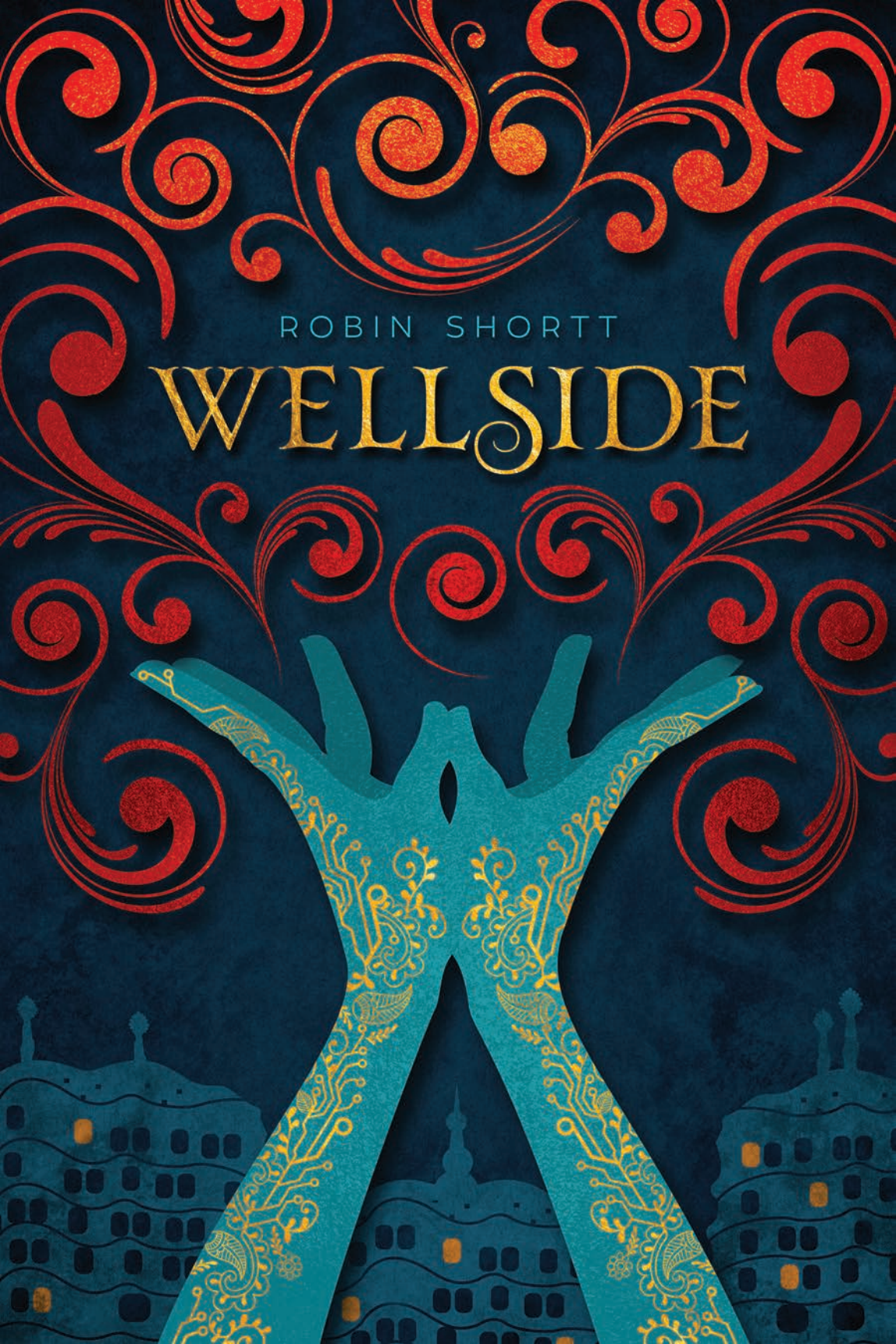


ROBIN SHORTT

# WELLSIDE







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Candlemark & Gleam

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*For Charlie*





PART ONE







## CHAPTER ONE

Essa Roth, alone at her table in the back of the cafeteria, was sketching again. Ben, also alone two tables away, kept glancing over to see what it was.

And maybe also to check out Essa Roth a little bit. But mostly to see what she was drawing.

His phone buzzed. His mum, with a calendar invite. *Meeting with lawyer*. She didn't say whether it was her lawyer (the divorce) or Ben's lawyer (the arrest) and he wasn't sure it mattered. He tapped *Accept* and watched his calendar shift itself around. Half a dozen alerts bloomed on the screen—conflicts with appointments his dad had sent him earlier.

He sighed and glanced at Essa again as she rolled her head back to ease her neck. She was wearing the same black blouse and jeans she wore every day—it was gearing up to be a brutal summer even for Queensland; it was barely noon and already the air tasted like it had been run through a clothes dryer, but she never even rolled her sleeves up. It wasn't that she didn't feel the heat, either. Her short dark hair (really short, just this side of a crew cut) was stiff with dried sweat. She was wearing her fingerless climbing gloves too, like she always did, even though it must have made it hard to draw. And also like always, she'd dusted her fingertips with gold glitter.

The glitter clashed with everything else about her, but then, that wasn't the weirdest thing about Essa. For a start, there was the whispering. She was doing it now, he could see her lips moving, forming those weird alien syllables like something played backwards as she bent over her sketchbook.

He looked back at his calendar. Every one of those conflicts was another argument waiting to happen—his mum pacing the kitchen, gripping her phone so hard the tendons stood out on her wrist, voice pitched low and full of venom, his dad's voice rising until Ben could hear it from across the room. He felt a headache ramping up, right at the base of his skull, as he started shifting stuff around on his calendar, getting rid of those conflicts. Proposed new times to his tutor, his Math Olympiad team, his online coding class. Watched his free time shrink to nothing. Played Tetris with his life.

He looked up again when Essa ripped the page she'd been working on out of her binder. She took a critical look at it before throwing it onto the table beside her, and Ben craned his neck to see.

It was upside down but he could tell it was a Librarian. She stood on a sandstone pinnacle barely large enough for her feet, robe blowing straight back in the wind. Librarians were a favourite of his, and he cautiously leaned back in his chair for a better view. He was careful not to cut his eyes to the right, where Ryan Bradman and his douchebag lackeys Nick and Troy had commandeered a table. Ryan was showing them something on his phone—something horrific and degrading, probably, from the way they were laughing. Nick had a fishing knife he was scratching something into the desk with.

It would be a spectacularly bad idea to make Ryan think Ben was looking at *him*. You never wanted to remind Ryan that you and he shared the same universe, because Ryan apparently had a grudge against everyone in it.

He didn't even know why any of them had shown up. It was Year

12, it was December, and he doubted Ryan was all that worried about his exams. Everyone was on edge as the year wound down. It was like the previously solid walls of Chifley High had grown thin, like a worn-out eggshell, and everyone was restless to break through and gulp air.

Or in Ben's case, depending on how the next week worked out, swap them for walls a whole lot thicker, and a tracksuit with CORRECTIONAL CENTRE ISSUE on it.



Essa sketched all the time. She always had her big binder out, or else a little leather-bound notebook she pulled out of her back pocket during any kind of downtime.

Ben had first gotten a look at her work one afternoon in the gym, while Essa was on the wall. You weren't supposed to be on the climbing wall without a teacher there, but then you weren't supposed to be in the gym anyway. A storm last spring had soaked all the ceiling tiles, and they weren't replacing them until after the school year. But you could fiddle the lock pretty easily, and it was the only way he could get any climbing time in.

Ben had been hitting the wall whenever he could lately, although not as much as Essa did. When he was solving a climbing problem, figuring out the route from *here* to *there*, he didn't have to think about his parents, or getting tried as an adult, or any of it. He climbed until his fingers buzzed and trembled so much he could barely type; he didn't know how Essa sketched like that after a session.

Essa was a phenomenal climber. She wasn't skinny like most climbers but she absolutely *swarmed* up and down that wall. She really lost herself in it—you just knew she had no idea she was smiling like that. It was the only time she ever smiled, and Ben loved to see it. Not

that he saw it much. She usually came in, fiddling the lock without even breaking stride and dumping her stuff by the door, just as he was leaving. And one day he'd seen that her binder had dropped out of her bag and fallen open on a landscape, strange slumping spires like the dribble castles kids made on the beach, punctuated by hundreds of tiny windows. In one corner, in Essa's cramped handwriting, had been the caption *redsandcity*. Ben had googled it, and it'd turned out to be the name of Essa's deviantART account.

He'd spent almost a whole night going through the hundreds of images in her gallery and had come to school the next day sluggish and scratchy-eyed. She hadn't bothered sorting them into folders, but there were a few themes she kept coming back to, a few captions she used over and over:

*Vats*: a skinless, six-fingered hand (lots of detail to the musculature) holding a wicked-looking double-bladed scalpel, handle curved and recurved, its contours almost biological. A human face with a double row of black eyes like a spider's.

*Cogs*: an elbow joint with struts and cables of gleaming metal instead of muscle and bone. A guy in one of those tall Napoleonic soldier's hats, a cigar in his mouth and most of his face hidden by the smoke, so you could only see his muttonchop sideburns and the glass lenses he had for eyes.

And, of course, *Library*. Those figures in black cowls, faces hidden by shadow. Pages filled with complicated concentric patterns, like Buddhist sand paintings, in beautiful stippled pencil that must have taken her ages.

But all of those put together were outnumbered by the doors.

Essa loved drawing doors. All kinds of door—round metal hatches with wheel locks, giant granite slabs, wooden doors with slats and peeling paint. More than once she'd done the Mystery Door in the gym. She always drew it as slightly ajar, with darkness behind it.

That was a joke—that door had never worked; no one had been able to open it as long as Ben had been at the school.

Was she telling a story? Building a fantasy world? He had no idea, and she never explained anything on her dA page, never even replied to comments. Not that he'd left any. Anyway, she hadn't updated it in weeks.

He could have just asked her. He could have just asked her *out*. He'd definitely thought about it. But that wasn't going to happen.

He didn't have the time.



On cue, his phone chimed again. His dad this time, an extra appointment with his tutor. Getting back at his mum. The headache flared up, and he decided he didn't want to deal with any of it right now. He put his phone back in his pocket and leaned back a little further, getting a better angle on Essa's sketch.

Since Ben had been old enough to have a phone, his parents had been running his life through his calendar, scheduling it down to the minute. They'd always been in sync with each other, working around each other's appointments. Now that the divorce was finally going through, their schedules were drifting, like clocks at different speeds, getting further apart with time. Each of them had their own stuff they wanted him to do, and now every conflict was another choice he had to make, either his mum or his dad. He tried to keep them both happy—that was why he had two different math tutors—but he only had so much free time to give up.

Ben had tutors instead of doing regular math at school because he was “gifted,” although he didn't think it was much of a gift. It was just a dumb trick, and not even the kind of dumb trick he could go viral with and make some ad money—he wasn't going to blow up Twitch

doing linear algebra. It wasn't going to do much for him after school, either. He'd just be in a tiny office at some university, or maybe doing stats for a hedge fund. (Or tutoring his fellow prisoners for time off his sentence.) None of those options were exactly thrilling.

He bet Essa didn't have to deal with any of that. Not that he, or anyone, really knew anything about her. They'd both come to Chifley about a year ago: Ben from Melbourne, and Essa from somewhere in Canada, supposedly. Ben was hardly what you'd call outgoing, but even in that short time he'd picked up friends, guys who gave him crap and guys he gave crap to. He was part of the food chain, the Great Wheel of High School Karma. Even getting arrested hadn't really set him apart—you had to do a lot more than that when you were in the same year as a psychopath like Ryan.

Essa, though, had somehow stepped *off* that wheel, and no one knew what to do with her.

It wasn't like she was the only person at Chifley who acted like they were bored with everything. But with everyone else, you knew they were just being poseurs. It seemed to Ben that everyone was just poses on top of poses, and if you dug all the way down, who knew if there was a real person there at all. Writing everyone off like that was probably a pose too, of course, and the biggest poseurs were usually the ones who *called* everyone a poseur, but you could drive yourself crazy thinking like that.

“Quiet” was a word that came up on Ben's report cards a lot, and some teachers used it to mean “deep,” but he wasn't. He just didn't want to say anything unless he was sure he meant it, so he didn't usually say anything at all.

Essa was no poseur, though. With Essa it was real, and bone-deep. She didn't seem depressed or sad, just absolutely weary of everything, like she'd seen it all before and it hadn't been any fun the first time either. She took an absolute blizzard of crap from everyone because of

the glitter, and the whispering, and her unplaceable accent, and weird way of cursing, and everything else about her, but she just didn't care. Ben had no idea how she did it. In his year at Chifley High, Essa had become a...symbol, he guessed, of something that was, if not better, then at least *realer* than his own life. Like she was anchoring him to the world, which was weird because Essa herself didn't seem anchored to anything—

He leaned back just a little more, for a final look at the sketch, and realized he was tipping backwards a moment too late to do anything about it. The chair went out from under him and he landed flat on his back on the floor.

A couple of halfhearted snickers from the handful of people in the cafeteria. A loud snort of laughter from Ryan Bradman. Ben couldn't help raise his head a little to look at Essa, and of course she was looking right back at him. No mockery on her face, no contempt, just more weariness: *Will you look at who I'm stuck in this school with?* He'd have preferred laughter. A desolate future unfolded in his head, of getting that exact same look from Essa every time they crossed paths, of two more weeks of school that stretched out into infinity.

So he wasn't even thinking about what he was doing as he clambered to his feet and his gaze met Ryan's, and Ryan sneered a single word at him, and Ben said it right back.



The bell rang. If it'd happened two seconds earlier, it would've drowned out what Ben had said, but it didn't. Even with the deafening noise, the sound of Ryan's chair scraping across the floor as he stood up was crystal clear.

Ben grabbed his bag as he got to his feet. Before he turned to run he saw, very clearly, Ryan swipe Nick's fishing knife off the table.

Then he kicked his chair aside—it clipped some luckless guy in the head—and came after Ben, who was halfway to the cafeteria door.

Adrenaline obliterated thought, but a tiny dispassionate part of his brain noted that Nick and Troy *hadn't* gotten up. If this was just a bashing, they'd want to be in on it, but whatever they thought Ryan was going to do, they'd decided to sit it out. As Ben sprinted out of the cafeteria and into the hall, he speculated about what that meant. Like everyone else in Chifley, he'd been in denial about Ryan; the rumours, about what he'd done to that dog in fifth grade or what he'd done to that girl from Atherton High, were thin enough to ignore, especially if you were trying really hard to steer clear of the guy anyway. But he'd started to think that Ryan had no brakes at all. That he was capable of anything.

Right then it was looking like *anything* would be Ben.



No teachers outside the cafeteria, and the first couple of classrooms he passed were empty. He would have to run for the teacher's lounge, hang around outside until Ryan gave up. Undignified but safe. He hoped. He kept seeing Ryan grabbing that knife from Nick. He probably just wanted to wave it under Ben's nose, try and make him wet himself, but Ben wasn't taking chances.

The corridor was packed. They'd built it way too narrow and it was always a massive bottleneck, especially after lunch when everyone was heading to class. Like now. A double line of people ground past each other like tectonic plates, with the occasional shove or curse. Ben tried throwing himself into the crowd and pushing through. Someone jeered and pushed him back, hard. He gave up and headed for the main hall, hoping that whichever architect had designed that corridor had had a really crappy life.



His bag banged on his hip as he ran. It had his laptop in it, which he'd taken to school that day, against his better judgment, because his dad had signed him up for night LaTeX classes at the uni. The laptop was just a beat-up Dell with a shot battery, but he was pretty sure that if Ryan got his hands on it, he'd need to replace it, and he dreaded asking his parents for a new one. He'd end up with two, probably totally impractical seventeen-inch monsters that neither of them could really afford. Since his parents had gone to war with each other, Ben had spent most of his time trying to talk them *out* of buying him stuff. It was another battlefield for them, another chance to one-up each other. Like that first meeting with the lawyer after he'd been arrested—they'd blamed each other for the whole thing, and the idea that it was Ben's fault hardly came up, even though he was the one who had, you know, *done* it.

Right now, though, the divorce, and the arrest, and his laptop getting pissed on and chucked out of a window looked like they might be the least of his problems.

Halfway down the hall Ben took a hard right, his sneakers skidding on the laminate floor, and headed for the double doors of the gym. If he could fiddle the lock, get inside, and get the doors shut before Ryan reached them, he'd be safe. Assuming Ryan didn't know how to fiddle it too. If he'd been thinking clearly, he would have taken shelter in an empty classroom and hoped Ryan blew past him, then doubled back and lost himself in the crowds, but atavistic fear kept him running, the desperate need to put distance between him and his pursuer.

Ryan's boots squeaked on the floor somewhere behind him. Ben hadn't lost him, then, and the gym was his only hope. Not a sound from Ryan himself, no yelling or blustering, no putting on a show for the spectators in the hall, which was starting to scare Ben badly. He'd seen enough of Ryan to know there was really two of him. One was the standard-issue bully—loud threats, public humiliation, painful

but ultimately trivial violence—and one was...the other Ryan. Who'd given Victor Jia a concussion that had kept him out of school for a week. Who'd done all that stuff that everyone tried not to think about. That other Ryan could show up without warning, for the smallest of reasons or no reason at all, and Ben was pretty sure that was the Ryan he was dealing with.

He put the brakes on as he approached the gym doors but still slammed into them hard enough for the *bang* to echo all the way down the hall.

He slid a trembling finger between the doors, looking for the latch. Pull it back as you lifted it, and it would—

The latch gave and the doors swung inward. He pushed through, turned and shoved them hard, sending them flying back at Ryan, who was still only halfway down the hall.

Sweet relief. For about a second and a half. Before he realized he'd forgotten to reset the latch. The doors banged shut, then slowly eased themselves open again, and he saw Ryan striding towards him, face bloodless and eyes wide.



Ben took half a step towards the doors, but he knew he didn't have time to close them. So he turned and ran into the gym, looking for an escape route that didn't exist.

The gym was in rough shape. The flood had soaked the ceiling tiles, and they were sporting a healthy crop of mould. The floor was a hillscape of warped boards. Little drifts of reddish dust had piled up in the corners that the janitors hadn't bothered sweeping up, since they were just going to rip everything out anyway.

At the far end was the Mystery Door. It wasn't really a mystery (it said right there on the door what was behind it, EQUIPMENT),

but it just wouldn't open. They were supposed to be fixing that in the summer, too.

The gym's back doors were chained and padlocked. Ben headed for the climbing wall, because he didn't have a choice. If he climbed to the top then maybe he could yell for help. Maybe he could knock Ryan out with a thrown ceiling tile.

Or maybe he was screwed.

He passed the Mystery Door on his way to the wall, and with a new and gut-level understanding of the phrase "grasping at straws," he reached for the handle.

And it turned in his hand.



He let go of it like it was hot. It kept turning without him. A dull *click* from the latch, and the door swung out into the gym.

He should have been looking at a dusty collection of padded mats and medicine balls. Instead there was...darkness. Just darkness, and a faint, rich smell like rain-wet soil.

Something scraped the floor at his feet and he looked down.

There were hands down there, a pair of them, hanging onto the bottom of the doorframe. It was impossible—there was nothing to hang down *into*, the hands' owner should have been lying flat on the floor. The sallow fingers were obscenely long, their cracked yellow nails almost touching the toes of Ben's sneakers. Then another pair of hands appeared halfway up the doorway, and another close to the top, gripping the frame. Ben stepped back as something heaved its way up and into the gym.

It was bigger than the door, but it squeezed, *oozed* through, a lump of mottled flesh twice the size of a man. More of those long-fingered hands had appeared, connected to the waxy body by a multitude

of arms. They were much, much longer than arms should be, and with way too many elbows that flexed with a sound like dry twigs snapping. A multitude of tiny mushrooms sprouted from the thing's back, casting a pale glow in the gloom of the gym. At the end of its long, wrinkled neck swayed a tiny head, features blurred and distorted but horribly human. A baby's face, eyeless, flesh sagging like half-melted wax. It opened its mouth and bleated.

Ben backed away. He bumped into something behind him and a hand grabbed his shoulder, and he lashed out without thinking. The hand let go and he turned and saw Ryan, who he'd completely forgotten about, bending double and wheezing. It seemed Ben had punched him in the balls. Touching the junk of the biggest homophobe at Chifley: Ryan was *definitely* going to kill him now, but the way things were going, it looked like Ryan could get in line.

He tripped on the uneven floor, fell on his butt, and scrambled backwards as Ryan, his face crimson, turned to look at him. He hadn't seen the thing looming silently behind him. It reared up and over Ryan on its eight spindly arms, and he had time to say "You're *dead*, you—" before the thing's belly split open to reveal a second mouth, a maw lined with tombstone teeth, that yawned wide as it fell on him.

## CHAPTER TWO

Rain dulls everything. It turns the grey flagstones almost black. The deep grooves in the stones have overflowed into puddles the girl has to work around with her chalk.

Drawing is difficult. The chalk clots and blurs, but the girl remains intent on her task. She's covered a fifth of the courtyard already, and it's not small.

The grooves in the flagstones form looping paths, complex interlocking circles. They track the stately dance of the three suns through the days and seasons, but right now, under the lowering sky, they might as well be random scribbling. The chalk patterns look random, too, but the girl's hand is assured and never hesitates.

Rain beads on the glossy black leaves of the vines that cover the courtyard's towering walls. It beads in the hair of the man who watches from the far side of the courtyard and settles on his coarse black robe. The man is tall but the Governess beside him is a head and a half taller. Her skin, stretched tight on her elongated skull, gleams a pearlescent white. Her high-collared dress doesn't hide how inhumanly spindly she is, and he wonders if she can even stand without her long steel cane. The dress, like her tightly braided hair, is a brilliant red, and even somewhat dulled from the rain, it's still the most vivid thing in the courtyard; he could almost hold his hands up to her for warmth.

She doesn't breathe through her bud-like lips but through the double row of holes marching up her long white throat. The sound puts the man in mind of an ocean, waves rising and falling.

He turns his attention back to the girl. Like the other children, she wears only a light shift and gooseflesh covers her bare arms. Her black hair straggles across her forehead. The blood leaking from her swollen nose mixes with the rain and drips from her chin.

"A dispute over the chalk." If the Governess's breath is the ocean, then her voice is the shore it breaks on, a million diamond pebbles chiming and clattering. With her cane she indicates another corner of the courtyard and the children clustered there, all about a season old, like the girl herself. One boy, much bigger than the others, is snivelling and nursing a bruised jaw. "He tried to take it from her. She objected."

"Antisocial?"

"She gets along fine with the others, for the most part. Once she's finished with her..." The cane indicates the chalk drawings.

The man walks along the wall for another angle on them. The Governess keeps up, cane tapping, steel on slate.

"Family?"

"If she had any family who cared, she wouldn't be here," she says in her lovely voice.

"Claims?"

"The Choir has formally denied her a part. The other Powers made their choices weeks ago; the children have already gone. We'd begun to think the Library was sitting this season out."

"We were busy."

"So I hear," says the Governess.

As they watch, the girl adds a final flourish and stands. She trudges across the courtyard to the snivelling boy and holds out the chalk. He slaps it out of her hand and looks away. The girl shrugs, goes back to her drawing, sits on the wet flagstones looking at it.

The man begins walking in her direction, the Governess keeping pace.

“What does it mean?” he asks.

“Whatever it means, it’s to her alone.”

“But there’s a system?”

“Oh yes. She always begins with those spirals, then adds the angular things”—pointing with the cane—“then the connectors. Then elaborates from there. We assumed it was in the nature of an imaginary friend, only more...abstract. We were wrong?”

“You were exactly right. The symbols themselves don’t matter. We’re after a certain way of thinking...excuse me.”

The Governess doesn’t. Her cane blocks the man’s path, striking the flagstones hard enough that a couple of the children look up. He looks up at her too.

“Will she be safe?”

“Will she be safe here?” he replies.

“The Exile left its scars on a hundred worlds. Your own most of all. If it were to happen again—”

“If it happens again,” says the man, “no one’s going to be safe.”

He steps around the cane and the Governess doesn’t stop him. She watches as he squats beside the girl. She can’t hear what he says. The girl doesn’t react. The man reaches into his robe, produces a worn leather pouch. He loosens the drawstring and spills a handful of red dust onto the flagstones. The Governess shivers.

He draws in the dust with a finger, and the dust stirs around him. He spreads his hands to invite the girl to do the same, but she’s already copying the man’s symbols, then after the briefest pause she elaborates on them, adds her own. The dust begins to dance. She’s smiling.

“Poor child,” murmurs the Governess.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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