

Excerpt from *Otherbound*

"A TALE OF PASSION, POSSESSION, AND HAIR-RAISING
LEAPS FROM WORLD TO WORLD." —Printz Honor winner Margo Lanagan



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n the world of the Dunelands, Amara was sleeping.

Striding through the Walgreens aisles, Nolan wished he could do the same—just curl up in bed, shut his eyes, and see nothing but the insides of his eyelids.


No: see nothing but the insides of Amara's eyelids. He hadn't seen his own in years.

If he hurried, he could buy the notebooks and get home before Amara woke up. He stopped by the office supplies, adjusted his backpack, and hunted the shelves for the right kind: hard-backed, easy to stack, and with thick enough paper that his ink wouldn't bleed through when his pen paused at the same spot too long.

"Can I help you find anything?" A perky salesclerk appeared to his right.

Nolan offered a smile. Not quite his teacher-smile, but close—he didn't visit stores often enough to have a salesclerk-smile. All these fluorescent lights and shoppers made him uneasy. If something happened in Amara's world, he had nowhere here to hide. At least his school had bathrooms. Sometimes he even got to use a teacher's office. When the disabled kid said he felt a seizure coming, teachers listened,





if only out of fear that Dad would threaten to sue them again.

“No, thank you.” Nolan drew back from the salesclerk. Another smile. He fingered the straps of his backpack. “I’m doing fine. But thank you.”

He turned back to the notebooks. Amara would give everything she owned for a single one of these. He ignored that thought—with Amara asleep, this was the one time of day he could focus on his own world. Once she woke, or when she started dreaming, all his inner peace and quiet would fade.

Maybe he should pick up some pens, as well. He couldn’t risk running out of ink.


The salesclerk crouched to rearrange some mixed-up kids’ sketchbooks. Nolan zeroed in on the shelves, on the recent pop cover blaring from the store’s speakers. Easier said than done. The music cut out every time he blinked, replaced with Amara’s slow breaths and the quiet rustling of sleepers in her inn room.

There. They’d moved his brand of notebooks to another spot. Nolan raised his—

—get up!—

—it was just a snatch of a voice. Male. At first, Nolan thought it was another shopper, maybe the radio.

It wasn’t. Amara had woken up. Nolan turned away from the salesclerk. He needed to shut his eyes without the clerk worrying, get a second’s glimpse of Amara’s world to see what was happening. The fluorescent glow of the Walgreens faded into nothing—



“—this?” It was Jorn’s voice, as Nolan knew it would be. Long fingers dug into Amara’s wrist. They were cold to her sleep-warm skin, and strong, squeezing too tightly.

Jorn yanked her out of the alcove bed. Her blanket slid off, caught by the hatch, and Amara stumbled on all fours onto the inn floor. Splinters stabbed her knees and feet.

Jorn shoved beige squares of paper at Amara. Scratches of ink covered every inch, forming slashes and loops and dots Amara was learning to recognize as letters. “I know these are yours,” Jorn growled. “You’re learning to write. What do you think you need that for?”


Amara didn’t answer. Even when she could, when he wasn’t dragging her by the arm like this, she never answered. Jorn would only get worse. She scrambled for balance, but her every muscle held stiff from fear and sleep.

Through the panic, Nolan tried to yank Amara’s arm free. It didn’t respond. Never did. He only got to watch and feel.

Cilla, Amara was thinking, maybe Cilla can stop him, she could tell him that teaching me to write was her idea, that it wasn’t just me—but Jorn wouldn’t care. He couldn’t punish Cilla. He could punish Amara—

“—Nolan?”

His eyes flew open at the feel of the salesclerk’s hand on his back. Her perfume wafted into his nose, sharp and Jélisse fruity—no, the Jélisse people were from Amara’s world, not here. The clerk’s perfume was just plain fruit. End of story.



This world: perfume and office supplies, the inconstant whirl of the AC. Forget the Dunelands. Forget the splintery wood of the inn floors, the musty smell of Amara's mattress, the salt coming in from the dunes.

He must've been in Amara's head for longer than a second. At least he'd stayed upright, though he'd slouched against the store's racks and knocked a pack of notebooks to the floor.

"Are you all right?" The clerk squinted. Caked makeup around her eyes wrinkled into crow's-feet. "You're Nolan, aren't you? Nolan Santiago? Should I call Dr. Campbell?"


"No. I think I'm all right." He forced a smile. She not only knew his name, but his doctor's, too? Small-town gossip would be the death of him. "Sorry for dropping those."

"No problem at all!"

Nolan took a pack of pens from the rack, then bent to help pick up the fallen notebooks. His eyes started to ache, but he couldn't allow himself to blink. He knew what Amara was facing; blinking meant he would have to face it, too. He needed to hide. "Could you point me to a bathroom?"

He couldn't keep his eyes open any longer. They burned. He blinked, and for that fraction of a second Amara sucked him in—**flames crackled in the room's fire pit, and Amara made a sound that barely escaped her lips**—then Nolan was back. He blinked a couple more times, too rapidly to get anything but flashes of heat and fear. The fire was getting closer.

Something had happened to Jorn. Nolan hadn't seen him



this outraged in years. He'd hit Amara often enough, and writing and reading were off-limits for servants like her—but *this*? No.

Nolan held the plastic-wrapped notebooks so firmly they shook. The salesclerk was staring at him. If she'd answered his bathroom question, he'd missed it. "I'll get your mother," she said.

His mother? How would she find his mother? But the clerk was gone before he could respond, and Nolan gritted his teeth, spinning around. Finding a bathroom would take too long. He'd find a place to hide in the parking lot, instead. He couldn't break down in the store. Couldn't make a scene.


Another blink. Nolan went from stalking through the aisles to—**dragged along, legs tangled and kicking**—and when his eyes opened and he snapped back to his own world, he stumbled. His prosthetic foot slid out from under him before he could get a grip. Nolan caught himself on the nearest rack, sending metal rattling against metal.

"Nolan?" Mom's voice. He stiffened. There she stood, short and thin, wearing an ill-fitting Walgreens uniform and a name tag that proclaimed her MARÍA.

Despite everything, that caught Nolan's eye. Mom was a child-care professional. She had training, certificates, her own business. What was she doing here?

"Are you OK?" Mom asked.

"I need a—a space." Nolan tried a Mom-smile and failed.




“Is he going to have a seizure?” The salesclerk stood behind Mom, her eyes as wide as Nolan’s own probably were but for entirely different reasons. She dug around in her pockets for her cell. “I’ll call 911!”

“No,” Mom bit out. “They can’t help. Is the back room free?”

The next time Nolan blinked, flames licked at Amara’s hands. He muffled a scream. He found himself bent over, the notebooks in his hands creasing. *Let me go*, he thought at Amara, though she didn’t hear him and never would. This was a one-way street. She didn’t know Nolan existed, let alone what her magic did to him. *Please. Stop pulling me in. I don’t want to feel this.*

He wanted to tune her out. Even with his eyelids spread wide, the aftertaste of her pain clung to his hands, and more than anything, he wanted to tune her out. On their own, the images he got through blinking were chaos, like switching between TV channels and only catching a half word here, a bright shape there—enough to wreak havoc on his concentration but nothing more. Get enough of them, though, and he had two movies playing alongside each other and no way of pressing pause.

A group of curious shoppers watched from a distance. Not that many, given that it was a Sunday morning, but enough to make him wish for the parking lot, despite the risk. He’d lost one foot already. If Amara made him stumble onto the road, who knew what’d come next? He should’ve stayed home. He



should've asked Mom or Dad to pick up the notebooks while getting groceries. Served him right for thinking he could handle anything on his own.

Mom wrapped her arm around his shoulders and guided him to the back room, where he slammed his ass to the floor and pressed himself against a wall. He managed a tight nod in thanks as Mom clicked on a table fan, which whirled and stuttered into action. She pushed aside chairs and boxes, anything he might hurt himself on. Standard seizure procedure. Even though there was nothing standard about his seizures.

Nolan managed to open the zipper of his backpack, then grabbed his current notebook and the pen clipped to its cover. He should write down what he saw. Writing always helped.

"I'm here, all right?" Mom said, in Spanish now, her voice soothing. "I'm taking an early lunch break. We'll go home the moment you can. I'm right here."

Every time he blinked: the sear of pain, the smell of burning flesh. Already, sweat was beading on his forehead. The pain lingered after he opened his eyes, his brain still shouting panicked messages of fire! fire! fire! before catching up. Nolan's hands were intact, Nolan's world safe.

Until he blinked again.

He couldn't hold on to the pen. His hands squeezed to his chest until they were all that remained.



[More information on the book.](#)

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