



# THE EXCHANGE

PATRICK

**P**ATRICK AMARASINGHE TRIED NOT TO LOOK NERVOUS AS HE scanned the queue of people waiting for the London Eye. (Which was difficult for him, considering he was almost always nervous.) Every few seconds, he glanced over his shoulder to check if they were being watched.

The Eye was a giant Ferris wheel where passengers rode in enclosed glass pods the shape of dinosaur eggs, suspended high above the London skyline. Even though it was a cloudy spring day, hundreds of people had bought tickets. But Patrick couldn't see the one person they were waiting for.

Patrick's twin sister, Pearl, looked perfectly at ease, as she always did when they were about to do anything dangerous, irresponsible, or downright illegal. She adjusted her wristwatch, pressing a button on the side as she angled it toward the growing queue.

"Over a hundred people here, but no facial recognition match yet," Pearl said, looking at the readout on the watch face (it was one of her own custom designs).

"I don't like this, Pearl," Patrick said. (Patrick said this exact line quite a lot.)

"Don't worry," Pearl reassured him. "He'll show up."

To the casual observer, the twins looked like regular twelve-year-olds on a school excursion. To be fair, they *were* twelve years old, and they *were* on a school excursion with an overexcited gang of their classmates and their already exhausted teacher. But they were far from regular, and they both knew it, which was why they always had to make special efforts to camouflage themselves in plain sight.

Pearl wore dark jeans and a gray hoodie with the NASA logo on it. She had warm brown skin with wavy black hair that she wore in a short bob beneath a baseball cap. Her hair was always a little wild and unkempt. It made her look like a mad scientist (which, of course, she was). Patrick knew that her shiny silver backpack was actually made out of a radiation-resistant nanomaterial that she'd patented last summer, and that her hoodie had actually been a gift from NASA for her scientific contributions to the new moon exploration program.

Patrick himself had the same chestnut-colored eyes as his sister, but his own curly black hair was neatly combed with a sharp part on one side. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and a plaid button-down shirt tucked into green cargo pants with lots of pockets. Nothing too unusual from the outside, except his pockets were full of archaeological equipment in case he ever stumbled on an artifact of interest. The Thames was full of old treasures from the past, and Patrick never passed up an opportunity to swipe his miniature metal detector over the river's muddy banks. He also carried brushes to dust off ancient pottery, an infrared microscope to read damaged manuscripts, and

a dictionary of dead languages (though he rarely needed to consult it because he read many of them fluently). Having his tools with him always made him feel more confident.

Patrick noticed that Pearl's focus had strayed. She was now staring hard at a group of girls in their class as she eavesdropped on their conversation.

"Oh my God, I love it!" Harriet said as she held up a silver necklace that one of her friends had given her. Harriet was white and strawberry blond and pretty and popular. It was her birthday today, which meant that tonight she would throw a pool party for all of her girlfriends, like she did every year. Patrick knew that Pearl wanted desperately to go, but she'd never been invited.

Patrick nudged his sister. "Why don't you go say happy birthday. Harriet won't bite. You might get an invitation if you, you know, actually talk to her."

Pearl stuck her nose up in the air. "Patrick, if you hadn't noticed, I'm on a very important mission. I'm *deeply* unconcerned with the frivolities of silly twelve-year-old girls."

*Sure*, Patrick thought. Sometimes Pearl seemed to forget that she was, herself, a twelve-year-old girl.

"Okay, everyone, I have your tickets!" It was Ms. Rasmussen, the twins' teacher who had dreamed up this end-of-term school excursion to the Eye. They were supposed to learn about the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben, Westminster Abbey, and Tower Bridge, all of which were visible from the Eye. Patrick already knew all there was to know about these landmarks, but this turned out to be a most convenient location for their very important, very secret, possibly very dangerous meeting.

"There," Pearl said suddenly. "That's him, walking out of the ticket office."

"I see him," Patrick replied. "What is he *wearing*?"

Among the crowd of their peers (if you could classify kids who considered fart jokes the height of comedy as their "peers"), moved a man in an oversized trench coat and dark sunglasses.

Owen Day was a PhD candidate who worked part-time on the Conservation team of the British Museum. Right now, though, he looked like a character from a B-grade spy movie—which is to say, he looked extremely conspicuous. People were going to notice if he came over and started talking to them.

"Do we abort the mission?" Patrick asked, a little too much hope in his voice. (Patrick loved nothing more than canceled plans.)

Pearl shook her head. "No. We've waited this long. We're so close. We can't give up now."

"Artemis?" Owen asked as he approached the twins. Artemis was Pearl's code name. "Apollo?" he said to Patrick. Together, the twins had code-named themselves Artemis (goddess of nature and hunting) and Apollo (god of truth and poetry): twins from ancient Greek mythology. They both had an *ever so slight* obsession with ancient Greece and ancient Rome. Patrick, because he loved history, and Pearl, because she admired all the brilliant scientists the era had produced, from Archimedes to Pythagoras.

"Line up in front of us, but don't talk to us directly," Pearl said under her breath as she turned away from Owen.

"And take off your hat and sunglasses," Patrick added with a grimace as he stepped up beside his sister. "You can't come to a tourist attraction dressed like you're a secret agent. You're drawing too much attention."

"Oh," Owen said. He took off his hat and raised his sunglasses onto his head. "Right. Sorry. I'm not used to . . . It's just that . . ."

Owen dropped his voice to a whisper and leaned in close. "I've never done anything *illegal* before."

"Another tip," Patrick whispered back, trying not to move his lips as he spoke in case MI5, the security agency, was watching (they frequently were). "When you're about to do something illegal, don't tell everyone around you that you're about to do something illegal!"

"That makes sense. Sorry. Again."

They shuffled ahead in the queue, silent for a few moments; then Pearl whipped around with a confused expression on her face.

"What's wrong?" Patrick asked.

"I felt a tug on my backpack. I thought it could've been a pickpocket."

Patrick turned around to look. It wasn't a pickpocket—it was something much worse. A group of boys from their class, all absorbed in a video that Digby Strode was showing on his phone. "Gross!" and "No way!" they shrieked.

*Oh no.*

Patrick had thought Digby was still suspended for another day.

Digby had always reminded Patrick of a pale reptile. Part Komodo dragon, with a stocky frame and thick limbs. Part frill-necked lizard, with ears that fanned out on either side of his face and a mouth that gaped as if his tongue was about to poke out and catch a fly.

"What are you staring at, Pee Pee?" Digby smirked when he caught sight of Patrick watching him. "See something you like?"

Patrick's heart rate doubled instantly with Digby's scornful gaze trained on him. Digby had been calling the twins Pee Pee

since the first grade, because both of their names began with *P*. It was so childish it wasn't worth bothering with a comeback.

Digby found the nickname hilarious.

Pearl didn't care.

Patrick, though. Patrick cared quite a lot.

"Nothing," he said, and quickly spun back around, his palms drenched with sweat. As with any rabid animal, it was best to give Digby Strode a wide berth and not try to reason with him. Sure, the archaeological tools Patrick carried made him feel more confident in most scenarios—until Digby was in the vicinity.

What good was a pottery brush against a semi-reptilian goon, after all?

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Digby and his crew shoved the twins aside and made to cut ahead of them—and Owen—in the queue. There was a vicious sting at the back of Patrick's arm as Digby elbowed past.

"Ow!" Patrick yelped, rubbing the skin where Digby had pinched him and twisted the flesh so hard Patrick had *felt* the blood vessels bursting. He knew it would leave a bruise, because Digby had given him so many over the years.

"Did he hurt you?" Pearl asked shrilly. "Digby, you nematode, get back here!"

Digby rounded on her. "What did you call me?"

"You heard me," Pearl said, stepping up close to him, her jaw set and her head held high. "*Nematode.*"

It was a good insult. Nematode worms had the smallest brains of any animal. Not that Digby would know that.

Digby scowled. "You gonna stand there and let your *sister* stick up for you, little Pee Pee?"

“Just leave it, Pearl,” Patrick said, pulling her back. “*Please.*”

“You are a criminal mastermind,” Pearl whispered furiously. Patrick didn’t like being described as a criminal. Sure, he committed the *occasional* crime—but often it was only ever as Pearl’s accomplice and almost always against his will. “You have outsmarted professors and outwitted the CIA—but you let *him* get under your skin?”

“What are you two whispering about?” Digby demanded.

“Nothing, Digby,” Patrick said, forcing a smile, even as his eyes still watered from the pain of the pinch. He wanted to melt into the ground, for this moment to be over. He wanted to not exist. “Pearl just got confused. Everything’s fine.”

“Yeah. Good.” Digby turned back to whatever heinous video was on his phone.

“You couldn’t *pay* me to go back to school,” Owen said under his breath as he stared at Digby and his friends.

“Let me use my InShrinkErator on him,” Pearl grumbled so only Patrick could hear her. “*Please.* I’ll shrink him to the size of my pinky finger and feed him to our mutant worms.”

Patrick shook his head and tried to blink away the moisture in his eyes.

Why was it so easy for Pearl to be brave, and so hard for him? Why was she so bold, so intrepid, so fierce, so able to stand up to anyone who crossed her, when he was so . . . well, not any of those things? They were twins, weren’t they? Why couldn’t he be more like her?

Suddenly someone behind them shouted, “Fire!” All heads turned toward a rubbish bin where a small flame had caught. One of the London Eye staff members rushed over with a fire extinguisher and put it out with a few sprays.

"*What* is going on today?" Pearl wondered aloud. "Things feel . . . off. Like someone is watching us."

"Someone's watching us?" Owen asked, too loud, too panicked. He looked like a rabbit who might bolt at any second. "I shouldn't be here, I can't risk—"

"Stay calm, everything is fine," Pearl reassured him.

Patrick wasn't so sure. Pearl was right: Something felt off this morning. He too kept having the strange sensation that they were being watched. By whom, he wasn't sure.

"Nothing to worry about. All under control," Ms. Rasmussen said from the front of the queue. "It's our turn now—single file, let's go."

The ticket inspector scanned their passes and waved them through to the open pod.

Right at the entrance, Pearl whipped around suddenly. "Okay, now I *know* I felt someone touch my backpack again."

Patrick turned to look behind them—but the next people in line were a couple with a crying baby. They were trying to soothe it by vigorously bouncing it up and down. Not exactly his idea of pickpockets. He shrugged. Pearl was very sensitive when it came to her silver backpack: She carried many of her most precious inventions around in it wherever she went, so that they couldn't be stolen or (even worse in Pearl's view) copied by someone else.

Pearl was silent as she scanned the whole scene before them. "Something *odd* is happening, Patrick. I can't put my finger on it."

"Hurry up, you two!" Ms. Rasmussen called.

Pearl shook her head. They both scrambled into the pod before the doors closed. Their school group was crammed in alongside a pair of German tourists, and Owen.

When the doors closed, Pearl took off her backpack and handed Owen and Patrick a pair of neon-orange earplugs each. “Put these in tight and don’t take them out until I tell you to,” she ordered.

The wheel began to turn, easing them slowly into the air. Patrick felt queasy—he hated heights—but he took a breath and kept his eyes trained on the floor as Pearl knelt to place a small tin of mints between the three of them.

“Ready?” she asked.

Patrick gave a half-hearted thumbs-up. Owen looked like he might vomit.

Pearl shoved in her own earplugs and opened the tin. There were no mints inside, only a complicated tangle of wires. Suddenly all of the people around them closed their eyes and slumped against the walls, fast asleep. Even Digby, who’d had his lizard face smooshed against the glass to see the view, went slack and slid to the floor, snoring, leaving a slime trail of drool down the window.

Pearl took out her earplugs and motioned for Patrick and Owen to do the same.

“What the— How did you do that?” Owen asked.

Pearl snapped the mint tin closed and put it back in her backpack. “It’s a unique frequency that triggers an instant REM sleep cycle in the human brain. I call it the Night Lite.”

“Incredible.”

“It’s practically useless, actually. It only works inside a Faraday cage and can transmit for about six feet, max. Really, the only place it will probably ever work is in a London Eye pod. Hence the reason we’re meeting here.”

Owen poked a snoozing Harriet in the arm. “How long does it last?”

"They'll all wake up from their naps in about ten minutes," Patrick said, glancing out the glass as the pod climbed slowly, slowly, slowly through the air. It would take around thirty minutes for it to make a full loop. "They'll think they were just daydreaming and won't remember having fallen asleep."

Owen went fishing in his trench coat. "Right. I have the—"

"Not *yet*," Pearl said.

"What now?"

"Stay still." Pearl took another small device out of her backpack, this one disguised to look like a tube of lip balm. She waved the tube all over Owen, but there was no reaction. "No bugs. He's clean."

Owen looked at the twins as if he was really seeing them for the first time. "Who *are* you two?"

Patrick handed Owen one of their business cards. One side read, *ARTEMIS & APOLLO Inc.* The other said, *Historiographical technologists for hire. Always discreet.*

(The business cards had been Patrick's idea. He was quite proud of them. The card stock was of tasteful thickness, and it even had a watermark.)

"Please," Patrick said as he sat cross-legged on the floor. "Have a seat."

Owen did as he was told. He was younger than their parents, perhaps in his mid-twenties (it was always so hard to guess the age of adults). He had blue eyes and freckles on his fair skin. Even though the air inside the capsule was cool, there was a bead of sweat sliding down the bridge of his nose and puddles of moisture collecting under his armpits.

*The poor guy looks like he's about to faint*, Patrick thought. It was understandable. It was how he himself felt most of the time

whenever Pearl dragged him on one of her “adventures.”

“You’re much younger than I thought you would be,” Owen said nervously.

“Do you have what we want?” Pearl asked.

Owen pulled some papers—now slightly soggy with his sweat—from inside his trench coat and laid them on the floor. Pearl flicked through them and grinned, the afternoon sun glinting off her rainbow braces, then handed them to Patrick. In his hands he held blueprints with the security master plan of the British Museum. Every air duct, every surveillance camera, every alarmed door, every laser beam laid out here in precise detail.

“It’s all there,” Owen continued. “Everything you need to break in, even the code to the service entrance.”

“Who ever said anything about breaking in?” Pearl said. “We are merely fans of neoclassical architecture.”

Owen frowned. “Sure. Whatever. Look, I got you what you wanted. Where’s my payment?”

Pearl gave her silver backpack to Patrick, who took out what looked like an entire ream of paper. Patrick flicked through his work one last time, then handed it to Owen. “One PhD thesis, as requested. I hope you like the title. ‘Bride and Prejudice: Marriage Traditions of the Ancient Greeks.’ There are two glaring mistakes—one on page fifty-seven, the other on page one hundred and ninety-two. Don’t correct them before you submit. Reviewers will be suspicious if there are no suggestions for them to make.”

The thesis was, admittedly, not Patrick’s best work. He’d written it over the space of a week and hardly conducted much groundbreaking research—but it would be enough to earn Owen his PhD.

“Wow,” Owen breathed as he flicked through the pages. “Wow, this is really good stuff.”

A true expert on ancient rituals would have chuckled at Patrick’s wild speculation about Athenian fertility dances and their sacred egg magic. Fortunately, there were only three such experts in the world—and Patrick Amarasinghe happened to be one of them.

Of course, involving a lazy PhD student in their grand plan hadn’t been their first choice, but the security system of the British Museum had proved more challenging than anticipated. Pearl and Patrick had broken into many impenetrable buildings in their time: Buckingham Palace, the Cheyenne Mountain Complex, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, and even one highly stressful infiltration into Area 51 six weeks ago, for another one of their secret project’s essential components. Yet nothing had stumped them like the British Museum.

Enter Owen, who occasionally worked there on the Conservation team and was coming to the end of his history PhD without a completed thesis (and constantly moaning about it on social media). It had been easy to bribe him with an offer he couldn’t refuse.

“This is really lifesaving—you have no idea,” Owen continued. “I’ve been offered a job at this new start-up, and I need to finish my PhD, like, yesterday.”

“A start-up?” Patrick asked. “You’re not going to become an archaeologist or archivist or work in academia?”

Owen scoffed. “Not if I can help it.”

Patrick frowned. This was a very confusing revelation for him; he could imagine no better job than one day working as

a history professor. He daydreamed about it often: lecturing students on ancient history by day and then, on the weekends, traveling to Greece or Italy using their secret project so that he could collect data firsthand.

Patrick thought of himself as a modern-day Indiana Jones. Except, instead of robbing graves, he intended to carefully and methodically remove, catalog, and study his findings. Indiana Jones was far too reckless for his liking. (Though Patrick did love his fashion. The fedora? The bullwhip? The leather jacket? Yes, yes, and yes.)

"I myself am planning to study history at Oxford," Patrick told Owen, puffing out his chest a little.

"Dude, do *not* study history," Owen replied as he continued to thumb through the thesis. "If I could go back in time and change one thing about my life, it would be to study something totally different. Something useful, you know, like coding or—I don't know—social media marketing."

Patrick was flabbergasted. "History *is* useful!"

"The only thing I've learned after seven years of studying history is that it's just bones and dust and bits of broken pottery."

"It's *not* just bones and dust," Patrick said with a gasp (although even he had to admit there was a lot of broken pottery). "It's . . . it's . . . so rich and alive and it tells us so much about our own world and—"

"Nope, it's definitely not alive. History is a bunch of boring, stale dead dudes." Owen tucked the thesis under his sweaty armpit, did up his trench coat, and glanced at Digby, who was beginning to stir. "I went to school with a boy like him, you know. Nasty piece of work. You know what he does now?"

"Toilet cleaner?" Patrick mused, imagining, with great satisfaction, the fate inevitably awaiting the likes of Digby Strode. "Pest control, maybe?"

"Real estate mogul," Owen said gloomily. "Started selling property right after he graduated bottom of the class. Now he's worth two hundred million pounds—and I've eaten instant noodles every night for the past seven years. I've had scurvy twice. Twice! Trust me. You don't want this life. Nobody cares about history."

"I care," Patrick mumbled to himself. He could make other people care too. One day.

"Now, Tempus," Owen continued, starry-eyed, "they are going to change the way people think about history forever. They are going to make history cool."

"What's Tempus?" Pearl asked.

"The start-up I'm going to work for. I can't say too much about it, obviously. They're in stealth mode." Owen looked like he really wanted them to ask more questions, so Patrick purposefully didn't ask anything at all. Owen's face fell a little. "Anyway, listen. Maybe when you finish school, you can come and work for me. How would you like that? You can be my assistants."

Patrick crossed his arms and pressed his lips together in a firm line. "Sure," he managed acidly. "Sounds just great."

Work for this dolt?! Owen Day, who wouldn't know an ancient Athenian marriage ritual from a Druidic fertility dance? No way.

Besides, if the secret project he and Pearl had been building for the past year worked like it was supposed to, people would suddenly be *very* interested in history again, no matter what Owen had to say about it. Digby Strode would grow up to have a career in waste management, as was his destiny. Patrick would

grow up to be renowned and respected, and it wouldn't matter anymore that he wasn't brave like his sister.

No one would push him around. No one would make him feel small. Everyone would care about the things he cared about.

Patrick glanced at the timer on Pearl's phone. Ten minutes were almost up. He stuffed the blueprints into the silver backpack and handed it to his sister. "Okay, Owen, go stand at the other end of the pod until the ride ends. Don't make any further contact with us."

"And remember," Pearl added, "if the authorities question you—this never happened."

Owen nodded. "Got it. Never happened. Thanks, kiddos."

Around them, people started to yawn and blink their eyes open. Digby, who had a long strand of drool hanging from his lip, snorted awake with a shout of, "No, Mummy, I said I want Cocoa Puffs!"

"Oh my," Ms. Rasmussen said as she stood and smoothed down the front of her shirt. "Sorry, I got lost in my thoughts for a second. Now, where were we? Oh, look! Big Ben is right there! Who can tell me anything about Big Ben?"

"The tower was completed in 1859," Patrick said under his breath, reciting from memory. "Designed by Augustus Pugin in a neo-Gothic style. Ninety-six meters tall. The pendulum weighs almost seven hundred pounds. Big Ben is the nickname for the Great Bell, but everyone calls the clock tower Big Ben as well."

"Nobody *cares* about Big Ben," Digby moaned.

"Anybody? No?" Ms. Rasmussen asked. "Okay, everyone, get out your worksheets and start reading from the top."

Patrick sighed. The twins had decided when they started school that, as part of their camouflage, they would never reveal

their genius intellects to anyone. They had to pretend every day that they didn't know the answers to most of the questions they were asked. They had to pretend that they were perfectly mediocre—but hopefully not for much longer.

If their plan worked—if their secret project could really do what Pearl said it could do—then, by that very night, they were going to do something that no human had ever done before. Soon, the whole world would know who they were and what they were capable of.

Patrick wouldn't have to pretend anymore. Patrick could finally find people who thought like him and cared about the things he cared about. Patrick wouldn't have to fend off brutes like Digby Strode every day.

Patrick would finally fit in.

He checked the time. It was one o'clock. The twins had to be home for dinner by seven-thirty, and there was a lot to do before then.

There was a glint in Pearl's eye as the ride peaked at the top of the wheel. All of London was spread out quite sickeningly before them. "Are you ready to win that Nobel Prize we deserve?" she asked.

Patrick closed his eyes and let a beam of spring sunshine wash over him as he took a deep breath.

"I'm ready to make history," Patrick said—and he meant it.