

THE PECULIAR

STEFAN
BACHMANN

GREENWILLOW BOOKS

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The page is decorated with numerous black feathers of various sizes and orientations, scattered across the white background. Some feathers are large and detailed, while others are smaller and more delicate. They appear to be falling or drifting, creating a sense of movement and texture.

Prologue

FEATHERS fell from the sky.

Like black snow, they drifted onto an old city called Bath. They whirled down the roofs, gathered in the corners of the alleys, and turned everything dark and silent, like a winter's day.

The townsfolk thought it odd. Some locked themselves in their cellars. Some hurried to church. Most opened umbrellas and went about their business. At four o' clock in the afternoon, a group of bird catchers set off on the road to Kentish Town, pulling their cages in a cart behind them. They were the last to see Bath as it had been, the last to leave it. Sometime in

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the night of the twenty-third of September, there was a tremendous noise like wings and voices, creaking branches and howling winds, and then, in the blink of an eye, Bath was gone, and all that remained were ruins, quiet and desolate under the stars.

There were no flames. No screams. Everyone within five leagues disappeared, so there was no one left to speak to the bailiff when he came riding up the next morning on his knock-kneed horse. No one human.

A farmer found him hours later, standing in a trampled field. The bailiff's horse was gone and his boots were worn to nothing, as if he had been walking many days. "Cold," he said, with a faraway look. "Cold lips and cold hands and so peculiar."

That was when the rumors started. Monsters were crawling from the ruins of Bath, the whispers said, bone-thin fiends and giants as tall as the hills. On the nearby farms, people nailed garlic to their doorposts and tied their shutters closed with red ribbons. Three days after the city's destruction, a group of scientists came down from London to examine the

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place where Bath had been, and were next seen in the crown of a gnarled oak, their bodies white and bloodless, their jackets pierced through and through with twigs. After that, people locked their doors.

Weeks passed, and the rumors turned to worse things. Children disappeared from their beds. Dogs and sheep went suddenly lame. In Wales, folk went into the woods and never came out. In Swainswick, a fiddle was heard playing in the night, and all the women of the town went out in their bed-gowns and followed it. No one ever saw them again.

Thinking this might be the work of one of England's enemies, Parliament ordered a brigade of troops to Bath at once. The troops arrived, and though they found no rebels or Frenchmen among the tumbled stones, they did find a little battered notebook belonging to one of the scientists who had met his death in the oak. There were only a few pages of writing in it, badly splotched and very hurried, but it caused a sensation all over the country. It was published in pamphlets and newspapers, and limed up onto walls. Butchers read it, and silk weavers read it;

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schoolchildren, lawyers, and dukes read it, and those who could not read had it read *to* them in taverns and town squares.

The first part was all charts and formulas, interspersed with sentimental scribblings about someone named Lizzy. But as the writing proceeded, the scientist's observations became more interesting. He wrote of the feathers that had fallen on Bath, how they were not the feathers of any bird. He wrote of mysterious footprints, strange scars in the earth. Finally he wrote of a long shadowy highway dissolving in a wisp of brimstone, and of creatures known only in tales. It was then that everyone knew for certain what they had been dreading all along: the Small Folk, the Hidden People, the Sidhe had passed from their place into ours. The faeries had come to England.

They came upon the troops in the night—goblins and satyrs, gnomes, sprytes, and the elegant, spindly white beings with their black, black eyes. The officer in command of the English, a well-starched

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man named Briggs, told them straight away that they were suspected of great crimes and must go to London at once for interrogation, but it was a ridiculous thing, like telling the sea it must be judged for all the ships it had swallowed. The faeries had no intention of listening to these clumsy, red-clad men. They ran circles around them, hissing and teasing. A pale hand reached out to pluck at a red sleeve. A gun fired in the darkness. That was when the war started.

It was called the Smiling War because it left so many skulls, white and grinning, in the fields. There were few real battles. No great marches or blazing charges to write poems about later. Because the fay were not like men. They did not follow rules, or line up like tin soldiers.

The faeries called the birds out of the sky to peck out the soldiers' eyes. They called the rain to wet their gunpowder, and asked the forests to pull up their roots and wander across the countryside to confuse English maps. But in the end the faeries' magic was no match for cannon and cavalry and the rows of

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soldiers that marched among them in an endless red tide. On a low rise called Tar Hill, the British army converged on the fay and scattered them. Those that fled were shot down as they ran. The rest (and there were very many) were rounded up, counted, christened, and dragged away to the factories.

Bath became their home in this new country. It grew back a dark place, pressing up out of the rubble. The place where the highway had appeared, where everything had been utterly destroyed, became New Bath, a knot of houses and streets more than five hundred feet high, all blackened chimneys and spidery bridges wound into a ball of stinking, smoking dross.

As for the magic the faeries had brought with them, Parliament decided it was something of an affliction that must be hidden under bandages and ointments. A milkmaid in Trowbridge found that whenever a bell rang, all the enchantments around her would cease, and the hedgerows would stop their whispering, and the roads would lead only to where they had led to before, so a law was passed that commanded

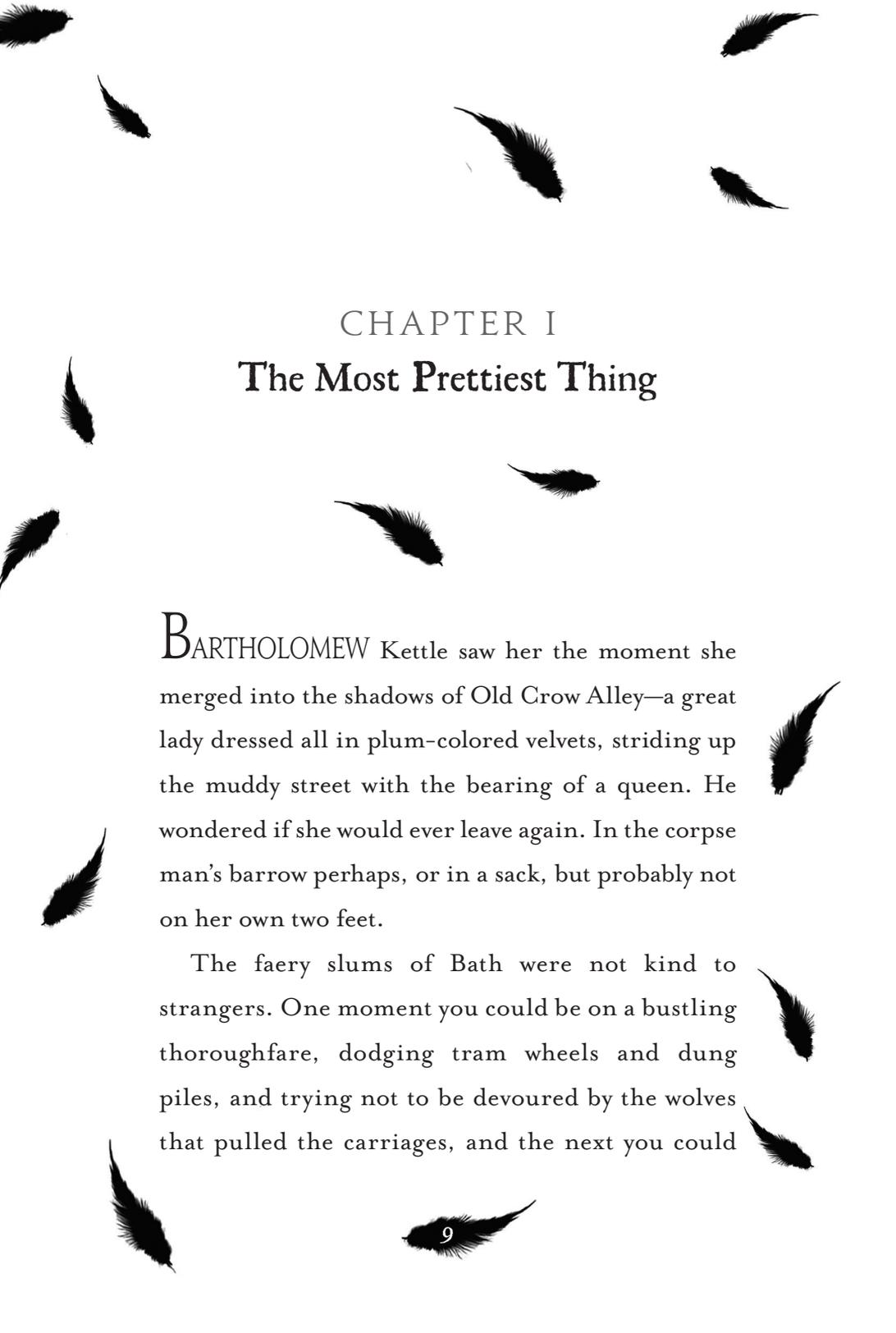
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all the church bells in the country to toll every five minutes instead of every quarter hour. Iron had long been known as a sure protection against spells, and now little bits of it were put into everything from buttons to breadcrumbs. In the larger cities, fields were plowed up and trees chopped down because it was supposed that faeries could gather magic from the leaves and the dewdrops. Abraham Darby famously hypothesized in his dissertation *The Properties of Air* that clockwork acted as a sort of antidote to the unruly nature of the fay, and so professors and physicians and all the great minds turned their powers toward mechanics and industry. The Age of Smoke had begun.

And after a time the faeries were simply a part of England, an inseparable part, like the heather on the bleak gray moors, like the gallows on the hilltops. The goblins and gnomes and wilder faeries were quick to pick up English ways. They lived in English cities, coughed English smoke, and were soon no worse off than the thousands of human poor that toiled at their side. But the high faeries—the pale, silent Sidhe

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with their fine waistcoats and sly looks—they did not give in so easily. They could not forget that they had once been lords and ladies in great halls of their own. They could not forgive. The English might have won the Smiling War, but there were other ways to fight. A word could cause a riot, ink could spell a man's death, and the Sidhe knew those weapons like the backs of their hands. Oh yes, they knew.



CHAPTER I
The Most Prettiest Thing

BARTHOLOMEW Kettle saw her the moment she merged into the shadows of Old Crow Alley—a great lady dressed all in plum-colored velvets, striding up the muddy street with the bearing of a queen. He wondered if she would ever leave again. In the corpse man's barrow perhaps, or in a sack, but probably not on her own two feet.

The faery slums of Bath were not kind to strangers. One moment you could be on a bustling thoroughfare, dodging tram wheels and dung piles, and trying not to be devoured by the wolves that pulled the carriages, and the next you could

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be hopelessly lost in a maze of narrow streets with nothing but gaunt old houses stooping overhead, blocking out the sky. If you had the ill luck to meet anyone, chances were it would be a thief. And not the dainty sort, like the thin-fingered chimney sprytes of London. Rather the sort with dirt under their nails and leaves in their hair, who, if they thought it worthwhile, would not hesitate to slit your throat.

This lady looked *very* worthwhile. Bartholomew closed the book he had been reading and pressed his nose against the grimy window, watching her progress down the alley. Folks killed for less, he knew. If the half-starved corpses he had seen dragged from the gutter were anything to go by, folks killed for much less.

She was so tall, so strange and foreign in her finery; she seemed to fill every nook of the murky passage. Long gloves the color of midnight covered her hands. Jewels glimmered at her throat. A little top hat with an enormous purple flower in it sat on her head. It was perched at an angle so that it cast a shadow over her eyes.

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“Hettie,” Bartholomew whispered, without turning from the window. “Hettie, come look.”

Feet pattered in the depths of the room. A little girl appeared next to him. She was too thin, her face all sharp bones and pale skin, tinged blue from lack of sunlight. Ugly, like him. Her eyes were huge and round, black puddles collecting in the hollows of her skull. The tips of her ears were pointed. In a pinch Bartholomew might still pass as a human child, but not Hettie. There was no mistaking the faery blood in her veins. For where Bartholomew had a mess of chestnut hair growing out of his scalp, Hettie had the smooth, bare branches of a young tree.

She pushed a wayward twig out of her eyes and let out a little gasp.

“Oh, Barthy,” she breathed, clutching at his hand. “It’s the most prettiest thing I’ve seen in my whole *life*.” He went onto his knees next to her, so that both their faces were just peeking over the worm-eaten wood of the sill.

Pretty indeed, but there was a wrongness about that lady. Something dark and unsettled. She carried

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no baggage or cloak, not even a parasol to shield herself from the heat of late summer. As if she had stepped from the shadowy hush of a drawing room directly into the heart of Bath's faery district. Her gait was stiff and jerking, as though she didn't exactly know how to work her appendages.

"What d'you suppose she's doing here?" Bartholomew asked. He began to gnaw slowly at his thumbnail.

Hettie frowned. "I dunno. She might be a lady thief. Mummy says they dress pretty. But isn't she far too splendid for a thief? Doesn't she look like . . ." Hettie glanced at him, and a flicker of fear passed behind her eyes. "Like she's looking for something?"

Bartholomew stopped chewing his nail. He peered at his sister. Then he squeezed her hand. "She's not looking for us, Het."

But even as he said it he felt the uneasiness curl like a root in his stomach. She *was* looking for something. Or someone. Her eyes, half hidden in the shadow of her hat, were searching, studying the houses as she moved past them. When her gaze fell on the house

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they lived in, Bartholomew ducked down under the sill. Hettie was already there. *Don't get yourself noticed and you won't get yourself hanged.* It was perhaps the most important rule for changelings. It was a good rule.

The lady in the plum-colored dress walked the full length of the alley, all the way to the corner where it wormed into Black Candle Lane. Her skirts dragged over the cobbles, becoming heavy with the oily filth that covered everything, but she didn't seem to care. She simply turned slowly and made her way back down the alley, this time inspecting the houses on the other side.

She must have gone up and down Old Crow Alley six or seven times before coming to a halt in front of the house directly across the way from where Bartholomew and Hettie watched. It was a crooked, sharp-roofed house, with chimneys and doors that poked through the stone in odd places. Two larger houses stood on either side, pinching it in, and it was set a little farther back from the alley, behind a high stone wall. An archway was set into the wall at its center. The twisted remains of a metal gate lay on the

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ground. The lady stepped over it and into the yard.

Bartholomew knew who lived in that house. A family of half-bloods, the mother a faery, the father a bellows worker at the cannon foundry on Leechcraft Street. The Buddelbinsters, he'd heard them called. Once they'd had seven changeling children, and Bartholomew had seen them playing in the windows and the doorways. But other people had seen them, too, and one night a crowd had come and dragged the children away. Now there was only one, a frail-looking boy. Bartholomew and he were friends. At least Bartholomew liked to think they were. Some days, when Old Crow Alley was particularly quiet, the boy would steal out onto the cobbles and fight invisible highwaymen with a bit of stick. He would catch sight of Bartholomew staring at him from the window. The boy would wave. Bartholomew would wave back. It was utterly forbidden—waving at people through windows—but so wonderful to do that Bartholomew forgot sometimes.

The lady in the plum-colored dress stalked across the rubble-strewn yard and rapped at the door nearest

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to the ground. Nothing happened for what felt like an age. Then the door was yanked open to the end of its chain, and a thin, sour-looking woman poked her head through the gap. It was the father's old-maid sister. She lived with the Buddelbinsters, minded their business for them. That included opening the doors when they were knocked on. Bartholomew watched her eyes grow round as saucers as she drank in the sight of the exquisite stranger. She opened her mouth to say something. Then she seemed to think better of it and slammed the door in the lady's face.

The lady in the plum-colored dress stood very still for a moment, as if she didn't quite understand what had happened. Then she knocked at the door again, so loudly it echoed out of the yard, all the way up Old Crow Alley. A few houses away, a curtain twitched.

Before Bartholomew and Hettie could see what would happen next, the stairs outside the door to the rooms they lived in began to groan noisily. Someone was hurrying up them. Next, a red-cheeked woman burst in, huffing and wiping her hands on her apron. She was small and badly dressed, and would have

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been lovely with enough to eat, but there was never enough to eat, so she looked like some sort of hot-house flower, all wilted and bothered. When she saw the two of them on the floor she clapped her hands to her mouth and shrieked.

“Children, get away from the window!” In three steps she had crossed the room and was dragging them up by their arms. “Bartholomew, her branches were sticking right up over the sill! Do you want to get *seen*?”

She shooed them to the back of the room and bolted the door to the passage. Then she turned and her eyes fell on the potbellied stove. Ash flitted out through the slats in its door.

“Oh, would you look at that,” she said. “I asked you to empty it, Barthy. I asked you to watch out for your sister, and wind up the wash wringer. You’ve done nothing . . .”

In an instant Bartholomew had all but forgotten the lady in plum. “Mother, I’m sorry I forgot about Hettie’s branches, but I found something out, and I had a very good idea, and I need to explain it to you.”

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“I don’t want to hear it,” his mother said wearily.
“I want you to do as you’re told.”

“But that’s just it, I won’t have to!” He cleared his throat, drew himself up to his full height of three and a half feet, and said, “Mother, may I please, please, *please* summon a domesticated faery?”

“A what? What are you talking about, child? Who’s that in the Buddelbinsters’ yard?”

“A domesticated faery. It means it lives in houses. I want to invite a faery servant. I’ve read about it here and here, and here it explains how to do it.” Bartholomew lifted a heap of old books from behind the stove and pushed them up under his mother’s nose. “*Please*, Mother?”

“Larks and stage lights, would you look at that dress. Barthy, put those books down, I can’t see properly.”

“Mother, a faery! For houses!”

“Must be worth twenty pounds, and what does the silly goose do? Marches down here through all this muck. I do declare. Rusty cogs in that head and nothing but.”

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“And if I get a good one, and I’m nice to it, it would do all sorts of work for us and help pump the water and—”

His mother wasn’t looking out the window anymore. Her eyes had gone stony-flat, and she was staring at Bartholomew.

“—wind up the wash wringer,” he finished weakly.

“And what if you get a *bad* one.” It wasn’t a question. Her voice drove up between his ribs like a shard of nasty iron. “I’ll tell you what, Bartholomew Kettle. I’ll tell you! If we’re lucky it’ll sour the milk, empty our cupboards, and run off with every shiny thing it can get its fingers on. Otherwise it’ll just throttle us in our sleep. No, child. No. Don’t you *ever* be inviting faeries through that door. They’re upstairs and downstairs and on the other side of the wall. They’re all around us for miles and miles, but not in here. Not again, do you understand me?”

She looked so old all of a sudden. Her hands shook against her apron and tears shone at the corners of her eyes. Hettie, solemn and silent like a little ghost, retreated to her cupboard bed and climbed

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in, closing the door with the most accusing look. Bartholomew stared at his mother. She stared back. Then he turned and slammed through the door into the passageway.

He heard her cry out after him, but he didn't stop. *Don't get yourself noticed, don't let them see.* His bare feet were quiet on the floorboards as he fled up through the house, but he wished he could shout and stomp. He *wanted* a faery. More than anything else in the world.

He had already imagined exactly how it should happen. He would set up the invitation, and the next day there would be a petal-winged pisky clinging to the top of his bedpost. It would have a foolish grin on its face, and large ears, and it wouldn't notice at all that Bartholomew was small and ugly and different from everyone else.

But no. Mother had to ruin everything.

At the top of the house they lived in together with various thieves and murderers and faeries was a large and complicated attic. It ran this way and that under the sagging eaves, and when Bartholomew was little it had been filled with broken furniture and all

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sorts of interesting and exciting rubbish. Everything interesting and exciting had deserted it now, the rubbish having all been used as kindling during the bitter winter months or swapped for trinkets from the travelling faery peddlers. Sometimes the women crept up to hang their washing so that it could dry without being stolen, but otherwise the attic was left to the devices of the dust and the thrushes.

And to Bartholomew. There was one part where, if he was very careful, he could squeeze through a gap between a beam and the rough stone of a chimney. Then, with much wriggling and twisting, he would arrive in a forgotten little gable. It did not belong to anyone. There was no door, and only a child could even stand up in it. It was his now.

He had fixed it up with odds and ends that he had salvaged—a straw mat, some dry branches and strands of ivy, and a collection of broken bottles that he had strung together in a pitiful copy of a Yuletide garland he had read about. But his favorite part of the attic was the small round window, like the sort in a boat, that looked out onto Old Crow Alley and

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a sea of roofs. He never tired of looking through it. He could watch the whole world from there, high up and hidden away.

Bartholomew forced himself through the gap and lay panting on the floor. It was hot under the slates of the roof. The sun hammered down outside, turning everything brittle and sharp, and after that mad rush up seventy-nine uneven steps to the tip of the house, he felt like a little loaf under the pointed gable, baking.

As soon as he had caught his breath, he crawled to the window. He could see across across the high wall through it, directly into the yard in front of the Buddelbinsters' house. The lady was still there, a brilliant blot of purple amid the brown rooftops and scraggly, sunburnt weeds. The sour-looking woman had opened the door again. She appeared to be listening to the lady warily, her hands clamping and unclamping the gray braid that hung over her shoulder. Then the lady in plum was slipping her something. *A little purse?* He couldn't see it properly. The sour one retreated back into the house, all hunched

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up and greedy, like a rat that has found a scrap of meat and is determined not to share it with anyone.

The instant the door closed, the lady in plum became a whirl of activity. She dropped to the ground, skirts pooling around her, and plucked something from inside her top hat. A small bottle caught the sunlight and glinted in her hand. She bit off the seal, uncorked it, and began dribbling its contents in a circle around her.

Bartholomew leaned forward, squinting through the thick glass. It occurred to him that he was likely the only one who could see her now. Other eyes had been following her since the moment she stepped into the alley. He knew that. But now the lady was deep in the yard, and any other watchers in the alley would see nothing but the high and crumbling wall. The lady in plum had chosen the Buddelbinster house on purpose. She didn't *want* to be seen.

When the bottle was empty, she held it up and ground it between her fingers, letting the shards fall to the weeds. Then she rose abruptly and faced the house, looking as poised and elegant as ever.

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Several minutes passed. The door opened again, a little uncertainly. This time a child stuck his head out. It was the boy, Bartholomew's friend. Like Hettie, his faery blood showed clear as the moon through his white, white skin. A thicket of briars grew from his head. His ears were long and pointed. Someone must have shoved him from behind because he came tumbling out of the door and onto the ground at the lady's feet. He stared up at her, eyes wide.

The lady's back was toward Bartholomew, but he knew she was talking to the boy by the way he kept shaking his head in a small, fearful way. The boy glanced timidly back at his house. The lady took a step toward him.

Then a great many things happened at once. Bartholomew, staring so intently, nodded forward a bit so that the tip of his nose brushed against the windowpane. And the moment it did, there was a quick, sharp movement in the yard below, and the lady reached behind her and jerked apart the coils of hair at the back of her head. Bartholomew's blood turned to smoke in his veins. There, staring directly

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up at him, was another face, a tiny, brown, ugly face like a twisted root, all wrinkles and sharp teeth.

With a muffled yelp, he scabbled away from the window, splinters driving into his palms. *It didn't see me, it didn't see me. It couldn't ever have known I was here.*

But it had. Those wet black eyes had looked into his. For an instant they had been filled with a terrible anger. And then the creature's lips had curled back and it had smiled.

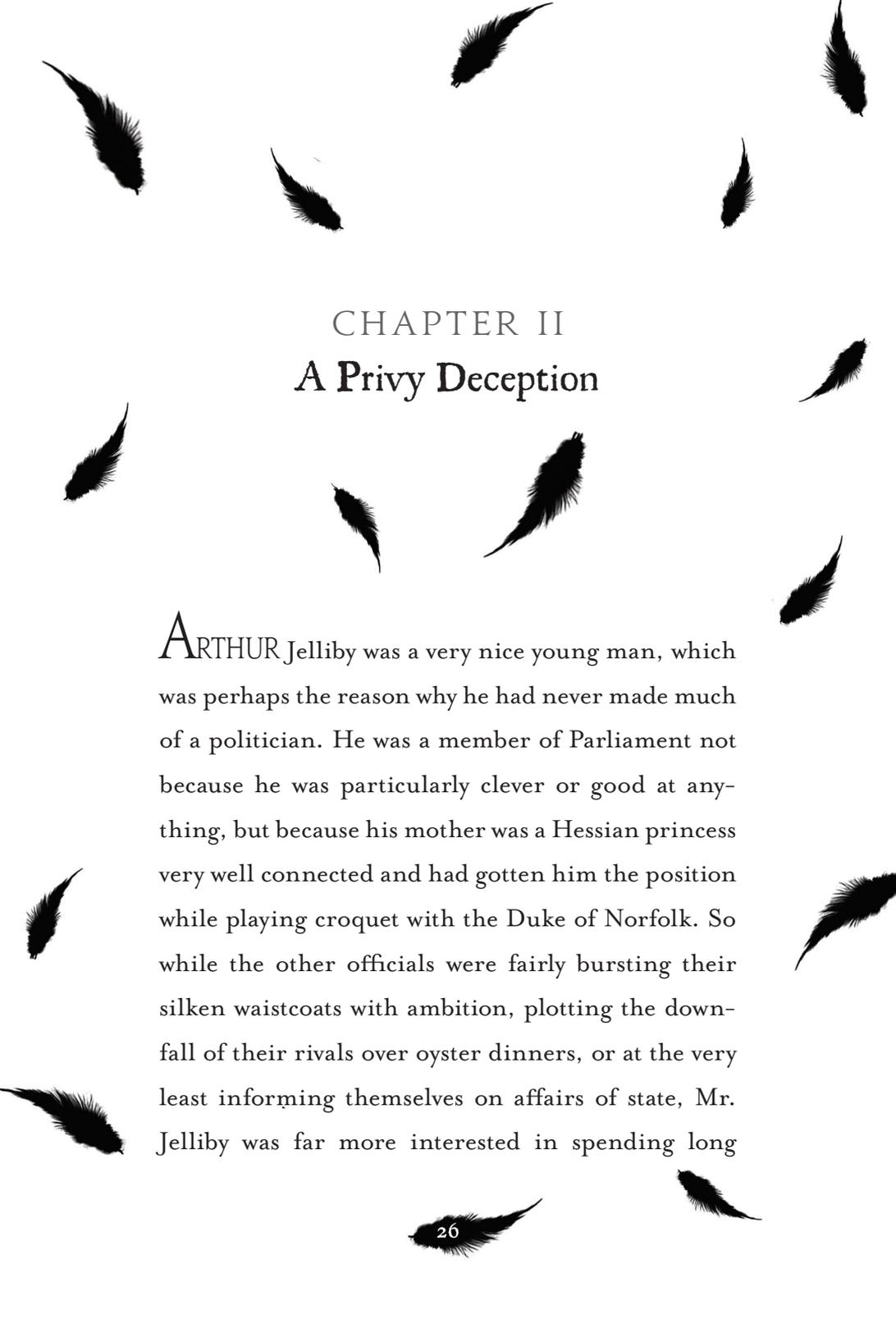
Bartholomew lay gasping on the floorboards, heart pounding inside his skull. *I am dead now. So, so dead.* He didn't look very much like a half-blood, did he? From down in the yard he would look like a regular boy. He pinched his eyes closed. *A regular boy spying on her.*

Very slowly he brought his head back level with the window, this time keeping deep in the shadows. The lady in plum had moved a little ways distant from the boy in the yard. Her other, hideous face was gone, hidden under her hair. One of her long, velvet-gloved hands was extended toward him, beckoning him.

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The boy looked at her, looked back again at his house. For the shortest instant, Bartholomew thought he saw someone in one of the upper windows, a stooping shadow, hand raised against the pane in farewell. One blink later and it was gone, and the window was empty.

The boy in the yard shivered. He turned back to the lady. She nodded, and he moved toward her, taking her outstretched hand. She clasped him close. There was a burst of darkness, a storm of black wings flapping. It exploded up around them, screaming toward the sky. A ripple passed through the air. Then they were gone, and Old Crow Alley was sleeping once again.

The page is decorated with numerous black feather silhouettes of various sizes and orientations, scattered across the white background. Some feathers are large and prominent, while others are small and delicate. They are positioned around the text, creating a decorative border and a sense of movement.

CHAPTER II

A Privy Deception

ARTHUR Jelliby was a very nice young man, which was perhaps the reason why he had never made much of a politician. He was a member of Parliament not because he was particularly clever or good at anything, but because his mother was a Hessian princess very well connected and had gotten him the position while playing croquet with the Duke of Norfolk. So while the other officials were fairly bursting their silken waistcoats with ambition, plotting the downfall of their rivals over oyster dinners, or at the very least informing themselves on affairs of state, Mr. Jelliby was far more interested in spending long

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afternoons at his club in Mayfair, buying chocolates for his pretty wife, or simply sleeping until noon.

Which is what he did on a certain day in August, and which is why the urgent summons to a Privy Council in the Houses of Parliament caught him completely unprepared.

He stumbled down the stairs of his house on Belgrave Square, one hand trying to get the worst of the tangles out of his hair, the other struggling with the tiny buttons of his cherry-red waistcoat.

“Ophelia!” he called, trying to sound cheerful but not really succeeding.

His wife appeared in the doorway to the morning room, and he pointed an apologetic finger at the length of black silk that hung limply under his collar. “The valet’s off, and Brahms doesn’t know how, and I cannot *do* it on my own! Knot it up for me, darling, won’t you, and spare us a smile?”

“Arthur, you must not sleep so long,” Ophelia said sternly, coming forward to tie his cravat. Mr. Jelliby was a tall man, and broad-shouldered, and she rather small, so she had to stand on tiptoes to reach.

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“Oh, but I need to set an example! Think of the headlines: ‘War averted! Thousands of lives saved! The English Parliament slept through its session.’ You’d find the world a far more pleasant place.”

This did not sound nearly as witty as it had in his head, but Ophelia laughed anyway, and Mr. Jelliby, feeling very amusing, sallied forth into the tumult of the city.

It was a fine day by London’s standards. Which meant it was a day slightly less likely to suffocate you and poison your lungs. The black curtain of smoke from the city’s million chimneys had been worn away by last night’s rain. The air still tasted of coal, but shafts of light sprang down through the clouds. Government-issue automatons creaked through the streets on rusty joints, sweeping the mud in front of them and leaving puddles of oil behind them. A group of lamplighters was out feeding wasps and dragonflies to the little flame faeries that sat behind the glass in the streetlamps, dull and sulky until nightfall.

Mr. Jelliby turned into Chapel Street, hand raised

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for a cab. High overhead, a great iron bridge arched, groaning and showering sparks as the steam trains rumbled across it. On normal days Mr. Jelliby would have been riding up there, head against the glass, gazing idly out over the city. Or perhaps he would have had Brahms, the footman, heave him onto his newfangled bicycle and give a good push to get him started across the cobbles. But today was not normal. Today he hadn't even breakfasted, and so everything felt spoiled and hurried.

The carriage that stopped for him was driven by a gnome, sharp-toothed and old, with gray-green skin like a slimy rock. The gnome drove his horses as if they were a pair of giant snails, and when Mr. Jelliby knocked his walking stick against the carriage ceiling and shouted for a quickening of pace, he was thrown back into his seat by a volley of curses. Mr. Jelliby frowned and thought of all sorts of reasons why he should not be talked to so, but he didn't open his mouth for the rest of the journey.

Westminster's great new clock tower was ringing thirty-five minutes when he alighted on the curb in

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Great George Street. *Drat.* He was late. Five minutes late. He dashed up the steps to St. Stephen's Porch and pushed past the doorkeeper, into the vast expanse of the main hall. Huddles of gentlemen stood scattered across the floor, their voices echoing in rafters high above. The air stank of lime and fresh paint. Scaffolding clung to the walls in places, and some of the tile work was unfinished. It was not three months since the new Westminster Palace had been opened for meetings. The old one had been reduced to a pile of ash after a disgruntled fire spirit blew himself up in its cellars.

Mr. Jelliby hurried up a staircase, along an echoing, lamp-lined corridor. He was almost pleased when he saw he was not the only one late. John Wednesday Lickerish, Lord Chancellor and first Sidhe ever to be appointed to the British government, was also running behind the swiftly ticking hands of his time-piece. He rounded a corner from one direction, Mr. Jelliby came from the other, and they barreled into each other with some force.

"Oh! Mr. Lickerish! Do forgive me." Jelliby

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laughed, helping the faery gentleman to his feet and slapping some imaginary dust from his lapels. “A bit clumsy this morning, I’m afraid. Are you all right?”

Mr. Lickerish gave Mr. Jelliby a withering look, and removed himself from Jelliby’s grip with a faint air of distaste. He was dressed to perfection, as always, every button in place, every snippet of fabric beautiful and new. His waistcoat was black velvet. His cravat was cloth of silver, faultlessly knotted, and everywhere Mr. Jelliby looked he caught a glimpse of leaf stitchery, of silk stockings, and cotton starched so stiff you could crack it with a mallet. *It only makes the dirt stand out more*, he thought. He had to bite his tongue to keep from smiling. Brown half-moons looked up from under the faery’s fingernails, as if he had been clawing about in the cold earth.

“Morning?” the faery said. His voice was thin. Just a rustle, like wind in leafless branches. “Young Jelliby, it is no longer morning. It is not even noon. It is almost night.”

Mr. Jelliby looked uncertain. He didn’t exactly know what the faery had just said, but he supposed

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it not very polite to be called young. For all he knew, the faery gentleman was not a day older than himself. It was hard to tell, really. Mr. Lickerish was a high faery, and like all high faeries he was the size of a small boy, had no hair at all, and his skin was as white and smooth as the marble under his shoes.

“Well,” Mr. Jelliby said brightly. “We’re very late, whatever the case.” And much to the faery gentleman’s annoyance, he kept pace with him all the way to the privy chamber, talking amiably about the weather and wine merchants and how his summer cottage in Cardiff had almost been blown into the sea.

The room in which the Privy Council was expected to meet was a small one, dark-paneled, at the heart of the building, its diamond-paned windows overlooking a hawthorn tree and the court. Rows of high-backed chairs crowded the floor, all but two of them already filled. The Speaker of the Council, one Lord Horace V. Something-or-other (Mr. Jelliby could never remember his name) sat perched at its center, at a sort of podium artfully carved with fauns and sagging clusters of grapes. The Speaker must have

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been dozing because he sat up with a start when they entered.

“Ah,” he said, folding his hands across his ample girth and frowning. “It appears Mr. Jelliby and the Lord Chancellor have decided to grace us with their presence after all.” He looked at them glumly. “Please be seated. Then, at last, we may begin.”

There was much grumbling, much shuffling and pulling in of legs as Mr. Jelliby picked his way through the rows to one of the empty chairs. The faery chose the one at the opposite end of the room. When they were both seated, the Speaker cleared his throat.

“Gentlemen of the Privy Council,” he began. “I bid you all a good morning.”

One of the faery politician’s pencil-thin eyebrows arched at this, and Mr. Jelliby smirked. (It was not morning, after all. It was *night*.)

“We have assembled today to address a matter most grave and disturbing.”

Drat again. Mr. Jelliby sighed and dug his hands into his pockets. Matters most grave and disturbing

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were not things he liked addressing. He left that to Ophelia whenever he could.

“I daresay most of you have seen today’s headlines?” the Speaker inquired, in his slow, languid voice. “The latest murder of a changeling?”

A murmur passed through the gathering. Mr. Jelliby squirmed. *Oh, not murder.* Why couldn’t people simply be *nice* to each other?

“For the benefit of those who have not, allow me to summarize.”

Mr. Jelliby took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. *You needn’t trouble yourself,* he thought, a little desperately. It was getting unbearably hot. The windows were all closed, and there seemed not a breath of air in the room.

“There have been five deaths in the past month alone,” the Speaker said. “Nine in total. Most of the victims appear to be from Bath, but it is difficult to say as no one has stepped forward to claim the bodies. Whatever the case, the victims are being found in London. In the Thames.”

A small, stern-looking gentleman in the front row

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sniffed and raised his hand with an angry flourish.

The Speaker eyed him unhappily, then nodded, giving him permission to speak.

“Petty crimes, my lord. Nothing more. I’m sure Scotland Yard is doing all they can. Does the Privy Council have nothing more important to discuss?”

“Lord Harkness, we live in complicated times. These ‘petty crimes,’ as you call them, may have dark consequences a little ways down the road.”

“Then we shall step over them when they are lying across our path. Changelings have never been popular. Not with their sort, and not with ours. There will always be violence against them. I see no reason to give these new incidences any undue significance.”

“Sir, you do not know the half of it. The authorities think the murders are related. Planned and orchestrated with malicious intent.”

“Do they think that? Well, I suppose they must earn their money somehow.”

“Lord Harkness, this is not the *time*.” A trace of unease broke the Speaker’s sleepy manner. “The victims are . . .” He faltered. “They are all children.”

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Lord Harkness might have said “So?” but it would not have been polite. Instead he said, “From what I hear, there are very few changelings who are *not* children. They don’t generally last long.”

“And the method of murder—it is also the same.”

“Well, what is it?” Lord Harkness seemed to be intent on proving the entire meeting a ridiculous waste of time. Nobody wanted to hear about changelings. Nobody wanted to discuss changelings, or even think about changelings. But nobody wanted to hear how they died either, and all Lord Harkness got for his efforts was a storm of black looks from the other gentlemen. Mr. Jelliby was tempted to cover his ears.

The Speaker’s nose twitched. “The authorities are not exactly sure.”

Ah. Thank goodness.

“Then how can they possibly claim the murders are related?” Lord Harkness’s voice was acid. His handkerchief was in his hands, and he looked as if he wanted to wring the old Speaker’s neck with it.

“Well, the corpses! They’re— Why, they’re . . .”

“Out with it, man, what is it?”

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The Speaker looked straight ahead, and said, "Lord Harkness, they are hollow."

For several heartbeats the room fell completely still. A rat scurried under the polished floorboards and its hurrying feet rattled like a burst of hail in the silence.

"Hollow?" Lord Harkness repeated.

"They are empty. No bones or internal organs. Just skin. Like a sack."

"Good heavens," breathed Lord Harkness, and fell back into his chair.

"Indeed." The Speaker's eyes passed over the other gentlemen in the room, as if daring anyone else to disrupt the proceedings. "The newspapers said nothing of that, did they? That is because they do not know. They do not know many things, and for the time being we must keep it that way. There is something strange about these murders. Something wicked and inhuman. You will not have heard it, but the changelings were covered in writing, too. Head to toe. Little red markings in the faery tongue. It is an old and different sort of faery dialect that could

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not be deciphered by any of the Yard's cryptographers. I am sure you can all see what sort of unpleasantness this might lead to."

"Oh, certainly," the Earl of Fitzwatler mumbled from behind his drooping walrus moustache. "And I think it should be quite clear who is responsible. It is the anti-faery unions, of course. They had some waifs murdered and then scribbled up the bodies with faery words to put the blame on the Sidhe. It's very plain to me."

There was a great hissing at this, and just as many sage nods. Approximately half the council were members of one anti-faery group or another. The other half thought being anti anything narrow-minded, magic absolutely fascinating, and faeries the key to the future.

"Well, I say it *is* the faeries' doing!" the ancient Lord Lillicrapp cried, hammering his cane into the floor so hard a splinter of wood flew up like a spark. "Little beasts. Devils straight from Hell, if you ask me. They're the reason England's in the state it is. Look at this country. Look at Bath. It's going wild,

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it is. Soon we'll have rebellion on our hands, and then where'll we be? They'll turn our cannons into rosebushes, take the city for themselves. They don't understand our laws. They don't care about murder. A few dead men here and there? *Pshaw.*" The man spat contemptuously. "It's not wrong to them."

A bobbing of heads followed this outburst. Mr. Jelliby pinched the bridge of his nose and prayed it would end soon. He wanted very much to be somewhere else, somewhere cheerful and loud, preferably with brandy and people who talked about the weather and wine merchants.

The Archbishop of Canterbury was the next to speak. He was a tall, grim-looking man with a haggard face, and his tweed suit—no longer very new—stood out sorely against the cravats and colored waistcoats of the other gentlemen.

"I would not be so quick to judge," he said, leaning forward in his chair. "And I do not know why we must insist upon this word 'changeling.' As if we are still children, whispering over taery tales in the nursery. Peculiars, they are called, and they are quite

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real. They are not waifs put into the cradles of human children while the true infants are stolen into the Old Country. They will not wrinkle and waste away in a few years' time. They will be hanged. They are forever being hanged in our more remote villages. And no wonder, if we speak of them as if they were nothing but wind and enchantments. Humans think they are curses in child's form. Faeries are disgusted by their ugliness and are in the habit of burying them alive under elderberry bushes in case it's catching. I rather think both parties are sufficiently foolish and ill-informed to kill."

Up until then, Mr. Lickerish had been listening to the discussion quite impassively. But at the archbishop's words he stiffened. His mouth formed a thin line. Mr. Jelliby saw his hand go to his waistcoat pocket. The fingers slipped in, twitched, and were still.

The faery stood. Mr. Jelliby thought he smelled wet earth. The air didn't feel so close any more, just old and damp and rotten-sweet.

Without bothering to wait for the old councilman's

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permission, Mr. Lickerish began to speak.

“Gentlemen, these matters are indeed most troubling. But to say that the *fay* are murdering *change-lings*? It is deplorable. I will not sit silent while the blame for yet another of England’s woes is laid upon the shoulders of the *fay*. They are citizens! Patriots! Have you forgotten Waterloo? Where would England be without our brave faery troops? In the hands of Napoleon, together with all her empire. And the Americas? Were it not for the tireless efforts of trolls and giants, forging our cannon and pouring our musket balls in the infernal heat of the factories, building our warships and ether guns, it would still be a rebel nation. We owe so *much* to the faeries.” Mr. Lickerish’s face remained smooth, but his words were strangely beguiling, full of nuance and subtle passion. Even the council members who were distinctly anti-*fay* sat up in their chairs.

Only the man next to Mr. Jelliby—a Lord Locktower—clicked his tongue. “Yes, including forty-three percent of our crime,” he said.

Mr. Lickerish turned on him. He flashed his

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pointed teeth. “That is because they are so poor,” he said. He stood a moment, considering Lord Locktower. Then he spun sharply, addressing instead the gentlemen on the other side of the room. “It is because they are being exploited!”

More nods and only a few hisses. The smell of damp was very strong now. Lord Locktower scowled. Mr. Jelliby saw him pull out a heavy old pocket watch and examine it angrily. The watch was an antiquated thing, scrolled and made from iron. Mr. Jelliby thought it somewhat unfashionable.

The faery politician began to pace. “It has been this way since the day we arrived,” he said. “First we were massacred, then we were enslaved, then we were massacred again. And now? Now we are your scapegoat, to be accused of all the crimes you find too distasteful to blame on your own people. Why does England *hate* us? What have we done that your world loathes us so? We do not *want* to be here. We did not come to stay. But the road home has vanished, the door is closed.”

The faery stopped pacing. He was watching the

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assembled gentlemen, watching them very closely. In a voice that was barely a wisp, he said, "We will never see our home again."

Mr. Jelliby thought this unbearably sad. He found himself nodding gravely along with most of the others.

But Mr. Lickerish was not finished yet. He walked to the center of the room, right up next to the Speaker's podium, and said, "We have suffered so much at the hands of fate. We live here in chains, locked into slums, among iron and bells that harangue against the very essence of our beings, but is that enough for you? Oh, no. We must be murderers as well. Murderers of innocent children, children who share our very blood." He shook his head once, and as the light shifted across it, his features seemed to change, and the angles soften. He didn't look so cold anymore. He looked suddenly tragic, like the weeping angels under the trees of Hyde Park. "I can only hope justice will prevail in the end."

Mr. Jelliby gave the faery politician what he hoped was a look of deep and heartfelt sympathy. The other

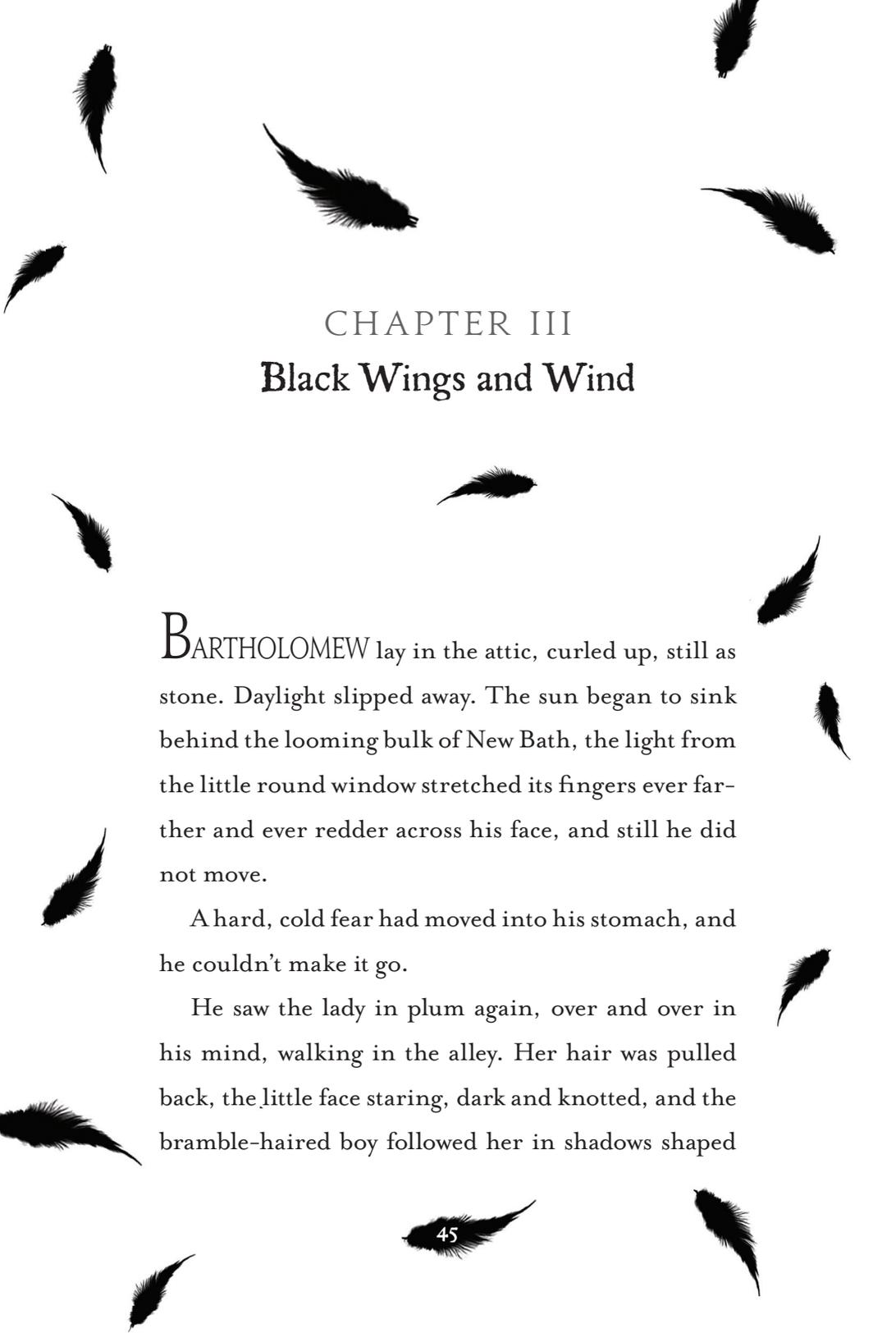
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gentlemen tutted and harrumphed. But then Lord Locktower stood up and stamped his foot.

“Now stop all this!” he cried, glaring at everyone at once. “Whining and sniveling, that’s what this is. I, for one, shall have none of it.” The gentleman two chairs over tried to shush him. He only spoke louder. Other men broke in. Lord Locktower began to shout, his face flaring red. When the Baron of Somerville tried to pull him back into his seat, he brought up a glove and slapped him hard across the face.

The whole room seemed to draw in a breath. Then it exploded into pandemonium. Chairs were overturned, walking sticks were hurled to the floor, and everyone was on his feet, bellowing.

Mr. Jelliby made for the door. Lords and dukes were everywhere, jostling and elbowing, and someone was crying “Down with England!” at their top of his lungs. Mr. Jelliby was forced to turn aside, and when he did he caught sight of Mr. Lickerish again. The faery was standing in the midst of the commotion, a pale slip in the sea of red faces and flailing black hats. He was smiling.



CHAPTER III
Black Wings and Wind

BARTHOLOMEW lay in the attic, curled up, still as stone. Daylight slipped away. The sun began to sink behind the looming bulk of New Bath, the light from the little round window stretched its fingers ever farther and ever redder across his face, and still he did not move.

A hard, cold fear had moved into his stomach, and he couldn't make it go.

He saw the lady in plum again, over and over in his mind, walking in the alley. Her hair was pulled back, the little face staring, dark and knotted, and the bramble-haired boy followed her in shadows shaped

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like wings. *Jewels, and hats, and purple skirts. A blue hand grinding glass. Wet black eyes, and a smile under them, a horrid, horrid smile.*

It was too much for him. Too much, too quickly, a rush of sound and fury, like time sped up. Bartholomew had seen thieves from that attic window, an automaton with no legs, a pale corpse or two, but this was worse. This was dangerous, and he had been seen. *Why had the lady come? And why had she taken his friend away?* Bartholomew's head ached.

He stared at the floorboards so long he could make out every rift and wormhole. He knew it wasn't the magic that had shaken him. Magic was a part of life in Bath, always had been. Somewhere in London, important men had decided it would be best to try to hide it, to keep the factories heaving and the church bells clanging, but it hadn't done much good. Magic was still there. It was simply underneath, hidden in the secret pockets of the city. Bartholomew saw a twinkly-eyed gnome in Old Crow Alley now and again, dragging behind him a root in the shape of a child. Folk would open their windows to watch, and when someone dropped the gnome a penny or a bit

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of bread, he would make the root dance, and make it wheel around and sing. Once in a blue moon the oak on Scattercopper Lane was known to mumble prophecies. And it was common knowledge that the Buddelbinsters' faery mother could call the mice out of the walls and make them stir her soups and twist the wool for her spinning wheel.

So a whirling pillar of darkness was not really dreadful to Bartholomew. What was dreadful was that it had happened here, in the muddy confines of his own small street, to someone just like him. And Bartholomew Kettle had been seen.

The sun was completely gone now. The shadows were beginning to slink from behind the rafters, and that made Bartholomew get up. He crawled out of the attic and made his way downstairs, trying not to let the groaning, sagging house give him away. *Don't get yourself noticed, and you won't get yourself hanged.*

At the door to their rooms, Bartholomew paused. Oily yellow light seeped from under it. The rhythmic clank of the mechanical wash wringer sounded dully into the passage.

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“Come now, Hettie,” Mother was saying. Her voice was loud and cheerful, the way it was when nothing was well and she was determined not to show it. She was trying to keep Hettie from worrying. “Drink your broth down quick-like, and then off to bed. This lamp’s not got more ’n fifteen minutes in it. I’ll be needing it another night or two.

There was a slurp. Hettie mumbled, “It doesn’t taste like anything.”

That’s because it’s only water, thought Bartholomew, leaning his head against the door frame. *With wax drippings so we think there’s meat in it.* It was why the saucers at the base of the brass candlesticks were always empty in the morning. Mother thought she was careful about it, but he knew. They were scraped clean by the kitchen spoon.

“Mummy, Barthy isn’t back yet.”

“Yes . . .” Mother’s voice was not so loud anymore.

“It’s dark outside. It’s past bedtime. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, dearie, it is.”

“I suspect something, Mummy.”

“Oh . . .”

“Do you want to know what I suspect?”

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“There isn’t any salt left.”

“No. I suspect a kelpy got him and dragged him down into his bottomless puddle.”

Bartholomew turned away before he could hear his mother’s reply. She wasn’t really thinking about the salt. She was thinking about where he might be hiding, where she hadn’t searched yet, and why he hadn’t returned. He felt cruel suddenly, slinking around outside their door while she worried inside. Soon she would start to panic, knock on the neighbors’ walls, and go into the night with the last fifteen minutes of the lamp oil. He had to be back before then.

Tiptoeing the rest of the way downstairs, he scraped himself along the wall toward the alley door. A goblin sat by it, fast asleep on a stool. Bartholomew slid past him and ran his hand over the door, feeling for the bolt. The door had a face in it—fat cheeks and lips and sleepy old eyes growing out of the gray and weather-beaten wood. His mother said the face used to demand beetles from folks who wanted to come in, and spat their shells at folks who wanted to go out, but Bartholomew had never seen it so much as blink.

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His fingers found the bolt. He pulled it back. Then he slipped under the chain, out onto the cobbles.

It was strange being out in the open. The air there was close and damp. There were no walls or ceilings, just the alley splitting into other alleys, on and on into the great world. It felt huge, frightening, and endlessly dangerous. But Bartholomew didn't suppose he had a choice.

He scurried across the alley to the low arch in the Buddelbinsters' wall. The yard was dark, the crooked house as well. Its many windows had been thrown open. They looked as though they were watching him.

He leaped over the broken gate and pressed himself to the wall. The night was not cold, but he shivered anyway. Only a few hours ago, the lady in plum had stood here, her second, ugly face and the thousand black wings all hidden away, luring his friend to her with blue-gloved fingers.

Bartholomew shook himself and moved away from the wall. The circle the lady had poured onto the ground was still there, a few steps to the right of the path. From his attic window Bartholomew had been

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able to see it clearly, but up close it was very faint, practically invisible if you didn't already know it was there. He knelt down, pushing aside a tuft of weeds to examine it. He frowned. The ring was made of mushrooms. Tiny black mushrooms that looked like no sort of mushroom he would want to eat. He plucked one up. For a moment he could feel its shape, soft and smooth against his fingertips. Then it seemed to melt, until it was only a droplet of black liquid staining the whiteness of his skin.

He stared at his hand curiously. He waved it inside the circle. Nothing happened. One more hand and his forehead. Still nothing. He almost laughed then. It didn't work anymore. They were just mushrooms now.

Standing up, he dug his bare toe into the cold soil inside the ring. Then he stomped a few of the mushrooms. He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard a soft titter at that, like a crowd of whispers, far away. Without another thought, he leaped up and landed in the middle of the mushroom ring.

A hideous screeching erupted all around him.

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There was a burst of darkness, and wings were everywhere, flapping in his face, battering him. He was falling, flying, a fierce and icy wind tearing at his hair and his threadbare clothes.

“Idiot!” he screamed. “You stupid, stupid, what were you thinking, you—” But it was too late. Already the darkness was subsiding. And what he saw then was not Old Crow Alley or the Buddelbinsters’ yard. It was not anything in the faery slums. Flashing through the wings like scraps of sunlight was warmth, luxury, the gleam of brass and polished wood, and heavy green drapes stitched with leaves. A fire was somewhere nearby. He couldn’t see it, but he knew it was there, crackling.

With a desperate lunge, he tried to throw himself free of the wings. *Please, please put me back.* The magic couldn’t have taken him far in those few seconds, could it? Maybe a few miles, but if he hurried he could find his way back before the faeries and the English filled the streets.

The wings slashed past his face. Gravity seemed to become unsure of its own laws, and for a moment

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he thought his plan might have worked; he was soaring, weightless. And then the wings were gone. The screeching stopped. His head thudded against smooth wood, and the air was knocked from his lungs.

Bartholomew propped himself up on his elbows dizzily. He was on the floor of the loveliest room he had ever seen. There were the green drapes, drawn against the night. There, the fireplace and the flames. Woodsmoke drifted from the grate, making the air warm and hazy. Books lined the walls. Lamps with painted silk shades threw a soft glow about them. A few feet away from where Bartholomew had fallen, a circle had been carefully drawn with chalk on the bare floorboards. Rings of writing surrounded the circle, thin twining letters that seemed to spin and dance as he looked at them.

That was where I was supposed to land, he thought, feeling the bump that was growing on his head.

Shakily, he got to his feet. The room was a study of some sort. A heavy wooden desk took up most of one end. It was carved with bulbous frogs and toads, and they all looked to be in the process of eating one

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another. On top of the desk, in a neat row, were three mechanical birds. They were each a slightly different size, and were built to look like sparrows, with metal wings and tiny brass cogs that peeped out from between the plates. They sat utterly still, obsidian eyes staring keenly at Bartholomew.

He took a few steps toward them. A little voice at the back of his mind was telling him to run, to get away from that room as fast as he could, but he was feeling dull and silly, and his head still hurt. A few minutes wouldn't make any difference, would they? And it was so pleasant here, so shiny and warm.

He walked a little closer to the birds. He had the strongest urge to reach out and touch one. He wanted to *feel* those perfect metal feathers, the delicate machinery, and the sharp black eyes. . . . He uncurled his fingers.

He froze. Something had shifted in the depths of the house. A floorboard or a panel. And then all Bartholomew heard was the *clip-clip* of feet approaching briskly from the other side of the door at the far end of the room.

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His heart clenched, painful. *Someone has heard.* Someone had heard the noise, and now he was coming to investigate. He would find a changeling in his private chambers, a pauper from the faery slums clearly breaking into his house. A constable would come, beat Bartholomew senseless. Morning will find him swinging by the neck in the hot breath of the city.

Bartholomew flew across the room and wrenched at the doorknob with desperate fingers. It was locked, but the person on the other side would have a key. He had to get out of there.

Racing back to the chalk circle, he leaped and landed squarely in the middle. His heels struck the floor painfully, the force jarring up his legs.

Nothing happened.

He threw a frantic look back at the door. The footsteps had stopped. Someone was right there, right on the other side, breathing. Bartholomew heard a hand being placed on the knob. The knob began to turn, turn. *Click.* Locked.

Panic slithered in his throat. *Trapped. Get out, get out, get out!*

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For a moment the person outside was silent. Then the knob began to rattle. Slowly at first but becoming more insistent, getting stronger and stronger until the whole door was shivering in its frame.

Bartholomew stamped his foot. *GO!* he thought desperately. *Work! Take me away from here!* His chest began to ache. Something was pricking the back of his eyes, and for a moment he wanted nothing more than to sit down and cry like he had when he was little and had lost hold of his mother's hand at the market.

The person outside began to beat viciously against the door.

It wouldn't do any good to cry. Bartholomew ran his hand over his nose. A crying thief would still be hanged. He looked down at the markings all around him and tried to think.

There. A section of the chalk circle was smeared across the floor. The ring didn't go all the way around anymore. He must have ruined it when he fell.

Dropping to his knees, he began scrabbling the chalk dust together, piling it in a rough line to close the circle.

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A dull snapping sounded from the door. The wood. *Whoever is outside is breaking down the door!*

Bartholomew couldn't hope to copy all the little marks and symbols, but he could at least complete the ring. *Faster, faster . . .* His hands squeaked against the floor.

The door burst inward with a thunderous crash.

But the wings were already enveloping Bartholomew, the darkness howling around him, and the wind pulling at his clothes. Only something was different this time. Wrong. He felt *things* in the blackness, cold, thin bodies that darted against him and poked at his skin. Mouths pressed up to his ears, whispering in small, dark voices. A tongue, icy wet, slid over his cheek. And then there was only pain, horrid searing pain, tearing up his arms and eating into his bones. He kept down his scream just long enough for the room to begin to flit away into the spinning shadows. Then he shrieked along with the wind and the raging wings.