



Chapter 1
THE
YURT

THE LAST THING Orion said to me, the absolute bastard, was *El, I love you so much.*

And then he shoved me backwards through the gates of the Scholomance and I landed thump on my back in paradise, the soft grassy clearing in Wales that I'd last seen four years ago, ash trees in full green leaf and sunlight dappling through them, and *Mum*, Mum right there waiting for me. Her arms were full of flowers: poppies, for rest; anemones, for overcoming; moonwort, for forgetfulness; morning glories, for the dawn of a new day. A welcome-home bouquet for a trauma victim, meant to ease horror out of my mind and make room for healing and for rest, and as she reached to help me, I heaved myself up howling, "*Orion!*" and sent the whole thing scattering before me.

A few months—aeons—ago, while we'd still been in the midst of our frantic obstacle-course runs, an enclaver from Milan had given me a translocation spell in Latin, the rare kind that you can cast on yourself without splitting yourself into bits. The idea was that I'd be able to use it to hop around

from one place to another in the graduation hall—all the better to save people like enclavers from Milan, which is why she'd handed me a spell worth five years of mana for free. You couldn't normally use it to go long distances, but time was more or less the same thing as space, and I'd been in the Scholomance ten seconds before. I had the hall visualized as crisp and clear as an architectural drawing, complete with the horrific mass of Patience and the horde of maleficaria behind it, boiling its way towards us. I was placing myself at the gates, right back where I had been when Orion had given me that final shove.

But the spell didn't want to be cast, putting up resistance like warning signs across the way: dead end, road washed out ahead. I forced it through anyway, throwing mana at it, and the casting rebounded in my face and knocked me down like I'd run straight into a concrete wall. So I got back up and tried the exact same spell again, only to get pasted flat a second time.

My head was ringing bells and noise. I crawled back to my feet. Mum was helping me up, but she was also holding me back, saying something to me, trying to slow me down, but I only snarled at her, "*Patience was coming right at him!*" and her hands went slack, sliding off me with her own remembered horror.

It had already been two minutes since I'd been dumped out; two minutes was forever in the graduation hall, even before I'd packed it full of all the monsters in the world. But the interruption did stop me just banging my head against the gates repeatedly. I spent a moment thinking, and then I tried to use a summoning to get Orion out, instead.

Most people can't summon anything larger or with more willpower than a hair bobble. But the many summoning spells I've unwillingly collected over the years are all intended

to bring me one or more hapless screaming victims, presumably to go into the sacrificial pit I've incomprehensibly neglected to set up. I had a dozen varieties, and one of them that let you scry someone through a reflective surface and pull them out.

It's especially effective if you have a gigantic cursed mirror of doom to use. Sadly I'd left mine hanging on the wall of my dorm room. But I ran around the clearing and found a small puddle of water between two tree roots. That wouldn't have been good enough ordinarily, but I had endless mana flowing into me, the supply line from graduation still open. I threw power behind the spell and forced the muddy puddle smooth as glass and staring down at it called, "Orion! *Orion Lake!* I call you in the—" I took a quick glance up at the first sunlight and sky I'd seen in four years of longing for them, and the only thing I could feel was desperate frustration that it wasn't dawn or noon or midnight or anything helpful, "—waxing hours of the light, to come to me from the dark-shadowed halls, heeding my word alone," which would very likely mean he'd be under a spell of obedience when he got here, but I'd worry about that *later*, later after he was *here*—

The spell did go through this time, and the water churned into a cloud of silver-black that slowly and grudgingly served up a ghostly image that might have been Orion from the back, barely an outline against pitch darkness. I shoved my arm into the dark anyway, reaching for him, and for a moment, I thought—I was *sure*—I *had* him. The taste of frantic relief swelled through me: I'd done it, I'd got hold of him—and then I screamed, because my fingers were sinking into the surface of a maw-mouth, with its sucking hunger turning on me.

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Every part of my body wanted to let go at once. And then it got worse, as if there were any room for that to get worse,

because it wasn't just one maw-mouth, it was *two*, grabbing at me from both sides, as if Patience hadn't quite finished digesting Fortitude yet: a whole century of students, a meal so large it would take a long while eating, and meanwhile Fortitude was still groping around trying to feed its own hunger even while it was being swallowed down.

And it had been blindingly obvious to me back there in the graduation hall that we couldn't possibly kill that monstrous agglomerated horror, not even with the mana of four thousand living students fueling me. The only thing to do with Patience was the only thing to do with the Scholomance: we could only push them off into the void, and hope they vanished away forever. But apparently Orion had disagreed, since he'd turned back to fight even with the school teetering on the edge of the world behind him.

As if he'd thought Patience was going to get out, and in some part of his stupid brutalized brain imagined that he could *stop* it getting out, and therefore he had to stay behind and be a hero this one more time, one boy standing in front of a tidal wave. That was the only possible reason I could imagine, and it had been stupid enough without shoving *me* out the gates first, when I was the only one of us who'd ever actually fought a maw-mouth before. That made it so unutterably stupid that I needed him *out*, needed him *here*, so I could scream at him at length to impress upon him exactly how stupid he'd been.

I clung to that rage. Rage made it possible for me to keep holding on, despite the heaving putrescence of maw-mouth trying to envelop my fingers, sucking on my skin and my shielding like a child trying to get through a candy shell to the better sweetness inside, trying to get to *me*, trying to get to every last bit of me so it could devour me down to staring eyes and screaming mouth.

Rage, and horror, because it was going to do that to Orion, Orion who was still there in the hall with it. So I didn't let go. Staring down into the scrying puddle, I hurled murder at it past his blurry, half-seen shoulder, casting my best, quickest, killing spell over and over, the feeling of a lake of rot sloughing away from around my hands each time, until I was gulping down nausea with each breath I took, and each casting of "*À la mort!*" went rolling off my tongue on the way out, blurring until the sound of my breathing was death. All the while I kept holding on, trying to pull Orion out. Even if it meant I'd heave Patience out into the world with him and spill that devouring horror into the cool green trees of Wales right at Mum's feet, my place of peace I'd dreamt of in every minute I'd been in the Scholomance. All I'd have to do was kill it, after all.

That had seemed utterly impossible five minutes before, so impossible I'd just laughed at the idea, but now it was only a low and trivial hurdle when the alternative was letting it have Orion instead. I was really good at killing things. I'd find a way. I even had a plan laying itself out in my head, the clockwork machinery of strategy ticking coolly away in the background of my mind where it never stopped after four years in the Scholomance. We'd fight Patience together. I'd kill it a few dozen lives at a time, and he could pull the mana out and feed it back to me, and together we'd create an unending killing circle between us until the thing was finally gone. It would work, it would work. I had myself convinced. I didn't let go.

I didn't let go. I was pushed off. Again.

Orion did it himself. He must have, because maw-mouths don't let go. The mana I was pouring into the summoning spell was coming out of the graduation supply that was still unending, as if everyone in the school was still putting mana

into our shared ritual. But that didn't make any sense. Everyone else was gone. They were out of the Scholomance, hugging their parents and telling them what we'd done, sobbing and treating the wounds they'd taken, ringing all their friends. They weren't still feeding me power. They weren't *meant* to be. The whole idea of our plan was to sever all connection to the school: we wanted to cram it full of mals and break it off the world and let it float away into the void like a putrid balloon full of writhing malice, vanishing off into the dark where it belonged. It had been going when Orion and I had made that last run towards the portal.

As far as I knew, the only thing keeping it anchored to reality now was *me*, still clinging to the line of mana coming out of the school. And the only person left in the Scholomance to feed me that mana was Orion. Orion, who could capture mana from mals when he killed them. So at least in that moment, he must still have been alive, still fighting; Patience hadn't swallowed him up yet. And he must have felt me trying to drag him out, but instead of turning round and helping me to pull him through, he drew away from me instead, resisting the summoning. And the horrible sticky mouthing over my hand pulled away, too. Just as if he was trying to do the same thing my dad had done, all those years ago: as if he'd reached out and grabbed a maw-mouth and pulled it away, letting it have him instead of the girl he loved.

Except the girl Orion loved wasn't a gentle, kind healer, she was a sorceress of mass destruction who on two occasions had already managed to shred maw-mouths apart, and the stupid bloody fool could have tried trusting me to do it again. But he didn't. He fought me instead, and when I tried to use my summoning hold to *force* him to come, abruptly the bottomless ocean of mana ran out from underneath me like he'd taken the plug out of the bath.

In an instant, the power-sharer on my wrist turned cool and heavy and dead. In one more, my wild profligate spell ran sputtering out of gas, and Orion slid out of my grip as if I'd been trying to hold on to a fistful of oil. His outline in the scrying pool vanished into the dark. I kept desperately groping for him anyway, even as the image began fading out at the edges, but Mum had been crouching beside me all along, her face stricken with worry and fear, and now she grabbed me by the shoulders and threw all her weight into shoving me over and away from the puddle, likely saving my hand from being cut off at the wrist as the spell collapsed and my bottomless scrying well returned to being half an inch of water pooled between tree roots.

I went tumbling and rolled back up onto my knees in a single smooth motion without even thinking about it: I'd been training for graduation for months. I threw myself back at the puddle, fingers scrabbling it into mud. Mum tried to put her arms around me, begging me desperately to stop. That's not why I stopped, though. I stopped because I couldn't do anything else. I didn't have an ounce of mana left. Mum caught me by the shoulders again, and I turned and grabbed at the crystal round her neck, gasping, "Please, *please*." Mum's whole face was desperation; I could feel her longing to get me away, but then she shut her eyes a moment and with shaking hands reached up and undid the chain and let me have it: half full, not enough to raise the dead or burn cities to the ground, but enough to cast a message spell to scream at Orion with, to tell him to throw me back a line and let me help him, save him. Only it didn't go through.

I tried and tried, shouting Orion's name until the crystal and my voice were spent. I might as well have been shouting into the void. Which was where the whole Scholomance had presumably now gone. Just as we'd so cleverly, cleverly planned.

When there wasn't even enough mana for shouting, I used up the very last dribbles for a heartbeat spell, just trying to find out if he was still alive. It's a very cheap spell, because it's stupidly complicated and takes ten minutes, so the casting itself makes almost all the mana it needs. I cast it seven times one after the other without ever getting up off my mud-soaked knees, and stayed there listening to the wind blowing in the treetops and birds making noises and sheep talking to each other and somewhere in the distance a little running stream. Not a single echoing thump came back to my ears.

And when at last I didn't have mana left even for that, I let Mum lead me back to the yurt and put me to bed like I was six years old again.



The first time I woke up was so much like a dream that it hurt. I was in the yurt with the door open to let in the cool night air, and outside I could faintly hear Mum singing, the way I had in all my most agonizing dreams for the last four years, the ones that always ended in a jolt when I tried desperately to stay in them for a few minutes more. The truly awful part of this one was that I didn't want to stay in it. I turned over and went back down.

And when I couldn't sleep anymore, I just lay on my back in bed staring up at the billowing curve of the ceiling for a long time. If there had been anything else to do, I wouldn't have gone to sleep in the first place. I couldn't even be angry. The only person available to be angry with was Orion, and I couldn't stand to be angry with him. I tried: lying there I tried to think of every savage cutting remark I'd have made to him if he was here right now. But when I asked Orion *what were you thinking*, I couldn't make it come out angry, even inside my own head. It was just pain.

But I couldn't grieve him either, because he *wasn't dead*. He was busy screaming while a maw-mouth ate him, just like Dad. People do like to pretend maw-mouth victims are dead, but that's just because it's unbearable to think about it otherwise. There's nothing you can *do* about it, so if someone you love gets eaten by one, they're dead to you, and you might as well pretend it's all over. But I know, I know *from inside*, that you don't die when a maw-mouth eats you. You're just being eaten, forever; for as long as the maw-mouth lasts. But knowing didn't help. I couldn't do anything about it. Because the Scholomance was *gone*.

I hadn't moved when Mum came in a while later. She put a small tinkling handful of things into a bowl, saying softly, "There you are," to Precious, who made a squeak that meant gratitude and started cracking seeds. I couldn't feel sorry I hadn't thought about her, small and hungry. It was too far away, and I was too far down. Mum came and sat down next to my camp bed and put her hand on my forehead, warm and gentle. She didn't say anything.

I fought her off a little: I didn't want to feel better. I didn't want to get up and go on in the world, agreeing that it was in any way acceptable for the world to keep going itself. But lying there under Mum's hand, unimaginably safe and comfortable, I couldn't help but feel stupid. The world was going on anyway whether I gave it permission or not, and finally I sat up and let Mum give me a drink of water in the lopsided clay cup she'd made herself, and she sat on the bed next to me and put her arm around my shoulders and stroked my hair. She was so *small*. The whole yurt was so small. My head brushed the roof at the edge, even sitting on the camp bed. I could have made it outside on one good jump, if I were stupid enough to leap out into the unknown where anything could be waiting to ambush me.

Of course, that wouldn't have been stupid at all now. I wasn't in the Scholomance anymore. I'd set the students free, and jailed all the mals in our place, and then I'd broken the school off the world with all of them crammed hungry inside to gnaw on each other forever. So now I could sleep for twenty hours without a care, and I could go bounding out of my yurt with a song in my heart, and I could do anything and go anywhere in the world I wanted to. And so could everyone else, every last child I'd shepherded out of the Scholomance and all the children who'd never even have to go.

Except for Orion, gone into the dark.

If I'd had any mana left to do anything with, I would have imagined the possibility of doing something for him long enough to try some more. But since I didn't, all I could imagine was going for help to someone else—his mum maybe, who was on track to be Domina in the New York enclave—and asking her for mana so I could do something, and that was where my imagination broke down: looking her in the face, someone who'd loved Orion and wanted him home, and asking her for mana, for any of the ideas that became obviously stupid and useless as soon as I had to persuade someone else to believe in them. So I did the only thing left to do, and put my face in my hands and cried.

Mum sat beside me the whole time I was weeping, sat *with* me, caring about my misery without pretending she was feeling it too, or hiding away her own deep joy: I was home, I was alive, I was safe. Her whole body was radiating gladness out into the universe, but she didn't try to make me join in or smother my own grief; she knew I was deeply hurt, and was so sorry, and ready to do anything that she could to help me, when I wanted it. If you'd like to know how she told me all that without saying a word, I would too. It was nothing I could ever have done myself.

When I stopped crying, she got up and made me a cup of tea, picking leaves out of seven different jars on her crammed-full shelves, and she boiled the water with magic, which she'd never ordinarily have done, just so she didn't have to go outside to the fire and leave me alone yet. The whole yurt filled with the sweet smell when she poured the water in. She gave it to me and sat down again, holding my other hand between both of hers. She hadn't asked me any questions, I knew she wouldn't ever push, but there was a gentle silence between us waiting for me to start talking about it. To start grieving with her, for something that was over and done. And I couldn't bear to.

So after I drank my tea, I put the mug down and said, "Why did you warn me off Orion?" My voice came out hoarse and roughed-up, like I'd run sandpaper up and down the inside of my throat a few times. "Was this why? Did you see—"

She flinched like I'd jabbed her hard with a needle, and her whole body shuddered. She shut her eyes a moment and took a deep breath, then turned and looked at me full in my face in the way she called *seeing properly*, when she really wanted to take something in, and her own face went crumpling into folds along the faint wrinkle lines that were just beginning at the corners of her eyes. "You're safe," she said, half whispering, and she looked down at my hand and stroked it again, and a few tears dripped off her face. "You're *safe*. Oh my darling girl, you're safe," and she heaved a massive gulp and was crying herself, four years of tears running down her face.

She didn't ask me to cry with her; she looked away from me in fact, trying to keep her tears from me. I wanted to, I wanted so much to go into her arms and feel it with her: that I was alive and safe. But I couldn't. She was crying for joy, for love, for me, and I wanted to cry for those things too: I was home, I was out of the Scholomance forever, I was alive in a

world I'd changed for the better, a world where children wouldn't have to be thrown into a pit full of knives just for the hope they'd make it out again. It was worth rejoicing. But I couldn't. The pit was still there, and Orion was down in it.

I pulled my hand away instead. Mum didn't try to hold me. She took several deep breaths and wiped her tears away, packing the joy out of the way, tidy, so she could go on being with me, then she turned and cupped my face with her hand. "I'm so sorry, my darling."

She didn't say why she'd warned me off Orion. And I understood why at once: she wasn't going to lie to me, but she didn't want to hurt me either. She understood that I'd loved him, that I'd lost someone I loved, in the same horrible way that she'd lost Dad, and my grief was all that mattered to her now. It didn't matter to her to tell me why, or persuade me that she'd been right.

But it mattered to me. "Tell me," I said through my teeth. "*Tell me.* You went to Cardiff, you got that boy to bring me a *note*—"

Her face crumpled a little, miserable—I was asking her to hurt me, to tell me something she knew I didn't want to hear—but she gave in. She bowed her head and said softly, "I tried to dream you every night. I knew I wouldn't be able to reach you, but I tried to anyway. A few times, I thought you were dreaming me back, and we almost touched . . . but it was only dreaming."

I swallowed hard. I remembered those dreams too, the faint handful of near-touches, the love that had almost made it to me despite the thick smothering layer of wards blanketing the Scholomance, the ones that blocked every possible way that anything could get in—because otherwise mals would use that way, too.

"But last year—I did see you. The night you used the linen

patch.” Her voice was a whisper, and I hunched up, back in that moment and seeing it with her eyes: the little cell of my room, me on the floor in a puddle of my own blood, with the gaping ragged hole in my belly where one of my especially charming fellow students had shoved a knife into me. The only reason I’d survived it had been that healing patch she’d made me herself, years of love and magic worked into every linen thread she’d grown and spun and woven.

“Orion helped me with it,” I said. “He put it on me,” and I stopped, because she’d dragged in a gasping breath, her face twisting into the memory of a horror worse than my lying on the floor bleeding out.

“I felt him touch it,” she said raggedly, and even as she was speaking, I knew I was going to be sorry I’d asked. “I saw him, so near you, touching you. I saw him, and he was just—*hunger*—” and she sounded *sick*, she sounded like she’d been watching a mal eat me alive, instead of Orion kneeling on my floor and pressing healing into my torn body.

“He was *my friend*,” I said in a howl, because I had to make her stop, and I stood up so fast I cracked my skull hard into a crossbar and sat down with my hands on top of my head with a squawk and started crying again a little from the jolt of pain. Mum tried to hold me, but I shrugged her arms off, angry and dripping, and heaved myself off the bed again.

“He saved my *life*,” I ground out at her. “He saved my *life thirteen times*,” and I gasped on a breath of agony: I’d never have the chance to catch up now.

She didn’t say anything, didn’t argue with me, just sat there with her eyes shut and her arms wrapped around herself, breathing through it in shudders. She only whispered, “My darling, I’m so sorry,” and I could hear she truly was, she was so very sorry for hurting me with this supposed truth of what she’d seen in Orion that I wanted to scream.

I laughed instead, a horrible vicious laugh that hurt me to hear it in my own ears. “No worries, he’s gone for good now,” I said, jeering. “My brilliant plan took care of that.” And I went out of the yurt.



I walked around the commune for a while, staying in the trees just past the limits of where anyone had a pitch. My head ached from crying and banging it against the roof and from pouring an ocean’s worth of mana through my body, and from four years of prison before that. I didn’t have a handkerchief or anything. I was still wearing my filthy sweaty leggings and T-shirt, the New York T-shirt Orion had given me, threadbare with four holes and still the only wearable top I’d had left by the end of term. I pulled up the hem and wiped my nose on it.

I wanted to go back to Mum, but I couldn’t, because I wanted to ask her to hug me for a month, and I wanted to scream at her that she didn’t know anything about Orion at all. What I really wanted was to not have asked her in the first place. It was worse than if she’d told me she’d foreseen it all, and if I’d only listened to her warning, instead of pulling him into my magnificent scheme to save the whole school, he’d have made it out fine.

I could guess what Mum had seen: Orion’s power that let him pull mana out of mals, and the empty well inside him because when he took the power, he gave it *away*. The power so terrifyingly vast that it had forced him to become exactly the kind of stupid reckless hero who’d face an entire horde of maleficaria alone, because for every moment of his life, people had made him feel like a freak unless he was putting himself out in front of them.

He’d been the most popular boy in the Scholomance, but

I'd been his only friend, because when everyone else looked at him, that was all they saw: his power. They pretended they saw a noble hero, because he'd tried so hard to fit himself into that picture, and they loved the picture: that made his power something *for* them, something that would help them. The same way everyone looked at me and my power and saw a monster, because I *wouldn't* play along with what they wanted. But they'd loved Orion only in exactly the same way they'd hated me. Neither one of us were ever people to them. He just made himself useful, and I refused to.

But I'd never imagined that *Mum*, of all people—who'd never let me see a monster in my own mirror, even when the whole world was trying to convince me that was all that was there—would look at Orion and see his power, and decide that *he* was a monster. I couldn't bear it that she hadn't been able to look at him and see a person. It made it feel like she was lying about seeing *me* as one.

So I could have gone back to scream at her, to tell her the only reason I was alive for her to dream of was because Orion had killed the maleficer who'd gutted me, and had risked his own life spending the night in my room killing the endless stream of mals who'd come to finish the job. But the way I really wanted to prove her wrong was by having Orion walk up the path to our yurt next week, the way he'd promised he would, so she could see for herself that he wasn't either the terrible power she'd glimpsed or the gleaming perfect hero everyone else wanted him to be. That he *was* a person, he was just a person.

Had been a person. Before he'd got himself killed at the very gates of the Scholomance, because he'd thought it was his job to make a way out for everyone else but him.

I kept walking around as long as I could. I didn't want to feel anything as small as being tired and filthy and hungry, but

I did. The world did in fact insist on going on, and I didn't have the mana to make it stop. Precious finally came and got me, darting out from underneath a bush to pounce on my foot when I circled back closer to the yurt again. She refused to let me pick her up. She ran away from me a little way towards the yurt, and sat up on her haunches and gave me a scold, her white fur practically glowing in an invitation to the large number of cats and dogs who roamed the commune more or less freely. Being a familiar doesn't make you invulnerable.

So I followed her back to the yurt and let Mum give me a bowl of vegetable soup that tasted like it had been made with real vegetables, which might not sound very exciting to you, but what do you know. I couldn't help eating five bowls of it, even seasoned with agony and sour resentment, and almost all of a loaf of bread and butter, and afterwards I let Mum coax me to the bathhouse. There I spent a full hour in the shower, very much against commune rules, trying to dissolve into the hot water I was gluttonously consuming. I wasn't even mildly worried that an amphisbaena might erupt out of the showerhead.

Claire Brown turned up instead. I had my eyes shut under the spray when I heard the shockingly familiar voice saying, "So that's Gwen's daughter back, then," not with enthusiasm, and deliberately loud enough to be overheard.

It didn't make me angry, which was odd and uncomfortable; my supply of anger had never run dry before. I shut off the shower and came out hoping to find some, but it didn't work. The showers let out onto a big round dressing room, only that had also shrunk while I'd been away. The commune had built it when I was five, and my toes knew every weird uneven inch of the floor, so I knew the cramped little room with its one bench was the same place, but it still didn't seem

believable that it could be. And there on the bench was Claire, with Ruth Marsters and Philippa Wax, waiting together in their towels as if I'd been in their way even though there were two other cubicles.

They all stared at me as if I were a stranger. And they surely had to be strangers, too, even though they did look and sound almost exactly like the women who collectively between them had told me ten thousand times or so that I was a sad burden to my saint of a mother. Everyone who lived here had a reason, something that had driven them to shut themselves away from the rest of the world. Mum had come to live here because she wasn't willing to compromise with selfishness, but these three women, and a lot of the other people here, they hadn't come here to do good, they'd come here to have good done for them. And they'd looked at me and saw a perfectly healthy child, with this magical being lavishing love and attention and energy upon her, and they all knew what it would have meant to them to have that same unbounded gift, and here I was, apparently sullen and ungrateful, soaking it up to no good end at all that they could see.

Which wasn't an excuse for being nasty to a miserable lonely kid, and just because I understood their reasons didn't mean I was ready to forgive them. I should've enjoyed it so much, I should've spoken to them with contempt: *That's right, I'm back, and I've grown; have any of you accomplished anything in the last four years besides horrible gossip?* Mum would have sighed when she heard about it, and I wouldn't have cared. I'd have floated out of the bathhouse on a cloud of mean greedy pleasure.

But I couldn't do it. Apparently, if I wasn't going to be angry at Orion, I couldn't be angry at anyone.

I didn't say anything to them, and they didn't say anything

to me, or to each other. I turned and dried off with their silence behind my back and put on the clothes Mum had left for me on the hook next to my shower stall: actual new cotton knickers fresh from the cellophane, and a linen shift with a drawstring at the neck, big and loose enough to fit me; one of the people in the commune made them for medieval reenactors. A pair of handmade sandals from one of our other neighbors, just a flat sole cut out of wood with a leather cord. I hadn't worn anything this clean in four years, except the day I'd first put on Orion's shirt. The last clothes I'd grudgingly bought were a couple of pairs of lightly used underwear off a senior at the start of my junior year, when there just wasn't enough left of my last pair to cast make-and-mend on them. *New* underwear went for insanely exorbitant prices inside: you could've bought an all-round antidote potion for a pair of unworn pants, and now here I was with untold riches.

I couldn't enjoy them any more than I could enjoy a round of delicious payback. I put them on, because it would have been stupid not to, and of course it felt better, it felt wonderful, but I looked at the ragged filthy ruin of Orion's shirt, which wasn't fit for anything but the bin, and feeling better felt worse. I tried to make myself chuck it along with the rest of my old things, but I couldn't. I folded it up and put it into one of my pockets—it was so worn thin, half made of magic at this point, that I could get it to the thickness of a handkerchief. I cleaned my teeth—new toothbrush, fresh minty paste—and walked out. It was dark outside by then. Mum had a small fire going outside the yurt. I sat down on one of the logs next to the pit and after a bit, I cried some more. It wasn't original or anything, I realize. Mum came round and put an arm around my shoulders again, and Precious climbed into my lap.



I spent the next day sitting blankly by the dead firepit. I was clean, I was fed, I was sitting outside in sunshine and a brief shower—I didn't move—and sunshine again. Mum pattered around me quietly, handed me food to eat and tea to drink, and left me alone to process. I wasn't processing. I was trying very hard not to process, because there wasn't anything to process except the raw horrible truth that Orion was somewhere off in the void screaming. I could almost hear him, if I thought about it too long: I could almost hear him saying, *El, El, help me, please. El.*

Then I looked over, because it wasn't just in my head anymore. There was a small odd bird standing on the log right next to me: purple-black, with an orange beak and bright-yellow marks around its head, and a big round beady black eye it tilted up towards me. "El?" it said to me again. I stared down at it. It stretched its head out long and made a sound like a person coughing, then straightened up again. "El?" it said again. "El? El, are you okay?" and it was Liu's voice: not exactly the same sound maybe, but the accent and the way she'd have said the words; if it had spoken from behind me, I'd have thought she was there.

"No," I told the bird, honestly. It tilted its head and said, "Nĩ hǎo," and then, "El?" again, and then it said, in my voice, "No. No. No." Abruptly it took wing and darted away into the trees.

We'd had an agreement, me and Aadhya and Liu: I was going to go and get my hands on a phone, as soon as I made it out, and text them both. They'd made me memorize their numbers. But that had all been part of the *plan*, and I couldn't make myself do any of it.

It had been a perfectly good plan. I had the Golden Stone sutras all ready: they were snugly bundled together with all my notes and translations inside a soft bag I'd crocheted out of my last threadbare blanket, to pad them inside my painstakingly carved book chest, which had itself been bundled into my waterproof shower bag. I'd slung it on my back when the gears first started to turn. They were the only thing I'd taken out with me, my prize—the one truly wonderful thing I'd got out of the Scholomance. I would have swapped them for Orion if some higher power had made me the offer, but it would've taken me two heartbeats instead of one to agree.

The plan was, if I made it out alive, I was going to hug Mum half a million times, roll around in grass for a while, hug Mum some more, and then take the sutras and head to Cardiff, where there was a decent-sized wizard collective near the stadium. They weren't powerful enough or rich enough to build an enclave of their own, but they were working towards it. And I'd have offered to take the mana they'd saved up and build them a little Golden Stone enclave outside the city instead. Nothing grandiose, but a space good enough to tuck their kids in at night and keep them safe from whatever stray mals had been left behind by the purge.

Orion hadn't been part of the plan. Yeah, it had occurred to me that he could find me in Cardiff, if he came looking. But he would have been landing in his own parents' arms and the wider embrace of the united New York enclave. They'd all have fought him leaving with every clinging vine of sentiment and loyalty they could wrap around him. So I really sincerely hadn't expected Orion to come: I'm good at pessimism. And I hadn't *needed* him to come, either. I'd been ready to go on with my own life.

I don't know that I'd even needed him to make it out alive.

I had been fairly sure before we began on our objectively lunatic plan of escape that I'd end up dead myself, and at least half the people I cared about along with me, with Orion topping the likely list. If our plans had gone pear-shaped, if the maleficaria had broken loose from the honeypot illusion and started slaughtering us, and we'd all had to run for it, and in the chaos he'd been one of the people who hadn't made it out, I think I'd have cried and mourned him and gone on.

But I couldn't bear this. I couldn't bear that he'd been the *only* one who'd died getting all of us out. Getting *me* out. Even if he'd chosen on his stupid own to turn round and face Patience, even if he'd chosen to shove me away, still being the hero he thought he had to be to be worth anything. I couldn't bear for that to be his story.

So I wasn't okay. I didn't go and get a phone, and I didn't try to call Aadhya and Liu. I didn't go to Cardiff. I just sat around, inside or outside the yurt mostly at random, and kept trying to change it in my head, play the whole thing out again, as if I could change what had happened by finding some better set of things I should've done.

I can say from experience that it was very much like when you've been humiliated in the cafeteria or the bathroom in front of a dozen people, and because you couldn't think of any clever comebacks at the time, you keep daydreaming about all the viciously witty things you might have said. As Mum had pointed out to me several times during my childhood, really what you're doing is bathing yourself endlessly in the humiliation all over again, while your tormentor sails on perfectly unaffected. She was right, and I'd known it even then, but knowing had never stopped me before. It didn't stop me now. I stayed stuck, going back and forth on the rails, trying to find a way to shove the train that had already arrived off the tracks somehow.

After a few more days of trying to rewrite history on the inside of my own head, I came up with the magnificent and highly original idea that maybe I could do it on the world instead. I went into the yurt and dug up one of my old notebooks from primary school that Mum had saved in a box, and I found a blank page towards the back and scribbled a few lines down, something something *l'esprit de l'escalier*. The idea felt very French, just like my best and most elegant killing spell, and if that doesn't sound like a recommendation to you, I can't imagine why.

I can't tell you what I was thinking when I started creating a spell that would let me literally alter the fabric of reality. That sort of thing just doesn't work on a long-term basis, no matter how powerful you are. Reality is more powerful, and it will eventually bounce your attempt off, generally disintegrating you personally along with it. But you can certainly have a nice long run—at least from your own perspective—in your own personal fantasy universe, and the longer you go and the more power you have to keep it going, the more havoc you'll wreak on yourself and others in its final implosion. And if I'd stopped long enough to think about it, I'd have *known* all that: both how useless it would ultimately be and how much damage I'd do if I tried it. But I didn't. I was just trying to find an exit from the agony, like I was in the maw-mouth with Orion, mindlessly desperate to escape.

Mum found me looking for the next line of the spell, which I was almost certainly going to find. I'm very bad at writing spells of my own devising unless they cause vast amounts of destruction and terror, and then I'm absolutely unmatched. Her tolerance for the grieving process didn't extend to watching me tie the whole planet into knots and eradicate myself along the way. She got one look at what I was writing and tore it out of my hands and threw it into the

fire, and then she went down on her knees in front of me, caught my hands tight, and pinned them against her chest. “Darling, darling,” she said, and then she freed one of her hands and put her palm against my forehead, pressing hard between my eyebrows. “Breathe. Let the words go. Let the thoughts go. Let them slip away. They’re already going, out on the next breath. Breathe. Breathe with me.”

I obeyed her because I couldn’t help myself. Mum had almost never used magic on me, even when I was exactly the howling furious storm of a child that any other wizard parent would have been spelling into calm every other day. Most wizard kids can fend off their parents’ coercion spells by the age of ten, but when I was four and screamed because I didn’t want to go to sleep, I got three hours of lullabies, not a spell to make me go quietly to bed; when I was in a kicking rage at seven, I got understanding and space and patience, even when what I would’ve liked much better was a screaming match and a good dose of soothing potion. I don’t actually advocate for this approach—in retrospect I still think I would quite have appreciated a dose of soothing potion once in a while—but it did mean that I wasn’t any good at blocking Mum’s magic, at least not instinctively, and instinct was the only thing I was running on in the first place.

Anyway, Mum’s magic feels good, because it’s only ever meant to be good for you, and I leaned straight into the relief of it. By the time I did manage to wrench myself loose, she’d knocked the beginnings of the spell out of my head and also made me feel better enough that I could recognize I’d been doing something incredibly stupid.

Not that I was grateful for her help or anything. It only made me feel worse knowing she’d been perfectly right. After she let me go, I was too unwillingly calm to storm off into the ongoing rain, but I also didn’t want to do anything unendur-

ably horrible like talk about my feelings or say thanks for saving me from unmaking myself and blowing up the commune if not half of Wales. I had to find another way to escape, so I got out my book bag and took out the sutras.

Mum had gone to the other side of the yurt to wash pots with her back turned, to give me space. But after a while she glanced back and saw me reading and said in her peacemaking voice, which I both loved and hated passionately, “What are you reading, love?”

Of course I wanted to boast of them and show them off, but instead I just muttered surly, “It’s the Golden Stone sutras. I got them at school,” except I didn’t finish the sentence because Mum made a noise like someone had stabbed her repeatedly and dropped the plate she was cleaning to thump on the ground. I stared at her, and she was staring back, wide and terrible and frozen, and then she fell to her knees and put her hands over her face and literally howled like an animal on the floor.

I panicked completely. She was in roughly the same state of hysteria as I’d been myself, half an hour before, but I’d had her for help, and she had me, and I’m not very useful unless you’re under attack by an army of maleficaria. I hadn’t any idea what to do. I literally ran round the yurt twice looking at things wildly before getting her a cup of water. I begged her to drink it and tell me what was wrong. She just kept keening. Then I got the idea she had been poisoned by the washing-up liquid and tried to test it for toxins, found nothing, decided I had to cast an all-heal, didn’t have enough mana, and started doing jumping jacks to build it, all while she wept. I must have looked a proper twat.

Mum had to pull herself out of it. She gulped a last few times and said, “No, no, to me.”

I stopped, panting, and went on my knees facing her and

caught her shoulders. “Mum, what is it, just tell me what to do, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” I forgave her everything, I forgave her for not loving Orion, I forgave her telling me to keep away from him, I forgave her for making me feel better. None of it mattered in the face of this upheaval, as if my awful half-written spell had somehow already begun to take the whole world apart underneath me.

She made a slow drag of breath that was a moan and then said, “No, love. Don’t. It’s not for you to be sorry, it’s me. It’s me.” She shut her eyes and squeezed my shoulder when I was going to say something inane like no it’s all right, and then she said, “I’ll tell you. I’ll have to tell you. I have to go to the woods first. Forgive me darling. Forgive me,” and she got up like an old woman pushing herself off the floor slowly and went outside straight into the pouring rain.

I sat on the bed hugging the sutras to me like a stuffed bear, still in a restrained panic that only stayed restrained because Mum did go into the woods all the time, and came out again with calm and healing and care, so some part of me could cling to the hope that she’d come out with them again this time, but nothing like this had ever happened in my life, and the bad things in my life were always my fault. I nearly cried when Mum did come back, only an hour later, wet through with her dress plastered in tissue-paper bunches to her legs and muddied all up the front and over her face like she’d lain in the dirt for a while. I was so desperately relieved to see her, all I wanted was to hug her.

But she said, “I have to tell you now,” and it was her deep, far-off voice, the one that only comes when she’s doing major arcana: when a wizard comes to her who’s trying to be healed of something really awful, a deep curse or magical illness of some kind, and she’s telling them what they have to do, only this time she was telling *herself*. She took my hands for a mo-

ment and held them, and then she pulled my face down and kissed me on the forehead like I was going away, and I was half sure that Mum was about to tell me that she'd been wrong all these years and I really was doomed after all to fulfill the prophecy of death and destruction and ruin that's been hanging over my head since I was a tiny child, and that I had to leave her forever.

Then she said, "Your father's family were from one of the Golden Stone enclaves."

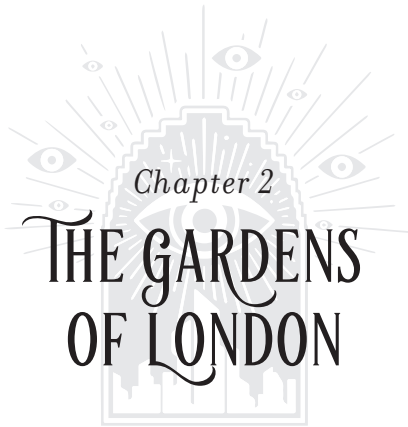
"The ones built with the sutras?" I said it in a broken whisper, not really a question. I'd known my father's family, the Sharmas, had once lived in an enclave—an ancient strictmana enclave in the north of India somewhere—that had been destroyed a couple of centuries ago during the British occupation. The Golden Stone sutras were old, old Sanskrit spells, and I knew they'd been used to build a whole slew of enclaves in that part of the world, ages ago. So that was a bit of a coincidence, but it didn't seem anything bad. I was still terrified: I could feel something absolutely horrible was coming.

"Enclaves are built with malia," Mum said. "I don't know how they do it, but you can feel it when you're there, if you let yourself. All of them, except the Golden Stone enclaves. Your father told me about them."

"But, that's good, then," I said, high and begging; I held the sutras out to her like an offering. "There's no malia in building them, Mum. I've read all of it, I can't cast it all yet but I'm sure—" but her face was crumpling in as she looked down at the beautiful book. She put out her hand over it trembling, fingers hovering a little bit away as if she couldn't bear to actually touch it, and then they curled back into her palm again without even brushing the cover.

"Arjun and I, we wanted to build a new golden enclave,"

she said. “We thought, if we could only show everyone a better—” She cut herself off and started over, in a familiar way: she always reminds people not to explain when they’re trying to ask forgiveness, not to offer excuses until they’re invited. “We wanted to build a golden enclave. We wanted to find the sutras,” she said, and I think maybe by then I was beginning to understand, but my head was going blank, full of white noise. “We thought our best chance was there in the school, in the library. My darling, I’m so sorry. We cast a summoning spell. We summoned the sutras, and we left the payment open.”



Chapter 2

THE GARDENS OF LONDON

“**W**E THOUGHT IT HADN’T WORKED,” Mum said. “We thought they’d just been lost or destroyed.”

I’d already sat back down on the bed by then. I was still clutching the sutras to me. Maybe the right reaction should have been to set them on fire, but at the moment they felt like the only thing in the universe that I could rely on.

I’m not sure if it was better or worse than Mum telling me that she had changed her mind about me and was now convinced I was in fact doomed to go mortally evil. I’ve been preparing myself to hear that my entire life. It would have smashed me into pieces, but I was braced for it. I wasn’t ready to be told that Mum had, that she and Dad had—I didn’t even know what to call it.

Summoning is like make-and-mend. There’s a basic version of it in any given language, which you then elaborate on, depending on what you’re asking for and what you’re offering up in return. You can use a summoning to get almost anything you want—including unwilling sacrificial victims—as long as the thing you want exists. But you have to pay for

it—and more than what the average wizard would call its fair market value. If you do a summoning and you lowball the offer, don't put enough mana in or make enough of a sacrifice, then you lose whatever you *have* put up, and the summoning doesn't work anyway.

But there's another way to cast a summoning. You don't have to put in any mana or make an offering at all. If you don't, if you just leave the payment wide open, you're offering anything and everything you have, including your life. Or, in this case, offering to have one of you spend a dragged-out eternity screaming in the belly of a maw-mouth, and offering to have the other crawl out of the Scholomance gates alone and sobbing to bear and raise your child.

And you're offering up the life of that child herself. That handful of cells so completely dependent on your body that you *can* offer her up without even realizing you're doing it. Making her *a burdened soul* as my great-grandmother colorfully put it in her prophecy, signed onto the family mortgage from birth, a vessel to be filled up with terrible slaughtering power and a hideous destiny of murder and destruction, the balance for your pure idealism. All of you paying together, just so that one day that child will earn a chance, just a thin sliver of a chance, to jump up and grab a copy of the spellbook you're after, off a library shelf at school, to accomplish your dream of generosity and freedom.

I still had my arms wrapped around the sutras, my fingers tracing the embossed pattern in the leather without thinking about it. I'd known that they were a windfall, luck beyond anything I'd earned; I had just held on to them all the tighter, and never asked questions. And now it turned out actually I'd been paying for them my whole life, without ever having agreed to it up front. I'd been paying in the single worst moment of my life: when I'd had to face the maw-mouth in the

library, the one that had been waiting at the end of the stacks after I'd made that jump and got the sutras off the shelf. The last chunk of my parents' debt.

I suppose I'd had a choice about that. I hadn't had to fight the maw-mouth. I could have let it go and kill several dozen freshmen instead. I could have paid off the debt of my parents' courage with that cowardice, sending a pack of children to go down screaming into ten thousand years of hell, and set the balance right that way. I'd paid with my own screaming instead. I didn't want to remember, but I couldn't help it, queasy and shivering on the cot, clammy-skinned with the memory. Some part of my brain would still be screaming, still in that maw-mouth, the rest of my life.

And that was why I'd told Orion we couldn't fight Patience, why I hadn't been able to imagine trying. So—maybe that was why he'd shoved me out. Because I'd told him we couldn't do it, that *I* couldn't do it, and so he'd thought he had to save me from it, too. From the horror he'd known I couldn't bear to face. Maybe that meant *he'd* been part of the price, too.

I looked down at the sutras in my lap, paid off in full. I'd loved them, so much. I'd been ready to build my whole life upon them. Now even that—all my plans for the future, my own dream of golden enclaves—suddenly felt like something I'd inherited instead of something I'd chosen. I wanted to be angry about it; I felt I had a right to be angry.

Mum did too. She was standing in front of me like she was waiting for me to deliver a verdict. Intent doesn't matter, she'd say, when you've really injured someone else. You need to be open to their pain and anger if you're ever to make things whole between you. Only I couldn't find any to give her. She and Dad hadn't offered me up as a sacrifice in their

place—they'd both paid worse than I had, and they hadn't even known I was there to be offered in the first place.

But if I couldn't be angry, I didn't know what to be. I didn't even quite believe it yet really, not in my gut. I don't mean I thought she was lying or making it up; it just wasn't something that I could fully believe that Mum had done. She could hurt me, could make me angry. I'd harangued her for half my childhood to take me to an enclave, and she'd refused: she hadn't been willing to make that bargain even to save my life, although she'd have died to protect me. But she couldn't have done *this*. She couldn't have put me on the hook for a summoning without my full knowledge and consent. She'd have cut her own heart out first.

Which of course was still true, and she more or less had, but that didn't help me organize my own feelings. Just because the brakes failed instead of the driver doesn't mean the lorry hasn't hit you, only in this case it felt more like a star had broken the laws of physics to collapse and destroy my planet.

"I need to think," I said. I meant it literally. I couldn't think. I couldn't make sense of it in any way that would let me do or say or even feel anything. Precious crept up from the small nest she'd made herself next to my pillow and curled up on my shoulder, a tiny lump of comfort, but that wasn't any use. I didn't need comforting. I wasn't unhappy. I was lost in the mountains without a compass.

Mum took it as instructions. She said, "I'll go to the bathhouse," and went at once. I didn't know if I wanted her to go, but I also couldn't decide to call after her to stay. So she went and left me in the yurt alone.

It was still raining. The roof hole cover needed mending; one of the seams was leaking a little bit. Mum usually kept

things in good trim, but after all, she'd spent the last four years waiting to find out if her only child was going to live. I watched each fat drop slowly accumulating until it finally plinked down softly. Mum had spent roughly half my childhood trying to teach me to meditate, how to find peace. I'd never been very good at it. Now I managed a full half hour just blank and staring at the leaking rain, although I didn't find any peace in the process; my head was full of white noise, not stillness.

The power of inertia would probably have kept me sitting there another month, trying to find some way to feel something. Only inertia wasn't given the chance. "So you really are just sitting here in the middle of nowhere," a voice said. "I almost didn't believe her."

It took me a moment even to register that someone was talking to me. No one ever came to the yurt to talk to me; if they looked in and Mum wasn't here, they went away again without saying anything to me, unless they really wanted her urgently, and in that case, sometimes they asked me where she was, and I ignored them belligerently until they went away. It took me another moment to realize that I recognized the voice talking to me, and that it was Liesel, and another one after that to turn my head so I could stare at her blankly.

She was standing in the doorway of the yurt, looking in at me. The last time I'd seen her had been less than a week ago, at the Scholomance gates, in the same outgrown rags we'd all been wearing by graduation. Now she was wearing a slim knee-length dress that looked like she was on her way to a party, with sections curved in on the sides that were made of some scaled fabric that gleamed like pearl—amphisbaena scales, I realized distantly: the ones Orion had got her, in exchange for her doing all his remedial homework. They were