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Dark Flight Down

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The Dark Flight Down

Marcus Sedgwick

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Prologue

Midnight at the Imperial Court of Emperor Frederick III. The Court has been emptied for the evening of its usual crowd of sycophants and entertainers, of its alchemists, astrologers, doctors, faith-healers, druggists, noblemen, ne'er-do-wells, priests, actors and occultists.

The Emperor sits on his throne, apparently alone, brooding. He lifts a pale hand, slowly, lazily.

'Maxim!' he calls, in his high, pathetic voice. 'Dammit, Maxim, where are you?'

From the shadows behind the throne a tall, heavy figure emerges, swathed in a dark red robe that trails in the dust on the marble Court floor. Maxim, the Emperor's right hand, his confidant and oracle.

'Sire?' Maxim says. He is tired, but careful to show no sign of this to Frederick. He runs a hand across the top of his shaven head.

'There you are!' Frederick declares, but without emotion. 'There you are.'

'Sire,' Maxim says, ready to do the Emperor's bidding.

'Maxim, how many years have I left to live?'

Maxim hesitates briefly before answering, wondering how many times he has had this conversation with the

Emperor, and then, depressingly, he wonders how many *more* times he will have it.

'Sire, we have established beyond all possible doubt that you will live to a venerable age.'

He bows, to try to emphasise the significance of his words, hoping they will be sufficient to keep Frederick happy.

'Yes, yes,' says Frederick, far from happy. He lifts a long, thin finger and scratches the side of his nose. Flakes of skin float into the gloom of the deserted Court. 'But how long exactly, would you say?'

Maxim sighs inwardly. It is not to be short, then.

'Ah!' he says brightly. 'Well, our finest thinkers are convinced that you will live to be . . . a hundred!'

Frederick is silent for a while. Maxim begins to edge away.

'But what then?' Frederick cries suddenly.

Maxim hurries back to the foot of the throne.

'Well,' he says. 'Well! We have every right, every reason, to suppose that you will live to be a hundred and twenty. There is no reason why not.'

'Ah. I see. One hundred. And twenty.'

'Sire,' says Maxim, wondering if he dare retire from the Emperor's presence.

'But! But what then? What then, Maxim? What. Then?'

Maxim is tired, and would very much like to be upstairs in his chambers, asleep, but he knows there is little chance of that now. Still, he is careful to show no sign of his tiredness, his irritation.

'Sire, Your Excellency may then have the good grace to die.'

That should shut him up, Maxim thinks, bowing his large frame as low as he can manage without falling on to his nose.

'Die?' Frederick whines. 'Die? And what then?'

Maxim jerks his head upright, now irritated beyond reason by the Emperor's voice.

'Well, Sire,' he says slowly, gazing at the ceiling, 'there'll be . . . mourning. A period of great sorrow across the whole City. People will . . . stop to remember the great Frederick, and celebrate. They'll make . . .'

Maxim hesitates, inspiration deserting him. He looks down, and finds the Emperor scowling at him.

'They'll make . . . ?'

'Yes, Sire,' says Maxim. 'They'll make . . . boom boom.'

'Boom boom?' Frederick asks. 'They'll make boom boom? What in heaven's name do you mean? A celebration? Fireworks? Is that it? Is that all I will have to show for my time?'

Maxim lifts his head to the Emperor, opens his hands wide, and for once is at a loss for words.

Frederick rises to his feet. Even standing, his short, skinny frame is dwarfed by his towering throne.

He points at Maxim.

'They will not make "boom boom" because I am not going to die! Not ever. I will reach one hundred, and then another one after that, and then another after that. Do you see, Maxim? Do you? I am the last of the line, Maxim; you know that as well as anyone. I have no kith, Maxim, no kin, no offspring nor progeny. If I die, the chain is broken. The end is reached. The Empire will have no Emperor. There is only one answer. I am not going to die!

You, my loyal servant, will see to it. I am not to die, and you are going to make sure of it.'

Maxim hesitates. The Emperor is a fool. And he is a liar too. Some things cannot be forgotten, cannot be hidden as easily as Frederick would like, but Maxim doesn't dare tell him that.

'But, Sire, I—'

'No, it is no use. I have made up my mind. Either you find a way to make me immortal, or your own end will be swifter than you might expect. Now get out of my sight, and find someone to carry me up to bed. You have no idea how bad it is for me, sitting on this throne all day.'

'No, Sire,' says Maxim, his hand already pulling a bell-rope.

'And don't forget! Find a way to make me live for ever. Or . . .'

And Maxim watches with a familiar prickle of horror as the feeble old Emperor whisks a skinny finger across his own throat.

'Phht!'

The City

The Place of Obscured Memories





The City froze hard that Winter, iron-cold and stone-still. When the snows came, they settled in to stay. It had started with snowstorms that seemed as if they were angry with something, as the wind whirled snowflakes down on to the City's filthy streets and crumbling buildings. It had started in the last few days of the year as Boy and Willow had been swept along by the magician Valerian in his ultimately futile quest for survival.

Then, early on New Year's Day, the fury abated, but still for day after day large fluffy flakes of pure whiteness drifted gently down, covering the muck and the mire, hiding the decay of the old City beneath a thick layer of pristine white youth.

The snow obliterated broken slates and chimney stacks, removed all traces of dilapidated walls and rotting windowsills, and laid a clean and soft white carpet along every single alley, street, avenue and parade, that was renewed every night.

It was as if the snow was trying to purify the squalid City, or at least hide its evil under a shroud of forgetting. Each night, the old, horrible and grim was replaced by something new, young and beautiful.

But there was a price for this rebirth. It was cold, bitterly cold, and the City froze deep, and deathly still.

With it, something inside Boy froze too.

Too much had happened too quickly.

Valerian. Boy couldn't even begin to think, to understand, about Valerian. He could barely feel.

He struggled to order, let alone comprehend, the events of the dead days at the end of the year that had just died, taking Valerian with it. And beyond Valerian's death, there was what Kepler had said, right before the end – the thing that had tormented Boy's brain ever since, the truth of which still lay obscured.

That Valerian was Boy's father.

The new year that had just begun had hardly been a few hours old when Boy's one comfort had been taken from him too.

Willow.