Let the true dreamer wake...

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DAVID FARR

THE BOOK OF STOLEN DREAMS

Illustrated by Kristina Kister

BOOK ONE

Introduction

If you are reading this book, or if someone is reading it to you, you will know we are living in strange times.

A shadow has passed over the land of Krasnia. And people are afraid.

The shadow has a name. It is President Charles Malstain.

He came from nowhere and now he is in control of everything.

You cannot fight him. Not if you value your life.

You cannot persuade him. Not if you value your tongue.

You can only stay and suffer – or flee.

Look up!

High in the night sky there is a great silver airship. The airship is heading west over the ocean. It is called the *Pegasus*. It is taking desperate fugitives away from Krasnia, from the cruel control of Charles Malstain to the welcoming arms of a foreign city – Port Clement.

Look closer, through the windows into the airship's first-class compartments. Those sad, lonely faces. They are leaving loved ones behind. Will they ever see them again?

Now move your gaze lower. Down through the shadows, past steel girders and ladders, to the second-class deck. It is open to the winds and bitterly cold. A single lantern at each corner barely produces a glow to ease the darkness. Thin grey blankets drape over thinner shoulders, hats are thrust down over ears.

Look closer still. Can you see a figure standing alone on the far corner, looking out into the night?

A girl!

She is twelve years old. She is skinny, she has dark hair and a freckled nose. She has fingerless gloves, carries a strangely elegant small travelling bag and she wears a worn woollen coat, under which is a red checked shirt, a grey jumper, and trousers that seem more likely to belong to a boy. Her black leather shoes are a size too big and could do with a clean.

And now look. There is another figure approaching her across the deck. Oh no! Is she in danger?

The man is slight, dressed in a shabby suit that no longer fits him. In his left hand he carries a battered violin case wrapped in a blanket.

And unless Rachel Klein is very much mistaken, he seems to have a penguin on his head.

1
On the Lower Deck of the Pegasus

"Excuse me. I couldn't help noticing you are alone. Please, my dear girl, you have no reason to fear."

Rachel said nothing. The scruffy man stood in the frozen darkness and smiled. His suit jacket was missing several buttons. His eyes twinkled but were sad at the same time. He looked the way a kind uncle would – if Rachel had a kind uncle. What age was he? Rachel wasn't sure.

He spoke again, words tumbling from his mouth like laughter.

"You will want to know my name. Quite right! Who am I? Why am I talking to you? Why am I here on this huge airship travelling across the night-sky to Port Clement? How did I get my ticket away from that miserable city of Brava? Why is my ticket for this trip pink and yours blue? Is my moustache real? Why am I wearing a hat in the shape of a penguin?"

He stopped for breath. Rachel stayed silent and looked down at her shoes. They were so obviously too big. Would he notice? Would he see the little bulge in her sock? She must be careful. He might have followed her from Brava. From Meyer's House of Illustration. These days you could trust no one.

"And you, my dear? How old are you?"

"Twelve." Rachel could tell him that. That was safe.

"Good Lord! You don't look a year older than eleven! Your name?"

Rachel Klein thought fast. Remembered her false name.

"Isabella von Gurning."

"An utterly charming name. Do you live in Brava? Which side of the city are you from?"

Rachel took a deep breath and lied again.

"From the west? A charming area. Full of the best-dressed women." He studied her. "And yet I sense in you a different spirit."

Oh no. He had seen through her! How could he tell?

The man scrutinised her carefully. His breath was visible in the dim glow of the deck's lighting.

"No. I suspect you cowme from the poorer north of the city, from a family of artists. Your eyes are musical, and your nose gives me the strongest impression that you have a piano in your living room."

How did he know? How could he possibly know…?

"You do? Ha! I knew it!" He jumped in delight. "Where are your wonderful parents? Are they getting you a hot chocolate from the cafe? I'm afraid to say it isn't very good."

Why was she nearly crying? Was it lack of sleep? Was it the mention of the hot chocolate? Memories of muffins in the old family apartment?

"But, my dear – why do you look so sad? Is it the poor quality of the hot chocolate? No, I see now. Your parents aren't here with you. You are alone. Where are they?"

Rachel looked into his understanding eyes, and told him the truth: "My mother is dead."

The man's face fell.

"Oh, my poor girl. How tactless I am. I could beat myself with a stick! I should have thought that there might be a darker reason for you being on this journey. Oh, you're shaking! Please take my blanket. It smells slightly of salad cream due to an unfortunate accident with a baguette earlier today. You will find out in time why it is flea-bitten and why the design is of watermelons."

Rachel shivered and took the rather grubby piece of old rug that he had unwrapped from around the violin case.

"And your father? Where is he?"

"He's in prison. Soldiers took him."

"Oh, my dear Isabella! But it's an all-too-common story these days. Did he put up a fight? No? It was probably wise of him. You don't mess with Charles Malstain's state police.

In the days of the Emperor, if soldiers came to arrest you, they offered a polite smile, a bunch of flowers or a box of chocolate hearts. But these days the police have neither reason nor manners. And there are no chocolate hearts."

Rachel looked up at him. His ragged suit. His funny facial hair. He spoke again.

"Why are you going to Port Clement, may I ask?"

"My brother is there. I have to find him."

"Is he doing well there?"

"I don't know."

"You haven't heard from him? Do you know where he lives? You don't even have a telephone number? Then how will you find him? Now don't cry, I was only asking a question. Of course you will find him, even though Port Clement is a city of seventeen million people and he has no idea you're coming. Why are you crying again? Here I am trying to cheer you up and I only make things worse! My problem, Isabella, is I speak before I think. My mother – a marvellous woman – was very critical of this flaw of mine. Forgive me."

Rachel wiped her eyes and said she would. She looked out across the darkness. It was endless and unknowable.

As if sensing what she was thinking, the little man stood beside her at the rail and spoke quietly.

"My dear, listen to me very carefully. Your brother will find you – or you will find him. I promise you."

"How do you know?"

"Because he will hear your heart beating."

For a moment their eyes met. Rachel felt a little spring of hope deep inside her.

And with that the little man slapped her on the back.

"Now how about a cup of dreadful cocoa?"

2
Josef Centurion

They walked together to the sad little kiosk at the opposite corner of the *Pegasus*'s deck. A woman with long earrings dispensed thin dark liquid into plastic cups. The little man paid for two. He handed Rachel hers.

"I'm afraid it tastes of dead moths," he whispered. He was right. But it was warm, and that was something.

Together they sat in the bowels of the airship's huge lower deck. The little man wound the watermelon blanket tightly around her. It did indeed smell of salad cream – with a hint of gherkin. Rachel's hands clasped the warm cup like a friend.

It was a long flight over the ocean to Port Clement. She didn't want to be alone. Yes, the man was odd, he dressed like