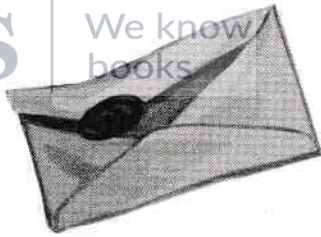


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✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦
DIVINE ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦
RIVALS ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

REBECCA ROSS



MAGPIE

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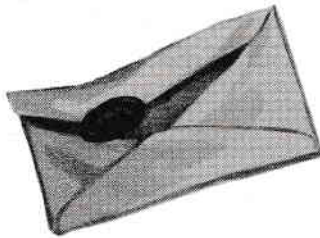
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PART ONE

Letters
Through
the
Wardrobe





1

Sworn Enemies



FIVE MONTHS LATER

Iris dashed through the rain with a broken high heel and a tattered trench coat. Hope was beating wildly in her chest, granting her speed and luck as she crossed the tram tracks downtown. She had been anticipating this day for weeks, and she knew she was ready. Even soaked, limping, and hungry.

Her first pang of unease came when she stepped into the lobby. This was an old building, constructed before the gods were vanquished. A few of those dead divines were painted on the ceiling, and despite the cracks and the faint light of the low-hanging chandeliers, Iris always glanced up at them. Gods and goddesses dancing among the clouds, dressed in long gilded robes with stars gleaming in their hair, their gazes sweeping the ground. It sometimes felt like those painted eyes were watching her, and Iris stifled a shiver. She removed her mangled right shoe and hurried to the lift with a stilted gait, thoughts of the gods swiftly fading when she thought about *him*. Perhaps the rain had slowed down Roman too, and she still had a chance.

She waited a full minute. The confounded lift must be stuck, of all days,

and she decided to take the stairs, hustling up to the fifth floor. She was shaking and sweating when she finally pushed through the heavy doors to the *Oath Gazette*, greeted by a wash of yellow lamplight, the scent of strong tea, and the morning hustle of preparing the newspaper.

She was four minutes late.

Iris stood amidst the hum, her gaze flickering to Roman's desk.

It was empty, and she was pleased until she glanced at the assignment board and saw him standing there, waiting for her to appear. As soon as their eyes met, he gave her a lazy smile and reached up to the board, yanking a piece of paper from a pin. The last assignment.

Iris didn't move, not even when Roman Kitt wound around the cubicles to greet her. He was tall and lithe with cheekbones that could cut stone, and he waved the piece of paper in the air, just out of her reach. The piece of paper she so badly wanted.

"Late again, Winnow," he greeted her. "The second time this week."

"I didn't know you were keeping tally, Kitt."

His smirk eased as his gaze dropped to her hands, cradling her broken shoe. "Looks like you ran into a bit of trouble this time."

"Not at all," she replied, her chin tilted upward. "I planned for this, of course."

"For your heel to break?"

"For you to get this final assignment."

"Going easy on me, then?" He arched a brow. "That's surprising. We're supposed to duel to the death."

She snorted. "A hyperbolic turn of phrase, Kitt. Which you do often in your articles, by the way. You should be careful of that tendency if you get columnist."

A lie. Iris rarely read what he wrote. But he didn't know that.

Roman's eyes narrowed. "What's so *hyperbolic* about soldiers going missing at the front?"

Iris's stomach clenched, but she hid her reaction with a thin smile. "Is that the topic of the last assignment? Thanks for letting me know." She turned away from him and began to weave around cubicles to her desk.

"It doesn't matter if you know it," he insisted as he followed her. "I have the assignment."

She reached her desk and flicked on her lamp. "Of course, Kitt."

He wasn't leaving. He continued to stand by her cubicle, watching her set down her tapestry bag and her mangled high heel like it was a badge of honor. She shed her trench coat. He rarely watched her this attentively, and Iris knocked over her tin of pencils.

"Did you need something?" she asked, hurrying to gather the pencils before they rolled off the desk. Of course, one did, landing right before Roman's leather brogues. He didn't bother to pick the pencil up for her, and she swallowed a curse as she bent down to retrieve it, noticing the spit polish of his shoes.

"You're going to write your own article about missing soldiers," he stated. "Even though you don't have the full information on the assignment."

"And that worries you, Kitt?"

"No. Course not."

She glanced at him, studying his face. She put her tin of pencils on the back side of her desk, far from any chance of spilling again. "Has anyone ever told you that you squint when you lie?"

His scowl only deepened. "No, but only because no one has spent as much time looking at me as you do, Winnow."

Someone snickered from a nearby desk. Iris flushed, sitting down in her chair. She grappled for a witty reply but came up short, because he was unfortunately handsome and he often drew her eyes.

She did the only thing she could; she leaned back in her chair and granted Roman a brilliant smile. One that reached her eyes, crinkling the corners. His expression darkened instantly, just as she expected. He hated it when she smiled like this at him. It always made him retreat.

"Good luck on your assignment," she said brightly.

"And you can have fun with the obituaries," he countered in a clipped tone, at last departing to his cubicle, which was—regrettably—only two desks away.

Iris's smile melted as soon as his back was turned. She was still absently staring in that direction when Sarah Prindle stepped into her field of vision.

“Tea?” Sarah asked, raising a cup. “You look like you need some, Winnow.”

Iris sighed. “Yes, thanks, Prindle.” She accepted the offering but set it down with a hard clunk on her desk, right next to the stack of handwritten obituaries, waiting for her to sort, edit, and type them. If she had been early enough to snag the assignment, Roman would be the one sifting through this heartache on paper.

Iris stared at the pile, remembering her first day of work three months ago. How Roman Kitt had been the last to shake her hand and introduce himself, approaching her with a hard-set mouth and cold, keen eyes. As if he were measuring how much of a threat she was to him and his position at the *Gazette*.

It hadn’t taken long for Iris to learn what he truly thought of her. In fact, it had taken only half an hour after she had first met Roman. She had overheard him saying to one of the editors, “She’ll give me no competition. None at all. She dropped out of Windy Grove School in her final year.”

The words still stung.

She hadn’t expected to ever be friends with him. How could she, when they were both competing for the same columnist position? But his pompous demeanor had only sharpened her desire to defeat him. And it had also been alarming that Roman Kitt knew more about her than she knew of him.

Which meant Iris needed to dig up his secrets.

On her second day of work, she went to the friendliest person on staff. Sarah.

“How long has Kitt been here?” Iris had asked.

“Almost a month,” Sarah had replied. “So don’t worry about him having seniority. I think you both have a fair shot at the promotion.”

“And what does his family do?”

“His grandfather pioneered the railroad.”

“So his family has money.”

“Heaps,” Sarah said.

“Where did he go to school?”

“I think Devan Hall, but don’t quote me on that.”

A prestigious school where most of the rich parents of Oath sent their

spoiled brats. A direct contrast to Iris's humble Windy Grove. She had almost winced at this revelation, but pressed on with "Is he courting anyone?"

"Not that I know of," Sarah had answered with a shrug. "But he doesn't share much about his life with us. In fact, I don't really know that much about him, other than he doesn't like anyone touching the things on his desk."

Partly satiated with her newfound knowledge, Iris had decided the best course of action was to ignore her competition. She could pretend he didn't exist most of the time. But she soon discovered that would be increasingly difficult as they had to race each other to the bulletin board for weekly assignments.

She had triumphantly snagged the first one.

Roman had then obtained the second, but only because she had let him.

It had given her the chance to read a published article of his. Iris had sat hunched at her desk, reading what Roman had written about a retired baseball player—a sport Iris had never cared about but suddenly found herself ensorcelled by, all due to the poignant and witty tone of Roman's writing. She was transfixed by his every word, feeling the stitches of the baseball in her hand, the warm summer night, the thrill of the crowd in the stadium—

"See something you like?"

Roman's haughty voice broke the spell. Iris had startled, crumpling the paper in her hands. But he knew *exactly* what she had been reading, and he was smug about it.

"Not at all," she had said. And because she was desperate for something to distract her from her mortification, she noticed his name, printed in small black type beneath the column headline.

ROMAN C. KITT

"What does the C stand for?" she asked, glancing up at him.

He had only lifted his cup of tea and taken a sip, refusing to reply. But he held her gaze over the chipped edge of the porcelain.

"Roman *Cheeky* Kitt?" Iris had guessed. "Or maybe Roman *Churlish* Kitt?"

His amusement dimmed. He didn't like to be made fun of, and Iris's grin broadened as she leaned back in her chair.

"Or perhaps it's Roman *Cantankerous* Kitt?"

He had turned and left without another word, but his jaw had been clenched.

Once he was gone, she had finished reading his article in peace. It made her heart ache—his writing was extraordinary—and she had dreamt about him that night. The next morning, she had promptly torn the paper to shreds and vowed to never read another one of his pieces again. If she did, she was bound to lose the position to him.

But she was reconsidering now as her tea went cold. If he wrote an article about missing soldiers, she *might* be inclined to read it.

Iris yanked a fresh sheet of paper from the stack on her desk, feeding it into her typewriter. But her fingers hovered over the keys as she listened to Roman pack his messenger bag. She listened to him leave the office, no doubt to gather information for his article, his footsteps muffled amongst the clack of typebars and the murmur of voices and the swirl of cigarette smoke.

She clenched her teeth together as she began to type out the first obituary.

By the time Iris was almost done for the day, she felt heavy from the obituaries. She always wondered what had caused the deaths, and although that information was never included, she imagined people would be more inclined to read the eulogies if it was.

She gnawed on a hangnail, tasting a faint trace of metal from the typewriter keys. If she wasn't working on an assignment, she was elbow deep in either classifieds or obituaries. The past three months at the *Gazette* had seen her cycle through all three, each drawing different words and emotions from her in turn.

"In my office, Winnow," said a familiar voice. Zeb Autry, her boss, was walking by, and he tapped the edge of her cubicle with his golden ringed fingers. "Now."

Iris abandoned the obituary and followed him into a glass-walled chamber. It always smelled oppressive here, like oiled leather and tobacco and

the strong sting of aftershave. When he sat at his desk, she settled in the wingback chair across from him, resisting the urge to crack her knuckles.

Zeb stared at her for a long, hard minute. He was a middle-aged man with thinning blond hair, pale blue eyes, and a cleft in his chin. Sometimes she thought he could read minds, and it made her uneasy.

“You were late this morning,” he stated.

“Yes, sir. I apologize. I overslept and missed the tram.”

By the way his frown deepened . . . she wondered if he could sense lies too.

“Kitt got the final assignment, but only because you were late, Winnow. I posted it on the board at eight o’clock sharp, like all the others,” Zeb drawled. “You’ve been late to work *two* times this week alone. And Kitt has yet to be tardy.”

“I understand, Mr. Autry. It won’t happen again, though.”

Her boss was quiet for a beat. “Over the past few months, I’ve published eleven articles of Kitt’s. I’ve published ten of yours, Winnow.”

Iris braced herself. Was it truly going to come down to the numbers? That Roman had written slightly more than her?

“Do you know that I was going to simply *give* the position to Kitt after he got his feet wet here?” Zeb continued. “That is, until your essay won the Gazette-in-Winter Competition. Out of the hundreds of essays I sifted through, yours caught my eye. And I thought, Here is a girl who has raw talent, and it would be a shame if I let that slip away.”

Iris knew what came next. She had been working at the diner, washing dishes with muted, broken dreams. She hadn’t once thought the essay she submitted to the *Gazette’s* annual competition would amount to anything, until she returned home to find a letter from Zeb with her name on it. It was an offer to work at the paper, with the tantalizing promise of columnist if she continued to prove herself exceptional.

It had completely changed Iris’s life.

Zeb lit a cigarette. “I’ve noticed that your writing hasn’t been as sharp lately. It’s been quite messy, in fact. Is there something happening at home, Winnow?”

“No, sir,” she answered, too swiftly.

He regarded her, one eye smaller than the other. "How old are you again?" "Eighteen."

"You dropped out of school this past winter, didn't you?"

She hated thinking about her broken promise to Forest. But she nodded, sensing that Zeb was digging. He wanted to know more about her personal life, which made her tense.

"You have any siblings?"

"An older brother, sir."

"And where is he, now? What does he do for a living?" Zeb pressed on.

Iris glanced away, studying the black and white checkered floor. "He was a horologist's apprentice. But he's at war now. Fighting."

"For Enva, I presume?"

She nodded again.

"Is that why you dropped out of Windy Grove?" Zeb asked. "Because your brother left?"

Iris didn't reply.

"That's a pity." He sighed, releasing a puff of smoke, although Iris knew Zeb's opinion on the war, and it never failed to irk her. "What about your parents?"

"I live with my mother," she replied in a curt tone.

Zeb withdrew a small flask from his jacket and poured a few drops of liquor into his tea. "I'll think about giving you another assignment, although that's not how I usually do things around here. Now, I want those obituaries on my desk by three this afternoon."

She left without another word.

Iris set the finished obituaries on his desk an hour early, but she didn't leave the office. She remained at her cubicle and began to think of an essay to write, just in case Zeb did give her a chance to counter Roman's assignment.

But the words felt frozen inside of her. She decided to walk to the sideboard to pour herself a fresh cup of tea when she saw Roman Conceited Kitt walk into the office.

He had been gone all day, to her relief, but he now had that annoying

bounce in his stride, as if he were teeming with words he needed to spill across the page. His face was flushed from the chill of early spring, his coat speckled with rain as he sat at his desk, rummaging through his messenger bag for his notepad.

Iris watched as he fed a page to his typewriter and began to furiously type. He was lost to the world, lost to his words, and so she didn't take the long way back to her desk, as she often did, to avoid passing him directly. He didn't notice her walking by, and she sipped her overly sweetened tea and stared at her blank page.

Soon everyone began to leave for the day, save for her and Roman. Desk lamps were being turned off, one by one, and yet Iris remained, typing slowly and arduously, as if every word had to be pulled from her marrow, while Roman two cubicles away was pounding into the keys.

Her thoughts drifted to the gods' war.

It was inevitable; the war *always* seemed to simmer at the back of her mind, even if it was raging six hundred kilometers west of Oath.

How will it end? she wondered. *With one god destroyed, or both of them?*

Endings were often found in beginnings, and she began to type what she knew. Snippets of news that had drifted across the land, reaching Oath weeks after they had happened.

It began in a small, sleepy town surrounded by gold. Seven months ago, the wheat fields were ready for harvest, nearly swallowing a place called Sparrow, where sheep outnumber people four to one, and it rains only twice a year due to an old charm cast by an angry—and now slain—god, centuries ago.

This idyllic town in Western Borough is where Dacre, a defeated Underling god, was laid to sleep in a grave. And there he slept for two hundred and thirty-four years until one day, at harvest time, he unexpectedly woke and rose, sifting through the soil and burning with fury.

He came upon a farmer in the field, and his first words were a cold, ragged whisper.