Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The White City

Written by Simon Morden

Published by Gollancz

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE WHITE CITY

SIMON MORDEN

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Gollancz
An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Carmelite House, 50 Victoria Embankment,
London EC4Y 0DZ
An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Simon Morden 2016

The moral right of Simon Morden to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 473 21148 3

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



www.simonmorden.com
www.orionbooks.co.uk
www.gollancz.co.uk

1

The moon was overhead, and Mary was on her back, staring up at its vast ivory seas.

'Do you think,' she said idly, 'do you think I could fly there?'

'No.' Dalip, lying nearby, sounded definite, but she wasn't so sure. She could see the shadows cast by the lunar mountains shift as they passed overhead, and if she reached up, she thought she might touch them.

She raised her hand, extending her fingers, stretching out. But all she felt was cool air, not the dry granularity of another world. She traced the curves of the craters, the lines of the rilles, and wondered.

'Why not?' She let her arm fall back and rested her wrist across her forehead.

'The atmosphere's only, what, eighty kilometres thick, and for almost nine-tenths of that it's too thin to sustain life. The moon's further away from Down than that. A lot further.'

'Sure?'

'Positive. Our moon is four hundred thousand kilometres away.'

'Okay.' She batted away a tiny flying thing that seemed intent on hovering between her nose and her top lip. 'But what if it's not like that here? What if, you know, magic?'

'This moon doesn't have an atmosphere. If it did, it'd have weather, and we'd be able to see clouds. The shadows are too sharp, too. Light scatters in air – that's why the sky's blue – and there's no evidence for that. So, yes. Magic. But you can't fly to the moon. Not even here.'

His voice grew increasingly exasperated, and she tutted. The silence between them dragged out.

'I …' said Dalip finally. She heard him turn on his side to face her. 'I'm worried.'

There was a lot to be worried about. They had control of the biggest cache of maps that Down had ever seen – at least according to Crows, but he was an inveterate bullshitter – and that level of wealth was going to draw the wrong kind of attention. And in Down, almost all attention seemed to be the wrong kind.

She twisted her head to see Dalip. She was on one side of the rough wooden trunk containing the maps, and he was the other. Though it wasn't big, the size of a large suitcase, the trunk obscured him from shoulders to knees. She touched the planks to remind her of the riches and danger inside.

'So what are you worried about?' she asked. 'Apart from thieves, assassins, monsters, the weather, Crows, the portals, the journey and this city we're supposed to be heading for? Tell me if I've left something out.'

'Tides,' said Dalip.

'Fuck off.'

'No, I'm serious. A moon that huge should create tides higher than mountains, and that's without thinking about the earthquakes it should be causing. It doesn't make sense.'

'I can turn into a giant fucking eagle-thing, and you're saying the tide doesn't do what it should?'

The pale light from above cast deep shadows on Dalip's face. One eye was bright and glittering; the other, dark and hidden.

'Down has to follow rules, even if they're different to what we're used to.'

'Does it?'

'Yes. And we know most of them are similar, because if they weren't, we wouldn't even be able to exist here. Gravity—'

'Gravity?'

'– is an intrinsic property of mass. We don't feel any heavier or lighter, so it must be about the same here, and yet the moon doesn't behave like it is.'

He was lecturing her, so she took her revenge and shook her fist at the sky. 'Fuck you, moon,' she called.

He rolled back and drew his lips into a thin line. She'd offended him again, something she didn't mean to do yet managed almost as often as he pissed her off by parading his education. To her, his quest for order amongst the chaos – a chaos as woven through Down as a silver thread through a banknote – seemed pointless. As far as she could tell, Down did as it pleased: it gave and took away, capricious as a gang leader. Sometimes it was generous, sometimes it was searingly violent, but it was never predictable.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'that Down doesn't do what you want it to do. It doesn't do some of the things that I want it to. But unlike you, I don't expect it to.'

He groaned, 'I know. It's … I want it to be logical. And there are patterns. The thing with the portals, the lines of power, the villages and castles, the instruments Bell used – they had to be measuring something, or she wouldn't have had so many of them. Down orbits its sun, and the moon goes round Down predictably. There are rules—'

'Even to magic?'

'Even that. If we can understand them, then we can start to predict events, and then maybe control them.'

'But what if it isn't like that? Bell was batshit crazy. I've got scars on my back to prove that.'

'Then,' he said, 'this box of maps is worthless, and we may as well cut them up for toilet paper.'

He had a point. Everyone, but especially Crows and Bell, whose opinions about this were the only ones that really counted, thought like Dalip: given enough information, an answer would fall out and give them control of the portals. That was pretty much what being a geomancer was all about. Mary had her doubts, though. Down was more like the kids' homes she'd been brought up in than the schools that had tried to educate her. Lots of rules; almost all of them broken, almost all of the time.

Mary put her hand in front of her face again and looked at the moon through the bars of her fingers. One side of them was silvered. The side closest to her were black shadow. She concentrated on that darkness and dragged it like ribbons through the air, five ragged lines whose edges trembled in time with her fingertips.

She stared at what she'd done, at what she could do. It was simple enough now she knew how. Crows had showed her, and she'd practised. And yet, when the others – Dalip, Elena, Luiza, Mama – had tried, none of them could emulate her. It was a gift to her, and her alone. As far as she knew, science didn't work like that. It didn't prefer one person over another.

So if there were patterns, they were fucking weird. Easier perhaps to believe that she was Down's favourite: unlike poor, mad Stanislav, who had been blessed in an entirely different way. She could still see the eyes and the teeth in her dreams. So many eyes, so many teeth.

She blinked the image away, or at least tried to, because it seemed to be burned on her retinas like a bright light.

'I remember toilet paper,' she said to distract herself. 'I remember the first fag of the day, and leaning out the window to blow the smoke away. I remember the traffic on the street below, and the people on the pavement. I miss the toilet paper.'

'Oh, come on. You were made for Down,' said Dalip, and he sat up, leaf litter clinging to the back of his orange work overalls. He pushed himself up using the box until he was kneeling, hands

on the lid. 'But I don't know about the rest of us.'

The moon, still vast and close, passed with uncanny silence. In her mind, it rumbled and growled past like a huge truck. The trees, the ground, the air itself, should be shaking.

'I don't know why I don't miss those things. Okay, it was all a bit shit, and I was in a fuck-ton of trouble, but I was getting it together. I even had a job, for fuck's sake, a crappy cleaning job, but I wasn't going to do that for ever. I didn't ask for London to burn down, and I didn't ask to come here. But now we're here …'

'… we have to decide what we're going to do.' Dalip leaned heavily on the trunk, making it creak, and when he got up, he did so carefully, stiffly.

Mary had given him those injuries, nearly killing him in order to save him from smearing himself against the iron-hard surface of a lake. She still felt guilty. She watched him stretch, and squeeze a finger between his scalp and the band of cloth he wore instead of his turban. He scratched and sagged, and she looked up at him, looking down at her. Her red dress, long to her ankles, bare to her shoulders, was less vibrant than when she'd first worn it to go Stanislav-hunting, but it was still more than serviceable. She'd put on the mantle of the Red Queen. Maybe one day she'd actually be that person: she'd sit on a throne, and let all the responsibility that title brought settle on her proud head.

The presumably airless moon had drifted in the direction of her feet, affording her an oblique look at the ring of mountains surrounding one crater. The sunward slopes were bright, those in the shade utterly dark. Beyond it, the sky was blank, like a wall of night. No stars, no other planets, nothing. Down, its moon and its sun, was all there was.

'What do you think happened?' she asked. 'To London.'

'There's a thing called a firestorm.' Dalip shrugged and sat down on the trunk. 'Learnt about it in history. If enough stuff

burns – and we're talking about a city-sized amount of stuff – all the hot air rising causes a hurricane-force wind to suck in fresh air from all around. It feeds the fire with fresh oxygen, and it gets hotter and hotter until there's nothing left to burn. We made it happen in the Second World War, dropping incendiaries on German cities. Killed tens of thousands of people. Not soldiers, either. Just civilians, hiding in their cellars from the bombing, roasted alive by the heat. Like we almost were.'

'Fucking hell,' she said.

But they'd escaped. They'd opened the door to the street, caught a fleeting glimpse of an inferno, then been in Down in all its baffling majesty.

'Nuclear bombs can do the same sort of thing. It doesn't take a thousand bombers any more. Only one. But' – and he clenched his teeth, showing them white in the darkness – 'you're right. That's not what happened. We would have felt the bomb go off; it would have been like an earthquake. Unmistakable.'

'There were bangs and other noises first. Like thunder, in the distance sometimes, then closer. I thought it was actually thunder. Then I went underground, and I couldn't hear it any more.'

'And an hour, an hour and a half later, the whole of London was burning down.' Dalip stood again and raised himself up on tiptoe. 'If it wasn't a bomb, then I don't know. London just caught fire, everywhere, all at once. If we made it out, then maybe other people did, if there are other portals attached to our time. They'd all be starting off at different points on Down, and they'd all be as clueless as us. And assuming we stay alive, we might bump into them one day.'

'That'd be weird.'

'No weirder than meeting a whole bunch of people from the sixties, or the thirties. When did Crows say he crossed over?'

'Thirty … six? They cut him. Badly. If he hadn't found Down, they would have killed him.'

‘That doesn’t make him a decent man. Or rather, it didn’t. Let’s face it, none of us deserved to be saved. None of us are wiser, smarter, stronger or prettier than all those we watched die. Whatever criteria Down uses, how worthy we are doesn’t come into it.’

She climbed to her feet and brushed her skirts free of leaf litter. ‘So what if it was just luck? I didn’t want to die, and I still don’t. I wanted to live, which is what I can do now. Don’t tell me you don’t feel the same?’

Dalip looked at the ground, then at the trees around the edge of the small clearing they’d co-opted for their camp.

‘It’s not just the lack of tides that scares me,’ he finally said. ‘I’m not very … I just … Look, I have to face up to the fact that I’m comfortable being told what to do. I know where I am with that. I’m safe.’

‘You were nails taking on Stanislav. Fucking nails, man. You threw us off a mountain to finish him off.’

‘And where did that get me?’

‘Here. Alive. What the fuck are you complaining about?’

‘My own choices nearly killed me. When I sleep, I dream I’m falling. Sometimes I don’t wake up in time. Sometimes, you don’t catch me, and you know what? It hurts. I hit that water so hard, it’s bits of me that sink.’

She regarded his shadow. ‘Why didn’t you say before?’

‘Because you’re so obviously enjoying yourself, there didn’t seem any point in, you know. Raining on your parade.’

‘I thought we were mates. Proper friends who told each other stuff.’

‘I’m,’ he said quietly, ‘I’m not supposed to be weak. I’m supposed to be a lion. It’s even my name. One of our gaolers called me “Little lion man”, but not in a good way. He knew. He knew I was weak.’

‘So what happened to him?’ she asked Dalip.

‘Stanislav killed him. Stabbed him a dozen times in the guts.’

He shrugged again, and she didn't know what to say. She was used to the empty posturing of street kids, posing for shaky-cam videos while brandishing kitchen knives and ball-bearing catapults, where weakness was the one thing you didn't dare show, let alone tell anyone else. It didn't matter whether they were cowards, or too stupid to run when it all went down: it was the act, and that was the one thing that Dalip's tightly controlled world had never taught him.

If she wasn't careful – if he wasn't careful – Down would eat him alive. It might have already started, and she couldn't tell.

The others were on the opposite side of the fire; four still shapes, curled in various configurations on ground that, no matter how soft it started off, always ended up like concrete.

'That bloke's gone, and you're still here. And you know what? That's what counts. You found it when you needed it, and when you need it again, you can always find it again. I don't know what you think a man is, but I've put up with kids pretending that they're all grown up, all big men, and they can fuck right off. You don't want that any more than I do. We all know what you did, and none of us think you're weak. Fucking hell, look at you. You were this stringy thing, and now you've got all the muscles and stuff.'

He acknowledged his subtle transformation with a shrug. 'My grandfather—'

'Fought the Japanese when he was still a kid, you told me, like a dozen times. And what a pain in the arse he was to live with.'

For a moment, Dalip's expression darkened and deepened, and he held himself tense and still. Then he let it go, and looked up at the receding moon. 'You sound like my mum.'

'Maybe you should have listened to her.'

'I did. I do. I … I'm hanging on to the few certainties I have left.'

Mary walked the few steps to him, and landed a slow, deliberate punch on his shoulder. 'We need you, not your grandfather.

The war veteran we had turned into a soup of eyes and teeth, and I don't want you going the same way.'

He nodded, but she could see that he was scared of that, too.

'You're not, are you?' she asked. If he was, there'd be very little she could do, except ask him to leave. Stanislav had hidden his transformation so well that by the time it had taken him completely, he'd been almost impossible to kill. Almost.

'No, that's not happening,' said Dalip. 'At least, not that I know of. Keep an eye, or three, on me.'

'That's not a good joke.'

He shrugged, and the glimmer of his smile shone in the moonlight. 'I was never any good at telling them. Always the serious kid in the corner. I thought I might lighten up a bit.'

'All work and no play, right?'

He shrugged again. 'Something like that. I'm not actually dull, just … people tell me what to do, and I do it. It's a habit.'

'No one's going to tell you what to do here. Not now you're free of Bell and her Wolfman.'

'There'll be others. Once they find out what's in the box, it'll be everybody.' Dalip looked at the ground, then at her. 'If we pull this off, we'll be the luckiest people ever.'

'What if that's it? We don't have to be the smartest or the strongest. Just the luckiest. What, if out of all of London, we were the luckiest?'

'Then,' he said, 'everything we ever knew, everyone we ever knew, is ash. My family, Mama's babies: they're all gone, and it doesn't matter what we learn or if we can open the portals: there's nothing to go back to. Perhaps it'd be better to hope we're not lucky at all.'

Mary had forgotten that her escape was his captivity. She burned, and started to walk away.

'It's all a bit academic, though, isn't it?' he said at her retreating form. 'We don't know, we won't until we try to find out. And I'd rather know than not.'

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. She was, too.

‘I’ll wake Mama and Luiza. It’s time.’ His bare feet brushed through the grass of the clearing, leaving her with the crate of maps.

She knelt next to it and undogged the hasps that held it closed. She creaked the lid open, just a little way, so she could glimpse the jumble of paper inside. There was so much of it, and they’d barely looked through any of the sheets, let alone tried to work out how, and if, they might fit together.

She lowered the lid again. Crows seemed to be fast asleep, but a single black bird perched on the tree above him, staring down at her, its eyes bright with reflected fire. Mary scowled at it and, with a flutter of dark wings, it was gone.