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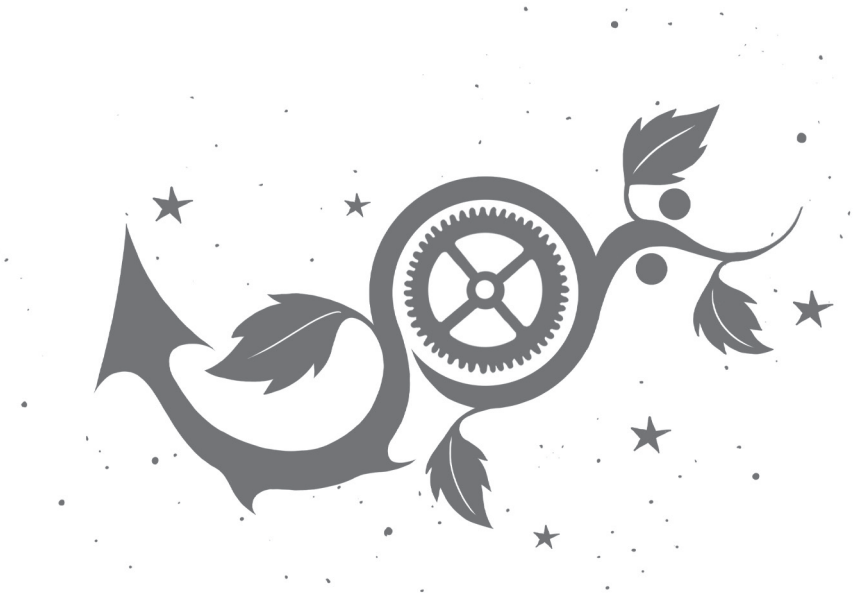


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For my "favourite" children,
Hattie and Dylan





Chapter One

Anglesey, North Wales, 1870

The first time I heard my house sing, I might have missed it altogether had the gulls not fallen silent at precisely that moment. I was out by the boathouse, securing my coracle against the rising tide. I have never seen the water in the strait so high. Sweeping my hair from my eyes, I happened to look up just as the strange sound came again.

Our house often takes on a menacing air at that time

of the day, but there was something different about it that evening, something that sent a shiver down my spine. As I ran up through the gardens, past the towering rhododendrons and under the weeping willows, I had the most peculiar feeling that the house was watching me – tempting me, daring me to come home.

I swung back briefly to face the water, confused by the sudden silence of the gulls. There were none to be seen. The heaving mass of water was now almost invisible under a veil of low-slung dark cloud.

The song came again and I looked up, ignoring the wind whipping at my face. It seemed to be coming from somewhere up high, from the top of the tower, from behind the battlements. The mournful lament became so intense it took my breath away.

As I reached the wide hardstanding to the front of the house, the sun slipped behind the bridge and a wave of grey swept overhead; in this strange half-light, for just a moment, the house almost seemed to sigh.

I ran towards the back of the house, under the archway, past the stables. Perhaps it was nothing, just the wind whistling through the turrets. But a bird might be trapped on the roof; I couldn't ignore that. I flung the back door open, ran through the pantry, through the kitchens, past the sleeping cats lined up in front of

the range and into the long corridor that leads to the main staircase. I didn't know what I was doing, but I knew I had to go up to the roof. If there was something trapped up there, I couldn't leave it to die.

As I ran up the stairs, the peculiar sound came again, more muffled now I was inside. It was long and low, and sent a shudder through my heart.

I reached the landing and tiptoed towards the small door that leads up to the attic. Easing the door open, I paused to listen.

Ignoring the little voice inside my head that told me to turn round, I stepped through the low doorway and climbed the steep, bare-boarded stairs up to the attic, using my hands to guide me. I reached the top of the stairs, wishing I'd thought to pull on a coat on my way up. A slim shaft of moonlight led me to the final flight of stairs that leads up to the roof. The boards under my feet vibrated as if someone nearby was beating a slow drum. With a pounding heart I climbed through the hatch and stepped out on to the flat lead-lined walkway that runs round the tower between the sloping roof to the left and the old battlements that overlook the waters of the strait. It was due to be a full moon that night, bringing with it a high spring tide. Waves were already lapping against our shingle beach, no doubt scooping up thousands of

pebbles and sweeping them out to sea.

A sudden shriek nearby made me jump, but it was just a family of passing gulls, squabbling somewhere out in the darkness.

Everything fell silent.

Even the waves seemed to still for a moment.

And then the song came again, loud and clear. This was no trapped bird, or other wild creature. The song was coming from all around, consuming me, its cool fingers clutching at me. It came from above and below, from the roof tiles, and the stone of the battlements.

I was alone on the roof of my house.

I was alone with the song of my house.

And then, with a great shudder, it just stopped. I stood motionless, suddenly feeling the intense cold, slowly coming to my senses. What was I doing up there? Had I lost my mind? I turned on my heels and fled along the walkway, tumbled through the little door, down the attic stairs, not caring one bit about the darkness as I raced to the safety of my room.



Chapter Two

That was three weeks ago now, and I haven't heard the noise since. I'd told Pa about it soon afterwards, but he'd laughed at me and said, as he always does, that I needed to rein in my overactive imagination.

He's already at the dining-room table when I come down for breakfast, hidden behind his newspaper. He lowers it just enough to see who has come in. Tudur is sitting by his side, in my usual seat.

"Good morning, Wren," Pa says. "Have you seen your aunt on your travels?"

"No," I say. "She's probably still getting dressed."

"At this time of the day?" he snaps.

I shrug. "I'm sure she's on her way." I take a seat, glancing at the serving table at the side of the room; it's empty apart from an oil lamp and a pair of large place mats. The door swings open and Alis comes in holding a steaming dish above her head. She's flanked by Gelert and Pelham, their snouts high as they inhale the scent of whatever she's carrying.

"Kippers," she says, rolling her eyes.

I jump up and grab hold of the dogs' collars, tugging them away from her, keeping hold of them until she's placed the dish at the back of the serving table. They sit next to me grudgingly, their wide eyes fixed on the dish, rivulets of drool dangling from their jowls.

"Someone needs to train that pair of oafs," Pa says. He looks at the door again. "Where *is* your aunt? Does she not realise what time it is?"

I've no idea why he thinks Aunty Efa's timekeeping is my responsibility. I blow out slowly, watching as a little white cloud forms in front of my face. The fire's been lit but it's still bitterly cold in here. It's dark too, darker than normal. The little lamp in the middle of the table

encloses us in its dull yellow embrace, but the far end of the room is lost in darkness. Someone could be sitting in the window seat and we'd never know they were there.

A sudden explosion of noise from down the corridor makes us all jump. It's Aunty Efa. The distinctive clickety-clack of her wheelchair becomes more clamorous as she enters. She toots her horn – a harsh interruption to the silence of the room. Pa shudders as the acrid tang of steam and smoke reaches us. Aunty Efa's steam-powered wheelchair *is* an unusual sight, but it gave her freedom to get about after the accident without relying on other people, so who can complain if it's a bit noisy? She toots her horn again, looking at Pa pointedly, and manoeuvres herself into place across the table from me. Steam belches from beneath her wheels as she comes to a standstill.

"Is breakfast ready?" she says, glancing at the serving table.

Tudur wafts her smoke away with a hand and pretends to cough, his eyes slipping to Pa, as if looking for his approval.

"I only just brought it in," Alis says. "It's still piping hot."

"That is not the point," Pa says, folding up his newspaper. "Breakfast is always served at eight, and it

is now five past."

Aunty Efa ignores him, instead nodding a brisk thank-you to Alis as she plonks a plate of kippers and eggs in front of her before serving the rest of us. Pa slides his spectacles into their silk case and tucks in. I look at Aunty Efa surreptitiously. Her hair is piled high on top of her head and held in place with an elaborate arrangement of wire and lace and something that looks like an oily rag. She notices me looking at her. "It's the latest fashion," she says, patting her hair. "From Paris, would you believe?"

"You look like a true Parisian lady," I say. "Very stylish."

Pa appraises her in the way he often does, eyebrows high, chin raised slightly. "You appear to have brought a quantity of engine oil with you to breakfast, dear."

Aunty Efa taps the rag that's entwined about her hair like a serpent. "And so indeed I have. Thank you for bringing it to my attention, Wigbert."

"You'll start a fashion for it!" I say. "Everyone in Beaumaris will be wearing them soon. You'll see."

She laughs. She probably came to breakfast dressed like this just to annoy him. He's too busy pulling bones from his fish to notice how she's narrowing her eyes at him.

I'm desperate to get out of here and on to the water.

I heard a rare bird was spotted out there yesterday, somewhere near Church Island. If I take my notebook with me, I might even get close enough to do a quick sketch.

"I'm going out in my coracle this morning," I say, to break the silence more than anything else.

"No, you are not," Pa replies. He hates me going out on the water, especially at this time of year, but he doesn't normally try to stop me.

"Yes, I am." I try to sound firm. I don't want to explain again how important it is to me, and that being out on the water is the best way to stop thinking about Ma.

"No, you are not, Wren, because I have arranged for Mrs Hughes from the institute to come over and work on your embroidery with you."

"I don't want to work on my embroidery, Pa!" I say. "It's a waste of time. And I'm no good at it."

"That is because you spend too much time on the water, when you should be honing your needlework skills."

I glare at him. I'll make sure I'm nowhere near the house when Mrs Hughes arrives. She's always telling me my fingers are too rough from all the time I spend outside, that I'm too impatient, that I'll never be a "proper young lady" if I can't learn to sit still for hours

at a time. And her breath smells of cabbages.

"You're too like your blasted mother," Pa hisses.

"Don't call her that," I cry. "She was brilliant, not blasted."

"Oh, so brilliant she went and got herself killed. What kind of mother does that, eh?"

I ball my fists and sink my fingernails into my palms. Even Tudur looks upset with Pa now. "How can you say that?" I shout.

"The problem is, Wren, you're going down the same path and, like her, you seem incapable of accepting your limitations." His face is flushed. He knows he's gone too far.

"She knew what she was doing," Aunty Efa hisses at Pa. "It's *you* who has the problem in that department, Wigbert."

Pa starts picking at the fish skin left on his plate, his brow furrowed.

"But you don't have to be like her, you know, Wren," Aunty Efa says. "One daredevil in the family was more than enough, considering what happened." She takes a sip of coffee. "And that sea breeze does horrible things to your hair."

I shouldn't have expected her to be on my side. All she's interested in is where her next dress is coming from

or whether I'll embarrass her in front of her friends. "I just want to look for a bird," I whisper.

Pa sighs. "Well, if you kill yourself, it'll be your fault. You know what those currents are like."

"I'm always careful," I say. I want to shout that if I wasn't careful every time I went out on the water, I'd be dead like Ma, but I bite my lip, slide my chair out and run from the room before he tries to stop me.

"So we'll cancel Mrs Hughes then, shall we?" Aunty Efa calls after me.

I don't reply.

On my way back to my room I glance at the correspondence tray, hoping something might have arrived from France, but it's empty apart from a small silver toothpick and a pair of spectacles.

★

It's choppier out on the water than I expected, and I struggle to control my coracle as I scud about on the grey waters in the shadow of the bridge. My boat bucks and twists and I move my body from side to side to keep it steady. The currents are even more vicious than normal today, and I paddle hard to keep a safe distance from the Swellies, the most dangerous part of this stretch of water. The cold air helps to calm my mind. I know I'm like my ma – Pa tells me often enough, as if that's

a bad thing. But she was clever and kind and talked to me about everything – about her dreams, and her huge, unwieldy ideas. Pa said once, after returning from a lock-in at the Royal Oak, that he thought he'd have been able to "break her in" like a horse, after my grandfather, the local doctor, had given up on her, but Ma was not to be licked into shape by any man.

I scan the waves with my binoculars, hoping to spot the bird everyone's been talking about. The red-necked grebe, hardly ever seen in these parts, especially in winter, was spotted just last week, according to Alis, but today there isn't a bird in sight. Even the gulls are hiding.

Eventually I give up; it's just too cold. Pa won't ask me how I got on. His only interest in birds is whether they fly slowly enough for him to shoot them or what type of display case will best suit their plumage.

It takes far longer than I expected to get back to the shore. High waves smack against the side of my boat, some leaping inside, threatening to drag my coracle and me down. I bale out water as quickly as it comes in, all the while paddling hard to get home.

I'm close to the shore when I spot a pile of white and grey feathers bobbing on the surface of the water nearby. I paddle towards it against the current, unsure what it might be. As I get closer, I realise it's a gull, tangled up

in a piece of fishing net and flapping desperately as it attempts to extract itself from its prison. "It's all right," I call. "I'll help you."

I ease my boat alongside it and lean out, but a current snatches it away from me. I stretch out a tiny bit further; I can't leave it to die. My frozen fingers almost make contact with the bird, but just as I'm close enough to grab it, it bobs out of reach. Muttering under my breath, I push my paddle into the water and follow it. I draw alongside it once more, but just as I reach out to lift it from the water, a wave slaps the side of my coracle. Not expecting the sudden movement, I topple out into the icy sea. Gasping for breath and inadvertently sucking salt water up into my nostrils, I swim towards the creature, and eventually manage to grab hold of it. I quickly spin round and, struggling against the weight of my heavy dress, swim back towards my boat, reaching it just as my feet touch rocky ground. I stagger out of the water, the bird dangling from my wrist, and haul my boat out, swearing like a fisherman.

As soon as I'm back on the beach, I collapse in a heavy, soggy heap and with shaking, numb fingers set about untangling the creature. Using my teeth and a foot to tear at the netting, I eventually set the bird free. It doesn't hang about to say thank you, but simply lifts

itself up with powerful wings, and is soon lost in the mass of low clouds.

Knowing I can't sit here for long in my wet clothes, I drag my boat up the beach, my skirts clinging to my legs. The sky is turning to a deep charcoal, suggesting a storm is on its way. I quickly secure my coracle and waddle up through the garden towards the house. The wind whistles through the battlements at the top of the tower; it's making a peculiar sound, like someone playing a tune through gapped teeth. I run under the archway to the side of the house, through the yard, wrapping my shawl tightly round my shoulders, and burst in through the back door.

Mrs Edwards, the cook, glances up as I pass. She's at the butcher's block, in a food-stained apron, hacking at a piece of meat with a cleaver. I've no idea what creature it once was but guess it's now something to do with supper.

"Hello, Wren," she says, looking me up and down with her eyebrows raised. I keep to the other side of the table as I pass, so she doesn't notice how drenched I am.

"Hello, Mrs Edwards," I reply. "Is that supper?"

"Not tonight's. For tomorrow. Fresh pheasant, it is. Shot by your pa. It's been hanging in the pantry for a good two weeks. Should be nice and tender."

"Hmm, delicious," I say, shuddering inwardly at the sight of the shining red flesh being tossed into a pile of bite-sized pieces.

"Not known as much of a shot normally, is he, your pa?" she says, her eyes gleaming. "Better make sure he knows how much you appreciate it!"

"I will," I say, briefly warming my legs in front of the range, before sloshing out of the kitchen.