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The Assistant

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Hartford, Connecticut

Thesis

The Assistant

submitted by

Georgia Summers

Class of 2015

In Partial Fulfilment of Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts in English

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Reader: Professor Ciaran Berry

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“I wither slowly in thine arms,
Here at the quiet limit of the world,
A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream
The ever-silent spaces of the East,
Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.”

- Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Tithonus*.

"If you ever have need of my life, come and take it."

- Anton Chekhov, *The Seagull*

Chapter One

In a stuffy council room, Sophia Bridgeton sits under the rheumy-eyed stares of six men, aware that every move she makes is under judgement. It is silent save for the constant murmur of rustling paper: maps veined with red and blue ink plotting routes across countries, reams of notes about archaeological sites and equipment, several sketches of the landscape, pages of translations from Gaulish. Someone has thrown open the windows in an effort to tempt a breeze, inviting several flies to explore instead.

She clears her throat. In the hour that she's sat here, she's remained silent while the men have gone over her notes, smudging her handwriting with their sweaty fingers. She's waited more than long enough for an answer.

"So, do I get the grant?"

The men look up from the maps. If prompted, she could name every one of them, where their bloodlines cross with hers, which cousins they share. She could talk about how they doted on her as a child, and the numerous dinner parties they attended at her parents' invitation. She could probably even describe how they each take their tea, having served it to them often enough.

But in this room, none of that matters. Here, they don't stand as family friends, but as appointed representatives of the inner circle of magicians, handpicked within the families to serve and maintain the law. There is a seventh chair, empty and propped up against the wall, where the only female member of the council should be. However, Sophia's mother is absent, off on a month long retreat with other researchers.

The eldest of the council, James Weatheridge, takes off his glasses, wipes them with a handkerchief, and replaces them on the bridge of his nose. Almost blind, he is as close to a grandfather as she's ever had.

“Miss Bridgeton.” He breathes as if every word costs him too much air. “This is all very impressive, but I'm afraid the council can't grant you the funding for your archaeological dig. Funds are only available for qualified magicians. You know this.”

“With all due respect, I think that the detail of my research -” she gestures to the maps in front of them “- demonstrates my ability to lead this dig.”

It's taken months to compile the research needed, with hours and hours spent hunched over her desk. They can sit there and try to pick holes in her notes, but she's prepared for that: a lifetime – however little that means to the men in front of her – spent learning about magical history, grabbing at whatever books she could get her hands on, and searching for those she could not. She can't sit here and watch her dream slip through her fingers because she missed something trivial.

When they don't answer her, she presses on. “If you look at my notes, you'll see -”

Weatheridge holds up his hand. “How old are you, Miss Bridgeton?”

As if he doesn't know. As if none of them remember sending her cards on her last birthday.

“I turned twenty-three last month,” she says.

“And in all that time, you've never considered an assistant's position?”

This is where they've drawn their line. She takes a deep breath and tries to remember that she's more than qualified for this. She's gone over this argument a thousand times in her head, and every time she wins.

“My parents believe that there are multiple pathways to magical knowledge, and I uphold that belief. I doubt that there is much left in an assistant position that I would find beneficial to my education.”

Another man, Arnoud Bouvier, steeples his fingers. “That may be, Miss Bridgeton, but as it stands, we require an assistantship in order to consider you an official magician. It is the law.”

The bloody law. On particularly frustrating days with the council, Sophia’s mother would pace in the kitchen, ranting in a tirade of French and English. *Mon dieu, ces hommes! Old laws written by old men.*

Besides, if Bouvier’s son can get a grant for his ‘historical assessment of Europe’ – a six-month holiday spent on Grecian beaches – then the council can surely give her one, too.

“You know me,” she says. “You know that I’m trained. You know I’m qualified. More than qualified.”

If her family had money, this wouldn’t be a problem. She could hire her own team, her own equipment – all of it. She could get by without the other perks of a council grant, like the support of other magicians, or the networking chain that would give her all kinds of discounts. They’re all desirable items, but she could make do without them.

Money is another issue altogether. Without the money to fund the trip, it doesn’t matter how good she is at negotiating for better prices, or how cheap the equipment is, or even if she can wrangle volunteers. Right now, she can’t even book a flight to the potential site.

“Miss Bridgeton, in the eyes of the law,” Bouvier says, mouth thin in disapproval, “you are not.”

It takes all of her effort not to scream in frustration. Instead, she grips the armrests of her chair so tightly that her knuckles whiten. She has to remain calm. If she gets angry in front of the council, she'll have lost, and all of her research will have been pointless.

“Mr Bouvier. Council. I have wanted this all my life. I would not ask for the grant unless I was absolutely certain that I could do this.” Her voice lowers to a whisper. “Please, let me do this.”

The council members look at each other as she holds her breath. A bead of sweat rolls towards the crook of her elbow, but she doesn't move. Her collar itches.

Weatheridge sighs. “Sophia,” he says gently, “it doesn't matter if you have all the training in the world. We can't let you go.”

Sophia stands up and bows, maintaining eye contact with Weatheridge.

“Thank you for your time,” she says.

And leaves.

That night, Sophia receives a phone call, as she plots yet another potential route to the archaeological site, red pen slashing through various boundaries on the map. It rings, unanswered, while she writes lists of cheap hotels on scrap paper and tallies their costs alongside them. The kitchen table is covered in maps and pieces of paper like this, interspersed with heavy leather volumes and thin letters that have been highlighted so often the ink bleeds through onto the other side. Outside, the ocean roars as waves lash against the rocks under the house, which sits precariously on a cliff ledge.

After the tenth ring, she picks up. “Hello?”

“It's James.”

Weatheridge sounds even more asthmatic on the phone than he does in person. Sophia stops chewing on her pen and pushes her hair out of her face. The clock above the kitchen sink reads twenty past two in the morning. The hours for social calls are long over.

“I’m sorry about what happened today,” he says.

Of course he is. Several of the council members have already expressed their regrets to her via phone calls, so that they can walk away safe in the knowledge that they have upheld their precious law. They will go to bed tonight and close their eyes, and the world will turn again, safe and unchanging.

“It’s fine,” she says.

But Weatheridge isn’t done. He wheezes on the other end of the line, and continues.

“I think I can solve your problem, my dear.”

She frowns, and tilts the receiver closer to her ear. “You can get me the funding?”

Hope sings in her veins.

“No, no, that is out of the question entirely. The law is the law.”

Sophia stares at the table, disappointment curdling her stomach. The law is the law is the law. Weatheridge’s phone call is nothing but an extended attempt to rid himself of his guilt and his complicity. It is crushing.

“Are you still on the line, Sophia?”

“I’m here,” she says, though she now wishes she hadn’t picked up the phone.

“Anyway, after you left, I thought there was surely something else that I can do. I racked my brain for a good hour or so before it struck me! I can get you an assistant’s post.”

Despite everything, Sophia finds herself leaning into the phone. “How?”

She is twenty-three; the window for an assistantship is more than shut. Every other candidate will be younger than her, and ruthless in the face of competition. She can’t possibly win against people like that.

“Well, as it turns out, I do know of someone looking for an assistant.” He hesitates. “It’s the Dupont heir.”

“Huh.”

She turns the name over in her mind. It’s the first time in years that she’s heard it spoken without the verbal equivalent of side-eye. Weatheridge says it almost jovially, a sign that he’s trying very hard to ignore all the connotations it comes with. Like dead assistants.

“He’s looking for someone smart, capable – of course, I immediately thought of you. We all signed a recommendation letter.”

They must be feeling *really* guilty if they’ve organised a recommendation. They’re incredibly rare, and they guarantee employment. Not even the enigmatic Dupont heir can turn her down with the letter in hand.

“It’s a year’s position. I’ll send it over along with the details tonight, if you want the job,” Weatheridge says. “You’ll be doing research – nothing exciting, I’m afraid, but you’re used to that, of course.”

Anything’s more exciting than following an expedition that begins and ends in ink. Sophia looks at her maps, scattered across the table, and tries to gather her thoughts. A year is an awfully long time to spend under someone else’s tuition, especially when she doesn’t need it, and there might still be other chances to receive funding, slim as they are.

But maybe this is one of those chances.

Weatheridge's voice rasps into the receiver. "There's one other issue to discuss. We, as the council, would ask a favour of you. I assume you've heard of the rumours about the Duponts' previous assistants?"

Has she ever.

"It would be terrific if you could, ah, keep an eye on things, make sure nothing's really out of place, if you know what I mean. It's nothing official as such, so I would advise you to keep it to yourself. It certainly shouldn't interrupt your job."

"You want me to *spy* on the Dupont heir?" she says.

Weatheridge backtracks impressively fast. "Not spy, my dear. Just to let us know if something is out of place. We want you to stay safe, after all."

A year under the Dupont heir is not the worst price to pay for her dig. A year, and she'll be able to reapply for the grant; there's no way the council will say no, especially after she pulls this favour for them. A year, and she could be in northern France, finally, *finally* living her dream.

"It's a good opportunity," he says. "You might not get another."

Ink to dirt to discovery.

"I'll take it," she says.

Chapter Two

It is far too early when Sophia gets off the bus and onto the train, letter tucked safely into one of her bags. In her dawn blariness, she almost stumbles onto the wrong one, and has to sprint to the other side of the station when she realises her mistake.

With only a few hours to organise everything, the night had been spent in a flurry of packing up. She'd gathered her most essential belongings: her diary, a ring picked up on the beach by her house, several letters from her parents, and a necklace. It was all she had room for; the rest is taken up by clothes and various documents stuffed into the bottom of the ancient carpetbag. In her backpack, she'd packed what little money she had, as well as her casting gloves – essential equipment for her magework. She'd cleared off the kitchen table, sorting her notes meticulously by date and location. When she comes back to them in a year, it'll be crucial to have them all in the right place.

Nevertheless, it had been hard to lock the door knowing she wouldn't be back for so long. She'd left a letter on the table, explaining what had happened to her parents, for whenever they come back.

The ticket inspector comes down the aisle and Sophia reaches into her bag, pushing past various items to get to it. The destination is stamped on the right-hand side, a village with a claim to obscurity and a dwindling population – for the non-magical community, that is. To every mage, it's a constant source of curiosity and speculation.

It's where the Duponts live.

Except now it's just one Dupont, who hasn't left the village in more than four years. He'd even declined his seat on the council, passed down to him in the wake of

his father's death. It's the reason why Sophia's mother is there, despite her family's complicated history with the council. Her parents had fought about it in the kitchen, voices rising and falling with their tempers. *Bertram, I am tired of these men walking all over us, with their stupid old laws about what magicians can and cannot do. Do they know it's not 1793 anymore? When was the last time a woman held the council position? You forget that I was born a Thierry, Bertram. You Bridgetons can keep your history – I am interested in the future!*

Her mother had been the first person to successfully argue for the importance of archaeological research, to push for the grant that Sophia so desperately needs. It seems absurd that the inner circle with all its ancestral pride would show so much disinterest in their early history. She has a suspicion – though she would never admit it to Weatheridge – that it has a lot to do with the inner circle's insecurities. No one wants an origin story that doesn't begin with the current status quo.

The train stops at the Gare du Nord in Paris, and she breaks into another, more intentional sprint to the next platform. The station smells like rain and damp, food and people. If she could stop to admire the scenery, she would. History is so much easier to observe in cities; every building tells a story, pulling her back and forth through time. Magic is different in cities, too, her parents say, especially in Paris. The laws mean less, and they are not as enamoured by the inner circle's enormous wealth and prestige.

It says a lot that the Duponts are considered wealthy by the rest of the inner circle.

Sophia reaches the train just in time and slides into her seat as it pulls away from the station. She watches the city through the window, her eyes flickering back and forth while the train picks up speed. It's like watching a time-lapse of the

apocalypse; grey buildings are swallowed by foliage as they head into the countryside. She cranes her neck to watch the last of Paris disappear from sight.

Rain begins to patter against the window, and she turns away. It strikes her, for the briefest of moments, that Weatheridge was not entirely honest about the assistantship's description. 'Research' doesn't kill people, as far as she knows, and a lot of people have died at the Dupont house.

It happens, from time to time. An assistantship primarily involves conducting experimental magic, and sometimes it goes wrong. But the Duponts seem to have a knack for losing assistants to all sorts of terrible deaths; they've drowned in empty bathtubs, pulled out their eyeballs with their fingers – she shudders to think of the soft squish and pop and the screams afterwards – and if they survive, they come back scarred and quiet. The assistant Sophia intends to replace spontaneously combusted, according to the report; she wouldn't look at the pictures. Honestly, she's surprised that the council has waited so long to investigate.

Yet people keep applying for the position, thanks to the Duponts' illustrious legacy of power and wealth. Few have seen the mysterious Virgil Dupont, the Great Virgil's son. Mad with grief over his parents' death and shut away for good, or a desperate young man, searching for an immortality spell. Or a Frankenstein, having murdered his own kin to create a disfigured army in the basement. The only people who know the truth are either dead or uninterested in talking about their experience.

Either way, she's about to find out.

At eight o'clock, Sophia's train finally arrives at the station, four hours late. Hot and sweaty, she pulls her blonde hair back and steps onto the platform. Her backpack sinks beneath her shoulder blades, and she has to set down her carpetbag to

wipe her hands on her jeans. The third-class carriage is packed, and she almost trips as someone shoves past her. She swears loudly and rights herself, clutching her bag in one hand.

She stops at the information desk to inquire about a taxi. The woman at the desk peers over it, her spectacles pushed high on the bridge of her nose. Maybe it's Sophia's unkempt appearance, or the star-spiral tattoo on her left shoulder, but the woman eyes her with suspicion.

Sophia tells her where she's going.

"The château?" The woman wrinkles her nose and her glasses slip. "That's standard fare plus extra."

Sophia roots around her pockets, feeling the coins rub against her fingers. It will be enough to get her there, but not enough to get back.

"Can I walk there?" she asks.

"No."

"God knows why so many of you want to go to the château," the woman says, folding her arms. "You should know that we don't put up with bad behaviour. If there's anything illegal going on, don't expect -"

Sophia interrupts her. "There's nothing illegal. I expect most of the visitors will be gone by tonight."

Because she will be there, thanks to the council. The woman's lips thin in dissatisfaction.

"Well, then. You make sure of that."

Four taxis flat out refuse to drive Sophia, each one citing random and illogical excuses. Figures. Even though the non-magical folk know nothing of the assistants, they're not stupid. They can tell that something is off.

When she finally flags down a taxi that will take her to the château, the driver comes round and opens the door for her. He even goes so far as to doff his hat.

“My grandmother worked up there,” he says. “Before World War One. She said there used to be plenty of staff from the village.”

Sophia gets into the car, dragging her bags with her. “But that was before the war.”

“True, very true.”

The taxi driver slides into his seat and hits the pedal. Sophia leans her head on the window, watching the landscape slip past, bathed in the fiery hue of sunset. They drive along almost empty roads, slipping from the town into deep countryside. The taxi driver takes them on coastal routes, dangerously close to the ocean; more than once, she catches sight of a roadside memorial, denoted by red ribbons and straw crosses. It is impossible not to think about careening off the side, the car leaping for the ocean, reaching for their grave. At least one assistant has died this way – she’s checked.

Forty-five minutes later, the village appears. Although the buildings in the village’s centre are brick, they soon give way to old farmhouses with thatched roofs. Bollards block the square, and awnings jut out from the shops lining it. People still mill around, catching the last of the day’s shopping, but they’re few and far between.

When she turns her head to glance behind her, she can see the ocean, sparkling against the sunset. A few boats dot the horizon, but most of them are closer to the docks, little fishing dinghies with barely enough space for two. Certainly none of them are equipped to go out much further than the bay.

As the car climbs a steep hill, the village recedes quickly, and the spires of the château come into view. Sophia’s insides tang with nerves, and also, to her surprise,

anticipation. The château is supposed to be riddled with old magic, saturated in history from before the council's founding, from when the inner circle and non-magical aristocracy still intermingled, before the magical community hid themselves. Having access to its famed library could even help further her archaeological studies.

"We're here, love." The taxi driver opens her door for her. "Are you sure this is where you want to be?"

"This is it."

She grabs her bags and hefts them over one shoulder. Arriving like a packhorse is probably the worst way to come, but she has no choice. She hands the last of her money over to the taxi driver and gives him a thumbs up. Her hands are trembling, but he doesn't seem to notice. He drives off with a wave in the rear-view mirror.

There is nothing left to do but introduce herself.

So she straightens her shoulders despite the weight, and walks up to the house. From the front, it seems almost too small to be a château. It backs up onto a cliff face, but the colouring is so similar that it is difficult to tell where the building ends and the cliff begins. Wisteria climbs over it, spreading tendrils into gutters and across windows, winding its way up the towers. Upstairs, a light flickers on in the impending darkness.

She can do this. After all, she has the council's letter, which counts for everything. She takes a deep breath and raps on the door three times. Her heart flutters, anxious. She doesn't want to do this. She has to do this.

Muffled footsteps shuffle towards the door, and it clicks. The door swings open, revealing a young man with dark circles under his eyes and almost translucent skin. His shirt hangs on his frame, the two top buttons undone in the heat. *My God,*

I've stumbled upon a vampire. The sunlight just touches the rim of the doorstep, and she represses a childish urge to pull him towards it.

This can't be Virgil the Great's son. He looks like a breeze could tip him over, not the magician he's supposed to be, and much less the heir to the powerful Dupont line. On the bright side, though, he also doesn't look like he keeps his parents locked up in the towers.

She gathers her thoughts. Focus.

"I'm here to apply as an assistant," she says. When he doesn't answer, she adds, "You *are* Virgil, aren't you?"

The young man stiffens slightly. In all of her imaginings, she'd never pictured Virgil Dupont II as her age, even though she's always known this in theory. It's hard to believe that this is the man to inherit the famed Dupont legacy, son of Virgil the Great.

"Yes. Interviews are over, though." He doesn't open the door any further, nor does he step out to shoo her away.

Sophia runs one hand through her hair, aware of how unkempt she looks. Why hadn't she thought to change her clothes before she got here? Even a brief struggle with her hairbrush would have been an improvement.

"Look, my train arrived late," she says. "There were sheep on the tracks – I know it sounds stupid, but –"

Virgil puts one hand up, as if to wave her off. "I'm sorry, but I've already selected a new assistant, Julien Marchand. Good evening to you."

He starts to close the door, but Sophia wedges her foot in the gap and it bounces off her heel instead. Pain shoots up her ankle, but she maintains her position. She's come too far to let some skinny guy fob her off. She's got to be better than

whatever second-rate assistant he's hired. Besides, she doesn't have anywhere else to stay, and no money to return home.

"I have a letter of recommendation from the council," she says.

She tugs it out of her breast pocket and hands it to him. The edges of the envelope are singed from the fireplace; on the front *Virgil Dupont II* is written in Weatheridge's elegant, distinctive script. The council's seal closes over the back in red wax.

Virgil turns the letter over several times in his hands. He sighs and opens the door all the way, the last of the sunlight sweeping over the floor.

"You'd better come in," he says.

With that, she steps over the threshold.

Chapter Three

It is almost unbelievable. Julien is standing here, *really standing* in the Dupont house, and not as some intruder, or an easy to fob off guest, but as a real assistant. All of his belongings are already in their various drawers, organised and folded. It's highly unlikely that Mr Dupont will ever come by for a rummage in his sock drawer, but if he does, he'll be impressed by the colour coding.

When he's sure that no one is coming for him, Julien undoes the top button of his shirt and rolls his shoulders back. He's still here. His new quarters are more lavish than anything the Academy could offer him *or* the professors. They consist of a main living room and kitchenette, as well as a study – all decorated in the shabby chic that only the very wealthy can pull off. And that doesn't even begin to take into account his bedroom. It takes more than two steps to walk from one side to the other, and he has a whole bathroom to himself. It feels like luxury after using communal showers for six years. When he sits down on the bed, the mattress sinks comfortably under him, and there's no *gloiiing* from old springs.

He could get used to this. If he can forget that he's an Academy graduate, and not from the aristocratic inner circle. If he can forget that he's working for someone in a system he despises.

Not that he has a problem with Virgil Dupont. He's far younger than Julien had imagined, and noticeably awkward, with an angular frame and choppy hair. Virgil is, at most, a year older than him, undoubtedly having completed his assistantship underneath the instruction of his father. Yet, somehow Julien still ended up picturing an older man, strong and wizened from experience.

It's a shame about the attitude in the village, though. Julien had struggled to get a lift to the Dupont château, and by the time he had, he'd got stuck at the back of

the interview queue, behind people who could actually afford to own a car. A ‘stay away from us and we’ll stay away from you’ mentality, even though he’s pretty sure that none of them know about the Duponts’ magical lineage.

By the time he’d reached the head of the line, he’d been the only interviewee left. He’d walked into the study with his shoulders squared, and sat down. Handing over his credentials had felt like a killing blow, even though it’s standard procedure. Academy mages *never* get the assistantship, he’s learnt.

But all Virgil had said was, “I hear the Academy is doing well.”

The rest of the interview had been routine, with the usual round of questioning before difficult, more complex questions that required several minutes of pondering before he could respond. More than once, he’d glanced at his credentials, *Academy graduate* stamped across the top.

Yet somehow, it had been enough.

A knock at the door sends Julien bolting upright. He refastens his top button and smooths down his shirt. He can’t afford to be sloppy. Virgil may not seem prejudiced against the Academy, but he can’t be certain of that. He walks through the living space straight to the door and opens it.

Virgil is there – with a woman.

Julien’s first thought is that she must be a sister, but then he remembers that Virgil the Great only had one heir. Besides, the young woman looks nothing like Virgil; she’s short and blonde – exactly his opposite. She hangs behind him, weighed down with a backpack and carpetbag. His next thought is that they might be friends, but there’s a wariness about the woman that suggests otherwise.

“This is Sophia Bridgeton,” Virgil says. “The other assistant.”

Julien's face heats up. Of course he wouldn't be trusted to do a good job on his own. He's only an Academy brat, after all, not some pedigree mage born with a wand up his ass. It doesn't matter how skilled he is; inner circle magicians like Virgil will never trust him to do a good job of anything. Instead, they hire more inner circle mages, like the Bridgetons.

The insult is compounded by the Bridgeton woman's outfit. She doesn't look fit to be an assistant. She's dressed like she's halfway to the beach, as if she's on holiday instead of about to start employment. Did Virgil even bother to interview her? He's careful not to let his disappointment show on his face. He smiles politely and shakes her hand.

Virgil glances at the room behind them. "It appears that I will have to make some adjustments to the quarters before it is habitable for the both of you. The study will have to be converted into a second bedroom. I trust you understand why."

Julien nods, an automatic rise and fall of his head that betrays nothing of the anger coursing through him. He has earned his place here, and yet he cannot even call the quarters his own. Worse, he will have to watch every step with Sophia around him. It will not be enough to simply be competent; he will have to be the better assistant at every single turn to prove that he doesn't need her.

"I will be back momentarily," Virgil says. "Please make yourselves comfortable."

With that, he disappears into the study and closes the door behind him. There are several banging sounds, and Julien can feel the buzz of magic reverberating in his teeth. He pushes the discomfort out of his mind.

"So, you're the other assistant."

Sophia looks at him with a smile that could either be friendly, or challenging. She drops her bags on the floor and folds her arms.

“I guess I should at least know your name,” she says.

“I’m Julien Marchand.”

He tucks on his last name as an act of defiance, and he watches as Sophia’s eyebrows knit in confusion. Marchand is not a circle name. It is not even a magician’s name.

“Your family are in the outer circle?” she asks.

This conversation never fails to come up. In interviews, discussions, sometimes behind his back. It’s as if someone has stamped *NOT A MAGE* on his forehead in bright red letters, even though there should be no question about what he is. He’s standing in the Dupont house with a degree and a job, isn’t he? But his surname and social rank is all that anyone cares about.

“No,” he says, throat tightening.

Her frown deepens. “Inner circle?”

His muscles are straining to hold his smile in place. He shakes his head and stares past her, towards the open door and the hallway beyond. Even the simplest aspects of the house have been crafted with exquisite skill, the kind that comes from wealth and connections. The books in this room alone could probably buy his parents’ house.

“I’m an Academy graduate,” he says.

There’s no avoiding it. Sooner or later, she’ll want to know why she hasn’t seen him at functions, and he would rather push it out in front of him before he feels tempted to lie to her. He shouldn’t have to feel embarrassed about where he comes from, even if it is the Academy. He lifts his chin a little higher.

Her smile falters. “Oh. I didn’t think Academy students went in for assistantships.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t you want to all go into teaching?”

Heat prickles the back of his neck. Does she really believe that Academy students *choose* to go into teaching? Is she a complete idiot? God, how he’d fought to get here. He opens his mouth to say something, but the banging in the study stops abruptly, and he closes his mouth again.

A moment later, Virgil re-enters the living area. “It’s done. I’ll leave you to unpack and settle in.”

It’s as if Sophia’s words have never happened. She gives Virgil a thumbs up and smile that makes Julien clench his fists and unclench them again. It shouldn’t be so easy for her to ingratiate herself with Virgil, but here she is anyway, sucking attention towards her, swallowing the room.

It was foolish to believe that this place could ever be his, that he could ever stand as an equal to Virgil Dupont. It doesn’t matter how hard he tries, or how skilled he becomes. He’ll never be anything but a temporary replacement for the inner circle, a stand in until someone else comes along.

Chapter Four

Sophia's new room is spartan, at best. Its only redeeming feature is the window seat and accompanying view that overlooks the village. From here, she can see flickers of light from the street lamps, and the ceramic tiled roofs of the town, burning orange even in the dark. Moonlight dapples the ocean behind it.

She dumps her bags on the bed and sits by the window for a while, watching the waves roll in and out of the moon's light. The house is too far away to hear the *shh shh* of the ocean, but even if it was, she can't imagine that it would ever make the same sound as water rushing over rocks at home. It shouldn't be possible that she's looking at the same ocean.

And even now, sitting here, she's not sure she's earned this. The interview had been, well, short. Virgil had opened the letter, taken one look at the contents, and listed off questions that required one-word answers. She'd known the council's recommendation was a guarantee, but it still shouldn't have been so easy, even for Virgil 'I hide bodies in the walls' Dupont. During the entire interview, he'd kept glancing back to the letter, as if it had presented some unknown horror within. She hadn't actually read it beforehand, but whatever the council had to say couldn't have been that bad, surely?

There's a knock at her door and she jumps up. Before she can open it, however, the other assistant walks in. Julien. She takes a step backwards. He stands rigid in her doorway, mouth pressed together in a thin line. All traces of his earlier smile have vanished.

"You forgot this," he says, holding up one of her scarves.

He holds it out in front of him with two pinched fingers. When Virgil had mentioned another assistant, she'd hoped for someone with a personality, or at the

very least, someone that she'd recognise. Julien covers neither of these bases, and to top it off, he radiated sycophancy while Virgil was here. His dislike of her isn't entirely surprising, though, given the situation. If she cared more about the assistantship position, she'd be pissed, too, but as the usurper, she can't complain.

"Thanks," she says.

He lets it go as her fingers clasp over the fabric, and their fingertips brush ever so slightly. He yanks his hand away, as if she's burned him.

"Is something wrong?" she asks.

The other assistant's face reddens. "No."

She opens her mouth to press further, but his discomfort is so painfully obvious that she sighs instead.

"Well, thanks for giving me back my scarf. I guess I should unpack."

Her minimalist packing style makes her feel a little regretful. If she'd known how bare this room would be, she would have tried to take more decorations – something to put over the plaster walls, or hide the water stain that creeps over the ceiling. Even her bed sheets are white, the linen tired but serviceable. The only place with any real character is the living room, where arch-braced trusses jut out from the roof like ribs on a skeleton.

"You can come in if you want," she says.

"No, I should leave you to unpack." He backs out. "Dinner's in an hour."

He shuts the door behind him. Sophia watches it for a second longer than necessary, and when she's sure that he's no longer there, she checks for a lock. There's a large keyhole, but no key. It'll be a complicated piece of magic to make one to fit, but she'd rather have the protection than not.

It takes a pitiful amount of time to unpack. She sets aside her casting gloves for later, but everything else fits neatly into two drawers. The diaries with all of her notes goes between her mattress and bed frame.

Once she's finished, she cracks her door open and peers around it. Julien must be in his room, so she takes the opportunity to allow herself a closer look at the living area. It's as dark as the rest of the house, wrapped in oak panelling. With the windows covered by drapes, it exudes a faint but persistent atmosphere of a funeral parlour. She pulls aside the heavy curtains and moonlight pours in, illuminating dust motes. When she sits down in one of the armchairs, a cloud of it swirls up around her.

She's in the middle of brushing herself down when a quiet cough alerts her to a presence. Virgil waits another minute before he steps further into the room. Almost immediately, Julien glides out of his bedroom, his shirt as creaseless as it had been an hour before. It looks like he's ironed it, but that seems excessive.

"Dinner is this way," Virgil says, looking past both of them. "Please follow me."

Sophia waits for the hallway to twist into the staircase they'd gone up, but instead, it morphs into another corridor, lined with mirrors. Most of them hang in gold frames, ugly fat cherubs clinging to the edges. Sophia catches sight of herself in one of them and winces at how unkempt she looks. She tries to comb her hair with her fingers, but when she notices Julien staring at her, she stops.

They turn the corner and head up a flight of stairs. Up?

This is definitely not the way she'd come in.

"Is there another way to the kitchen?" she asks, confused.

The smug look on Julien's face suggests that he's already received the explanation. Virgil looks pained from having to speak again so soon.

“The house has unnatural properties,” Virgil says. “It won’t behave like an ordinary building. The doorways change.”

As if to illustrate this, Virgil opens the door into a bathroom and climbs over the tub to the door on the other side. Sophia stares for a moment, before following him. Although the bath itself is pristine, both taps are missing, and rust stains linger around the drain. Is this where that assistant drowned?

It’s not a question that she can really ask, but she files it away for later examination. There are spells that reveal scenes of violence, or lingering fear – simple enough to perform. She’ll have to come back here on her own, away from prying eyes.

As soon as she shuts the bathroom door, wallpaper plasters itself across it and the wall flattens with a soft grinding noise. Seconds later, it’s as if the room never existed. Out of the corner of her eye, she notices Julien’s eyebrows shoot up, but Virgil doesn’t even flinch.

“So this is how the house works? All the time?” she asks, glancing behind her.

Virgil shrugs. “Usually. I strongly caution against wandering around on your own. The house is not fond of strangers.”

“I’ll remember that,” she says.

It’ll be the first thing she puts in her letter to Weatheridge.

Chapter Five

Julien sits down to dinner across from Sophia and Virgil, who almost brush elbows every time they lift their forks. He notes the same glint of gold on their hands: rings, each one embellished with a crest unique to their families. The Duponts' symbol is asphodel, but from here, he can't see Sophia's. Julien touches his right index finger, where the family ring would sit if he had one.

The food is simple fare, but better than he'd expected. He looks around for evidence of a cook, but he hasn't seen signs of *anyone* else so far. Perhaps they're all hiding, waiting until the end of the meal to pop out and whisk away dirty dishes.

"I suppose I should explain the task that you'll undertake," Virgil says.

Julien's heart swells in anticipation. He's heard so many stories about what an assistant does: working with difficult spells, preparing experiments, translating ancient languages and more. It sounds like a joyless position to some, but Julien has worked incredibly hard to get here. It's everything that the Academy can't afford to offer him.

"You will continue the research started by myself and earlier assistants," Virgil continues. "Tomorrow morning, we'll convene in the library."

Tomorrow can't come soon enough. The research, whatever it is, must be incredibly dangerous; like everyone else, Julien's heard the stories, and they're not pleasant. Crushed to death, exsanguination, dismemberment – the last one's happened more than once. Still, it'll be far more interesting than anything he'd ever get to do at the Academy, and anyway, experimental magic never comes without a price.

"What's the village like?" Sophia says, dislodging the silence. "James told me that it's quite beautiful in the evenings."

It takes a moment for Julien to realise that she's talking about James Weatheridge, head of the council and another member of the inner circle. Of course they'd be on first name terms with someone like him; the only time James Weatheridge had visited the Academy was for the annual speech, and he'd stared at the floor most of the time, looking out of place in his embellished hat and tailed coat.

"I suppose it is," Virgil says.

He doesn't elaborate, so Sophia presses on. Julien glances out of the kitchen window, but in the darkness, it's almost impossible to see anything, save for dots of light emanating from houses. He'd been so nervous on the way over that he'd barely paid attention to his surroundings. For all he knows, the village could be hideous, or halfway underwater, or inhabited by talking animals.

"James asked after you, by the way," she says. "I think he wants to invite you to the reception this year." She suddenly turns to Julien, as if noticing him for the first time, and her hand flies to her mouth. "Oh – I'm sorry. The reception is -"

"For inner circle only. I know," Julien says.

He sets his jaw and stares at his food, determined not to give her the satisfaction of his annoyance. He'll never be invited to any inner circle soirees, and he'd thought he was well over that, but the comment still stings.

Sophia gives a little shrug, cheeks colouring, and turns back to Virgil. "Anyway, the offer's there for you."

Virgil twists his ring around his finger several times. In the bright kitchen, he looks ill, like he could keel over at any moment. The shadows under his eyes have deepened since Julien's interview.

"That's kind of him, but I must decline. I'll be occupied, most likely."

With what? Julien wants to ask, but he restrains himself. Instead, he gets to watch Sophia tackle the question.

“I haven’t even given you the date,” she says, surprised. “How can you be so sure?”

Virgil’s ring spins faster and faster around his finger, digging red lines into his skin. Despite his animosity, Julien wants to nudge Sophia under the table, to let her know that she’s going too far. Doesn’t she understand that there’s a line between employer and employee, that assistants are not supposed to ask these kinds of questions?

“I have longstanding obligations,” Virgil says.

“Fair enough,” she replies. “Another time, then.”

The dinner lapses back into silence. Julien focuses on his knife and fork, the carved ivory handles sliding against his palm. For a moment, he imagines being back in the Academy’s cafeteria, squashed between students, barely able to hear each other over the din, lamenting over the food. At home, it would be much the same, except he’d be elbowing his sister instead of his friends, and maybe better cooking, depending on whose turn it was. He can’t even begin to envision a scene like that here.

“Does the Academy have receptions as well, Julien?”

He snaps his head back towards Sophia. “No. We can’t afford it.”

It’s both a cause of pride and shame: pride because the Academy doesn’t go in for all the frills and superficialities of circle life, and shame because they can’t, even if they wanted to. Sure, sometimes alumni will come back and drink together in the local pub, but there’s nothing organised.

Sophia’s smile slips. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t. I don’t want you to feel sorry for me.”

He doesn’t mean it to come out so harshly, but it cuts across the room. Sophia stares at him. If she expects an apology from him, then she’ll be disappointed because he only stares back, daring her to say anything more. A split second before it becomes awkward, she glances towards the kitchen window, her mouth pinched in an unhappy line. She tugs on a stray piece of hair and winds it around her finger.

The rest of the meal continues in a hush so tense that Julien loses his appetite well before the end. He drinks three glasses of water just to have something to do.

As they clear their plates away, Virgil speaks. “I don’t have a lot of rules for this house, but the ones I have in place are for your safety. I mentioned this before, but again: don’t wander around the house, especially after nightfall. And try to limit your use of magic, particularly outside of your quarters. The house can be unpredictable.”

“What do you mean by unpredictable?” Sophia asks.

“It depends,” he says, “but suffice to say, I’d rather you didn’t experiment.”

For the first time, he looks Sophia in the eyes, as if this statement is only for her benefit, and Julien can’t help but feel slightly smug inside. She returns the look coolly.

“I gathered that.”

This doesn’t seem to satisfy Virgil, but he shrugs anyway and opens the kitchen door to the corridor beyond. Last out, Julien gets to close the door and watch it slide back into the wall, replaced by a painting of a shepherdess. Several other paintings materialise with it, hung in heavy gilt frames and lit by wall sconces. A question burns in his throat.

“I was wondering,” he says, “if there’s a set path you follow. I can’t seem to figure out the house’s mechanics.”

Virgil takes a moment to answer. “Each room has a kind of presence – a thread of energy – that can be traced throughout the house. After that, it’s simply a matter of following it.”

“Oh. I see.”

It seems too easy, and yet as they meander through a series of dusty and unused rooms, Julien can sense the different threads, each one illuminating the other in brightly coloured chaos. Still, it’s impossible to tell how many there are; as soon as he focuses on one, the others grey out, indistinguishable from one another.

Finally, they reach the arched doorway of the assistants’ quarters. Virgil gives them both a tight nod.

“You will find breakfast items in your kitchenette. I expect to see you both at nine tomorrow morning,” he says. “Please don’t be late, and again, please don’t wander by yourself. Goodnight.”

With that, he disappears down the corridor and around a corner, leaving Julien and Sophia alone. He turns to say goodnight, but Sophia’s face is dark with rage. The words falter on the edge of his tongue.

“Did you have to do that?” she says.

He blinks. “Excuse me?”

“Humiliate me. In front of Virgil.” Her hands are on her hips, her eyes narrowed. “I don’t know what kind of manners they teach you at the Academy, but generally people aren’t assholes to one another.”

Julien’s mouth twists in anger. “You did that all by yourself. Don’t let my inferior Academy manners get in the way.”

“God!” she says, exasperated. “You – I was only trying to be friendly!”

“Yeah, I could tell, what with all of that inner circle jargon. So inclusive.”

He can’t help it; the sarcasm comes out as a snarl. He glares at her, daring her to prove him wrong. When the retort doesn’t come, he adjusts his glasses and folds his arms.

“Next time you make a fool of yourself, don’t try pinning it on me,” he says.

He walks away, anger surging against his chest, sloshing up his ribcage. How *dare* she? He’d barely said two words at dinner; it’s not his fault that none of them had told her to shut up. Slamming his bedroom door would be a relief, but instead he manages to close it gently; it’s not his property, after all.

When he’s sure that she’s not going to stampede after him, he sits on his bed and heaves a sigh.

It’s going to be a long year.

Interlude I

He should be sleeping, but Julien's bed is, incredibly, too soft. Trying to move at all requires an excessive amount of flailing; forget about flipping over. He closes his eyes, opens them again. Next door, Sophia is probably fast asleep, already well accustomed to the luxury of a soft bed.

Maybe he should have been a little nicer to her. Tendrils of guilt snake around his stomach when he thinks of how obviously smug he'd been at Virgil's comments, even though he'd promised himself to keep professional. He can't remember if the Bridgetons are well liked in the inner circle, but Virgil seemed uncomfortable and anxious around her.

Still, she could have dressed for dinner. She could have tried to brush her hair, but apparently even that was too much of a hassle. At the very least, she should have known to keep quiet. And she certainly can't blame him for that.

But it's not his business – not really. As long as she doesn't get in his way, he can ignore her and her prejudices. Living together will be tricky, but he'll keep to his side, and hopefully she'll keep to hers, and that way neither of them will end up duelling each other over something stupid. She won't be the reason he gets fired.

He props himself up on his elbows to look out of the window. From here, he can't see anything but more darkness. He'll prove that he's a worthy assistant. He'll more than prove it.

Otherwise, what on earth is he here for?

Sophia kneels over the floor, head bent down over a handful of glass marbles on a heat mat. For this, she's tied up her hair to keep it out of the way; it would be great if she can avoid setting anything on fire. She's already spent hours trying to

clear her thoughts of the humiliating dinner scene in preparation for this; she's not a glass mage, so everything's harder. Her gloved hands pull back in a clawed casting position and as she mutters to herself, the glass grows red hot, then white, melting across the heat mat, too bright to look at directly.

Then, still as malleable as it is, she pulls the glass back together, whispering words for binding and knotting material. The ribboned glass twists into a long stem with a square at the end, melting and reforming around itself.

This is the tricky part. With one hand, she carries the heating mat and glass object towards the door, concentrating. If it isn't hot, the next part won't work. She presses her other hand firmly towards the empty keyhole and watches as it grows frosty around the edges.

It's the split trick. Half of the mind focuses on the hot, and the other half on the cold. An extremely difficult task, it can go badly wrong if concentration is broken. Sophia is accustomed to the balancing act, but only because of hours and hours of training. She can't stop to think about anything else – not even the possibility of injury. Her confidence of success must be absolute.

The keyhole is ready. Any colder, and the ice slicking over the surface will give the key an uneven impression, and it won't work. Sophia takes a deep breath to steady herself and grabs the end of the white-hot glass stem. Instead of burning, however, her hand frosts over and the handle of the key hisses, steam curling from the rapidly cooling glass. She thrusts the rest of the glass, still hot, into the keyhole and waits, keeping an eye on its temperature.

When she is certain that the glass has hardened, she pulls it out of the keyhole. The square of glass is now toothed and cold. She places it in the lock and turns it.

There is a satisfying click as the bolt slides across. She has bought herself a slightly stronger safe space against either Virgil or Julien.

Only now can she let herself sleep.

Midnight comes and goes, and even though everyone else in the house must be fast asleep, Virgil tosses and turns in his bed, trying and failing to get comfortable. At first he's too hot, so he pushes the covers off him, but then it's too cold, and goose pimples prick his skin. Eventually, he sits up and rubs his eyes.

Hiring Sophia was a mistake. At dinner, she wouldn't stop asking questions, each one problematic in their own way. If she keeps this up, it'll only be a matter of time before she starts asking more difficult questions, ones that he can't answer.

On the other hand, he can't give her up. Not without a clear reason. Sophia may complicate things, but she came with a council recommendation – something he can't ignore. If he'd sent her away instead, who knows what would have happened? Maybe nothing. Maybe a visit from the council.

And that's something he can't risk.

He'll have to find some other way

Chapter Six

Julien is up and dressed before Sophia even leaves her room. It gives him a chance to look around at the living quarters, something impossible when Sophia is around. She's always in the way, always making him feel as though he has to be on his best behaviour, even though there's no true competition between them. Not after the way she behaved last night.

The books above the fireplace look tempting, but it would hardly be the responsible thing to start reading now. Instead, he opens all of the cupboards in the kitchenette until he discovers cereal and toast.

He is midway through toast when Sophia walks in. She gives him a tired glare and disappears into the bathroom, clutching an armful of clothes. He takes note that she's still wearing the same type of ratty outfits as the day before. How can she expect anyone to take her seriously if she doesn't dress for the job? His suit may be at the end of its lifespan, but that has more to do with money than a lack of care.

By the time she comes out, he's already finished breakfast and washed his dishes.

"Aren't you going to wear something smarter than that?" he asks, eyebrows raised.

She glares at him. "If I wanted personal commentary, I would have asked."

Well, no one can say he didn't try.

She reaches into the cupboards, but before she can make anything, Virgil appears at the doorway. Julien immediately drops the tea towel and straightens, ready for whatever's expected of him. Will he be required to perform complex spells? His casting gloves, threadbare from use, are folded in the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Sophia, are you ready?" Virgil asks.

She nods and grabs a slice of bread from the packet. “Now I am.”

Julien watches her pick at the bread as they walk, birdlike. Crumbs fall onto her clothes, and she brushes them off with a careless hand. If Virgil notices, he doesn't say anything – but of course Sophia gets preferential treatment. He doubts that Virgil would make the same concessions for him.

“This house, as you might have guessed, is the product of multiple generations of magicians and their experiments.” He gestures to the corridor around him. “I've been tracing its growth, but the records are... sketchy. Most of the information should be in the library, but I don't have time to go through everything. So that will be your job.”

Julien's heart sinks. Research like that is something he could have done at the Academy. It's time-wasting work for lackeys. Maybe that's the only reason why Virgil chose him in the first place. *Ah, an Academy graduate. This is simple enough for him.* It was too much hope that Virgil would choose him based on merit alone.

“It's a tedious job,” Virgil continues, “but I hope you know that I appreciate it. However, I must ask you not to attempt any spells you come across, no matter how enticing it seems. The library does not discriminate against incompetency, and it simply isn't worth the risk.”

To Julien's intense satisfaction, Virgil levels his gaze at Sophia, who can only stare back, speechless. She draws herself up as tall as she can, and puts her hands on her hips.

“I'm quite aware of that, thanks.”

Her glare switches to Julien when she catches him looking at her. Well, what did she expect? He starts to narrow his eyes in return, but his gaze is distracted by something else, and he tilts his head to the left.

The corridor abruptly widens to make space for a set of double doors, a frosted glass window set into each one. Both doors are adorned with carved peacocks, and even though it's only wood, Julien can't help but believe that they're only half a breath from flying. He suppresses the urge to kneel down and run his fingers across the grain.

Virgil opens the door and walks in. The front of the library has been raised onto a dais, with several steps leading to a study area set against a circular window high enough to brush the ceiling. Rain patters against the glass. And the books! Stacks of them set against each other, or on shelves so tall Julien will need a ladder to reach them. Behind him, he hears Sophia gasp. It seems that even for the inner circle, this is impressive.

"This is where you'll be working," Virgil says. "I hope this is comfortable enough. You'll find all of the ledgers on the desk over there." He gestures to the study area. "The other assistants' notes should help you with where to start." He turns around, pauses, and then turns back. "Oh. There is one other thing. If either of you come across a mention of a necklace, please let me know, even if it seems trivial. It's a family heirloom, and I'm particularly invested in its return."

With that, he gives them both a tight nod and walks away, closing the door behind him. Great. So Julien is here to make petty notes and search for jewellery.

He wanted this. He still wants this. Even if the job is a disappointment, in the end, he'll still walk away a fully-fledged magician. He'll do whatever it takes to survive here. A year is not forever.

Shaking off his disappointment, he heads straight to the desk. Sophia, however, takes her time, examining the different carvings of demons and angels on the edges of the bookshelves.

“I think they’re supposed to tell a story,” she says.

He ignores her. He can’t afford to let anyone distract him, especially if he wants to prove his worth beyond research lackey. Even the beautiful library can’t distract him from the feeling that this is a consolation prize. Maybe if he proves himself, Virgil will move him to more exciting ventures.

While Sophia is still admiring the décor, Julien pulls out one of the chairs and sits down, facing away from the window – another distraction. There are reams of notes on the table, but as he flips through them, it’s clear that they’re ordered by date, with the book titles on the left hand side of each page. There are breaks where the handwriting and colour of ink changes, indicating a change of assistant. Some of the documents pull out to reveal blueprints of rooms and their tentative locations in the house.

“So how do we do this, then?”

He glances up to find Sophia next to him, too close for comfort. Her hair falls into her face, inches away from his. He pulls his chair aside to give him some breathing room.

“That remains to be seen,” he says.

He goes back to the notes. There doesn’t seem to be any indication of where the books are, or what order they’re in, save for the titles – and it doesn’t look like anything’s organised alphabetically. He folds his arms and frowns. God forbid magicians use Dewey decimal.

Sophia tilts her head to one side and then grabs the top sheet of paper. She leans past him to reach for it, and he ends up with a faceful of hair.

“Hey! What are you -”

“The numbers on the side.” She points to the little scribbles next to each title. “My God, they actually counted the books. If we take -” she ruffles through the sheath of paper “- *this* one, for example, it’s the fourth hundredth and thirty-second book. We’ve just got to figure out where they started counting from, and we should be able to continue easily.” She glances up. “Is there a card catalogue system here?”

Bewildered, he can only stutter, “I – I don’t know.”

Julien takes a closer look at the notes, and sure enough, there are little numbers along the edge. How had he failed to notice this? Sophia, meanwhile, is already back at the shelves, halfway up a stepladder. Still holding the top sheet of notes, she runs her fingers across the book spines, mouthing numbers to herself.

“This is a stupid system,” he says. “At the Academy -”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed yet,” she says, “but this isn’t the Academy, so I would keep quiet about things you don’t know. The system makes perfect sense to me.”

Julien fights down his anger as she plucks a book off the shelf and climbs back down the stepladder. When she sets it on the desk, her expression is one of determination.

She opens the book to the first page. “Let’s get started.”

Chapter Seven

The day goes by smoothly, if a little dull. Sophia pulls books from the shelves and makes notes of their titles and contents. Most of them have nothing to do with the house, but given that some of them are in languages she can't identify, it takes a while before she feels confident enough to set them aside. In the assistants' notes, there's nothing that suggests what's caused so many of them to expire prematurely.

Even though she's supposed to be working in tandem with Julien, both of them decided that they'd rather work independently. That way, Sophia doesn't have to spend so much time watching him scowl at her. She'd always heard that the Academy students were a fairly miserable bunch, but she'd never expected so much of that misery to be directed towards her. After all, what's she done? His irritation towards her would make more sense if they were on speaking terms, but even that seems like too much for him.

When the sun starts to slip down the horizon, she puts the books down. This assistantship may be important, but it's not worth losing sleep over. Since Virgil failed to assign them a leaving time, she's giving herself one.

"Are you done already?" Julien says, looking up from his own book.

She shrugs. "It's five."

He raises his eyebrows, but says nothing, thank God. As bad as all of the smirks and side-glances are, they're ignorable. She's not sure she can hold back if he says something antagonistic again.

As she gets ready to leave the library, she tucks her notebook under one arm and places her palm against the door, concentrating. There! She wondered if she'd been imagining it earlier when Virgil had escorted them through the house, but if she focuses, she can feel the threads of energy that run through the house. They're faint,

and waver in and out of her consciousness, but all of Virgil's insane pathways suddenly make sense.

Each thread of energy connects to a room in the house. Some are more tenuous than others – she can feel the weight of the library against her palm – but others are thin, barely there. A red thread twangs brightly amongst them, clashing with their muted colours. It's definitely not the way back to the assistant's quarters.

The smart thing to do – really, the only correct thing to do – would be to go back to her room and wait for dinner. The rest of her ignores this. The Dupont château is enormous; it would be a shame if she spent a year here without coming to grips with its massive interior. Besides, Weatheridge will be disappointed if she doesn't find *something* that explains why so many assistants die in here.

She picks out the red thread because it's the easiest to follow, and starts walking. Behind her, there's a slight breeze as the library disappears, a wall pulling up where the door had been with a harsh, grinding shriek. It's surprisingly difficult to keep track of the red thread; several times she has to stop and press her hands against the wall, eyes shut to aid her focus. Without some sort of physical contact, it's like grabbing at fistfuls of wind.

When she passes through the mirrored hallway, the back of her neck prickles with unease. Her reflection stares back at her, diminished under the weight of the gold and silver frames, and she picks up the pace a little. There's no need to be frightened of her own reflection, but nevertheless, she feels watched. Every time she moves, a hundred versions of herself move with her, jerky and fleeting as she moves in and out of the frame.

Climbing over the bathtub has already lost its novelty. The tiles are cold against her bare feet and she almost slips on the bathmat. She falls into the wall,

elbow connecting with the metal towel rail, and she swears viciously at it until the throbbing pain ebbs.

The next corridor she comes to feels like any other, but this is where the red thread has led her. The energy spikes against a wooden door that looks like it's seen better days. It's cracked open, and yellow light seeps towards her feet.

She pushes it open gently, and stares. Compared to the rest of the house, the attic is explosive chaos, thanks to the various objects that have made their way up here. An entire colony of Tiffany lamps live here, as do musical instruments, leather bound books, maps, and more. Several cracked mirrors lean against an empty wardrobe, painted blue and speckled white. Then she notices Virgil.

He's arranged a desk of sorts in the middle of the attic balanced across the roof on a board of plywood, with a large chest in front of it, presumably for sitting on. But instead of sitting at the desk, he lies flat on the roof beams, facing the rafters, surrounded by paperwork. One arm rests on top of his chest, moving up and down as he breathes, his head supported by a sagging pillow. From where Sophia stands, she can tell that he's sleeping, and that he hasn't noticed her, thank God.

It's an odd place to take a nap.

She tiptoes back, out of the door, and shuts it gently behind her. It's a nice, if slight reassurance that Virgil is not as inhuman as his initial appearance has made him out to be. But somehow, she doesn't think that he would appreciate her watching him sleep.

It takes longer than she'd anticipated to get back to the assistant's quarters, requiring more than one attempt. By the time she does reach the arched doorway, however, Julien has already got there ahead of her. He's in the middle of writing something at the table, but he looks up when she walks in.

“Where were you?” he asks, suspicion evident in his tone. “I thought you were coming back straight away.”

“I got lost.” An answer he can’t argue with.

His mouth purses. “We’re not supposed to wander.”

She ignores this. He can think whatever he wants, as long as he doesn’t get in her way.

“Did you find anything interesting?” she asks, mainly to distract him from her absence. “Anything about the necklace?”

“No.”

“I guess it’s the first day,” she says. “You can’t really expect to find much, especially since it’s not what you’re used to.”

Julien’s eyes narrow. “I know how to research.”

Immediately, Sophia realises that she’s upset him, although she’s not sure why. “*You* were the one who said it was a stupid system.”

“It’s not complicated.” His voice is like ice. “The Academy taught us to count, too. Incredible, I know.”

Before she can say that she didn’t mean it like that, he takes his letter and strides towards his room, shutting the door behind him. It doesn’t slam, but that only makes the action more aggressive. *She* would have slammed the door.

Instead, she stands in the living space, bewildered. What had just happened? She hadn’t tried to say anything offensive – even now, she struggles to figure out what had set him off – but he’d jumped on her words too quickly for her to ask what was wrong. Was it because she’d mentioned the Academy?

Everything she’s heard about the Academy graduates comes from other family friends who work in education – not that there are many of them. Academy alumni are

notorious for sticking to themselves, bordering on antagonistic when it comes to interacting with anyone outside of their group. She'd thought that maybe things would have been different between her and Julien; after all, they're going to be roommates for a year. They might as well accept each other's company. But either Julien has forgotten the memo, or he's sidestepped it entirely, preferring to make Sophia's life as difficult as possible.

He certainly seems to think she's useless. Between him and Virgil throughout the day, it was all she could do to keep quiet. If she didn't want the funding so much, she would have told them to shove it up their ass. Then she would have walked out, head held high, taken the train back home.

Instead, it looks like she's going to have to prove *yet again* that she's capable of doing whatever they expect of her. All with a smile on her face.

Chapter Eight

It's the weekend. A glorious, brilliant weekend drenched in sunshine and skies so blue it hurts to look up. Julien stands by the window in the kitchen, watching the village sprawl out beneath him. Bright sunlight strikes off the terracotta roofs. In the village, children will be by the beach for most of the day. Parents will take out their boats in the cooler evenings, or fish in the shallow waters. Cats lounge in the shade, dozy from the heat.

"Hello?" Sophia says.

He glances away from the view. "What?"

She puts her hands on her hips, holding a sheet of paper in one hand. Her shadow streaks across the kitchen table and over Virgil, who looks like a thin, watered-down version of himself in such a light space. After a month of tense silences, she hasn't spoken much, but Saturday morning energy seems to have renewed her vigour. Unfortunately.

"We can find all of this in the village, right?" she says, gesturing to the piece of paper. "The groceries."

"Yes," Virgil says. "I trust you can find your way back at a suitable hour."

"Is there anything else?" she asks.

He shakes his head. "That's all, thank you."

"When would you like us back?" Julien asks.

"It's your weekend." Virgil stares out towards the ocean. "You're free to do what you want."

For once, Julien leads the way, tumbling out of the front door first. No matter how much he wants this job, it's a relief to feel sunshine on his face after a week in such a dark house. It's also a chance to get away from Sophia.

“Hey, want to wait for me?” she says.

He doesn't slow down, but she catches up with him anyway, slowing to walk alongside him. He tunes her out and focuses on the village below. Last night, after a particularly frustrating afternoon in the library, he'd tossed and turned in his bed, imagining what it would be like if Virgil hadn't hired her. He'd have the assistant's quarters to himself, and the uncomfortable mealtime behaviour would evaporate. He'd be able to relax every once in a while.

Sophia has made all of this impossible. She's constantly in the living area, or too close by for comfort. She's kept her distance, probably because she thinks she'll catch some inferior mage disease from him. Or maybe he's just not high enough in the social circles for her to acknowledge him as an equal. Well, he doesn't need a Bridgeton to validate him. He has the job.

“You can give me the list now,” he says.

She frowns. “Why? I can get it.”

“No, I'll do it.”

He holds his hand out for the list and waits, but she doesn't reach for it in her pocket. Instead, she tilts her head to look at him, squinting against the sunlight. She isn't smiling.

"I am perfectly capable of grocery shopping."

"Are you? Don't you have servants to do that? I thought you had servants to do everything for you."

She crushes the grocery list in her hand, jaw set. “Funnily enough, no.”

They stand there for a moment, and then Julien sighs. Fine. If she messes it up, then it's her responsibility. He shrugs and lets his hand fall.

The rest of the walk is in silence. It's uncomfortable, and more than once, Julien debates walking on ahead. He glances at Sophia, but she won't look at him. Her back is rigid, and although she swings her arms, her mouth is set in a thin line.

When they reach the bottom of the hill, Julien's neck is sweaty from the midday heat. He wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. With the new income from Virgil, he has change to spare, and an icy lemonade sounds like perfection.

"I guess I'll see you back at the house, then," he says, turning to Sophia.

"Whatever."

He takes off down the main street and takes an arbitrary right, increasing his pace so that Sophia falls behind him. Gulls shriek overhead, and when he turns right again, he almost trips over the cobblestoned road. The houses on either side are whitewashed, but clematis trails across them and into their gutters, sprouting white and purple flowers that strew petals on the ground.

For a while, Julien wanders the streets, forgetting his thirst. Other than a slight discomfort, he loses track of the time, instead pushing further into the tiny cobbled alleyways. Save for the sound of the breeze and distant gulls, he doesn't hear anyone.

As he walks, Sophia keeps coming up in his thoughts, an unwanted presence that pulls at whatever guilt he might have over the morning's events. It was only grocery shopping. He could have been kinder, but every time he sees her, something twists in his stomach and words spill out regardless of his intentions.

She's just so *annoying*. She may be competent at research, but in every other aspect, she fails miserably. It's painful to watch her try and initiate conversation with Virgil, whose discomfort is palpable at every encounter, and that's not even touching on her attitude to the assistantship. She's inner circle, for God's sake – none of this should be new to her.

A noise startles him and he jumps out of his reverie. It's only a dog barking somewhere. He runs his tongue over his lips, which sting. He should go back to the main square and get a drink, even at the risk of running into Sophia.

He turns to go, but movement catches his eye and he twists around again. A ragged curtain flaps in the open window of a building, clearly abandoned. It's set at the end of the street, distant from the picturesque cottages of earlier in its shaggy mess of weeds and ivy. Julien stops and looks at it. And keeps looking.

No one's been in there for ages. It probably doesn't belong to anyone, and surely it wouldn't hurt to have a closer look inside. He takes another step forward. There's something mesmerising about its façade, although he couldn't say what. It's not another cottage, but what else could it be?

He glances around. There's no one here. He can take a look. It won't hurt.

With another cursory look over his shoulder, he slips into the shadow of the open door. The entrance is cooler than outside, and his feet click against the tiled floor. He squints into the darkness, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

Places like this have always fascinated him. In the city, it's harder to go exploring; any abandoned buildings are usually taken for shady deals. He's been in the catacombs with friends, of course, but only for illicit parties and good music. Despite this, he could never quite get his friends to go exploring for its own sake. Not like this.

He stands in a small lobby with a ticket desk at the front. The glass pane is missing, and shards of glass scatter across the floor like beautiful knives. He's careful to avoid them as he wanders through. God, if only he had a camera.

Several narrow corridors lead off to the right and left, with ghostly marks on the wall where there might have been signs or posters. He chooses one that doesn't

reek of rainwater and keeps going, one hand on the wall to guide him. He almost trips over a couple of stars, but he ventures downward anyway, testing each step with his weight.

The corridor abruptly flattens out into a continuous circle, almost pitch black. Without equipment, anyone else would have to abandon the exploration, but Julien has his own methods. He pulls out one of several glass marbles in his pocket and holds it between his forefinger and thumb. It bursts into light and he holds it away from him, waiting for his eyes to adjust to its brilliance. It's an easy spell – the first one taught at the Academy – but as a glass mage, he's never without a few marbles on hand.

When he can finally see, he notices several archways set at equal intervals along the interior wall. Each one is boarded up, but chinks of light escape through the cracks. Marble in hand, he reaches the end of the corridor to find that one of the archways has not been entirely boarded up, leaving a space big enough for one person to squeeze through.

What's more – someone is speaking. Julien leans towards the sound, straining to catch the words. The boards buckle under his weight.

“... I'll deliver all; and promise you calm seas, auspicious gales, and sail so expeditious that shall catch your royal fleet far off. My -”

The board snaps.

Julien falls through, his clothes snagging on splintered wood. He tumbles forward and lands hard on his knees, the marble flying out of his hand. It disappears between a row of chairs, no longer a source of light. A cloud of dust whirls up around him. He gets up, wincing, and brushes himself down.

This is a theatre. He stands at the top of the stalls, gazing down at a stage. Sunshine pours onto it from a rip in the roof like a spotlight, highlighting the foliage in the orchestra pit. One shredded burgundy curtain hangs precariously, while the other drapes across stage left.

And there is a woman, standing at the edge of the stage, her mouth open in surprise.

She puts her hands on her hips. “Who the hell are you?”

Chapter Nine

At the edge of the main square, Sophia looks at the list again. All basic ingredients – apart from the sleeping pills – and easy enough to find. Julien is an ass if he thinks she can't come back with these.

The main square bursts with life. There are stalls dedicated to a variety of cheese, ranging from pale yellow to those covered with bright red wax, while other stalls buckle under the weight of leafy vegetables crusted with soil. People move from stall to stall with large plastic bags that get progressively fuller as they continue. The stench of fish and salted meat is not wholly appetising, but nevertheless, there's something invigorating about so many smells and sounds crammed into one place.

All of the stalls are fairly busy, so Sophia waits in line after line, clutching the list in one hand. Julien is definitely an ass. It astounds her that someone who barely knows her could be so unpleasant in such a short space of time. Did she kill his cat in a past life? Sometimes, she doesn't need to do anything but walk into a room for him to scowl at her and stomp off.

She's still thinking about Julien when she reaches the front of the queue for vegetables. The man behind the counter looks up and raises his eyebrows.

"You're new," he says. "Around here, that is."

Of course. The village is so small that any new face probably sticks out. She nods and holds out her hand, which the man shakes.

"I'm Sophia," she says. "I just got here a week ago."

"Oh, really? We don't get many visitors."

"Yeah, I'm actually staying at the Dupont château."

She gestures to the hill behind her. Even with all of this terrific sunlight, the house is still cast in shadow from the cliffs overhead.

The man stops smiling. “You work for the Duponts.”

“Yeah. Is something wrong?”

He doesn’t speak. Instead, he passes over the vegetables without another word, and waits with suspicion etched on his features while Sophia counts out the money. She opens her mouth to demand an explanation, but he turns straight to the next customer, leaving her standing there.

It happens again at the fish stall, so when she goes to ask for directions to the bakery, she makes noncommittal noises at the questions. She certainly doesn’t get the same dirty look, but when she comes back next week, and the week after, they’ll eventually twig that something’s up.

Aside from the sleeping pills, the last thing is the bakery. She finds it off the main square, down an alleyway close to the ocean. She can hear it, even if it’s blocked off by another row of houses.

She stares at the ground, but even with her eyes closed, the ocean sounds different. So this is what it’s going to be like for the next year. The village doesn’t like her, Julien *really* doesn’t like her, and Virgil’s practically a ghost in his own house. At this point, she’s better off talking to brick walls instead of people.

“Hey, are you coming in or what?”

Her gaze flicks upwards, to the open door of the bakery. A young man stands in the doorway, an apron around his waist. There’s flour on his jeans.

“Yeah, sure.”

She shifts the bags over to her other hand and follows the man inside. The warmth inside the shop is dizzying, and everything smells like fresh bread and salt. Stacks of loaves sit by the window, and machine whirr in the background.

“What do you want?”

“Just...” She checks the list. “Rye. Thanks.”

“So you’re working at the Dupont château, huh.”

Sophia’s gaze snaps back to the young man’s. “How do you know that?”

“The guy up there is the only one who orders it,” He smiles. “You’re new. It’s an easy guess.”

“And you’re not worried that you’ll burst into flame if you speak to me?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “Nope.”

He gestures to a chair behind the counter and she slumps down, setting her bags on the floor. Her shoulders ache after lugging around food for an hour. She stretches and yawns.

“Oh man, I needed that.” She pushes her hair out of her eyes and smiles, the first real pleasure she’s felt all week. “I’m Sophia.”

“Rhys. Nice to meet you.” He hesitates. “You’re the first assistant to introduce yourself.”

“You mean the first assistant to behave like a human? I know. There are two of us up there.”

Rhys drags a chair across the room and sits opposite her, leaning against the wall. He folds his arms across his chest.

"So tell me straight," he says. "Is the Dupont house haunted? I heard that there's this one guy up there all alone, like some sad lunatic or something."

Sophia grins. "No ghosts. No lunatics. Just Virgil Dupont."

She tries to think back to the only other time she's met him - as a little boy not much older than twelve, during some tedious dinner party. She doesn't remember him as a brooding recluse. That award had gone to James Kent, who had lurked under the

table for most of the evening, despite repeated attempts to pull him out. Virgil had been quiet, that's all, standing behind his parents until they moved away from him.

Rhys watches her with curiosity, his eyes scrunched slightly at the corners. His white blond hair is tied back in a short ponytail at the nape of his neck, and at least three piercings glint off his ear. He catches her looking and tugs on his earlobe.

"Undercover rock star?" she suggests.

He looks sheepish. "Not even a little bit."

They chat for a little while, going back and forth over little details. Rhys' mother is Welsh, but his father is French and village-born. He has a twin sister. He makes an excellent ciabatta.

In return, Sophia listens, avoiding questions about her family with noncommittal shrugs. She can't even begin to imagine the kind of trouble she'd get into if she accidentally revealed the magical community. Instead, she steers the conversation towards his interests, and the history of the village.

Eventually, Rhys stands up and stretches. His fingertips brush the low ceiling.

"Have you seen the docks yet?" he asks.

Sophia shakes her head. "No. I've been kind of busy grocery shopping today."

All because Julien thinks she's incompetent. She would have quite happily given him all the chores to do, but since he'd behaved like a jackass, she'd taken it on herself. He's probably off somewhere right now, enjoying the freedom that's supposed to be hers. Well, next time it's all his.

"Leave the bags here," he says. "I'll take you."

But she shakes her head, even though she's dying to see the ocean. She has a job to do, and she'll be damned if she's going to give Julien any satisfaction at her wrongdoing.

“I can’t,” she says. “Another time, though. Tomorrow?”

Rhys smiles. “Tomorrow.”

Chapter Ten

The woman repeats the question again. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

She sits down and swings her legs over the edge of the stage, her feet dangling into the abyss of the orchestral pit. Julien's head aches from the fall, as do his palms and knees, but he ignores the stinging and the feel of blood rolling down his wrist. He glances over his shoulder at the half-boarded up archway behind him. Unless he wants an armful of splinters, there's no way he can get back through there.

"Hey! I'm talking to you."

He turns back, startled. "I - I didn't realise anyone else was here. I'm sorry. I should go," he adds, immediately forgetting about the toothed boards.

The headache intensifies to an edged buzzing that beats in syncopation with the panic in his chest. If Virgil finds out about this - Julien could lose his job - he could lose everything - breaking in, trespassing - not how an assistant should behave -

Oh God. Oh God oh God oh God.

"Don't go that way," the woman says. "You'll really hurt yourself. Again." She shuffles around the stage, towards the safer ground at the bottom of the stalls. "You're bleeding."

In his fog of anxiety, Julien tries to take deep breaths, feeling the pain wash over him with each heartbeat. The stinging helps to clear some of the panic, although it does nothing to reduce the tightness in his chest. He has to stay calm. He has to work this out.

"Are you okay? You look like you're about to have an aneurysm."

"I'm fine," he says. "I'm really sorry. I mean it. I'll leave, I swear."

The woman slips off the stage into the aisle, her feet dislodging dust and debris. Her dress hikes around her thighs and she pulls it down before moving towards Julien.

"You're really bleeding. Come here," she says.

"No, no, I'll leave."

He takes a step backwards and finds himself as close to the boards as he can without being pricked by errant chunks of wood. Curse him and his stupidity. He knows better than to pull shit like this, especially now that he isn't a teenager. He's too old to be doing something so risky.

"It's okay if you stay. I was just surprised, that's all," the woman says.

"Are you sure?" Julien asks.

His heart still feels too fast, hammering against his ribcage so loudly that it echoes in his ears. He takes in another deep breath and holds it, counting to ten before he releases. The woman doesn't look mad anymore, only curious. He wonders how much of his fear is showing. God, he must look like an idiot. He bites his lip so hard that he breaks skin and tastes coppery blood.

"I'm sure," the woman says. "Now come here so I can see the damage." When he doesn't move, she adds, "I've taken first aid classes. I can help."

He forces himself to take one step forward, and then another, going down the stairs to meet her at the bottom. A bead of blood rolls off his elbow and spatters his jeans.

The woman at the bottom of the stairs frowns when she sees his palms. "Jesus, you really did a number on yourself. I think you'll live, though. There's a first aid kit in the green room." She goes to shake his hand, but stops herself. "Better not," she says, smiling. "Anyway, I'm Mira. You must be new around here."

"I'm Julien," he says. "I just started working for Mr Dupont."

Mira is quiet for a minute before she speaks again. "That guy up on the hill?"

"That's him. Why?"

"Just curious," she says. "Let's get you patched up."

Mira leads Julien along the edge of the stage, pointing out shards of glass and debris scattered across what must have once been a red carpet. She sweeps aside a ragged curtain, revealing a doorway that looks significantly sturdier than anything else he's come across in the building.

"I've fixed up the green room," she says, "but I'd be careful of everything else. This whole building could fall at any moment."

"Huh."

They go down a short brick corridor, and then through another door, freshly painted compared to the rest of the building. Someone, presumably Mira, has painted *Green Room* in crooked white letters. Inside, the room is small, but cosy, with sagging furniture and a scuffed coffee table. There is a row of cupboards against the back wall, and another door with *Exit* barely visible underneath the grime.

"Sit," Mira says.

She opens one of the cupboards and pulls out a first aid kit, the blue plastic jarring against the muted colours of the room. Julien finds a couch that looks like it can support his weight and slumps into it. He was going to go out today and explore, not put himself in injury's path. His wrists are unpleasantly sticky, streaked with blood.

"It's not as bad as it looks," she says, catching his gaze. "It's a deep graze, though." She pulls out disinfectant wipes. "This is going to hurt."

Pain fizzes through his wrist, but it recedes quickly enough. Mira does the same thing to his other hand, dislodging the black dirt particles before she slaps on a plaster. She repacks the kit and hands him another wipe to get rid of the blood streaks.

"Why do you have all of this here?" he asks.

"There are so many hazards in this building, I don't even know where to begin." She tilts her head upwards and points at a cross-shaped scar. "I fell through the floor once. It's sheer bloody luck that I didn't break any bones." She focuses on Julien again. "So tell me, how did you end up here?"

"I was curious," he confesses.

A little weight lifts from his shoulders. Curiosity never feels like a good enough reason to do something as stupid as this, but he finds that he doesn't want to lie to Mira.

"This place used to belong to the Duponts," she says, "but they haven't used it in generations. No one comes here anymore. It's just me. Sometimes my brother comes, too." She smiles at Julien. "And now you."

They continue to chat, exchanging stories as best as they can, although Julien leaves out anything relating to magic. They talk for so long that by the time he checks his watch, it's already well past mid-afternoon. If he doesn't get up and start the trek back, he might be walking in the dark. He stands up and stretches.

"I'm sorry, but I've got to go," he says. "Thank you for everything."

"Sure. Let me show you the easy way out."

She opens the door marked *Exit* and sunlight pours through it. Julien shields his eyes, waiting for them to adjust; everything is white.

"You should come back again," Mira says. "I'm usually here on the weekends. It was nice to have company."

Julien smiles. "I'd like that. I really would."

"Good!"

He gives her one last wave, and then takes off, back towards the Dupont house.

Chapter Eleven

Sophia knocks on the door of the Dupont house, tired and sunburnt, but with everything she needs, including the sleeping pills. Rhys has promised her a tour of the town tomorrow, and there is still a warm glow in the bottom of her chest from the kindness of his offer. It subsides a little, however, when Virgil answers the door, his eyes widening ever so slightly when he sees the bag of groceries she's carrying.

"I thought Julien would -" He stops himself. "Never mind. Come in."

Sophia's mouth twists. He thought Julien would what, get all the groceries because she's incapable of doing anything right? Because *getting bread* is too difficult? She even remembered the sleeping pills - not that it's a noteworthy achievement.

As they walk to the kitchen, they pass through the mirrored hallway again, as well as the library, opening a side door that leads into a reading room. It's so dark that Virgil has to open the curtains just to see where he's going. Unlike the atrium, the furniture in here is worn and scuffed, the colour dulled by age. The books here also show signs of disuse; Sophia can't even read the titles for the dust that's accumulated over time.

Virgil stops and looks around. Then he turns to her.

"Did you know this was here?" he asks.

It's such a bizarre question that it takes her a moment to respond. This is *his* house.

"No. Did you?"

He shakes his head. "No."

Sophia watches him wander around the room, brushing the books' spines free of dust with his fingertips. Each bookshelf contains elaborate carvings of vines and

flowers, twisting up and down the edges. Sophia gets closer, and finds that someone has scratched a pair of initials amongst the leaves. *E. D.* and *E. F.* nestle at the edge of a rose, easy to miss at a glance.

"This is incredible," Virgil says. "Some of these are diaries." He picks one up and flips to the first page. "This was my great-grandfather's."

"Wow."

Sophia comes round for a closer look, and her elbow brushes against Virgil. She steps back, but not before his eyes meet hers. He mumbles an apology and closes the diary again.

"Anyway," Sophia says, clearing her throat. "Are we going to the kitchen, or what?"

She doesn't add that she doesn't need his help to get there. Her nightly wanderings have helped her figure out the way the house works, but until he gives her the okay, it's probably best to feign incomprehension.

"Oh - er, yes, right."

"We can also stay here for a little longer, if you'd like," she says.

"No, no, it's fine. I'll come back later."

She puts her hand on his shoulder. "It's okay. I don't mind."

The action is supposed to be comforting, but Virgil only stares at her until she removes her hand again. Her neck grows hot and she looks away. She shouldn't have touched him at all; if Julien were here, she wouldn't have done it. It is so easy to forget that the rules of the circle have never quite touched her own household, but here, it's never been more apparent. Next time, she'll remember.

"If you don't mind, then. Just for a while."

She turns in time to catch the last of a smile as he moves back to the bookshelves. He must really enjoy his research; Sophia can't think of anything else that would prompt such an emotional response. After a month of glum expressions and a withdrawn demeanour, Virgil is smiling - actually *smiling*. Where are the banners? The confetti?

While he starts pulling out books, Sophia finds herself drawn to the dusty tables and reading chairs, unused for so long. There are several books stacked on one of the tables, and one of them lies open on the table, spine cracked. It will probably never close again. There are even a couple of marbles, presumably for lighting when it got dark. It's as if the reader got up for a walk and never came back.

"No electricity," she notes.

Virgil glances up from his activity. "You're right. This room has been missing for a while, I think."

His words send chills up her spine, and suddenly the shadows seem to grow from the corners of the room. Did the reader forget about their book, or did the house swallow the room instead? The book is cracked open three quarters of the way through. What a shame to never finish it. Sophia blows on the open pages and a cloud of dust whirls up around her. She slips the receipt from the bakery into the book and folds it shut. She tucks it in amongst the groceries; after all, a book that's sat untreated for so long will probably be okay for a little longer amongst greenery.

"So rooms often disappear like this?"

Virgil turns back to her, clutching an armful of books. "Hm? Oh, yes. It happens from time to time, if the house perceives an extreme disturbance."

This whole time, she's chalked up the house as part of the eccentric bells and whistles charade that the Dupont family maintains. It isn't supposed to have a

personality. As if the house can read her thoughts, something in the room gurgles and the hairs on the back of her neck rise. She's never believed in ghosts, and she's not about to start now.

Virgil, noting her expression, says, "This house is saturated in magic. It was going to have an effect sometime." He looks past her, towards the half-concealed window. "It's impossible to say how big this house really is. It extends under the cliff, you know. It's where the servants' quarters used to be."

Sophia follows his gaze to the window, where bright yellow and blue wildflowers grow in abundance. He's never spoken to her like this before, like he's a person ready to have a conversation. She's suddenly more than grateful for Julien's absence; she doesn't doubt that if Julien were here, they would have already moved on to the kitchen, away from this quiet preservation of history.

"We really should leave," Virgil says, twisting his mouth into a pained expression. "There are groceries in there that should go in the fridge."

For a moment, Sophia is tempted to tell him to stay, that she can take the groceries into the kitchen, but instead, she picks up the bag with her book nestled inside, and lets it settle in the crook of her elbow.

"Do you want me to help you with some of those books?" she asks.

"Please."

He passes her several and she tucks them under her other arm. Despite his height, Virgil seems dwarfed by the books around him. His stack of books fits neatly underneath his chin, and she wonders how many of those he intends to get through. One hand supporting the books, his other curls itself around the door handle and twists.

"Wait," he says, pausing with one foot in the hallway. "Should we close the curtains?"

Sophia looks at the dust motes swirling in the light, at the floorboards sticky with darkness, and shakes her head with a smile. Then she follows him out of the room, pulling the door shut with her foot.

When they reach the kitchen, Virgil sets the books on the table and retrieves a damp cloth from underneath the kitchen sink. He wipes them free of dust, careful not to scrub off the gold and silver embossing that detail many of the covers. Sophia puts the groceries away as best as she can, even though she's pretty sure that Virgil will go through and reorganise afterwards.

"I've finished putting everything away," she says.

Except for one last thing. She turns to look at him in the half-light, where shadows dapple his shoulders. She slides over the sleeping pills on the table next to the books, and he gives her a curious glance, as if expecting her to question him on it.

A knock at the front of the door startles them both and Virgil gets up, almost knocking the pills off the table. He goes to answer the door, but Sophia stays where she is, watching the boats on the ocean.

When Julien comes back, he stiffens at the sight of her. Maybe he'd hoped that she'd decided to get back on the train home. Too bad for him.

"You managed to get everything, then?" he asks.

It sounds like more of a challenge than a question. She straightens her shoulders, trying to stay calm.

"Yes. I did."

"Thank you," Virgil says. "I appreciate it."

She's never heard *thank you* sound so apologetic before. She shrugs.

“It was no big deal.” She catches sight of Julien’s hands. “What happened to you?”

His ears redden. “Nothing. I fell.”

Whatever. She doesn’t care where he’s been; if he wants to lie, he can go right ahead. She turns to Virgil, all traces of her good mood gone.

“If it’s okay with you, I’m going to eat in the quarters. It’s been a long day.”

And before he can agree to it, before he can make yet another judgement call on her part, she leaves.

Interlude II

Julien winces as he peels off the plasters to wash his wounds in the bathroom sink. Even though Mira did her best, there are still bits of grit embedded in his hand. He bites his lip as he runs his hands under the cold tap water, the scrapes stinging fiercely. His hand sings with pain, and does not ebb when he shakes them dry, not wanting to bloody the towel.

He should have asked to see her again. He could go back to the theatre tomorrow, but part of him shies away from the idea. What if he goes again, and Mira isn't there? Or worse, he could turn up, but she could demand that he leave, and he would have no choice but to turn around and head back.

Back to this house. Back to Virgil, and Sophia.

His hands curl around the edge of the sink before the agony reminds him that he shouldn't hold on to anything too tightly. While he was out, Sophia and Virgil were in the house, most likely reminiscing about their shared family experiences together. Where they went on their pony rides, how they ate with Daddy's silver cutlery and Mummy's bone china while discussing their next yacht trip. As much as he tries, he'll never be part of that conversation, and although he's not even sure he wants to, it still hurts.

Well, let them have their circle nonsense. Just as long as Sophia doesn't get in his way.

Sophia's room is dark, save for the moonlight that comes in through the window, spilling across her bed. She grabs several marbles from her bedside table drawer and weighs them in the palm of her hand, watching them glow brighter until

they are almost too brilliant to look at. If a mage could choose their specialisation, she would have chosen glass magic to work with.

The book from the reading room lays spread out on her bed, open at the page where she found it. She places the marbles on the duvet, where they illuminate line after line of handwritten text. Flipping to the first page, she notes a name, written in faded blue script. *Étienne Dupont*. And underneath, in a smaller, more cramped hand, *Elodie Lenoire*, accompanied by a small rose.

She turns the first page over, and starts to read.

17th June 1901

Today, I write with great sorrow. Guillaume has finally passed on, leaving me the sole heir of the house. It is so quiet.

Sophia holds one of the marbles up against the ink scrawl, squinting at the cursive. What on earth has she picked up?

Another sleepless night. Another moon, arcing slowly over the house, pinwheeling amongst the stars. Virgil stares up at his ceiling, which is dominated by a series of panels supposedly painted by his great-grandfather, Étienne Dupont. His mother explained the story to him on more than one occasion. *It's Zémire et Azor*. *See, there's Sander plucking the rose*, she would say, tracing the story with her finger in the air. There are roses in several other panels, too, and the outline of a ship, but the paintings have faded over time and Virgil no longer remembers how the rest of it is supposed to go.

His thoughts keep coming back to the afternoon with Sophia. He'd never seen the reading room before, but suddenly with her, it's as if the rest of the house has opened up, silently expanding its walls to include all of the possibilities that had died

along with his ancestors. He closes his eyes and listens to the various threads of magic in the house, noting a new, thin line that undoubtedly connects him to the reading room.

One day, he'll go back with her. Maybe he'll find something else that he's been missing all along.

Afterword

I think it's impossible to write genre fiction in an academic environment without acknowledging its tussle with literary fiction. While the two different categories seem to be at odds with one another, the line between them is remarkably difficult to draw. Most authors baulk against the label, preferring to use 'speculative fiction' as a more abstract category, when it really serves as an umbrella term for many different genres – the 'genre fiction' label without the stigma. In a review of his latest book, *The Buried Giant*, Kazuo Ishiguro asked: "Will [readers] understand what I'm trying to do, or will they be prejudiced against the surface elements? Are they going to say this is a fantasy?" (Alter, n.p.), even though *The Buried Giant* is set in Arthurian England, with dragons, ogres, pixies and more – all traditional elements of fantasy. Ishiguro is a critically acclaimed novelist, but his anxieties suggest that by categorising his novel as fantasy, it removes its literary merits and undermines the philosophical questions with which the novel attempts to engage. He's not the only well-known author to have qualms about genre fiction, either: Margaret Atwood has repeatedly labelled the *MaddAddam* trilogy as speculative fiction, rather than sci-fi; China Miéville calls his fiction 'weird fiction'; and although David Mitchell categorises his own work as genre, many of his critics avoid the term.

Why do such well-established authors fear being labelled as genre fiction? Do they worry that genre implies that their works are limited or derivative, attached to a series of tropes and clichés, unable to pose interesting questions? A common argument is that good fiction transcends the limitations of genre, thereby removing the label, but that seems to imply that literary fiction has no tropes, when there are entire Twitter accounts dedicated to mocking these clichés. 'Guy In Your MFA' lists examples such as "idea: a man exercising on a treadmill who is also going nowhere in

life”, “A broken clock = symbolism”, and “You know my protagonist is deep and tortured because he’s having an affair” (Schwartz, n.p.). Perhaps one of the reasons why these tropes are not traditionally recognised is that they all follow a white male-centric agenda, the dominant narrative in the literary canon. On the other hand, genre fiction is more likely to explore other viewpoints, framing them outside reality in order to critically examine their representation in society. I submit, therefore, that bad genre fiction *and* literary fiction remains confined by its derivative nature. Equally, good genre fiction has the same requirements as good literary fiction: to synthesise different elements of the genre, constructing something new and interesting. Rejecting the genre fiction label shouldn’t be necessary to prove the writing’s worth.

Certainly, my biggest influence, *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern, embraces its genres. Set over several decades in the 19th Century, the novel focuses on a magical circus, which acts as the stage for a duel between two magicians, the rules of which are undisclosed. The story’s point of view trades between the two magicians, Celia and Marco, but tends to lean towards Celia, who travels with the circus. While critics panned the plot, most of the novel’s charm comes from its descriptions of the circus itself; each tent is spectacularly unique and play different parts throughout the story. Crucially, the story shows an interesting synthesis of genre, ranging from historical drama to fantasy to romance, as well as walking the boundary between young adult and adult fiction in a way that makes it difficult to characterise beyond the umbrella of genre fiction.

I admired many of these aspects, and wanted to incorporate them into my own writing, though I found many of them challenging, particularly the issue of synthesis. Originally, I had based my thesis around the fairy-tale of *Beauty and the Beast*, but the structure proved too rigid to navigate successfully, and in the end, I had to rewrite

most of it. *The Night Circus*' blend of genre made me consider the kind of story I wanted to tell, and helped me to reimagine a plot less constricted by genre conventions. It made me realise that I could strip away most of the elements of *Beauty and the Beast* without losing important themes, like loneliness and entrapment, so that even though my thesis no longer reads as an adaptation of the fairy-tale, it hopefully still brings with it all of the details that I value the most.

I also wanted to deal with issues like gender and class in a way that seemed organic, so to look at this closely, I reread *The Raven Boys* series by Maggie Stiefvater, which deals with these social problems masterfully through what is *not* said out loud. While the characters' external goal is to find Glendower, an ancient Welsh king supposedly asleep in Virginia, the majority of the novels remain invested in the characters' own personal growth and concerns about what it means to not have enough money, or how to be aware of financial and gender privilege. Most of the noticeable comments on the class divide come from characters' interior thoughts, and the way they each interpret the same scenario differently. Although my intention was to reveal class tensions mostly through Sophia and Julien's separate point of views, several people noted that it made Sophia read flat as a character, and that there needed to be more audible conflict between the two.

Most of all, I wanted to write a narrative within a confined setting – something I've never done before. Alongside *The Night Circus*, I read *The Miniaturist* by Jessie Burton, which takes place almost exclusively in the house of Johannes Brant. The house itself is almost antagonistic, a secondary character to give atmosphere to the events over the course of the novel. Placing the bulk of my story into a single house forced me to focus on personal interactions and interiority to develop the characters, rather than an external threat. It also made me to pay closer attention to detail, as

every room in the house has to have different meanings to the different characters; for example, Sophia sees the assistants' quarters as a stifling reminder of her lack of choice, whereas for Julien, it's a sign that he's one step closer to making it.

The other reason I chose to place all of the characters in such a small setting is that I wanted to explore what it means to live somewhere for so long. As someone who's never lived in the same place for more than four years, I find the idea of living in the same area for so long horribly depressing, and I wanted to take that feeling to the extreme. What if it was impossible to escape? Putting multiple characters under the same roof also means that the loneliness they each experience isn't physical, but comes from a deeper absence, something that I found extremely hard to convey.

Although genre fiction currently enjoys attention through its popular counterparts like the television adaptation of *Game of Thrones* and films like *The Hunger Games*, many of these stories still focus on a white male narrative, or have problematic issues with race and gender – all of which have nothing to do with its relation to the sphere of literary fiction. *Game of Thrones* has been criticised for its gratuitous use of rape scenes as plot devices, especially given that most of the scenes seem to cater towards male audiences. Likewise, the film adaptation of *The Hunger Games* has had issues with its whitewashing and romanticisation of the Capitol's behaviour, a significant departure from the books' more traditionally dystopian nature. Even then, not everyone is enjoying the slight increase in diversity; the recent scandals surrounding the Hugo Awards are a direct backlash to the perceived increase in left-wing politics and diverse narratives: “Observe the list of things that Torgeson [leader of the Sad Puppies slate] does not want in his science fiction: racial prejudice and exploitation, sexism and the oppression of women, gay and transgender issues, the evils of capitalism and the despotism of the wealthy” (Sandifer, n.p.).

Having noted all of this, I think it's important that I continue to write genre fiction because I want to show that it has worth and importance both within its own category as well as alongside literary fiction. As shown above, there are difficult and complex conversations happening within genre fiction that have everything to do with how we relate to the world around us; it's hardly a stretch to go from the oppressive nature of the Capitol in *The Hunger Games* to the recent protests against police in Ferguson, New York City, and Baltimore, and how we interpret that on both a national and personal level. Even though I've chosen to frame my thesis very differently than the examples above, I have still attempted to explore and further discussions based around financial and gender privilege, and how we, as individuals, choose to acknowledge it.

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