

GOING  
UNDER

ALSO BY JUSTINA ROBSON

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Silver Screen

Mappa Mundi

Keeping It Real: Quantum Gravity Book One

Selling Out: Quantum Gravity Book Two

QUANTUM GRAVITY BOOK THREE

GOING  
UNDER

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## CHAPTER ONE

An unkempt dawn with ragged clouds crept to daybreak in Demonica. Fitful winds swung the gather-baskets outside the windows and made small trails of raw magic fizz and evaporate out of their tiny holes as Lila watched them move to and fro. Presently the grumbling, muttering form of the Collector appeared on Lila's balcony.

The old demon was almost petrified with age but his movements were sure. Horned, thorned, blue, and knot-sided he climbed along the walls on his sticky feet and plucked the baskets from their hooks, replacing them with empties and chucking the full ones into a large sack on his back with all the expertise of a hundred years of practise. He ignored her, even though she was standing right in front of the full height windows that overlooked her private balcony and in turn she fixed her stare beyond the western edge of the city to the lagoon. It wasn't polite to stare at old demons and they had some interesting curses to award for gawpers.

One of the Collector's feet adhered briefly to the crystal pane in a biologist's miracle of exquisitely tiny scales, hairs, and magic, then was gone without leaving a mark. It was said there was no surface that those creatures (she couldn't remember the name, there were more kinds of demon than there were species in Otopia) couldn't walk on, even the face of eternity.

They said a lot of things like that in Demonica, Lila reflected. To a human these gnarly little gnosticisms became irritating and portentous after a while. It was even more irritating later on at some point, if you stuck around, to discover that most of them were true. A frown made itself on her brow as she drew her silk dressing gown closer around her and folded her arms more tightly. The sight of the rising city was not comforting.

In the dawn's light the dirigibles and boats that never ceased to ply the air and water dimmed their enchantments and changed their signal flags from the glowing night colours to day's brilliant but ordinary hues. Blimps and zeppelins lost their resemblance to giant lightning bugs and became simple balloons. Then the giant gaudy fancy of the Theatre Des Artes suddenly blazed up from the Mousa Precinct as the sun rose high enough to catch its roof. Lila changed the filtering in her eyes to adjust for the shocking glare and continued her monitoring of the activity—demons everywhere, busy, active, full of energy as if there was no tomorrow. She felt tired with the kind of tiredness that follows frenetic activity, fear and grief once it has all passed. Pleasant, but still tired and in need of a lengthy, solitary rest.

There was a sigh and a yawn from behind her in the room. It was followed by the soft sound of silk sheets. From the voice's tone she knew it was her husband, Zal, turning over and stretching out into her part of the bed. He was a heavy sleeper, for an elf, and had a fondness for pretending to lie comatose late into the morning whilst secretly being awake the entire time and composing songs in his head. He said it was the best time of day to imagine new things, before you opened your eyes and the world grabbed your attention and tried to make it fit yesterday instead of today. So she guessed he was wide awake, and faking.

A messenger sprite, decked in house colours, flitted up over her railing and deposited yet another covered basket with a beribboned handle onto the balcony floor after a momentary struggle to find a space among all the other baskets that were already set there, covering

the table, the chairs, and some of the larger plant pots. It tipped its ridiculous little blue porter's cap to her when the job was done and zipped off over the roof, farting methane that ignited on contact with its sparking tail and sent it jolting into the sky. The wind made all the ribbons flutter and dance. A few minutes later the clouds disbanded entirely and the sun shone with spring heat through the windows. It was deliciously warm.

Lila heard padding sounds just behind her and turned to look. A white demon, griffonesque, dragonish, horsey, with feathers and fur and quills and the air of a big cat, had crossed the floor. It lay down in the lozenge of sunlight beside her and closed its long, silver eyes to enjoy the heat. Its lengthy tail was curled upwards in a semicircle of pleasure as it made minor adjustments to reach perfect basking posture and settled down. Its wings, with their thorny and razored edges, were furled neatly along its back. Its ribs moved under its iridescent skin as it breathed, and elsewhere thin muscles like iron bands ran in ropes of efficient power that looked dynamic even though it was, she was certain, already and properly asleep again after its move. Teazole, her husband, could sleep for Demonia.

He could fall asleep at the drop of a hat though she had always found him getting up halfway through the night. He would fall asleep in human form, out of politeness, but then slide out of bed to shift to this, his natural shape. This was unsuited to humanoid beds and had a tendency to rip sheets and mattresses. He had his own nest that hung from the ceiling like a giant beehive. He said that the luxurious furs that made it up were all stripped from the bodies of his enemies but he might have been lying. Most demons just didn't have such great fur.

Husband. What a stupid word that was. Wife. That was even stupider. Both carried a vast and toxic cargo of expectations and she could only stomach the associations for an instant because Zal was an elf demon and Teazole was a demon and the marriage was Demonian in nature and had nothing to do with her human culture's hulking

great trainloads of stupidity. Some people, she understood, found marriage and its roles a pleasantly comforting drama to enact. A shudder and a vision of her parents screaming at one another through a fog of alcoholic disappointment invariably accompanied thoughts about it. As her mother gambled away fortunes and then flung herself into torments of guilt and self-loathing, her father became sweetly dutiful and the picture of noble caretaking. Then as their finances recovered and Mom got increasingly bored and began to fuss around the house, he would quietly pickle himself with vodka until he lost his job. Mom would then solve their problems by entering various poker tournaments at which, sober and determined, she would do well, until recklessness took over and so the cycle began again . . . Lila had, by the age of fourteen, long since given up the hope that this round would be the last of its kind and something banal and comforting would take its place.

Death had brought the curtain down on that one. How curious that in death they should so quickly forget the petty occupations that had obsessed every living moment. But they had. She'd met them there, in the afterworld, and it was as though they had never struggled. Her heart stabbed her with pain as she remembered, because in their faces, just before they had crossed over the final brink to Thanatopia's unknown shores, she had seen their lonely and sober knowledge that the lives that were over had mostly been wasted. And there was nothing to be done about it. Nothing at all.

And she had not saved them.

Until they were dead she hadn't even known that was her mission in life. Her firm, yet unacknowledged plan: she would make a successful career, save plenty of money, become socially impeccable and marry someone also of that mould in order to set an example and to become wealthy enough to start both parents off in detox programmes that really worked . . . gaining their undying love and gratitude and, above all, attention. No, that motive hadn't revealed its tawdry mar-



tyred glory until she was back in her own body, what was left of it, and they were gone for good.

*Are you going to maunder along all day?* Murmured a testy voice just to the left of the middle of her head.

She shot a dart of sullen loathing at Tath, the presence in her chest.

The elf made the spiritual equivalent of a shrug as his aetheric body—the last surviving fragment of his being—circulated slowly around inside her heart where he had lived since his physical death, months ago. He sounded as precise and chilly as a mathematics professor intent on lecturing a tardy student even though—and, she thought, possibly because—he had been young and full of hopes when he died. *Demons usually vent their rage more creatively. Let us do something excessive.*

*You hate demon ways.*

*I am beginning to find them curiously liberating. At least they do not hate themselves more than once a day.*

*Stop badgering.*

*Stop wallowing.*

*Trauma much? I'm allowed some wallow time.*

*I cannot see the point of it.*

Lila flicked at her sleeve, flicking away his comment as she glared down at the sleeping white demon near her feet. She let Tath have his superiority, since it was all he'd got, but damn if he didn't test her to the limit. She wanted to scream but that would entail a conversation with the living afterwards.

Teazle didn't know about Tath's permanent residency—his *andalune* body supported by her physical one. Only Zal knew, as far as she was aware, and she intended to keep it that way but Tath was unhappy and restless in a human host; anyone would be, she reasoned, if they were a helpless passenger in somebody else's body. She ought to be more compassionate towards him, but she was tired of his eternal presence too, never knowing how much of her feeling and thoughts he was privy to. It made intimacy difficult with others whilst between

Tath and herself their enforced closeness was like a wound that could open at any time and must be carefully protected. Since her parents had been murdered, they had entered a strange and sympathetic truce of sorts and as time passed they had naturally become more relaxed about the whole thing. She didn't like that. She wanted it to stay frosty and uncomfortable, as that was the only distance possible. It ate at her that eventually casual attitudes would lead to a nasty truth as she started another round of

*. . . marital bitching?* he said, beating her to it.

*Thank you.*

Yes, marital bitching, with him.

*I have not married you, human.*

*I wouldn't marry you, elf, if you were the last person alive.*

*Fortunately that situation will never arise,* Tath said with sufficient frost that she had cause to stop and doubt his sincerity for a moment. But she was too anxious to think on it, instead rushing into another defence.

*I hope you didn't find last night too . . . soiling.* She was surprised at the stinging tone of her thought, which amply conveyed her embarrassment and anger at being perpetually spied upon, whether wilfully or not. It was a struggle not to let any memory surface for his perusal: she clearly saw one image of Zal naked.

*I kept my promise. I have no idea what you are talking about. Did you all enact some dire orgy together? Who knew such an innocent little thing like yourself could be capable of that sort of debauchery?*

Lila's fear and anger suddenly evaporated and she snorted with laughter.

*I ever did it?*

*You can't carry off Puritan,* she told him. *It's not your nature.*

Tath grumbled but she sensed that he was pleased. She was reasonably sure that he hadn't missed a trick either. At least he had been completely discreet about it and that was about the only mercy she was going to get.

She moved to the wall and pressed her face for a moment against the cool stone of the pillar that supported the window arch. Its solidity was reassuring. Memories of other kinds: her parents walking away to the cruise liner that would take them far from Thanatopia's fragile shores into the infinite; an imagined vision of Zal's first wife, Adai, taking the same journey, forlorn aboard an airship with white wings—these visions came as they always did, accompanied by a flood of guilt and sadness. And then other visions—darker and less certain. These came later, tripping tripping across the bridge of suspicion: she was not the first person to be made over using the bomb fault technology. There had been others. Surely. What happened to them? The existence of remote controllers was proven, but not how many there were, or of what kind. The intentions of those who held them were also a mystery. And for how long could she attempt to embrace the demon life when she was no demon? Or an elven life, being no elf, nor anything but herself—and even that not what she had dreamed it a few scant months before.

Something moving caught the corner of her eye and she looked up to see the imp, Thingamajig, hopping over the baskets on the balcony towards the door. He pressed his small, hideous face to the glass and stared at her; the pet who could not come in. On the carpet Teazle yawned and hooked some loops with his claws in a satisfied sort of way that seemed entirely in keeping with his leisurely pose but which signalled to Lila that he was highly alert. Teazle didn't have a lot of time for imps; possibly less than ten seconds.

Outside Thingamajig was doing an elaborate mime. When she frowned at him, he went off and shortly returned with a dead bird. He tore out the tail feathers and stuck them to his bottom and then held the loose-necked head in front of his face. Then he dropped his props and wiggled his fingers close to his eyes before stretching his arms out, indicating all directions. Satisfied from the change on her face that she had understood, he returned to yanking ribbons off the baskets and licking them for traces of aether.

“He’s right,” Teazle murmured without opening his eyes. His tail twitched. “You should go and see her. It’s time.”

“If it’s time why is he still here?” she folded her arms and watched the imp’s activities. “Surely I’m still hellbound if he hasn’t gone away of his own accord?”

Teazle grunted, “Unlike most imps he seems to have an agenda that goes beyond tormenting the damned.” He sounded vaguely intrigued, but only vaguely. “If that weren’t the case I’d have eaten him already. But he hasn’t been on your shoulder in a week, and that’s good enough. Will you go alone?”

She knew enough about the white demon by now to know that a leading question from him was always a taunting opportunity in the making; if she said no, she’d drop in his estimation and his power over her—always a factor that must be accounted for, even with demons with whom you were intimate—would rise. This was a world where yielding to fear had dire consequences.

“I’ll get dressed and take a flight,” she said casually, not wishing in the slightest to make the visit.

“Zal and I will amuse ourselves,” Teazle murmured, making it sound in just those few words as though he had elaborate plans that would involve a great deal of life-threatening activity. No doubt he did. Lila wondered just how long they could survive a vacation in Demonia. “Don’t worry your human head about it,” was added into her silence.

“I don’t have a human head,” she said and turned around, heading towards the bathroom.

“Heart then,” the demon said with surprising fondness. “I know you love him. I’ll be sure and be the first to die.”

She couldn’t think of an adequate reply to that, so she just went and took her bath.