



Published by Knights Of
Knights Of Ltd, Registered Offices:
119 Marylebone Road, London, NW1 5PU

www.knightsof.media
First published 2025
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Set in Baskerville / 12pt
Typeset by Georgina Charles
Printed and bound in the UK

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A CIP catalogue record for this book will be
available from the British Library

ISBN: 9781915820068



When The STORM COMES



Polly Ho-yen

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KNIGHTS OF

For Eishar Brar

The storm had been brewing for weeks.

When I look back and remember those days of dripping rain, the thick, grey cloud blanketing the sky, the rolling thunder, I wonder how we didn't see it coming. We didn't realise it was building to something.

Back then, we just thought it was stormy weather.

We had no idea what lay ahead.

We couldn't ever have imagined how it would engulf us.

CHAPTER ONE

Before I was Mali, I was Amaryllis. A word that is not only so hard to pronounce that a lot of teachers used to mumble it when they read it on the register, but is even more annoying for the fact that it is actually the name of a plant. It's the one you see a lot at Christmas time, that looks all stalky and tall and then erupts into a giant red flower.

It was my mum's favourite plant, which is how I ended up with it as my name. My dad wanted to name me after something that would remind him of her even though I know, just by looking at me, I remind him of my mum all the time. He doesn't have to say it; I can just see from the way his face changes when he's looking at me that that's what he's thinking.

It was OK when I was little. I would lift my head right up when I heard my name being called in the morning register; no-one picked up on the fact that my name was something so odd. I've always been the smallest in the year, and so making myself a little taller made me feel like I was just like everyone else. I didn't want to hide

away back then.

But, it did become a problem when I left primary school. When my name was first called, there was a snigger in the classroom, and the young teacher with a high ponytail stumbled over the syllables.

‘A-ma ... A-ma-lis, no Amaryllis - that’s a plant, right?’ she said, looking up, all innocently with big eyes and a nervous smile. She was new.

‘Are you a plant?’ a boy called Petey shouted, and the sniggers grew into laughter.

Someone else prodded me, and I squirmed in my seat.

‘Are you Amaryllis?’ the teacher asked me.

Another eruption of laughter.

I could see the teacher’s eyes widen a little, as she realised that things were beginning to turn out of her control.

I said ‘yes’ under my breath and gave her the smallest of nods.

She locked eyes with me for just a moment and I realised that she was sorry; sorry for bringing it to everyone’s attention and sorry that it had exploded. But it was too late for sorry.

I was haunted, hunted by my name. Someone, and I say someone because I think it was a few people revolving and taking it in turns, would throw a handful of grass in my direction during registration. It would

come from different tables and at first, I turned my head sharply to see who did it, but when I couldn't work it out, I tried my best to ignore it. I'd stare forwards as the blades of grass would settle around me like confetti. I was pretty sure that boy Petey, who had first shouted out about my name, was one of the people who threw grass. He always had a mocking smile on his face, like he had a not-very-secret secret, when it happened.

And I don't quite know how it happened, but in the corridors, I always seemed to be in his way. Petey was bigger than me, in every way: taller, thicker, broader. When I accidentally bumped into him, it felt like I was hitting a wall.

The first time it happened, at the beginning of school, I mumbled sorry and looked up to see who I'd inadvertently walked into. Petey looked down at me, with small piggy eyes, and for a second before I looked away, I took in his freckles, his short, shaved at the sides, light hair; we didn't look we came from the same species. I adjusted the sleeves of my jumper, pulling them down a little to cover my bony hands and wrists. How could we be the same age when I was so tiny, and he was so huge?

'Watch it,' Petey said.

'Sorry,' I said again, but even quieter than the first time.

I tried to step around him, but he feinted as though he was going to stamp in that direction and so I tried to

go the other way. Stamp. His shoe came down again, thunderous and heavy.

I was still for a second and then he stamped again, right towards me, and this time his shoe came down on mine. It was all I could do not to cry out as I felt my foot being crushed.

'I said, watch where you're going,' Petey said.' I mean, no wonder you can't see what you're doing with that ridiculous hair.'

Despite what he said, I let the curtains of my dark hair fall over my eyes, hiding me just the smallest amount, and bit down on my lip, both features I'd inherited from my mum. People said that I looked like her a lot, and I used to think that was a good thing, but suddenly, like my name from her, it felt like something I should be ashamed of.

I scuttled away, glad for a moment to escape the stamping but it didn't last long when I realised he was in fact the boy from my tutor group who I would see every morning, every day of term.

But, as I said, I felt sure it was more than just one person, more than just Petey, as horrible as he was. It felt like it was coming at me from every direction.

It was Shiyoon who first called me Mali, Shiyoon who changed everything for me.

The first day I met him, he was carrying a rucksack

that looked so comedically big for him that I honestly thought that he was going to fall backwards from the weight of it. He was not much bigger than me in height or stature, and yet he seemed much taller and bigger somehow. Maybe it was because of the huge grin plastered across his face, a smile that lit up his eyes in a way that suggested mischief.

He was new, transferred from another school. I didn't learn until later on that it was not just that he'd moved from another school, he'd moved countries. His mother's job meant that his family had set up homes in Germany, Singapore, and now the UK, all before his twelfth birthday. Maybe it was because he was so used to starting over, but on his first day, Shiyoon didn't seem remotely nervous. The opposite, in fact. He was practically beaming, and somehow, his open friendliness wasn't seen as a sign of weakness or an object of humiliation; people liked him. He was in his own little bubble of Shiyoon.

When the grass came raining down from behind me that morning, he looked over at me and then plucked a blade of grass from my shoulder.

'Old joke?' he said.

'Something like that,' I mumbled.

He said something next like 'old joke gone bad' or 'old joke gone stale' – I'm not entirely sure because he

didn't exactly say it to me, it was more to himself.

When he grinned over at me and said, 'I'm Shiyoon' with an open friendliness that I wasn't used to, I found myself saying, 'I'm... I'm... I don't want to tell you my name.'

'Ah, you want me to guess!' He seemed delighted; by me or by the thought of guessing, it was hard to tell.

'No, it's not ... my name's the joke around here,' I said and picked another blade of grass from where it had landed in front of me. I let it float to the floor.

'Can I tell you a secret?' he said. He leant towards me a little. 'They only care because you care.'

'You haven't heard the name yet,' I said.

'I've heard them all,' he said. 'Honestly, you cannot shock me. At my last school, the parents got pretty er ... creative. You actually stood out if you were called something normal. I had a friend called Sarah who felt so left out that she insisted we all started calling her Saturn.'

'Did you?'

'What?'

'Call her Saturn?'

'Yeah, why not?' Shiyoon wrinkled his nose a little and cocked his head to one side. I would later learn that he would do that anytime someone said something that seemed strange to him.

‘Maybe I should change my name,’ I said. ‘Not to Saturn though,’ I added quickly.

‘Do what you’d like,’ Shiyoona said. ‘Maybe I was wrong about not caring – I know it’s hard not to care what other people think. I’ve just changed schools so many times that I’ve realised I can turn that off somehow and then it’s weird that, because of that, people don’t seem to pick on me. Although there’s plenty of reasons why they could.’ He gestured to himself; his scrawny thin arms, his overlarge rucksack. His teeth were wonky and stuck out just a little bit, and his bowl-cut hair stood out in untamable tufts.

I nodded and remembered the week he’d joined when he’d been so open and friendly but also like he was waterproof to anyone not liking him; no-one could be bothered to pick on him.

‘I’ll try it,’ I said.

Shiyoona nodded.

‘Which part?’

‘Both – I’ll try not to care *and* I’ll change my name.’

‘Woah, the double whammy,’ Shiyoona grinned.

‘Just have to think of one now,’ I said.

‘Hmm,’ said Shiyoona, looking thoughtful.

‘What do you think of ...’ I tried to think of a new way of saying Amaryllis, but every way sounded wrong. But then, as I doodled it onto my hand, I wondered if

maybe I could just use some of the letters. ‘Mali,’ I said.

‘Mali,’ Shiyoon said, nodding and smiling even wider if that was possible. ‘I like it. Nice to meet you, Mali.’

I smiled back. ‘Nice to meet you, Shiyoon.’

It wasn’t really funny but we both started laughing, a small giggle that felt contagious somehow, until it was a riotous laughter that came bursting out from inside us.

Everyone stared at us, at me, but, for the first time since I started at that school, I didn’t care.



Not so long after that, Shiyoon and I were inseparable. It really felt like I was a different person to the quiet, lonely Amaryllis who had started term that year.

Though I could still sometimes sense the laser glare of Petey, and I still had the occasional run-in with him in the corridors, it seemed like somehow being friends with Shiyoon had made me less of a target. At first I still kept my distance from Petey; if I saw him looming in the distance, I might go another way to avoid him but, over time, with Shiyoon bounding along next to me, I even stopped doing that.

I discovered that I was funny – well, funny to Shiyoon, at least. But that meant I felt like I was funny to everyone else, too.

We got a reputation pretty quickly for being the class jokers, although in truth we were mostly concerned with making each other laugh. I'm not even sure anything we said was that funny, but we just seemed to spend most of our time together laughing. Whenever we saw each other, in the morning or in between classes, we would always say 'Nice to meet you, Mali' and 'Nice to meet you, Shiyoon' and that would always start us off.

Not too long after Shiyoon started, we were paired together in Drama and we ended up doing a silly sketch where we did impressions of the Head of Year. It sent everyone wild in hysterics. It felt almost impossible to imagine I could be this person, acting and huffing about like Mr. Heron but that was who I became. Afterwards, we drew the sketch into a little comic strip and Shiyoon showed it to a few people who said they liked it. And then, from the back of that, we started making our comic book.

It was Shiyoon's idea, I think, although we both got so excited about it that it's hard to remember. From then on, it was what we spent all our time doing. It was a comic about our school, with the teachers as thinly disguised versions of themselves, only they were all, in fact, outcast vampires. They had been shunned by vampire society and were trying to take over the school, so they could present to their kind a whole school of

juicy teenagers to get back in favour with them. But they got foiled time after time by the unwitting students, who had no idea what they were really up to.

We worked on it whenever we could, both of us doing the drawing and writing – we each had different characters we liked drawing and then we wrote the dialogue together. I had the idea that we could call it ‘Blood Suckers’ and then Shiyoona said that maybe we should just call it ‘Suckers’ because then it wouldn’t matter if what we made sucked in the end.

‘Suckers’ took up a lot of our time; we just had one copy of it that we kept adding to and handing back and forth to each other. As with everything else, it was purely to make us laugh, but I could imagine people in our class enjoying it. Sometimes we talked about littering the whole school with copies when we finished it, on Halloween or something, although it was hard to imagine sharing it.

All that, those sort of plans, feel so far away to me now; it’s as if I’ve somehow time-travelled back to those early days of term when I was known as Amaryllis. Although on the outside I am Mali, I’m back to being that scared, shy kid on the inside.

Because Shiyoona has gone. It’s as if he was never even here.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Nice to meet you Mali,’ Shiyoon said as usual one morning, about a month ago.

‘Nice to meet you Shiyoon.’ I didn’t wait for him to reply before I launched into what I wanted to talk to him about. ‘Hey, I was thinking about that the chapter last night when Mr. Hero starts to booby-trap all the tools in the D&T room ... how about we have him chopping off his own arm but he doesn’t feel any pain and then he has to pretend he’s human—’

When I looked at Shiyoon’s face something stopped me from continuing.

‘I’ve got to tell you something,’ he said, his expression uncharacteristically serious. ‘We’re moving again.’

‘Moving?’ I repeated. Although I didn’t really grasp what he was saying.

‘We’re going to America,’ he said.

‘America, America?’

‘America, America,’ Shiyoon said.

‘But ... but ... you just moved here.’

‘I know,’ Shiyoon said. ‘I stomped off and wouldn’t

talk to my parents last night after they told me. I can't believe they're doing it again. They promised me we'd be here for three years at least. But it's happening. Mum's got a new job offer. We're going to New York – that will be pretty great at least. You know all those hot dogs ... and what else do they eat there?'

'Really massive pieces of pizza,' I said quickly, trying to ignore the lump building in my throat.

'Yeah,' said Shiyoon, his eyes lighting up. 'Really big slices. Like as long as my arm.'

'Longer than your leg,' I said back, trying to make light of it. Shiyoon gave a small chuckle before falling quiet.

'So, when are you going?' I asked. My voice had a slight tremor to it, which I tried hard to hide.

'Half-term.'

'But that's the week after next,' I said.

'I know. It sucks.'

'Apart from the giant pizza,' I added.

Shiyoon took a deep breath, and I thought he was going to say something else, but he just breathed out and looked a bit relieved. And then I had a terrible thought: I wondered if maybe he was glad he was going, maybe it was a relief that he didn't have to be friends with me anymore.

There was nothing he said about leaving that

proved that to be true, but the awful thing about having a thought in your head like that is that it can grow bigger and bigger, and so you start to believe it.

Shiyeon said that we should keep working on the comic but that I should hold onto the copy for now and then send it to him in a few months' time. And then I wondered if that was just because he was glad not to have to keep working on it.

After that he said I should come round for dinner for his leaving party but, on the night of it, he messaged to say that he'd come down with a sickness bug and so had to cancel. That translated to me that he didn't even want to spend any more unnecessary time with me.

When I think back to it, there were only ten days between us going from best friends and hearing he was leaving to not seeing him again. Because of the sickness bug, we didn't even say goodbye in person.

I was sure he was probably glad he didn't have to have the awkwardness of a goodbye. I knew he was used to moving schools and making new friends and so I imagined he didn't feel as sad about it as I did. But for me, the first day back to school without him was even worse than I imagined.

It's not like something especially awful happened or anything like that. No-one threw grass at me like in the old days or went back to teasing me as they used to.

But, even though I knew in my mind he was gone, I found that I kept on looking out for him. I was sure that I would hear his footsteps behind me and his greeting to me - 'Nice to meet you Mali' - but it never came. I kept wondering why I felt so odd and strange all day, only to remember all over again that Shiyoon had left and was not coming back.

It was very quick, our friendship – only a few months – but he was the first person I considered to be a best friend and without him, everyone at school seemed to treat me differently. Not like they had before when I had been an object of humiliation, but as if I wasn't even there.

Only one person, the person who I imagine wished I wasn't there, zeroed in on my new status: Petey.

I was sort of dragging myself through the day immediately after Shiyoon left, it was hitting me with each moment how hard it was going to be to be at school without him. The bell had gone for tutor time and I walked slowly towards the form room, as though my feet were sticking to the floor and I had to make an effort to peel my sole from the ground with every step.

'Hey, watch it,' said a familiar voice. It was the same phrase he'd said before, an almost exact replica of the first time Petey had picked on me. I had the eerie sensation of slipping back to the time before Shiyoon had come along and changed my world, like none of

it – Shiyoon, our friendship, my feelings of things being able to be light and fun – had ever happened.

I didn't even look up to Petey, my gaze stayed fixed on the floor. I took in his huge trainers, remembering how he'd stamped down on my foot before. His trainers were immaculate, like they'd never seen mud - it was almost like they were brand new, although there was something about them that made me think that they weren't new, just cleaned and kept pristine. This time, it felt as if he'd be able to lift up one of those hoofing trainers and stamp down on my whole body, squash me into the floor as if I was nothing more than an inconsequential bug in his path.

But this time, he didn't stamp. It was worse.

He came very close to me, bending down so he could almost whisper in my ear.

'I see you, you know,' he said. He was so close to me that I could smell his breath, the tang of cheese and onion crisps he'd just eaten. 'I see you – and you're pathetic.'

He turned away then and stalked into the tutor room, without a care. Behind him, I stayed in the corridor, feeling as though my body was turning in on itself, shriveling and shrinking and collapsing.

I stayed there, frozen, until I heard someone coming down the corridor and I ran to hide into the toilets. Behind the cubicle door, I told myself that there

was no point – no point in coming to school, no point in pretending things were OK. I would find a way to hide myself properly, from Petey and from everyone else too. What hurt most was that Petey's words were the truth – I *was* pathetic, that was how I felt. I just thought that I had got away with hiding it, or Shiyoon had made it seem smaller and, for a little while, even disappear completely. But Petey, for all his meanness, had seen the truth.

Dad, of course, noticed straight away.

'Let me look at you,' he said, the day after I had the run in with Petey, one week after Shiyoon had left.

He put a hand onto my temple as though feeling for a temperature.

'I told you, I've not got a fever, it's a pain here,' I said, gesturing vaguely around my stomach. I'd decided that I'd rather be at home miserable than go to school.

'Hmm,' he said, and I knew he was not convinced. 'Can I feel your tummy?'

He felt my stomach and asked if it hurt more here or there. I tried to reply as if I was ill, even though it was easy to imagine that there was a pain in there.

'Let's see how you are in the morning for school.'

'It really hurts,' I said again.

'Well then maybe we should go to A&E,' he said, looking at me levelly. Last time we'd gone to A&E,

because I'd broken my arm jumping off the sofa, we'd been there all night waiting to be seen.

I met his gaze. 'Yes, maybe we should.'

'Hmm,' he said again. At just that moment, a fierce wind blew outside and rattled the window. Out of nowhere, rain poured down from the sky. It had never looked more uninviting to leave the house. Dad looked at the pounding rain and I wondered if he would double-bluff me about A&E, but I think the weather made him think again. 'Well, let me know if it gets worse; if it does, we'll go in then.'

'OK,' I said.

'Is it because Shiyoon has gone?' he asked quietly.

'Why would it be about Shiyoon?'

'He's been a good friend to you. It's sad he's had to move away.'

'We only knew each other for a little bit.'

'That doesn't matter,' Dad replied. 'It's OK to miss him, you know.'

'I don't,' I said shortly, meeting his gaze again.

'OK, you're giving me that look,' Dad said. 'The look that says, please stop talking, Dad.'

'You are too,' I retorted. Our eyes were the same colour and a similar shape and, as we stared at each other, I had the uncanny feeling of looking at myself. Dad's dark brown eyes looked sad, almost as if they

could fill with tears at any moment.

‘Well, it would be OK if you did – miss him,’ he said, still looking at me intently. I could see he wasn’t going to let it go and so I made my excuses to go to bed.

In my room, I looked around for something to do. ‘Suckers’ was peeking out of my school bag and without thinking, I started drawing the next scene and adding in dialogue. But when I came to a character that Shiyoon liked to draw, I had to stop. I tried a few times to draw them, but they just kept coming out wrong.

In the end, I shoved ‘Suckers’ down to the bottom of my bag so I wouldn’t have to look at it.