

The
Fantastical Exploits
of
GWENDOLYN
GRAY



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~ Sneak Preview ~

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CHAPTER ONE

NO STORY...

Once upon a time, in the City of No Stories, Gwendolyn Gray was surrounded by zombies.

Though you may have encountered stories of zombies before, Gwendolyn had not, but if she had, she would certainly agree it was a fit word to describe the mindless creatures shuffling toward her.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Yesterday, Gwendolyn had not been in this predicament. Yesterday, light had streamed in through the window of her dull grey bedroom. But Gwendolyn was already awake. The nightmares saw to that. Always the same—black clouds, grasping tentacles, and rumbling thunder.

Three weeks since she'd returned from Tohk. Three weeks since she'd had a decent night's rest. She rose from her bed and brushed a frizzy waterfall of red curls out of her face. She rubbed tired and itchy eyes, and looked around.

Pictures stared back at her. Hundreds of them, wallpapering the room. Sparrow. Starling. Tohk. Copernium. She'd been drawing nonstop, though she could no longer make the colors appear like she used to. She thought she caught the two children in the pictures waving at her now and again, but it was, of course, just her imagination.

She touched a picture of Sparrow, feelings swirling inside her. I would like to describe those feelings to you, but though I have some skill with words, they fail me here. When attempting to describe the sensation of falling in love with an imaginary friend that you have accidentally brought to life and then lost forever, I find myself at a loss. It is a very specific sort of feeling.

Gwendolyn sighed and opened the closet to see some of the only color she had left: the red dress of her own creation and the green, puffed-sleeve dress from the Mainspring Marketplace. The faithful green dress was a bit ragged, not to mention weighed down with too many memories to fit comfortably. So she threw on the red one and went downstairs to her family's stylish living room, full of glass and chrome and black leather cushions.

Father was reading his paper, and Mother was busy in the kitchen. Gwendolyn crept toward the door, hoping to escape without any hassle.

"And just where do you think you're off to this fine morning?" Father asked. Behind the newsprint, Danforth Gray was a handsome man with an outrageous mustache and a twinkle in his eye.

Gwendolyn froze. "The School," she lied.

Father lowered his paper. "Did you hear that, Marie? She's off to the School. Do you know, I daresay she's forgotten?"

Mother came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a rag. Her platinum hair was up in its usual bun, her sharp features unusually soft this morning.

“Forgotten? Of course not. Even our distracted daughter wouldn’t forget her own birthday.” Her tone was teasing, but a flicker of worry passed between her and Father.

“Oh, yes. Birthday . . .” Gwendolyn said. May fifteenth. She *had* forgotten. “Happy birthday. I mean . . . no, that’s what *you* say, isn’t it?” She forced a small laugh. Another set of motions to go through. But she would try, for her parents’ sake.

Father shared another glance with Mother, then coughed. “Yes, happy birthday! It’s not every day one turns *thirteen*, after all.”

“Yes!” Mother said, with extra cheer ladled on top. “Now, into the kitchen with you. I’ve whipped you up a special breakfast.”

Gwendolyn cringed. She’d had enough experience with her mother’s cooking to beware the word *special*.

There were no balloons or cake or candles, not in the City. But Gwendolyn’s parents always made some effort. Mother proudly presented a plate of poached eggs, fried meat-from-a-tin, and a square of colorless gelatin that Gwendolyn supposed was meant to be festive.

At least it wasn’t boiled cabbage again. She took a bite and forced a look of appreciation.

“So,” Father said, preparing to ask the same question he asked *every* year. “Do you feel older?”

“Umm . . . I suppose so?” She never knew how to answer. Who woke up feeling a whole year older all at once?

Mother wrung her hands. “Well, eat up. A birthday is no reason to be late to the School. Although, must you wear *that* dress again? You’ve worn it so much recently, it’ll be threadbare soon, and I’ve had to do the wash that much more often—”

“Now dear, don’t nag the poor girl. It’s her birthday, let her wear what she wants.” Father winked at Gwendolyn.

Mother put up her hands in apology. “I’m sorry, it *is* your day.”

Gwendolyn pushed her chair back and stood. She’d had her fill of awful birthday food and awkward birthday talk. “Thank you, both. Mother’s right, I really should be going. I, um, promised I’d be there early today . . .”

“Ah!” Father said, latching onto a thought. “Meeting some friends before class, eh? Wonderful! Why don’t you invite your School chums over for games tonight? I’m sure we can find some somewhere . . .”

Gwendolyn presumed he meant games, not friends, though she didn’t know where to find either. Neither had ever been seen in the apartment. “Yes, that’s it,” she lied. “I’ll be sure to ask them. Though I won’t get my hopes up, it’s very short notice . . .”

She grabbed her bag and checked that her treasures were safely snuggled inside. The powerless Fignent gem, which had once held enough magic to take Gwendolyn between worlds. The red book, *Kolonius Thrash and the Perilous Pirates*, into which she had travelled on her last adventure. Starling’s goggles, which the older girl had left behind. And her pencils, about the only thing from the City itself that she cherished.

Her parents followed her to the door, and Mother wrapped her in a sudden and unexpected embrace. Gwendolyn cringed. She hated being touched, especially lately, but she endured. Mother noticed the cringe, which made her hug Gwendolyn all the tighter.

They parted, and Mother held Gwendolyn at arm's length for a moment. The changes in their daughter were not lost on Father and Mother, but they had no idea how to break through her depression to find the girl they loved within. Mother gave Gwendolyn a slow, meaningful look. "We love you, Bless. Happy birthday."

Father held out a package wrapped in white tissue. "Here you are."

Gwendolyn took it, and opened it. "Oh. Another sketchbook." She tried to muster some enthusiasm. "Thank you."

Father tried to hide a frown. "Yes. Well. I saw that you'd used up your old one. So . . . yes. There you are. Have a good day."

This was about all the attention Gwendolyn could stand. She said a hurried thank you, dashed out the door, and didn't stop dashing until she was safely aboard the monorail.

The train wound its way out from the Middling, away from the School she'd said she was going to. Flopping onto a seat, she opened her bag and put on Starling's goggles, using them to hold back her bushy red curls. To answer Father's question—she certainly *did* feel older. This had nothing to do with the number of birthdays she'd had, of course. She wasn't exactly sure what *older* was supposed to feel like, but to her it felt like tired, and angry, and more tired. She hardly recognized herself anymore, and she didn't like it—but like her parents, she didn't know what to do about it.

She leaned her head against the window, and watched the buildings slide by.

The City was a dull, grey place, full of boxy buildings and forbidding skyscrapers. It owed much of that dullness to the Lambents, thousands of clear, crystal balls each the size of a marble. When working properly, the Lambents would emit a white light, filling the Cityzens

with a wonderful feeling of calm, draining them of their worries and concerns. It also drained them of any troublesome ideas or questions that might alter the City in any way.

But the Lambents were *not* working properly. Gwendolyn had seen to that on her previous adventure. The trouble started when her daydreams had gotten a bit out of control, which involved making a certain classmate grow honest-to-goodness rabbit ears and infesting her bedroom with an all-too-real imaginary monster.

These changes did not go unnoticed in the highly unimaginative City, and Gwendolyn found herself subject to the attentions of the Faceless Gentlemen, Mister Five and Mister Six, whose job was to make sure the City stayed as dull and unchanged as possible. So naturally, they attempted to erase all her changes, along with our girl herself.

She had narrowly escaped them with the sudden appearance of Sparrow and Starling, two world-hopping explorers who helped Gwendolyn travel into her favorite book, *Kolonius Thrash and the Perilous Pirates*, and its fantastic world of Tohk.

Unfortunately, the Faceless Gentlemen had followed them, and unleashed a ravenous shadow monster, the Abscess. After a rollicking adventure involving perilous escapes, ingenious traps, and a thrilling airship battle with dastardly pirates, Gwendolyn had blasted the Abscess with the legendary Pistola Luminant, blowing the darkness to pieces.

But she had not stopped there. She returned home and blasted every Lambent in the City to smithereens, freeing the Cityzens from its hypnotic influence. She had expended the rest of her power restoring what the Abscess had erased. For a full account of these Marvelous Adventures, see the previous volume, but for those who are just joining us, we must make them feel welcome.

Needless to say, Gwendolyn's life had been much simpler before all that. Her biggest challenges had been boredom, and getting teased at the School. In hindsight, boredom was a very fine problem to have, because it meant that nothing truly bad was happening to you. She knew now that there was so much worse than boredom.

The mono was dirtier than usual. Grime, trash, and even some graffiti had accumulated, and no one seemed interested in cleaning it. At least she was alone. No one ever came this far but her. Finally she reached the Edge, the furthest part of the City, the part that no one else knew existed. The part that she had found three weeks ago. The only place in the City where she could be really, truly, alone. She got out and walked past the automated factories that belched smoke into the sky.

Gwendolyn trudged her familiar path to a familiar building, entered through the broken window, climbed up to the roof, and sat in her usual spot. She dangled her legs over the side and stared at it.

The Wall. It needed no other name. It stretched at least a hundred stories high, and as far as she could see in both directions. Where everything came to an end, but where her adventures had all begun. Where she'd been chased into that abandoned old apartment, where she found the book and the gem. And then there were Sparrow and Starling.

It hurt to think about them, but an old familiar hurt, like poking a sore in your mouth with your tongue. But sometimes you bite the sore by mistake, and feel a fresh throb of pain, and a blaze of anger, as Gwendolyn did now. She grabbed an empty bottle from a pile she had gathered for precisely this purpose. She flung it at the Wall, but it fell short, hitting the ground with a satisfying smash. "Happy birthday to me," she mumbled.

She'd spent a day traveling all over different parts of the City, but no matter which way she went, the Wall was there, waiting. No way out.

So Gwendolyn sat and stared and sulked and sketched, filling the pages in her new sketchbook, though inside she just felt empty.

She found her favorite picture of her friends again. Sparrow, winking up at her. Starling, trying to be serious, but with a hint of a smile at the corner of her mouth. Gwendolyn's relationship with them was . . . complicated. It turned out that her friends were not from another world at all, but had instead leapt fully formed from her imagination. But Gwendolyn's imagination had a habit of becoming real, and Sparrow and Starling were now as real as it got.

Maybe it had all been just a dream. But it hadn't *felt* like a dream. She may have imagined Sparrow and Starling, but the things she imagined became *real*, and she knew they were real now, were really still out there somewhere. Sparrow and Starling, probably stuck in Tohk where she left them, probably having adventures with Kolonius Thrash, the Figment lacking the power to bring them here, its energy spent in saving the world.

She could never have imagined all of Tohk by herself. It was just as real as her own world, which made losing it all the more awful. It would have been better if it *had* all been in her imagination. But it was all as real as the ache in her chest. She wondered if they even missed her.

After a few hours, her drawing was interrupted by another smash of glass. Not one from her. She ran to the opposite side of the roof and looked down.

A group of boys wandered the street below, prying up cobblestones and throwing them through factory windows. There was no doubt in her mind that they were trouble.

Well, Gwendolyn could use a bit of trouble.

She rushed down to the street and darted around the corner, planting herself directly in the boys' path. "Hello, children," she said, bold as you please. "What brings you out this far?"

"'Ello yourself," one of them snapped back. There were three, all taller and older than her. They were the sort of dirty and shabby that one only saw in the Outskirts. The Lambents would normally have kept the boys glued to their couches at home, hypnotizing them into dull-witted lumps, but it had been more than a fortnight since the Lambents had broken. They must have gone to play outside for once in their pasty lives, wandering farther out until they reached the Edge.

"Lookit that dress. What's a fancy thing like her doin' so far out 'ere? Whaddya think, boys?" said the tallest boy.

"I think she's got a right pretty dress on. Must be a Central. And what's with that hair?" said the boy to his right.

Gwendolyn was used to that sort of thing. After all, she was the only redhead in the City. And her red dress just made her stand out all the more.

"'Ey, you. Got any food, oddling?" the first one said, pointing to her bag.

She snorted dismissively. "Didn't your mothers teach you to wash before eating?"

"Fancy thing's got a mouth on 'er," said the lead boy. His hair was long and greasy and pale.

"Lookit that bag of hers. I'd say she's holdin' out on us," said the one on her left, his face a cratered map of fresh pimples and old pitted scars. He drew out a knife, which would have been altogether too dark and frightening for a story of this sort, but it was a small vegetable paring knife he had obviously taken from his mother's kitchen, and Gwendolyn had to stifle a

laugh. It was nowhere near as frightening as a gang of pirates armed with proper swords. The boy edged around behind her, and gave her a little push.

“Yeah, holdin’ out on us,” said Long Hair. “Whaddya think, Travis?”

Travis, the mouth breather on her right, grunted.

“Right,” said Long Hair. “Get it.”

Pimples grabbed her arm with his free hand while Travis yanked her bag off, tearing the sleeve of her dress.

Gwendolyn just stared at them. “You tore my dress,” she said. Anger flickered through her numbness. It felt good. Feeling anything felt good.

Long Hair leaned in close. “I don’t bleedin’ care, you redheaded freak. Now run on home to mummy.”

“I like this dress. It’s my favorite.” She clenched her fists. “And I’ll be needing my bag back.”

“Ooo, listen to her,” Long Hair said, turning to his cronies. “It’s her favorit—”

Gwendolyn grabbed a handful of greasy hair and yanked. The boy shrieked.

Pimples lunged at her. She twirled out of the way but still caught a nasty cut on her cheek. She kicked him in a place a polite girl would not. He sucked in a sharp breath and dropped the knife, clutching himself with both hands.

Travis got an arm around her neck, his breath heavy in her ear. She bit him, hard enough to break the skin—just like a zombie would, though she won’t discover what they are ’til chapter three.

Travis yelped and let go. Gwendolyn snatched up the knife and waved it at them. “Run away now, boys.”

“Get outta here, she’s feral!” Long Hair yelled. Two of them sprinted down the street, while Pimples hobbled gingerly after them. She scooped up a loose cobblestone and threw it after them. Soon all three were out of sight.

Gwendolyn stood there, panting. Her chest burned. She dropped the knife and stepped back, shocked at herself. Who was she? Fighting, and threatening people with knives?

The world spun around her, and Gwendolyn collapsed to the pavement and wrapped her arms around her knees. Her whole body shook, suddenly weak and fragile. Her breath came in rapid gasps. Her vision grew dark around the edges.

She forced herself to take one deep breath, and another. And another. Eventually, the adrenaline subsided. The anger faded. The numbing blanket wrapped itself around her again, and all she felt was tired.

Gwendolyn Gray forced herself to stand. “So,” she said, looking at the grey buildings all around, “this is the City I helped save.”

And after saving the world, Gwendolyn might have expected some kind of “happily ever after.” But she’d never heard of any “happily ever afters,” and things seemed to be worse than ever. It was not the end to her story that she’d expected.

But this is no story, she thought.

She was quite wrong, of course. We’re all in a story. Just rarely the one we expect.

Gwendolyn picked up her bag from where Travis had dropped it, and inspected the rip in her dress. The seam on the sleeve had split. Something warm ran down her cheek, and she probed the cut. It stung. She used the hem of her dress to dab at it. No one would notice the blood against the red fabric.

She headed home, using the hazy spire of Central Tower to guide her. She was in no hurry, so she walked instead of taking the mono, strolling right down the very middle of the street, as if daring the City to get in her way.

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