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# THE SHIP OF STRAYS

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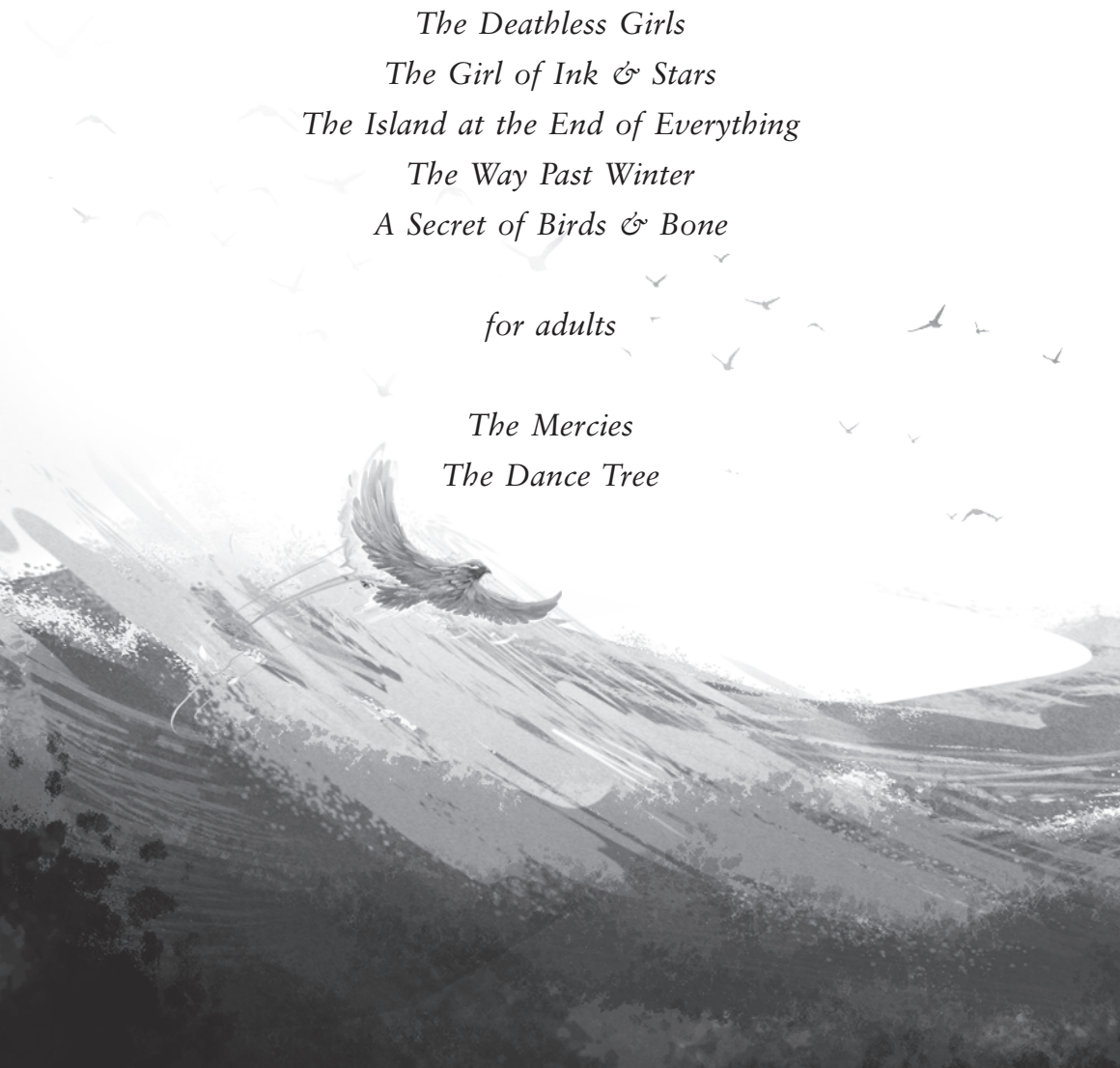
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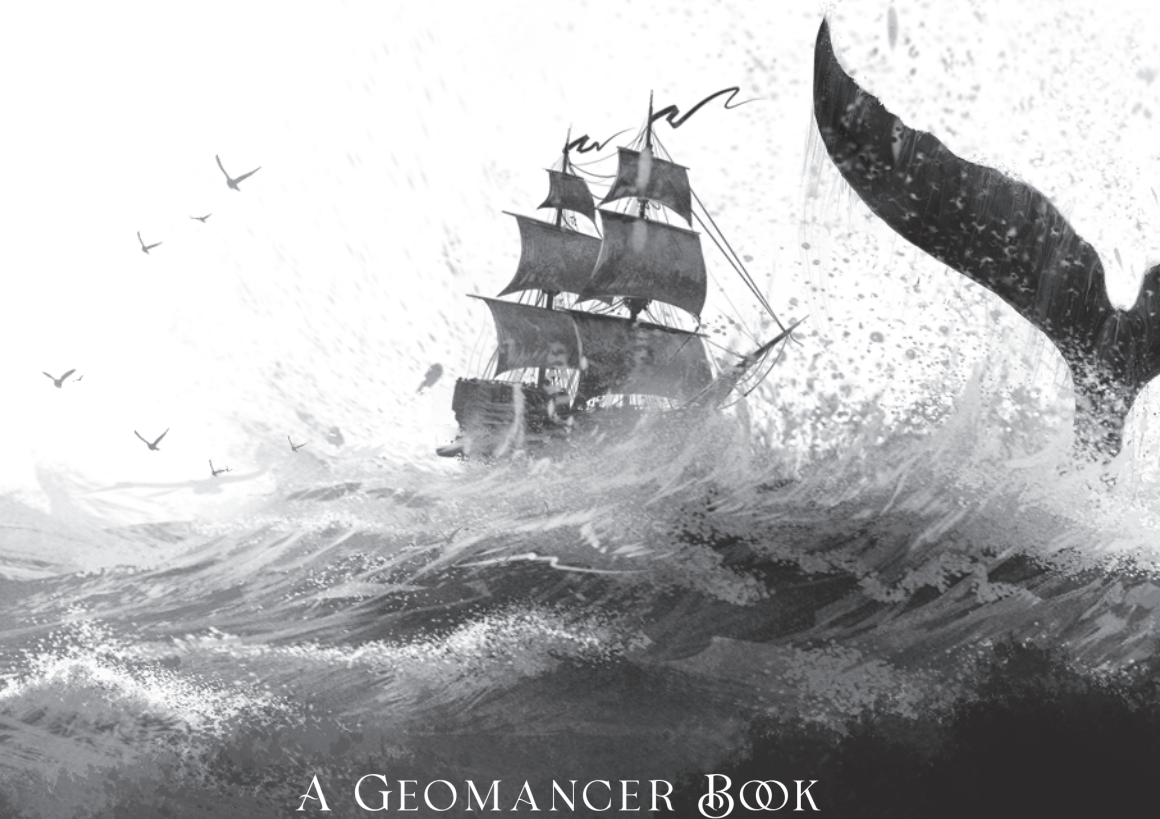
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KIRAN MILLWOOD  
HARGRAVE

THE SHIP OF  
STRAYS



A GEOMANCER BOOK

Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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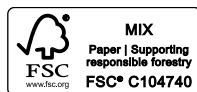
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*For my editor, Rachel Wade,  
who sailed us here so beautifully*







# BOOK THREE:

## THE SHIP OF STRAYS

*'Only in silence the word, only in dark the light,  
only in dying life: bright the hawk's  
flight on the empty sky.'*

– from *A Wizard of Earthsea* by Ursula K. Le Guin

*'Fungi are the original angels. Angel in its  
oldest root of the word: messenger . . . Weavers.  
Communicators. They sew soil to plants,  
trees to trees . . . fungi connect us into messages  
from an even older pre-human paradise:  
the mythic underworld.'*

– from *Mycelium and Myth* by Sophie Strand





The header features a light gray background with several dark gray leaves scattered across it, appearing to fall. Below the leaves are wavy, horizontal lines in a light gray color, creating a sense of movement or water. The word "Wreaking" is centered in a black, serif font.

# *Wreaking*

Gentle lessons have failed. The warnings of warm winters and cold summers, the slow death of certainty in tides and migrations, flowers growing in the snow. Whales flinging themselves on to sharp rocks, deer pedalling the air from cliffs, ice melting beneath the chicks too young to float. So now the floods, the quakes, the fires. The final warnings.

This is how you create anew: destroy the old. In each living thing this knowledge dwells, understood by everything ever touched by the light of dying stars. Leaves grow, drop, rot to feed the roots that once fed them. Spiders hatch and eat their mothers. Each winter and each summer a season of death and birth: one born of frost, one of sun.

And beneath an ocean sewn with coral, circled by doomed ships, a chamber has opened. Along a meridian

uncharted but in stories, beneath a tornado of water that yawns like a mouth. Swimming down is no effort, rising cannot be done. There, past what is possible, they wait. What was once skin and a heart, a human brain, is now a seething mass of lessons. They cannot stir their tongue, but there are other ways to speak.

It was not so strange to become this new form: in the end, they are all the same elements. Earth, fire, wind, water. Body, blood, breath, tears.

All of us born from the same starburst, at the beginning of everything.

All of us torn from the same stars.



## CHAPTER ONE

# FALLEN STARS



It was dark as a grave around the ship, as silent. The gulls that had followed them shrieking from Hamar's harbour long dropped away, or settled like dull, fallen stars on the flat water. Ysolda had never seen a sea so still, nor moved under a sky so dark. She weaved under the hammocks of the night crew, slung between masts and barrels, and crept carefully over the cats slinking about the deck like assassins. Sorrell pounced from her hiding place behind the long tail of the rudder, batting at Ysolda's feet, but Ysolda didn't mind. The magic of having her sister Hari's cat here, so far from home, was a miracle she couldn't have dreamed of.

The other cats, at least fifty of them, stalked the floors from top to bottom, keeping the ship clear of mice so utterly the women treated them like part of the crew. Luna, the cat

Safiyah had rescued from the supposed safe haven of Hamar, was sitting on the stern, staring out at the bobbing gulls with green, greedy eyes. She turned them upon Ysolda when she sat beside her, cushioned on a pile of rope. No, not ropes. Stays. And those were not floors the cats stalked, they were decks.

Ysolda recited them, from top to bottom: sail deck, berth deck, hold. Deck, stays, rudder, stern. New words, a new language since setting foot on the Ship of Strays. Only three days since leaving Norveger and beginning their journey south, but fast learning had been essential. They were not passengers, that was made clear. They too were crew, the lowest on the order, and must be useful.

Eira hadn't taken to it the way Ysolda had expected. Maybe it wasn't a surprise that a princess didn't enjoy being ordered around, especially the daughter of the fearsome wolf queen. But of course, no one could know this was who she was. Eira's mother, Seren, was the enemy of many, as any powerful person was. On this ship, they needed all the friends they could get.

And the life of a princess was far behind her, now. The castle of broken boats, the seat of her mother's power and Eira's someday inheritance, was no more. A dull pang, like a riven bell in Ysolda's chest. It was gone, washed away by a massive wave that had destroyed dunes, caves, trees: everything. Though Ysolda had been thousands of miles

away, had not seen the desecration first hand, she imagined it, over and over, her mind showing her in aching detail the drawing back of the sea, the gathering on the horizon, a wall of water as hard as stone rushing with the pace of a hunting wolf to the shore.

Kore killed first, in her sandstone cave, her Forgive's headdress torn apart, her future-telling fire extinguished, the stones that had read Ysolda's fate tumbled away. Ysolda felt for the hag stone she wore hidden around her neck. Kore had gifted it to her, told her it would help her see more clearly, and she had been right. The stone had shown Ysolda bogs, entrances, deception. Through its weather-carved hole Ysolda had even seen a future vision of herself.

And on the water would have moved, not liquid and sinuous but solid, relentless, crashing through the boats that marked the wolf queen's conquests, a new graveyard made of an old one, the Hull Hall with the map of Seren's realms stitched with song lines torn away, her throne jumbled into kindling and crystals, and all those people Ysolda had seen living there, drowned amid the wood and tiny creatures that provided them with light.

Ysolda remembered seeing them for the first time, those glowing specks held in water, now rushed along with the terrible current as above the wrecks were resubmerged and below –

Below. In the sandstone comb of caves that was Seren's prison. Each cave stoppered with a door as thick as silence.

Set with fool's gold to weaken the gifted imprisoned there, gifted who might challenge Seren's attempts to become the Geomancer. Gifted, like Uncle, who had first told Ysolda the word 'Geomancer'. Gifted, like Hari, who had first told Ysolda any word at all.

'No,' said Ysolda aloud, the syllable a choked sob. She missed her sister in the marrow of her bones, in the deep breath of her lungs. The pain was invisible and everywhere, like air. Sorrell, never friendly to Ysolda at their home in Glaw Wood, tilted her weight closer, so the soft fur along her spine tickled Ysolda's ankle. Luna yawned and closed her eyes.

From behind her in the dark came the snicker of Barley, shifting in his sleep. The maltreated horse Eira had stolen from the Sun Inn had found his sea legs faster than Ysolda, and was enjoying his new life as a horse of leisure. Ysolda stroked Sorrell, feeling the nubs of her spine – the cat was so much thinner, shrunk from a ball of fluff and fat to something else, warier. Like Ysolda herself.

Now she was alone with the cats and horse, she removed the wadding she'd placed around her hand to keep curious eyes at bay. It had been as Cassandra said – no one asked questions aboard the Ship of Strays, but everyone looked, everyone watched, all the time. The women and the cats.

She held her palm out, inspecting where she had planted the Anchorite's heart. The black threads of her veins seemed



to pulse visibly, as though she could see the blood moving through them. Tendrils, like roots, taking hold. It looked bizarre, like something from another plain of another world, but also right, natural. She flexed her hand, could feel the heart there like a pit in soft fruit, but it didn't hurt.

She could hear, at the far edge of her mind, Nara's presence. The hawk was never quiet, except in sleep. Every chitter an exclamation, a statement.

Now the hawk was grumbling to herself. **Never still, this land, always moving. No stomach for fish.** Ysolda smiled to herself. It seemed sea hawks could get seasick.

She listened, beyond the hawk. There it was again, the murmuring she had begun to hear the past few days. Not words just yet, but the sense of them: conversations heard through a thick door. Was this what the forest had sounded like to Hari? But these were not trees speaking. Ysolda glanced at Sorrell, now curled into a perfect circle by her side. She was sure it was the cats she could hear, and Barley too, through the same alchemy, the same knack, the same gift the planting of the heart had given her.

She idly scratched Sorrell's side, and the cat unfurled slightly to let her stroke her belly.

'You like me now, do you,' she murmured. 'Do you miss Hari too?'

It came then, the sense of an answer. Not the words she heard from Nara, who must hear Ysolda's own thoughts in

some sea hawk tongue. But an affirmation. A sense of Sorrell's sadness, and agreement that, yes, she did miss Hari. She missed the warm fire and the mackerel hung to smoke above it. She missed the wool blanket that smelled of safety and Hari, Hari who knew how to scratch her behind the ears just so, and when she wanted to be lifted and when she wanted to be left.

'I miss all that too,' said Ysolda. 'Except the ear-scratching part.'

She sighed and lay back against the coil of rope. It stank of old seaweed, but it was quite comfortable lying there, with Sorrell against her side and Barley snoring nearby, Nara at her consciousness's edge and the deep sea below them. Overhead the taut lines of the mast stays, the ropes holding the thick, carved trunk from which hung the canvas sail, stowed tonight for lack of wind.

Now her thoughts drifted again, not to the Anchorite's heart or her own perilous journeys both ahead and behind, or even to the wolf queen, perhaps at Hamar and making enquiries about a girl with a sea hawk. Ysolda herself had seen Seren's spy arrested at the tavern in Hamar, was nearly certain he hadn't spotted her.

Instead, her thoughts settled on Eira. She'd left her sleeping soundly, or pretending to very convincingly, when Ysolda crept up top. Ysolda should have been sleeping too. Her body ached from winding rope and scrubbing the deck

all day – the work on board was never done. The girls had been given a bunk on the berth deck, shared between day and night watches. Other than their first night aboard, when Eira had removed the bandage protecting her snow-scalded eyes, Ysolda felt like she'd not had a moment alone with her . . . friend? Surely they must be friends after all that had happened. But Eira was not acting like it. She was mostly silent, and surly. She seemed angry at Ysolda – but then, she seemed angry at everything.

There was another emotion in her too. Ysolda sensed it in the way Eira looked at her, or at the bandage wadded over her wound. The way she'd grimace when Nara flew down to Ysolda, and they spoke together through their new connection. A flash in her amber eyes, the arch in her black brows. *Jealousy*.

The gulls lifted suddenly from the sea in a great cracking of wings, pale underbellies revealed so they seemed like white ghosts erupting into the sky. Luna and Sorrell stood excitedly, ears back, tails flicking, and Ysolda saw the dark shape of one of the other cats leap hopefully into the air. A few of the night crew sat up in their hammocks, cursing softly. Barley snored on. Ysolda's heart raced as she stood, leaning over the stern, scanning the water.

But there was no silent ship approaching bearing the Kalti flag of Thane Boreal, no sea wolf swimming smoothly through the sea, with Seren on its back. Beneath the black

water, about fifty yards from the ship and just visible, was something also black but made of living flesh. Something pitted and vast, and rising to the surface.

Ysolda let out a cry of surprise, and one of the nearest hammocks stirred, its occupant rolling out smoothly. Ysolda saw it was Safiyyah, her black hair loose, her green eyes narrowed with annoyance.

‘Can you keep it down?’

‘There!’ choked Ysolda.

Safiyyah sauntered to her side, following the direction of Ysolda’s quaking finger. The shape broke the surface of the sea, and it was not black but deep blue and white, barnacled and enormous, nearly twice the length of the ship. From its head blew a gust of water and air, and Ysolda saw tiny silver fish flapping in the jet and falling around the creature in a dance of speckled light.

‘*Huut*,’ yawned Safiyyah.

‘What?’ said Ysolda, her heart racing.

‘*Huut*,’ repeated Safiyyah, looking at her squarely, a challenge in her beautiful face. ‘A whale.’

‘Why didn’t you say so,’ mumbled Ysolda, rubbing her chest as the animal floated atop the still water, its white belly glowing under the surface. She had never seen one so vast.

‘I did,’ said Safiyyah. ‘You or Astrid call it a whale, Cassandra a *baleine*, *hvēla* for Devi.’ She gestured at the

nearest hammock, where a short woman with light-brown skin sat up, rubbing her eyes. She nodded at them when she heard her name, pushing on to her feet. ‘There is no reason I should tell you in your language first. Typical Isles dweller,’ said Safiyyah on another yawn.

‘Leave her,’ said Devi. Ysolda hadn’t spoken more than two words to her before now, only recalled her name because on their first night Eira had asked her if she was from Seren’s first realm, where they called her Raani, and Devi answered no, she was from Nepala. Her hair was braided to her waist, and threaded with tiny silver bells that tinkled gently as she walked towards them. ‘Why should she know our words?’

She favoured Ysolda with a small, sweet smile. Her eyes were warmest brown, her cheeks full, and there was a smear of red paste between her eyes. ‘I’m sure you will learn, won’t you?’

‘She won’t stay long enough,’ said Safiyyah. ‘A passenger only, aren’t you, Isles girl?’

Devi made a *tchi* sound. ‘*Buss*.’ She smiled again at Ysolda. ‘*Buss* means enough. It’s a word you’ll need around Safiyyah.’

Safiyyah snorted.

‘Been a while since we saw a whale,’ continued Devi, leaning against the taffrail. ‘These channels are usually crawling with them, but that’s the first I’ve seen in days.’

Ysolda leaned next to her, and, after a moment, so did Safiyyah. Ysolda tugged her sleeve down to hide her black veins and bandaged hand. That would get harder as they moved south, from the cold of Imbloc to the spring of Ostara. She wondered what names the other women had for the seasons. She didn't want to ask now, after Safiyyah's comments about her ignorance, but it was clear just from looking that the Ship of Strays carried crew from all over the world.

On their first night, Cassandra had the women gather on the sail deck beneath the billowing canvas bearing them away from Norveger, and sit around a large unscrolled map to introduce themselves.

'We made this map ourselves,' said Cassandra proudly. 'That is why my country, Kanem, part of what the Isles know as Afrik, is at the centre of the map. It is my centre, and we have grown our family outwards from this point.' She smiled around at the circle of women and girls. 'Show our newcomers the places you have put on our map.'

Devi was from Nepala, a mountainous region north of Seren's first realm. Full-lipped Mei with the loud laugh was from an immense place called Zhonghou, in the far east. There was a thick-haired, open-faced woman called Itzel who wore a beautiful shawl and had lines inked on her face, who was from a western land called Quauhtlemallan. The oldest woman, grey-haired, high-cheekboned Mila,

pointed out a mountainous region labelled the Ural mountains. Safiyyah's closest friend, the flame-haired, pale and plump Aethel spoke the language of the Suthridge from the Isles, but called it Mercia, a name for their country Ysolda had never heard before. Safiyyah herself was from a country north of Cassandra's that the captain called Maghreb, but Safiyyah had corrected her.

'My people are the Banu Ifran,' she'd said. 'Warriors of the north. Travellers of deserts and mountains, finders of water. Our aid helped the Diviner herself win a battle against the Umayyad army and keep Numidia free.'

'Free for who?' challenged Cassandra.

'The Zenata, the Banu Ifran and countless other tribes who share that land.'

'The land known as Maghreb. I can show you it now, on another map.'

'A map you bought in Carthage, where the people who sought to end our way of life settled.'

'And were slaughtered by the Diviner in the process.'

'It was a worthy cause!'

'It was your cause, and you judge it worthy.' Cassandra softened. 'I do not mean to offend you. Only to say: there are two sides to each battle, and neither thinks they are in the wrong. Therefore there are no victors, for a worthy cause is always defeated.'

Cassandra's words echoed in Ysolda's mind now, as they

watched the whale – the *huut*, the *baleine*, the *hvēla* – rest atop the sea. She'd been invited to mark Glaw Wood on the map, Cassandra offering a piece of charcoal, but Ysolda's hands had shaken so much she couldn't hold it. Glaw Wood – what it had been, where it had been, who had lived there – was gone. Uprooted and burned by Thane Boreal, washed away by the flood.

'It's all right,' said Cassandra, seeming to understand. 'All of us are marking memories anyway. Maybe another time.'

The captain offered the charcoal next to Eira, who hesitated a moment. Ysolda thought it was because the castle of broken boats was swept away too, the Lakes now all water, but when Eira made her mark it was not on the Isles' western edge. She placed a triangle at the centre of Seren's first realm, the V-shape of it jutting into the sea and crammed with many names: Bharat, Tianzhu, Bhāratavarṣa, India, Aryavata. Inside the triangle, in tiny letters, she wrote 'Cedi'.

Ysolda asked Eira later, curled into the dark in their neighbouring berths, why she hadn't marked the castle of broken boats, or the Lakes.

'I understand you don't want people to know who you are, but why not where you come from?'

'I do come from Cedi.'

'I thought you were born in the Lakes?'



‘I was born at sea,’ she replied, ‘but Cedi is where my mother was born, where she built her first palace.’

Ysolda was silent. She’d hardly heard Eira mention Seren without an insult following. After a beat, Eira continued. ‘She used to tell me about it, about the pink marble hallways, and courtyards carved into ornate patterns to catch water for the sunbirds to drink from. She would sit in that courtyard and dream of her realms, the child she would pass it on to. Me. My inheritance. That is where she dreamed of me, and what is mine.’

There was so much knotted into Eira’s words. Hurt, and anger, and loss.

Ysolda hadn’t realised what power names had until she saw that map, saw how many words people had for the same places. It formed part of them, part of their identity, their histories. Maybe it was no surprise the word for whale had touched a nerve with Safiyyah.

‘*Hunt*,’ she said carefully. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Safiyyah smile.

‘See?’ said Devi. ‘I told you she’d learn. Now, I must rest before my watch.’

She scooped up Luna, who was watching the whale hungrily and gave a pathetic mew of protest, before settling into Devi’s arms with a purr of surrender. Ysolda heard her hammock creak, the gentle puncturing sounds as Luna kneaded the woman’s blanket in an effort to get comfortable.

As though it had been waiting for a cue, the whale dived, a perfect arc, the barnacled and scarred mass of its body made smooth by the water, its colours dulled once more to black. Its tail, a beautiful curve, swooped out of the sea and crashed down, creating a swell that rocked the boat, drenching Ysolda and Safiyyah with icy water.

## CHAPTER TWO

# CASSANDRA'S CABIN



‘Roots!’ cried Ysolda. Barley snorted awake, kicking to his feet, but Safiyyah was laughing, her hair plastered to her cheeks. She flicked water from her long fingers into Ysolda’s face, and Ysolda kicked more back at her from a puddle at their feet.

‘This looks cosy.’ Eira was standing behind them, arms crossed beneath the wolfskin cloak she never took off nowadays. Her hair was coming loose from its braid, her cheek marked with the imprint of the hand she’d slept on. She’d clearly just woken up and was not in a good mood.

‘Eira,’ said Ysolda, feeling strangely guilty. ‘Why aren’t you asleep?’

‘Why aren’t you?’ said Eira. ‘I woke up and you weren’t there.’

‘Sweet,’ said Safiyyah. ‘Need your friend to protect you from nightmares?’

Ysolda laughed at the idea she would be the braver one, but one look at Eira showed she’d misinterpreted her meaning. She turned on her heel and stomped back down into the hatch. Safiyyah rolled her eyes, squeezing seawater from her hair.

‘I just . . . I should . . .’ Ysolda shrugged helplessly, gesturing after Eira.

‘Run along,’ said Safiyyah, that wicked smile back on her face. ‘It’s my watch anyway.’

She crossed to the mast and wrapped her arms and legs around it, shimmying up to a crow’s nest at the top. The darkness swiftly swallowed her, and, teeth beginning to chatter, Ysolda made for the horse stomping nervously on the wet deck.

‘Here,’ she said, leading him to a dry patch of timbers. She briefly stroked Barley until the horse relaxed enough to slump back on to his scarred side. Teeth chattering, she dried herself hurriedly with his itchy woollen blanket.

Ysolda felt something butt her ankles. ‘Sorrell. Mind if I use you as a fluffy shield?’

She scrambled down the ladder to the berth deck and paused a moment, listening. All was quiet aside from the sound of the sea gently gurgling against the thick hull of the ship and the gentle snores of Mila at the berth closest to the ladder. She told them she took that, the worst

location, because she slept like the dead, *being so close to greeting them*.

Cassandra had her own cabin, nooked off from the berths, but the door stood open, faint light leaking out from a single swaying lamp. She must be on night duty. From here, Ysolda could see the map pinned to the wall, marked with the crew's lands and cities, towns and villages, the rivers that threaded their childhoods. She hadn't heard enough of their stories yet, but some of them must have known destruction like Ysolda's home had. She could not be alone in being brought to this ship by catastrophe.

Still clutching Sorrell, and with the faint idea that she could claim to have been fetching the cat if anyone saw her, she crept over the doorway and into Cassandra's cabin, pushing the door gently to behind her.

It was perhaps a quarter of the size of the deck above, shaped into the stern with two curved walls and a straight one at the back, where the map was pinned. There was a desk, a narrow bed, a single chair, but everything was covered in beautifully printed fabrics, lengths of cowrie shells like daisy chains looped across the ceiling. There were also three cats asleep at various intervals on the bed: a black cat lay sprawled on her back, exposing a single patch of white on her belly, a tabby lay with her paws tucked primly on the pillow, and a long-haired grey cat blinked amber-eyed and haughty from the foot.

Cats aside, Ysolda was reminded irresistibly of the Hull Hall, the wolf queen's throne chamber. Built of a single upturned ship, it was inlaid with gems and across one wall stretched a map. The queen's first realm was central to that one, and across the whole world were faint silver threads marking the song lines Uncle had described in the sandstone prison.

*Dragon lines, ley lines. Most realms have their stories about these lines that cross the earth. Connect it. That along these channels are places where gifted people are found in abundance, where the crops are bountiful and the mines generous. There are many products of these lines. The Anchorite is one of their wonders, the Sea Henge a second, the Drakken Peaks a third, the Hell Gate another.*

Ysolda had scoffed at the idea of the Anchorite, the Hell Gate. But here she was with the ancient girl's heart in her palm, aboard a ship to the Hell Gate. All that once seemed impossible was possible. Including the fact that Glaw Wood was lost.

'Lost,' she murmured to Sorrell. 'Lost to time and sea. But not to you, eh? Not to me.'

Transferring Sorrell to her shoulder, where the cat hung like a furry shawl, she took up a piece of charcoal from Cassandra's desk and stood on tiptoe to mark the place where she was born, grew up and had been happy. The place where Hari and she had built a home of stone, and

where she'd found Nara dashed from her nest. The place that had been her world before she'd had knowledge or need of any other. And because she wanted there to be no confusion over names, she did not write GLAW WOOD, but four letters, in Ogham.



The canvas gave slightly under her hand, as though the fabric rested on another layer held taut over a hollow. Ysolda pressed her finger to the surface again, but a smudgy fingerprint was left on the Ulaidd Sea and she quickly withdrew.

‘What are you doing?’

Ysolda spun round, dropping the charcoal and already grasping for Sorrell on her shoulder, readying her excuse. But it wasn't Cassandra, or a member of her crew. It was Eira, glaring with the same disgruntlement she'd displayed upstairs.

‘I was just fetching Sorrell.’

‘The map,’ said Eira, closing the door softly behind her. ‘What were you doing with the map?’

Ysolda saw no point in lying. ‘I was marking Glaw Wood on it.’

Eira peered past her. ‘That doesn’t say “Glaw Wood”.’ She squinted. ‘H-O-M-E. Oh.’

She looked at Ysolda, almost pitying, and Ysolda felt her cheeks flush. She didn’t want Eira to look at her like that, as though she saw the sadness Ysolda was trying so hard to disguise.

‘Well read,’ she said instead. ‘You’ve been practising your Ogham?’

‘Of course,’ said Eira. ‘I told you I’m a good student.’

This had been the claim Eira made on a riverbank beside Slidr River, in the early stages of their ascent of the Drakken Peaks. She didn’t know why, but Ysolda felt she wanted to apologise – for laughing with Safiyyah? For not being around for Eira the past few days? She opened her mouth, but Eira spoke first.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I know I’ve been . . . spiky. Kore used to say I could change the weather with my mood.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Ysolda hastily. ‘I’m sorry you missed the whale. Did you know Safiyyah calls it a *huut*?’

Another frown, quickly smoothed. ‘And in my mother’s first realm we call it a *vhel*. And in Ogham?’

Ysolda recognised an olive branch, an offering of a truce. She still wasn’t entirely sure what had caused the fight, but she was anxious for it to be over.



‘If you want me to teach you,’ she said, ‘you know that means I get another question.’

Eira crossed her arms. ‘Go on then.’

‘Why are you angry with me?’

Though she stood with the lamplight full upon her face, Eira’s expression was unreadable. ‘I’m not.’

‘You’re lying. The deal says you must answer honestly.’

The words sounded so thin to Ysolda, so childish. Like a toddler stamping their foot and saying *but you promised!* She hated the power Eira held in their relationship, despite Ysolda being the one with the heart in her palm.

‘I’m just tired,’ said Eira at last. ‘I’m a bit seasick. And my eyes are still sore. I’m angry at everything, not you.’

Ysolda was sure this wasn’t the truth, or at least not the whole of it. But before she could respond, a deep voice broke the tension.

‘Are you lost?’

The girls spun round, Sorrell jumping from Ysolda’s shoulder. Ysolda watched as her excuse trotted out of the open door. The captain stood on the threshold with her eyebrows raised, braids tied atop her head in a thick knot.

‘I was just—’ Ysolda gestured after Sorrell, but Eira interrupted.

‘I was sleepwalking,’ she said. ‘Ysolda caught me before I started a fight with your desk.’

‘Just as well,’ smiled Cassandra, but the grin didn’t reach her eyes. ‘It’s built of buloke, the strongest wood in the world. Nails were no match for it, so it was slotted together using natural grooves.’

‘I would have lost then?’

‘I wouldn’t fancy your chances.’

Cassandra was still smiling, but Ysolda noticed her eyes sliding around the cabin, as though checking nothing was amiss or missing. They alighted on the map, and Ysolda was sure she’d notice the smudged fingerprint, the Ogham lettering, but she seemed interested only in the edges, where it was pinned to the wall.

‘Sorry,’ said Ysolda. ‘I didn’t want her to hurt herself.’

‘Of course,’ said Cassandra. ‘I have to leave the door open, for the cats.’ She gestured at the sleeping animals. ‘But it is generally understood that my personal space is to be respected.’

‘I’ll keep a close eye on Eira,’ promised Ysolda emptily.

‘Well then,’ said Eira breezily, grasping Ysolda by the elbow and steering her none too gently towards the exit. ‘We should get back to bed.’

The captain moved aside, still smiling. ‘Let me know if I should find you some rope.’

‘Sorry?’

‘To tie up your friend. A ship is no place for a sleepwalker.’

The cabin door closed in Ysolda’s face. She waited in the

darkness, hearing Mila's snores and Eira moving stealthily away from her, towards their berths. Her weeks of snow blindness had lent her grace in the dark, but Ysolda had to wait for the black to grow shadows, and then shapes, before she could follow. Why were her palms sweating? There had been an expression in Cassandra's face she hadn't liked: suspicion she could understand, but fear?

Ysolda slipped under the thin woollen sheet Mila had given her. It smelled of goat and tar soap, not entirely unpleasant.

'Fast thinking,' whispered Ysolda into the darkness.

'Good excuse going forward too,' said Eira. 'If I'm found somewhere I shouldn't be.'

Typical Eira, thinking three steps ahead, and always with a slant towards mischief. 'Eira?'

'Mmm?'

'Wasn't Cassandra strange?'

'I thought we were lucky. If my mother had found someone in her bedroom they wouldn't have lived to tell the tale.'

'I suppose.' She wanted to ask if Eira had seen the fear too, but there was a more pressing question. 'You know I don't believe you're just angry with everything, don't you? I think I've done something, or you think I've done something.'

Eira let out a soft, hollow laugh. 'You think too much. I preferred it when you just followed.'

Ysolda pressed her lips into a thin line. She was tired, and Eira was irritating her. But she also felt a bit proud of herself, for no longer being someone who just followed.

When she woke, it was with no sense of whether it was day or night. No daylight reached this deck, so the only clue that it was morning was the night-watch women now asleep in the neighbouring berths, and most of the cats, mostly nocturnal, curled up asleep with them too. She could hear shouts, footsteps, the scrape of wood and creak of sails. They must have caught some wind.

Ysolda rolled over. Eira's bed was empty, the sheets thrown back and pillow punched out of shape. It always looked like Eira had picked a fight with her bed in the mornings, her sleep clearly not as simple as it had been when they travelled with her wolf, Ravi. Whatever Cassandra said about hardwood and nails, if Eira ever did sleepwalk into the desk, Ysolda would back the wolf queen's daughter.

Clambering from bed, Ysolda felt the floor roll as the water had over the whale's back. The ship was moving fast. Sorrell let out a soft squeak and stretched, exposing her soft belly. Ysolda gave it a quick stroke before groping for her tunic, but it wasn't where she'd left it on the foot of her bunk.

She kneeled and looked under the bunk, bumping her

head against the wood as the ship rolled again. She cursed, drawing a tut from the nearest occupied berth.

‘I’m trying to sleep here.’

Ysolda grimaced in apology, spying through the gloom Safiyyah’s glare.

‘Sorry. I can’t find my tunic.’

‘That stinking rag,’ said Safiyyah on a yawn. ‘It’s gone for washing.’

Ysolda looked down at herself. She couldn’t go above deck like this, in nothing but her leggings and vest.

‘What do I—’

‘The clean shelf,’ said another voice. It was Aethel, the girl from the Suthridge, smiling blearily at her from Safiyyah’s other side.

‘Clean shelf?’ Ysolda was bewildered. Aethel got up, her thick red hair dulled in the darkness. Safiyyah huffed and rolled over as Aethel led Ysolda to a long shelf running the length of the berth deck. Piles of clothes were stacked on it at various intervals, and Aethel gestured along the length.

‘Take your pick.’

‘What?’ Ysolda frowned. ‘Is one of these mine?’

‘As soon as your tunic left your back, it ceased to be yours. We only keep hold of our shoes onboard.’ She gestured to the shelf. ‘If it’s on the clean shelf and fits, you wear it.’

Aethel began sifting through the piles, sizing Ysolda up and pulling items to hold against her.

‘What about this?’

It was a dress, floor length and daffodil yellow. Ysolda pulled a face, and Aethel laughed quietly. ‘All right – this?’

This was better: a tunic, heavily embroidered with blue and pink thread, forming a pattern of thick zigzagging stripes.

‘Whose is this?’

‘I told you, it’s everyone’s. But I think it was originally worn by Devi?’

Ysolda pulled it over her head. The fabric was thick and must once have been stiff with thread, but now was soft and pliable, though still heavy. She smoothed her hands over it and noticed tiny mirrors stitched at intervals along the seams. A faint smell of sweetness came from the clean fabric. Suddenly her leggings felt dirty by comparison. She checked her hag stone was hidden and turned to Aethel.

‘I think I need to change these too.’

‘I agree,’ smiled Aethel, and together they searched the clean shelf for something suitable. Ysolda found a pair of soft wool trousers that were only a little too long, and pulled them on, securing them with the attached leather strings around her ankles and waist.

‘Good,’ said Aethel. ‘You look more like one of us now.’

‘Like how?’

‘Like a stray.’

‘Aethel,’ hissed Safiyyah, ‘when you’re done dressing our guest can you get back in? My feet are freezing.’

‘Use a cat,’ whispered Aethel. ‘I’m not tired.’ She turned to Ysolda. ‘You’re late for duties. Come on, I’ll take you up top.’

## CHAPTER THREE

# FALSE TIDES



The deck was flooded with a chill, winterish light. Ysolda was glad of the tunic's thickness and the soft wool leggings, and she pulled the sleeves down over her hands, shielding them from the bitter wind filling the sail above her head. But the massive expanse of pale-green cloth was dwarfed by what surrounded them.

They were passing through a narrow channel, vast heights of grey-white stone rising sheer either side. Waves threw themselves against the cliffs, foam boiling. Ysolda cringed as the ship seemed to stray towards the solid rock, but it was only an illusion – through watering eyes she saw that in fact they were keeping an impressively straight line down the centre of the channel.

'Don't fear,' Aethel said in her ear, loud over the tumult



on deck. ‘Cassandra’s made this pass a hundred times. She knows the ship like her own body.’

Shouts from the prow of the ship filtered back to the stern where Ysolda had sat last night, and where Cassandra now stood, whipstaff in hand, giving her crew instructions to guide them safely through the channel. Barley was happily munching, surrounded by admirers, his head in a nosebag.

‘Where are we?’ asked Ysolda, wind whistling past her ears.

‘Yemyock Fjord. The throat of Norveger. Once we are out of this channel it’s open ocean.’

‘We’ve not yet been on open ocean?’ said Ysolda, recalling the endless stretch of water around her last night, the whale surfacing vast from seemingly fathomless depths.

Aethel laughed. ‘No, only inland seas. Remember Cassandra’s map?’ Aethel held up her hand, fingers trailing down to form the land of Norveger and its neighbours. ‘We have traced the eastern edge from Hamar, down to the tip of Norveger. We turned our stern to the Ural mountains, and now we go south-west, on to what Safiyyah calls the Bahr al-Zulamat – the Sea of Darkness.’

Ysolda gave an involuntary shudder and Aethel squeezed her gently, her large rough hand encompassing her shoulder. ‘Don’t worry. I – and perhaps you? – know it as the Middle Sea.’

Ysolda shook her head. She had no knowledge of the seas around here, had no knowledge of the sea at all beyond what lapped their cove below Glaw Wood.

‘Aethel!’ Mei called from the stern, where she was standing with half a dozen women, and Eira. She stood slightly apart from the others, holding the edge of a large net the women were untangling. ‘Bring a shuttle! The newcomer can help you.’

Aethel gestured for Ysolda to follow her, and plucked a leaf-shaped piece of wood, inlaid with pieces of white and black, from a basket lashed to the foremast. She carried it to the back of the boat, and Ysolda tried to follow with the same nimble grace, but the pace of the ship and the choppiness of the waves whipped by the wind made her stumble. Two crew were sweeping and mopping the deck with rags, the water making the boards even more slick.

**Please let me not have to crawl,** she thought, and Nara’s voice replied.

**That would look silly.**

Ysolda looked up in time to see her hawk swooping down from the topsail, a graceful arc, and land hard on Ysolda’s shoulder. It did for Ysolda’s balance entirely, and she fell to her knees.

Above the wind and general chatter, Ysolda heard a hoot of not unkind laughter and looked up from the wet planks to see the women with the net pulling amused and pitying

faces. Eira was staring blankly at her, as though she couldn't care less. This stung worse than her knees.

**Ah well,** said Nara. **Everyone saw.**

**Yes, thank you, Nara. Where have you been?**

**Fishing.** Nara's talons were digging into her shoulder. Ysolda would need to make another shoulder guard, her last lost on the Drakken Peaks. **Fish here are fresh, but fewer.**

Ysolda's stomach gurgled. She hadn't suffered too badly with seasickness, but still hadn't much appetite. Nara's mention of fish made her hungry. **Looks like we are fishing too,** she said, pushing herself to her feet and staggering after Aethel.

'Hard fall,' said Mei, eyes crinkling at their edges. 'Your hawk?'

'Yes,' said Ysolda, rubbing her sore knees and glancing around at Eira, who was helping hold the net taut and watching Aethel.

'She's a fine bird. Had her since an eyas?'

'Found her after a storm.' The ship rolled slightly and she stumbled again. Nara tightened her grip, grumbling, and Ysolda winced.

'Your sea legs will arrive soon,' said Mei. 'No choice. Now hurry up.'

Aethel was crouched over the net, the leaf-shaped piece of wood in her hand, working with swift, precise movements

to mend a hole, looping the loose strands with the point of the shuttle and reweaving them into the whole. It was fine, delicate work, and Aethel's hands moved gracefully.

Mei jerked her head at Ysolda, indicating a space next to her, and Ysolda held the slack of the net, standing across from Eira. She still wasn't looking at her. Ysolda was losing patience. Aside from Nara, she was the only one who knew their true mission, and more than that she was her only real friend aboard. How long would her mood last?

The women started a gentle chatter, guiding Aethel to other holes, moving the net around between them. There was an obvious ease between them all. The Ship of Strays was like a floating village and all the women friendly neighbours, though they were all so different. Perhaps a shared year aboard a ship was as good as a shared childhood on land.

Ysolda looked to Cassandra, standing with her feet planted solidly apart, hand on the whipstaff. Her braids whipped in the wind like little snakes, glass beads clinking. As though she'd called her, the captain looked over her shoulder and smiled at Ysolda. It did not quite meet her eyes.

'The Marbled Hills, right?'

Mei was nudging her, and Ysolda noticed there was a lull in the conversation, the other women looking at her.

'Sorry?' she said.

‘Hearing bad as well as balance?’ said Mei.

A woman with a scarf wrapped ornately around her head tutted. ‘Hush, Mei, or shall I tell our new crew about you spending your first week spewing your guts overboard?’

‘I think you just did, Saba,’ said Mei.

‘We were saying,’ smiled Saba, ‘it’s just as well Cassandra altered our course, or else we wouldn’t have been able to take you so close.’

Ysolda frowned, adjusting her grip on the net. ‘I thought you were always going to Kriti.’

Saba shook her head. ‘We were bound for Kanem after Hamar, Cassandra’s homeland. We usually head that way for summer.’

‘I thought it was at war?’

‘Everywhere’s at war. And yet life goes on. And life there is delicious,’ said Saba.

‘Amazing food,’ nodded Mei. ‘That spinach and crayfish dish.’

Mei and Saba *mmm*’d in unison.

‘But after a couple of days in Hamar, Cassandra decided Kriti instead.’

Ysolda didn’t know what to say. She frowned, looking again at Eira, who raised her eyebrows.

‘Do you know why?’ asked Eira.

Mei shook her head. ‘Cassandra will have her reasons.’

‘Still,’ said Saba, ‘it must be something vital to dissuade Cassandra from visiting her homeland. Especially in times such as this.’

‘Such as what?’ asked Ysolda, though she thought she could guess.

‘Such as quakes. Such as flood and famines, birds forgetting to fly south for winter and whales beaching themselves in their hundreds. Such as false tides.’

‘What are they?’ frowned Eira.

‘Wrong tides. Unnatural tides,’ said Saba. ‘Tides that don’t obey the moon.’

‘Water doesn’t obey the moon,’ scoffed Eira.

‘Of course it does,’ said Saba. ‘Except . . . these don’t. They beach ships, uncover coral reefs, drown villages.’

Mei nodded. ‘In the Realm of Four Parts, they found temples as high as mountains that had sunk to the seabed. Now you can walk from land up to their peaks.’

The women murmured, a mix of awe and worry. Ysolda’s back was beginning to ache from holding the net taut.

‘What about the sunken city?’ asked Saba. ‘Perhaps it’s given up its treasure!’

‘I’ve heard nothing like that,’ said Mei a little tightly.

Aethel, silent and intent on her task until now, said, ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if that day comes. In the Isles a whole ancient forest was uncovered when the waters drew back.’

‘Really?’ asked Ysolda.

Aethel nodded. ‘It surrounded an island – or what we thought was an island, where a king is said to be buried. In the channel between the Lakes and Ulaid.’

She pulled the shuttle round in a complicated knot and used her teeth to hold it taut, cutting through the loose rope with a small knife. ‘Makes you think, doesn’t it? Of all the shapes our world has had before, long before us. How many it will have after.’

A silence swept the group, the cracking of the sail seeming distant as each woman stood sunk in her own thoughts. Ysolda, fingers cramped on the net, was transported to the moment the Anchorite had shown her history: a seeming eternity, where rocks moved like water and water became fire became land, all elements connected and remade as each other over time, time that was not smooth and straight like an arrow but as deep as a well, a whirlpool.

Her palm pulsed, and she felt a haze coming over her, as though her head were encased in fog, floating away from her body, away from the women, from the ship, moving over the sea. She turned her head and saw her wings, familiar with their flared tips, brown feathers. A voice muffled and shrieking **Out Out!** far enough off not to bother her much because *oh!* She was flying! It was not like floating, it was muscle and blood and effort, but she was strong, she rode

the wind as though it were a wolf, alive and vicious, but she had command of it, of herself.

The cliffs clipped past her, nests sprouting from their crevices like hardy mosses. She soared higher. There was the ship, far ahead with its green sail, but no matter – she could cover that distance easily, in a moment. She could see all the way ahead to the open sea. The Sea of Darkness. The Middle Sea. There was nothing beyond it, only water. It surely stretched to the end of the world. They would reach it within minutes.

Even at this height, she could see fish moving under the surface of the channel below her, but her belly was full and she paid them no mind, her eyes able to drift over their sinuous movement, over the scattering of mice amid the rocky and grass-seeded tops of the cliffs. **Out!** the voice said, and Ysolda prodded it deeper away so it could not bother her. Her eyes showed her four shades of light: the light of the sea, the light bouncing from the high cliffs, the light of the high white sun and the light that pulsed between them all, channels of light twisting like Aethel's shuttle, weaving everything together.

She dipped lower once more, racing the ship, coming to hover overhead. The cats, looking like specks, darting about the deck, Barley still eating, the women in their different and shared clothes, milling around a body lying still on the deck. Something twisted in her gut, wrongness like rotten fish. It was her. Her body, collapsed, seemingly lifeless.



Another shriek, and she was plummeting. Her wings were twitching, pulled between two minds, and Ysolda was the stronger but she did not know, she now realised, how to fly. She was spinning, caught and thrown by the wind, crashing towards the hard wooden deck where surely she would be crushed by her own momentum –

The sail bounced her, slowing her slightly, her sharp beak ripping the canvas such was her momentum, and then, just as the deck rushed up to meet her, she sat, gasping, back in her own, human body, surrounded by Eira and Mei and Aethel and Saba and the other women, Aethel's hand on her wrist, feeling for her pulse. There was a devastating shriek from near the mast, and a curse from Cassandra.

‘The sail!’

Ysolda jumped to her feet, Saba grasping her elbow and saying, ‘Steady!’

But Ysolda shook her off, tripping up over her own feet and following Cassandra as she rushed forward to the mainsail mast, scattering cats and crew. The ripped canvas was making a nauseating battering sound, but worse was the noise from the foot of the mast. A broken cry, almost childlike. But Ysolda knew even before she saw it wasn't a child, but Nara.

The hawk was scrabbling desperately, flapping her wings disjointedly, talons skidding on the freshly washed deck. A

few of the crew were encircling her warily, the cats watching with a calculated interest.

‘Nara!’ cried Ysolda, pushing through the watchers and falling to her knees.

**Hurt me! Hurt me!**

**What’s hurt you, Nara?**

**You!** Nara let out another shriek and finally seemed to regain use of her wings. Flapping viciously, she took flight, a talon catching Ysolda on the cheek, drawing blood. Ysolda pressed her fingers to the wound as she tracked Nara into the sky, the hawk alighting on the mast.

‘Damn hawk!’ shouted Cassandra, sucking her teeth. ‘Look at my sail!’

‘Your cheek,’ gasped Aethel, who had come running after her. Ysolda swatted her concerned touch away, neck craned to see Nara, swaying atop the mast.

**Nara?** she called in her head. And then, ‘Nara!’ aloud. But the hawk ignored her.

‘What just happened?’ said Eira, and there was more curiosity than concern in her voice. This needled Ysolda’s raw heart even more.

‘I was—’ Ysolda caught herself. She had almost said *flying* but Aethel was staring at her, and a number of the other women were within earshot, following Cassandra’s orders to take down the mainsail. The sound of ripped canvas increased as the wind caught the slack, filling

Ysolda's brain. Then Eira was dragging her away, towards the prow of the ship.

'You're being *weird*,' she hissed as they went. 'Stop it!'

Ysolda shook her off. 'You stop it!'

Tears were pricking her eyes, but she wiped them away angrily. The sensation of flight hadn't left her, and her body felt frustratingly heavy and solid. Her cheek stung, but not as badly as Nara's words. *Hurt me! You!*

'What happened?' said Eira, checking they were alone. Luna blinked lazily from the guardrail, before returning her attention to the waves.

Ysolda chewed her tongue, sorting her thoughts. Part of her didn't want to tell Eira anything, to punish her for her moodiness. But more of her was desperate to share what she'd experienced.

'I was flying,' she said.

Eira snorted. 'You were not. You were lying on the deck, drooling.'

'I know my body was, I saw it,' she insisted. 'I saw it from up there.' It was dawning on her now, how she'd flown. Whose the voice had been, shouting *Out!* 'But I was . . . my mind was . . . inside Nara's body.'

She waited for Eira to scoff, to roll her eyes. But Eira's gaze was intent on her face, her brown irises deep and, Ysolda saw for the first time, flecked with greenish gold, like tarnished bronze.

‘It was like I floated. Up into the sky. And Nara, her body, she caught me. And then I was a hawk – no, I was her. But I wasn’t. I was taking over her body.’ Ysolda shuddered. ‘And she didn’t want me there. She kept saying *Out Out* but I didn’t understand what I was hearing. I didn’t know I was hurting her.’

‘Is that why she fell?’

Ysolda nodded, guilt flooding her chest. ‘It must be. I think she was trying to get me out, and her wings stopped working, and it felt like I tipped out of her, and then I was back, back on deck.’

‘You two,’ shouted Mei. ‘We need all hands on the sail!’

‘One moment,’ called Eira. ‘She’s just a bit dizzy.’

‘Let’s go,’ said Ysolda. ‘I’m fine.’

But Eira stayed her. ‘You possessed her. How did you do it?’

‘I didn’t. It just happened.’

‘You must have done something.’ Eira gripped her wrist, tight enough to hurt. ‘Think!’

‘Everything all right here?’ Aethel was standing beside the foremast, her ruddy face carefully smooth.

Eira let go of Ysolda’s wrist. ‘Fine,’ she snapped.

‘I brought this,’ said Aethel, holding out a clay pot, ‘for your cheek. It will help it heal. You should go and help Eira. Mei’s getting angry.’

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ said Eira huffily, striding off.

‘Sorry,’ said Aethel. ‘The sail—’

‘No . . . thank you.’ Ysolda took the pot.

‘It’s devil’s claw and honey,’ said Aethel. ‘It’ll heal it fast.’

‘Devil’s claw?’

‘It’s a plant from Safiyyah’s homeland. But I had the idea of mixing it with the honey. On its own it stings a lot more.’

Ysolda opened the pot and dabbed some paste on to her cut. She hissed.

Aethel chuckled grimly. ‘What happened? Just then?’

‘Nothing. Eira’s just—’

‘Not with her. With you. It was like you fainted, but when I felt your pulse, there was none.’

She tapped Ysolda’s wrist, and for the first time since she came back to her body, Ysolda noticed her carefully rolled-down sleeves had been pushed up, the bandage concealing the planted heart exposed and unravelling slightly. She yelped and rewrapped it, yanking down the sleeve of the borrowed tunic.

She laughed, trying to cover for her reaction. ‘You must have just not found it. I’m breathing, aren’t I?’

‘Yes.’ There was something watchful in Aethel’s face, and Ysolda was sure she was about to ask a hard question, when Cassandra called from the mainmast.

‘Ysolda, Aethel! We need all hands!’