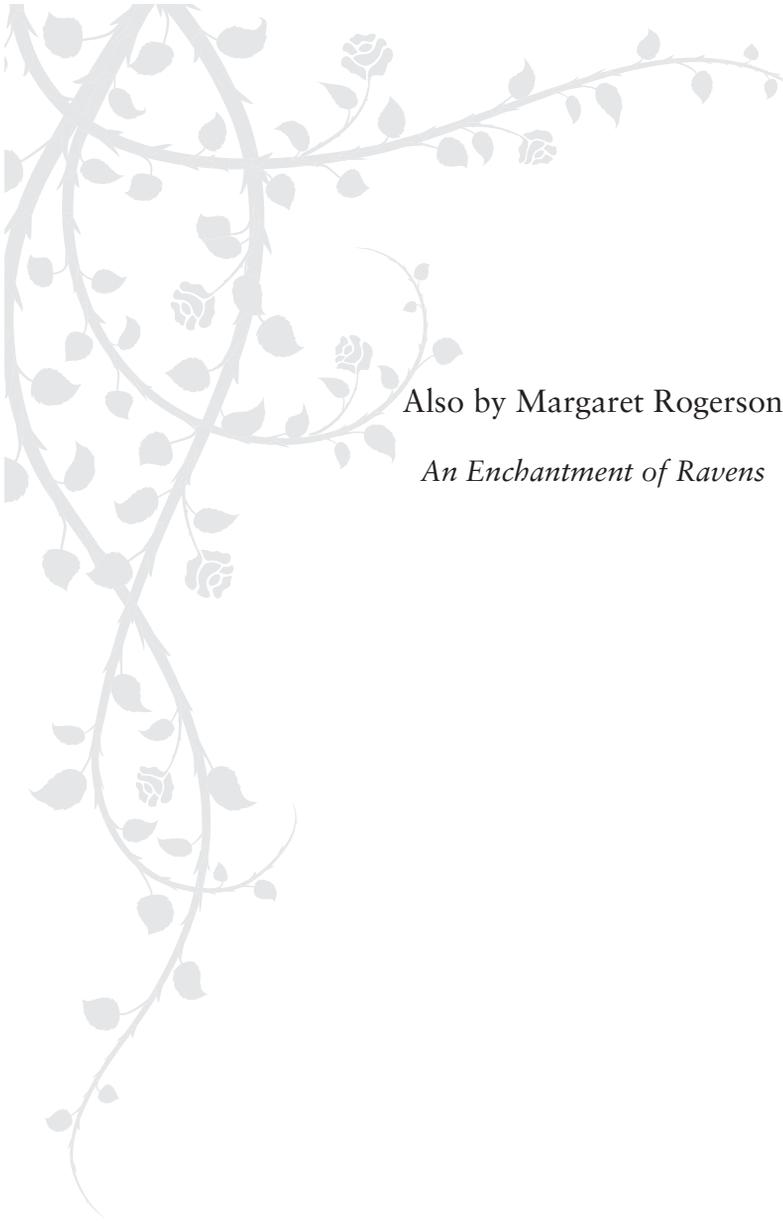


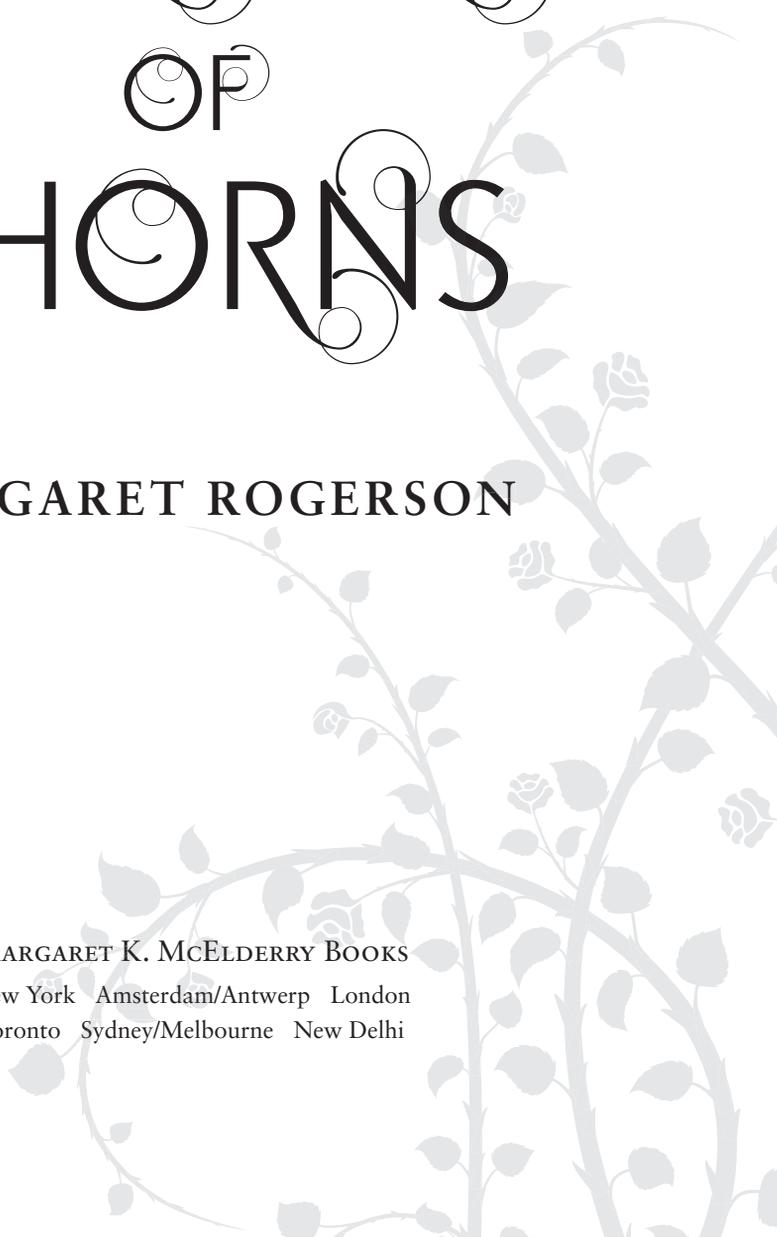
SORCERY
OF
THORNS



Also by Margaret Rogerson

An Enchantment of Ravens

SORCERY OF THORNS



MARGARET ROGERSON

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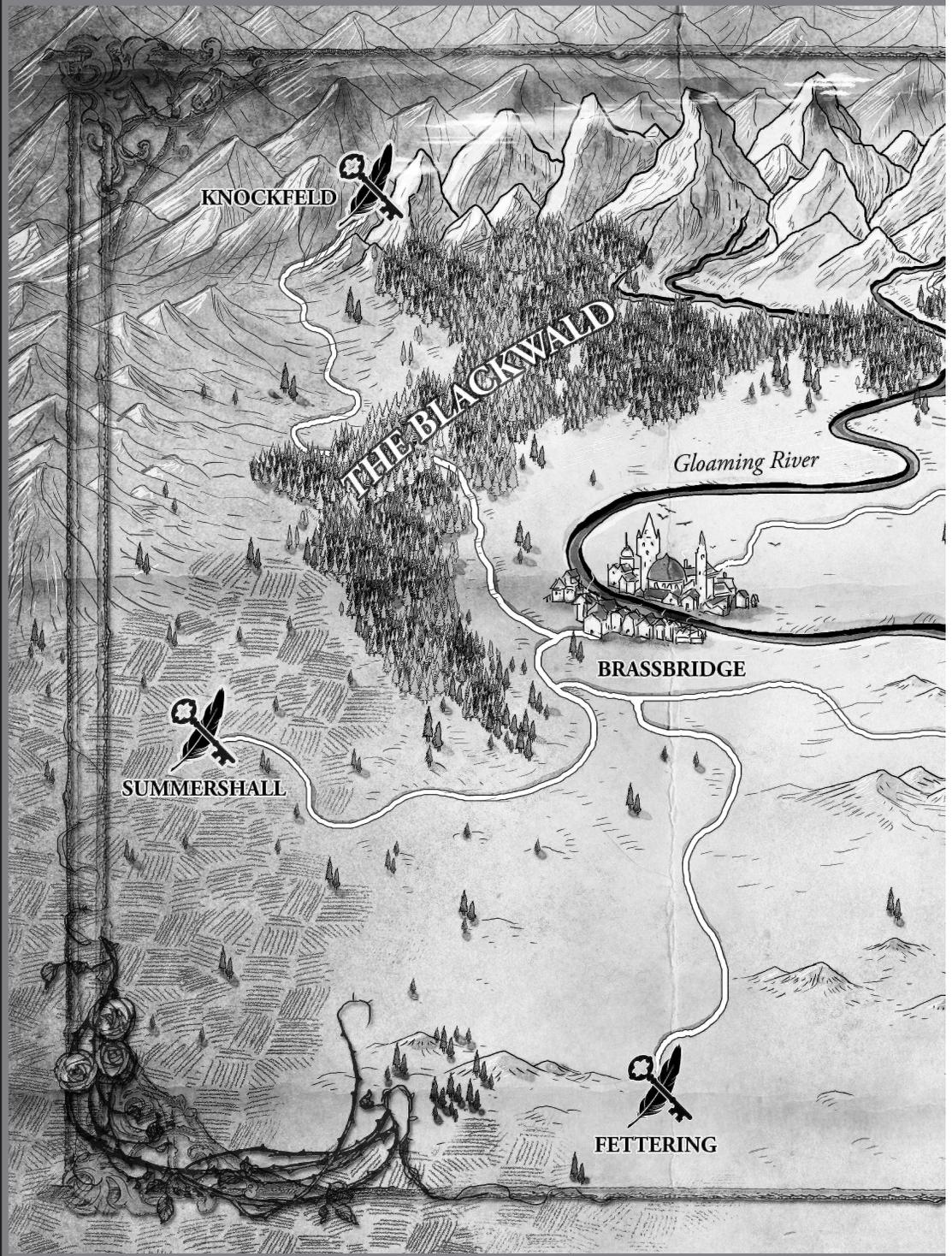
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For all the girls who found themselves in books.



KNOCKFELD

THE BLACKWALD

Gloaming River

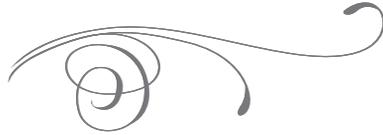
BRASSBRIDGE

SUMMERSHALL

FETTERING



ONE



NIGHT FELL AS death rode into the Great Library of Summershall. It arrived within a carriage. Elisabeth stood in the courtyard and watched the horses thunder wild-eyed through the gates, throwing froth from their mouths. High above, the last of the sunset blazed on the Great Library's tower windows, as if the rooms inside had been set on fire—but the light retreated swiftly, shrinking upward, drawing long fingers of shadow from the angels and gargoyles who guarded the library's rain-streaked parapets.

A gilt insignia shone upon the carriage's side as it rattled to a halt: a crossed quill and key, the symbol of the Collegium. Iron bars transformed the rear of the carriage into a prison cell. Though the night was cool, sweat slicked Elisabeth's palms.

"Scrivener," said the woman beside her. "Do you have your salt? Your gloves?"

Elisabeth patted the leather straps that crisscrossed her chest, feeling for the pouches they held, the canister of salt that hung at her hip. "Yes, Director." All she was missing was a sword. But

she wouldn't earn that until she became a warden, after years of training at the Collegium. Few librarians made it that far. They either gave up, or they died.

"Good." The Director paused. She was a remote, elegant woman with ice-pale features and hair as red as flame. A scar ran from her left temple all the way to her jaw, puckering her cheek and pulling one corner of her mouth permanently to the side. Like Elisabeth, she wore leather straps over her chest, but she had on a warden's uniform beneath them instead of an apprentice's robes. Lamplight glinted off the brass buttons on her dark blue coat and shone from her polished boots. The sword belted at her side was slender and tapered, with garnets glittering on its pommel.

That sword was famous at Summershall. It was named Demonslayer, and the Director had used it to battle a Malefict when she was only nineteen years old. That was where she had gotten the scar, which was rumored to cause her excruciating agony whenever she spoke. Elisabeth doubted the accuracy of those rumors, but it was true that the Director chose her words carefully, and certainly never smiled.

"Remember," the Director went on at last, "if you hear a voice in your mind once we reach the vault, do not listen to what it says. This is a Class Eight, centuries old, and not to be trifled with. Since its creation, it has driven dozens of people mad. Are you ready?"

Elisabeth swallowed. The knot in her throat prevented her from answering. She could hardly believe the Director was speaking to her, much less that she had summoned her to help transport a delivery to the vault. Ordinarily such a responsibility fell far above the rank of apprentice librarian. Hope ricocheted through her like a bird trapped within a house, taking flight,

falling, and taking flight again, exhausting itself for the promise of open skies far away. Terror flickered after it like a shadow.

She's giving me a chance to prove that I'm worth training as a warden, she thought. If I fail, I will die. Then at least I'll have a use. They can bury me in the garden to feed the radishes.

Wiping her sweaty palms on the sides of her robes, she nodded.

The Director set off across the courtyard, and Elisabeth followed. Gravel crunched beneath their heels. A foul stench clotted the air as they drew nearer, like waterlogged leather left to rot on the seashore. Elisabeth had grown up in the Great Library, surrounded by the ink-and-parchment smell of magical tomes, but this was far from what she was used to. The stench stung her eyes and stippled her arms with goose bumps. It was even making the horses nervous. They shied in their traces, scattering gravel as they ignored the driver's attempts to calm them down. In a way she envied them, for at least they didn't know what had ridden behind them all the way from the capital.

A pair of wardens leaped down from the front of the carriage, their hands planted on the hilts of their swords. Elisabeth forced herself not to shrink back when they glowered at her. Instead she straightened her spine and lifted her chin, endeavoring to match their stony expressions. She might never earn a blade, but at least she could appear brave enough to wield one.

The Director's key ring rattled, and the carriage's rear doors swung open with a shuddering groan. At first, in the gloom, the iron-lined cell appeared empty. Then Elisabeth made out an object on the floor: a flat, square, iron coffer, secured with more than a dozen locks. To a layperson, the precautions would have appeared absurd—but not for long. In the twilight silence, a single, reverberating thud issued from within the coffer, powerful

enough to shake the carriage and rattle the doors on their hinges. One of the horses screamed.

“Quickly,” the Director said. She took one of the coffer’s handles, and Elisabeth seized the other. They hefted its weight between them and proceeded toward a door with an inscription carved atop it, the arching scroll clasped on either side by weeping angels. OFFICIUM ADUSQUE MORTEM, it read dimly, nearly obscured by shadow. The warden’s motto. *Duty unto death.*

They entered a long stone corridor burnished by the jumping light of torches. The coffer’s leaden weight already strained Elisabeth’s arm. It did not move again, but its stillness failed to reassure her, for she suspected what it meant: the book within was listening. It was waiting.

Another warden stood guard beside the entrance to the vault. When he saw Elisabeth at the Director’s side, his small eyes gleamed with loathing. This was Warden Finch. He was a grizzled man with short gray hair and a puffy face into which his features seemed to recede, like raisins in a bread pudding. Among the apprentices, he was infamous for the fact that his right hand was larger than the other, bulging with muscle, because he exercised it so often whipping them.

She squeezed the coffer’s handle until her knuckles turned white, instinctively bracing herself for a blow, but Finch could do nothing to her in front of the Director. Muttering beneath his breath, he heaved on a chain. Inch by inch, the portcullis rose, lifting its sharp black teeth above their heads. Elisabeth stepped forward.

And the coffer *lurched.*

“Steady,” the Director snapped, as both of them careened against the stone wall, barely keeping their balance. Elisabeth’s

stomach swooped. Her boot hung over the edge of a spiral stair that twisted vertiginously down into darkness.

The horrible truth dawned on her. The grimoire had wanted them to fall. She imagined the coffer tumbling down the stairs, striking the flagstones at the bottom, bursting open—and it would have been her fault—

The Director's hand clasped her shoulder. "It's all right, Scrivener. Nothing's happened. Grip the rail and keep going."

With an effort, Elisabeth turned away from Finch's condemning scowl. Down they went. A subterranean chill wafted up from below, smelling of cold rock and mildew, and of something less natural. The stone itself bled the malice of ancient things that had languished in darkness for centuries—consciousnesses that did not slumber, minds that did not dream. Muffled by thousands of pounds of earth, the silence was such that she heard only her own pulse pounding in her ears.

She had spent her childhood exploring the Great Library's myriad nooks and crannies, prying into its countless mysteries, but she had never been inside the vault. Its presence had lurked beneath the library her entire life like something unspeakable hiding under the bed.

This is my chance, she reminded herself. She could not be afraid.

They emerged into a chamber that resembled a cathedral's crypt. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all carved from the same gray stone. The ribbed pillars and vaulted ceilings had been crafted with artistry, even reverence. Statues of angels stood in niches along the walls, candles guttering at their feet. With sorrowful, shadowed eyes, they watched over the rows of iron shelves that formed aisles down the center of the vault. Unlike the bookcases in the upper portions of the library, these were

welded in place. Chains secured the locked coffers, which slid between the shelves like drawers.

Elisabeth assured herself that it was her imagination conjuring up whispers from the coffers as they passed. A thick layer of dust coated the chains. Most of the coffers hadn't been disturbed in decades, and their inhabitants remained fast asleep. Yet the back of her neck still prickled as though she were being watched.

The Director guided her beyond the shelves, toward a cell with a table bolted to the floor at the center. A single oil lamp cast a jaundiced glow across its ink-stained surface. The coffer remained unsettlingly cooperative as they set it down beside four enormous gashes, like giant claw marks, that scarred the table's wood. Elisabeth's eyes darted to the gashes again and again. She knew what had made them. What happened when a grimoire got out of control.

Malefict.

"What precaution do we take first?" the Director asked, jolting Elisabeth from her thoughts. The test had begun.

"Salt," she answered, reaching for the canister at her hip. "Like iron, salt weakens demonic energies." Her hand trembled slightly as she shook out the crystals, forming a lopsided circle. Shame flushed her cheeks at the sight of its uneven edges. What if she wasn't ready, after all?

The barest hint of warmth softened the Director's severe face. "Do you know why I chose to keep you, Elisabeth?"

Elisabeth froze, the breath trapped in her chest. The Director had never addressed her by her given name—only her last name, Scrivener, or sometimes just "apprentice," depending on how much trouble she was in, which was often a fantastic amount. "No, Director," she said.

"Hmm. It was storming, I recall. The grimoires were restless

that night. They were making so much noise that I barely heard the knock on the front doors.” Elisabeth could easily picture the scene. Rain lashing against the windows, the tomes howling and sobbing and rattling beneath their restraints. “When I found you on the steps, and picked you up and brought you inside, I was certain you would cry. Instead, you looked around and began to laugh. You were not afraid. At that moment I knew I couldn’t send you away to an orphanage. You belonged in the library, as much as any book.”

Elisabeth had been told the story before, but only by her tutor, never the Director herself. Two words echoed through her mind with the vitality of a heartbeat: *you belonged*. They were words that she had waited sixteen years to hear, and desperately hoped were true.

In breathless silence, she watched the Director reach for her keys and select the largest one, ancient enough to have rusted almost beyond recognition. It was clear that for the Director, the time for sentiment had passed. Elisabeth contented herself with repeating the unspoken vow she had held close for nearly as long as she could remember. One day, she would become a warden, too. She would make the Director proud.

Salt cascaded onto the table as the coffer’s lid creaked open. A stench of rotting leather rolled across the vault, so potent that she almost gagged.

A grimoire lay inside. It was a thick volume with disheveled, yellowing pages sandwiched between slabs of greasy black leather. It would have looked fairly ordinary, if not for the bulbous protrusions that bulged from the cover. They resembled giant warts, or bubbles on the surface of a pool of tar. Each was the size of a large marble, and there were dozens altogether, deforming nearly every inch of the leather’s surface.

The Director pulled on a heavy pair of iron-lined gloves. Elisabeth hastened to follow her example. She bit the inside of her cheek as the Director lifted the book from the coffer and placed it within the circle of salt.

The instant the Director set it down, the protrusions split open. They weren't warts—they were eyes. Eyes of every color, bloodstained and rolling, the pupils dilating and contracting to pinpricks as the grimoire convulsed in the Director's hands. Gritting her teeth, she forced it open. Automatically, Elisabeth reached into the circle and clamped down the other side, feeling the leather twitch and heave through her gloves. Furious. Alive.

Those eyes were not sorcerous conjurations. They were real, plucked from human skulls long ago, sacrificed to create a volume powerful enough to contain the spells etched across its pages. According to history, most sacrifices had not been willing.

"The Book of Eyes," the Director said, perfectly calm. "It contains spells that allow sorcerers to reach into the minds of others, read their thoughts, and even control their actions. Fortunately, only a handful of sorcerers in the entire kingdom have ever been granted permission to read it."

"Why would they want to?" Elisabeth burst out, before she could stop herself. The answer was obvious. Sorcerers were evil by nature, corrupted by the demonic magic they wielded. If it weren't for the Reforms, which had made it illegal for sorcerers to bind books with human parts, grimoires like the Book of Eyes wouldn't be so exceptionally rare. No doubt sorcerers had attempted to replicate it over the years, but the spells couldn't be written down using ordinary materials. The sorcery's power would instantly reduce the ink and parchment to ashes.

To her surprise, the Director took her question seriously, though she was no longer looking at Elisabeth. Instead she

focused on turning the pages, inspecting them for any damage they might have sustained during the journey. “There may come a time when spells like these are necessary, no matter how foul. We have a great responsibility to our kingdom, Scrivener. If this grimoire were destroyed, its spells would be lost forever. It’s the only one of its kind.”

“Yes, Director.” That, she understood. Wardens both protected grimoires from the world, and protected the world from them.

She braced herself as the Director paused, leaning down to examine a stain on one of the pages. Transferring high-class grimoires came at a risk, since any accidental damage could provoke their transformation into a Malefict. They needed to be inspected carefully before their interment in the vault. Elisabeth felt certain that several of the eyes, peering out from beneath the cover, were aimed directly at her—and that they glittered with cunning.

Somehow, she knew she shouldn’t meet their gaze. Hoping to distract herself, she glanced aside to the pages. Some of the sentences were written in Austermeerish or the Old Tongue. But others were scrawled in Enochian, the language of sorcerers, made up of strange, jagged runes that shimmered on the parchment like smoldering embers. It was a language one could only learn by consorting with demons. Merely looking at the runes made her temples throb.

“Apprentice . . .”

The whisper slithered against her mind, as alien and unexpected as the cold, slimy touch of a fish beneath the water of a pond. Elisabeth jerked and looked up. If the Director heard the voice, too, she showed no sign.

“Apprentice, I see you. . . .”

Elisabeth's breath caught. She did as the Director had instructed and tried to ignore the voice, but it was impossible to concentrate on anything else with so many eyes watching her, agleam with sinister intelligence.

"Look at me . . . look . . ."

Slowly but surely, as if drawn by an invisible force, Elisabeth's gaze began to travel downward.

"There," said the Director. Her voice sounded dim and distorted, like she was speaking from underwater. "We are finished. Scrivener?"

When Elisabeth didn't answer, the Director slammed the grimoire shut, cutting its voice off midwhisper. Elisabeth's senses rushed back. She sucked in a breath, her face burning with humiliation. The eyes bulged furiously, darting between her and the Director.

"Well done," the Director said. "You held out much longer than I expected."

"It almost had me," Elisabeth whispered. How could the Director congratulate her? A clammy sweat clung to her skin, and in the vault's chill, she began to shiver.

"Yes. That was what I wished to show you tonight. You have a way with grimoires, an affinity for them that I have never seen in an apprentice before. But despite that, you still have much to learn. You want to become a warden, do you not?"

Spoken in front of the Director, witnessed by the angel statues lining the walls, Elisabeth's soft reply possessed the quality of a confession. "It's all I've ever wanted."

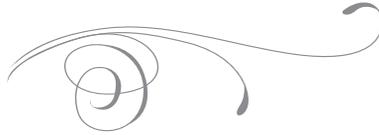
"Just remember that there are many paths open to you." The scar's distortion gave the Director's mouth an almost rueful cast. "Be certain, before you choose, that the life of a warden is what you truly desire."

Elisabeth nodded, not trusting herself to speak. If she had passed the test, she didn't understand why the Director would advise her to consider forsaking her dream. Perhaps she had shown herself in some other way to be unready, unprepared. In that case, she would simply have to try harder. She had a year left before she turned seventeen and became eligible for training at the Collegium—time she could use to prove herself beyond a doubt, and earn the Director's approval. She only hoped it would be enough.

Together, they wrestled the grimoire back into the coffer. As soon as it touched the salt, it ceased struggling. The eyes rolled upward, showing crescents of milky white before they sagged shut. The slam of the lid shattered the vault's sepulchral quiet. The coffer wouldn't be opened again for years, perhaps decades. It was secure. It posed a threat no longer.

But she couldn't banish the sound of its voice from her thoughts, or the feeling that she hadn't seen the last of the Book of Eyes—and it had not seen the last of her.

TWO



ELISABETH SAT BACK, admiring the view from her desk. She had been assigned to transfers on the third floor, a vantage from which she could see all the way across the library's atrium. Sunlight streamed in through the rose window high above the front doors, casting prisms of ruby, sapphire, and emerald across the circular balconies' bronze rails. Bookcases soared upward toward a vaulted ceiling six stories above, rising around the atrium like the layers of a wedding cake or the tiers of a coliseum. Murmurs filled the echoing space, punctuated by the occasional cough or snore. Most of those sounds did not belong to the blue-robed librarians striding to and fro across the atrium's tiles. They came from the grimoires, muttering on the shelves.

When she breathed in, the sweetness of parchment and leather filled her lungs. Motes of dust hung suspended in the sunbeams, perfectly still, like flakes of gold leaf trapped in resin. And teetering stacks of paperwork threatened to spill from her desk at any moment, burying her in a landslide of neglected transfer requests.

Reluctantly, she wrested her attention toward the imposing

piles. The Great Library of Summershall was one of six Great Libraries in the kingdom. It was a full three day's journey from its closest neighbors, which were spaced evenly apart in a circle around Austermeer, with the Inkroads connecting them to the capital at the center like the spokes of a wheel. Transferring grimoires between them could be a delicate task. Some volumes nurtured such a potent grudge toward each other that they couldn't be brought within miles of the same location without howling or bursting into flame. There was even a house-sized crater in the wilderness of the Wildmarch where two books had clashed over a matter of thaumaturgical doctrine.

As an apprentice, Elisabeth was entrusted with approving transfers for Classes One through Three. Grimoires were classed on a ten-point scale according to their level of risk, with anything Class Four and above requiring special confinement. Summershall itself held nothing above a Class Eight.

Closing her eyes, she reached for the paper on top of the stack. *Knockfeld*, she guessed, thinking of Summershall's neighbor to the northeast.

But when she turned the paper over, it was a request from the Royal Library. Unsurprising; that was where more than two-thirds of her transfers went. One day she might pack up her belongings and travel there, too. The Royal Library shared a grounds with the Collegium at the heart of the capital, and when she wasn't busy with her warden training, she would be able to wander its halls. In her imagination its corridors stretched on for miles, lined with books and passageways and hidden rooms that contained all the secrets of the universe.

But only if she earned the Director's approval. A week had passed since the night in the vault, and she hadn't come any closer to deciphering the Director's advice.

She still remembered the exact moment that she'd vowed to become a warden. She had been eight years old, and she had fled into the library's secret passageways in order to escape one of Master Hargrove's lectures. She hadn't been able to bear another hour of fidgeting on a stool in the stifling store-room-turned-classroom, reciting declensions in the Old Tongue. Not on an afternoon when summer pounded its fists against the library's walls, thickening the air to the consistency of honey.

She recalled the way sweat had trickled down her spine as she crawled through the passage's cobwebs on her hands and knees. At least the passage was dark, away from the sun. The golden glow that filtered between the floorboards provided enough light to see by, and to avoid the skittering shapes of booklice as she disturbed their nests, sending them racing around in a panic. Some grew to the size of rats, engorged on enchanted parchment.

If only Master Hargrove had agreed to take her into town that day. It was just a five-minute walk down the hill through the orchard. The market would be bustling with people selling ribbons and apples and glazed custards, and travelers sometimes came in from outside Summershall to peddle their wares. She had once heard accordion music, and seen a dancing bear, and even watched a man demonstrate a lamp whose wick burned without oil. The books in her classroom hadn't been able to explain how the lamp worked, so she assumed it was magic, and therefore evil.

Perhaps that was why Master Hargrove didn't like taking her into town. If she happened to encounter a sorcerer outside the library's protection, he might steal her away. A young girl like her would no doubt make a convenient sacrifice for a demonic ritual.

Voices snapped Elisabeth back to attention. They were ema-

nating from directly beneath her. One voice belonged to Master Hargrove, and the other to . . .

The Director.

Her heart leaped. She flattened herself against the floorboards to peer through a knothole, the light that poured through it setting her tangled hair aglow. She couldn't see much: a slice of desk covered in papers, the corner of an unfamiliar office. The thought that it might belong to the Director sent her pulse racing with excitement.

"That makes for the third time this month," Hargrove was saying, "and I'm simply at my wit's end. The girl is half-wild. Vanishing off to who-knows-where, getting into every possible kind of trouble—just last week, she released an entire crate of live booklice in my bedchambers!"

Elisabeth barely stopped herself from shouting an objection through the knothole. She'd collected those booklice with the intention of studying them, not setting them free. Their loss had come as a tremendous blow.

But what Hargrove said next made her forget all about the lice.

"I simply have to question if it's the right decision, raising a child in a Great Library. I'm certain that whoever left her on our doorstep knew we are in the practice of taking on foundlings as our apprentices. But we do not accept those boys and girls until the age of thirteen. I hesitate to agree with Warden Finch on any matter, yet I do believe we ought to consider what he's been saying all along: that young Elisabeth might fare better in an orphanage."

While unsettling, this was nothing Elisabeth hadn't heard before. She endured the remarks knowing that the Director's will assured her place in the library. Why, she could not say. The

Director rarely spoke to her. She was as remote and untouchable as the moon, and equally as mysterious. To Elisabeth, the Director's decision to take her in possessed an almost mystical quality, like something out of a fairy tale. It could not be questioned or undone.

Holding her breath, she waited for the Director to counter Hargrove's suggestion. The skin on her arms tingled with the anticipation of hearing her speak.

Instead, the Director said, "I have wondered the same, Master Hargrove. Almost every day for the past eight years."

No—that couldn't be right. The blood slowed to a crawl in Elisabeth's veins. The pounding in her ears almost drowned out the rest.

"All those years ago, I did not consider the effect it might have on her to grow up isolated from other children her age. The youngest apprentices are still five years her elder. Has she displayed any interest in befriending them?"

"I'm afraid she's tried, with little success," Hargrove said. "Though she may not know it herself. Recently I overheard an apprentice explaining to her that ordinary children have mothers and fathers. Poor Elisabeth had no idea what he was talking about. She quite happily replied that she had plenty of books to keep her company."

The Director sighed. "Her attachment to the grimoires is . . ."

"Concerning? Yes, indeed. If she does not suffer from the lack of company, I fear it is because she sees grimoires as her friends in place of people."

"A dangerous way of thinking. But libraries are dangerous places. There is no getting around it."

"Too dangerous for Elisabeth, do you think?"

No, Elisabeth begged. She knew these weren't ordinary

books the Great Library kept. They whispered on the shelves and shuddered beneath iron chains. Some spat ink and threw tantrums; others sang to themselves in high, clear notes on windless nights, when starlight streamed through the library's barred windows like shafts of mercury. Others still were so dangerous they had to be stored in the underground vault, packed in salt. Not all of them were her friends. She understood that well.

But sending her away would be like placing a grimoire among inanimate books that didn't move or speak. The first time she had seen such a book, she had thought it was dead. She did not belong in an orphanage, whatever that was. In her mind's eye the place resembled a prison, gray and shrouded in damp mists, barred by a portcullis like the entrance to the vault. Terror squeezed her throat at the image.

"Do you know why the Great Libraries take in orphans, Master Hargrove?" the Director asked at last. "It is because they have no home, no family. No one to miss them if they die. I wonder, perhaps . . . if Scrivener has lasted this long, it is because the library wished it to be so. If her bond to this place is better left intact, for good or for ill."

"I hope you are not making a mistake, Director," Master Hargrove said gently.

"I do as well." The Director sounded weary. "For Scrivener's sake, and our own."

Elisabeth waited, ears straining, but the deliberation over her fate seemed to have concluded. Footsteps creaked below, and the office's door clicked shut.

She had been granted a reprieve—for now. How long would it last? With the foundations of her world left shaken, it seemed the rest of her life might come tumbling down at

any moment. A single decision by the Director could send her away for good. She had never felt so uncertain, so helpless, so small.

It was then that she made her vow, crouched amid the dust and cobwebs, grasping for the only lifeline within reach. If the Director was not certain that the Great Library was the best place for Elisabeth, she would simply have to prove it. She would become a great and powerful warden, just like the Director. She would show everyone that she belonged until even Warden Finch could no longer deny her right.

Above all . . .

Above all, she would convince them that she wasn't a mistake.

"Elisabeth," a voice hissed in the present. "Elisabeth! Are you asleep?"

Startled, she jerked upright, the memory swirling away like water down a drain. She cast around until she found the source of the voice. A girl's face peered out from between two nearby bookcases, her braid flicking over her shoulder as she checked to make sure no one else was in sight. A pair of spectacles magnified her dark, clever eyes, and hastily scribbled notes marked the brown skin of her forearms, their ink peeking out from beneath her sleeves. Like Elisabeth, she wore a key on a chain around her neck, bright against her pale blue apprentice's robes.

As luck would have it, Elisabeth hadn't remained friendless forever. She had met Katrien Quillworthy the day they had both begun their apprenticeship at the age of thirteen. None of the other apprentices had wanted to share a room with Elisabeth, due to a rumor that she kept a box full of booklice underneath her bed. But Katrien had approached her for that very reason. "It had better be true," she had said. "I've been wanting to experiment with booklice ever since I heard about them. Appar-

ently they're immune to sorcery—can you imagine the scientific implications?” They had been inseparable ever since.

Elisabeth covertly shoved her papers to the side. “Is something happening?” she whispered.

“I think you're the only person in Summershall who doesn't know what's happening. Including Hargrove, who's spent the entire morning in the privy.”

“Warden Finch isn't getting demoted, is he?” she asked hopefully.

Katrien grinned. “I'm still working on that. I'm sure I'll find something incriminating on him eventually. When it happens, you'll be the first to know.” Orchestrating Warden Finch's downfall had been her pet project for years. “No, it's a magister. He's just arrived for a trip to the vault.”

Elisabeth nearly tumbled from her chair. She shot a look around before darting behind the bookcase next to Katrien, stooping low beside her. Katrien was so short that otherwise, all Elisabeth could see was the top of her head. “A magister? Are you certain?”

“Absolutely. I've never seen the wardens so tense.”

Now that Elisabeth thought back, the signs from that morning were obvious. Wardens striding past with their jaws set and their hands clenching their swords. Apprentices forming clusters in the halls, whispering around every corner. Even the grimoires seemed more restless than usual.

A *magister*. Fear thrilled through her like a note shivering up and down the strings of a harp. “What does that have to do with us?” she asked. Neither of them had so much as seen a regular sorcerer. On the rare occasions that they visited Summershall, the wardens brought them in through a special door and ushered them straight into a reading room. She was certain

a magister would be treated with even greater caution.

Katrien's eyes shone. "Stefan's made a bet with me that the magister has pointed ears and cloven hooves. He's wrong, naturally, but I have to find a way to prove it. I'm going to spy on the magister. And I need you to corroborate my account."

Elisabeth sucked in a breath. She glanced reflexively at her abandoned desk. "To do that, we'd have to go out of bounds."

"And Finch would have our heads on pikes if he caught us," Katrien finished. "But he won't. He doesn't know about the passageways."

For once, Finch wasn't Elisabeth's greatest concern. The Book of Eyes' bloodshot, bulging stare flashed through her mind. Any of those eyes could have previously belonged to someone like her or Katrien. "If the magister catches us," she said, "he'll do worse than put our heads on pikes."

"I doubt it. The Reforms made it illegal for sorcerers to kill people outside of self-defense. He'll just make our hair fall out, or cover us in boils." She wiggled her eyebrows enticingly. "Come on. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. For me, at least. When will I ever get to see a magister? How many chances will I have to experience magical boils?"

Katrien wanted to become an archivist, not a warden. Her job wouldn't involve dealing with sorcerers. Elisabeth's, on the other hand . . .

A spark blazed to life inside her breast. Katrien was right; this *was* an opportunity. The other night, she'd resolved to try harder to impress the Director. Wardens were not frightened of sorcerers, and the more she learned about their kind, the better prepared she would be.

"All right," she said, rising from her crouch. "They'll most likely take him to the eastern reading room. This way."

As she and Katrien wound through the shelves, Elisabeth shook off her lingering misgivings. She did try not to break the rules, but her efforts had a curious way of never working out. Just last month there had been the disaster with the refectory's chandelier—at least old Mistress Bellwether's nose looked mostly normal now. And the time she'd spilled strawberry jam all over . . . well. Best not to dwell on that memory.

When they reached the bust of Cornelius the Wise that Elisabeth used as a place marker, she cast around for a familiar crimson binding. She found it halfway up the shelf, its gold title too worn and flaked to read. The grimoire's pages rustled a drowsy greeting as she reached up and scratched it just so. A click came from inside the bookcase, like a lock engaging. Then the entire panel of shelves swung inward, revealing the dusty mouth of a passageway.

"I can't believe that doesn't work for anyone but you," Katrien said as they ducked inside. "I've tried scratching it dozens of times. Stefan, too."

Elisabeth shrugged. She didn't understand, either. She concentrated on trying not to sneeze as she led Katrien through the narrow, winding corridor, batting away the cobwebs that hung like spectral garlands from the rafters. The other end let out behind a tapestry in the reading room. They paused, listening, to make sure the room was empty before they fought their way out from behind the heavy fabric, coughing into their sleeves.

Apprentices were forbidden from entering the reading room, and Elisabeth was both relieved and disappointed to discover that the room appeared quite ordinary. It was a manly sort of space, with a great deal of polished wood and dark leather. A large mahogany desk sat in front of the window, and several leather armchairs encircled a crackling fireplace, whose logs

popped and sent up a fountain of sparks when they entered, making her jump.

Katrien didn't waste any time. While Elisabeth looked around, she went straight to the desk and started rifling through the drawers. "For science," she explained, which was frequently what she said right before something exploded.

Elisabeth drifted toward the hearth. "What's that smell? It isn't the fire, is it?"

Katrien paused to waft some air toward her nose. "Pipe smoke?" she guessed.

No—it was something else. Sniffing industriously, Elisabeth tracked the smell to one of the armchairs. She inhaled above the cushion, only to recoil at once, her head spinning.

"Elisabeth! Are you all right?"

She sucked in gulps of fresh air, blinking away tears. The caustic odor clung to the back of her tongue thickly enough that she could almost taste it: a scorched, unnatural smell, like what she imagined burnt metal would smell like, if metal were able to burn.

"I think so," she wheezed.

Katrien opened her mouth to speak, then shot a look at the door. "Listen. They're coming."

Moving quickly, they squeezed behind the row of bookcases lined up against the wall. Katrien fit easily, but the space proved cramped for Elisabeth. At the age of fourteen, she had already been the tallest girl in Summershall. Two years later, she towered over most of the boys. She kept her arms rigid at her sides and breathed shallowly, hoping to appease the grimoires, who were muttering in disapproval at the intrusion.

Voices came from the hall, and the doorknob turned.

"Here you are, Magister Thorn," said a warden. "The Director will arrive shortly to escort you to the vault."

Her stomach somersaulted as a tall, hooded figure strode inside, his emerald-green cloak billowing around his heels. He crossed to the window and flicked the curtains open, then stood gazing out across the library's towers.

"What's happening?" Katrien breathed below her shoulder. "I can't see anything from down here."

Elisabeth's perspective consisted of a horizontal slice above the books' spines. She couldn't see much, either. Slowly, carefully, she inched sideways for a better angle. The tip of the magister's pale nose came into view. He had taken down his hood. His hair was pitch-black and wavy, longer than the men wore it in Summershall, shot through at the left temple with a vivid streak of silver. Another inch to the side, and . . .

He's hardly any older than we are, she thought in surprise. Both the silver streak and his title had prepared her for someone far older. Perhaps his appearance was deceiving. He might maintain the semblance of youth by bathing in the blood of virgins—she had once read something to that effect in a novel.

For Katrien's benefit, she gave a slight shake of her head. His hair was too thick for her to tell whether or not he had pointed ears. If he had hooves, the hem of his cloak concealed them.

She followed up the signal with another, more urgent shake of her head. The magister had turned in their direction, his gaze fixed on the shelves. His gray eyes were extraordinarily light in color, like quartz, and the look in them as they scanned the grimoires turned her blood to ice. She had never seen eyes so cruel.

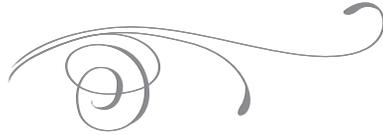
She didn't share Katrien's confidence that if he found them, he wouldn't hurt them. She had grown up on tales of sorcery: armies raised from mass graves to fight on the behalf of kings, innocents sacrificed in gory rituals, children flayed as offerings

to demons. And now she had been to the vault, and seen for herself the work of a sorcerer's hands.

As the magister drew nearer, Elisabeth found to her horror that she couldn't move. A grimoire had seized her robes between its pages. It growled around the mouthful of fabric, tugging like an angry terrier. The sorcerer's eyes narrowed, searching for the source of the noise. Desperately, she grabbed her robes and yanked, only for the grimoire to release it at the exact same time, throwing her against the shelves—

And the bookcase collapsed, taking her with it.

THREE



ELISABETH'S EARS RANG. She choked in a cloud of dust. When her vision cleared, the magister was standing over her. "What's this?" he asked.

Her fearful cry emerged as a croak. She flung herself away from him, scrambling amid the pile of books and broken shelving. Half-blind with terror, it took her longer than it should have to realize that she felt fine, with the exception of several highly unmagical splinters. He hadn't cast a spell on her. Her scrabbling slowed, then stilled. She looked over her shoulder.

And froze.

The sorcerer had sunk down onto one knee and clasped his hands atop the other. Firelight played across his pale, angular features. She tried to avert her eyes, but couldn't. As her heart threw itself against her ribs, she wondered whether he was using magic to lock her gaze in place, or whether she was simply too terrified to look away. His every feature projected villainy, from his dark, arching eyebrows to the sardonic twist of his mouth.

"Are you hurt?" he asked at last.

She said nothing.

“Can’t you speak?”

If she didn’t answer, he might hurt her to provoke a reaction. Trying her best, she managed another croaking sound. Amusement glittered in his eyes.

“I was warned I’d see some strange things in the countryside,” he said, “but I admit, I didn’t expect to find a feral librarian roaming the stacks.”

Elisabeth possessed only the vaguest notion of what she must look like, aside from the parts of herself that she could see. Ink stained her fingernails, and dust streaked her robes. She couldn’t remember the last time she had remembered to brush her hair, which stuck out in tangled chestnut-brown wisps. Her spirits lifted a cautious fraction. If she were dirty and homely enough, he might not find her worth his time or his magic.

“I didn’t expect you to find me, either,” she heard herself say. Then, horrified, she clapped a hand over her mouth.

“So you can speak. You’d just rather not speak to me?” He lifted an eyebrow when she nodded. “A wise precaution. We sorcerers are terribly wicked, after all. Prowling the wilds, stealing away maidens for our unholy rituals . . .”

Elisabeth didn’t have time to react, because just then, a knock came on the door. “Everything all right in there, Magister? We heard a crash.”

That deep, gravelly voice belonged to Warden Finch. Elisabeth reared back in alarm, protectively gripping her wrists. When Finch discovered her out of bounds—out of bounds and speaking to a magister—he wouldn’t bother with the switch; he would cane her within an inch of her life. The welts would last for days.

The magister’s gaze lingered on her for a moment, appraisingly, before he turned toward the door. “Perfectly all right,” he

replied. "I'd prefer not to be disturbed until the Director's ready to take me to the vault, if you don't mind. Sorcerer's business. Very private."

"Yes, Magister." Finch's reply sounded grudging, but his footsteps moved away from the door.

Too late, Elisabeth's foolishness sank in. She should have called out to Finch. She could think of several reasons why the magister might want to be alone with her in private, and a caning paled in comparison.

"Now," he said, turning back to her. "I suppose I should clean up this mess before someone blames it on me, which means you have to move." He unclasped his hands from his knee and offered her one. His fingers were long and slender, like a musician's.

She stared at them as though he had aimed a dagger at her chest.

"Go on," he said, growing impatient. "I'm not going to turn you into a salamander."

"You can do that?" she whispered. "Truly?"

"Of course." A wicked gleam entered his eyes. "But I only turn girls into salamanders on Tuesdays. Luckily for you, it's a Wednesday, which is the day I drink a goblet of orphan's blood for supper."

He looked entirely serious. He didn't seem to have noticed her robes, which labeled her an apprentice, and therefore an orphan by default.

Determined to distract him, she took his hand. She hadn't forgotten her mission for Katrien. When he pulled her up, she pretended to stumble, and landed with her fingers buried in his black-and-silver hair. He blinked at her in surprise. He was almost as tall as her, and their faces nearly touched. His lips parted as if to speak, but no sound came out.

Her breath quickened. With that startled expression on his face, he looked less like a sorcerer who bargained with demons and more like an ordinary young man. His hair was soft, the texture of silk. She didn't know why she would notice such a thing. Hastily, she snatched her hands from him and backed away.

To her dismay, he grinned. "Don't worry," he assured her, smoothing his tousled hair. "Young ladies have seized me in far more compromising locations. I understand the impulse can be overpowering."

Without waiting for her reaction, he turned to study the wreckage. After a moment of consideration, he raised his hand and spoke a string of words that left her ears buzzing and her head turned inside-out. Dazed, she realized that he was speaking Enochian. It was unlike any language she had heard before. She felt as though she should recognize the words, but the moment she tried to repeat them to herself, the syllables trickled from her mind, leaving only a raw, resounding silence, like the air after a deafening clap of thunder.

Her hearing returned with a susurrus of rustling paper. The pile of spilled grimoires had begun to stir. One by one, they lifted into the air, floating in front of the sorcerer's extended hand amid swirls of emerald light. They spun and flipped and shuffled, sorting themselves back into alphabetical order while behind them, the fallen bookcase righted itself with a labored creak. The broken shelves fused, whole again; the grimoires flew back to their original positions, a few reluctant stragglers switching places at the last second.

Magic, she thought. *That is what magic looks like.* And then, before she could stop herself, *It's beautiful.*

She would never dare give voice to such a thought aloud. The sentiment verged on betraying her oaths to the Great Library.

But a part of her rebelled against the idea that in order to be a good apprentice, she should close her eyes and pretend she hadn't seen. How could a warden defend against something they didn't understand? Surely it was better to face evil than cower from its presence, learning nothing.

Emerald sparks still danced across the tidied shelves. She stepped forward to touch the grimoires, and felt the magic skate across her skin, bright and tingling, as though she'd plunged her hands into a bucket of champagne. Surprisingly, the sensation wasn't painful. Nothing happened to her body—her hands didn't change color, or shrivel like a prune.

When she looked up, however, the sorcerer was staring at her as though she'd grown a second head. Clearly, he had expected her to be afraid.

"Where is the smell?" she asked, emboldened.

He appeared momentarily at a loss. "The what?"

"That smell—the one like burnt metal. That's sorcery, isn't it?"

"Ah." A line appeared between his dark brows. Perhaps she had overstepped. But then he went on, "Not exactly. It accompanies sorcery sometimes, if the spell is powerful enough. Technically it isn't the smell of magic, but a reaction when the substance of the Otherworld—that is, the demon realm—comes into contact with ours—"

"Like a chemical reaction?" Elisabeth asked.

He was looking at her even more strangely now. "Yes, precisely."

"Is there a name for it?"

"We call it aetherial combustion. But how did you—?"

He broke off as another knock came on the door. "We're ready for you, Magister Thorn," said the Director outside.

"Yes," he replied. "Yes, I—one moment."

He glanced back at Elisabeth, as though he half expected her to have vanished like a mirage the instant he turned away. His pale eyes bored into her. For a moment, it seemed he might do something more. Utter a parting word, or conjure a spell to punish her for her insolence. She squared her shoulders, bracing for the worst.

Then a shadow crossed his face, and his eyes shuttered. He pivoted on his heel and started for the door without speaking. A final reminder that he was a magister and she a lowly apprentice librarian, wholly beneath his notice.

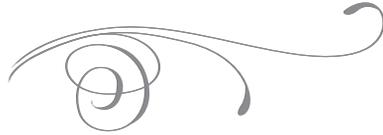
She slipped back behind the shelves, breathless. A hand darted out and gripped hers.

“Elisabeth, you’re absolutely mad!” Katrien hissed, materializing from the darkness. “I can’t believe you touched him. I was poised to jump out and bludgeon him with a grimoire the entire time. Well? What’s the report?”

Her nerves sang with exhilaration. She smiled, and then for some reason began to laugh. “No pointed ears,” she gasped. “They’re completely normal.”

The reading room’s door creaked open. Katrien clamped a hand over Elisabeth’s mouth to smother her laughter. And not a moment too soon—the Director was waiting outside. She appeared as stern as always, her tumble of red hair gleaming like molten copper against the dark blue of her uniform. She glanced back into the room, and paused; after a moment of searching, her gaze unerringly found and held Elisabeth’s through the shelves. Elisabeth went rigid, but the Director said nothing. One corner of her mouth twitched, tugging at the scar on her cheek. Then the door clicked shut, and she and the magister were gone.

FOUR



THE MAGISTER'S VISIT marked the last exciting event of the season. Summer arrived in an onslaught of scorching heat. Soon afterward, an epidemic of Brittle-Spine left everyone exhausted and miserable, forced to massage the afflicted grimoires with foul-smelling ointment for weeks on end. Elisabeth was assigned to care for a Class Two called The Decrees of Bartholomew Trout, which developed a habit of wiggling provocatively every time it saw her coming. By the time the first autumn storm blew over Summershall, she never wanted to see another pot of ointment again. She was ready to collapse into bed and sleep for years.

Instead, she jolted awake in the dead of night, convinced she had heard a sound. Wind lashed the trees outside, howling through the eaves. Twigs pelted against the window in staccato bursts. The storm was loud, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she had woken for a different reason. She sat up in bed and threw off her quilt.

"Katrien?" she whispered.

Katrien rolled over, muttering in the throes of a dream. She didn't rouse even when Elisabeth reached across the space between their beds and shook her shoulder. "Blackmail him," she mumbled against her pillow, still dreaming.

Frowning, Elisabeth slipped out of bed. She lit a candle on the nightstand and glanced around, searching for anything amiss.

The room she shared with Katrien was located high in one of the library's towers. It was small and circular, with a narrow, castle-like window that let in drafts whenever the wind blew from the east. Everything looked exactly as it had when Elisabeth had gone to bed. Books lay open on the dresser and slumped in piles along the curved stone walls, and notes belonging to Katrien's latest experiment littered the rug. Elisabeth took care not to step on them as she crossed to the door and drifted into the hall, her candle enfolding her in a hazy glow. The library's thick walls deadened the wind's howling to a faraway murmur.

Barefoot, dressed in only her nightgown, she drifted down the stairs like a ghost. A few turns brought her to a forbidding oak door reinforced with strips of iron. This door separated the library from the living quarters, and it always remained locked. Prior to the age of thirteen, she hadn't been able to unlock it herself; she'd had to wait for a librarian to come past and usher her through. Now she possessed a greatkey, capable of unlocking the outer doors of any Great Library in the kingdom. She wore it around her neck at all times, even when sleeping or bathing, a tangible symbol of her oaths.

She lifted the key, then paused, running her fingertips across the door's rough surface. A memory flashed before her: the claw marks on the table in the vault, which had scored the wood as though it were butter.

No—that was impossible. Grimoires only transformed into

Maleficts if damaged. It was not something that would happen in the middle of the night, with no visitors and all the grimoires safely contained. Not with wardens patrolling the darkened halls, and the Great Library's colossal warning bell hanging undisturbed above their heads.

Resolving to banish her childish fears, she slipped through the door and locked it again behind her. The atrium's lamps had been dimmed for the night. Their light glimmered off the gilt letters on books' spines, reflected from the brass rails that connected the wheeled ladders to the tops of the shelves. Straining her ears, she detected nothing out of the ordinary. Thousands of grimoires slumbered peacefully around her, velvet ribbons fluttering from their pages as they snored. In a glass case nearby, a Class Four named Lord Fustian's Florilegium cleared its throat self-importantly, trying to get her attention. It needed to be complimented out loud at least once per day, or it would snap shut like a clam and refuse to open again for years.

She stole forward, holding her candle higher. *Nothing's wrong. Time to go back to bed.*

That was when it struck her—an eye-watering, unmistakable smell. The last few months fell away, and for a moment she stood in the reading room again, bending over the leather armchair. Her heart skipped a beat, then began pounding in her ears.

Aetherial combustion. Someone had performed sorcery in the library.

Quickly, she snuffed out her candle. A banging sound made her flinch. She waited until it happened again, quieter this time, almost like an echo. Now suspecting what it was, she snuck around a bookcase until the library's front doors came into view. They had been left open and were blowing in the wind.

Where were the wardens? She should have seen someone by

now, but the library seemed completely empty. Chill with dread, she made her way toward the doors. Though every shadow now possessed an ominous quality, stretching across the floorboards like fingers, she skirted around the shafts of moonlight, not wanting to be seen.

Pain exploded through her bare toe halfway across the atrium. She had stubbed it on something on the floor. Something cold and hard—something that shone in the dark—

A sword. And not just any sword—Demonslayer. Garnets glittered on its pommel in the gloom.

Numbly, Elisabeth picked it up. Touching it felt wrong. Demonslayer never left the Director's belt. She would only allow it out of her sight if . . .

With a stifled cry, Elisabeth rushed to the shape that lay slumped on the floor nearby. Red hair feathered by moonlight, a pale hand outflung. She gripped the shoulder and found it unresisting as she turned the body over. The Director's eyes stared sightlessly at the ceiling.

The floor yawned open beneath Elisabeth; the library spun in a dizzy whirl. This wasn't possible. It was a bad dream. Any moment now she would wake up in her bed, and everything would be back to normal. As she waited for this to happen, the seconds unspooling past, her stomach heaved. She stumbled away from the Director's body toward the doors, where she coughed up a sour string of bile. When she put out her hand to steady herself, her palm slipped against the door frame.

Blood, she thought automatically, but the substance coating her hand was something else—thicker, darker. Not blood—ink.

Elisabeth instantly knew what this meant. She wiped her hand on her nightgown and gripped Demonslayer's pommel in both hands, shaking too violently to hold it with only one. She

stepped out into the night. The wind rushed over her, tangling her hair. At first she saw nothing, only the twinkling glow of a few lamps still lit down in Summershall. Their lights flickered as the orchard's trees thrashed in the wind. A high wrought iron fence stood around the library's gravel yard, its sharp finials spearing the restless sky like daggers, but the gate hung open, warped on its hinges, dripping with ink.

Then, in the distance, a hulking silhouette moved among the trees. Moonlight shone on its greasy surface. It limped toward the village with a rolling, ungainly gait, like a malformed bear clumsily attempting to walk on two legs. There was no mistaking what it was. A grimoire had escaped from the vault. Drawing upon the power of the sorcery between its pages, it had swelled into a gruesome monster of ink and leather.

Upon sighting a Malefict, Elisabeth was supposed to alert the nearest warden or, if that was impossible, race up the stairs to ring the Great Library's warning bell. The bell would call the wardens to arms and prompt the townspeople to evacuate into the shelter beneath the town hall. But there was no time. If Elisabeth turned back, the monster would reach Summershall before anyone even had a chance to rise from bed. Countless people would die in the streets. It would be a slaughter.

Officium adusque mortem. Duty unto death. She had passed beneath that inscription a thousand times. She might not be a warden yet, but she would never be able to call herself one if she turned away now. Protecting Summershall was her responsibility, even at the cost of her life.

Elisabeth flew through the gate and down the hill. The sharp gravel gave way to a soft, wet carpet of moss and fallen leaves that soaked the hem of her nightgown. She tripped over a root in her path, nearly losing her grip on the sword, but the Malefict

didn't pause, only continued its lumbering advance in the opposite direction.

Now she was close enough to gag on its rotten stench. And to see how big it was, far larger than a man, with limbs as thick and gnarled as tree stumps. Paralyzing waves of fear crashed over her. Demonslayer grew heavy in her hands at last. She was no hero, just a girl in a nightgown who happened to be holding a sword. Was this the way the Director had felt, Elisabeth wondered, when she faced her first Malefict?

I don't have to beat it, she thought. If she could distract it for long enough, and make enough of a commotion doing so, she might save the town. *After all, disturbing the peace is what I'm good at. Most of the time, I do it without even trying.* Courage crept back to her, freeing her frozen limbs. She drew in a deep breath and shouted wordlessly into the night.

The wind tore her voice to shreds, but the monster finally lumbered to a halt. The oily black leather of its hide rippled as if reacting to a fly. After a long, considering pause, it turned to face her.

It was bulky and roughly man-shaped, but lopsided, crude, as if a child had fashioned it from a lump of clay. Dozens of bloodshot eyes bulged across every inch of its surface, ranging from the size of teacups to the size of dinner plates. Their pupils had shrunk to pinpricks, and all of them stared directly at Elisabeth. The library's most dangerous grimoire walked free. The Book of Eyes had returned.

After gazing at her for a moment, it wavered, torn between her and the town. Slowly, its eyes began to roll back in the direction of Summershall. It must not have seen her as a threat. Compared to all those people ahead, she wasn't worth bothering with. She needed to convince it otherwise.

She raised Demonslayer and charged, leaping over fallen branches, dodging between the trees. The Malefict's bulky form loomed above her, blocking out the moonlight. She held her breath against its nauseating stench. Several of its eyes swiveled to focus on her, their pupils enlarging in surprise, but that was all they had a chance to see before the blade swiped across them, spattering ink in an arc through the shadows.

The monster's roar shook the ground. Elisabeth kept running; she knew she couldn't face the Book of Eyes head-on. She plunged through the orchard and skidded to a crouch behind the mossy ruin of an old stone well, sucking in gasps of clean air.

Somehow, hiding from the monster was worse than facing it. She couldn't see what it was doing, which allowed her imagination to fill in the gaps. But she did determine, without a doubt, that it was looking for her. Though it moved with unnerving stealth, it was too large to pass between the trees without betraying its presence. Branches snapped here and there, and apples plopped to the ground with hollow smacks. The sounds gradually drew nearer. Elisabeth stopped panting; her lungs burned with the effort of holding her breath. An apple struck the well and burst, spattering her with sticky fragments.

"Apprentice . . . I'll find you . . . only a matter of time . . ."

The whisper caressed her mind like a flabby hand. She reeled, clutching her head.

"Better if you gave up now . . ."

The greasy suggestion swirled through her thoughts, compelling in its bloodless pragmatism. Her mission was impossible. Too hard. All she had to do was give in, put down the sword, and her suffering would be over. The Book of Eyes would make it quick.

The Book of Eyes was lying.

Gritting her teeth, Elisabeth looked up. The Malefict stood above her, but it hadn't seen her yet. Its eyes twisted in their sockets, moving independently of one another as they scanned the orchard. The ones she'd injured had closed up, weeping rivulets of ink like tears.

"Apprentice . . ."

Resisting the whispers was like treading water in sodden clothes, barely keeping her nose and mouth above the surface. She forced herself to stop holding her head and clenched her fingers around Demonslayer's grip. *Just a little longer*, she told herself. The monster shifted closer, and a yellow eye looked down. When it spotted her, its pupil dilated so hugely that the entire iris appeared black.

Now.

She thrust Demonslayer upward, piercing the eye. Ink cascaded down her arms and dripped onto the moss. The Malefict's bellow shuddered through the night. This time, as she scrambled away, she saw new lights winking on in the town below. More joined them with every second that passed, spreading from house to house like banked embers flaring back to life. Summer-shall was waking. Her plan was succeeding.

And her own time was running out.

An arm swept from the darkness, tossing her through the air like a rag doll. A bright shock of pain sparked through her as her shoulder clipped a tree trunk, sending her spinning through the damp grass. She tasted copper, and when she sat up, gasping for breath, her surroundings blurred in and out. A strap of her nightgown hung loose, torn and bloodied. The Malefict's dark shape towered over her.

It leaned closer. It had a lumpy head, but no face, no features aside from those countless bulging eyes. *"An odd girl, you are.*