

SELLING  
OUT

ALSO BY JUSTINA ROBSON

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Silver Screen

Mappa Mundi

Keeping It Real: Quantum Gravity Book One

QUANTUM GRAVITY BOOK TWO

# SELLING OUT

JUSTINA ROBSON



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## CHAPTER ONE

Lila Black sat in the office of her psychologist, Dr. Williams. Her memory of her last mission was downloading through one of her WiFi outlet channels; key features streamlined for Williams's analysis by her AI-self, statistics ready-packaged for the medical teams that monitored her health, cybertronic readouts tabulated for the engineering experts, weapons and armour performance playing back for her master-at-arms.

Dr. Williams was reading as the information spread out before her on her flat screen. Lila was playing with the doctor's antique Rubik's Cube. It had been two days since she'd returned from the near total disaster of her first assignment, acting as bodyguard to the most famous rock star in Otopia. Well, it had been three actually, but she wasn't prepared to admit the first twelve hours they'd been holed up alone in a luxury hotel. That was personal, and as such she had deleted it from her AI memory.

There were many other things she would have liked to delete. The cold-blooded murder of a friend was top of the list, alongside the haunting memories of her family's appalled faces—the way she imagined they'd look if they ever found out what she'd done, and what she'd become; the first cyborg agent of the Otopian Security Agency. They thought she was missing in action in Alfheim, the elven universe.

In those old, long-lost days of innocence Lila had gone there as a diplomat's secretary. It was a great assignment, because Alfheim was one of the least-visited realms, and open only to the diplomatic corps from Otopia. She had been among the first humans to ever be permitted inside its borders. But the high-level meetings, attempting to forge a treaty permitting cross-border activities, had faltered. Lila didn't know the details, only that she had agreed to spy for the Otopian Secret Service and that it had seemed the most exciting adventure. The only thing she had to do was report on what she had seen in the course of her normal duties.

But then she met another spy, Vincent, and had gone into the deep country to check out the rumours of odd magical trading—weapons' grade magical artifacts being smuggled into Alfheim's heart. They had been caught by the elven secret service agents, the Jayon Daga. Vincent was dead. Lila had survived by the slenderest of margins, her body almost completely ruined by a magical attack. And then she had been sent back, a slab of meat, a warning to Otopia, and Otopian SS had made her into a multibillion-dollar hero. And that was only the beginning.

For the first time since those days Lila found herself glad that her family would never know the truth. She was glad that her psych profiles would show the redlines all over her shame and revulsion, because she didn't think she could speak about them aloud.

*The luxury of self-recrimination is not for you,* said a familiar voice from somewhere close to her heart. *We are already slaved to duty, and we must endure, and go on.*

*You'd better keep quiet,* Lila replied in the silent speech of thought. *I don't know how much of you the AI can pick up.* She sighed aloud without thinking and Williams glanced at her.

Lila gave the white-haired old woman a nod and a shrug, knowing that the substance of her report was enough to excuse a few heartfelt sighs. Having a "dead" elf living inside her chest wouldn't be one of the causes that Williams might automatically jump to.

In response to her words Tath coiled up obediently, a slow-whirling green energy. His *andalune* body was all that remained of him after Lila's sometime colleague, the elf agent Dar, had murdered him. Tath was a necromancer, and thus unique among the elves in being able to switch hosts for his aetheric self. His *andalune*—the magical body all elves possessed—had jumped from his dead body to hers when she had kissed his face in pity.

*Regret it?*

*Shut up when you're winning*, Lila suggested. She knew perfectly well that her survival and what success she'd had were in part due to Tath—the two days it had taken her to re-edit her memories of the mission, removing him, proved that. Waiting for a reaction to her download was agonising as a result. She kept thinking of all the inconsistencies, the mistakes she might have made that would give her and him away. Of course, as a good agent and a loyal girl, thankful for her life, she should have told everything. But she was no longer sure how much she trusted Otopian SS, even if she trusted these friends and colleagues who worked on her team. She had heard too much in Alfheim, and she had to look out for herself. She hated that. She wanted to go back to the first days, when it had seemed straightforward and honest in every degree, everyone trustworthy and Lila Black doing heroic information-gathering for the security and safety of the human race.

It was all she could do to bite her tongue and suppress a laugh at the idea now. But how she longed for it! Tears threatened. Tath growled internally, a vibration against the wall of her heart, and his impatience and the tickling sensation made her laugh burst out.

Dr. Williams looked up. "What's so funny?" Her face was serious. "Sorry," Lila said. "Hysteria."

Williams gave her an I-don't-believe-a-word look and went back to her analysis. At that moment the door opened and two more of Lila's Technical Team came into the room.

Lila got up to greet her Aetherial Supervisor, the elf Sarasilien.

Since humans were incapable of sensing or using magic he was on loan from Alfheim to the service as part of yet another diplomatic wrangle. He had served the OSA since the early days of the realms' discovery, some ten years ago, and he had been the one who had helped Lila to survive her transformation from human to cybernetic organism. She hugged him in spite of his natural elven reserve and the situation. Although his physical self remained formally polite she felt the cool-water contact of his *andalune* body touch her with kindness.

! Tath signalled, afraid that Sarasilien would go more than skin deep and see him. It was a great effort for him to stay so self-contained that nothing of his presence was detectable outside Lila's rib cage and every time they met another aetherically tuned being it was always going to be touch and go.

*It's okay*, she said to him and stepped back reluctantly from Sarasilien's fatherly embrace.

*It's dangerous*, Tath corrected her. *He feels affection for you, and his andalune is strong. He will be very hard to fool for long.*

When she stood back she could see the faintest hint of a smile at the corner of the older elf's long mouth, a sign most humans would easily have missed unless they were very familiar with his race. His long ears, the tips level with the top of his head, moved forward slightly. She could smell wintergreen in the long silky fall of hair that parted over his shoulders in fox tones, white and auburn. The aetheric symbols woven into his jacket sparkled.

His slanted eyes blinked slowly, "It is good to see you so well, Lila." Was that a special meaning Lila could detect in his words? Did he know about her and Zal, or her and Tath? Could he—smell it on her or something? She was appalled at the idea.

Behind him the team head, Cara Delaware, gave Lila a brisk smile and a nod. Cara was never anything but functionally social. Lila smiled in response and they took their seats, waiting for Williams to conclude her study.

Lila finished the cube puzzle for the third time and closed down her memory automatic archive so she could scramble it up again. Things which had seemed incredibly awkward, boring, and annoying to her about her cyborg self when she was originally made were now second nature. She glanced at the three faces quietly observing her and sighed, putting the cube down. It was worse than facing her parents after staying out all night.

Dr. Williams was, to look at, a kindly little-old-lady figure, like Red Riding Hood's grandmother, but in a white coat. Sarasilien was an alien presence in the high-tech environment of the Incon headquarters, an ageless elf sitting with the stillness of a statue at the point in the room which was least disturbed by strong electromagnetic fields from all the machinery, including Lila. Cara Delaware was a sharp suit from Langley, who looked as though she'd been born in a button-down white shirt and tailored slacks. None of them fooled Lila for a second.

She knew that Williams was a merciless and devious interrogator, Sarasilien a master aetherician (why can't humans just say mage?), and Cara, well, Cara was the agency personified—a young and ambitious woman venturing out into an all-new world of five new universes, keen to make friends and influence people, desperate to know something about the sudden appearance of five new sets of dimensional neighbours: the elves, the demons, the faeries, the elementals, and the undead.

Lila was their instrument. No, all right, she meant a bit more than that, but she'd come to realise very recently (about the time she'd knifed her friend, the elven agent Dar, in the chest), that fifty billion dollars of research and engineering and the knife edge of interdimensional relations had bought parts of her she didn't even know were for sale. So she was sitting here, part employee, part volunteer, part slave, part friend, a little bit of daughter and a whole shitload of resentment, explaining to their quiet, experienced faces the grim details of how she had fulfilled her last mission.

Lila did her best to tell it in her own way, even though they all had the benefit of the download.

It had been a success in its central cause—Zal had been saved from a fate worse than death and was now playing stadium concerts in the midlantic states. But the peripheral discoveries and events were less than great.

Zal turned out to not just be a freak elf who liked playing mode-X rock. If he had been that would have been enough, because Alfheim saw that alone as sufficiently treacherous and defiant of their core beliefs to exile him forever. But Zal was much more than that. During his work for the Jayon Daga as an agent in Demonica he had somehow changed his aetheric allegiance and was now—well, even Lila didn't know what he was. An elf with demonic tendencies? Not quite half and half, but definitely changed in radical ways so that the oppositional magics of Alfheim and Demonica were both available to him. As a result of that, and his subsequent defection to the Otopian music scene, he had become one of those magical items most prized by people with really big ambitions.

One such person was Arië, a ruler in Alfheim's arcane monarchic government, who had taken it upon herself to use him in a spell to sever the realms altogether. In saving Zal, Lila had caused the destruction of a large part of the Alfheim ruling classes, indirectly caused the death of Arië herself, and now Alfheim was in open civil war.

Still, it was even worse than that.

She had killed one friend to save another. She hadn't mentioned that.

She didn't plan to.

She had a dead elf necromancer living inside her chest.

She didn't plan to mention that either.

She felt no loyalty, sitting there. She didn't know what she felt, but it wasn't good. She had hoped, thought—well, she had had some stupid idea that coming here and debriefing would be like a confession

which would absolve her. It wasn't. Didn't. She longed to go back forty-eight hours and to be in bed with the curtains closed, Zal's naked, sleeping body in her arms—when she hadn't had a care in the world and every fuse in the place was blown dead so that nothing and nobody could find her.

"Lila?" Dr. Williams asked her.

"Oh. Well. Arië was eaten by the water dragon and then . . ."

"What did it do next?" Sarasilien asked.

"I didn't see," Lila said, honestly. "It could still be in the lake for all I know. So, chomp. Which was lucky, otherwise I probably wouldn't be here. Chomp. Then we fell into the lake—everything fell. The whole palace collapsed when she died. Lots of people drowned and I caught hold of Zal and got him back to the surface okay and we made our way back out of Sathanor and then, here. Arië—there was a moment when I thought her whole spell to sever the realms was working but I don't know if that was true."

Cara flipped through the notes on her lap. "Extensive earth tremors were reported at that hour here in Otopia. It has been put down to crucial tectonic pressure shifts as several conjoined plates moved at once. Nothing too bad. Small tidal waves. Only a few hundred dead. Nothing since you came back."

Lila stared at her, wondering what kind of statistics Cara was used to dealing with that these seemed such small beer to her. "Arië was helped by necromancers from all the other realms, including this one."

Cara nodded. "A specialist team has been dispatched to attempt to reclaim or otherwise prove the deaths of those Otopians involved."

"Right," Lila said. "We were about two hundred metres down. It was very messy. They almost certainly drowned. I don't believe they could have survived."

"There was an aetheric shockwave," Sarasilien said. "Congruent with your descriptions. It was—difficult—to avoid." He winced. "All the other realms have sent us intelligence about the effects they have

perceived. We are convinced Arië's efforts would have been reasonably successful if Zal had continued to function as the spell's axis. You are to be congratulated on a most successful outcome."

"Thanks," Lila said, wondering if she'd have sounded any more enthusiastic if he'd been inviting her to a funeral. Yes, she'd have been much more enthusiastic about funerals.

Dr. Williams made yet another note on her clipboard. Lila zoomed in on what she was writing but it was all in wretchedly tiny shorthand and on intelligent paper too, which concealed messages until it was cued to display them, so she could read nothing. Dr. Williams noticed her attempt, and made a note about that too. Lila frowned.

"As it stands," Cara said, "what interests us the most now is the connection between Zal's kidnap and the evidence concerning the Quantum Bomb fault underlying Bay City, which you and Malachi have uncovered."

"There's a link?" Lila said. She felt a tremor in her chest as Tath stirred with interest at the news. The quiescent, green shimmer of his presence opened out: alien spring.

"We believe that Arië was not alone in wanting to achieve fundamental separation of the realms. The recordings you found near the studios in Bay City were being taken by faery agents for their intelligence-gathering moot. Though our relations with them are somewhat hampered by the fact that we are all new to one another and have much to learn, they were willing enough to admit that they have been pursuing similar research in all the realms. They would not say what they were looking for but we believe it is closely related to the faultlines in Otopia which were created by the Quantum Bomb. As you know, faeries deny the Bomb as a fact, as do the other realms."

"Weird that they're so interested in evidence about it then?" Lila asked, recalling that it was faeries who had been key to Zal's kidnap in the first place.

"Yes. It is also known to us that Zal's own efforts are hardly lim-

ited to making money or music in Otopia. As you said in your report, your Jayon Daga informant . . .”

“Dar. He was called Dar.”

“Yes. Said that it was not an accident where or what Zal sang. That he was one of Alfheim’s principal defenders until he ‘went native’ in Demonia.”

“Elf and demon aetheric usage is very different,” Sarasilien said quietly. “Their cultures are built around those differences. Elves use language to mobilise and shape aetheric energy. Demons use music. We suspect that Zal is adept in a new, hybrid form of aetheric control. It is possible that he was made so by demon agencies and acts for them, or that he was deliberately involved in this spell of Arië’s . . .”

“No way,” Lila said.

“We are assigning you to discover exactly what happened to Zal in Demonia,” Cara told her. “We need to know how, when, and why he was changed, and what it means to the demons, the elves, and everyone else on the aetheric block.”

Sarasilien winced—Lila knew it was because of Cara’s words. Clumsiness or imprecision of speaking were almost physically painful to elves. She was surprised that Delaware didn’t notice. “Zal is no innocent bystander,” Sarasilien said and Lila wanted to kill him, even though, of course, he was right and she knew that.

Dr. Williams made a note.

“You will go into Demonia under a scholarship ticket,” Delaware was saying. “You have diplomatic immunity but you are there to study demon culture and lore, to covertly discover Zal’s heritage and to bring back as much information as you can on whether or not the demons are also interested in Bomb faults or whatever they call them. Sarasilien has organised your entry with a friend of yours who is native. He will brief you before you leave.” Delaware got up, looking at her watchface where it was scrolling with bright charts and schedules. “If you’ll excuse me, I have other meetings . . .” She shook Lila’s hand

with formal vigour. “Feels just like the real thing,” she said, with an encouraging smile.

“Yeah.” Lila blinked, releasing the woman from her synthetic skin’s grip. Since she had been in Alfheim she’d forgotten to keep remembering that her arms and legs were mostly prosthetics. They had started to seem her own, until now. “From the other side too.”

Delaware glanced at her, revealing more sharp intelligence in that moment than she had all day. Lila shook her head, letting the matter go. “Good luck,” Delaware said.

Sarasilien stood when she had gone. “I too must depart and prepare to meet with you this afternoon when our demon guest will be with us.” He held his hand out to Lila and she shook it, feeling really stupid now until she realised he was only doing it as an excuse to touch her. His *andalune* body ran across her hand and arm. He held her hand in both of his and lifted one eyebrow in a very uncharacteristic invitation to complicity. “I look forward,” he looked down at her chest, “to hearing more details of your visit to my beautiful homeland later.”

Tath cursed.

Lila nodded. “Sure. Later.” She wanted to hug him, to warn him, to tell him not to say a damn word about whatever he could see, but as she met the strong gaze in his slanted blue eyes she knew that he wasn’t about to give her away. Not yet at least. The pointed tip of his right ear twitched—something like a silent smile. “Sure.”

He left her alone with Dr. Williams, the one person that Lila really, really, didn’t want to be talking to right now, though since all the formal information-gathering had been done there was no way she could put it off a minute more.

“Hello Lila,” said the doctor with a gentle smile. “How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

Dr. Williams sighed and turned her clipboard around. She tapped the paper with the end of her pen, activating it. It showed Lila that what she had taken for shorthand were a lot of drawings of little stick

figures. They were standing in groups, shouting, and in the middle was one with robot arms and legs which had its hands pressed against its head. It was surrounded by a large scribbled circle of darkness. “Anything you want to tell me about in particular?”

Lila thought about it. “Dar, the elf agent who almost killed me, the one who was hunting Zal. Well, I nearly killed him, but then I saved him—in Alfheim. He saved me. I was having a bad time with all my metal. Like last time you saw me, it was all too powerful for my bones. I kept getting hurt. But after we did this healing in Alfheim I was fine. Better than fine. Zal said I have elementals fused into me now and Dar must have done that. I don’t know. We . . . Dar and I . . . we worked together . . .”

“Not as enemies?”

“No! No, not at all. We worked together to get Zal free. But our cover got blown and I had to kill him just to stay in with a chance of finishing the . . . of getting Zal out and stopping Arië. He’s dead. I think he was a true friend although there were lots of times when he . . .” She paused. She wanted to explain how the loyalties to state and friend, to family and self were so mixed up. But that wouldn’t be the right thing to say now, perhaps ever, in her position, since it could only be seen as a weakness in her. “Funny how we always end up talking about Dar.”

“Not really. If it weren’t for Dar you wouldn’t be here at all.”

“No,” Lila said. “I’d still be a desk cowboy in Foreign Affairs with all my arms and legs and family and I’d never have met him, or Zal, or you. Can I go?”

“Yes, if you answer me just one question.”

Lila looked at Dr. Williams’s gentle, sympathetic face. “What?”

“Was what you did in Alfheim right, or wrong?”