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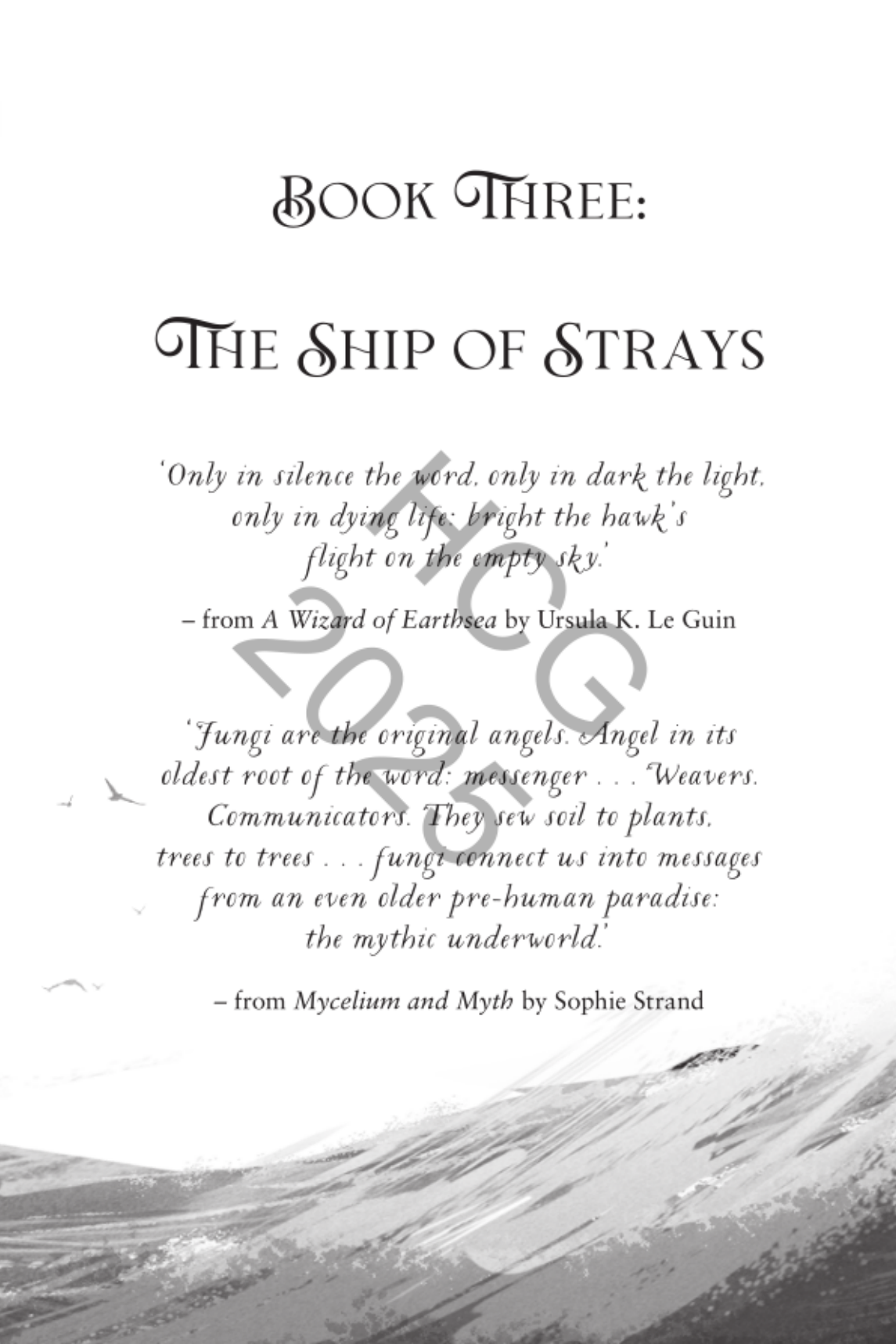
THE SHIP OF STRAYS

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

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

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

– from *Mycelium and Myth* by Sophie Strand





Wreaking

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

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

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

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

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

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

All of us torn from the same stars.



CHAPTER ONE

FALLEN STARS



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Can you keep it down?’

‘There!’ choked Ysolda.

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

‘*Huut*,’ yawned Safiyyah.

‘What?’ said Ysolda, her heart racing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Safiyyah snorted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Free for who?' challenged Cassandra.

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

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

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

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

'It was a worthy cause!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'I do come from Cedi.'

'I thought you were born in the Lakes?'

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

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

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

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

'*Huut*,' she said carefully. Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw Safiyyah smile.

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

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

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

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