

Clive Barker



ABARAT

ABSOLUTE MIDNIGHT

Clive Barker

Absolute Midnight

Аннотация

A dazzling fantasy adventure for all ages, the third part of a quartet appearing at two yearly intervals, richly illustrated by the author. The Abarat: a magical otherworld composed on an archipelago of twenty-five islands – one for each hour of the day, plus an island out of time. Candy Quackenbush, escaping her dull, dull life from the most boring place in our world, Chickentown, USA, finds that in the Abarat she has another existence entirely, one which links her to marvels and mysteries; and even to murder... In this, the third volume in Clive Barker's extraordinary fantasy for both adults and children, Candy's adventures in the amazing world of the Abarat are getting more strange by the Hour. Christopher Carrion, the Lord of Midnight, has sent his henchmen to capture her. Why? she wonders. What would Carrion want with a girl from Minnesota? And why is Candy beginning to feel that the world of the Abarat is familiar to her? Why can she speak words of magic she doesn't even remember learning? There is a mystery here. And Carrion, along with his fiendish grandmother, Mater Motley, suspects that whatever Candy is, she could spoil his plans to take control of the Abarat. Now Candy's companions must race against time to save her from the clutches of Carrion, and she must solve the mystery of her past before the forces of Night and Day clash and Absolute Midnight descends upon the islands. A final war is

about to begin. And Candy is going to need to make some choices that will change her life forever...

Abarat: Absolute Midnight
Clive Barker



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Johnny 2.0 Raymond

Mark Miller

Robbie Humphreys

[Epigraph](#)

There'll be no sun tomorrow morning.
There'll be no moon to bless the night.
The stars will perish without warning.
These lines proclaim the death of light.

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Dream!

Forge yourself and rise

Out of your mind and into others.

Men, be women.

Fish, be flies.

Girls, take beards.

Sons, be your mothers.

The future of the world now lies

In coral wombs behind our eyes.

—A song sung in Paradise Street

ON THE EARLY COAST of Idjit, where two a.m. looked south over the darkened straits toward the island of Gorgossium, there was a house, its facade much decorated, set high upon the cliffs. Its occupant went by the name of Mr. Kithit, and several others besides, but none of the names were truly his. He was known simply as the Card-Reader. The cards he read were not designed for games of chance. Far from it. He only ever used the Abaratian tarot deck, wherein a reader as expert as Mr. Kithit might find the past murmuring, the present in doubt, and the

future barely opening its eyes. A decent living could be made from interpreting the way the cards fell.

For many years the Card-Reader had served the countless customers who came there in search of wisdom. But tonight he was done with serving the curiosity of others. He was done with it forever. Tonight, it was not the future of others he was going to find in the cards. They had summoned him to show him his own destiny.

He sat down and took one slow, calming breath. Then he proceeded to lay out a pattern of nineteen cards chosen by the will of his fingertips. Blind though he was, each image appeared in his mind's eye, along with its name and numerical place in the pack.

There was Fear. There was The Door to the Stars. There was The King of Fates and The Daughter of Curiosity. Each card was not only to be read for its own values, but also calibrated against the cards surrounding it: a piece of mythological mathematics, which most heads could not fathom.

The Man Lit by Candles; Death's Island; The Primal Form; The Tree of Knowing . . .

And of course the entire arrangement had to be set against the card that his customer—in this case himself—had chosen as his Avatar. In this case, he had elected a card called The Threshold. He had put it back into the pack and then shuffled the cards twice before laying them out by instinct in the Naught Hereafter Spread, its name signifying that all things the Deck

contained would be here displayed: all reparations (the past), all possibilities (now), and all risk (henceforth and ever).

His fingers moved quickly, summoned by a call from the cards. There was something here they wanted to show him. He quickly understood that there was news of great consequence here, so he neglected the rules of reading, one of the first being that a Reader waited until each of the number of cards required for the Spread had been laid out.

A war was coming; he saw it in the cards. The last of the plots were being laid, even now, the weapons loaded and polished, the armies assembled, all in readiness for the day when Abaratian history turned the final corner. Was this the cards' way of telling him what part there was for him to play in this last, grim game? If so then he would attend to whatever he was being taught, trust to their wisdom as had so many who had come to him over the years, despairing of all other remedy, seeking that which the cards would show.

He was not surprised to find that there were many Fire cards around his Threshold, laid out like gifts. He was a man whose life—and flesh—had been re-wrought by that unforgiving element. Touching the cards with his seared fingertip, it was impossible for him not to remember the merciless conflagration that had beaten him back as he tried to save his family. One of his children, the youngest, had survived, but the fire had claimed all the rest except his mother, and it had only granted her a reprieve because she had always been as pitiless and all-consuming as a

great fire; a fire large enough to reduce a mansion and most of a dynasty to ashes.

In effect he'd lost everything, because his mother—crazed by what she'd witnessed, it was said—had taken the infant and disappeared into Day or Night, perhaps in her madness to hide the one survivor of her twenty-three grandchildren from the slightest hint of smoke on the wind. But the insanity plea had never been sufficient to quite calm the Card-Reader's unease. His mother had never been a very wholesome woman. She'd liked—more than was good for an unbalanced spirit such as hers—tales of Deep Magic, of Earth-Blood Doing and worse. And it had troubled the Card-Reader more than a little that he had lost track of both his mother and son; it troubled him because he'd not known what they were up to. But even more because they—the one who had borne him, and the one he had fathered—were out there somewhere, a part of the powers assembling for the labors of destruction that were signaled everywhere in the lay of the cards.

“Must I come and find you?” he said. “Is that what this is? Do you want a sentimental reunion, Mother?”

He judged by weight how many of the cards he had so far laid down. A little over half, he guessed. It was possible the half he still held carried news of his last connection with Abaratian history but he doubted it. This was not a spread of specificities. It was the Hereafter Naught, the last apocalyptic gospel of the Abaratian tarot.

He set the unplayed cards down, and went to the door of his house to bathe his scarred face in the cast of the silver starlight. The years when the children of the village of Eedo, which was at the bottom of the steep trail that zigzagged up the cliff to his house, had lived in fear of him had long since passed. Though they would playact terror to amuse each other, and he played the growling monster to feed the fiction, they knew he usually had a few paterzem to toss over the threshold for them to squabble over, especially when—as tonight—they brought him something they had found along the shore to give to him. Today, as he stood at the door of the house, one of his favorites, a sweet hybrid of Sea-Skipper and commonplace child, called Lupta, came squealing to find him with an entourage of children following closely behind her.

“I have flotsammi jetsammi!” she boasted. “I have many. Lookazis! Lookazis! All thrown up by Our Gracious Lady Izabella.”

“You want to see more?” said her brother, Kipthin.

“Of course,” the Card-Reader said. “Always.”

Lupta grunted out instructions to her little gang, who noisily un-netted their catch onto the ground in front of the Card-Reader’s house. He listened with a practiced ear to the noise the find gave off: the objects were large. Some clattered and clanged, others rang like sour-noted bells.

“Describe them to me, will you, child?”

Lupta proceeded to do so, but—as was so often the case for

haggling in the weeks since the persuasive currents of the Izabella had invaded the Hereafter, flooded Chickentown in Minnesota, and returned carrying some trophies of that other dimension with them—the objects that the tide had thrown up on the rocky beach below were not easily described or pictured, having no equivalent in the Abarat. Still the Card-Reader listened intently, knowing that if he was to understand the significance of the deck half spread in the darkened room behind him then he would need to understand the nature of the mysterious Humaniticks, some of whose artifacts, their details hard to make sense of when a man had no sight, surely offered profound clues to the nature of those who might unmake the world. Little Lupta perhaps knew more than she thought she knew. And behind her guesses, she was plucking up truths.

“What were these things made for?” he asked her. “Are they engines? Or toys? Are they to be eaten? Or maybe to kill?”

There was some frantic whispering among Lupta’s gang, but finally the girl said with absolute confidence:

“We don’t know.”

“They’re much beaten by the sea,” Kipthin said.

“I would expect nothing less,” the Card-Reader said. “Even so, let me put my hands upon them. Guide me, Lupta. You needn’t hesitate, child. I’m not a monster.”

“I know that. If you were, you wouldn’t look like one.”

“Who told you that?”

“I did.”

“Hm. Well, is there something here you think I might understand?”

“Yes. Here. Put out your hands.”

Lupta put one of the objects into his proffered palms. As soon as his fingers made contact with whatever it was, his legs gave way beneath him, and he fell to the ground dumping the piece of trash Lupta had given him. He reached down and searched for it, seized by the same fervor that caught hold of him whenever he was reading the cards. There was one significant difference, however. When he read the cards his mind was able to make a pattern of the signs he was seeing. But there was no pattern here. Only chaos upon chaos. He saw a monstrous ship of war, with his mother, aged but still as much a harridan as ever, commanding the waters of the Izabella to burst through the divide between its natural bed and into the Hereafter, its crazed flood ripping apart what lay on the other side.

“Chickentown,” he murmured.

“You see it?” said Lupta’s brother.

The Card-Reader nodded. “Being ripped apart.” He closed his eyes more tightly, as though he might blot out with a willed blindness the horrors he saw.

“Have any of you heard any stories concerning the people of the Hereafter?” he asked the children.

As before, there was frantic whispering. But he caught one of his visitors urging Lupta to tell him.

“Tell me what?” the blind man said.

“About people from a place called Chickentown. They’re just stories,” Lupta said. “I don’t know if any of them are true.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“Tell him about the girl. She’s the one everyone talks about,” said a third member of Lupta’s gang.

“Candy . . . Quackenbush . . .” the blind man said, half to himself.

“Have you seen her in your cards?” Lupta asked. “Do you know where she is?”

“Why?”

“You have, haven’t you?”

“What would it matter if I had?”

“I need to talk with her! I want to be like her! Everything she does people talk about.”

“Like what?”

Lupta’s voice became a whisper. “Our priest says it’s a sin to talk about her. Is he right?”

“No, Lupta, I don’t believe he is.”

“I’m going to run away one day. I am! I want to find her.”

“You be careful,” the Card-Reader said. “It’s a dangerous time and it’s going to get worse.”

“I don’t care.”

“Well, at least come and say good-bye, child,” the Card-Reader said. He dug into his pocket and brought out a few paterzem.

“Here,” he said, handing the coins over to Lupta. “Thank you

for bringing the stuff up from the shore. Will you divide this between you? Fairly, now.”

“Of course!” Lupta said. And happy with their reward she and her friends went off down the road to the village, leaving the Card-Reader with his thoughts and the collection of objects the current, the children, and circumstance had brought before him.

The urchin and her gang had arrived at an opportune moment. Perhaps with the remnants they’d brought he could make better sense of the Spread. The cards and the trash had much in common: they were both collections of clues connecting what the world had been like in a better age. He went back into the house and sat at the table again, picking up the un-spread cards. He had only laid down another two when the card representing Candy Quackenbush appeared. It was easily identified. I Am They, the card was called. He could not recall having ever seen it before.

“Well, well . . .” he murmured. “Look at you.” He tapped her with his finger. “What gives you the right to be such a power? And what business have you got with me?” The girl on the card stared at him from his mind’s eye. “Are you here to give me harm or happiness? Because I tell you I’ve had more than my share of sorrow. I can’t take much more.”

I Am They watched him with great compassion.

“Ah,” he said. “It isn’t over. At least now I know. Be kind to me, will you? If it is in your power.”

It took him another six and a half hours from his speaking to Candy Quackenbush to finally deciding he was done with the

Spread. He gathered up all of the cards, counting them to be sure he had them all, and then he went outside, taking them with him. The wind had picked up considerably since he'd been out here with Lupta and her little gang. It came speeding around the corner of the house, buffeting him as he walked toward the cliff edge, the pack of cards trembling in his hand.

The farther from his doorstep he ventured the more unreliable the ground became, the solid earth giving way to loose dirt and pebbles. The cards were becoming more excitable with every step he took out there beyond the cliff edge. Events they'd been unable to share until now were imminent.

Suddenly the wind picked up its strength, and threw him forward, as if to cast him into the world. His right foot trod vacant air, and he toppled forward—seeing all too clearly in his mind's eye the waves of the Izabella below. Two thoughts came into his head at the same instant. One, that he had not seen this (his death) in the cards. And two, that he'd been wrong about Candy Quackenbush. He would not meet her after all, which saddened him.

Then two small yet very strong hands seized his shirt and pulled him back from the brink. Instead of dropping to his death he toppled backward, landing on top of his savior. It was little Lupta.

“I knew,” she said.

“Knew what?”

“You were going to do something stupid.”

"I was not."

"It looked like you were."

"The wind caught me is all. Thank you for saving me from losing my—"

"The cards!" Lupta said.

His grip on the cards was too weak. When the wind came gushing again it snatched them from his hand, and with what sounded like a ripple of applause as they slapped against one another, they were carried away, out into the naked air.

"Let them go," the blind man said.

"But how will you make money without your cards?"

"Heaven will provide. Or else it won't, and I'll go hungry." He got to his feet. "In a way it confirms my decision. My life here is over. It's time I went to see the Hours one last time before they and I pass."

"You mean they're coming to an end?"

"Yes. Many things will end soon. Cities, Princes, things foul and things fine. All will pass away." He paused, looking up sightlessly at the sky. "Are there a lot of stars tonight?"

"Yes. Lots."

"Oh good, very good. Will you lead me down to the North Road?"

"Don't you want to go through the village? Say good-bye?"

"Would you?"

"No."

"No. Just get me to the North Road. Once I have it beneath

my feet, I'll know where to go from there.”

Part One The Dark Hours

Oh sweet children, my beloveds, time to go to bed.

Oh sweet children, heavy-lidded,
you are bathed and you are fed.

Time for pillows, time for sleeping,
and fearless dreams to fill your heads.

Oh sweet children, my beloved,
time to go to bed.

—Anon.

Chapter 1 Toward Twilight

CANDY'S GANG OF ABARATIAN friends had plenty of plans laid to celebrate her safe return to the islands after the violence and insanity of the Hereafter. But they had barely finished welcoming her home with kisses and laughter (to which the John Brothers added an a cappella version of an old Abaratian standard) when Deaux-Deaux the sea-skipper, who had been the first friend Candy had made in Abaratian waters, came to find her, to tell her that word was being passed by every means in every direction, demanding her presence at The Great Head of the Yebba Dim Day. An emergency meeting of the Council of the Hours was presently assembling there to fully analyze the calamitous events that had taken place in Chickentown. Given that Candy had a unique perspective on those events, it was vital that she attend to give evidence.

It wouldn't be an easy meeting, she knew. No doubt, the

Council suspected that she was the cause of the events that had wrought so much destruction. They would want her to give them a full account of why and how she had come to make herself such powerful enemies as Mater Motley and her grandson, Christopher Carrion: enemies with the power to override the seal the Council had put on the Abarat and force the waters of the Izabella to do their bidding, causing it to form a wave powerful enough to wash over the threshold between worlds, and to fill Chickentown's streets.

She quickly said her good-byes to those she'd only recently greeted again—Finnegan Hob, Two-Toed Tom, the John Brothers, Geneva—and with her geshrat friend Malingo for company she boarded the small boat the Council had sent and departed for the Straits of Dusk.

The journey was long, but went without incident. This was no thanks to the temperament of the Izabella, which was much stirred up, and carried on her tide plentiful evidence of the journey her waters had recently taken across the border between worlds. There were keepsakes from Chickentown floating everywhere: plastic toys, plastic bottles, and plastic furniture, not to mention boxes of cereal and cans of beer, pages of gossip magazines and broken televisions. A street sign, drowned chickens, the contents of somebody's fridge, leftovers bobbing by sealed in plastic: half a sandwich, some meat loaf, and a slice of cherry pie.

"Strange," Candy said, watching it all float by. "It makes me

hungry.”

“There’s plenty of fish,” said the Abaratian in Council uniform who was guiding their boat through this detritus.

“I don’t see fish,” Malingo said.

The man leaned over the side of the boat, and with startling speed, he reached down into the water and pulled out a fat fish, yellow dotted with spots of bright blue. He proffered the creature, all panic and color, to Malingo.

“There,” he said. “Eat! It’s a sanshee fish. Very good meat.”

“No thanks. Not raw.”

“Please yourself.” He offered it to Candy. “Lady?”

“I’m not hungry, thank you.”

“Mind . . . if I . . . ?”

“Go ahead.”

The man opened his mouth much wider than Candy had thought possible, revealing two impressive parades of pointed teeth. The fish, much to Candy’s surprise uttered a high-pitched squeal, which died the moment its devourer bit off its head. Candy didn’t want to look revolted by what was probably a perfectly natural thing for the pilot to have done so she went back to looking at the bizarre reminders of Chickentown as they floated by, until finally the little vessel brought them into the busy harbor of the Yebba Dim Day.

Chapter 2 The Council Speaks its Minds

CANDY HAD EXPECTED TO be called into the Council Chamber, questioned by the Councilors about what she’d seen

and experienced and then released to go back to join her friends. But it became apparent as soon as she presented herself before the Council that not all of the eleven individuals gathered here thought that she was an innocent victim of the calamitous events that had caused so much destruction, and that some punishment needed to be agreed upon.

One of Candy's accusers, a woman called Nyritta Maku, who came from Huffaker, was the first to present her opinion, and she did so without any sweetening.

"It's very clear that for reasons known only to yourself," she said, her blue-skinned skull bound so as to form a series of soft-boned sub-skulls of diminishing size that hung like a tail, "you came to the Abarat without invitation from anyone in this Chamber, intending to cause trouble. You quickly did so. You liberated a geshrat from the employ of an imprisoned wizard without any permission to do so. You roused the fury of Mater Motley. That in itself would be reason for a stiff sentence. But there's worse. We have already heard testimony that you have the arrogance to believe you have some significant part to play in the future of our islands."

"I didn't come here deliberately if that's what you're saying."

"Have you made any such claims?"

"This is an accident. Me being here."

"Answer the question."

"If I was to take a wild guess I'd say she's trying to do that, Nyritta," said the representative from the Nonce. It was a spiral

of warm dappled light, in the midst of which flakes of poppy and white gold floated. "Just give her a chance to find the words."

"Oh, you really like the lost ones, don't you, Keemi."

"I'm not lost," Candy said. "I know my way around pretty well."

"And why is that?" said a third Council member, her face an eight-eyed, four-petaled flower with a bright-throated mouth at its center. "Not only do you know your way around the islands, you also know a lot about the Abarataraba."

"I've just heard stories here and there."

"Stories!" said Yobias Thim, who had a row of candles around the brim of his hat. "You don't learn to wield Feits and Wantons by hearing stories. I think what happened with Motley and Carrion and your knowledge of the Abarataraba are all part of the same suspicious business."

"Let it be," said Keemi. "We didn't summon her here to Okizor to interrogate her about how she knows the Abarataraba."

She glanced around at the Councilors, no two of whose physiognomies were alike. The representative from Orlando's Cap had a brilliant coxcomb of scarlet and turquoise feathers, which were standing proud in his agitated state; while the face of Soma Plume's representative, Helio Fatha, wavered as though he was gazing through a cloud of heat, and the dawning face of the Councilor from six a.m. was streaked with the promise of another day.

"Look, it's true. I do know . . . things," Candy admitted. "It

started at the lighthouse, with me knowing how to summon the Izabella. I'm not saying I couldn't do it, I could. I just don't know how I did. Does it matter?"

"If this Council thinks it matters," growled the stone visage from Efreet, "then it matters. And everything else should be of little consequence to you until the question has been satisfactorily answered."

Candy nodded. "All right," she said. "I'll do my best. But it's complicated."

So saying, she began to tell them as best she could the parts that she did know, starting with the event from which everything else sprang: her birth, and the fact that just an hour or so before her mother got to the hospital on an empty, rain-lashed highway in the middle of nowhere, three women of the Fantomaya—Diamanda, Joephi and Mespa—had crossed the forbidden divide between the Abarat and the Hereafter looking for a hiding place for the soul of Princess Boa, whose murdered remains lay in the Nonce.

"They found my mother," Candy said, "sitting, waiting for my dad to come back with gas for the truck . . ."

She paused, because there was a humming sound in her head, which was getting louder. It sounded as though her skull was filled with hundreds of agitated bees. She couldn't think straight.

"They found my mother . . ." she said again, aware that her voice was slurring.

"Forget your mother for a moment," said the representative

from Ninnyhammer, a bipedal tarrie-cat called Jimothi Tarrie, who Candy had met before. “What do you know about the murder of Princess Boa?”

“Boa.”

“Yes.”

Huh. Boa.

“Quite . . . quite a lot,” Candy replied.

What she’d thought to be the voices of bees, was forming into syllables, the syllables into words, the words becoming sentences. There was somebody speaking in her head.

Don’t tell them anything, the voice said. They’re bureaucrats, all of them.

She knew the voice. She’d been hearing it all her life. She’d thought it was her voice. But just because the voice had been in her skull all her life didn’t make it hers. She said the other’s name without speaking it.

Princess Boa.

Yes, of course, the other woman said. Who else were you expecting?

“Jimothi Tarrie asked you a question,” Nyritta said.

“The death of the Princess . . .” Jimothi reminded her.

“Yes, I know,” Candy said.

Tell them nothing, Boa reiterated. Don’t let them intimidate you. They’ll use your words against you. Be very careful.

Candy was deeply unsettled by the presence of Boa’s voice—and especially unhappy that it should make itself audible to her

now of all times—but she sensed that the advice she was being given was right. The Councilors were watching her with profound suspicion.

“. . . I heard bits of gossip,” she said to them. “But don’t really remember much . . .”

“But you’re here in the Abarat for a reason,” said Nyritta.

“Am I?” she countered.

“Well, don’t you know? You tell us. Are you?”

“I don’t . . . have any reason in my head, if that’s what you mean,” Candy said. “I think maybe I’m just here because I happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Nice work, Boa said. Now they don’t know what to think.

Boa’s assessment seemed right. There were a lot of frowns and puzzled looks around the Council table. But Candy wasn’t off the hook yet.

“Let’s change the subject,” Nyritta said.

“And go where?” Helio Fatha asked.

“What about Christopher Carrion?” Nyritta said to Candy. “You were somehow involved with him. Weren’t you?”

“Well, he tried to have me murdered, if you want to call that involvement.”

“No, no, no. Your enemy was Mater Motley. There was something else going on with Carrion. Admit it.”

“Like what?” Candy said.

She needed to lie now, Candy knew. The truth was that she was indeed aware of why Carrion had been drawn to her, but she

wasn't going to let the Councilors know about it. Not until she knew more herself. So she said it was a mystery to her. And a mystery, she didn't neglect to remind them, that had almost cost her her life.

"Well, you survived to tell the tale," Nyritta remarked, his voice dripping sarcasm.

"So why don't you tell it, instead of meandering around explaining nothing at all?" Helio Fatha said.

"I've nothing to tell," Candy replied.

"There are laws defending the Abarat from your kind, you know that, don't you?"

"What will you do? Execute me?" Candy said. "Oh, don't look so shocked. You're not angels. Yes, you probably had good reason to protect yourselves from my kind. But no kind is perfect. Even Abaratians."

Boa was right, Candy thought. They were a bunch of bullies. Just like her dad. Just like everyone else. And the more they bullied, the more she was determined not to give them any answers.

"I can't help it whether you believe me or not. You can interrogate me all you like, but you're just going to get the same answer. I don't know anything!"

Helio Fatha snorted with contempt. "Ah, let her go!" he said. "This is a waste of time."

"But she has powers, Fatha. She was seen wielding them."

"So maybe she saw them in a book. Wasn't she with that idiot

Wolfswinkel for a time? Whatever she may have learned, she'll forget it. Humankind can't hold on to mystery."

There was a long, irritated silence. Finally Candy said, "Can I go?"

"No," said the stone-faced representative from Efreet. "We're not finished with our questions."

"Let the girl go, Zuprek," Jimothi said.

"Neabas still has something to say," the Efreetian replied.

"Get on with it."

Neabas spoke like a snail edging along a knife. He looked like iridescent gossamer. "We all know she has some affection for the creature, though why that should be is incomprehensible. She's plainly concealing a great deal from us. If I had my way I'd call in Yeddik Magash—"

"A torturer?" Jimothi said.

"No. He's simply somebody who knew how to get the truth when, as now, it was being willfully withheld. But I don't expect this Council to sanction such a choice. You're all too soft. You'll choose fur over stone, and in the end we'll all suffer for it."

"Do you actually have a question for the girl?" Yobias Thim asked wearily. "All my candles are down and I don't have any others with me."

"Yes, Thim. I have a question," Zuprek said.

"Then, Lordy Lou, ask it."

Zuprek's shards fixed upon Candy. "I want to know when it was you were last in the company of Christopher Carrion," he

said.

Say nothing, Boa told her.

Why shouldn't they know? Candy thought, and without waiting for any further argument from Boa she told Zuprek, "I found him in my parents' bedroom."

"This was back in the Hereafter?"

"Yes, of course. My mother and father haven't been to the Abarat. None of my family has."

"Well, that's some sort of comfort, I suppose," Zuprek said. "At least we won't have an invasion of Quackenbushes to deal with."

His sour humor got a few titters from sympathetic souls around the table: Nyritta Maku, Skippelwit, one or two others. But Neabas still had further questions. And he was deadly serious:

"What was Carrion's condition?" he wanted to know.

"He was very badly wounded. I thought he was going to die."

"But he didn't die?"

"Not on the bed, no."

"Somewhere close by, you're implying?"

"I only know what I saw."

"And what was that?"

"Well . . . the window burst open, and all this water rushed in. It carried him away. That was the last time I saw him. Disappearing into the dark water, and then gone."

"Are you satisfied, Neabas?" Jimothi said.

“Almost,” came the reply. “Just tell us all, without any lies or half-truths, what you believe the real reason for Carrion’s interest in you was?”

“I already said: I don’t know.”

“She’s right,” Jimothi reminded his fellow Councilors. “Now we’re going around in circles. I say enough.”

“I have to agree,” Skippelwit remarked. “Though I, like Neabas, yearn for the good old days, when we could have left her with Yeddik Magash for a while. I don’t have any problem with using someone like Magash if the situation really calls for it.”

“Which this doesn’t,” Jimothi said.

“On the contrary, Jimothi,” Neabas said. “There is going to be One Last Great War—”

“How do you know that?” Jimothi said.

“Just accept it. I know what the future looks like. And it’s grim. The Izabella will be bloodred from Tazmagor to Babilonium. I do not exaggerate.”

“And this will be all her fault?” Helio Fatha said. “Is that what you’re implying?”

“All?” Neabas said. “No. Not all. There are ten thousand reasons why a war is bound to come eventually. Whether it will be the last war is . . . shall we say . . . open to speculation. But whether it is or isn’t, it’s going to be a disastrous conflict, because it comes with so many questions unanswered, many of them—maybe most, maybe all—are associated with this girl. Her presence has raised the heat under a simmering pan. And

now it will quickly boil. Boil and burn.”

What do I say to that? Candy silently asked Boa.

As little as possible, Boa told her. Let him be the aggressor if that’s the game he wants to play. Just pretend you’re cool and sophisticated instead of some girl who was dragged up out of nowhere.

You mean act more like a Princess? Candy replied, unable to keep the raw displeasure from her thoughts.

Well, as you put it that way . . . the Princess said.

As I put it that way what?

Yes. I suppose I do mean more like me.

Well, you keep thinking that, Candy said.

Let’s not get into an argument about it. We both want the same thing.

And what’s that?

To keep Yeddik Magash from taking us into a sealed room.

“So, if anyone has insight into Carrion’s nature, it’s our guest. Isn’t that right, Candy? May I call you Candy? We’re not your enemies, you do know that?”

“Funny, that’s not the impression I get,” Candy replied. “Come on. No more stupid games. You all think I was conspiring with him, don’t you?”

“Conspiring to do what?” Helio Fatha said.

“How would I know?” Candy said. “I didn’t do it.”

“We’re not fools, girl,” said Zuprek, reentering the exchange with his tone now nakedly combative. “Nor are we without

informants. You can't keep the company of someone like Christopher Carrion without drawing attention to yourself."

"Are you telling me that you were spying on us?"

Zuprek allowed a phantom smile to haunt his stone face. "How interesting," he said softly. "I sniff guilt."

"No, you don't," Candy told him. "It's just irritation you can smell. You had no right to be watching me. Watching us. You're the Grand Council of the Abarat and you're spying on your own citizens?"

"You're not a citizen. You're a nobody."

"That was just vicious, Zuprek."

"She's mocking us. Do any of you see that? She intends to be the death of us, so she mocks."

There was a long silence. Finally somebody said, "We're done with this interview. Let's move on."

"I agree," Jimothi said.

"She told us nothing, you dumb cat!" Helio yelled.

Jimothe sprang up off his chair and onto his haunches in one smooth motion.

"You know my people are closer to beasts than some of you others," he said. "Maybe you should remember that. I can smell a lot of fear in this room right now . . . a lot."

"Jimothe . . . Jimothe!" Candy stepped in the Cat King's line of sight. "Nobody's been hurt. It's all right. There's just some people here with no respect for those who are a little different."

Jimothe stared through Candy not hearing her, it seemed, or

listening to anything she was saying. His claws curled into the table and raked the polished wood.

“Jimothe . . .”

“I have such high regard for the visitor. I admit that predisposes me to think well of her, but if I genuinely believed she would be—as Zuprek put it—‘the death of us’ there is no sentiment in the Abarat that would make me merciful.”

“Well then, Zuprek,” Nyritta said. “I think it falls to you to prove or not to prove.”

“Forget proof,” Neabas said. “This isn’t about proof. It’s about faith. We who have faith in the future of the Abarat must act to protect it. Sometimes we will be criticized for our decisions—”

“You’re talking about the camps,” Nyritta said.

“I don’t approve of the girl hearing us discussing the camps,” Zuprek said. “It’s none of her business.”

“What does it matter?” Helio said. “People already know.”

“It’s time we discussed this,” Jimothe said. “Commexo is building one on Ninnyhammer, but nobody asks questions. Nobody cares as long as the Kid keeps telling them everything’s perfect.”

“Don’t you support the camps, Jimothe?” Nyritta said.

“No, I do not.”

“Why not?” said Yobias. “Your family line is perfectly pure. Look at you. Purebred Abaratian.”

“So what?”

“You’d be perfectly safe. We all would.”

Candy sniffed something of significance here, but she kept her tone as casual as possible, despite the sickening feeling she had in the pit of her stomach. "Camps?"

"It's nothing to do with you," Nyritta snapped. "You shouldn't even be hearing these things."

"You make it sound like they're something you're ashamed of," Candy said.

"You're reading something into my words that's not there."

"Okay. So you're not ashamed."

"Absolutely not. I'm simply doing my duty."

"I'm glad you're proud," Jimothi jumped in, "because one day we may need to answer for every decision we've done. This interrogation, the camps. Everything." He was staring down at his paws. "If this goes bad they'll need necks for nooses. And they'll be ours. It should be ours. We all knew what we were doing when we started this."

"Scared for your neck, are you, Jimothi?" said Zuprek.

"No," Jimothi said. "I'm scared for my soul, Zuprek. I'm afraid I will lose it because I was too busy making camps for Pure-bloods."

Zuprek uttered a grinding growl, and started to get up from the table, his hands closed into fists.

"No, Zuprek," Nyritta Maku said, "this meeting is at a close." She threw an aside at Candy. "Go, child. You're dismissed!"

"I haven't finished with her!" Zuprek yelled.

"This committee has!" Maku said. This time she pushed

Candy toward the door. "Go!"

It was already open. Candy glanced back at Jimothi, grateful for all he had done. Then she headed away through the door while Zuprek's cries echoed off the Chamber walls:

"She'll be the death of us!"

Chapter 3 The Wisdom of the Mob

CANDY FOUND MALINGO WAITING for her among the crowd outside the Council Chambers. The look of relief that flooded his face when she emerged was almost worth the discomfort of the highly unpleasant interview. She did her best to hurriedly explain all that she'd just endured.

"But they've let you go?" he said when she was finished.

"Yeah," Candy said. "You thought they were going to throw me in jail?"

"It crossed my mind. There's no love for the Hereafter, that's for sure. Just listening to people passing by . . ."

"And the worst is still to come," Candy said.

"Another war?"

"That's what the Council thinks."

"Abarat against the Hereafter? Or Night against Day?"

Candy caught a few suspicious glances coming her way. "I think we should continue this conversation somewhere else," she said. "I don't want any more interrogations."

"Where do you want to go?" Malingo said.

"Anywhere, as long as it's away from here," Candy said. "I don't want to have any more questions thrown at me until I've got

all the answers straight.”

“And how do you plan on doing that?”

Candy threw Malingo an uneasy glance.

“Say it,” he said. “Whatever it is you’ve got on your mind.”

“I’ve got a Princess on my mind, Malingo. And now I know she’s been there since the day I was born. It changes things. I thought I was Candy Quackenbush from Chickentown, Minnesota. And in a way I was. I lived an ordinary life on the outside. But on the inside, in here,” she said, putting her finger to her temple, “I was learning what she knew. That’s the only explanation that makes sense. Boa learned magic from Carrion. And then I took it from her and hid it.”

“But you’re saying that aloud right now.”

“That’s because she knows now. There’s no use to play hide-and-seek, not for either of us. She’s in me, and I know it. And I’ve got everything she knows about the Abarataraba. And she knows that.”

I would have done the same thing, I don’t doubt, Boa said. But I think it’s time we parted.

“I agree.”

“With what?” Malingo said.

“I was talking to Boa. She wants her freedom.”

“Can’t blame her,” Malingo said.

“I don’t,” Candy said. “I just don’t know where to start.”

Ask the geshrat to tell you about Laguna Munn.

“Do you know somebody called Laguna Munn?”

“Not personally, no,” Malingo said. “But there was a rhyme in one of Wolfswinkel’s books about the woman.”

“Do you remember it?”

Malingo thought for a moment or two. Then he recited it:

“Laguna Munn,

Had a son,

Perfect in every way.

A joy to see at work time,

And bliss to watch at play!

But oh, how did she come by him?

I cannot bear to say!”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. Supposedly one of her sons was made from all the good in her, but he was a dull child. So dull she wanted nothing to do with him. So she went and made another son—”

“Let me guess. Out of all the evil in her?”

“Well, whoever wrote the rhyme cannot bear to say, but yes, I think that’s what we’re supposed to think.”

She’s a very powerful woman, Boa said. And she’s been known to use her powers to help people, if she’s in the mood. Candy reported this to Malingo. Then Boa added, Of course, she is crazy.

“Why is there always a catch?” Candy said out loud.

“What?” Malingo said.

“Boa says Laguna Munn’s crazy.”

“And what—you’re Candy, the sane lady? I don’t think so.”

“Good point.”

“Let the mad find wisdom in their madness for the sane, and let the sane be grateful.”

“Is that a famous saying?”

“Maybe if I say it often enough.”

The geshrat talks a lot of sense . . . for a geshrat.

“What did she say?” Malingo asked Candy.

“How did you know she said anything?”

“I’m starting to see it on your face.”

“She said you were very clever.”

Malingo didn’t look convinced. “Yeah, I bet she did,” he said.

Their route took them back to the harbor via a selection of much smaller streets than those by which they had ascended to the Council Chamber. There was an air of unease in these narrow alleys and tiny yards. People were going about anxious, furtive business. It was, Candy thought, as though everyone was making plans for what to do if things didn’t turn out right. Through partly opened doors that gave access into shadowy interiors she even caught a glimpse of people packing up in preparation for a hurried departure. Malingo clearly interpreted what they saw the same way because he said to Candy:

“Did the Council talk about evacuating The Great Head?”

“No.”

“Then why are people getting ready to leave?”

“It makes no sense. If anywhere’s safe, it’s the Yebba Dim Day. Lordy Lou! This is one of the oldest structures in

existence.”

“Apparently old age isn’t what it used to be.”

They walked on in silence then, down to the harbor. There were a dozen fishing boats or more trying to find docking places so that the cargo of detritus could be unloaded.

“Bits of Chickentown . . .” Candy said grimly.

“Don’t let it bother you. The people here have heard so many things about your people over the years. Now they’ve got something to actually hold in their hands.”

“It looks like trash, most of it.”

“Yeah.”

“What are they going to think of Chickentown?” Candy said sadly.

Malingo said nothing. He hung back to let Candy go on ahead to examine the stuff the fishermen had scooped from the waters of the Izabella. Did the people of the Abarat think any of this was of value? Two pink plastic flamingos, washed away from somebody’s garden, a lot of old magazines and bottles of pills, some bits of bashed-up furniture, a big sign with a stupid bug-eyed chicken painted on it, and another that announced the subject of the Sunday sermon at the Lutheran Church on Whittmer Street: The Many Doors of God’s Mansion.

Somebody among the crowd, a golden-eyed, green-bearded individual lubricated by several bottles of the Kid’s Best Ale, had decided to take this opportunity to pontificate on the subject of how dangerous humankind and its wicked technologies could be.

He had plenty of supporters and friends among the crowd, who quickly provided him with a couple of fish crates to stand on, from which perch he let loose a venomous tirade. “If the tide carried their treasures here,” he said, “then it’s going to bring some of their owners too. We need to be ready. We all know what the people of the Hereafter will do if they come back. They’ll be after the Abarataraba again.”

He had only got that far when Candy heard somebody nearby murmur her name.

She looked around, and quickly found a friendly face, that of Izarith, who’d taken the trouble to look after Candy when she’d first ventured into the chaotic interior of The Great Head. She’d fed Candy, and given her a warm fire by which to dry herself, even given Candy her first Abaratian garments to wear. Izarith was a Skizmut; her people were born from the deep waters of what Izarith had called Mama Izabella. Now she came through the crowd toward Candy, wearing what looked like a homemade hat, sewn from different kinds of seaweed. She was cradling her baby Nazré with one arm and holding the little hand of her daughter Maiza with the other.

She was very emotional about seeing Candy again. Her eyes filled with silver-green tears.

“I’ve heard so much about you since you first came to my house. About all the things that you’ve done.” She glanced at Malingo. “And I’ve heard about you too,” she said. “You’re the one who worked for the wizard, right? On Ninnyhammer?”

Malingo made a little smile.

"This is Izarith, Malingo," Candy said. "She was very kind to me when I first got here."

"I did what anybody would have done," Izarith said. "Do you have time to come back to the house and tell me whether all the things I've heard are true? You both look hungry."

"Actually, I am a little," Malingo said.

But in the short time since Izarith had called to Candy the mood of the crowd had changed, influenced by the anger toward humankind pouring from the man with the green beard.

"We should hunt them down, every last one of them humans, and hang them," he said. "If we don't it's only a moment of time before they come looking to steal our magic again."

"You know, I don't think we have time to eat, Izarith, much as we'd liked to stay."

"You're worried about Kytomini aren't you?"

"Is he the one saying he'd like me hanged?"

"He hates everybody. Right now it's your people, Candy. It could be geshrats in five minutes."

"There's a lot of people agreeing with him," Candy said.

"People like to have somebody to hate. Me, I'm too busy raising the little ones."

"What about your husband?"

"Oh, Ruthus is working on his boat right now. Patching it up for selling. We're getting out of the Yebba Dim Day as soon as we have the money. It's getting too dangerous."

"Is his boat seaworthy?" Malingo said.

"Ruthus says it is."

"Then perhaps he'd take us to the Nonce, for a price."

"The Nonce?" Izarith said. "Why are you going there?"

"We're meeting friends," Candy said. She reached in her pockets as she talked, and brought out all the paterzem she had. Malingo did the same. "Here's all the money we've got," she said to Izarith. "Would that pay for the journey?"

"I'm sure it'll be more than enough," Izarith replied. "Come on, I'll take you to Ruthus. The boat's nothing fancy, just so you know."

"We don't need anything fancy," Candy said. "We just need to get away from here."

Izarith lent Candy her wide-brimmed hat, to keep anyone in the increasingly agitated crowd from realizing that they had a member of humankind in their midst, then led Candy and Malingo down the quay, past vessels large and small to one of the smallest of the lot.

There was a man on board doing some final work on his vessel with brush and paint. Izarith called her husband away from his work, and quickly explained the situation. Meanwhile Candy watched Kytomini's audience from the corner of her eye. She had a nasty feeling that she and Malingo had not passed through the crowd entirely unnoticed, a feeling that was lent weight when several of the crowd's members turned to look in Candy's direction, and after a moment, started to walk down the

quay toward them.

“We’re in trouble, Izarith,” Candy said. “Or least I am. I think it would be better if you weren’t seen with me.”

“What, then?” Izarith said, staring back contemptuously at the approaching thugs. “I’m not afraid of them.”

“Candy’s right, love,” Ruthus said. “Take the children quickly and go around the back of the fish market. Hurry.”

“Thank you,” Candy said. “Next time it won’t be so rushed.”

“You tell my husband to come back to us as quickly as possible.”

“He will, don’t worry,” Candy replied.

The man with the green beard, who had first incited the anger with his speechifying, was now breaking through the approaching little mob of bullies to lead it.

“Are we going?” Ruthus yelled.

“Oh, Lordy Lou, are we ever,” Candy said.

“Then come on!”

Candy jumped into the boat. Its boards creaked.

“If ye’ve cracked her boards and you drown, don’t blame me.” Ruthus grinned.

“We won’t drown,” Malingo said following Candy. “This girl has work to do. Great work!”

Candy smiled. (It was true. What, or how, or when—she had no idea. But it was true.)

Ruthus was racing to the wheelhouse yelling to Malingo as he did so: “Cut the rope, geshrat. Be quick!”

The dock was reverberating as the mob, its numbers increasing, followed Green Beard's lead.

"I see you, girl!" he yelled, "and I know what you are!"

"Rope's severed, Ruthus!"

"Hold on, then! And pray!"

"Go!" Candy yelled to Ruthus.

"Your crimes against the Abarat must be punished—"

The last word was repeated by every hate-filled throat in the crowd. "Punished!" "Punished!" "Pun—"

The third time, the threat was drowned out by the raucous roar of Ruthus's little boat, as its engine came to life.

A cloud of yellow exhaust fumes erupted from the stern of the boat, its density blotting all sight of the mob, just as its din had blotted all sound.

Ruthus's work was not over. They had got away from the dock, but they were not yet out of the harbor. And there were more opportunistic fishermen bringing in cargos of garbage all the time. If Ruthus's boat had been any larger, it would have been caught in the confusion. But it was a tiny thing, and nimble-like, especially with Ruthus at the wheel. By the time the smoke trail had cleared, the boat was out of the harbor and into the Straits of Dusk.

Chapter 4 The Kid

CANDY'S ESCAPE FROM THE mob in the Yebba Dim Day had not gone unnoticed. The greatest concentration of eyes spying her jeopardy were at Three O'Clock in the Morning. At

the heart of that extraordinary city was a vast round mansion, and at the heart of the mansion, a circular viewing chamber, where the innumerable mechanical spies that were scattered around the Abarat—perfect imitations of flora and fauna so cunningly crafted as to be indistinguishable from the real thing, but for the fact that each carried a miniscule camera—reported what they saw. There were literally thousands of screens in the Circular Room covering the inner and outer walls, and Rojo Pixler would have been there, watching the world he had brought into being—its little tragedies, its little farces, its little spectacles of love and death on full display—but today he was not riding around the room on his levitation disc, surveying the archipelago. The team of island-watchers was currently led by his trusted colleague, Dr. Voorzangler, wearing his beloved spectacles which offered the illusion that his two eyes were one. It was he who was noting any significant comings and goings, one of which was that of Candy Quackenbush. Voorzangler ordered his second, third, and fourth in command to be sure that each reminded the other to remind Voorzangler to report the movements of the girl from the Hereafter to the great architect when he finally returned.

Though the phrase “when he returns” usually carried little significance, today it did. Today the great architect was surveying the site of his next great creation: an undersea city in the deepest trenches of the Sea of Izabella. Why? Voorzangler had asked Pixler more than once to which the answer had always been the same: to put a name to the hitherto nameless, and embrace

the wonders that surely existed in the lightless deeps. And when innocent endeavors had been achieved and those creatures had been catalogued, then he would be able to undertake the true objective of this endeavor (one which he had only shared with Voorzangler): to lay in the hidden habitat of these unknown life-forms the foundation of a deep-water city so ambitious in scale and design that the blazing immensity of Commexo City would be as a rough sketch might be to the finished masterwork.

Even now, as Voorzangler watched Candy Quackenbush leave the Yebba Dim Day, Pixler was visible on an adjacent screen climbing into his bathyscaphe, giving the camera a confident wave as he did so. Inside he had only artificial intelligences beside him, but their cold company was all he needed.

His face appeared now in the fish-eye lens that relayed his presence at the master controls of the bathyscaphe. His voice, when he spoke, had a metallic tone.

“Don’t look so worried, Voorzangler,” Pixler said. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Of course, sir,” the doctor replied. “But I wouldn’t be human if I wasn’t a little concerned.”

“Boasting now?” Pixler said.

“About what, sir?”

“About your humanity. There aren’t very many employees of the company who could say such a thing.” Pixler ran his hands over the bathyscaphe’s controls, turning on all the vessel’s functions. “Smile, Voorzangler,” he said. “We’re making history,

you and I.”

“I just wish we were making it on another day,” Voorzangler replied.

“Why?”

“Just . . . bad dreams, sir. Every rational man is allowed a few irrational dreams, wouldn’t you say?”

“What did you dream?” Pixler wanted to know. The bathyscaphe’s door slammed closed and sealed with a hiss. An artificial voice announced that the winches were all fully functional.

“It was nothing of consequence.”

“Then tell me what you dreamed, Voorzangler.”

Voorzangler’s single eye dodged left and right, looking for a way to avoid meeting the great architect’s inquiring gaze. But Pixler had always been able to stare him down.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll tell you. I dreamed that everything went perfectly well with the descent except—”

“Except?”

“Once you got into the very deepest place . . .”

“Yes?”

“There was a city there already.”

“Ah. And its occupants?”

“They’d gone, thousands of years before. Great scaly fins they’d had. And beauty in their faces. There were mosaics on the walls. Such bright, ambitious eyes.”

“And what happened to them?”

Voorzangler shook his head. "They left no clue. Unless their perfect city was the clue."

"What kind of clue is perfection?"

"Well, you would know, sir."

Pixler was not so easily persuaded. "Why did you have to have that stupid dream? You may have cursed my entire enterprise."

"We're scientists, sir. We don't believe in curses."

"Don't tell me what I believe in. Find me the Kid."

"He's being searched for."

"And not found?"

"Not so far."

"Don't bother. I just thought he'd want to see me off."

The automatic doors of the bathyscaphe were closing. A flicker of anxiety crossed the great architect's face. But he would not be commanded by it. The three massive winches—one of them supplying power to the bathyscaphe, the second delivering clean air, the third, and largest, bearing the weight of the immense vessel—were paying out steadily now. Voorzangler looked at the readings on the screens that surrounded the cabin. Hundreds of tiny cameras, like shoals of one-eyed fish, circled the descent column down which the bathyscaphe would be coming, their motion and their iridescence designed to draw out of the darkness every kind of mysterious creature that hunted in their oppressive depths.

"What happens if he never comes back?" said a forlorn voice.

Voorzangler looked away from the screens.

It was the Kid who had spoken. For once his smile had deserted him. He watched the bathyscaphe's descent with the expression of a genuinely deserted child.

"We must pray he does," Voorzangler said.

"But I always prayed to him," the Kid said.

"Then, my child, I suggest you think of another God, as quickly as you can."

"Why?" said the Kid, his voice tinged with a little hysteria. "Do you think Pops will die down there?"

"Now would I think that?" Voorzangler said, his response unconvincing.

"I heard you two talking about something that lives deep down in the dark. It's called the Recogacks, isn't it?"

"They, boy," Voorzangler said. "They are called the Requiaux."

"Ha!" the Kid said, like he'd caught Voorzangler in a lie. "So they do exist."

"That's one of the things your father's gone down to find out. Whether they exist or not."

"It's not fair. He's mine. If he goes down into the dark and never comes up again what will I do? I'll kill myself. That's what I'll do!"

"No, you won't."

"I will! You see if I don't!"

"Your father's a very special man. A genius. He's always going to be looking for new places to explore and things to build."

"Well, I hate him!" the Kid said. He took out his catapult,

loaded it with a stone, and aimed it at the biggest screen. He could scarcely have failed to miss. The screen shattered when the stone struck it, exploding in a shower of white sparks and Commexo Patent Glass fragments.

“Stop that immediately!” Voorzangler said.

But the Kid had already loaded his catapult again and was firing. A second screen went to pieces.

“I shall have to summon the guards if you don’t—”

He didn’t need to finish. The Kid had already seen something on the screens that made him forget his catapult. There was a girl being watched by the spy cameras: a girl who the Kid knew, at least by sight, because his father had summoned up her image for him the night he’d come back from Ninnyhammer, where he met her.

“Her name’s Candy Quackenbush, my boy,” the Kid said, perfectly imitating his Creator’s voice.

The sight of Candy put all of the Kid’s rage toward Pixler out of his mind. Now he was consumed by curiosity.

“Where are you off to, Candy Quackenbush?” he said too quietly for Voorzangler to hear. “Why don’t you come to the City and be my friend? I need a friend.”

He went to the lowest of the screens that carried her image and, reaching out, he gently put his hand upon her face.

“Please come,” he murmured. “I don’t mind waiting. I’ll be here. Just come. Please.”

[Chapter 5 Remnants of Wickedness](#)

ABOUT THREE WEEKS AFTER the waters of the Sea of Izabella had crossed the threshold between the Abarat and the Hereafter, flooding many of the streets of Chickentown and demolishing in its force and fury the town's finest old houses along with the courthouse, the church and the Henry Murkitt Public Library, Candy's father, Bill Quackenbush began to take nightly walks through the town.

Bill had never had any enthusiasm for exercise before now. He'd always been happiest at his most sedentary, slumped in his leatherette throne in front of the television with beer, cold pizza and a warm remote control close at hand. But he no longer watched television. During the early evenings he sat in his chair drinking his way through a dozen cans of beer, smoking until every ashtray was filled, and on occasion eating slices of white bread. As the hours crept on, the members of his family would slope off to bed, not even his wife, Melissa, bothering to say good night.

Only once the house was finally still and silent, usually a little after midnight, would Bill go into the kitchen, brew some strong coffee to wake himself up, and prepare for the trek ahead by putting on his old work boots, still crusted with dried chicken blood, and his dark blue windbreaker. The weather was becoming unpredictable, as autumn's grip deepened. Some nights there'd be rain in the gusts from the north, even sleet on a couple of occasions. But he didn't let the drop in the temperature change his rituals.

There was something he needed to do out in the streets of the town where he'd lived all his life: important work that his dulled mind tried to comprehend day after day as he sat in front of the blank television screen, the drapes drawn against the October sky; work that demanded he leave the comfort of his chair and venture out to wander through the town even though he had no idea what, or why, he was seeking. All he had by way of a compass was the deep-rooted conviction that one night he would turn a corner somewhere in the town and find before him the solution to this mystery.

But each night it was the same story: exhaustion and disappointment. Just before dawn he'd come home to the dark, silent house, with his hands empty and his heart aching as it had never ached: not in sorrow, nor in regret, and certainly never out of love.

Tonight, however, there was a strange certainty in him that had him so eager to start his search that he had headed out into the night as soon as he heard Melissa switch off the lamp beside the bed where they had once slept as husband and wife.

In his haste to leave the house he had not only forgotten to make some coffee, but also to put on his windbreaker. No matter. One evil canceled out the other: the cold so bracing he could scarcely have been more awake, more alive. Though his fingers rapidly became numb, and his eyes ached in their sockets, the anticipation of joy and the joy of anticipation were so powerful that he pressed on without concern for his well-being, allowing

his feet to choose streets to turn into that he would never have chosen, or perhaps even seen, before tonight.

Finally his wanderings brought him to a little cul-de-sac called Caleb Place. The waters of the Izabella had done extremely devastating work here. Trapped within the basin of the cul-de-sac, they had thrown their destructive power around the ring of houses, completely leveling several of them and leaving only three with any hope of being rebuilt. The most coherent of the surviving buildings was the one to which Bill Quackenbush was drawn. It was heavily cordoned off with wide plastic tape on which was repeatedly printed the warning:

DANGEROUS STRUCTURE DO NOT ENTER

Bill ignored the warning, of course. Ducking under the tape, he scrambled up over the rubble and into the interior of the house. The moon was bright enough to spill through the stripped roof to illuminate the interior with a silvery wash.

At the front door he paused for a long moment and listened. He could hear an unidentifiable sound from the interior: rhythmical, muffled. He listened carefully so as to at least locate its source. It was coming from somewhere upstairs, he concluded. He pushed open the front door, and waded through the litter of trashed furniture and bricks between the door and the stairs. The floodwaters had stripped virtually everything off the walls: the pictures, the wallpaper, even much of the plaster, which had fallen away in cobs making some of the stairs difficult to negotiate. But Bill had met and overcome many obstacles since

Candy's time in the Abarat. He wasn't going to be dissuaded from this journey by a few littered stairs.

He experienced a few clammy moments as he gingerly stepped from one cracked timber to the next. But his luck held. He reached the landing, which was more solid than the stairs, without incident. He paused a moment to get his bearings, then he started down the passage toward the room at the far end, from which came, he was certain, the strange noise that had drawn him up here.

The room still had its door, which was open a few inches. He paused before it, almost reverentially, and then, using the pressure of just two fingers, he pushed. Creaking, the door swung open. The moon's brightness illuminated half the room. The rest was in shadow. On the moonlit boards he saw scattered the source of the sounds he'd heard. Dozens of birds, common creatures he couldn't have named even though he saw them on Followell Street whenever he'd gone out back. They were lying on the floor, as though some merciless force was pinning their heads to the boards, leaving them to flutter wildly, beating their wings so violently that the air was filled with flecks of feathers, which the constant updraft from the panicked wings below kept in circulation.

"What is this . . ." he muttered to himself.

In the dark half of the room, something moved. Something that Bill knew wasn't a bird.

"Who's there?" he said.

There was a second motion in the dark and something suddenly propelled itself out of the shadows into the wash of moonlight. It landed among the stricken birds no more than a yard or two from where Bill was standing, then leaped up again, so that with its second leap it struck the moonlit wall opposite the door. Bill got only a blurred impression.

It might have been a brightly colored monkey, except that he'd never seen a monkey move so fast. The motion drove the birds into a fresh frenzy, and some, in their terror, found the strength to escape their pinning. They rose into the middle of the room, apparently unwilling, despite the open roof above them, to depart the presence of whatever had attracted them here in the first place.

Their excited circling made it even harder for Bill to get a clear sense of the thing.

What was this strange entity pinned to the wall? It seemed to be made of fabric rather than skin: a patchwork of four, perhaps five, colored materials that ranged from livid scarlet to one of polished black with a dash of vibrant blue.

The beast didn't appear to have any recognizable anatomy; there was no sign of anything resembling a head or even any of the features a head might have carried: it had no eyes that Bill could make out, nor ears, nor nose, nor mouth. Bill felt profoundly disappointed. Surely this couldn't be the answer to the mystery of his nightly searches around town. The answer he'd been seeking had to be something more than some formless

scraps of stained felt.

However, though there was little about the creature he found beguiling, he was still curious about it.

“What are you?” he asked, more to himself than anything.

The creature’s response, much to Bill’s surprise, was to stretch out its four extremities and draw all its power into itself. Then it kicked off from the wall and flew at Bill as though plucked by an unseen hand.

Bill was too slow, too surprised, to avoid it. The thing wrapped itself around him, blinding him completely. In the sudden darkness Bill’s sense of smell worked overtime. The beast stank! It had the stench of a heavy fur coat that had been put away soaking wet and had been left in a wardrobe to rot ever since.

The stench oppressed him, disgusted him. He grabbed hold of the thing and tried to pull it off his head.

“Finally,” the creature said, “William Quackenbush, you heard our call.”

“Get off me!”

“Only if you will listen to us.”

“Us?”

“Yes. You’re hearing five voices. There are five of us, William Quackenbush, here to serve you.”

“To . . . serve me?” Bill stopped fighting with the thing. “You mean, like, to obey me?”

“Yes!”

Bill grinned a spittle-grin. “Anything I say?”

“Yes!”

“Then stop smothering me, you damn fools!”

The five responded, instantly leaping off his head and back onto the wall again.

“What are you?”

“Well, why not? If he doesn’t like the truth because it sounds crazy, then he’s learned something hasn’t he?” the thing said to itself. Then it addressed Bill. “We were once five hats, belonging to members of the Noncian Magic Circle. But our owners were murdered and the murderer then celebrated his getting what he wanted by having a heart attack. So we were left looking for someone to give our powers to.”

“And you chose me.”

“Of course.”

“Why ‘of course’? Nobody has ever willingly chosen me for anything.”

“Why do you think, lord?”

Bill knew the answer without having to think.

“My daughter.”

“Yes,” said the thing. “She has great power. No doubt it comes from you.”

“From me? What does that mean?”

“It means you will possess greater influence than you ever dreamed of owning. Even in your wildest dreams of godhood.”

“I never dreamed of being God.”

“Then wake up, William Quackenbush! Wake up and know

the reality!”

Though Bill was already awake, his instinctive self understood the deeper significance of what he was being told. The expression on his face opened like a door, and whatever was behind it caught the attention of the creature that had once been several hats.

“Look at you, Billy-boy!” it said, its five voices suddenly changed and harmonizing in admiration. “Such a radiance there is out of you! Such a strong, clear light to drive all the fear away.”

“Me?”

“Who else? Think Billy-boy. Think. Who can deliver us from the terror that your child is about to call down upon the world if not you who made her?”

At the moment when the creature had talked about Bill’s “radiance” the many silent birds Bill had seen rose into the air and circled around Bill in a vortex of bright black eyes and applauding wings.

“What are they doing?” Bill asked the shapeless thing.

“Paying homage to you.”

“Well, I don’t like it.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Stop them.”

“Stop them dead?”

“Sure.”

“Sure,” the creature said, catching perfectly the tone of Bill’s response.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Never,” came the reply.

A heartbeat later every single bird dropped out of the air and fell lifeless in the debris.

“Better?” the creature said.

Bill considered the silence.

“A whole lot,” he finally replied. He laughed lightly. It was a laugh he’d forgotten he was capable of: that of a man who had nothing to lose and nothing to fear.

He glanced at his watch.

“Almost dawn,” he said. “I’d better be going. What do I do with you?”

“Wear us. On your head. Like a turban.”

“Foreigners wear those.”

“You are a foreigner, Billy-boy. You don’t belong here. You’ll get used to wearing us. In our previous life we made very impressive hats. We’ve just come unglued of late.”

“I know exactly how you feel,” Bill said. “But that’s all going to change now, isn’t it?”

“Indeed it is,” said the remnants of Kaspar Wolfswinkel’s five hats. “You’ve found us. Everything changes now.”

Chapter 6 Under Jibarish

RUTHUS’S LITTLE BOAT CARRIED Candy and Malingo southwest down the Straits of Dusk and between the islands of Huffaker and Ninnyhammer to Jibarish, in the wilds of which a tribe of women called the Qwarv lived by preying on weary travelers, who they then cooked and ate. Rumor had it

that Laguna Munn, the sorceress they had come to find, was sympathetic to the Qwarv, despite their appetites, tending to them when they were sick, and even accepting their offer to eat with them on occasion. Certainly the island was a fit place for such repugnant events to occur. It stood at Eleven O'clock at Night: just one hour from the horror of Midnight.

The islands were still, however, slivers of time sealed off from one another. Only sounds would find their way through for some reason, echoes of echoes, eerily remote. But it wasn't difficult to identify the sounds from the nearby Hour of Gorgossium. There was demolition going on. Massive land-clearing engines were at work, bringing down walls, digging up foundations. The noise echoed off the heights of Jibarish's west-facing cliffs.

"What are they doing over there?" Malingo wondered aloud.

"It's best not to ask," Ruthus said in a hushed tone. "Or even think about it." He stared up at the stars, which were so bright over Jibarish that the sum of their light was greater than even the brightest moon. "Better to think of the beauty of light, yes, than to think of what's going on in the darkness. Curiosity kills. I lost my brother Skafta—my twin brother—just because he asked too many questions."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Candy said.

"Thank you, Candy. Now, where do you want me to let you off? On the big island or the little one?"

"I didn't know there was a big one and a little one."

"Oh yes. Of course. The Qwarv rule the big island. The little

one is for ordinary folks. And the witch, of course.”

“By witch, you mean Laguna Munn?”

“Yes.”

“Then that’s the island we want.”

“You’re going to see the incantatrix?”

“Yes.”

“You do know she’s crazy?”

“Yes. We’ve heard people say that. But people say a lot of things that aren’t true.”

“About you, you mean?”

“I wasn’t—”

“They do, you know. They say all kinds of wacko things.”

“Like what?” Malingo said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Candy said. “I don’t need to hear silly things people dream up. They don’t know me.”

“And you as well, Malingi,” said Ruthus.

“Malingo,” said Malingo.

“They say terrible things about you too.”

“Now I have to know.”

“You’ve got a choice, geshrat. Either I tell you some ridiculous gossip I heard, and while I’m wasting my time doing that the current throws us up on those rocks, or I forget the nonsense and do the job you’re paying me for.”

“Get us to solid ground,” Malingo said, sounding disappointed.

“Happily,” Ruthus said, and turned his attention back to the

wheel.

The waters around the boat were becoming frenzied.

"You know . . . I don't want to be telling you your job," Candy said, "but if you're not careful the current's going to carry us into that cave. You do see it, don't you?"

"Yes, I see it," Ruthus yelled over the roar and rage of the Izabella. "That's where we're going."

"But the water's—"

"Very rough."

"Yes."

"Frenzied."

"Yes."

"Then you'd better hold on tight, hadn't you?"

Before another word could be exchanged, the boat entered the cave. The passage into the cave forced the foaming waters to climb and quicken, quicken and climb, until the top two feet of the boat's mast were snapped off as it scraped the roof. For a few terrifying moments it seemed the entire boat and those aboard would be scraped to mush and splinters against the roof. But, as quickly as the waters had risen, they subsided again without any further damage done. The channel widened and the racing current eased.

Though they had already been borne a considerable distance into the body of the island, there was a plentiful supply of light, its source the colonies of phosphorescent creatures that encrusted the walls and stalactites that hung from the roof. They were

an unlikely marriage of crab and bat, their bizarre anatomies decorated with elaborate symmetrical designs.

Directly ahead of them lay a small island, with a steep wall around it, and rising in a very sharp gradient, a single hillock covered with red-leaved trees (that apparently had no need of sunlight to prosper) and a maze of whitewashed buildings arrayed beneath the garish canopy.

“We’ll need rope to scale that wall,” Malingo said.

“Either that or we use that,” Candy said, pointing to a small door in the wall.

“Oh . . .” said Malingo.

Ruthus brought the boat around so that they could step out of the vessel and through the door.

“Give my love to Izarith,” Candy said to Ruthus. “And tell her I’ll see her again soon.”

Ruthus looked doubtful.

“Are you sure you want me to just leave you here?” he said.

“We don’t know how long we’ll be with Laguna Munn,” Candy said. “And I think things are getting chaotic. Everyone’s stirred up for some reason. So I really think you should go back and be with your family, Ruthus.”

“And you, geshrat?”

“Where she goes, I go,” Malingo replied.

Ruthus shook his head.

“Crazy, the both of you,” he remarked.

“Well, if things go badly for us, you have nothing to blame

yourself for, Ruthus,” Candy said. “We’re doing this in spite of your good advice.” She paused, smiled. “And we will see you again.”

Malingo had already climbed out of the boat and was squatting on the narrow step, trying the door. It opened without any forcing.

“Thank you again,” Candy said to Ruthus, and stepped out of the boat, heading through the small and roughly painted door in pursuit of Malingo.

Before she stepped over the threshold, though, she glanced back down the bank. She had no chance to call good-bye to Ruthus. The possessive waters of the Izabella had already seized hold of the little boat and it was being carried away from the island, while the winged crabs applauded the boat’s escape with a mingled ovation of wing and claw.

Chapter 7 The sorrows of the Bad Son

A STEEP, NARROW- STEPPED PATH wound its way up from the door in the wall through the trees. Candy and Malingo climbed. Though there was a wash of visible brightness through the orange-red canopy, very little of it found its way down to the path. There were, however, small lamps set beside the steps to light the way. Beyond their throw the thicket was dense and the darkness denser still. But it wasn’t deserted.

“There’s plenty of eyes on us,” Candy said very quietly.

“But no noises. No birds chirping. No insects buzzing around.”

“Maybe there’s something else here. Something they’re scared of.”

“Well, if there is,” Malingo said, speaking with a fake clarity, “I hope it knows we’re here to cause trouble.”

His performance earned him a reply.

“You say you’re here to cause trouble, geshrat,” said a young voice, “but saying it doesn’t make it true.”

“Why are you here?” said a second voice.

“The sons,” Malingo murmured, the words barely audible to Candy, who was standing a single step away from him.

“Yes,” said the first voice. “We’re the sons.”

“And we’ll hear you,” taunted the second, “however quietly you whisper. So don’t waste your time.”

“Where are you?” Candy asked them, slowly climbing another step as she did so, and scanning the shadows off to their right, from which direction the voices had seemed to come.

In her hand she quickly conjured a little ball of cloud-light; a cold flame she had learned to call up from Boa. It had been, Candy vaguely thought, one of the earliest pieces of magic Candy had filched from Boa’s collection. Candy squeezed it tightly.

The moment would come when she had one of Laguna Munn’s boys close enough to—

There! A shadowy form moved across her field of vision. She didn’t hesitate. She raised her arm and let it go. It blazed yellow-white and blue, its illumination spilling only down at the figure Candy had willed it to illuminate. The cloud-light did its job and

Candy saw the first of Laguna Munn's boys. He looked like a little devil, Candy thought, with his stunted horns and his squat body made of shadow and shards of color, as though he'd stood in the way of an exploding stained-glass window, which hadn't hurt him because his body was made of Dark Side of the Moon Jell-O.

When he spoke, as now he did, his voice was completely mismatched with his appearance. He had the precise, well-cultured voice of a boy who'd been to a fancy school.

"I'm Mama's Bad Boy," he said.

"Oh really? And what's your name?"

He sighed, as though the question presented huge difficulties.

"What's the problem?" Candy said. "I only asked your name."

There was something in her plain, unpretentious Minnesotan soul that was not taking to Laguna Munn's self-proclaimed Bad Boy.

"Oh, I don't know . . ." he said, nibbling at his thumbnail. "It's just hard to choose when you've got so many. Would you like to know how many names I have?"

She didn't.

"All right, I'm listening. How many?"

"Seven hundred and nineteen," he said rather proudly.

"Wow," Candy said flatly. Then, even more flatly, "Why?"

"Because I can. Mama said I can have anything I like. So I have a lot of names. But you can call me . . . Thrashing Jam? No, no! Pieman Hambadikin? No! Jollo B'gog! Yes! Jollo B'gog

it is!”

“All right. And I’m—”

“Candy Quackenbush of Chickencoop.”

“Chickentown.”

“Coop. Town. Whichever. And that’s your geshrat friend with you, Malingo. You saved him from being the slave of the wizard Kaspar Wolfswinkel.”

“You’ve certainly done your homework,” Candy said.

“Homework . . . homework . . .” Jollo B’gog said, puzzling over the word. “Oh. Work given to students by their tutors in your world, which they attempt to avoid doing by any possible means.” He grinned.

“That’s right,” Candy said. “On the nose!”

“On the nose!” Jollo B’gog said triumphantly. “I got it on the nose! I got it on the nose!”

“Somebody’s enjoying themselves,” said a woman, somewhere beyond the spill of the light that Candy had shed on Jollo.

The boy’s good humor instantly died away, not out of fear, Candy thought, but out of a peculiar reverence for the speaker.

“Bad Boy?” she said.

“Yes, Mama.”

“Will you find our guest Malingo something to eat and drink, please?”

“Of course, Mama.”

“And send the girl up to me.”

“As you wish, Mama.”

Candy wanted to point out that she was also hungry and thirsty, but this wasn't the time to be saying it, she knew.

“All right, you heard Mama,” Jollo said to Candy. “She wants you to go to her, so all you need to do is follow the silver eye.” He pointed to a foot-wide eye, its pupil black, the lens of it silver, which hovered in between the trees.

“Should I come?” Malingo said to Candy.

“If I need you, I swear I'll yell. Really loud.”

“Happy?” Jollo said to Malingo. “If Mama tries to eat her, she's going to yell.”

“Your mother wouldn't—”

“No she wouldn't, geshrat,” Jollo replied. “It's humor. A joke?”

“I know what a joke is,” Malingo said without much certainty. He looked for Candy, but she'd already followed the silver eye off the path into the darkness of the trees.

“Come on, geshrat. Let's get you fed,” Jollo said. “If you hear Candy call, you can go straight to her. I won't even try to stop you. I promise.”

Chapter 8 Laguna Munn

LAGUNA MUNN'S ISLAND HAD seemed small when viewed from Ruthus's boat, but now that Candy was being led up through its darkened slopes it seemed far larger than she'd expected. She'd left the cloud-light behind her, but the silver eye shed its own light as it led her through the dense thicket.

She was glad of its guidance. The ground beneath her feet was becoming steeper, and the trees she was moving between—sometimes having to force a gap large enough for her to get through—became steadily more gnarled and ancient.

There was a wind blowing up here on the higher elevations. It made the antiquated trees creak, and their branches shake down a dry rain of leaves and withered fruit. Candy didn't let anything distract her from her guide. She followed it as closely as the passage through the choked undergrowth would allow, until it led her to a place where the trees' lowest branches had woven their twigs with the bushes below, forming a wall of knitted wood. Candy stood before it a moment, while the eye cast its light upon the interwoven twigs. A few seconds went by and then a shimmer of motion passed through the wall, and where the eye had shone its light the wall unwove itself, opening a narrow door. The trees and shrubs were still parting when the voice that had spoken to Jollo said, "Either come in or be gone, girl. But don't just stand there."

"Thank you," Candy said, and stepped between the writhing branches.

She had come to the top of the island. The wind here moved in sighing circles, the freight of leaves it bore rising and falling as it was swept around her. It wasn't just leaves in the circling gusts, however. There were animals too, creatures of every size and shape moving around her, their flanks pale as the moon sometimes, sometimes red as a setting sun, their eyes blazing

green and gold, and all leaving trails of motion on the shadowy air.

She couldn't be sure whether she was witnessing a joyous race or a life-and-death pursuit. Whichever it was, it suddenly turned in her direction, and she dropped to the ground, hugging her head with her hands as she felt the rush of life passing over her. It was loud now. Not only the rush of wind but the thunder of hooves and paws, and the screeches, roars, and howls of perhaps a thousand species, perhaps twice that.

"Do you not yet know the difference between a dreamed thing and a living one?" Laguna Munn said, her voice closer to Candy than the sound of the animals' passage.

"Dreamed . . . ?" Candy said.

"Yes, girl," Laguna replied. "Dreamed. Imagined. Conjured. Invented."

Candy dared a cautious glance up. Whatever the incantatrix was saying, the hooves and the claws that were still racing over the top of Candy's head looked real and extremely dangerous.

"It's an illusion," Laguna Munn said. "Stand up. Go on. If you don't trust me, how can anything I try to do for you have a hope of working?"

Candy saw the sense in this. She raised her head a little more. The violence of the living torrent galloped over the dome that protected her thoughts. It hurt. Not just her skull, creaking beneath the assault of the hooves, but the bones of her face, and the delicate tissues it protected.

If she didn't endure this assault she'd not find anyone else to tell her what Laguna Munn could.

She stood up.

Lordy Lou, the pain of it! Even though it was an illusion it was still strong enough to make blood trickle from her nose. She wiped it away with the back of her hand, but a fresh flow immediately followed. And still the animals thundered on, the violence of their passage buffeting her as they pressed on.

"I know you're there, Laguna Munn," she said. "You can't hide forever. Come on. Show yourself."

Still the creatures came, their passage through her as powerful as ever. The blood running from her nose was in her mouth. She tasted it, copper and salt. How much longer could her body survive this relentless onslaught? Surely the incantatrix wouldn't let her die because she failed?

"I'm not going to die," she told herself.

Again, she tried to force her vision through the conjuration. Again the conjuration forced its reality upon her.

You'll never do it without me, Boa said.

"Help me, then."

Why should I?

A wave of anger rose up in Candy. She was sick of Boa; sick of every egocentric woman with more power than compassion that she'd encountered, starting with Miss Schwartz, and finishing up with Mater Motley. She'd had enough of them—all of them.

And finally, her eyes started to prick the illusion that was

battering her, giving her a glimpse of the mysterious Laguna Munn. She was what Candy's mother, Melissa, would have called a "big-boned woman," by which she'd meant fat.

"I . . . see . . . you," Candy said.

"Good," Laguna Munn replied. "Then we can proceed."

Laguna raised her hand, and made a fist of it. The tidal flow of living things ceased instantly, leaving Candy with aching bones, a buzzing head, and a bloody nose. Laguna spoke, her voice soft.

"I didn't expect to meet you, though I was curious, I must say. I thought the Fantomaya had your affections."

"The Fantomaya is the reason I'm here," Candy said.

"Ah, so somebody's been telling you stories."

"It's not just a story!" Candy snapped.

The anger was still in her, bubbling up.

"Calm yourself," Laguna Munn said. She seemed to rise from her chair and move toward Candy without taking a single step. "What did I see in your head, girl?"

"Something more than me," Candy said. "Another person."

Laguna's eyes, already huge, grew larger still, and brighter. "Do you know the name of this other in your head?"

"Yes. Her name's Princess Boa. Her soul was taken from her body by the women of the Fantomaya—"

"Stupid, stupid . . ." Laguna Munn muttered to herself.

"Me?" Candy said.

"No, not you," Laguna replied. "Them. Playing with things that they had no business with."

“Well, they did it. And now I want to undo it.”

“Why not go to them?”

“Because they don’t know I know. If they’d wanted us to separate eventually, they would have told me she was there, wouldn’t they?”

“I suppose that’s reasonable, yes.”

“Besides, one of them has already been killed because I came over to the Abarat—”

“So if any other witch was going to die you’d prefer it to be me.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“It’s how it sounded.”

“What is it about this place? Everybody playing stupid games! It makes me sick.” She wiped her bloodied nose again. “If you’re not going to help me, then I’ll just do it myself.”

Laguna Munn didn’t attempt to conceal her astonishment or the seam of admiration that ran beside it.

“Lordy Lou. You would, wouldn’t you?”

“If I have to. I can’t find out who I really am until she’s out of my head.”

“And what happens to her?”

“I don’t know. There’s a lot of things I don’t know. That’s why I came to you.”

“Tell me honestly, does the Princess want to have a life free of you?”

“Yes,” Candy said with confidence. Laguna stared at her with

intimidating intensity. “The problem is that I don’t really know where I stop and she begins. I must have been born with her already in my head. And we’ve always lived together, her and me.”

“I should warn you, if she truly doesn’t want to leave, then you’ll have a fight on your hands. A fight like that could be fatal.”

“I’ll take the risk.”

“Do you understand what I’m—”

“Yes. It could kill me.”

“Yes. And I’m assuming that you’ve also considered the fact that there may be parts of you that aren’t you at all?”

“That are her? Yes. I’ve thought of that too. And I’d lose them. But if they were never mine in the first place—never me—then I’m not really losing anything, am I?”

Laguna Munn’s gilded gaze softened.

“What a crazy conversation there must be going on inside your head right now,” she said. “And I’m not talking about the one between you and your stowaway. It’s a pity you and I have met so late in life,” she said with what seemed to be genuine regret.

“I’ve only just turned sixteen,” Candy said.

“I know. And that’s young, I realize. But there are roads to revelation that should have been laid when you were just a baby, and laying them is going to be harder now. You came here in search of freedom and revelation, and I’m afraid all I can give you is warnings and confusion.”

“So you can’t separate me from Boa?”

“That? I can do that. I can’t make any predictions concerning the consequences of the separation. But I can promise you that you will never be the same again.”

Part Two You, Or Not I

As thorn and flower upon a single branch sit,
So hate beside my love for her will fit.

Two pieces of one thing, that make a whole.

As you and I, my love, a single soul.

—Christopher Carrion

Chapter 9 A New Tyranny

IT WOULD HAVE COME as no surprise to the occupants of Gorgossium that the sounds of demolition were audible from the waters surrounding the island. Its inhabitants could barely hear themselves think.

The Midnight Island was undergoing great changes, all designed to deepen the darkness that held Gorgossium in thrall. It was not the darkness of a starless sky. It was something far more profound. This darkness was in the very substance of the island. In its dirt, in its rock and fog.

Over the years many had attempted to find the words to evoke the horrors of Gorgossium. All had failed. The abominations which that island had brought to birth, and nurtured, and sent out often across the islands to do bloody and cruel work defied even the most articulate of souls.

Even Samuel Klepp, who in the most recent edition of Klepp’s Almenak, the standard guide to the islands, had written about

Midnight in as brief and offhand a fashion as possible.

There is a great deal more, he had written, which I will not sully the pages of the *Almenak* by relating, horrors that haunt the Night-Noon Hour that will only go on to trouble our minds the more if their horrid visions are dwelt upon. Gorgossium is like unto a fetid carcass, rotting in its own consumption. Better we do upon these pages what we would do were we to encounter such a thing upon a road. We would avert our eyes from its foulness and go in search of sweeter sights. Then so should I.

There was worse to come, much worse. Whatever the fear-flooded mind might have imagined when it thought of Midnight—the unholy rituals performed there in the name of Chaos and Cruelty, the blank-eyed brutalities that took the sanity or the lives of any innocent who ventured there; the stink out of its gaping graves, and the dead who had climbed from them, raised for mischief's sake, and left to wander where they would—all this was just the first line in a great book of terror that the two powers who had once ruled Gorgossium, Christopher Carrion and his grandmother, Mater Motley, had begun to write.

But things had changed. In an attempt to track down and finally slaughter Candy Quackenbush (who had caused her endless problems) Mater Motley had stirred up the Sea of Izabella and used their maelstrom to carry her warship, the *Wormwood*, into the Hereafter. Things had not gone well. The magic she had unleashed in that other world, contained perhaps by laws of matter that had no relevance in the Abarat, had lost

its mind. The warship had been torn apart in the water—pieces of the Izabella and countless numbers of her stitchling warriors torn up the same way. Her grandson, Christopher Carrion, had drowned there too. Mater Motley had returned to Gorgossium alone.

Her first edict as the sole power now ruling Midnight was to summon up six thousand stitchlings—monsters filled with the living mud that was only mined on Gorgossium—to begin the labor of demolishing the thirteen towers of the Iniquisit. In their place, she would let it be known, there would be just a single three-spired tower built, far taller than even the tallest of the thirteen. From there she would rule, not only as the Sovereign of Gorgossium, but in time as the Empress of the Abarat.

She was a dangerous potentate.

Even among her hundreds of seamstresses—some of whom had known her for the better part of a century—there were few who trusted her affections. As long as she had need of their services (and at present she did) they were safe from harm, for without seamstresses there were no new stitchlings, and without stitchlings, no new legions to swell her army. But if that situation were to ever change, the women knew, they would be as disposable to the Old Mother as any stitchling.

Her weapon of choice when summarily executing one of her mud-men was her snake-wood rod, a simple but immensely powerful wand made of snake-wood that had been burned, buried, and raised up again on three consecutive midnights. It

shot black lightning, destroying its target in an instant.

On several occasions, while surveying the work of demolition, she would catch sight of one of the stitchlings failing to labor as hard as the rest, and would summarily execute the brutish thing where it stood. The lesson: life and death were Mater Motley's gift to give or take as she saw fit, and only a fool or a suicide walked where she walked without caution.

With such a powerful overseer, work on the demolition and removal of rubble proceeded at great speed, and in a matter of days the plateau where the many towers of the Inquisit had stood there now stood a monumental structure. A single tower, designed by an architect of genius, incantatrix Jalafeo Mas, who used her knowledge of magic to defy the laws of physics and raise up a tower taller than the sum of the thirteen that had once stood there.

It was here, in the red-walled room at the top of the tower, that Mater Motley assembled the most trusted of her seamstresses: nine of them.

"The years of labor and faith are over," Mater Motley said. "Midnight approaches."

One of the nine, Zinda Goam, a seamstress half a thousand years old who had arranged to have her familiars raise her from the grave after her death so that she might continue to serve Mater said, "Are we not at Midnight now?"

"Yes, this is a time called Midnight. But now it's Absolute. There is a greater Midnight than any in the making. A Midnight

that will blind every sun, moon, and star in the heavens.”

Another of the women, whose emaciated body was draped with veils of fine cobwebs, could not silence her incredulity.

“I have never understood the Grand Design,” said Aea G’pheet. “It doesn’t seem possible. So many Hours. So many heavens.”

“Do you doubt me, Aea G’pheet?”

The seamstress, though her skin was pale, became paler still. She hurriedly said, “Never, m’lady. Never. I was just astonished is all—overwhelmed, really—and misspoke.”

“Then be careful in the future lest you find yourself without one.”

Aea G’pheet lowered her head, the cobwebs shimmering as they shook.

“Am . . . am I . . . forgiven?”

“Are you dead?”

No, m’lady,” Aea said. “I’m still alive.”

“Then you must have been forgiven,” the Old Mother said without humor. “Now, back to the business of Midnight. There are, as we know, many forms of life that have taken refuge from the light. Even the light of the stars. These creatures will be freed when my Midnight dawns. And they will make such mischief . . .” She paused, smiling at the thought of the fiends unleashed.

“And the people?” said another of the nine.

“Anyone who stands against us will be executed. And it will fall to us to spill their blood when the time comes, without

hesitation. And if there is any woman here who is unwilling to fight this war upon those terms let her leave now. No harm will come to her. She has my oath on that. But if you choose to stay, then you will have agreed to do the work before us without fear or compromise.

“The labor of Midnight will be bloody, to be sure, but trust me, when I am Empress of the Abarat, I will raise you so high all thought of what you did to be so elevated will seem like nothing. We are not natural women, henceforth. Perhaps never were. We have no love of love, or of children, or of making bread. We are not made to tend fires and rock cradles. We are the unforgiving something upon which despairing men will break their fragile heads. There is no making peace with them, no husbanding them. They must be beneath our heels or dead and buried beneath the earth upon which we walk.”

There was a ripple of pleasure around the chamber at this remark. Only one of the younger seamstresses murmured something inaudible.

“You have a question,” Mater Motley said, singling her out.

“It was nothing, lady.”

“I said speak, damn you! I won’t have doubters! SPEAK!”

The seamstresses who had been surrounding the young woman now retreated from her.

“I was only wondering about the Twenty-Fifth Hour?” the young woman replied. “Will it also be overtaken by Midnight? Because if not—”

“Our enemies could find sanctuary there? Is that what you’re asking?”

“Yes.”

“It’s the question to which, in truth, I have no answer,” Mater Motley said lightly. “Not yet, at least. You are Mah Tuu Chamagama, yes?”

“Yes, lady.”

“Well, as long as you are so curious about the state of the Twenty-Fifth, I will put two legions of stitchlings at your disposal.”

“To . . . do what, m’lady?”

“To take the Hour.”

“Take it?”

“Yes. To invade it. In my name.”

“But, lady, I have no skill in military matters. I could not.”

“Could not? You dare say **COULD NOT** to me?”

She stretched out her left arm, the fingers of her hand outstretched. The killing rod she used against the stitchlings flew from its place against the wall into her hand. She grasped it in a white-knuckled grip and in one sweeping motion pointed it at Mah Tuu Chamagama.

The young woman opened her mouth to offer some further word of defense, but she had no time to utter it. Black lightning spat from the rod in her direction, and struck her in the middle of her body.

Now she made a sound. Not a word, but a cry of horror as her

ghastly undoing spread out from her backbone in all directions turning her flesh and bone to flakes of black ash. Only her head remained untouched, so that she might better witness every moment of her dissolution.

But it was only long enough for her to see what her young beauty had been, and to turn her eyes up toward her destroyer one last time. Lone enough to murmur: “No.”

Then her head went to ashes, and she was gone.

“So dies a doubter,” the Old Mother said. “Any further questions?”

There were none.

Chapter 10 The Sorrows of the Good Son

LAGUNA MUNN CLIMBED DOWN from her chair and called for her second son, her Good Boy.

“Covenantis? Where are you? I have need of you, boy!”

A joyless little voice said, “I’m here, Mother,” and the boy Laguna Munn had reputedly made from all the good in her came into view. He was an unfortunate creature, as gray and dull as his Bad Boy brother had been glamorous and charismatic.

“We have a guest,” said Laguna Munn.

“I know, Mother,” he said, his voice colorless. “I was listening.”

“That was rude, child.”

“I meant no disrespect, Mother,” the boy replied, his mother’s chiding only serving to increase the sum of hopelessness in his empty eyes.

“Lead her to the Circle of Conjurations, boy. She has come here to do dangerous work. The sooner it’s begun, the sooner it’s safely over.”

“May I stay and watch you teach her?”

“No. You may not. Unless you want to witness something that might well be the death of you.”

“I don’t much mind,” Covenantis said, shrugging.

His whole life was in that shrug. He seemed not to care whether he was alive or dead.

“Where will you be?” Candy asked the incantatrix.

“Right here.”

“So how are you going to help me with the separation?”

Laguna Munn looked at Candy with lazy amusement.

“From a safe distance,” she replied.

“What happens if something goes wrong?”

“I’ll have sight of you,” Laguna Munn said. “Don’t worry. If something goes wrong I’ll do what I can to fix it. But the responsibility for the outcome falls on you. Think of yourself as a surgeon delicately separating twins born joined together. Except that you are not only the surgeon—”

“I’m also one of the babies,” Candy said, beginning to understand.

“Exactly.” Laguna looked at Candy with new admiration. “You know, you’re smarter than you look.”

“I look dumb? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No. Not necessarily,” she said, and then raised her hand,

which was a fist, and opened it.

Candy put her hand in her pocket and took out the photograph she and Malingo had taken in the market in the port city of Tazmagor, on Qualm Hah. In it, she was wearing the same clothes she was wearing now. She had purchased those clothes on a whim, but now that she took a closer look, she realized that she resembled her mother to an astonishing degree. She quickly put the photo back in her pocket. Laguna Munn was right: when this was all over, she was going to get a change of clothes as quickly as possible. She'd dress like the Nonce, she decided, all color and happiness.

Before she had fully broken from her thoughts, Candy saw something bright move toward her from Laguna Munn's palm. It came too fast for her to make sense of what it was, but she felt it strike her like a gust of cold wind. There was a flicker of light in her head and by the time it was extinguished Laguna Munn had disappeared, leaving only poor, gray Covenantis at Candy's side.

"Well, I suppose you'd better come with me then," he said, showing not the least enthusiasm for the task.

Candy shook the last reverberations of the light from her mind, and followed the boy. As he stepped in front of her, she caught her first glimpse of his lower anatomy. Until now, she had been so caught up by the pitiful expression on his face she hadn't realized that below the belt, he looked more like a child-sized slug than a boy. His legs were fused into a single, boneless tube of gray-green muscle upon which the upper portion of his body,

which was simply that of an ordinary boy, was raised up.

"I know what you're thinking," he said without looking back at Candy.

"And what's that?"

"Can that really be the son she made from the good in her? Because he doesn't look very good. In fact he looks like a slug."

"I wasn't—"

"Yes, you were," the boy said.

"You're right, I was."

"And you're right. I do look like a slug. I've thought a lot about it. In fact it's really the only thing I think about."

"And what have you found out, after all that thinking?"

"Not much. Just that Mother never really loved the good in her. She thought it was boring. Worthless."

"Now, I'm sure—"

"Don't," he said, raising his hand to stop her trying to pamper the hurt. "That only makes it worse. My mother's ashamed of me. That's the truth, plain and simple. It's my evil little brother, with his glittering smiles, who gets all the glory. That's what they call a paradox, isn't it? I'm made from good, but I'm nothing to her. He's made of all the evil in her and guess what: she loves him for it. Loves him! So now he's the good son after all, because of all the love he's been given. And me, who was made from her compassion and her gentility, was left out in the cold."

Candy felt a flicker of anxiety run through her. She understood Covenantis's words all too clearly. She knew the

glittering beauty of evil. She'd seen it, and been in some ways attracted by it. Why else had she felt so sympathetic to Carrion?

"Stay here while I light the candles," Covenantis said.

Candy waited while he moved off into the shadows. It was only when he'd gone that Candy's thoughts returned to the strange gesture Laguna Munn had made before she had gone from view. And with the memory came other recollections, stirred up by the woman's gift and Candy realized exactly how many coincidences, instinctual maneuvers, and twists of fate were really pieces of Boa's magic at work within her.

She remembered it all now with uncanny clarity: she remembered the words that had come unbidden into her throat on the Parroto Parroto—Jassassakya-thüm!—and once spoken, they had had driven off the monstrous Zethek; she remembered instincts, when Mama Izabella had come at her across the grasslands, that had allowed her to relax in the grip of the sentient that might well have drowned her if she'd caused any trouble; and she remembered the way she'd fallen into a pattern of bittersweet exchanges with Carrion, who would have slaughtered her in a heartbeat if he hadn't sensed something inside her that he knew. No, that he loved.

For the first time, Candy realized just how much of Boa there might be in her. A spasm of panic seized Candy.

"Oh no," she said. "I don't think I can do this."

Of course you can. You've come this far, haven't you?

"Do you think it'll hurt?"

Hurt? Boa replied. HURT? A cut finger hurts, girl. A cracked rib. But this is the end of a union of souls that has defined you since the day you were born. When the connection between us is severed you'll lose forever pieces of your mind you thought were yours.

"But they were yours. They were you."

Yes.

"So why would I want them?"

Because it'll be an unspeakable agony to lose them. You see, I know what it's like to be alone in my head. I'm used to it. But you . . . you have no idea of what you have invited down upon yourself.

"I know perfectly well, I think," Candy said.

Do you? Well, for what it's worth, I doubt you'll keep your sanity. How could anyone stay sane when you can no longer recognize the face in the mirror?

"That's my face!" Candy protested. "A Quackenbush face!"

But the eyes.

"What about the eyes?"

You'll look at your reflection and the mind you'll see staring back at you won't be yours. All the memories of glory that you thought belonged to you, all the beautiful mysteries that you believed you'd discovered for yourself, all the ambitions you hold dear—none of them are yours.

"I don't believe you. You're lying now the way you lied to Finnegan and Carrion."

You keep Finnegan out of this, Boa said.

“Oh, feel a bit guilty do you?”

I said—

“I heard you.”

There were a few moments of extremely strained silence between them. Then Boa said: Let. Me. Out. Of. This—
PRISON!

Covenantis appeared and looked at Candy with round, terrified eyes.

“Did you hear that?” he said softly. “A human’s voice, I swear. Tell me it’s not just me.”

“No, Covenantis, you’re perfectly sane. Will you get the conjuration underway please, before she gets murderous?”

“It’s already begun. I’m going into the labyrinth to prepare the site of separation. Follow me there. But first repeat the sacred word nineteen times.”

“Abarataraba?”

“Yes.”

“Does that one count?”

“No!”

Then the last thing he said before disappearing into the maze, leaving Candy to feel as though at the very moment she was making a life-changing decision for herself—a very adult thing to do—he’d reduced her to a kid in the school yard.

She smeared the last six Abarataraba into a single Abarrarababa, and without alerting Covenantis to the fact that

she was done counting and was coming, ready or not, she plunged into the maze, entering as Two-in-One and hopefully exiting as simply two.

Chapter 11 Severance

CANDY TOOK FOUR CAUTIOUS steps into the darkened trees, each step delivering her into an even profounder darkness. On the fifth step, however, a flying creature appeared at the periphery of her vision. It buzzed like a big insect, and the brightness of its colors—turquoise and scarlet, speckled with flecks of white gold—defied the darkness.

It darted around her head for a while then sped away. Candy took a fifth cautious step, then a sixth. Suddenly the creature reappeared, accompanied by several hundred identical beasts, which surrounded her with so much color and movement that she felt faintly nauseated.

She closed her eyes to seal off the sight, but the chaotic motion of the creatures continued behind her eyelids.

“What’s happening?” she said, raising her voice above the noise of the buzzing cloud. “Covenantis? Are you still there?”

“Patience!” Candy heard the boy say.

He’s frightened, Boa said, a distinct undercurrent of amusement in her words. This isn’t an easy thing to do. If he messes up, he’ll sacrifice your sanity. She let the laughter surface; there was undisguised malice in it. Wouldn’t that be a pity?

“Covenantis,” Candy said. “Stay calm. Take your time.”

“He never was very good at that, were you, brother?” said Jollo

B'gog.

"Stay out of here!" Covenantis said. "Mother! Mother!"

"She was the one who said I could come and help," the Bad Boy replied.

"I don't believe you," Candy said, opening her eyes again.

As she did so she saw the Bad Boy run through a wall of the colored creatures, who had assembled ahead of her in an intricate jigsaw of wings, limbs and heads. He yelled as he ran, scattering the assembled creatures. They rose up in front of her, the motion of their wings causing a gust of wind to come at her face, tasting of metal on her tongue.

"Stop that!" Covenantis yelled, his voice shrill with anger.

The Bad Boy just laughed.

"I'll tell Mama!"

"Mama won't stop me. Mama loves everything I do."

"Well, aren't you lucky?" Covenantis said, unable to entirely disguise his envy.

"Mama says I'm a genius!" the Bad Boy crowed.

"You are, darling, you are," Laguna Munn said, entering the space as little more than a shadow of herself. "But this isn't the time or the place to fool around."

All it took was the sound of Laguna Munn's voice and the creatures that had been scattered by the Bad Boy's cavorting came back down on the instant, knitting themselves together—wing to claw to beak to coxcomb to fanning tail—forming a small prison around Candy.

“Better,” Laguna Munn said, her voice all-forgiving. “Pale Child?”

“Yes, Mama?” Covenantis said.

“Have you secured all the locks?”

Oh yes, Boa said. Got to have plenty of locks. I like the sound of that.

“What are the locks for?” Candy said aloud. “What are you keeping out?”

“Nothing’s being kept out—” Covenantis said, stopping only when his mother yelled his name, and dropping the last part of his reply to a whisper. “It’s you she’s keeping in.”

“Covenantis!”

“I’m coming, Mama!”

“Quickly now. I haven’t got much time.”

“I’ve got to go,” the Good Boy said to Candy. “I’ll be right outside.”

He pointed to a narrow slit of a door in between the wings and claws of the big bugs, and for the first time Candy realized that a solid little chamber had formed around her. The walls were draining of color even as she watched, and every last crack or flaw in the knitted forms sealed. What had been a colorful room made of fluttering wings was becoming a silent concrete cell.

“Why are you locking me in?” Candy said.

“Conjurations this strong are unstable,” Covenantis said.

“What do you mean?”

“They can go wrong,” he whispered.

“Covenantis!” Laguna Munn shouted.

“Yes, Mama!”

“Stop talking to the girl. You can’t help her.”

“No, Mama!”

“She’ll probably be dead in under a minute.”

“I’m coming, Mama,” Covenantis said. He gave Candy a little shrug, and slipped out through the door, which closed, leaving no trace of its presence, not a crack.

Well . . . Boa said softly. You got us here. Better finish it. If you’ve got what it takes.

“I’ve got what it doesn’t take,” Candy replied, without hesitation.

Oh? And what’s that?

“Don’t be stupid,” Candy said. “You.”

And suddenly, the fear drained from Candy and she turned on the spot, addressing the cold, gray walls.

“I’m ready,” she told them. “Do whatever you have to do. Just get it over with. If you can avoid spilling blood, that’d be great. But if you can’t, you can’t.”

She didn’t have to wait very long for the cell to respond. Six shudders passed through its walls, ceiling and floor, like tides of life moving in its dead matter, resurrecting it. She understood now why she’d been given a peripheral glimpse of what the cell had been in its last incarnation: the flock of winged beings. She saw them haunting the gray walls still. One life inside another.

Was the lesson here that she would have been gray and lifeless

as the walls if Boa's soul had not come into her? Was she being warned that the life she was choosing would be a cell: gray and cold?

She didn't believe it. And said so.

"I'm more than that," she told the shimmering gray. "I'm not dead matter."

Not yet, Boa crowed.

"Are you ready to do this?" Candy said and thought to both wall and Princess. "Because I'm getting bored with all these stupid threats."

Stupid? Boa raged.

"Just do it," Laguna Munn said, her voice quickening the powers in the walls. "Quick and clean."

"Wait!" Candy said. "I just wanted Boa to know I'm sorry. If I'd known she was there I would have tried to set her free years ago."

If you're looking for absolution, Boa said, you won't get it from me.

"Then that's an end to that," Laguna Munn said, her response making Candy realize with a shock that the old woman had been listening in on her thoughts from the beginning. "Let's get this done, one way or the other. Candy! Palms to the wall. Quickly!"

Candy lay her palms on one of the walls. Instantly she could see the creatures dancing in the solid air beyond. Their wings and bodies shed the flakes of white gold that decorated them. They converged on Candy's palms, the fragments flowing together into

two gilded streams.

She felt them against her palms, breaking into deltas, spreading along the dry watercourses of the lines upon her hands, and then sinking deeper, dissolving her surface in order to flow into her veins. Her hands became translucent; the brightness inside her flesh was so intense she could see the strong simple lines of her finger bones, and the complicated design of her nerves.

The brightness quickened once it got to her elbows, like a fire blown by the wind into a thicket many summers dry. It raced up her arms, and across her body.

She felt it, but it didn't hurt. It was more like being reminded that this was her.

She was real: and being real, and her, was—What? What was it? Who was it?

That was the big question, wasn't it? When all the fireworks were over: Who was she?

You're nothing, Boa said quietly.

Candy wanted to counter Boa's insults. But her energies were focused elsewhere: on the rush of awakening that was passing through her body, down from her neck, over her torso, and up, filling the twice-souled vessel above.

Did you hear me? Boa said.

"Keep your petty insults to yourself, Boa," Laguna Munn said. "You may have suffered a little, trapped in the child's head. But Lordy Lou, there are worse deaths to suffer. Such as the

real thing. Oh . . . and while we're talking, I know what you're thinking: that once all this is over you'll have my sons running around doing your bidding!"

Boa said nothing.

"That's what I thought. Well, forget it. There's only room for one woman in the lives of my beautiful sons."

Please, Boa protested. I'd never try to compromise the sacred relationships between you and your sons.

"I don't believe you," Laguna Munn replied plainly. "I think you'd try anything if you thought you could get away with it."

I wouldn't dream of it. I know what you're capable of.

"You might think you do but you don't have the first idea, so be careful."

Understood.

"Good. Now, I should leave this chamber."

"Wait," Candy said. "Don't go yet. I'm feeling dizzy."

"That's probably because I'm still here gabbing. I should leave you to give birth to Boa."

The image Laguna Munn's words conjured was grotesque. It made Candy feel sicker than ever.

"It's too late to feel queasy now, girl. This is dirty magic we're doing. It's not the kind of work sanctioned by the Council of the Yebba Dim Day. If it was, you wouldn't be here. Do you understand?"

"Of course," Candy said.

She understood perfectly well. It was the same in

Chickentown. There was a Dr. Pimloft whose offices were above the Laundromat on Fairkettle Street. He'd do certain operations people were too embarrassed to talk to their regular doctors about. Sometimes that was your only choice.

"I'm going to get out of here," Laguna said, "before I throw the conjuration off balance."

"Where will you be? In case there's a problem?"

"It'll be fine," Mrs. Munn said. "You want to be separated, after all. So . . . here comes the conjuration. I designed it to do what you require. So let it do its job."

There was a sound like someone chopping with axes from behind Mrs. Munn, and a shadow-bird—or something like it—rose from the darkness and flew in and out through the intricate pattern, wall to wall to wall to wall, before disappearing into the darkness behind Mrs. Munn.

"What was that?" Candy said.

"The chamber is getting impatient," she said. "It wants me gone."

The phenomena occurred again, exactly as before.

"I should go," Laguna Munn said. "Before this gets any worse."

Candy suddenly felt weak and her legs buckled beneath her. She tried to make her legs respond to her instruction, but she realized she was no longer the mistress of her body. Boa was.

"Wait . . ." Candy started to say, panic rising in her chest. But even her tongue wouldn't do as she instructed. And it was almost

too late. Laguna Munn had turned her back on Candy, preparing to leave.

It's over now, the Princess said.

Candy didn't waste energy trying to reply. She was seconds away from losing herself forever. She could feel rhythmical thundering that no doubt Boa had set to work. It was eating at the corners of her world, consuming her consciousness with ever-larger bites.

Through a haze of white noise she saw Laguna Munn open up a door in the wall.

No. Candy tried to say. But no sound came out.

This would be a lot easier if you just gave up and gave in. Let go of Candy Quackenbush. You're going to die. And you won't want to be alive when I start feeding.

What? Candy thought. Feeding off me? Why?

Because I've got to grow myself a body, girl. That requires nourishment. A lot of nourishment. Did I forget to mention that?

Candy wanted to weep at her own stupidity. Boa must have shaped these plans no more than a few thoughts away from where Candy had been hiding her own thinking. But she'd hidden her intentions totally. There hadn't been a moment when Candy had been suspicious.

But you know now, Boa gloated. If it helps, think of this as punishment for stealing my memories of magic. I know death may seem a very strong punishment, but it was a terrible thing you did.

I'm . . . I'm . . . sorry?

Too late. It's over. It's time you died, Candy.

Chapter 12 One Becomes Two

FAR OFF, SOMEWHERE IN the darkness, Candy Quackenbush thought she heard the sound of Laguna Munn's voice.

“Covenantis? Did you lock the chamber? The lock, boy!”

There was no answer from the child. All Candy heard was the chorus of strange noises her dying body was making. Her heart hadn't stopped entirely. Every few seconds it still managed to beat; on occasion it even managed two or three beats strung together. But what little life her body still possessed was more like a memory than the real thing: like a vision of the Abarat even as it slipped away. All gone now. All forgotten.

No, not entirely forgotten. Some portion of her eyes' ability to form images still existed. Though she could no longer see the walls of the Separation Chamber, she could see, with eerie specificity, a stain of smoky gray air appearing in front of her face. She knew its source. It was coming from her own body.

It was Boa's soul she was looking at. At least the haunted shadow of it, finally liberated from the cell into which the women of the Fantomaya had put it. Freed from Candy. And now gaining strength.

It was pushing itself, spreading itself, extruding rudimentary legs from its torso, and something that had the potential to become arms, while from the top a single thread of gray matter

sprouted. From this fragile stalk, two leaves had formed and on them, the undeveloped shape of a mouth and nose. And above the leaves, two white, slim petals grew, each with bursts of blue and black upon them, as if blessed with sight.

It was a simple illusion, but it quickly gained credibility as new stalks sprayed upward in their dozens, forming intricate lacerations of vein and nerve that began to conjure to shape of their possessor's face. Though it was still little more than a skinless mask knitted of pulsing threads, there was a glimpse, even there, of the young woman who would soon come into being. She would be beautiful again, Candy thought. She would break hearts.

Candy hadn't lifted herself up off the ground since her knees had buckled beneath her. She still knelt in the same spot, watching the vestigial form of Princess Boa attract to it the detritus of the life-forms shed by the chamber walls: withered flower housings, leaves, living and dead, all adding their sum to the patchwork that was slowly giving the Princess more substance. The surrounding flora and fauna were nourishing Boa's body, and it was by their sacrifice alone that Candy's life had been spared. But the process was going too slowly.

Candy could sense Boa's frustration as she received these pitifully inadequate contributions to the body she was trying to grow again.

She opened her lips, and though her throat and tongue were unfinished, she managed to speak. It was light, more than a quiet whisper, but Candy heard it plainly.

“You look . . . nourishing . . .” she said.

“I’d make bad eating right now. You should find something healthier.”

“Hunger is hunger. And time is of the essence. . . .”

This time Candy forced her throat to form the question, though it was barely audible.

“Why is that exactly?” she said.

“Midnight,” Boa said simply. “It’s almost upon us. You don’t feel it, do you?”

“Midnight?”

“Midnight! I can feel it. The last darkness is coming, and it will blot out every light in the heavens.”

“No . . .”

“Saying no will change nothing. The Abarat is going to die in the dark. Every sun will be eclipsed, every moon blinded, every star in every constellation extinguished like a candle flame. But don’t worry. You won’t be here to suffer the consequences. You’ll be gone.”

“Where?”

“Who knows? Who’ll care? Nobody. You will have served your purpose. You had sixteen years of life, going places you would never have gone if you hadn’t had me hidden inside you. You have nothing to complain about. Now your life ends. And mine begins. There’s something quite pleasing about the balance, isn’t there?”

“I’m not done living . . .” Candy murmured.

“Well, I’m sorry,” Boa said, mocking Candy’s gravity.

“You don’t . . . understand,” Candy said.

“Trust me. There’s nothing you know that I don’t.”

“You’re wrong,” Candy said. Her voice was gaining strength as she drew upon the clarity Laguna Munn’s gift had given her. “I know how you played Carrion along all those years, making him think you loved him, when all you really wanted from him was the Abarataraba.”

“Listen to yourself,” Boa said. “To hear you, people might think you actually knew what you were talking about.”

Candy sighed.

“You’re right,” she said. “I don’t know much about the Abarataraba. It’s a book of magic—”

“Stop! Stop! You’re embarrassing yourself. Don’t waste your last minutes worrying about something you’ll never understand. Death has come for you, Candy. And when it leaves it’s going to be taking you along with it. You, and every thought you ever had. Every hope, every dream. All gone. It’ll be like you never lived.”

“The dead don’t disappear. There are ghosts. I’ve met one. And I’ll be one, if necessary. I have energy and power.”

“You have nothing,” Boa said with a sudden burst of rage.

She reached out and seized hold of Candy. The effect, in both directions, was immediate. Now, as she drew power out of Candy directly the smoky air began to solidify into gray bone behind the latticework of veins and nerves that had first defined her features.

“Better,” Boa said, smiling through gritted teeth. “Much

better.”

Every part of her body was speeding toward completion now. The fluids in Boa’s eye sockets bubbled like boiling water. Even in her diminished state Candy could still see the bizarritiy in the sight before her.

“Oh, I like this,” Boa said, luxuriating in the bliss of her reconstruction.

This time there was enough of her flesh and bone in place that Candy could see a hint of the beautiful woman whose image Finnegan Hob had kept above his bed. But every sliver of Boa’s recovered beauty was being purchased at the expense of Candy’s life. Each time Boa’s greedy fingers touched Candy they left her more impoverished, more exhausted. And this was not the kind of exhaustion that she could sleep off in a few quiet hours. This was the other kind: the sleep from which there was no waking.

Death has come for you. Boa had uttered the words just a few minutes ago.

She hadn’t lied.

Chapter 13 Boa

WEAK THOUGH CANDY WAS—THE convulsions wracking her body with increasing frequency, her legs so exhausted she doubted they’d support her for more than two or three strides—she had no choice. She had to get out of the chamber quickly, or Boa’s appetite for her life force would be the death of her. In one small detail, luck was on her side.

Candy remembered hearing Laguna Munn’s voice. It felt ages

ago, but the incantatrix made mention of the lock. Suddenly Candy realized that despite his mother's instruction, Covenantis had failed to lock the chamber door. It had opened, just a crack. But it was sufficiently wider than the narrow shadow it cast. Without it, Candy would have had little or no chance of locating her escape route. But here it was!

She only allowed her gaze to linger on the shadow of the door for the briefest moment. She was afraid of giving anything away to Boa. Then, directing her gaze to the opposite wall—as if it was there that she'd guessed the door to be—she slowly started to haul herself to her feet.

Boa's relentless appetite had robbed Candy's body of strength and flexibility. It felt like a dead weight, which took every bit of willpower to get moving and keep moving. Every part of her seemed close to failure. Her lungs were like two stones inside her, while her heart fluttered like a torn paper bird. Her body would have to be stirred from its torpor if Candy was to have any hope of escaping this chamber. She would have to force her enfeebled arms to make her torso collaborate in its own survival.

"Come on," she told herself through gritted teeth, "... move."

Reluctantly, her body responded. But it hurt. Her heart-bird got panicky. The rest of her innards started to close down. She could taste something disgusting in her throat, as though her entrails were backed up like choked sewer pipes. She tried not to think about it, which was in fact quite easy because her mind was failing along with everything else.

She didn't need much brainpower to recognize her mortal enemy, however. Boa was with her in the chamber, and she was a distressing sight. Without bones, Boa's anatomy was a ragged mass of possibilities that had not yet congealed. Her fingers dangled like empty gloves, her face a long mask of lost intention, and her mouth, a hole without a tongue or teeth.

Boa's appearance was so appalling that Candy forgot her exhaustion and scrambled to get out of her way. With a sudden rush of energy, Candy pushed herself up off the chamber floor, catching Boa off guard, and knocking her to the floor.

"Be still, witch!" Boa yelled. "Let's have this over with, once and for all!"

Candy lurched toward the door, avoiding the coils which, had they encircled her and tightened their grip once more, would have ground her ribs to powder and her guts to meat and excrement.

She reached out to the shadow, which marked her destination, and slid her fingers around the door. It was no illusion. It was solid and real in her grip. She pulled, half expecting the door to protest its opening, but no. Despite its massive size, it was served by some kind of counterweight, which allowed it to swing open with only the most modest of effort on Candy's part.

Her surprise made her careless. As she pulled the door open, Boa's forefinger wrapped itself around her throat, tightening with the efficiency of a noose.

Candy instantly let go of the door, and forced her fingers down between neck and noose. But it wasn't enough to keep Boa from

putting so much pressure on Candy's windpipe that she could no longer draw breath.

Candy's thoughts were already in swift decay thanks to Boa's theft. Now the sudden loss of oxygen robbed her mind of still more functions. Her thoughts became increasingly confused. What was she doing in this place? And the woman with the hole for a mouth; who was she?

Boa's skills with her body were growing as fast as Candy's body was drained. She spoke now, her voice crude.

"This is no way to die," Boa said. "Where's your dignity, girl? Stop struggling, and let me take what's mine. You lived a fine life because of me. Brief, yes, but full of my insights. My lessons. My magic."

Somebody outside the chamber walls, but close enough to have heard Boa's speech, apparently found it very funny. Her mockery echoed around the chamber.

"Listen to yourself." It was Laguna Munn. Again, the laughter ignited. "Such pretension. And from what? A cannibal. Yes, that's the truth of it when you get down to the facts. You are able to devour the life of a girl who gave you sanctuary from those who had taken yours and would gladly have extinguished your soul. Let Candy go."

"Oh no . . . there's no letting go."

"Is there not? We shall see about that."

As she spoke, the wall opposite the door began to fold in upon itself, and the incantatrix came into view.

She was pointing at Boa, as she continued her accusations.

“Whatever was good in you, and bright, has gone to corruption.”

“You can say whatever you like, old woman,” Boa replied. “Your time’s over. There’s a new world about to be born.”

“Funny. I hear that a lot,” Laguna Munn said, her voice thick with contempt. “Now let the commoner go, Princess. If you really want to dine on flesh, you shouldn’t be eating the hoi polloi.”

The expression on Boa’s face suddenly cleared.

“Oh my. She is, isn’t she?”

“She’s not of noble birth, like you, Princess.”

“No,” Boa said, her tone deeply grateful. “If you hadn’t stopped me—” She released Candy from her grip. “I could have tainted myself.”

“And what a sad day that would have been for all those poor suffering aristocrats like yourself who would have lost a beloved sister.”

“Oh me! Oh, poor beloved me.”

As Candy stumbled out of Boa’s hold she turned and the subtle signs of deceit upon Boa’s face caught Candy’s attention. Boa didn’t wait to let Candy speak. She quickly was gone, out of the chamber and off up the wooded slope. Candy did her best to recover her equilibrium, but it was difficult. Boa’s thefts had left her body weak, and her thoughts ragged. She was only certain of one thing.

“She would have killed me . . .”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” Mrs. Munn replied. “But this is my rock, girl, and she has no—”

“Mama!”

The cry came from Covenantis. And as heart wrenching as his wails were, the terrible howl of anguish that followed was infinitely worse.

Laguna was clearly torn between her responsibilities to her injured guest, and those she had to her son. Candy simplified things:

“Go to the boy! I’ll be fine. I just need to recover my breath.” She looked up at Mrs. Munn. “Please,” she said, “don’t worry about me!”

Her plea was lent force by another sobbing cry from her son.

“Where are you, Mama?”

Laguna Munn looked at Candy one more time.

“Go!” Candy said.

Laguna Munn didn’t put up any further argument. Instead, she addressed the walls of the chamber.

“This girl is here as my guest. She’s hurt. Heal her.” She turned her attentions back toward Candy for a moment. “Stay here and let the chamber do its work. I’ll be back with my boys.”

“Be careful . . .”

“I know, girl, I know. Boa’s dangerous. But believe me, so am I. I’ve got a few tricks she wouldn’t want to see. Now heal. The dark Hours that are coming won’t wait for you to put yourself

back together. Hurry up. The beginning's been a long time over. And the end always comes sooner than you expect."

And so saying, she left the girl who was truly Candy Quackenbush, nothing added or taken away, to the healing hush of the chamber.

Chapter 14 Empty

NEVER IN HER SIXTEEN years had Candy felt as alone as she felt now. Though she'd tried many times to imagine what it would be like without Boa in her head, her attempts had failed miserably. Only now, alone in the vastness of her thoughts did she sense the horror of such solitude. There would never again be a presence to silently share the state of being as Boa had. She was utterly, unconditionally alone.

How did people, ordinary people like those on Followell Street—even her own mother, even her father—deal with the loneliness? Did her dad drink himself senseless every night because it made the emptiness she was feeling right now hurt a little less? For them, was it the constant chattering of the television that helped them through the bad times? Or hurtful little power games like those Miss Schwartz played that helped them forget the hush in their heads?

Candy suddenly recalled the big billboard outside the Presbyterian Church on Munrow Street in Chickentown that had carried the same message for as long as Candy could remember:

THE LORD IS WITH YOU ALWAYS. YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Well he's not with me now, Candy thought. Nobody's with me. And I just have to live with things being like this from now on, because nobody's going to step in to help change it. All I can do is—

A shriek interrupted her thoughts. Laguna Munn was shouting one word, its force fueled by horror and rage.

“NO!”

She stopped only when she ran out of breath. She inhaled and began again.

“NO!”

Finally, she let the word fall off into silence. Several seconds passed and then Candy heard her say, “My son. What have you done to my son?”

Candy didn't wait for any more clues as to what had taken place. She got up headed for the door, realizing as she did so that while she'd been contemplating her loneliness, the sentient chamber had obeyed Laguna Munn's instructions and begun the process of healing her. She was no longer shaking as she had been just a few minutes earlier. And her weakened legs had recovered some of their strength. Even her thoughts, which had been left muddled by Boa's attacks, were clearer now.

Exiting the chamber, she didn't need any further cries from the incantrix in order to discover her whereabouts. The powers she feared she'd lost to Boa's devouring were unharmed. Once the chamber had washed from her thoughts the grime of Boa's appetite, she remembered without effort how to locate Mrs.

Munn in the darkness. All she had to do was follow the vibration that moved ahead of her, trusting it to choose a safe path up the slope.

The temperature quickly warmed up as she ascended; the air carried with it a smell like rotted meat that had been burned on a barbecue.

Bad magic, she thought.

Then she heard Mrs. Munn again, speaking softly somewhere ahead of her.

“What’s she done to you, child? Now you hush your weepin’. I’m right here. Where does it hurt?”

“Everywhere, Mama.”

Candy saw a light now, no brighter than two candle flames, hovering in the air a few feet above the ground. The scene illuminated was a grim one.

Mrs. Munn was kneeling on the ground, tending to her favorite son, Jollo B’gog. He was in a terrible state. All the dark beauty he’d possessed when Candy and Malingo had first met him had gone. He was emaciated now, his bones jutting through his withered skin. His teeth were chattering, his eyes rolled up behind his lids.

“Listen to me, Jollo dear,” Mrs. Munn was telling him. “You’re not going to die. You hear me? I’m here.”

She stopped talking, and looked up in rage, her gaze instantly locating Candy. There was a flicker of lightning in her eyes.

“It’s only me,” Candy said. “Don’t—”

The lightning receded, and Laguna Munn looked back down at her son. "I want you to stay here with him. Keep him from any further harm while I find her."

"Boa . . ." Candy growled.

Laguna Munn nodded. "She took from the child what I stopped her taking from you." She tenderly stroked her son's cheek. "You just stay here, sweet one," she said to him. "Mama will be back in just a few moments."

"Where are you going?"

"To find her. And take back what she took from him."

She got to her feet, rising with surprising ease for so large boned a woman, looking down at Jollo all the while. It was only with the greatest difficulty that she finally separated her gaze from him.

"I'm so sorry," Candy said. "If I'd known what she was capable of doing—"

"Don't," Mrs. Munn said, waving Candy's apology away. "We have more urgent business than talk. Will you please stay with him, maybe talk to him a little so his spirit stays near?"

"Of course."

"She's not a real Princess, you know," Mrs. Munn said with an odd deliberation in her voice, like an amateur actor reciting lines. "She may have a crown and a title but they mean nothing. True royalty is a state of the soul. It belongs to those who have the gift of empathy, of compassion, of vision. That's how people are led to do great things, even in cold, brutal times. But this . . .

Boa . . .” Her lips curled when she spoke the two syllables: Bow-ah. “. . . attempted to first take your life, and then my Jollo’s, just to put some flesh on her spirit. That’s not the act of a Princess. To attack someone who had been her sanctuary? And then a child? Where is the nobility in that? I’ll tell you. There is none. Because your Princess Boa is a fake! She has no more royal blood in her than I do.”

There was a furious shriek from overhead—

“Liar! Liar!”

—and the branches shook so violently that a green rain of torn leaves fluttered down.

“There you are,” Candy heard Laguna Munn mutter under her breath. “I knew you were up there somewhere, you vicious little —”

A branch overhead creaked loudly, drawing Candy’s gaze up through the knotted branches to the place where Boa was squatting, her form delineated by narrow rays of violet light that passed up through her body from her soles to her scalp and from her head to her heels, throwing off a loop of incandescence when they crossed at her waist. She rocked back and forth on the branch, and then suddenly spat on Laguna Munn’s now upturned face.

“What are you staring at, you fat, old buzzard?” Boa said.

Mrs. Munn pulled a large handkerchief out of the sleeve of her dress. “Nothing of any worth,” she replied as she wiped her face. “Just you!”

And with that she sprang up from the ground into the canopy where Boa was squatting, leaving her handkerchief to drop to the ground.

“Take care of Jollo!” she yelled to Candy as she disappeared into the shadowed canopy. Then the nearby trees shook as Boa attempted her escape into it, and the chase overhead moved off up the slope, leaving Candy alone with the sick child.

Chapter 15 Face-to-Face

MAMA?” JOLLO SAID WHEN Candy sat down beside him. She didn’t need to correct his error. “Wait, you’re not Mama.”

“Your mom won’t be long,” Candy told him. “I’m just here to look after you until she comes back.”

“Candy.”

“Yes.”

“She came out of you, didn’t she? The girl who killed me.”

“You’re not dead, Jollo. And your mom’s not going to let you die.”

“There’s some things even Mama can’t control,” Jollo said. His voice was getting weaker, word by word.

“Listen to me,” Candy said. “I know what the Princess did to you was horrible. She tried to do the same thing to me. But hold on. Please.”

“What for?”

“What for?”

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to answer that.” He raised his head off the ground and squinted at Candy. “Tell me about the

Constrictor.”

“The what?”

“Boa,” he said, his face suddenly becoming a playground of mischief. “Get it? Ha! I just made that up.”

At the moment death was forgotten, anything was possible. Candy grinned. There was such sweetness in him she saw, hidden behind his melancholy.

“She was there inside you all the time?”

“Yes, she was there.”

“But you didn’t know what a monster she was, did you?”

Candy shook her head. “I had no idea,” she said. “She was part of me.”

“And now? How does it feel?”

“Empty.”

“You feel alone?”

“Yes . . .”

“Still, it’s better that she’s gone.”

Candy took a moment to consider this before replying.

“Yes. It’s better.”

Before Jollo could ask any further questions, a welcome and familiar figure appeared between the trees. “It’s only me!”

“Malingo!”

“Same old geshrat,” he said. “But who’s this?”

“You remember Jollo? Mrs. Munn’s boy?”

“He remembers me the way I was,” Jollo said. “Before Boa got to me.”

“So it worked,” Malingo said.

“Yes, she’s gone,” Candy said. “But she almost killed poor Jollo.”

“And you.”

“Well, yes. And me.”

“Where is she now?”

“Up in the trees somewhere,” Candy said.

“She’s running away from Mama,” Jollo said. He looked up at Candy. “Isn’t she?”

“That’s right.”

“But I want her back now. Just to say good-bye.”

“Maybe I should go and look for her,” Candy said.

“Yes . . .” Jollo said.

Candy took hold of Jollo’s hand. His fingers were sweaty but cold. “What do you think, Jollo? If I have Malingo stay with you, will you promise not to . . . not to . . .”

“Not to die?” Jollo said.

“Yes. Not to die.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll try. But bring Mama back soon. I want her here with me if . . . if I can’t stay any longer.”

“Don’t say that,” Candy said to him.

“It’s the truth,” he replied. “Mama says it’s bad to tell lies.”

“Well, yes,” Candy said. “It is.”

“So hurry,” he said, slipping his fingers out of Candy’s grasp. “Find her.” He turned to Malingo. “You were a slave to a wizard once, weren’t you?” he said.

“I was,” Malingo said.

“Come closer. I can’t see you in the darkness. There. That’s better. Tell me about it. Was he cruel? I heard he was cruel.”

Jollo’s interest in Candy had already slipped away; all his focus was now entirely upon Malingo. Candy got to her feet and left the two of them to talk, happy the boy was diverted.

“So how did you become a slave?” he said to Malingo.

“My father sold me . . .” Malingo began.

Candy didn’t hear any more. She retreated until she no longer had sight of Jollo, and he had no view of her. Only then did she turn her back on the place where he lay and face the tree-covered slope. This time she didn’t need any magic to plot a course to Mrs. Munn. She could hear the chase going on through the densely knitted canopy farther up the slope. Candy could even hear echoes of the incantatrix calling after Boa.

“There’s no way off this island, Boa.”

“Let me alone, will you?” Boa yelled back as she sprinted over the treetops. “I didn’t know the boy was your son. I swear I didn’t. I mean, how could I? There’s no family resemblance.”

“Liar! Liar!” Candy yelled right back, her interruption echoing that of Boa, minutes before. But she had more to say. “You knew exactly who he was, Boa. Because I knew. And if I knew then—”

“Stay out of this, Quackenbush!” Boa hollered. “Or you’ll be sorry!”

“I’m already sorry,” Candy yelled back. “I’m sorry I ever let

you out of my head.”

“Ah, the sting of regret!” Boa crowed. “Well, it’s done, girl, and it can never be undone. So you’d better get used to it. I’m in the world now. Everything changes from now on. Everything.”

“Stay away from her, Candy!” Mrs. Munn hollered. “She’ll hurt you!”

“I’m not afraid of her,” Candy said.

“Liar, liar, funeral pyre!” Boa chanted.

“Well, one of us is going to have to tell the truth sooner or later,” Candy replied.

Boa finally reached the tree beneath which Candy stood, and looked down through the leaves, shaped in their fullness, like planets with golden rings around them. That Boa’s body was defined by the dual motion of bright rings was no accident. Her new skin—bought with the coin of Jollo’s suffering—had taken for inspiration the design of the foliage all around it.

“You want the truth,” Boa said, squatting on a branch so as to peer down at Candy through the canopy. “Then here: have it. I would have taken all the life force in you to heal me completely. But I was denied the total sum of you by that fat witch. And then when I do the only thing left to me—take her son—she comes howling after me as though I’d committed a crime. Ridiculous woman!”

“I heard that!”

“So? You think I’m afraid of you?”

“I know you are. I can smell the fear off you!”

There was a great commotion in the trees behind Boa. The branches were cracking as they were shaken and their motion becoming more violent as it got nearer.

“You are dead, you vile creature.”

“No. Death is what you will all inherit now. I am returned with life. But you . . . you will follow the child into oblivion, come soon, come late. No exceptions for children or lost girls. Everybody dies, come soon, come late. And you—”

She leaped off the branch where she'd been perched, heading for Candy as she descended. She grabbed hold of Candy's face, throwing them both back through the barbed thickets to the ground. Her hand went from Candy's face to her throat.

“You, I say soon!”

Chapter 16 Laguna Munn Angered

IF CANDY HAD NOT had the sight of the Princess's face to look up at, she would have quickly succumbed to her death grip. But luckily she only had to look up at Boa's beautiful, hateful face to keep fighting, even though Boa's hold on her throat had cut off most of her air. She just kept beating at Boa's face, over and over and over, determined not to let the waves of darkness that lapped at her sight overwhelm her. But even with her fury at Boa to help keep her conscious she couldn't hold back the black tide forever. Her blows were getting weaker, and Boa was showing not the least sign of being hurt or dissuaded from further attack. She stared down at Candy with the implacable gaze of an executioner.

And then, behind her joyless face, there was a blur of color, too chaotic for Candy's weary eyes to make sense of.

But the voice that came with the colors was a different matter. That made perfect sense.

"Let go of the girl right now," the incantatrix said, "or I swear I will break every bone in your body, Princess or no Princess."

A moment later Boa's hands let go of Candy's throat and she gratefully inhaled two lungfuls of sweet, clean air. It took her body a little while to push back the tide that had come so close to drowning her, by which time the struggle between Laguna Munn and Boa had already taken the two of them some distance from the place where Candy lay. When she got to her feet and looked around she saw them a long way up the slope, standing several yards apart but locked together by several cords of conjuration—those pitched by Mrs. Munn, digging their blazing fingers into Boa, while the cords Boa had cast danced vicious tarantellas around Mrs. Munn. The cords had shed bright flakes of energy—some no larger than fireflies, others the size of burning birds—that littered the darkness around and above the circle of ash and blackened timber that the powers of the combatants had burned into being.

Candy knew when she was out of her league. These two were exchanging blows from a magic she had no comprehension of, much less the means to conjure. Even as she watched, each of the pair called out more incandescent hurts and harms, yelling their furies at each other in what Candy recognized as Old Abaratian,

the mother tongue of time itself. She understood not even a syllable of what they were hurling back and forth. But there was strange proof of its potency in the branches and on the ground all around the fire-formed grove.

While most of the scraps of power remained in the arena's zone of influence, a few escaped, and finding living subjects up among the branches and down between the roots, remade them. It was the sweet-songed capellajar birds that shed light on the spectacle, the magic transforming them into beasts that had something of the bat about them, and something about the lizard, their once modest beaks became snouts the length of their bodies, which pierced the dense lattice of branches, twigs and leaves as they descended from their high perches. The cavern's crystalline roof threw down shafts of rainbow silver, lighting the shadow world below.

For a few seconds Candy was enraptured by the eccentric life-forms that were appearing from the trees and thicket: bizarre relatives of creatures that would have still had a certain strangeness to Candy, even in their unaltered state, but were even more extraordinary now.

The spectacle held her in thrall so completely that she failed to notice that the two women were no longer fighting in the burned-out grove, and were making their way back down the slope toward her, until she heard Mrs. Munn's voice:

"Take it, girl!"

Candy persuaded her gaze to look away from the animals,

and found that Laguna Munn was approaching her through the trees at an extraordinary rate, fearlessly careening through the thornbushes, no more than seven or eight strides from where Candy stood.

And again she shouted, as though the sense of what she was saying was utterly self-evident.

“Take it, girl!”

And as she shouted, and raced toward Candy, she offered up her right hand, which was partially open and completely empty.

“Be quick, girl. The vicious thing behind me means to take our lives!”

Candy looked back over Mrs. Munn’s shoulder and saw that Boa’s recently acquired flesh wore an expression of almost insane fury: her eyes gaping, her mouth gasping, and her lips curled back like those of a crazed dog, exposing not only her teeth but her gums too. Her body, though it was still without clothes, wore a pattern of shadowy stains that moved under the surface of her skin, dividing into smeared spots in one place and gathered into a single ragged shape in another, all constantly changing.

Even her face was stained: with a swarm of blots, then with rows of rising stripes, then a single black diamond, one form becoming another without lingering in any state for so much as a moment.

For some reason the display touched a nerve in Candy. It was literally sickening; it made her stomach rebel, and it was all she could do not to keep herself from puking.

Mrs. Munn's half-opened hand was now in front of Candy.

"Take it!" Mrs. Munn said. "Just do it!"

"Take what?"

"Whatever you see in my hand."

"It's empty."

"Look again. And be quick." Candy was aware of Boa's shape rising up behind Mrs. Munn, and beating at the air above her. "I can't hold her off for long. The power in her!"

Candy could hear Boa calling to her as she beat at the Air Armor the incantatrix had put up to keep her from finishing the chase. The Armor, a conjuration Candy knew of but couldn't wield, made Boa's voice slurred and remote, but Candy could still comprehend enough to know what Boa was doing. She was trying to sow seeds of doubt in Candy concerning Mrs. Munn.

"She says you're crazy," Candy said.

"She's probably right," Laguna Munn replied. "Did she make you want to vomit when you saw the Sepulcaphs?"

"Is that what they're called? Yes. It was horrible."

"If she tries it again, you run, put your eyes out, bury your head in the ground, just don't look at the patterns. If she's strong enough to keep them in her skin, which she is, she can make you puke yourself inside out."

"That's . . . that's not possible. Is it?"

"I'm afraid it is. She almost had me doing it two minutes ago, up the hill. Me? On my own rock! Where she got power to wield Sepulcaphs is . . ." She shook her head. ". . . unbelievable."

“She was taught by Christopher Carrion.”

“Interesting. And of course the question remains: where did he get it? The Hereafter doesn’t have power. That’s why you did business with us. But even the Abarat doesn’t contain wieldings that powerful.”

There was a sharp stinging sound, as more pieces of the Air Armor behind Laguna Munn shattered beneath Boa’s assault.

“Lordy Lou. How did you ever live with her?”

“She wasn’t like this.”

“Or she was and you suppressed it.”

“Huh. I never thought of that.”

“No wonder you were a dull little batrat of a child. All your energy was going into keeping this monster from breaking out.”

“Who said I was a dull little ratbat—”

“Batrat.”

“—of a child?”

“You did. Who you are is the stone on which you stand. Now no more—”

There were two more brutal stings in quick succession. Then another three.

“She’s breaking through. Take your weapon!”

Once again she was offering her hand to Candy, and once again Candy was seeing nothing but an empty palm. There was a desperate urgency to the problem. Boa and her nauseating Sepulcaphs were a cracked plate of air away.

“Look again!” Mrs. Munn insisted. “Look away. Clear your

head. Then look again. It's right there!"

"What is?"

"Whatever you want."

"Like a poisonous snake?"

She had but to ask, and there it was in Mrs. Munn's hands. a seven-foot-long snake, its colors—a toxic yellow-green with a band of glistening black running along its length—designed to tell anyone that it was a venomous thing.

"Good choice, girl!" Mrs. Munn said, in a tone so ambiguous Candy had no idea whether she was serious or not. "Here! Take it!"

She tossed the snake at Candy, who, more out of instinct than intention, caught it in both hands.

"Now what?" she said.

[Chapter 17 Snake Talk](#)

JOLLO?"

There was no response from the wizened figure on the ground. His eyes were closed, and his pupils were motionless behind his gray, papery lids. Malingo kneeled down beside him, and spoke to him again:

"Are you still there?" he asked.

For several seconds there was no response. Then his gummy green eyelids opened and he spoke. His words were slurred, his voice watery.

"I'm still here. I just needed to rest. Everything was too noisy with my eyes open," he said.

Malingo glanced up at Covenantis, hoping he'd know the significance of Jollo's confusion of senses, but Covenantis's focus was neither with his brother nor Malingo. Covenantis was turned away from his brother in the direction of the sound of—

“Shattering air,” Covenantis said.

“I didn't even know air could shatter,” Malingo said.

“Glass can be poured like treacle if it's hot enough. Did you not know that either?” Covenantis replied. “Are all geshrats so stupid?”

The noise came again. And again. Malingo was now looking in the same direction as Covenantis, curious as to what shattered air looked like. Suddenly, Jollo seized hold of Malingo's arm, first with one hand then with both, pulling himself up into a sitting position, his eyes opening wide.

“She's there,” he said, staring with eerie accuracy in precisely the same direction as his brother.

Malingo didn't need to ask Jollo of whom he was speaking. There was only one “she” in the boys' universe. And all Jollo wanted right now was the comfort of her presence.

“Mama . . .” said Jollo. “Find her, Covenantis.”

“She's coming, little brother.”

“Hurry her up. Please?”

“I can't hurry her when she has such important work, brother.”

“I'm almost dead,” Jollo said. “I want to see her one last time . . .”

“Hush, Jollo. No more talk of death.”

“Easy to say when it’s not your life that’s . . . fading away.” His face became a tragic mask. “I want my mama.”

“She’ll come as soon as she can,” Covenantis said, only this time much more quietly, his voice filled with sorrow as though he knew, however fast she came it would never be fast enough.

“Don’t look up!” Mrs. Munn yelled over another round of shattering air. “Just be ready!”

“What do you mean?”

“You wanted the snake. Get ready to use it!”

Candy felt stupid and angry and confused all at once. She’d never imagined letting Boa go would escalate into such chaos: the Princess nearly killing Mrs. Munn, her firstborn, and Candy, and now breaking through Mrs. Munn’s defenses, still no doubt wearing the Sepulcaphs. The mere thought of them was enough to stir up nausea, so Candy concentrated on the snake.

Its body was too thick for her to get her hand around, but it didn’t seem to want to escape her grip. Quite the reverse. It slid the cool, dry length of its tail twice around one of her arms and then, raising up its large head so that it could look down imperiously at Candy it said, “I think myself a very fine snake. Do you not agree?”

Its speech, which was as elegant and smooth as its motion, came as no great surprise to Candy. It had been the greatest disappointment of growing up—far more wounding than finding out that there was neither an Oz nor a Santa Claus—to discover that though animals talked often and wisely in the stories she

loved, few of them did so in life. It made perfect sense then that a creature she had fashioned in a moment of blind instinct would possess the power of speech.

“Are you the one who called me into being?” the serpent inquired.

“Yes, I’m the one.”

“Lovely work, if one may be so bold,” the snake said, admiring his gleaming coils. “I would have done nothing different. Not a scale. One finds oneself . . . perfect.” He looked a little embarrassed. “Oh dear, I think I’m in love,” he said, kissing his own coils.

“Aren’t you poisonous?” Candy said.

“Indeed. I can taste the bitterness of my own poison. One is of course immune to one’s own toxins, but if a single drop fell on your tongue—”

“Dead?”

“Guaranteed.”

“Quick?”

“Of course not! What’s a poison worth if it’s quick?”

“Painless?”

“No! What’s a—”

“Poison worth if it’s painless?”

“Precisely. My bite may be quite swift, but the consequence? I assure you, it’s the very worst. It feels like a fire is cooking your brains and your muscles are rotting on your bones.”

“Lordy Lou.”

Hearing the animal speak so lovingly of the agonies it could cause made Candy think of Christopher Carrion. Much like the snake's poison, Carrion's soup of nightmares had been lethal to others. But to Carrion, they'd been companions, trusted and loved. The similarity was too strong to be a coincidence. Candy had laced her invented snake with a little of Carrion's essence.

The chat with the snake, along with Candy's recollection of Carrion, had taken but a few seconds, during which time the sound of Boa battering on the last plate of air had grown steadily louder.

"Does your snake know what to do when Boa gets in?" Mrs. Munn yelled over the noise. "Because she's a vehement one. She's going to be through very soon, and you'd better be ready."

"Oh, I think my snake knows his business," Candy yelled back.

"Your snake, am I?"

"As long as you don't object," she said, doing her best to reproduce the snake's imitation of high birth.

"Why would one mind?" the snake replied. "In truth, lady, one is both honored and moved."

It raised its finely formed snout a little way, in order to deepen the bow that followed. Candy did her best to conceal her impatience (what part of her, conceiving of a snake, had created one with such humorless formality?) but it was difficult. The only thing that kept her from losing her composure was the serpent's genuine commitment to her.

"You've won me over entirely," it said to her. "I would kill the

world for you, I swear I would.”

“Candy . . .” Mrs. Munn said. “Be quick or it’s ended.”

“I hear you,” Candy replied. “We’re ready.”

“Is it to be the world then?” the snake said.

“Thanks for the offer, but no, I just need you to stop one person.”

“And who’s that? The fat woman?”

“I heard that, snake!” Mrs. Munn yelled.

“No, snake,” Candy said. “Absolutely not. That’s our friend.”

“It’s not the world and it’s not the fat one. So who?”

“The one on the other side of the air,” Candy said.

“Why her?”

“Because she’s a bad piece of work,” Candy said. “Trust me. Her name’s Boa. Princess Boa.”

“Oh, now wait,” the serpent said. “This one’s royalty? No. No no. One has one’s limits. She’s one of my own!”

“Look at her! She’s no snake.”

“I don’t care to.”

“You were ready to kill the world for me just a minute ago!”

“The world, yes. Her? No.”

Mrs. Munn had not heard a single word of this. She’d been too busy using her strengths—mental, physical and magical—to keep the final plate of air, which was already badly cracked, from shattering completely.

It was a struggle she was going to lose very soon, Candy feared. Boa’s power was now so formidable that despite all the

incantatrix's years of wieldings, she had run out of energies to oppose her. In desperation she had reached into her very soul for strength. But even that had not been sufficient. Its fuel had been almost entirely burned through in seconds. When it was gone, her life would be over.

"I'm sorry, Candy . . ." The thundering of Boa's forces beating against the final plate of air almost drowned her out. She drew a deep breath and tried again one last time. "I can't hold her back. I've used everything I have. There's no life left in me."

"No! Mrs. Munn, you can't die. Just get out of her way."

"If I move, it's over," she said. "Boa will be through and we'll both be vomiting."

"You know what?" said Candy. "Let her come. I'm not afraid of her. I've got a killer snake right here at my side."

"You don't have me," the snake said.

Candy had neither the time nor the temper left for debate. She raised the snake still coiled around her arm. "Now you listen to me, you pretentious self-loving, empty-headed worm—"

"Worm? Did you call me a worm?"

"Shut up. I'm shouting! You exist because I made you. And I can unmake you just as easily." She had no idea whether this was actually true, but given that she'd brought the snake into being, it was a reasonable assumption.

"You wouldn't dare!" the snake said.

"What?" Candy said, not even looking at him.

"Unmake me."

Now she looked. “Really? Is that a request?”

“No. No!”

“Are you quite sure?”

“You’re crazy.”

“Oh, you’ve seen nothing yet.”

“And I don’t want to, thank you very much.”

“Well then, do as I say.”

She met the snake’s beady black gaze, and held it. And held it. And held it.

“All right!” it said finally, breaking his gaze. “You win! There’s no dealing with insanity.”

“Good choice.”

“I’ll bite her, but then you let me go.”

Before Candy could reply, Boa unleashed a shriek, which was drowned out seconds later, overwhelmed by the crash as the final plate of air shattered. The blast of energy slammed into Laguna Munn, who shielded Candy and the snake from the worst of its force. She, however, was picked up, despite her weight, and thrown like a straw doll, off into the darkness between the trees.

The snake’s instant response was to escape from Candy’s grip, the entire muscular length of its body writhing around in panic.

“So sorry. One has to leave. Look at the time.”

“Nice try, worm,” Candy said, reaching out and grabbing hold of its body, somewhere, she guessed, close to its head. She was loathe to open her eyes too wide to check on where she’d fallen in case an exploratory glance, however brief, gave her a lethal

glimpse of Boa and her Sepulcaphs. On the other hand she wasn't going to be able to use the snake against Boa unless she knew where the enemy was standing.

Suddenly the snake's frenzied twists and turns stopped, and seizing the chance its sudden passivity offered, Candy slid her hand up along its body. She'd seen how real snake handlers worked. They seized hold of the animal right behind its head and held on with all their strength so that the snake couldn't whip around and bite them.

But Candy's snake showed no intention of doing so. It didn't move at all. In fact, the reason for its sudden stillness was clear just a few inches farther along its body. A shoeless foot was pressed down upon the snake's head.

"So . . ." Boa said. "I think it's time you looked at me, don't you? I can make you if I want to."

Chapter 18 An EndGame

MALINGO WAS STILL STARING off between the trees, hoping to catch some sign of Candy's return—so far no luck. What he did see was a flock of perhaps ten or twelve winged creatures, which looked through the trees in his general direction, barking and squealing, chattering and howling with the stolen voices of a dog, pig, monkey and hyena.

"What's that noise?" Covenantis said.

"You need to see for yourself," Malingo said, his vocabulary too impoverished to do the sight justice.

"I can't look right now," the slug-boy replied. "I'm . . .

concentrating on something. It's not something I can take my eyes off."

"You need some help?"

"No," the boy said. "This is for me to do and only me. Why don't you just keep watching for Candy and Mama? And please . . . don't watch me while I'm doing the wielding."

"Are you going to do some magic?"

"I'm going to try. Just a verse and a chorus."

"What?"

"They're songs. Mama wrote down all the spells she learned or created as songs. They're harder to steal that way, she says. I've been listening to Mama's songs as recordings since I was about two. So I know all her magic because I could sing all her songs, every single one."

"Did you understand them?"

"We're about to find out, aren't we? That's why I don't want anyone watching. If something goes wrong, at least you'll have your back to it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing too ambitious. I'm a horrible singer. But I'd like to ease Jollo's pain if I can."

"Isn't your mother going to go crazy when she finds out you've been stealing her magic?"

"Probably. But she'll go even crazier if she gets back and finds Jollo's dead. It'll break her heart. And what kind of son will I be if I don't try to stop my own mother's heart from being broken?"

I'll tell you. A bad one. I've disappointed her enough. This once I'm going to get it right."

"Couldn't you just wait a few more minutes?"

"Don't ask me. Ask Jollo."

Malingo glanced back at Jollo, and had his answer. If it hadn't been for the very subtle rise and fall of Jollo's chest, Malingo might easily have assumed the life had already left Jollo's body.

"I have to start," Covenantis said. "You keep looking for Mama or the Quackenbush girl."

"They'll come," Malingo said, and turning his back to Covenantis he did as the boy had requested and stared off between the trees.

As he studied the corridor of shadow before him and ever-deeper shadow ahead of him he became aware that he, the studier, was himself being studied. He let his gaze follow his instinct up into the

lower branches of a tree close by. There sat three members of the pale-feathered flock that had made such noisy passage between the trees only a couple of minutes before. They were silent now, hushed perhaps by the melancholy scene below. He watched them watching him, unnerved by their scrutiny.

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