

# PRAISE FOR PHOENIX

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Shortlisted for the **Guardian Children's Fiction Prize**



*Also by SF Said  
with illustrations by Dave McKean*

**VARIK PAV**

**THE OUTLAW VARIK PAV**



# PHOENIX

SF Said

Illustrated by Dave McKean

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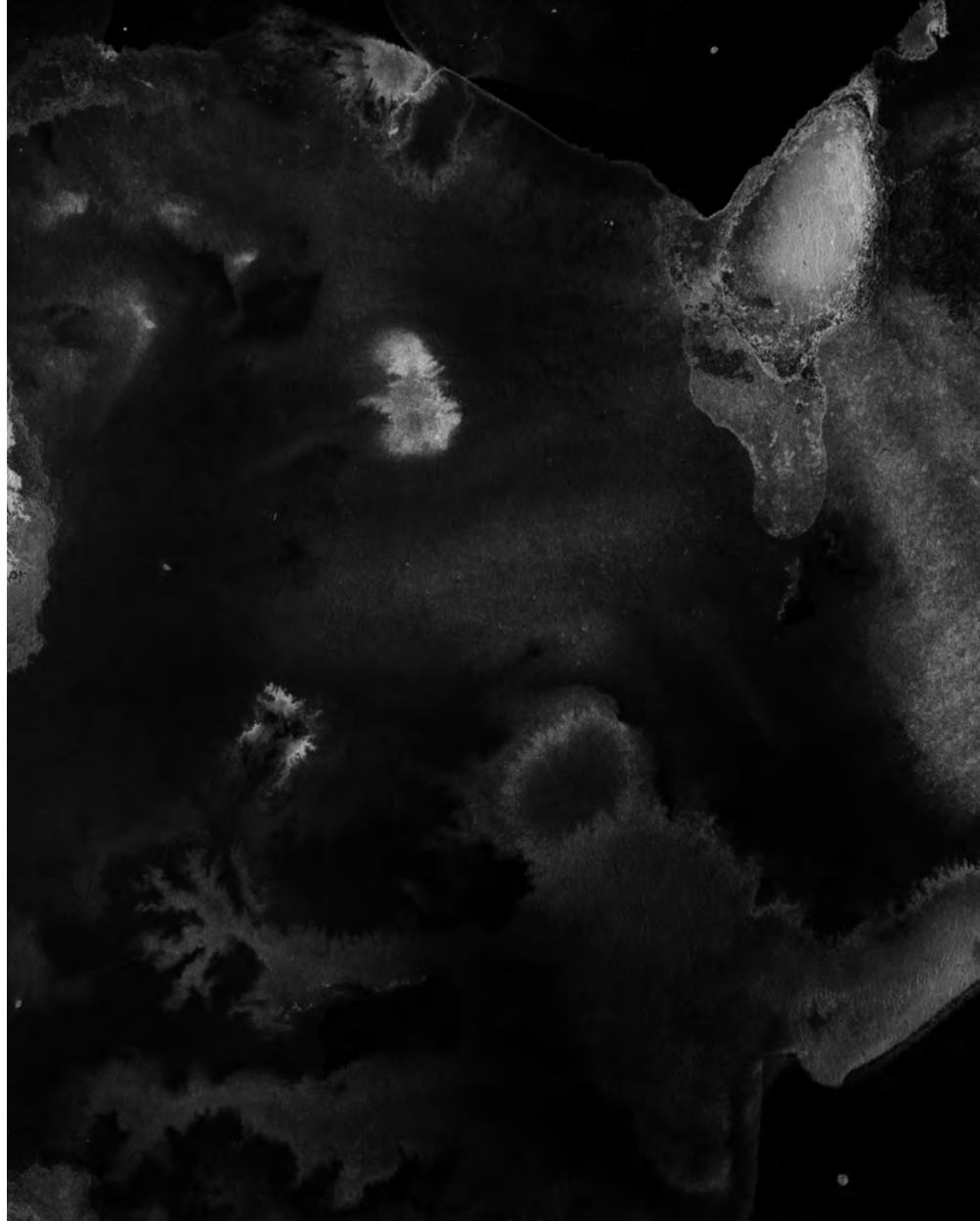
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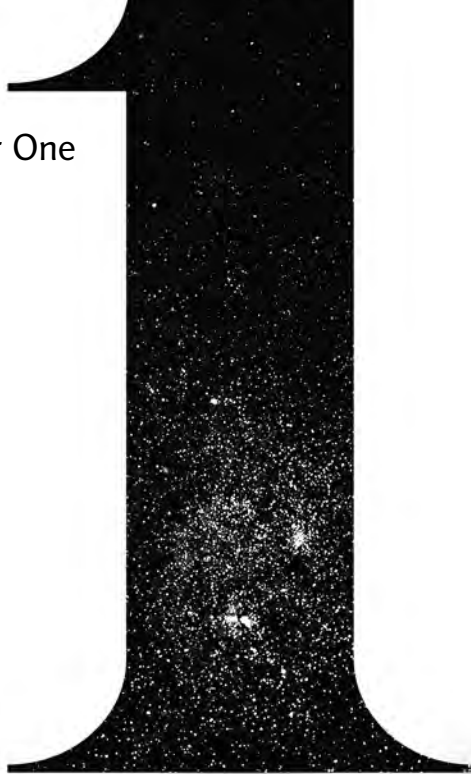
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# Chapter One

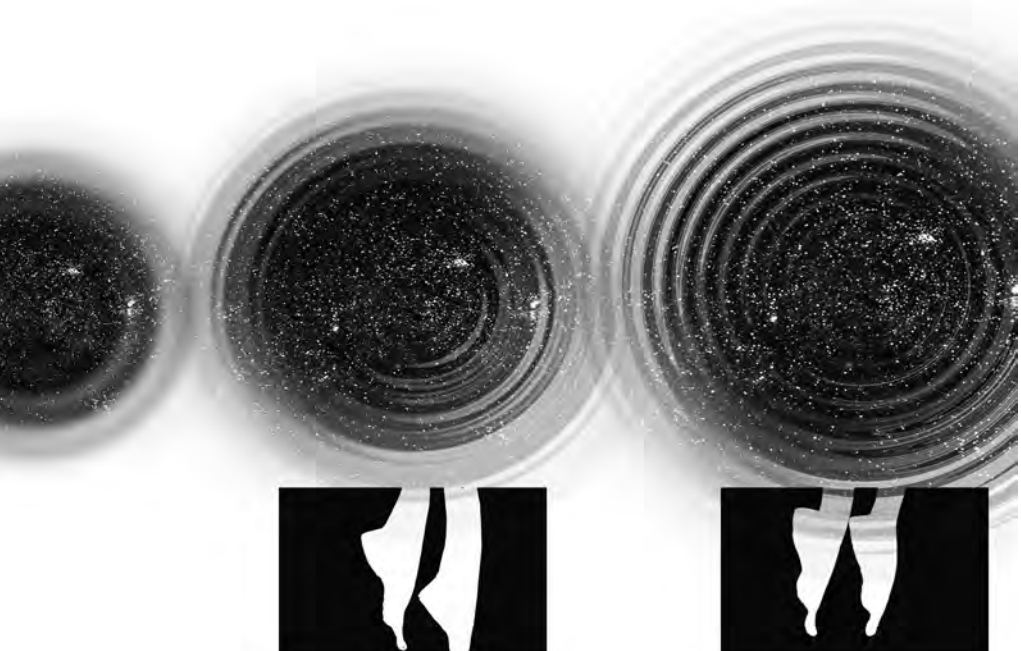


Lucky dreamed of the stars again that night. He loved the stars, and dreamed about them most nights. A million points of silver light, shining in the black.

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.

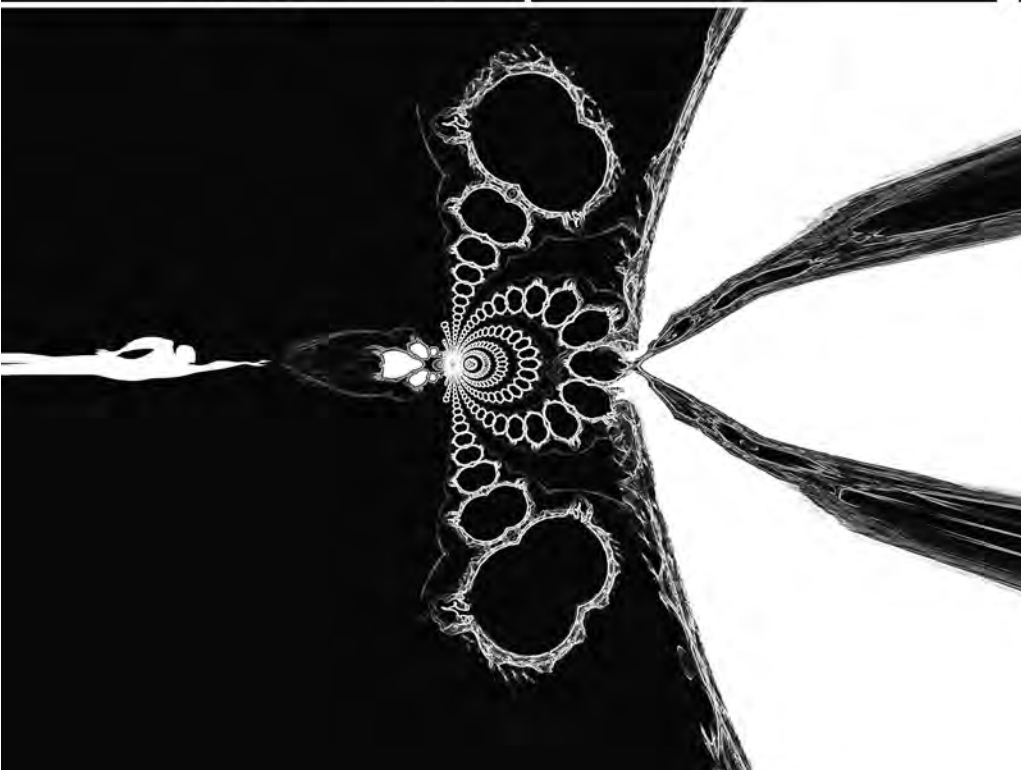
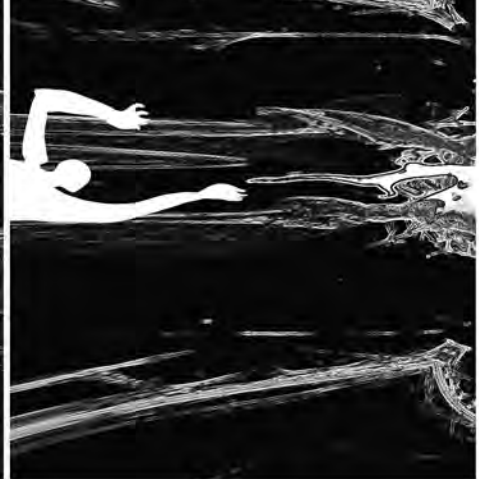


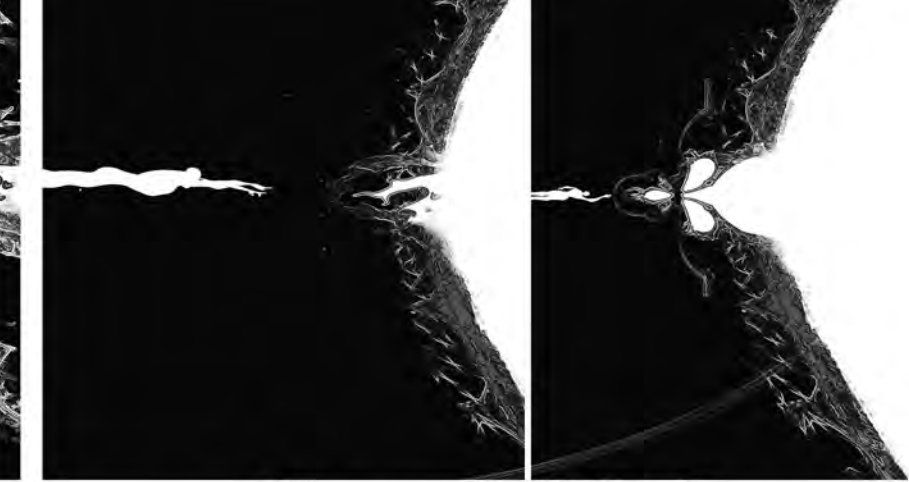
It didn't feel like a dream. It seemed so real.  
He rose higher and higher, until the sound  
wasn't distant any more. It was all around  
him now, surrounding him with waves of  
overwhelming power, though he still couldn't  
grasp its meaning. If he could just get a little  
nearer . . .







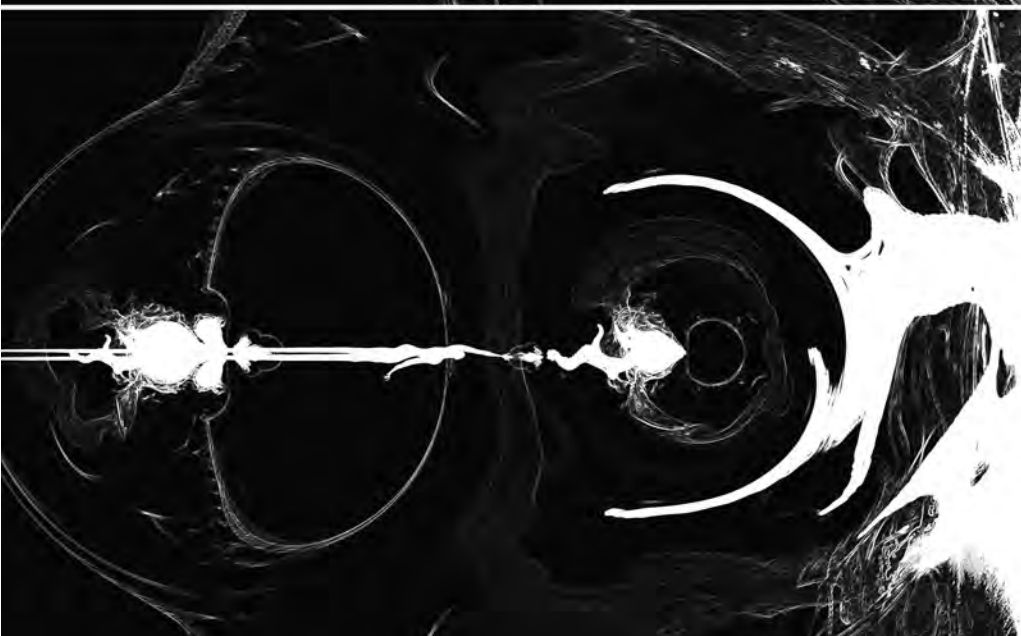




He flew so close, he could taste the stars, sparkling on his tongue. He felt their heat on his face.

They weren't little points of silver any more. 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 school bag 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 favourite, 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 towards 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, 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 favourite 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 moustache, 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 any more. 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 disc, 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's 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! Now 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 any more. 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 Astraeus Of  
The Sky Cannot  
Stop It





For The Wolf  
Will Eat  
The Stars . . .

