

ONCE
UPON
A
FEVER

Chicken
House

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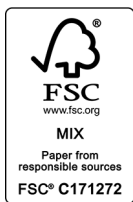
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For Callum

Also by Angharad Walker

The Ash House



CHAPTER ONE

It was a night like any other at King Jude's Hospital. Steam filled the Invisibility Ward to make its fading patients visible. Muffled groans came from the Department of Dreams, Delusions and Disturbed Thoughts. Nurses and methics began their night shifts. None of them knew that on the other side of the quad, through stone corridors and sleeping wards, the Darke sisters stood on the threshold of a secret passageway.

'How did you find out about this?' Payton asked.

'By exploring,' Ani replied.

'And this is the only way to the old laboratory?'

'The only way without getting caught. You can go back if you're scared.'

'I'm not scared.'

'Are you sure you still want to go?'

Payton squared her shoulders. 'If it's the only way.'

The Methics Hall was empty but oppressive, with

its wood panelling and stern oil paintings. Only methics – the doctors who committed their lives to the care and healing of the city’s people – were allowed in. The black eyes of the paintings stared into space, capturing nothing of the sitters’ great minds. Payton’s nervous breath brushed Ani’s hair.

Ani marched across the hall without hesitating and stopped midway. She curled her fingers into a groove in the wood panelling and, with force from her shoulder, a section of the panelling bent inwards, revealing a door and stone steps. The sound of rushing water came from the darkness below.

Payton joined her and looked over her shoulder.

‘Wow.’

‘I told you.’

Ani went first, pulling a gwaidlamp from her pocket.

‘How do you have one of those?’ Payton demanded.

‘Lost and Found.’

‘There isn’t a Lost and Found at King Jude’s.’

‘Well, somebody lost it and I found it.’

Ani balanced the glass orb in the palm of her hand. As it warmed with the temperature of her blood, it gave off a green glow that illuminated the steps, their faces and the awkward shape of the masks that hung unused around their necks.

Payton closed the door behind them and they descended.

At the bottom of the stairs was a basement filled with large wooden waterwheels, which gave the hospital its electricity. The water foamed pale in the gloom, thundering around each wheel before disappearing through the channels under a wall.

‘This way,’ Ani shouted over the din.

She leapt deftly over the narrow channels and Payton followed, holding up her hands to stop the water from splashing her face.

‘We need to go through here.’

Payton looked where Ani was pointing. One of the channels had run dry; only a trickle fell from the bricks to join the rest of the underground stream. The wheel in front of it was still.

They clambered up the unmoving waterwheel, close enough to the others to feel the noise rattle their teeth. They crawled along the channel, their masks swinging from their necks and bumping their elbows. Cobwebs sagged overhead, and the bricks were cold and wet under their hands and knees.

Soon their way was blocked by a metal grille. Ani bashed it open with the heel of her hand, and it fell to the floor with a clatter.

‘Careful!’ Payton hissed.

Ani rolled her eyes.

They climbed down and found themselves in a corridor. Ani held the gwaidlamp aloft until she found

a light switch. The lights were old – some of them sputtered, while others didn't turn on at all. Curved walls bent and disappeared from sight at both ends.

'Where are we?' Payton asked.

'Underneath the operating theatre. It's locked every night, but I found this way in,' Ani said with pride.

She walked a short distance and pointed. Payton saw that there was an alcove, about as wide as double doors, built from a different colour brick.

'In there?'

'Yes. Did you bring the stuff?'

Payton reached into the pocket of her dress and brought out a wooden tub labelled MOINTOTHE in neat lettering. She clicked the lid off to reveal a thick white paste.

'How long will it take?' Ani asked.

'I once saw Methic Gilchrist use it on a crystallized patient. A minute or two.' Payton jerked it away from the inquiring reach of her younger sister. 'Careful! It's a chemical. Not for kids.'

'You're a kid. You're thirteen.'

'And you're eleven, which makes you more of a kid than me. Besides, I know as much as any of the methics. Now hold up the light.'

Using the wooden stick inside the tub's lid, Payton began to smear the paste on the mortar between the bricks of the alcove. When she'd finished, she leant

against the opposite wall, shoulder to shoulder with Ani, and waited. They watched the flickering green shapes Ani threw on the wall with the gwaidlamp and her fingers. Soon crumbs of mortar started to fall to the floor.

‘Now?’ Ani asked.

‘Not quite.’

When Payton decided they had waited long enough, she instructed Ani to put her mask on.

‘Do I have to?’

‘It’s an old lab, Ani. No one has set foot in it since the Turn. I don’t know what’s in there, but the methics will have closed it up for a reason. Put it on. Don’t touch anything when we’re inside either.’

‘How do we get in?’ Ani’s voice echoed in her mask as they approached the wall, the mortar grainy under their feet.

‘I guess we just bash it.’

‘Brilliant!’

Ani flung herself at the wall. She cried out with pain, then laughed straightaway when she felt the bricks give a little. Payton began to push too and soon they had created a dark, gaping hole in the wall. Their breath was warm inside their masks, which gave each of them the ludicrous look of an adult’s head on a child’s body, with round, unblinking glass eyes and rasping breath.

They got mortar under their fingernails, and the grey, practical pinafore dresses that Nurse Wheeldon made them wear became covered in dust. They paused and inspected their handiwork. The hole revealed nothing beyond but darkness. They looked at each other. Payton nodded. Ani went first, the leafy glow of the gwaidlamp thrust out in front of her.

It became clear the dust-laden laboratory had been closed in a hurry. Notebooks lay open on the workbenches. Some had been abandoned mid-sentence. Beakers and test tubes were strewn about, and the girls winced at the sound of broken glass crunching underfoot as they entered. Ani held the gwaidlamp a little tighter.

‘Stay here. Stand still. Keep the light shining.’ Payton’s voice was muffled by her mask but lost none of its imperious tone.

‘Can’t I help look?’ Ani begged.

Payton ignored her. Something about the room made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She could hear rustling, just beyond the gwaidlamp’s glow. The inside of her mask smelt stale, and she imagined the whole room around her rotting and releasing diseases it had stored like a tomb.

The chemical cabinet was old. There were small craters in the surface of the wood where some sort of

acid had been handled carelessly. The wooden door creaked as Payton opened it. It was stocked full. In their hurry to leave and never come back, the methics hadn't even taken their most precious ingredients. She wondered what could have happened to make them abandon such valuable chemicals.

'Look at all this . . .' She scanned the long, complicated words on the labels. 'I don't even know what some of these are . . .'

'Maybe it's possible you don't know *everything*,' Ani jibed.

'I know my medicines.' She slapped Ani's hand as it reached out to touch the glass vials. 'And I know not to touch something if I don't know what it is. You're lucky I let you come tonight.'

'You *let* me? You didn't know this was here. If it weren't for me—'

'It's here!'

'What?'

'Bring the light closer.'

Payton's hand became bathed in green; she was holding a small vial of clear liquid. Ani tried to read the scientific label on its side.

'Thi . . . Th'eiraaa—'

'*Th'eiraudur*,' Payton whispered with awe. 'Unspoken Water.' She cradled it as if it was a rare gem. Her heart pounded with excitement. 'I wasn't really expecting to

find it. This place was my last hope. *This* right here is my last hope.’

‘Hope for what?’

Payton turned away from Ani. ‘An experiment.’

‘You mean like homework?’ Ani felt that only Payton could turn a mission to the secret laboratory into something so dull.

‘Advanced medicine that your tiny brain wouldn’t be able to understand.’

‘Fine. I don’t care about your stupid experiments anyway.’ Ani was already wandering away from the cabinet, holding the green light up to the chalkboard and workstations. A large glass box stood in the corner of the room. Its door was ajar.

‘Payton, what’s that?’

‘It’s a fume chamber. You put dangerous chemicals into it in case—’

‘No, I mean, what’s *that*?’

Something inside the fume chamber dripped. The girls drew nearer and saw that the insides of the glass were splattered with a thick, dark liquid.

‘I don’t know . . .’

Ani took half a step closer so she was standing on the threshold. She brought the gwaidlamp as close as she dared. The congealed sludge had a brown hue. Something seemed to move under its surface.

‘Ani . . .’

‘What the—?’

A droplet of the brown liquid burst from the surface of the glass, as if aiming for the warmth of the gwaid-lamp, and landed on Ani’s mask. Payton screamed. Ani started to yell too, and the sisters locked arms and ran away from the fume chamber and out of the lab, bumping into the workstations, knocking over stacks of paper, and stumbling over the loose bricks. When they were through the hole in the wall, Payton yanked off her mask. Her usually neat hair was ruffled and chaotic. Ani removed her own mask and tossed it inside the lab without pausing to look at the liquid that had struck her. She started to giggle.

‘What’s so funny?’ Payton demanded.

Ani did an impression of their screams within their masks, and Payton found herself laughing too. Soon they were bent over, clutching their stomachs, each whoop inspiring a louder one from the other.

‘Stop, *stop!*’ Payton rubbed her eyes with her shoulder. It had been years since she’d laughed like this with her sister. ‘We shouldn’t be so . . .’

‘Happy?’

‘It’s not good for us. Feelings are the—’

‘Start of all disease.’ Ani recited the boring warning that the methics and nurses gave them every day. ‘I know. As if you’d let me forget.’

The sisters were silent and awkward again, looking

at the hole in the wall.

‘What do you think it was?’

‘I bet it was a feeling.’

‘A pure one?’

Payton nodded. ‘Back then, methics did a lot of experiments trying to capture pure feelings so they could study them. Sometimes it went a bit wrong. I bet that’s why they blocked it up. Come on. I found the Unspoken Water. Time to go.’

‘What are you doing?’ Ani asked.

Payton had picked up a brick.

‘We have to rebuild the wall. Whatever that stuff was, it needs to stay in there. It won’t take long.’

She set about methodically stacking the bricks back in place, brushing aside the crumbling mortar that had held them together. Ani started to help, but her approach was haphazard and none of her bricks seemed to slot together. Payton waved her away, so she drifted down the corridor, her hand trailing along the damp stone. With each step the sound of Payton stacking the bricks grew quieter and was replaced by the *plub-plink* of dripping water. Spiders poked their crooked legs out from behind the lamps.

Ani carried the gwaidlamp in front of her and wondered what made her blood produce green light. Not much at King Jude’s was green. There was a knitted rabbit made of faded green wool on the windowsill

of the bedroom she shared with Payton. It was a present from the Head of the Hospital's wife when they first arrived at King Jude's five years ago, shivering and disoriented at the sight of the grand hospital, so different from their cottage in the Isles. Payton had declared herself too old for toys and Ani did too at the time, though she hid the rabbit under her blankets anyway.

She made a low whistle, which reverberated off the walls. It was one from the secret language she had made up with Payton when they were small; they had needed a series of sounds and gestures during the weeks they refused to speak to or in front of their father. This one, a lilting low noise that swept up into a higher note, simply meant: *Let's play a game.*

A whistle drifted back along the corridor.

'That's not it,' Ani called. Payton didn't reply, so she walked back to her. 'Payton, that's not it. It's -' Ani did their *yes* and *no* whistles.

'What?' Payton turned from the wall, now nearly bricked up again.

'You didn't do our language right.'

'I didn't do it at all.'

'But . . .'

'That was for when we were little, Ani.' She dusted the mortar from her hands. 'There. All done. Now let's go before Father notices we're missing.'

'I definitely heard something.'

'It was probably an echo.'

'No . . .' Ani turned and peered back down the gloomy corridor. 'Somebody whistled back.'