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The OTHERWHERE POST

‘An epic dark fantasy tale of love, justice, the delicate magic of finding connection, and the complex art of scribing... thrilling, gripping and thoroughly enjoyable’

***Kirkus*, starred review**

‘Inventive worldbuilding... witty banter and reluctant romance... inject levity and depth’

***Publishers Weekly*, starred review**

‘With delicious layers that readers will love unravelling, this fantastical piece will positively whisk you away’

***Booklist*, starred review**

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Lyssa Mia Smith, author of *Revelle*

‘Unique, whimsical and utterly spellbinding’

Jessica S. Olson, author of *A Forgery of Roses*

‘This dark academia fantasy features masterful worldbuilding, a wildly interesting new magic system, and a loveable cast of characters’

***School Library Journal*, starred review**

The
OTHERWHERE
POST

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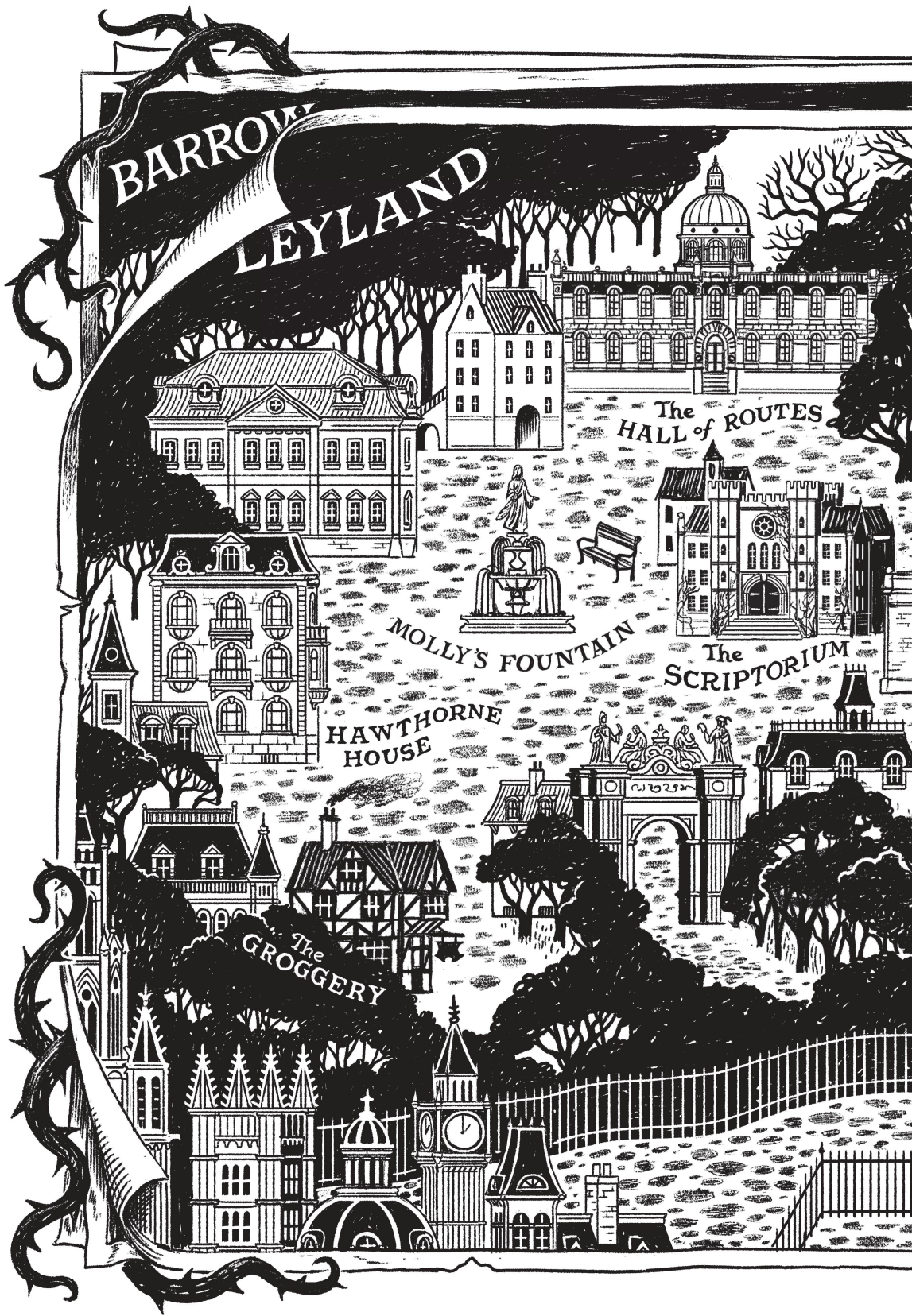
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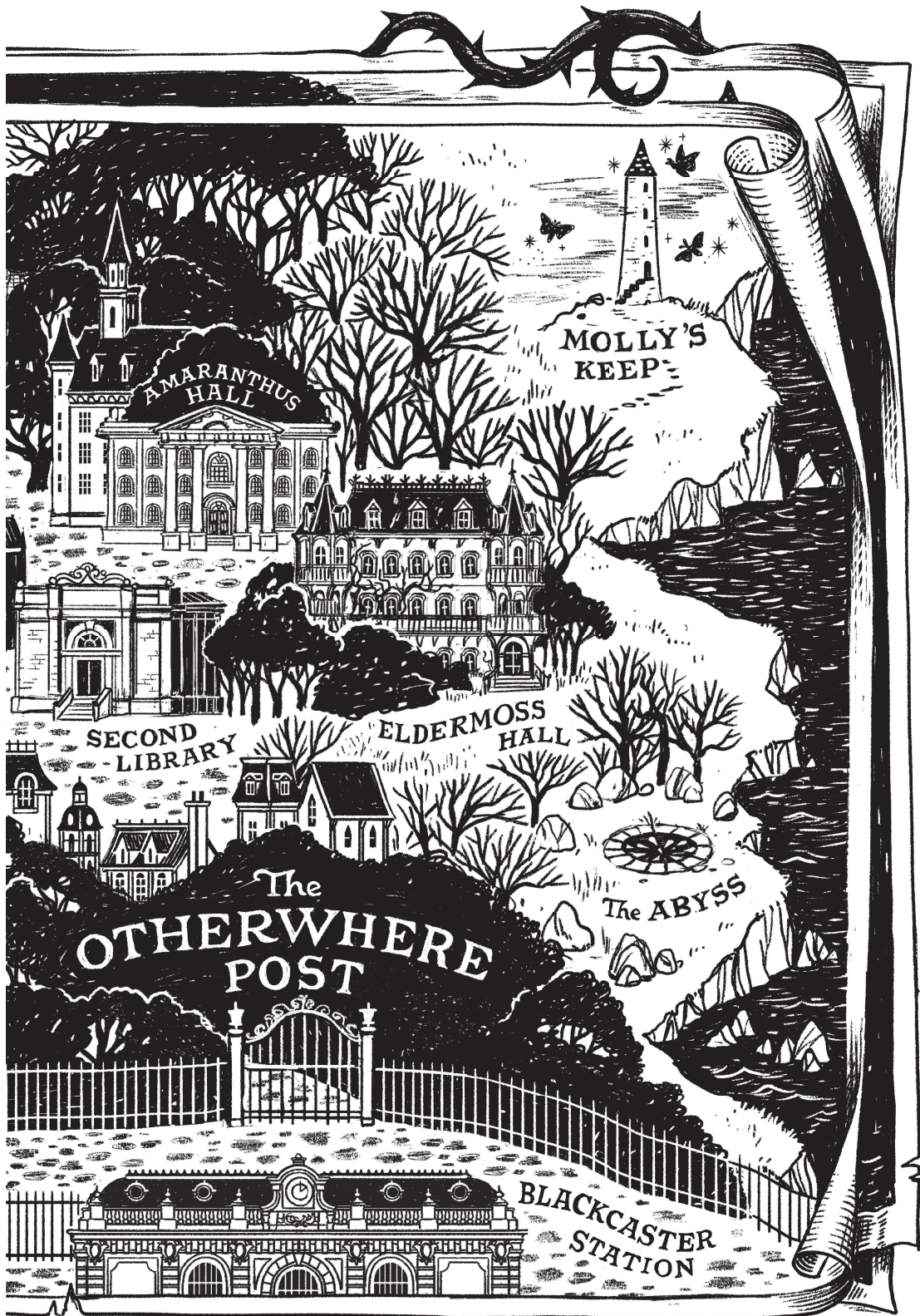


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For Rogue and West







Maeve always carried the love letter with her. She knew every ink stroke by heart, that it took twenty-three seconds to unsheathe the brittle paper from the envelope and read the tender words penned by her mother to her father ages ago. It was all she had left of her parents.

Today, however, it sat like a weight at the base of her right pocket.

Tucking her rust-red braid into her coat collar, Maeve hurried up the rain-slicked cobblestones of Widdick's Close until she crested the hill near her flat.

Autumn air clung like wet leaves to her tongue. Bleak ocean winds beat her cheeks, and the city of Gloam spread out before her: blackened stone university buildings tangled between steep roads that ran together like an ink spill. The city of Gloam in Leyland.

It was such an ugly world.

Maeve imagined she could see the two other known worlds of Inverly and Barrow wrapped over this one like the translucent sheets of tissue she used to package quills. The three known worlds appeared identical if you squinted, but truly comparing them was the same as searching for similarities between a fresh apple and a lump of hearth coal.

Unfortunate, considering she happened to be stuck in that lump of coal.

She pulled out the love letter, along with a train ticket she'd purchased just yesterday. The ticket took her ages to save for. It granted passage to the south coast of Leyland in exactly one week. In seven short days, she would kiss this decrepit city goodbye for good.

A smile tugged at her lips. She tucked the precious ticket back inside her pocket, then dragged a gloved finger along the love letter's tattered corner.

She dearly wished she had a single memory of her mother, but Aoife Abenthy had died from a wasting sickness when Maeve was a mere babe. Her father was a different matter entirely.

She'd discovered this letter in his things the week before she lost him, back when she wouldn't let him walk out the door without slipping her hands over his wiry shoulders and forcing him to hug her twice. Before she learned he was a twisted murderer.

She was only eleven years old. Now, at eighteen, she had lived with that knowledge for too many years.

Her fingers tightened, straining the envelope until it was on the verge of ripping. This love letter might have been written by her mother, but it belonged to *him*.

"Guess what, Father? I finally saved enough to buy a train ticket. I'm leaving your favorite city in one week's time. After that, I hope to never spend another minute of my life thinking of you."

A burst of lightning lit up the gray sky, as if her father were laughing at her. He'd perished in another world, but Maeve was half convinced his spiteful ghost resided here nonetheless, haunting her every step.

Trembling, she tucked the letter down into her pocket, beside the train ticket. Out of sight.

As much as she wanted to love something her mother wrote, she hated that letter. But she didn't dare get rid of it. The constant feel of the envelope against her hip bone served as a necessary reminder to be careful to never use her real name. To never speak it. If anyone discovered who she was, they would call the constabulary. Unless the families of her father's victims came for retribution first.

Maeve took a strangled breath, feeling the sickening weight of his crimes pressing against her lungs—the shame of having to live in a world that he had tarnished.

At least she was leaving in a week. It might prove difficult to run away from the blood in her veins, but she would certainly try her best.

More lightning cracked across the sky, followed by rain. Maeve tightened her scarf. It was a long trek to the Alewick Inksmithy, a quaint, quiet establishment in the southernmost neighborhood in Gloam. Maeve's eyes watered as she finally entered through the front. The heated shop air was scented with lampblack ink, powdered blotting papers, sealing waxes, and solvents: all the tools one required to pen a letter.

"Is that you, Isla?" Mr. Braithwaite called from the back.

It took Maeve a full second to answer; she still wasn't used to her latest alias. "Yes, I'm here! And drenched, I'm afraid."

His cane knocked against the rough-hewn floorboards as he hobbled into the front. A thick scowl deepened the wrinkle lines in his brown, freckled cheeks. "You're awfully late again."

She wouldn't be surprised if her employer had a ticking pocket watch instead of a heart. "Only twelve minutes."

"Late is late. I thought I would be forced to hunt you down and make you feed Bane."

The old nipping mare had a countenance as charming as her master's. Maeve avoided Bane. She avoided all horses.

Peeling off her gloves, she caught her reflection in the front mirror and frowned. Her damp coat pulled against her wide bust—where the tarnished row of brass buttons almost never remained in their holes—but she was too chilled to shrug it off. The mole above the right corner of her lip stood out like a point on a pallid map. At least with a pinch to her cheeks, she appeared slightly less like a blanched onion.

Maeve came around the counter, pausing at the locked valuables cabinet that had stood empty yesterday.

"Those came in late last night." Mr. Braithwaite gestured to three left-handed quills hanging inside, their fletching dyed exquisite shades of indigo and violet.

The quills were crafted from molted right-wing feathers, which made them enormously expensive. Most feather merchants gathered right-wing feathers for other uses besides left-handed quills, and the few they sold were usually snapped up by university faculty long before they arrived in Alewick.

Maeve ran a finger over the blisters along her left-hand thumb, dearly wishing feathers weren't as costly as train tickets.

Tearing her eyes from the case, she took out her favorite quill knife, a small, rusted blade that got the job done faster than most. She tested it against a fingertip. When a bead of blood welled, she licked it off.

"So?" Mr. Braithwaite said a whole half a minute later. "Why were you late?"

Meddlesome man. "I forgot my hat at home and had to go back for it," Maeve lied, then reached for a box of molted swan feathers.

"Back for a hat?" Mr. Braithwaite said with a disagreeable grunt.

He pushed his reading spectacles to his forehead. “Doesn’t seem such an important thing to me, but I suppose I can’t understand the importance of fashion to a woman.” He glanced toward the aged sepiagraph hanging behind the counter, of a pretty young woman, her dark cheeks stained pink. “My Una loved shopping for hats, and I never understood it,” he said, then dabbed tears in his eyes.

Maeve fidgeted, uncomfortable at the sight of him weeping.

A job posting brought her here eight months prior. Mr. Braithwaite had been trying to hire a stockist for weeks; his demeanor likely sent all other applicants fleeing in terror. It was the perfect opportunity, until he confessed in a gut-wrenching tone that Una had passed away.

Lonely people were the ones Maeve watched out for, who recognized the loneliness in her and thought it an invitation. She had almost walked out, but then he offered her the job, and she needed the money more than she cared to admit.

“Una was in Inverly the day it was destroyed, shopping for a new hat,” he said quietly, still staring at the portrait.

Maeve jolted at the mention of Inverly—one of the three known worlds—and dropped her quill knife. She scrambled to pick it up.

He had never told her how Una died.

Mr. Braithwaite didn’t seem to notice her reaction. His eyes were lost in his wife’s face. “Una preferred the Inverly haberdashers, with their colorful spools of thread. She had an appointment to visit one two blocks from Blackcaster Station that very afternoon. I’ve always wondered if she tried running for Leyland and simply didn’t make it.”

Blackcaster Station was no train station. It once housed the two great Written Doors—doors people used to travel back and forth

between the three known worlds. Once, you could leave a university lecture in Gloam in Barrow, have dinner in Gloam in Inverly, then visit a tavern here in Gloam in Leyland, all in a single evening. Until one terrifying afternoon seven years ago.

"I'm so sorry," Maeve managed through a tight throat.

She had been in Inverly that afternoon as well, and thinking of it never failed to send her back to the moments of terror she'd experienced—people screaming, everyone running to escape. She was one of the lucky ones—close enough to Blackcaster Station to dart inside and make it through to Leyland before it was too late.

Minutes after she escaped Inverly, the Written Door between the two worlds was burned to cinders, obliterating its magic. Then the fire spread to the other Written Door connecting Barrow and Leyland, burning it as well, stranding thousands on either side. By the time the smoke cleared, everyone had learned the truth: that Inverly was destroyed and everyone inside of it was gone forever. Just like that. Barrow and Leyland were both spared, but with the doors burned, all travel was cut off instantly, stranding everyone wherever they happened to be. Trapping Maeve in godforsaken Leyland all by herself.

In the wake of Inverly's destruction, the House of Ministers recruited specialists to try to repair the Written Door connecting Leyland and Barrow. The effort was intended to help those stranded in the wrong world to return home, but nothing came of it. Now the only people able to cross between Leyland and Barrow were couriers trained in the magical art of scriptomancy, delivering precious letters to those desperate to hear from their loved ones.

Maeve never hoped for a letter herself. Everyone she loved had been in Inverly.

Tears burned the backs of her eyes, and the memories of that afternoon threatened to swallow her. When Mr. Braithwaite failed to stop his weeping, Maeve couldn't stand it anymore. She unwrapped a sheet of tissue from around a quill and tossed it to him, then turned to face the wall.

Breathe, she told herself.

Mr. Braithwaite didn't mention Inverly again, thankfully. He wiped his cheeks, then stepped to his worktable, where he proceeded to open today's copy of the *Herald* and give Maeve a rundown of the news, along with his delightfully pessimistic commentary.

Professor's Row was being repaved—*two years too late!* The Leyland campus of the university hired new faculty—but *they were all snobs with wallets bigger than their brains*. A tavern in Old Town caught fire, but no one was hurt—a *miracle considering the festering buildings*. On and on it went.

"Ah. There's actually something interesting from the Otherwhere Post," he said.

Maeve glanced up. The paper was opened to the back page, where Postmaster Byrne's newsletter was printed weekly.

"Would you look at this. Old Byrne has announced that the backlog of letters from the months after the Written Doors burned are finally being sent out. My sister wrote me from Barrow some twenty times all those years ago. Wouldn't it be something to get her letters now?"

"Without a doubt." At least Maeve knew that none of those old letters were for her.

"It's good the Post finally sorted out their disastrous infrastructure. God knew how hard it was for Byrne to find enough couriers

he could teach to scribe. I heard it's one in a hundred that can pull off the magic."

It was one in three hundred, but she didn't correct him. The talk of scriptomancy caused her palms to sweat.

He flipped the page. "One of these days, I'd like to see exactly how scriptomancy works."

"It would be a sight to behold," she said, hoping Mr. Braithwaite would drop it. Already, images of her father with a quill between his fingers poured across her mind.

Scriptomancy is the art of enchanting any piece of existing handwriting, from a penned novel to a scribbled grocery list, he always told her with a twinkle in his eye. He was a skilled scriptomancer, and had promised to teach her the art "one day soon," whatever that had meant. Then he'd given her journals and asked her to fill them, said that scriptomancy required a deep understanding of linguistics and chirography before you were ever allowed to practice. She'd listened fiercely because she'd loved him more than anything in the worlds. Things had certainly changed.

Maeve shoved her father from her mind and set about carving quills. A few minutes passed, and the shop grew strangely silent. Mr. Braithwaite hadn't made another peep. It was unlike him. Worried something had happened, she turned to find him regarding her with a bewildered frown.

"What did I do now?" She hadn't cracked a feather or spilled any ink. The front counter was as neat as a pin.

"You're leaving in a week."

"Yes, I know. We discussed it yesterday."

His expression turned grim. "I won't be able to replace you, and I don't like it."

"Sure you will. You'll hire a brawny stock boy who likes to smile and can name more parchment substrates than I can."

"They won't be half as capable."

"That's utter nonsense." She had neat writing, certainly, and above-average organization, but she couldn't upsell a customer to save her life. She always tried, though, rather awkwardly.

"Ill-tempered as you may be, you have no idea of the treasure you are to me."

A treasure? Maeve glanced at his worktable to make sure he hadn't accidentally inhaled anything, but there were no uncorked solvents.

He called her a treasure, but the reality was, she was a liability. Her father's legacy made sure of that.

Her eyes dropped to the fine blue veins threading the inside of her wrist. She often wondered if the potential for murder was passed through blood, if evil lurked inside of her now. Even if it didn't, she was still a risk to Mr. Braithwaite. Her father's crimes were so disgraceful that everyone in Leyland had reason to hate him. If anyone discovered her identity, this shop would be tainted by association, and nobody would come in. Mr. Braithwaite would lose the shop, the flat above it, even the shirt on his back, and it would be her fault for not quitting sooner. The past eight months had already been too long.

The front door opened, and the grocer's wife, Mrs. Findlay, bustled inside with a steaming loaf for Mr. Braithwaite tucked beneath her homespun cloak. She dusted a drop of rainwater from the tip of her pink nose. Her inquisitive eyes pierced Maeve. "Ah, Isla. I spotted you from my shop window running in late. Did something happen?"

Half the neighborhood was too nosy for their own good.

Maeve held up her quill knife. "Would you look at how dull this is? I'll need to sharpen it in the back straightaway."



MR. BRAITHWAITE RETIRED to his upstairs flat at six o'clock sharp, leaving Maeve to lock up at seven. By half past six, rain lashed the windows. Maeve doubted any customer would brave a storm for a dram of ink, but she'd been asked to stay, and she needed her final week's pay.

Shucking off her boots, she sidled into the stained shop chair and opened her latest journal until the spine made a satisfying crack.

She drew a contented sigh through her nose.

Regardless of her complicated feelings toward scriptomancy, Maeve kept up with journaling. At first, she used it to record the black thoughts about her father that wouldn't let her sleep at night. But she eventually grew to need the calming feel of parchment against her palms. Now it was the only piece of her past that she wasn't willing to part with. Her life often felt like a violent ocean tossing her about, but writing gave her a foothold. A moment to catch her breath.

Mr. Braithwaite thought it strange she had so much to say with ink, considering she volunteered so little with her mouth, but on the page, her words always spilled out in a torrent of meticulous lettering.

Maeve dipped a quill into a thimbleful of lampblack ink, then filled pages with her hopes for her trip south, including a detailed description of her future perennial garden—nestled against a sloped yard, like her aunt's garden in Inverly, with each flower carefully chosen to attract bees and butterflies. The outside world

faded as if she were in the clutches of a spell, her presence trapped between quill and parchment.

Her eyes snapped up at a rumble of thunder. The sky had darkened to pitch. Time to go. Maeve locked the shop, then started the long walk back to her flat.

Clouds smothered the moon. The dim gas lamps lining Alewick's main avenue barely illuminated the streets. She flipped up her collar to shield her neck from the wind off the ocean.

"You there!" someone shouted.

Maeve spun to face a hulking silhouette carved by lamplight. A man with a satchel slung across his chest. His grizzled beard twisted in the wind, and his black cloak billowed around him, a storm made corporeal.

There was nowhere to run—they were alone together on the street.

The man strode toward her, and Maeve backed away until her heel caught on a cobble. She braced herself, expecting him to pull a knife.

He held up an envelope instead.

Maeve blinked in surprise. "You're an otherwhere courier."

"I am," he said in a voice half-swallowed by the wind. "This is for you. It's one of the letters from after the doors burned. Seven years late, but hopefully it will still mean something."

The envelope was old and tattered and entirely blank.

But it couldn't be for her. "Are you positive you have the right person?"

He grumbled and forced the letter into her hand. She tried to give it back, but he shook his head. "Like I said, it's for *you*."

Maeve nodded in disbelief. Everyone knew otherwhere couriers never delivered a letter to the wrong person. It simply was not

done. Regardless of the facts, it seemed impossible that the letter was for her; she'd thought everyone who knew her had been lost in Inverly. This envelope, however, meant that she might be wrong.

She paused at the thought. All the letters posted after the Written Doors burned were from lost family members trying to find one another.

Tears sprang to her eyes, and a confusing tide of emotions moved through her: surprise, pain, then a sharp longing that caught her off guard. It slipped beneath her breastbone, pressing like a blade against her heart.

A black wax seal sat on the envelope's fold, embossed with a bead-eyed pigeon holding a scribing quill in its sharpened talons: the emblem of the Otherwhere Post.

"Goodnight, miss," the courier called, then slid into the night.

Not wanting to waste another second, Maeve severed the seal, cracking the pigeon at the neck. She scrambled to unfold the letter.

Dear Maeve,

I'm a childhood friend of your father's. He visited me in Leyland in those final days and told me a secret that changes everything. Meet me at the mouth of Edding's Close on the first of the month. Your father was innocent, and you deserve to hear the truth.

—an old friend