

CARRY ON



THE RISE AND FALL
OF SIMON SNOW

RAINBOW
NOWELL

MACMILLAN



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BOOK ONE

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SIMON

I walk to the bus station by myself.

There's always a fuss over my paperwork when I leave. All summer long, we're not even allowed to walk to Tesco's without a chaperone and permission from the Queen—then, in the autumn, I just sign myself out of the children's home and go.

"He goes to a *special* school," one of the office ladies explains to the other when I leave. They're sitting in a Plexiglas box, and I slide my papers back to her through a slot in the wall. "It's a school for dire offenders," she whispers.

The other woman doesn't even look up.

It's like this every September, even though I'm never in the same care home twice.

The Mage fetched me for school himself the first time, when I was 11. But the next year, he told me I could make it to Watford on my own. "*You've slain a dragon, Simon. Surely you can manage a long walk and a few buses.*"

I hadn't meant to slay that dragon. It wouldn't have hurt me, I don't think. (I still dream about it sometimes. The way the fire consumed it from the inside out, like a cigarette burn eating a piece of paper.)

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I get to the bus station, then eat a mint Aero while I wait for my first bus. There's another bus after that. Then a train.

Once I'm settled on the train, I try to sleep with my bag in my lap and my feet propped up on the seat across from me—but a man a few rows back won't stop watching me. I feel his eyes crawling up my neck.

Could just be a pervert. Or police.

Or it could be a bonety hunter who knows about one of the prices on my head. . . . ("It's *bounty* hunter," I said to Penelope the first time we fought one. "No—*bonety* hunter," she replied. "Short for 'bone-teeth'; that's what they get to keep if they catch you.")

I change carriages and don't bother trying to sleep again. The closer I get to Watford, the more restless I feel. Every year, I think about jumping from the train and spelling myself the rest of the way to school, even if it puts me in a coma.

I could cast a **Hurry up** on the train, but that's a chancy spell at the best of times, and my first few spells of the school year are always especially dicey. I'm supposed to practise during the summer—small, predictable spells when no one's looking. Like turning on night-lights. Or changing apples to oranges.

"Spell your buttons and laces closed," Miss Possibelf suggested. "That sort of thing."

"I only ever wear one button," I told her, then blushed when she looked down at my jeans.

"Then use your magic for household chores," she said. "Wash the dishes. Polish the silver."

I didn't bother telling Miss Possibelf that my summer meals are served on disposable plates and that I eat with plastic cutlery (forks and spoons, never knives).

I also didn't bother to practise my magic this summer.

It's boring. And pointless. And it's not like it *helps*. Practising doesn't make me a better magician; it just sets me off. . . .

Nobody knows why my magic is the way it is. Why it goes off like a bomb instead of flowing through me like a fucking stream or however it works for everybody else.

"I don't know," Penelope said when I asked her how magic feels for her. "I suppose it feels like a well inside me. So deep that I can't see or even imagine the bottom. But instead of sending down buckets, I just think about drawing it up. And then it's there for me—as much as I need, as long as I stay focused."

Penelope always stays focused. Plus, she's powerful.

Agatha isn't. Not as, anyway. And Agatha doesn't like to talk about her magic.

But once, at Christmas, I kept Agatha up until she was tired and stupid, and she told me that casting a spell felt like flexing a muscle and keeping it flexed. "Like *croisé devant*," she said. "You know?"

I shook my head.

She was lying on a wolfskin rug in front of the fire, all curled up like a pretty kitten. "It's ballet," she said. "It's like I just hold position as long as I can."

Baz told me that for him, it's like lighting a match. Or pulling a trigger.

He hadn't meant to tell me that. It was when we were fighting the chimera in the woods during our fifth year. It had us cornered, and Baz wasn't powerful enough to fight it alone. (The *Mage* isn't powerful enough to fight a chimera alone.)

"Do it, Snow!" Baz shouted at me. "Do it. Fucking unleash. Now."

"I can't," I tried to tell him. "It doesn't work like that."

"It bloody well does."

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“I can’t just turn it on,” I said.

“Try.”

“I *can’t*, damn it.” I was waving my sword around—I was pretty good with a sword already at 15—but the chimera wasn’t corporeal. (Which is my rough luck, pretty much always. As soon as you start carrying a sword, all your enemies turn out mist and gossamer.)

“Close your eyes and light a match,” Baz told me. We were both trying to hide behind a rock. Baz was casting spells one after another; he was practically singing them.

“What?”

“That’s what my mother used to say,” he said. “Light a match inside your heart, then blow on the tinder.”

It’s always fire with Baz. I can’t believe he hasn’t incinerated me yet. Or burned me at the stake.

He used to like to threaten me with a Viking’s funeral, back when we were third years. “Do you know what that is, Snow? A flaming pyre, set adrift on the sea. We could do yours in Blackpool, so all your chavvy Normal friends can come.”

“Sod off,” I’d say, and try to ignore him.

I’ve never even had any Normal friends, chavvy or otherwise.

Everyone in the Normal world steers clear of me if they can. Penelope says they sense my power and instinctively shy away. Like dogs who won’t make eye contact with their masters. (Not that I’m anyone’s master—that’s not what I mean.)

Anyway, it works the opposite with magicians. They love the smell of magic; I have to try hard to make them hate me.

Unless they’re Baz. He’s immune. Maybe he’s built up a tolerance to my magic, having shared a room with me every term for seven years.

That night that we were fighting the chimera, Baz kept yelling at me until I went off.

We both woke up a few hours later in a blackened pit. The boulder we'd been hiding behind was dust, and the chimera was vapour. Or maybe it was just gone.

Baz was sure I'd singed off his eyebrows, but he looked fine to me—not a hair out of place.

Typical.