

# FORBIDDEN CHILD

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GWEN NEWELL



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*To N.D. Wilson.*  
*Thanks, Nate, for everything.*

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# 1. THE ESCAPE

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IN WINTER UNDER A CLOUDY SKY, THE NORTH ATLANTIC WAS GRAY LIKE ICE, GRAY like whales, gray like the *Escape*. The *Escape* was the last American ship on the seas, and she had been sailing for forty years. She was a battered old cruise liner carrying eight thousand souls through the ocean over what was once New England.

At two hundred fifty feet above the waterline, the ship rose like a small skyscraper, and she was so long that if you stood her up on her end, she would needle the same sky as the Empire State Building. Except there was no Empire State Building now. No New York City. No New York State. No America. Around the *Escape*, as far as the eye could see, the ocean waves rolled like deep thoughts to the tug of the moon, but they did not crest into breakers on the beach because all the beaches were gone.

Snapping in the wind against the white sky was the *Escape's* flag: the solid gold silhouette of a muscular woman raising both arms to heaven against a blood-red field. Beneath the flag stood a giant billboard, now chipped and faded. The billboard read: KEEPING YOU SAFE UNTIL THE WORLD IS SAFE AGAIN.

No eager faces peered from the windows, for most of the *Escape's* windows had been blinded with black-out boards or plastered over with white tape. On the top deck, no happy hands clasped the railing as passengers looked out to sea. No excited bare feet ran here and there. Nobody was sipping cocktails.

In fact, hardly anybody was on the top deck at all, for it was illegal for unauthorized crew to set foot anywhere outside the hull. Four lone guards wearing stumpy wool coats and holding shabby rifles shuffled slowly up and down the deck, one guard for each side of the ship. The cruise ship's gaudy lounge chairs were long gone. The speakers piping pop music had been silenced. The swimming pools were empty, and there is nothing in the world so empty as an empty swimming pool.

All in all, the *Escape* looked like a ghost ship adrift on the wintry waves, but not according to the eight thousand Americans living below. If you asked them, they would tell you the *Escape* was their home. Their haven. Their life. And nobody would have said this louder than Piper Pascal.

On this morning, far below the top deck, deep inside the *Escape's* hull, thirteen-year-old Piper climbed silently down from her bunk bed in her cold, dim cabin and tucked her thin cotton shirt into her wool skirt, pulled on her wool sweater, laced her boots, which were too big for her, and tied her braid with string. Her breath came in white puffs in the near darkness. Today, Godmother's Day, the first day of the week, was the only day the crew was allowed to sleep in, but Piper never did. Today, like any other day, she strapped on her belt and inserted her extendable rubber truncheon, radio, flashlight, and a pair of handcuffs flaking rust. Onto her shirt collar, she pinned a single silver bar.

She was Lieutenant Piper Pascal, leader of the Children's Army, spy in the Secret Agency Countering Terrorism—SACT—and she did not sleep in.

Piper's face would have freckled in the sun had she ever seen it, and her hazel eyes would have sparkled had she been born fifty years earlier and lived in a normal house with parents called Mom and Dad and opened a stocking on Christmas morning and had felt beach sand between her toes and had known what chocolate tasted like and had read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. But Piper Pascal did not know any of those things. If you had told her she must be sad, she would quietly reply that sadness was impossible aboard the *Escape*, the perfect world of the Godmother.

And if you had told her on this icy Sunday morning in late December 2070 that her world was coming to an end, she would not have believed you. Because for Piper Pascal, life on the *Escape* was eternal.

She closed her eyes, bowed her head, and murmured the Ten Commandments.

“I am not my own. I belong to the Godmother. All good things come from the Godmother. I will love and serve the Godmother. I will report all crime, my own and my neighbor’s. Failure to report a crime is punishable by death. No desertion. No stealing. No secrets. No contraband. No Illegal Organisms.” Piper bowed her head further. “Thank you for keeping me safe until the world is safe again.”

She whispered because she did not want to wake the other girls. She loved having the first few minutes of each day to herself, alone with her thoughts and prayers and dreams, and if the other girls were awake, they might want to join her. Especially Alexis. Alexis always wanted to join her.

She sat down at her desk and gazed up at the Godmother’s portrait. The Godmother was more striking than pretty. She had a tightly pursed mouth and a tart miniature nose, and her scarlet hair was chopped in a bob around a jagged jaw. Hardest of all were her eyes, which were dark as mahogany, snagging her face like barbed wire. Piper felt like she could nick her hand on those eyes, just



polishing the glass, which she did every day even when it was another girl's turn.

The Godmother appeared middle-aged in this photo, though Piper knew she must be a few years older by now. The history books never stated the Godmother's age, but they certainly glowed with praise of her feats. Once upon a time, the Godmother had been a commander in the US Navy in the Old World. She must have been a very young commander back then to be only just past middle age now.

When the Flood came, at first the water had swallowed only the lowest countries like India and Afghanistan and the Netherlands. Then the world had realized that the Flood was not coming for sea-level countries; it was coming for all of them. But by then it was too late—for most people.

While the populations of the planet had scrambled for lifeboats and rowboats and fishing boats and cruise ships and battleships and anything that floated, the Godmother had been way ahead of them. At the first signs of flooding on the other side of the world, she had given up her submarine, assumed command of the *Escape*, and converted the ship from a luxury cruise liner into a floating, self-sufficient city. Thousands of Americans had flocked under the Godmother's wing. First come, first served. And the Godmother had been keeping them safe ever since. All the other American vessels had sunk in storms, withered with disease, run out of water, or

fallen to pirates, but the *Escape* had remained true to her name for forty years. The Godmother was a wonder.

Piper peered closer. There was a gray smudge by the Godmother's chin. She jumped up and rubbed the smudge away with her sleeve. It was actually Alexis's day to dust the portrait, but Piper loved doing it. Anything for the Godmother. And anything to get ahead of Alexis.

She sat back down and pulled her little red Merit Book out of her pocket. This book, like every book in general, was one of the last of a dying breed. On a ship whose paper mill was reserved for imperative projects, books were expensive and rare. Now the only new books were made out of old books. Merit Books were prioritized for the crew because merits were so important. Merits were everything. Merits showed how good you had been, how much you were worth, how much better you were than someone else. Merits were the difference between living in the hull with the regular crew, and living down in Atonement: the awful prison decks in the belly of the ship.

Piper opened to the last filled page and ran her fingers down the ink-dimpled paper. Her cabin was still too dim to read, but she didn't need light. She knew she had 26,300 merits, more than any other Thirteen, more than most adults. Most people earned a couple dozen merits a week, if that, but Piper was not most people. Just last week she had earned one hundred, and yesterday she

had tracked down a chef smuggling food, for which she might receive another twenty or thirty. And today, only a few minutes old, stretched gloriously before her like the long corridor outside her cabin: open and full of every chance to earn even more merits.

Someone stirred behind her. Holding her breath, Piper looked back. Alexis rolled over in one of the middle bunk beds, smacking her lips as she buried back into her pillow. The other girls were still and silent in their triple decker bunks. Cecile lay below Alexis, and in the other bunk were redheaded Gloria, black-haired Lindy, and Kimberly, whose blonde bristles were still short from when they had shaved her head in her last stint in Atonement. Everyone was still sleeping.

Piper let go her breath and turned back to her desk. She found her eyes drawn to the porthole beside the Godmother's portrait. She had been staring at the blinded window a lot recently. Something about its perfectly round shape . . . the way the white tape sometimes glowed with sunlight, though that was rare in winter . . . The tape was there for Piper's protection. If the *Escape* encountered pirates or even vaguely unfriendly foreign ships, the Godmother didn't want the enemy looking in and seeing her children. Their safety was so paramount that tearing the tape was worth one hundred demerits, and breaking the glass was worth one thousand.

Piper had never seen the sea, but she knew its smell, its salt that somehow invaded the watertight window and warped and crusted her desk, its ice that made the ship pop like an old lady's knuckles, its storm wrath that battered and rinsed the windows. Somewhere on the other side of the tape, a sun she had also never seen was rising now. Sunrises could be the color of pink cotton candy, old people said. Or pearls. Pink, blue, purple, shimmering gold . . . Piper didn't know cotton candy, but she had seen pearls traded from the Chinese.

Whatever the color, she didn't care about sunrises. She only cared that each dawn was a fresh chance to prove her love for the Godmother and climb her way to the Summit: the top six decks of the *Escape*. The Summit was an astounding place for the blessed. That's all Piper knew. *Come to the Summit*, said the posters on the walls throughout the ship, *and you will reap your reward*. The crew had differing opinions on what "reward" could mean. Another day off besides Godmother's Day? An extra daily serving of milk? Fresh eggs, not powdered? Maybe a cabin you shared with only four people instead of five . . . It was hard to imagine such things and risky to speculate aloud, because that would imply a complaint about life on the *Escape*, and complaining was ingratitude, and ingratitude was unpatriotic. Thus, most of the crew had learned to keep their dreams of the

Summit to themselves, waiting for the day when they at last accumulated one hundred thousand merits and could ascend to the Summit and behold its wonders with their own eyes.

A few times a year, a white-haired man or a bent and wrinkled woman would finally receive the coveted 100K stamp on their Merit Books and stagger away with stunned, dreamy looks, escorted by black-clad Secret Service in the secure elevator up to the Summit. Very rarely, a middle-aged person made it. A child, never. Yet Piper was determined to be the youngest crew member ever to earn her pass to the Summit, though it was not food or a bigger cabin she longed for.

She reread her merit tally with a sigh. How many more merits did she need? Ink was precious and she had been taught not to waste her pen by scribbling easy calculations, so she did the math in her head. Seventy-three thousand, seven hundred merits to go. Then she would be out of the hull and up in the world of the Godmother.

*I will see her, Piper thought. I have to see her. I need to know her. I need her to know me.*

The Godmother loved her, Piper knew, because the Godmother loved all her children, but Piper wanted more than to *believe* the Godmother's love. She wanted to *feel* it. She wanted to feel it in a special way all on her own.

She longed to see those eyes in the portrait bend down on her in particular, glowing with an affection and pride that the Godmother would give to her and nobody else. In the center of that gaze, Piper believed, she would truly matter. She would finally *belong*. Did the Godmother even know she existed, beyond a name on a list? How could she mean anything to the Godmother way down here, so far below the Summit? How could the Godmother truly love her if they had never actually met?

Piper ran more math in her head. At her average speed of accruing points, she would make it to the Summit in . . . twenty years. Only twenty! That was not so bad. She would be thirty-three years old, far younger than anyone else who had made it to the Summit. Just twenty more years. Twenty more years.

Piper closed her book, folded her arms on top, and sank her head onto her arms.

Twenty.

Her radio crackled with her favorite voice. *Piper, are you secure?*

It was a private channel, but Uncle Barney always made sure she was alone.

Piper glanced quickly at the girls to make sure they were still asleep. She slid her Merit Book back into her pocket and slipped into the head and shut the door. The head was so narrow, there was barely room to stand

without putting one foot in the toilet and the other in the shower, but Piper was small, and she squeezed between the sink and the door. She didn't turn on the light because she couldn't. Lights didn't function till ten a.m. on God-mother's Day, to save power.

"Secure," she whispered in the dark. Her heart was pounding. An early call like this could mean only one thing. Uncle Barney needed her for something important. A chance to earn more merits! *Please, let it be another raid*, she wished silently.

*Report to my office*, Uncle Barney said. *Bring your gear.*

"Is it a raid, sir?"

*Just get up here.*



Piper pictured throwing open the door, startling the crew out of sleep, rushing in before they had time to collect their wits or hide any contraband. She always managed to reap a chunk of merits with a raid, because she always found someone breaking some law or other.

The hall outside her cabin was dark and empty and quiet as she stole towards the elevator. One of these days, she hoped to catch a big-time criminal like the ones Uncle Barney arrested in the early days. The ship had

been full of terrorists back then, Uncle Barney said. Terrorists who had wanted to destroy the *Escape*. Terrorists who had been labeled Ship's Enemy Number One. Uncle Barney had personally arrested hundreds and flattened their organization. He had awards on his wall and the star of deputy chief to prove it, and a total of ninety thousand and fifty-three merits in his Merit Book.

Thanks to Uncle Barney, all the glamorous criminals were gone now. Wiped out. The only criminals left were the lazy, the lying, the irreligious, the occasional thief. When Piper dreamed of catching another Ship's Enemy Number One, she felt as if she might as well dream to have her parents back. She could not go back in time. Nobody was wicked or interesting enough to be Ship's Enemy Number One.

She summoned the elevator and waited. She tried to ignore her dampening forehead, her tightening throat, her knotting stomach. Why could she not learn to control her fear? She was terrified of elevators. Always had been. They made her feel trapped and meaningless, like she was stuck in the hull forever and would never make it to the Summit and would never matter to the Godmother at all.

*Ding.*

The elevator doors trundled open.

The elevator's once shining glass walls had been boarded over and plastered with the *Escape's* red flag, which looked



a little baggy now, hanging as it did from rusted staples. The bleary fluorescent lights turned the red walls into a yellowed crimson, like anger with a little jaundice poured in. Perched high in one corner was the dead security camera. The *Escape* had run short of batteries years ago, and you didn't waste batteries on security cameras when you had a ship full of people watching each other.

Piper stared. She had to get in, she had to. Uncle Barney needed her for something special. She could earn more merits. She had to!

Sleeping in a rumpled ball in the corner by the control panel was the travel guard. He was a Thirty-Three, born the generation ahead of Piper, but he was already hatching pink bald spots all over his head. He was picking at the spots in his sleep.

Piper took a deep breath and stepped inside. The doors shut. She was dying to hit the button herself so she could get out of here, but that was against regulations. "Fifteen," she said hoarsely.

Groaning, the travel guard sat up. "Purpose?"

"Uncle Barney's orders." She showed him her passport. The travel guard staggered up and punched Fifteen. The elevator jerked, clanked, and heaved. Old cables hummed and groused. Piper closed her eyes. Cold sweat stood on her forehead. The walls were closing in. They were almost touching her. She grabbed the rail. She

felt like as long as she could feel the cold metal in her hands, she wouldn't actually die.

Big dark eyes.

She shut her eyes even tighter and turned her head away, but she could still see him.

Big dark eyes.

The boy had been a Six, like her. He was the reason she felt claustrophobia now. She had never been afraid of tight spaces until he had done what he did.

Big dark eyes.

The elevator hauled up and up. She clung to the rail. She couldn't breathe. This was it, her life was over. She would die alone and would never matter. To anyone.

She was just like the boy. Alone in a box.

The elevator convulsed and settled. *Ding*. The doors opened.

Piper stumbled free and wiped the sweat off her face with shaking hands and drew deep breaths. There was no mirror nearby, but she knew she was white to the lips. She calmed her hands by flattening them against her thighs. Slowly, the world blossomed back into color. The roar in her ears subsided and was replaced by the ringing silence of Deck Fifteen. Nobody was around. She pulled a few wet hair strands off her neck, shook back her braid, and marched up the short staircase to the main corridor.

Her boots thudded lightly on the faded red carpet.

Dust swirled in clouds down the hall where a lone old woman was sweeping. The old woman didn't look up as Piper passed. Piper knew SACT had requested the vacuum to attack the carpet up here, but for some reason the vacuum never came. The old woman didn't look strong enough to push a vacuum anyway.

The Godmother's eyes followed Piper down the hall. A copy of the Godmother's portrait hung on every door. The hall of beige walls and brown doors stretched endlessly on, empty on the ship's day off. Deck Fifteen was nicknamed the Deck of One Thousand Eyes because it housed the headquarters of SACT, the Secret Agency Countering Terrorism. SACT spies were everywhere and saw everything: some in uniform like Piper, others in plain clothes, disguised as normal crew. Today SACT was asleep like everyone else—or at least that's what they wanted the rest of the ship to think. Like Piper, many SACT agents might be up and about on secret business behind closed doors; you just never knew.

In the ship's days as a luxury cruiser, Deck Fifteen had been a passenger deck of four hundred cabins. Now behind each door was a private office or polygraph machine or heavy filing cabinets sagging with information on the crew. Even the price and limited stores of paper did not stop SACT from writing thousands of pages on every soul aboard: parents, birthdate,

height, weight, career, merits, demerits, crimes, punishments, preferences, patterns, cabin mates, how often you checked the Post Office, when you washed your uniform, whether you preferred halibut to cod. Everything.

On the wall space between office doors hung a variety of bright patriotic posters. A bright, golden background held the words:

**COME TO THE SUMMIT  
AND YOU WILL REAP YOUR REWARD**

Piper's favorite was the poster featuring a beautiful photograph of the red-haired Godmother laughing with a lapful of children:

**RAISING A PERFECT FUTURE  
100 PERFECT GIFTS AT A TIME**

Another poster was a cartoon of a crew member dramatically whispering to a SACT agent while another crew member—guilt all over his face—anxiously observed from afar:

**LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR.  
REPORT ALL CRIMES.**

Another showed contraband in two stern lists of black icons: gun, knife, battery, flare, gasoline tank, lighter fluid, radio, and baby, each sternly labeled with a red X:

**KEEP OUR SHIP SAFE**

Another featured the inked profile of a baby curled up in the womb, crossed out in zealous red:

**CHOOSE THE FUTURE  
CHOOSE LIFE**

Another was a cartoon of a baby with red eyes and wrinkled, outstretched hands. It was as if the cartoonist had personified a germ as a tiny person that wanted to kill you.

**HAVE YOU SEEN ME?  
I CAN GROW INSIDE YOU.  
I WAS NOT CHOSEN BY THE  
GODMOTHER.  
I AM POISON. I AM DEADLY.  
I AM AN ILLEGAL ORGANISM.**

The first thing Piper had been taught was that the Godmother was all-powerful and ought to be worshiped and that she loved you. The second thing Piper had

been taught was that Illegal Organisms, or IOs, were the deadliest threat of the New World. Besides oil pumped from beneath the ocean floor, earth's resources were restricted to those that were manufactured, recycled, or renewed on the few dozen ships uneasily sharing the worldwide ocean. Foreign vessels ranged from nearly hostile to very hostile, so the *Escape* traded with other ships rarely and suspiciously.

Everything must be preserved almost as if the *Escape* were the last ship on the seas: materials, ship-grown crops, desalinated water, even fish had to be carefully regulated, for the *Escape* was much too tall for you to fish over the side from the top deck, and she had lost her fishing boat in a storm years ago and now relied on trading.

Thus, ironically, in a world where the majority of the people on earth had perished forty years ago, the greatest peril on the *Escape* was . . . people.

The last time unrestricted childbearing was permitted had been right after the Flood. Post-Flood babies had come in a rush, which was why two thousand crew were now in their late thirties. But beginning in year seven, the Godmother had been forced to regulate the number of mouths to feed. Every twenty years came the Nativity Lottery in which a hundred randomly selected couples won permission to bear one child apiece.

Lawful newborns weren't called IOs; they were called Godmother's Gifts. And there were always exactly enough gifts.

But the danger did not stop with sheer numbers. Piper had heard stories of the horrible discovery that, due to the limited diet and lack of prenatal vitamins in the New World, IOs were born infected. Hemorrhagic fever, it was called.

*What is hemorrhagic?* Piper had asked her mother years ago.

*You bleed on the inside and outside, her mother had said. First you get a rash on your hands or wherever you touched the sick person. Then you get a fever, sore throat, headache, diarrhea, and vomiting. As your blood stops clotting and your kidneys and liver fail, your brain swells. Then you die.*

Piper's mother knew these details all too well. She remembered the virus breaking out after the first Nativity Lottery, before doctors had known to vaccinate the babies, before the vaccine had even been created. The virus had started on Deck Eleven. The entire deck had been quarantined. The entire deck had died. Now IOs were vaccinated and kept in isolation for seven days until they were safe to hold.

*Was I sick when I was born?* Piper had asked.

*You were highly infected, her mother had said. Even after they vaccinated you, I didn't touch you for six months.*

Piper had felt a little lonely when she'd heard that. But her mother had added, a little scornfully: *Your father held you. He was always reckless.* That had made Piper feel only slightly less diseased. Even now, of all the posters on the *Escape*, the poster with the germ-baby was her least favorite.

Towards the end of the hall, she reached Uncle Barney's office with excitement fluttering again in her chest. A raid on Godmother's Day! How many merits lay ahead? Perhaps even another promotion? She had made lieutenant a few months back . . . Next she would be a captain . . .

The name plate on Uncle Barney's door said *Barnabas Shelby, Deputy Chief, Special Agency Countering Terrorism*, but the portrait, of course, was the Godmother's. Piper looked up at the Godmother's face, exhaled, and thought: *73,700 merits to go.*

She knocked.