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ERIN MORGENSTERN



THE MAGICIAN KING



LEV GROSSMAN

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We shall now seek that which we shall not find.

—Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*

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BOOK I

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CHAPTER 1

Quentin rode a gray horse with white socks named Dauntless. He wore black leather boots up to his knees, different-colored stockings, and a long navy-blue top-coat that was richly embroidered with seed pearls and silver thread. On his head was a platinum coronet. A glittering side-sword bumped against his leg—not the ceremonial kind, the real kind, the kind that would actually be useful in a fight. It was ten o'clock in the morning on a warm, overcast day in late August. He was everything a king of Fillory should be. He was hunting a magic rabbit.

By King Quentin's side rode a queen: Queen Julia. Up ahead were another queen and another king, Janet and Eliot—the land of Fillory had four rulers in all. They rode along a high-arched forest path littered with yellow leaves, perfect little sprays of them that looked like they could have been cut and placed by a florist. They moved in silence, slowly, together but lost in their separate thoughts,

gazing out into the green depths of the late summer woods.

It was an easy silence. Everything was easy. Nothing was hard. The dream had become real.

“Stop!” Eliot said, at the front.

They stopped. Quentin’s horse didn’t halt when the others’ did—Dauntless wandered a little out of line and halfway off the trail before he persuaded her for good and all to quit walking for a damn minute. Two years as a king of Fillory and he was still shit at horseback riding.

“What is it?” he called.

They all sat for another minute. There was no hurry. Dauntless snorted once in the silence: lofty horsey contempt for whatever human enterprise they thought they were pursuing.

“Thought I saw something.”

“I’m starting to wonder,” Quentin said, “if it’s even possible to track a rabbit.”

“It’s a hare,” Eliot said.

“Same difference.”

“It isn’t, actually. Hares are bigger. And they don’t live in burrows, they make nests in open ground.”

“Don’t start,” both Julia and Janet said, in unison.

“Here’s my real question,” Quentin said. “If this rabbit thing really can see the future won’t it know we’re trying to catch it?”

“It can see the future,” Julia said softly, beside him. “It cannot change it. Did you three argue this much when you were at Brakebills?”

She wore a sepulchral black riding dress and an actual

riding hood, also black. She always wore black, like she was in mourning, even though Quentin couldn't think of anyone she should have been in mourning for. Casually, like she was calling over a waiter, Julia summoned a tiny songbird to her wrist and raised it up to her ear. It chipped, chirruped something, and she nodded back and it flew away again.

Nobody noticed, except for Quentin. She was always giving and getting little secret messages from the talking animals. It was like she was on a different wireless network from the rest of them.

"You should have let us bring Jollyby," Janet said. She yawned, holding the back of her hand against her mouth. Jollyby was Master of the Hunt at Castle Whitespire, where they all lived. He usually supervised this kind of excursion.

"Jollyby's great," Quentin said, "but even he couldn't track a hare in the woods. Without dogs. When there's no snow."

"Yes, but Jollyby has very well-developed calf muscles. I like looking at them. He wears those man-tights."

"I wear man-tights," Quentin said, pretending to be affronted. Eliot snorted.

"I imagine he's around here somewhere." Eliot was still scanning the trees. "Discreet distance and all that. Can't keep that man away from a royal hunt."

"Careful what you hunt," Julia said, "lest you catch it."

Janet and Eliot looked at each other: more inscrutable wisdom from Julia. But Quentin frowned. Julia made her own kind of sense.

Quentin hadn't always been a king of Fillory or

anywhere else. None of them had. Quentin had grown up a regular non-magical, non-royal person in Brooklyn, in what he still in spite of everything thought of as the real world. He'd thought Fillory was a fiction, an enchanted land that existed only as the setting of a series of fantasy novels for children. But then he'd learned to do magic, at a secret college called Brakebills, and he and his friends had found out that Fillory was real.

It wasn't what they expected. Fillory was a darker and more dangerous place in real life than it was in the books. Bad things happened there, terrible things. People got hurt and killed and worse. Quentin went back to Earth in disgrace and despair. His hair turned white.

But then he and the others had pulled themselves together again and gone back to Fillory. They faced their fears and their losses and took their places on the four thrones of Castle Whitespire and were made kings and queens. And it was wonderful. Sometimes Quentin couldn't believe that he'd lived through it all when Alice, the girl he loved, had died. It was hard to accept all the good things he had now, when Alice hadn't lived to see them.

But he had to. Otherwise what had she died for? He unslung his bow and stood up in the stirrups and looked around. Bubbles of stiffness popped satisfyingly in his knees. There was no sound except for the hush of falling leaves slipping through other leaves.

A gray-brown bullet flickered across the path a hundred feet in front of them and vanished into the underbrush at full tilt. With a quick fluid motion that had cost him a lot of practice Quentin nocked an arrow and drew. He could

have used a magic arrow, but it didn't seem sporting. He aimed for a long moment, straining against the strength of the bow, and released.

The arrow burrowed into the loamy soil up to the feathers, right where the hare's flashing paws had been about five seconds ago.

"Almost," Janet said, deadpan.

There was no way in hell they were going to catch this thing.

"Toy with me, would you?" Eliot shouted. "Yah!"

He put the spurs to his black charger, which whinnied and reared obligingly and hoofed the empty air before lunging off the path into the woods after the hare. The crashing sound of his progress through the trees faded almost immediately. The branches sprang back into place behind him and were still again. Eliot was not shit at horseback riding.

Janet watched him go.

"Hi ho, Silver," she said. "What are we even doing out here?"

It was a fair question. The point wasn't really to catch the hare. The point was—what was the point? What were they looking for? Back at the castle their lives were overflowing with pleasure. There was a whole staff there whose job it was to make sure that every day of their lives was absolutely perfect. It was like being the only guests at a twenty-star hotel that you never had to leave. Eliot was in heaven. It was everything he'd always loved about Brakebills—the wine, the food, the ceremony—with none of the work. Eliot loved being a king.

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Quentin loved it too, but he was restless. He was looking for something else. He didn't know what it was. But when the Seeing Hare was spotted in the greater Whitespire metropolitan area, he knew he wanted a day off from doing nothing all day. He wanted to try to catch it.

The Seeing Hare was one of the Unique Beasts of Fillory. There were a dozen of them—the Questing Beast, who had once granted Quentin three wishes, was one of them, as was the Great Bird of Peace, an ungainly flightless bird like a cassowary that could stop a battle by appearing between the two opposing armies. There was only one of each of them, hence the name, and each one had a special gift. The Unseen Monitor was a large lizard who could turn you invisible for a year, if that's what you wanted.

People hardly ever saw them, let alone caught them, so a lot of guff got talked about them. No one knew where they came from, or what the point of them was, if any. They'd always been there, permanent features of Fillory's enchanted landscape. They were apparently immortal. The Seeing Hare's gift was to predict the future of any person who caught it, or so the legend went. It hadn't been caught for centuries.

Not that the future was a question of towering urgency right now. Quentin figured he had a pretty fair idea of what his future was like, and it wasn't much different from his present. Life was good.

They'd picked up the hare's trail early, when the morning was still bright and dewy, and they rode out singing choruses of "Kill the Wabbit" to the tune of "Ride of the Valkyries" in their best Elmer Fudd voices. Since then it had zigzagged

them through the forest for miles, stopping and starting, looping and doubling back, hiding in the bushes and then suddenly zipping across their paths, again and again.

“I do not think he is coming back,” Julia said.

She didn’t speak much these days. And for some reason she’d mostly given up using contractions.

“Well, if we can’t track the hare we can track Eliot anyway.” Janet gently urged her mount off the track and into the trees. She wore a low-cut forest-green blouse and men’s chaps. Her penchant for mild cross-dressing had been the scandal of the season at court this year.

Julia didn’t ride a horse at all but an enormous furry quadruped that she called a civet, which looked like an ordinary civet, long and brown and vaguely feline, with a fluidly curving back, except that it was the size of a horse. Quentin suspected it could talk—its eyes gleamed with a bit more sentience than they should have, and it always seemed to follow their conversations with too much interest.

Dauntless didn’t want to follow the civet, which exuded a musky, un-equine odor, but she did as she was told, albeit at a spiteful, stiff-legged walk.

“I haven’t seen any dryads,” Janet said. “I thought there’d be dryads.”

“Me neither,” Quentin said. “You never see them in the Queenswood anymore.”

It was a shame. He liked the dryads, the mysterious nymphs who watched over oak trees. You really knew you were in a magical fantasy otherworld when a beautiful woman wearing a skimpy dress made of leaves suddenly jumped out of a tree.

“I thought maybe they could help us catch it. Can’t you call one or summon one or something, Julia?”

“You can call them all you want. They will not come.”

“I spend enough time listening to them bitch about land allocation,” Janet said. “And where are they all if they’re not here? Is there some cooler, magical-er forest somewhere that they’re all off haunting?”

“They are not ghosts,” Julia said. “They are spirits.”

The horses picked their way carefully over a berm that was too straight to be natural. An old earthwork from an ancient, unrecoverable age.

“Maybe we could make them stay,” Janet said. “Legislate some incentives. Or just detain them at the border. It’s bullshit that there’s not more dryads in the Queenswood.”

“Good luck,” Julia said. “Dryads fight. Their skin is like wood. And they have staves.”

“I’ve never seen a dryad fight,” Quentin said.

“That is because nobody is stupid enough to fight one.”

Recognizing a good exit line when it heard one, the civet chose that moment to scurry on ahead. Two sturdy oak trees actually leaned aside to let Julia pass between them. Then they leaned back together again, leaving Janet and Quentin to go the long way around.

“Listen to her,” Janet said. “She has so totally gone native! I’m tired of her more-Fillorian-than-thou bullshit. Did you see her talking to that fucking bird?”

“Oh, leave her alone,” Quentin said. “She’s all right.”

But if he was being honest, Quentin was fairly sure that Queen Julia wasn’t all right.

Julia hadn’t learned her magic the way they had, coming

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up through the safe, orderly system of Brakebills. She and Quentin had gone to high school together, but she hadn't gotten into Brakebills, so she'd become a hedge witch instead: she'd learned it on her own, on the outside. It wasn't official magic, institutional magic. She was missing huge chapters of lore, and her technique was so sloppy and loopy that sometimes he couldn't believe it even worked at all.

But she also knew things Quentin and the others didn't. She hadn't had the Brakebills faculty standing over her for four years making sure she colored inside the lines. She'd talked to people Quentin never would have talked to, picked up things his professors would never have let him touch. Her magic had sharp, jagged edges on it that had never been filed down.

It was a different kind of education, and it made her different. She talked differently. Brakebills had taught them to be arch and ironic about magic, but Julia took it seriously. She played it fully goth, in a black wedding dress and black eyeliner. Janet and Eliot thought it was funny, but Quentin liked it. He felt drawn to her. She was weird and dark, and Fillory had made the rest of them so damn light, Quentin included. He liked it that she wasn't quite all right and she didn't care who knew it.

The Fillorians liked it too. Julia had a special rapport with them, especially with the more exotic ones, the spirits and elementals and jinnis and even more strange and extreme beings—the fringe element, in the hazy zone between the biological and the entirely magical. She was their witch-queen, and they adored her.

But Julia's education had cost her something, it was hard

to put your finger on what, but whatever it was had left its mark on her. She didn't seem to want or need human company anymore. In the middle of a state dinner or a royal ball or even a conversation she would lose interest and wander away. It happened more and more. Sometimes Quentin wondered exactly how expensive her education had been, and how she'd paid for it, but whenever he asked her, she avoided the question. Sometimes he wondered if he was falling in love with her. Again.

A distant bugle sounded—three polished sterling silver notes, muffled by the heavy silence of the woods. Eliot was sounding a reheat, a hunting call.

He was no Jollyby, but it was a perfectly credible reheat. He wasn't much for drafting legislation, but Eliot was meticulous about royal etiquette, which included getting all the Fillorian hunting protocol exactly right. (Though he found any actual killing distasteful, and usually managed to avoid it.) His bugling was good enough for Dauntless. She trembled, electrified, waiting for permission to bolt. Quentin grinned at Janet, and she grinned back at him. He yelled like a cowboy and kicked and they were off.

It was insanely dangerous, like a full-on land-speeder chase, with ditches opening up in front of you with no warning, and low branches reaching down out of nowhere to try to clobber your head off (not literally of course, though you could never tell for sure with some of these older, more twisted trees). But fuck it, that's what healing magic is for. Dauntless was a thoroughbred. They'd been starting and stopping and dicking around all morning, and she was dying to cut loose.

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And how often did he get a chance to put his royal person at risk? When was the last time he even cast a spell? His life wasn't exactly fraught with peril. They lay around on cushions all day and ate and drank their heads off all night. Lately whenever he sat down some unfamiliar interaction had been happening between his abdomen and his belt buckle. He must have gained fifteen pounds since he took the throne. No wonder kings looked so fat in pictures. One minute you're Prince Valiant, the next you're Henry VIII.

Janet broke trail, guided by more muffled bugle notes. The horses' hooves made satisfyingly solid beats on the packed loam of the forest floor. Everything that was cloying about court life, all the safety and the relentless comfort, went away for a moment. Trunks and spinneys and ditches and old stone walls whipped and blurred past. They dodged in and out of hot sun and cool shade. Their speed froze the falling sprays of yellow leaves in midair. Quentin picked his moment, and when they hit open meadow he swung out wide to the right, and for a long minute they were side by side, coursing wildly along in parallel.

Then all at once Janet pulled up. Quickly as he could Quentin slowed Dauntless to a walk and brought her around, breathing hard. He hoped her horse hadn't pulled up lame. It took him another minute to find his way back to her.

She was sitting still and straight in the saddle, squinting off into the midday gloom of the forest. No more bugle calls.

"What is it?"

"Thought I saw something," she said.

Quentin squinted too. There was something. Shapes.

“Is that Eliot?”

“The hell are they doing?” Janet said.

Quentin dropped down out of the saddle, unslung his bow again and nocked another arrow. Janet led the horses while he walked in front. He could hear her charging up some minor defensive magic, a light ward-and-shield, just in case. He could feel the familiar staticky buzz of it.

“Shit,” he said under his breath.

He dropped the bow and ran toward them. Julia was down on one knee, her hand pressed against her chest, either gasping or sobbing, he couldn’t tell which. Eliot was bent over talking to her quietly. His cloth-of-gold jacket had been yanked half off his shoulder.

“It’s okay,” he said, seeing Quentin’s white face. “That fucking civet threw her and bolted. I tried to hold it but I couldn’t. She’s okay, she just got the wind knocked out of her.”

“You’re all right.” That phrase again. Quentin rubbed Julia’s back while she took croaking breaths. “You’re okay. I always said you should get a regular horse. I never liked that thing.”

“Never liked you, either,” she managed.

“Look.” Eliot pointed off into the twilight. “That’s what made it bolt. The hare went in there.”

A few yards away a round clearing began, a still pool of grass hidden in the heart of the forest. The trees grew right up to its edge and then stopped, like somebody had cleared it on purpose, nipping out the border precisely. It could have been ruled with a compass. Quentin picked his way toward it. Lush, intensely emerald-green grass grew over

lumpy black soil. In the center of the clearing stood a single enormous oak tree with a large round clock set in its trunk.

The clock-trees were the legacy of the Watcherwoman, the legendary—but quite real—time-traveling witch of Fillory. They were a magical folly, benign as far as anyone could tell, and picturesque in a surreal way. There was no reason to get rid of them, assuming you even could. If nothing else they kept perfect time.

But Quentin had never seen one like this. He had to lean back to see its crown. It must have been a hundred feet tall, and it was massively thick, at least fifteen yards around at its base. Its clock was stupendous. The face was taller than Quentin was. The trunk erupted out of the green grass and burst into a mass of wiggly branches, like a kraken sculpted in wood.

And it was moving. Its black, nearly leafless limbs writhed and thrashed against the gray sky. The tree seemed to be caught in the grip of a storm, but Quentin couldn't feel or hear any wind. The day, the day he could perceive with his five senses, was calm. It was an invisible, intangible storm, a secret storm. In its agony the clock-tree had strangled its clock—the wood had clenched it so tightly that the bezel had finally bent, and the crystal had shattered. Brass clock-work spilled out through the clock's busted face and down onto the grass.

"Jesus Christ," Quentin said. "What a monster."

"It's the Big Ben of clock-trees," Janet said behind him.

"I've never seen one like that," Eliot said. "Do you think it was the first one she made?"

Whatever it was, it was a Fillorian wonder, a real one, wild and grand and strange. It was a long time since he'd seen one, or maybe it was just a long time since he'd noticed. He felt a twinge of something he hadn't felt since Ember's Tomb: fear, and something more. Awe. They were looking the mystery in the face. This was the raw stuff, the main line, the old, old magic.

They stood together, strung out along the edge of the meadow. The clock's minute hand poked out at a right angle from the trunk like a broken finger. A yard from its base a little sapling sprouted where the gears had fallen, as if from an acorn, swaying back and forth in the silent gale. A silver pocket watch ticked away in a knot in its slender trunk. A typically cute Fillorian touch.

This was going to be good.

"I'll go first."

Quentin started forward, but Eliot put a hand on his arm.

"I wouldn't."

"I would. Why not?"

"Because clock-trees don't just move like that. And I've never seen a broken one before. I didn't think they *could* break. This isn't a natural place. The hare must have led us here."

"I know, right? It's classic!"

Julia shook her head. She looked pale, and there was a dead leaf in her hair, but she was back on her feet.

"See how regular the clearing is," she said. "It is a perfect circle. Or at least an ellipse. There is a powerful area-effect spell radiating out from the center. Or from the foci," she added quietly, "in the case of an ellipse."

“You go in there, there’s no telling where you’ll end up,” Eliot said.

“Of course there isn’t. That’s why I’m going.”

This, this was what he needed. This was the point—he’d been waiting for it without even knowing it. God, it had been so long. This was an adventure. He couldn’t believe the others would even hesitate. Behind him Dauntless whickered in the stillness.

It wasn’t a question of courage. It was like they’d forgotten who they were, and where they were, and why. Quentin retrieved his bow and took another arrow from his quiver. As an experiment, he set his stance, drew, and shot at the tree trunk. Before it reached its target the arrow slowed, like it was moving through water instead of air. They watched it float, tumbling a little end over end, backward, in slow motion. Finally it gave up the last of its momentum and just stopped, five feet off the ground.

Then it burst, soundlessly, into white sparks.

“Wow.” Quentin laughed. He couldn’t help it. “This place is enchanted as *balls!*”

He turned to the others.

“What do you think? This looks like an adventure to me. Remember adventures? Like in the books?”

“Yeah, remember them?” Janet said. She actually looked angry. “Remember Penny? We haven’t seen him around lately, have we? I don’t want to spend the rest of my queenhood cutting up your food for you.”

Remember Alice, she could just as well have said. He remembered Alice. She had died, but they’d lived, and wasn’t this what living was about? He bounced on his toes.

They tingled and sweated in his boots, six inches from the sharp edge of the enchanted meadow.

He knew the others were right, this place practically reeked of weird magic. It was a trap, a coiled spring that was aching to spring shut on him and snap him up. And he wanted it to. He wanted to stick his finger in it and see what happened. Some story, some quest, started here, and he wanted to go on it. It felt fresh and clean and unsafe, nothing like the heavy warm lard of palace life. The protective plastic wrap had been peeled off.

“You’re really not coming?” he said.

Julia just watched him. Eliot shook his head.

“I’m going to play it safe. But I can try to cover you from here.”

He began industriously casting a minor reveal designed to suss out any obvious magical threats. Magic crackled and spat around his hands as he worked. Quentin drew his sword. The others made fun of him for carrying it, but he liked the way it felt in his hand. It made him feel like a hero. Or at least it made him look like a hero.

Julia didn’t think it was funny. Though she didn’t laugh at much of anything anymore. Anyway, he’d just drop it if magic was called for.

“What are you going to do?” Janet said, hands on her hips. “Seriously, what? Climb it?”

“When it’s time I’ll know what to do.” He rolled his shoulders.

“I do not like this, Quentin,” Julia said. “This place. This tree. If we attempt this adventure it will mean some great change of our fortunes.”

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“Maybe a change would do us good.”

“Speak for yourself,” Janet said.

Eliot finished his spell and made a square out of his thumbs and forefingers. He closed one eye and squinted through it, panning around the clearing.

“I don’t *see* anything . . .”

A mournful bonging came from up in the branches. Near its crown the tree had sprouted a pair of enormous swaying bronze church bells. Why not? Eleven strokes: it still kept time, apparently, even though the works were broken. Then the silence filled back in, like water that had been momentarily displaced.

Everybody watched him. The clock-tree’s branches creaked in the soundless wind. He didn’t move. He thought about Julia’s warning: some great change of our fortunes. His fortunes were riding high right now, he had to admit. He had a goddamned castle, full of quiet courtyards and airy towers and golden Fillorian sunlight that poured like hot honey. Suddenly he wasn’t sure what he was wagering that against. He could die in there. Alice had died.

And he was a king now. Did he even have the right to go galloping off after every magic bunny that wagged its cottontail at him? That wasn’t his job anymore. All at once he felt selfish. The clock-tree was right there in front of him, heaving and thrashing with power and the promise of adventure. But his excitement was slipping away. It was becoming contaminated with doubt. Maybe they were right, his place was here. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.

The urge to go into the meadow began to wear off, like a drug, leaving him abruptly sober. Who was he kidding?

Being king wasn't the beginning of a story, it was the end. He didn't need a magic rabbit to tell him his future, he knew his future because it was already here. This was the happily ever after part. Close the book, put it down, walk away.

Quentin stepped back a pace and replaced his sword in its sheath in one smooth gesture. It was the first thing his fencing master had taught him: two weeks of sheathing and unsheathing before he'd even been allowed to cut the air. Now he was glad he'd done it. Nothing made you look like more of a dick than standing there trying to find the end of your scabbard with the tip of your sword.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Julia.

"It is all right, Quentin," she said. "This is not your adventure. Follow it no further."

He wanted to lean his head down and rub his cheek back and forth against her hand like a cat.

"I know," he said. He wasn't going to go. "I get it."

"You're really not going?" Janet sounded almost disappointed. Probably she'd wanted to watch him blow up into glitter too.

"Really not."

They were right. Let somebody else be the hero. He'd had his happy ending. Right then he couldn't even have said what he was looking for in there. Nothing worth dying for, anyway.

"Come on, it's almost lunchtime," Eliot said. "Let's find some less exciting meadow to eat in."

"Sure," Quentin said. "Cheers to that."

There was champagne in one of the hampers, staying magically chilled, or something like champagne—they were

still working on a Fillorian equivalent. And those hampers, with special leather loops for the bottles and the glasses—they were the kind of thing he remembered seeing in catalogs of expensive, useless things he couldn't afford back in the real world. And now look! He had all the hampers he could ever want. It wasn't champagne, but it was bubbly, and it made you drunk. And Quentin was going to get good and drunk over lunch.

Eliot climbed back into the saddle and swung Julia up behind him. It looked like the civet was gone for good. There was still a large patch of damp black earth on Julia's rump from the fall. Quentin had a foot in Dauntless's stirrup when they heard a shout.

"Hi!"

They all looked around.

"Hi!" It was what Fillorians said instead of "hey."

The Fillorian saying it was a hale, vigorous man in his early thirties. He was striding toward them, right across the circular clearing, practically radiating exuberance. He broke into a jog at the sight of them. He totally ignored the branches of the broken clock-tree that were waving wildly over his head; he couldn't have cared less. Just another day in the magic forest. He had a big blond mane and a big chest, and he'd grown a big blond beard to cover up his somewhat moony round chin.

It was Jollyby, Master of the Hunt. He wore purple-and-yellow striped tights. His legs really were pretty impressive, especially considering that he'd never even been in the same universe as a leg press or a StairMaster or whatever. Eliot was right, he must have been following them the whole time.

“Hi!” Janet shouted back happily. “Now it’s a party,” she added to the others, sotto voce.

In one huge leather-gloved fist Jollyby held up a large, madly kicking hare by its ears.

“Son of a bitch,” Dauntless said. “He caught it.”

Dauntless was a talking horse. She just didn’t talk much.

“He sure did,” Quentin said.

“Lucky thing,” Jollyby called out when he was close enough. “I found him sitting up on a rock, happy as you please, not a hundred yards from here. He was busy keeping an eye on you lot, and I got him to bolt the wrong way. Caught him with my bare hands. Would you believe it?”

Quentin would believe it. Though he still didn’t think it made sense. How do you sneak up on an animal that can see the future? Maybe it saw other people’s but not its own. The hare’s eyes rolled wildly in their sockets.

“Poor thing,” Eliot said. “Look how pissed off it is.”

“Oh, Jolly,” Janet said. She crossed her arms in mock outrage. “You should have let us catch it! Now it’ll only tell *your* future.”

She sounded not at all disappointed by this, but Jollyby—a superb all-around huntsman but no National Merit Scholar—looked vexed. His furry brows furrowed.

“Maybe we could pass it around,” Quentin said. “It could do each of us in turn.”

“It’s not a bong, Quentin,” Janet said.

“No,” Julia said. “Do not ask it.”

But Jollyby was enjoying his moment as the center of royal attention.

“Is that true, you useless animal?” he said. He reversed

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his grip on the Seeing Hare and hoisted it up so that he and the hare were nose to nose.

It gave up kicking and hung down limp, its eyes blank with panic. It was an impressive beast, three feet long from its twitching nose to its tail, with a fine gray-brown coat the color of dry grass in winter. It wasn't cute. This was not a tame hare, a magician's rabbit. It was a wild animal.

"What do you see then, eh?" Jollyby shook it, as if this were all its idea and therefore its fault. "What do you see?"

The Seeing Hare's eyes focused. It looked directly at Quentin. It bared its huge orange incisors.

"Death," it rasped.

They all stood there for a second. It didn't seem scary so much as inappropriate, like somebody had made a dirty joke at a child's birthday party.

Then Jollyby frowned and licked his lips, and Quentin saw blood in his teeth. He coughed once, experimentally, as if he were just trying it out, and then his head lolled forward. The hare dropped from his nerveless fingers and shot away across the grass like a rocket.

Jollyby's corpse fell forward onto the grass.

"Death and destruction!" the hare called out as it ran, in case it hadn't made itself clear before. "Disappointment and despair!"

CHAPTER 2

There was a special room in Castle Whitespire where the kings and queens met. That was another thing about being a king: everything you had was made specially for you.

It was a marvelous room. It was square, the top of a square tower, with four windows facing in four directions. The tower turned, very slowly, as some of the towers in the castle did—Castle Whitespire was built on complicated foundations of enormous brass clockwork, cleverly designed by the dwarves, who were absolute geniuses at that kind of thing. The tower completed one rotation every day. The movement was almost imperceptible.

In the center of the room was a special square table with four chairs—they were thrones, or thronelike, but made by someone who had the knack, pretty rare in Quentin's experience, of making chairs that looked like thrones but were also reasonably comfortable to sit in. The table was

painted with a map of Fillory, sealed under many layers of lacquer, and at each of the four seats, pieced into the wood, were the names of the rulers who'd sat there along with little devices appropriate to said rulers. Quentin got an image of the White Stag, and the vanquished Martin Chatwin, and a deck of playing cards. Eliot's place was the most elaborately embellished, as befitted the High King. It was a square table, but there wasn't any question which side was the head.

The chairs didn't feel comfortable today. The scene of Jollyby's death was still very clear and present in Quentin's mind's eye; in fact it replayed itself more or less constantly, with showings every thirty seconds or so. As Jollyby collapsed Quentin had lurched forward and caught him and eased him to the ground. He groped helplessly at Jollyby's huge chest, as if he'd hidden his life somewhere about his person, in some secret inside pocket, and if Quentin could only find it he could give it back to him. Janet screamed: a full-throated, uncontrollable horror-movie scream that wouldn't stop for a full fifteen seconds until Eliot grasped her shoulders and physically turned her away from Jollyby's corpse.

At the same time the clearing filled with ghostly green light—a bleak, alien spell of Julia's that Quentin still didn't get the details of, or even the broad outlines of, that was intended to reveal any bad actors who might be present. It turned her eyes all black, no whites or iris at all. She was the only one who'd thought to go on the attack. But there was no one to attack.

"All right," Eliot said. "So let's talk about it. What do we think happened today?"

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They looked at each other, feeling jittery and shell-shocked. Quentin wanted to do something, or say something, but he didn't know what. The truth was, he hadn't really known Jollyby all that well.

"He was so proud," he said finally. "He thought he'd saved the day."

"It had to be the rabbit," Janet said. Her eyes were red from crying. She swallowed. "Right? Or hare, whatever. That's what killed him. What else?"

"We can't assume that. The hare predicted his death but it may not have caused it. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*. It's a logical fallacy."

If he'd waited even another second he would have realized that Janet wasn't interested in the Latin name of the logical fallacy that she might or might not have been committing.

"Sorry," he said. "That's my Asperger's flaring up again."

"So it's just a coincidence?" she snapped. "That he died right then, right after it said that about death? Maybe we've got it wrong. Maybe the hare doesn't predict the future, maybe it controls it."

"Perhaps it does not like being caught," Julia said.

"I have a hard time believing that the history of the universe is being written by a talking rabbit," Eliot said. "Though that would explain a lot."

It was five o'clock in the afternoon, their regular meeting time. For the first few months after they'd arrived at Castle Whitespire Eliot had left them to do their own things, on the theory that they'd naturally find their own courses as

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rulers, and take charge of the things that best suited their various gifts. This had resulted in total chaos, and nothing getting done, and the things that did get done got done twice by two different people in two different ways. So Eliot instituted a daily meeting at which they sorted through whatever business of the realm seemed most pressing as a foursome. The five o'clock meeting was traditionally accompanied by what may have been the most gloriously comprehensive whiskey service ever seen on any of the possibly infinite worlds of the multiverse.

"I told the family we'd take care of the funeral," Quentin said. "It's just his parents. He was an only child."

"I should say something," Eliot said. "He taught me bugling."

"Did you know he was a were-lion?" Janet smiled sadly. "True story. It went on a solar calendar—he changed only at equinoxes and solstices. He said it helped him understand the animals. He was hairy *everywhere*."

"Please," Eliot said. "I would give anything to not know how you know that."

"It helped with lots of things."

"I have a theory," Quentin said quickly. "Maybe the Fenwicks did it. They've been pissed at us ever since we got here."

The Fenwicks were the most senior of the several families who were running things at the time when the Brakebills returned to Fillory. They weren't happy about being kicked out of Castle Whitespire, but they didn't have the political capital to do much about it. So they satisfied themselves with making mischief around the court.

“Assassination would be a big step up for the Fenwicks,” Eliot said. “They’re pretty small-time.”

“And why would they kill Jollyby?” Janet said. “Everybody loved Jollyby!”

“Maybe they were trying for one of us, not him,” Quentin said. “Maybe one of us was supposed to catch the hare. You know they’re already trying to put it around that we killed him?”

“But how would they have done it?” Eliot said. “You’re saying they sent a rabbit assassin?”

“They could not turn the Seeing Hare,” Julia said. “Unique Beasts do not intervene in the affairs of men.”

“Maybe it wasn’t the Seeing Hare at all, maybe it was a person in hare form. A were-hare. Look, I don’t know!”

Quentin rubbed his temples. If only they’d hunted that stupid lizard instead. He was annoyed at himself for forgetting what Fillory was like. He’d let himself believe that things were all better after Alice had killed Martin Chatwin, no more death and despair and disillusionment and whatever else the hare had said. But there was more. It wasn’t like the books. There was always more. *Et in Arcadia ego*.

And even though he knew it was crazy, in a childishly elegant way, he couldn’t escape a vague feeling that Jollyby’s death was his fault, that it wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t been tempted by that adventure. Or maybe he wasn’t tempted enough? What were the rules? Maybe he should have gone into the clearing after all. Maybe Jollyby’s death had been meant for him. He was supposed to go into the meadow and die there, but he didn’t, so Jollyby had to instead.

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“Maybe there isn’t an explanation,” he said out loud. “Maybe it’s just a mystery. Just another crazy stop on Fillory’s magical mystery tour. No reason for it, it just happened. You can’t explain it.”

This didn’t satisfy Eliot. He was still Eliot, the languid lush of Brakebills, but becoming High King had uncovered a dismayingly rigorous streak in him.

“We can’t have unexplained deaths in the kingdom,” he said. “It won’t do.” He cleared his throat. “Here’s what’s going to happen. I’ll put the fear of Ember into the Fenwicks, just in case. It won’t take much. They’re a bunch of pussy dandies. And I say that as a pussy dandy myself.”

“And if that doesn’t work?” Janet said.

“Then, Janet, you’ll go lean on the Lorians.” That was Fillory’s neighbor to the north. Janet was in charge of relations with foreign powers—Quentin called her Fillory Clinton. “They’re always behind everything bad in the books. Maybe they were trying to decapitate the leadership. Stupid pseudo-Viking fuckers. Now for Christ’s sake let’s talk about something else for a while.”

But they had nothing else to talk about, so they lapsed into silence. Nobody was especially happy with Eliot’s plan, least of all Eliot, but they didn’t have a better one, or even a worse one. Six hours after the fact Julia’s eyes were still flooded with black from the spell she’d cast in the forest. The effect was disconcerting. She had no pupils. He wondered what she could see that they couldn’t.

Eliot shuffled his notes, looking for another item of business, but business was in short supply these days.

“It is time,” Julia said. “We must go to the window.”

Every day after the afternoon meeting they went out on the balcony and waved to the people.

“Damn it,” Eliot said. “All right.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t today,” Janet said. “It feels wrong.”

Quentin knew what she meant. The thought of standing out there on the narrow balcony, frozen smiles on their faces, princess-waving at the Fillorians who gathered for the daily ritual, felt a little off. Still.

“We should to do it,” he said. “Today of all days.”

“We’re accepting congratulations for doing nothing.”

“We’re reassuring the people of continuity in the face of tragedy.”

They filed out onto the narrow balcony. In the castle courtyard far below, at the bottom of a vertiginous drop, a few hundred Fillorians had gathered. From this height they looked unreal, like dolls. Quentin waved.

“I wish we could do something more for them,” he said.

“What do you want to do?” Eliot said. “We’re the kings and queens of a magic utopia.”

Cheers drifted up from far below, faintly. The sound was tinny and far away—it had the audio quality of a musical greeting card.

“Some progressive reforms? I want to help somebody with something. If I were a Fillorian I would depose me as an aristocratic parasite.”

When Quentin and the others took the thrones, they hadn’t known exactly what to expect. The details of what was involved were vague—there would be some ceremonial duties, Quentin supposed, and presumably a lead role in policy making some responsibility for the welfare of the

nation they ruled. But the truth was that there just wasn't much actual work to do.

The weird thing was that Quentin missed it. He'd expected Fillory to be something like medieval England, because it looked like medieval England, at least on casual inspection. He figured he'd just use European history, to the extent that he remembered it, as a crib sheet. He would pursue the standard enlightened humanitarian program, nothing extraordinary, greatest hits only, and go down in history as a force for good.

But Fillory wasn't England. For one thing the population was tiny—there couldn't have been more than ten thousand humans in the whole country, plus that many talking animals and dwarves and spirits and giants and such. So he and the other monarchs—or tetrarchs, whatever—were more like small-town mayors. For another, while magic was very real on Earth, Fillory *was* magical. There was a difference. Magic was part of the ecosystem. It was in the weather and the oceans and the soil, which was wildly fertile. If you wanted your crops to fail you had to work pretty hard at it.

Fillory was a land of hyperabundance. Anything that needed making could be gotten from the dwarves, sooner or later, and they weren't an oppressed industrial proletariat, they actually enjoyed making things. Unless you were an actively despicable tyrant, the way Martin Chatwin had been, there were just too many resources and too few people to create anything much in the way of civil strife. The only shortage that the Fillorian economy suffered from was a chronic shortage of shortages.

As a result whenever any of the Brakebills—as they were

called, even though Julia had never even been to Brakebills, as she wasn't slow to point out—tried to get serious about something, there turned out not to be much to be serious about. It was all ritual and pomp and circumstance. Even money was just for show. It was toy money. Monopoly money. The others had all but given up on trying to make themselves useful, but Quentin couldn't quite let it go. Maybe that was what had been nagging at him, as he stood on the edge of that meadow in the woods. There must be something real somewhere out there, but he could never quite seem to get his hands on it.

"All right," he said. "What next?"

"Well," Eliot said, as they filed back inside. "There is this situation with the Outer Island."

"The where?"

"The Outer Island." He picked up some royal-looking documents. "That's what it says. I'm king of it, and even I don't know where it is."

Janet snorted. "Outer is off the east coast. Way off, a couple of days' sail. God, I can't believe they even let you be king. It's the easternmost point in the Fillorian Empire. I think."

Eliot peered at the map painted on the table. "I don't see it."

Quentin studied the map too. On his first visit to Fillory he'd sailed deep into the Western Sea, on the other side of the Fillorian continent, but his knowledge of the east was pretty sketchy.

"It's not big enough." She pointed to Julia's lap. "That's where it would be if we had a bigger table."

Quentin tried to imagine it: a little slip of white tropical sand, embellished with a decorative palm tree, embedded in an ocean of blue-green calm.

“Have you been there?” Eliot said.

“No one’s ever been there. It’s just a dot on the map. Somebody started a fishing colony there after his ship collided with it like a million years ago. Why are we talking about the Outer Island?”

Eliot went back to his papers. “Looks like they haven’t paid their taxes in a couple of years.”

“So?” Janet said. “Probably that’s because they don’t have any money.”

“Send them a telegram,” Quentin said. “DEAR OUTER ISLANDERS STOP SEND MONEY STOP IF YOU HAVE NO MONEY THEN DO NOT SEND MONEY STOP.”

The meeting flagged while Eliot and Janet tried to outdo each other in composing the most useless possible telegram to the Outer Islanders.

“All right,” Eliot said. The turning tower had rotated to where the flaming Fillorian sunset lit up the sky behind him. Ladders of pink cloud were stacked up above his shoulders. “I’ll lean on the Fenwicks about Jollyby. Janet will speak to the Lorians.” He waved vaguely. “And somebody will do something about the Outer Island. Who wants scotch?”

“I’ll go,” Quentin said.

“It’s just there on the sideboard.”

“No, I mean to the Outer Island. I’ll go there. I’ll see about the taxes.”

“What?” Eliot sounded annoyed by the idea. “Why? It’s

the ass end of nowhere. And anyway, it's a treasury matter. We'll send an emissary. That's what emissaries are for."

"Send me instead."

Quentin couldn't have said what the impulse was exactly, he just knew that he had to do something. He thought of the circular meadow and the broken clock-tree and the film clip of Jollyby dying started up again. What was the point of all this when you could just drop dead, just like that? That's what he wanted to know. What was even the fucking point?

"You know," Janet said, "we're not invading it. We don't need to send a king to the Outer Island. They haven't paid their taxes, which by the way is like eight fish. They're not exactly powering the whole economy."

"I'll be back before you know it." He could already tell he'd gotten it right. The tension inside him broke as soon as he said it. Relief was flooding through him, at what he didn't even know. "Who knows, maybe I'll learn something."

This would be his quest: collecting taxes from a bunch of backwater yokels. He had skipped the adventure of the broken tree, and that was fine. He would have this one instead.

"Could look weak, with the Jollyby thing." Eliot fingered his royal chin. "You taking off at the first sign of trouble."

"I'm a king. It's not like they're going to not re-elect me."

"Wait," Janet said. "You didn't kill Jollyby, did you? Is that what this is about?"

"Janet!" Eliot said.

"No, really. It would all fit together—"

"I didn't kill Jollyby," Quentin said.

“All right. Fine. Great.” Eliot ticked the item off on his agenda. “Outer Island, check. That’s it then.”

“Well, I hope you’re not going alone,” Janet said. “God knows what they’re like out there. It could be Captain Cook all over again.”

“I’ll be fine,” Quentin said. “Julia’s coming with me. Right, Julia?”

Eliot and Janet both stared at him. How long had it been since he surprised those two? Or anybody? He must be on to something. He smiled at Julia, and she looked back at him, though with her all-black pupils her expression was unreadable.

“Of course I am,” was all she said.

That night Eliot paid Quentin a visit in his bedroom.

When he first found it the room had been stuffed with an appalling amount of hideous quasi-medieval junk. It had been literally centuries since all four of Whitespire’s thrones had been filled at the same time, and in the meantime the extra royal suites had been invaded and occupied by creeping armies of superfluous candelabras, defunct chandeliers listing and deflated like beached jellyfish, unplayable musical instruments, unreturnable diplomatic gifts, chairs and tables so piteously ornamental they would break if you looked at them, or even if you didn’t, dead animals ruthlessly stuffed in the very act of begging for mercy, urns and ewers and other even less easily identifiable vessels that you didn’t know whether to drink out of or go to the bathroom in.

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Quentin had had the room cleared out to the bare walls. Everything must go. He left the bed, one table, two chairs, a few of the better rugs, and some pleasing and/or politically expedient tapestries, that was all. He liked one tapestry in particular that depicted a marvelously appointed griffin frozen in the act of putting a company of foot soldiers to flight. It was supposed to symbolize the triumph of some group of long-dead people over some other group of long-dead people whom nobody had liked, but for some reason the griffin had cocked its head to one side in the midst of its rampage and was gazing directly out of its woven universe at the viewer as if to say, yes, granted, I'm good at this. But is it really the best use of my time?

When it was finally empty the room had grown by three times its size. It could breathe again. You could think in it. It turned out to be about as big as a basketball court, with a smooth stone floor, towering timbered ceilings where light got lost in the upper reaches and made interesting shadows, and soaring Gothic lead-glass windows a few little panels of which actually opened. It was so gloriously still and empty that when you scuffed your foot on the stone it echoed. It had the kind of hushed stillness that on Earth you saw only from a distance, on the other side of a velvet rope. It was the stillness of a closed museum, or a cathedral at night.

There was some murmuring among the upper servants that such a spartan chamber was not entirely suitable for a king of Fillory, but Quentin had decided that one of the good things about being a king of Fillory was that you got to decide what's suitable for a king of Fillory.

And anyway, if it was high royal style they wanted, the High King was their man. Eliot had a bottomless appetite for it. His bedroom was the gilded, diamond-studded, pearl-encrusted rococo lair of a god-king. Whatever else it was, it was entirely suitable.

“You know in the Fillory books you could actually get into the tapestries?” It was late, after midnight, and Eliot was standing eye-to-eye with the woven griffin and sipping from a tumbler of something amber.

“I know.” Quentin was stretched out on the bed, wearing silk pajamas. “Believe me, I’ve tried. If they really did it I have no idea how they did it. They just look like ordinary tapestries to me. They don’t even move like in Harry Potter.”

Eliot had brought a tumbler for Quentin too. Quentin hadn’t drunk any yet, but he hadn’t ruled out the possibility either. At any rate he wasn’t going to let Eliot drink it, which he would inevitably try to do when he was done with his own. Quentin made a nest for the tumbler in the blankets next to him.

“I’m not sure I’d want to get into this one,” Eliot said.

“I know. Sometimes I wonder if he’s trying to get out.”

“Now this fellow,” he said, moving on to a full-length portrait of a knight in armor. “I wouldn’t mind getting into his tapestry, if you get what I mean.”

“I get what you mean.”

“Pull that sword out of its scabbard.”

“I get it.”

Eliot was building up to something, but there was no rushing him. Though if he took much longer Quentin was going to fall asleep.

“Do you think if I did you’d see a little tapestry version of me running around in there? I don’t know how I’d feel about that.”

Quentin waited. Since he’d made the decision to go to the Outer Island he felt calmer than he had in ages. The windows were open, to the extent that they could be opened, and warm night air flowed in, smelling like late summer grass and the sea, which wasn’t far off.

“So about this trip of yours,” Eliot said finally.

“About it.”

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this.”

“Do you have to?”

“Something about quests and adventures and whatever. Sailing beyond the sunset. It doesn’t matter. We don’t need you here for the Jollyby thing. One of us really should go out there anyway, they probably don’t even know they have kings and queens again. Just pass along any prurient details as a matter of state security.”

“Will do.”

“But I want to talk to you about Julia.”

“Oh.” Whiskey time. Trying to drink lying down, Quentin took a bigger swallow than he meant to, and it ignited a brush fire in his guts. He suppressed a cough. “Look, you’re only High King,” he gasped, “you’re not my dad. I’ll figure it out.”

“Don’t get defensive, I just want to make sure you know what you’re doing.”

“And what if I don’t?”

“Did I ever tell you,” Eliot said, sitting on one of the two chairs, “how Julia and I met?”

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“Well, sure.” Had he? The exact particulars were fuzzy. “I mean, not in granular detail.”

The truth was that they hardly ever talked about that time. They talked around it. No good memories there for anybody. It was after the big disaster in Ember’s Tomb. Quentin had been half-dead and had to be left in the care of some irritating but ultimately very medically effective centaurs while Eliot and Janet and the others returned to the real world. Quentin had spent a year recovering in Fillory, then he went back to Earth and gave up magic. He spent another six months working in an office in Manhattan until Janet and Eliot and Julia finally came and got him. If they hadn’t he’d probably still be there. He was grateful, and he always would be.

Eliot stared out the window into the black moonless night, like an oriental potentate in his dressing gown, which looked too heavily embroidered to be comfortable.

“You know Janet and I were in pretty rough shape when we left Fillory?”

“Yes. Though at least Martin Chatwin hadn’t chewed you practically in half.”

“It’s not a contest, but yes, that is true. But we were shaken up. We loved Alice, too, you know, in our way. Even Janet did. And we thought we’d lost you as well as her. We were well and truly done with Fillory and all its goods and chattels, I can tell you.

“Josh went home to his parents in New Hampshire, and Richard and Anaïs went off somewhere to do whatever it was they’d been doing before they went to Fillory. Not big mourners, those two. I couldn’t face New York again, nor

could I face my grotesque so-called family in Oregon, so I went home with Janet to L.A.

“That turned out to be an excellent decision. You know her parents are lawyers? Entertainment lawyers. Fantastically rich, huge house in Brentwood, working all the time, no discernible emotional life whatsoever. So we sucked around Brentwood for a week or two until Janet’s parents got tired of the sight of our post-traumatic faces shuffling off to bed as they were getting up for a predawn squash match. They packed us off to a fancy spa in Wyoming for a couple of weeks.

“You wouldn’t have heard of it, it was that kind of place. Impossible to get into and ludicrously expensive, but money means nothing to these people, and I wasn’t about to argue. Janet practically grew up there—the staff all knew her from when she was a little girl. Imagine that—our Janet, a little girl! She and I had a bungalow to ourselves and positively legions of people to wait on us. I think Janet had a manicurist for every nail.

“And they did a thing with mud and hot stones—I swear to you there was magic in it. Nothing feels that good without magic.

“Of course, the terrible secret of places like that is that they’re horrifically boring. You have no idea the extremes we were driven to. I played tennis. Me! They got *very* scoldy when it came to drinking on the court, I can tell you. I told them it’s just part of my form. You can’t relearn technique, not at my age.

“Well, by the third day Janet and I were considering having sex with each other just to relieve the tedium. And

then, like a dark angel of mercy come to safeguard my virtue, Julia appeared.

“It was like one of those Poirot mysteries set at a posh country seat. There was some accident down by the pool—I was never clear on the details, but an enormous fuss was made. I suppose that’s one of the things you pay for: first-class fuss. At any rate the first time I laid eyes on our Julia she was being carried through the lobby strapped to a backboard, soaking wet and cursing a blue streak and insisting that she was fine, absolutely fine. Take your paws off me, you damned dirty apes.

“The next day I came down to the bar around three or four in the afternoon and there she was again, drinking alone, all in black. Vodka gimlets I believe. The mysterious lady. It was painfully obvious that she didn’t belong at the spa. Her hair was a rat’s nest, you literally can’t imagine. Worse than now even. Her cuticles were bitten down to the quick. Shoulders hunched. Nervous stutter. And then she had no grasp of how things worked. She tried to tip the staff. She pronounced the names of French wines with an actual French accent.

“Of course I was drawn to her at once. I figured she must be Russian. Daughter of a jailed oligarch, that sort of thing. No one but a Russian could afford to stay there and still have hair that bad. Janet thought she was just out of rehab and from the looks of it headed right back in. Either way we fell upon her like starving people.

“The approach was subtle. The trick was not setting off her alarms, which were all obviously set to a hair trigger. It was Janet, that mistress of seduction, who cracked her in the

end—she planted herself in a public lounge and complained loudly about a rather involved computer issue. You could watch our Julia wrestle with herself, but it was a fait accompli.

“After that—well, you know how it is on those vacations. As soon as you learn another person’s name they become inescapable. We ran into each other everywhere. You wouldn’t think a place like that was her style, would you? But there she was, up to her neck in mud, with cucumber slices over her eyes. She was constantly plunging in and out of baths and things. Once Janet tried to go in a steam bath with her, but she’d turned it up so high everybody else had to flee. Probably she had them thrash her with birch twigs. It was like she was trying to rid herself of some stubborn taint.

“It came out that she had a weakness for cards, so we spent hours just drinking and playing three-handed bridge. Not talking. We didn’t know she was a magician, of course. How could we? But you could tell she was bursting with some terrible secret. And she had those things that one likes about magicians: she was disgustingly bright and rather sad and slightly askew. To tell you the truth I think one of the things we liked about her was that she reminded us of you.

“Well, you know how in the Poirot books he always goes on vacation to get away from it all, the mysteries and whatever else, only to have a murder committed on the very island he’s fled to for peace and quiet and some civilized gastronomy? It was exactly like that, except that we were fleeing magic. One night I wandered over to her bungalow around ten or eleven at night. Janet and I had had a fight,

and I was looking for someone to complain about her to.

“When I passed Julia’s window I saw that she was building a fire. That was odd to begin with. The fireplaces were absolutely enormous in those bungalows, but it was the middle of summer and nobody in their right mind was using them. But Julia had a roaring blaze going. She was building it very methodically, placing the logs very carefully. She marked each log before she put it on—scraped away some of the bark with a little silver knife.

“And then as I watched . . . I don’t know how to describe it so you’ll understand. She kneeled down in front of the fire and began putting things in it. Some of the things were obviously valuable—a rare shell, an old book, a handful of gold dust. Some of them must just have been precious to her. A piece of costume jewelry. An old photograph. Each time she put one in she’d stop and wait a minute, but nothing happened, except that whatever it was burned or melted and gave off a nasty smell. I don’t know what she was waiting for, but whatever it was it never came. Meanwhile she got more and more agitated.

“I felt utterly tawdry spying on her, but I couldn’t look away. Finally she ran out of precious things, and then she started crying, and then she put herself into the fire. She crawled over the hearth and collapsed, half in and half out of the flames, sobbing her little heart out. Her legs were sticking out. It was awful to see. Her clothes went up right away, of course, and her face got black with soot, but the fire never touched her skin. She was absolutely sobbing. Her shoulders shook and shook . . .”

Eliot stood up and went to the window. He struggled

with one of the little panes for a second, then he must have found a catch Quentin had never noticed because he pulled the whole window open. Quentin couldn't see how he did it. He put his glass on the sill.

"I don't know if you're falling in love with her or if you just think you are or what it is you're doing," he said. "I suppose I can't blame you, you always did like to make things as hard as possible on yourself. But just listen to what I'm telling you.

"That was how it all started, how we knew she was one of us. The spell was something very strong. I could hear the hum of it even over the fire, and the light in the room had gone a funny color. But so much of her magic is just impossible to parse. I knew right away she'd never been to Brakebills, because it sounded like gibberish to me, and I couldn't get within a thousand miles of how it worked or what she was trying to do, and she never said, and I never asked.

"But if I absolutely had to guess I'd say she was attempting a summoning. I'd say she was trying to bring back something that she'd lost, or that was taken away from her, something that was very precious to her indeed. And if I had another guess, I'd have to say that it wasn't working."

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, Quentin rode down to the docks in a black carriage with velvet curtains and plushly padded velvet seats. It was safe and musty inside, like a living room on wheels. Next to him, swaying loosely with the rocking of the carriage, sat Queen Julia. Across from them, their knees practically touching, was the admiral of the Fillorian navy.

Quentin had decided that if he was going on a trip to the island at the ass end of the universe, he should do it properly. He should make preparations. There were rules for this kind of thing. Such as: if you were going on a journey you needed a stout vessel.

All ships were available to the crown, in theory, but most of the ones they kept just lying around on call were warships, and those turned out to be scarily spartan on the inside. Rows of hammocks and racks of hard pallets. Not a stateroom in sight. Not really suitable at all for the Voyage

of King Kwentin, as Eliot liked to spell Quentin's name in official documents. So they were going down to the docks to find a ship that was suitable.

Quentin was feeling good. He was full of energy and a determination that he hadn't felt for long time. This is what he'd been waiting for. The admiral was an almost alarmingly short man named Lacker with a thin gray face that looked like it had been hollowed out of schist by the action of fifty years of wind and spray.

It wasn't that Quentin couldn't have said what he was looking for, it's just that he didn't want to, because if he did it would have been embarrassing. What he was looking for was a ship from one of the Fillory novels, specifically the *Swift*, which figured in the fourth book, *The Secret Sea*. Pursued by the Watcherwoman, Jane and Rupert—he could have explained to Admiral Lacker, but didn't—had stowed away on the *Swift*, which turned out to be run by pirates, except they were only pretending to be pirates. They were really a party of Fillorian noblemen, wrongly accused, who were seeking to clear their names. You never got a particularly nautically rigorous look at the *Swift*, but you nonetheless came away with a powerful impression of it: it was a plucky but cozy little vessel, elegant to look at but game in a fight, with sleek lines and glowing yellow portholes through which one glimpsed snug, shipshape cabins.

Of course if this were a Fillory novel the ship he needed would already be tied up at the docks, awaiting his command, just like that. But this wasn't a Fillory novel. This was Fillory. So it was up to him.

"I need something not too big and not too small," he

said. "Medium-sized. And it should be comfortable. And quick. And sturdy."

"I see. Will you require guns?"

"No guns. Well, maybe a few guns. A few guns."

"A few guns."

"If you please, Admiral, don't be a cock. I'll know it when I see it, and if for some reason I don't, you tell me. All right?"

Admiral Lacker inclined his head almost imperceptibly to indicate that they had a deal. He would endeavor to be as little of a cock as possible.

Whitespire stood on the shore of a wide, curving bay of oddly pale green sea. It was almost too perfect: it could have been carved out of the coastline on purpose by some divine being who took a benevolent interest in mortals having somewhere to put their ships when they weren't using them. For all Quentin knew it had been. He had the driver drop them at one end of the waterfront. They clambered out, all three of them, blinking in the early morning sun after the swaying dimness of the carriage.

The air was ripe with the smell of salt and wood and tar. It was intoxicating, like huffing pure oxygen.

"All right," Quentin said. "Let's do this." He clapped his hands together.

They walked, slowly, all the way from one end of the docks to the other, stepping over taut guy ropes and squashed and dried fish carcasses and weaving their way around massive stanchions and windlasses and through labyrinths of stacked crates. The waterfront was home to an astounding variety of vessels from all points in the Fillorian Empire and

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