CHAPTER 1

The academy admitted the six witches and refused to admit their luggage.

Behind the clerk, on a table polished almost white with use, lay the letter Sorrel had carried north for eleven days. It had survived rain, a leaking flask and Letha sitting on it. Apparently it would take more than that to get a box of roots through a gate.

“Research materials,” Sorrel said.

“I understand.” He turned the inventory towards her. “They have been entered as household supplies.”

“Can you enter them differently?”

“Not a declaration made at the border.”

Water dripped from the bottom of Letha's crate onto his floor.

He looked down.

“It needs watering,” Letha said. “Usually at the other end.”

Sorrel crouched by the corner the timber had pinched open. A root lay trapped under the strap. She freed it and waited for the tip to turn towards the damp pad of her finger before she drew it a little farther. Her mother would have called that an avvell, small as it was. The trick was knowing which way the root meant to go before you interfered. Her mother still carried the worst of Sorrel’s early efforts out back when visitors came.

“Hold this.”

While Letha held the strap, Sorrel loosened the knot, tucked a fold of wet cloth into the gap and retied it. The dripping slowed. Behind them, Bessil set down the trunk of surveying tools with a thump.

They had been standing since dawn. There was dust inside Sorrel's stockings.

“The specimens are approved,” the clerk said as she stood. “It’s the containers. They’re in the wrong category.”

Beyond the inner gate, the words Academy of Six Measures ran the width of a lintel. Sorrel could see one of the survey rooms from here. Somewhere behind that great sheet of glass were the garden books she’d been asking to see for two years. In later copies the witches who made them had quite disappeared.

She could give the man another five minutes. “Could I see that, please?”

She held her hand out for the inventory.

He let her take it.

“These are the same six cases.” Sorrel pointed to the list. “The officer counted the boxes separately. Can you accept them as packaging?”

He read the page again, then rang for someone to inspect the seals.

Letha sat down on her crate before he could suggest opening it.

While they waited, Sorrel moved aside for two students carrying long practice staffs. One glanced at the wet patch on the floor, then at the little bunch of dried flowers tied to Letha's bag. He smiled to his companion. Neither said anything.

That was going to be the worst of it, Sorrel thought. Not enough insult to answer. Just enough to make answering look foolish.

An older porter came in from the yard, wiping his hands on his trousers. “Exchange?” he asked.

“Eventually,” Letha said.

He bent to check the seals. He did it without asking why they needed so much dirt, which earned him Sorrel's immediate goodwill.

“Greenhouse cases go round the east,” he said. “Though they've moved half the stores again. If someone tells you the copper cupboard's in the old house, don't believe them.”

“Again?” Sorrel asked.

“Repairs.” He straightened with a small grunt. “Always repairs. Which of these goes to your rooms?”

“All but the two marked in green.”

“There we are.” The clerk brought his pen down decisively. “Packing.”

Sorrel took the admission papers before he changed his mind and turned over the narrow grey card tucked inside.

The space beneath Archive permission was empty.

“When do we get our research passes?”

“After assessment.”

“Our research proposals have already been accepted.”

“Yes. This is the practical assessment.” He tapped tomorrow's date. “You'll find it on the schedule.”

There it was on the schedule, between the welcome address and luncheon. Nobody had mentioned that their access depended on it.

“And if our assessment isn't considered suitable?”

“The registrar will advise you.”

Letha stood. “We'll ask the registrar.”

Sorrel folded the papers and put them away.

Outside, the air was warm and smelled of clipped grass. A pair of students passed them arguing over whether an eight was a respectable reserve if the person

carrying it had no precision at all. One said precision could be taught. The other said that was what everyone with a six said.

On the wall opposite the gate hung a board filled with names and numbers. Students had gathered beneath it, pointing, laughing, looking for themselves.

Sorrel stopped long enough to find the heading.

COMBAT STANDING.

Sorrel found herself looking for a witch's name before remembering that they were the first.

“Rooms first?” Letha asked.

Sorrel checked the directions on the back of the grey card. “Registry. It closes at four.”

“We've got until tomorrow.”

“To find out what happens tomorrow.”

Letha considered arguing, then held out her hand. “Give me your bag.”

“It's heavy.”

“I had noticed, yes. You kept putting it on my feet in the carriage.”

Sorrel surrendered it. With the weight gone, her shoulder ached in a new place.

“Eat something,” Letha called after her.

Sorrel found the last flattened plum in her pocket and ate it on the way.

The shortest route to the registry passed through a training court.

The longer route ended at a locked door. Sorrel returned to the court, checked the Registry sign and stepped beneath the arch.

Lightning struck the paving six feet in front of her.

She stopped.

The crack reached her a moment later, hard enough to hurt her ears. A bright white line ran over the stones and vanished into a metal strip at the edge of the court. The air smelled scorched.

“Outside the rope,” someone called.

There was a rope. It lay at her feet, where one of its supporting posts had been knocked over.

Sorrel stepped back under the arch.

At the centre of the court, a man in a dark sleeveless training coat lowered his hands. His hair was so pale that for a moment she thought the light had changed its colour. Then he turned towards her and it stayed pale, falling untidily over his forehead.

“Stop the frame,” he called, already coming towards her. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Sorrel pointed to the rope. “That was down.”

“It shouldn't have been. I'm sorry.”

A woman sitting on the low perimeter wall slid down and righted the fallen post.

“You can cross now,” he said. “We're stopped.”

Sorrel glanced past him at the frame. “What were you trying to hit?”

He followed her gaze. “The centre target. It's easier to show you.”

“The registry closes at four.”

“It takes a minute. Or you can go through.”

Sorrel stayed beneath the arch. “A minute, then.”

He waited until she was clear of the rope before returning to his place.

At the far end of the court, iron discs swung on chains from a wooden frame. When the woman on the wall lifted a flag, he sent a fine white strike between the first two, catching another disc Sorrel hadn't seen at all.

His left foot moved. The next bolt passed through the gap made by the swinging chains.

He wasn't following the targets. He knew where they would be.

Sorrel forgot the registry for several seconds.

At the midsummer fairs she had seen sheets of flame, coloured fountains, a man who could lift his own cart provided nobody asked him to keep it level. Here she could follow each decision: the shift of his weight, the small turn of his wrist. All that power, and he was using only what he needed.

The last disc spun sideways. He let the bolt die rather than follow it into the wall.

“Missed,” the woman said.

“Your chain's twisted.”

“A tragic thing to happen to a champion.”

“I shall write to someone.”

She laughed and began lowering the frame.

He came towards the arch, breathing a little harder now. Up close, the neat movements had a physical cost: sweat darkened the collar of his coat, and a muscle in his forearm kept shifting as he flexed his hand.

Sorrel realised she was looking at it. She looked at his face instead, which was not much of an improvement.

“Through there.” He pointed to a narrow door beyond the court. “Turn left. If you reach the stairs, you've missed it.”

“Thank you.”

She took two steps before he said, “You're one of the exchange witches.”

It was not a question, but she stopped anyway.

He was looking at the green cord around her field cloth. Her chalk, knife and prepared thread were all she had kept when Letha took her bag.

“Sorrel Orrel.”

“Alban.”

He offered his hand. She took it before thinking about the lightning. His palm was warm and dry at the centre, his fingers cooler than she expected.

“Does that take long to put together?” he asked, nodding at the cloth.

“Depends what I need it for.”

“I've always wondered what you do if something happens before you've prepared.”

“Such as?”

“Someone attacks you.”

“I'd probably object.”

He smiled. “With the thread?”

Sorrel let go of his hand. “If it was convenient.”

“I only meant it seems a great deal to carry around.”

“All your magic is inside you?”

“More or less.”

“And you carry it everywhere?”

“Yes.”

“That seems less convenient.”

The woman at the frame made a small sound. Alban glanced over his shoulder at her, then back at Sorrel.

“At least I don't have to unpack it.”

“No. You just need the right footing.” She glanced at his hands. “And all of that.”

He looked at her more closely. “You were watching.”

“You were standing in the way.”

“For a minute.”

“It was quite a long minute.”

The far bell began to sound.

Sorrel swore, turned and crossed the court. Behind her, Alban said something to the woman, but Sorrel had no intention of staying to hear it.

The registry door stood open. A clerk was pulling down a blind.

“Please,” Sorrel said, before he could shut it. “One question.”

He looked past her to the clock. Then he let go of the blind. “One.”

She put her grey card on his desk. “What exactly is tomorrow's practical assessment?”

“We measure your reserve and how well you use it. The standard assessment.”

“Internal reserve?”

“Yes.”

“We're witches.”

“I'm aware.”

“Then the first measure won't tell you much.”

“Everyone takes the same assessment.” He said it with the satisfaction of a man offering a perfectly fair arrangement.

Sorrel tried again. “Is there a practical demonstration afterwards?”

“Mixed exercises in the afternoon.”

“And those count towards our access applications?”

“That will be for the assessors to decide.”

He drew the card back towards himself, checked its number and wrote on the reverse.

PROVISIONAL.

“Bring this with you at nine. You don't want to be late.”

On her way back, Sorrel found the training court empty. The ropes were tied properly now, and the swinging discs had been stilled.

She stopped beside the place where the first bolt had struck. The stone was not cracked. There was only a pale scuff, little wider than her thumb.

He could have put it anywhere.

For some reason, that annoyed her almost as much as the question about the thread.

Letha had found their room, unpacked both bags and discovered that the washroom produced hot water without anyone having to carry it upstairs.

“We can stay,” she said when Sorrel came in.

Sorrel shut the door with her heel. “I'm glad that's settled.”

There were two beds, a narrow desk and a window overlooking the eastern gardens. Someone had put flowers in a jar on the sill. They were not the ones from Letha's bag.

For a moment Sorrel simply stood there. She had expected a storeroom with beds in it. Perhaps three beds, if the academy had been especially economical. Instead,

the sheets were clean, the floor had been swept and there was a small cake of soap folded into a towel on each pillow.

She sat down carefully on the nearer bed.

“Did you eat?” Letha asked.

“A plum.”

Letha handed her a plate from the desk. There was bread, cheese and half a pear.

“Where's the other half?”

“A fee for carrying your bag.”

Sorrel ate the cheese before answering.

Letha waited until the bread was nearly gone. “How bad?”

Sorrel gave her the card. “Tomorrow should be humiliating,” she said.

Letha set the card on the desk. “Can we find out first? Before we decide they brought us here to humiliate us?”

“I don't think that.”

Letha looked at her.

“Not all of them,” Sorrel amended.

A knock came at the open adjoining door. Nerine leaned around it, holding a roll of paper under one arm and a spoon in her other hand.

“There's soup downstairs. And this came with the welcome things. Is it any use?”

She put the roll on the desk. Letha helped her spread it flat while Sorrel finished the pear.

It was a map of the academy grounds. The gardens were far larger than Sorrel had expected: glasshouses, a walled orchard and long experimental beds.

She bent over the eastern boundary. “That's odd.”

“What?” Nerine asked.

“The drainage turns here.” Sorrel traced it with a clean finger. “But the ground slopes the other way.”

“Could be built up.”

“Could be.”

The oldest glasshouse narrowed to a point at either end. Students had written Long Glass along one side in three different hands, as though the draftsman might still get the message. Beneath it was a blank rectangle. No foundation, no channel, no reason for the line to stop.

In the copied surveys at home, that part of the grounds had contained a witch boundary garden. Sorrel had spent one entire winter trying to reconstruct it from a later elemental plan. The writer had labelled three of its working marks decoration.

She knew the frustration of trying to tell whether a dead scholar had misunderstood something or simply thought it beneath his notice.

Here, somewhere, was the original.

Nerine tapped the map. “You can ask tomorrow.”

“After we show them how little magic we have.”

“Sorrel.”

“I know.” She moved back from the desk. “Sorry. I'm tired.”

Nerine accepted that without requiring an improved mood. “Soup helps.”

It did. So did sitting with the other witches in the small common room while the windows darkened and someone downstairs attempted a song with considerably more enthusiasm than skill.

Bessil had spread her orchard survey beside her bowl. The paper was worn at the folds, repaired twice with strips from an older map.

“They have the missing northern section here,” she said, following the torn edge with a finger. “If I can copy it, we can stop telling the valley growers that the water disappears somewhere beyond the hill.”

“Perhaps it does,” Mave said.

“Water doesn't become mysterious because the surveyor went home.”

Mave grinned and shifted her small balance away from the bowls. It measured flow through a working. She had packed it so carefully that her clothes had travelled in a sack. It was older than Sorrel, repaired by Mave herself; tomorrow she would find out how it compared with the academy’s instruments.

At the other end of the table, Illa held a small stone between her palms. She passed it to Nerine, who sighed as its stored warmth reached her fingers.

“Road crews,” Illa said when Sorrel looked over. “That's what I put in the proposal. The academy has three kinds of weather shelter and none of them help someone who can't stop working to get inside one.”

“You'll have to get the stone back from her first,” Bessil said.

Nerine tucked it against her sore shoulder. “Research takes time.”

Sorrel moved her kit aside to give Bessil room to flatten the survey. She had spent the journey imagining the doors she needed opened.

Bessil needed those doors too. All of them did.

By the time the bowls were empty, Sorrel could explain the assessment without sounding as though she meant to overthrow it.

“The afternoon exercises matter,” she said. “That's where we show them what the morning leaves out.”

“If they let us,” Letha said.

“I'll ask.”

“Politely.”

“I can ask things politely.”

“You can. Sometimes you choose not to.”

Sorrel let that stand. She unrolled her field cloth on the cleared table and checked the chalk for cracks. One stick had snapped during the journey. She kept both pieces.

They settled on a boundary repair, a working they knew, with a result the assessors could see. Sorrel left room on the table for the others’ kits.

“You don't have to answer every question,” Letha said quietly while the others gathered what they needed.

Sorrel looked up. “There are six of us.”

“I know.”

“Let it show.”

Sorrel folded the spare chalk into a scrap of cloth and pushed it towards her. Letha tucked it into her own kit.

Later, alone at the desk while Letha washed, Sorrel turned the provisional card over in her hands.

She thought of the man in the court, carrying a storm under his skin and wondering what she could do with a piece of thread.

He had stopped his last strike when the target moved wrong. She had liked that. She wished he had not spoiled it by speaking.

From the window she could see the nearest glasshouse catching the light of the rising moon. Beyond it, the dark shapes of the older buildings crowded close together. For two years she had imagined working here. Now she could hear water moving somewhere beneath the garden and could not tell where it went.

She put the provisional card inside her kit, beside the short pieces of chalk. If the assessment said she had almost no magic, she would ask them to watch what she could do with it.

CHAPTER 2

The needle lifted, trembled and settled so close to nothing that the assessor bent to check it.

Sorrel kept her hand on the plate.

“Again, please,” the assessor said.

“That is it.”

“Make sure you're drawing from your full reserve.”

“I am.”

From the benches behind her came the sound of someone trying not to laugh. Sorrel concentrated on the small crescent of dirt beneath the assessor's thumbnail. It helped to have something ordinary to look at.

“Point four,” he told the recording clerk.

The clerk wrote it down.

Sorrel had rehearsed explanations while putting on her boots. None of them had included the laughter.

“May I ask what the plate draws from?”

Master Oskel seemed genuinely glad to have them. He’d taken such pains explaining the six measures that Sorrel had had to wipe her palm on her skirt before she touched the plate. At least the clerk had got her name right beside that miserable four-tenths.

“Your available internal power.”

“Then the measure is correct.”

“Yes.”

“But it won't tell you how I work.”

He hesitated. “We allow for differences in training.”

“Training won’t change it.” Sorrel took her hand off the plate. “You’ve measured the bucket. I work with the spring.”

“The source has to be available under controlled conditions.”

“There are roots under this floor.” Sorrel put her fingertips to a seam between the flags. A hair of green had come through it. She felt the fine white root beneath it take up moisture, then ease sideways into the damp mortar. The plate stayed at point four.

“We don't include external resources in the reserve measure.”

“Then please put that beside the result.”

The recording clerk stopped writing.

Oskel looked towards the long table where two observers sat. One was reading the next assessment form. The other had listened throughout without interrupting.

“A reasonable qualification,” the second man said. “Measures internal reserve only. It already says so in the protocol.”

He was grey-haired and plainly dressed, with a small patch of ink on the side of one finger. He spoke to the clerk, not to the room, and the room became quieter anyway.

“Of course, Scholar Dey,” Oskel said.

The clerk added the words.

The number stayed. But so did the qualification, in the clerk’s small, neat hand. Sorrel thanked them both and moved on.

Containment was better: she held their little charge inside a chalk ring without losing it. Then came more tests of power she barely stored, and an argument over

whether her damp strip of linen counted as equipment. By the last station, a headache was starting behind one eye.

Letha took her place at the plate. Point six. She turned to Sorrel with an expression of exaggerated triumph, and Sorrel had to bite back a laugh.

It helped more than it should have.

Several of the academy students wore bronze field-service pins. One had brought a child, who sat with a caretaker near the door. They were older than Sorrel had first thought. This was the advanced cohort; these marks would follow them into jobs, onto estates, into royal service.

So would hers.

She sat on the end of a bench and wrote down the objections she had not managed to make aloud. Halfway through the second one, a shadow fell across the page.

“Point four?” Alban asked.

Sorrel looked up at him.

“Good morning to you too.”

“Sorry. I heard the result.”

He was dressed properly today, in a dark coat fastened to the throat. This ought to have made him less distracting. It did not. The pale hair was still untidy, as though he had pushed it back with wet hands and hoped that would do.

“Most people did,” she said.

He sat down a careful distance away. “Was the plate wrong?”

“No.”

“Then how much can you do without preparing first?”

Sorrel closed her notebook.

“You really do want an answer to that.”

“I wouldn't keep asking otherwise.”

Somehow the absence of mockery was worse. She wanted him to stop asking about the number, and he was waiting as though she could explain herself if only she tried.

She looked towards the open window. Rain had collected along the outer sill. Beneath the wall, somewhere she could not see, ivy roots held the wet earth together. She let her attention rest there and borrowed enough movement to bring one drop of water through the window.

It landed on the back of Alban's hand.

He looked at it.

“Quite a dangerous drop.”

“I didn't want you to think I was showing off.”

He wiped it away with his thumb. “Could you have brought in more?”

“Yes.”

“How much more?”

“How long is it going to rain?”

For once, he did not answer immediately.

At the next station, a student sent a hard blue flare into the receiving bowl. The room applauded. Alban turned to watch, and Sorrel opened her notebook again.

After a moment he said, “The afternoon exercise will be different.”

“I hope so.”

“It's a ward repair.”

She looked at him. “How do you know?”

“I helped break it.”

That sounded likely enough. Sorrel decided not to say so.

He got up as Oskel called the next name. Before leaving, he tapped the edge of her notebook with one finger.

“Don't bring the rain indoors. He'll spend twenty minutes deciding which column it belongs in.”

She almost smiled at him.

Almost was plenty.

The damaged ward held a shallow sheet of water three feet above a stone basin.

Every few seconds the water tipped towards one corner and dragged a floating wooden marker with it. If the ward failed, Oskel said, the marker would drop and their exercise would be over.

“The basin catches the water,” he added, as though he had noticed Sorrel inspecting the floor. “Nobody needs to be heroic.”

Five working tables stood along the covered yard, each with its own version of the same problem. The witches had been divided among the elemental students. Sorrel was paired with a tall woman named Cairis and a broad-shouldered man who introduced himself as Pello while pushing his sleeves up.

“What did you score?” he asked.

“Very little,” Sorrel said.

Cairis gave him a look. “Can we inspect the ward first?”

They could. Oskel allowed five minutes before the clock began.

Sorrel crouched beside the basin. Chalk marks covered a copper band fitted around the lip. One had been rubbed away; another had a neat little cut through its middle. Both were obvious enough to be invitations.

“There,” Pello said, pointing to the cut.

“Maybe,” Sorrel said.

He was already reaching for the working chalk. “Containment's broken.”

“The water's still contained.”

“Badly.”

“Yes. But where does it go when it tips?”

Cairis leaned in. The water shivered above their heads.

“Left. Back. Left again.”

Sorrel felt beneath the rim. Two marks had been joined that should have stayed separate, trapping the power in a loop.

At the centre of the yard, Oskel rang a small bell.

Pello put his hand over the cut and released a steady white glow. The water levelled.

“There,” he said.

The marker spun once. Cairis frowned.

“It hasn't stopped moving.”

“I can hold it.”

“We aren't meant to hold it,” Sorrel said. “We're meant to repair it.”

Pello did not answer. He had begun breathing through his mouth.

At the next table, a basin emptied itself with a terrific splash. Someone swore. Oskel called that the exercise was over for that group and asked them to move back.

Sorrel kept watching the marker.

“Let go,” she told Pello.

“It'll fall.”

“It's going to fall if you keep doing that.”

He gave her a short, irritated glance. The light in his hand brightened.

“Cairis, lower the left edge a little when Pello lets go,” Sorrel said. “I need to break this join.”

Cairis looked at Sorrel’s hand beneath the rim, then nodded.

“That's the containment mark,” Pello said.

Sorrel shook her head. “This one is.” She touched the intact mark beside it. “They're joined. They shouldn't be.”

Applause broke out across the yard. Sorrel heard Alban’s voice, but the water over her head was tipping again.

It began to bulge.

“Pello,” Cairis said. “Try it.”

He pulled his hand back. For an instant the whole sheet sagged. Cairis steadied the falling edge while Sorrel rubbed away the false join, then finished the return with one short stroke across the curve.

The water dropped.

Pello lunged forward. White light flared in his hand.

“Don't,” Sorrel said.

He stopped with his fingers almost touching the copper.

A narrow stream fell into the basin. The rest of the water held, now lower than before. The marker floated without spinning.

Sorrel kept two fingers against the damp stone and guided a little power through the repair. The copper warmed. The last uneven tremor disappeared.

She lifted her hand.

Nobody moved for several seconds.

“That's it?” Pello asked.

Sorrel looked up at the water. “I think so.”

Cairis reached out and touched the copper band. She followed the marks with her finger, stopping at the place Sorrel had rubbed clean.

“You changed the path.”

“It was running round the same little loop. More power just made it run faster.”

Pello looked at his hand, then at the water. He did not apologise. After a moment he handed Sorrel a clean cloth from the edge of the table.

Her thumb was covered in chalk and copper grime.

“Thank you,” she said.

Oskel came over with the observers. Alban stood behind them, near enough that Sorrel could see the small nick beside his thumbnail. She wondered whether he had caught it on the frame yesterday. Then she wished her mind would find something more useful to do.

“Who supplied the holding power?” Oskel asked.

“Pello first,” Cairis said. “Then I lowered the water. Sorrel repaired the return.”

Oskel leaned over to inspect it.

“You removed a working line.”

“A wrong one,” Sorrel said.

He studied it for another moment. “Yes. That would do it.”

Scholar Dey asked whether she had recognised the pattern from previous work.

“A millrace,” she said. “Not with water in the air. The return had silted up.”

“Where?”

“South of Orrel village.”

He wrote that down. A place and a repair, rather than a number.

“An effective traditional remedy,” Oskel said to the clerk.

Sorrel's pleasure faded a little.

“It uses the same return principle,” she said. “Your ward already had it.”

Oskel looked at her, then at the band. “Yes. It did.”

He corrected the wording before the clerk finished writing.

Across the yard, Letha caught Sorrel's eye and lifted both damp sleeves. Her team's water was still in the air, though apparently some of it had made an earlier escape. Sorrel smiled at her.

When she turned back, Alban was studying the repaired mark.

“You knew before he added power,” he said.

“I suspected.”

“You sounded fairly certain.”

“He wasn't listening when I sounded uncertain.”

Alban glanced at Pello, who was helping Cairis empty their basin.

“You could have told me yesterday that the thread wasn't the important part.”

“I tried.”

He opened his mouth, reconsidered and closed it.

She put the short piece of chalk back in her kit. He was still studying the repair when she left.

The chalk would not come out from beneath Sorrel's thumbnail.

At the yard pump, Letha read their amended cards aloud: supervised use of the lower practice rooms, common collection, east greenhouse. Still no historical archives. Sorrel scrubbed at her thumb, then took the catalogue request Letha held out. A desk number. Tomorrow morning.

“One door,” Letha said.

“Three, if we count the greenhouse.”

“That's better.”

“He changed the report,” Sorrel said.

“Who?”

“Oskel. When I asked.”

Letha waited.

“I know. I was being unfair last night.”

“A little.”

“You don't have to enjoy that so much.”

“I've had a difficult morning. Let me have something.”

Sorrel nudged her aside with her shoulder and let her use the pump.

At the other end of the yard, Scholar Dey was helping the clerk sort the damaged copper bands. He stopped her sending them to stores and wrote an instruction in the supply book.

“Which one was he?” Sorrel asked.

Letha followed her gaze. “Dey. Halric, I think. He wrote the article you hated about boundary gardens.”

“I didn't hate it.”

“You wrote six pages in the margin.”

“I disagreed with six pages of it.”

“Then you'll have plenty to talk about.”

Sorrel watched him hand the book back. He had asked about the mill as though the answer might matter. That had mattered to her.

Alban came out of the covered walk carrying one of the empty basins against his hip. A student called him over. He set the basin down and stopped to listen, pushing his pale hair out of his eyes.

“You know who that is?” Letha asked.

“Yes. We met.”

“And?”

“And he has questions about witchcraft.”

Letha made a noise that suggested this did not begin to describe him.

Sorrel dried her hands. “What?”

“Alban Ors. King Teren's son.”

Sorrel looked back across the yard.

He was laughing at something the student had said. A few minutes ago she had been pleased with herself for making him stop talking.

“The king's son is Iven Raithe.”

“The heir is Iven. Alban is his younger brother.”

“Half-brother?”

“Yes. The king acknowledged him, but he wasn't married to Alban's mother. Ors is her name.”

Sorrel folded the damp cloth more carefully than she needed to. “Nobody said.”

“They probably thought you knew.”

He had said Alban. She could hardly accuse him of lying. Still, some warning would have been useful before she told a king’s son that he carried his magic inconveniently. Probably.

Across the yard, he looked over and caught her staring.

Sorrel looked away too late.

“Oh,” Letha said.

“No.”

“I didn't say anything.”

“You were going to.”

Letha took the cloth from her and hung it over the pump rail. “Come on. Nerine found someone who can show us the greenhouse.”

Sorrel followed her towards the arch. Beneath her kit, the returned catalogue request was beginning to crumple. She smoothed it out.

No permission yet. But a desk, a time and someone to ask.

She put it away before Alban could reach them.

He had come to collect the basin. Nothing to do with her at all.

“Orrel,” he said as she passed. “Bring the thread next time.”

She turned her head.

“I'd like to see it.”

She could not decide whether that was another joke. For once, she hoped it wasn't.

CHAPTER 3

The original garden catalogue was twelve feet from Sorrel, on the other side of a locked grille.

She recognised the title and the handwriting on its spine. Edda Renn had labelled the surviving southern volume the same way, with the last letters crowded together as though she had been surprised by the end of the leather.

Sorrel had spent a winter reading that woman's notes. Now the next volume stood close enough to touch if somebody would move the key.

“Your card allows the common collection,” the archivist said.

“I understand. That's why I brought the application.”

“And I've entered it.”

“How long does approval usually take?”

The archivist took off her spectacles. “Usually a week. I don’t know yet for an exchange request. I’m afraid you can’t read it here until then either.”

It was harder to be angry with someone who sounded sorry.

Sorrel set her bag on the floor. “Could I have the collection rules, then?”

While the archivist fetched the rules, Sorrel searched the public catalogue. Alterations. Improvements. Changes to water supply. A hundred years reduced to things that had happened somewhere. She turned back a page and tried again.

“Orrel?”

Scholar Dey stood at the end of the counter with three thin folios under one arm.

Sorrel straightened. “Good morning.”

“The mill repair. You said south of the village?”

“About two miles. At the old crossing.”

“I know it. Or I did, a long time ago. The wheel used to run badly in winter.”

“It still does if the miller doesn't clear the intake.”

Dey smiled. “Some things survive every advance in scholarship.”

He set the folios down. His quiet voice made this feel like a conversation, not a lesson for the room.

“Halric,” he said. “There are too many scholars here to keep saying it.”

“Sorrel.”

“What are you looking for?”

She told him. He listened without glancing towards the grille until she reached the part about the old boundary garden.

“The northern survey,” he said. “I used it for an article some years ago.”

“I read it.”

“Did you?”

Sorrel hesitated. This was where Letha would usually come in, but Halric seemed quite prepared to wait for an answer.

“I don't think the three eastern marks were ornamental.”

His eyebrows lifted. “No?”

“Their spacing matches the water returns in the southern survey.”

“The soil conditions are quite different.”

“That would change the distance between them. Not necessarily what they did.”

He drew the public catalogue towards himself. Sorrel expected him to explain why she was wrong. Instead he turned to a page near the back. “Have you seen this one?”

It listed a later inventory of planting beds, available in the common collection. She had passed over it because it was a century too late.

“There’s an old sketch in the margin,” Halric said. “A copy, but you might find your marks.”

“Thank you.”

“If you find I'm wrong, I'd rather know.”

The archivist returned with the collection rules and a small stack of forms. She put the rules in front of Sorrel and the forms beside Halric's folios.

“The maintenance authorisations. I was going to send them over.”

“I'll take them.”

“And accounts are still asking about Mara Venn's copying fee. She hasn't collected it.”

He paused with his hand on the first form. “Has she sent an address?”

“Not to us.”

“Then leave it open. She'll need to be paid when she does.”

He signed the forms while Sorrel stepped aside.

“And the residence lantern,” the archivist said. “The exchange asked for it back.”

“Tell the practice steward to send it after tomorrow's evening exercises. Someone will be going that way.”

Sorrel was glad Nerine had remembered to ask. Their little lamp barely reached the far end of the garden.

Under his sleeve lay a plan of the eastern glasshouses. Red ink crossed out several rooms. At the Long Glass the draughtsman had drawn a narrow passage, right across the place where the line on her map gave out.

“Are the gardens closed?” she asked.

“Only the old service rooms. You should be able to use the main houses.” He looked at her application. “They've given the exchange students working space?”

“Yesterday.”

“Good.”

He gathered his folios without offering to take her application through the grille. Sorrel nearly asked him to. Then she copied the title he had given her instead.

The book he recommended was on an ordinary open shelf.

She found the copied sketch exactly where he had said it would be. There were the three marks, faint but intact, linked by a curve the later plan had omitted.

Sorrel sat down.

For the first time since reaching the academy, she stopped wondering whether coming had been a mistake.

By the time Sorrel reached the competition stands, Letha had saved her a place and lost it twice.

“I told you to come early.”

“You said before the first bout.”

“This is the third.”

Sorrel looked towards the arena. Two students were bowing to one another beside a scorched patch of sand. “Oh.”

Letha moved her bag off the bench. “Did you find something?”

Sorrel put her notebook on her knees and showed her the copied sketch. They bent over it while the crowd argued about the previous result.

“That's a return,” Letha said.

“I think so.”

“You know so.”

“I'd like to see the original before I start being unbearable about it.”

“A new policy.”

Sorrel closed the book as the next pair entered the arena.

Alban wore the dark training coat again, this time over a thin long-sleeved shirt. His opponent was the woman who had righted the rope in the practice court. Someone behind Sorrel shouted encouragement to her, calling her Dessa.

“She beat him last autumn,” Letha said.

“You know quite a lot about this.”

“People talk when you leave the library.”

A bell sounded. The two mages separated, moving towards opposite ends of the arena.

Sorrel had intended to study the boundary wards. Water channels carried heat away beneath the stands; a strip of exposed stone crossed the sandy arena. They were worth studying.

Then Dessa lifted both hands and the sand rose in a thick brown sheet.

Alban moved before it reached him. Lightning flashed across the nearest edge, bright enough to leave Sorrel blinking. By the time she could see properly, he was on the stone strip and Dessa had turned the lifted sand into three solid shapes that struck where he had been.

“Why didn't he break through?” Sorrel asked.

Letha leaned closer. “I don't know.”

The answer came a moment later. Dessa had left a narrow space between the shapes. It looked like a passage. It was not. When Alban sent a small strike into it, the sand closed with a sound Sorrel felt in her teeth.

He laughed. She could not hear it over the crowd, but she saw him do it.

Dessa did not laugh back.

Dessa drove him towards a pillar. His first two fingers spread, his wrist turned, and Sorrel followed the bolt as it skimmed the stone and burst against the ward at Dessa’s side.

Dessa turned to meet it.

That was what he had wanted. His next strike caught the loose sand behind her and threw it across her line of sight.

She stumbled. Only a little, but he was already moving.

Sorrel's fingers tightened on her notebook.

He could end it now. Even she could see that. Dessa had one hand up to protect her face and the other too far back to bring the sand between them.

Alban raised his arm.

One of the fallen shapes rolled against Dessa's heel. She lost her footing entirely.

The white light in his hand vanished.

He stepped in instead, caught her upper arm and kept her head from striking the stone. The bell sounded twice. The bout was over.

People cheered. Several complained that he had wasted a perfect finishing strike. Beside Sorrel, Letha stood to let a steward pass and asked whether the woman was hurt.

“She's fine,” the steward said. “He gets no additional points for burning someone who's already down.”

Below, Dessa had got to her feet. She brushed sand from her face and said something to Alban. He looked offended. She laughed at him, and he gave her a short bow before leaving the field.

Sorrel loosened her grip on the notebook.

“Good?” Letha asked.

“The water channels are clever.”

Letha looked at the closed book on her knees.

Sorrel opened it.

Two rows behind them, a man in a very fine green coat was making little effort to keep his voice down.

“A reserve like that. Shame about the name.”

His companion made a quiet sound of agreement.

“Iven's sound enough,” the first man continued. “But you do wonder what the king might have chosen, given the choice.”

Sorrel stopped writing.

At the far gate, Alban was pulling off one glove with his teeth. Another man waited for him there, dressed simply enough to pass for a visiting scholar except that the people around him kept making space.

He took the glove from Alban and slapped it lightly against his shoulder.

Alban said something. The man's face broke into a grin.

“Iven,” Letha murmured.

The prince caught Alban by the back of the neck and pulled him briefly close, forehead nearly touching his brother's. It was quick, familiar and entirely at odds with the discussion behind Sorrel.

When they separated, Iven handed the glove back and pointed towards the arena. Alban shook his head vigorously. They had the absorbed, mildly exasperated look of two people continuing an argument begun years earlier.

The man in green was still explaining their relationship to his companion.

Sorrel turned a page rather harder than necessary.

“What?” Letha asked.

“Nothing.”

Alban looked up. Sorrel kept her hand on the page, hoping he was looking at someone behind her.

He lifted his hand.

Sorrel gave a small answering wave.

He smiled at her, and she lowered her hand to the notebook. Too late to make the wave smaller.

Iven followed his gaze, said something and received an elbow in the ribs for his trouble.

“Water channels,” Letha said.

“I can still leave.”

“You could. He'd see you.”

Sorrel stayed for the next bout and made several perfectly useful notes.

The following evening, Sorrel was trying to fit a tracing of the old garden into the margin of her notebook when Letha took the book away.

“No.”

Sorrel held out her hand. “I'm nearly finished.”

“You said that before supper.”

“I was nearly finished before supper.”

“And now you have found something else.”

Unfortunately, that was the problem.

Letha closed the book around Sorrel's loose papers and put it on the highest shelf. The shelf was not beyond Sorrel's reach. The gesture was clear enough.

“Come outside.”

“Why?”

“We're doing a revelation.”

Sorrel stared at her. “Here?”

“Yes, here. There are six witches, an enclosed garden and nobody's aunt to tell us we're doing it wrong.”

“One of us will tell us we're doing it wrong.”

“Probably you.”

Sorrel leaned back in her chair. Beyond Letha, through the open door, she could see Nerine carrying a folded cloth towards the stairs. Two of the others followed with cups and a bottle wrapped in a damp towel.

Letha sat on the edge of the desk. “Sorrel, I want you there. One evening. The books will still be here.”

Sorrel looked at Letha's hands. A small red mark crossed one knuckle where a crate had caught her on the first day. Letha had spent the afternoon helping Nerine settle the cuttings, then treated a porter's burned palm with the supplies in her field case.

Sorrel had not asked whether she liked the greenhouse.

“How did the planting go?”

“Well.” Letha pulled the spoon out of Sorrel’s abandoned supper bowl and set it aside. “The north bed stays wet. We’ll move the feverleaf tomorrow.”

“I can help.”

“You can come outside tonight.”

Sorrel gave in.

The garden behind the residence was small enough to have been an afterthought. One side was a high stone wall, one the back of the house, and the remaining two were fenced with climbing roses that had nearly finished flowering. A narrow path ran through to a gate in the wall. Beyond it lay the service walk leading towards the practice courts.

Someone had put cushions on the dry paving. There was bread left from supper, sliced fruit and a small round mirror resting inside a copper rim.

Sorrel stopped when she saw the mirror.

“That's the one from home.”

“Of course,” Nerine said. “I wasn't putting it in the luggage cart.”

“You carried it on your lap for eleven days?”

“You carried three books about drains.”

“Boundaries.”

“I know. I sat beside you.”

Sorrel sat on the nearest cushion. The paving held the day's warmth through her skirt. For a few minutes they ate and discussed the academy's bread, which everyone

agreed needed more salt, and the hot water, about which there was no disagreement at all.

It was almost dark when Letha began setting out the thread.

“No names unless somebody wants to give one,” she said.

“No trying to force an answer,” Sorrel added.

“There she is.”

Sorrel accepted the teasing. At twenty-four she was old enough to know that refusing to be teased only made it last longer.

Nerine lifted the mirror and cleaned a mark from its rim with the corner of her sleeve.

“Does it matter that we're so far from home?” she asked.

“It doesn’t care where we are,” Letha said. “It shows an open link for a moment. Then it’s done.”

“And if there's no link?”

“We get to finish the bottle without embarrassing anyone.”

Sorrel hoped they would do that anyway. She took the loose end of thread when Letha offered it and felt the familiar small warmth against her fingers.

She had not thought about the library for nearly half an hour.

Then someone laughed beyond the garden wall, and a man's voice answered, close enough to be familiar.

Sorrel tightened her grip on the thread.

CHAPTER 4

The voice passed the gate and moved away.

Sorrel relaxed her hand.

“Don't strangle it,” Letha said. “It isn't alive.”

“I know.”

“Then pass it here.”

Sorrel surrendered the thread. Letha set the mirror flat on the paving and laid the thread around it in a loose circle, leaving a gap where the person taking a turn would sit.

Nerine lit the little lamp. Warm light spread over the cushions and caught on the copper rim. Beyond the garden, the academy was settling into its evening noises: doors closing, a cart travelling over cobbles, someone calling from an upstairs window to somebody who refused to hear.

“Who first?” Letha asked.

Mave lifted her hand, then put it down when everyone turned towards her.

“You don't have to say anything,” Nerine told her.

“You will, though.”

“Only if it's interesting.”

They laughed. Mave moved her cushion into the gap, picked up the two loose ends and held them between finger and thumb.

For a few seconds the mirror showed only the darkening sky. Then a pale line appeared across its surface. It moved like light on water, gathered near the copper rim and shaped itself into a man's face.

The face had a crooked nose and a look of permanent surprise.

“Oh,” Nerine said.

“No names,” Letha reminded her.

“I didn't say his name.”

“You said quite a lot with oh.”

Mave dropped the thread and covered the mirror with both hands. The face vanished.

“He repairs clocks,” she said after a moment, though nobody had asked.

Nerine nodded with such elaborate seriousness that the poor woman threw a cushion at her.

Sorrel laughed. She couldn't help it. The earnestness was worse than the teasing, and everyone knew it.

“It's a useful profession,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“You'd always know when to come home.”

The cushion hit Sorrel next.

They settled slowly. Another witch took a turn and produced nothing at all, which she accepted with visible relief. Nerine claimed that this was suspicious, but Letha said the mirror was allowed to have an uninteresting evening.

Sorrel reached for her cup.

“Your turn,” Letha said.

“I haven't finished this.”

“It will wait.”

“You go.”

“I went last time.”

“Last time was six months ago.”

“Then I've been patient.”

Sorrel put the cup down and moved into the gap. The paving beneath the mirror felt cooler than the stone beneath her cushion. She shifted her foot away from it.

“What if it shows somebody you don't want?” Nerine asked.

“Then you put the thread down,” Sorrel said.

“I meant afterward.”

Letha sat back on her hands. “You don't have to do anything. It's a feeling, not a contract.”

“It could be a mistake.”

“Most of my feelings have been mistakes.”

This earned her a few noises of agreement. Letha ignored them.

Letha nudged the thread towards Sorrel. “Look if you want to. You don’t owe the face in the glass anything.”

Sorrel picked up the ends. She had helped prepare the flax at home, working it until it could carry a little power. Her thumb found the small hard place where Nerine had repaired a break.

It was comforting to hold something she understood.

The copper rim warmed. Sorrel let her attention soften, aware of the roots beyond the paving and the slow draw of water up the roses. She borrowed no more than she needed.

“Don't concentrate on not thinking about anyone,” Letha said.

“I wasn't.”

“Good.”

Sorrel promptly began concentrating on not thinking about anyone.

The mirror remained dark.

A latch lifted behind her.

She turned, still holding the thread.

Alban stood in the open garden gate with a large covered lantern in one hand.

“Nerine?” he said. “They told me to bring this back here.”

Nerine got up. “Oh, good. I thought the practice steward had forgotten.”

“He did. I tripped over it.”

He handed it through the gate. The light from their little lamp reached his face, and he noticed Sorrel sitting inside the circle.

“Am I interrupting?”

“Yes,” Sorrel said.

“Only a revelation,” Letha said at the same time.

Alban looked at the mirror. “What does it reveal?”

“An excellent reason for you to leave,” Sorrel said.

He held up his empty hand. “Fair enough.”

He had almost turned away when Nerine asked whether the steward had fixed their own lamp.

“Not yet. They're borrowing one from the west court tomorrow.”

“They can keep ours another day.”

“No, you'll need it. The lower rooms have dreadful lighting.” He glanced at Sorrel. “You're using them, aren't you?”

“Apparently we're qualified for rooms.”

The words came out sharper than she intended.

Alban stopped with one hand on the gate.

“Still no archive pass?”

“Still no archive pass.”

“I can ask.”

For a moment Sorrel wanted to say yes. He was still waiting by the gate, as though this were a small thing he could put right for her.

“Who?”

“The registrar. I could get you a personal pass. Sign you in as my guest.”

“I've asked the registrar.”

“I mean a guest pass. It doesn't have to wait for the application.”

The mirror gave a small pulse of light. Sorrel did not look down.

“Because they'll answer you.”

“They might.”

“And then the other witches can wait until they know somebody worth answering?”

He glanced at Letha, perhaps expecting her to explain why Sorrel was making this difficult. Letha left him to it.

“I wasn't offering to solve the entire system,” he said. “I was offering to help you.”

“They accepted my work, Alban. That’s why I’m here. I shouldn’t have to come in as your guest.”

“You've been here four days.”

Sorrel’s fingers closed hard around the thread.

She got to her feet. “I've been asking for two years.”

Alban moved his hand from the gate. “I didn't know that.”

“No. You didn't ask.”

“Sorrel,” Letha said quietly.

She was still holding the thread like a fool. When she opened her fingers to drop it, the thread clung to her skin, suddenly hot.

Alban took one step into the garden. “You could let me finish before deciding what I mean.”

“Wait.”

He stopped talking as Sorrel drew back one hand and the thread came with it.

The light in the mirror brightened. Sorrel felt heat against her fingers, followed by a cold pull from the paving beneath her feet.

She looked down.

The cold had nothing to do with the thread.

Sorrel opened her hands.

The thread fell against her skirt. It should have gone dull at once. Instead, a white line stretched from the mirror to her fingers and stayed there.

“Letha.”

Her friend was already moving. She caught the loose thread with the cloth they had used to wrap the mirror and pulled it away from Sorrel's legs.

The light did not break.

Alban looked from one woman to the other. “What is it?”

“Stay where you are,” Sorrel said.

He stopped.

Cold ran through the seams beneath her feet, against the water’s flow. Under the roses, the roots recoiled.

That was wrong. Roots could not recoil quickly enough for her to feel it happen.

Nerine set the big lantern on the garden table and hurried back towards them.

“Don't touch the rim,” Sorrel told her.

“I wasn't going to.”

The mirror tipped. One side rose clear of the paving, unsupported, and the reflected sky stretched across its surface as though someone were drawing the glass thin.

Alban's hand came up.

Sorrel saw the movement she had watched in the arena. Two fingers apart. Wrist turning.

“Don't cast.”

“I'm not.”

His voice had changed.

Light ran between his fingers. Not a controlled strike. It leaked over the back of his hand and travelled up beneath his sleeve. He stared at it, then at Sorrel.

“I'm not doing that.”

She believed him.

Letha pulled her little knife free and cut the thread. Both ends fell. The line between Sorrel's hand and the mirror held steady.

Sound fell away. Nerine’s mouth moved; Bessil snatched the bottle and cups from the circle. Sorrel heard only knocking beneath the stones, deep and irregular.

Alban bent forward as though someone had struck him in the stomach.

Sorrel moved before she thought about it.

She caught his arm. His skin felt cold through the thin cloth, then so hot that she almost let go. He gripped her shoulder to keep himself upright.

“Get out,” he said.

She could barely hear him.

“Your hand.”

“Sorrel, move.”

There was nowhere useful to move. Light had spread across the ground around them, picking out the spaces between the stones. Beside the gate, a little copper plate glowed beneath the edge of the rose bed. Two pale strokes crossed its curved mark.

Two strokes. At the assessment she had needed only one.

Then Alban's knees gave way.

She tried to lower him. He was too heavy, and the force beneath them pulled before she could get her other arm under his weight. They hit the paving together.

The mirror rang.

Sorrel had never heard glass make a sound like that. It was a thin, sustained note, almost pleasant beneath the pressure building in her ears.

She reached for the roots. If she could open a path into the damp soil, perhaps the force could drain away, as it had at the assessment.

The roots were there.

Then they were gone.

She reached again, harder, and found nothing. No soil. No water moving beneath the stones. No roses, though a trailing stem was caught against her sleeve.

She clawed at the paving with her free hand, as though she could reach the soil that way.

Alban's hand locked around hers.

The pressure changed direction.

Something struck through her chest, bright and impossibly large. She could not breathe around it. Light filled her mouth, her hands, the space behind her eyes. The mirror burst beside her, and she turned her face against Alban's shoulder as fragments hit the wall.

She thought he said her name.

For one brief instant she could feel his heart beating under her cheek. It was very fast.

Then she could feel too much of everything, and nothing at all.

*

When sound returned, Letha was saying, “Don't move her yet.”

The ringing in Sorrel's ears made the words sound far away.

“Sorrel?”

Something warm touched her cheek. She opened her eyes to a narrow strip of light and shut them again. It hurt.

“She heard you,” Alban said.

He sounded breathless.

Sorrel tried to answer, coughed and tried again. Her mouth was dry.

“Water,” someone said.

“Not until she's sitting up.”

Letha's fingers touched her face again, then the side of her neck. She had brought her small field case from the house and opened it beside Sorrel's knee.

Sorrel opened her eyes once more.

The big lantern stood on the table. Its light reached the broken mirror, the damp cloth, a heel of bread lying on the paving. Nerine was kneeling beside Illa, pressing a folded towel to a cut on her forearm.

Alban sat beside Sorrel, close enough that she was leaning against him. One hand rested behind her shoulders. His face looked wrong without any colour in it.

“Can you hear me?” Letha asked.

Sorrel managed a nod.

“Where does it hurt?”

She moved carefully. Her shoulder ached where she had landed, and one knee was scraped. The terrible pressure inside her had gone.

“My shoulder. I think I fell on it.”

It came out hoarsely, but it was an answer.

Letha checked each arm, then her breathing and the scraped knee. Sorrel let her, grateful for questions she could still answer.

“All right,” Letha said. “No rushing up yet.”

Beyond the wall, the ordinary sounds had returned. Somebody was laughing in a distant corridor. A door slammed. Nobody outside the garden seemed to know anything had happened.

Sorrel tried to reach for the roses again.

Nothing answered.

In the hand lying against her skirt, something moved instead.

CHAPTER 5

Sorrel waited until she could stand before telling Letha she wanted to leave the garden.

“Slowly,” Letha said.

She obeyed. The first attempt made her knees feel unpleasantly distant. On the second, Alban put out his arm and she took it.

He was not much steadier than she was.

“Both of you, sit down inside,” Letha said. “Nerine, bring the lantern.”

The equipment room opened off the covered walk behind the residence. It contained folded benches, spare watering cans and a narrow padded chair with a split in its seat. Nerine set the lantern on a shelf and helped Sorrel onto the chair. Alban sat on the edge of a bench.

Letha crouched in front of them.

“Did you hit your head?” she asked Sorrel.

“No. His shoulder.”

Alban nodded. “I had hold of her.”

“And you?”

“No.”

Letha checked the shallow cut on his wrist and asked him to move his fingers. He did, watching them more closely than seemed necessary.

“How long was I out?” Sorrel asked.

“A few breaths. Long enough.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't apologise yet. We haven't worked out what you did.”

She said it gently. Sorrel found that harder to bear.

Nerine had already gone back for the water. Through the open door, Sorrel could see the others moving cushions and broken things away from the garden path. One of them had a towel tied around her arm.

“Is she all right?”

“A cut,” Letha said. “It looks worse than it is. I'll clean it in a minute.”

“I can help.”

“You can stay in the chair.”

Sorrel stayed in the chair.

Alban had regained some colour. Sorrel could breathe again, but something kept stirring beneath her ribs. She pressed the folds of her skirt flat over her knees and waited for Letha to stop studying them.

“I'll get salve and clean cloths,” Letha said. “If either of you feels worse, call me. Don't decide to be impressive about it.”

“I won't,” Alban said.

She looked at Sorrel until Sorrel agreed too, then went to the residence door.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

The lantern hissed softly on the shelf. Sorrel could hear Nerine outside, telling someone to keep their boots on until the last glass was swept up.

Alban flexed his hand again.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I don't know.”

“Has that ever happened before?”

“No.”

“Anything like it?”

“No.”

She heard how sharply she was answering and made herself stop.

“We cut the thread. It should have ended.”

“It didn't.”

“I was there.”

He sat forward, elbows on his knees. “Yes. You were.”

Sorrel lifted her head. He had stopped asking questions.

He was frightened.

His right hand kept moving against his knee, though he held the rest of himself still.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

He raised the hand between them.

Nothing happened.

“Alban?”

He tried again. Sorrel recognised the small adjustment of his fingers. She had spent enough time noticing it.

Still nothing.

He lowered his hand. “It's gone.”

Sorrel could think of several things to ask. None seemed safe enough to say first.

“You might be exhausted,” she managed.

“I'd still feel it.”

“After a shock—”