

PROLOGUE

The Ala had gone to the library in search of hope. She walked through the stacks, one hand tucked into the pocket of her trench coat, the other trailing over the cracked spines of well-loved books and through the dust collected on those lesser-loved ones. The last patron had departed hours earlier, yet the Ala kept her sunglasses on and her scarf wrapped tightly around her head and neck. The dimness of the library made her black skin appear almost human dark, but the feathers she had in place of hair and the unrelieved blackness of her eyes, as wide and glossy as a raven's, were pure Avicen.

She was fond of books. They were an escape from responsibilities, from the other members of the Council of Elders, who looked to her—their only living Seer—for guidance, from the war that had raged for longer than most could remember. The last great battle had been fought more than a century ago, but the threat of violence lingered, each side waiting for the other to slip up, for that one tiny spark to

ignite a blaze beyond anyone's control. Her fingers stopped their slow dance as a title caught her eye: *A Tale of Two Cities*. It might be nice to read about someone else's war. Perhaps it would make her forget her own. She was about to pull the book off the shelf when she felt a feather-light tug on her coat pocket.

The Ala's hand shot out to grab the pickpocket's wrist. A girl, skinny and pale, clutched the Ala's coin purse in a tight, tiny fist. She stared at the Ala's exposed wrist, brown eyes unblinking.

"You've got feathers," said the girl.

The Ala couldn't remember the last time a human had seen her plumage and been so calm about it. Dropping the girl's wrist, the Ala pulled the sleeve down over her forearm, straightening her coat and scarf to hide the rest of her.

"May I have my wallet back?" It wasn't a wallet, not really. In place of money, it held a fine black powder that hummed with energy in the Ala's hand, but the girl didn't need to know that.

The thief looked up at her. "Why do you have feathers?"

"My wallet, please."

The girl did not budge. "Why are you wearing sunglasses inside?"

"Wallet. Now."

The girl looked at the small purse in her hand, seemed to consider it for a moment, then looked back at the Ala. Still she didn't relinquish the item in question. "Why are you wearing a scarf? It's June."

"You're very curious for a little girl," the Ala said. "And it's midnight. You aren't supposed to be here."

Without a moment's hesitation, the thief replied, "Neither are you."

The Ala couldn't not smile. "Touché. Where are your parents?"

The girl tensed, eyes darting around, scouting an escape. "None of your business."

"How about this," the Ala said, crouching down so she was level with the girl's eyes. "You tell me how you came to be in this library all alone in the middle of the night, and I'll tell you why I have feathers."

The girl studied her for a moment with a wariness at odds with her age. "I live here."

Scuffing the toe of one dirty white sneaker against the linoleum floor, the girl peered at the Ala from under thick brown lashes and added, "Who are you?"

A multitude of questions wrapped in a neat little package. Who are you? What are you? Why are you? The Ala gave the only answer she could. "I am the Ala."

"*The Ala?*" The girl rolled her eyes. "That doesn't sound like a real name."

"Your human tongue could never hope to pronounce mine," the Ala said.

The girl's eyes widened but she smiled, hesitantly, as though she wasn't quite used to it. "So what should I call you?"

"You may call me the Ala. Or Ala, for short."

The little thief scrunched her nose. "Isn't that like calling a cat 'cat'?"

"Perhaps," the Ala said. "But there are many cats in the world, and only one Ala."

The answer seemed to satisfy the girl. "Why are you

here? I've never seen anybody else in the library at night before."

"Sometimes," the Ala said, "when I'm feeling sad, I like to be around all these books. They're very good at making you forget your troubles. It's like having a million friends, wrapped in paper and scrawled in ink."

"Don't you have any normal friends?" the thief asked.

"No. Not as such." There was no melancholy to the Ala's answer. It was merely truth, stripped of adornment.

"That's sad." The girl slipped her hand into the Ala's, one small finger stroking the delicate feathers on her knuckles. "I don't have anyone either."

"And how is it that a child has escaped the notice of everyone who works here?"

A little shyly, the girl said, "I'm good at hiding. I had to do it a lot. Back home, I mean. Before I came here." With a determined nod, she added, "It's better here."

For the first time in as long as the Ala could remember, tears stung at the corner of her eyes.

"Sorry about taking your wallet." The girl held the coin purse up to the Ala. "I got hungry. If I'd known you were sad, I wouldn't have."

A tiny thief with a conscience. Would wonders never cease?

"What's your name?" the Ala asked.

The girl looked down but kept her hold on the Ala's hand. "I don't like it."

"Why not?"

Shrugging a single bony shoulder, the girl said, "I don't like the people who gave it to me."

The Ala's heart threatened to crumble to ashes. "Then maybe you should choose your own."

"I can do that?" the little thief asked, dubious.

"You can do anything you want," the Ala replied. "But think carefully on it. Names are not a thing to be rushed. There's power in names."

The girl smiled, and the Ala knew she would not be returning to the Nest alone that night. She had gone to the library in search of hope, but what she'd found instead was a child. It would take her many years to realize that the two were not so different.

CHAPTER ONE

10 YEARS LATER

Echo lived her life according to two rules, the first of which was simple: don't get caught.

She stepped gingerly into the antiques shop nestled deep in a back alley of Taipei's Shilin Night Market. Magic shimmered around the entrance like waves of air rising from hot cement on a sizzling summer's day. If Echo looked at it dead-on, she saw nothing but an unmarked metal door, but when she angled her head just right, she caught the faint gleam of protective wards, the kind that made the shop all but invisible, except to those who knew what they were looking for.

The neon light that filtered in from the market was the only illumination in the shop. Shelves lined the walls, packed with antiques in varied states of disrepair. A dismantled cuckoo clock lay on the table in the center of the

room, its bird dangling from a sad, limp spring. The warlock that owned the shop specialized in enchanting mundane objects, some of which had more nefarious purposes than others. The darkest spells left behind a residue, though Echo had been around magic long enough to be able to sense it, like a chill up her spine. As long as she avoided those objects, she'd be fine.

Most of the items on the table were either too rusty or too broken to be an option. A silver hand mirror was marred by a crack that divided its face in two. A rusted clock ticked away the seconds in reverse. Two halves of a heart-shaped locket lay in pieces, as if someone had smashed it with a hammer. The only object that appeared to be in working order was a music box. Its enamel paint was chipped and worn, but the flock of birds that graced its lid was drawn in lovely, elegant lines. Echo flipped the top open and a familiar tune drifted from the box as a tiny black bird rotated on its stand.

The magpie's lullaby, she thought, slipping her backpack off her shoulders. The Ala would love it, even if the concept of birthdays and the presents that accompanied them was all but lost on her.

Echo's hand was inches from the music box when the lights flared on. She snapped her head around to find a warlock standing in the shop's doorway. His chalky white eyes, the only thing that marked him as not quite human, zeroed in on Echo's hand.

"Caught you."

Crap. Some rules, it would seem, were meant to be broken.

"It's not what it looks like," Echo said. It wasn't her finest explanation, but it would have to do.

The warlock lifted a single eyebrow. “Really? Because it looks like you were planning on stealing from me.”

“Okay, so I guess it’s exactly what it looks like.” Echo’s eyes darted to a point behind the warlock. “Holy— What is that?”

For just a second, the warlock glanced over his shoulder, but it was all Echo needed. She grabbed the music box and shoved it in her bag, slinging the pack over her shoulder as she rushed forward, slamming into the warlock. He crashed to the floor with a shout as Echo bolted into the market square.

Rule number two, Echo thought, snagging a pork bun from a food stall as she sailed past it. *If you do get caught, run.*

The pavement was slick with the day’s drizzle, and her boots skidded as she turned a corner. The market was teeming with shoppers packed in shoulder to shoulder, and the rich odors of street cuisine mixed in the balmy air. Echo bit into the bun, wincing at the steam that burned her tongue. Hot, but delicious. It was a universal truth that stolen food tasted better than food that wasn’t stolen. Echo hopped over a murky puddle and nearly choked on a mouthful of sticky bread and roasted pork. Eating while running was harder than it looked.

She squeezed through the crowd, dodging rickety carts and gawking pedestrians. Sometimes being small paid off. The warlock on her tail was having a tougher time of it. Tourist-grade china clattered to the ground as he crashed into the pork bun stall and let loose a flurry of curses. Echo’s Mandarin was sparse, but she was pretty sure he’d just lobbed a barrage of colorful insults at her and her parentage.

People got so touchy when their things were stolen. Especially warlocks.

Echo ducked beneath a low-hanging awning and glanced over her shoulder. The warlock had fallen behind, and there was a respectable amount of distance between them now. She took another bite of pork bun, crumbs flying. A magic-wielding psycho with a grudge might have been hot on her heels, but she hadn't eaten since the slice of cold pizza she'd had for breakfast. Hunger waited for no woman. The warlock shouted for a pair of policemen to stop her as she blew past them. Fingers glanced against her sleeve, but she was gone before they found purchase.

Fan-flipping-tastic, Echo thought, fighting the ache building in her muscles. *Almost there.*

The brightly lit sign for the Jiantan metro station came into view, and she gasped with relief. Once she was in the station, all she had to do was find a door, any door, and she would be gone in a puff of smoke. Or rather, a puff of sooty black powder.

Echo dropped the remainder of the pork bun into a nearby bin and rummaged in her pocket for the small pouch she never left home without. She catapulted herself over the turnstile, tossing a cursory "Sorry!" at the flummoxed station attendant as the stampede of booted feet closed in.

There was a utility closet on the platform less than fifty yards ahead that Echo knew would do nicely. She dug her fingers into the pouch to capture a handful of powder. Shadow dust. It was a generous amount, but the leap from Taipei to Paris was hardly a modest one. Better to be safe than sorry, even if it meant running perilously low for the trip back to New York.

Echo smeared the dust against the doorjamb and hurtled through it. The warlock shouted at her, but his cry, along with the sound of trains pulling into the station and the buzz of conversation on the platform, died as soon as the door shut behind her. For a brief moment, all was darkness. It wasn't nearly as disorienting as it had been the first time she'd traveled through the in-between places of the world, but it never stopped being strange. In the empty space between all the heres and all the theres, there was no up, down, left, or right. With every step, the ground shifted and warped beneath her feet. Echo swallowed the bile rising in her throat and thrust her hand out, deaf and blind in the vacuum of darkness. When her palm connected with the peeling paint of a door beneath the Arc de Triomphe, she sighed with relief.

The Arc was a popular way station for travelers of the in-between. With any luck, the warlock would have a hell of a time tracking her. Tracing a person's progress through the in-between was difficult but not impossible, and the warlock's dark magic would make it that much easier for him. As much as Echo loved Paris in the spring, she wouldn't be able to stay for long. It was a shame, she thought. The parks were lovely this time of year.

She made her way to the opposite end of the Arc, scanning the crowd for the familiar sight of a cap pulled low to hide a shock of vibrant feathers coupled with a pair of aviators worth more than her entire wardrobe. Jasper was one of her more mercurial contacts, but he was usually true to his word. She was about to give up and pick a door to ferry her back to New York when she saw it: a flash of bronze skin and the glare of sunglasses. Jasper waved, and Echo broke into a grin before cutting through the crowd at a brisk clip.

Her voice was breathy with exertion when she reached him. “You got the stuff?” she asked.

Jasper slid a small turquoise box out of his messenger bag, and Echo noticed that the door beside him already had a smear of shadow dust on its frame. Jasper could be thoughtful when he tried, which wasn’t very often.

“Have I ever let you down?” he said.

Echo smiled. “Constantly.”

Jasper’s grin was equal parts dazzling and feral. He tossed the box to Echo with a wink strong enough to penetrate the reflective glass of his aviators. Echo popped up onto her toes to press a quick kiss to his cheek. She was through the door and into the in-between before he could summon a witty retort. She’d once told Jasper that he could have the last word when he pried it from her cold dead hands, and she meant it.

Crossing the threshold into the in-between was less jarring the second time around, but the contents of Echo’s stomach still gave a mighty heave. She groped through the black, grimacing when her hands made contact with something solid. The doors leading to Grand Central Station were always grimy, even on this side of the in-between.

New York, she thought. The city that never cleans.

Echo exited into one of the corridors branching out from the main concourse. She paced around the information booth at its center, weaving between gaggles of tourists taking pictures of the constellations on the ceiling and commuters awaiting their trains. Not one of them knew there was an entire world beneath their feet, invisible to human eyes. Well, to most human eyes. As in the warlock’s shop, one had to know what one was looking for. She’d give the warlock a handful of minutes to make an appearance. If he’d managed

to follow her from the Arc, she wanted to make sure she didn't lead him to her front door. Echo had no proof, but she was certain that warlocks made terrible houseguests.

Her stomach rumbled. A few bites of pork bun wasn't going to cut it. She spared a thought for the hidden room in the New York Public Library that she called home, and the half-eaten burrito she'd left sitting on her desk. Earlier that day, she'd swiped it from an unsuspecting college student as he napped, head pillowed on a battered copy of *Les Misérables*. There had been poetry to that minor act of thievery. It was the only reason she'd done it. She didn't need to steal food to survive, as she had when she was a child, but some opportunities were too good to pass up.

Echo rolled her neck, letting the tension that had built up in her muscles work its way down her arms and out her fingers. Inch by inch, she let herself relax, listening to the rumble of trains in and out of the station. It was as soothing as a lullaby. With a final glance around the concourse, she hefted her bag over her shoulder and headed toward the Vanderbilt Avenue exit. Home was a scant few blocks west of Grand Central, and there was a stolen burrito with her name on it.

CHAPTER TWO

Two kinds of people camped out in the New York Public Library so late at night. There were the scholars: Caffeine-addled college students. Obsessively meticulous PhD candidates. Ambitious academics angling for tenure. And then there were the people who had nowhere else to go: People who sought solace in the comforting musk of old books and the quiet sounds of other humans breathing, turning pages, and stretching in their creaky wooden chairs. People who wanted to know that they weren't alone while being left alone. People like Echo.

She moved through the library like a ghost, feet quieter than a whisper over its marble steps. It was late enough that no one bothered to raise their eyes from their books to take notice of a young woman, dressed in head-to-toe black, slinking around where she had no business. Echo had long ago established a route that led around staff members counting the minutes until they got off work. She didn't need to worry

about security cameras. America's librarians fought valiantly to keep their readers' privacy protected, and the library was a camera-free zone. It was one of the reasons why she'd chosen to make it her home.

She slipped through the library's narrow stacks, breathing in the familiar smell of stale books. As she climbed the darkened stairwell leading to her room, the air thickened with magic. The wards that the Ala had helped Echo set up pushed back at her, but the resistance was weak. They were designed to recognize her. Had anyone else stumbled upon the staircase, they would have turned back, remembering that they'd left the stove on or were running late for a meeting, but the spell rebounded off her.

At the top of the stairs was a door, as beige and plain as any other utility closet, but it too had magic all its own. Echo slipped her Swiss Army knife from her back pocket and flicked it open. She pressed the tip of the small knife into the pad of her pinkie and watched a bead of blood well up.

"By my blood," Echo whispered.

She touched the drop of scarlet to the door, and the air crackled with electricity, raising the fine hairs at the back of her neck. A quiet click sounded, and the door unlocked. Just as she did every time she entered the cramped room overflowing with treasures she'd liberated over the years, she kicked the door shut behind her and said, to no one in particular, "Honey, I'm home."

The silence that answered was a welcome change from the shrill symphony of Taipei and the cacophonous crowds of New York at rush hour. Echo slung her bag onto the floor beside the writing desk she'd salvaged from the library's

recycling pile and collapsed on her chair. She flicked on the fairy lights strung around the room, casting the cozy space in a warm glow.

Before her lay the burrito she'd been dreaming about, surrounded by the odds and ends that decorated every available surface of her room. There were tiny jade elephants from Phuket. Geodes from amethyst mines in South Korea. An original Fabergé egg, encrusted with rubies and trimmed with gold. Surrounding it all were stacks of books, crammed on every available surface, piled on top of each other in teetering towers. Some Echo had read a dozen times, others not at all. Their mere presence was a comfort. She hoarded them just as eagerly as she hoarded her other treasures. Her seven-year-old self had decided that stealing books was morally bankrupt, but since the books hadn't left the library—they'd merely been relocated—it wasn't *technically* stealing. Echo looked around at her sea of tomes, and a single word came to mind: *tsundoku*.

It was the Japanese word for letting books pile up without reading them all. Words were another thing Echo hoarded. She'd started that collection long before she'd ever come to the library, back when she lived in a house she preferred not to remember, with a family she'd have been happier forgetting. Back then, the only books she'd had belonged to a set of outdated encyclopedias. She'd had few possessions to call her own, but she'd always had her words. And now she had a trove full of stolen treasures, some more edible than others.

She raised the burrito to her lips, poised to take a bite, when the sound of fluttering feathers interrupted her. Only one person had the ability to bypass her wards without

raising a single alarm, and she never bothered to knock. Echo sighed. *Rude.*

“You know, I’ve heard that in some cultures,” Echo began, “people knock. But then, that could just be idle gossip.”

She swiveled in her chair, burrito in hand. The Ala sat on the corner of Echo’s bed, black feathers ruffling gently, as if caught on a breeze. But there was no breeze. There was only the Ala and the slight charge to the air that accompanied her power.

“Don’t be moody,” the Ala said, smoothing her arm feathers. “It makes you sound positively adolescent.”

Echo took an exaggerated bite of the burrito and spoke around a mouthful of rice and beans. “Truth in advertising.” The Ala frowned. Echo swallowed. “I *am* adolescent.” If Echo had abysmal table manners, the Ala had only herself to blame.

“Only when it suits you,” the Ala said.

Chewing with her mouth open was a perfectly reasonable response as far as Echo was concerned.

“Anyway,” the Ala sighed, surveying the shelves overflowing with shiny knickknacks of every variety, “I’m glad you’ve returned, my little magpie. Steal anything nice today?”

Echo pushed her backpack toward the Ala with a toe. “As a matter of fact, I did. Happy birthday.”

The Ala tutted, but the sound was more pleased than disappointed. “I don’t understand your obsession with birthdays. I’m far too old to remember mine.”

“I know, and that’s why I assigned one to you,” Echo said. “Now open it. My bacon was almost burned by a warlock getting that thing.”

“Just one?” The Ala’s words were tinged with laughter. She slipped the music box from the backpack, handling it with more care than it looked like it deserved. “I wouldn’t think a single warlock would be a problem for such a talented thief. You did, after all, boast of your ability to—what did you call it—‘B and E’ with the best of them.”

Echo scowled, though the effect was mitigated by the shredded cheese dangling from her lower lip. “Throw that back in my face, why don’t you?”

“If I didn’t, how would you ever learn the folly of your arrogance?” A gentle smile softened the Ala’s chiding. “The young always think they’re invincible, right until the moment they learn otherwise. Usually, the hard way.”

Echo’s only response was a half shrug. The Ala cast a glance about the room, and Echo wondered what it looked like to someone besides herself. Books piled precariously high on every surface. Pilfered jewels worth enough to pay for college twice over. A riot of crinkled candy bar wrappers. It was a mess, but it was her mess. From the wrinkle forming between the Ala’s brows, Echo didn’t think she appreciated the significance of that.

“Why do you stay here, Echo? You can come to the Nest and live with us. I know a fair few Avicelings that wouldn’t mind having you near.”

“I need my space” was all Echo said.

What she didn’t say was that she needed space away from the Avicen. Her own smooth skin, bare of the colorful feathers that decorated their limbs, was enough to signal that she didn’t belong. She didn’t need their sidelong stares to remind her that she was among them but not of them. And stare they did. As if her presence disrupted the natural

order of things. They might have gotten used to Echo over the years, but that didn't mean they had to like her.

The library was her home. Books didn't give her dirty looks or whisper snide comments under their breath. Books didn't judge. Books had been her only friends before the Ala had found her, alone and hungry, and whisked her away to the Avicen Nest. These books were her family, her teachers, her companions. They had remained loyal to her, so she would remain loyal to them.

The Ala's weary sigh was as familiar a sound to Echo as the beating of her own heart. "Fine. Have it your way." She looked down at the music box in her hands. "This is lovely."

Echo shrugged, but she couldn't fight the pleased grin that found its way to her face. "It was the best I could do, given the circumstances."

The Ala cranked the knob at the base of the music box a few times before lifting the lid. The little bird spun in place as the tinny melody wafted into the air.

"The magpie's lullaby," Echo said. "That's why I picked it." She lazily waved her fingers in the air as though she were conducting a tiny orchestra. "*One for sorrow, two for mirth.*"

The Ala smiled fondly. "*Three for a funeral and four for a birth.*"

"*Five for silver, six for gold,*" Echo sang. They finished the last line together. "*And seven for a secret not to be told.*"

Just as the last note rang out, a compartment slid open near the base of the box. It had blended so seamlessly with the lacquered wood that Echo hadn't even noticed it. The Ala removed a folded piece of paper from the compartment. "What's that?" Echo asked.

The Ala unfolded it with careful fingers. She cocked her head to the side, gaze still locked on the paper. “What made you choose this music box?” she asked. Her voice was low and cautious, as if the words were chosen with the utmost care.

“I thought it was pretty,” Echo said. “And it played our lullaby.” She leaned forward to peer at the paper, but her view was blocked by the Ala’s hands. “What is that?”

The Ala rose to her feet, folding the paper once more, movements quick and precise. She tucked it into one of the pockets hidden in the folds of her gown. “Come. We can discuss it at the Nest.”

“Can it wait?” Echo asked, waving the burrito at the Ala. Little bits of rice and cheese plopped onto her lap. “I’m about to go to town on this burrito.”

The Ala’s arched eyebrow was all the answer Echo needed.

“Fine,” she mumbled, placing the burrito back in its foil. It looked so sad, alone and half eaten. It was downright mournful. She stood, brushing off her jeans and picking up her backpack. “But this had better be worth it.”

“Oh, it will be,” the Ala said, sprinkling a handful of shadow dust into the air around them. The inky black tendrils of the in-between snaked around her legs, and Echo’s stomach gave a preemptive lurch. Traveling through the in-between was never fun, but without the anchoring solidity of a doorway, it was a wretched experience. The Ala held out a hand to Echo. “Remind me, child, have I ever told you the story of the firebird?”