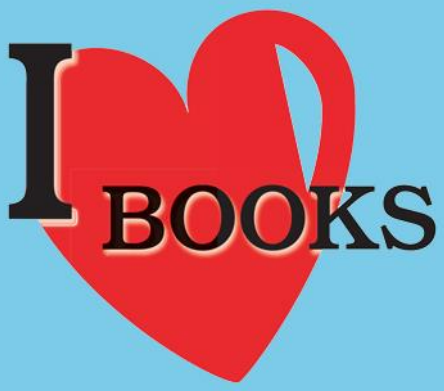


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Chapter One

Ivy hurtled headfirst through the darkness. Her brown curls blew into her face as the bag walls flapped noisily around her. 'Seb!' she shouted. 'Are you still there?'

A crack of light appeared in the distance.

About time.

She slowed as the crack grew into an opening, and then squeezed her way out of the hessian bag, her body expanding back to normal size like a balloon filling with water.

She found herself in a small, lavishly furnished room. Moonlight streamed through a single porthole window, illuminating a polished oak desk, leather armchair and deep-pile rug. Leaning against one wall was a boy with pale skin, messy blond hair, and green eyes just like hers.

'Seb, where are we?'

Her brother's cheeks bulged. 'Can't speak . . . Trying not to hurl.'

'We're on a ship,' answered a shaky voice behind her. 'And we're not alone.'

Ivy turned to find their friend Valian, an expression of distress on his tanned, angular face. He was kneeling beside the body of a man wearing a black uniform. The man lay sprawled across the floor, one arm above his head, the other squashed under his side. He looked about the same age as Ivy and Seb's parents – mid forties – with a curly blond beard and a white streak through his left eyebrow.

'Is he sleeping?' Ivy asked, crawling closer. The man's eyes were closed. She nudged his shoulder, but he was unresponsive.

Valian lowered his ear to the man's lips and then felt his neck. 'He's not breathing.'

'We've got to help him!'

'I don't think we can.' Valian lifted his fingers away, swallowing. 'He hasn't got a pulse.'

Ivy went still. 'You mean . . . ?'

'He's dead,' Valian said sombrely. 'He's still warm. It must've happened only recently—'

There was a loud bang as Seb bolted through a door, hand clamped over his mouth. Through the gap Ivy glimpsed a white marble bathroom. 'Maybe he tripped over the rug and fell,' she suggested. As she stood up, the floor swayed. On a tray in the corner a set of whisky glasses rattled.

Valian frowned. 'I don't think so; there's no bump on his head and no blood from a wound.' He got to his feet

and studied the cabin. Amid the jewelled lamps and gilt mirrors, his straggly dark hair, slashed skinny jeans and muddy red basketball shoes looked completely out of place. 'We need to find out what vessel we're on.'

'There's a badge on the man's jacket,' Ivy observed. Beneath a logo were some words. '*Chief Officer*,' she read. '*MV* Outlander.'

A toilet flushed and the door to the bathroom swung open. Seb wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his hoodie. 'Sorry – I couldn't hold it in any longer.'

Ivy crinkled her nose as he tramped into the centre of the cabin and slipped his mobile phone out of his jeans pocket. 'Can you just do something helpful?' she asked. 'You're the one who made us rush into this whole thing without a proper plan.'

Seb glared down at her. 'It's an experiment – I was using my initiative. I didn't know there'd be a dead person here.' He was broad-shouldered and tall, with the muscular arms of someone who – unfortunately for Ivy – did an hour's drum practice every evening. She didn't know how they were siblings; she was so slight.

Valian peered over Seb's shoulder. 'Can that device tell you where we are?'

Ivy still found it odd that Valian knew next to nothing about common technology.

'Hmmm.' Seb slid his finger across the phone a few times. 'GPS is working, but I'm on a different network

operator, so we must be somewhere outside the UK.' His eyes widened. 'Whoa. By the looks of this, we're just off the coast of Norway!'

'Norway?' Valian grabbed the hessian bag that Ivy had just crawled out of, and snatched at the paper luggage tag tied to the top. He read it twice. 'I definitely wrote the label correctly – it says, *Selena Grimes* – but what would she be up to in Norway?'

Seb jerked his head. 'Er, parent-napping? Blackmail? Torture? The Dirge probably do bad-guy stuff all over the world.'

A chill ran through Ivy's body. The Dirge was an organization that was so evil, just hearing their name left her cold. 'We don't know for sure that she's here yet. The label might not have worked.' Secretly she was hoping it hadn't. Selena Grimes was dangerous. The last time their paths had crossed Ivy had almost been eaten by Selena's pet wolf. 'Perhaps the bag can't take us directly to a person, only to a certain place, like all other uncommon bags?'

'This bag is *different*,' Valian insisted. 'You know that. The Great Uncommon Good are the five most powerful uncommon objects in existence – I'm telling you, this thing is capable of more than we know.'

Ivy considered the shabby old potato sack. It was strange to think that something so ordinary looking had the power to transport you thousands of miles in

only a few seconds. But that was the thing about all uncommon objects – even the most normal, everyday item could be hiding an extraordinary ability.

Seb squinted at the chief officer. 'What's that in his hand?'

Ivy turned her attention back to the body. There was something glinting in the man's grasp. Grateful that she was wearing gloves, she gently prised his fingers apart to reveal a tiny silver coin. It was bent in the middle and there was writing around the edge.

'A crooked sixpence,' she blurted, scrambling away. She'd recognize the coin anywhere – it was the Dirge's calling card.

'One of the Dirge murdered him,' Valian said with a scowl. 'The label on the bag *must* have worked; it's too much of a coincidence otherwise. Selena did this.'

Seb cast a sidelong glance at the door that led out into the rest of the ship. 'Selena must have left the cabin only moments before we arrived. Which means she's on board somewhere, possibly with other members of the Dirge.' He grabbed the Great Uncommon Bag off the floor. 'You were right; we didn't think this through. Let's get out of here.'

Ivy was about to raise an alarm to warn the crew when the bitter whiff of chemicals wafted into her face, making her blink. 'Yuck – where's that smell coming from?'

Valian sniffed and turned his gaze to the crooked sixpence in the chief officer's hand. 'Tongueweed,' he growled. 'I'd know the stench anywhere – the Dirge used it on my parents. It's a poison that makes you speak the truth right before you die. The coin's been coated in it; it must have penetrated the man's skin.'

Guilt tugged at Ivy's heart as she thought of Valian's mum and dad. 'We can't leave yet,' she told Seb. 'If we can find out why Selena killed this man and what she's doing here, it could help us understand what the Dirge are planning – and stop them.'

'Ivy, it's too dangerous!' Seb protested. 'Selena's already killed this guy; if she sees us here, she'll kill us too.'

Ivy wanted to tell her brother that he should have thought of that before he started all this, but there wasn't time to argue. 'We don't know how long Selena will be on board; we've got to take the opportunity now.'

'I've got something that'll help us,' Valian said. 'I mean, with the not-being-seen part. Can you find the layout of this ship on your device, Seb? It's called the MV *Outlander*.'

With a grunt of disapproval, Seb stuffed the Great Uncommon Bag inside his hoodie pocket and got out his phone. 'MV *Outlander* – here we go. It's a cargo ship that sails between Norway and London. There's three levels plus the engine room, and a big crane on the deck where the containers are stored.'

Ivy wondered why the Dirge would be interested in a common ship like the MV *Outlander*. 'Let's go up on deck,' she suggested. 'We can examine the containers. Perhaps the cargo will give us clues as to why the Dirge are here.'

'Good plan.' Valian stuffed a hand inside his leather jacket and brought out a small crystal perfume bottle. It was fitted with an ornate brass atomizer and filled with a small measure of dark liquid. 'A ship this big will be teeming with crew. We'll need to use this to keep ourselves hidden.' He shook the bottle, checking that there was liquid left in the bottom.

'What *is* that stuff?' Ivy asked, drawing closer.

Valian aimed the brass nozzle at her head. 'Technically it's just fountain water inside an uncommon perfume bottle, but most uncommoners call it liquid shadow. It enables the wearer to blend into any shadow they're touching. It won't make us totally invisible, but people tend to notice shadows a whole lot less than they notice actual humans.'

Ivy sniffed as the dark liquid fell in droplets on the shoulders of her navy duffel coat and into her hair. It smelled a bit like smoke.

'We'll have an hour before it evaporates and the effect wears off,' Valian warned, squirting the stuff over Seb before turning the spray on himself. 'Let's go.'

They shut the cabin door, leaving the chief officer's body where it lay. The passageway outside, with its

curved metal walls covered in rivet heads and grey gloss paint, was like a futuristic tunnel. The unnatural lighting cast shadows everywhere. Ivy stepped into the first one she came upon.

'No way!' Seb whispered, staring right at her. 'Ivy, you've disappeared.'

She reached forward but couldn't see her hand. She examined her body. There was no skirt, bobbly wool tights or scuffed white trainers to be seen. They seemed to have dissolved into the gloom. As an experiment, she extended her foot into the light, and a toe-shaped shadow appeared on the floor.

Valian signalled at them both to hurry up. 'Come on.'

They hastened along the corridor towards the stairs. The hull interior was stark and cramped, and echoed with strange noises. Ivy tried not to dwell on the warning signs everywhere – FIRE VALVE (MAIN SECTION), EXPLOSIVE HAZARD, LIFEBUOY, EMERGENCY DOOR.

She had only just grasped the handrail at the base of the stairwell when the stamp of heavy boots sounded overhead. Valian nose-dived into the darkness under the steps, taking Ivy and Seb with him. Ivy flattened herself against the wall, breathing heavily, as a group of sailors in navy uniforms came clattering down.

Incredible. The liquid shadow had worked.

Crewmen shouted orders in another language as they hurried through a heavy door into the next passage. When they were out of sight, Ivy, Seb and Valian left the shadows and scuttled up the steps.

Outside, the night air was filled with the crash and rumble of the ocean. Ivy stood with her legs apart as the ship swayed, her skin prickling in the cold. A string of electric lights rattled in the wind, illuminating the giant metal containers spread out across the deck. They were arranged in rows, with space for people to pass between, but the place seemed eerily empty. Valian pointed to the top of a large crane standing in the middle of them, and they headed towards it.

As they moved into the shadows, Valian and Seb disappeared. Ivy knew they were there somewhere but, unable to see them, she felt alone.

The huge containers were painted in bright colours, with thick steel bars securing the doors and serial numbers stamped on the front. Ivy examined each one carefully as she passed, but there was no clue to what they might hold.

Creeping by a red container, she heard a loud clang and froze. It sounded like something was moving *inside* it. Ivy jumped back as two dark shapes came gliding *through* the corrugated wall. She clamped a hand over her mouth to stop herself from gasping. Only one kind

of people could move through solid matter like that: *races of the dead.*

There wasn't enough light to see the pair clearly, but one was very tall with an odd-shaped head, and the other wore a long hooded cloak trimmed with white fur. Checking that she still had the appearance of a shadow, Ivy kept still. The cloaked figure drifted into a patch of moonlight and slid back her hood. A glossy dark plait fell to her waist.

Selena Grimes.

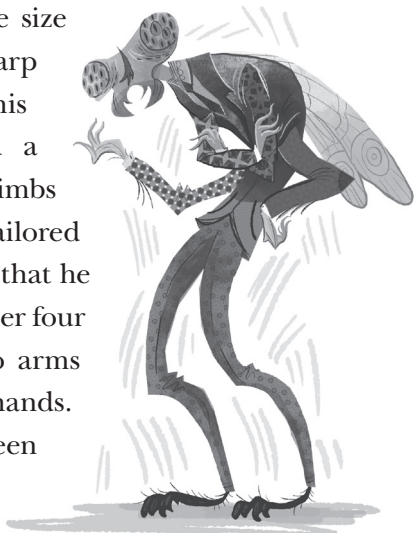
Ivy flinched. The ghoul had the same movie-star good looks as she remembered: glowing skin, angular cheekbones and bright red lips. Selena's dark hair framed her delicate face, making her piercing blue eyes look all the more intense.

'Even with the tongueweed, that fool told us nothing,' she snapped. Her steely voice made Ivy shudder. 'I should've killed him sooner. Are you certain the Jar of Shadows is on board?'

'The tracing serum I have been using to track it is highly accurate,' whistled Selena's companion. The voice sounded as if the owner was talking through a set of pan pipes. 'The jar is definitely on this ship; I would not have contacted you otherwise.'

The speaker stepped out of the darkness. He looked like a human-sized praying mantis, with smooth green skin and a flat, triangular head mounted with two

glowing yellow eyes the size of salad bowls. Sharp mandibles hung from his jaw, and Ivy counted a total of six stick-thin limbs protruding from his tailored emerald wool suit: two that he was using as legs; another four that were adapted into arms with thorny, clawed hands. The arches of silky green wings poked above his shoulder blades.



Ivy recoiled in horror. She wasn't sure what race of the dead he was; he certainly wasn't a ghoul like Selena.

'I will continue searching the cargo until the vessel docks,' he pledged. 'The ship is scheduled to arrive in London in the early hours.'

'London?' Selena's eyebrows rose in surprise. 'But that's perfect. Lundinor opens for spring Trade tomorrow; someone must be taking the jar there.' She smirked. 'They have no idea that the object has Pandora's power. Wait till the ship unloads, then hunt for the jar in Lundinor. And do it quickly.'

Mantis Man lowered his head. 'As you wish, Wolfsbane.'

Ivy shivered. Wolfsbane was Selena's code name. The other members of the Dirge – Ragwort, Blackclaw, Nightshade, Hemlock and Monkshood – were named after poisons too.

'And contact me again with any news,' Selena continued. 'It is imperative that I get hold of the jar as soon as possible. There is no time to waste.' She removed one of her black satin gloves and examined her fingers. The skin on her hand was scabbed and rotting, oozing with yellow pus. Ivy looked away in disgust. 'The Dirge's age in the light is coming.' Selena flicked a maggot off her knuckles. 'Soon it is the muckers who will understand what it's like to live in darkness.'

Ivy wasn't sure what Selena Grimes meant, but it couldn't be good. 'Muckers' came from the expression 'common as muck'. It was the horrible slang term for commoners – people who, by blood, weren't entitled to know anything about the uncommon world.

All of a sudden something hit her on the arm and she squeaked in shock. Seb was standing beside her, Valian a little way behind him. An angry hiss filled the air, making the hairs on the back of Ivy's neck stand on end.

'Spies,' Mantis Man growled, his antennae clicking.

The liquid shadow had worn off.

Selena shouted, 'GET THEM!'

With a great *whoosh*, Mantis Man extended his wings and rose into the air as Selena shot in Ivy's direction.

Ivy ran, her feet hammering across the deck. Sprinting ahead, Valian turned down the next aisle. Ivy raced after him and almost collided with Seb.

'Keep going!' he cried, pumping his arms. 'The bug guy is right behind us.'

They could hear the ominous beat of wings overhead. Seb snatched the Great Uncommon Bag out of his hoodie and whispered something into the opening.

'Throw it here,' Valian yelled.

Seb lobbed the bag, and Valian caught it in one hand before skidding to a halt by the ship's rail. The sea beyond was black. 'We have to jump,' he told them, panting. 'Trust me.' Using one hand for support, he hurdled the bar and leaped over the edge.

Seb shoved Ivy forward. 'Ivy – go!'

Scrambling up onto the rails, she snuck a look over her shoulder. Selena Grimes and Mantis Man were almost upon them. Inhaling a great lungful of air, she jumped into the waves.

Her limbs flailed. She spied the Great Uncommon Bag fluttering just out of reach, the heels of Valian's red basketball shoes disappearing inside.

'I-veeeeeeee!' Seb called, falling behind her.

Wind screamed in her ears as she forced her arms down and aimed her head at the opening, diving into the bag.