive the eye.



The boy is the son of the fortune-teller. He has reached an age that brings an uncertainty as to whether this is something to be proud of, or even a detail to be divulged, but it remains true.

He walks home from school toward an apartment situated above a shop strewn with crystal balls and tarot cards, incense and statues of animal-headed deities and dried sage. (The scent of sage permeates everything, from his bedsheets to his shoelaces.)

Today, as he does every school day, the boy takes a shortcut through an alleyway that loops behind the store, a narrow passage between tall brick walls that are often covered with graffiti and then whitewashed and then graffitied again.

Today, instead of the creatively spelled tags and bubble-lettered profanities, there is a single piece of artwork on the otherwise white bricks.

It is a door.

The boy stops. He adjusts his spectacles to focus his eyes better, to be certain he is seeing what his sometimes unreliable vision suggests he is seeing.

The haziness around the edges sharpens, and it is still a door. Larger and fancier and more impressive than he'd thought at first fuzzy glance.

He is uncertain what to make of it.

Its incongruousness demands his attention.

The door is situated far back in the alley, in a shadowed section hidden from the sun, but the colors are still rich, some of the pigments metallic. More delicate than most of the graffiti the boy has seen. Painted in a style he knows has a fancy French name, some-

thing about fooling the eye, though he cannot recall the term here and now.

The door is carved—no, painted—with sharp-cut geometric patterns that wind around its edges creating depth where there is only flatness. In the center, at the level where a peephole might be and stylized with lines that match the rest of the painted carving, is a bee. Beneath the bee is a key. Beneath the key is a sword.

A golden, seemingly three-dimensional doorknob shimmers despite the lack of light. A keyhole is painted beneath, so dark it looks to be a void awaiting a key rather than a few strokes of black paint.

The door is strange and pretty and something that the boy does not have words for and does not know if there are words for, even fancy French expressions.

Somewhere in the street an unseen dog barks but it sounds distant and abstract. The sun moves behind a cloud and the alley feels longer and deeper and darker, the door itself brighter.

Tentatively, the boy reaches out to touch the door.

The part of him that still believes in magic expects it to be warm despite the chill in the air. Expects the image to have fundamentally changed the brick. Makes his heart beat faster even as his hand slows down because the part of him that thinks the other part is being childish prepares for disappointment.

His fingertips meet the door below the sword and they come to rest on smooth paint covering cool brick, a slight unevenness to the surface betraying the texture below.

It is just a wall. Just a wall with a pretty picture on it.

But still.

Still there is the sensation tugging at him that this is more than what it appears to be.

He presses his palm against the painted brick. The false wood of the door is a brown barely a shade or two off from his own skin tone, as though it has been mixed to match him.

Behind the door is somewhere else. Not the room behind the wall. Something more. He knows this. He feels it in his toes.

This is what his mother would call a moment with meaning. A moment that changes the moments that follow.

The son of the fortune-teller knows only that the door feels important in a way he cannot quite explain, even to himself.

A boy at the beginning of a story has no way of knowing that the story has begun.

He traces the painted lines of the key with his fingertips, marveling at how much the key, like the sword and the bee and the door-knob, looks as though it should be three-dimensional.

The boy wonders who painted it and what it means, if it means anything. If not the door at least the symbols. If it is a sign and not a door, or if it is both at once.

In this significant moment, if the boy turns the painted knob and opens the impossible door, everything will change.

But he does not.

Instead, he puts his hands in his pockets.

Part of him decides he is being childish and that he is too old to expect real life to be like books. Another part of him decides that if he does not try he cannot be disappointed and he can go on believing that the door could open even if it is just pretend.

He stands with his hands in his pockets and considers the door for a moment more before walking away.

The following day his curiosity gets the better of him and he returns to find that the door has been painted over. The brick wall whitewashed to the point where he cannot even discern where, precisely, the door had been.

And so the son of the fortune-teller does not find his way to the Starless Sea.

Not yet.



January 2015

There is a book on a shelf in a university library.

This is not unusual, but it is not where this particular book should be.

The book is mis-shelved in the fiction section, even though the majority of it is true and the rest is true enough. The fiction section of this library is not as well traversed as other areas, its rows dimly lit and often dusty.

The book was donated, part of a collection left to the university per the previous owner's last will and testament. These books were added to the library, classified by the Dewey Decimal System, given stickers with barcodes inside their covers so they could be scanned at the checkout desk and sent off in different directions.

This particular book was scanned only once to be added to the catalogue. It does not have an author named within its pages, so it was entered in the system as "Unknown" and started off amongst the U-initialed authors but has meandered through the alphabet as other books move around it. Sometimes it is taken down and considered and replaced again. Its binding has been cracked a handful of times, and once a professor even perused the first few pages and intended to come back to it but forgot about it instead.

No one has read this book in its entirety, not since it has been in this library.

Some (the forgetful professor included) have thought, fleetingly, that this book does not belong here. That perhaps it should be in the special collection, a room that requires students to have written

permission to visit and where librarians hover while they look at rare books and no one is allowed to check anything out. There are no barcodes on those books. Many require gloves for handling.

But this book remains in the regular collection. In immobile, hypothetical circulation.

The book's cover is a deep burgundy cloth that has aged and faded from rich to dull. There were once gilded letters impressed upon it but the gold is gone now and the letters have worn away to glyph-like dents. The top corner is permanently bent from where a heavier volume sat atop it in a box during a stretch in a storage facility from 1984 to 1993.

Today is a January day during what the students refer to as J-term, when classes have not yet started but they are already welcomed back on campus, and there are lectures and student-led symposiums and theatrical productions in rehearsal. A post-holiday warm-up before the regular routines begin again.

Zachary Ezra Rawlins is on campus to read. He feels mildly guilty about this fact, as he should be spending his precious winter hours playing (and replaying, and analyzing) video games in preparation for his thesis. But he spends so much time in front of screens he has a near-compulsive need to let his eyeballs rest on paper. He reminds himself that there is plenty of subject overlap, though he has found subject overlap between video games and just about anything.

Reading a novel, he supposes, is like playing a game where all the choices have been made for you ahead of time by someone who is much better at this particular game. (Though he sometimes wishes choose-your-own-adventure novels would come back into fashion.)

He has been reading (or rereading) a great many children's books as well, because the stories seem more story-like, though he is mildly concerned this might be a symptom of an impending quarter-life crisis. (He half expects this quarter-life crisis to show up like clockwork on his twenty-fifth birthday, which is only two months away.)

The librarians took him to be a literature major until one of them struck up a conversation and he felt obliged to confess he was actually one of those Emerging Media Studies people. He missed the secret identity as soon as it was gone, a guise he hadn't even realized

he enjoyed wearing. He supposes he looks like a lit major, with his square-framed glasses and cable-knit sweaters. Zachary still has not entirely adjusted to New England winters, especially not one like this with its never-ceasing snow. He shields his southern-raised body with heavy layers of wool, wrapped in scarves and warmed with thermoses full of hot cocoa that he sometimes spikes with bourbon.

There are two weeks left in January and Zachary has exhausted most of his to-read list of childhood classics, at least the ones in this library's collection, so he has moved on to books he has been meaning to read and others chosen at random after testing the first few pages.

It has become his morning ritual, making his choices in the book-dampened library quiet of the stacks and then returning to his dorm to read the day away. In the skylighted atrium, he shakes the snow from his boots on the rug by the entrance and drops *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Shadow of the Wind* into the returns box, wondering if halfway through the second year of a master's degree program is too late to be unsure about one's major. Then he reminds himself that he likes Emerging Media and if he'd spent five and a half years studying literature he would probably be growing weary of it by now, too. A reading major, that's what he wants. No response papers, no exams, no analysis, just the reading.

The fiction section, two floors below and down a hallway lined with framed lithographs of the campus in its youth, is, unsurprisingly, empty. Zachary's footsteps echo as he walks through the stacks. This section of the building is older, a contrast to the bright atrium at the entrance, the ceilings lower and the books stacked all the way up, the light falling in dim confined rectangles from bulbs that have a tendency to burn out no matter how often they are changed. If he ever has the money after graduating Zachary thinks he might make a very specific donation to fix the electrical wiring in this part of the library. Light enough to read by brought to you by Z. Rawlins, Class of 2015. You're welcome.

He seeks out the W section, having recently become enamored of Sarah Waters, and though the catalogue listed several titles, *The Little Stranger* is the only one on the shelf so he is saved decision-making. Zachary then searches for what he thinks of as mystery books, titles

he does not recognize or authors he has never heard of. He starts by looking for books with blank spines.

Reaching to a higher shelf that a shorter student might have needed a stepladder to access, he pulls down a cloth-covered, wine-colored volume. Both spine and cover are blank, so Zachary opens the book to the title page.

Sweet Sorrows

He turns the page to see if there is another that lists the author but it moves directly into the text. He flips to the back and there are no acknowledgments or author's notes, just a barcode sticker attached to the inside of the back cover. He returns to the beginning and finds no copyright, no dates, no information about printing numbers.

It is clearly quite old and Zachary does not know much about the history of publishing or bookbinding, if such information is possibly not included in books of a certain age. He finds the lack of author perplexing. Perhaps a page has gone missing, or it was misprinted. He flips through the text and notices that there are pages missing, vacancies and torn edges scattered throughout though none where the front matter should be.

Zachary reads the first page, and then another and another.

Then the lightbulb above his head that has been illuminating the U–Z section blinks and darkens.

Zachary reluctantly closes the book and places it on top of *The Little Stranger*. He tucks both books securely under his arm and returns to the light of the atrium.

The student librarian at the front desk, her hair up in a bun skewered by a ballpoint pen, encounters some difficulty with the mysterious volume. It scans improperly first, and then as some other book entirely.

"I think it has the wrong barcode," she says. She taps at her keyboard, squinting at the monitor. "Do you recognize this one?" she asks, handing the book to the other librarian at the desk, a middle-aged man in a covetable green sweater. He flips through the front pages, frowning.

"No author, that's a new one. Where was it shelved?"

"In fiction, somewhere in the Ws," Zachary answers.

"Check under Anonymous, maybe," the green-sweatered librarian suggests, handing back the book and turning his attention to another patron.

The other librarian taps the keyboard again and shakes her head. "Still can't find it," she tells Zachary. "So weird."

"If it's a problem . . ." Zachary starts, though he trails off, hoping that she'll just let him take it. He feels oddly possessive about the book already.

"Not a problem, I'll mark it down in your file," she says. She types something into the computer and scans the barcode again. She pushes the authorless book and *The Little Stranger* across the desk toward him along with his student ID. "Happy reading!" she says cheerfully before turning back to the book she had been reading when Zachary approached the desk. Something by Raymond Chandler, but he cannot see the title. The librarians always seem more enthusiastic during J-term, when they can spend more time with books and less with frazzled students and irate faculty.

During the frigid walk back to his dorm Zachary is preoccupied by both the book itself, itching to continue reading, and wondering why it was not in the library system. He has encountered minor problems with such things before, having checked out a great number of books. Sometimes the scanner will not be able to read a barcode but then the librarian can type the number in manually. He wonders how they managed in the time before the scanner, with cards in catalogues and little pockets with signatures in the backs of books. It would be nice to sign his name rather than being a number in a system.

Zachary's dorm is a brick building tucked amongst the crumbling cluster of graduate residences and covered in dead, snow-dusted ivy. He climbs the many stairs to his fourth-floor room, tucked into the eaves of the building, with slanted walls and drafty windows. He has covered most of it with blankets and has a contraband space heater for the winter. Tapestries sent from his mother drape the walls and make the room admittedly cozier, partially because he cannot seem to get the sage smell out no matter how many times he washes them. The MFA candidate next door calls it a cave, though it is more like a den, if dens had Magritte posters and four different gaming systems.

His flat-screen TV stares out from the wall, black and mirrorlike. He should throw a tapestry over it.

Zachary puts his books on his desk and his boots and coat in the closet before heading down the hall to the kitchenette to make a cup of cocoa. Waiting for the electric kettle to boil he wishes he had brought the wine-colored book with him, but he is trying to make a point of not having his nose constantly in a book. It is an attempt to appear friendlier that he's not certain is working yet.

Back in his den with the cocoa he settles into the beanbag chair bequeathed to him by a departing student the year before. It is a garish neon green in its natural state, but Zachary draped it with a tapestry that was too heavy to hang on the wall, camouflaging it in shades of brown and grey and violet. He aims the space heater at his legs and opens *Sweet Sorrows* back to the page the unreliable library lightbulb had stranded him on and begins to read.

After a few pages the story shifts, and Zachary cannot tell if it is a novel or a short-story collection or perhaps a story within a story. He wonders if it will return and loop back to the previous part. Then it changes again.

Zachary Ezra Rawlins's hands begin to shake.

Because while the first part of the book is a somewhat romantic bit about a pirate, and the second involves a ceremony with an acolyte in a strange underground library, the third part is something else entirely.

The third part is about him.

The boy is the son of the fortune-teller.

A coincidence, he thinks, but as he continues reading the details are too perfect to be fiction. Sage may permeate the shoelaces of many sons of fortune-tellers but he doubts that they also took shortcuts through alleyways on their routes home from school.

When he reaches the part about the door he puts the book down.

He feels light-headed. He stands up, worried he might pass out and thinking he might open the window and instead he kicks over his forgotten mug of cocoa.

Automatically, Zachary walks down the hall to the kitchenette to get paper towels. He mops up the cocoa and goes back to the kitch-

enette to throw away the sopping towels. He rinses his mug in the sink. The mug has a chip he is not certain was there before. Laughter echoes up the stairwell, far away and hollow.

Zachary returns to his room and confronts the book again, staring at it as it rests nonchalantly on the beanbag chair.

He locks his door, something he rarely does.

He picks up the book and inspects it more thoroughly than he had before. The top corner of the cover is dented, the cloth starting to fray. Tiny flecks of gold dot the spine.

Zachary takes a deep breath and opens the book again. He turns to the page where he left off and forces himself to read the words as they unfold precisely the way he expects them to.

His memory fills in the details left off the page: the way the white-wash reached halfway up the wall and then the bricks turned red again, the dumpsters at the other end of the alley, the weight of his schoolbook-stuffed backpack on his shoulder.

He has remembered that day a thousand times but this time it is different. This time his memory is guided along by the words on the page and it is clear and vibrant. As though the moment only just happened and is not more than a decade in the past.

He can picture the door perfectly. The precision of the paint. The trompe l'oeil effect he couldn't name at the time. The bee with its delicate gold stripes. The sword pointed upright toward the key.

But as Zachary continues reading there is more than what his memory contains.

He had thought there could be no stranger feeling than stumbling across a book that narrates a long-ago incident from his own life that was never relayed to anyone, never spoken about or written down but nevertheless is unfolding in typeset prose, but he was wrong.

It is stranger still to have that narration confirm long-held suspicions that in that moment, in that alleyway facing that door he was given something extraordinary and he let the opportunity slip from his fingers.

A boy at the beginning of a story has no way of knowing that the story has begun.

Zachary reaches the end of the page and turns it, expecting his

story to continue but it does not. The narrative shifts entirely again, to something about a dollhouse. He flips through the rest of the book, scanning the pages for mentions of the son of the fortune-teller or painted doors but finds nothing.

He goes back and rereads the pages about the boy. About him. About the place he did not find behind the door, whatever a Starless Sea is supposed to be. His hands have stopped shaking but he is light-headed and hot, he remembers now that he never opened the window but he cannot stop reading. He pushes his eyeglasses farther up the bridge of his nose so he can focus better.

He doesn't understand. Not only how someone could have captured the scene in such detail but how it is here in a book that looks much older than he is. He rubs the paper between his fingers and it feels heavy and rough, yellowing to near brown around the edges.

Could someone have predicted him, down to his shoelaces? Does that mean the rest of it could be true? That somewhere there are tongueless acolytes in a subterranean library? It doesn't seem fair to him to be the solitary real person in a collection of fictional characters, though he supposes the pirate and the girl could be real. Still, the very idea is so ludicrous that he laughs at himself.

He wonders if he is losing his mind and then decides that if he is able to wonder about it he probably isn't, which isn't particularly comforting.

He looks down at the last two words on the page.

Not yet.

Those two words swim through a thousand questions flooding his mind.

Then one of those questions floats to the surface of his thoughts, prompted by the repeated bee motif and his remembered door.

Is *this* book from *that* place?

He inspects the book again, pausing at the barcode stuck to the back cover.

Zachary looks closer, and sees that the sticker is obscuring something written or printed there. A spot of black ink peeks out from the bottom of the sticker.

He feels mildly guilty about prying it off. The barcode was faulty,

anyway, and likely needs to be replaced. Not that he has any intention of returning the book, not now. He peels the sticker off slowly and carefully, trying to remove it in one piece and attempting not to rip the paper below it. It comes off easily and he sticks it to the edge of his desk before turning back to what is written below it.

There are no words, only a string of symbols that have been stamped or otherwise inscribed onto the back cover, faded and smudged but easily identifiable.

The exposed dot of ink is the hilt of a sword.

Above it is a key.

Above the key is a bee.

Zachary Ezra Rawlins stares at the miniature versions of the same symbols he once contemplated in an alleyway behind his mother's store and wonders how, exactly, he is supposed to continue a story he didn't know he was in.

SWEET SORROWS

Invented life.



It began as a dollhouse.

A miniature habitat carefully constructed from wood and glue and paint. Meticulously crafted to re-create a full-size dwelling in the most exquisite level of detail. When it was built it was gifted to and played with by children, illustrating daily happenings in simplified exaggerations.

There are dolls. A family with a mother and father and son and daughter and small dog. They wear delicate cloth replicas of suits and dresses. The dog has real fur.

There is a kitchen and a parlor and a sunroom. Bedrooms and stairs and an attic. Each room is filled with furniture and decorated with miniature paintings and minuscule vases of flowers. The wallpaper is printed with intricate patterns. The tiny books can be removed from the shelves.

It has a roof with wooden shingles each no bigger than a fingernail. Diminutive doors that close and latch. The house opens with a lock and key and expands, though most often it is kept closed. The doll life inside visible only through the windows.

The dollhouse sits in a room in this Harbor on the Starless Sea. The history of it is missing. The children who once played with it long grown and gone. The tale of how it came to be placed in an obscure room in an obscure place is forgotten.

It is not remarkable.

What is remarkable is what has evolved around it.

What is a single house, after all, with nothing surrounding it? Without a yard for the dog. Without a complaining neighbor across the street, without a street to have neighbors on at all?

Without trees and horses and stores. Without a harbor. A boat. A city across the sea.

All this has built up around it. One child's invented world has become another's, and another's, and so on until it is everyone's world. Embellished and expanded with metal and paper and glue. Gears and found objects and clay. More houses have been constructed. More dolls have been added. Stacks of books arranged by color serve as landscape. Folded-paper birds fly overhead. Hot air balloons descend from above.

There are mountains and villages and cities, castles and dragons and floating ballrooms. Farms with barns and fluffy cotton sheep. A working clock of a reincarnated watch keeps time atop a tower. There is a park with a lake and ducks. A beach with a lighthouse.

The world cascades around the room. There are paths for visitors to walk on, to access the corners. There is the outline of what was once a desk beneath the buildings. There are shelves on the walls that are now distant countries across an ocean with carefully rippled blue paper waves.

It began as a dollhouse. Over time, it has become more than that. A dolltown. A dollworld. A dolluniverse.

Constantly expanding.

Almost everyone who finds the room feels compelled to add to it. To leave the contents of their pockets repurposed as a wall or tree or temple. A thimble becomes a trash can. Used matchsticks create a fence. Loose buttons transform into wheels or apples or stars.

They add houses made from broken books or rainstorms conjured from glass glitter. They move a figure or a landmark. They escort the tiny sheep from one pasture to another. They reorient the mountains.

Some visitors play in the room for hours, creating stories and narratives. Others look around, adjust a crooked tree or door, and depart. Or they simply move the ducks around the lake and are satisfied with that.

Anyone who enters the room affects it. Leaves an impression upon it even if it is unintentional. Quietly opening the door lets a

soft draft rustle over the objects inside. A tree might topple. A doll might lose its hat. An entire building might crumble.

An ill-placed step might crush the hardware store. A sleeve could catch on the top of a castle, sending a princess tumbling to the ground below. It is a fragile place.

Any damage is usually temporary. Someone will come along and provide repairs. Restore a fallen princess to her battlement. Rebuild the hardware store with sticks and cardboard. Create new stories upon the old ones.

The original house in the center changes in subtler ways. The furniture moves from room to room. The walls are painted or papered over. The mother and father dolls spend time separately in other structures with other dolls. The daughter and son leave and return and leave again. The dog chases cars and sheep and dares to bark at the dragon.

Around them, the world grows ever larger.

It sometimes takes the dolls quite a while to adapt.



ZACHARY EZRA RAWLINS sits on the floor of his closet with the door closed, surrounded by a forest of hanging shirts and coats, his back up against where the door to Narnia would be if his closet were a wardrobe, having something of an existential crisis.

He has read *Sweet Sorrows* in its entirety and read it again and thought perhaps he should not read it a third time but read it a third time anyway because he could not sleep.

He still cannot sleep.

Now it is three a.m. and Zachary is in the back of his closet, a version of his favorite reading spot when he was a child. A comfort he has not returned to in years and never in this closet, which is ill-suited for such sitting.

He sat in his childhood closet after he found the door, he remembers that now. It was a better closet for sitting. A deeper one, with pillows he had dragged in to make it more comfortable. That one didn't have a door to Narnia, either, he knows because he checked.

Only the singular section of *Sweet Sorrows* is about him, though there are pages missing. The text comes back to the pirate and the girl again but the rest is disjointed, it feels incomplete. Much of it revolves around an underground library. No, not a library, a book-centric fantasia that Zachary missed his invitation to because he didn't open a painted door when he was eleven.

Apparently he went around looking for the wrong imaginary entryways.

The wine-colored book rests at the foot of the bed. Zachary will not admit to himself that he is hiding from it, in the closet where it cannot see him.

A whole book and he has no idea even after reading it three times how he should proceed.

The rest of the book doesn't feel as tangible as those few pages near the beginning. Zachary has always had a complicated view of magic because of his mother, but while he can grasp herbalism and divination the things in the book are very much beyond his definition of real. *Magic* magic.

But if those few pages about him are real, the rest could be . . .

Zachary puts his head between his knees and tries to keep his breathing steady.

He keeps wondering who wrote it. Who saw him in that alleyway with the door and why they wrote it down. The opening pages imply that the first stories are nested: the pirate telling the story about the acolyte, the acolyte seeing the story about the boy. Him.

But if he's in a story within a story who is telling it? Someone must have typeset it and bound it in a book.

Someone somewhere knows this story.

He wonders if someone somewhere knows he's sitting on the floor of his closet.

Zachary crawls out into his room, his legs stiff. It is near dawn, the light outside his window a lighter shade of dark. He decides to take a walk. He leaves the book on the bed. His fingers start twitching immediately, wanting to take it with him so he can read it again. He wraps his scarf around his neck. Reading a book four times in one day is perfectly normal behavior. He buttons his wool coat. Having a physical response to a lack of book is not unusual. He tugs his knit hat down over his ears. Everyone spends nights on the floor of their closet during grad school. He pulls on his boots. Finding an incident from your childhood in an authorless mystery book is an everyday occurrence. He slips his hands into his gloves. Happens to everyone.

He puts the book in the pocket of his coat.

Zachary trudges through newly fallen snow without a destination in mind. He passes the library and continues toward a hilly stretch of campus near the undergraduate dorms. He could adjust his route to pass his old dorm but he does not, he always finds it strange to look at a window he used to look out from the other side. He works his way

through the crisp unbroken snow, crushing the pristine surface under his boots.

He usually enjoys the winter and the snow and the cold even when he can't feel his toes. There's a wonder to it, left over from reading about snow in books before he got to experience it for himself. His first snow was a laughter-filled night spent in the field outside his mother's farmhouse, making snowballs with his bare hands and constantly losing his footing in shoes he discovered after the fact were not waterproof. Inside their cashmere-lined gloves, his hands tingle thinking about it.

He is always surprised how quiet the snow is, until it melts.

"Rawlins!" a voice calls from behind him and Zachary turns. A bundled figure with a striped hat waves a brightly mittened hand at him and he watches the mismatched color move over a field of white as it trudges up the hill through the snow, sometimes hopping in the foot holes he has left. When the figure is a few yards away he recognizes Kat, one of the few undergrads from his department who has moved from acquaintance to almost-friend, mostly because she took it upon herself to get to know everyone and he has been Kat-approved. She runs a video-game-themed cooking blog and tends to try out her often delicious experiments on the rest of them. *Skyrim*-inspired sweet rolls and classic *BioShock* cream-filled cakes and maraschino truffle odes to *Pac-Man* cherries. Zachary suspects she doesn't sleep and she has a tendency to appear out of thin air to suggest cocktails or dancing or some other excuse to coerce him out of his room, and while Zachary has never articulated the fact that he is grateful to have someone like her in his otherwise highly introverted lifestyle he is pretty sure she already knows.

"Hey, Kat," Zachary says when she reaches him, hoping he won't appear as off-kilter as he feels. "What brings you out so early?"

Kat sighs and rolls her eyes. The sigh drifts away as a cloud in the frigid air.

"God-awful early is the only hour I can get lab time for as-of-yet unofficial projects, how 'bout you?" Kat shifts her bag on her shoulder and nearly loses her balance, Zachary puts a hand out to steady her but she recovers on her own.

“Couldn’t sleep,” Zachary answers, which is true enough. “Are you still working on that scent-based project?”

“I am!” Kat’s cheeks betray the smile hidden by her scarf. “I think it’s the key to immersive experience, virtual reality isn’t all that real if it doesn’t smell like anything. I can’t figure out how to get it to work for in-home use yet but my site-specific stuff is going well. I’m probably going to need beta testers in the spring if you’d be willing.”

“If spring ever shows up, I’m game.” Kat’s projects are legendary throughout the department, elaborate interactive installations, and always memorable regardless of how successful she deems them. They make Zachary’s work feel overly cerebral and sedentary by comparison, especially since so much of his own work is analyzing work already done by others.

“Excellent!” Kat says. “I’ll put you on my list. And I’m glad I ran into you, are you busy tonight?”

“Not really,” Zachary says, having not thought about the fact that the day would go on, that the campus would continue in its routines and he is the only one who has had his universe turned askew.

“Could you help me run my J-term class?” Kat asks. “Seven to eight thirty or so?”

“Your Harry Potter knitting class? I’m not a very good knitter.”

“No, that’s on Tuesdays, this one is a salon-style discussion called Innovation in Storytelling and this week’s topic is gaming. I’m trying to have a guest co-moderator for each class and Noriko was supposed to do this one but she bailed on me to go skiing. It’ll be super chill, no lecturing or anything you need to prepare, just babbling about gaming in a relaxed yet intellectual setting. I know that’s your jam, Rawlins. Please?”

The impulse to say no that Zachary has for pretty much anything that involves talking to people arises automatically, but as Kat bounces on her heels to keep warm and he considers the proposal, it sounds like a good way to get out of his head and away from the book for a little while. This is what Kat does, after all. It is good to have a Kat.

“Sure, why not,” he says. Kat whoops. The whoop echoes over the snow-covered lawn, prompting a pair of disgruntled crows to abandon their perch in a nearby tree.

"You're awesome," Kat says. "I'll knit you a Ravenclaw scarf as a thank-you."

"How did you know—"

"Please, you're so obviously Ravenclaw. See you tonight, we meet in the lounge in Scott Hall, the one in the back on the right. I'll text you details when my hands thaw. You're the best. I'd hug you but I think I'd fall down."

"Sentiment appreciated," Zachary assures her and he considers, here in the snow, asking if Kat has ever heard of something called the Starless Sea, because if anyone would have heard of a possibly fairy-tale, possibly mythical location it would be Kat, but articulating it aloud would make it too real and instead he watches as she trudges off toward the science quad where the Emerging Media Center is housed, though he realizes she might very well be headed to the chemistry labs instead.

Zachary stands alone in the snow, overlooking the slowly waking campus.

Yesterday it felt like it always does, like almost not quite home. Today he feels like an impostor. He breathes in deeply, the pine-scented air filling his lungs.

Two black dots mar the pale blue of the cloudless sky, the crows that took flight moments ago in the process of disappearing into the distance.

Zachary Ezra Rawlins commences the long walk back to his room.

Once he has kicked off his boots and peeled off his winter layers, Zachary takes out the book. He turns it over in his hands and then puts it down on his desk. It doesn't look like anything special, like it contains an entire world, though the same could be said of any book.

Zachary pulls his curtains shut and is half asleep before they settle over the window, blocking out the sun-brightened snowscape and the figure watching him from across the street in the shadow of an unruly spruce.

Zachary wakes hours later when his phone chirps a text alert at him, the vibration rattling it enough that it falls off the desk and onto the floor, landing softly on a discarded sock.

7pm scott hall first floor lounge—from the front entrance go past the stairs & turn right down the hall, it's behind the french doors & looks like the postapocalyptic version of a room where fancy ladies have tea. i'll be there early. you're the best. <3 k.

The clock on the phone informs him that it is already 5:50 and Scott Hall is clear across campus. Zachary yawns and drags himself out of bed and down the hall to take a shower.

Standing in the steam, he thinks he dreamed the book but the relief that this thought brings slowly dissipates and he remembers the truth.

He scrubs his skin near raw with the homemade almond oil and sugar mixture his mother gifts him every winter, this year's batch is scented with vetiver to promote emotional calm. Maybe he can scrub off that boy standing in that alleyway. Maybe the real Zachary is under there somewhere.

Every seven years each cell in your body has changed, he reminds himself. He is not that boy anymore. He is twice removed from that boy.

Zachary spends so long in the shower that he has to rush to get ready, grabbing a protein bar when he realizes he hasn't eaten all day. He tosses a notebook in his satchel and his hand hovers over *Sweet Sorrows* before grabbing *The Little Stranger* instead.

He is halfway out the door when he doubles back to put *Sweet Sorrows* in his bag as well.

As he walks toward Scott Hall his damp hair freezes in curls that brush crunchily against his neck. The snow is crisscrossed with so many boot tracks that there is hardly an untouched patch on campus. Zachary passes a lopsided snowman wearing a real red scarf. A line of busts of former college presidents is mostly obscured in snow, stray marble eyes and ears peeking out from beneath the flakes.

Kat's directions prove helpful once he arrives at Scott Hall, one of the residences he's never been in before. He passes the stairs and a small empty study room before finding the hallway and following it for some time until he reaches a half-open pair of French doors.

He's not sure he has the right room. A girl sits knitting in an

armchair while a couple of other students rearrange some of the postapocalyptic-looking tea-party furniture, velvet chairs and settees worn thin and wounded by time, a few repaired with duct tape.

“Yay, you found us!” Kat’s voice comes from behind him and he turns to find her holding a tray with a teapot and several stacked tea-cups. She looks smaller with her coat and striped hat removed, her buzzed-short hair a fuzzy shadow covering her head.

“I didn’t realize you were serious about the tea,” Zachary says, helping her move the tray to a coffee table in the middle of the room.

“I don’t jest about tea. I have Earl Grey and peppermint and some sort of immunity-boosting thing with ginger. And I made cookies.”

By the time the tea and the multiple trays of cookies are arranged the class has filtered in, about a dozen students, though it feels like more with all the coats and scarves flung over the backs of chairs and couches. Zachary settles into an ancient armchair by the window that Kat directs him to with a cup of Earl Grey and an oversize chocolate chip cookie.

“Hi everyone,” Kat says, pulling the attention in the room away from baked goods and chatter. “Thanks for coming. I think we have some newbies who missed last week, so how about we do quick intros around the room, starting with our guest moderator.” Kat turns and looks at Zachary expectantly.

“Okay . . . um . . . I’m Zachary,” he manages between chews before swallowing the rest of his cookie. “I’m a second-year Emerging Media grad student, I mostly study video-game design with a focus on psychology and gender issues.”

And I found a book in the library yesterday that someone wrote my childhood into, how’s that for innovative storytelling? he thinks but does not say aloud.

The introductions continue and Zachary retains identifying details and areas of interest better than names. Several are theater majors, including a girl with impressive multicolored dreadlocks and a blond boy with his feet propped up on a guitar case. The girl with cat-eye glasses who looks vaguely familiar is an English major, as is the girl who continues to knit but barely glances down at her work. The rest are mostly Emerging Media undergrads, some of them he recognizes

(the guy in the blue hoodie, the girl with the tattooed vines peeking out of the cuffs of her sweater, ponytail guy) but no one he knows as well as Kat.

“And I’m Kat Hawkins, senior Emerging Media and theater double major and I mostly spend my time trying to turn games into theater and theater into games. And also baking. Tonight we’re going to discuss video games specifically, I know we have a lot of gamers here but if you’re not please ask if you need terminology clarification or anything like that.”

“How are we defining ‘gamer’?” the guy in the blue hoodie asks with enough of an edge in his voice that Kat’s bright expression darkens almost imperceptibly.

“I follow the Gertrude Stein definition: a gamer is a gamer is a gamer,” Zachary jumps in, adjusting his glasses and hating himself for the pretentiousness but hating the guy who needs to define everything a little bit more.

“As far as how we’re defining ‘game’ in this context,” Kat continues, “let’s keep along the lines of narrative games, role-playing games aka RPGs, etcetera. Everything should come back to story.”

Kat prompts Zachary into sharing some of his standard primers on game narrative, character agency, choices, and consequences, points he’s made in so many papers and projects that it’s a pleasant change to relate them to a group that hasn’t heard them all a thousand times before.

Kat jumps in here and there and it doesn’t take long for the discussion to take off organically, questions becoming debates and points volleying between sips of tea and cookie crumbs.

The conversation veers into immersive theater which was last week’s topic and then back to video games, from the collaborative nature of massive multiplayer back to single-player narratives and virtual reality with a brief stopover on tabletop games.

Eventually the question of why a player plays a story-based game and what makes it compelling comes up to be examined and dismantled.

“Isn’t that what anyone wants, though?” the girl with the cat-eye glasses asks in response. “To be able to make your own choices and

decisions but to have it be part of a story? You want that narrative there to trust in, even if you want to maintain your own free will.”

“You want to decide where to go and what to do and which door to open but you still want to win the game,” ponytail guy adds.

“Even if winning the game is just ending the story.”

“Especially if a game allows for multiple possible endings,” Zachary says, touching on the subject of a paper he’d written two years previously. “Wanting to co-write the story, not dictate it yourself, so it’s collaborative.”

“It’ll work in games better than anything,” one of the Emerging Media guys muses. “And maybe avant-garde theater,” he adds when one of the theater majors starts to object.

“Choose Your Own Adventure digital novels?” the knitting English major throws out.

“No, commit to being a full-blown game if you’re going to go through all the decision-making option trees, all the if-thens,” the girl with the vine tattoos argues, talking with her hands so the vines help emphasize her points. “Proper text stories are preexisting narratives to fall into, games unfold as you go. If I get to choose what’s going to happen in a story I want to be a mage. Or at least have a fancy gun.”

“We’re veering off topic,” Kat says. “Sort of. What makes a story compelling? Any story. In basic terms.”

“Change.”

“Mystery.”

“High stakes.”

“Character growth.”

“Romance,” the guy in the blue hoodie chimes in. “What? It’s true,” he adds when several raised eyebrows turn in his direction. “Sexual tension, is that better? Also true.”

“Obstacles to overcome.”

“Surprises.”

“Meaning.”

“But who decides what the meaning is?” Zachary wonders aloud.

“The reader. The player. The audience. That’s what you bring to it, even if you don’t make the choices along the way, you decide what it

means to you.” The knitting girl pauses to catch a slipped stitch and then continues. “A game or a book that has meaning to me might be boring to you, or vice versa. Stories are personal, you relate or you don’t.”

“Like I said, everyone wants to be part of a story.”

“Everyone *is* a part of a story, what they want is to be part of something worth recording. It’s that fear of mortality, ‘I Was Here and I Mattered’ mind-set.”

Zachary’s thoughts begin to wander. He feels old, not certain if he was ever so enthusiastic as an underclassman and wondering if he seemed as young to the grad students then as this group seems to him now. He thinks back to the book in his bag, turning over ideas about what it is to be in a story, wondering why he has spent so much of his time propelling narratives forward and trying to figure out how to do the same with this one.

“Isn’t it easier to have words on a page and leave everything up to the imagination?” another of the English majors asks, a girl in a fuzzy red sweater.

“The words on the page are never easy,” the girl in the cat-eye glasses points out and several people nod.

“Simpler, then.” Red-sweater girl holds up a pen. “I can create a whole world with this, it may not be innovative but it’s effective.”

“It is until you run out of ink,” someone retorts.

Someone else points out that it’s nine already and more than one person jumps up, apologizes, and rushes off. The rest of them continue to chat in fractured groups and pairs and a couple of the Emerging Media students hover over Zachary, inquiring about class recommendations and professors as they put the room more or less back in order.

“That was so great, thank you,” Kat says once she’s gotten his attention again. “I owe you one, and I’m going to get started on your scarf this weekend, I promise you’ll have it while it’s still cold enough to wear it.”

“You don’t have to but thanks, Kat. I had a good time.”

“Me too. And oh, Elena’s waiting in the hall. She wanted to catch you before you left but didn’t want to interrupt while you were talking to people.”

“Oh, okay,” Zachary says, trying to remember which one was Elena.

Kat gives him another hug and whispers in his ear, “She’s not trying to pick you up, I forewarned her that you are orientationally unavailable.”

“Thanks, Kat,” Zachary says, trying not to roll his eyes and knowing she probably used that exact phrase instead of simply saying that he’s gay because Kat hates labels.

Elena turns out to be the one in the cat-eye glasses, leaning against the wall and reading a Raymond Chandler novel Zachary can now identify as *The Long Goodbye* and he realizes why she looks familiar. He probably would have placed her if her hair had been in a bun.

“Hey,” Zachary says and she looks up from her book with a dazed expression he’s used to wearing himself, the disorientation of being pulled out of one world and back into another.

“Hi,” Elena says, coming out of the fiction fog and tucking the Chandler in her bag. “I don’t know if you remember me from the library yesterday. You checked out that weird book that wouldn’t scan.”

“I remember,” Zachary says. “I haven’t read it yet,” he adds, not sure why the lie is necessary.

“Well after you left I got curious,” Elena says. “The library’s awfully quiet and I’ve been on a mystery kick so I decided to do some investigating.”

“Really?” Zachary asks, suddenly interested when before he had been lying in nervous apprehension. “Did you find anything?”

“Not a lot, the system’s so barcode-happy that if the computer doesn’t recognize it it’s hard to dig up a file, but I remembered that the book looked kind of old so I went down to the card archives, back from when everything was stored in those fabulous wooden catalogues, to see if it was there and it wasn’t but I did manage to decipher how it was coded, there’s a couple of digits in the barcode that indicate when it was added to the system, so I cross-referenced those.”

“That’s some impressive librarian detective work.”

“Ha, thank you. Unfortunately, the only thing it turned up was that it was part of a private collection, some guy died and a foundation distributed his library to a bunch of different schools. I updated the files and wrote down the name, so if you want to find any of the other

books someone should be able to print out a list for you. I'm working most mornings until classes start up again if you're interested." Elena digs around in her bag and pulls out a folded scrap of lined notebook paper. "Some of them should be in the rare book room and not in circulation, but whatever. I gave it a catalogue entry so it should scan fine whenever you return it."

"Thanks," Zachary says as he takes the paper from her. *Item acquired*, a voice in his head remarks. "I'd like that, I'll stop by sometime soon."

"Cool," Elena says. "And thanks for coming tonight, that was a great discussion. See you around."

She's gone before he can say goodbye.

Zachary unfolds the paper. There are two lines of text, written in remarkably neat handwriting.

*From the private collection of J. S. Keating, donated in 1993.
A gift from the Keating Foundation.*

SWEET SORROWS

There are three paths. This is one of them.



Paper is fragile, even when bound with string in cloth or leather. The majority of the stories within the Harbor on the Starless Sea are captured on paper. In books or on scrolls or folded into paper birds and suspended from ceilings.

There are stories that are more fragile still: For every tale carved in rock there are more inscribed on autumn leaves or woven into spiderwebs.

There are stories wrapped in silk so their pages do not fall to dust and stories that have already succumbed, fragments collected and kept in urns.

They are fragile things. Less sturdy than their cousins who are told aloud and learned by heart.

And there are always those who would watch Alexandria burn.

There always have been. There always will be.

So there are always guardians.

Many have given their lives in service. Many more have had their lives taken by time before they could lose them in other fashions.

It is rare for a guardian not to remain a guardian always.

To be a guardian is to be trusted. To be trusted, all must be tested.

Guardian testing is a long and arduous process.

One cannot volunteer to be a guardian. Guardians are chosen.

Potential guardians are identified and watched. Scrutinized. Their every move, every choice, and every action is marked by unseen judges. The judges do nothing but observe for months, sometimes years, before they issue their first tests.

The potential guardian will not be aware that they are being tested. It is critical to steep the tests in ignorance to result in

uncorrupted responses. Many tests will never be recognized as tests, even in hindsight.

Candidates for guardianship who are dismissed at these early stages will never know that they were ever considered. They will go about their lives and find other paths.

Most candidates are dismissed before the sixth test.

Many do not make it past the twelfth.

The rhythms of the first test are always the same, whether it occurs within a Harbor or without.

In a large public library a small boy browses books, biding time before he is meant to meet up with his sister. He stands on his toes to reach volumes shelved above his head. He has long since abandoned the children's section but is not yet tall enough to reach all of the other shelves.

A woman with dark eyes and a green scarf—not a librarian, as far as he can tell—hands him the book he had been reaching for and he shyly nods his thanks. She asks if he will do her a favor in return, and when he agrees she requests that he keep an eye on a book for her, pointing out a thin volume bound in brown leather sitting on a nearby table.

The small boy agrees and the woman leaves. Minutes pass. The boy continues browsing shelves, always keeping the small brown book in sight.

Several more minutes pass. The boy considers looking around for the woman. He checks his watch. Soon he will have to leave himself.

Then a woman walks by without acknowledging him and picks up the book.

This woman has dark eyes and wears a green scarf. She looks quite similar to the first woman but she is not the same person. When she turns to walk away with the book, the boy seizes up with mild panic and confusion.

He asks her to stop. The woman turns, her face a question mark.

The boy stammers that the book belongs to someone else.

The new woman smiles and points out the fact that they are in a library and the books belong to everyone.

The boy almost lets her leave. Now he is not even certain it is a

different woman, as this woman is nearly identical. He is going to be late if he waits much longer. It would be easier to let the book go.

But the boy protests again. He explains in too many words that he had been asked to watch it for someone.

Eventually the woman relents and hands the book to the small flustered boy.

He holds the hard-won object to his chest.

He is unaware that he has been tested but he is proud of himself nonetheless.

Two minutes later, the first woman returns. This time he recognizes her. Her eyes are lighter, the pattern on the green scarf is distinct, golden hoops climb up her right ear and not her left.

The woman thanks him for his service when he hands her the thin brown book. She reaches into her bag and pulls out a wrapped piece of candy and puts a finger to her lips. He tucks it into his pocket, understanding such things are not permitted in the library.

The woman thanks him again and departs with the book.

The boy will not be approached directly for another seven years.

Many of the initial tests are similar, watching for care and respect and attention to detail. Observing how they react to everyday stress or extraordinary emergencies. Weighing how they respond to a disappointment or a lost cat. Some are asked to burn or otherwise destroy a book. (To destroy the book, no matter how distasteful or offensive or badly written, is to fail the test.)

A single failure results in dismissal.

After the twelfth test, the potential guardians will be made aware that they are being considered. Those who were not born below are brought to the Harbor and housed in rooms no resident ever sees. They study and are tested again in different ways. Tests of psychological strength and willpower. Tests of improvisation and imagination.

This process occurs over the course of three years. Many are dismissed. Others quit somewhere along the way. Some, but not all, will figure out that perseverance is more important now than performance.

If they make it to the three-year mark, they are given an egg.

They are released from their training and studying.

Now they need only return with the same egg, unbroken, six months later.

The egg stage is the undoing of many a potential guardian.

Of those who depart with their eggs, perhaps half return.

The potential guardian and their unbroken egg are brought to an elder guardian. The elder guardian gestures for the egg and the potential guardian holds it aloft on their palm.

The elder guardian reaches out but instead of taking the offering closes the potential guardian's fingers around the egg.

The elder guardian then presses down, forcing the potential guardian to shatter the egg.

All that remains in the potential guardian's hands is cracked eggshell and dust. A fine golden powder that will never completely fade from their palm, it will shimmer even decades later.

The elder guardian says nothing of fragility or responsibility. The words do not need to be spoken. All is understood.

The elder guardian nods their approval, and the potential guardian has reached the end of their training and the beginning of their initiation.

A potential guardian, once they have passed the egg test, is given a tour.

It commences in familiar rooms of the Harbor, starting at the clock in the Heart with its swooping pendulum and moving outward through the main halls, the residents wings and reading rooms and down into the wine cellar and the ballroom with its imposing fireplace, taller than even the tallest of the guardians.

Then they are shown rooms never seen by anyone but the guardians themselves. Hidden rooms and locked rooms and forgotten rooms. They go deeper than any resident, any acolyte. They light their own candles. They see what no one else sees. They see what has come before.

They may not ask questions. They may simply observe.

They walk the shores of the Starless Sea.

When the tour reaches its end the potential guardian is brought to a small room with a burning fire and a single chair. The guardian is seated and asked a single question.

Would you give your life for this?

And they answer, yes or no.

Those who answer yes remain in the chair.

They are blindfolded, their hands are bound behind their back.
Their robes or shirts are adjusted to expose their chests.

An unseen artist with a needle and a pot of ink pierces their skin,
over and over again.

A sword, perhaps three or four inches in length, is tattooed on
each guardian.

Each sword is unique. It has been designed for this guardian
and no other. Some are simple, others intricate and ornamented,
depicted in elaborate detail in black or sepia or gold.

Should a potential guardian answer in the negative, the sword
that has been designed for them will be catalogued and never
inscribed on skin.

Few say no, here, after all they have seen. Very few.

Those who do are also blindfolded, their hands bound behind
their backs.

A long, sharp needle is inserted quickly, piercing the heart.

It is a relatively painless death.

Here in this room it is too late to choose another path, not after
what they have seen. They are allowed to choose not to be a guard-
ian, but here, this is the only alternative.

Guardians are not identifiable. They wear no robes, no uniforms.
Their assignments are rotated. Most stay within the Harbor but
several roam the surface, unnoticed and unseen. A trace of golden
dust upon a palm means nothing to those who do not understand
its significance. The sword tattoo is easily concealed.

They may not seem to be in servitude to anything, but they are.

They know what they serve.

What they protect.

They understand what they are and that is all that matters.

They understand that what it is to be a guardian is to be pre-
pared to die, always.

To be a guardian is to wear death on your chest.



ZACHARY EZRA RAWLINS is standing in the hall and staring at the scrap of notebook paper when Kat comes out of the lounge wrapped in her winter layers again.

"Hey, you're still here!" she remarks.

Zachary folds the piece of paper and puts it in his pocket.

"Has anyone ever told you that you have stellar observational skills?" he asks, and Kat punches him in the arm. "I deserved that."

"Lexi and I are going to the Gryphon for a drink if you want to come," Kat says, gesturing over her shoulder at the theater major with the dreadlocks who is pulling her coat on.

"Sure," Zachary says, since the operating hours of the library prevent him from investigating the clue in his pocket further and the Laughing Gryphon serves an excellent sidecar.

The three of them make their way through the snow away from campus and downtown to the short strip of bars and restaurants glowing against the night sky, the trees lining the sidewalk wearing coats of ice around their branches.

They continue some of the conversation from earlier, which segues into Kat and Lexi recapping the discussion from the previous class for Zachary, and they are describing site-specific theater for him when they reach the bar.

"I don't know, I'm not big on audience participation," Zachary says as they settle into a corner table. He has forgotten how much he likes this bar, with its dark wood and bare Edison bulbs illuminating the space from mismatched antique fixtures.

"I *hate* audience participation," Lexi assures him. "This is more self-directed stuff, where you go where you want to go and decide what to watch."