

The Stargazers' Daughters

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Part I

The Doorway to Everywhere

“Any sufficiently understood magiq is indistinguishable from science.”

–Merowin Mathonway

Chapter 1

Rose's Wagon Express

Few children could afford reading materials at home, and Lilliea considered herself fortunate in that regard. All the books she owned concerning history and storytelling had come across the Sea with her mother, while everything to do with natural magiq, or *science*, belonged to her father's private study. That included the leatherbound tome she kept on her nightstand and the smaller book tucked into her bag, the one stamped *Liber Cosmi* in gilded letters, with her father's name, Merowin Mathonway, printed below.

She loved her father's book most of all and couldn't wait to show it to her teachers and classmates now that they were old enough to learn about the planets and the stars.

Lilliea reached the bottom of the stairwell, her shoulders aching under her satchel, when a pungent odor tickled her nostrils. Dad stood in the kitchen, bringing to mind a rather befuddled man-at-arms stranded on the battlefield. He held a smoldering plate in his outstretched hands with what she could only assume was breakfast. An iron skillet simmered on the stove, exuding hints of onion and garlic, teasing her stomach despite the overriding smell of burnt eggs and lamb, probably.

"If you'd only been here sooner . . ." He set the plate down, running his fingers through the white streaks of his hair.

"You always burn the cooking, Dad." She smiled, letting him know it was fine.

"Hey, that's not . . . That isn't entirely accurate."

"Sorry, Dad . . ." She snatched a triangle of toast from the table, hoisted her bag—it got heavier every year—and made for the door with the bread clenched between her teeth.

"Wait! Did you remember your pencils?"

Did I? She couldn't be sure but nodded anyway.

"Parchment? Ink?"

Lying to her father, to anyone really, made her gut churn. The Demon of Guilt never let up on her. But was she lying if she didn't know? She swallowed the last bit of toast, scraping the linings of her throat. "Of course."

"What about—" He tapped the frames above his nose. "You're not wearing them, Lilliea."

He'd crafted the lenses himself, bending the light to cure his vision and hers. Without them, she struggled to see the blackboard from the first row. But nobody, teachers included, seemed to understand what they did or how

they worked, and the unwanted attention given to her see-it-and-forget-it face sometimes outweighed the benefits of sharper vision.

Lilliea produced the frames from the small pocket sewn into her sleeve, and her father came into focus, the fine ridges of his eyes, and the pride in his smile for his daughter.

“Happy?”

“My happiness isn’t the issue.”

She sighed. “Alright, Dad, now I *really* must be going. Love you!”

She slammed the door with her heel as she left. *Dad really needs to fix up the place.* Too many rooms had been added over the years, one atop the other, so that, from afar, her ramshackle home could be mistaken for a pile of children’s building blocks. The roof sloped from a dozen odd angles, missing shingles and belching smoke from a variety of mismatched chimneys. And, despite having lived here since birth, she could only guess where all the doors went or what rooms belonged to what windows.

Sometimes the townsfolk—never the neighbors; they didn’t have neighbors—paid them visits only to complain, and she was too embarrassed to invite her fellow pupils for playtime or studying—assuming anyone would ever be inclined to spend an afternoon with the awkward girl who lived on the hill.

But they did own a waterwheel, and that was pretty neat. When the rains fell and the water gushed into a stream, the apparatus rotated to power her

father's inventions. During the dry season, when he needed his machines to work, she and her sister had to pedal or turn cranks by hand because Dad refused to pay for a donkey. That was probably for the best, because he'd likely forget to feed the animal, and the chore would fall upon her, lest the poor thing die of hunger.

What Lilliea most loved about her home was the greenhouse out back, though it hadn't been used for flowers in years. All their roses and lilies had died with Mom, and the scaffold Dad built over the weeds, his observatory, became their window to the Cosmos. Every night, she and Rose stood atop the raised platform, gazing at the stars, recording their movements, learning new physics. And what other kid could boast of owning a telescope?

Watching the clouds drift away, exposing the moons' light, Lilliea suddenly remembered the time. Why had she been dawdling so? It wasn't as if she hadn't stood in her front yard on countless occasions, mulling over the peculiar house she lived in. Only now, an unwelcome feeling washed over her, an eerie sensation she could hardly describe, as if she wasn't alone, as if some invisible entity was studying her every step.

The small violet disc in the sky was nearing its noontime position, and in a blind panic, she rushed across the yard to the door in the fence, her satchel slipping from her shoulder to drag across the clovers.

Her home stood at the peak of the hill overlooking Graton. Dad picked the location to avoid light pollution. A spiraling cobblestone path led to the Sea, yet it would take a quarter-passing to reach the center, and by then, she'd be missing attendance. But that wasn't the only way down, she knew . . .

An idea crept into her head then, filling her with dread. If she were to go over the steep side, she might make it to school before anyone noticed her tardiness. Or she could break a leg and be stuck in bed for another cycle.

Lilliea hated moments like these. Indecision made her tremble, and sweat break across her forehead. And sweat was only good for acne. Paralyzed between the safer, slower path and the quicker, riskier one, was when it happened, the thing to ruin her day.

Lilliea Graton was attacked by a giant frog.

"Isn't he great?" An overeager face burst from the bushes, a little girl with smudged cheeks broadening into a wide, toad-like grin, her upturned palms cupping a slimy, bulb-eyed creature. "I found him in the swamp!"

Lilliea screamed and tripped over her laces. The frog croaked, its eyelids sliding over the slick surface of its pupils in a slow, lazy blink.

"Rose! What are you—? Get that thing away from me!"

"Aw . . ." She sounded genuinely disappointed. "But look how cute he is." Rose hopped forward, thrusting the warty frog into her face.

Lilliea dropped her schoolbag, frantically backing away and swatting at the offending sight as Rose pursued her with eager, outstretched arms. The frog, all the while, never moved, comfortably couched between the six-year-old's entwined fingers.

"Just look, Sissy," she implored. "*Look!*"

They circled the yard three times before exhaustion set in. Lilliea could feel her simmering blood rushing to the top of her head. How could her sister do this to her? And today of all days?

"Rose!" She called her by name only when she was upset. "Get rid of that thing *this instance* or you'll catch a disease!"

"I'm not gonna get a disease," she said, as if that were the most absurd remark she had ever heard. "And he's not a *thi-ing*," she asserted. "He's a toad . . . or maybe just a frog? I can't tell. His name is Teddy, by the way, but I think I'll call him Ted for short."

Lilliea straightened to her full height. "Rose, I really don't have time for this. I'm going to be late for school."

"Oh, can I come with you?" She bunched her face up like an infant, puffing her already fat cheeks and wagging her pigtails. "Pleeeeeeease?"

Dad could never resist that expression—he was powerless against it—but Lilliea knew her sister's tricks. "You know you can't. Not until you're ten." She stomped across the yard to gather her supplies. Her bag was sooty and

green with moss, and wet clovers were now sticking to its sides. *Gross*. She'd be scrubbing it clean for a passing as soon as she got home.

Rose strolled to the edge of the plateau. "I saw you. You were gonna take the quick way down, weren't you? That's the way *I'd* go," she said, emphasizing this last part with a sound of glee only someone her age could make. She then squatted onto her hands and knees, fervently reaching under the ferns for the iron handle hidden under the foliage. Rose was barefoot—*did you lose your shoes again, Sis?*—and her yellow skirt had turned a yucky shade of brown after rolling in the dirt. But their father, as always, had been too preoccupied to notice.

She righted herself with a triumphant grin as a wheeled platform broke from under the brambles in a cascade of falling leaves. "We'll go much faster in this! I call it *Rose's Wagon Express!*"

Lilliea dimly recalled the day Rose had gotten it. Some contraption her father ordered from the port came in a wheeled metal box, and when the top broke off, the courier left it for her sister to roll around in. Dad later helped her build a functioning vehicle, adding a questionable braking system and a perpendicular bar to steer by.

"Come on, Sissy! Hop in!"

Under normal circumstances, Lilliea would never have accepted such an offer. But today of all days, she was desperate. Just the thought of strolling

into school, late yet again, with all her classmates leering at her, sniggering at her, inventing outlandish rumors for what she might have been doing all of low moon, and having Mrs. Hailsham standing at her desk glowering . . .

Breaking a bone just might be preferable.

“Is it . . . Is it safe?” She knew the question was absurd the moment she asked it. How did she honestly expect her to answer? *No?* Despite bloodying her knees and elbows on a daily basis, for Rose, safety was an otherworldly concept. For all Lilliea knew, her sister believed herself indestructible.

Rose dragged the wagon to the drop and climbed inside, slipping Ted into the front pocket of her overalls. The frog sat there looking content as could be, his springy forelimbs hanging freely over the seam. He could not have looked more natural lounging on a lily pad. Lilliea was hesitant to follow, hovering with her boot over the wagon as if she were boarding a canoe amid choppy waters, trying to calculate the angle of descent in her head. She hated heights and would never have agreed to this if the hillside dropped too sharply away, and the rutted switchback lessened the angle to a manageable degree, so long as Rose could make the turns and the brake didn't fail. If not, the bushes sprouting from the rock face were there to catch them. And surely, Rose had tested this route before . . . hadn't she?

“Ready, Sis?”

Lilliea clambered into the concave belly of the makeshift vessel, her satchel fixed between herself and sister, knowing she was about to regret this, wanting to voice her concerns—the hill was looking steeper by the second. But Rose never gave her the chance. Kicking the wagon into motion, they jerked forward, rolling leisurely at first before dipping suddenly and sharply, the wheels beneath their seats emitting a dismaying, ear-splitting squeal.

“Hope we make it!” Rose declared.

Lilliea’s protests trailed away as the ground fell under them. She could feel her hair whipping against her cheeks, tumble forward and back as her limbs turned cold and stiff and her insides churned like wet laundry. Rose leaned into Lilliea’s lap, her pigtails bobbing, her chubby fingers holding fast to the jittering steering column. All Lilliea could do was scream, stopping to complain between gasps of air.

“Rose! If you get us killed, I’ll—” They hit a rock and flew up and out of their seats. “—I’ll never . . .!” Another bump and she bit into her tongue, “. . . forgive you!”

Every stone and root rattled her bones, made her spectacles dance across her face—*why had she bothered to wear them?*—and her teeth clack like dice behind her lips. Branches threatened to knock their heads off, and some

flying insect went darting into her left nostril. Yet Rose never stopped laughing.

“Isn’t this fun?”

They were moving at an unsafe velocity, she knew, but there was no time to work the numbers. Leaves and pebbles and upturned dirt rushed to greet them in a blurring, shuddering kaleidoscope of forest colors. Lilliea couldn’t look, the cart flaking against her fingernails as she held the rusty sides in a death grip, her leather bag with her books, pencils, and parchment wedged in her lap like a shield.

Now the front left wheel decided to go its own way, jerking to and fro, threatening to snap loose from the axle below. “Don’t think I can control it!” her sister shouted into the wind without an inkling of concern. Rose was Rose, after all, and she was exhilarated. *Thrilled.*

Lilliea dared to open her eyes enough to catch her sister wrestling with the wagon, desperate to steer them clear of disaster, to redirect them from the path of the tree they were fast approaching and sure to crash into. But the handlebar was freely spinning in Rose’s chubby hands, having broken from its base. They were out of control, careening wildly from side to side. With gruesome certainty, Lilliea knew they were done for, but to Rose, this was just a silly game. And this fact was just too much for Lilliea—it was so infuriating she nearly forgot to be afraid.

The broad bole of the oak filled their sights, and then even Rose let out a frightful yelp, as Lilliea shielded her face from certain doom and Ted, secure in her sister's overall pocket, gave a sudden croak of alarm.

They became weightless, floating through the air as her schoolbag ripped open, the belt binding her books coming undone. Leather spines passed before her eyes one after the other. Time slowed. Her father's *Liber Cosmi* came first, followed by *Thangar & Sint*, her sister's favorite story, though she hadn't remembered packing it—*why would she?* Other books flew by that she didn't recognize: *Gilgamesh*, *Don Quixote*, *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, *The Neverending Story*, *The Magiq of Aenya* . . . More books than she could possibly fit in her satchel. More books than could be contained in her entire school.

Lilliea found herself in a sort of maze, towering walls rising every which way. The brilliance pained her eyes, yet she was slowly adjusting to it, to the penetrating light, and she could just make out the endless shelves. Rows and rows of bookshelves. Tomes stretching into infinity.

Tell me another story, dear wife, for I am weary and long for sleep.

Then lay down your head, O Sultan . . . so that I may regale you with a wondrous tale of adventure. It is the tale of a young woman, a special young woman who lives in a faraway land, a land by the Sea . . .

She lay on her back in a bed of crushed maples, her schoolbag intact and glued to her arms, a vague recollection surfacing to the fore of her mind: her sister tumbling from the wagon at the moment of impact before cartwheeling down the hill, her books falling freely, and then—*those mysterious voices*. They'd been inside her head, a man and his wife. She didn't recognize them, yet she couldn't ignore the uncanny sensation she knew them somehow.

She sat up, dazed, the blinding passages burned in her brain. It was like waking from the most vivid dream, though the couple she'd heard speaking was already slipping away like sand through a sieve, their terse exchange becoming inseparable from her own fractured thoughts.

Sargonius' salty beard, am I going crazy? Or had she damaged her head on a rock?

No. There had to be a proper explanation for this phenomenon. There always was. She'd been fretting over her schoolbag, and the trauma to her skull must have triggered some hallucination, a vision of a massive library.

Yes, it had been a library, a manifestation of the books she most feared to lose. How else to make sense of it?

She fingered the back of her head, careful not to mess her mousy brown curls, feeling for tender spots to confirm her theory, but came up empty. There was no swelling. No soreness. Only a nest of twigs to pick from her disheveled hair.

Her pretty new boots were chaffed and discolored, and the laces had come loose again, but everything else was in working order. She'd have bet anything that a bone was broken, but she hadn't a scrape to complain about.

The wagon lay like a crumpled piece of tin ten paces from where they'd been dumped, the front of it merged with the oak, the handle and steering column bent into an oval shape. Unfazed by the destruction, Rose cartwheeled into view.

"Sissy! Wasn't that great?"

Lilliea clenched her fists. It was all she could do to express her anger.

"*Rose*, we could have been killed!"

"But we weren't . . . and now you won't be late for school," she answered, giving her that 'see-I-was-right' smirk Lilliea hated.

Lilliea wanted to argue the point, to explain how reckless and irresponsible they both had been. But the moons were pressing her for time. Madam Hailsham would be calling attendance any moment now. At least

they'd made it to the bottom of the hill, where the neighbors' chimneys could be seen poking from the trees, and in the far distance, the blue lip of the Sea, and the lighthouse mirror glimmering from the port.

"Oh no! Where's Ted?" Rose cried, genuinely distraught, craning her neck every which way. "Sorry, Sissy . . . I can't come to class with you today. I've got to look for Ted."

Lilliea watched her sister go, not knowing whether to feel grateful or furious. But what she most wanted was to pull Rose into a protective embrace. She could not help imagining her tot of a sister, splayed across the ground with a fractured femur or—Sargonus forbid—a broken neck. And her father would no doubt blame her should anything so terrible happen.

Chapter 2

A School for Dunces

M loves P,

Lilliea read the letters again with growing irritation. Who were M and P? And why were their initials defacing her desk? The “L” in “loves,” of course, had been spelled with two stick figures holding hands, a symbol used by the young and infatuated.

Yech.

Why anyone felt the need to express their affections to the world like this was beyond her comprehension. If she ever found herself drooling over some stupid boy, she’d definitely keep it to herself. Besides, vandalizing school property could be a serious offense. And trying to rub the message away with the underside of her wrist was an effort in futility. It only smeared the ink across the table and stained her skin purple.

Now she’d be spending the year wondering about M and P. They were no doubt upperclassmen, some irresponsible couple who had likely broken up by now.

At least she’d managed to arrive before the bell, early enough to pick a seat near the blackboard. But Lilliea was the only student at her desk readying for the day’s lesson. Her twenty other classmates were busy milling

between their chairs, chattering like seagulls. She caught bits of conversation regarding the low-moon holiday, always with a focus on who said what to whom. Nobody noticed the shiny new textbooks waiting on the shelves. As always, her peers resisted the threat of education until the moment their teacher called for it.

But seriously, who were M and P? Could it be Marlena and Phillip? Did she even know them?

The chairs were a bit tall for the short-legged desk she was at, making for a tight fit, forcing her elbows into her ribs when she lowered her head to test her new pencil. Still, she'd not trade her spot at the front of the class with anyone. Without her spectacles, she could scarcely discern the chalk from the blackboard, and from here she had an unobstructed view of the southern coast.

In her first year at school, ten-year-old Lilliea sat, marveling at the map decorating the wall, as the other kids circled the classroom, screaming and chasing themselves dizzy.

The mural was far older than she was, closer to her father's age, maybe as old as the town. The limestone wall showed beneath the sun-bleached paint, and cracks in the mortar spread across it like newly formed canals. Yet the mysteries suggested by those lines awakened her obsession with faraway places. She daydreamed of the shattered coastline and the hundreds

of islands to the north. What was the nation of Lesocco really like? How did its people speak and dress? What spices did they cook with?

And what of the Oasis City of Shemselinihar way down south? The most remarkable products flowed into Graton from that fabulous city, and on from Graton to Hedonia and all the lands of Aenya. From her desk, Shemselinihar was nothing but a blot of paint, but to Lilliea, that blot teemed with customs, clothing, and history. Wonders her heart ached to experience.

And isn't the ruler of Shemselinihar called the 'sultan'? That's what she'd heard after falling off Rose's wagon, wasn't it? A voice speaking to the sultan?

Always she hungered to know more. "What's over there?" she'd asked Madam Hailsham one day, pointing beyond the edge of the mural, and was disappointed when her teacher could only offer an indifferent shrug. Her father knew a great deal more, having collected a dozen atlases for his private study, but even his books fell mute when it came to the Dead Zones and the Dark Hemisphere. The records of the most famed explorers amounted to only half the world, if that.

Lilliea had long dreamed of completing what remained of the map. She'd visit places no one had ever been and fill every blank space with names for future schoolchildren to learn. Yet she found her mind drifting further still,

from geography to astronomy. Were those pinpoints of light like the blots of paint on her classroom map? And if that were so, what awaited beyond those stars? Did the Cosmos ever end?

A sudden hush fell over the class, the cacophony of voices stilled by scraping chair legs, groaning seats, and slates rattling on tables. Lilliea reached into her schoolbag, removing her inkwell and quill. She placed the bottle over the lovers' names so M and P wouldn't distract her. Her pencils she arranged in meticulously neat, parallel rows, ready and sharpened, in case she needed to copy something in a hurry. But perfection could not last. The table, she realized with dismay, wasn't entirely even with the floor, and now the fourth pencil on the left started rolling toward the edge. She caught it and put it back, deciding to arrange them horizontally, but one or the other of her writing utensils went rogue, threatening to hurl itself from her desk.

The gods do not smile on me today!

She thought this without believing in any supernatural powers—gods were fictions produced by ignorant minds. Still, some mysterious force seemed to have it out for her today. First, she was almost kissed by a frog; her little sister nearly got her killed; then she had to deal with M and P; and now her desk was crooked.

“Lilliea Graton!”

Madam Hailsham loomed high above her, her teacher's girthy bosom lying flat against the table, rearranging her pencils. She could tell by the woman's exasperated expression that her name had been called a number of times already.

Hailsham had a rather large, intimidating physique, much like a potato. She wore the same navy-blue tunic with the tiny white dots every day, possibly because she owned no other outfit, and her hair was done up in stiff white curls, resembling a head of cauliflower. Her double chin had begun to sprout a third, and if Lilliea had never seen the woman speak, she might not have known she owned a mouth. But it was her teacher's eyes, those diminutive, rheumy eyes—so much like a crow's—Lilliea found especially unnerving. No matter what Lilliea was doing, Hailsham exhibited that same look of astonished disappointment.

"Li-ll-ie-a Gra-ton," she said again. For the third time? The fourth?

"Yes, Madam?"

"Well?" She raised her measuring stick, impatiently tapping the blunt end against her palm. When students misbehaved, Hailsham rapped them on the knuckles, which hurt quite a bit and made writing a painful exercise for the rest of the day.

"Well . . . what?" Lilliea stammered.

"Are you here or aren't you?"

Her cheeks flared as her classmates sniggered from the back rows. At least nobody could see her face, which was another good reason for sitting up front. "I'm sorry, Madam . . . I *am* here."

"Are you certain?"

"Quite certain, Madam. As you can evidently see." More giggles and suppressed murmurs. It was beginning early this year. She was already becoming the brunt of the joke.

Hailsham stepped away, her eyes rolled up into her skull. "What're we going to do with you, young lady? Your head's never where it should be. Always in the clouds. Always in *another* world."

Lilliea wanted to bury herself in her desk, hide inside the pencil box she'd brought if only she could shrink small enough. The same remarks had been made about her since she was old enough to spell her name. *Lilliea doesn't pay attention. Lilliea needs to learn to focus.* Most of all, people said she was *in another world*.

Was she supposed to apologize again? She wasn't sure, so she knitted up her mouth and waited for the day's lesson to begin.

Hailsham let out a long, exasperated sigh, turning her attention—much to Lilliea's relief—to the rest of the class. "Alright, then . . . I've received some complaints from your parents that you've not been taught proper doctrine. So, let's review the names of the deities and their domains, shall we?"

Everyone quieted except for Eli, the boy in the corner with the blocked nasal passage. “Please repeat after me.” She raised her measuring—no, Lilliea thought—her *punishment* stick like a baton, leading them into a familiar droning chorus. “Sargonus god of the Sea Solos god of the sun Strom god of storms Maki goddess of war Irene goddess of love Zoë goddess of wisdom Dak god of time the Taker god of darkness . . .” And on it went, like the buzzing of gnats, the words losing all meaning. But Lilliea wouldn’t have it. Not this time. She crossed her arms defiantly, moving her lips in tandem with the other students to produce the occasional vowel, but otherwise refusing to participate.

“Very good, everyone.” The teacher looked pleased, nearly breaking into a smile. If she had, Lilliea was certain her head would crack open like an egg. “Now, class, let’s turn our attentions to the lesser beings of the heavens—the giants who hold up the moons.”

It’s now or never.

Lilliea had longed for this moment since she was ten. She would explain what her father did, show them his book and all he’d learned of the stars, moons, and planets, despite how greatly she dreaded attention.

Hailsham’s voice became background noise as a battle played out in Lilliea’s head between her wanting to remain unnoticed and her eagerness for sharing the truth. She was missing the lesson, would certainly fail any

exam on the subject, but what did it matter? Hailsham was lecturing them about Lunestes, the invisible giant who carried the Greater Moon on his shoulders, but that was mythology, not science! How could they not know the difference?

She reached into her satchel, gently setting the *Liber Cosmi* on her desk. It boosted her confidence, having her father's book in her possession, with his name embossed in gold leaf. They couldn't laugh at her now. Not if she showed them this.

Her arm twitching nervously, she raised her hand. It took a moment for the teacher to notice—a long, unsettling moment. Hailsham didn't like interruptions, yet she encouraged discussion, or claimed to.

"Lilliea. What is it?"

"Actually, Madam . . ." *Come on, Lilliea. This is your moment!* It was her father's voice speaking in her head. And Rose was in there too, cheering her on. "Giants have nothing to do with it. What you call the Greater Moon is held in place by angular momentum, its motion around the sun, you see. The same is true for Eon. But our smaller moon orbits Infinity, just like we do. Aenya can also be considered a moon of Infinity, in case you didn't know that."

A deathly silence permeated the room like a tangible mass, a mass so dense she could have sliced it with a knife. Even Eli's nasal cavity seemed to

clear up in that moment. For all Lilliea could hear, she was no longer at school, but had been transported to some desolate, windless mountaintop.

“And that’s . . . not all,” she said, pushing through the growing tension, through a wall of unease and uncertainty. “There exist at least seventeen confirmed moons my father has discovered—so far. He suspects there may be . . . um . . . more.” Her voice dwindled to a whimper, the final word dying in her mouth.

Silence.

Lilliea told it all correctly, was fairly certain of it. Had he been present, her father would have been proud. But Hailsham simply stood there gaping like a dazed fish. Then the room erupted with nervous laughter, unintelligible murmuring, and the same hushed remarks they thought she couldn’t hear.

“She’s so weird.”

Twenty pairs of eyes bore into her, yet she recognized that voice. That stuck up tone was unmistakable. It could only be Loreia or Zeily, the twins, who always sat together, wearing the same clothes, sharing the same tongue and brain. Their snide remarks were never made to her face, but near enough for Lilliea to feel hurt by them, strings of mean little quips that nipped at her heart.

What happened to her hair? She's wearing that again? Why can't she just be normal?

When they were Rose's age, and all that mattered was finding a playmate for a game of tag, Lilliea considered them her friends. Loreia and Zeily blossomed through the years, growing into tall, womanly figures with flowing blonde hair and sparkling teeth. Nobody ever called them odd, and everyone competed for their approval.

"I'm not—" she searched for a clever rebuttal, but her brain's store of clever rebuttals had run dry. "It isn't . . ." Her vision doubled, their smug faces blurring, then quadrupling. Despite her efforts, she couldn't pretend she did not care, nor act as if she was immune to their jeers, and the tears began to well up around her eyes.

"It's all in my father's book!" she bellowed at last.

"But your dad's crazy. Everybody knows that."

Laughter broke out again—they could not help it—even Eli was chortling, until Hailsham shut them up. "Loreia! That was entirely uncalled for."

Lilliea decided she'd had enough. She rose abruptly, her chair thundering to the floor. Kicking her desk away, the stargazer's daughter stood with an air of power, her electrically charged hair dancing about her face, rage pulsing through her outstretched fingers. Loreia turned to Zeily in disbelief,

the twins sharing a fearful spasm before turning to face the girl they once called friend.

“How dare you speak about my father that way! Merowin Mathonway is a great man! More important than you’ll ever be! And what does your dad do, anyway? Drown his sorrows at the pub night after night? Your mom must be so proud.” Loreia could only stare, stupefied, her wordless mouth working out a reply—the sincere, heartfelt apology Lilliea had so longed to hear.

Lilliea is brilliant! How wrong we were about her! Not to mention brave, eloquent, beautiful. One by one, her peers started clapping, their clapping evolving into cheers. Were they actually cheering her name? They were! They were!

No, that’s much too much. That could never happen. But it had been a lovely daydream nonetheless. What actually transpired was far less dramatic. Lilliea did not stand or respond in any way. Instead, she sat at her desk, swallowing the hurt, burying it deep inside, not daring to expose her tears. And, for once, she was grateful for her unkempt mass of hair—however dull and plain it looked—to hide her face.

“Now, class, settle down . . . Settle down, please.” Hailsham showed Lilliea no more concern. Loreia and Zeily would not be punished, she knew, because they never were. But even now, she could hear their chittering, the rumors spreading from desk to desk like a virus.

Did you hear about the girl with the big hair? Wait till you hear what she said today . . .

Lilliea wanted to scream, to snatch her *libris* and rush from the school and never return. Why had she been so stupid to think this year would be any different? That she could wow anyone with her father's discoveries? Then, for the second time that day, her little sister came to her rescue.

"SISSY!"

Daylight cascaded into the room from a single opening opposite the mural, teasing Lilliea with open skies and beautiful lawns, and there was Rose, her upper body dangling from the window, while her other half—her wiggling butt and legs—protruded outdoors.

"Hey, SISS-EEEEEE!"

Lilliea would never have left her desk without permission. But her sister's disruption could not be ignored, and she felt compelled to act.

"And just where do you think you're going, young lady?"

For the first time in her life, Lilliea paid her teacher no mind. And why should she? What respect did she owe someone who understood so little of the universe? Lilliea stomped across the room, still riled by her classmates, not knowing whether to pull her sister into the building or shove her back outside. And that's when it happened. Yet again. Lilliea came lip to lip with a giant frog.

"It's Ted! He's alright, Sissy! I found him!"

"What are you doing here, Sis? You know you're not allowed in school."

"But-But, I knew how much you were worried about him." She teetered from the windowsill, kicking to keep her balance. "I thought I'd lost him when he didn't come back. But he was just scared is all." Ted croaked with approval, his gullet expanding and shriveling again like a paper lantern.

Rose's antics never ceased to embarrass her, but today she welcomed the distraction, the absurdity of it all. Already, she was beginning to forget her miserable day. "That's fine, Sis. I'm happy for . . . Ted. Now, please, you've got to go before I get in trouble."

Lilliea returned to her seat, not bothering to watch her sister go, when Rose cried out, "Ted was scared because of the falling star, I think. But I told him not to worry. I told him Dad would know what to do."

Chairs scuffed the floor, toppled backward, as everyone rushed to the window. Even Loreia, Zeily, and Eli were abandoning their desks. They crammed about her sister, twenty children pressed into a knot, their wondering eyes turned skyward. Even Madam Hailsham was craning her stout neck to steal a glance, her measuring stick slack against her thigh, her alarmed expression so unlike her usual drab demeanor.

Lilliea shoved her way through the crowd, elbowing past the twins. The girls didn't complain, didn't so much as notice. Rose squirmed back through

the window, and Lilliea followed her out, clambering over the jamb. The rest of the students joined them one by one. Anyone watching from afar would have thought the school had caught fire and that all the doors were blocked. Only their teacher remained in the classroom, poking her head through the square opening, her bosom caught in the frame.

It was clearly visible. A rip had appeared in the sky, cutting through a cluster of cumulonimbus clouds, a smoking streak of blue fire, a streaming, tear-shaped—

“Star!” someone shouted. “There it is!”

But Lilliea knew better. She knew stars could never just fall to the ground like that. They were much too big, bigger than the entire world. “No,” she answered in a low voice, “that’s a comet,” adding, with a hint of dread, “and it’s headed our way.”

Chapter 3

Rose Leads the Parade

Rose watched her sister's class merge with hundreds of students from other parts of the school. They gathered like flocks of geese, their eyes fixed to the sky, their voices reverent. "What's going on?" and "What's that?" were popular refrains, followed closely by "By the gods!" and Rose's all-time favorite, "Sargonius' salty beard!"

News spread like wildfire. Children fled from the white-columned building where they spent their afternoons like rats from a sinking ship, pouring from every window and postern door. Rose pictured them squeezing from the cracks in the walls somewhere.

The first to seventh-year students rushed out with their teachers on their heels. The grownups who didn't bother looking at the sky were furious, brandishing their sticks and demanding their charges return to their desks "posthaste!" whatever that meant. But the power they possessed evaporated before the more pressing issue of the *world may be ending*; and it was not long before they relinquished control. More than a few teachers, like Madam Hailsham, were as transfixed by what was happening as the children.

As the school emptied, the throng of mostly children drifted in the same southerly direction like dinghies caught in the wind. Nobody barked orders, nor did anyone debate the best course of action—their mouths were too busy gaping. But the decision could not have been clearer. Rose's infamous father had yet to be mentioned, but the fireball in the sky was terrifying to behold, and in moments like these—when knowing what you're talking about truly mattered—fanciful tales of gods and giants died quickly.

Rose slipped Ted into the front pocket of her overalls as she led them away—"Come on, everyone!"—her arm raised like a commander overseeing her troops. "Let's go see my dad!"

Lilliea fell in line behind her, and Loreia and Zeily came next, followed by Eli, furiously wiping his nose with his sleeve. Hundreds more drained from the schoolyard. Dazed by this sudden turn of events and lacking imagination, their teachers took up the rear.

They crowded onto the cobbled streets between the hanging lanterns, narrowing into an impromptu parade—the least practiced parade in history.

The star continued down, a white-plumed streak over the sky, arcing northward with every passing breath. How could anyone look away? Even Rose, accustomed to the wonders she saw nightly through her father's telescope, could not tear her eyes away. She skipped along, glanced up, took several more skips, and looked again. On and on like this she went—they all

did—half-blinded by their curiosity, stumbling into lamp posts, falling over picket fences, colliding with one another with repeated lines of “excuse me,” “so sorry,” “didn’t see you there.”

The procession moved through the town square, where houses pressed together, and every street sloped down to the port. Rose hopped playfully under the striped awnings, winding through Hedonian-built arches, eyeing the blue tint of the Sea and the rising masts of the ships in the harbor with the decorative markings on their sails.

Dogs barked at them from second-story balconies and bedroom windows. Grownups stood in their fancy arbor terraces with puzzled expressions, husbands clutching their wives as mothers tugged at sons and daughters. Rose waved at each of them as she passed. She was having fun and could not understand the look of dismay marring their faces.

The parade swept from avenue to avenue like a storm, gathering in size like a great ball of tumbleweed. Townsfolk too old for school dropped their chores to join the march. Mothers arrived with thumb-sucking toddlers clinging to their hips, and shriveled grandpas shuffling in line with their canes, and barefoot children abandoning their hiding places and kickball games to seize the hands of older siblings. A parade of hundreds turned into thousands.

From the market district, they picked up shopkeepers, barbers, dentists, apothecaries, milliners, and shoe shiners. Door locks tumbled, and “Sorry Clos’d” signs were hurriedly set up. From *The Book of Faces Tavern* came the barkeep and barmaid. He carried a ring of what must have been a hundred or so keys. She wore an apron heavy with forks and spoons. The warrior woman followed, her hair wild as fire, alongside her knight companion, clanking in his heavy plate armor.

“Where’s everybody running off to?” the knight asked no one in particular, his white-haired mustachio dripping with ale.

Rose led them to the Wily River, taking Pickle Dill Road, stepping over mounds of steaming horse droppings that could always be found there. Here, a boy on his bicycle came panting up the bridge toward them, throwing his weight into every stroke, balancing the six-foot pole at his side. Rose waved him over, hopping in place and shouting his name. “Lan! Over here, Lan!”

Lan had celebrated his tenth year a cycle ago—they had had papier-mâché animals and everything—but he’d never been to school because, as his father often reminded him—and as Lan often reminded Rose—“What’d ya need schoolin’ for, boy? ‘Tsa whole lotta hooey to get you confused is all. You’re a lamplighter, like my pa before me and his pa before him. You’re a lamplighter, and you’ll always be a lamplighter. End o’ story.”

She continued waving him over, even as his bike squealed to a halt an arm's length from her chin. Lifting the brim of his fisherman's hat from his eyes, he noticed all the people, and his jaw dropped. "What's going on, Rose?"

"You mean you really don't know?"

She felt Lilliea squeeze her hand and step forward. "Does no one ever bother looking up? *Gods!*"

The star shone distinctly against the pastel blue of the sky, a fiery tail trailing behind it, no longer lingering over their heads but leveling with the horizon. Lan removed his hat completely and a startled look came into his eyes. Rose thought he might retch over the bridge, but all he did was make a worrisome noise, a nervous exhale gushing from his mouth and nostrils. It sounded like a "wow" with the intonation one makes at the end of a question. "Wh-What . . . What is that?"

"We're not sure."

Lilliea could not contain herself, correcting Rose like she loved to do, "Depending on its current mass and velocity, we may be looking at an extinction-level event here." It all came out at once, her vowels running together in an unintelligible jumble.

Lan appeared to be listening, yet his expression never changed.

"OooOoOoo," he said.

“I concur . . .” Rose added with a wink. “Velocity!” She didn’t quite know what that meant, but Lan didn’t either. “EK-STINK-SHUN!” she declared with an explosive, spittle-spewing “PSHHHHH!” blowing an imaginary fireball. She completed her demonstration by rapidly opening and clenching her fists, imitating flying debris.

“Rose!” Lilliea was scowling. Again. “Don’t you realize what’s going on? *This is serious!*”

“I know that, Sis . . . But you don’t want to worry, Lan, do you? Besides, Dad’ll know what to do. He always does.”

“I’m not so sure he—” she started, cutting herself short. Lilliea seemed more anxious than normal, even more than when she was having a bad hair day. A look of doubt washed the color from her cheeks, and her lips were curled into a frozen scowl. She had wanted to explain more, but held herself back for some reason.

“Wanna come with us, Lan? I’m leading the parade!”

The lamplighter boy lifted his eyes to the crowd. They neared the bridge like a swarm of locusts, the younger folk already crossing over, not bothering to wait for Rose’s leadership. Lan wiped the sweat from his brow—it was a scorcher of an afternoon—planting his little round hat back on his scalp. He turned to the girls, torn between his duty to oil the lanterns and

the pressure to join his peers. At last, he piped up, asking, "I can go with you guys? Really?"

Lan's not the brightest, Rose thought, but what she said was, "Of course, you can, Lan!"

With the lamplighter boy in tow, walking his bicycle beside them, Rose and Lilliea turned for home, leaving the Sea and the markets behind. The countryside was sparsely populated, the farmhouses spread so far from town that she could pinch the grain silos between her fingertips.

Where cobbles gave way to dirt and grass, a thousand pairs of feet stomped through vegetable patches, uprooting cabbages, ruining what might have been somebody's tomato crop. Chickens clucked, angrily flapping their feathers, but the sheepos were more agreeable, happily bleating to witness the townsfolk finally joining their flock.

Rose raced ahead, lured by the open field, abandoning her sister to bounce, cartwheel, and snatch at the dandelions. She blew their petals apart, their fuzzy white pappus stems twirling into the wind like tiny pirouetting dancers. Shirtless boys ran kites alongside her, clutching coiled spools of string, lifting taut tethers into the air in long wavering arcs. They had been watching the trailing comet with fascination. Who could have made such a wonderful kite, they wondered aloud, and how had they made it glow?

The parade reached the highest peak in Graton, where her father had built his observatory ages ago. At the base of the hill, a smoky ribbon curled from the blacksmith's chimney. Davor stood gazing at the sky as they approached him, still wearing his tool belt and gloves and carrying his tongs. Sometimes, he came to help Dad with the house, but Rose never heard him speak. Even now, as the procession neared his door, he retired to the dim confines of his home without a word.

Granny lived across the road from the blacksmith. Her home was unremarkable as homes go, a squatting stack of bricks and a roof with faded green shingles hidden behind a slouching red maple tree, a timeworn fence, and a wall of weeds. But Rose knew what tulips, gardenias, and roses blossomed amid those weeds, all the pretty flowers Granny planted ages ago, before she'd gotten too old to tend her garden. Whenever it stormed, Rose and Lilliea liked to dart under her leaky porch, playing *catch the raindrops* in Granny's pans. But that was long ago, when Rose was smaller, and Lilliea still remembered how to have fun.

Now Granny appeared from under her portico to greet them, failing to notice the thousands arriving from below. She only had eyes for her grandchildren, it seemed, and her vision was only so-so.

"Where are you girls off to today?" Her mother's mom looked as she always did, shrunken and rounded with age, with a head of hair like the fraying roots of an out-of-date onion.

Rose beamed, rocking on the balls of her feet. "It's the end of the world, Granny!"

"Well . . ." she said, hesitating a bit. "Isn't that nice."

Lilliea stood beside her, looking aghast, but didn't argue.

"We're going up to see Dad," Rose continued. "Wanna come?"

"No . . . I'm afraid my legs aren't quite what they used to be. How 'bout you girls come inside? If you're thirsty, I can make you my special drink."

She said nothing, hiding her disgust as best a child her age could be expected. Fortunately, Lilliea was there to provide an escape, knowing just what grownups wanted to hear. "No thanks, Granny. Some other time, perhaps."

"Wait up!" Lan was suddenly beside them, having stashed his bicycle next to Granny's swinging fence door in a posy of wilting tulips. "I'd like a special drink, please."

"No, you wouldn't!" She yanked him by the crook of the elbow, dragging him from the porch. The parade could not wait for pleasantries, and neither could they. And as leader of the parade, she had to press on.

"Bye, Granny!" she called over her shoulder as Lilliea, ever the polite one, stood a moment longer before doing the same.

"But . . . But I'm thirsty," Lan complained.

"Trust me, you *don't* want it—it's orange drink."

"Orange juice? I love orange juice."

"No!" Her irritated voice carried far and wide and a dozen heads turned their way. "It's not juice, Lan," she explained, more softly this time. "It's orange *drink*. Nobody knows what's in it or how Granny makes it, but it's absolutely *blech*." She emphasized the point with a sour expression, as if biting into a lemon. "We just can't tell her we hate it. If you knew Granny, you'd understand."

"Oh, come off it, Rose," Lilliea countered. "It isn't *that* bad." Her sister was afraid to hurt anyone's feelings, even when they weren't around to be insulted. "You just have to . . . get used to it," she explained, not sounding convinced herself. Their grandmother's concoction was undrinkable, and Lilliea knew it.

Hand-in-hand, they started up the hill, rounding the path Lilliea would have taken had her sister left earlier for school. Nettles, pine trees, and boulders obscured the sky so that, for a time, the imminent threat of the star could be forgotten, and they could concentrate on their steps. But the way to

the observatory was steep, and the elders with their poor knees started to grumble and fall behind.

Halfway to the top, Lilliea doubled over, her hands on her knees, to catch her breath. "See? It's not my fault I go late to class . . ." she said, still panting, ". . . when I have to wake up a good passing before anyone else does."

"Come on, Sis! We're almost there." Rose reached for her hand, intending to drag her sister up the path if necessary, when she noticed the smaller gathering ahead of them. Apparently, they had not been the first to seek counsel with the town stargazer.

The two groups clashed together, shouting, accusing one another of minor transgressions, and being generally unpleasant, and the parade fell apart, balling into a confused, panic-stricken mob. For Rose, it was like an anti-party where, instead of celebrating some joyous occasion, everyone was doing the opposite, and somehow, she was caught in the middle of it. At every turn, she saw hips, elbows, and stomping feet, passing her by as if she were invisible.

Sargonius' salty beard! Rose hated being so small. Hated being ignored. And where had Lilliea and Lan run off to? Try as she may, she could not see them anywhere.

"SISSEEEE!" she wailed, trying not to be afraid, even as fear pounded on the doors of her heart. "Where *are* you!" But there were just too many

people, countless distraught faces, their brows glued to the reddening glow passing over the slender pines to the north. Her voice was lost in the chaos, and no answer came.