

READER REVIEWS

‘**Phenomenal** . . . a perfect 5-star review. It delves into a fictional war, intricate politics and profound love. The characters are both heartbreakingly lovable and remarkably resilient. I was personally held hostage by this book until the final pages.

I will be waiting for the next release.’

‘An **extraordinary** debut that questions the cost of power, the dangerous game of politics and the ability to trust even in a time of chaos.’

‘**Epic** . . . the wordbuilding is nothing short of amazing. Moira keeps giving you hope and then crushes it again.’

‘**Captivating** . . . you become so invested in each of the characters.’

‘5 stars from me . . . **Loved every single second** reading it.’

‘This book was amazing, I couldn’t put it down. It’s a **heart-wrenching** story and we’re only really into the beginning of what’s to come! I loved this so much.’

‘The almost folkloric juxtaposition between the pretty perfection of the town and its folk and their hidden actions are chilling and believable. This took me by surprise and I can see it being a **big hit**.’

‘**Easiest 5 stars ever** . . . anyone who loved *The Handmaid’s Tale*, will adore this book.’

‘Brilliant! I loved it so much and was SO sad to finish it.
When is the next one coming?’

‘I read this all weekend and couldn’t stop! **A classic.**’

‘Loved it. How long do I have to wait for the next one?’

‘The Chrysalids is one of my favourite novels and by merging its themes of empathy, communication and imagination with that of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Songlight* stands as a dystopia that addresses many of the most urgent topics of today. Written with passion, compassion and propulsive energy, **it will enthrall and inspire a new generation**, much as *The Hunger Games* did.’

‘It is a **brilliant, page-turning** read.’

‘A joy to read. I loved Elsa, she had moments of strength and extreme vulnerability. The world, and songlight, had so much depth.’

‘Electrifying.’

‘The writing is so engaging, really draws you in and on with the characters, who are all brilliantly conceived. I laughed, cried and I actually **cannot wait to read more.**’

‘I couldn’t put the book down and still can’t stop thinking about it.’

‘A brilliant book. Original, moving, dramatic and exquisitely written.’

SONGLIGHT

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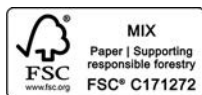
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SONGLIGHT



MOIRA BUFFINI

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For Midie





SEA of SIDON

NORTHAVEN

River
Borgas

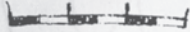
BORGAS
MARKET

BRIGHTLAND

GREENSWARD

GREAT PALANTIC OCEAN

50 Miles



*Ever seeking balance,
grant us wisdom
to be shepherds of creation.*

Ancient prayer to Gala.
Fragment from the *Book of Woe*.

PROLOGUE

KAIRA

I'm leaving my bedroom for the last time. I can't take anything with me, as this is supposed to be an ordinary shopping trip. I put my coat on. I haven't had a new one in years and my arms poke out of the sleeves, embarrassing me with their length, like the soft talons of a baby bird. I glance at myself in my little mirror. After today, I'll never stare in it again. I'm seventeen but no one would know. I'm small for my age, thin from illness and plain as a bean. My thick spectacles don't help. I daren't think about what I'm going to do. My heart is knocking at my ribs.

Stop thinking, I tell myself. Just go. I close the door behind me.

The smell of ham and cabbage hits me. In the kitchen, my latest Mama is cooking. I console myself with the thought that I'll never have to eat her soggy food again.

'I'm going to the market now,' I call.

Ishbella looks out of the kitchen. When she first came to our house she was sharp. She wore pointy dresses with pleats like knives and her lips were always painted red. She looks tired and creased around the edges now – and everything I say and do scrapes upon her like a lathe.

'What about your papa's jackboots?' she demands.

'I've done them.' I smile, pointing to a pair of gleaming jackboots.

‘Get me a tin of chicken paste,’ she says.

‘I won’t,’ I say to myself. And I leave.

The fresh air hits me. It’s dizzying. A wind whips around me as I walk towards the market. But the market’s not my destination. I’m going to escape.

I send a thought-frond high into the air, just as Cassandra taught me. A single, solitary note of songlight, aimed keenly. I feel it touch her spirit.

‘I’m on my way,’ I tell her.

I feel Cassandra’s presence brighten as she lets me into her consciousness. Momentarily, I see the world through her eyes. She’s leaving work, walking down the corridor towards the hospital entrance. She passes a senior doctor and nods to him.

‘Goodnight, Nurse,’ I hear him say.

Cassandra leaves the building. She walks gracefully, with such an easy spring, so unlike my halting limp. When I’m with her in songlight, I feel a happiness so sudden and acute I find it almost painful. To be held in her light . . . It’s like the most perfect summer’s day.

When I was in hospital, Cassandra was the nurse who saved my life. She sensed my songlight, before I dared to name it.

‘You know what you are, don’t you?’ she asked. She spoke without using her voice, yet I could hear her very well. I replied the same way.

‘An unhuman.’

‘No,’ she replied. ‘Never use that word. You’re a Torch.’

I see the lights on the esplanade falling in pools ahead of her now. The city’s great turbines turn in the breeze, rising above

her like a metal forest.

‘You know where to meet me?’ she asks.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I’m ready.’

She senses my raised heartbeat, my trepidation. ‘Freedom isn’t easy. It’s dangerous. But it’s the right thing.’

‘Where will we go?’ I ask.

‘It’s safer not to tell you. Don’t be scared, Little Bird.’

‘I’m not.’

In my heart, I wish she wouldn’t call me Little Bird. I know she does it for safety – we should never say each other’s names, not even in songlight, in case a Siren is eavesdropping. But ‘Little Bird’ makes me feel like I’m a kid, just someone she has to look after.

The tram station looms ahead, built in the Brethren’s mighty style. I climb to the platform, taking each step slowly. I’m tiring now and I stop to get my breath. I’m getting stronger every day but the Wasting Fever has left its mark. I tire quickly and my right leg is slightly thinner than the left – some days it aches so bad I need a cane. But I’m luckier than some. I survived.

The platform is crowded. Citizens wait on either side of the tracks. I try not to look at the lone Inquisitor, who stands at the top of the stairs in his dark uniform. I pass him as meekly as I can and I walk down the platform. At last, I see Cassandra arrive. She passes the Inquisitor and winks at me. I feel a beam of joy. In truth, I’d follow Cassandra to the moon and back.

I think of the days ahead that I’ll spend in her company and the beam becomes a glow that warms my whole body and fills me with strength. My trepidation fades away.

I’m going to be free.

I feel a pang of regret for my papa – but the strain of hiding who I am has grown too much to bear. I know my secret would have broken out sooner or later – and it would cause Papa anguish to destroy me. I can never be the daughter that he wants.

Cassandra stands apart, as if we're strangers waiting for our tram. I won't be afraid. I won't have doubts. I will be worthy of her friendship and her care. I allow myself to glance at her, my whole soul shining with gratitude and love.

And then it happens.

I see something flicker in the atmosphere beside her. A male figure, staring at her. A glimmer of a man in cheap suit, a hat pulled over his shaven head. He's one of our kind, a Torch who has been captured and now, in exchange for his life, he must use his songlight to ensnare others.

He's a Siren. And he has my beautiful Cassandra in his sights.

PART ONE

|
ELSA

I know there's something in the lobster pot before I start to lift it. Down there on the sea floor, I can sense the creature I have caught. It's eaten the bait and tried every way to escape, finding its huge claws to be only a hindrance. I do what any good seaworker would do and concentrate on how badly Northaven needs to eat. Food shipments from Brightlinghelm are becoming unreliable and we don't have good farming land round here. Up on the cliffs there is moorland and marshland, not the green and golden wheat fields that you hear of in the south. Our last harvest was shredded by the gales. This runs through my head as I pull the rope up from the sandy floor, bringing the unlucky creature into my boat.

I love the blue melt of the sea and sky, the salt spray, the way I have to balance on the swell, the sun dazzling, the wind lifting my spirits high into the air. I reckon I'm a natural on the water – like my pa. My brother Piper is a senior cadet, training for the war. So when Pa died, the boat was left to Ma and me. As a widow, Ma is not supposed to work outside the house, so in those dark years after Pa's death, I taught myself his trade. I think I had it in my bones. Pa knew I liked the water. He'd take me out with him when I was barely old enough to walk. He'd move about the boat, grinning at me, showing me the wonders of the sea. I love

the moving waves so much that when I step on solid land, I feel all heavy and bereft.

I look at the lobster: a huge female. I see her egg sacs, held precious under her belly. I admire her blue-black armour, her otherworldly eyes. I'm opening her pot when I realise I'm no longer alone.

I smile with delight and I thrill at the danger. Rye Tern has come. 'How's the catch?' he asks.

I see him then – or sense him, I should say. Songlight can't be described in words. Rye's with me, but he's not. I see him, but I don't. He's here in every sense – but only my sixth one perceives him. He's leaning on a mop, his shirt sleeves rolled up. He'll be somewhere in the barracks, but to me it seems like he's standing in the stern. The sun still shines through him but as our minds cleave to one another, he grows more solid. 'We were parading and I saw your boat. Got myself put on punishment duty so I could come.' He brandishes his mop. The way he smiles through his troubles makes my heart flip upside down.

'Reckless idiot.' I turn to my work, considering the lobster.

Rye comes closer. 'She looks a bit like you.'

'I'm better defended.' I melt at his grin.

His light is closer still. I've no defences against Rye at all.

'She's carrying her egg sacs,' I tell him. 'So she has to go back in the sea.'

I lean over the side and let the lobster queen slip back into the water. We watch her disappear down into the blue. Her freedom makes me glad.

Rye comes out to my boat whenever he can. It's the only place

that we feel safe, where our love isn't hidden. We can let ourselves go here, high into the air, circling each other like gulls – or we listen to the deep. We can tell when there are herrings coming – we sense their sleek glide, all singing the same note. Sometimes there are yellowfins, speeding under us like shooting stars. Always there are jellyfish, drifting in shoals like the souls of the dead.

His songlight is all I'm aware of now, his presence joining with mine. Desire twists in my guts as I remember the last time I touched him for real . . . As night was falling, a tap came on my bedroom window. Rye was there in our garden, vulnerable, his jacket ripped from a fight with his pa. I cherish that image of him. It comes into my mind, over and over – the way the moonlight fell upon his skin, the hurt that I could sense in him. I climbed out of the window and he caught me in his arms. I held him close, not wanting to speak. The intensity of his body took my breath away. The smell of him, the iron of his arms, his lips on my neck . . . Nothing in songlight could ever come close.

Together we went down to Bailey's Strand and swam. We lay on the sand, under the stars. We heedlessly broke every rule and restraint. Thinking of it now – of being joined with his body as well as his mind – makes me crave for it again. I want Rye Tern here, in my boat. I want to smell him, kiss him, explore him with my hands. Rye can tell what I'm thinking of. I feel his longing in every breath.

What we've done is interdicted. According to the *Anthems of Purity*, which we must learn by heart, I am now tarnished. But how can such a thing be criminal? We are not sex traitors, we are Elsa and Rye.

‘I have to see you,’ I whisper.

‘I know,’ he says. ‘Something has to change. We have to be together.’

‘Meet me,’ I tell him. ‘Down on Bailey’s Strand. Tonight. In the flesh.’

‘It’s dangerous.’

‘I know.’

Our songlight is one keen note of desire. I want his lips on mine, his belly pressing against me, my legs wrapped around him. We hold the note, breathing our need, until the whole ocean feels like it’s singing to our tune.

Then I sense him looking over his shoulder. For a second I see the world through his eyes. He’s in the refectory, mopping the floor. I hear heavy footsteps approaching him.

‘Someone’s coming,’ he says. Instantly, his warmth and vigour fades.

He’s gone, leaving me in turmoil.

The quality of the sound all around me changes. I become aware of the breeze, the water lapping against the sides of the boat. I hate it when he vanishes suddenly like this.

I pull in my nets and I turn back towards Northaven. My songlight isn’t wanted there. I keep it buried underneath my lungs. I push my songlight down my legs and arms and hide it under my fingernails. If anyone else in our town has songlight, they must keep it well concealed. To my knowledge, it’s just Rye and me. In Northaven, songlight is a burden; it’s treacherous. Occasionally, I’ll sense a note on the air like the colours of the loom, or a sigh like water falling down a drain, or thought-wreathes hanging like the crackling of

a fire. And then the singer notices and suddenly it's tight and hard to breathe. I know the feeling. When Great Brother Peregrine took power, back when Ma was a girl, there were culls of all unhumans. Our temple to Gala was closed and locked. Anyone known to have songlight was cuffed around the skull with lead and taken to Brightlinghelm to be enslaved. Every few years, an Inquisitor comes with his Siren to inspect the population. Last time, the Inquisitor took old Ellie Brambling, Mr Roberts and Seren Young. I was a junior choirmaiden then, and my songlight had not fully shown itself.

Before the Inquisitor left, he stood with our elders and drilled us on how to spot the signs. If we had this mutation, this corruption, it would soon become apparent. If we sensed any signs in ourselves or in others, we were beholden to confess. Did we, when alone, ever feel the presence of another? Did we ever sense what others might be thinking? Did we experience a sensation of floating, of being out of our bodies? Did we ever feel controlled by the will of another? If we suspected an unhuman at work or felt an unhuman stain upon our souls, we had to come forward and speak. If we were honest, no harm would befall us. Our songlight would only be contained. We'd be able to use it in service of the Brethren.

'No thanks to that,' I thought, as my songlight developed in full flow. Night after night I'd wake and find myself high above our house. I would be out in the boat and find myself looking down from the sky, feeling birdsong like a language, or seeing the world through the eyes of the seals that watch me as I work. I felt intensely connected to every living thing. And very, very afraid.

Then one day, Rye Tern showed up in my boat. I'd known Rye all my life – he was one of Piper's friends. He appeared in songlight

when I was pulling in my nets. I tried to ignore him, my heart thumping with fear. *Unhuman. Unhuman.*

‘I know you can see me, Elsa.’

‘Leave me alone, unhuman,’ I told him.

‘You’re unhuman too, fool. What’re you going to do about it?’ he asked. ‘Turn me in?’

I had nothing to say; just a slow tear that fell down my face.

‘It’s like your worst fucking nightmare, isn’t it?’ said Rye quietly.

I nodded.

For a while we prowled around each other like cats, claws out, not daring to trust. But it was such a relief to have a friend. I’d been so lonely with my oddness, so scared when it began. It was far worse than my monthlies. The pain and the blood-cloths were nothing compared to the fear I felt when my mind began to leave my body. When I began to glimpse the underthoughts of others, sensing what they felt when their words said something else, I was full of lonely dread. But Rye and I shared our otherness. It was a solace, every time we met. Maybe I’d have loved Rye even if he’d been ugly as a stick because his hurting, his anger, his raw sweetness, the way he finds humour in the darkest things – all these things are beautiful. But I’ve watched him grow from boy to man and Rye Tern isn’t ugly, not by any stretch. Rye Tern is a looker. From his long lashes to his gorgeous shoulder blades – every inch of him thrills me.

On land, in person, we make sure to keep apart. Not even Piper, my own brother, knows how we’re connected. But we’re two songs joined. And there’s a word for that.

A harmony.

2

ELSA

I sail into harbour quite alone, watching the shadows of the wind turbines move like god-wings over our homes. Our town falls down steep hillsides from the moors above, where our high turbine towers catch the coastal winds. I look at the white houses hugging the cove, our brightly painted front doors. I ignore the barbed wire, the gun placements and the watchtowers, trying to forget the ugliness of war.

Northaven centres round its natural harbour. The long quay with its sea wall protects us on one side, and on the other a mossy headland leads down to Bailey's Strand, our golden-sanded beach. Beyond, to the north, there's nothing but moors and marshes. Only herders live up there. To the east and south of our great island is the vast Greensward, where my mother comes from. It's an impassable, mountainous forest. People live there in travelling tribes, coming out to trade in the markets. It was at such a market that my Greensward ma met my seaworker pa. There's no road through the centre of the island, so we're connected to our capital, Brightlinghelm, only by sea. Transport ships come and go, a journey of two days through the war-torn Alma Straits, bringing grain if we're lucky, taking fish and all our men.

Northaven is a pretty town, a brave town. We've seen off Aylish raiders more than once. But as I approach the harbour, my

breathing constricts and my shoulders tighten. Home.

Mrs Sweeney is waiting for me. Her husband is our harbour master – but Mrs Sweeney does all his work. He’s too busy propping up the bar in the Oystercatcher Inn. She’s as weatherworn as the wind-whipped Brightling flag that flies above her house. Mrs Sweeney usually greets me with a good-humoured insult. She likes me – rare among the elderwomen, that’s for sure. I’m expecting one of her leatherwork smiles, but today she’s agitated.

‘You’re in a lot of trouble, Elsa,’ she says. ‘Emissary Wheeler’s here.’ She pulls me off the boat with her big red hands. ‘He came on the transport ship from Brightlinghelm.’

I look towards our biggest quay and see the transport ship, turbines whirring, rust dripping from its bolts, being loaded for its return journey with iced fish and fruits of the sea. My heart sinks. Emissaries bring news and edicts to the villages. They are our link with Brightlinghelm and have the authority of the Brethren. Everyone here fawns on Emissary Wheeler – and he never brings good news.

‘I lost track of time,’ I say, dismayed.

Songlight is particularly attuned to choral human voices and I can sense our choir, the raw sound tingling down my spine. I should be there.

‘I’ll see to your catch,’ says Mrs Sweeney. ‘Run.’

I’m halfway up the quayside when I realise I’m carrying three mackerel for our supper. Should I go back and dump them in the boat? I’m late enough already . . .

Beside me, a long, vivid mural runs the whole length of the harbour wall. The colours blur, I’m moving so fast. I see our brave

boys and men, in their black and red uniforms, repelling an attack from an enemy horde – the Aylish, fiends in dirty shades of blue. Every time I see it, I get a rush of pride, for I hate the Aylish worse than anything alive. Those savage bastards killed my pa.

I trip up the steps and across the town square. It's laundry day and women are cleaning sheets and shirts at our communal laundry while their children play. There seem to be pregnant women wherever I look. First Wives, Second Wives, widows dressed in grey.

The Elders' Hall, looking small but mighty, is draped with Brightling flags and banners: our black and white bird of prey soaring on a red background. As I draw closer, I hear my fellow choirmaidens singing our anthem. The words and tune are so familiar they're ingrained. I pick up my part of the harmony before I get to the door.

*'Brightland, Brightland, ever human, ever true,
Brightland our home, our noble Elderland,
The Brethren have remade us,
In purity we stand . . .'*

I press against the heavy doors and hurry into the space without thinking.

*'Brightland our pride, our enemies we smite,
The Brethren victorious – for liberty we fight . . .'*

The door slams shut behind me as the anthem ends. I find myself exposed in front of the whole assembled company. I see a flash of

anger from Hoopoe Guinea, our choirmother. She's responsible for all Northaven's choirmaidens of marriageable age. A tongue-lashing will follow, that's for sure. All eyes are on me as I make my way to the back of the choir stand. To one side of me I see a blur of disapproving black: the eldermen. That luxurious coat among them belongs to Emissary Wheeler. I daren't look him in the face.

My friend, Gailee Roberts, makes room for me. She looks down at the mackerel I'm holding in dismay. Chaffinch Greening and Tinamou Haines turn round to stare, as if I'm some alien creature. Chaffinch – dressed in pink, with perfect, sculpted hair – looks at my seaworker's boots with a sneer. My eyes stare straight ahead, as if what I've just done is perfectly acceptable.

Wheeler walks forward, inspecting us. He saves a special disapproving glare for me. He's tall and he projects strength, but when he opens his mouth, his voice is high and weak.

'The time has come for you to prove yourselves as women. Northaven has raised you in virtue. It's now your privilege to sacrifice your purity on the altar of marriage.'

What is he saying? I try to decipher his bombast. Marriage?

I feel like I've been sleepwalking. This has been our fate since girlhood – but the reality of it hits me only now.

'The senior cadets are leaving. Soon after, Northaven's long-serving heroes will be coming home on their wedding leave. You'll be gifted to your husband by the town and it's your duty to serve him by bearing him sons.'

I can't unpack what he's saying. *The senior cadets are leaving.* Does he mean Rye and Piper? Leaving when? I look at Gailee, wanting her to translate. Our brothers are leaving? And a bunch

of men we haven't seen since we were tiny little girls are going to come home and take us to their beds? I've always known this was going to happen but it's felt far-off, unreal.

'At last . . .' whispers Chaffinch Greening. She is on her tip-toes in excitement. Am I the only one who is appalled?

'Your training as choirmaidens is almost complete,' says the Emissary. 'It only remains for your choirmother to teach you the mysteries of the marriage bed.'

He glances at Hoopoe Guinea and she gives us all a sticky smile. Nela Lane snickers. Uta Malting tries to hide her grin. Tinamou Haines nudges Chaffinch Greening. We've been training for our wedding day for years; I always thought I'd get out of it, that I'd invent some acceptable reason not to be a bride. How can I marry a stranger? I'm in love with Rye Tern. These thoughts are whirring through my head as Wheeler looks us over.

'You are Brightland's Hope and Beauty. You are all Emblems of Victory. Over the coming days,' he rasps, 'lists will be drawn up. Those not gifted as a man's First Wife may yet be chosen as his Second.'

I'm clenching my fists in dread. I'll be married. Rye will be gone.

'Our heroic fighting men have earned you as their brides. Your every thought must be on them.'

Ely Greening steps up. He's our lickspittle mayor.

'Northaven's choirmaidens have been very well trained – my own daughter, Chaffinch, among them. I can assure you of their loyalty and devotion.'

He directs Wheeler's gaze towards Chaffinch. From behind, I see her do a coy sway, revelling in her status. Wheeler appraises her,

approving. Then his eyes fall on me. He pauses. His eyes take in my sea-salt dress, the sweat under my arms, the mess of my hair, the mackerel in my fist.

‘I’m only sorry that one of you sees fit to arrive late, dragging her supper.’

‘Apologise, Elsa Crane,’ barks Hoopoe in frustration.

‘I’m very sorry.’

I suppose I should call him ‘sir’ or ‘Emissary’. Or do a coy sway. But in truth, I despise Wheeler like pissweed. He glares at me, waiting for more.

‘Some girls need a firm hand and I hope you get it,’ he says. ‘You’ll not be going out to sea once you’re a wife.’

That’s the last straw. I have to see Rye Tern.

I slip away the moment we’re given permission to leave. I take in lungfuls of air outside the Elders’ Hall. Gailee Roberts hurries loyally after me.

‘Did you forget our inspection was today?’

‘Yes.’

‘Go back. Make your peace with Hoopoe Guinea. Tell her the wind was against you.’

‘I’ve used that excuse too many times.’

Chaffinch catches up with us. ‘How dare you come and stand in our choir, stinking of old cod guts.’

‘They’re mackerel,’ I tell her.

‘D’you think you’ll get on the list for First Wife, going around behaving like that?’

‘I’ve got a job, Chaffinch. I’m out every day, providing food,

while your head's full of bog moss.'

I don't realise that Hoopoe Guinea is behind me.

'Elsa, marriage is your first duty,' she intones.

I fall silent in dismay. My time of reckoning has come. And Chaffinch is going to enjoy it.

'You let me down in front of Emissary Wheeler. You let every choir maiden down.'

I don't dislike Hoopoe. When we got the news that my father was dead, she was very kind to me. I've disappointed her ever since.

'The wind was against me,' I say sheepishly. It sounds so feeble.

'I know your mother needs you. I know you have to work. But marriage training must come first.'

'I'm sorry.'

'What would your father think to see you getting chastised?' she asks. 'Do you think he'd be proud?'

I shake my head, my gaze on the ground.

'Gwyn Crane died doing his duty. When are you going to start doing yours?'

This hits home.

Hoopoe walks away, the choir maidens following in her wake. Chaffinch Greening turns, giving me a sly glance. Only Gailee remains.

Gailee Roberts will never be a First Wife. The only person who can't see it is the girl herself. Her family has an unhuman stain. When Mr Roberts was taken to the Chrysalid House, the whole family lost their standing. Gailee and her siblings struggle now. Her mother works through the night, taking laundry, doing piles of mending. She doesn't have a pension like a war widow, so Gailee

acts as mother to the little ones. Gailee has no songlight – but sometimes I think she can read me like a book.

‘Shall I call for you tonight?’ she asks. ‘Let’s walk down to practice together. You still haven’t chosen your special skill.’

‘Nothing I’m good at counts.’

‘Elsa,’ she pleads. ‘You could get First Wife. Your pa died a hero, which is bound to give you points.’

She doesn’t mention her own pa.

‘I’ll come round later and help you style your hair,’ she offers.

Gailee’s own hair is already fixed in a plaited sculpt that looks like it won’t move for several days. I see that she’s been practising with make-up too. There’s red on her lips and cheeks, her eyelids blackened with a wobbly hand.

‘I’ll show you needlework too, if you like. That’d be a fine special skill. And it can’t be so different from mending fishing nets . . .’

It should impress me, how hopeful Gailee is. She watches others, like Chaffinch or Tinamou, who are both First Wife material. They puzzle her, as if their privileged behaviour is a subject she can learn. Gailee has attached herself to me because I stop the others being cruel. They bully her. But sometimes I lose patience and I’m cruel to her myself. She can be a proper irritation. Her whole purpose, her every waking thought is set on how to please the elders. She doesn’t give up. Partly my heart breaks for her because of her unhuman pa. We’ve never talked about him being taken, not once ever. Gailee’s ma and her sisters were all examined by the Inquisitor and his Siren but apparently her pa had kept his songlight to himself.

‘What about dancing?’ she says as we start walking up the hill. ‘I bet you could dance. That’s a special skill a man is sure to like.’

I wanted to choose dancing but Chaffinch said I'd make myself a spectacle.'

'Chaffinch is a stinging wasp.' I hold out two of the mackerel. 'I caught these for your ma,' I say. 'We've got plenty at home.'

Gailee takes them with such a gush of gratitude that I'm annoyed all over again.