

THE  
GIRL  
WHO  
GREW  
WINGS  
ANNA WATERWORTH

Chicken  
House

2 PALMER STREET, FROME.  
SOMERSET BA11 1DS

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*For Simon*  
*You hold the hand inside me*



## PROLOGUE

*First there was nothing. Then there were three: the Moon Goddess, the Sun God and his Divine Shadow. Both the Sun God and his Divine Shadow loved the Moon and craved her affection, but she could love only one. She chose the Sun. And from their union came children. Mankind.*

*What of the Divine Shadow? Filled with jealousy, he slithered beneath the Earth and created a land of eternal ice – cold enough to numb the most broken of hearts. And every year, from this Underworld, he snatches a peek over the horizon to spy upon his love, gripping the Earth in his wintry claws.*





## ICARI

**D**emons of the Underworld do not deserve their wings, we mortals do. Not to fly, but to flee, for even a pinch of powder ground from their milk-white feathers allows us to escape our earthly pains. Mama and I are Healers, so we're permitted to possess and administer the silver dust known as devil wing for medicinal purposes only. We are not, under any circumstance, allowed to trade or sell it; this privilege is reserved for the High Priest and noblemen, for whilst devil wing numbs pain, it soon makes slaves of those who ingest it, and he who controls the drug, controls the addict.

Power begets power.

So it's no surprise that my limbs shake as Mama and I trek through the oasis to the marketplace, one vial each of devil wing hidden in our apron pockets. Mama said we only needed one vial, but we brought another just in case – sometimes traders can get greedy. The vials themselves are no bigger than amulets, yet the closer we get to the village, the heavier they grow. Soon they'll be boulders that bend our spines.

Mama and I are not criminals. We are in the business of helping the sick, not nurturing addiction. Yet our sanatorium

is unusually full, draining the shelves of ointments and linen wraps, and devil wing is the only thing we have to trade of any worth. I inhale deeply, trying to still my nerves, a nest of vipers in my belly.

‘It will be fine, Icarì,’ Mama whispers as we wind our way through the huddle of mud huts towards the village agora. ‘Nothing I haven’t done before. Try not to fidget so. You are ten years and six, practically an adult.’ Yet despite her words, her knuckles protrude from her fists like polished stones as she grips her medical satchel, a telltale sign she’s as anxious as me.

The scent of moist earth and jasmine blossom makes way for that of plaited breads and flower oils as the agora comes into view, a large clearing in the mud huts and sycamores. Normally, I love the agora – the clamour of people, the children playing with stacking stones, the air thick and moist with river dew. Normally, I don’t have a vial of devil wing stashed in my apron, weighted with the possibility of twenty public lashings.

Today is market day, and the expanse of sunbaked mud hides beneath the usual selection of higgledy-piggledy stalls, set out in a crescent shape reaching from the marble temple of Father Sun, Guardian of Life, at one end, to the stone monument of Mother Moon, Guardian of Death, at the other. Locals and traders from nearby villages gather to sell clay pots and woven papyrus baskets, spools of bright fabrics, and hampers filled with barley or salted meats. A boy turns a desert hog on a giant spit whilst the flames hiss their objection beneath; the smell of roasted flesh taints the air, causing my mouth to fill with saliva.

The appearance of the city guard is unusual – they generally don't care what goes on beyond the city walls – yet still I'm relieved when I note their absence. As if reading my thoughts, Mama squeezes my arm and smiles her soft smile.

'We will be quick,' she says. 'Father Sun will keep us safe. And I know the trader, remember? He's expecting us.'

As we cross the agora, she glances to the Sun Temple, a thin needle of grey barely able to contain one tenth of the villagers in worship. The symbol of the Sun God gazes down at us, the face of the temple: a gold disc with doleful eyes and a sheath of barley slung across its middle. He is the God of the Healer, so naturally, I glance at him and kiss my fist, a sign of respect. But my eyes, ever curious, drift without permission towards the monument of Mother Moon – Goddess of the Embalmer – at the opposite end of the agora.

'Icari,' Mama whispers, following my line of sight. 'Remember your Calling.'

'Surely there is no harm in looking, Mama.'

She breathes out slowly through her teeth.

Only a lucky few are born with the Calling, meaning they are able to call on one of the Celestial Trio: Father Sun, Mother Moon or the Divine Shadow. I am a Healer, which means I have the Sun God in my veins, enhancing my ability to treat disease and injury, just like Mama. Embalmers, however, call on the Moon Goddess, preserving the dead with such skill, their bodies never decay, never returning to the dirt from whence they came. And the Alchemists, the rarest and most feared of all the gifted, summon the power of the Divine Shadow, enabling them to transmute bad into good, be that rust-coated metal to gold, damaged crops into



fields that grow tall and thrive, or the wildest of storms into the calmest of skies.

It is only permitted to practise one Calling in the Sunlands – indeed, it is only permitted to *possess* one – so when Mama discovered she had two in her blood, Healer and Alchemist, a target was painted upon her head, splashed in colours of fear and envy. She only practises as a Healer now, and so far, she has escaped all punishment but for idle gossip and the occasional jibe, for Healers are well-loved.

‘Come, Icari,’ Mama says, pulling me from my thoughts.

I follow her towards a stall slightly removed from the others; a misplaced tooth in a perfect smile. I have never seen a stall like this before, magical and disturbing in equal measure. Row upon row of glass bottles glisten in the heat, some containing jewel-bright liquids flecked with golds or fragments of petals, others stuffed with coiled snakes submerged in vinegar, or animal paws preserved in vivid powders. On either side of the stall’s wooden frame, sheets of starched linen are displayed like flags, pinned with sun-dried scorpions and lizards. One such sheet holds an array of butterflies, their wings fanned out and tacked in position. A small whimper escapes my mouth.

Mama’s arm is around my shoulder in a heartbeat. ‘Worry not, they are free now.’

I know what she means: free to fly to Mother Moon and rest for eternity with the stars, free from the hardship of life. But my eyes still smart at the thought of their pretty, flightless wings forever frozen in this outstretched position, as if death plays a cruel joke, or the Divine Shadow himself mocks them.

A trader steps from behind the stall. He wears the simple linen tunic of a male villager, yet the knowing, sun-wrinkled look of a traveller. When he sees Mama, recognition flashes on his face, though he covers it swiftly with a neutral bow of his head.

Mama's hand slips from my back. 'We need bone dust and the tips of the eucalyptus leaf, if you have them.' She pauses. 'And mint-infused linen wraps.'

'Come, won't you see for yourself, Healer?' His voice brims with warmth.

Mama slips inside the stall, and I let my eyes wander, the anxiety finally dissipating in my gut. Soon, the deal will be done.

Beyond the mud huts, across the oasis, the city Appollis climbs up the great mountain of the same name, and crowing from the peak is the citadel, home to the High Priest of the Sunlands, with palaces and temples of marble and gold. This is where Mama trained as an Alchemist over twenty years ago, though she rarely talks of it now. Poorer folk like us live outside the city walls in the oasis that rings the foot of the mountain. The oasis is as bountiful as it is beautiful and lies between Appollis and the Redland desert, providing the city a buffer from sand clouds, desert beasts and the fire-viper-haired witches of the Farlands, who are said to steal women and turn men to stone with only a glance.

Away from Appollis, the Nubi river peeks between the trees, a ribbon of blue that feeds the oasis. The heat in the agora is unbearable, stripped of any shade, yet hemmed in by trees and buildings that block the river breeze, and I gaze at the waters, longing to throw off my tunic and cool my

skin in its icy depths, allowing it to revive me as it does the whole oasis.

On the edge of the agora, something strange catches my eye. A pile of dried grass and wood, of loose desert weeds and twists of old bark; a pile made strange by the fact it has clearly been gathered in the Redlands where the ground grows cracked and arid, and brought to the oasis in preparation for a bonfire.

‘Why would they build a bonfire there?’ I call to Mama.

‘What’s that, dear-heart?’ She moves towards me, temporarily abandoning the deal.

I point. ‘Look. Someone’s built a bonfire on the treeline.’ I glance at Mama. ‘Don’t they normally have bonfires in the middle of the agora, away from the huts and the plants?’

Fear tremors beneath her features. ‘Yes, and not on market day.’ Her voice is hollow, removed. She looks at the trader, her face hardening, then moves towards me, stretching out her palm in a gesture that is both pleading and demanding. ‘Give me the devil wing, Icari.’

Glancing about me, I shake my head, alarmed she would talk of it so openly. ‘But . . . people might see.’

‘Now is not the time to argue – just give it to me.’ Her voice is all spikes and angles, completely unfamiliar, and I recoil as if slapped.

‘Mama? What’s the matter?’

‘If they catch you with it . . .’

‘If *who* catches me?’ I close my fist firmly around the vial in my apron.

Her eyes slide away from me, her expression pulling between fear and affection. The name of the High Priest

leaves her lips in a whisper. ‘Uriel.’

Following her gaze, I find him part hidden in the treeline, his robes of silver and gold sparkling amidst the shadows. Despite the arrogant tilt of his chin, he is alarmingly handsome, with a regal jaw and a shock of charcoal hair spilling on to light brown skin. On his head sits an ornate headdress of gold-and-silver vines that hold the symbol of the Alchemist to his forehead – a wisp of shadow, snaking upwards like a plume of smoke, made all the darker by the backdrop of a golden sun.

The High Priest is the most powerful man and Alchemist in the Sunlands. Mama once told me that she trained with him at the citadel, though it is hard to imagine their paths merging; everything about him shouts of wealth and importance, whereas Mama remains humble and poor.

Beside him stands a tall lady, whose black gown and silver headdress tell me she’s Madame Embalmer, tutor to the embalming students at the citadel. Indeed, her silver-streaked hair and milk-pale skin suggest she’s so dedicated to Mother Moon, she’s modelled her look on the goddess herself. Madame’s eyes lock on to Mama, and she clasps Uriel’s arm as if holding him at bay. Her lips move, a frantic blur, and whilst I’m unable to hear what she’s saying, I can tell from the panic in her expression that she’s trying to talk the High Priest out of something.

‘Mama? What’s happening?’ My voice trembles. What could Uriel want with our little village?

He holds Mama’s gaze for a moment, then raises a hand.

Two burly guards appear beside Madame Embalmer and guide her away, even as her desperation rises.

Madame's voice peaks and I catch her words on the breeze. 'Don't do this, Uriel, I beg of you. There must be another way.'

I'm about to ask Mama what Madame means, when more guards emerge, stepping from behind trees and huts, filtering through the crowds and converging like a swarm of locusts before descending upon us. Terror unfurls through my body and I reach towards Mama, whose face holds the reflection of my own – features pulled wide by panic. For a moment, our fingers connect, then the gruff hands of the soldiers are upon us, wrenching us apart.

The guards' tunics are slashed diagonally down the middle, one half gold and boasting the symbol of Father Sun, and the other, silver, with Mother Moon holding court. If it weren't for the long spears clutched in their hands and the crossbows slung across their backs, I would appreciate gazing upon their splendour.

Two guards hold me steady, expecting me to fight, their fingers digging into the exposed flesh of my upper arm. They needn't have bothered. Mama once told me that fear divides us into three groups: the fighters, the runners and the statues. Sephie, my twin sister, is without doubt a fighter. I'd always assumed I'd be a runner, but current circumstances suggest I am a statue. So as well as being completely paralysed, unable to snatch a breath, I'm crushed by disappointment.

A broad guard shoves Mama's arm behind her back, ignoring her yelp of pain. Even this isn't enough to awaken my courage. My ears ring, my heart slams against my ribs, and the vial inside my apron is now heavier than a hundred stones, so the guards have to drag me to the centre of the

agora behind my mama.

*The punishment for the illicit sale of devil wing is twenty public lashings.*

An explosion of adrenaline floods my system and the world tilts.

A crowd begins to form, watching us with sad, helpless eyes. Despite the whispers of witchcraft, Mama is well-loved by the villagers – our whole family is, for it is to us they come when they are at their most vulnerable, and we never turn them away.

A man wearing a sneer and a headband of leaves dipped in gold, denoting his status as a general, steps towards us. His face reminds me of the pickled snake in the jar, with its pale, lifeless skin, black wide-set eyes, and a broad mouth with lips so thin it's as if they've been removed. He leans towards Mama and in one fluid motion plucks the vial from her apron. The silver powder sparkles within, a dusting of frost, and he holds it to the sun as if examining a jewel, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

'Devil wing?' Even his voice is a snake – fanged and quick – and when he looks at Mama, violence simmers in his eyes.

I would do anything to help Mama, for she is my best friend, my mentor, my world, and I know that not having reached my eighteenth birthday yet, any judgement of me will be far softer than any of her. So why can't I say that the devil wing is mine? Fear has turned my words into leaden balls, which clank around my belly, too heavy to rise up my throat, let alone burst from my mouth.

Whatever happens to Mama now, it will be my fault.