

MYSTERIES
OF
THORN
Manor



Also by Margaret Rogerson

An Enchantment of Ravens

Sorcery of Thorns

Vespertine



MYSTERIES OF THORN Manor

MARGARET ROGERSON

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*To those who believe in
fairy-tale endings*

ONE



“I DIDN’T DO THIS!” Nathaniel insisted, leaning out the manor’s front door, gazing helplessly at the vines thrashing up along the thorn hedge, the animated topiaries prowling through the garden, and the threatening magical gale that howled around Thorn Manor, carrying past leaves and branches and loose cobblestones in a whirling cyclone. “I swear upon Baltasar’s unholy grave, I didn’t do a thing.”

Elisabeth gave him a skeptical look. “Most of the time when you say that, it turns out that actually—”

“Yes, yes, I know.”

“Like when it started raining teacups on Laurel Avenue—”

“I thought we agreed not to talk about that.”

“And the time a lightning strike blew off one of the Magisterium’s towers—”

“Point taken. But I didn’t have another nightmare last night, did I? You certainly would have noticed.”

She felt herself turn pink. “No. You didn’t.”

He grinned at her, looking unfairly handsome in just his nightshirt, with his sleeves billowing and his dark hair whipped in every direction by the wind. “Anyway, all of this must have something to do with the manor’s wards. Look at the street past the gates, it’s completely normal.”

She squinted through the streaks of swirling debris, and saw that he was right. The rest of Hemlock Park appeared to be enjoying a sunny, peaceful February morning. That failed to ease her mind. Especially because, standing just past the cyclone, a crowd had gathered; and at the very front stood a group of—

“Reporters,” Nathaniel said darkly.

“Elisabeth Scrivener!” they called out in excitement, noticing that the front door had opened. “Magister Thorn! Would you care to comment on the situation? Have you lost control of your magic? Is it true that your demon is back?”

Nathaniel only frowned. Then another reporter shouted, “Is this likely to impact your preparations for the Midwinter Ball next w—”

Elisabeth didn’t hear the rest, because Nathaniel had hastily drawn her inside and slammed the door behind them.

“You know, I find that I don’t mind it a great deal after all,” he said later that day, cheerfully watching a shrub sail past the foyer’s window. “In fact, I believe the view is growing on me.”

“You can’t leave it this way forever,” Elisabeth pointed out. “It’s trapping us inside, too. We’ll starve. Also, that looks like it came off the roof.”

Nathaniel used his cane to slide the curtain open a little wider, watching with interest as a giant chunk of masonry went spinning by. The crowd of spectators screamed and ducked. If anything, Nathaniel only looked more pleased.

“Oh, I’m sure we have enough provisions to last us a few weeks. And if the roof starts leaking, I can simply use magic . . . Scrivener?” he asked in alarm. “Where are you going?”

She didn't answer, because she had drawn Demon-slayer and charged out the door.

A moment later she charged back inside, chased by an army of vines swarming at her heels, their dagger-length thorns clattering angrily across the foyer's tiles. She was wild-eyed, with leaves tangled in her hair.

"Their heads grow back!" she shouted, hacking at the vines.

"Of course they do!" Nathaniel yelled. "They're magical topiaries! I could have told you that, if you hadn't charged outside to fight them in your pajamas!" He summoned a gout of emerald fire that burnt several vines to ashes, filling the room with the potent stink of aetherial combustion. But it didn't seem to help. As soon as the ashes pattered to the floor, another wave of vines swarmed inside to fill the gap.

They stretched from the hedge all the way indoors, their numbers inexhaustible. The more Elisabeth hacked at them, and the more Nathaniel scorched them with fireballs, the more they multiplied like the heads of a hydra. The tide of battle finally turned when Mercy emerged from the hall, let out a full-throated battle cry,

and whacked the vines with a broom. This seemed to work for a moment, if only due to the element of surprise: the hedge shrank back, appearing rather shocked. Before it could rally, Elisabeth forced her way to the door and shoved it shut with all her strength, slamming it on a single thorny tendril that had enterprisingly snaked back inside. When it refused to retreat, she lopped off the end with her sword.

They all stood watching in silent horror as the vine flopped around on the carpet, still alive. Eventually Mercy had the presence of mind to trap it beneath an overturned dustbin.

“Suppose we’re stuck inside, then,” she observed as the dustbin hopped and rattled furiously across the carpet.

“So it would appear,” said Nathaniel cheerfully. “How terribly inconvenient. It’ll take me weeks to sort this out.”

Elisabeth paused, remembering what the reporter had started to say earlier, and then rounded on him. “What is the Midwinter Ball?”

He was busy dusting burnt-up vine ash off his sleeves. “Trust me, Scrivener, you’re better off not

knowing. Imagine being stuffed into a sorcerer's fusty old ballroom, where the chandeliers are enchanted to drip wax on anyone who criticizes the hors d'oeuvres, and getting tortured to death with small talk for hours."

"It is a social occasion, mistress," contributed a whispering voice from the hall.

"Exactly," Nathaniel said.

Sometimes, Elisabeth still felt a frisson of surprise when Silas appeared. Standing in the hallway's shadows, he looked like a ghost, and it was easy to imagine him as one—pale, insubstantial, his narrow silhouette poised to melt into the wainscoting at any moment. She had difficulty shaking the idea that he was a figment of her imagination, or even an illusion conjured by Nathaniel during one of his nightmares. But he was undeniably real. She had touched him. Earlier, he had served her breakfast.

She couldn't make out his face, but she got the impression he was trying his best not to look at the layer of ash coating the foyer's tiles—or, for that matter, notice the dustbin juddering its way determinedly toward the parlor. He continued softly, "It is a yearly tradition among sorcerers, meant to uphold the rela-

tions between houses. Every winter, a different magister is chosen to host the ball.”

Elisabeth evaluated Nathaniel in suspicion. Over the past few weeks, she had caught him feeding formal-looking letters into the fire. “You’re supposed to host it this year, aren’t you?”

“I don’t see why I should.” He had gone back to dusting off his sleeves. “Until barely two months ago, I was no longer a sorcerer.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to get out of it by using the manor’s wards?”

“No, but I wish I’d thought of that. Brilliant, isn’t it?” Outside, someone screamed.

“Reporter,” Mercy declared, peering through the curtains. “Still alive.”

“More’s the pity,” Nathaniel said.

At some point Silas had stepped into the light, though Elisabeth hadn’t seen him move. His marble-white features looked no less unearthly in the late-afternoon glow leaking through the leaded panes, which winked with the shapes of debris swooping past, casting flickers of shadow across the foyer’s checkered tiles. “Perhaps we might retire to the dining room. I

have prepared your supper, which is growing cold.”

His soft voice held no indication of a threat. Nevertheless, everyone scrambled to obey.

The dining room proved to be turned out in rare style even for Silas. Lit tapers reflected on the long table’s polished walnut surface and glimmered from a profusion of silver utensils and tureens. Each place had been formally set with fine porcelain and jade chargers—not just their three places, but the table’s full complement of eighteen. Mercy hesitated at the threshold before stiffly taking a seat, her face grimly set, as though preparing herself for battle.

Elisabeth’s brow furrowed in concern, but then Silas returned with a platter in his hands, and her mind disintegrated at the smell. She had devoured three portions of flaky white fish, lost in the spice of the ginger sauce and the delicate crunch of snow peas, before she regained the capacity for rational thought. When she finally looked up, Nathaniel was prodding his meal with his fork.

She felt a twinge of sympathy. The prospect of publicly reemerging into magical society couldn’t be easy for him. Not after his injury, and the reporters, and the

questions circulating about his sorcery. But her goodwill promptly vanished when the conversation turned to fixing the wards, and he pretended to go to sleep.

“If no one gave them orders, why would they have woken up?” Mercy asked after an uncertain glance at Nathaniel, who was sprawled across his chair, snoring extravagantly. “Is the manor trying to tell us that we’ll be in danger if we leave the house? It isn’t something like Ashcroft again, is it?” By now she had been filled in on nearly every detail of last autumn’s events.

Silas glanced at her beneath his lashes. Elisabeth tensed. She couldn’t explain it, but for some reason a jolt of alarm shot through her every time he acknowledged Mercy’s presence, even though he’d been nothing but polite to her ever since he’d returned and found her working as a servant in the manor.

To her obscure relief, he only said, “Not necessarily, miss. Ancient spells such as the ones laid down in this manor’s foundations often grow temperamental with age. I believe it is more likely that something has occurred to trigger a minor modification to the wards. Sorcerers have added their own clauses over time, some of which are quite specific. Can any of you think of

anything out of the ordinary you have done in the past twenty-four hours?”

He asked this in a very mild tone of voice, but at once everyone turned to look at Nathaniel, who proved that he was awake by opening his eyes and sputtering in protest.

“Well, I can’t,” Mercy said stoutly.

“I was in the study all day yesterday, working,” Elisabeth put in.

“I was barely home!” Nathaniel exclaimed. “I was at the Magisterium consulting on Ashcroft’s artifacts. I didn’t get back until well after dark, and then—”

The two of them exchanged a look, remembering.

“What is it?” Mercy asked.

“Nothing,” Elisabeth said quickly. And really, it couldn’t be important. She had slept in Nathaniel’s room plenty of times before; she had done it nearly every night during his recovery, so she could be there to help him if he needed to get up to use the water closet or started having a nightmare. The wards hadn’t objected *then*. Granted, she had been sleeping on the floor, and most of the time they hadn’t been touching each other . . .

But it wasn't as though they'd done anything last night. Just a little kissing. A few minutes of kissing, and then they'd gone to sleep.

"Indeed," said Silas ambiguously. "In that case, master, I recommend that we retire for the evening, and discuss this more tomorrow."

Silas insisted on drawing Elisabeth a bath, which she had to admit wasn't unwarranted as she watched the water in the copper tub turn brown, swirling with bits of leaves. At least he hadn't made her wash her hair; he had relented to her protestations with a sigh, and placed an ivory comb on the nightstand instead.

When she had finally succeeded in conquering her unruly tangles, she soaked for a while with her eyes closed, listening to the soft sounds as he moved around the room, opening and closing drawers. Then she forced herself to sit up, her arms clamped over her chest as still-steaming water sluiced from her skin. Silas had laid a towel over the folding screen and placed a clean set of nightclothes across the foot of the bed. Craning her neck, she could see him just beyond the screen's edge: he stood turned away, casting a critical gaze over her

ruined clothes, which hung limply from his hands.

She rarely got the chance to look at him without him noticing. Silently, she studied him in the lilac room's gauzy light. Upon cursory inspection, he looked exactly the same as he had before that fateful night in the Royal Library, his alabaster beauty untouched. But Nathaniel was convinced that he had been injured by the Archon. He couldn't explain how he knew, only that he could sense Silas's unwellness like a shadow at the corner of his mind.

Silas had never revealed how he had survived the confrontation, or what had happened to him afterward in the Otherworld. If Elisabeth watched him steadily enough without interruption, she began to grow aware of something different about him, though she couldn't explain exactly what: only that he seemed to fade, to become thinner and more insubstantial. At times she imagined she glimpsed pain lurking deep in his yellow eyes, as difficult to interpret as the impassive gaze of a wounded feline.

Whatever ailed him, she was glad Mercy worked here now, so he didn't have to do everything on his own. As soon as she had the thought, she regretted thinking

it. Silas was as adept at reading her as ever. His eyes flicked to hers, and his lips thinned.

“Isn’t it better to have help?” she blurted out. “It’s just—it’s a big house. You don’t have to do everything alone.” *You don’t have to do it at all*, she didn’t add, for the matter had already been raised, and Silas had insisted on resuming his role as a servant with a strange brittle intensity that had put an end to the discussion immediately.

“As you say, mistress,” he said. He helped her step out of the bath, wrapping the towel around her shoulders with his eyes averted. Then he gave a slight bow, and left.

Elisabeth bit her lip. She dried herself off and tugged on her nightgown, followed by the matching silk dressing gown. When she was done, she caught her own reflection in the mirror, rippling across the glass: the cream-colored silk trimmed with a pattern of spring vines, her unbound hair shining in waves nearly to her waist. She touched the silver strands glittering among the brown, representing the single day of life that Silas had taken from her—a match for Nathaniel’s own token payment. Out of habit, she lifted Demonslayer from her