KATE J. ARMSTRONG

FREE SAMPLER!

In a city full of secrets, their magic is the best kept of all.

NIGHTBIRDS

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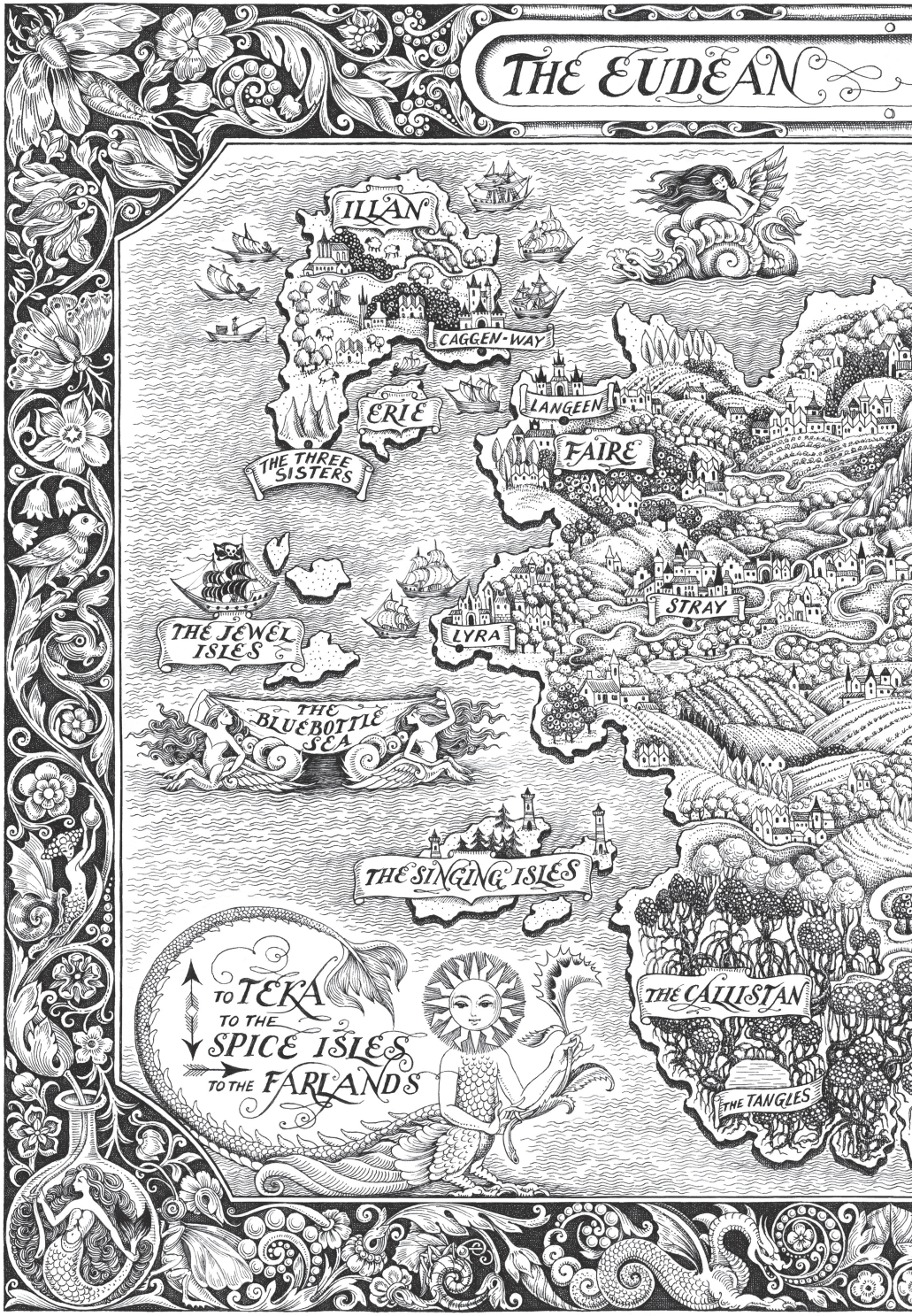
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ERIE
THE THREE SISTERS
LANGEEN
FAIRE
STRAY
LYRA
THE JEWEL ISLES
THE BLUEBOTTLE SEA
THE SINGING ISLES
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TO THE SPICE ISLES
TO THE FARLANDS
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THE ARDENT SEA

MAP T/K

– PROLOGUE –

THE MAGIC IN A KISS

All his life, young lord Teneriffe Maylon has heard whispers. They circled the edges of ballrooms and slithered through hushed conversations over port. *The Nightbirds will change your fortunes,* the whispers promised. *Their magic can be yours with just a kiss.*

If you can find them, that is, and meet their requirements. It is a privilege he's about to pay quite dearly for.

At last, Tenny is allowed to remove his blindfold. For a moment, all he can make out is the bright burn of candles painting circles on the deeply purple walls. Then a woman perched behind a desk comes into focus. She is wearing a darkly feathered mask. It shrouds her face, mesh stretched over the eyeholes. He knows her only by her code name: Madam Crow.

She holds out a gloved hand, letting it hover. "Your payment."

Tenny's fingers shake a little as he extends the string of rubies. That shake is what gets him into trouble at the krellen

tables—it's such an obvious tell. Tenny is used to seeing money leave him, but it usually flows in the form of coins, not treasures pilfered from his dame's jewel box. He is tired, nerves tattered from avoiding his rather nefarious creditor and his sire's certain wrath if he finds out about his son's growing debts. Tenny's had a poor run of luck, is all. Tonight, that all changes.

Madam Crow winds the rubies around her fingers. The dark gems seem to swallow the light.

"And your secret?" she demands.

Sweat slides down Tenny's collar. "The jewels are payment enough, don't you think?"

She arches a brow. "Secrets protect my girls better than gems, however pretty. I will have your secret, or you'll have nothing at all."

Tenny sighs and hands her the note he wrote that afternoon, explaining it was he who took his dame's rubies. He threw in the extent of his debts and the dalliance with his family's maid for good measure. It's a risk, to put these secrets into Madam Crow's keeping, but he knew that money wouldn't be enough to get him through this door.

The Madam reads his secrets, then folds them up again. She holds a stick of purplish wax over a candle flame until it drips. His pulse picks up as she pours it onto the paper's folds and slides it toward him. He presses his House Maylon ring into the wax, marking its contents as authentic. Ensuring he will never tell a soul of what he sees tonight.

That business done, the Madam smiles. "Which Nightbird are you seeking?"

Tenny licks his lips. A few of his friends have boasted vaguely about their time with a Nightbird, but the magic they spoke of

seemed too fanciful to credit. Wild tales to trap desperate fools like him.

The Madam lays down three cards on the desk between them. They look like krellen cards, but instead of numbers they hold finely drawn birds, two words under each.

"No Nightbird's magic is the same," she explains. "They are each a different vintage. The Goldfinch will help you change your feathers, making you look like someone else. The Ptarmigan gives the gift of camouflage—near invisibility. The Nightingale lets you manipulate someone's emotions, smoothing them in whatever direction you desire."

Tenny's mouth has gone dry. All magic is illegal in the Eudean Republic, but this kind is also incredibly rare. He's tasted plenty of alchemical magic—the kind that's mixed into cocktails in Simta's speakeasies and ground into powders in alchemists' back rooms. Such concoctions will let you speak another language for a handful of minutes or make your skin glow in the dark. But a Nightbird's intrinsic gift is purer, and so much more precious. It is what those alchemists and barkeeps try so hard to imitate.

"The gift only tends to linger for a day and night," the Madam says. "So choose wisely."

Tenny is tempted by the Nightingale, who might help him sway the outcome at the krellen tables, but he doesn't want to cheat his way out of his trouble. He wants to win it back by himself.

He points to the Goldfinch.

The Madam's smile turns sharp. "As you wish."

She gives him the rules: no names, no demands, no pointed questions. He is too nervous to take in more than a few words. Then the blindfold goes back on, and someone leads him down a hall that smells of lilies. Thick carpet gives under his boots as slender fingers tug him by the wrist.

After a few twists and turns, they stop, and the fingers release him. Paper shuffles, the covert sound of a card being shoved under a door.

Sweat dampens Tenny's cuffs.

"Ah . . . how should I address her?" he asks the darkness.

There is a pause, then a scratchy male voice that makes him jump.

"By her code name. Otherwise, you don't need to address her at all."

More silence. Guilt prickles at the back of Tenny's neck. His sire supports the Prohibition and is a staunch abstainer. What would he say if he could see his son buying such magic with some stolen family jewels?

Tenny sighs. He doesn't know why krellen calls to him so strongly. Just that he loves how it offers players a chance to be pauper or king, god or mortal, a thrilling brand of risk. This night is a risk, as dangerous-sweet as any. He turns his thoughts away from his sire and toward the Goldfinch—only the Goldfinch. The mysterious, miraculous magic to come.

Tenny straightens his tie as a door clicks open. Light flickers

through his blindfold, soft and warm. He is pushed forward, and then the door shuts behind him.

"You can look," the Goldfinch says. "It's just us now."

Her voice is soft. No, rich, like blush wine from the Farlands, strangely distorted. She must be burning some sort of voice-altering alchemical. Another layer of disguise.

He takes off the blindfold. The room is dimly lit and richly furnished, dark wood draped in velvet and wine-colored rugs. Two chairs sit near the fireplace, deep and beckoning. Amidst it all is a girl in a mask. Hers is like Madam Crow's, covering most of her face in gold-edged feathers that catch the light of the candles on the hearth. The mesh over her eyes makes her anonymous, but he guesses she must be his age, perhaps younger. Though her smile speaks of a wisdom that is well beyond her years.

She isn't a courtesan—he would be foolish think it—but it's hard not to stare at those full, generous lips. Has he seen them before? It would be dangerous to put a name to them. There is a reason for the code names and the masks. Some would kill to have unfettered access to such magic. The church, and many of the city's staunchest abstainers, would likely kill the girls outright. No: It's better that she just be the Goldfinch. Tenny doesn't need more trouble than he has.

He bows deeply. "Welcome evening, Young Lady Goldfinch."

Those lips curl, coy and playful. "Young Lord Maylon. Aren't you a pretty surprise."

His eyes follow the golden chain around her neck, traveling downward. Why do they call it a neckline when it tends to hang so much lower? He looks up, hoping she hasn't noticed. With the mesh over her eyes, it is impossible to tell.

"Let's have some wine," the Goldfinch says. "Or perhaps something stronger?"

He nods, though his stomach is twisted. “Lady’s choice.”

The Goldfinch goes to pour their libations. The dark sequins of her fashionable dress wink as she moves. Truth be told, he isn’t clear on the finer mechanics of the evening he’s purchased. How will it start? How will it feel?

She hands him a glass full of amber liquid that smells of pine resin and thunderheads.

“Fortune favor you,” she says, tilting her glass to him.

He swallows hard. “And you as well.”

They drink. Tenny finishes his in one large gulp. He sits in one of the chairs, expecting her to perch on the other. Instead, she settles on his lap.

“Are you ready?” she whispers.

He nods, willing his hands to stop shaking.

The Goldfinch pulls out a simple black mask and fits it to the top half of his face.

“This is what will call up the magic,” she says, “when you’re ready to use it. Just tie it on and envision the person whose face you want to wear.”

He leans into her touch. She smells of smoke and something sweeter.

“You will need to hold something belonging to the person you want to look like. A kerchief is fine, if they’ve recently held it, but hair or fingernails are better.”

He nods again. His heart is thumping wildly. It feels like the moment just before he lays out his krellen cards, not knowing if he’s won or lost.

“Now imagine how you will use my gift,” she says. “Put the image in your mind, strong and clear.”

It isn’t hard—the images are there already. He sees himself

walking into the Simtan Bank wearing his sire's face, his voice, his manner, accessing the funds he needs to win his way out of the shadows he is in.

The Goldfinch tilts up his chin and kisses him.

Tenny has kissed girls before. Boys, too, for that matter, but those were only sparks compared with this fire. Her magic spills from her lips and past his, warm and heady, twining itself around his bones. He is drunk with it. It makes him feel like a king—perhaps a god.

His arms go around her. He understands, now, why this girl is such a secret. To hold on to her, he would pay any price.

PART I

A Thousand Layers of Secrets

Darling Matilde,

This dress is old, yes, but it's a fine vintage—one I believe will suit you well. I have had it re-charmed so that its jewelflowers unfurl as they did when I was in your shoes, with all the world shining before me. Let it be honey that lures in only the worthy. Let it be your armor, too.

Fly carefully.

My deepest love,
Gran

—A NOTE FROM LADY FREY DINATRIS
TO HER GRANDDAUGHTER

— CHAPTER 1 —

JEWEL, STAR, AND SEA

MATILDE IS A thousand layers of secrets.

Some sit against her skin, there for anyone who knows how to read them.

Others are tucked into a rarefied language that only a few girls can speak.

Still others have wings, and they are hidden inside her.

She smiles to herself behind her mask.

As Matilde descends the stairs into the ballroom, heads swivel. This is precisely why she made her family wait for over an hour before leaving for Leta's season-opening ball. Grand entrances, she finds, are the only kind worth making. Especially during the summer season, when Simta floods with people from all over the Eudean Republic, come to make matches, deals, and fortunes in the City of Tides.

The room is full of finely dressed people, talking and swaying to a tasteful string quartet. It's clear that many of them have been to Simta's best trickster tailors, who have outdone themselves enchanting their outfits for the evening. The seed pearls at one girl's neckline unfurl into flowers. A boy's evening coat

sparks every time someone brushes past. Masks smoke, lapels bloom, gloves glow. Matilde is sure there are alchemical potions here she can't see, hidden inside watch fobs and hollowed-out canes. Leta's added some to her candles so that they flame cerulean and emerald and white, her House colors.

Standing here, you would never know that magic is illegal. In the circles Matilde swims in, such laws barely apply.

Her brother, Samson, gazes longingly at Æsa, their pretty housemate, but she is busy staring wide-eyed at the room. After a sidelong glance to make sure their dame isn't watching, Samson snags a few drinks from a passing waiter and holds one out to her. Æsa shakes her head—the newest Nightbird seems too nervous to enjoy her first proper party in Simta. Matilde will have to work on that.

"I wish you had worn what I laid out for you, Matilde," her dame says.

A dress with frothy skirts, like Æsa's, and a far too-tight bodice. The one that made Matilde look like a present wrapped for someone else.

"Really?" Matilde does a twirl. "I'm rather pleased with my choice."

Her gown is a columnar sheath, with beaded jewelflowers shimmering darkly against wine-red velvet, gathered up at one hip with a golden clasp. She likes how it's somehow both loose fitting and suggestive. It's also vintage, her gran's from when she was a Nightbird, made over in the newest style. Perhaps that's why her dame doesn't like it—she thinks it's something Gran should have given her instead, just like her Nightbird gift. Intrinsic magic runs through most of the Great House bloodlines, passed down from woman to woman, but some-

times it skips a generation. Matilde doesn't think her dame has ever gotten over it.

Dame purses her lips. "It's just the cut is rather . . ."

Matilde smiles. "Rather ravishing?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of risqué."

Gran smiles in a way Matilde has practiced for endless hours but has yet to master.

"Good fashion is never risqué," she says. "Only a little daring."

Dame's lips pinch together even tighter.

Matilde runs a gloved finger down one of the jewelflowers' beaded petals. It curls, trickster-kissed to open and close as she moves. Gran has tried to grow real jewelflowers in their garden, but they don't do well outside the swamps of the Callistan. One bloomed last summer, though, its near-black petals begging to be touched. Gran caught her hand before she could. *This jewel's beauty is her trick,* she said. *She lures in prey by looking soft, and once they're close* . . . She let a ribbon fall, and Matilde watched the flower swallow it. She could hear the sizzle as the ribbon turned to ash.

She thinks of it often, that flower with a secret. Poison in the guise of something sweet.

"Let's get to our table," Dame says. "We must survey the season's prospects."

Prospective suitors, she means. The army of bores she will pour onto Matilde's and Æsa's dance cards, trying to push them both into an advantageous match.

"Really, Dame," Matilde says. "We only just got here."

Her dame lowers her voice. "You've already had too many single seasons. People are starting to talk of it."

Matilde rolls her eyes. “I’m not a fish at market. I won’t start to stink if you leave me in the sun.”

She doesn’t know why she froths over the issue—most Great House boys would eagerly wed a Nightbird. They apply to Leta, their Madam, for the privilege, even though they don’t know who they’re getting engaged to. From what Matilde has seen, they don’t seem much to mind. The suitors are Great House born, and always social diamonds. But choosing from a small, curated jewel box isn’t the same as choosing for yourself.

She goes to hook an arm through Æsa’s, but Dame beats her to it. Æsa looks like a fish caught on a line. Matilde has the notion that her dame is pushing Samson toward Æsa—not that he needs the encouragement. With red-gold hair, lush curves, and green Illish eyes, she is stunning. She has no money, but being a Nightbird is a dowry all its own.

She wonders if Æsa can see her dame’s machinations. She’s seemed too homesick for her island home to see much at all.

“I’ll take a turn first,” Matilde says. “Do a bit of my own surveying.”

Dame frowns. “The last thing we need is you causing mischief.”

Matilde tugs at one long, silken glove. “I wasn’t planning on it.”

Her dame sniffs. “You never do.”

Samson closes one eye behind his umber-colored mask, as if he might block out the brewing argument. “Really, ladies. Must we?”

Samson won’t be chastised for the cut of his outfit or made to dance with some sweaty lord with an underbite. Resentment burns, hot on her tongue.

"Never fear," Matilde says. "I don't imagine I'll break any rules between here and the refreshments table."

Dame is clearly about to argue when Gran cuts in.

"Oura, it's Matilde's first party of the season. Let's allow her to enjoy it."

Matilde waits as her dame pretends to consider it. After all, she is not the head of House Dinatris.

"Fine," she says at last. "But don't be long, Matilde. And no cocktails. I mean it."

With that, she heads toward their table, tugging Æsa along with her. The girl looks back with *don't leave me* eyes, her red-gold hair burning in the shifting light. Matilde should rescue her from Dame's clutches, and she will—eventually. Samson follows, swiping a glass of Leta's signature cocktail and raising it in a mock toast to Matilde.

Gran turns toward her, the grey-blue sequins of her simple mask winking. "Don't mind your dame. You know how she worries."

Matilde adjusts her own mask, made of dark red velvet. "I've forgotten what she said already."

It's a lie, of course. Dame's words from that afternoon are still circling. *You cannot fly forever. Eventually you must settle down and build a nest.* Matilde doesn't want to *nest* with someone who only wants her for her magic. She wants the freedom to choose a future for herself.

"She's right, though," Gran goes on. "You will have to choose soon."

Marriage is expected of a Nightbird, so she can pass on her gift to a new generation of Great House girls. It's practically demanded. The thought makes something tighten in her chest.

Gran adjusts Matilde's corsage of winglilies, their House's floral sigil, and gives her a secretive smile.

"I had adventures in that dress, you know. It has tricked many into thinking the girl beneath was soft and biddable."

Matilde's lips tilt. "Are you saying that you got up to *mischief* in it?"

"Perhaps." Gran taps the back of her hand with two fingers. "Fly carefully, my darling."

Matilde smiles at the Nightbird watchwords. "I'll do my best."

She weaves through the room, guessing whom she might know and whom she should want to. Matilde enjoys secrets and puzzles, and so she loves the Houses' penchant for throwing masked summer balls. People grow bolder with their faces covered; they gamble with fortunes and with hearts. It's easy to tell who isn't from Simta: They have a shine in their eyes like the wings of newborn flamemoths, dazzled to see so much magic on display. Simta boasts the Republic's best trickster tailors and alchemists, and those with coin and connections know where their illegal concoctions can be found. Such powders and potions are coaxed out of herbs and earth, crafted by clever hands, and they make wonderful illusions, but it isn't like the magic that runs through Matilde's veins. Hers can't be brewed: It lives inside her, rare and unfiltered. She loves being a secret glittering in plain sight.

She takes a deep breath. The air tastes of flowers and champagne, and the beginning of the season. It's a flavor that Matilde knows by heart. If this is to be her last summer flying free, she's going to drink in every drop of it. She reaches for a coup glass full of Leta's signature cocktail, Sylva—*Dreamer*. The magic

in it makes it taste of nostalgia: A favorite childhood treat, a sunny field, a stolen kiss. But as it slides across her tongue, her thoughts turn toward the future.

Whose jewelflower will I be tonight?

SAYER STALKS THE edges of the ballroom. She is used to being the watcher, not the watched, and it feels like half the dashed room is staring at her. She stares back, fighting the urge to bare her teeth.

Leta's ballroom reminds Sayer of a mini version of Simta: a series of rings that get prettier and richer as you make your way in. A ring of servants, guards and butlers stand by the walls, not really a part of things. They're the Edges. A few steps in you find the strivers trying to look like they belong. They're the Fringes. A few steps more and you arrive at the Great Houses that form the privileged center of it all. Her dame was one of them, once, glowing like the flamemoths that fill lanterns in the Garden District. Of course, that was before she tripped and fell out of the light.

Sayer is supposed to be mingling, but all this glitz and empty talk is making her restless. The bootleg magic in this ballroom could probably buy a fleet of merchant ships. These people flash magic like gems, a status symbol. Alchemicals, when imbibed, give off a scent like burnt sugar. It's on the air now, but the fragrance is delicate. Only the best for Simta's brightest young things.

As a man tries to sneak a peek down her dress, she's sorely tempted to try and slip something out of his pocket, just for practice. Since leaving Griffin Quarter, she hasn't had much

chance to use her cutpurse skills, and no real need. Leta, her new guardian, has been more than generous. Leta's told everyone that her prickly new ward is some distant cousin from the country. No one seems to have guessed that she's the daughter of the late, disgraced Nadja Sant Held.

Unlike her dame, Sayer grew up across the canals in Griffin's. They lived above a silversmith's, in four rooms that smelled of metal polish and dusty castoffs from friends who never came to call. Until a few months ago, Sayer had barely set more than a foot in this Quarter, even though it was just across the water. It was another world, made wistful by her dame's rosy stories that all seemed to begin with *if only*. If only she had waited for Wyllo Regnis to propose instead of giving in to his desire for his favorite Nightbird. If only he would regain his senses and come to claim them as his own.

Sayer's magic first started stirring late, for a girl like her: Only six months ago. She tried to hide it, but then her dame's coughs started painting whole kerchiefs red. That's when her *if only* words turned slurred and urgent.

If only you would join the Nightbirds. You could bring us back into the light.

Sayer had no interest in joining her dame's old club, but she promised she would, hoping it would revive her. It didn't. And then she died, and Sayer found herself alone. Even then, she wasn't sure she would become a Nightbird. But what else was there? Her options were to scrape together coins as a coffee girl, join a gang, or go with Leta. So here she is, at the heart of all her dame yearned to get back to. And all she wants to do is tear it down.

She stops to watch a maid set up a coffee service on a side table. The smell takes her back to her days at Twice Lit, where

she worked despite her dame's protests. After all, they needed the coin. She liked the smell of roasted twills and the sound of students at its tables, debating the movements of politics and stars. She liked the urchins and the sandpiper gang boys who hung around the shop even better. They taught her more useful things: How to blend into a crowd, wield a knife, steal with a smile.

A partygoer brushes past the maid, making the stack of plates she's holding wobble. He uses steadying her as an excuse to move in close. Sayer can't see his hands, but the maid blushes fiercely at whatever part of her he is touching. The girl won't complain, though: the man's a lord. Sayer grimaces. In Simta, all the wrong people suffer.

Sayer moves in. "She doesn't need your help. Move along."

The man makes an affronted noise but moves on without protest.

"Oh," the maid says. "Thank you, miss."

She bobs a curtsy. The gesture makes Sayer feel strange.

"Can I help you set up?" Sayer asks.

"Oh, no." The girl's eyes widen. "Such work isn't meant for ladies."

The words are replicas of ones Dame said when Sayer first got her job at Twice Lit.

Words Sayer will never hear her say again.

She clears her throat, swallowing down the painful weight there. The maid's refusal is just as well, as Sayer isn't sure she can bend down in this dress. It's in the latest style, its drop waist falling just below her hipbones, clinging to her in a dark, blue-black sheath. A capelet drapes down her back, shimmering with tiny beads that some alchemical tailor's trickster-kissed to shoot like stars across it.

Smile, my girl, Leta said when she presented it. *You are a walking constellation. One that everyone will want to wish on.* But shining brightly only makes people want to steal some of your glow.

Later tonight, she'll become the Ptarmigan: a code name Leta chose for her because of that bird's adroit camouflage. Sayer's magic has the power to help someone blend into their surroundings, letting them walk through the world invisible. Giving a piece of herself to a stranger still makes her want to stab something, but she made her dame a promise. For a summer, at least, she'll see it through. Leta promised she could keep the Ptarmigan's earnings; a couple months' worth will equal more than she could make at Twice Lit in a decade. It will set her up so that she never needs help again.

From across the room, Matilde catches Sayer's eye, crooking a finger. She seems to wish for the three of them to be a pretty flock of fledglings, sharing outfits and secrets and dreams. *Nightbirds are like sisters,* Dame told her once. *They are the only ones who will ever truly know you.* But where were they when her dame needed them? Probably laughing around a table at some gilded party like this one.

Sayer didn't come here for sisters. She came to pick these people's pockets for all they're worth. After all, she is not a star made for *if only* wishes. She's the kind of star that burns.

ÆSA'S GRANDDA USED to say she had a sheldar within her. It's an old story, whispering of a time when the windswept Illish Isles held not just fishing nets and rusted tills, but strength and a deep, resonant magic. That one day it might come back again.

They were always women, the sheldars, he would say, stringing

the day's catch up by the fire to cure. *Touched by the Wellspring, they were. Witches fierce as the sea, and just as fearless.*

They shot their foes with magic-kissed arrows, her gran would add, jabbing at his fancies. *And rode bears with antlers.*

They needed no steeds, he corrected, *because the sheldars could fly.*

Æsa liked the part about their intricately braided hair, woven with bones and sea glass wishes. She longed for their fearlessness as well.

Remember, my girl, Grandda would say when the crops died, or the rent came due. *You have a sheldar singing through you. Just listen for her tune and have the courage to learn it.*

Sometimes, when she stood on the beach, its dark blue sand sucking beneath her, she thought she heard it—a song inside, deeper than want, stronger than fear, but she isn't a sheldar. She doesn't have that kind of power. After all, she is only a girl.

Grandda died last winter, and after that Æsa heard no more stories. Her own da thinks they're just blasphemous tales. He is an abstainer and regular churchgoer, and the Church of the Eshamein, or the Four Gods, preaches that magic is holy, not to be grasped by mortal hands—certainly not by women. They corrupted it, once, poisoning the Wellspring from which all magic flows. That is why the church's paters once hunted witches. They think they rid the world of girls with magic running through them long ago. Yet here she stands, trying not to lose her nerve.

Æsa positions herself against the wall beside a potted featherfern, relieved to be away from the Dinatris table and Oura's oppressive attentions. She still can't picture Matilde's dame and her own being friends, but they grew up in Simta together. Nothing Mam told Æsa prepared her for this raucous place. The city's full to the brim with people speaking tongues she's never heard

before, having many-layered conversations that she struggles to take in. Even after a month of living with the Dinatrises, she feels overwhelmed by it, this ballroom especially. Its cream-colored marble floor twisted through with red waves is nothing like the earthen floor of her family's cottage. The stain of it won't leave her feet, no matter how hard she scrubs.

Æsa clutches at the folds of her frothy gown, which is the pale green blue of the ice moss that grows along cliffs back in Illan. She resists the urge to tug up the neckline. It's more modest than most, and yet she still feels exposed by it. Mirrors fill the room, but she can't bring herself to look.

She needs to find one of her fellow Nightbirds. Surely her first Simtan ball will be less terrifying with them beside her. But they are still mostly strangers: Matilde, bright and impatient, and Sayer, all shielded eyes and sharp-edged words. Anyway, they are from Simta. They don't understand what it means to be an outsider, full of a homesickness that surges every time you take a breath. She misses her family, her familiar, wild cliffs, the sound of the sea. All she wants is to go home.

You're here now, Matilde said just days ago as she painted Æsa's nails the palest blue. *No more dirt floor and fish cakes. Why not let yourself enjoy it?*

How can she, knowing what lives inside her? That soon she will have to let it out?

She remembers the night Leta came to their cottage. Da was gone on a trip to Caggan-Way, hunting for work. The autumn fishing had been bad, and their table held little but sourcakes and a jug of swiftly turning milk. Until she came, Æsa didn't see how thin Mam was, her clothes like ill-fitting sails, hanging windless. Hungry for more than their life could give.

At first, Æsa thought Leta was one of Mam's old friends

come to visit. But then why did Mam keep wringing her hands, eyes darting to the door?

In the end, the deal was simple: Æsa would have lavish room and board and an advantageous marriage into a Great House. Her family would be taken care of. All Æsa had to do was gift her magic.

Will she be safe? Mam asked Leta.

She will be a secret. All secrets in my care stay safe.

What must she do to give her magic to someone?

It's just a touch. Just a kiss.

Later, when Æsa asked Mam if Da knew, she said he wasn't to know. She would tell him that an old Simtan friend offered to sponsor their daughter, and that a wealthy aunt died, leaving an unexpected purse.

When Æsa asked if she had to go, Mam said yes, because she wanted better for her.

You need this, Æsa. We all need this. And we both know that you cannot stay here.

Even now, she isn't sure if she chose to go or if Mam sold her. It shouldn't matter if it means they won't ever have to struggle again.

Dancers twirl around her: an older couple, a group of girls, two young men holding each other close. It hurts her eyes, the way their clothes shift colors and move in phantom winds. She has never seen such wanton displays of magic. In his sermons back home, Father Toth rails against using magic, preaching that it's a moral duty to abstain.

Guilt stings. What would he say about *her* magic? Probably the same thing he says about vice, and the scarlet moss that grows amidst the jinny fields. *Such things must be ripped out before they spread.*

Oh, but she tried. After what happened with Enis Dale, she prayed to the Eshamein to take the magic out of her. She filled her hair with sea glass and made wishes on them all.

A man steps in close, blocking her view of the dancers. He is a lot of things: Very round, very red, very shiny. A sticky-looking mass of flowers hangs from his lapel.

"Good season, Young Lady."

"A-and to you," she stammers. Is that right? Her Simtan's rough when she's nervous.

His mask gleams copper against his wine-flushed cheeks. "How fares your evening?"

She grasps for words she learned in those etiquette lessons. "Favorable, I thank you."

He smiles, lips wet with grease from the plate of meat he is holding. The nearest table of food has gone mostly untouched. Such a waste.

"Is that an Illish accent I hear?" he says. "How charming. Whereabouts?"

Æsa sighs, grateful to speak about something familiar. "Adan-Way. At the edge of the Faire."

"Ah, of course."

He launches into a story she struggles to follow about his grandame's country house, with charming chimneys that smoked and a redheaded maid. And she wonders: Will he be at the Nightingale's door later tonight, demanding kisses? Asking for things it feels blasphemous to give?

His hand finds hers, his gaze too hungry. "Dance with me."

She wants to pull away, but feels frozen. "Really, I . . . would rather not."

He doesn't seem to hear her. "Come, now. You're too lovely to hide against the wall. Let the room enjoy you."

She looks away. Matilde says her beauty is an advantage, but it makes her feel like a target. Beautiful seems like a dangerous thing to be.

Someone steals her gloved hand from the shiny man's grip. *Æsa exhales.*

"Darling," Matilde says. "Where have you *been*? I've been desperate for you."

The man puffs out his chest, clearly affronted by the interruption.

"Young Lord Brendle," Matilde says. "Is that you?"

He lets out a braying laugh. "Not even a mask could make me look like my son, Young Lady Dinatris."

She bats at his arm. "It wipes years from you, Lord! I swear it. You had me utterly fooled."

Matilde is so elegant, all dark gloves and chestnut waves and polished sparkle. So at home in this world—she doesn't seem afraid of anything.

The man looks back at Æsa. "And what business have you with this dazzling creature?"

"It's quite scandalous," Matilde says, smiling wickedly. "Not fit for your innocent ears."

He grumbles, but Matilde is already looping her arm through Æsa's. At the press of skin to skin above their gloves, something tingles. It's always like this when they touch: a call and response in some unknown language. Æsa assumes it's the magic within them. It makes her want to both pull close and pull away.

"That man is odious." Matilde's nose wrinkles. "More ferret than lord."

Æsa tries to answer, but her breath is a wave that won't come back to her. The room is spinning, the lights like spirits in mist.

"Air is made for breathing, darling." Matilde hands her a glass of something cool. "So breathe. And drink this."

Matilde is not one to take refusal lightly, so Æsa tips the cocktail back. It tastes of ocean spray and the cakes Mam used to make on harvest Sundays. She tries not to let a sob rise in her throat.

"You don't need to be nervous," Matilde whispers. "There's nothing in this room to fear."

But this place is full of sharks, and she is a minnow. She feels certain it will swallow her whole.

Matilde sighs. If Æsa's going to thrive, she needs to learn how to deal with lecherous weasels like Brendle. The trouble is that she's a terrible liar. Matilde has tried to teach her the art of deception, but she's frightened of everything, and her pale Illish skin does her no favors when it comes to hiding blushes.

"You do know this is a party, don't you?" Matilde asks. "It's meant to be enjoyed."

"I know. It's just that I have a feeling . . ."

Matilde stifles a sigh. It's a good thing Tenny Maylon didn't choose the Nightingale the other night—in her opinion, the girl doesn't seem ready to see clients, but the first night of the season is a time of high demand.

"What kind of feeling?"

Æsa bites her lip. "That something bad is going to happen."

Matilde pushes an errant lock of Æsa's hair behind her ear. "We're well guarded. You don't need to worry."

Æsa doesn't look convinced. "I just wish . . ."

She lets her wish hang unfinished, so Matilde casts her eyes over the crowd. Distraction is in order.

"Let's take a turn."

As they circle the room, Matilde points out who is who among the dancers. She doesn't point out her past clients or tell Æsa what the Goldfinch made possible for each. The lord who impersonated a business rival to discredit him in front of associates; the young lady who made herself look like a certain sailor so she could sneak her way onto a naval ship. What some do with her gift she doesn't know, and doesn't want to, truly, but she thinks it must be thrilling to wear so complete a mask.

She wouldn't know. Nightbirds can only gift their magic to others, though family lore says that the women she's descended from could use it for themselves. She grew up with bedtime stories about the feats of the girls they once called Fyrebirds. They sound like goddesses, parting seas and moving mountains. Tempting tales that seem too good to be true.

A girl walks by them, leaving a trail of trickster smoke behind her.

"So much magic," Æsa whispers. "Don't any of them fear the law?"

Prohibition, she means, championed by magic abstainers and the church. The paters do love to drone on about how magic is a holy thing, not to be touched.

"Leta's parties are very exclusive," Matilde says. "There aren't any abstainers or Wardens here."

For coins and favors, many of them will avert their gazes from parties like this one. None would dare break down a Great House door, anyway.

"And you don't fear it?" Æsa asks.

Matilde twirls, and the jewelflowers on her dress all snap closed. "Oh, please. If a Warden saw me in this dress, he'd only slap my wrist."

"No, I mean . . . because of the other kind."

Their intrinsic magic? Matilde smiles. "Of course not, darling. According to the church, girls like us don't exist."

Prohibition's a bore, sometimes, but it's never really felt like it applied to her. Matilde finds there's something of a thrill in breaking rules.

She taps a foot. "Where has Sayer skulked off to?"

"Missing me already?"

Matilde and Æsa both jump.

"Dash it, Sayer," Matilde says. "What have I told you about skulking?"

Sayer gives her a feline smile. "It's not my fault you're easy to scare."

Her golden eyes shine out from her midnight mask, her bobbed hair slicked back in fetching waves. The new fashions suit her long, lean frame. But even in fine fabric, Matilde would know she didn't grow up in Pegasus Quarter. It's something in the way she prowls, a hungry cat.

"And what have you been up to?" Matilde asks. "Picking pockets?"

Sayer's expression doesn't change. "Only the loose ones."

Leta wouldn't tell Matilde where Sayer came from, but Dame says she has Nadja Sant Held's golden eyes. Nadja Sant Held, who it's said lost her place as a Nightbird because of some clandestine love child. Matilde would do a saucy dance for Lord Brendle if it meant gaining access to *that* story, but Sayer's lips are closed tighter than a Farlands oyster shell.

Matilde pulls them both closer.

"Let's play a game."

Sayer groans. "Not this again."

Matilde misses being a Nightbird with Petra, Sive, and Octa-

via; misses the easy gossip and secrets whispered over pilfered wine. Nights with them used to sparkle, full of promise. But Petra has been busy since she got married last summer, as have Sive and Octavia, married a few months before that. When a girl's magic blooms, a dame or grandame will bring her to the Madam to be tested. Sometimes not even all their family knows: Her own brother doesn't. The gift dims after a decade or so, sometimes two, which is why they tend to marry after only a season. They stop being a Nightbird, reserving their gift for their spouse. Matilde was alone until a few months ago, when Sayer came, with Æsa arriving some weeks after. Sometimes it's worse than being a party of one.

"We each tell one secret," Matilde continues. "And the others have to guess if it's true."

"Fine." Sayer tilts her head, making her mask's sequins wink. "I've got a knife under my dress."

Matilde sighs. "True. But where in the dark depths do you hide it?"

"You said *one*. Now it's your turn."

She quirks a brow—why not have fun with it? "I've developed a fancy for an alchemist's apprentice. We talk of running away."

"False," Sayer shoots back. "You're too in love with the high life. You'd never dream of flying out of your gilded cage."

Matilde stiffens, but Sayer is all sharp corners with no desire to be blunted. She has a way of making her feel weighed and judged.

"It's not a cage we're in, darling. It's a club—something I think you desperately want to belong to."

Sayer's golden eyes glimmer. "The girls at the Purple Pony are a club, too. You don't see me lining up to join it."

"Don't fight," Æsa warns. "Not here."

Matilde ignores her. "Must you say it like that?"

"Like what?" Sayer asks.

"Like what we do is whoring."

"Well, isn't it?"

Anger flares, hot in her chest. "You would think that, given who your dame is."

Æsa gasps. Something shoots through Sayer's eyes like a star, too fast to catch. She storms away without another word.

"Matilde," Æsa intones. "That was unkind."

Matilde tugs at one of her gloves. "Was it?"

"Her dame only passed away a few months ago."

Her cheeks flame. "Dash it, she started it."

"Sayer misses her," Æsa says, gaze trailing after their fellow Nightbird.

How would Æsa know that? Are they having deep chats when Matilde's back is turned?

Love your sisters, Gran used to say when she and Petra argued, or Sive acted jealous, or Octavia threw a shoe. But these two, guarded and timid, don't appreciate what it means to be a Nightbird. They don't seem to want to know her at all.

She turns, looking for a diversion, and catches sight of Samson walking toward them, a friend in tow. It's Teneriffe Maylon. She knows it's him, despite his golden mask. They grew up in the same circle, playing in drawing rooms while their dames plotted social domination over brunch. But that's not why she knows him in this moment. This tingling recognition always lingers after someone comes to see the Goldfinch. For a week or more, she could find them anywhere in Simta. Her magic glows in him like a flamemoth, a light that only she can see.

The boys are in front of them now, bowing. Samson smiles, swallowing Æsa with his eyes.

"Æsa, may I have the honor?"

After a moment, she nods. They swirl off, and suddenly it's just her and Tenny. He reaches for her hand.

"Young Lady Dinatris, will you join me?"

She's not nervous. Clients never seem to look at Matilde and see the Goldfinch. People only see the parts of her she wants them to.

"Since you asked nicely."

His hands go around her. "You look wonderful, Matilde. But then you always do dazzle."

"You look rather handsome yourself."

Tenny looks much better than he did when she kissed him a week ago. He must have used the Goldfinch's magic to advantage. What she can see of his face is flushed with drink and triumph.

"Samson tells me you've been rather lucky lately."

He puffs out his chest. "I've had a few good turns at the krellen tables. My skills are improving. I might even be able to beat you."

At krellen? Please. "A boy can dream."

She doesn't know how, exactly, but she's sure it's her magic that helped turn him so golden. And yet how easily he pretends he did it all on his own.

He pulls her in. The scents of clove smoke and the jasmine pinned to his lapel are overpowering.

"That's not the only thing I've been dreaming of," he says.

"Is that so?"

"My sire says it's time for me to find myself a wife, and it strikes me you would make an awfully pretty one."

The way he says it, as if it's a foregone conclusion, sparks an angry heat in her chest.

"That's a little presumptuous."

He laughs. "Ah, come now. I'm not so bad a catch."

Tenny isn't the brightest flamemoth in the lantern, but he is handsome, and from a prestigious Great House. On paper, he is as fine a match as any. But she isn't going to be anyone's pretty decoration. She is poison in the guise of something sweet.

She smiles, flashing teeth. "I'm not sure you could afford me."

He mistakes her meaning—of course he does.

"Oh, I'm sure I could keep you in style."

Over his shoulder, Matilde glimpses her dame watching them, face alight—no doubt she's already planning the reception. How she would love to see Matilde on Tenny's arm, walking toward a future full of tasteful dinners and putting someone else's wants before her own.

All at once, Matilde feels mutinous. That angry spark is now a leaping flame.

She leans in close. "I hope you've held on to your mask."

He touches his face, nonplussed. "Aren't I wearing it?"

"Not that one," she purrs. "The one you got from the gold-feathered bird."

His mouth drops open. She should stop, but the words are tumbling off her tongue.

"You wouldn't want to lose so precious a souvenir, would you? Who knows if you'll ever taste such riches again."

The song comes to an end, and she turns to leave him, pursing her lips into a shape he will remember and blowing him a kiss.

His eyes widen, recognition blooming in them.

Matilde walks away, heart pounding hard.

Did she really just reveal her secret to Tenny Maylon? She doesn't know what possessed her to let it flow. She just wanted to wipe that assured smile off his face, destroy his certainty. It did that, at least. But ten hells . . .

She grabs another cocktail and takes a deep, steadying breath. The music flows in liquid streaks around her. She knows each step the dancers will take, every gesture. This is her world, her rules—she owns it wholly. Nothing can hurt her in this game she knows by heart.

One never forgets his first taste of a fine alchemical. It sparkles on the tongue like bubbly wine. But that is nothing compared to how it feels to kiss a Nightbird. Alchemicals are a blend of ingredients, and they require a set of human hands to craft and distil them, while a Nightbird's magic is the finest spirit drunk neat. Alchemicals fade, but those girls are bottles you can continue to drink from. One can see why they are worth such a heavy price.

—AN EXCERPT FROM THE PRIVATE PAPERS
OF LORD EDGAR ABRASIA

– CHAPTER 2 –

MIDNIGHT VISITATIONS

MATILDE SLIPS ON her Goldfinch mask. It's like a second skin: her truest face and best lie.

It's late, and she is perched high in a mansion in the Garden District. Leta moves their location now and then to ensure no one finds the Nightbirds except through the Madam, but the room is always the same: luxe furnishings, two chairs, the feathered mask.

Anticipation flutters. Who will her client be? Young or old, man or woman, they will be from one of the Houses. Theirs is an exclusive, high-end club. At least she can be sure it won't be Tenny Maylon, thank the Wellspring. Leta only lets a client see a Nightbird once or twice a year. *Too much of a drug leads to addiction,* she is fond of saying. Another favorite: *Anything can be had for a price.*

What will that kiss she blew to Teneriffe Maylon cost her? It's been a few hours since Leta's party, but her nerves are still fluttering like wings, unable to settle, even as she tries to put it out of her mind. It's not as if she explicitly *said* she was a Nightbird. Wine-fueled Tenny might not have understood . . .

And even if he did, he has no way to prove it. Surely he won't speak of it at all. He's a puppy, eager to follow the rules—the ones the Houses set up long before him.

Long ago, when the paters made it their business to hunt down girls with magic inside them, some of the most powerful hid in the small port town of Simta. Some families hid the Fyrebirds, and the girls hid their magic. No more moving mountains and parting seas. They only used their smaller, less visible gifts, giving them to the families that protected them. Over time, the practice formalized into a kind of club: Fyrebirds became Nightbirds. That's where the name came from. They're still birds of a sort, but they only do magic in darkness. An inside joke.

The Houses keep the girls safe from those who might harm them. In return, they get exclusive access to their gifts. It's a system that benefits all—Tenny knows it as well as she does. Just as he knows that if he spilled, Leta would send whatever secrets he gave her flying to places he doesn't want them to go. His sire is an abstainer: Such people think it's sacrilegious to use magic for personal gain or pleasure. Tenny wouldn't risk him finding out, surely. There isn't anything for her to fear.

Matilde looks down at her locket, Gran's from when she was a Nightbird. The candles make it look like liquid gold pooled in her palm. Its contents are a secret, like so much else about her. Usually, she prides herself on how many she keeps.

Never take off your mask. A Nightbird rule. *Never let them see you*.

What would Gran think if she found out that Matilde let hers slip?

A knock comes. Two short taps and a cascade of fingertips, clicking against the door like rain. It's her Sparrow. Matilde slips her locket back under her dress, clearing her thoughts.

A note is passed under the door. She picks it up and reads the name:

Lord Dennan Hain of House Vesten

Matilde's breath flies away.

Dennan Hain is at her door?

She's surprised that Leta would admit him. He is Great House born, yes, but his sister is the suzerain—the Eudean Republic's chief magistrate, and a powerful member of the Table that governs it. She is also a staunch supporter of the Prohibition, which became law some five years ago. Leta would never let Epinine Vesten see the Goldfinch, that's for certain. But Dennan isn't truly a Vesten. Most people call him the Bastard Prince.

The last time she saw Dennan Hain was three years ago, at a reception at the Winged Palace.

The last time she saw him, she made a terrible mistake.

She rushes around the room, blowing out some of the candles. The light was dim to begin with, but she wants it dimmer still. She only stops to peer into the mirror above the mantle. Her feathered mask is straight, her lips painted. The costume is complete, and yet . . .

She takes a steadying breath. She could send him away—Leta warns clients that it's a Nightbird's choice whether to admit them. And yet she finds herself reaching for the door.

When it opens, she sees her little Sparrow, the girl who guides clients to her, and the hulking Hawk who guards her room, faces covered. Dennan Hain is between them, wearing a light suit and a blindfold.

Matilde unclenches her fists and nods to the Sparrow. The girl pushes him forward, and suddenly it's just the two of them.

The drip of wax on the mantel seems too loud in their silence, drowned out only by the sound of her heart.

She takes her time soaking him in. His finely cut suit and slicked-back hair make him look older than she remembers—but then, he is older. Taller, too. Lean and deeply tanned, he looks like the best kind of mischief. The curve of his lips holds a spark she can't quite name.

His voice is spark, too. "May I take off the blindfold, my lady?"

"Not yet." Sometimes the best way to own the room is to remind a client that they're there at her pleasure. "I like you better in the dark."

He puts his hands in his pockets. She takes a slow, deep breath. The Vox oil she's burning will change the timbre of her voice, making it sound like someone else's, but the true key to playing the Goldfinch is confidence. She gives her words a playful tilt.

"I suppose I should welcome you home, Lord Hain. How long has it been? Years, surely."

He tips his head, a small bow. "It's nice to be remembered."

Oh, she remembers. They used to be friends, but she's heard nothing from him in the last three years—only *of* him.

"Yes, well, stories of your exploits precede you."

"I see. And are the stories good?"

"They've certainly won you a fair number of Simtan hearts."

The stories tell of an up-and-coming sea captain, securing new trade routes with the Farlands, fighting pirates, and leading the charge in the trade wars with Teka. Bastard or no, the people consider him a member of House Vesten, whose members have served as Eudea's suzerain for so long.

But before that, Dennan was the boy she used to play with at the edges of parties. As Marcus Vesten's son, he was always

invited, but because his dame was no-one-knew-who—certainly not Marcus's wife—he was a scandal. Matilde's dame demanded she keep her distance, but that only made her want to chase him. Forbidden fruit is so much sweeter than the rest. She followed him into closets and dark corners, where they made up complicated games together. They wrote each other notes in a code only they knew.

Their connection is one of Matilde's favorite secrets. Or was, before he left without a word.

"Tell me," she says. "Is it true that you spent your days fighting pirates, or did you become one?"

"That depends on whom you ask."

She should probably make him leave on the blindfold, but she has the sudden urge to see his eyes. She used to wish she could bottle their vivid blue purple, like sweet crysthellium syrup from the Jewel Isles. Are they the same as she remembers? Is *he*?

There's only one way to find out.

"Well, then. You might as well make yourself comfortable."

He peels the blindfold off, blinking into the dimness. Even in the low light, his eyes glow.

For a few long breaths they just stand there, watching each other. She makes sure to keep her posture languid, as if this is all a lark to her. Let him think she has no real stake in this game.

"Shall we have a drink, Lord Hain? A toast to your fortunes."

He nods. "I'll have whatever you're having."

Matilde turns her back and goes to the sideboard, discreetly pulling out her locket. Once unscrewed, the top becomes a golden dropper, dispensing the alchemical liquid inside. Estra doole, it's called. *Truth teller*. It makes clients calm and pliable, which is

good, because they sometimes get overexcited. A Nightbird's magic—all magic—has an intoxicating effect. A Nightbird's gift can't be taken by force, and her Hawk is there to ensure clients don't try it, but one can never be too careful. Besides, Matilde is a collector of the clandestine, and this is often how she finds it. Estra doole has the delicious side effect of loosening lips.

She finds herself wanting some of Dennan Hain's secrets quite badly.

Matilde watches the potion bead at the dropper's end. She won't need much: It's potent stuff.

Drugging clients? Sayer's voice is like church bells on an Eshamein's day, annoyingly insistent. *I hear the girls at the Purple Pony do that, too.*

Matilde silently snaps back: *This isn't a Smoky Row brothel.*

But Sayer's words from earlier haven't left: *Well, isn't it?*

Matilde pulls the dropper back from the wine she's poured them, screwing the locket closed before she can second-guess her choice.

"I must admit," Dennan says. "Growing up, I thought the Nightbirds were just a flight of fancy, invented by men in their smoking rooms."

She turns. "And yet here I am, dream made flesh."

Matilde hands him the drink. This close, she can see a pale scar cutting through his lip that wasn't there before. It makes him look like a rough-cut rogue.

"What shall we toast to?"

He smiles. "My crew likes to toast to good friends, both old and new."

It takes an effort not to choke on her wine. "To friends, then."

They toast. She sits on one of the chairs, and he does likewise, swirling the contents of his glass. His hands are calloused—

a sailor's hands, no doubt hard won on the ocean. She wonders what they would feel like on her skin.

She takes another sip. Usually she enjoys this moment, anticipation in the air, made into a thrill with playful banter. But with him, the usual script doesn't feel right.

"Tell me," he says at last. "Do you like it?"

He says it the way you might a lover's confession. It makes something quiver in her chest.

"Like what?"

"Being a Nightbird."

Truth to tell, no one has ever asked her that question. She wonders what kind of game they are playing.

"It has its moments."

"You don't mind having strangers at your door, demanding kisses?"

"No one can demand things from a Nightbird." Leta would have told him that. "And you and I won't be strangers for long."

A candle pops. The air seems to be getting warmer. She's good at playing silences, but his wears away at her, making her want to say something—anything. But she won't.

He leans an elbow on the arm of his chair. "There just seem to be a lot of rules and deception. You don't mind living in the shadows?"

Matilde bristles. "The rules are there to protect us."

"Rules can also keep you in the dark."

Behind her mask, her cheeks flush. He is clearly trying to rile her, but why?

She makes her tone light. "As scintillating as this discussion is, we have business to attend to."

He puts his elbows on his knees. The gesture makes him look more like the boy she remembers.

"But you see, I didn't come here for a kiss."

Her breath catches. "Then what did you come for?"

The smile and playfulness are gone. "I came to warn you about the suzerain."

His sister? She fights to keep her voice smooth, unreadable. "Go on."

"She wants to steal the Nightbirds. All of you."

That knocks Matilde speechless. Suddenly there isn't enough air in the room.

"As I'm sure you know," Dennan says, "when our sire died, Epinine became the suzerain on something of a technicality."

The suzerain is elected by the Table, the governing body that keeps the Republic running smoothly. Made up of a handful of Great House members, the suzerain, and the church's Pontifex, they all have power. There was a time when the suzerain ruled as monarch, but these days she is more figurehead than sovereign. That doesn't mean the position has no teeth.

"The position is for life," he continues, "and so a vote should have been called the year he died. But we were at war with Teka, then, and such votes can't be called during wartime. So our sire's wish to have Epinine take his place was honored. But the summer meeting of the Table is coming, and with the peace assured they mean to call the vote at last."

Matilde frowns. "Surely the Table will vote her in."

The position is open to any Great House member, but it has always been a Vesten. They aren't royalty, but something almost like it.

"The Pontifex supports her, and the church holds plenty of sway on the Table. But she's convinced the other Houses are going to vote against her. They've accused her of mishan-

dling things in the war with Teka. And some of them don't like how cozy she is with the Pontifex, supporting his crusade on magic users. They think it's draining Simta's resources and only emboldening its gangs."

But would they really break with tradition and vote someone else in? It seems bold, but Matilde has eavesdropped on enough conversations in her lifetime to know the balance of power is never easy. Everyone wants a bigger slice than they have.

"Epinine wants to shore up her position before the vote is called," Dennan continues. She wants to weaken the other Houses by taking away the thing she thinks makes them strong."

Matilde swallows. "The Nightbirds."

Dennan nods. "She says she wants to hold you hostage until the vote is over, to ensure it goes her way. But I think she's just as likely to hand you over to the Pontifex. It would cement their favor and her commitment to the Prohibitionist cause."

It can't be true. Epinine must know what the church paters once did to the girls with magic inside them. Those stories, true or not, give her nightmares even now.

His words ripple through her: *She says*. How would he know about her plans unless she told him?

"Is that why you're here? You want to collect us for her, like spices from some foreign port?"

Frustration ruffles his features. "No."

All it would take is one shout and her Hawk would be on him, but something keeps her quiet, waiting on his next words.

"I want to save you from her."

She prides herself on being able to read people. It is why, when she plays something, she always wins. But there is too much in Dennan's eyes to sift through. Fixed on her they burn blue, like the heart of a flame.

"Why bring this to me? Why not just tell Madam Crow?"

He lets out a rough breath.

"Because I didn't think she would trust my good intentions."

"And you thought I would?" After all, he has given her no proof of what he claims. "Epinine is your sister."

"Why would I make up such a story about a member of my own House? What would I stand to gain?"

She doesn't know.

"I want to be your ally," Dennan says, "but you would have to trust me."

How can she?

"Trust is something to be earned."

His voice is soft. "I like to think I earned it long ago, after you kissed me and I never told a soul."

Her heart is in her throat. Ten hells, he *knows.*

She was fourteen when she kissed him—not yet a Nightbird, but she knew about the magic that ran in the Dinatris blood. She felt it stirring, a restless warmth beneath her skin. When he dared her to kiss him at that party, she didn't want to back down. She thought she understood how to keep the magic in, but she didn't. It spilled from her lips and onto his.

Later, she convinced herself she imagined it. Some truths, buried deep, will break down and disappear. Clearly she was wrong, but she won't admit it—can't admit it. She has risked too much tonight as it is.

"I don't know what you mean," she says. "You must be confusing me with someone else."

He stands.

"We played together in shadows deeper than these. I would know you anywhere."

He steps closer, until she can feel his breath against her neck.

"You trusted me once," he says. "But I know that there's only one way to prove you still can. It's to walk away with your secret and continue to keep it. When you're ready to talk, this is where I will be."

Something is pressed into her palm: a calling card, with an address in the Dragon Quarter. Then he turns away, toward the door. Matilde feels like the ground has gone soft beneath her. She needs a way to make it solid again.

"Lord Hain."

He turns. She points to her lips.

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

The comment was meant to throw him off-balance, but as he closes their distance, her thoughts become a cloud of frantic birds.

"I'd love nothing more." He takes her hand and brushes his lips against it. "But I would rather you kiss me of your own free will, Matilde. And as yourself."

His blindfold goes back on, and he is knocking on the door. It opens and he's gone, leaving her dizzier than the wine and with the taste of danger on her tongue.

She should call for her Hawk, or go get Leta, or . . . something. But what would she say? *I've spilled our secret to not one but two boys, alas?* Unfathomable. Just like what Dennan told her about Epinine Vesten. What to make of what he said—what to *do*?

She turns toward the fireplace. Her hands are tingling, and she has the sudden feeling that she has forgotten something important. Then she thinks she hears a muffled cry behind the wall. She strains her ears, but no . . . There's nothing but

the dripping of her candles. Dread blooms deep inside her just the same. And she knows, just as surely as if one of the girls whispered to her, that something is wrong in one of the Nightbird's rooms.

Sayer's Ptarmigan dress is a black tulle monstrosity. The dark, starry sheath from the ball is gone, replaced by a thing her Sparrow had to cinch her into. How is she supposed to move in this? Leta says pageantry is part of the deception, but the whole thing sets her teeth on edge.

Worse, the mask smells of the girl who wore it before her. Its pale feathers have held on to the cloying scent of her perfume, making Sayer's stomach twist and churn.

She has seen a few clients in the past few weeks—an ancient lord who didn't say one word during their entire exchange, and a chatty woman whose lipstick tasted unpleasantly of roses—so this evening's events aren't anything new. Still, she has to fight the urge to prowl the room, palms sweating. She thought after the first few times, being a Nightbird would get easier. Instead it only seems to get worse. She hates that she's giving any part of herself to these people. She hates how good using her magic feels. *It's like a hot bath amidst a cold day,* Dame said once of how it felt to gift her magic. *A sweet kind of relief.* Sayer hates imagining her dame in the mask, smiling sweetly. Her fall started in a room just like this.

Nadja Sant Held was always full of sunny descriptions of Wyllo Regnis, the young lord she fell hopelessly in love with. She had to describe him, as Sayer still has no idea what he looks like. It's not as if he ever came to call. But Nadja would never tell Sayer the full story of what happened—how

a Nightbird ended up in a dusty apartment in Griffin's. She suspected Nadja preferred the stories she conjured for herself. She always said that one day, Wyllo would come and make things right between them. He never did, but other men came in his stead.

She discovered this when she was thirteen, fresh back from one of her first shifts at Twice Lit, and she heard noises coming from the back bedroom. She crept through the dim light to find out what it was. She watched from behind a curtain as a posh-looking man kissed her dame against the wall, his hands possessive.

Little dove, he said, eyes glazed. *Nothing tastes as sweet as you do.*

Before he left, he put a satchel of money on a table. It took her days to understand what it was for. Sayer never asked, but she knew he had come for the last dregs of Dame's magic. And she had let him take it, time and again. That's why Sayer was so resistant to becoming a Nightbird. She vowed long ago never to make the same mistakes.

And yet you're here, she thinks. Matilde's irritating words from the ballroom float back to her. *It's a club. Something I think you desperately want to belong to.* But she has no interest in getting tangled up with anyone. She doesn't plan on marrying any of these puffed-up peacocks, and she doesn't care about her sire's approval—or anyone's. She's here to take her clients' money, then walk away, perhaps out of Simta entirely. She can see herself in the river-wrapped city of Sarask or one of the mountain towns of Thirsk, renting some quaint stone cottage. Perhaps set might up her own coffee shop. She imagines herself in a kitchen, warm and smelling of starcakes, someone's hand wiping a streak flour off her cheek. The person smiles at her around a dark green

eyepatch. It's Fenlin Brae, and suddenly she's leaning closer . . .

A soft knock shakes her from her thoughts. A note appears under the door, glowing against the dark carpet.

Lord Robin Alewhin of House Rochet

The name is a stranger's. But then, aren't they all?

She secures her mask; her palms are sweating, but she remembers the mantra Fen taught her during one of their sparring lessons. *Smile on your face, knife at your back.*

The door opens, revealing a blindfolded man about her height. With a head of dark hair and olive skin, he could be almost any man in Simta. She notices he isn't smiling.

She can see her Hawk in his beaked mask in the shadows, looking thuggish. It would be so much better to have a friend from Griffin's standing there—someone she trusts. She thinks of Fenlin Brae's wild flame of hair, her sharp humor, her lithe and brutal grace. Suddenly Sayer misses her so fiercely that she's breathless with it. Guilt stabs: she didn't even say goodbye to Fen . . . but now is not a time for thoughts like that.

She makes herself smile, though the client can't see it. Dame always said you can hear a smile in someone's voice: a pretty lie.

"Welcome, Lord Alewhin."

She sizes him up. A girl from Griffin's has to know how to tell a fool from an actual threat. He's thin, and sinewy as a sailor. He stands motionless in his suit, but something about him feels restless, a kettle simmering close to a boil.

A corner of his mouth ticks. "May I take off the blindfold?"

Matilde thinks she doesn't listen during their informal Nightbird lessons, but Sayer hears her. *That room is your world. It's best to quickly let them know it.*

"In a moment." Sayer goes to the sideboard and takes a lib-

eral sip of Illish whisky out of the crystal decanter, burning with the taste of brine and smoke. “Now you may.”

His eyes are the brown of weak coffee, and his eyebrows look like they were recently shaved.

“What happens next?” he asks, hands stiff at his sides. “I confess I’m not quite clear on the particulars.”

Sayer gestures to one of the armchairs. “You can start by taking a seat.”

As he sits, the dim light draws sharp lines across his features. He smells of something earthy, like the jawbone algae in Simta’s canals, but charred.

“Would you like a drink?”

“No,” he says, teeth clenched. “I thank you.”

It seems he wants this transaction over with quickly. Happily, so does she.

“For the magic to work, you need a way to call to it,” she says, picking up the gauzy grey mask on the mantle. “When you’re ready to call up the magic, just put this on.”

She holds the mask out, but he only he grips the arms of his chair.

She tries not to sound annoyed. “You’ll need to wear it when we kiss.”

He frowns. “Kiss?”

Blazing cats, did Leta tell him nothing? “Never you fear. I won’t bite.”

He puts on the mask and clamps his eyes shut. She thinks about taking another swig of whisky, but instead she sits across from him. You’re supposed to close your eyes for a kiss, she supposes, but she could never trust a man who would pay for one. So as she bends down, she keeps them open. That is why she sees the metal flash.

She leaps back, but her dashed dress is tangled up around her legs. She stumbles. The man stands fast and spins, one arm cinching her tight around her ribs.

"Scream," he snarls, pressing a knife to her throat, "and I will snuff you out."

She fights against his hold. Blazing cats, he's strong. She just needs to make some noise, knock something over, but it's hard to breathe and her feathered mask makes everything a shadowed blur.

"Your guard can't help you," he whispers, hot in her ear. "I've made sure of it."

A moment later, she hears something heavy hit the floor outside her door. Her Hawk—it must be. Her heart is beating fast enough to burst.

The client pulls a vial from his coat.

"Drink this," he says, "and no one else will get hurt."

She struggles as he unstoppers the vial and tries to press it to her lips, smelling like pond scum. She doesn't want to find out what it's for. His iron hold sends panic pouring through her, but Fen's voice breaks through with her advice about fights: *be unpredictable*. Swift as lightning, she brings her heel down on his foot. He stumbles but recovers quickly, grabbing for her arm as she lunges for the door. She spins, but her dress is a snare they both get caught in. They fall to the rug, twisting and grappling. There's a crunch as someone rolls over the vial.

Lord Alewhin—if that's even his name—must have dropped his knife because both hands are on her now, choking. His hot breath is on her face, and she has little of her own. The dress hitches up around her thighs as she bucks beneath him. For a wild moment, she wants to laugh: *If you came for a courtesan who takes her clothes off, you're in the wrong place*. But that can't be

what he wants, because he's holding her like he can barely stand to touch her. It's the only reason she can still breathe at all.

"Get off me," she croaks, straining for her knife. It's strapped to her thigh, trapped under feathers. If she can just get her hand down a few inches more . . .

"You are proof," he whispers, "that witches live amongst us. The kind who will poison the world if we let you. For bringing you in, I will be rewarded."

Bring her in to who? She doesn't know, but it's clear he means to hurt her. Something's building in her chest, tasting of storms.

His spit hits her cheek. "Sant catchta aelit duo catchen ta weld."

She strains, but she has no breath left to shout. No one is coming to save her. She's going to die at some man's whim after all.

The door to the hidden passage that connects the Nightbirds' rooms bursts open. Matilde tumbles through it. When she sees them, she screams.

The client's head whips around, hands loosening for just a second. It's long enough for Sayer to pull her knife out of its sheath. She swings it up and into his arm. He tumbles off her, shouting obscenities. Sayer grips the bloody knife and stands up.

"Move and I'll slice you where it counts," she growls.

He tries to get up, but someone else is in his face—Matilde, brandishing a fireplace poker. Surprise flashes through Sayer to see rage on the girl's face.

The main door into the room flies open and a Hawk is there—not hers—pulling the client up roughly. They wrestle briefly, but the client's wound seems to have doused some of his fire. In the struggle his jacket is ripped away, exposing some

of his chest. Dark lines are etched there, a tattoo made up of an oblong diamond framing a sword on fire. It feels familiar, but she can't quite place it.

Matilde nudges her. She is still clutching the poker like a sailor about to harpoon an octopus. "Please tell me you didn't start it."

Sayer wipes her knife on her dress. "He did. I just made him bleed a little."

The Hawk has the client now, hands pinned behind him. Something wet is running down Sayer's arm, dripping onto the carpet. It's his blood, she thinks, but who knows . . . It could be hers.

Her voice is low but clear. "Who sent you?"

"I do Marren's work," he gasps. "He gave me my mission. And where I failed, know that my brethren will not."

What had he said before? *Sant catchta aelit duo catchen ta weld*. They're the words paters use at the beginning of a candle prayer. *A cleansing fire to cleanse the world*. Cleanse it of what?

"And what is that mission?"

He smiles, but his eyes are far away. "To wipe your kind from the earth."

Something crunches. Black blood spills over the man's lips. Ten hells, Sayer almost kissed them.

The Hawk swears, trying to hold him as he shakes. "He ate a glass bead."

She's heard stories of glass beads: Soldiers hold them in their mouths and break them if they're captured. Better to die by poison than be tortured and shamed. Why would he want to die here, rather than be questioned? What is he hiding behind those manic eyes?

She grabs him by his lapels.

"Who sent you? Tell me. *Tell* me."

Black spit hits her neck, burning hot. "Soon enough, you will see."

She backs away as the Hawk lays the client down. They watch, frozen, as the light fades from his eyes.

She is from Griffin's: She's seen people stabbed, and dead bodies besides. But none of them ever tried to drug and abduct her. She shivers.

Matilde's face, still masked, is turned toward Sayer. Sayer is glad the girl can't see her eyes through the mesh.

Matilde touches her arm. "Did he hurt you?"

Something whispers through Sayer. Her skin tingles, tongue tasting of lightning. Between them she feels a strange sort of charge.

She pulls away, fast, and the feeling fades. "I'm fine. Though this isn't exactly how I thought I'd spend my evening."

"I'll bet." Matilde shakes her head a little. "Me either."

Sayer rubs at her neck, trying not to look at the client. Her eyes land on his palm, shiny with an old burn. "How did you know I was being attacked?"

The Goldfinch's room is in the opposite corner of the house: Surely she couldn't have heard them.

Matilde is looking down at the hand she just had on Sayer's arm. "I suppose I had a feeling."

Sayer frowns. "What do you mean, 'a feeling'?"

But then she gets one of her own. It's a tight, frantic fist around her chest. What's going on? Her thoughts are so jumbled.

Matilde gasps, spinning toward the back wall.

"Where is Æsa?"

ÆSA STANDS BY the window, gulping down air. In, out, but the fear still won't leave her. She pushes the window wider, its rose-tinted glass turned almost purple by the moonlight, and tries to peer through to the port. She can see the ocean twinkling in the distance, but she cannot smell it. Simta's city scents smother all else.

She takes out the pouch of sea glass she brought with her to from Illan, pouring them out on the windowsill. A few pieces are already braided into her hair where no one else will see. Something about the way they catch the moonlight reminds her of the push and pull of waves.

She never realized how constant the sound of the sea was in her life until she came here. Her home is a harsh place, but she knows its rhythms, its many moods and quietest cries. She belongs there.

Her client will arrive soon—her first as a Nightbird. She is already wearing the dark wig Leta picked to disguise her distinctive red-gold hair. All she needs is to fit the feathered mask to her face and she will be the Nightingale, a code name chosen for the way that bird's beautiful song entrances its audience. Though her magic is less about charming people and more about controlling how they feel. She shivers to think about what a client might do with such power, though she doesn't have to imagine—she has seen it. A tide of guilt rises swiftly in her chest.

The first time she kissed Enis Dale behind his da's drying shed, she didn't know about the magic. Her mam never said it ran in their family's blood. She remembers the feel of it leaving her lips like breath on a cold morning, soft and silent. It felt better than she thought a clandestine kiss probably should.

Did you feel it? he whispered, breaths ragged.

Feel what?

It was like a wave coursing between us. A rush.

He looked drunk, or awed, and it made her feel as powerful as one of the sheldar. She pulled him in and kissed him again.

Later, she told Mam about the kiss, thinking of how Pater Toth always preached that lying made the crops go bad. She told her about the feeling it gave her. Mam told her that Pater Toth wasn't to know, or her da. Æsa was ashamed of her wantonness, swore she wouldn't give in to it. But then Enis sought her out again. *Inger gave me his best horse,* he said, eyes fever bright. *I made him want to give it to me. Magic, Æsa. And I think it came from you.*

He wanted her to kiss him again, and gods help her, she did it. The magic spilled from her, eager and flushed. Their kiss fed something inside her—a hunger. A hollow ache she still can't name but knows to fear.

Would her magic have lain dormant or gone away if she hadn't given in to that temptation? Could she have changed her future if she'd prayed more and hungered less?

It doesn't matter. She's here now, and it's where Mam wants her. She goes to the mask on the mantle and tells herself to pick it up. But such magic is meant for the Wellspring and the Four Gods, not country girls. She thinks again of Pater Toth's sermons: *In mortal hands magic turns into a vice, and then a poison*. Mam wouldn't have sent her here if that were true, surely. But still she wonders: Is it wrong, to be a Nightbird? Will giving this magic away corrupt her soul or someone else's?

There is a soft creak behind her. She turns to see the rose glass window swinging wide. Her skin prickles as someone

climbs through the opening. She jumps, ready to shout, but then the intruder looks up.

She gasps. "Enis?"

His smile is wide. "Æsa. At last."

He looks the same as when she left him: dark red hair, pale cheeks made ruddy by sea winds. A piece of home.

She throws her arms around him, her relief so thick it's hard to speak. He holds her close, pulling the wig from her, fingers sliding through her red-gold hair.

"I can't believe it . . . how did you find me?"

"I had to find you."

Something in his voice makes her pull back. "But how, Enis?"

His eyes are the same blue, but deep shadows pool beneath them.

"I worried for you. Your mam said you sailed to Simta to stay with some relative, but I knew you wouldn't leave me. Not when we belong together."

Her breath catches. There was a time when she would have relished these words from him, but all she feels in this moment is dread.

"I couldn't sleep, after they took you. Couldn't eat." Enis strokes her arm, her hair, like he can't get enough of her, but his eyes don't quite seem to see her at all. "Since our kisses, I've felt this pull toward you. A mooring rope the Wellspring tied between my ribs and yours. I bought passage to Simta and I wandered, following that pull until I found you. When I passed beneath this window, I knew. So I climbed."

Matilde has said that Nightbirds feel a connection to their clients for a time, after the kiss, but she never said anything about this.

"I don't understand."

He smiles again, but this time she sees something manic in it.

"Don't you see? The gods mean for us to be together, Æsa. I know it. I *know*."

Her chin is trembling.

"Someone will come any minute," she says. "You can't be here when they do."

But he doesn't seem to hear her. Just draws her close, rough in his haste.

"Let them try to take you from me."

He starts pulling at her Nightingale gown. At first, she thinks he is just trying to hold her, but his urgency feels dangerous and dark.

"Enis." He is her friend—this isn't like him. "Stop it."

But he doesn't and she freezes, too terrified to break away.

His lips seek hers. Something rises in her chest, cool and crashing. It frees her voice. At last, she screams.

The door flies open and her Hawk is knocking Enis sideways. He is much bigger than her friend, but Enis fights like a half-crazed dog. They roll across the room, tumbling a vase, a chair. Æsa presses herself down next to the fireplace, eyes screwed shut. There's the sound of fists on flesh, then a crumpling. She wishes she were truly a bird so she could fly away.

Someone crouches before her, slow and quiet. She hears his breath catch as if in surprise or pain. Her eyes open, but she can't bring herself to look up at her Hawk, the boy tasked with protecting the Nightingale. Her shadow, though she doesn't know his face or name.

He doesn't touch her—it's forbidden.

Instead he says, "Kilventra ei'ish?"

The words are Illish, their meaning as many-layered as the sea. On the surface, it means *are you well?* But his twist on the first word—*ventra*, not *ventris*—makes it into something dearer. *Are you well, heart in mine?* That is what he just asked her. Her eyes fly up to meet his.

They're the color of the Illish coastline, blue-green-grey, and wide, as if he's as surprised by what he just said as she is.

It strikes her, all at once, that his mask is gone, and her face is uncovered. This is a rule they aren't supposed to break.

"I'm sorry, lass," he says in flawless Illish. "I don't know how he got past me."

She looks to Enis, sprawled out on the floor. "He came through the window."

The Hawk frowns. "I'll give him points for bravery, at least."

He leans forward, just slightly.

"Did he hurt you?"

She shakes her head. Her lips won't stop trembling.

"Don't worry. I'll take him down to the Madam. She'll sort it out."

She grabs his hand—another rule shattered, but Æsa has lost too much of home already.

"You can't."

The Hawk frowns. "He just attacked you."

Æsa tries to keep the desperation from her voice, but there is no hiding it.

"It's not his fault," she blurts. "It's mine."

The Hawk frowns. For a moment he just stares, like he is trying to read the depths of her. Then there's a noise behind one wall that sounds like footsteps, growing closer. The Hawk reaches for her mask where it's fallen to the floor.

"Put this on, quickly."

She ties it on with shaking fingers as he ties on his own, hiding his eyes.

Sayer and Matilde burst through the hidden door, both holding pointy objects.

"Dash it," Matilde pants, looking between the Hawk and Enis lying unconscious on the rug. "What happened?"

Æsa can't think. She has never seen the other girls with their masks on. The mesh makes their eyes into strange, dark pits.

"All's well," the Hawk says smoothly. "Her client got overexcited, is all."

The lie is well told, but she doesn't know how they're going to keep it. Any second her real client's going to come to the door.

"He attacked you?" Sayer says, pulling Æsa to her feet.

Panic floods. "No . . . well, yes, a little. But—"

"What did he say?" Matilde pokes Enis' foot with what appears to be . . . a fireplace spit? "He doesn't look like a zealous pater, but then I suppose not many do . . ."

Æsa's hands become fists. "Will you two just *listen*?"

Both girls fall silent.

"He isn't my client. He's my friend from back home."

There are noises in the hall. Æsa takes a shaky breath.

"I need you to help me hide him."

The masks shroud their expressions, but all three of their mouths have gone slack.

Matilde starts to speak, but Æsa cuts her off.

"Questions later. Right now, please just help me. *Please*."

There is a beat, and then her Hawk goes toward the door. Her heart sinks. But then he makes a gesture with his left hand: fingers curling like waves, thumb pressed down against them. Illish sailors use such symbols when the wind is too high to talk. It means *we sail for home*. It means *trust me*.

"I'll deal with them," he says, pointing toward the outer hall. "Put him in the secret passage. Make sure to tie and gag him. I'll carry him out when I get back."

He slips out of the room. Æsa's heart is pounding hard enough to break something inside her.

Sayer rushes forward. "Matilde, grab an arm. Æsa, grab some linens and the door."

She pulls down the thin curtain from the window. Her fellow Nightbirds drag her friend across the floor. Even unconscious, Enis has a worried wrinkle fixed between his brows.

"Honestly," Matilde grunts. "How can one redhead be this heavy?"

Sayer scowls. "Blazing cats, you're barely pulling him at *all*."

Once they have him in the narrow, hidden hall, they use what little light there is to bind and gag him. They've barely closed the door when Leta comes into the room. Even with her Madam Crow mask on, Æsa can tell she is livid.

"Here you are. All right, ladies?"

Æsa thinks she nods, but her thoughts have gone fuzzy.

"Stay here," Leta says. "I'll return shortly."

When the door closes again, Æsa slides down the wall and to the floor. Sayer tilts her mask back and sits down beside her. Her hands are stained, streaked red and black.

Æsa sucks in a breath. "Is that . . . blood?"

Sayer nods. "Probably."

Matilde sits on Æsa's other side, mask off, wine decanter in hand. With both girls so close, she feels that tingling sensation she always does when they touch. They're like birds on a line, something inside them each calling to the others. And yet it doesn't make her feel any safer than before.

"Well," Matilde says, voice just slightly shaky. "I think we could all use a fortifying drink."

Æsa takes a huge swig, coughing at the sudden burn. It's not wine—it's Illish whiskey.

"The redhead in the passage," Matilde says, taking back the bottle. "Are we sure letting him go is a good idea?"

"My Hawk will take care of him," Æsa says, hoping it's true. "Enis isn't a threat to us. Like I said, he is my friend."

"Friends don't grope friends," Sayer grumbles, pointing at Æsa's torn bodice.

Æsa reddens. "I know, but . . . he wasn't himself."

Both girls are looking at her, expectant. Her throat has gone uncomfortably tight. They aren't really her friends, and yet they just helped her without question. She owes them something. And yet when they ask her how Enis knew where she would be, Æsa lies. She says they have been sending each other letters, and in a moment of homesickness she told him where to find the Nightingale. *Don't tell Leta,* she pleads. She will send Æsa home, and her family needs her to stay here. It feels wrong to deceive them, but it is safer than the truth.

I couldn't sleep, after they took you, Enis said. *Couldn't eat.* It wasn't love that drove him. All those kisses back in Illan—her magic—did something to him. She saw it in the way he looked at her, eyes glazed like the men she's seen stumbling out of the Hollow Tree Inn. Empty of soul, full of nothing but want. An addiction.

Perhaps her kisses are poisonous after all.

In a secret room in the Phoenix Quarter, candles flicker. They lean toward Eli where he kneels on the floor. Eli hasn't spent much time in churches—until a few weeks ago, he spent most of his nights sleeping under stairwells, hoping not to get chased away. But then a pater came and gave him a bed, hot meals, and a purpose. The one that's brought him here tonight.

His eyes are level with the old stone altar. Two other boys kneel there too. Soon they will wear grey, like the men standing around them. It's the color of the ashes from a fire that once burned hot.

The chanting begins, deep and rhythmic. Eli shivers hard, but not with cold. He can only hope he is found worthy. He's never wanted anything as badly as he wants to be En Caska Dae. The Caska aren't like other paters he's met, all velvet robes and empty promises. They aren't afraid to fight for what is right.

A man in grey steps forward, out of shadow. His head and eyebrows are shaved, just like the rest, but his face is shiny with scars. Eli stares at the blood-colored handprint that stretches across his cheeks like warpaint. The Red Hand is the reason he's come here. He is their general in the war against sin.

He spreads his arms. "Eshamein Marren, we make of these boys an offering."

The Red Hand's voice reminds him of the ocean, which Eli sees often as he combs the muddy pylons of the port at low tide for scraps to sell. It's cleaner, that voice, but just as powerful. It pulls as surely as a current on the shore.

"Give them the light of your flaming sword. Accept their pledge."

The Red Hand cuts his palm. Blood wells and is caught in a wooden goblet. Once they've all been cut and bled, he pours the fluid over the altar, where it drips down the stone.

"We have let the Wellspring's gifts be abused for too long," the Hand rumbles. "We have allowed the people to flout Prohibition, using what's meant only for the gods. And what has it brought us? Corruption. Our once-great city has become a den of vice and sin."

Eli's fists clench. He knows the kind of damage bootleg magic can do. It killed his dame. Not that the sandpiper who sold it to her cared. Those who run this city don't, either. They take and take, never caring about those who live below them. But the Red Hand sees—he understands.

"What's worse, we have let witches rise again," the Hand says. "Our complacency has left a crack for such evil to slither through."

Eli shivers again. *Witches.* Girls who've stolen magic from the Wellspring, a holy thing that isn't meant to be theirs. The Red Hand says they hide in plain sight, looking as innocent as any other girl in Simta, but they are dangerous. Poisonous. Eli won't let himself be fooled.

"They are a wound, and we cannot let it fester. We must be the ones to rinse it clean."

The Red Hand closes his eyes, facing the altar.

"Marren, you once gave your life to banish witches.

Now these boys offer themselves as your soldiers in the fight against this rising tide. But first, they will prove their devotion."

Eli is the first to stand—he makes sure of it. The men around him chant as his skin crackles under the flame the Hand holds out. It hurts even more than the tattoo they inked into his skin, but he won't pull away from it. Not with the Red Hand's eyes on him, burning with the light of righteous fires.

"Will you cleanse this city of blasphemers?" he asks them.

Eli repeats the words as a statement—a promise. Together, they all recite Marren's prayer.

We light Marren's candle
and kindle his sword,
flames chasing shadows,
burning darkness away.
We make a fire,
a mighty fire,
a cleansing fire to cleanse the world.

– CHAPTER 3 –

TRUTH OR LIE

THE FIRE IN Leta's inner room is stifling. Matilde usually finds it a neat trick, the way she keeps it hot enough to ensure everyone's a little bit uncomfortable, making them more likely to spill truths. This morning, though, she has too much to hide.

Everyone is here: the Nightbirds perched together on a chaise, her dame and gran behind a painted screen, and Leta behind her desk, facing down their Hawks and Sparrows. Everyone is wearing their masks. She can't see their eyes, but she imagines they're as red-rimmed as hers are. After last night's excitement, she didn't sleep a wink.

Matilde reaches for more coffee as her Hawk makes his report. He is brief and brusque, as always. He's been with her for years, but she knows little of him outside his fondness for heathermints. Sayer's Hawk can't report, as whatever that horrid client managed to slip him knocked him out for most of the night and into this morning, so Æsa's tall, graceful Hawk steps forward.

His story is straightforward: He heard a sound of distress from the Nightingale's room, so he entered. She was upset, so he tried to calm her down. Then the Goldfinch and the Ptarmigan came in saying something about intruders, and he went to investigate. He's a much better liar than Æsa—smooth, unhurried. Not one word about the redhead they stashed behind the wall. Who knows what the Hawk did with him after that. He seems loyal to his Nightbird, at least. More so than the Madam, which is noteworthy. And the way Æsa leans forward as he speaks, hands bunched in her skirts, makes Matilde suspect that more passed between them last night than she's said.

She can't quite believe Æsa's story about telling her old friend where the Nightingale would be. And though she was vague about the boy's behavior, it clearly merited a swift intervention from her Hawk. Æsa's broken the rules—that much is certain. But it's not as if Matilde can throw stones.

After last night's events, the kiss she blew to Tenny Maylon seems almost like a trifle, and yet it isn't settling well. What would happen if she told her family? At best, they would be disappointed. At worst, would Dame try to use her boldness to make Matilde marry him?

She shakes off the thought as the Hawks and Sparrows file out, closing the door behind them. Her dame steps out from behind the folding screen painted with swans.

"Any of them could have been involved," she says. "We should dismiss them all and get new ones."

"They are loyal," Leta says. "I've made sure of it. Do you imagine such a flock is easy to replace?"

Leta takes off her Crow mask. She is stunning still, with the sweet face of a doll, though no one who knows her would dare

think she's safe to play with. Matilde's heard she was born not a Great House girl but a dockworker's daughter: the product, perhaps, of some House girl's wild youth. It isn't common for a Nightbird to crop up outside the Houses, but it happens. She's also heard that Leta once worked in a Smoky Row pleasure house, but it's hard to believe that rumor could be true.

Gran sits in a chair near the fire. "Even so, Leta. What happened last night was deeply troubling."

It makes no sense. There has always been a madam tasked with protecting the Nightbirds, but Leta is particularly fastidious. She's the one who introduced strict limits on how often one can visit a Nightbird, despite continued protests from the House lords and ladies. She's the reason the Nightbirds change locations and why clients come to see them blind. Madam Crow *loves* her rules, and she guards them fiercely. So how did such snakes find their way into her nest?

"An attack on a Nightbird," her dame spits. She has never liked Leta. "It's inexcusable. You're supposed to protect them."

Leta's expression hardens. "Lord Alewhin was Great House born, some country cousin of House Rochet. He had his sigil ring, and I had no reason to suspect him. These are the rules the Houses set."

"He almost *killed* her."

Before last night, Matilde had only seen a dead body once, when she was seven and her sire went to the waters. But where his face was placid in death, that client's was all malevolence, cheeks speckled with black spit and froth. She shudders. Beside her, Æsa does the same.

Sayer rips off her mask and stands up, stalking the purple rug's edges. She doesn't seem to like to sit still.

"He was a pater," she says. "He must have been. His eye-

brows looked like they'd been shaved recently, and he kept bringing up Marren."

Matilde has never been fond of the four Eshamein, the gods that form the cornerstone of Eudea's official religion, but Marren is the most odious of them all. In the days of the Great Revelations, say the paters, four men were gifted with magic from the Wellspring to accomplish noble deeds before they died, becoming gods. Marren's miracle was to rid the world of witches with his flaming phallic sword. Marren believed such girls corrupted the sacred Wellspring, which is what the church preaches. What flotsam. Any excuse to bring a strong woman down.

Leta nods. "The tattoo on his chest looks very much like a piece of the four-pointed star of the Four Gods. The one with Marren's symbol."

Sayer stops pacing. "I knew I recognized it. The flaming sword."

Æsa frowns. "But the paters don't mark themselves with ink. Pater Toth always said it tainted the blood."

Leta's expression is grim. "This pater appears to have been a very different breed."

Matilde scoffs. "But surely no House boy would spout that kind of fire and brimstone. He knows better."

After all, the Houses have always protected the Nightbirds. There may be some abstainers amongst them, but they would never hurt one of their own.

"He was a zealot, for certain," Leta says. "But it's hard to say if he was acting under orders from the Pontifex or someone else entirely. Unfortunately, dead men tell no tales."

Sayer is staring into the fire, her golden eyes bright with its light.

"He didn't want to kill me," she says. "He wanted to take

me somewhere, to someone. He tried to get me to drink some potion in a vial."

She looks . . . not scared. Perhaps haunted. Matilde finds herself wanting to lighten the mood.

"It's a good thing you were armed," she says. "And that I'm so very good with a poker."

Dame makes a scandalized noise, but the comment provokes a small grin from Sayer.

"I'm not convinced you knew what you were doing with it."

It isn't a thank you, but Matilde will take what she can get.

Leta gives them a pointed look. "How is it that you knew something was wrong in Sayer's room, Matilde?"

Matilde fights the urge to fidget. "I heard a noise."

"Your Hawk didn't hear it."

"Perhaps his mind was on other things. I don't know."

She isn't about to tell them all *I had a tingly feeling*. Not when even she doesn't know what it was. It was as if Sayer's distress made something rise inside her, pulling her forward, charged with the same fizzing sensation she got when she sat close to the girls in the Nightingale's room. It's puzzling: she never felt this with her past Nightbird sisters, and they were her friends, unlike these two.

Leta sighs. "Well, I will be questioning the head of House Rochet, but I would be surprised if he knows anything useful. I'm more concerned about who else might have sent him."

They all turn to look at Sayer. Her long-fingered hands have curled into fists.

"He said I was proof," she says, "of witches. He said that he would be rewarded for bringing me in."

Gran's expression tightens. "To whom, the Pontifex? Do you think the church sent that man?"

"I don't know," Leta says. "But if so, then the danger could be greater than we think."

Sayer and Æsa both stiffen, and no wonder. Every Nightbird hears the stories of what the church did to the Fyrebirds of old. Their zealous persecution is why there are so few girls with magic in them now. What would happen if the Pontifex and his brethren found out about the Nightbirds and the Houses that protect them? Would they start pulling House girls in for inquisition one by one?

Matilde takes a slow breath. The man was probably a rogue—an anomaly.

"He didn't succeed, at any rate," she says, crossing her legs at the ankle. "And whoever sent him can't know our true identities, or else they would've come for us directly."

Leta nods. "True, but I would still like to get some eyes and ears into the halls of Augustain's church to see what they can find out."

Gran stacks her hands in her lap. "Are we sure none of the other clients were involved?"

Leta taps her thigh. "Æsa's seemed oblivious. As her Hawk said, the client was halted while he was still in the hallway. He never reached the Nightingale's door."

Matilde looks to Sayer, who is looking at Æsa, whose gaze is fixed on the mask in her lap. Surely if the boy they helped her hide was a threat, she would say so? She seems determined to keep her redhead friend a secret. Matilde wants to trust Æsa, so for now, so will she.

"And what of Matilde's client?" Dame asks.

Leta's expression is hard to read. "By the time of the commotion, he'd been and gone already."

Gran's gaze sharpens. "Who was he?"

For a moment, it looks like Leta isn't going to answer, but Matilde knows this isn't a secret she can keep.

She puts down her coffee. "Dennan Hain came to see the Goldfinch. He's back in town, didn't you know?"

Teacups clatter. The silence that follows hangs, thick enough that she could slice and serve it alongside the cake no one has touched.

Her dame speaks first. "Am I to understand that you let the Bastard Prince see my daughter?"

"He is Great House born," Leta says. "It's his right to ask for access."

"But he's a *Vesten*. You know their stance on magic."

"He is not the suzerain. Matilde could have turned him away, had she wished."

Her dame's gaze swings back to Matilde. "What were you thinking?"

Annoyance flares. "I thought you wanted me married. Isn't the Goldfinch meant to be showing off her wares?"

"Not to him," she says, aghast. "He isn't even a true Vesten."

"Oura," Gran warns. "What's done is done."

Her words defend Matilde, but the censure in her gaze speaks volumes. *You should never have let him through the door*. Gran knows: Matilde confided in her all those years ago about kissing Dennan. When he disappeared, Gran told her to put it out of mind, but now . . .

Gran asks, "Matilde, did you sense any threat from him?"

Another, silent question crouches behind. *Did he know it was you behind the mask?*

She should confess, she knows. It's their rule: Lie, but never to each other. Not here, though. Matilde doesn't have the patience for one of dame's tirades, and she doesn't want to other

girls to know—not yet. She wants more time to think about what Dennan told her. She can believe that Epinine Vesten might be a threat, but not him. He's known about her magic for years and kept the secret, and that counts for something. They were friends, once. She wonders what they are now . . . what they could be.

"No." Matilde palms her golden locket. "He seemed like any other client."

Leta doesn't press, but Gran's gaze says that she plans to. Matilde dreads it. She wants Gran's council, but not her censure. Still, she will tell her everything that Dennan told her. She will know whether to share it with Leta.

"This is outrageous." Dame's voice is rising, high and shrill. "Letting in zealots and Vestens and who knows who else. It's as if you *want* them in danger."

Leta's expression goes sharp. "Say what you like. I know what you whisper when you think my doors are closed. But I've been one of these girls, and I would never hurt them. I've seen what happens when Nightbirds don't look after their own."

Leta glances right at Sayer, who stares back with a look that's almost mercenary. There is a story there. Plenty of secrets crouch in this room besides Matilde's.

Leta stands. "I will get my spies hunting for answers. Until we get them, you will see no more clients."

Her dame's eyes flash. "The Houses won't like it."

"We are exposed," Leta says slowly, as if she's talking to a child. "I will not compromise their safety further. Not until we understand the threat and can control it."

Gran speaks again. "Just remember, Leta. Closing to clients also has its dangers."

She gives Leta a speaking glance. Matilde tries to grasp the

meaning behind it, but it's like smoke and mirrors, illusions slipping through her fingers. "What do you mean?" she asks.

Gran smiles. "Nothing that need concern you, darling."

Her voice is kind, but somehow it still feels like a slap. What are they hiding? There are things the matriarchs don't want them to see.

– ESTRA DOOLE –

5 spoons henbane
3 pinches letha, dried and ground
2 shakes powdered sleepweed (Callistan variety preferred)
12 chokeberries, fresh
a slug of flavien syrup, aged 3+ years in clay
half a bowl of coastal water (from north of the Neck)
a pinch of cold ashes
2 fresh tears

Grind the dry ingredients. Break open the berries with your hands (wear gloves unless you want blue hands for eternity) and combine them with the powder in a kettle. Stir slowly over medium heat, counterclockwise, until it starts to smell of forgetting. Add the syrup and the water, then ashes, then tears.

Most of the books you find on sleeping potions will stop at that. But this recipe is old, made for dreams and confessions. As you stir in the tears, cast this spell:

Fix your stare, stranger,
And close your eyes,
Drift slowly, friend,
But do not die.

—FROM THE YELLOW ALCHEMIST'S RECIPE JOURNAL

Photo credit: Paul Gablonski

KATE J. ARMSTRONG has always had a fondness for adventure. After graduating college, she left her home state of Virginia and has never really looked back. She's explored many places and vocations, working as a high school English teacher and a nonfiction writer and editor for publishers such as National Geographic. In 2018 she started *The Exploress*, a women's history podcast with a cult following and over half a million downloads. She is also the co-host of *Pub Dates*, a podcast that takes readers backstage to join her on the journey to publication for the book you're holding in your hands right now. When she's not writing or recording, you will find Kate hiking mountains, trying out cocktails, finding excuses to dress up in historical attire, or reading way past her bedtime. She lives in Melbourne, Australia, with her husband and their noble greyhound, Galahad.