

MAGONIA

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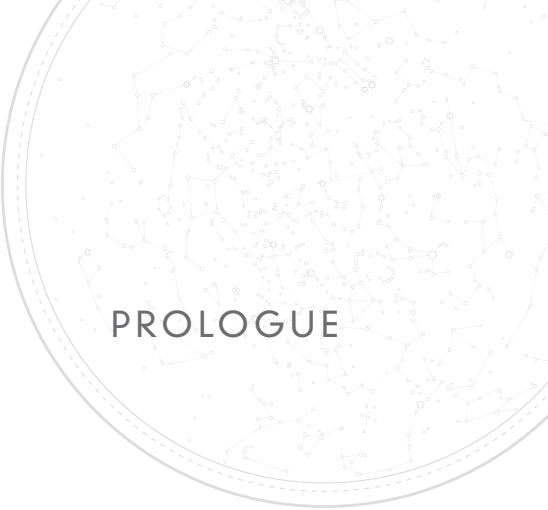
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First Edition

FOR CHINA

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PROLOGUE

I breathe in. I breathe out. The sky's full of clouds. A rope is looping down from above, out of the sky and down to earth. There is a woman's face looking at me, and all around us, hundreds upon hundreds of birds. The flock flows like water, surging up and into the air, black and gold and red, and everything is safe and cold, bright with stars and moon.

I'm tiny in comparison, and I'm not on the ground.

I know everyone has dreams of flying, but this isn't a dream of flying. It's a dream of floating, and the ocean is not water but wind.

I call it a dream, but it feels realer than my life.

My history is hospitals.

This is what I tell people when I'm in a mood to be combination funny and stressful, which is a lot of the time.

It's easier to have a line ready than to be forced into a conversation with someone whose face is showing "fake nice," "fake worry," or "fake interest." My preferred method is as follows: make a joke, make a half-apologetic/half-freaky face, and be out of the discussion in five seconds flat.

Aza: "Nothing really majorly wrong with me. Don't worry. I just have a history of hospitals."

Person in Question: "Er. Um. Oh. I'm so sorry to hear that. Or, wait, *glad*. You just said that nothing's really wrong with you! Glad!"

Aza (freaky face intensifying): "It's incredibly nice of you to ask."

Subtext: It isn't. Leave it.

People don't usually ask anything after that. Most are polite. My parents, my family, not so much, but the randoms? The substitute teacher who wonders why I'm coughing and having to leave the room—then having to go to the nurse's office—then

having to have a nice 911 call to summon an ambulance to spirit me back to my white linoleum homeland?

That sort of person doesn't typically want to remind me of things I no doubt already know. Which I very much do. Don't be stupid. Also, don't think I'm stupid.

This is not, like, *Little Women*. Beth and her nice, invalid Beth-ness have always made me puke. The way people imagined she wasn't dying. The way she blatantly was. In that kind of story, the moment someone decides to wrap you in blankets and you accidentally smile weakly, you're dead.

Hence, I try not to smile weakly, even if I feel weak, which I sometimes secretly or unsecretly do. I don't want to make myself into a catastrophic blanket-y invalid.

Bang, bang, you're dead. Close your eyes and go to bed.

Side note: *invalid*. Whoever invented that word, and made it the same word as not-valid? That person sucked.

So, right, the question of death comes up in my presence on a regular basis. Adults don't want to talk about it. Seriously, it's not as though I want to talk about it either. But other people my age do.

DEATH DEATH DEATH, everyone's thinking, like we're in our cars, driving slowly past accidents on the highway all day long. They're grossly fascinated.

Some of us, the ones actually dying, are maybe less fascinated than others. Some of us, maybe, would rather not get stuck in rooms where people are regularly talking about celebrity death-y things, whichever kind you want, the OD, the car crash, the mystery fall-apart . . .

People my age enjoy crying and speculating dramatically over how people our age could die. Take it from one who

knows. Take it from one whose role has been, for years, *The Girl I Knew Really Well Who Tragically Died One Day*.

Not that I've died yet. I am still totally here. Which is why all the artistic, goth morbidity is a bummer.

Adults want to talk about death way less than people my age do. Death is the Santa Claus of the adult world. Except Santa Claus in reverse. The guy who takes all the presents away. Big bag over the shoulder, climbing up the chimney carrying everything in a person's life, and taking off, eight-reindeered, from the roof. Sleigh loaded down with memories and wineglasses and pots and pans and sweaters and grilled cheese sandwiches and Kleenexes and text messages and ugly houseplants and calico cat fur and half-used lipstick and laundry that never got done and letters you went to the trouble of handwriting but never sent and birth certificates and broken necklaces and disposable socks with scuffs on the bottom from hospital visits.

And notes you kept on the fridge.

And pictures of boys you had crushes on.

And a dress that got worn to a dance at which you danced by yourself, before you got too skinny and too breathless to dance.

Along with, probably, though this isn't worthy of huge thinking, a soul or something.

Anyway, adults don't believe in Santa Claus. They try hard not to believe in Santa Claus in Reverse either.

At school, the whole rare-disease-impending-doom situation makes me freakishly intriguing. In the real world, it makes me a problem. Worried look, bang, nervous face, bang: "Maybe you should talk to someone about your feelings, Aza," along with a nasty side dish of what-about-God-what-about-therapy-what-about-antidepressants?

Sometimes also what-about-faith-healers-what-about-herbs-what-about-crystals-what-about-yoga? Have you tried yoga, Aza, I mean have you, because it helped this friend of a friend who was supposedly dying but didn't, due to downward dog?

No. I haven't tried yoga to cure my thing, because yoga isn't going to cure my thing. My thing is a Mystery and not just a Mystery, but Bermuda—no sun, only Triangle.

Unknowable. Unsolvable.

I take handfuls of drugs every morning, even though no one is entirely sure what the thing that's wrong with me actually is. I'm rare like that.

Rare, like bloodwork and tests and things reaching down my throat. Rare like MRIs and X-rays and sonograms and swabs and never any clear diagnosis.

Rare, like my disease is standing onstage in a tuxedo belting out a torch song that has a chorus along the lines of "*Baby, you're the only one for me.*" And then the disease just stands there, waiting for me to walk into its arms and give up resisting.

Rare, as in: so far, I'm the only person on earth who's been diagnosed with this particular precision awesomeness.

Maybe I sound like I'm exaggerating. No. My disease is so rare it's named *Azaray Syndrome*.

After me, Aza Ray Boyle.

Which is perverse. I don't want a doppelgänger in disease form, some weird medical case immortality, which means medical students'll be saying my name for the next hundred years. No one asked ME when the lab published a paper in *Nature* and gave this disease my name. I would've said no. I'd like to have named my disease myself: the Jackass, or maybe something ugly, such as Elmer or Clive.

None of the above topics, the death and dying topics, are things I actually feel inclined to talk about. I'm not depressed. I'm just fucked up. I have been since I can remember. There's not a version of my life that *isn't* fucked up.

Yes. I'm allowed to say that word if I feel like it, and I do. I feel like swearing about this. It's me in this body, thank you, snarled and screwed up and not going to make it; let's not go on about things we can't revise. I'm an edited version of a real live girl, or at least, that's what I say when I want to tell you something and I'd rather not talk about it but have to get it out of the way so we can move on to better topics.

Yeah, I totally know I don't look well. No, you don't need to look concerned. I know you wish you could help. You can't. I know you're probably a nice person, but seriously? All I really want to talk to strangers about is anything other than this thing.

The facts of it, though? Basic, daily of Elmer /Clive/the Jack-ass/Azaray Syndrome? I have to live in rooms kept free of dust. This has been true almost since forever. When I was born, I was healthy and theoretically perfect. Almost exactly a year later, out of nowhere, my lungs stopped being able to understand air.

My mom came into the room one morning and found me having a seizure. Because my mom is my mom, she had the presence of mind to give me mouth-to-mouth and breathe for me. She kept me alive until they could get me to the hospital. Where they also—barely—kept me going, by making a machine do the breathing. They gave me drugs and did things to make the oxygen density of the air less, rather than more. It got a little better.

I mean, a lot better, given that here I still am. Just not better enough. Early on, I slept for what felt like centuries inside a

shell of clear plastic and tubing. My history is made of opening my eyes in rooms where I didn't fall asleep, the petting of paramedics, the red and white spinning shriek of sirens. That's a thing that just is, if you're the lucky girl who lives with Clive.

I look weird and my inner workings are weird, and everyone's always like, huh, never seen *that* shit before. Mutations all over my body, inside, outside, everywhere but my brain, which, as far as anyone can tell, is normal.

All the brain chemical-imbalance misery that some people have? I don't. I don't wake up riddled with apocalypse panic, and I don't feel compelled to do anything in the category of biting my own fingers off, or drinking myself into a coma. In the scheme of things, having a brain that mostly obeys your instructions is not nothing.

Otherwise, I'm Aza-the-Exhibition. I'm the World's Fair. (All I want, ALL I WANT, is for there to be a *World's Unfair Exposition*, preferably in a city near where I live. Booths full of disappointments, huge exhibits of structures built to fail. No Oh-My-God-the-Future-Will-Be-Amazing Exhibits, but the reverse. No flying cars. Cars that squinch along like inchworms.)

I try not to get involved with my disease, but it's persuasive. When it gets ahold of me, the gasping can put me on the floor, flopping and whistling, something hauled up from a lake bottom. Sometimes I wish I could go back to that bottom and start over somewhere else. As *something* else.

Secretly, as in only semi-secretly, as in this is a thing I say loudly sometimes—I think I wasn't meant to be human. I don't work right.

And now I'm almost sixteen. One week to go.

School Nurse: "You're a miracle! You're *our* miracle!"

Aza Ray Boyle: (retching noises)

Because I'm still alive I'm thinking about having a party. There's that thing about sixteen. That big-deal factor. Everything changes and suddenly you're right in the world, wearing a pink dress and kissing a cute boy or doing a dancey-prancy musical number.

I clarify, that's what happens in movies. In this life? I don't know what happens from here. Nothing I majorly want to think about.

Who would I invite? EVERYONE. Except the people I don't like. I know enough people to categorize the group of people I know as everyone, but I like maybe five or six of them, total. I could invite doctors, in which case the group would radically grow. I said this to my parents a couple of days ago, and now they hover, considering my questionable attitude. Which they've been considering since forever.

But I ask you, wouldn't it be worse if I were perfect? My imperfections make me less mournable.

Nobody enjoys birthdays. Everyone in the house is nervous. Even the plants look nervous. We have one that curls up. It isn't allowed to share a room with me, but sometimes I visit it and touch its leaves and it cringes. It's curled up now into a tight little ball of Leaves Me the Hell Alone.

Get it?

Leaves? (Oh, haha. Oh very haha.)

High school. First bell. Walking down the middle hall. Past a billion lockers. Late for class. No excuse, except for the one I always have.

I raise my fist to bump with Jason Kerwin, also late, who doesn't acknowledge me with his face, just as I don't

acknowledge him with mine. Only fists. We've known each other since we were five. He's my best friend.

Jason's an exception to all rules of parental worry re: Hanging With Humans Other Than Parents, because he knows every possible drill of emergency protocol.

He's allowed to accompany me places my parents don't want to go. Or *do* want to go, but don't want to spend hours at. Aquariums, natural history museum bug collections and taxidermy dioramas, rare bookstores where we have to wear masks and gloves if we want to touch, back rooms full of strange butterflies, bone and life-size surgical model collections discovered on the internet.

Et cetera.

Jason never talks about death, unless it's in the context of morbid cool things we might want to hunt the internet for. *Aza Ray and the Great Failure of Her Physical Everything?* Jason leaves that filth alone.

Second bell, still in the hall, and I raise one casual relevant finger at Jenny Green. Pink streak in her hair, elbows sharper than daggers, tight jeans costing roughly the equivalent of a not un-nice used car. Jenny has pissed me off lately by being. I mean, not by basic being. Mean being. We have a silent war. She doesn't deserve words at this point, though she called me some a couple of days ago, in a frenzy of not-allowed. Calling the sick girl names? Please. We all know it's not okay.

I kind of, semi, have to respect her for the transgression. It's a little bit badass, to do the thing no one else has ever dared do. Lately, there's been this contagious idea that I resemble a hungry, murdery girl ghost from a Japanese horror movie, so Jenny came to school in blue lipstick and white powder. To mock me.

Jenny smiles and blows me a kiss full of poison. I catch it and blow it back through my today very indigo lips, thoroughly creeping her. I give her a little shudder gasp. If ghost girl is going to be my deal, I might as well use it to my advantage. She stares at me as though I've somehow played unfair, and takes off at a repulsed run for her class.

Insert meaningless pause at locker. Slow walk. Peer into classroom windows, through the wire mesh they put in there to discourage people like me from spying on people like them.

My little sister, Eli, senses me staring, and looks up from her already deep-in-lecture algebra. I rock out briefly in the hallway, free, fists up, at liberty like no one else is this time of morning. Sick-girl privilege. Eli rolls her eyes at me, and I walk on, coughing only a little bit, manageable.

Seven minutes late to English and it's Mr. Grimm, eyebrow up. *The Perpetually Tardy Mizz Aza Ray*, his name for me, and yeah, his name is Grimm, really. Blind bat eyes, thick-frame glasses, skinny tie like a hipster, but that look's not working for him.

Mr. Grimm's muscle-bound, though he never rolls up his sleeves. He has the kind of arms that strain against fabric, which fact tells me he has no actual life, and just veers between being a teacher and drinking protein shakes.

He'd seem as though he belongs in the PE end of the building, except that when he opens his mouth he's nerdtastic. I also think he has tattoos, which he's tried to cover up in various ways. Pancake makeup. Long sleeves. Not too smart to get a skull/ship/naked girl (?) permanently marked on you. You have to button your cuffs all the time.

Mr. Grimm's new this year. Youngish, if you can call thirty

young. But the tattoo is interesting. I can't tell exactly what it is because I've never seen the full extent of it.

It makes me want tattoos. I want one that's worse than whatever his is.

He's got a constant complaint going that I could work up to my potential if I'd only pay attention instead of burying my face in a book while he lectures. He can't lament too successfully, considering that I am one of, oh, what, four people in this school who read.

And I know that's trite. Yes, I'm a reader. Kill me. I could tell you I was raised in the library and the books were my only friends, but I didn't do that, did I? Because I have mercy. I'm neither a genius nor a kid destined to become a wizard. I'm just me. I read stuff. Books are not my only friends, but we're friendly. So there.

I don't need to pay attention to Mr. Grimm's lecture. I read it already, whatever it is, in this case, *Ye Olde Man vs. Ye Olde Sea*.

Obsessed guy. Big fish. Variety of epic fails. I have to wonder how many generations of sophomores have been oppressed by stories about this same damn thing.

Why? Which of us is or will one day be engaged in a death struggle with a big fish? What is the rationale?

I've read *Moby-Dick*, another version of Obsessed Dude, Big Fish, and taxonomies of sorrow and lost dreams.

I know, whale = not fish. Mammalian cetacean. Still, whales have always been the prototype for Big Fish Stories, which makes all kinds of sense given how wrong humanity always is about everything.

I even read the *Moby-Dick* chapters that no one reads. I could tell you anything you need to know about flensing. Trust

me on this, though, you don't want that information.

Ask me about *Moby-Dick*, Mr. Grimm. Go on. Do it.

He did do that once, about a month ago, thinking I was lying about reading it. I gave a filibuster-quality speech about suck and allegories and oceans and uncatchable dreams that I then merged into a discussion of pirate-themed movies, plank-walking, and female astronauts. Mr. Grimm was both impressed and aggravated. I got extra credit, which I don't need, and then detention for interrupting, for which punishment, in truth, I respect him.

I glance over at Jason Kerwin, who is ensconced in his own book. I eye the title. *Kepler's Dream: With the Full Text and Notes of Somnium, Sive Astronomia Lunaris*. It looks old and semi-nasty, recycled hardcover library copy. Big picture of the surface of the moon on the front.

No clue: me.

I slink my hand over to his desk and snatch it to read the flaps. The first science-fiction novel, it says, written in the 1620s. An astronomer tells a story of a journey to the moon, but also he attempts to encode in the novel a defense of Copernican theory, because he's looking for a way to talk about it without getting executed for heresy. Only later did people realize all the fantasy bits are pretty much Kepler's code for astronomy and equations.

I thumb. There's a flying alien witch.

Awesome. Kind of my kind of book. Except that I'd prefer it if I could write one of my own. This is always the problem with things containing imaginary languages and mysteries. I want to be the cryptographer. I'm not even close to being a cryptographer, though. I'm just what used to be called "an enthusiast." Or maybe a hobbyist. I learn as much as I can learn in like fifteen

minutes of internet search, and then I fake, fast and furious.

People therefore think I'm smarter than they are. It gives me room to do whatever I want, without them surrounding me and asking questions about things. It keeps people from inquiring about the whole dying situation. I invoke factoid privilege.

"Give," Jason whispers. Mr. Grimm shoots us a *shut-up* look.

I consider how to pacify my parents about the birthday party. I think they have visions of roller-skating and clown and cake and balloons—like the party they had for me when I was five.

That time, no one showed up beyond two girls forced by their mothers, and Jason, who crashed it. Not only did he walk a mile uninvited to my birthday party, he did it in formal dress: a full alligator costume left over from Halloween. Jason didn't bother to tell his moms where he was going, and so they called the police, convinced he'd been kidnapped.

When the squad cars showed up outside the roller rink, and the cops came in, it became immediately clear that Jason and I were destined to be friends. He was roller-skating in the alligator suit, spinning elegantly, long green tail dragging behind when they demanded that he show himself.

That party was not all bad.

For birthday sixteen, though, I'm drawing a better vision in my notebook: a dead clown, a gigantic layer cake from which I burst, a hot air balloon that arrives in the sky above me. From the hot air balloon's basket dangles a rope. I climb. I fly away. Forever.

How much pain would this solve? So much. Except for the pain of the dead clown, who died not according to his own plan, but mine.

Apparently, Mr. Grimm hears me snort.

“Care to enlighten us, Miss Ray?”

Why do they always use this phrase? Rest of the class is taking a quiz. They look up, relieved to be legitimately distracted. Jason smirks. Nothing like trouble to make a day pass faster.

“Do you really want enlightening?” I ask, because I’m working it today. “I was thinking about dying.”

He gives me an exasperated look. I’ve used this line before in Mr. Grimm’s classroom. It’s a beautiful dealbreaker. Teachers melt like wet witches when I bring it up. I kind of enjoy Mr. Grimm, though, because he sees through me. Which means he’s actually looking. Which is, in itself, weird. No one looks at me too closely. They’re afraid my unsustainability is going to mess them up. That plastic bubble I lived in when I was little? It’s still there, but invisible now. And made out of something harder than plastic.

“Dying, in the context of which literary work, Aza?” he asks. No mercy.

“How about *The Tempest*?” I say, because there it is, on the syllabus, looming. Everything is ocean this semester. “Drowned twins.”

“The drowned twins who don’t really drown are in *Twelfth Night*, not *The Tempest*,” he says. “Try it again, Ray.”

Embarrassing. I’m at a loss, unfortunately.

“Play it again, Sam?” I say, illegally using Mr. Grimm’s first name. Then I embark on my traditional method: one-fact-that-makes-them-think-you-have-all-the-facts. You can learn the oddest little items from a wiki page.

“Except that that’s a misquote. ‘Play it, Sam,’ it should be, but people want it more romantic and less order-givey.”

Grimm sighs. “Have you even seen *Casablanca*? Ten more minutes till pencils up. I’d do the quiz if I were you, Aza. And don’t call me Sam. It’s Samuel. Only people who don’t know me call me Sam.”

He’s won, because he’s right. I so haven’t seen *Casablanca*. That fact was all I had. I cede the field and pick up my pencil to navigate old man and marlin.

Samuel. Who names their kid Samuel these days? I consider making a remark about pen names: Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain, and *Life on the Mississippi*, recently read, but I don’t. Last time we did this it became a duel, and there’s something about my chest right now that makes me uncertain whether I can properly duel without coughing.

There’s a storm kicking up outside, and trees are whacking against the windows. The blinds are rattling like crazy, because this building is a leaky, ancient thing.

Jason flips a note onto my desk. Mr. Grimm is vigilant about phones buzzing, so we go low-tech. *Giant squid*, it says. *Tomorrow, five o’clock. Your house.*

We were supposed to watch the footage a couple of nights ago, but I was coughing so hard I had to go to the hospital. Which sucked.

I had to have a scope and when I revived all the way from the anesthetic, the surgeon was looking at me with the usual whoa, never seen that before look.

Mutant, I scribbled on the notepad they’d given me in case of complaint.

The surgeon looked at me, and then laughed. “No,” he said. “You’re a special young lady. I’ve never seen vocal cords like yours before. You could be a singer.”

If I could breathe, I wrote, and he had the grace to look mortified.

In solidarity, Jason didn't watch the squid footage without me, though he attempted to convince them to put it on in the ER. He couldn't get permission from the nurses. They're hardcore in there.

Speaking of ocean and big fish in it. This is the first footage of a giant squid ever taken in which the squid is swimming around in its own environment. Imagine this sea-monster unbelievable thing with eyeballs the size of a person's head, and a body and tentacles twenty-five feet long. As long as a school bus. Now, realize that no one's ever seen one moving around down there before. It's a pretty huge miracle, and if this exists, maybe there are things in Loch Ness too. Maybe there are things everywhere, all over the place. Maybe there's . . . hope?

Because every time someone finds a new animal, or a new amazing thing on earth, it means we haven't broken everything yet.

Up till now there's only been video of really dead or really sick giant squid, but a scientist went down in a submersible and found one and filmed it.

Someone Jason knows has a hack on Woods Hole, the oceanographers in Massachusetts, and he caught wind of expedition communications. He snatched the video from a server four days ago, and hasn't stopped crowing since.

I look over at Jason to smile at him, but he's deep in his book. I lower my head to get down to the quiz, when out the classroom window, over the top of the iguana terrarium, I see something in the sky.

It's only for a second but it's weirdly familiar, something I

dreamed, or saw in a picture, maybe.

A mast. And a sail.

More than one sail—two, three. Tall-ship style. Big, white, flapping. And out of the storm comes the prow of a ship.

Which . . .

I've hallucinated before, but nothing in this category. I read something recently about mirages in the sky, *fata morgana*, that's what they're called.

Someone once saw Edinburgh hanging in the sky over Liverpool for half an hour. But what's this—this boat reflecting from? We're inland. Deep inland.

I reach out and tug Mr. Grimm's sleeve. He looks at me, irritated. I point.

He looks, and for a moment, he doesn't move, staring hard out the window. Then he takes off his glasses and glances again.

"Shit," he says.

"What?" I say. "You see it? Do you see it?"

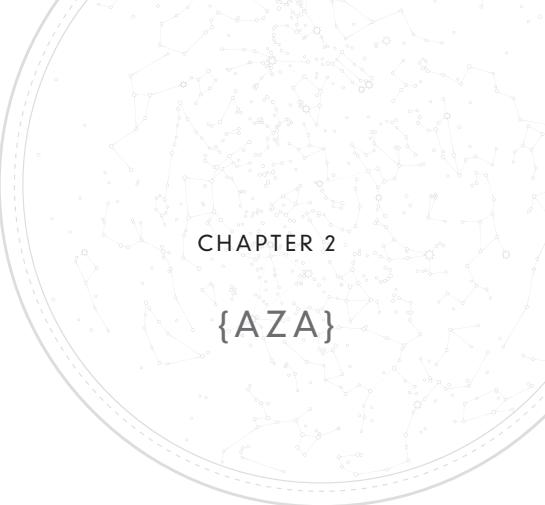
He shakes his head.

"Storm," he says, and yanks at the blinds.

As the blinds clang to the bottom of the sill and the room goes back to just being a room, I hear a whistle, long and high. Not exactly a whistle. More than a whistle.

Let me correct that. *Much* more than a whistle.

Aza, it says, the whistle. *Aza, are you out there?*



CHAPTER 2

{AZA}

None of this is real, Aza Ray Boyle, it is not real.

That's what I'm muttering to myself.

This is a new one, this kind of bad. The kind having to do with my brain.

My mom looks at me over the kitchen table, rumpling up her blond-gray ponytail and wrinkling her forehead.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You don’t sound okay. Remember last time you hallucinated? You had a fever.”

Once she looks at you, you’re done. There’s no room for fake around my mother. She’s spent all day in her lab. She’s an immunologist, and most nights she’s out late and involved with mice.

Today, she’s home relatively early, eleven thirty. Her experiments have been miserable recently. She has no tolerance for the thing she refers to as “flimflam,” in this case, me telling her I’m fine and don’t need to go to the doctor.

“Greta,” I say. “I’m as fine as I ever am.”

“Greta,” she says. “Is not what you call me, Aza Ray.”

“You don’t have to call me *daughter*,” I say. “You’re allowed to call me by *my* name.”

She doesn't even dignify that, but starts calibrating dosages, then sticks a thermometer into my mouth.

"Okay, *daughter*," she says, and smiles at me as though I deserve it. My mom has a smile that is simultaneously loving and blistering. The dominant emotion is just a matter of degrees.

So—I'm getting away with nothing in the realm of faking fine.

"You're a hundred and two," she announces. "So, there's your skyship."

I usually have a fever to some extent or another. I'm used to it. Clammy or boiling. Whatever. My mom wraps a blanket around my shoulders. I shed it as fast as I can. (Death-foreshadowing blanket? No, thank you.) I tug my particular million-pocketed hoodie on. The snick of the zipper is not allowed to remind me of a body bag.

"Take a breather, Aza," says my mom.

I give her a look. "Breather? Really?"

"Take a breather on your freak-out, because freaking out helps nothing, and here's a pill," and even as she says it, the pill's in my mouth, and I swear, I'm apparently a dog, because she gets it down my throat before I notice she's literally pilling me. Other hand has a glass of water at the ready, so bam, I'm washing the pill down.

That's Greta for you. She's quick. What's the point in resisting?

Besides, the pills seem to help.

They said, when I was two, that I'd be lucky to make it to six. When I was six, they said I'd be lucky to make it to ten. When I was ten, people were bewildered, and so they said sixteen.

And here comes sixteen, moving swiftly toward us.

So now, when I'm rushed to the hospital, my family has a full procedure to deal with things we're unwilling to talk about. We actually wrote them down, just in case. My mom thinks this will make it somehow less problematic, the whole major-concerns-over-dying thing.

I have, for example, a written apology from her for the time she spanked me when I was five and I gasped and wheezed my way into a brief coma. I forgive those things. They aren't even things. But she insists I have to carry the paper if I need to go to the hospital anyway.

My mom has a written apology from me for the entire category of brutal sarcasm. Eli has one entitled *Excessive Bitchiness, Hogging of Parental Attention by Repeatedly Being Sick Unto Death but Not Actually Dying*, and Variant Category: *Theft of Clothing*.

The one to my dad runs more along the lines of *Things I Wasn't Very Interested In, Parts 1-36*.

My mom's been—for the past many years—doing a side project along with her normal work. She's breeding a mouse, a kind of super mouse, which in theory will be invulnerable to various inhalable environmental toxins. It's based on an original badass Chicagoan lab mouse, which had a breathing mutation. The plan is that the new mouse breed will have a mutation that makes them able to flip their nostrils closed and reduce their need for air, at least temporarily, combined with some various invulnerabilities to all sorts of plague vectors.

The mouse is meant to be a drug-developing step. It's supposed to help drug companies end up with a drug that might make people who can't breathe normal air very well figure out how to deal with it better. People like me, obviously. But there

are other applications, which at least have made people willing to fund the research. If someone, for example, sets off a bomb with nerve gas? This mouse should be able to react fairly calmly, for an hour or so, which may or may not give the gas time to disperse. Originally my mom tried to make a joke about war-mice, riffing on the dormouse from *Alice in Wonderland*.

War-mouse. Joke fail.

My mom isn't a supporter of war anything. She never wanted to do military applications for her research. Because obviously, for everyone you'd protect with a war-mouse drug (civilians, kids, teachers, anyone who is stuck in a war zone and at the mercy of a chemical attack) you're also creating a version in which the attacking soldiers could potentially make themselves invulnerable to poisons they were pumping into the civilian air.

Which is to say, my mom is in massive conflict all day long. All she wanted was to create some kind of asthma drug, done large, something that would help the entire category of lung problems, emphysema, asthma, Azaray. But instead, she's stuck developing the war-mice.

Eli's also at the table, snipping off the bottom one-eighth inch of her hair with a pair of scissors she's sharpened herself on the knife sharpener. She's precise. I don't know how she manages it, but when she's done, the whole thing hangs like a smooth blond sheet of paper—her ends impeccably straight.

We look nothing alike. My hair's black and knotted and my eyes, though blue, are navy blue with some gold and red swimming beneath the surface. Eli's are the color of a barely-there sky. If this were a fairy tale, she'd straight up be the good sister, and I'd be the wicked one.

"Item One," Eli says, without bothering to acknowledge my

elder-sister superiority. “You heard thunder. We *all* heard thunder. I heard it from algebra. Item Two. You saw clouds. Which we all also saw. It was a storm. Item Three. You hallucinated a ship, because you’re basically side-effecting and fevery.

“There’s no way the storm spoke to you,” she concludes. “Also, there was no loudspeaker yelling your name. Just FYI.”

Possibly I got somewhat high-pitched in Mr. Grimm’s class. Possibly a scene was caused. Possibly I am known for drama. Possibly Eli is known for her amazing unhysterical nature. Even though she’s fourteen and has every right to be out of control with wrath and what used to be known as humors.

No. Even-keeled, Eli. She got her period last year and was like, *Right, fine*. She went straight to ballet class in a leotard, and there were no problems.

I myself have never gotten my period, which I’m actually not too upset about. Postpone the misery, I say. It’s because I’m too skinny, and have no luck gaining weight.

Clarification: by “too skinny,” I don’t mean Sexy Goth Girl in Need of Flowery Dress and Lipstick to Become Girl Who Was Always Secretly Pretty but We Never Saw It Till Now. I mean: dead girl walking. Corpse-style skin, and sometimes when I cough, it’s way gross. Just saying.

I’m not sure what happened today either. My dad had to come and fetch me from the principal’s office after I screamed a couple of words regarding liberty and self-determination and window blinds. Mr. Grimm gave me a look, and told me I knew where to go. Nurse’s office or principal’s office. I rotate.

My dad met me, sympathetic even as we were both chided. There is an attempt being made to treat me not like a freak, but like everyone else. Meaning no special anything.

Beyond the special everything already in place.

For example, there's a buddy system, which means there's presumably always someone sideways-watching my progress through the halls in case I fall down choking. I have no particular faith in this fail-safe. Couldn't tell you who was on Aza Duty today.

Lecture mode, though, is actually relatively typical.

Principal: "Ms. Ray, you know better than to create a disruption in the classroom."

I want to say, "Define 'know.'"

Because sometimes I find myself doing things I "know" better than to be doing, but that doesn't stop me. The activities in the corners of my brain call to me, and they're strong. On a daily basis, I have to actively not think of them, if I want to retain focus.

In eighth grade, I lost vigilance, and an hour later, I'd turned my copy of *Grapes of Wrath* into a circus of a hundred and thirty-four origami animals, ostriches and elephants, train cars with actual wheels, acrobats.

There was a bad period in third grade when it was all I could do to leave the aquarium alone. I kept feeling sure the fish were looking at me. And then again in sixth, when my classroom had a canary. That time, I swear, it *did* talk to me. Not in words. It just sat on its perch, staring hard at me and singing, incredibly loudly, so loudly that it actually had to be moved to another class, because it disturbed everyone.

Birds. I've never not had trouble with birds. I'm the person who gets dive-bombed by whatever's flying by. I wear hats when I'm outside.

Anyway, principal's office.

Aza: "I saw something weird in the sky."

Aza's Dad: "I apologize for my daughter. Her medication—"

Aza (disliking hallucination implications): "No, you're right. I got bored. So I made it up. Leave it."

Principal (eyeballing to see if he's being mocked): "Just no more, Ms. Ray. No more of your antics."

Antics is pronounced like a dirty word.

Upon extrication from the principal's office, I pressed my face to the window in the stairwell to try to see whatever it was I'd seen before. But no, nothing. It was gone.

Now my dad looks exhausted. He cooked. Tonight, some sort of noodle casserole with desperation sauce. Peanut butter involvement. He swears it's legitimate Thai, but there's no macaroni in Thai food. Nor jerky. I'm pretty sure there's jerky in there.

"She did see *something*," my dad tells my mom.

My mom looks at my dad, who regularly gets into trouble for believing things that defy logic. He's a passionate imaginer. My mom and Eli are the house realists. My dad finally shrugs and turns back to the stove.

"She hallucinated something," my mom says. "Not saw."

"She has a *vivid imagination*," Eli says, and snickers at the stupid phrase, which has been used on me for as long as I can remember.

"Whatever," I say. "It's over. Leave it."

I've already been out again, staring up at the sky—which is dark, plus a skinny slice of moon—and there's nothing whatsoever unreasonable about it. It's just itself, the sky, and there, the North Star.

I like the sky. It's rational to me in a way that life isn't. Looking

at it doesn't suck the way you might think it would, given all the dying-girl-stares-at-heaven possibilities. I don't think of the sky as any kind of heaven item. I think of it as a bunch of gases and faraway echoes of things that used to be on fire.

The proper name for the North Star is Cynosure, named after a nymph. It's a *scip steorra*, "ship star," for navigation. In some of the old stories (give it up for the many peculiar and awesome philosophers of the 1600s—in this case, Jacques Gaffarel, and no, I can't explain how I happened upon him, except that at some point, deep in the library, I saw a circular diagram of the sky, and the stars looked like breeding fruit flies in a petri dish, and I was So Obsessed), the patterns of the stars form letters. Celestial alphabets. Writing that gets rewritten as the earth moves. If you look at the sky that way, it's this massive shifting poem, or maybe a letter, first written by one author, and then, when the earth moves, annotated by another. So I stare and stare until, one day, I can read it.

When I was little, I tried to sneak out at night to get my fill of the stars. I had a plan involving bedroom window, drainpipe, up instead of down. My mom busted me as I was dragging the blanket onto the shingles, but she surrendered and took me up at four in the morning, accompanied by all kinds of just-in-case breathing equipment. We looked at the sky together, wrapped in my comforter, with a thermos, a flashlight, and a book of constellations. We just sat there in silence, and periodically, my mom would show me one of the star pictures and explain its meaning.

So when I complain? I complain with this context. My parents are the kind of parents people wish they had. They had no problem setting up a lamp with a shade poked full of holes that

project the entire Milky Way onto my bedroom ceiling when I turn the light on.

Imagine if you could see all the stars we can't see anymore. If the lights all got turned off, all over the world, the sky would be blazing and crazy, the way my lamp makes it look.

I don't know how to navigate by any of the stars, but I read once about someone who took on the entire ocean on a little handmade raft, from South America to Polynesia. The *Kon-Tiki*, his raft was called. He was a Norwegian explorer named Thor.

I kind of wish my name were Thor. It implies warrior-ness. But, no. Aza. Named after what? No one.

I didn't even start out being called Aza Ray. This is the name they gave me after the breathing problems started. Before that, I was called Heyward. (Heyward was a great-uncle. Eli is named after a great-uncle too. I'm not sure what's wrong with my parents. Could they not name us after our aunts?)

I'm still Heyward on official forms, which, Tell Not a Soul. But—

Mom: "That day, after we thought we were going to lose you, we suddenly knew your name was Aza. You were meant to be named after the full spectrum, *A* to *Z*. It was perfect."

Dad: "It just came to us. It was weirdly spiritual. We figured, who defies that?"

This Aza-ness, though, contributed totally to my freakitude. For part of grade school, I went by Ava, because some teacher screwed it up, and I let her. Eventually, I was busted in a parent-teacher conference.

Aza. For years, I thought that if I had to be a palindrome, make me *kuulilennuteetunneliluuk*. Which is the Estonian

word for the part of the gun a bullet whizzes through on its way to kill you.

If you're gonna go there, go there all the way. Right?

Instead, I'm the alphabet. Depending on your worldview and knowledge of the history of the alphabet, there could also be a silent & in there. The ampersand used to be the twenty-seventh letter. You'd recite your alphabet and at the end, you'd say X, Y, Z, &. So if you're doing my name, it's an alphabet loop, and that means that between Z and A, you get to add in an & too. Az(&)a.

There's an awesome thing about having that & in my name, as follows: the symbol itself is the Latin word for "and," as in *et*, with its two letters twisted together. So, there's an invisible extraterrestrial in my name.

Jason and I discovered this five years ago and we were obsessed with my internal ET.

I mean, how could you not be? "Phone home" and all of that.

Do you see how I'm making this awesome and not just weird? Do you give me credit? This makes me feel slightly better some days. Other days, not so much.

Today? Today sucks.

There's a rattle in my chest right now, and I'm pretending there isn't, but something about the misery of maybelikelyprettydefinitely hallucinating again, something about the fact that I'm a test case for every new drug the market invents, puts me into such a miserable place that before I know it I'm sitting at the kitchen table with my entire family, crying my eyes out, and coughing simultaneously.

They pack me off to the shower, where I sit on a stool in the steam, naked and bitter, inhaling water and trying to forget

about the ship I saw, the words yelled out of the sky, trying to forget about everything, including sixteenth birthdays and parents and sadness.

“You know you’re just special, baby,” my mom tells me as she’s closing my bedroom door. “We’re in this with you. You’re not alone. We love you.”

“Even if I die?” I say, because I am weak. “Will you still love me even if I die?”

My mom stands in the doorway. I see her trying to calm herself down enough to answer me. I can see her wanting to say “You’re not going to die,” but she doesn’t let herself, because that would be full-throttle lying.

She’s making herself meet me in this stupid messed-up body that has not enough time and not enough stability. Greta’s gripping my doorframe hard, but her face says, *Don’t worry*. She swallows, and then smiles at me.

“Even if you die,” she says. “Okay? We’ll love you forever and forever. Until the end of time.”

Because I feel very very shitty, I think about saying “You won’t. When people die, you forget about them eventually. You have to. Time passes. Nothing’s *that* important,” but I don’t say it.

My mom walks away, quietly.

She thinks I don’t hear her crying in the hallway for an hour after I’m supposed to be asleep.

She thinks I don’t hear her start the car and drive back to the lab because that’s all she knows how to do, the slow-research fix, inventing a cure for something no one even understands.

I’d like my parents to not have to be constantly thinking about me and my issues. I have a vision of my mom and dad at a

beach, drinking things with umbrellas in them.

We've never been to a beach. They've never been on a vacation by themselves, because: me.

So now I'm thinking halfheartedly about hitchhiking to some other city. Or stealing the car and driving there. I maybe-semi-kind-of-know how to drive. I learned three months ago, my dad beside me in the passenger seat, and my mom in the backseat, and both of them swearing they trusted me, even as I crashed into our garbage cans.

My Mom: "Don't worry. Nobody ever died at two miles an hour."

My Dad: "Snails?"

My Mom: "Lemurs."

My Dad: "Shrews. Wait. How fast do shrews move?"

My Mom: "Shrews move incredibly fast. They're predators. They take emergency ten-second naps, and the rest of the time, they hunt. You lose."

My Dad (grinning): "You win."

Me: "Um. Should I start the car again?"

I haven't actually gotten my license. But I know how to drive at top speed, because they showed me that, too, in the middle of the night, illegal on the highway, far out of town. I've never done it alone, but I did it with my parents. I drove really, really fast.

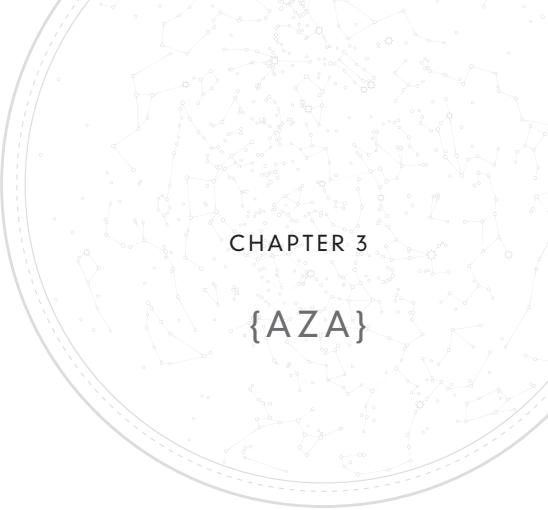
If I could drive really fast to another town, I could die there. Possibly in a hotel. And save everyone the catastrophe of watching me go.

Eli, I think. No matter what I do, this is going to utterly disaster her.

And all night, I'm thinking about how whatever I heard

coming out of the sky, it wasn't English, and it wasn't even really words. But it was familiar. I felt it in my bones, in the strangest way.

I felt like something was ringing me like a bell.



CHAPTER 3

{AZA}

I wake up at 4:30 a.m., sweating, panicked, heart pounding, coughing. My skin feels tight enough that I'm not sure it's not ripping. I walk shakily to the bathroom and look in the mirror. I look like me. The in-pain version.

I dream for the rest of the night, weird faces, and feathers, and I keep feeling smothered, as though something's pressing against my mouth and nose, and like there's something in my lungs. I wake up again, and it's seven. The sun's rising, and I'm convincing myself not to freak out.

I can't get rid of the feeling of my skin pinching too close to my bones, snagging on itself. My mouth feels weird too. My cough's epically worse than it was last night.

So, no school. Instead, doctor, where I put on my own backless white gown, with name embroidered—small perks—and my own slippers.

I've been known to pretend things about these events. Usually, it's the Black and White Ball. Truman Capote. My backless white is a gown constructed of silk and petticoat, and maybe some nice netting made of Audrey Hepburn's soul. (Audrey was invited, but did not attend.) Except that at that famously

glamorous party, I don't think anyone's gown was bottomless. No joy like the feeling of frozen upper thighs against an examining table.

This is a children's hospital, though, so there are things worse than me. I've seen curtains pulled shut suddenly, and on the other side the unmistakable sound of parents sobbing. I've seen the Make-A-Wish people roaming the hallways, costumed and ready for action, and sick kids looking like the world has flipped over and given them everything they ever wanted at the last possible moment.

What they want, inevitably, turns out to be things made of trying to be the same as everyone else. Once I saw a certain floppy-haired teenage singing idol in red leather pants shambling his way down the hallway to make someone's wish come true. A while later, I saw him leave, looking brain-broken.

Classic mistake: he'd shown up convinced he'd make the blind see and the dying live. It doesn't work that way. Famous people aren't magic. Despite their thoughts to the contrary.

A kid comes tearing around the corner, hairless and bleating like some kind of very hungry, quite large baby bird. He's chasing a clown, though, not running from a doctor, so it's not terrible.

The clown pauses in my exam room doorway and juggles her rainbow pom-poms. The three-year-old patient claps his hands wildly and looks at me with huge, excited eyes. Despite my bad mood, I end up smiling too.

Even though this is blatantly in violation of my rules against befriending fellow victims of the unimaginable, by the time my doctor arrives, I have the kid in my lap, and the clown is alternately blowing soap bubbles, and playing "Over the Rainbow"

on a harmonica. Not a good song choice, in my opinion, but one I've regularly been exposed to over the years. Some people think it's comforting to imagine being flung over a rainbow when you die, grabbed by your ankles by a bluebird, and swung into the void.

I mean, fine. There are obviously more upsetting possibilities. The kid's humming happily along. Neither of us is the worst thing that could happen. We're walking, talking, and coughing almost like regular humans.

Dr. Sidhu arrives and the clown carries the kid off into the labyrinth of hospital. My doctor begins her usual procedures of chest knocking and listening, as though she's a neighbor trying to spy through a locked door.

Except that Dr. Sidhu is the kind of neighbor who can see through the walls. Her face doesn't change expression. It's the not changing that tells me something's wrong.

"Huh," she says.

"What do you mean, 'huh'?" I ask.

I've known Dr. Sidhu my whole life. She never says "huh." And this is my body we're talking about. My organs are in strange places.

There's a theory that things in my chest cavity got shifted during that early period of really, really not being able to breathe. One of my lungs, for example, is tilted far toward the center of my chest. My ribs are more flexible than they should be if I were anyone other than Aza carrying around a disease named Clive.

Clive the Jackass makes me flat-chested, pointy-ribbed, and lung-tilted. Otherwise, I'm totally awesome.

"There's an unusual sound. Stop talking."

I don't want to stop talking, but I do, because Dr. Sidhu looks

up at me and makes a dangerous face. She has little patience for the likes of me, yammering on through my appointments. She lassos her stethoscope around, and considers my heart. (Heart. Also misplaced. It's never had quite enough room. We deal with this shit, we deal, we do, but bless any intrepid doctor who ever tries to listen to my heart, beating where it isn't. I've let some doctors try it, just to watch their faces when they think momentarily that I'm somehow walking and talking, heartless. Entertainment.) She takes me to X-ray, and disappears briefly to peer at the results.

"MRI," she says.

Great. I can feel my dad, outside the door, dreading.

"I'm okay," I tell him as I hit the waiting room, wheelchaired (hospital policy). Into the MRI tunnel, where they give you earplugs but you still hear things popping and clicking and hissing and singing out as they ping along your insides.

Sometimes while I'm here, I pretend I'm a whale, deep down, listening to the singing and dinging of my whale family. Today I hear something more along the lines of: *Aza, Aza Ray*.

It's like I'm hearing something coming from outside again. Or is it inside? No matter what, I hate it.

"Hold your breath," says the tech. "Try not to cough."

I try not to cough. I pretend "giant squid" instead of "whale." Lights flash. Things whistle and pop and extremely beep and make me feel as though I ought to be listening to something else. I read a thing once about deep ocean creatures and how the noises of earth are messing with their sonar. Whole lot of lost whales beaching themselves in cities—things like that. I read another one about sound-chaos, how nature is supposed to be harmonious, but human noises are screwing everything

up and now people are going wacko due to atonal everything.
Maybe I'm already wacko.

Aza, go outside.

I press the call button.

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what? The obnoxious noise? You know what this sounds like, darling, you've been here a thousand times,” says the tech, Todd, who is a friendly person.

Todd always gives me an extra heating pad before I get rolled in here. I love him, because he moonlights in a laser hair-removal clinic, dealing death to follicles. He has some very happy stories involving vanquishing unwanted whiskers from women's faces. The patients in the hair-removal clinic are totally grateful all the time. Here, people tend to grumble. No one really likes getting an MRI, and everyone's sick. “We're almost done. Are you okay?”

So not, it turns out, because the moment I say I'm fine, and the whistling begins again? I hear: *Azalistenlistenazaaza azalistencomeoutside.*

I clench my teeth, don't cough, and stand it. It is not easy to stand it.

When I get out of the thing, everyone's looking at me, like *What the hell?* That isn't the usual look that people give you when you come out of an MRI. Todd sighs, and pats me on the shoulder.

“You can't say I said, but basically, there's a feather in your left lung.”

“As in, I grew a feather?”

Of course I'm not growing feathers. But it's the first thing I think.

Todd clarifies. “As in, we think you aspirated a feather. Which would explain the coughing.”

Except, no. It’s the sort of thing you’d notice. If you snorted in some air, and with that air came a feather big enough to show up on this scan? You’d so, so, SOOOO know.

They give in and show me, and yes. A feather the size of my little finger. This feather can only have come from a pillow, and feather pillows aren’t allowed in my room. Whoever put a feather pillow on my bed is in trouble. (Eli, obviously. My dad is as appalled as I am.)

I don’t think about the voices I’ve been hearing.

I don’t think about the sky.

I don’t think about how everything feels apocalyptic all over my life. Apocalypse, we all know, is a sign of brain betrayal, and my brain’s the only part of me that’s ever been okay.

“Is there any explanation?” my dad asks, but the techs have nothing for him.

“Doctor Sidhu will call you in for a follow-up,” says Todd. “Seriously, don’t tell her you saw this.”

I have, of course, seen scan results for years. Everyone shows me everything. It’s that way when you’re a lifetime patient. I’ve been interpreting MRIs longer than Todd has. That does not mean this doesn’t totally freak me out.

Todd’s freaked out too. I can tell. He’s whistling under his breath, in a way that’s meant to make me feel more comfortable but actually makes me panic.

His whistling, of course, does not have any sort of words or patterns of words hidden under it. It doesn’t, except that I’m hearing words in *every* whistle. Everything sounds sentient to me now, and I can’t help myself. The squeaks of the

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floor. The creaks of the doors.

I put my clothes and various metal things back on. Earrings.
Necklace. Unnecessary bra.

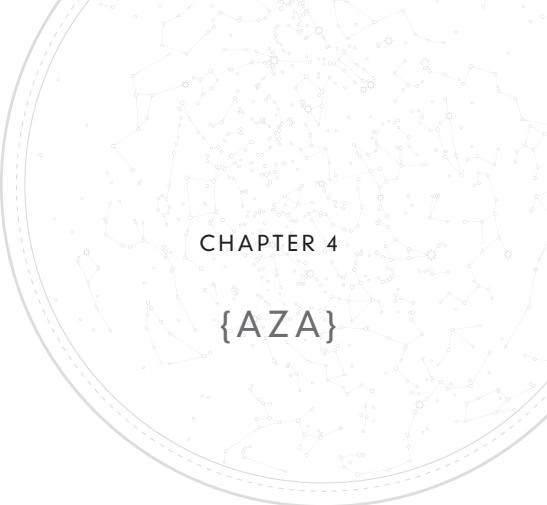
Aza, come outside.

The fact that I hear that combined with some kind of
birdsong?

Is not relevant to any of my fears, any of my bad dreams, any
of the things I've been worrying about.

It's meaningless.

It's nothing at all.



It's amazing that we're allowed to leave the hospital, but we are. Back tomorrow for little pinchers down my windpipe. I've had worse. At least it's not a full-on surgery. I try not to think about the fact that it's a feather, not a swab; the fact that everything is wrong; the fact that my birthday is only five days away.

I don't think about the center of my chest, where my ribs come together, and how that might look, opened up wide: French doors into someone's poisonous overgrown garden.

That's not how surgeons get into the lungs anyway. But something about this seems not-just-lungs. My ribs rattle like a birdcage. There's nothing in there that's not supposed to be in there. I swear it to myself as we walk across the parking lot.

The sky's full of huge storm clouds, which I very emphatically don't look at. I have no urge to see any more ships. That's where this wrongness started, and I want it un-wronged. I shiver, even though I'm bundled up.

"Alright. I'm the one you tell," my dad says. "Give it up, Az. Have you been smoking?"

I give him a look.

"This is serious, Henry. You act like it's not serious."

“I’m Henry, now? No, you can keep right on calling me Dad. Cigarettes? Pot? Hookahs?”

Hookahs. He really asks that. As though we are, where? There are hookahs in the world, yes. I’ve seen the parlors in the university district, people in there, smoking and looking kind of queasy and too excited, but really? The only place I can imagine anyone actually smoking a hookah is in *The Thousand and One Nights*.

“I don’t have a thousand and one nights left to smoke in, even if I wanted to, which I don’t, because no one smokes hookahs unless they’re in a story, and unless they’re completely not me,” I tell him.

“You *do* have a thousand and one nights,” my dad says, sounding sure. “You have two thousand and one. You have three thousand and one. You have thirty thousand and one.”

He’s smiling like he’s telling me the truth.

When I was ten, my dad carried me up onto our neighbor’s trampoline, and we jumped and jumped together. This was supremely not allowed, but he did it anyway, against doctor’s advice, against my mom’s rules. We jumped. And when we were done, he put me down, did a backflip, and bowed for me. He looked as though maybe he’d pulled something crucial, but he was grinning.

“Right,” my dad said then. “That was someone who shouldn’t flip upside down flipping upside down. In case you were wondering how that’d look.”

“Don’t worry about the feather,” he tells me now. “I can see you worrying. We’ll get through this. I’m a master fighter. If it turns out Big Bird’s hanging out in your bedroom, I’ll slay that bird.”

This is actually weirdly comforting for someone who's pretty sure that she's about to die. Having a dad who's willing to declare war against an institution as deeply rooted as Big Bird is not nothing.

"Even if the bird goes Hitchcock?" I ask him.

For a moment, my dad and I sit in silence in the car, imagining *The Big Birds*, a sky horrifically full of big, yellow, leggy birds, dive-bombing us. At first, it's funny, but then, more worrying than you'd think.

"I don't care. I'd still fight them for you," he says. "I'd pluck them into oblivion."

I'm actually semi-laughing as we pull up to the house.

Jason Kerwin's waiting for me on our front steps. It's only two o'clock, which means Jason isn't where he's supposed to be—namely, school. My dad notices this at the same time I do and sighs.

"Do you need me to call attendance?" my dad asks him.

"Seriously?" says Jason. "What do you take me for? It's covered. I'm at a dentist appointment. Routine cleaning that'll turn into a small gum surgery, with a couple of days of recovery time." He turns to me. "I'm coming with you to the hospital tomorrow."

How he knew anything about me going to the hospital tomorrow is anyone's guess.

Jason has long been a collector of information. He's also an entrepreneur with three patents, one of them for a chemical compound that can be sprayed on clothes, dry-cleaning them in seconds. It comes in a tiny can the size of a battery, and can be hung from a key chain. He invented it for people who don't want their parents to know they smoke. Jason doesn't smoke, because you don't smoke if your best friend has a mortal-terror

lung disease named after her, but he saw a market.

He has another patent for a small piece of plastic that attaches to hotel—or hospital—fitted sheets, kind of like a shoehorn, and enables people to make beds in half the time it previously took. These bits of plastic are manufactured in a small place known as the Kerwin Factory, in New Delhi. Jason runs the whole thing from his phone. We've had discussions about labor and questionable policy regarding outsourcing, but I haven't won. There are parts of Jason that are more OCD than even I can penetrate. His vision of a factory trumped my utopian idea of handcrafted things made primarily of wood. So, he's not perfect. He sometimes does things just because he can—and not the way he necessarily should.

He's killing time in high school. He barely passes his classes because he says he's proving a point. He plans to graduate at the bottom and then take over the world. Better for the inevitable, eventual biographies, I guess.

Jason is notoriously frustrating to all teachers. He doesn't work up to his genius potential. He merely looks at you, blankly, and conquers.

"A feather in your lung," he says. "Really? You snorted a feather? Going for an Icarus thing?"

When we were ten, I did go for an Icarus thing. Jason built the wings, from plans drawn by Leonardo da Vinci. Turns out that canvas and balsa-wood Renaissance wings don't cut it when you're hopping from the top of the garage. He broke his arm, and I broke my leg, and that was the end of Icarus. Our parents were relieved. It was one of our few displays of semi-normal. They told everyone the story of the wing fail for years, with these hopeful voices, an *ob, kids, they do the craziest things* tone. All the while

not itemizing any of the other craziest things Jason and I did.

When we were twelve, we stole Jason's mom Eve's Pontiac, and drove it three hundred miles in order to acquire the correct feathers for the taxidermy of a hoax griffin. We paid a weirdo in cash, got back onto the freeway, and drove home, busted by Eve in Jason's driveway. The Pontiac had a trunkful of dead turkey and roadkill lynx on ice, along with assorted talons from vultures, and a serious stash of superglue and glass eyeballs. Eve, to her credit, had an expression of *hell yeah* on her face when we opened the trunk, because Eve's the kind of person who'd build a hoax griffin on a moment's notice, but then she had to pretend parental upset. Carol, Jason's Mother Number Two, went to bed for four days.

Jason and I did normal things, too, knee-skinning things, bug-capturing things. But it's the griffin-building that sticks in everyone's minds.

Jason will either be recruited by the CIA or he'll live a life of crime. No one is sure which. I mean, like those are opposites anyway.

"What?" I ask him. "Do you really think you get to have an opinion about me snorting feathers?"

I sit, despite the frost on the step. My dad sighs, takes off his coat, and buttons it around my own.

"Five minutes," he says. "Then I'm coming for you."

"Don't snort that," Jason says, pointing to the coat, though of course it's fake down, not really feathers.

We sit a minute in comfortable quiet, except that today has sucked so much nothing's comfortable.

"There's an increased likelihood of something," I say experimentally.

“Of?”

“You know. Soon. Very soon.”

“You’ve been dying since forever,” says Jason, who doesn’t respect the rules. “If they think things are accelerating, they’re wrong. You look good.”

He glances at me.

“For you, you look good.”

His face tells me I don’t. The fact that he suddenly takes off his scarf and wraps it around my throat tells me I don’t. Jason doesn’t normally seem nervous, even though he’s spent his entire life on a constant loop of calculation, stressed about everything.

“How are you?” I ask him. “You seem weird.”

“Good,” he says, talking too fast. “I’m fine, I mean, I’m not the one we need to be worried about, obviously. So stop worrying about me.”

This version of Jason doesn’t bode well.

“Did you take your pill?”

“Stop,” he says. “Of course I did.”

I’m suspicious. Also guilty. Because if Jason’s this worried, it’s my fault.

My dad makes us come in, but he leaves us alone in the kitchen. Jason begins speedy work on baked goods. I watch him from behind as he pushes up his sleeves and puts on my dad’s apron. His hair is the color of the chocolate he’s melting. He has freckles on the back of his neck, five of them. His most distinctive feature is the serious furrow between his eyebrows, which he’s had since we were nine and he realized we definitely weren’t immortal.

I don’t know how someone who’s a genius might have

thought we'd live forever, but he'd been working on some kind of chemistry compound related to both starfish and tortoises, and he was pretty sure, up until it exploded in his garage, that it was totally going to be a Thing. I think he was trying to grow me some new lungs, but he's never admitted it.

Jason looks like someone recently emerged from a sealed city. Last week, he wore the T-shirt top of a pair of ancient *Star Wars* pajamas to school, with his grandfather's suit jacket over the top of that. The pajamas dated from when he wasn't the height he is now. The sleeves ended not far below his elbows. The shirt was tight. He didn't care. I saw girls looking at him all day long, not with the expected look of horror, but with happy surprise.

It was like he'd grown boobs over the summer. Well, except not, but you know. He'd become stealth hot or something.

Jason, however, didn't notice the girls. I mean, he's straight, but he's never cared whether anyone knew it or not. He has two moms. The last time anyone commented critically on that, he gave that guy a black eye. Jason's right hook, and the resultant bruise, startled everyone, including Jason, I think, because it isn't like Jason normally punches people.

When he feels inclined, he's been known to make chocolate éclairs. Today he feels inclined. If I weren't already worried, this'd worry me. Chocolate éclairs are for birthdays. If he's making them early, I must really look bad.

Yeah. I think I'll avoid the mirror.

"I'm home, aren't I?" I say. "They'd never have let me come home if things were that awful."

Jason just looks at me with his particular hazel-eyed stare. The stare claims he doesn't give a shit what I say, and that

nothing could possibly surprise him. He'd pull it off, if not for the furrow, which is especially deep today, and the rapid way he's stirring.

Maybe it's that furrow, maybe it's me, also feeling worried, but I tell him everything. The whistles, the ship, all of it. The way it just drifted out of the clouds. Hunting.

Hunting?

I don't know why I think of it that way, but that's how it felt. Hunting. I tell him about Mr. Grimm, too, who acted weird, in my opinion, though maybe that was me acting weird. For a second, I was pretty sure Mr. Grimm saw the ship, too, but then he pretended not to.

Jason puts the pastries in the oven, whisks their filling for a moment, and considers, as though he's rifling through papers inside his brain.

"Ship was a cloud formation. Basic answer."

I start to protest.

"Stay with me," he says. "Unexplained visual phenomena. Green ray starts UFO panics all the time."

I raise my hand.

"People understand like half of why light does what it does," Jason continues without answering my question. "There's a whole category of mirage where people see ships in the sky. Some people actually think the *Titanic* sank because a mirage made the iceberg invisible."

I'm researching while he talks, on my phone. Boy's a Wikipedia sinkhole, though he's doing it without any internet connection. He's just whipping the éclair filling, casually facting me into oblivion.

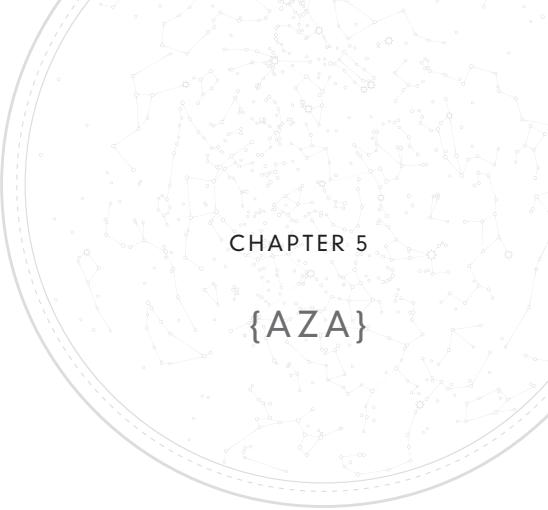
What I saw, though, was not any of the things he wants to

make it. I feel bitey. He should believe me. He's the person who always believes me. I count on him to be my primary enabler of Vivid Imagination.

"You looking it up? Pissed off with me for not swallowing your story without questioning anything? Well, how about spooklights?" he says. He turns around and grins at me, which disgruntles. "UFOs, black helicopters, phantom dirigibles. All those things."

Then he says one more word, and for some reason it stops me dead.

"Magonia."



CHAPTER 5

{AZA}

“Magonia?” I repeat, feeling twitchy.

The word isn’t unfamiliar. I try to joke it out.

“Is that a disease? A kind of architecture? A poisonous plant? If it’s a disease, I don’t want to know, I warn you right now. I’m not in a disease textbook mood—”

“We’re not talking about diseases. We’re talking about mirages. Check the *Annals of Ulster*,” Jason says, and sighs his long-patented Sufferer’s Sigh.

“Ulster. Like blisters crossed with ulcers? Leprosy of some kind?” I blather to disguise the fact that the word immediately haunts me. I feel a memory lurking somewhere in the black holes of my brain. Maybe I read about it somewhere. After all, everything I know, I read about.

Jason snorts.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t read the *Annals*.”

“I’ve read them.” I lie, because maybe I have, maybe I haven’t. I cough, part fake. I don’t know why I’d even try to lie to Jason. When someone hangs out with you every day since you were five, they pretty much know what you’ve read, and they definitely know when you’re emergency-skimming internet

synopses beneath the kitchen table.

The *Annals of Ulster* are Irish histories, according to the wikis.

“No one’s read them. But I studied the relevant sections today. Mass hallucinations. About seven forty-eight AD, there’s this: ‘Ships with their crews were seen in the air.’ Does that ring any bells? Anything at all?”

Nope, nothing. He goes into his favorite mode, fast-talking, clipped words, robot boy.

“Basics. Not the *Annals*, but part of the same story. Eight thirty or so AD. France.” He grand-gesture sketches out the date and place in the air with his hand, subtitling his documentary. “This Archbishop of Lyons reports four messed-up people in his town, three guys, one woman, insisting they fell out of the sky. Fell from ships. In. The. Sky. Are you hearing me?”

I’m hearing him. So hearing. I pretend I’m not.

“The bishop goes to a public meeting where these four are in the stocks—”

I interrupt.

“Do not tell me you’re doing the universal hand gesture for ‘in the stocks,’ because that doesn’t exist, no matter how hard you just tried to make it a thing.”

He has the grace to blush and remove his hands (and the precariously tilting bowl of éclair filling) from “dude trapped in the stocks” position.

“—and getting screamed at for being crop thieves. They’ve been dumb enough to claim they’ve been stealing crops from earth using little sky-launch boats. The people in the town agree with the idea that they’re crop thieves, because, duh, they’re having harvest problems anyway.”

I am so annoyed at the randomness of Jason Kerwin. He's a mutant memorizer. He has no apologies for that, and never has.

"*MAGONIA*, they say—all of them. We fell out of Magonia. People in town start to freak out."

Jason whisks the filling so hard some of it splatters on the fridge.

"Then what?" I ask.

"Yeah, so I can't remember if the Magonians ultimately got hanged for being witches, or if they got run out of town, but I doubt it was a fantastic outcome for them, given that they'd already said they didn't belong on earth and wanted to go home with all the village's corn."

"Jason," I say eventually. "You are Not Relevant."

"All I'm saying is, if you're hallucinating, you're hallucinating in an old tradition," he says. "Congratulations on the quality of your visions. Want more *Magonia*?"

"Nope," I say. "I want chocolate."

I can't believe I didn't know everything about this *Magonia* stuff already. It's totally my kind of thing.

"*Maganwetar*. That's Old High German for 'whirlwind.'"

"Jason," I say.

"Calm down. I don't speak Old High German," he says.

"You'd better not," I tell him. "Because that would be a big lie. The secret learning of Old High German without me."

There's no shaming him.

"Some people think that's where the word 'Magonia' comes from. If you're from Magonia, then, you live in a whirlwind. That's what Jacob Grimm says, the same guy who wrote the fairy tales. He also says that it might refer to magicians, like *magoi*, Greek, hence Magonia would mean 'Land of Magicians.'

I prefer whirlwind. Plus, a land of magicians would be boring, because the whole point of magic is that not everyone can do it. Otherwise it's just normal life. It'd be, basically, Land of Mechanics."

I'm head down in my phone. There. Some archbishop named Agobard grumbling about how the people in his town believed hail and lightning were made by storm-makers in the sky.

"But I've heard rumors of crowds, nay, entire villages of people overwhelmed by gullibility, turned to such fools that they insist there is a kingdom named Magonia, where the sky is sea, and where ships sail the clouds. These ships harvest the leavings of our crops, our fields broken by weather and trampled by hailstones, and they carry them up into their own storehouses. Payments are made by the sky sailors to storm-creators, and thus are our own crops stolen from us. I am shocked to discover that my own town has lately been so blind and certain of the existence of this Magonia that four prisoners have been displayed in chains, one woman and three men who claim they are citizens of the sky, fallen from cloud ships. The townspeople voted at meeting that these crop-thieves be stoned."

I look up from my phone. "So Magonians are crop thieves?"

Jason's smug. "I don't care about crop circles, but you know how the UFO people are. Are you at Gervase of Tilbury yet?"

No. I'm scrolling through reams of Irish history. Things about anchors being thrown from cloud ships.

"I'm in *Annals of Ulster* now," I say and sigh, because of course he doesn't have just one reference. Even his text messages come with footnotes.

"Gervase tells a story about how a whole bunch of people

come out of church one day. They see an anchor drop out of the clouds and get stuck in a rock in front of the church. A moment later, a sailor comes *swimming through the air, and down the anchor rope*, trying to untangle it. How awesome, please, is that?"

I'm Googling. "This happened when?"

"Twelve hundreds. The townspeople cut the rope and kept the anchor. Made it part of the church door."

"That's a fairy tale." Something occurs to me. "What does he say happened to the sailor?"

Jason looks at me.

"The sailor drowned," he says.

I meet his eyes.

"In the air. He drowned *in the air*. So, keep telling me about the 'not-relevant' situation. You haven't been drowning for sixteen years in air or anything."

I feel shivery. There's something stressfully specific about that anchor story.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure what I saw outside Mr. Grimm's window was a helicopter."

"Right. That's why you freaked out. It's not like you don't have personal experience of helicopters. You definitely *never* got life-flighted out of a field trip in fifth grade, because you stopped breathing at the fake safari theme park."

I roll my eyes.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio," Jason Kerwin says, at which point he's busted for Trite.

"Hamlet. Really?" I say. "I'm not Horatio. This is med side effects, feather in lungs, early death."

Hamlet is all about hallucinations and meltdowns and

early death. Not that you're dying. Because you're not."

He spins around and stirs some more.

I'm now even grouchier than I was. I feel shaky, like a dog wanting to whirl and get loose of water. My skin feels like Spanx. I don't really know how Spanx feel, but my mom has a pair, and she tells me they're torture devices specifically designed to cause women to lose circulation all over their bodies. My skin? Feels exactly that way.

"I don't get it," I say finally, after I bite the insides of my cheeks for a while. I don't quite know what I'm upset about, but I feel inclined toward slapping and also toward collapsing. "Are you saying you think I'm hallucinating?"

Jason just considers me.

"Or are you saying there's actually a ship in the sky looking for me? From this, this—Magonia place?"

I test that out by mumbling it.

"I'm saying you must have read some of this stuff somewhere, and it's been rattling around in your brain, and now it's showing up. You saw a cloud formation, and your brain filled in the gaps." He pauses. "A ship in the sky isn't the worst hallucination you could have," he says. "You could be hallucinating everything on earth being on fire. That happens to some people. After the drugs kick in."

"Please tell me more about drug side effects," I say. "I know nothing about drug side effects." I can't shame him. He doesn't believe me. I don't believe me either. Why don't I want to be hallucinating? Hallucinating isn't horrible. It's absolutely a more palatable idea than ships in the sky yelling your name.

"Sometimes people hallucinate even worse than that," he goes on. "You—the stuff you're hallucinating? It's like, a Disney

movie. It's some kind of *Peter Pan* plus *E.T.* hybrid."

I'm disgusted by the implication I'm having a children's hospital hallucination.

"So you think this is brain melt," I say to Jason. "Fine. Whatever." I say something mean. "You're one to talk about brain melt."

"I am," he says, so calmly I feel instantly bad. "I know about what brains do when they get screwed up."

"How do you even *know* about Magonia?" I wish I didn't sound whimpery. "You didn't read the *Annals of Ulster* for fun."

"Remember when I was building the UFO? Magonia's an early version of UFO stuff."

"Your moms would have hated that UFO."

Jason's mom Eve is a biologist who used to be an ecoterrorist. She would say anti-ecoterrorist, because she thinks people who ignore the damage they do to the environment are the terrorists. But regardless, she was once a person who chained herself to trees and in at least one case, for which she was arrested, seriously damaged a bulldozer, using a wrench. You wouldn't think this looking at her. She looks like a mom. I guess that's how it works.

She now writes academic articles about farming practices, and the way we're messing the world up in order to make an economy out of food-buying. An essay she wrote about the irresponsible farming of bananas actually made it so I don't eat bananas anymore.

"The UFO would have been made of recycled materials," Jason says. "They wouldn't have minded that. Taste this."

The éclair's full of hot air, and it burns my tongue. I'm staring at Jason with a bit more wide-eyes than I'd prefer. He's pleased with himself.

“Yep,” he says. “Not much I don’t know about UFOs.” He pauses, then takes pity on me. “Also, when you got busted in Mr. Grimm’s class yesterday, swearing about ships in the sky, I Googled ‘ships in the sky.’”

I swear again. This time at him. With relief.

“Basic search. On my phone. You’d have done it if you weren’t quote, *side-effecting*, unquote, to no clear purpose. You don’t usually invent things out of nowhere, Az. I tend to believe you when you say you’re seeing a ship sailing through the clouds.” He’s not looking at me. “So, yeah, I think you saw . . . something.”

I’m flooded with relief again, a lot more of it. And something that I guess must be gratitude.

“You didn’t see it, did you?” I ask, a just-in-case plea. “No sails? No masts? Or hear it?”

He shakes his head. “Doesn’t matter. We’ll figure it out, Az.”

“Are you sure?”

Jason spoons filling into the éclairs, pours chocolate over their tops, and is done.

“Yeah. Happy birthday.” He sticks a candle messily into the top of one of the éclairs and lights it.

“It isn’t my birthday yet,” I say.

“So what? Your wish is here early,” he says. “If you don’t blow out that candle, I’m doing it.”

I look at the candle some more. It’s dripless.

“I’ll take your wish and wish it myself,” Jason warns. “You don’t want what I’m going to wish for.”

“Which is?”

“You’ll end up in an alligator suit,” he says. “Roller-skating. Trust me. I could make that happen.”

I smile in spite of myself. I close my eyes.

“Wish,” Jason says, like I’m going to forget to wish.

I wish. I blow. I look at Jason.

Jason looks at me. He’s chewing on his bottom lip.

“I have a present thing for you,” he says.

“Give,” I say, and I’m suddenly filled with hope, because this hadn’t even occurred to me. Maybe this whole ship-vision thing was something he did. “Did you hire projectors or something? It’s a hoax, right?”

He just looks at me. This isn’t his usual. Normally he’d shove something across the table, grinning wildly. Last year, he gave me a terrarium containing a flea circus. He’d bought them from some sad guy who’d spent his life training batch after batch of them. They died pretty soon after, as fleas do, but before they did, they did a lot of crazy amazing backflips.

“What is it?” I ask him. “Where is it?”

I poke his shirt pocket. Nothing there. It suddenly feels deeply weird to be prodding his chest and I snatch my hand back like I’ve just burned it. I try to pretend I have a cramp in my fingers. I can feel his body against my hand still, solid and warm and oh no, no, very no.

“I’ll give it to you while we watch the squid video,” he finally says.

I’m taken aback. I’d totally forgotten about the squid footage, but Jason’s bringing out his laptop.

“Dark,” he says. “This demands dark.”

“Basement,” I say.

Usually, this would be super normal. We spend most of our time in the basement or in the garage.

But he's looking at me in a way that makes me wonder if he's invented the whole giant-squid-footage thing completely, and he's actually going to do something weird—pour water on my head when I walk through the basement door, or present me with immortality ointment. I don't think about any other kind of thing he might be wanting to do with me, because he's Jason, and I'm me.

We plant ourselves on the couch, almost as though we're regular teenage creatures and not two people about to watch stolen raw footage of cephalopods illegally downloaded through back channels.

Jason sets up the laptop and cues the video, and then pulls out his notebook, scribbles something, and folds up the paper. He hesitates, and then passes it across the couch to me.

I open it, and see what he's written inside.

I { } you more than [[[{{(())}}]]].

Just parentheses and brackets with nothing in them. I look up at him. He looks away.

"Okay. So. That's my list," he says. "In case there ever needs to be a list. Which there doesn't." He pauses. "Right, so that's settled."

He lifts his fist and bumps mine. But then he lets his hand stay there. I feel his knuckles. I feel myself turning red. With my bluish skin, that probably makes me lavender.

For a long time, we're watching a black screen. We can see a little bit of something glowing—squid bait.

I think of the note.

I want to say *me too*.

I want to say *I know*.

I want to say *I can read the gaps in your sentences. I can read the space between your letters. I know your language. It's my language too.*

I want to say that.

Instead, I stare at the screen, and say { } for a good minute and a half while Jason's fingers and my fingers lace together like we're not attached to them.

The squid appears, a constellation coming into being out of a night that previously contained no stars at all. It unfolds, this silver, twirling thing, and it's there. Swimming past the camera, alive and impossible. Its eyes, its tentacles, its hugeness. It explodes into visibility, this thing we've only really seen dead or dying.

Alive.

We don't look at each other.

We're both definitely crying.

I can feel him next to me, his arm against mine, his knee in his jeans, right there next to my knee. I can smell the lemon peel he scrubs his hands with to get rid of most of whatever toxicities he's been touching, the charcoal in the soap he uses to get rid of the rest, the smell of pencil shavings and graphite. All I've got is { }.

Jason's fingers are running up and down my hand, and his other hand is petting my wrist and, and, and.

&,&,&.

!!!!

I can't look at him.

Finally, in the silence of the giant squid footage, as it swims away, back to its own world, I manage to say, "Don't you want to know what I wished for?"

Like he doesn't know. I think he wishes the same wish I do. Both of us are very good at pretending we aren't superstitious about these things, but we *so* are.

"I don't need to know," he says, then looks at me and grins a crooked grin that is in danger of not being a grin at all.

"Aza," says Jason, and leans in. I want to lean into him, too, I want to, and I start to, and I can't breathe, and I'm me and he's him and we're best friends and what is this? Kiss the sick girl?

No, no, this is Jason, an inch from me. He's still crying, and so am I. I'm leaning in and he's leaning in, and

Lightning.

White, sizzling, hair standing up all over our bodies, ozone. OMG, it's striking in my backyard. Outside the basement windows. Right outside them. Ten feet away.

We jump, instinctively, away from each other.

AZA! screams a whistling voice. *AZA COME NOW.*



CHAPTER 6

{AZA}

Rain starts to pour down the window, and then hailstones the size of Ping-Pong balls. Wind banging hard.

Jason grabs me, and keeps me from falling off the couch.

“Did you hear that?”

“What? The thunder?” he says. “Yeah, that was close.”

“No, THAT,” I say. “Like a million birds. Like a million birds screaming at me personally.”

Jason has his arms around me. I am as stormed by that as anything.

There’s another sonicboomjetenginemethundercrash of a noise, and that noise screams, in a lot of different voices:

AZA.

I hear more than that. Individual voices, flickering across the wind, humming wire voices. Everyone—who?—is shouting, singing, shrieking my name.

AZAAZAAZAAZAAZAAZAAZAAZAAZAAZAAZAAZAAZA

I grab Jason’s shirt, and stare at him. He listens for a second, then shakes his head.

“Crazy,” he says.

“Crazy what?”

“Weather. And birds. A lot of birds.”

I pull back from him, adjust my shirt, fold up the paper he gave me, and put it in my pocket.

“Maybe,” I say. I pretend my fingers aren’t shaking.

Shit, shit, shit. I’m losing it. This is a whole new level of wrong.

Jason’s staring at me. I try not to think about how one day I walked into my room and looked at the flea circus and all the fleas were just dead in their spangles.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Not so much,” I say.

“Because of everything,” he says slowly, “or because I just screwed up?”

I shake my head. That’s all I can do. “Give me a second,” I say at last.

He looks hard at me, and then nods, folds up his laptop and its miracle squid, and goes upstairs. I sit on the couch in the dark, trying to hold myself together. I want to cry and laugh at once.

We almost—

But no.

And—

After a few minutes, my heart goes back to being a heart, and I head upstairs.

“You okay?” He’s at the sink, doing the dishes. We are made of awkward.

“Better,” I say.

He clears his throat. “Back to Magonia?” he says, not looking at me. “More proto-UFO theory?”

I stare at his back. Shoulders = too high.

“Maybe,” I say. And then I’m insanely brave because I keep talking. If this is it for me, if this is the last day I’m going to be alive? Why *not* be brave?

“I want to go back to what we were doing before,” I say. “It was me who screwed that up.”

I’m forced to blurt out the rest as fast as I can.

“All-right-do-you-want-to-start-over-even-though-I’m-a-disaster?”

Jason’s shoulders relax. His face softens. “You think you hold horrors for me . . . ,” he says, which is what he always says when I utter anything in this category.

“But you hold no horrors,” I say, which is the correct response.

Jason leans over the table, and I get myself ready to change our status, because OMG, I think I would desperately like to change our status, but Eli chooses that moment to bang her way into the kitchen, looking disgusted.

It’s okay.

I didn’t need to kiss him.

I hadn’t been imagining kissing Jason under the surface of my brain for years or anything.

I feel a flash of rage at Eli, whose fault it isn’t.

“Weather out there sucks it,” she says, and then looks at us, assessing, coolly. “Weather in here kind of sucks it too. I got rained on. Did you see the lightning?”

She flicks a drop of rain off her shoulder. Only one. Possibly she just walked between raindrops. Me, I get drenched anytime there’s even fog.

“Eli?” I say. “Do you think you could—”

She must be reading my mind, because she's instantly defensive.

"This is my house too," she says. "You can't order me out of the kitchen."

"I wasn't," I say, cringing that she's about to comment on what she almost walked in on.

"You were about to try to," she says, psychic, and sits down at the table. "It's not happening. I'm hungry."

I leave Eli and Jason to eat éclairs. I go coughing into my freezing room.

There are eleven hours until my procedure. I'm not counting them. I don't need to count them because I'm totally not dying tomorrow.

I take the piece of paper Jason gave me out of my pocket and stare at it. He's not allowed to make me want to stay alive this way. *I { } you more than [[[{{(())}}]]].*

and I'm both grinning and stupidly kind of crying—

When the window opens. I put the note back, weirdly embarrassed.

My mom was cleaning in futility and didn't latch it, maybe. I look out. It's starting to snow, completely wrongly, right after that rain; it's only November. The back lawn is covered already, a thin dusting of it, and it's the kind of glowing darkish afternoon that snow makes happen. Like the snow is the surface of the moon. Like we're here, and at the same time, in outer space. Which of course, we are. We're all untethered, all flying around in the dark, the same as Mars and Venus, the same as the stars.

I'm definitely not going to cry.

The window creaks.

I think about celestial junk. Maybe every planet in this solar system is discarded by giant hands. Each star a crumpled ball of paper, a love letter lit on fire, a smoldering bit of cigarette ash.

A robin picks its red-breasted finicky way across the yard, considering the blades of grass sticking up out of the white. It cocks its head and looks at me for a long time.

I turn forcibly away and rummage in my closet, packing my hospital bag. I can hear Jason and Eli blithering on in the kitchen, something about a hailstorm where the hail turned out to be, actually, a rain of frogs, each one frozen into a ball of ice. A rain of frogsicles is so Jason's kind of thing.

I hear a chirp much closer than it should be. When I turn around to close the window, the lawn is covered with birds. Maybe fifty of them. Robins, crows, and blue jays, seagulls, chickadees, and swallows.

On my windowsill, there's a bright yellow bird with a black beak and wings spread like it's wearing a cape made of marigold petals.

This is the one chirping.

Here, it says. She's ready.

No, it definitely does not say that. It's a bird. It opens its beak and shrills, and the other birds look expectant. I try to shoo it off the sill. I have my fingers on the sash when all the birds turn their heads and look at me.

Not just in the direction of me. No, there's a flock of birds, out of season, sitting patiently in the snow, watching me. A hawk lands. An owl. None of the rest of the birds even look at them.

And it's insanity, right there, rain of frogs insanity, except

that it's rain of birds, and I'm shaking with cold and also with something else. The bird on the sill doesn't move. It just looks at me.

"Fly away!" I yell, coughing, freezing, but none of them move. They start to sing.

To speak.

All of them.

Aza Ray.

Inside my chest, I feel a weird rattle and then there's something I can't explain, a giant gap, inside my lungs. The little yellow bird looks me in the eyes. I cough.

And then, out of fucking nowhere, the bird flies into my mouth.

I can feel its tough little bones, its claws scratching at my teeth. I'm trying to scream but my mouth's full of feathers. It's pushing and its wings are opening in my mouth and then in my throat and I can't breathe, and then it's down my windpipe and speaking from inside my chest.

Got her, sings the yellow bird. I can feel it in my left lung.

Got her. I'm in. We're ready.

I scream. I can feel it whistling, beating its wings.

Bird in my lung? BIRD IN MY LUNG? I'm hyperventilating.

Out the window, in the clouds, I'm seeing—

Oh my god, sails over the tree line, and rigging—dark figures on a deck. I'm crying and holding my chest and I don't know I don't know I don't know what to do.

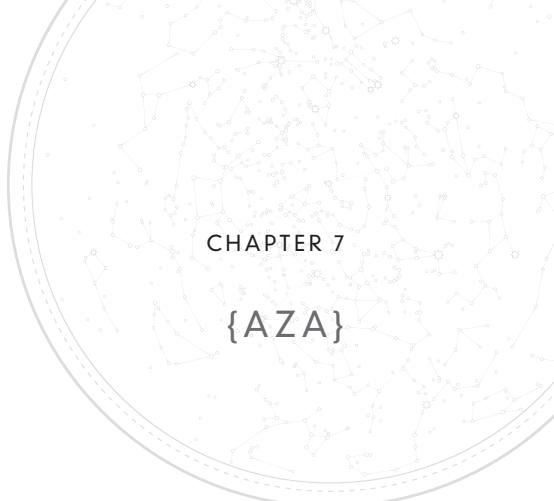
Readyreadyreadygo the bird in my chest whistles, and out on the lawn the rest of the birds look at me as though I have a clue what's happening, and I'm thinking this is it this is dying and why didn't anyone in any of the near-death books ever say

MARIA DAHVANA HEADLEY

there'd be a crowd of birds seeing you off? Where's the white light? Where's the peace and calm? Where's the voice of God and the angelic-ness and the—

A rope loops down, down, down out of the clouds and clearly I'm dreaming. It's swinging through the sky outside my window, and there's no air in here, no air anywhere—

Readyreadyready my chest sings. The sky is full of hail and snow and wind. The birds on the lawn are taking flight, and they have the rope in their talons. I'm dizzy. I'm gasping. I'm—



I come to in redwhiteandblue emergency lights, wrapped in heat blankets, snow coming down hard outside the windows. I'm in the back of an ambulance with my dad, Jason, and Eli.

I try to sit up but I'm strapped down. I have a mask on my face. I want to cough. I want to talk. I want to tear it off.

“You had a seizure,” the paramedic tells me, speaking slowly, as though I’m not me, as though I don’t know everything about this already. I’m a professional patient, even if I have no idea how I got here, no idea who this paramedic is, no idea where the ambulance is taking me, or why.

My chest is still.

The *bird* is still?

“There were birds in your room—a lot of them,” Eli says, her voice shaking. “I heard them screaming, so I came in.” She looks completely terrified.

Jason’s fingers are wrapped around mine very tightly.

What just happened?

I can’t really feel my hand in the real world at all, but I can feel Jason’s. I want to shake my fingers out of his grasp. I feel like he’s holding me somewhere I don’t want to be. And that’s

not okay. It's Jason. I *want* him to hold my hand.

My dad's crying. He's got my other hand.

"Don't worry, Az," he says. "They're helping you breathe. That's why you had the seizure. You're okay. It's okay. Mom was at the lab but she's on her way."

Everything looks as though I'm seeing it from the bottom of a swimming pool.

"It was like you were drowning," Jason says, so quietly I almost don't hear him. "You were completely blue, and you weren't breathing. Your chest was . . . spasming and making this sound I've never heard before. I gave you mouth-to-mouth."

I look at his mouth. It touched mine. I think about the note he gave me. It's still in my pocket.

I blink a couple of times for yeah, I get it. But I don't. I remember the *bird*—god, the bird—and I jerk and try to sit up again. I have to get it OUT.

Am I having a heart attack? My lungs feel crushed and full of something all at once.

"I have the letters in my backpack," Eli says, her voice not quite her voice. "The I-love-you lists, and the apologies. But I never made mine. Now I will, okay? I'm making one for you right now, because I'm sorry for all the times I pretended you weren't my sister and said we weren't related, and the time I stole your sweater and the time I made fun of you because you coughed so hard I told people you swallowed your phone—"

I look at Jason. I look at him and I don't know how, but for a moment I forget the bird and I say { }.

"Aza, are you listening?" my dad asks me, and there's panic in his voice. More than panic. "CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

I look at Eli, and say { }.

"I'm sorry, Aza! I didn't mean any of anything I ever did wrong!" Eli is crying now, and talking as fast as she can. She's apologizing for things she didn't even do.

I look at my dad, and say {{ }}. I try to give him extra for my mom.

My dad is fading out. All I can see are my own eyelashes and my own eyelids, and somehow, also, my own brain, all the pathways inside it, everything dark and narrow, and getting narrower, bookshelves closing in, books crushed, falling into muddled piles, pages crushed, words mangled, and me, running through it all, trying to get out before the walls collapse.

I feel the entire inside of my body folding up, some kind of awful origami. I thought it would hurt, but the pain I've been feeling forever and ever is actually something that's ceasing to matter to me, just like my bones no longer matter to me, and I inhale, and exhale, and

Bird in my chest

Bird in my chest

Ships in the sky

Last moments before dying

Like this, the last moments of this, storm, bird, confused, cold can't talk can't tell anyone I love them can't—

How far are we from the hospital?

I stretch my head and try to look into the front. The driver has red hair. He glances at me.

We swerve.

I hear Eli sobbing. I hear Jason talking fast to me. I can feel his breath on my ear. I'm watching the driver, and the ambulance skids, and I see the guy twisting the wheel. Shoving it hard.

We spin slowly in a circle in the middle of a frozen road.

Everyone's screaming but me, because I can't. I'm trying to breathe, to stay, but I'm not staying.

I'm going.

The windows of the ambulance are freezing over, and here's my family, and here I am, on this gurney, and it doesn't matter as much as I thought it did.

Life and death aren't as different from each other as I thought they were. This isn't like walking into a new country. This is walking into a new room in the same house. This is sharing a hallway and the same row of framed family pictures, but there's a glass wall between.

I'm right here. And not.

If this is *it*, then I'm ready. I'm dark matter. The universe inside me is full of something, and science can't even shine a light on it. I feel like I'm mostly made of mysteries.

Inside my chest, I hear the whistling of a little bird, something singing me to sleep.

The ambulance is stopped, lights and sirens still on, ice beneath our tires, and the EMT in the back with us radios for a helicopter, her voice panicky, "Emergency . . ."

The red-haired medic runs out and looks up at the sky. "Signaling," he shouts. He goes into the white, and all around him is a halo of snow.

I'm an ocean with a giant squid inside it. There's a bird buffeting, flying around and banging hard against my ribs.

"Pneumonia," the paramedic says.

"Aza, don't," my dad says, an order. "DO NOT DO THIS."

I want to listen.

I look at my dad. I'm looking at myself, and what I was is

starting not to matter to me at all.

Where am I going?

Readyreadyready says the bird inside me. And someone outside answers *Readyreadyready*.

Something hits my chest, hard, and then it's gone. My chest? Is it even mine? Then, no, I see, it's the medic using crash pads on my heart.

Jason says, "You don't have to die."

Eli's talking fast into her cell phone.

"Mommy-you-have-to-get-here-now-right-now-hurry-I-don't-know-I-don't-know-what-happened-it's-really-bad—"

I hear my mom through the phone, telling Eli it'll be okay, and she sounds so certain that I almost think it will be, that there's something I don't know, but then Eli says, wailing,

"But it's already not okay!"

Readyreadyready

The crash pads hit me again, hard, at chest level. Eli's put her phone to my ear.

I can hear my mom.

I hear her take a deep breath. I hear her pushing words out, and I can almost see her, for a second, the look on her face, her hand pressed to her own heart, the other in a fist.

"You can go if you have to go," my mom says, and her voice shakes, but she's solid. She says it again, so I'll know. "You can go if you have to go, okay, baby? Don't wait for me. I love you, you're mine, you'll always be mine, and this is going to be okay, you're safe, baby, you're safe—"

I'm hearing my mom talking, feeling her in my ear and not in my ear at the same time.

There's a blast of cold air and the redhead medic comes back in.

"Chopper's coming," he mutters to the other paramedic, and pushes himself into the space beside me. "Get the girl's family to move back."

He pushes the other medic away, too hard. She winces. His hands are working on me in ways that make no sense.

I feel something slide into my skin, near my left lung. It's a cut, but it's different from any cut I've ever felt before. Pain or release? I feel myself dividing, right where my tilted lungs are, right where my ribs have always been wrong.

"What are you doing?" I hear my dad say.

"Sir, you're getting in the way of an emergency procedure. We're trying to keep her breathing. Stay back."

"Calm down," the female medic says. "It's okay, it's going to be okay."

She's trying to keep my dad from looking at what's happening, but I catch a glimpse of his face, his eyes.

I have no voice. I'm trying to say no.

The man's tying a rope to me, I can feel it, around my chest, but I can't see it.

"I'm making an incision for her to breathe. Please, sir, move back *now*," the medic says.

"This isn't it," Jason says urgently. "This isn't happening. Don't let it, Aza. They're going to find a way to— Oh my god."

He sobs. The paramedic's looking down at me and I'm looking up at him. He's has his hand in my shirt pocket, and he's taking something out of it. The note—

There's pressure on my neck and there's still no pain. There's a splitting, something falling off, and that feeling of a

rope around my chest, and my body is halfway on the gurney and halfway with me, standing up, watching.

“I’ll find you,” Jason says, and I hear him. I hear him. I trust him.

The lights flicker. I hear a giant impact up in the sky, and there’s an explosion, fire, the smell of smoke and ozone. Something snags me and pulls hard, out the ambulance doors, outside, and my dad is swearing, and Jason’s still telling the girl on the gurney he’s not letting her go, and Eli’s screaming, and then

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S T O P.

And after that? There’s nothing.