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PHOENIX



from the author of *Varjak Paw*

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PHOENIX

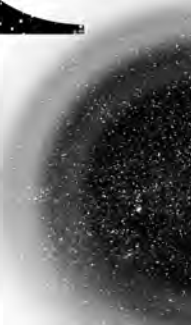
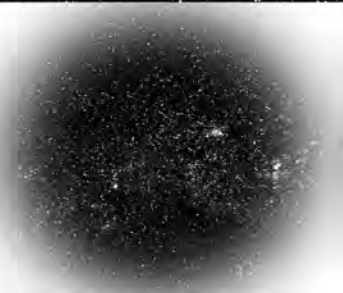
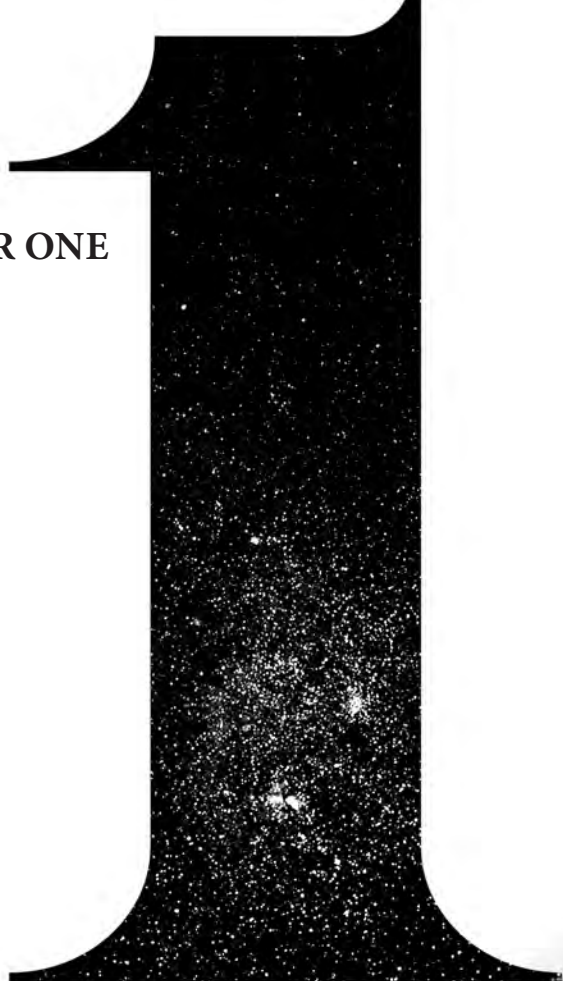
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CANDLEWICK PRESS

CHAPTER ONE

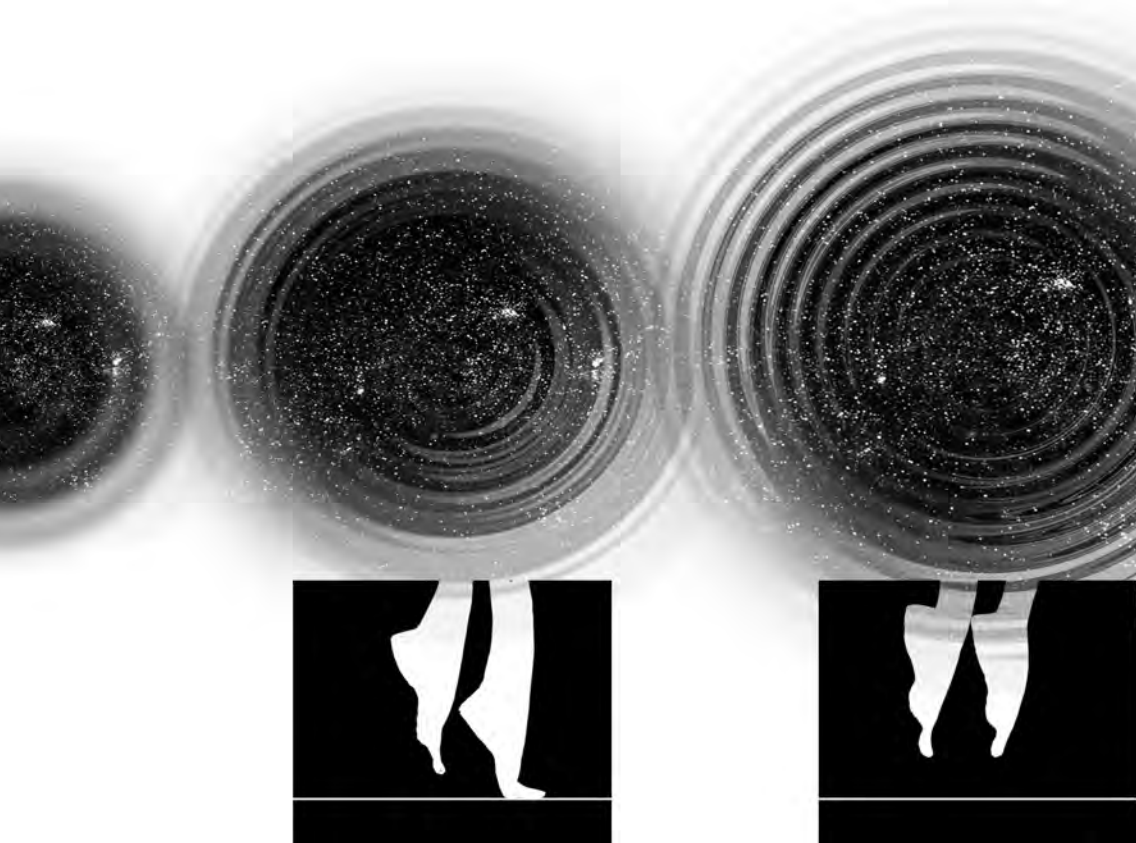


Lucky dreamed of the stars again that night. He loved the stars, and dreamed about them most nights. A million points of silver light, shining in the black.

But this dream was different. This time, the stars were calling him. They were trying to tell him something. They were making a small, soft, silvery sound, like the chime of a faraway bell.

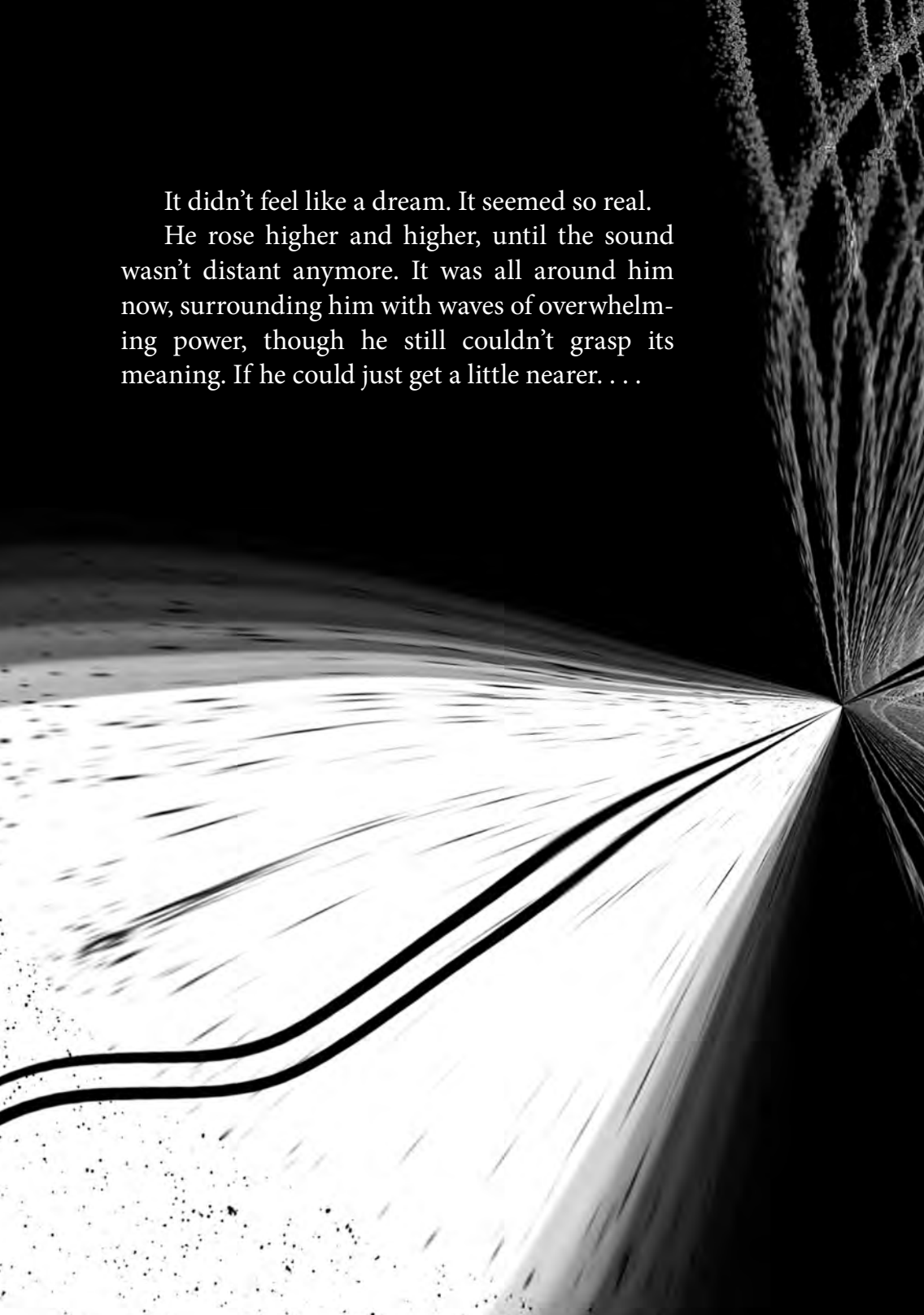
The sound grew. It surged and swelled, rising up into the sky. Lucky's blood surged with it. His feet lifted off from the floor.

And in his dream, Lucky flew. He rose up and soared through space, into the stars and constellations.

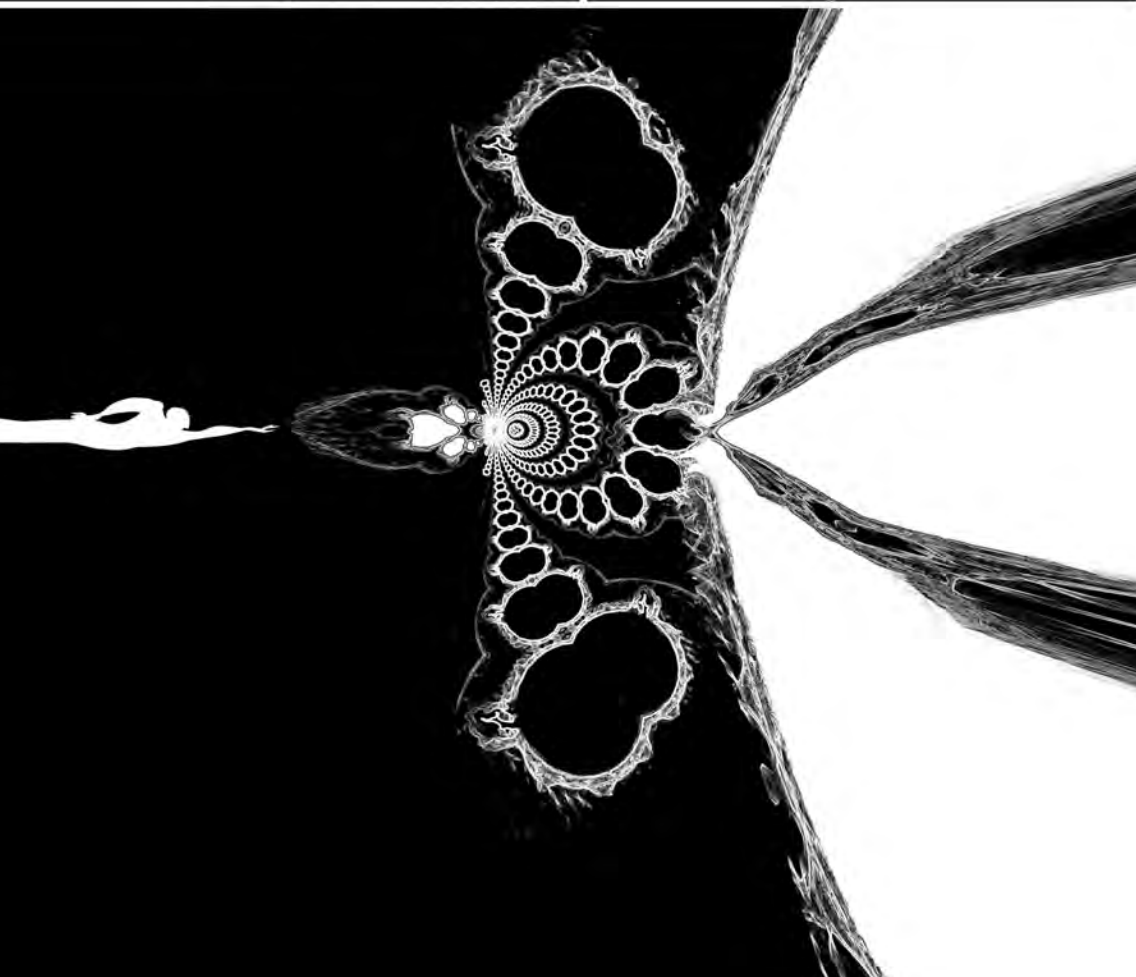
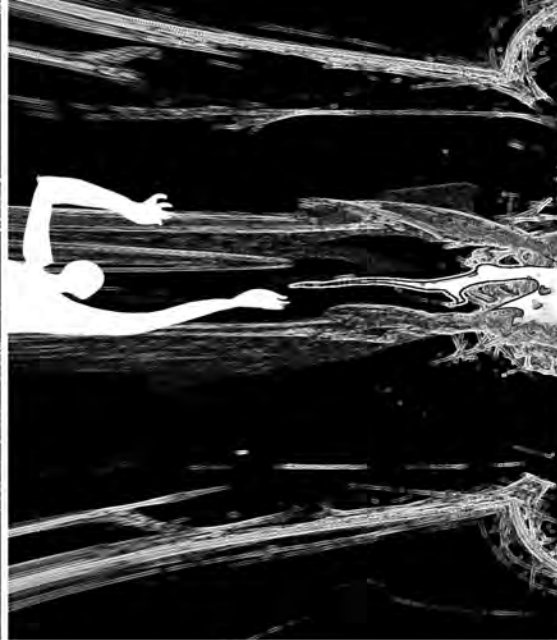


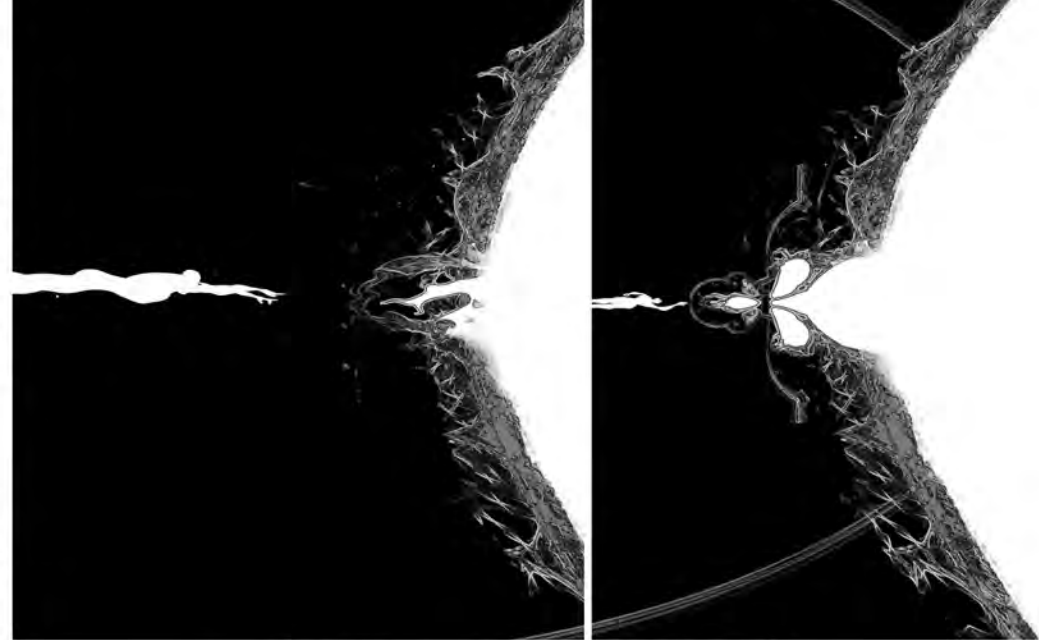
It didn't feel like a dream. It seemed so real.

He rose higher and higher, until the sound wasn't distant anymore. It was all around him now, surrounding him with waves of overwhelming power, though he still couldn't grasp its meaning. If he could just get a little nearer. . . .





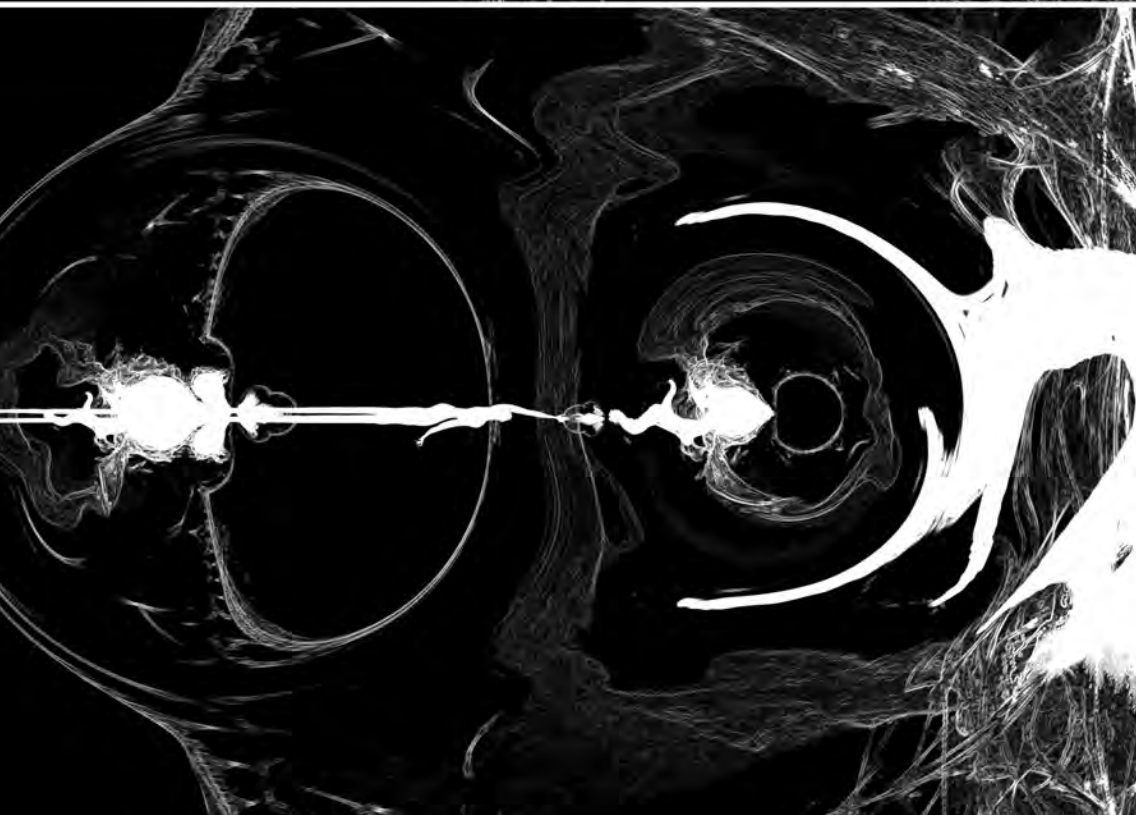
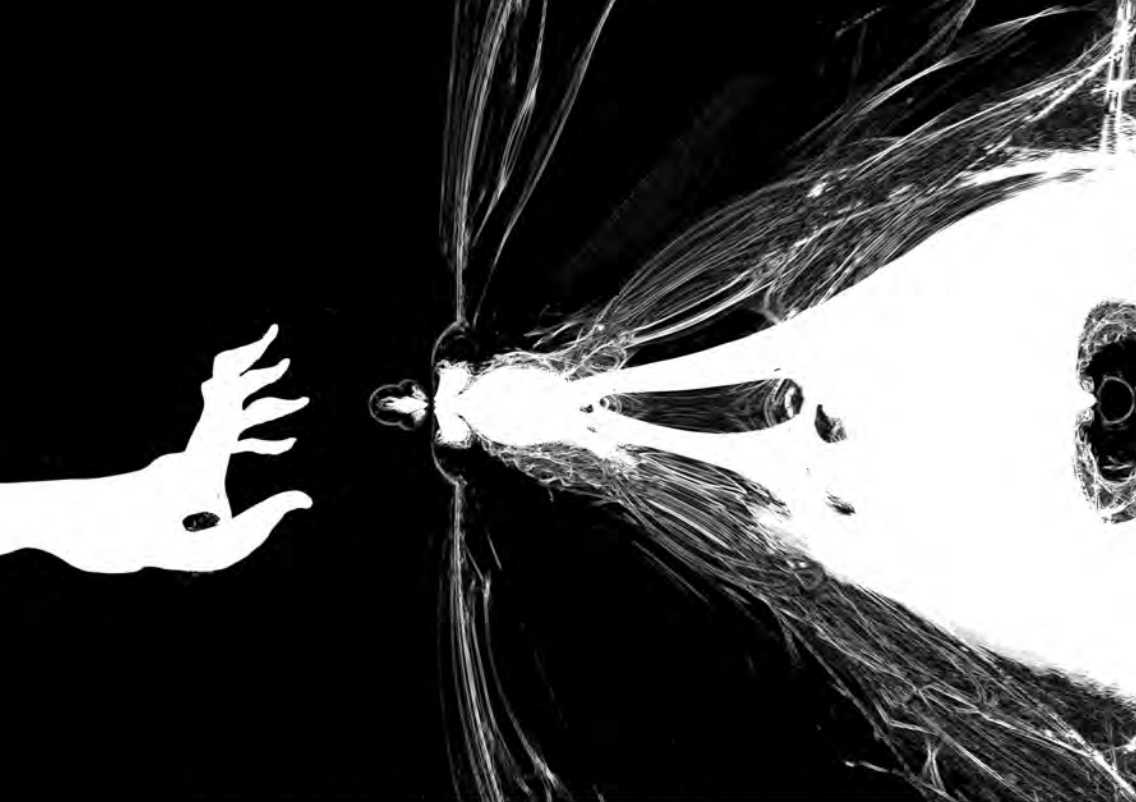




He flew so close, he could taste the stars, sparkling on his tongue. He felt their heat on his face.

They weren't little points of silver anymore. They were suns: each one a giant blazing sun. Inside them burned impossible energies, stronger than the fires in a nuclear furnace, bigger than the blast of a billion atom bombs.

He reached out his hands to touch them —





— and woke up with a violent start.

He was in his bedroom, in his mother's apartment, back on Phoenix. It was just before dawn. The air-conditioning was on full blast, but he was drenched in sweat and fever hot. A headache throbbed behind his eyes.

He fumbled for the lights — and then he saw his sheets.

The top sheet on his bed was burned. There was a massive hole through the middle of it. All around the hole, the white linen had gone black and crumbled into ash.

Lucky checked the bottom sheet. Normal. He looked back at the top one, and there it was again: a gaping hole. Smoke was still rising. His bedroom stank of it; he could taste it in his mouth.

Panic rose inside him, tightening in his chest. *What's going on?* he thought, coughing on the smoke. *Am I burned?*

He stood up. Black ash fluttered all around him. He waved it away with shaking hands and examined his skin. No burn marks. He felt exhausted and his head ached, but his body didn't seem to be hurt. It was the same puny, clumsy body as always.

Everything else in his room looked normal. The school uniform strewn on the floor. The schoolbag by his desk. His bedroom walls flickering with starmaps, showing every system this side of the Spacewall. And flying among them, his collection of model starships.

Everything was in its place, undamaged. Yet his bedsheet was burned, his room stank of smoke, and there were ashes crumbling under his fingers, smearing on his hands. *Did I do this?* he wondered. *No way — it's impossible! I wasn't even awake. . . .*

The memory of a dream flickered at the edge of his mind . . . and then slipped away.

He powered down the security matrix and opened his window, gulping in fresh air, trying to cool himself. It was still dark outside. But high above the suburban apartment blocks, the stars were shining. The sight calmed him just a little. He'd lived on this moon at the edge of the Aries system all his life, yet he never tired of gazing at the stars. They seemed so free, up there in the sky. Nothing could ever harm them.

He could hear the distant roar of starships, taking off from the spaceport. Soon it would be morning, and his mother would wake up. She would see the ruined sheet. When he couldn't explain it, she'd get worried. She'd been asking him weird questions lately, wanting to know if any unusual changes were happening to his body. He didn't know what these questions meant, but from the anxious way she asked, he knew it was trouble.

And now this. Trouble for sure . . .

No, he thought. She mustn't see the sheet. I have to get rid of it. Replace it, and never say a word.

He pulled on some clothes and tiptoed out of his bedroom. It was so peaceful in the corridor, he could feel the security matrix's subsonic hum in the soles of his feet. Everything was neat and ordered, as his mother liked it. Everything in its place. Shipshape, she called it.

There was a faint light under the kitchen door, and the scent of chocolate brownies. She must be in there, baking. Of course. On days when she went to work before he was awake, she'd always get up early to make him a treat: the

food that had always been his favorite, back from when he was a little child.

He crept silently past to the storeroom and opened up the door. It was crammed with boring household stuff. He never looked in here normally and wasn't sure where to find sheets. He hunted through stacks of tinned food and toiletries, packs of cotton wool and bandages. Even a full battlefield Medikit! How ridiculous! Why would they ever need a thing like that in a place like Phoenix, so far away from the War?

"Lucky?" His mother's voice, behind him. He turned, and there she was: her apron on, her long red hair tied back. He hadn't heard her coming at all. "Sweetheart?" she called. "What are you doing in there?"

"Oh — nothing," he said guiltily.

"Why are you awake so early?" She sniffed the air. Her blue eyes narrowed. "What's that smoky smell?" She took off the apron and strode toward his bedroom.

"Don't go in there!" He tried to get in her way, but he was too slow. Before he could stop her, she was entering his room. He followed her in, cheeks flushed with shame —

— and there it was. The evidence. The ruined sheet, with a hole burned right through the middle.

He felt dizzy, seeing it again. It hit him with fresh force: just what a strange thing it was.

His mother breathed in sharply at the sight. Fear flashed through her eyes as she took in the smoke and ashes. But in her voice, there was not the slightest trace of surprise. "Please, *no*," she whispered. "Not so soon . . ."

"What is it, Mum?" he said, his skin beginning to crawl. "What's happening?"

She didn't answer. She went over to the window and stared up at the sky. Lucky followed her and looked up too. There they were, as always: a million points of silver light. Whatever happened, the stars would always be there.

No.

Wait.

There was something strange in the sky. A tiny black crack. A crack in the sky, shaped like a V, where a moment ago, a star had been.

His mother slammed the security matrix on. She shut the window and backed away from it, face full of horror.

"What — what was that thing in the sky?" he managed to say.

She covered her face with her hands and breathed in deep. Then again, and again, until she'd brought her breathing under tight control. Only then did she take her hands away.

Her face showed nothing but determination now. Her voice was scarily calm.

"We have to get out of here," she said.

CHAPTER TWO

Lucky's mother pulled a kitbag down from his cupboard, and started to throw his clothes into it. Panic clawed at his chest as he watched her.

"Please, Mum," he begged. "What's going on? I need to know —"

"I need you to promise me something," she interrupted. She glanced at the burned bedsheet, at the smoke that still hung in the air. "Promise me you will never, ever tell anyone what happened here."

"I—I promise," he said, though her words were just making it worse. Her voice was so grave, as if someone had died. He could see she was making a massive effort to stay calm, but a tiny tremor worked its way along her jaw as she talked.

"Your father warned me this day would come," she said as she packed the bag, moving rapidly around his room. "I hoped he was wrong, but it's here, and it's real —"

"What is?"

She shook her head. "I can't explain it all now. It'll take too long. I'll tell you everything once we're safe, but right now, we have to leave town. Leave Phoenix, even."

Lucky gaped at her. “It’s that bad?” She didn’t reply; she just kept stuffing more and more clothes into the bag. “But . . . what about school?” he said. “I’ve got a test this morning, the one you were helping me —”

“Test?” she said. The kitbag was full to bursting now. “Don’t worry. School’s not important.”

“Since when?” He hugged himself tightly, trying to hold down the shivering fear that was threatening to overwhelm him. He glanced at his starmaps, his spaceships. “What about my —?” he began, but she cut off the question before he could even ask it.

“This is the only thing that matters,” she said, firmly zipping the bag shut. “Now I’m going to pack some things for me, and then we’re out of here. I’ll find us a ship at the spaceport. We’ll be off Phoenix before the day is through. OK?” And with that, she marched out of his bedroom.

His stomach was churning, his mind raging with unanswered questions. Why wouldn’t she tell him what she knew?

His father would have told him. He felt sure of it.

Lucky touched the wall screen and brought up his favorite vidpic. It was an old one, from before the War. He was just a baby in it; his mother was cradling him in her arms. Behind her was a handsome man with a mustache, dressed in a starship commander’s uniform. He was watching over them protectively, smiling down at them beneath the blazing stars of a spiral nebula.

Lucky gazed at that smile, so far away in time and space. It was so warm, so full of love. It always made him feel better to see it.

If only his father hadn't gone to fight in the War. Everything would've been different, then. He imagined running away from his mother, going to find his father . . . but where would he even start? He had no contact with him. No memories of him. Only this vidpic, and the adventures they had together in Lucky's fantasies, built around his model spaceships and starmaps.

His mother hadn't packed a single one of them. She'd never liked them. But they were things he loved. He didn't want to leave them —

— and he didn't want to leave home, either.

He stumbled out into the corridor. She'd been through already, leaving a trail of chaos behind her. Baking trays and packets of sugar were strewn across the floor, abandoned. The storeroom doors hung forlornly open.

He couldn't see the Medikit in there anymore. But he could see something else: something strange, glinting in the far corner of the storeroom. An object that had been discarded in the shadows. It resembled nothing he'd ever seen before.

Scalp prickling, he reached in and picked it up.

It was a thick black disk, blacker than black, like a chunk of outer space. It was made from some kind of metal that looked like it had fallen from the sky. It felt cool to the touch, and though it was as big as both his hands cupped together, it was very comfortable to hold.

There were no words on it. But around its circumference were faint markings, intricate patterns. Twelve symbols, like a long-forgotten alphabet, carved into the black.

He couldn't take his eyes off them. He didn't recognize them, but just looking at them made his skin tingle.

They looked ancient. They looked mystical. They looked almost alive.

And within this circle of symbols lay other, smaller circles. A series of dials, like wheels within wheels, tracing elegant arcs and crescents, describing a geometry as precise as it was mysterious.

“Lucky,” said his mother. She stood behind him in the corridor, a packed bag beside her already. “Put that astrolabe down.”

“Astro *what*?” He hefted it in his hands. “What is it? It feels so comfortable — like it was made for me or something —”

“It has nothing to do with you,” she said, a strange edge in her voice. “You weren’t meant to find it. Your father never —”

“It’s my father’s?” Lucky stared at her in shock. “Shouldn’t we take it with us?”

Her blue eyes blazed. “Forget it! Come on. Let’s go.”

But he couldn’t. He couldn’t even think about forgetting it. “If it’s my father’s,” he said, “then we *have* to take it. You’re making me leave everything here: my school, my friends, my stuff . . . Do you want to take him away from me too?”

A wave of hurt washed across her face. There was a painful silence between them for a moment.

Then she took him in her arms and held him gently. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” she said. “I’m so sorry — about all of this. I know how confusing it must be. I wish things were different. I wish we could be with your father. And believe me, so does he. . . .”

Lucky wriggled away. His mother was looking at him with a concern so deep it was awful, with a love so strong he felt embarrassed.

"If my father really wanted that," he said, "then why isn't he here with us? Why doesn't he ever get in touch? Does he even care I exist?"

"Of course he does! But . . . it's so complicated. We can't be safe with him. And right now, we can't be safe here, either."

"But why not?" he said. "Why won't you tell me what's going on?"

"All I'm trying to do is protect you, my love. I would never do anything else. You know that, right?"

He looked down. "I guess," he muttered.

She reached out again and tentatively squeezed his hand. "So will you trust me? Will you come with me? Please?"

He bit his lip. "Can I bring this astro . . . thing?"

His mother gave him a long, hard look — but he held her gaze and did not look away.

"You're as stubborn as he is!" she groaned at last. "OK. We don't have time for this, so here's the deal. I don't want to see that thing ever again. But . . . if you hide it away, and do exactly what I say . . . then, all right. You can bring it."

"I can?"

She grunted. "Don't get your hopes up. I could never get anything out of it, not one single glimmer of light. I don't expect you will, either."

Lucky didn't say a word. He just held the astrolabe in his hands, held it tight. His whole body was tingling with the strength of his emotions. At last, he had something that linked him to his father. Something better than model starships; something real. An object his father's hands had actually touched. His mother had kept it all these years, and now it was his.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

She shouldered her bag. “OK. Let’s get out of here.”

He tucked the astrolabe away in his kitbag and took one last glance back at his bedroom. The mystery of the burned sheet remained there, unexplained. But whatever secrets his mother was keeping, whatever was really going on here, he didn’t feel so afraid anymore. Not when he knew she was there, taking care of him, like always.

She put on the big dark glasses she always wore outdoors, even at night. She deactivated the forcefields, gravfields, power bars, and locks of her security matrix, pulled the front door open —

— and together, they left their home, searching for a ship to take them to the stars.





XII

The Wolf Is Rising.

The Astræus of
the Sky Cannot
Stop It



for the Wolf
Will Eat
the Stars....



CHAPTER THREE

Outside the apartment, Lucky looked for the crack in the sky again. But he couldn't see a trace of it. The suburban sky looked totally normal and clear. The sun rose, as it always did, and by late afternoon, when they reached the spaceport, Aries One was over the horizon. The nearest planet's great red face made the clouds glow crimson.

Yet he still felt edgy as he paced after his mother into the port. Everything was so much bigger here. Above their heads, giant vidscreens flashed up the latest headlines from the War. From every rooftop, security vidcams scanned the people below. The air reeked of burning fuel and exhaust fumes.

He was panting, out of breath. A stitch cut into his side. He wasn't fit like his mother was. He hated exercise, and he hated his own body. It was always letting him down.

But then he heard a sonic boom, looked up to see a ship taking off, and he couldn't help but feel a thrill. So often, he'd heard their distant roar from his bedroom. Now here he was, looking at real-life starships, like the ones his father was flying on the other side of the galaxy.

They entered the space terminal. It was a huge white building, its lofty architecture a monument to Human civilization and its conquest of the stars. Its walls flickered with massive starmaps, projecting out into the hall, showing flights to every Human world, in every system from Aries to Libra — all the way to the Spacewall.

And through its observation windows, Lucky could see the starships glittering in their landing bays, so close now he could almost reach out and touch them. There were so many of them in the port. Their hulls were pitted from vast voyages across space. Heat haze shimmered around them, making the air look liquid with possibility.

He gazed at them, spellbound. Was one of these ships really going to take him to the stars?

“Let’s see,” said his mother. “Where shall we go?”

Lucky hardly needed to look at the starmaps. “How about Leo?” he suggested. It was the most glamorous Human system, famous for exotic markets where, it was said, you could get anything your heart desired. The only drawback was the large minority of Aliens who lived there too, refugees who’d fled the War.

His mother shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said. “How about the smaller moons of Aries? They’re barely populated, they’ll be perfect. Look, there’s a flight to Lethe! Let’s get it.”

She led Lucky up to a grand ticketing desk, where an officer with a crew cut and a headset was taking bookings.

“Welcome to Phoenix Spaceport,” said the officer. “Your ident, please?”

“Of course,” said Lucky’s mother as she handed over her

identity card. Lucky didn't have his own yet; he was just a name on hers.

The officer scanned it and nodded formally. "Everything seems to be in order, Mrs. . . . Diana Ashbourne. What can we do for you?"

"We want a flight to Lethe," she said. "That one." She pointed at the starmaps — and then paused, puzzled. Because there, where the flight had been listed, was now the word CANCELED.

The officer frowned and adjusted his headset. "Just a moment. There's an announcement coming. . . ."

He looked up at the giant vidscreens on the wall. They were showing images of destruction. Burning buildings. Bodies on stretchers. People with hopeless, empty eyes. These images were being beamed from a Human world. A familiar one at that.

"News coming through of a Dark Matter bomb attack on Aries One!" boomed a voice from the vidscreens. "Stand by for a message from the President!"

There was an audible gasp around the terminal building. Aries One? The biggest world in this part of the galaxy had been bombed?

With a sense of dread, Lucky looked out the observation windows. He was relieved to see the great red planet still there in the sky, though he thought it looked wounded, somehow. The clouds around it seemed the color of blood now.

The vidscreens filled with an image of President Thorntree, leader of the Human government: a kindly but stern-looking woman with steely blond hair.

"I'm sorry to confirm that the Aliens have struck again,"

said the President. “Aries One was a peaceful world, but nowhere is safe while *they* are at large. My government is suspending all space traffic in the Aries system as a security measure, effective immediately. If you see anything suspicious, report it at once to the Shadow Guards. With your help, we will defeat our enemies.”

The vidscreens flashed up an enormous image: the Alien King, the most wanted being in the galaxy. Lucky recoiled instinctively, and so did everyone around him. No matter how many times he saw Alien features, he couldn’t get used to them: the curving horns, the cloven hooves, the burning eyes of flame.

He was glad he’d only seen them on the news, and not in real life. He’d never even seen a Shadow Guard; nothing like that ever happened in the suburbs of Phoenix. But if the Aliens had just bombed Aries One, they must be close.

Was this what his mother was running away from? Were the Aliens coming to get them?

He could feel the fear rising up inside him. It was spreading through the terminal. All around him, people were staring in horror at the vidscreens, shaking their heads at the images coming through. Some of them were crying; others were talking frantically on their comms, trying to contact families and friends.

The starmaps were all changing now, the word CANCELED coming up on every flight, to every destination.

“Surely they can’t just cancel all the flights?” protested Lucky’s mother. “We have to travel as soon as possible. It’s an emergency.”

“I’m sorry, madam,” said the officer. “You’d better go home, for your own safety. It could be hours, days, weeks —”

She leaned in closer to his desk. “What about unlisted flights?” she said, more quietly. “I know there are always some freelance pilots in a spaceport. Could you help us charter one of those?”

The officer looked horrified. “No pilot would dare take off now! The Shadow Guards would stop them if they tried.” He shook his head sternly. “Why would you want to leave Phoenix, anyway? At least there aren’t many space devils here. Only the ones in this port, and most of them are penned up in that camp. . . .”

Lucky bit his lip. He was afraid: afraid of the Aliens, but even more afraid of the fact that his mother still seemed so desperate to get away, despite all the obstacles. What could be a bigger emergency than a Dark Matter bomb?

Whatever the answer, it looked like they weren’t going to the stars after all. He’d been excited, gazing at the ships, but now it wasn’t going to happen.

His scalp tingled. He had the strangest feeling. The astrolabe in his kitbag: he had the distinct sensation that it was calling him.

He glanced at his mother. She was still arguing with the officer.

Lucky couldn’t stop himself. He couldn’t resist. He turned away from the desk, unzipped the bag a fraction, and peered inside.

His whole body was tingling now, because the black

metal disk was gleaming with silvery light. The twelve symbols around its circumference shimmered, shining like starlight in the black.

It looked like a portal, an entryway to distant lands. The silver light within it seemed to come from somewhere far, far away. It was beautiful: so beautiful, he found he was holding his breath. Time stood still before it.

Lucky stopped being conscious of the crowds, the vid-screens, the terminal building. All he was aware of was the mysterious object in his bag. He reached down to touch the cool black metal. There was such a sense of power thrumming there, just waiting to be activated, if only he knew how to work it. . . .

He ran a fingertip around its circumference, touching each of those twelve symbols in turn. Not one of them did a thing. He tried to move the dials, but they were firmly fixed in place. He searched for a lock or a clasp that might open it up, but nothing he did could make it budge. It just sat there, silently shimmering at him.

He must have lost track of time, because he was suddenly aware that the officer was shouting at him. Abruptly, the silver glow vanished. The black metal disk looked lifeless and dark again.

“. . . hell!” the big man was yelling, his eyes goggling as he stared over Lucky’s shoulder into the kitbag. “Is that what I think it is?” Lucky’s mother was frantically shaking her head on the other side.

“Uh . . .” Lucky’s cheeks burned. Fumbling, he closed the bag, catching his finger in the zipper as he shut it. “It’s — er — nothing,” he said feebly.

“That was an astrolabe!” said the officer. “What’s a boy like you doing with an astrolabe? You know they’re illegal!”

“Illegal?” Lucky gulped.

“Of course it wasn’t an astrolabe,” his mother cut in, taking charge. “How could it be? When was the last time you saw one of those?”

The officer’s eyes were narrow. “Not since the War began — but I’d recognize one anywhere. You never forget a thing like that.” He moved to grab Lucky’s bag.

“Are you calling me a liar?” Lucky’s mother said. She threw her arms up in a great show of indignation. “How dare you! I’m not standing for this!” She marched away from the ticketing desk, dragging Lucky behind her toward the exit.

“Stop!” said the officer. “Stop right there!” He bounded after them and seized Lucky’s arm. Lucky tried to wriggle away, but the man was far too strong. He yanked him back, so hard it hurt.

“Oww!” cried Lucky, falling backward, losing his balance, feet crumpling beneath him —

— but he never hit the floor. His mother caught him first. She swerved around and put herself between him and the officer.

“*Let the boy go,*” she said, in an icy low voice Lucky had never heard her use before.

She twisted the big man’s wrist, just a little, and he released Lucky at once. He backed away, clutching his hand, mouth wide open in shock.

Lucky stared at his mother. How did she do that? He was twice her size!

But the officer’s surprise was already turning to fury. “I’m

going to report you to the Shadow Guards!” he raged. “What do you think you’re doing, running around with astrolabes, assaulting people? Who the hell are you, anyway?”

Lucky’s mother didn’t say another word. She strode away in silence, dragging Lucky behind her, out of the terminal building and back into the streets.

It was chaos out there. There were streams of people who’d been turned away from their flights. Crowds looking up at vidscreens, waiting for more news, or staring at the great red planet in the sky. On the corner of the street, a man in a crumpled suit was shouting into a megaphone.

“The End Times are here!” he proclaimed, as Lucky and his mother rushed past him. “The End of All Worlds! The Devil himself walks among us!”

“I—I’m sorry,” said Lucky as he followed his mother through milling crowds. “I’m sorry about the astrolabe—”

“I *told* you to keep that thing hidden,” she said.

“You never told me it was illegal,” he protested. “Why’s it illegal? What does it do?”

She glanced up at the sky. “We have to get off Phoenix before they find us,” was all she said.

“The Aliens?” said Lucky. “Won’t the Shadow Guards protect us from them?”

She didn’t reply; she just picked up her pace. Lucky shivered. The temperature in the spaceport was dropping rapidly. Night was falling. The sky blackened, and the stars came out. Aries One rose higher, like a great red wound in the sky.

Lucky’s mother led him into shadowy parts of the port where there were few people and no vidcams. Here, she

found a small landing bay that housed a rusty cargo ship, with a couple of old starsailors beside it.

“They might take us, if I make it worth their while,” she said. “Wait here while I try.” She approached the men and talked to them quietly — so quietly Lucky couldn’t hear what she said. One of them didn’t respond. He didn’t even seem to be aware she was there; he just stared straight ahead with empty eyes. But the other starsailor’s reply was all too clear.

“No way, lady! Haven’t you heard the news? We ain’t messing with the Shadow Guards, and neither should you!”

She hurried away from them, leading Lucky deeper into the backstreets. They went from landing bay to landing bay, ship to ship, through thickening shadows, trying every craft they could find. But it was the same everywhere. No one would give them a ride.

As he waited for his mother by the last of the landing bays, Lucky bit his lip, fighting down the feeling that this was all his fault. All this because of a burned bedsheet. But why?

ssssshh

A soft hissing sound. Behind him, above him. It set his teeth on edge.

He turned around, looked up — and nearly bit his tongue off.

Because the crack in the sky was back.

It was bigger. Much bigger. It covered a whole quadrant of the sky now. It was shaped like a great black V: a sharp-edged shadow where the night’s darkness looked even darker, somehow. Thicker. And all the way through it, he couldn’t see a single star.

The stars had disappeared.

Lucky wanted to say something, to warn his mother or cry out, but he couldn't. His mouth had gone dry. His throat constricted. Looking at the thickening shadow, he couldn't even breathe. . . .

"No luck," said his mother, returning from the landing bay. "I don't think there are any more ships—"

"What *is* that thing?" he managed to whisper, digging his nails into the palms of his hands.

"What thing?"


He pointed behind her. "There — in the sky . . ."

ssssshh

The V was growing bigger. Bigger and bigger.

His mother breathed in sharply, then took his hand. "Quick now, Lucky," she said, already beginning to move. "Run."

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