

AN
UNKINDNESS
OF
MAGICIANS



ALSO BY KAT HOWARD

Roses and Rot
A Cathedral of Myth and Bone





AN UNKINDNESS OF MAGICIANS

KAT HOWARD

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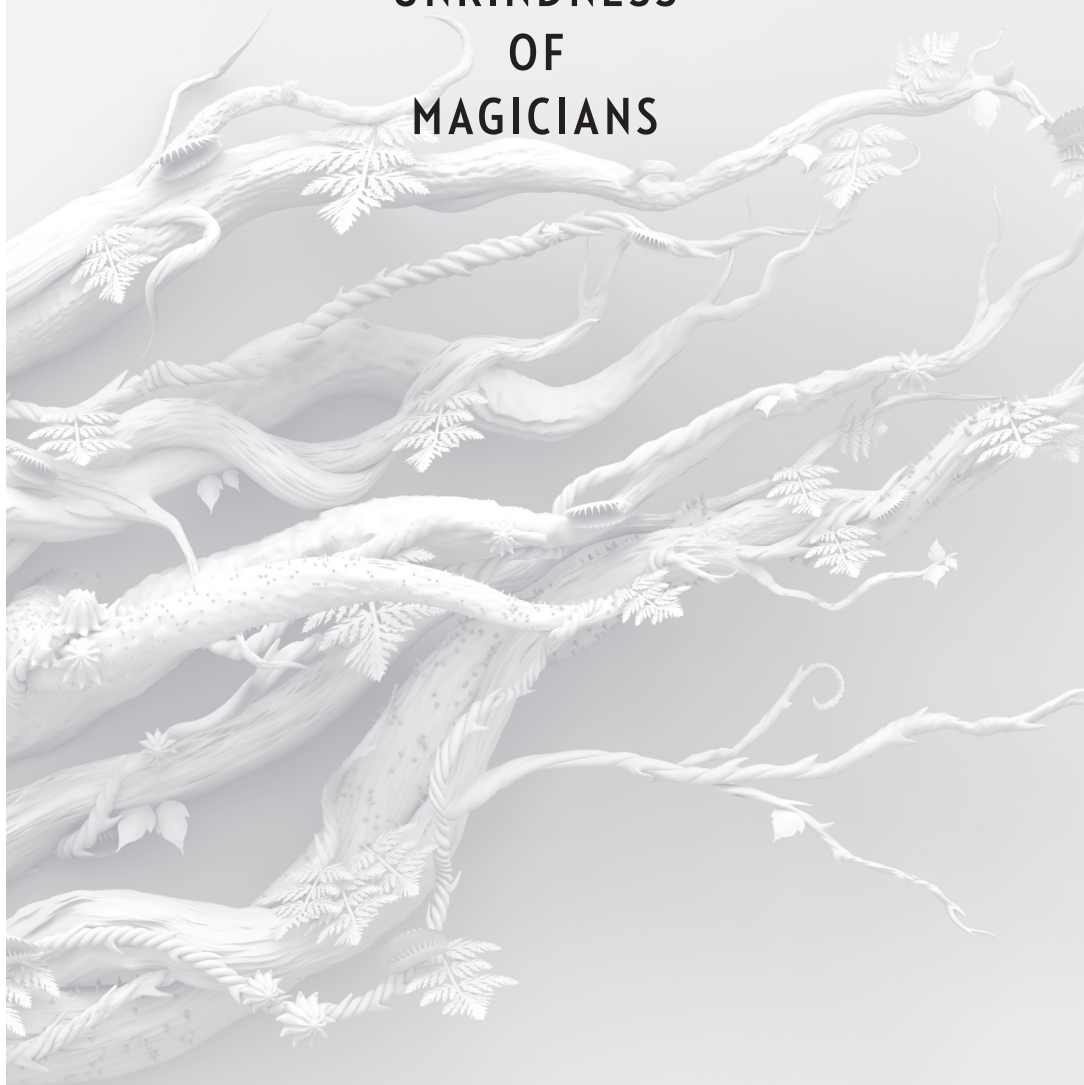
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*For my parents, who helped me keep body
and soul together while writing this book.*

But this rough magic I here abjure . . .
—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *The Tempest*

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CHAPTER ONE

The young woman cut through the crowded New York sidewalk like a knife. Tall in her red-soled stilettos, black clothing that clung to her like smoke, red-tipped black hair sharp and angular around her face. She looked like the kind of woman people would stop for, stare at, notice.

None of them did.

Stalking down Wall Street, the spire of Trinity Church rising before her, she slid among the suits and tourists like a secret, drawing no eyes, no shouted “hey, babys,” not even the casual jar of a shoulder bumped in a crowd. She could have been a ghost. A shadow.

The sun stark, the sky a harsh blue, cloudless and broken only by the glare of reflections. Late-summer heat stewed salt-sweat and heavy cologne together, mingling them with the sizzle rising from sidewalk food carts. The day bright, almost ordinary.

The woman paused at a corner. Her slate-grey eyes flicked up toward some unmarked window in one of the buildings scraping the sky, as if to be sure someone was watching. Her

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lips, red as blood, quirked up at the corners, and Sydney stepped off the curb and into traffic.

Neither the cars nor their drivers seemed aware of her presence.

Sydney walked to the center of the intersection and raised her arms like a conductor about to begin a symphony. She stood, unmoving, for one breath. Two. Three. If there had been eyes somewhere above that rushing city that were able to watch, they would have seen her lips moving.

And then.

The cars around her, as one, lifted gracefully into the air.

Sydney held them there, rust-stained taxis and sleek black sedans with tinted windows, courier vans and a tour bus blaring the opening number of the latest Broadway hit. Ten feet above the ground, floating through the intersection like some bizarre migration of birds. A smile stretched, bright and wild, across her face. If the people in the cars could have seen it, they might have called it exhilaration. They might have called it joy.

The people in the cars didn't see her. No blaring horns, no cursing drivers. No awe—no reaction—from either the people in the now-flying vehicles, or from any of the passersby. Simply flight, where that shouldn't have been an option.

Sydney directed the cars through the intersection—through the air—with words, with small precise gestures that bent her

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fingers and hands into severe origami, with no obvious effort.

And then.

Her hands paused. Held like a breath. Two. Three. She lowered her arms to her sides, and as she did, the cars returned to the street as gracefully as they had left it, the flow of traffic uninterrupted. Sydney walked out of the intersection and cut back into the crowd. No heads turned. No one gave her any notice.

She had gone less than half a block when the text alert vibrated through her phone. *The job is yours.*

The message that began everything arrived in a variety of ways. Email. Text. Type-written formalities on plain, business-weight white. Handwritten letters in bordeaux ink, sealed with wax. Though no matter which medium carried it, in each instance, the words were the same:

*Fortune's Wheel has begun its Turning. When it
ceases rotation, all will be made new.*

If somehow you were not a magician, not a member of the Unseen World, and you managed to acquire one of these messages, it would look like nothing. A fortune cookie's paper, a glitch in your email program. Uninteresting and easily discarded.

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Miranda Prospero was a magician, and she knew precisely what had just landed on her desk. A surprise, and not a good one.

A precise and elegant woman in her late fifties, Miranda had the sort of face that had been too strong-featured for beauty until she had aged into it. Now, she wore her clothing and makeup like armor, as much of a shield and mask as anything she could have conjured. There to project an image, carefully chosen.

The cool morning light washed over her office where she sat behind an elegantly curved antique rosewood desk. She touched her fingertips to the edge of the paper. She quartered the air above it with her hands, spoke words that smelled harsh and bitter in their echoes. The message looked authentic, and there was magic in place—magic that should be inviolate, locked carefully away from influence—that would prevent such a message from being sent in error. But it was early, very early, for a Turning to be happening again. Normally, there would be at least twenty years between one and the next. Only thirteen years this time, barely more than half a generation.

Well. Thirteen years, five months, one week, and four days. Miranda knew the circumstances of the previous Turning well. They had, in many ways, made her.

A flash of light, and a sigil floated in the air above the paper: the Rota Fortunae. Blindfolded Fortune, turning a wheel.

What was written, then, was true.

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The beginning of fear, its tiny barbed threads, lodged themselves in her heart. There were reasons why a Turning might come again so soon. None of them were comfortable.

She was prepared. She had been preparing for every day of those last slightly more than thirteen years. But she had hoped for more time in between. She had done everything she could to make sure that Prospero was a strong House. Well placed. Established and powerful enough that she would have no difficulty finding someone willing to represent it.

She pressed her fingertips to her temples, then rested them on her desk. She knew by now what a Turning involved, the rules and the stakes—she had been through them before—but details were homes for devils, and no more so than here. And so she read:

*Any House may contract out their participation.
Any such contracted champions will be deemed
members of Houses with all attendant rights
and responsibilities for the duration of their
contract. Once contracted, a champion cannot
be substituted. Any House that does not contract
out its involvement accepts full consequences to
its members, including death and disappearance,
and forswears vengeance outside of the
sanctioned challenges. The actions of a champion,*

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contracted or otherwise, during the course of a duel are final.

Any House that, by the activity of any member, Blood or Contract, exposes the Unseen World to mundane attention will be unmade. Any House that chooses not to participate will be unmade. Malicious interference in an active challenge may result in magic being stripped from the magician or the interfering House being unmade.

Miranda's mouth twisted. All of that would be taken as seriously as it ever was, with the first major breach of one of the rules committed by the end of the first week, if not the end of the first duel, and then the first time someone shook off that breach with some variant of "Fortune's Wheel does turn" immediately following. The Unseen World liked its rules, but only when they were convenient.

Any House whose champion, either Blood or Contracted, dies in the course of a duel will be exempt from the next required sacrifice to the House of Shadows.

The House ranked highest at the end of the

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Turning will become the head of the Unseen World.

And those last few clauses would be followed, convenient or not. Because underneath the pageantry and shine, those last few clauses were the purpose of the Turning.

Everything was as she expected. All the usual terms. No surprises. Those would come during the Turning itself. They always did.

Miranda refolded the letter, precise along its crease, and set it aside. House Prospero would maintain its tradition and contract out to a champion. There were always those willing to trade the risks inherent in a Turning for a large enough amount of money or the promise of membership in a House. She pulled her files, notes she'd kept on skilled younger sons and daughters, on talented cousins with no hope of inheriting a House on their own. She pushed aside the cold lump of fear that had settled itself in the center of her chest, and made her plans.

"Your mother," Laurent said, "is going to lose her Chanel-wearing shit when she finds out you're doing this."

"As far as Miranda is concerned, I'm no longer her son, so I doubt she'll do anything other than make sure that whoever she hires as champion knows I'm one more obstacle to

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be neutralized in her quest for power.” Grey poured whiskey, heavy with smoke and peat, for both of them, then set the bottle back on the bar cart. “Cheers.”

They sat at a long butcher-block table in Laurent’s apartment. Glass and chrome, granite and pale wood, high enough to make the lights and noise of New York City a scene in a silent movie below them. Laurent was particularly skilled in magic related to luck and chance, and had parlayed that and a more mundane skill set into a very healthy investment portfolio.

“Do you think so?” Laurent asked. “Even when she learns you’re representing yourself? I mean, eventually the duels are mortal. I know you two aren’t speaking, but do you really think she’d be cool with you winding up dead?”

Five years ago, Laurent had bought his parents a retirement home in the Pacific Northwest, two hours north of Seattle. “Woods and water, that’s what I want,” his dad had always said. His mom added that she’d like some grandbabies to spoil: “And there’s certainly enough room here for you to come visit.” He’d told them he’d start with the woods and water, and putting the keys in their hands had been one of his happiest days. Opposite coasts and life happening meant he didn’t see his parents more than once or twice a year, but they loved each other. He couldn’t imagine either one of them coldly telling someone that all he was was an obstacle.

“If she were to lower herself to speak to me in any way whatsoever about this, she would simply remind me that”—Grey’s voice changed, becoming an exaggeration of Miranda’s pitch and cadences—“I had an excellent and assured place as the heir to House Prospero, and the fact that I now do not came about solely through my own folly. I agreed that I would accept the consequences of my actions, and these are no more than continuing consequences.” He smirked and took another drink.

Laurent laughed. “Your mother is a real piece of work.”

“Believe me,” Grey said. “I know.”

It had been just over three years since she had disinherited him. That particular procedure had been bloodless—swipes of pens on papers messengered from one office to the next.

The rift had begun over a matter of magic. Grey felt comfortable pushing boundaries, looking for access to power in places that Miranda didn’t. She was, at her heart, a traditionalist. She felt he had crossed a line, and so she had taken everything from him.

They hadn’t spoken since.

“Oh, and speaking of your family,” Laurent said.

“Do we have to?” Grey pushed back in his chair.

“I ran into your cousin Madison downtown the other day. She looked good. We grabbed coffee.”

“Oh, she looked that kind of good, did she?” Grey leered.

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“Not everything is about getting laid, you player.” Laurent shook his head in mock disapproval.

“Yeah, but most things are. So, how is she? I haven’t seen her since she left school.”

“She said she had just made partner at some big law firm—Wellington & Ketchum, maybe?”

“Good firm. Prospero uses it. Actually, that’s probably why she’s there. Almost all the Houses have people in place to deal with their mundane world interests. It’s better when it’s family. They understand how important magic is, and they don’t complain about the secrecy.”

It wasn’t one of the things that got talked about, but it happened. Every so often there were members of Houses who weren’t strong enough magicians to maintain membership in the Unseen World, or who chose to renounce their magic. They were cast out, but only so far. The Unseen World might keep secrets from the mundane one, but it understood it was still part of it, and someone had to do the busy-work.

“She asked about the Turning, didn’t seem surprised that you were in it,” Laurent said.

“I wouldn’t have thought it was the kind of thing she would care about.” Grey shrugged the thought away and finished his drink. “Have you found your champion?”

“I think so.”

“You *think*?” Grey poured himself more whiskey and held out the bottle to Laurent, who shook his head. “Things start soon. You need to have someone in place. Unless you’ve changed your mind and decided to represent yourself. It’s not like you don’t have the talent and balls to do well.”

Laurent snorted. “Thanks. No, I still want to watch one of these before I try it, so a champion it is. But she hasn’t signed the contract yet.”

“Do you honestly think that she won’t? Maybe you should invite her up here, impress her with all you can offer.” Grey gestured toward the window, the lights of city outside glittering like jewels spread out against velvet.

“Ha ha. It’s not that—I think she’s happy with the terms I offered, but she’s good enough to have her pick. More than good enough.” Laurent passed a hand over the tight crop of his black hair. “Her spell was astounding—complex and delicate, and completely hidden from the mundanes. Even the ones caught up in it. I’ve never seen anyone do magic like that, and she just walked in and out of the spell like this was what she did every Tuesday.”

Grey’s face tightened. “Where did you say she was from again?”

“I didn’t—she’s unHoused.”

“An outsider with that kind of power? That ought to make things interesting,” Grey said. “Give us all something to talk

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about other than how fast this Turning happened. I figured it would be another ten years, at least.”

“It’s the only way either of us become Houses,” Laurent answered. “Better that it happens now.”

“Agreed,” Grey said. “I’m tired of waiting.” He had been, with decreasing patience, every day of the last three years. It was long past time.

“Besides,” Laurent grinned. “An enormous magic fight? This is going to be fun.”

High above the city, they toasted each other, their potential, and the turn of Fortune’s Wheel.

Not for the first time, Harper Douglas wished she had stronger magic. Wished she had any magic really, beyond the ability to light a candle with a word. Which actually took a lot more effort than using a match did, and gave her a splitting headache after.

She had seen the woman with red and black hair, the one that no one else had seemed to notice. Had watched her walk down the sidewalk and into the street. Tracking her progress made Harper dizzy, then made her feel as if she might vomit, but she had kept the woman in view until she had stepped into the intersection, because she had known what that queasy dizziness meant. It meant she was close.

Then Harper had felt the woman’s magic, a dull-bronze

electric-fence feeling in her mouth, but she hadn't been strong enough to see the spell. She'd tried to get closer, but the woman's power had hit her like a tidal wave.

Overwhelmed, Harper had collapsed outside a bodega. She'd opened her eyes to the awareness that her left elbow had landed in something worryingly squishy. She tried to sit up.

"You look very bad. Stay where you are." An elderly Russian woman was squatting down next to her. She fished around in a cloth bag, then handed Harper a plastic bottle of orange juice. "Drink this."

"Did you see her?" Harper asked. She had been so close—her mouth still tasted like electricity.

"See who? Someone did this to you?" The woman looked around sharply.

"No, no. No one did this. I just thought I saw someone. Someone important." Her rescuer wouldn't have seen the woman though, not unless she was in the Unseen World, in which case she'd never tell Harper about the woman.

"Did you hit your head? Is that why you see things? Do you need a doctor?" Eyes narrow, mouth pursed.

"No, this is enough. Thank you," Harper said, in between gulps of the juice. She could feel her blood sugar perking back up, her hands growing steady.

"Are you going to fall down again?" the older woman

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asked, in a tone that implied that Harper ought to make better choices than keeling over on a sidewalk.

“No, ma’am. I feel much better. Here, let me get you some money for the juice.”

She swatted Harper’s hand. “What kind of manners did you learn? You don’t pay someone for kindness. You say thank you.”

“Thank you. Truly.” Harper picked herself up off of the sidewalk, peeled the remains of someone’s cream-filled doughnut off of her arm with a shudder, and walked in the direction she had last seen the magician, toward the great bronze doors of Trinity Church.

Nothing. Not even a hint of magic remained, not that she had expected otherwise. If a magician didn’t want to be seen by mundane eyes, they wouldn’t be. And for all Harper had brute-forced her way into the tiniest bit of magic use, she was definitely mundane. She turned in a circle once more, looking carefully, just in case, then walked down the steps to Wall Street station, into the rattle and roar of the subway.

Close. She had come close. If she could just get a little bit closer, then she’d be able to find her way into the Unseen World. Then she’d be able to keep her promise.

As Sydney crossed the threshold of her building, the veil of magic she had draped herself in sloughed off, and she was

again visible to the world around her. “Any messages, Henry?” she asked the doorman.

“Not today, miss.”

She smiled her thanks and took the elevator up to the seventh floor. Sydney lived in a mundane building on purpose—no one from the Unseen World would think to look for her there. The snobbery was as useful as it was predictable—she had set up a series of wards when she’d first moved in six months ago, and they’d never even been tested, much less crossed.

She closed her door, locked it behind her, and stepped out of her shoes, rolling the aches from her arches. Pulled her phone from her pocket and texted her acceptance to Laurent.

Done.

Barefoot, Sydney walked to her kitchen island and poured a glass of dark red wine. She had set the wheels turning. Not Fortune’s Wheel—she had little enough patience for the trap-pings of the Unseen World—but her own.

She drank, savoring the curl of the liquid down her throat, enjoying the richness of it. Being able to indulge in pleasures, even ones as small as a glass of wine when she wanted, was still something new. Something she’d worked hard enough for that she still luxuriated in the indulgence of it.

Working with Laurent would be good. She’d wanted a candidate House, hoped for an outsider. Someone unestablished, less likely to have accepted all of the Unseen World’s

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dirty little secrets as gospel. Someone who might come to see things as she did, might even be an ally.

She planned to drag all those dirty little secrets out of the shadows and into the light, and if necessary, the light would be cast by the flames she had lit as she burned the Unseen World to the ground.

She raised her glass, toasting its destruction.

Tremors racked her. The wine sloshed over the rim of the glass, spilling drops as red as blood. A dull knife of pain took up residence in her wrists and shoulders, and she felt herself hollow out, as if she were caught in the grip of a fever. Sweat beaded up on her skin.

This was the price for today's magic.

Sydney set her glass down and breathed into the shaking, the ache, the hollowness in her bones. She centered herself in it until she was steady, the pain not gone but acknowledged. She was used to acknowledging pain. It had become, over time and trial, rather a specialty of hers. She raised her glass again, held it steady, her hand unshaking.

She drank.

CHAPTER TWO

At 12:01 a.m., her celebratory toast nothing more than a glass upended on a drying rack, Sydney stood on the southern shore of the Central Park Reservoir. She lit matches with the flick of her thumbnail. One, two, three.

Before the smoke of the last had faded, a wooden boat rose through the dark water. Old and worn, it seemed as if a touch might scuttle it. The boat bumped gently against the shore, waiting.

Sydney stepped on board. It creaked and swayed beneath her feet as it moved across the water.

She rode standing. The magic that propelled the boat did not extend to drying the seats, and she didn't like using her own here where the House might notice. And the House would notice. The House noticed everything.

The darkness thickened before her and resolved itself into the House of Shadows. Low and secret, it sat on the water like a toad, crouching upon an island made of bones and misery, hulked atop a place that should have never been. That place had been her home from the day she was given to pay

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someone else's price until the day she had grown powerful enough to open its doors and walk out of them.

Sydney hated it.

The boat fetched up against its steps, and Sydney went inside.

Cold. The kind of cold that seeped up through the soles of her shoes and sank into her bones until they ached. She could use no magic the House didn't permit while she was inside its doors, not without fighting the House for the privilege, and she had learned long ago that it would deny her comfort. It had become a matter of pride not to ask. Back straight, head up, she refused to let herself shiver. No weakness.

She would give the House nothing it did not take, and it had taken enough already.

Dim lights flickered on the walls. Fireflies underwater, luminescence below glass. The only sound the muted echo of her footsteps.

The House could have brought her to Shara directly. Could have arranged itself so that she stepped into a warm, well-lit room. Could have done any number of things to make Sydney's life easier.

Of course, it could also hold her here, behind its doors, rearranging itself like a labyrinth until she dropped dead of exhaustion, could open its floors over an oubliette and seal her in it, could offer any number of other fatal unpleasant-
ries. It could make her walk past the rooms where magic was

extracted from the less-lucky residents of the House, the ones who would be used up and cast aside, who would never leave. Could make her listen to the screams, the sounds made by throats torn raw, the pleading. Could bring the scents of blood and fear to her nose. Could force her to stand and watch, to see and feel again what she had been made to endure.

Her earliest memories were of those rooms. Phantom scars ghosted across her skin. Echoes of past screams rose in her throat.

She swallowed hard. A long walk in the cold dark was nothing.

“You’re late.” Shara’s voice appeared before the light did. The light was a watery blue, cold enough to burn, making the shadows knife-edged. The House was in a mood tonight.

Sydney said nothing. No matter that she had lit the matches at precisely the appointed time, no matter that it was the House’s mood that had made her late. This was neither the time nor the place for small talk.

“I trust you haven’t failed in any other ways today.” Shara’s face as marble-cold as her voice. Fish-belly pale from having lived her whole life in Shadows, she wore her hair as long and tangled as a medieval sorceress and a dress that might have been woven from the shadows she ruled. Her eyes bright blue, lights in the darkness. Sydney had never once heard her speak kindness. “What do you have to report?”

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“As you instructed, I am contracted to a House for the duration of this Turning,” Sydney said. There was a plan, and this was its beginning.

“Which House?” Shara walked closer, her shadow elongating behind her. It flickered in the changing light, but it was smooth at its edges. Whole.

“Laurent Beauchamps.” Sydney’s hands ached, and she could feel frost gathering in her hair. Shara, of course, looked perfectly comfortable.

“A candidate House. Interesting choice.”

Sydney held her silence. If Shara wanted a disagreement, to scold Sydney for one thing or another, she would make that clear soon enough. But without a reason, Sydney did not want to say anything she would come to regret. There were secrets that needed to be kept, even here.

Especially here.

“Very well. Continue to proceed as we discussed. There’s nothing else at this time.”

Sydney turned on her heel.

“Except, of course, the contract.” Shara’s voice sly and pleased, almost happy for the first time in the conversation.

Except. Of course.

Long before she had contracted herself to Laurent to help him win legitimacy in the eyes of the Unseen World by founding a House, Sydney had been contracted by the House of

Shadows. It made no matter that she had not entered into that contract voluntarily. The House kept careful records of debts. She was a long way from paying hers.

On a table by Shara, a pen, the contract, and a knife, bone-handled. Its blade as dark as shadow, its edge as sharp and fine as truth.

Shara picked up the knife. She gathered Sydney's shadow into her hand. The sensation was the crawling of skin, her flesh rising into goose bumps, but she felt it inside, like needing to shudder and vomit all at once.

Shara sliced, cutting away enough to curl into the barrel of the pen to use as ink. The cut was the flaying of an already raw nerve, salt in a wound, fire on her soul. It was nothing that had not happened before and nothing that would not happen again, and it was that—that ever and ongoing debt—that was the worst of it.

Sydney forced her mind to blankness and, once again, signed her name. As she re-signed her name every time she was summoned here, as she would again and again until she had balanced the weighted scales and was free. Shadows would decide when that was—Sydney couldn't even count the days.

The day that she had first signed that contract, she had thought the ritual would become easier, that the pain would grow less. She had been wrong. At least she had learned to

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keep her hand steady, she thought, as the tears that had broken through her lashes froze on her skin.

“You will be called for again when you are required, and you will not be late,” Shara said. “That will be all.”

Sydney did not look back as she left. The House opened immediately to the outside, to the half-flooded boat that had carried her across the water. She stood, hands clenched so hard her nails pierced her skin, focusing only on those bright, sharp cuts, not on the fresh and weeping wound in her shadow, not on anything but the wood and water beneath her feet, the night air against her skin, until she fetched up on the far shore, until the boat faded back into night and shadow.

Then, as she walked, she let her own plans fill her head. The ones that began in the same place as those of Shadows but ended somewhere far different.

Deep inside the belly of the House of Shadows, Grace Valentine lay in the cold, in the dark, and waited for the blood on her hands to dry. She flexed her fingers, wincing as some of the unhealed cuts reopened.

The hands were the worst—the pain lingered there, like the magic. Plus, the cuts were a reminder of how she had come to be in here in the first place, a reminder that set her hands to bleeding again, as her clenched fists reopened the rest of the damage.

Still, the carving of her hands had been the only thing she'd been made to endure today. It had seemed like in the past few . . . weeks? months?—she was never really sure how time passed in here, even when the House wasn't altering her perception of events to make things hurt worse, or for a longer time—she had spent less time having her magic taken, having pain inflicted as a way to increase that power in what was collected, and had spent more time learning the magic that was unique to Shadows.

That still hurt, of course. Everything here did, sometimes even breathing. But it was a better kind of hurt. Because if she could endure that new kind of hurt, the one that had power underneath it, if she could learn what Shadows was teaching her, then she could use that magic to leave.

She had heard of it happening, once, long before she was hidden away in here. She had felt the ripples through the House—seen it bleed—when someone else had managed it. She locked the possibility in her heart, the darkest of secrets.

Hidden away and forgotten, Grace Valentine lay in the darkness of the House of Shadows. As the blood dried on her hands, she counted scars to fall asleep. She dreamed revenge.

Miranda had chosen to interview candidates for House Prospero's champion in person. Flashy magic was all well and good, and she would certainly require a demonstration of

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ability before she made a decision, but the fact of the matter was the champion would represent the House. She wanted to be sure the House liked them.

She also wanted to be sure that she was able to—if not like—at least respect them. They and their magic would represent Prospero, would be the face of the House. Power, ability—those mattered, but character did as well, particularly as the champions' decisions during a challenge were final. There was always the risk that someone whose goals did not fully match with hers would choose poorly, or in service of their own ends. And once the challenges turned mortal, she was asking someone to potentially die for the House. She wanted to be sure they would.

As her final preparation for the morning's interviews, Miranda gathered defensive magic, spindling the power around her fingers, then releasing it into an empty ink bottle for storage. Knocking the bottle over would trigger the spell. It was unlikely that she'd need to use it at all, but there was always the possibility that someone would move against House Prospero before the duels began. Better to be prepared.

She glanced at her office once more, her eyes measuring the alignment of the items on her desk, the bloom of the flowers—all white, green accents, and none with overly heady fragrances—that stood on a side table, noting the angle of the light that streamed in from the windows behind her. She moved a letter

opener a fraction of a centimeter to the right, then nodded.

“All right,” she told the House. “Send in the first candidate.”

He is an addition to your schedule.

The House didn’t actually speak with a voice. Rather, Miranda had made a series of spelled mirrors when she became its Head. They were keyed to her voice and presence, and if the House wanted to say something to her without being addressed first, the words that appeared on the mirror’s surface would be accompanied by a faint chime. No one else in the room would see the words or hear the chime ring. The spell also allowed her to respond mentally, thus enabling a completely secret conversation, if necessary.

Miranda raised an eyebrow at the House’s boldness. Then Ian Merlin walked into her office, and she moved her left hand to rest on top of her desk, near the magic-filled bottle.

“Madame Prospero.” He inclined his head to the exact correct degree. He’d dressed politely as well—a black-on-black suit, well cut and quiet. It wasn’t the sort of detail that would have mattered to everyone, but it did to her, and she appreciated the effort.

“Ian. Did we have an appointment?” She allowed a hint of mild curiosity into the question.

He folded like a knife into an antique chair. “I heard your House required a champion. I’d like to convince you it should be me.”

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She'd seen his magic before. There was no need for her to require a test of his abilities—if the magician existed who was better, Miranda hadn't met them yet. "Forgive me for stating the obvious, but you're the heir to House Merlin." It didn't mean he couldn't represent another House, couldn't strike out and attempt to found a House of his own, but such a choice wasn't usual. "And you haven't been much of a presence in the Unseen World recently. So I am a bit surprised to see you here."

"You still have your gift for understatement," Ian said. "You should know that I'm not the heir to House Merlin. I renounced all claims when I left. My father hasn't named my sister heir because he hopes I'll change my mind, something I have no intention of doing."

"I see." Miranda straightened in her chair as she considered. Hiring him would be a coup, but she still wasn't sure what he had to gain by contracting himself out. "Why House Prospero? Why not take advantage of the Turning and try to establish your own House?"

"I don't like how the Unseen World runs. I'd like to change it, and it will be easier to do that from inside of a powerful, established House."

"Also, my father doesn't like you, and I'm in the mood to aggravate him. Helping you win the Turning—winning the leadership of the Unseen World away from him—would do

that nicely.” He paused. “Forgive me for being blunt, but it seems better to be honest.”

Miranda tapped the fingers of her left hand on her desk. It was a reason she could appreciate. “I don’t much like Miles, either, and I like the way he’s been running things for the past thirteen years even less. But I like to know what I’m supporting. What, exactly, are you hoping to change?”

“The reliance on the House of Shadows. If you hire me, and if House Prospero then finds itself leading the Unseen World at the end of this Turning, I want your support in ending it. You understand why I want the outside support.” It had been House Merlin, Ian’s great-grandfather, that had founded the House of Shadows, that had begun the spell that allowed members of the Unseen World to draw on a store of collected power, to use magic at no personal cost, beyond that of a House sacrifice once a generation. Though Fortune’s Wheel did turn, House Merlin had been in power ever since.

Miranda kept her voice neutral. “I believe I could be persuaded to do that. Is there anything else you want?”

“No,” he said. “Only the support, and only under those conditions.”

“Then I accept your terms,” she said. “Do you have any questions?”

“I saw Grey’s name on the list of candidate Houses. How

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do you want me to deal with him in a duel?” His question and tone were both carefully neutral.

Miranda didn’t even blink at the confirmation that Grey would be participating in the Turning. It was what she had expected from him. “Should he challenge the House, deal with him as required by the terms of engagement.”

A very polite call and response that meant that Ian could kill Grey in a mortal challenge if one was made. Ian waited a beat. When Miranda said nothing else, he continued. “All right. Do you require a demonstration of magic?”

“I’ve watched you grow up, Ian. I’m quite satisfied with your magical abilities. I’m happy to sign the contract if you are,” Miranda said.

“I already have.” He smiled then and opened his right hand, spreading the fingers. The top drawer of her desk opened.

She pulled the thick sheet of paper from her drawer. The standard agreement, modified for his terms for payment. His signature at the bottom, the ink still drying. “And if we hadn’t reached an agreement?”

“It would have remained blank, and I would have been disappointed.”

He had done this spell while sitting across from her. Very elegant—she hadn’t even felt it. Miranda smiled as she countersigned, secure in the knowledge that her House would not only survive the Wheel’s Turning, but triumph. “Excellent,”