



TAMSYN MUIR

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# NONA

## THE NINTH

"You will love Nona, and Nona loves you." —Alix E. Harrow

NONA  
THE  
NINTH



TAMSYN MUIR

T O R  
D O T  
C O M

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

NEW YORK

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for pT



## ~~DRAMATIS PERSONAE~~

### GUEST LIST

(as transcribed by C. Hect.)

#### **Dogs to invite to birthday party**

- Brown one by the fish shop, average sized, four legs
- Stop It, name assumed, lies under counter at dairy, red colour, big sized, four legs
- White-and-black one seen once in the park, average sized, tail curled twice, three legs
- Noodle, king of dogs in secret, white-adjacent, small sized, six legs
- Spotted beach dog, often on beach, large sized, huge ginger eyebrows, three legs

#### **Members of gang to invite to birthday party**

- Hot Sauce
- Honesty
- Born in the Morning
- Beautiful Ruby
- Kevin

#### **Teachers**

- The Angel?

#### **Blood of Eden**

- Crown Him with Many Crowns (No.—C.)
- The Captain, maybe (Not possible.—C.)
- Cell Commander We Suffer and We Suffer, although actually she might be Wing Commander, I don't know which it is (It's both, and no.—C.)
- And you three (Good to know.—C.)

*One for the Emperor, first of us all;  
One for his Lyctors, who answered the call;  
One for his Saints, who were chosen of old;  
One for his Hands, and the swords that they hold.*

*Two is for discipline, heedless of trial;  
Three for the gleam of a jewel or a smile;  
Four for fidelity, facing ahead;  
Five for tradition and debts to the dead;  
Six for the truth over solace in lies;  
Seven for beauty that blossoms and dies;  
Eight for salvation no matter the cost;  
Nine for the Tomb, and for all that was lost.*

You told me, *Sleep, I'll wake you in the morning.*

I asked, *What is morning?* and you said,  
*When everyone who fucked with me is dead.*

*When everyone we loved has gone or fled,*  
*That's morning. Empty's just another word for clean.*  
*Let's put this first-draft dream of mine to bed.*

*In the appointed hour*  
*I'll pull up your sheets. I'll kill the light,*  
*Lie down beside you; die; and sleep the night.*

*This time will be the time we get it right:*  
*Forgiveness not so hard, nor anger long;*  
*Our graves will be less deep, our lies less true.*

You held aloft the sword.

I still love y



## JOHN 20:8

IN THE DREAM, he told her the words about where he took his degrees, his postdoc, his research fellowship. They were his noise and not really for consumption. More like meditation; like even his mouth knew the pointlessness of it, and just wanted to recite. Dilworth. Otago. Auckland. Overseas to Corpus. (She likes the word *corpus*; it sounds nice and fat.) Then another year abroad, where he got the grant and met the men who would make things happen. Special pleading with the New Zealand government and Asia-Pacific Environmental, at his suggestion, then back to the facility outside Greytown. They mocked it up to look like a freezing works. We all thought that was funny, he said.

He said: We just wanted to save you. You were so sick.

He said, It was me and A— and M— at the start. It wasn't that they didn't have the money for a bigger team; we were simply the only ones capable of what they were asking. M— for medical, A— because he was the glycerol-6 genius. He could've gone anywhere but he stuck with me ... and thank God for that, because he handled all the shareholders. I was there for everything, but those meetings were like dying. I'll never love meetings. C— was brought on by the oversight execs for contracts, you know, checks and balances, but look where *that* ended up, she was on our side before the first year was over ...

He said: You have to understand that right up until that last year we believed they were going to see it through. We *knew* the plan could work. The Mark-R cryo cans had room for eleven billion people, easy. We'd got the procedure down to five hours per person with a trained team of four. Assuming an existing medical degree, that training could take as little as weeks, manpower wasn't an issue if we started *now*. Sure, the maternity stuff wasn't totally ironed out, but we were nearly there, and the packing was perfect. Of course they bitched about the timeline, and they bitched about the money, but they were always going to bitch about the money. Our rule was, nobody knowingly left behind.

He said: Even when they were constructing the other ships we got told straight-up that it was nothing, they were being sent off to the Kuiper installation to be on point for the full-population evac. IAF were involved, Pan-Euro Astronautics gave it their blessing, it was all so benign. We even lent them G— at the time because they wanted to talk about coating. M— said that she didn't like it, she smelled a rat, and you know what

I said? You know what I told her? I said, *Don't let it get to you* and I said, *Don't get paranoid!* I fucking looked her in the eye and said, *This is the way we're getting out, and you know that the moment half a dozen trillionaires realise it, they're going where the oxygen is.* That's what I always told her. *They're going where the oxygen is. Wealthy men head for the exit.*

He said: When they called me up and said the cryo project was over she looked at me and she just said, *There they go, John.*

In the dream they were sitting on the beach. He had made a fire from damp driftwood. The smoke made a black mark where it touched the tarpaulin, at the top, where it was stretched over their heads. The ash was still falling. It made them sick, but only ever for a little while. Anything that hurt them only ever hurt them for a little while.

In the dream, she was sat next to a bundle of meat he'd cut, thighs mostly, for when they felt hungry, which happened rarely and always simultaneously. When it did happen they would be side by side, eating until their stomachs were sore. They would drink from the sea like dogs.

He said after a pause: You know the worst part? She cried. She and A— both cried. In each other's arms, like babies. They were so fucking scared. And I was right there, and I couldn't do piss. Everything I was and everything I had done, and I couldn't do a damned thing.

He was quiet for a long time. The sea ate at the sand. The waves glowed a little even though there was no sunshine, only thick yellow cloud.

She prompted: So what did you do?

He said: A damned thing, didn't I.

She said: When is the part where you hurt me?

He said: Soon. It's coming up.

She said: I still love you.

And in the dream he rubbed his temple with his thumb and said: "You always say that, Harrowhark."

# DAY ONE

REGARDING NONA—HOT SAUCE IS WATCHFUL—THE CITY HAS  
A BAD DAY—NONA GETS A BEDTIME STORY—FIVE DAYS UNTIL  
THE TOMB OPENS.



# 1

LATE IN THE YEAR of nobody she really thought about that much in particular, the person who looked after her pushed the button on the recorder and said, “Start.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and began in a practised hurry:

“The painted face is on top of me. I’m in the safe water—I’m lying down, I think. Something’s pushing at me. The water goes over my head and it’s in my mouth. It goes up my nose.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No.”

“How do you feel?”

“I like it. I like the water, I like her hands.”

“*Her* hands?”

“They’re the things around me—maybe they’re my hands.”

The pencil scratched loudly on the paper. “How about the face?”

“It’s the picture face.” The sketch they’d made for her, the one locked in the secret drawer where they put all the really interesting things, like cigarettes and the fake identification cards and all the money they said wasn’t legal tender and couldn’t be used. The pencil obligingly scribbled its way across the page. It was hard not to open her eyes and look at the person opposite, so she amused herself by imagining what she would see: tanned sure hands on the notebook, head bent over it, the fringe pinned up waiting for haircut day. Imagining was better than looking anyway, because the battery lamp wasn’t switched on.

She said, “What are you writing?” because the pencil was still going. Most of the time the writing was interesting, but some of the time it was just boring descriptions of how her face was changing when she talked, like *0.24—Smiled*.

“Incidentals. Keep going, you woke up late.”

“Can you change the alarm song? I can sleep through ‘Good Morning, Good Morning’ now.”

“Sure. I’ll drop a wet sponge on your face instead. Keep thinking.”

She kept thinking.

“The arms go really tight around me. They’re her arms, definitely.”

“Is she familiar?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“How do you know they’re ‘her’?”

“I don’t know.”

“What happens after that?”

“Don’t know.”

A long pause. “Anything else?”

“No. It’s gone already. Sorry, Camilla.”

“Not a problem.”

Camilla Hect depressed the button with a bright and final plastic *clack*. This was the cue, so she exploded into action. The rule was that she had to lie still and concentrate as hard as she could from the time that the button went down to the time when the button went up. When it went *up*, pyjamas came *off*; under the pale, wavering light of the tiny torch taped to Cam’s clipboard, she undressed and dressed herself at the same time, which required a lot of contortions. She wrestled out of her nightshirt with her arms and stretched on her trousers using her ankles, in the move that Camilla called *worm with problems*.

Being the worm with problems did not worry her. Just being able to dress herself was charming. In the bad old days she used to have to be helped even with the nightshirt, because she couldn’t be trusted not to get stuck with it halfway over her head and get all hot and upset from claustrophobia. It was incredibly important that she not get upset like that again. She had only ever had two tantrums in her life, but it would be humiliating to have a third. Her fingers fumbled a little with the vest, but she was fine pulling on the UV sand shirt, even with arranging the cuffs, which could be complicated and if you got it wrong you had to stand in the bath to take it off again in showers of yellow dirt. The canvas jacket with the toggle closers didn’t slow her down at all. When she finished Cam said, “Good. Quick,” and she was so exhausted from the praise she collapsed back on the mattress.

“I’m doing my stretches now,” she announced hastily, before she could be told to do anything else. She swung her legs upward until her feet were pointed flat at the ceiling, and as she’d been taught, rotated her toes from that angle to circle around the water stains she could see on the plaster. The winter wet was over, but the huge patch of black damp in the corner hadn’t dried up yet. She had told everyone that she should really talk to the landlord, but it had been communicated to her that if she could even *find* the landlord she would get a gold medal.

Camilla had not said anything in approval or censure, so she said more emphatically, “My *legs* are really *tight* today,” in the immortal hope that Cam would take her ankles in her hands and walk them forward. Cam would do this until her knees were touching her chest and her hamstrings were stretched so taut she was convinced they were about to go

*ping* and snap. It was the best thing in the world. If she was *really* lucky Camilla would rub her calves, which were always sore from walking, or even sometimes her back, though that was usually after practise. But Camilla was busy writing and did not take the bait no matter how much she wiggled her toes. She even repeated herself, and added, “Wow, *very* tight, goodness gracious,” in a slightly louder voice.

Cam said, not looking, “Walk it off.”

“I think I might have a cramp. I think I can’t move.”

“Guess you can’t go to school, then.”

She knew when she was beaten. “I’m up, I’m up.”

To prove how *up* she was, she arched her back and rocked up to stand, having only pushed herself up a little bit with her arms: she’d been practising, and when she straightened up with only the slightest wobble she was delighted. But all Camilla said was, “Don’t hyperextend,” crushingly, and worse, “Go see if Pyrrha needs help with breakfast.”

“Okay. She’s probably done though, we took forever. Maybe the food went cold,” she added, misty with desire.

Camilla briefly looked up from the notebook with a critical eye at her bedhead, which had not been improved with stretches or jumping, and she added: “Get her to do your hair. I’m going to talk.”

“Oh, good! I’ll time.”

“I’ve got a clockwork.”

“Cam, that sounds strange, nobody here calls it a *clockwork*, they say *watch*.”

“Good to know. Stop trying to miss breakfast.”

She hedged cunningly. “At least please can you write down, *I love you, Palamedes*, please, from me? At least write, *I love you, Palamedes, from Nona*.”

This Camilla Hect did unblushingly, though Nona had to take it on trust. When she squatted down on her haunches, following the strokes the pencil made, she could not make out a single word. She could not even make out a letter, not of any alphabet she’d ever been shown, which interested everyone except herself. But you could always trust Cam. When the pencil stopped and the message was obviously discharged Nona leant into her and said, “Thanks. I love you too, Camilla,” and: “Do you know who I am yet?”

“Someone who’s late for breakfast,” said Camilla.

But as Nona straightened, she turned and smiled her rare brief smile, the one like the sun catching the glitter of a car on the motorway. Cam smiled so seldom now that Nona immediately felt it was going to be a good day.

It wasn’t any lighter in the kitchen. There was thin blue light coming through the joins in the curtains, and an orange glow from the worn-out hot plate mostly blocked by the other person she lived with. There was a baby wailing in morning-related outrage a few apartments away, so Nona walked on the balls of her feet to not add to the noise. The people underneath hated it if you walked loudly, and Pyrrha said they had militia

links and not to piss them off because they were also hungover ninety percent of the time. This was unfair, because the person *above* them never took their shoes off inside, which surely meant they were allowed to complain about that. But Pyrrha said they shouldn't piss *them* off because they were a cop. Pyrrha called it the shit sandwich. Pyrrha always seemed to know everything about everybody.

"All done? Good timing," said Pyrrha, without turning around.

Pyrrha was holding a can of spray-on oil whose nozzle she directed neatly into the pan, where she wiped the pale froth around with a spatula. She was wearing pyjama pants and a string vest and no shirt, so the orange glow of the hot plate ring lit up all the scars on her wiry arms. She was feeling around for the breakfast things in the cupboard with her other hand, so Nona came and took the mesh basket and started counting out plates for her. "Is that pikelet mix?" she said.

"Get bowls. It's eggs," said Pyrrha.

Up close Nona could smell the spray-on oil and watch Pyrrha agitate a fork in a beaker of violently orange liquid, radioactively orange even in the dark, before tipping it into the pan to sizzle. Yellow lacework immediately formed where it splashed against the hot edge. Nona replaced the plates with two chipped bowls, and Pyrrha said, "Doesn't that school of yours teach counting?"

"Oh, but Pyrrha, it's so hot. Can't I have something cold?"

"Sure. Leave them to get cold."

"Yuck, that's not what I meant."

"The eggs aren't optional, kiddie. How's the dreams?"

"Same as normal," said Nona, reluctantly taking another bowl. "I wish I could dream something different for once. Do *you* dream, Pyrrha?"

"Sure. Just last night I dreamed I had to give a briefing, but I wasn't wearing pants and my backside was hanging out," said Pyrrha, hacking the shocking orange curds into clumps with the edge of the spatula. During a pause in Nona's gurgles of mirth, she added solemnly, "It was no fun, my child. I knew I'd be okay so long as I was hiding behind the podium, but I didn't know what I'd do once I had to sit down again. Die, I guess."

"Are you being serious or joking with me?" Nona demanded, once this fresh pleasure had subsided.

"Deadly serious. But go put another mark under *ass joke* anyway."

Nona was happy enough to get up from the table and cross to the big sheet of brown paper tacked up on the wall; to take the pencil and wait for Pyrrha to say, "One higher, one left, stop right there," so she could make a blobby tally mark.

She counted up the tally marks and said, "That's the seventh one this month. But that's not fair when you keep making them. Palamedes will say you're skewing the data."

“I never could help giving the girls what they wanted,” said Pyrrha. She turned off the hob and upended some of the pan into Nona’s bowl, then set the pan back on the hob with a cloth over it to keep it warm. She wiped her hands and said, “Eat. I’ll do your hair.”

“Thank you,” said Nona, grateful for the understanding. “Cam said to ask. Can I get braids?”

“Whatever the lady wishes.”

“Can I get one big braid and two little braids coming off it at the sides?”

“Sure, if we’ve got time.”

“They don’t come loose and the plain plaits do.” Nona added in the spirit of truth: “And I can’t help chewing the ends with plaits. I want to steer clear of Temptation.”

“Don’t we all? I need to stop torturing myself by staring at the cigarette drawer.”

“Don’t start the secondhand smoke argument again,” said Nona in alarm, but then, figuring she’d been harsh: “Anyway, they’re bad for you and I love you, Pyrrha.”

“Prove it,” said Pyrrha, which meant she had to eat the eggs.

Nona ate while Pyrrha brushed out her hair in short, brisk strokes, letting its fine black sheets fall over Nona’s shoulders. It went almost to the bottom of her back now, and it was soft and thin as water: every fourth haircut day they cut it, but not *every* haircut day because it was a pain, and because people noticed your hair growing less when it was already long, Camilla said. Camilla and Pyrrha both got to have short hair, which she envied. Cam’s was dark brown and bobbed off sharply at the chin and it felt nice against your cheek, and whenever Pyrrha didn’t shave her head quick enough she got a little flat cap of dark terracotta, the colour of wet red earth at the building site. Most of Pyrrha was the colours of the building site: deep dried-out browns, dusty hunks of clay, rusted metal. She was raw and ropy and square-shouldered, and Camilla was long and shadowy and lean. Nona thought they were both exquisite.

Camilla came in when Pyrrha was fixing up the first braid and when Nona had gotten as far as *chewing* the eggs, which was an agonising step on the journey to *eating* the eggs. Camilla said unhappily, “Eggs? Have we not invented a new protein?” which meant it wasn’t Camilla at all.

The easiest way of telling who was who was in the eyes. Palamedes had soft cool eyes of brownish grey, like bare ground in the cold mornings when Nona had been little, and Camilla had the clearest of clear grey eyes like storybook ice, not like normal cloudy ice at all. But Nona could tell them apart from across the room, which she was proud of, because their body was otherwise exactly the same. The difference was how they stood: Camilla couldn’t stand still, ever, not without shifting her weight back and forth on each knee or popping her knuckles, and Palamedes stood like he was playing a game of Hot Chocolate and the tagger was looking right at him. Hot Chocolate was in fashion with her friends at the moment and Nona wanted to get really good at it.



“Meat’s black-market only right now,” Pyrrha said, starting in on a second braid. Palamedes was spooning gritty black spoonfuls of instant coffee into mugs. He said absently, “Coffee, Nona?” even though she always said, “No, but thank you”—Palamedes liked giving you options—and he even waited until she said, “No, but thank you” before he poured the boiling water twice. No milk, because they’d run out of packets. He put one mug where Pyrrha could reach it—she was currently leaning over to the counter for a hairpin—and kept one for himself. They sat and steamed in the muggy air, and Nona sniffed at the nice bitter coffee smell. Pyrrha continued, “Anyway, you’re paying for the meat roulette. The stuff the butcher’s keeping back is only ten percent upholstery, the rest is livers and gristle.”

Nona wanted to know. “What part’s the upholstery?”

“A very nutritious part,” said Palamedes.

“The part that hung out in my dream,” said Pyrrha.

That set Nona off again, so she had to get up from her eggs to make another mark on her tally sheet. Palamedes stared, distracted, and said: “Dear God, two in a day? Why are we even remotely in doubt? Forget the meat, I was being facetious. We wouldn’t have upholstery money even if I wrote hardcore pornography for a living.”

Pyrrha said, “Wish you’d try. These nicotine patches are killing me.”

“If that’s meant to make me feel guilty, I feel nothing, thank you,” said Palamedes. “Cam’s body is a temple. She’s the one who’s banned me from a life peddling poor-quality erotica. Says she doesn’t want our last gift to the universe to be tales of people mashing birthday cakes beneath their bottoms. Speaking of, Pyrrha—do you have a minute? You came in too late last night to talk.”

“We’re over time, is why,” said Pyrrha. “The damn drills stop every half hour so we can take cover.”

Nona felt the pin securing the last little braid to her head, and then the braid being patted flat with one weathered hand. Pyrrha said, “Empty that bowl, Nona,” and took her mug of coffee as Palamedes spooned himself some eggs. She and Palamedes went back into the bedroom with their breakfasts and closed the door behind them.

In their absence Nona considered the eggs. They were a uniform yellow colour, with dusty black flecks of pepper. You were allowed to put as much thin, fiery red sauce on them as you liked, but it wasn’t the taste Nona minded. She then considered the window beyond the curtains, which was open a crack, at the very least enough for a spoon; Pyrrha had, after all, said to empty the bowl. But Palamedes said that she could handle abstract concepts and therefore literal interpretation was not a defence. She considered the eggs again. As a virtuous compromise she put three spoonfuls in her mouth and walked soundlessly over to the shut door. It was unnecessarily harsh to expect her not to listen *and* to eat.

“—verdue for a chat about the due date,” Pyrrha was saying.

“If they want her early, want can be their master. They gave us a year.”

Then they both moved away from the door, which made things more difficult.

“—nything from your si—” Palamedes was speaking at the bottom of Camilla’s voice.

“—aying some guys to comb over Site B ... push maybe tomorrow we—”

“—promise in Site C: we know they own the build—”

“—afe sites first. The closer we get to the barracks ... to being rumbled that we’re searchi—”

There was more talking, but they had both dropped their voices past Nona’s comprehension so it sounded like *mnah mnah mnah*. She held the eggs in her mouth silently and pressed her ear to the door as hard as she dared, and was rewarded with Palamedes saying:

“—could’ve made inroads on the barracks at any point. They’re holding off. Why?”

“You know why,” murmured Pyrrha’s voice in response. “The moment they go in there and clean out the last poor bastards busy divvying up the rats and the sedatives, that’s going to put a big black mark on the negotiations. The Cohort dies like anyone else under siege ... eventually.”

“Then this is our last chance to make a difference. Give us *orders*, Commander.”

Pyrrha was audibly chewing. “Stopped being that when I died, Palamedes. It was a courtesy title, anyway, and there’s an embarrassment of commanders here if you want ’em.”

“Pyrrha,” he said, “why are they running now? Why would Blood of Eden run when they have the best hand they were ever dealt? Why would they run when common sense, good tactics, and foreknowledge must tell them all that this is the best moment to make a stand? The time you’ve spent—the insights you’ve had that nobody else has been privy to—and you’re truly telling me you don’t even have an *inkling*?”

“You’re not a prude. Feel free to say it,” said Pyrrha, and though her voice was its normal deep, comfy, slightly hoarse self, there was a little undercurrent in it that Nona couldn’t quite parse. Nona would have understood it more if only she’d been able to see Pyrrha. “I spent all that time sleeping with the enemy with very little to show for it, right? Blood of Eden is a house with many rooms, and I was only ever visiting one of ’em. Sure, I’ve got *inklings* aplenty.”

“Then you’ve *got* to brief us—”

He was cut off by a metal-on-plastic noise, like eggs being spooned from the bottom of the bowl. “No. Not if there’s any risk of you two undergoing interrogation.”

“Neither of us appreciate being treated like children.”

“Children? I’m treating you like the Sixth House Warden and his cavalier, neither of whom have been trained to survive a Blood of Eden hot seat,” said Pyrrha. “Don’t think because Camilla’s carrying you that you’d have an easy ride. You have no idea what BoE torture is like, and we don’t have the five years I’d need to teach you.”

“Pyrrha, stop saying you don’t have time to teach us things and *start teaching*. We’re quick studies.”

There was a definite slurp of coffee being drunk. Pyrrha always did drink loudly. She said she still wasn’t used to her teeth. “I could teach you some bits and pieces, sure. I’d need my necromancer to teach Camilla.”

“Why?”

“Because you need teaching to be an asset, and Cam wants teaching to be a killer.” There was a brief silence, until Pyrrha said slowly, “Or you could take me up on my first offer, which would solve a lot of your problems—”

Palamedes spoke at the bottom of Cam’s voice, which made it harder to catch. “It was a beautiful offer, Pyrrha, and almost completely useless. There’s no retiring our forces in a search-and-recovery op. In any case Eden would turn on us completely, even our own cell. We need to fight clever.”

“If you wanted to fight clever you’d focus on search-and-recovery and not on the barracks. It’s not helping Cam. She’s mad as hell—even madder than you—and it’s getting you nowhere.”

“Thank you for your insight regarding my cavalier,” said Palamedes politely. “It’s appreciated.”

A snort of laughter. “He ices over ... I’m too old to know not to be offensive, Palamedes, so forgive me quickly for telling you your business and let’s move on. I’ll say it outright. Forget the barracks and stop trying to be the people’s hero. We’ve lost that fight.”

“Lost? There could still be two hundred people holed up in th—”

“—optimistic—”

“If there were *two* I’d do it. It’s a rotten way to die, House or not. What’s more, once it’s over—the deluge.”

“Hey, we might get some breathing space. It might drain the boil.”

“You can’t truly believe that.”

“No, I don’t. It’ll be first blood,” said Pyrrha, and made another slurp. “I know how it is. You should have heard the demo crew yesterday. These people are beside themselves waiting for kickoff, waiting for the Houses. One guy tells me this’ll all be over once the barracks get cleaned out, another guy tells me he’d welcome the Cohort regiment with open arms if they just brought supplies and broke up the gangs. Half my guys would strangle the other half on a pretext. This is what happens when you force refugees from twenty different planets to live cheek by jowl and you keep thinking people unify under a common threat ... She always made that mistake. I told her twenty years ago. Works beautiful in the short-term, but you’ve got to give them a future to really keep ’em glued. Palamedes, we made this mistake ourselves. You can have the barracks *or* your people—or neither. You can’t say ‘I choose both’ like a wet towel and expect the universe to fall into line.”

“Pyrrha, this is sounding perilously like giving up.”

“Is it? You *know* I’m ready to give up. This is a shitshow. You know I’m ready to get Nona safely off-world the moment you accept the way things are.”

“There’s *no way* off-world—”

“It’s called a ship—”

“If you’re hiding a ship in your dungarees, please share it with the rest of the class.”

His voice now raised a little. “Bypassing the question of *how*, where would we go, Pyrrha? What would we do?”

“Anywhere,” she said. “Anything. I’ve been out of commission for ten thousand years ... I’m ready for pretty much anything else.”

There was a brief silence, then a slurp. When Palamedes picked up again, his voice was earnest. “It’s a false dichotomy, you know. We’re all of us in one layered hostage situation. Three million people squatting on a thanergy planetoid millions of kilometres away from us. Nine million people in this city alone...”

“Who aren’t *yours* by any stretch of the imagination.”

“*Nine million*, Pyrrha, that’s equivalent to the whole of the Seventh and the Eighth put together. Three million people, plus nine million people, plus sixteen. We refuse to leave any of them behind.”

“You’re big-minded. Know who isn’t? Blood of Eden, and me,” said Pyrrha. “If you asked me to pick between the three of us and those twelve million plus sixteen, I’d pick us without turning a hair. You’re not listening to me. BoE are *making* that choice, Palamedes ... We Suffer’s lost. The Wakers and Ctesiphon Wing can’t protect us. Merv Wing’s got the glue, which is *a way out*. The Hopers call the shots now ... and I’ve met leaders like Unjust Hope before. They’re the guys who come to the fore when people want leaders who don’t count the costs. We’re heading for a purge, Sextus. This is the Blood of Eden who don’t give a fuck.”

“I wouldn’t have called them too generous with fucks before.”

“You’ve got no idea. Listen to me. You’ve never met this Blood of Eden, not really. *This* Blood of Eden has spent their entire existence gambling everything on staying alive for one more day ... and I don’t know if I even want to find out why anymore. ’Cause you know what? Gideon’s dead, and I don’t give a fuck either. Not if I can save our skins.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You should. I know a little moon that’s only half-flipped. It’s got great soil, breathable air. Gideon used to think about running away there. I know how to farm ... I can teach you and Cam and Nona. I can teach you how to wait. That’s my speciality. And the moment I get my hands on a ship, that’s where I’m taking us.”

There was another rustling: but then the timer bleated in a soft, muffled way, as though it was coming from inside a pocket. Palamedes made a sound under his breath that Nona knew was a rude word. He said quickly: “My time’s up.”

“That’s the best part, right? Getting out of rough conversations.” And, almost immediately, more quietly: “Forgive me the joke, Warden. I forget you’re not used to it.”

“Never will be. You understand. Look, you’ll be late for work and Nona will be late for school.”

Pyrrha’s voice dropped so that the only thing Nona caught was: “—ing her go to—?”

“I want her to remain as calm as possible. Can you push for Site B?”

“I’ll do it by end of day, even if I have to finish it off myself. Don’t worry.”

Nona looked at the last lumps of yellow in her bowl and silently scraped half of it up to put in her mouth, figuring that if she swallowed all at once she wouldn’t choke or taste. She could not have made the slightest sound, but Camilla—she could tell it was Camilla again—called from within: “How long were you listening, Nona?”

“You were pretty loud, so nearly the whole time,” said Nona, through eggs.

“Then that damn breakfast had better be eaten,” said Pyrrha.

Camilla stood by the kitchen counter and tore through her half-eaten breakfast mechanically as Nona unwrapped a sterile tablet in the bucket of greywater for the dishes. Pyrrha balanced a mirror on the table and shaved her face. Nona loved the clean, bright smell of shaving soap, and to see Pyrrha swiftly and expertly scrape the dark russet-brown stubble off her cheeks and from around her mouth, and the little wet red marks that appeared. When she reached over to touch one freshly smooth cheek, the marks were already wrinkling up and disappearing. Cam was stationed by the pegs at the door saying, “Hats,” prompting Nona to dutifully take down and hand round the hats, and, “Masks,” for the same. The hats were hideous, large-brimmed, with cloth panels that came down behind and strings to tie beneath the chin: Nona often thought about burning hers, and it wasn’t as though they needed either hats *or* masks. That was the whole problem, wasn’t it? Nona wouldn’t cough even if the wind blew the smoke straight into her face, and Pyrrha wouldn’t burn any colour other than her deep cool brown. Camilla was busy untucking the back veil on her hat, so Nona let her attention drift to the side of the window, where light was thickly glowing through the little rips in the tape, and the sky was visible through the worst tears.

The sky over the city used to be a thick yellow butterscotch colour. Now it was only like that at the very edges of the horizon, as the blueness had spread like a stain on carpet, touching even the light. Nona took a moment to surreptitiously twitch the curtains, peeking between the broken antisniper striping to catch a glimpse of the world outside. The blue light got stronger, and Camilla said sharply, “Nona,” and she hurriedly let the curtains fall.

Pyrrha, now masked, paused before the door with her wiry knuckles: “Roll call. What’s this week’s *all scatter* word?”

“Lowdown,” said Camilla.

“And the *all clear*?”

“Deadweight,” said Nona.

“Perfect. What are your stations if that thing in the sky even *looks* like it’s about to stop periscoping?”

“The underground tunnels by the fish market,” said Camilla.

“The big underpass bridge dugout,” said Nona.

“Ten points to you both. And what do you do once you’re there?”

“Hide until you come,” said Nona, and then added, truthfully: “And rescue any nearby animals so long as they don’t exceed the size of the box, and are woolly rather than hairy.”

“Half points. No animals, hairy *or* woolly, I don’t care. Cam?”

Camilla had finished with her hat, and now she was easing the big dark glasses onto her face—the ones she kept specially, despite the fact that they were a little unbalanced on her nose and her ears. They made both Palamedes and Camilla look chilly and clinical, but as Palamedes said, they solved the problem of the ghost limb. Without them he was everlastingly pushing something up his nose that wasn’t there. And Nona thought Camilla privately rather liked them.

She settled them on, considered the question, and said: “Fight.”

“No points. Camilla, if you engage with a Herald, you’re not coming home.”

“That’s your theory,” said Camilla.

“There’s data behind it. Hect—”

“If Camilla gets to fight, *I* should get to keep adjacent dogs,” said Nona decidedly. “Even if they’re hairy.”

Pyrha turned her eyes up to the ceiling in mute appeal. Her exhalation rasped loudly against the vent in her mask. “I used to run the whole Bureau,” she said, and she didn’t sound like she was addressing either of them. “Now I’m up against wannabe heroes and hairy dogs. This is the punishment she would’ve wanted for me. God, she must be pissing herself laughing ... Let’s go, kids. Like hell am I walking in this heat.”