



ONE

He came to the city at the end of summer, over the sea; leaning out over the boat's plain prow, scanning the horizon, nervously telling beads of scale and bone through his thin fingers. He'd crossed half the world to come there.

The sky over the Bay glittered with white gulls, diving and threading between blue air and sea, scavenging on the harbor's busy life. Those birds were the city's first sign, and they were a bright and lively one, lifting his spirits.

"Into the city soon, Mr. Roon." The captain clapped him on the back, giving him a gappy brown grin. "Already are, you could say. The birds' city too, isn't it? Scared, a little?"

In fact his name was Arjun, but he was quite well used to being mispronounced, and not too proud to let the error stand. He smiled mildly back and said, "Hopeful," but the captain had turned away, and was calling out orders in a rhythmic sailor's cant to his tiny crew of dark-skinned brothers and sons. And the city sketched itself in distantly on the horizon: a smudge of rooftops, a gauzy tobacco-brown cross-hatching of bridges and spires. Shifting and shaping in slowly, distorted by heat-haze, by its own density. A great mountain rising behind it all, a daub of distant blue. The fetish of scale and bone rustled over his knuckles. In his mind he was composing a letter to his Mothers and Fathers: *Here we begin at last. The city is a puzzle-box to be cracked open. Let me describe it to you. . . .* But he wasn't sure how, yet.

In every place he'd passed through on his journey, he'd heard

stories of Ararat. He thought of them as the city's echoes; that was how he'd been raised. In some places, they said the city was blessed. In others, they said *haunted*. In one such village, in the hills, in the pines, he'd stayed for a season with Ama, the doctor's daughter; she had begged him to stay, or turn back. When the snows lifted, and he had had to move on, she'd given him that charm, softly pressing his fingers over it. It would protect him, she promised. Her father had made it.

Perhaps it had some power. But he had come to search among the city's gods, not to hide from them. He let it slip from his fingers. It floated for a moment on the bright foam, then the hull forced it under.

The boat creaked and clanked as the crew worked.

A shimmer of spray rose from the water. The crew's rhythm faltered. The captain cried out. Arjun turned, to see one of the squat sea-brothers point to the sky with a yelp of delight, and another tilt his head back and moan deep in his throat. *Look up.*

Out of the Bay's high sun, curving steeply down over the water, opening out ample wings: in the first instant of perception, it could be a cloud unfolding from the cloudless sky, streaming across the firmament like a white pennant. At once, it becomes a great bird, driving forward. Its wings are wide white planes, beating slowly. Nothing so huge should be able to fly, but it seems weightless. The sunlight shivers ecstatically in its wake.

As it soars across the water, the Bay's birds gather around it, circling it with boundless fluttering adoration. It turns in a loose, free arc, and beneath it, fish leap from the water, hanging for a second amazed by the air. The Bird-God brings the gifts of flight and freedom with it. It casts no shadow.

The Bird drives over the Bay and in toward the ancient city. A single brightly painted barque bobs here, waiting, far out in the Bay. A red flare fires from its deck. A moment later, an answering flare appears over the shore, and deeper into the city, another follows. As the Bird passes overhead, the barque's sails burst with sud-

den air and it sets out after the god; but for all the craft's borrowed speed, it's a hopeless pursuit.

A close-packed, shifting maze of vessels sits before the docks. Under the Bird's wings, every sail applauds, snapping full for a moment. A babble rises from below: cheers, screams, canting charms and imprecations. Quickened into sudden motion, ships drift unpredictably in the crowded harbor.

The harbor's crews fight to recover control. Word of the Bird's return has gone out, and they are well-prepared. The Countess Ilona's office crafted *Rules and Regulations for the Ships of Ar-Mouth Harbor in the Event of the Return of the Great Bird, Praise Be*, and for weeks her men have been posting them in every public house, flophouse, pleasure barge, market, and church in the docks; and then, stung by this presumption—who is Ilona to claim jurisdiction over the docks? How dare she?—the Marquis Mensonge, the Gerent of Stross End, and a dozen other lords all had their agents post their *own* regulations, tearing each other's notices down or papering them over.

It's been a difficult few weeks for the landlords of the docks; each of the city's great Estates wants to see their own rules posted up behind the bar, and no one else's; so they've had to nail up the Countess's poster, ready to swap it quickly for the Gerent's if they saw his men come shouldering in the door, or vice versa. Of course, they're used to that sort of thing. The city's Estates are so very jealous, and there are so damn *many* of them.

The docksmen mostly prepared themselves in their own way anyway. The old hands remember the last time the Bird came to the city, and what it brought with it.

But nothing can be done to make the great Bird's return altogether safe. The harbor is full of foreign ships, and too many are unwarned and slow to react. The ships drift inexorably into their neighbors, hulls grinding painfully together.

At the center of the tangle of vessels, the great black hulk of the *Dauntless* lurches into motion. The ropes lashing it to surrounding vessels tear free and the juggernaut escapes ponderously seawards. No one knows how to stop it now. It bears down on an elegant barquentine from Akash. All hands stand on both ships' decks, yelling

and helplessly gesturing. A passenger on the Akashic ship fumbles with a flintlock, firing a shot that smacks pointlessly into the *Dauntless's* hull.

But the Bird has passed on already, following the River Urgos up from the harbor. It coasts between the parliaments and anti-parliaments that stamp their marbled presences along the river's banks: a strange and clumsy blend of colors and forms, shapes and styles, gentle curves next to angular pillars and pediments, ornament rubbing up against austerity, all grown warily accustomed to each other over the centuries, all stained alike by the city's smoke. The city below stretches out from the river, rising endlessly north into the blue slopes of Ar-Mount. Sunlight glints off copper and brass domes, steel girders, white stone spires; many thousands of temples, and many thousands more things that *might* be temples. Perhaps everything here is sacred. From this soaring elevation, it all gleams. The dust in the ancient city's air glitters in the sun and rising wind. The wind smells electric. The city stands ready to be changed and remade.

The Bird turns from the River Urgos to circle the spire of Monan's seminary, standing alone on the muddy ground by the river's banks. A cloud of pigeons bursts from the ragged spire and joins the wheeling seabird chorus. The motleyed flock chases the object of their adoration in a squabbling mass as the great Bird veers west toward the massive warehouses of Barbary Ward.

By now, the procession of flares has alerted much of the city. Abandoning their midday meals, people are climbing onto Barbary's square roofs. Docksmen mix with the bohemians of the artists' lofts. When the Bird passes over, small but growing crowds cheer it, running wildly after it until the edge of the roof brings them up short. A few throw tributes of white cloth and silk in the Bird's wake.

Countless painters decide to capture the Bird's image. It'll test their art. It's impossible to make out its details—before the eye can fix on it, it's moved on. It's huge, yes, but it's impossible to say *how* huge. It seems to be unthinkably distant even as it thunders immediately overhead—perhaps it's vastly further away and larger than it seems. Later, no one will even be able to agree what *kind* of bird it is. Some see a storm of bright feathers; others only the graceful motion

of its wings. Little more than a sense of easy, invincible speed remains. A dozen minds conceive abstract new schools of painting to capture the moment.

The rooftops are already a painting, though, made an olive-white impasto by the shit-shower of the bird chorus above. One of the artists, a young man called Mochai, will later say drunkenly to his lover Olympia, shortly before she leaves him for someone less needy, that “what the gods *are* is what they leave behind in the city. Isn’t that what Holbach says? That that’s their real substance? So that’s how I’ll capture It! And he’ll go out onto the rooftops, chisel in hand, to chip up stuff to spackle his canvases with; he’ll have to fight over it with the street urchins collecting for the nightsoil merchants, and with the Bird’s worshippers, who’ll want it to burn on their private attic altars; and then in the end, a mob of shaven-headed youths in white robes will tell him his shit-paintings are blasphemous and obscene, and burn down his exhibition. But that’s all much later, of course, and the Bird is here *now*.

The Bird has no church: its interventions into the city are too occasional and unpredictable, and it is utterly antithetical to order and structure in any case. But a handful of eccentric self-ordained devotees are here, wrapped in contraptions of linen and silk and balsa, ready among the sparse crowds, and as the Presence rushes by, they run to the chasm between roofs, fling out homemade wings, and plunge. In the moment of its passage, their wings catch flight, the Bird’s power passing briefly into them, and they wheel up to join it, tears of joy and terror on their faces. Those who miss the moment fall to be broken in the alleys below. Down there, the city’s no gleaming, gauzy thing; down there it’s hard and bruise-dark and stinking.

Jack Sheppard stands on the roof of the Barbotin House, legs tensed. His hands are occupied with his work, but his mind and eyes scan the sky. “Come on,” he mutters. “Come on. *Come*.”

Beneath his tensed feet is an unthinkable weight of windowless iron and stone. He’s been buried under it for too long. A moment of crisis is coming, a fulcrum around which he can pull himself up and

out of the earth and across the sky. He can feel it starting already. Or is he imagining it? He's so young, still. (Fifteen, sixteen? He doesn't know exactly.)

He's pale, sharp, and a little ratlike, like all those raised in the House. He is accustomed to opening his eyes very wide to see in the darkness of the House's halls, and, on the rare occasions when he is out in open daylight—as he is now, working on the roof, on the laundry detail—he squints, making him look harder and fiercer than he really is. Like many of those who grew up working the House's silk-mills, he is missing a finger, and has other scars. He wears a grey cap, and a grey wool jacket, itchy in the summer heat.

He is standing on top of Barbotin House. It occupies the length of Plessy Street at the edge of Barbary and Fourth Ward. Other workhouses in the city look like plain prisons; this one looks like a tomb, or like an iron puzzle box with no solution. Heavy-riveted panels of gunmetal are plated over the concrete and stone, sullenly sealing all windows. Within, there are no lamps or torches or even candles. Desperate children might turn fire into a weapon against the House; and besides, the Masters explain, this is a House of Tiber: fire is sacred here, and these boys are not worthy. Generations of dust accrete in every corner, unseen. The House's silk mills must be worked in the gloom. It's a dreary, dangerous business, and Jack's sick of it.

The House is set far back from the surrounding buildings, across a field of high barbed fences. It looks like something only a lunatic would design, and indeed, Jack knows its history and knows that to be the case. No boy has ever escaped.

Jack's pinning a dirty grey sheet to the line when he feels it whip slightly in his hands. He is intensely ready; he has schemed and fought to be here, at this time. When he sees the red flare, he knows what it must mean.

There is one special sheet in the bundle in his laundry basket. He snatches the bundle up and tenses himself.

If he's wrong now, he'll never have another chance—he could have four, five more years here before they spit him back out onto the streets, exhausted. It does not occur to him that he might die in the attempt. He has not thought what he will do with himself in the city outside, if he does get free.

Now, then: he launches himself into a mad run for the edge. He hurdles Carswell, who kneels obediently on the floor, folding a pile of grey cloth jackets. He bursts through a white line of sheets, thinking for a moment of the way the comedians at the Palace Cabaret, in his childhood in the days before the House, would come bursting through the velvet curtain and into the brassy stage light. He starts laughing. This is a *show*. "*Laaaaadeeeez an' gennelmennnn!*" he shouts.

Mr. Tar starts up and shouts, "What's this? Stop that boy!" Hutton, trying to curry favor with Tar, grabs Jack's arm. The older boy could hold Jack easily if he really tried, but he has no idea how desperate Jack is, so he stupidly turns his back and looks smiling for approval at the Master. He stumbles away a second later holding his bitten and bloodied ear. Jack swerves around a chimney and drops onto the slate slope of the lower roof. He stops for a second. When another boy comes up to the edge, Jack levers up a tile and throws it at his head. With a bark of triumph, he spins his rough cloth cap after it.

He scans the sky anxiously. Nothing there, no speck in any direction. "Oh no. Come on. Come on. Come *on*."

When it comes, it comes tremendously and all at once. Pigeons, rooks, gannets, and gulls burst over the roof and scatter the sky. Unbelievably, men and women wheel among them. In the center, the object of all attention, is the Bird.

Jack shakes out the bundle of laundry and draws out a bedsheet. It used to be as grey and mottled as every other sheet in Barbotin, but Jack has stolen some silk-dyes and bleached it white. He understands that to be an important gesture. Into the sheet are stitched stolen rags and filaments of silk. He shucks off his jacket, quickly, roughly. Beneath it, his shirt is also bleached white, and ornamented with long, brightly colored threads of stolen silk. He whips the sheet around his shoulders. He looks as comical and pathetic as a flightless bird.

Mr. Tar has climbed down onto the slope *now*. Jack salutes him, and runs to the edge. He slips on the steep slope for a second as a tile gives way under his feet, then rights himself. Jack's foot connects with the guttering under the eaves, and he kicks himself off into the air and throws his arms out.

It works, Praise Be, it works, but not well. His magic is crude and makeshift: he had to do the best he could with the materials to hand. He imagined flying like a bird, like *the Bird*. Instead, it's as if, for a second, he's free of gravity and with each step he can kick off again higher, so beautifully poised is he; but in the next second gravity returns like a blow across his back and he loses his balance. He falls hard and scrapes his knees. He looks back in sudden despair. But Praise Be! He's on the next roof, separated from Barbotin House by a wide chasm. Behind him, Mr. Tar is on all fours at the edge of the House's roof. Tar is clutching the guttering with one hand to steady himself, and with the other holding Jack's talismanic silk-shot bedsheet, torn from his back.

Jack's standing on the bare roof of another warehouse. There is a door in a square brick extrusion in the corner of the roof, but it's locked. There's no other way down. Tar yells and blows a whistle. There are answering yells from within the House. They'll find their way into this new building soon.

Jack runs to the edge and looks over the abyss to the next roof. There's another door there, this one open, *propped* open, with a brick. A group of women stands on the roof waving after the departing Bird and its flock. One of the young ones turns and sees Jack run. She gives a quick little clap of excitement.

He can't get to her. It's a whole street away and three stories down. His makeshift wings are gone. The Bird's presence is dwindling in the distance, drifting up over the escarpment that divides Shutlow from Mass How, and everything is very heavy again. The ritual is broken. There is no power left to call on.

The Fire with it anyway. He runs to the edge, closes his eyes, and reaches out, snatching at the last threads of potentiality drifting in the air, and leaps, praying.