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HERE HE IS in the furthest corner of an antique desert, just one of a string of people who move silently across the sand. The ferocious heat shimmers, although the day is on the wane and sunset isn't far. Some days this place is all Spider can remember. His skin is crusted with sweat, his tongue swollen, his feet sore, but he'll keep going, he has no choice with the sun sinking so fast.

The family are eleven in total, a raggle-taggle assortment, ranging from a child of five to a huge grey man in his sixties, and though some are able-bodied, others are less so. Spider knows that of all the family he's the strangest sight – though he stands almost two metres tall, is whip-like and healthy as a young tree, it's his clothes that set him apart: he wears desert boots, aviator goggles and a tattered woman's dress, which the slight breeze causes to flap lazily against his tanned legs. He leads the family's

single camel, laden with equipment; the camel is as downcast as the family, forlorn and battered, and she drags her feet and her humps are pitifully slumped.

Next to Spider walks Amasha: squat and round-figured, moving like a regal ocean-going ship, her veils fluttering around her face. In her expression there is no urgency, no betrayal that she feels the same fear as the rest of the family.

Spider glances over his shoulder to check the family are keeping up. The little blonde-haired girl, who has been trotting bravely next to the camel for the last two hours, is crying with fear.

‘Hey,’ he mutters, leaning his head sideways to Amasha. ‘Have you seen?’

Amasha doesn’t turn back to look – she keeps her eyes fixed on the horizon. ‘Of course. She’s scared, but we can’t stop.’

‘She’s crying.’

‘I know, I know. But for the sake of the family, we can’t stop. She has to keep up. She knows we have to get home. Don’t pay attention, she will soothe herself.’

Spider wraps the camel’s rope tighter around his fists and leans into the walk, putting everything he has into it. His eyes are itchy with tiredness, but he keeps going, placing one foot after the other, registering the places on his neck where his skin has burned in the last two days, the point in his boots where the leather is thin and rubbing his sole. He doesn’t look up at his surroundings, the long featureless tracts of sand, up to forty clicks in every direction, the distant cities and structures of iron. Vast funnel-shaped towers, some as much as a hundred metres tall and

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a hundred wide. Now that the sun is setting, the structures cast shadows immense as mountains collapsed across the sand.

The little girl cries louder now. Spider stops, and the camel stops obediently next to him. He ducks under the camel's neck and bends to take the little girl in his arms, but before he can hoist her up onto his shoulders, Noor, the tall man at the head of the train, turns.

In his late twenties, he is dressed in traditional kurta pyjamas of pale gold, his hair is straight and groomed, his nose high, shoulders square and he has the natural authority of a pope. He narrows his eyes at Spider, gives his head a faint but unequivocal shake – reminding him not to disobey Amasha.

Spider lowers his arms, crouches to the little girl, who is crying hard.

'Now listen, you've got to keep walking – it's almost night. You can rest soon, but for now you've got to keep going. You hear me?'

'I don't wanna walk, I'm scared.'

'I know that. I know you don't want to, and I know you've tried your best all day long and you're totally flaxed, tired as a frickin' dog, but you got to keep going. Think of it like a competition – you and Cairo or Mahmoud. Who's gonna be home first?'

The girl rubs her eyes, and her bottom lip sticks out as she swings her sullen gaze towards Cairo and Mahmoud, the little boys at the back of the line. 'Extra pancakes if me first?'

'That could be arranged.'

She lets out a long sigh. Kicks the sand with her open-toed sandals. 'OK. Maybe.'

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And so they walk on, Spider lowering his eyes against the late sun, dragging at the camel's halter.

It starts again when McKenzie hits junior year at high school.

She wakes one morning at three. She doesn't need to look at her clock, she can tell the time from the position of the constellations above her skylight, so she lies on her back blinking at them, trying to decide what woke her. There are goosebumps on her arms as if she's mid-nightmare.

She takes a deep breath, from the lower ribs, because Mom says that yoga breathing is the most calming thing you can do. The room is normal, nothing out of place, the posters of the desert on the wall, the roof windows wide open, although it's freezing. She squirms her hand down into her bed, searching for Cuddle Bunny.

She's had Bunny since she was a kid, maybe he's her best friend after India, the one she tells all her secrets to. She feels him warm against her belly, touches him, but there's no fuzzy velour. No floppy stitched-up ears. Instead a warm and scaly skin.

She gasps and Cuddle Bunny moves, squirming hard and muscular, something scratching her belly. She pushes herself off the bed and lands in a crouch, her heart racing – hands out in front of her. The quilt is moving, undulating. She backs away from the bed, half on her hands and knees, gets to the wall, trembling, and throws the light switch.

The coverlet moves, and a head appears from under it. A lizard of some sort, but like nothing McKenzie has ever seen in her life; buff in colour, it has a dinosaur-like ruff of horns around its neck.

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It blinks, then ducks back under the covers, fighting with them, until it reaches the end of the bed. It drops off the bed with a thud and disappears beneath it.

She throws the door open, steps through and slams it behind her. She stands for a moment, her heart pounding, then, taking the steps two at a time, canters down the staircase to the second floor.

‘Mom?’ Her throat is so tight with terror the word hardly comes out. ‘Mom?’

She gets to the next storey down, the long passage where, dotted along the wall, at foot height, are little flower-shaped night lights. Her brothers occupy the two bedrooms on the left – their doors are closed – and, at what seems an impossible distance, Mom and Dad’s bedroom door. Closed. She’s never seen Mom and Dad’s door closed at night; they always leave it open.

Very, very carefully she tiptoes into the passageway, past her brothers’ doors. The bathroom on the right, the door is open, a gaping hole – a triangle of mirror just visible, cut in half by a robe hanging on the towel rack.

She stands next to Mom and Dad’s door, her forehead almost touching it. She raises her hand to knock, it’s the polite thing to do, but changes her mind.

‘Mom?’ she whispers into the door crack. ‘Mom? Dad? Are you awake? Mommy? Please?’

She shivers. Her feet are bare, her vest and pyjamas are thin. Can she hear scratching on the stairs above?

‘Mom? Please?’

On the other side of the door she can imagine the room: large and comforting. There are family portraits on the wall, pictures of

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Mom and Dad at their wedding, one of Grandpop, who was born in Shanghai and died in LA last year – that must have been a big deal. She has been back to Shanghai and seen it all: the Chinese restaurants, the hotels for the rich and famous, the long streets. There’s a sofa in the corner where Mom often has her breakfast coffee and reads *The Washington Post*. The curtains are blue, printed with white tulips, and Dad wears pyjamas that smell like apple pie, when they come warm out of the laundry. His chin is always scratchy by the end of the day.

All so safe. She pushes the door a little wider, cringing at the squeak. The room is so familiar – blue moonlight from the squares of the windows. The gentle in-and-out sounds of Mom and Dad sleeping.

‘Dad?’

A sharp voice from the other side of the room. Dad’s voice. ‘Kenz? What’s happening?’

On the king-size bed Mom is sitting up, rubbing her eyes sleepily. ‘Kenz? Honey?’

‘Mom?’

‘What’s up, honey?’

‘I . . . I don’t know. I . . .’

‘Sweetie?’ Dad says sleepily. ‘What’s happening?’

‘Mom, Dad, there’s . . . I think there’s something in my room. You’ve got to come and see.’

Sunset. Spider hates sunset. He hates the way the day seems to sag, like rotting fruit, and the familiar smell that arises, as if the ground has opened its maw. Mostly he dislikes the fact that no

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one in the family will remark on it, as if talking about it or naming it could give it more power than it already has.

Noor waves his arm to muster the dawdling family. ‘Let’s do it,’ he shouts. ‘We’re running out of time.’

Spider leans forward, putting extra muscle into it, dragging the exhausted camel across the sand, through the cacti that surround this area, while behind him the family ramp up their efforts. The pattering and hard breathing, the subtle spatter of sand underfoot. No one wants to be out here after dark.

Half a kilometre ahead of them the family’s home tower rises up against the hazy desert floor. It is enormous; with a footprint bigger than that of the Eiffel Tower, it blocks out a huge quadrant of the darkening eastern sky. Its walls are riddled with rust – the sands and the salty desert winds have driven huge holes into it. An attempt has been made to paint it, to smarten it up in desert-bloom shades of violet and pale pink, but the air has flaked and cracked the paint, so now it hangs in strips as if scabs are dropping from it.

Spider’s skin is olive, though he can still burn in the relentless heat. His hair is corn-blond and his eyes are the blue of his father’s, and he struggles in this desert, always squinting, the sunlight seeming to find this special weakness in him and push its advantage. People tell him he has a fighter’s face, they say he always seems to be expecting a punch from nowhere.

Nobody speaks. At the tower Spider hitches Camel to a spike on the outer wall while he helps Noor unshackle the gate. The noise of rusting metal on metal booms around the tower, causing the family to glance anxiously over their shoulders at the empty expanses of sand around them.

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Spider holds the door open and waits for every member to hurry inside. Exhausted, they nod, but barely glance at him. Just as most of them are inside, the two boys at the back, Mahmoud and Cairo – always competitive, always causing trouble – dodge to the front of the line.

Tita Lily keeps her eyes on them – she half cries when she sees them moving forward. She ticks them off about their clothing and their lack of sunscreen. She worries about them not taking their hats, she worries about them showing too much skin. She is a proper worrier, Tita Lily, and cannot keep her eyes off the boys.

Cairo is trying to prove he is faster than Mahmoud – an impossibility, because the little boy, Mahmoud, is taller and stronger – but as he does so, he runs past Tita Lily. She is walking as she usually does, with her head held high, trailing her way between the cacti. She doesn't see them until it's too late. She trips over Cairo and is dragged by his momentum about a metre, against a cactus, before he stops, his hands out to her, a look of terror and guilt on his face.

'Tang ina!' she yells into the sand. 'You crazy son of bitches...'

Amasha comes back out of the tower and then, when Tita Lily doesn't jump up, the others stop and return. She is lying face down, holding down the white Grace Kelly hat over her dark hair. Her sunglasses have come off and there is a small stain of blood drifting up her white dress.

'A cactus,' Forlani says. He goes to her on his crutches, crouches as best he can, and tells her not to move. 'Did you get dragged across a cactus?'

'Yes. Get me upstairs,' she whispers.

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Elk and Hugo come back and lift Tita Lily effortlessly – she is tiny and wiry – and carry her into the tower, Forlani hobbling along next to her. There is a trail of blood, Spider sees, dark-red blood, and he doesn't want to think of the scent it might leave.

He unhooks Camel and leads her into the tower, then turns and sets about slamming down the giant bars on the back of the gate. He is one of the strongest of the family, so this task comes to him – the other family members each have an allotted chore, and now they scatter in the dimly lit tower to perform them.

The older family members check all entrances to the tower are still secure, while the little girl, Splendour, joins the two boys, both shamefaced now, and they work as a gang, checking water supplies and turning on the power supply from the solar panels. Madeira, the farmer's daughter, a cigar tucked behind her ear, goes to her crops, lifting the plastic coating to confirm the irrigation system hasn't been tampered with, and reads the little thermometers. There are the animals to check on too. She dips her fingers into the water troughs and scatters grain for the chickens, four buckets of swill for the pigs.

In the middle of the disorder stands the moth-eaten camel, patient while Spider unloads their camping equipment. He hauls the bags across the sand to the lockers that are dotted around the base of the tower and throws them inside, securing each locker with a strap. He is drenched in sweat and his mouth is sour and dry from the cured rabbit meat the family have lived on for two days.

The family's home – the 'Shuck', they call it – hangs like a vast seedpod sixty metres above them, something that seems to

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have grown naturally like a gourd, or a tumour up in the air. The access is a spindly iron ladder to its underside, where, hazy in the dwindling light, is the giant iron lock that permits entry and exit. The two carrying Tita Lily have got to the top of the ladder and are braced there, Hugo holding her and Elk unlocking the door. Forlani is a few rungs beneath them, holding his hands across her side. His face is covered in the dark blood that weeps from her.

As Spider gets the last of the equipment stowed, he sees a slash of red high on the wall. It is the low sun throwing a single blade of light into the tower – a sign that night is upon them.

‘Keep up the pace,’ he yells. His voice echoes round the tower. ‘Eight more minutes.’

The family’s sense of urgency increases, the tasks are finished hurriedly. Splendour is crying again from fear and exhaustion, but Spider can’t go to her. He lets Amasha herd her and the remaining family members towards the centre of the tower. There are thirty metres of ladder to climb, and the children are pushed to the front to get started. Spider leads Camel to her cage as, out of the corner of his eye, he sees the children make their way up, strung like vivid beads on a necklace in the late sun. Noor and Amasha bring up the rear: Noor’s long, muscular shins are revealed under the gold pyjamas, while Amasha’s jewelled hands and forehead glint. She hauls her bright-pink sari up above her thighs so that it rucks around her hips. There’s no vanity here; she has to climb. Her arm muscles bulge fat and square with the effort, and sweat stains the silk.

Camel’s cloven lip is trembling and crusted black. Smears run from her eyes. She is exhausted. Spider whips up the rope and

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tugs at her halter. ‘Come on, girl.’ He makes a soft click in his throat. ‘Come on.’

She’s a curmudgeonly character and needs to be coaxed, so he doesn’t drag at the halter but eases her along. She needs to be in the protective cage before he can trust himself to leave her. He’s made the cage with a cobbled-together arc-welder; it is thirty centimetres off the floor because somehow he thinks that will protect her. He has to ease her up the ramp.

Inside the cage he takes off her halter and rubs down her hide. Her humps are flaccid, one on either side, which should be comical if it wasn’t a sign of her exhaustion. Only two days without food or water to get this bad. Her age is showing.

‘Hey,’ he tells her, touching her top lip. ‘You’ve got a guard tonight. Look at this.’

In his few free hours he’s been working on a screen that pulls down around Camel’s sleeping cage. He will be safe in one of the Shuck pods overhead, and though the animals never suffer on the grey nights, it gnaws at him regardless that Camel has to witness what happens. He wants her protected, so he has devised a scroll-down screen. It locks first time and, when he rattles it, it stays firm.

Camel needs to drink. While she arranges herself in the cage, turning herself around to accustom herself to the new shape and dimensions, he snatches up her plastic drinking trug and makes a run for the perimeter of the tower, where the water is located. He clips open the tap and directs the head of the hose into the base of the container. It takes 180 seconds to fill, he knows this from experience, and in those moments of waiting he takes stock of his situation. Sand caked raw on his naked legs, his lips cracked

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and sore. Tita Lily upstairs injured, as if they don't have enough problems. And it's been another two days of searching without result. Things are shit, he thinks. Truly shit.

'Spider!'

He looks up. Thirty metres overhead, the lock to the Shuck is hanging open and in it, perched on the ladder, her legs bare, Amasha screams at him.

'Get up here.' She is holding onto the lock mechanism with one hand. With the other she beckons him, her saliva making a mist of pink in the last sunrays. 'Leave her. Get up here.'

'She needs water.' He wrenches off the water clip, flips the hose out and collects the trug handles.

'I'm telling you to leave her. She can go days without water.'

He could drop the trug and run for the ladder, but he's not going to leave Camel overnight without water, so he hefts the trug across the sand. The water tilts and laps and splashes.

'Spider. Last chance!'

Patiently he drags the container up the ramp into the cage. With the last of his strength he hauls it up to the hooks on the side of the cage, so Camel can reach it. She dips her head in and he takes five seconds to scratch her on the top of her head, then slams the cage and makes a run for the ladder. It creaks and groans as he scampers up it. Amasha waits, her brown arm extended out of the hole. She would rather die than leave one of the family down here at nightfall.

He makes the entrance just as the last of the sunrays leave the underside of the pod. Amasha pulls him inside, slams the lock shut while he lies on his back, breathing hard.

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‘Don’t do that to me again. I don’t ever want to know what would happen if you were left down there. I keep thinking about Nergüi.’

‘None of us wants to know what would happen,’ he assures her between deep breaths. ‘None of us.’

The room at the top of the house is as McKenzie left it – the bed-covers pulled back, the pillow on the floor.

Her mother, Selena Strathie, shivers. ‘Honey, do you ever think about closing those windows. The bills in this place are crippling.’

McKenzie doesn’t answer. The thing about the windows – the reason she has them open, no curtains or blinds – goes back to before she can even remember and is one of the things they argue about all the time.

‘Where did it go?’ Dad asks. ‘Under the bed?’

‘Uh-huh.’

Dad gets down on his hands and knees and lifts the covers, peering under the bed. ‘Nothing there now.’

‘I did see it.’

He lifts his head and gives her a strange look. ‘Didn’t say you didn’t, hon.’ He prowls the room, checking under her desk, opening her wardrobe and checking carefully in there. From his top pocket he levers out his glasses and loops the wire frames round his ears. He gets down on his knees and feels his way along the skirting boards.

‘Nothing.’

He goes into the shower room and hits the light. McKenzie and Mom come to stand together behind him and peer at the shower, the WC all gleaming in the electric light.

‘It’s big,’ she murmurs. ‘We’d see it.’

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Dad opens the vanity unit and feels around under the sink, stretching to look under there. ‘Nothing here.’

‘Any holes it could have crawled into?’

‘Nothing I can see.’ After a long time of looking, Dad sits on the bathroom floor, rubbing his eyes. ‘I don’t know, sweetie. I just don’t know. You wanna sleep with us?’

She bites her lip. ‘I guess it was a nightmare. Right?’

She must have been dreaming – it happens like this, she’s sure: your dreams bleed into your reality. No seams.

‘I’ll stay up here.’

‘You want us to stay with you, for a while?’

‘I guess. If you’re OK with that?’

‘A few minutes.’

Mom gets spare quilts and pillows out of the wardrobe and she and Dad prop themselves against the bed, wrapping the quilts around them. McKenzie lies on her side on her bed, staring into mid-air. What did she just see? A lizard?

She closes her eyes and thinks about India, her friend on the other side of the development. Neither McKenzie nor India has boyfriends; frankly, no boy has ever considered them dateable. India sometimes sleepwalks. She wakes up in sketchy places, like the car port, or once on the borders of her yard, looking down into the creek that runs way below the fall-off behind the houses. India’s mom said that was the scariest.

Is that what happened to McKenzie? Has she just sleepwalked into her parents’ room? Dreamed up a lizard?

‘Is she asleep?’ Mom murmurs to Dad, and although it’s the most natural thing to open her eyes and say, ‘*Not yet, but don’t stay*’,

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McKenzie keeps her eyes closed. She thinks her parents worry about her in a way they don't worry about her brothers, and she wishes she knew why.

There is a long silence. She can feel her parents' gaze on her face, but keeps breathing in and out, in and out.

'She's gone.' Dad yawns, gets to his feet. Mom, after a while, gets to her feet and seems to spend a bit of time pushing the quilt back into the wardrobe. She's a card-carrying neat-freak.

It's only when they get to the door that Mom speaks. 'Scott,' she murmurs, real sad and low. 'You don't think it's happening again, do you?'

2

SPIDER STILL DOESN'T have a clue what brought this family to the desert: all of them so disparate – from low-level incomes to the highest incomes, from South America to Sri Lanka and beyond. It's a test. Even worse, though, he knows he is not supposed to be here.

Spider is a killer, a cold and methodical killer, and he can't understand why no one has figured this out.

Tonight he goes into the main area of the Shuck where Amasha is wagging a finger at Cairo, scolding him again for his attempts to show off. Elk is in the kitchen, wearing an animal skin even in the heat. He is old, like a Viking, and his long grey hair is tied with a piece of kangaroo gut. He is the cook and the defender – the whole family could hide behind his vast bulk.

‘Where's Tita Lily?’

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‘With Forlani – in the pod at the back. She’s full of cactus spines. Take this.’ Elk hands Spider a glass of thin golden alcohol. ‘Make her drink it.’

Forlani, the teenager who is no larger than a child, is the medicine man in the family. Spider goes to the pod and finds Tita Lily lying on the bench with Forlani crouched over her, holding a pair of tweezers that he found in one of the cities. Her hat lies on the floor, her sunglasses are at an angle and her always-immaculate lipstick is smeared.

‘Spider, no, please don’t. You see me at my worst.’

‘You’ve never seen me at my worst?’

Tita Lily is from the Philippines, born of another gender, namely that of a male. She wears her hair styled long and has implanted, helmet-shaped breasts, which she likes because of the way they fill out a dress.

Even now she is scrabbling with Forlani, trying to keep him from lifting her dress. ‘I haven’t shaved, damn you – I haven’t shaved.’

‘I have to get these spines out. Lily, I mean it. I have to do it.’

‘OK, OK,’ she pants. ‘Just promise me. You’ll shave me later? Promise me you’ll do it.’

‘I promise.’

Spider sits next to her and holds her hand while Forlani gets himself into the most comfortable position he can and sets about removing the spines, dabbing at the wounds, applying compresses to them. Forlani’s legs were broken in five places by his uncle when he was five years old, in a mulberry orchard in Romania. He has never properly recovered, and the little girl, Splendour, sometimes looks at Spider and asks why Forlani isn’t called Spider.

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‘After all,’ she whispers quietly, ‘he’s the one what proper looks like a spider – not you.’

But Forlani has the gift of caring, the gift of knowing which herbs to use, the knack of standing in an abandoned hotel and knowing where the clinic is. After nearly six months in this desert he has collected whole truckloads of pills and phials and herbs and bandages. Caring for the family’s health is what keeps him going, and Spider thinks he cares more about Forlani than any of them. Maybe as much as he cared about Nergüi.

Now, in spite of Tita Lily’s nervy thrashing around, Forlani pushes on the places the thorns have entered, delivering five, then six cactus spines, which he places on a saucer. The last one, though, he is struggling with.

‘You OK?’

‘No,’ Tita Lily growls, flopping her head from side to side. ‘I’m not OK.’

He presses down, using the old tweezers he found. The wound bulges fat and red, but the spines don’t shoot out the way the others have. ‘They’re too deep.’

‘So what now?’

He shakes his head, stands, rubbing the back of his neck. He hates not to be able to help. ‘Your body will expel them when it’s time. It won’t be long.’

Tita Lily dabs at her eyes with a lace handkerchief that miraculously is perfectly white.

‘Hey,’ Forlani says quietly. ‘I can shave you now. OK?’

*

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Spider is tired. He eats with the others – the children take food to Tita Lily in her sleep pod, then Spider goes to his own pod. He's been awake for almost thirty-six hours, and tonight is the end of the forty-eight-hour cycle: the night they call the 'grey night', the one after the 'white night'.

He lies for a while, the door open, lulled by the family chatting among themselves where they sleep on a platform suspended above the floor. Splendour has sunburn again, she has that pale skin, and no one – not Forlani or Amasha – can convince her to look after it.

Noor spends a short while explaining about the sand, telling everyone how they have to harden their feet up or else they're always going to complain, until eventually Madeira laughs and chides him. 'Six months we've been hearing this, dude. I mean bless you, but can you change the record?'

Spider falls asleep listening to them, but a jangling anxiety wakes him in the middle of the night. He judges, from the stars outside the window, that it is two hours before dawn. It's cold and for a moment he lies in the darkness, picking through his dreams. Did he hear anything outside? He kneels and peers out of the window, an aperture glazed with pockmarked glass. There are no lights out there. Although there are – the family estimates – maybe fifty other families in the desert, most of them don't keep their towers lit.

The Pole Star is bright in the sky, but he doesn't know how to interpret its position. The one who knows how to read the heavens, the natural navigator, is missing from the family at the moment – off on a Scouting mission – and Spider has made no headway on the timepiece he's been attempting to assemble.

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His eyes travel slowly over the barren lands, hoping for a glimmer of shadow or a clue. He skips over the cities the family have explored, some with pinpricks of light, others dead and black; on he goes, past the dead Joshua-tree plains and the dunes in the south. On the western horizon is a shape that makes his pulse pick up. Quickly he finds his binoculars; they aren't perfect – he found them in Abu Dhabi under an abandoned racing car – but with a little polish and attention they serve well. With shaky fingers he focuses.

A cloud of sand on the horizon, maybe twenty clicks away.

Djinni. Or, as Amasha calls them, the *Pretas*. The hungry ghosts. Because Buddhists believe in the hungry ghosts as well.

They are swarming, but not in a direction. He's never seen that before – usually they are as swift as the wind, just a billow of sand to show where they have been, but now they seem directionless. Almost as if they are moving to and fro, considering their options, scoping the desert for a place to go.

Quickly he throws on his boots and puts his blanket over his shoulders, creeps out of his berth and down the corridor, palms on the walls as the passage gets narrower and twisty. Here, deep inside the Shuck, the family shelter seems organic; all the walls are sloping and curved, the ceilings dip and sometimes come down to within a metre or so of the floor, but there is a rigid framework beneath it, which holds them on this precarious perch tens of metres above the desert. Ridges like the segments of an orange are everywhere, and from the walls emanates a comforting smell like roasted peanut shells.

He creeps past the suspended family bed – a circular mattress where the family members who don't go to their private pods

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sleep together, curled like piglets. The sounds of them breathing and snuffling follow him as he tiptoes to the next floor of the Shuck. He reaches the common room, the place where the family gathers during the daytime, which he, Noor and Tita Lily designed and built.

It's a vast space, twenty metres by twenty, and stands taller than the surrounding tower, with enormous tables, cushions, sleeping mats. Along the eastern wall there is access to a series of small curved balconies; shuttered overnight and mounted atop the room, accessible only by a twisting ladder, is a polygonal lantern-shaped watchtower, glazed on all six sides by means of a clever polymer, which is strong yet soft – a person can lean into it and, though it will give slightly, it will hold one's weight.

Spider can just make out his own reflection in the dark windows as he makes his way up to the cupola. The Djinni are still there. Still hovering way beyond the sand dunes. Too far to hear them or guess what they are going to do. He crouches by the glazing, leaning his knees into it so that he is protruding dizzily above the drop, holds up the binoculars and adjusts them to this new angle. Before he can get the focus right, the Djinni move.

It happens so rapidly it jolts him, almost makes him lose the binoculars. The Djinni stream across the desert towards the sand dunes, moving in that familiar way, a line of sand billowing behind them, always obscuring them, so no one can see them. Heart thudding, Spider gets quickly to his feet, instinctively groping in his thigh holster for his knife.

The Djinni skirt the sand dunes and seem to be heading north towards the giant salt lake the family call the 'Virgule'. The

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Djinni can cover a kilometre in a few seconds, so Spider shuffles around the lantern, following their movement across the sand. They take the easternmost route around the Joshua-tree plains and continue north, heading directly for this tower.

There is no time – no time at all. Before he can yell for the others, the Djinni are less than a click away, powerfully churning up the sand. He gets halfway to the ladder as they veer north, galloping across the long expanse of sand that lies between this Shuck and the nearest city. Spider canters down the ladder and towards the balconies, throwing open the shutters.

The night is cool, the sky black, the air smells of the sap that rises from the rough-hewn floorboards under his bare feet. He grips the knife between his teeth and stares out at the Djinni, who are disappearing towards the Virgule.

As they hit the Virgule shores, something changes. They slow, then stop abruptly, sending a spurt of sand into the air. It's too far to tell what they look like – none of the family have seen a Djinni, and even now all he gets is a brief impression of their shape: something stick-thin and white. Much, much taller than a human being.

Instantly he recoils, jerking back inside the Shuck as quickly as he came out and hurriedly refastening the shutter. Before he can drag it closed, the sand cloud is torpedoing towards the tower, a high keening voice floating up to the balcony. Sweat breaks out on Spider's neck as he struggles, trying to fit the bar across the shutters, his hands like rubber. He gets the bar in place, slides it closed and, as he does so, a deep booming echoes through the Shuck, seems to shake the foundations, rattling the plates in the kitchen.

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Spider freezes, hands on the shutter. A Djinni has hit the outside shield. Spider breathes through the spike of adrenaline. And then another blow to the outside, another trembling of the Shuck. He clenches his teeth on the knife and grips the shutter closed. Never has a Djinni attacked the Shuck – it's the first time they've even come close. He cranes his neck and sees a Djinni reverse its trajectory and head back to the Virgule.

‘Spider?’

He glances to his right. Noor stands there, tall and bare-chested in his Turkish trousers, his brown eyes wide. Spider doesn't trust this man.

‘What the hell was that?’

Spider takes the knife out of his mouth. ‘Djinni. Threw itself at the tower.’

‘*What?* They can't climb it.’

‘No – but one threw itself. They smelled something.’

‘You were outside?’

‘For a split second. I mean, what the *fuck*, man ...? That's never happened – we've watched them before. They never smelled us before.’

‘Tita Lily's blood?’

‘There's been human blood around too – when Hugo cut himself outside the tower, and when ...’ He means to insert the word Nergüi, but he can't. ‘It's happened before.’

From the family sleeping platform Elk appears, his long grey hair hanging over his wide bare shoulders. ‘What's going on?’

Spider holds a finger up to his lip, shakes his head. ‘Are the kids awake?’ he hisses. ‘They need to go back to sleep.’

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‘Sure. Amasha’s with them. She’ll talk them back.’

Hugo, the full-faced English guy with the mop of blonde hair, appears from his sleeping pod, scratching his stomach confusedly. He has a red web of veins across his bulbous nose, and eyes like a husky’s. Then Madeira appears in white pyjamas, a cigar wedged above her ear – and eventually everyone except Forlani, Amasha and Tita Lily is in the room, whispering, shock-faced, standing at the window and trying to see what’s happening outside.

‘The whole place shook,’ Madeira whispers, standing on her tiptoes and trying to peer out. ‘Are they still there?’

It’s impossible to see what is on the desert floor close to the tower; even when Spider climbs back to the lantern room and leans his weight out, he can’t see. But there are no more noises and on the horizon – out towards the city with the skyscrapers, the one they haven’t yet explored – a cloud of sand is rising up. The sort of cloud that comes when the Djinni have made a kill. Sometimes just one person caught out on a grey night is enough to satiate them.

Noor taps on the ladder and, when Spider looks down, he calls softly up at him. ‘Let’s go to the hatch. If anything happens, we need to be ready.’

Spider comes down the ladder and creeps along the narrow passageways. The light is dim in the bay, there isn’t room for them all, so Spider stays crouched next to the giant door, the blanket over his head, his ear on the door, listening to the tower below, while the others gather on the level above him. Noor, meanwhile, disappears, reappearing a few moments later carrying a bow and a holdall, which he unzips. He doles out spears and knives to the

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family with a solemn expression. Then he comes down the few steps to Spider.

‘Anything?’

Spider shakes his head. ‘Doesn’t mean they’re not there,’ he murmurs. ‘Shall I open it?’

Noor stares at him, his fine nostrils twitching slightly. ‘No.’

Spider thinks about this. If Noor is confident the Djinni haven’t breached the tower, he shouldn’t be afraid to open it, unless he thinks there’s a Djinni crouched on the ladder on the other side of the door lock. It’s strange to Spider that everyone in the family has so much respect for Noor, as if his natural good looks somehow endow him with authority.

‘It should be safe to open it? We’ve done it before.’

‘No,’ Noor repeats. He sits cross-legged opposite Spider in the narrow margin between the metal door lock and the walls.

Spider eyes him carefully, missing Nergüi and his fighting skills.

No one likes Hugo for his privilege, his entitlement, his Britishness, his familiarity with a cricket green or an international cocktail party. It seems Hugo is unpalatable because of his grandiosity, he is always talking about high academics, whereas Noor’s background is acceptable because of his looks, his ease in his own skin. But Noor hated Nergüi, for a reason that made no sense to Spider, maybe because the guy was taller than Noor, or more muscular, or whatever ... In his heart Spider envies Noor, the golden child of advantage, the son of an ambassador from Pakistan who carries an air of confidence still, while all Spider can drag around is his own secret, heavy and stained.

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From the holdall Noor pulls out some arrows with wooden shafts and metal heads, plus two hefty Berber swords, both found in an abandoned casbah near Ouargla. He hands one to Spider, who takes it and inspects the blade. He pulls out a hair from his head, wedges the sword between his knees and spreads the hair over it. It takes pressure to snap it.

‘Blunt?’ Noor asks.

‘Blunt.’

Noor produces a whetstone from the bag. It’s a lump of rock that contains spessartine. Spider discovered it near the shores of the Virgule, spied it glittering red in the early-morning sun and recalled an adjutant in the Foreign Legion showing him some and explaining it was ‘Mandarin garnet’ and made a good blade-sharpener. Spider pocketed it and later fashioned a whetstone for Noor, who is the armoury master of the family.

Spider uses nylon twine to lash arrowheads to the shafts, while Noor begins to work the blade on the whetstone. Spider glances at him from time to time, watching his technique, until Noor looks up questioningly.

‘Make the angle bigger – you want about twenty degrees.’

‘Like this?’

‘A bit more. And as you move it, pull it from the heel to the tip.’

Noor tries but gets the action wrong.

‘Here.’ Spider puts down the arrows and takes the sword from him, moving it smoothly across the stone, drawing it down, then flipping it and doing the same on the other side. He breaks off

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from time to time to listen to the door. There is silence outside. When he has finished with the blade, he tests it with his hair again. It is as sharp as a diamond.

‘Mine too,’ Noor says, handing him the other sword. ‘Did you see them?’

Spider pauses his work, shakes his head. ‘No more than we ever have. They’re too fast.’

He takes the sword and works on it for a while, always monitoring the door. He has stopped shaking now, but every time he pictures what might be on the other side of the door he feels a line of acid shoot through his veins. Camel is down there – as far as the family know, the Djinni ignore livestock, but there are never guarantees in this place.

When he’s finished the sword he hands it back to Noor, who places it across his knees. Up the stairs the other family members have stopped talking – everyone is tired. The two men hold each other’s eyes across the gap, their ears open, ready to respond to the tiniest movement.

They sit in silence, while above them, one by one, the exhausted family fall asleep. Soon Noor becomes drowsy. His eyes droop, sitting upright in his warrior pose with his legs wide apart, hands ready on the sword.

Spider blinks. His own eyes are tired – he is equally drained from the last two days. If the Djinni are still down there and try to batter through the tower defences, they will make enough noise to rouse him, he reasons; there will be time to wake up and ready himself. Sunrise can’t be far away – it can’t be long.

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The last thing he thinks is that the family have been out on the balconies many times on a grey night and the Djinni have never smelled them. There has been blood here too.

Something has changed. But what? Before he can answer the question, he's asleep.

3

MCKENZIE'S ROOM IS the highest in the house because she can't sleep anywhere that doesn't have a view of the sky. Other rooms make her nervous, disorientated, like a rat in a science-lab maze. Opening her eyes the next morning, she stares up at the windows, watching the way the sun picks out the bottom branches of the live oaks, their leaves brown and limp. The trees are so high here that sometimes she wakes in the night, thinking she's been disturbed by the creak of a breaking trunk, that the next few heartbeats will see a tree crown crash through the ceiling. But she wouldn't give up this room for anything. She wonders if there will be rain today, or maybe snow. Usually she can tell, just by smelling the air.

Rain, she thinks, definitely rain, even though the sky is blue. And it's going to be crazy. A deluge. Bad as a monsoon. She

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sits up excited by this, sees the wardrobe door is half open and remembers last night.

The thought makes her lie back down, pulling the covers up to her neck, staring at the floor. The lizard. What *was* that in her bed? Did she really dream it? It seemed so real. And Mom, what was she talking about: *it's happening again*? Exactly *what* is happening again?

She gets out of bed and prowls around the room, checking again in all the places Dad looked. There isn't anywhere a lizard that size could hide, and nowhere it could have wriggled through. She throws back the bedcovers. Cuddle Bunny is there, lolling gawkishly, his badly stitched eyes staring at the ceiling. She picks him up, smells him. He doesn't smell of lizard – not at all – and somehow she thinks she'd know exactly how a lizard would smell. Whenever they visit the zoo she goes to the herpetarium where the reptiles are. That or the prairie dogs and the desert foxes.

Deserts are something she yearns for, places that both terrify her and excite her, all at once. She thinks about them all the time, here in tree-soaked Virginia, where the roads are wide and weary, obscured by hickory and redwood trees. She has no idea why, but her walls are decorated with posters showing desertification timelines; rainfall-per-inch graphs; and stark Ansell Adams images of the national parks. Dead Joshua trees.

The Sahara is expanding at a quarter-mile a year in every direction, and the Chinese deserts are spreading their fingers out, taking a knuckly grip on the surrounding green plains in spite of the wall of trees that the government has planted.

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Pride of place is taken by the blow-up photo of a micro-burst – a huge natural mushroom cloud – forming above Phoenix, Arizona. She’s been obsessed and half fearful of that photo since she was in second grade: it’s her phone background and she can still fall into it for minutes on end, feeling her skin crawl with excitement and foreboding.

Something about it ... Just something ...

Dad scratches his chin and rolls his eyes in dismay at the pictures: how could he have a family like this, so dotted around and disorganised?

‘*Diverse,*’ Mom always corrects. ‘*Diverse is the word you want.*’ But secretly Mom is also touchy about deserts and sand, though she’ll never say why, and although McKenzie would like to challenge her, if she had the courage, she thinks she knows what Mom would do: she’d shrug and say something light about there being nothing at all to worry about, and how McKenzie is a model student and there’s nothing can touch her, with her GPAs running as they are, and the *Proud Parent of an Honor Roll Student* bumper sticker that Mom gets to have on her car.

McKenzie showers, dresses, gets together all her coursework and her home study and goes downstairs, where the table is ready for breakfast – always like this, because Mom is so hyper-organised. Her brothers, Luke and Tatum, are sitting in silence, staring at Fox News, which is showing the President getting off Air Force One, cutting at the moment his comb-over threatens to gust skywards. On McKenzie’s plate is a single carrot.

She stops in the doorway and looks at it, breathing carefully. It’s an old joke, from her brothers. McKenzie the carrot-head.

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She doesn't look like the rest of the family: Mom, with her slim limbs and gleaming dark hair. Her brothers, the same hair so slick and neat, but with Dad's musculature – sports stars, the pair of them. Then McKenzie, slim too, but with her long sheet of hair the colour of flame.

Luke and Tatum pretend they haven't seen her, but their mouths are twitching, on the verge of hysterics. Which is lame, because they are at college now – in the media programmes at George Mason University, which they only got for their lacrosse, football playing and crew – therefore evidently not old enough to have progressed in their humour.

Without a word she picks up the carrot and throws it in the rubbish bin.

'Awwww ...' Tatum says. 'Wassa matter? Carrot – it's health-giving. Just wanting to help you with your vitamins.'

Luke chimes in, 'And Tatum never shoved it up his ass before putting it there, either. I promise.'

McKenzie sits down, shakes out some oats into her plate, pours herself a long glass of water. Something else weird about her – she won't drink coffee or sodas, she only drinks water. It mesmerises her. McKenzie has thought about it and thought about it, and she knows that she has the recessive gene from a sailor who made love with her great-great-grandmother and produced her great-grandmother in Shanghai. The photos of her great-grandmother had curiously round eyes and dark hair. And from her father's two recessive genes, which came together in a way that has produced her red hair.

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McKenzie pours soya milk on her oats, adds honey and eats. They've had this conversation before, about how she's undateable and how the redhead gene should be eradicated. The only thing about her that bears any resemblance to Mom are her slightly sticky-out eye-teeth, which the odontologist corrected two years ago, her dark-brown eyes and raised cheekbones.

Warrior-girl cheekbones, India calls them. *You should live under a hygge bobble hat, you're so hygge.*

'Because of course breeding with redheads is completely out,' Tatum says. 'It's like keeping a gene going that has no relevance.'

'And keeping the stupidity gene going,' McKenzie says, not looking at them. 'That's helpful to the human race. I'm sure I read a paper on it when I was doing your anthropology module.'

Mom comes in the door, ready for the yoga classes that she instructs, her hair in a neat ponytail, her sneakers shiny and white. Dad is behind her, business-suited, towelling his hair. He looks stressed.

'What's going on?' Mom asks, smelling the tension instantly. 'I sense an atmosphere. You know I'm not stupid.'

None of them speak. McKenzie stares at her bowl, her face growing hotter. She doesn't want a scene.

'What's happening?'

'Nothing,' Tatum says.

Mom and Dad both narrow their eyes at their children but continue getting breakfast, putting on the coffee, filling water bottles. It's only when Mom goes to put a banana skin in the rubbish that she sees what's in there.

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‘A carrot,’ she says, tilting her head at the boys. ‘I thought we agreed we’d leave this behind in fifth grade, since that’s the level of humour, or am I mistaken?’

‘Mom, please.’ Tatum gets down on his knees and pleads with her. He knows how to get round her. ‘It’s just our way of showing affection, and she *did* keep us awake all night.’

Mom cocks her head on one side. ‘Is that right? All night?’

‘She’s got the best room in the house and we can hear everything she does up there.’

‘Guys, keep it civil.’

‘And you’re going to let her go to Caltech? Out of state? While me and Luke stay in state.’

‘Tatum . . .’ Dad says suddenly. ‘I’m telling you this conversation is at an end.’

‘But it’s like how insanely much is Caltech going to set you back? Like a quarter of a million bucks? How is that fair and—’

‘No,’ McKenzie says, suddenly angry. ‘No, you’re wrong.’

‘How am I wrong?’

‘Because I’m gonna get a scholarship.’

‘Ooooohhh-woo.’ Luke is delighted with the irony. He rocks his chair from side to side. ‘A scholarship to, like, the most geeky college in the country. Yeah, right, that’s going to happen.’

McKenzie swallows hard. ‘It will happen. I’m working on it.’

‘*KIDS!*’

Everyone flinches. Dad has gone the puce colour that says he’s giving fair and appropriate warning he’s liable to explode.

He holds up a finger – his head shakes very slightly when he speaks. ‘Now I told you, and *I won’t tell you again*, this

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conversation is at an end. Eat your breakfast. I'm going to be late for work and I will personally blame you all.'

McKenzie's brothers instantly lower their heads and concentrate on eating their oatmeal. A small smile creeps over McKenzie that they've been silenced so radically. When, after a while, Tatum glances up, she mouths across the table to him, '*I won't do your coursework for you any more ...*'

Tatum shoots a glance at Dad, who is no longer paying attention, and mouths back at her with a shit-eating grin, '*Oh, you will. You will.*'

The children are the first to wake – they begin to play-fight and squeal delightedly, and before long everyone rouses and begins to mobilise. Spider wakes with a start; his mouth is dry, his body aching and cramped from the position he's slept in next to the door lock, surprised to find he's here and not in bed. Last night comes back to him and he drags himself awake, massaging his shoulders, which have seized up.

The hatch is still closed. Noor has gone, taking the bag with him, but Spider's sword is still here on the floor next to him. He clambers up the small ladder and finds a solar-powered torch that he rigged up with Hugo's help. Morning is the end of the threat from the Djinni – even so, he is tense as he unlocks the door, straining to turn the cogs.

He peers into the opening. The light is too dim to be sure everything is undisturbed, but the smell of sleeping animals comes up to him. He leans out of the lock and lowers the torch into the vast space. The faint sounds of snoring bounce off the

tower walls and he can see the animals sleeping. The tower floor is undisturbed.

He shines the beam up the side of the tower, with its steel panels bolted in place. No holes, nothing he can see to show where the creature threw itself at the tower sides.

‘Hey.’ He turns and looks up. Madeira and Hugo, alerted by the sound of the hatch opening, have appeared above him.

‘What’s happened?’ Madeira asks, her teeth clenched around a cigar. ‘Are the animals OK? My farm?’

‘It’s all good, I think.’

‘My pipes?’ the Englishman, Hugo, asks. Hugo is a man of few words – he keeps himself to himself, unless there is a point of classical education to comment on. He has carved out a role in the family as the plumber and is obsessed with the water supply, which comes to the Shuck from a reservoir deep under the sand that needs constant monitoring.

‘Everything’s the same – no break-ins. You want to see?’

Hugo climbs down, dangles out over the drop and reassures himself the tower isn’t disturbed. Then he hands back the lantern to Spider, wiping his shock of blonde hair off his face. He is always sweaty and his skin is like pink marzipan, but it’s always his arrogance that rules the day. ‘The kids don’t know a thing. We keep up the charade, OK?’

Hugo and Madeira don’t speak to each other; it’s only at times like this that they can bear to be in the same room. The family are bonded more deeply than anything they’ve known, but there are still chinks for resentment to grow: Madeira despises everything about Hugo, and in particular, his advantages. She

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grew up smuggling high-grade cocoa beans from Ghana to Côte d'Ivoire – and she often longs for the rain in Ghana; she chose the name Madeira in response to the children selecting different names. The shade and the smell of the sticky cocoa beans drying in the heat – they all miss something.

When the pair have gone, Spider slams the lock closed, then heads for the shower pods, where the walls are constructed from a smoother, walnut-like wood that has an oily, waterproof nature, with natural crevices where the family keep their rudimentary sheep's-milk soaps and shampoos. Hugo has been there already and has warmed and placed each man's daily washing ration in buckets at the entrance. They have to be very careful with water.

After the shower, Spider dresses. A tattered negligee and a leather combat jacket that bristles with tools and armoury, which he pulls on carefully, checking twice that all the fittings aren't disturbed. The family have long ceased to ask why Spider dresses like this – he manages to make the female clothes into battle gear, so they no longer question it. Truth is, the petticoat and fripperies give him a sense of freedom: his legs bare to the desert winds, always ready to fight to the skin. They also give him a place to hide extra tools, and a 'stuff-pocket', a hangover from the little-girl pickpockets in Paris, an extra hidey-hole to place his weaponry. He's a bad, wild boy, is Spider. There are knives, and worse, hidden under that petticoat.

In past months they've covered most of the desert accessible from this Shuck – there is just one pie-shaped segment left, and in that segment there are only two cities. One of them, from a distance, looks modern, with soaring skyscrapers; from what Hugo

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has told them of his travels in the Middle East in the banking industry, they think the city bears a resemblance to the Dubai skyline. The second city appears beaten and lowly, with what seems, through the telescope, to be rubbish piled in its approaches.

Spider goes up the spiral staircase, his hard desert boots clanging on the steps. He passes Madeira, who is doing pull-ups on the bottom of one of the open stairs.

‘Hey.’

‘Hey.’

She is dressed in cargo trousers and a white vest, her arms shining. About a third of her head is shaved and the other half is elaborate twists, all tied together and snaking down her back – she has her cigar behind her ear and wears gold earrings that make Spider cold, thinking about slashed ear lobes, should one of them catch on something.

The rest of the family is gathering in the common room – the windows are still mirrors in the dawn light, reflecting the tea lights and lamps and the sleepy faces of the family who are gathering together for breakfast. In the centre of the table is the ‘Regyre fruit’ – the sculpture made to represent the family’s progress in the Cirque, as Mardy calls this place, the dry desert. Next to it sits a steaming bowl of cornmeal spangled with almonds and candied pineapple, surrounded with fat pottery jugs of sheep’s milk, cruets of honey and chutney, and nearby a platter piled high with sliced kangaroo meat and dosas.

Elk is in the kitchen, his natural domain, the place where he alone holds sway – in his apron, grey hair tied back, sleeves rolled up to show his tattoos, his eyes blaze with the fire of a survivor.

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He choreographs the procedure, handing people plates to carry to the table, ordering the children around. The gas rings, powered by the dung that Hugo collects in the vast tanks to the west of the Shuck, are lit, and Elk's gourds bubble with the daily ration of water, into which he sprinkles handfuls of the yerba-maté leaves that Madeira has arranged on the long windowsill to dry out. Yerba-maté, their answer to caffeine, grows readily here and has saved the family time and again.

'Mahmoud?' Elk peers over his glasses at the tallest child. 'You forgot pepper on those eggs. And the date juice? Is it going to walk to the table on its own?'

Hugo comes out of the kitchen bearing rows of twice-baked yams on an earthenware pot the size of a truck tyre. He stops when he sees Spider. 'Have you looked yet?' He raises a questioning eyebrow.

'Not yet – and don't say anything until then? Not until they're ...' He nods meaningfully at the stairs, indicating where the children are usually taken before the moment when he climbs and scans the desert floor. 'Then we'll talk.'

Spider heads for the kitchen to be assigned a task by Elk, but before he can get there, one of the children – Splendour – throws her arms around his naked legs and looks up at him. She's well rested and is grinning at him with her wonky teeth, two in the front missing. She has mistletoe-grey eyes, like a steamed mirror.

'No noises, Spider. No scary stuff.'

'I know. It's good.'

'Splendour dreamed 'bout the Scouts, Knut and Yma.'

'Cool. I dreamed about them too.'

‘Nice dream?’

He hesitates. ‘Let’s fetch the bread.’ He ruffles her hair. ‘Look over there at Elk. He’s ready to blow a fuse. Go help him.’

Breakfast is always like this, always a chaotic event. The children are hungry and make disorderly grabs for the sweet things. Elk wants them to go slowly – to appreciate and revere the food – but his earnestness makes the other family members laugh.

‘*It’s just food,*’ they chide.

‘*It’s just air,*’ he replies.

Amasha and Forlani come in with Tita Lily. She is clothed, though her dress is bulkier than they are used to, as she must have bandages underneath – but she wears her usual red lipstick and her Audrey Hepburn hat, already tied under her chin. She smiles, and sits with discomfort at the table. Forlani and Amasha hover around her, getting things for her. They can’t afford to lose one person – even one will be a tragedy, especially after Nergüi.

Spider eats distractedly, barely tasting the food. He wants to get going. The Sarkpont is in a piscina in a corner of a rectangle, and the Sarkpont is all they think about, day and night, day and night. When another family finds it, the end of the Regyre comes and they have to close another segment of the Regyre fruit. Ten down, two to go.

As Splendour and the two boys, Cairo and Mahmoud, get food inside them, they liven up even further. Soon there is a lot of shouting and squabbling, and more than once Amasha has to chide them, remind them to keep their energy for later. ‘Do you think Tita Lily wants to hear this nonsense?’

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Today Amasha wears blue silk, emblazoned with silver edging. Her eyebrows have been outlined with white jewels.

‘Oh, if only the desert had monsoons,’ she says, smiling, her dark kohl-lined eyes gliding to the balcony. ‘Just a little rain – how we would dance! Wouldn’t we, Madeira?’

‘We would,’ answers Madeira, lighting her cigar.

Amasha smiles. She has a lot in common with Madeira. Although they were worlds apart, they grew up in similar climates, and she often sends up long soliloquies about the tea muster-sheds and the mist that would rise up over the terraces in Sri Lanka from her family farm. She was a wealthy Sri Lankan and studied overseas before she came here.

‘You need to get used to the desert,’ Noor says. Today he is beautifully turned out in silvery rose kurta. ‘Every day in the Thar Desert my family would run, and it worked: we survived.’

‘We know all about it,’ Spider says. ‘You remind us all the time.’

Amasha and Elk are the ‘Futatsu’, which, translated from Japanese, means ‘two people’ – the two people counted out for restaurants and funfairs – but in this case means *The Two People*. Anywhere else they’d be called chieftains or elders, but here, in the Cirque, they are the Futatsu, and although Amasha is only in her early forties, Elk in his sixties, their decision is final. They also bear the burden of having to contact the Scouts and exchange information.

Sunrise filters milkily through the upper storeys of the Shuck, and when breakfast is finished Amasha holds out her hands in elegant arcs, linking them to her neighbours’. They settle in their seats, heads down, hands linked, except for Elk, who has come

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from the kitchen still in his apron. He stands behind the nearest family member – Spider in this case – places his hands on his shoulders and lowers his head to join the prayer as Amasha speaks.

‘Ha’shem,’ she murmurs. ‘Please hear us, please today protect us all.’ The morning prayers are always quick and to the point. ‘Bless our Scouts in their quest, help them to listen and help us find the Sarkpont. Pray for Nergüi, pray he is safe.’

‘Pray for Nergüi,’ Elk echoes. ‘Pray we can find the Sarkpont today. And amen.’

‘Amen,’ murmur the family.

Madeira and Elk clear up breakfast and a line forms in front of Tita Lily. It is her daily chore to check everyone’s outfit for suitability: Tita Lily loves fabric, she hoards the sequins that Amasha loves, can summon a skirt or a shirt from the air, and nightly shaves and brushes her teeth with salt and lemons.

‘Splendour, you suffered yesterday,’ says Tita Lily. ‘Have you got suntan lotion on?’

‘Yeah,’ says Splendour.

‘Promise? It’s your face that will burn. You understand?’ Tita Lily winces. She has leaned forward too far and has to put a hand on her side. Forlani hovers near her, ready to help, but she waves him away. ‘Madeira, are you really going to wear those earrings again?’

‘Have I ever not worn them?’

‘Those ears of yours are going to rip.’

‘Then I’ll make it look fierce – I can wear a little scar, don’t you think?’

Tita Lily sighs. She doesn’t even look at Spider, whom she has got tired of chastising. If he wants to wear a dress that will leave his

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legs bare to all that the desert can throw at him, if he wants blisters and bites and sand getting into places it shouldn't, that's his business.

'Don't come running to me when you've injured yourself,' she murmurs, showing the front of her buck teeth.

Now she gets to her feet with some pain and hobbles out of the room. The children follow and the moment they've gone, everyone springs into action. Spider scrambles up the ladder into the lantern. Out of the window, the stars that hung over the distant desert mounds have paled and given way to the morning's first pink hues. He's seen more than 150 sunrises here in the Cirque, and he knows the colours the sky shifts through, starting with the grey-pink of a dead rose petal, moving through orange, yellow and white to end in the clear blue of another day.

He wedges himself into the space, straddling the crossbeams so that he can rotate to every angle. He won't be able to see the area directly around the tower, as the huge walls block his view, but he can see the desert floor from about ten metres outside, and he will see where the Djinni have moved and killed.

Hugo helps him, handing Spider the telescope, which he unfurls and swivels, checking everything. The sun starts slowly – almost teasingly revealing itself, spread across the horizon. Then the beginnings of the harlequining, which is the signature of the eastern sky at sunrise. It's the most breathtaking moment – no inhabitant of the Cirque gets tired of the view – a fan-shaped luminescence like a peacock's tail, the crystals in the sky like the scales on a fish, only larger and more iridescent.

And in this brief quality of light, for approximately a minute, any object on the desert floor gets a shadow ten times its size.

Spider studies the ground in thirty-degree segments, shuffling himself round to move through the angles. He sees the distant city beyond the Virgule – the city they haven't visited because the Virgule is too dangerous – and the city they think is Dubai, and the broken-down city to the south.

‘Anything?’

From the room below, Spider can feel five pairs of eyes staring up at him. He swivels again and checks once more, just to be sure. He collapses the telescope and clammers back down the ladder.

‘The Djinni came from the south, skirted the Joshua-tree plains and headed towards the Virgule.’ He indicates the vast, unnavigable salt lake that lies between the Shuck and the northern borders of the Cirque. ‘One of them changed direction and came back here.’

‘Because you tempted them,’ Madeira says sullenly.

‘I stood on the balcony for less than five seconds. We’ve all done it on a grey night – it’s never had that effect before.’

‘They smelled you. You’ve put us on their map.’

‘You think we’re not already on their map?’

‘Hey, hey . . .’ Amasha holds her hands up, moving the two of them apart. ‘It’s not for us to be arguing. Now, Spider – the desert floor? Which way can we go?’

‘The kill is out towards the place you think is Dubai. But there are tracks everywhere.’

There is silence at this. Every morning after a grey night the family try to set out in a direction that will conceal the truth from the children.

Elk rests his huge hands on the table. ‘Then we go south.’

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‘There’s only one place we haven’t explored south,’ Noor says. ‘The beat-up city. With the rubbish all piled up outside it.’

‘Appearances can be deceptive, Noor,’ says Spider. ‘And everything is changing for us – what happened last night is a sign.’

‘A sign of what?’ Madeira asks through a cloud of cigar smoke.

‘The Djinni have never behaved like that before. That’s more aggression, more responsiveness than we’ve ever seen. Maybe it’s a clue we need to leave this Shuck, find somewhere else to base ourselves.’

Everyone rounds to look at him accusingly. Spider opens his hands, tries to sound reasonable.

‘Don’t look at me like that. I know we’ve put a lot into this place, but most of it is transportable. Look out of the window – apart from Dubai, if it *is* Dubai, we’ve explored everything we can reach in twenty-four hours and we’re running out of options. We move to a new shelter, put two days into the move and we’ll have a completely different scope to explore. Maybe to the east.’

‘No,’ Madeira says. ‘I can’t move everything. It’s been too much.’

‘We could – we can take livestock, take soil, take Hugo’s pipes, take some of the steel. If we find the right place we can relocate.’

Madeira stares at him across the table, her nostrils flaring. Then she shakes her head, goes to the balcony and picks up the length of pole that Spider fashioned into a javelin for her. Breathing in and out hard, she leans back and hurls the javelin as far as she can into the twinkling morning. She hurls this javelin every single day they are here. More than once, if she’s angry.

THEO CLARE

The Regyre fruit is in the centre of the table – a familiar enough sight, it's been there almost since they arrived in the Shuck. Constructed by Spider and Knut from sandalwood scraps they discovered on the floor of a mosque in Abu Dhabi, it resembles a peeled orange, each of its twelve segments hinged so that it can be open or closed. At first the family thought they'd only see five, or at most six, of the segments closed before they found the Sarkpont. Now ten are closed and there are only two segments remaining.

Hugo coughs. He goes to the balcony without a word. No one looks at him. They know he is going to throw his javelin, because this is the daily routine. The challenge from Madeira is more than he can resist.

He throws. He is stronger than he looks. Afternoons spent bowling on a village green with the church bells chiming – cucumber sandwiches and Pimm's with strawberries for tea – have made his right arm strong. The javelin soars away into the air. He always throws further than Madeira, in spite of her daily workouts. That he won't cede to her, even for a moment, is another reason no one likes him.

4

DAD DRIVES THE boys to school, Mom heads to her car, a bright-orange yoga mat strapped to her back like a snail, and McKenzie gets out her rain gear, though the sun is shining. She is always riveted by the weather, by the way the clouds move, the way the sun changes places each day, albeit an infinitesimal amount. She can tell the date to within two days at sunset and sunrise, and a road crash could happen in front of her and she'd look straight past it and say, 'See those clouds? That means the front is clearing. It'll be hot tomorrow, real hot. You can take the cover off the pool.'

This morning she keeps her eyes on the sky as she hurries to the bus stop, her backpack heavy with books and notes. She trips over her long orange scarf, recovers, makes a half-hearted effort to throw it back over her shoulder, but it comes loose in her haste and she trips again.

THEO CLARE

India is standing in the cold, gloves on, watching McKenzie and laughing. ‘Come here,’ she tells her. ‘Come right here and let me mommy you.’

India spends a little time rebuttoning McKenzie’s coat and wrapping the scarf the right way, straightens her hair and wipes toothpaste off her blouse.

‘How come the raincoat?’

McKenzie hasn’t taken her eyes off the sky during all this. ‘Rain’s coming. I can smell it.’

‘Well, shit, thanks for warning me. My feed says later this afternoon.’

‘Maybe, but I think sooner. And it’s going to be a crazy one. Don’t worry, I’ve got another raincoat for you.’

‘And anything else wrong?’

McKenzie lowers her eyes to India. ‘What?’

‘Something else is wrong.’

‘Yeah. Yeah. It is.’

India is a great keeper of secrets, but she’s a rationalist. She has a picture of Emma González on her phone and subscribes to Amnesty International. She’s switched on politically, but doesn’t have much time for anything that doesn’t make sense. And what happened last night definitely falls into the category of not making sense.

‘I’ll tell you later. When we’ve got some time.’

The bus arrives, the panes steamed with all the kids’ breath. With the exception of some of the sophomores at the back, who probably ride the bus just for the social time, India and McKenzie are the eldest on the vehicle. They both drive, but India has to pay

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for her own petrol, and the Strathies still haven't bought McKenzie a car because they're afraid she'll forget to watch the road and be staring so hard at a cloud formation that she'll drive into a lorry.

The door hisses as it opens. Mrs Spiliotopolous, the driver, grins at the girls as they get on the bus. She lives on the other side of Clifton – her road is known for flooding, cutting off her house. Once she nearly lost her job for leaving the kids stranded at bus stops while she struggled to make it into school.

'There's a big storm coming.' McKenzie lowers her head and whispers, so the other kids can't hear. 'It's going to be serious.'

'There's a weather warning, but it ain't till this afternoon.'

'I know, but it's going to come earlier. That gully at the end of your drive is going to flood before the afternoon.'

'You sure?'

'You know that heavy feeling in the air? It's going to be earlier. Maybe lunchtime.'

Mrs Spiliotopolous shrugs and pushes the door lever forward. 'I'll think about it.'

McKenzie and India make their way to their places in the middle of the bus. No one looks at them; the other kids simply stare in bored silence out of the windows. Outside, everything is cloaked in trees, and McKenzie has to fight the suffocating feeling they give her. She wants to be able to see for miles. It's only when they turn at the top of the dual carriageway near Manassas, and she gets a clear view of the Appalachians in the far distance, that she feels a little calmer.

India gets out her phone and fiddles with it, checking Instagram. She has 800 followers, McKenzie has 180, and she accepts

THEO CLARE

follows from just about everyone. She's found that every time she posts something cool, her followers drop off by about two or three. Soon she'll be down to nothing, which will make her brothers – with their gazillion followers – howl with delight. Eventually, when she sees that India is lost in reading the comments on her latest post, McKenzie checks her page and there's a message.

She frowns. The user is 'TextbookJoe' and the photo is of Joe Marino, the guy in the college lacrosse squad whom all the girls have a crush on. He sits at the back of the bus with all the giggling sophomore girls who have manicures, wear animal-print leggings and are in drama club.

The message reads – *Hey, you've got a lovely smile. Just thought you should know that.*

She stares at the message.

Hey, you've got a lovely smile.

She doesn't dare glance over her shoulder. Instead, trembling, she nudges India, murmurs, 'Don't look round' and pushes the phone under her nose.

India reads the messages, pushes it away and sits bolt upright, her face flushing like crazy. She texts out a response.

– *Whoa? Wha? That's insane.*

– *What am I sposed to do?*

– *Lemme think, lemme think ...*

– *Well?*

– *Do nothing for now. Just do nothing.*

A long pause, Then McKenzie types – *ok.*

*