

INK,
IRON,
AND
GLASS

GWENDOLYN CLARE

{Imprint}
MAKE YOUR MARK

NEW YORK



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Whosoever burns this book
Shall find that something precious is took
Thereafter living in sore deprive
Or altogether not alive

FOR ATHENA, WHO UNDERSTANDS
THAT REALITY IS HIGHLY OVERRATED

1

NO GREAT MIND HAS EVER EXISTED
WITHOUT A TOUCH OF MADNESS.

—*Aristotle*

1891, THE SCRIBED WORLD OF VELDANA

Elsa crouched beside the tide pool, the hem of her skirt gathered over her arm to keep it off the algae-slick rocks. A new species of starfish had emerged, but whether it would persist in the world or not was an open question. Elsa pulled on her clockwork glove and activated the stability sensors in the fingertips, then gently lifted the starfish out of the water with her other hand.

The creature was quite lovely, orange and long-limbed and prickly against her skin, though Elsa tried not to get too attached just yet. New species sometimes destabilized and ceased to exist. She waved her hand over the starfish, and the mechanical innards of the glove buzzed against her palm, tiny gears whirring. After a

minute, the indicator light on the back of the glove flicked on: green, for stable. Elsa let out the breath she'd been holding, relieved.

Then the starfish imploded in her hand, folding in on itself and disappearing with a soft *pop*.

Belatedly, the indicator light switched from green to red. Unstable.

"You don't say," she muttered to the glove. "Useless bit of scrap."

Elsa's mother would not be pleased—Jumi took special pride in the emergence of new species. She scowled at the glove as she pulled her hand out. It had never given her a false positive like this before, but a stable species should not cease to exist that quickly. She hoped it was a malfunction. The alternative would be much worse—if the problem wasn't the glove, then something had gone seriously wrong with the most recent expansions to their world.

The brass finger-joints of the glove had leaked lubricant onto her hand. She hung the glove from her belt and wiped her fingers on her apron, smudging greasy streaks down the pale cloth. Then she stood and hastily picked her way around the tide pools, the rocks rough against the bare soles of her feet, and she trudged up the narrow strip of sand between the sea and the shore cliffs.

After she retrieved her flat-soled leather shoes from where she'd left them at the trailhead, Elsa decided she should do a quick walk-through of the whole expansion before returning to the village to report to Jumi. She turned back to walk the length of the beach, which was longer than it used to be. Jumi had added a new section during her latest revisions to the world.

Perhaps a kilometer out to sea, the Edgemist hung like a gray

curtain, running parallel to the shore. The Edgemist defined the boundaries of existence, and Elsa took comfort in the familiarity of its presence, even if it was farther away thanks to the most recent expansion. Veldana was a fabricated world, but it was Elsa's home, and she preferred the Edgemist to the endless horizons of Earth.

Up ahead, the cliffs curved outward and the Edgemist angled toward the shore. Though she couldn't see it from her vantage point on the beach, Elsa knew the two would meet somewhere, pinching off the sea. Along with the new cliffs there was a new trail, snaking up the side in a series of tight switchbacks. She was almost at the trailhead when the Edgemist, hanging close on her left, began to shift, and the movement caught her attention. She stopped short and whirled around to stare at it, a cold fear seeding in her stomach.

The mottled purple-gray patterns of the Edgemist, usually calm, now churned like angry storm clouds. Veldana only had mild rains, but Elsa had seen a real thunderstorm once in Paris, when she'd accompanied her mother on a trip to Earth. She remembered how the clouds hunkered low and menacing over the city, darkening the gaslit streets, and rain lashed the windowpanes until they rattled in their casings. She'd been eight and terrified, and this was the feeling that welled up in her now, seeing the Edgemist writhe before her.

A breeze picked up, tossing strands of black hair across Elsa's face and carrying with it the salt-and-decay scent of low tide.

Could this be an aftereffect of the most recent changes? Had Jumi expanded Veldana too quickly and somehow destabilized the boundaries of the world?

The breeze shifted direction, carrying the muffled sound of

shouts from somewhere above. Could a person somehow be causing the disturbance? Elsa turned and ran to the trailhead, stopping only to shove her feet into her shoes before rushing up the switchbacks. The path wove between the narrow, twisted trunks of Aleppo pines and squat, thick holly oaks. She followed as it bent to the left, eventually spitting her out onto a long, grassy meadow bounded on one side by forest and on the other by the gray wall of the Edgemist.

The shouts belonged to a gaggle of boys from the village. They were throwing pebbles at the Edgemist, trying to see if they could penetrate the invisible force that held matter inside the world. Some of the pebbles rebounded off the Edgemist as if off a wall, landing in the grass, while others passed silently through and disappeared forever. Here, too, the Edgemist swirled like eddies in a fast-flowing river.

Elsa heaved an irritated sigh. Surely, this must be the cause. As Jumi always said, coincidence was the assumption of a lazy mind.

“Jumi just made those rocks,” she said loudly in Veldanese.

The boys whirled around. One of the younger ones let out a frightened yelp, and another clapped a hand over his friend’s mouth.

The eldest was her once-friend Revan, now too broad at the shoulders to really be called a boy. “What’s the big deal? They’re just pebbles.”

“You’re destroying part of the world. It’s the principle of the thing.” She turned her gaze on the younger ones. “Now run on home before I tell Jumi and she erases you out of the worldbook!”

The children squealed and ran for the trailhead. Revan folded his arms, annoyed. “You shouldn’t scare them like that.”

“Oh? How should I scare them?” Elsa said, eyebrows raised. “They need to learn to respect Veldana, and you’re not helping any, encouraging these stupid games.”

“While I’m sure you find Jumi’s squirmy little sea creatures thoroughly enthralling, the rest of us have to make our own fun.”

That was the way it was among the children: her versus the rest of them. Revan’s mother, Baninu, was as close to a friend as Jumi had. Baninu hoped their children would someday marry, and this more than anything else had driven the wedge between Elsa and Revan, for she did not plan to marry. Ever.

“Just . . . find something else. Don’t do this again,” Elsa said coldly.

Revan stared at her like he was memorizing the face of a stranger. Elsa felt a sharp twinge of regret, but she turned away so he would not see it in her face.

The vanished starfish and the Edgemist’s strange behavior still nagged at her. A few pebbles shouldn’t have caused that instability all on their own. Best to rush straight home and consult Jumi.

The village lay nestled in a valley, bisected by a rocky-bottomed creek that emptied into the sea—now that there was a sea. The shallow banks were lined with moss, and Elsa’s shoes sank into the springy stuff as she hurried upstream.

She crossed a little wooden bridge and wove her way between the scattered cottages with their dark thatched roofs and white-washed wattle-and-daub walls. Past the gentle slope of the hill was the cottage she shared with her mother. There was a vegetable

garden along the side and a chicken coop behind, and as Elsa reached for the door she reminded herself that one needed weeding and the other needed sweeping.

The cottage itself had one large room on the ground floor and a loft for sleeping space. Hearing the door latch, Jumi glanced up from her writing table.

Looking at Jumi was like looking in a mirror that showed the future. Elsa's skin was a shade darker, bronze-brown to her mother's sienna tan, but they shared the black hair, clear green eyes, and even the shape of their faces: strong cheekbones sweeping low over an expressive mouth and sharp chin. Elsa took pride in the similarity, and if anyone saw parts of her father reflected in her, they did not dare to say. She herself had no idea what he had looked like when he was alive, and this was one of the few ignorances she felt no desire to correct.

"Elsa, dear. You're back early," Jumi observed.

"Afternoon, Mother."

Elsa came around the table to look at what her mother was working on. Jumi was scribing in a large worldbook—one that did not look familiar to Elsa, though she couldn't be sure since it was open to a mostly blank page.

"What's this?" Elsa said, curious.

"It's our freedom," Jumi said.

Elsa eyed her mother, wondering if she could press for a less cryptic answer. Veldana had been created by one of those self-superior European scriptologists, a man named Charles Montaigne, who had treated the Veldanese as subjects of an experiment. The damage he wrought to the Veldanese language alone had taken Jumi years to correct after she learned the scientific discipline of scriptology and negotiated Veldana's independence.

How, exactly, she had wrested control of the world from Montaigne was a subject Jumi always skirted around.

“What do you mean?” Elsa asked.

Jumi did not answer. Instead, she set her fountain pen aside and brushed her fingers across one thick off-white page, a soothing gesture, the way another person might stroke a nervous animal. “You’ll be seventeen next month. A grown woman. I think it’s time you have access to the Veldana worldbook. It will be your job to care for our world someday, and you’re skilled enough now to take a more active role in the expansions.”

Elsa felt a swell of pride. Nothing mattered more than being worthy of Jumi’s approval, worthy of inheriting her role as caretaker of Veldana. “Thank you, Mother.”

Jumi smiled one of her rare, soft smiles and put a hand to Elsa’s cheek, a gesture of affection that would have been embarrassing if they hadn’t been alone. “I could not have asked for better,” she said.

Elsa covered Jumi’s hand with her own, holding it against her face for a moment before letting it go. Flustered by her mother’s praise, she wasn’t sure what to say, so she changed the subject. “I think we might have a problem with the newest revisions. I’m not sure. . . .” Despite her earlier threats, Elsa found herself reluctant to betray the boys to Jumi. She decided to leave them out of the story. “The Edgemist was behaving strangely. It looked disturbed. And there was this starfish that seemed stable, then it up and vanished right out of my hand.”

Jumi frowned. “I scribed the expansion hours ago. The Edgemist should have settled away to its new location by now.”

“I know.” Elsa shrugged. “Perhaps it was nothing, but—”

There was a loud crack, like the sound of a branch breaking.

The room began to fill with smoke, and Elsa covered her nose and mouth with her sleeve. A sickly-sweet smell crept through the fabric as she ran for the door, but she stepped on something and slipped, and the hard slate floor came up to meet her, knocking the wind from her lungs. The smoke was making her dizzy, too dizzy to get back up. Somewhere nearby Jumi coughed and wheezed, but Elsa couldn't catch sight of her through the smoke.

Her thoughts seemed to be slowing down, like her brain was turning sticky as honey, her skull heavy. Her head dropped and her eyelids closed.

On Earth, in the city of Pisa, Leo Trovatelli was dreaming.

In the dream he was on a walkway beside a canal with his brother, Aris. Mist clung to everything, the way it always had in the early mornings of Venetian winter. Aris flashed him a knowing grin, then spun around and sprinted off down the walkway. Leo tried desperately to catch up, but he was a child again, and his short legs weren't fast enough. Aris pulled farther and farther away, fading into the mist. The cobblestones beneath Leo's feet shook, throwing him off balance, and he fell over the edge into the black waters of the canal.

Leo jerked awake, but the shaking didn't stop. He was slouched awkwardly in the armchair in his bedroom; he'd meant to rest his eyes for only a minute and now the whole room was vibrating. An earthquake? He'd felt his share of earthquakes, and this was somehow softer and faster, more frenetic, as if it were tuned to a different wavelength.

Knickknacks jounced around on his shelves, clattering against the wood. Something fell to the floor and shattered. Through the

half-open balcony doors, he heard someone shout in the cloister garden below.

After a moment the shaking stopped, but it left behind a sick, hollow feeling in his gut. Somewhere in the world, something had gone wrong.

He shook his head and pushed himself out of the chair. Aunt Rosalinda had always discouraged his superstitious feelings, and if she were here, she'd tell him it was nothing. Better to focus on the practicalities, like cleaning up whatever the earthquake had broken.

He knelt beside the shattered ceramic. There were so many pieces he didn't recognize it at first, but then he found part of the eye socket and realized: it was the *carnevale* mask, one of the few possessions he'd brought with him from Venezia. From his childhood with Aris.

This wasn't a sign, he told himself. *This wasn't a sign of anything.*

2

READING SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*, I HAVE TO WONDER:
AM I NOT THE VILLAIN OF MONTAIGNE'S STORY? AM I
NOT HIS MONSTER? OR AM I REAL ENOUGH FOR
THIS TO BE MY STORY, AND HE THE VILLAIN?

—*personal notes of Jumi da Veldana, 1886*

Elsa swam her way back to consciousness through a honey-thick sea of heavy dreams. When she finally forced her eyelids to peel themselves open, she was greeted by a splitting headache and a unique perspective on the underside of Jumi's writing table.

"Ugh," she said, lifting a shaky hand to press against her temple. "Mother, what happened?"

No one answered.

"Mother?" Elsa pushed herself up to a sitting position. The writing chair was knocked over, and her mother's favorite fountain pen had rolled across the slate flooring, leaking a thin trail of blue-black ink.

Fear tightened her chest, but she had to keep a level head and figure out what was going on. *Think, think!* Elsa groped on the

floor for the object she'd slipped on and came up with a small metal cylinder of some kind. She lifted it and sniffed carefully, confirming it as the origin of the sweet smoke. Some kind of gaseous chemical designed to induce sleep?

This was no accident. Someone had abducted her mother.

A thread of panic laced through Elsa, quickening her breath. She struggled to her feet, grabbing the edge of the writing desk to pull herself up. Gone, too, was the worldbook her mother had been scribing in. What did that mean? Was it valuable? Who could have taken her mother, and why?

Elsa bent over, hands on knees, breathing too fast. She was unaccustomed to the sensation of helplessness. She needed to figure out what to do; there had to be something she could do. Gather information, focus on the details, employ rational evaluation—this was the methodology Jumi had taught her, and so she forced herself to look up and observe.

Sunlight still filtered through the windows. How long had she been unconscious? Elsa scrambled for the door, her legs feeling wobbly and loose-jointed, and she peered outside to judge the time by the angle of the shadows. An hour, perhaps.

She might still be able to catch up with them. A portal from Veldana could only transport someone to the location on Earth where the Veldana worldbook was kept: the home of Charles Montaigne, the scriptologist who'd created her world. They could open a portal in the Edgemist anywhere along the boundaries of Veldana, but they could only arrive in Paris, France, inside Montaigne's study.

They'd taken Jumi's portal device, which had been sitting out on the writing table. Elsa clattered up the ladder to the loft, opened her mother's clothing chest, scooped out all the clothes,

and lifted the false bottom. Jumi was nothing if not dedicated to precautionary measures.

Elsa reached into the chest to take out the spare portal device and slipped it into a pouch on her belt. Next she lifted the revolver, shook six bullets out of the ammunition box, and loaded the revolver. She threaded the holster onto her belt and settled the revolver snugly into it. They were all Earth objects; Veldana had no infrastructure for manufacturing. The revolver had been a gift from Alek de Vries, a scriptologist who had mentored Jumi. Elsa knew how to operate the gun but had never pointed it at anything alive; the thought that she might have to, now, gave her a queasy feeling.

Last, Elsa lifted out a small book, its leather cover no larger than her hand. It contained her most ambitious scriptology project, and the only one in recent years for which she'd needed Jumi's advice—her doorbook. Deciding it might be useful, Elsa took the book, along with a pen and a little bottle of scriptology ink. Through the glass the midnight-blue ink gave off an iridescent sheen, as if swirled with quicksilver. There, that was everything.

Rushing from the cottage, Elsa lifted her skirt and ran along a narrow path that followed the creek upstream and out of the valley. There was a shortcut halfway up, a little-used trail so steep Elsa had to grab at tree trunks to lever herself or crawl on all fours over the rocks, but every step was familiar and she could fly up the slope much faster than a stranger might.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. The interlopers didn't know Veldana like she did, and carrying Jumi's weight would slow them down, but they had a whole hour's head start. They might have already reached the Edgemist—they might be dialing their portal device for the return trip even now.

The Edgemist . . . of course! The disturbance she'd observed had had nothing to do with a fault in her mother's alterations to the worldbook. These invaders must have opened a portal while Veldana was still adjusting to the expansions—even a single person coming through at the wrong time would be enough mass to destabilize the Edgemist temporarily.

Elsa flushed hot with panic and guilt. If only she had thought of that explanation before, there might have been time to prepare, time to fend them off. How could she have been so stupid?

She scrambled up the last section of the slope, and then it was a straight shot through the forest to reach the Edgemist. She took it at a run, her legs burning, the hard leather pouches that hung from her belt banging against her thighs. The forest opened up into a narrow strip of meadow separating the trees from the Edgemist, and Elsa stumbled to a stop. Her breath still hitching, she fished the portal device from its belt pouch.

Elsa knew the coordinates for Earth by heart, and she twisted the little brass knobs to the correct settings. The memory rose, unbidden, of the first time Jumi had let her work the portal device—she had been six, and the device had felt unwieldy in her small hands, requiring all her concentration. But she'd had plenty of practice since then, and despite the superior attitudes of European scriptologists like Montaigne, Elsa had taken to the science as if she were born for it. By now the controls were so familiar, she could have dialed the settings with her eyes closed.

The coordinates set, Elsa flipped the stiff brass switch in the center with her thumb. A small black dot appeared in the Edgemist before her, the mist spiraling around it as if it were the eye of a storm. The black eye irised open until it was an oval portal wide and tall enough to admit a person, and Elsa lunged in.

The insides of portals weren't, strictly speaking, existent places, and that was precisely how it felt to be there—as if one no longer existed. It was freezing cold and perfectly dark in a way that felt like the concepts of temperature and light were absent. Elsa knew to keep walking, even though there was nothing to walk on, and nothing to walk toward, and then it was over as suddenly as it had begun.

She stepped through into a room full of light and smoke, the portal automatically closing behind her. Elsa covered her face with her sleeve for the second time that day—Montaigne's shelves of worldbooks were burning. The thieves must have set fire to the study after they'd come through.

A surge of terror flooded her veins. The Veldana worldbook was hidden here, and if the book was destroyed, so was the world. Coughing, she ran to the blank wall where the worldbook's secret chamber lay hidden. Elsa pressed her palms against the wall the way she'd seen her mother do so many times, but the chamber refused to open for her. She screamed her frustration and slammed her palms against the wall again, but it was useless—the chamber was designed to open only for Jumi, and Jumi was gone.

Elsa struggled to rein in her racing thoughts. Other books—other worlds—were burning as she wasted time standing there. She should at least try to save what she could. Turning to run for the shelves, Elsa tripped over something on the floor and stumbled. It was a body: portly, middle-aged, lying facedown in a pool of blood. Charles Montaigne, Veldana's original creator. The abductors were also, apparently, murderers.

Elsa stared in shock. Jumi had found him infuriating, and had been careful to never leave Elsa alone with him, but murder still seemed an extreme solution.

A waft of smoke scraped at her lungs and sent her into a fit of coughing. Time was of the essence. The flames consuming the bookshelves had jumped to the curtains of the nearest window and were tentatively starting to crawl across the wooden floor. Elsa scanned the shelves for the familiar spine of the Veldana worldbook, in case it was outside the wall vault, but she didn't find it. So she went to the shelf with the lowest flames. Squinting against the heat, she pulled down the least scorched of the volumes—the ones that might not be damaged beyond repair. She rescued another mildly blackened volume from the floor near Montaigne's body and fled, her arms full, her lungs scoured with smoke, from the house.

Out on the street, Elsa was surprised to see that a small crowd of Montaigne's neighbors had gathered. Evening was falling over Paris, yellow gaslight from the streetlamps pooling along the cobblestones. The smoke from the fire cast a gray blot against the dark violet of the sky. Elsa stumbled down the front steps and dropped her armful of books in the street, then nearly went down with them as a coughing fit overtook her. Her lungs felt scorched dry, as if the fire had gotten inside her, and the damp evening air provided no relief.

She turned to run back in and rescue another armload of books, but someone grabbed her and held her back.

"You can't, miss! The house is lost," the man said.

She struggled and kicked. "You don't understand. The worlds are burning!"

Either the onlookers did not know the house belonged to a renowned scriptologist, or they understood but simply did not find her argument compelling. Another of Montaigne's neighbors came over to help drag her back. Frustration bloomed in her

chest like a dark flower. She should not have wasted time on those other worldbooks, she should not have left without Veldana—if she couldn't get the wall safe to open, she should have beaten down the wall with her bare fists and dragged the whole thing out.

The fire was spreading too fast, flames already visible in the front of the house through the sitting room windows. Her world was still inside, but there was nothing she could do now.

Elsa sagged in their grip, despairing, and they let go, returning immediately to a distance dictated by propriety. “The fire brigade's been called for,” the first one said, as if this would be a comfort. He reached down to retrieve his top hat, which had fallen in the struggle. “Are you well now, miss?”

“What a ridiculous question,” she snapped, and turned away from him.

She knelt on the cobblestones beside what books she had managed to save. She opened the closest one and pressed her fingers to the pages, feeling for the familiar buzz of a live worldbook. There was a subtle vibration, like the rubbing together of a cricket's wings, but it swelled and receded in a disturbing fashion. A finished worldbook should feel confident and solid, but this one was weak with fluctuations.

Elsa could feel the eyes of the crowd, as hot against her back as the fire itself. She had neither time nor patience for considering what they made of the situation—an angry brown girl in peasant clothes emerging from the house of their respectable, well-to-do neighbor. But whatever they thought, a crowded avenue was not the place to assess the extent of the fire damage done to the books.

Elsa pushed her sweat-damp hair out of her face and looked around. On the far side of the street, a black coach clattered by,

the horses rearing and rolling their wide eyes in fear, the coachman shouting curses as he fought for control. When the carriage had passed, Elsa scooped up the books and stalked across the street, away from prying eyes.

She turned the first corner, putting a building between her and the curious gazes of the crowd, and stood in a patch of shadow between the streetlamps. Using her legs like bookends, she set the books down between her feet to free her hands, then took her pocket-sized book from its belt pouch. It wasn't a proper world-book so much as a directory of places—a means by which to target the portal device and open a door from one location on Earth to another. A heretical application of scriptology, by the standards of European science, but for Elsa it was an achievement worthy of pride.

She skipped past the core text in the front, where the book's properties and functions were defined, and flipped through the destinations described in the back. Her hands shook a little as she considered where to go. Her mind went immediately to the one person on Earth whom she knew could be counted upon for assistance: her mother's old mentor, Alek de Vries. So she found the page where she'd scribed a description of the canal outside de Vries's flat in Amsterdam.

Taking out the portal device, she read the coordinates from the little doorbook, then tuned the brass knobs to the proper settings. When she flipped the switch, the dark disk of the portal widened, slicing through the very air of the alleyway—it hung there, unattached to anything, and even though Elsa had done this before, the sight of a portal with no Edgemist still disquieted her a bit. The real world didn't work in sensible ways.

As she tucked the portal device back into its pouch, she heard

the distant clatter of dozens of hooves and the creak of massive wheels behind her—the Parisian fire brigade, at last, arriving too late to do more than quell the spread of the blaze. Elsa let out a frustrated huff, hefted her stack of rescued books, and walked into the portal. She stepped through the infinite coldness and out onto a cobbled walkway tucked between a narrow canal and a row of looming four-story brick buildings all squeezed together like books on an overfull shelf. Amsterdam.

The portal winked closed of its own accord, and Elsa stepped up onto the stoop and shifted the books to rest on her hip, freeing one hand. She yanked down on the bell pull for de Vries’s flat, counting the seconds until he opened the front door.

De Vries was tall and skinny, bald on top but with the thick, cultivated mustache of a Victorian gentleman. He was wearing a burgundy smoking jacket, the velvet a little worn around the cuffs. Elsa thought of him as tragically old, though there weren’t any Veldanese older than about forty years, so she supposed she didn’t have much basis for comparison. In any case, he had laugh wrinkles around the eyes and frown lines between his brows, and at the moment the latter were the more prominent.

“Elsa, dear, what are you doing here? Where’s Jumi?” he said in Dutch, adjusting his wire-frame spectacles as if she might be some sort of illusion.

“A lot has happened. Let me in, it will take some time to explain,” Elsa said, smoothly switching to Dutch.

One of the characteristics scribed into the Veldana world-book gave Veldanese the ability to speak a new language within minutes of hearing it—no fuss over grammar, no laboring to memorize vocabulary. Though Elsa had known de Vries since she was a baby, so Dutch felt almost as natural to her as Veldanese.

“Of course, of course,” de Vries said, holding the door open wide and running his other hand over his hairless pate.

De Vries reached to unburden her, but Elsa held on to the books and pushed past him up the stairs to his second-floor flat. Out of politeness, she waited at the top for de Vries to let them both in.

“So?” de Vries said as he closed the door behind them. “Are you going to tell me why you’re soot-stained and smelling of smoke?”

Briefly, Elsa wondered how de Vries could even tell, considering that both he and his sitting room smelled strongly of pipe tobacco. She dropped the stack of worldbooks on a credenza beside the door and said, “Montaigne was killed. The library was in flames when I came through from Veldana. I saved what I could.”

De Vries swore a long chain of words he really oughtn’t say in front of a lady. He had been close friends with Montaigne—how *that* had worked, given the uneasy truce between Montaigne and Jumi, Elsa couldn’t guess—and the loss of Montaigne’s library was a terrible waste by anyone’s standards.

“De Vries!” she said, needing him to focus. “That isn’t all. I don’t have the Veldana worldbook. Jumi is the only one who can open the chamber where it’s kept. Veldana was still in the house when it burned.”

“Oh, Elsa. That doesn’t mean . . .,” de Vries began, awkward in his gentleness. “I don’t know much about the design of her wall safe, but the worldbook may very well have survived the fire precisely because it was locked inside.”

“Perhaps. But if the worldbook’s damaged, I can’t risk going back there. Not ever.” Elsa ground her teeth together, determined

not to let him see the anxiety that burned like acid behind her breastbone. A damaged worldbook meant a damaged world, and without its core properties intact—properties like breathable air and solid ground—she'd be opening a portal to her own unpleasant demise. Not to mention that there'd be no one left alive to return to.

He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "If Veldana is intact, your mother will realize you're missing and port here to look for you. Don't worry, you won't be stuck with me for long."

"No, I'm afraid she won't." The words caught in her smoke-roughened throat, and Elsa had to force them out. "She's gone, de Vries. There was a kind of smoke that makes you sleep, and when I woke up, she was missing. Taken."

"Gone," he repeated, and sat down suddenly on a footstool, the news landing like a blow. "Jumi is in the hands of God knows who?"

"Which means there's no one left in Veldana who knows how to operate a portal device. The link between our worlds is severed, if Veldana still exists at all."

"It means more than that," de Vries said, his lips pressed together in a grim line. "A talented scriptologist like Jumi being abducted . . . it could mean someone is making a play for power. But who? The French government?"

Elsa blinked, unfazed by his concerns. "I don't particularly care for your Earth politics. What I need is to find a way to ascertain the status of Veldana." Quietly, she added, "And a way to find my mother."

He nodded. "We can go to the house in the morning. If Veldana was destroyed, we may be able to establish it from the wreckage. And either way, we should look for clues while the scene is still

fresh. Whoever took Jumi must have come through the portal from Veldana at Montaigne's house, and they may have left something behind in their haste."

A seed of shame planted itself in Elsa's chest. Montaigne's house was the only link she had to her mother's abductors, and she'd run away from it like a scared little girl, naively hoping de Vries could make everything all right. "We should go back now . . .," she said, reaching for the doorbook.

He raised his eyebrows. "And do what, precisely? Stand in the street all night while the fire brigade stops the fire from spreading? Dig through the ashes in the dark? No, we'll get some sleep and go in the morning. Then, at least the ashes will be cold."

"The ashes may be cold, but the trail will be, too," Elsa said, folding her arms.

"I imagine that's why they killed Montaigne and set the house ablaze," he said quietly. "To make it impossible for anyone to learn who had been there."

"So you're saying it's hopeless?"

"I'm saying this isn't the sort of problem we're likely to solve before supper. Which I'd guess you could do with some of, after your ordeal."

Elsa wanted to snap a denial at him, but in truth she was famished. Since breakfast, she'd had nothing but a couple of wild plums found during her survey work. She sighed, relenting. "I'll go try to find something clean to change into."

In de Vries's guest room, Elsa unbuckled her belt and shed her soot-stained Veldanese apron and dress, then filled the washbasin and cleaned herself up as best she could. Only then did she discover that both of her knees were quite impressively bruised

from the spill she'd taken on the slate floor of the cottage. There hadn't been time to notice the pain.

Leaving in such a rush, she also hadn't spared a moment to let anyone know what was happening. Assuming Veldana still existed, did everyone back home think she and Jumi had abandoned them? Elsa couldn't claim to be friends with Revan anymore, but she found she didn't like the thought of him wondering why she'd vanished.

Of course, he might not be wondering anything anymore. He might never again have the chance to feel anger or hurt or any other emotion. Revan, and everyone else in Veldana, might be dead. The thought made Elsa's chest so tight she could barely breathe, and she had to splash water on her face again to dispel the panic. She did her best to push the idea out of her mind.

In the wardrobe hung a couple of her mother's spare dresses—French fashions with high collars and puffed sleeves, ridiculously impractical compared with simple Veldanese garb. She'd worn them whenever she came to visit. Elsa leaned close to take one of the dresses off its hanger, but froze when a familiar smell reached her nose: lemon verbena, Jumi's favorite scent, still lingering in the cloth. Suddenly, she wanted her mother with the fervency of a small child lost in the woods, her eyes stinging with the start of tears. The weight of everything that had happened, losing Jumi and Veldana in quick succession, felt like it was crushing her. She bit down on her lip hard, and swore to herself she *would not cry*.

In the morning, Elsa took de Vries with her through a portal to Paris. She knew he did not generally approve of the doorbook's

method of travel, thought it was too dangerous for casual use, but this time he reluctantly agreed they shouldn't waste time taking the train. As they stepped out of the portal, de Vries brushed a hand down the front of his jacket as if surprised to discover all his body parts had made it through in their correct orientations.

From the street, Montaigne's house looked a sodden, ashy ruin. The second story was still standing, but only barely, the roof having collapsed into the bedrooms at the front of the house. What windowpanes remained unbroken were coated in black soot. Elsa didn't know much about fire control, but it seemed lucky the blaze hadn't spread up and down the street.

"Well. I suppose it could be worse," said de Vries, climbing the front steps. "Watch your footing."

The front door was off its hinges, so they walked right in through the empty doorframe. Sections of the interior walls had collapsed, leaving behind a skeleton of charred wooden structural beams, and avalanches of wood and plaster fragments cluttered the floor. The hem of Elsa's skirt collected soot as she waded deeper into the wreckage, making her glad she'd dressed in her already ruined Veldanese clothes.

In the back of the house, Montaigne's study was hardly recognizable. Elsa could see into the bedroom above through holes in the scorched ceiling, and she didn't feel entirely convinced the second floor wasn't going to collapse on top of them. The smell of burnt books lingered in the air, but it looked as if the authorities had removed Montaigne's body—or whatever remained of it after the fire—which came as a small relief.

"What are we looking for?" said Elsa.

De Vries lifted a burnt book, the pages crumbling in his hands. Paper ashes swirled in a shaft of morning light like motes of dust.

“I’m not sure. If the covers aren’t too badly damaged, it would be worth doing an inventory of the titles. Or your mother might have left some small clue for you, assuming she was conscious by the time they brought her through the portal.”

She took a moment to orient herself. That pile of charred wood on her left was all that remained of the desk where Jumi had so often sat, the desk she used when scribing changes into the Veldana worldbook. Elsa turned to her right, picked her way over to the place where the Veldana worldbook’s chamber had been. The wall had collapsed, leaving nothing but empty air between the support beams. Elsa swallowed hard, feeling as if she might choke on her next words. “It’s gone.”

De Vries came over and crouched down, sorting through the pile of debris. She bent down to help him. After a few minutes of meticulous searching, he said, “No book remnants—not even a scrap of leather from the cover. That’s odd.”

“There’s nothing here! Nothing that looks like a wall safe, intact or otherwise.” Elsa pushed herself to her feet, frustrated. “Where could it be? Do you think someone might have removed it after the fire?”

He frowned thoughtfully at the place where the chamber should have fallen when the plaster and laths of the wall collapsed. “The police, maybe? If they thought the contents of a safe might prove important to their investigation. Assuming they know the fire was arson, and not an accident.”

Either way, Veldana was beyond Elsa’s reach. There was no going home. This was a reality she had to come to terms with. She drew a deep, rattling breath, determined to set aside the terror of having lost her home. “Then we focus on finding Jumi.”

They spent the morning doing as thorough and systematic a

search as was possible, given the chaos left behind by the fire. It was nearly midday when Elsa spotted a large rectangular shape amidst the rubble. She knelt down and put a hand out to touch it. The charred leather casing disintegrated beneath her fingers, revealing the Pascaline mechanical calculator it held. The heat of the fire had warped the brass faceplate, but the row of input dials—each shaped like a tiny spoked wheel—looked intact.

“I used to play with it when I was little, while Jumi worked on the Veldana worldbook.”

De Vries came over to see what she’d found.

“One time, I disassembled it to see how it worked,” she said as she held it up. “Jumi just about had a fit when she saw it all in pieces. I suppose Montaigne would have been furious if he’d found out, but I put it back together just fine.”

An odd silence stretched between them, and when she looked up from the Pascaline, de Vries was staring at her as if seeing her for the first time.

“What?” She frowned at him, confused. “Do you have a particular dislike for Pascalines?”

He suddenly declared, “We have to go.”

“Right this second? Why?” Elsa said obstinately. She didn’t understand his sudden change in mood, and that set her on edge.

De Vries made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat, but when he spoke, he chose his words carefully. “Did Jumi ever talk to you about . . . the madness?”

“Yes. When someone is brilliant at something, like scriptology, you Earth people say they have the madness.”

“It’s not quite so simple. The madness is brilliance, yes, but it’s also a sort of single-minded drive. An obsession. No one

could succeed at scriptology without being at least a little obsessive. Jumi has it, and you do, too.”

Elsa shrugged, still not sure how this was relevant. “If you say so.”

“We can’t stay in France. Your mother was infamous. If the nationals get ahold of you, you’ll spend the rest of your life in a very comfortable prison scribing worldbooks for the Third Republic. Amsterdam is hardly better than Paris. Lord, what a fool I’ve been.”

“Is,” Elsa corrected him. “My mother *is* infamous.”

De Vries shot her a look of pity. “Of course. My apologies.”

Elsa didn’t particularly like the idea of being rushed off somewhere with little explanation, but if her mother trusted anyone on Earth, it was de Vries, and he seemed genuinely afraid for her. For now, that knowledge would have to be enough. “So, where do we go, then?”

He pursed his lips for a moment, thinking. “Do you speak Italian?”

“Not yet,” said Elsa. “But I will.”

“Abbiamo bisogno di pratica.”

“It doesn’t happen that fast,” Elsa replied, still in Dutch. “I have to listen for a while before a new language clicks.”

De Vries smiled, as if her response was funny. “I said, ‘We have need of practice.’” He cleared his throat, and his tone turned serious. “I have friends in the Kingdom of Sardinia—we’ll go there, to the city of Pisa. Of the four Italian states, Sardinia is the safest, and Pisa in particular has a long history as a refuge for persecuted scientists.”

She nodded. “Very well.”

Before they left, Elsa gently lifted the wounded Pascaline

into her arms, intent on taking it with her. She'd lost so much—she wasn't going to give up on this, too, without at least trying to repair it.

They took the doorbook back to Amsterdam, surprising a pair of old ladies with parasols half to death when they appeared out of nowhere on the sidewalk. They cast furtive glances at de Vries and Elsa before nervously scurrying away down the sidewalk.

Up in the flat, Elsa washed up and changed again into her mother's laborious European clothing—chemise, stiff-boned corset, long skirts, high-necked white blouse, fitted jacket. The clothes were uncomfortable and impractical, and it struck her that she'd never asked Jumi how she'd felt when she traveled in Europe. Elsa had thought she'd known everything about her mother, and this small detail suddenly seemed of desperate importance. Panic roiled in her stomach. What else didn't she know?

Elsa pulled herself together, finished with the jacket buttons, and gathered whatever else of Jumi's possessions she could find that might be of use. De Vries gave her a pair of carpetbags: a larger one for the stack of rescued books and a smaller one for the Pascaline and her mother's personal items. She looked at him curiously when he came out of his room with his own set of packed luggage—she'd assumed he would return immediately to Amsterdam after making the introductions—but he offered no explanation.

“Well, I think that's everything,” said Elsa. “Have you been to Pisa before?”

“It has been some time,” de Vries said, stretching out the words with a reluctance that made Elsa wonder if there was more

to the story. He didn't seem to be in a forthcoming mood, though, so Elsa decided not to press him.

“Any time is good enough, so long as you've been there. Just describe a particular place to me. Something unique.” She opened the doorbook to a fresh page. “Do they have any distinctive buildings in Pisa?”

He smiled. “Yes, you could say that.”

De Vries gave her details and Elsa scribed them onto the page in the proper order, but her mind kept straying elsewhere, back to the events of the past day. Had the intruders taken Jumi because of her madness? It would've been easier to abduct someone here on Earth if they just needed a scriptologist. So they probably wanted Jumi specifically, but to what end? How could Elsa get Jumi back if she didn't even know who had taken her or why?

So many questions, and no answers in sight.

3

YOU MAY HAVE THE UNIVERSE IF I MAY HAVE ITALY.

—*Giuseppe Verdi*

They stepped out of the portal's darkness into a bright, pale world. Elsa looked around: they were standing on a flat, featureless plain, everything around them obscured by white haze.

De Vries squinted, wiped the condensation off his glasses with a handkerchief, and looked around again. "This . . . I don't believe this is right."

"No," Elsa agreed primly. "We quite failed to get there."

He paled. "You mean to say failure was an option?"

"Oh, no need to worry. I scribed the doorbook to shunt you to a fabricated world if the description isn't accurate enough to connect to the destination. Minimal possibility of accidents with bad portals. It's proved thoroughly reliable so far."

"The fact that the doorbook hasn't brought you to an untimely

demise *yet* is hardly a consolation. I've told you before, the very idea of connecting two locations on Earth to each other makes me nervous. It's unnatural."

"You have a talent for worrying. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Yes," he said. "Your mother. Frequently."

Elsa set down her carpetbags and sat cross-legged beside them. The ground was smooth and flawless like polished stone, but not as hard. Actually, it felt almost supple. She pressed her fingertips into it, and five imprints remained when she pulled her hand away. They slowly disappeared as the material rebounded. "Fascinating, isn't it? How a world will spontaneously generate properties that weren't specified in the text."

"I'm afraid the study of emergent properties has been somewhat out of fashion in recent years," de Vries said.

"Right. Of course. Because of Jumi." People were a difficult thing to create—when they were directly scribed into the world-text, they turned out like puppets, capable of basic call-and-response communication but with no consciousness, no sense of self. The Veldanese were the first successful attempt at scribed people, created as subtext using emergent property theory. Veldana was scribed with cottages and agriculture and drinking water, but the people themselves were not specified in the text; they were merely implied by the existence of human infrastructure.

The Veldanese were considered a major breakthrough in the science of scriptology. But when Jumi had fought back, demanding autonomy for her people, the scientific community had banned the creation of more populated worlds like Veldana.

Elsa sorted through her belt pouches and brought out a fountain pen, a bottle of ink, and the doorbook.

“You’re not going to do that here, while we’re still inside, are you?” de Vries said, aghast. “What next—shall we modify an airship engine while we’re in the air?”

“Relax. I’d have to do something monumentally careless to strand us here forever. How did you ever get to be one of Europe’s preeminent scriptologists with such a cautious attitude?”

Grumpily, he replied, “By living longer than all of the really brilliant ones.”

Bending over the doorbook intently, Elsa copied what she’d written onto a fresh page. She’d been distracted and gotten sloppy, so now she adjusted the syntax and asked de Vries for additional details to flesh out the description. After a few minutes of work, she said, “There. I think that should work now. Shall we give it a try?”

“How sure are you that it’s not going to kill us?”

“Um . . . ninety-seven percent sure?” Elsa grinned. She handed the book up to him so he could hold it open while the ink dried, then put away her writing supplies and stood.

De Vries harrumphed. “Well, at least you’re smiling about *something*. Not the thing I would have picked, though.”

Elsa sobered. For a moment there, she’d been too swept up in their adventure to remember her mother was missing. Guilt blossomed in her chest, and she swore to herself: no more smiling until she got Jumi back.

She dialed the new coordinates into her portal device, activated a portal, and tucked the device away again. Then she picked up her luggage and stepped through without turning to see if de Vries would follow.

He did, of course, emerging from the darkness a few seconds behind her. They stood in a broad, grassy square near the right

transept of an elaborate cathedral. The facade was an excess of columns and arches carved out of pale stone. To the left, near the front entrance of the cathedral, was a squat, round baptistry built in the same style. On their right, a multitiered bell tower tilted precariously away from the cathedral.

“That,” Elsa observed, “is some poor architecture.”

De Vries tilted his head back to look at it. “The Leaning Tower. It’s famous in part because it’s doomed.”

“How morbid.” She tried to make her tone light, even though there was something chilling about all these old monuments. Elsa told herself the buildings were intentionally designed to inspire awe, and so the feeling in her gut belonged to some long-dead architect’s imagination, not to her. But in truth, there was a part of her that couldn’t help wondering how many centuries the tower had seen, how many people had lived and died and turned to dust in the shadow it cast over the city. The weight and silence of all that history felt like too much for anyone to bear.

It came as a relief when de Vries led the way out of the square and onto a broad street paved with gray cobblestones. Elsa was also glad he seemed confident about which way to go. She could explore off-trail through unfamiliar woods and never get lost, but navigating city streets was not a skill she’d put much effort into developing. Now that she was stranded outside Veldana and Earth was the only inhabited world available, Elsa felt a bit foolish for neglecting to learn it.

“The Kingdom of Sardinia is just one of four independent states ruling different parts of Italy,” de Vries explained as they walked. “We’re lucky to have friends here—the Sardinian government is very forward-thinking and supportive of the sciences.”

“Not so in the other three states, I take it?” said Elsa.

A pained expression crossed his face, as if he had some personal experience with the danger of other governments. He cleared his throat and said, “Not so elsewhere. They exploit mad people when it suits them.”

Elsa was curious to hear more, but she could tell de Vries was reluctant to share the details. Instead, she asked, “So what exactly is our destination, now that we’ve made it to Pisa?”

He seemed relieved at the change of subject. “The place we’re going to is a sort of haven for madboys and madgirls. No one will be able to get to you there. You’ll be safe.”

Something in his tone made Elsa suspicious that there was more at play than he was letting on. Why the sudden onset of concern for her safety, back in the ruins of Montaigne’s house? But she decided to follow his lead anyway, as Jumi would have advised her to do, and trust that he would enlighten her at the proper time.

De Vries moved rather slowly on foot—the last time Elsa had visited him with her mother, Jumi had argued it was time for him to acquire a walking cane for his stiff left hip, but he was still walking without one. In Veldana, it would have driven Elsa mad to have to walk so slowly, but here she didn’t mind. Their plodding pace gave her time to eavesdrop on the other people out walking the streets, so she could absorb their language properly.

Everyone—the men especially—gestured a great deal with their hands as they talked. She wondered if the gestures served some critical linguistic function, though she could detect no obvious grammatical structure in the motions.

As she watched the citizens of Pisa, Elsa caught their stares lingering on her in turn. These were a pale people not so different

from the French, whereas the Veldanese all came in shades of brown. She could not guess what they thought of her, with her black hair and bronze skin and a pale elderly gentleman for an escort. Hot pinpricks of self-consciousness traveled down her spine.

“*Stai imparando?*” de Vries asked, interrupting her thoughts.

“I don’t know what that means yet,” Elsa snapped, feeling edgy and exposed. She wished the new language would hurry up and sink in so they could get off the streets and out of sight. They were both quiet for a minute or two, and she started regretting her curtness. “Thank you for your help, de Vries. I know I don’t always make it easy for you.”

He smiled down at her. “You can call me Alek, you know. After you’ve dug through a pile of burnt wreckage and run off to Toscana with someone, the need for formality has faded somewhat.”

Elsa shrugged. “I’m accustomed to de Vries.”

He chuckled to himself. “So like your mother. Sometimes I wonder if you aren’t a window back in time.”

“What do you mean?” she said sharply.

“Why, that she keeps everyone at a distance, of course. Everyone except you.”

Elsa scowled at him, but she noticed his use of the present tense—*keeps*—and was silently grateful for it.

She calmed her anxious thoughts and turned her attention back to the most immediate problem: language. As Jumi would have said, *How can you hope to master your world if you cannot master your own mind?* So Elsa started with herself, and focused on listening to and absorbing the words of passersby.

The words began to churn in the back of her brain, mixing

and clarifying. Yes, Elsa realized, it was not so unlike French in its grammar or etymology—startlingly familiar, now that she could hear it properly. She felt dizzy with the swelling knowledge.

“Steady there,” said de Vries, and caught her by the elbow as she swayed.

They had stopped walking. Elsa didn’t recall exactly when. Come to think of it, she’d lost track of where they were, too—she looked around at the cobblestone plaza they stood near the edge of, wondering how far they’d come from the Leaning Tower.

“Not much farther,” said de Vries as he led her toward a broad four-story stone building. He presented it with a wave of his arm. “Casa della Pazzia.” *House of the Madness*.

The front doors were framed with an elaborate lintel and pilasters, which gave the building a sense of monumental authority. Elsa couldn’t help but think “house” was a bit of an understatement; Fortress of the Madness might have been a better name.

De Vries stepped up to the doors and lifted the heavy brass knocker. After a minute, Elsa could make out the muffled sound of bolts sliding, and one side of the double doors opened.

The woman who answered was middle-aged, short and plump, with dark hair pulled back in a practical chignon. The stains on her smock looked like they’d come from an engine instead of a kitchen.

“Alek! What a surprise,” she said in Italian, her eyes lighting up. She pulled him forward and, much to Elsa’s surprise, planted a kiss on each of his cheeks. “Do come in.”

De Vries stepped inside, Elsa following warily. The foyer was expansive. A giant gasolier hung from the cavernous fresco-painted

ceiling, blue sky and sunset-tinted clouds of pink and orange. The inlaid-tile floor was polished so smooth it reflected and scattered the gaslight. Two curved staircases, one on either side of the room, led up to a balcony on the far wall. Elsa hadn't expected anything so lavish and formal from an acquaintance of de Vries.

De Vries, however, seemed perfectly at ease. "You look well, Gia. Is your husband home?"

"I'm afraid he's in Firenze for the week. Business with the Order."

"In that case, may I present Signorina Elsunani di Jumi da Veldana. Elsa, this is Signora Gioconda Pisano, headmistress of Casa della Pazzia." Elsa gave her a nod, and de Vries added, "I do wish Filippo were in town. I'm afraid it's a matter of some concern for the Order."

Signora Pisano folded her hands together. "Yes, I had supposed so, on account of your sudden arrival. Shall we go to my office?"

"One moment." De Vries turned to Elsa, switching back to Dutch. "How are you doing with the Italian?"

"Listening is easy. I imagine it will feel strange on my tongue for a while, though." She watched Signora Pisano's face, registering the incomprehension there. Good—they could speak privately then. "I have an odd feeling about this place. Are you certain we can trust these people?"

"I would trust them with my life," he said gravely.

"Well, that's good," Elsa sniped. "Since that's precisely what you're expecting me to do."

De Vries gave her a look of mild reproof. "Patience, my dear. I promise—"

"Watch out!" someone shouted in Italian from above, startling

everyone, including Signora Pisano. Elsa looked up to see a young man with a rapier in his hand leaning over the balcony railing. “It’s coming this way!”

He vaulted over the railing and Elsa sucked in a breath, thinking he was falling to his death, but he landed light as a cat on his feet. The boy looked up, and for a second their gazes locked. He was a study in brass—tawny eyes and olive skin, blond hair grown long enough he had to shake it away to see her clearly. Elsa felt heat rise in her cheeks.

“Leo, really!” Signora Pisano scolded in a tone that implied shock at his manners more than fear for his safety.

He broke eye contact with Elsa and turned his head to respond, but a loud buzzing noise began to emanate from the wall beneath the balcony, and a cloud of plaster dust started billowing into the foyer. Leo spun around, lifting his rapier to a ready position. Elsa found herself yet again covering her nose and mouth with her sleeve. A large section of wall detached from the rest and collapsed into the foyer with a crash, and through the cloud of plaster dust a two-meter-tall shadow was visible.

The imposing shape stepped forward—*No*, Elsa thought, squinting through the dust, *not step so much as roll*. Though Leo held his rapier as if waiting for an opponent to advance, the thing he faced was machine, not man, and it had treads instead of feet.

Leo stepped forward to meet the metal monster, and as the plaster dust began to settle, Elsa’s view of it improved. A round saw blade whirred at the end of one of its six limbs, and two more brandished rapiers. The other arms terminated with a flame-thrower, a mallet, and an enormous crablike pincer.

“Terribly sorry,” said Leo, though his ear-to-ear grin did not give Elsa the impression of remorse. He whipped his rapier

through the air, parrying and lunging. “I’m afraid I’ve improved the training bot rather too much.”

Elsa didn’t know much about swordplay, but the fact that the boy was still in one piece seemed a fair indication of his competence. Even so, flamethrowers and saws hardly made for a fair fight. Elsa drew the revolver from its holster and cocked back the hammer.

The bot had a head, but without a closer look it was impossible to know if anything important was located there besides the optics. Instead, she aimed for an exposed tube underneath one arm and fired. The tube burst open, spilling thick red-brown fluid down the side of the bot. The bot’s movements became slow and jerky, and after a few seconds its limbs sagged and went still.

“You shredded the hydraulics!” Leo said. “That’ll take hours to replace.” He gave her an annoyed look, which did nothing to lessen the perfect angles of his features.

Instead of answering, Elsa busied herself with tucking the gun away in its holster. The whole situation was so strange, she was unsure whether she would actually be expected to apologize for stopping the rampaging machine. She leaned closer to de Vries and muttered in Dutch, “Yes, I feel very safe here already.”

Signora Pisano was pinching the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger. “Why, pray tell, would you add a radial saw to a training bot?”

Leo shrugged and sheathed the rapier, then slipped his hand out of the intricate metalwork of the guard. “It seemed like the thing to do at the time.”

Signora Pisano took a closer look at the training bot. “How many times do I have to tell you, Leo? No flamethrowers in the house!”

“It’s only a small one,” he protested.

“You,” she said, pointing a finger close to his nose, “I will deal with later.” Then she looked away from Leo. “Casa?”

A disembodied voice echoed through the foyer, making Elsa jump. “Yes, signora?” The voice was deep and resonant, but with a somewhat feminine softness around the edges.

“We’re ready for repairs here.”

“Very well, signora.”

A small army of clockwork bots hurried in, ambling single file like ducklings. Elsa stood still, frozen by amazement. Some of them were tall and narrow with long brass limbs, some were barely knee-height, with a dozen different tools sticking out in all directions. One squat little bot cleaned the floor with round, rotating scrub brushes as it moved along. Elsa felt a sudden longing to grab it and take it apart to find out how it worked—her fingers itched for the feel of its delicate gears.

“Elsa . . . Elsa!” De Vries had his hand on her shoulder.

She shook her head to clear it and blinked up at him. “Yes?”

“There will be time to examine the bots later.”

“Right . . . of course,” she answered slowly.

“Come along,” said Signora Pisano, “let’s find somewhere we won’t be disturbed again.” At this she cast a scolding look at Leo, then led Elsa and de Vries out of the ruined foyer.

Signora Pisano’s office was comfortably small compared to the grandiose vastness of the foyer, with wall-mounted gaslamps bringing out the warm tones of the wood paneling. Her shelves displayed mechanical baubles and trinkets instead of books. Signora Pisano sat behind her polished-wood desk while Elsa and de Vries took up the comfortable armchairs placed in front of it for guests.

When de Vries finished relating all that had happened,

Signora Pisano leaned back in her chair and said, “That’s quite a story. You’re right, Alek, the Order will need to hear of this at once.”

“Naturally,” said de Vries. “I felt it was essential to secure protection for Elsa first, though.”

“Yes, yes.” Signora Pisano nodded thoughtfully. “I must say, Elsa, given your parentage, I would have thought scriptology would be your calling, not mechanics.”

“Well, I do scribe, of course,” said Elsa politely. “My mother taught me when I was little. We’re not exactly living in the steam age in Veldana, though, so I’m afraid I don’t know much about mechanics.”

Signora Pisano gave de Vries a significant look, complete with a raised eyebrow. “Both?”

He cleared his throat. “It appears so. Hence why I thought it best to bring her here immediately.”

Signora Pisano let out a breath and sat back in her chair. “Jumi da Veldana’s daughter, and a polymath besides.” She used the Greek word—*polymathes*—and it stood out sharp and cold against the lilting Italian syllables. Elsa jerked as if the word were a slap, unprepared for another new language so soon.

“What does that mean?”

De Vries took her hand in both of his, as if to deliver bad news. “You must understand, Elsa: most madboys and madgirls have a very specific interest or set of interests. They won’t—perhaps can’t—turn their attention to any topic beyond their chosen obsession. A polymath, however, is someone who experiences the madness but has no particular focus, being able to apply his or her genius to any field of study—scriptology or mechanics or alchemy, or any combination of the three—and thus having unlimited potential.”

“They’re exceedingly rare,” added Signora Pisano. “So rare some people claim they no longer exist. There are historical examples, of course, but no one alive today. If you are indeed a polymath . . .”

She frowned, as if sorting through the implications in her mind. Elsa felt unmoored. Last week she’d known exactly what her place was, but now she was in a different world, one she didn’t fully understand. And Signora Pisano did not seem to think being “rare” was a good thing.

De Vries said, “It puts you in a precarious position. Most madboys and madgirls are of limited use on the international stage, because their range of talent is too narrow. A government cannot commission a weapon from a madboy who only builds trains. But you . . .” He trailed off, unwilling to put the conclusion into words.

Elsa nodded, slipping her hand out of his grasp to knot her fingers together in her lap. Now when she spoke, her voice was small. “Everyone who wants power will want me.”

“Jumi hid your talents well. Even from me. What a fool I’ve been, thinking she was letting me keep up with her, when she was always two steps ahead.”

“Well, *someone* caught up,” Elsa said darkly.

Signora Pisano pursed her lips. “That they did. And we must assume they left you behind only because they didn’t know—”

The door flew open and a girl burst in. She was about Elsa’s age but dressed like a wealthy Parisian woman, her hourglass figure accentuated with a corset, the wine-dark velvet of the dress turning her light olive skin almost milky. The curves of her small mouth and round cheeks would have identified her as

Signora Pisano's daughter even if she didn't immediately say, "Mamma, you'll never guess—" Her smile vanished. "Oh, you have company."

"Yes, Porzia dear, that's why the door was closed," Signora Pisano said, but she sounded more amused than annoyed. "There will be plenty of time for you to become acquainted with Signorina Elsa after we've finished here."

Porzia paused in the doorway for a moment as if considering her options, but decided to take the hint. "Yes, Mamma." She did a brief curtsy in the general direction of Elsa and de Vries, then swept out of the room, pulling the door closed behind her.

Signora Pisano paused, momentarily distracted. "Well, as we were saying, I suspect it was your mother's ingenuity at hiding your talents that has kept you safe thus far. But since these unknown assailants now have Jumi in their possession, they may be . . . learning more."

Stony-faced, Elsa replied, "You mean they may be torturing her for information."

Beside her, de Vries inhaled sharply. "There's no point in speculating."

Signora Pisano leaned forward for emphasis. "Elsa, my husband and I—and Alek, as well—belong to a society of mad scientists called the Order of Archimedes. Its mission is to prevent the exploitation of mad people and to protect the integrity of our science. The Order will find your mother; this is precisely the sort of problem it exists to solve. Now, Casa, would you prepare a room for our guest?"

The house's voice seeped out of the walls. "Already done, signora."

“Excellent.” To Elsa, she said, “Try not to worry, dear. We’ll get your mother back soon.”

Right, thought Elsa. Her whole world had fallen apart—perhaps literally—and she was supposed to simply not worry. Signora Pisano seemed kind enough, but not excessively realistic. Still, if she was going to argue against staying here, best not to do it in front of the lady of the house. Elsa decided to hold her tongue until she and de Vries could speak alone.

Casa sent a little brass bot to act as a guide, leading Elsa to her new accommodations. The bot led her and de Vries up two flights of stairs—what Elsa wouldn’t give to disassemble the motile mechanism allowing it to do that!—and down a long, windowless hallway.

“Here you are, signorina,” Casa said, the bot spinning around to face them and gesturing toward the door on their left with its metal claw.

De Vries gave a start, as if suddenly recognizing where they were. “*This* door, Casa?”

Casa hummed innocently, choosing not to answer.

Elsa glanced around sharply. She hated feeling like everyone else knew something she didn’t. “What is it?” she asked de Vries.

“Nothing. It’s only . . . I knew the previous occupant, that’s all.” He reached out to open the door for her, but his grip on the knob was hesitant, as if he expected it might burn him. Elsa followed him inside.

The entrance opened onto a richly furnished sitting room, with doorways on the left and right leading to a bedroom and a study. In the center of the room, a sofa and two armchairs were arranged together, all upholstered in green-and-beige damask with arms and legs of finely carved wood ending in animal claws.

Elsa set her carpetbags beside the door and carefully laid out the contents of her belt—the gun, portal device, stability glove, door-book, and scribing materials—on a marble-topped commode. Then she went to examine the bedroom, which also displayed an excess of polished wood and fine fabrics. How in the world was she supposed to live here when it all looked too old and too fancy to be touched, let alone used?

When she returned to the sitting room, she saw de Vries had taken Jumi’s gun from the holster and was holding it gently, as if it were a fond memory.

Elsa said, “It was a good gift, you know. The sort of thing she would have gotten for herself. She’d never say it, but I think she likes that you understand her.”

De Vries blinked heavily, as if to clear his eyes of moisture. “Thank you. She was never easy, but always worth the effort.”

Elsa sank down onto the sofa. “Do you love her?” she said, trying to catch him off guard with the directness of the question.

“Like a daughter,” he answered easily. He set the gun back down and came over to sit beside her. “Which is why my first priority is to protect you, in accordance with what she would want me to do.”

“I’m not a child anymore. I could be useful.”

“And that’s precisely what I’m afraid other people might realize.”

Elsa narrowed her eyes at him, remembering how Signora Pisano had asked Casa to prepare a room for *our guest*, singular. “How soon?” she said.

“What?”

“I know you aren’t staying. You’re going to leave me here with these people. So, how soon?”

De Vries rubbed the back of his neck, reluctant to admit it. “I’ll catch the evening train to Firenze tonight. But you must know I wouldn’t leave you with just anyone—I’ve known the Pisano family a long time, they’re dear friends. You’ll be safe here.”

“Safe and useless,” Elsa said sulkily.

“Yes, safe and useless,” de Vries repeated, as if it were a triumph.

“You can’t stop me from leaving.” Elsa was the one who’d scribed the doorbook that could transport her anywhere in the real world—means of escape were hardly the problem.

“Please, Elsa—stay here. I couldn’t bear to find Jumi, only to have to tell her that I’d lost her daughter.” Then his tone brightened, as if to coax her toward enthusiasm. “Besides, this is a house of madness—it shouldn’t be too difficult to keep yourself occupied. Make friends, learn from them. Jumi’s an excellent scriptologist, but she couldn’t teach you the other sciences. Think of this as an opportunity, not a prison sentence.”

Elsa glowered. *An opportunity*. But could she afford to ignore de Vries’s advice when she knew so little about what it meant to be a polymath in Europe? He seemed genuinely afraid that some government would snatch her off the street.

“Fine, I’ll stay for now,” she grudgingly agreed, “but I’m going to search Montaigne’s books for clues. You know how he was, always hiding away inside his worlds—he may have left behind something relevant.”

“That’s a fine idea.” De Vries gave her an indulgent smile, as if he saw this activity more as a distraction than a viable strategy for finding Jumi. “But don’t worry overmuch—the Order of Archimedes will uncover what happened to your mother.”

After he left, Elsa pulled open the top drawer of the commode and slipped the gun inside. Better not to leave it out for anyone else to find. She trusted de Vries, but his trust in these people was another step removed from that. Her mother would warn her to be cautious, to keep her guard up. On second thought, she tucked away the doorbook and portal device beside the gun. It was rather too obvious a hiding place, but if she hid them more thoroughly she would lose time retrieving them whenever a hasty departure became necessary.

It wasn't that she believed de Vries would betray her. It was just that it all seemed . . . too fortunate. If her luck the past two days served as any indication, she had better be prepared for the worst. Even if it meant turning away from de Vries's well-intentioned help.

Jumi had taught her that love was a weakness—that if you let someone in, you gave them the power to hurt you. But before today, Elsa had thought of this as an untried philosophy, a theoretical truth that she had never gotten the chance to test.

She loved her mother and she loved Veldana, and now they were both beyond her reach, possibly both destroyed. She had never felt pain like this before, so acute it made her breath catch in her lungs. Her mother had been right—it was those you loved who could hurt you the most.

At the same time, she had to wonder: Was it simply the losses that hurt? Or did it also hurt to have nothing at all left to love?

Leo needed the help of five of Casa's cleaning bots just to haul the damaged training bot back to his laboratory, and a trail of hydraulic fluid leaked along the floor in his wake. He hoped Casa

could get that mopped up before Gia stepped out of her office again—there was only so much mess the poor woman could take. He didn't mean to be such a source of trouble, but things always seemed to spiral out of hand.

In Venezia, Aris had been the troublemaker, the ringleader whom the younger boys would follow anywhere. Rosalinda used to say that if Aris jumped in the Grand Canal, Leo would jump in two seconds after—she'd meant it as a criticism, though Leo had chosen to take it as a compliment.

Now, like it or not, Leo managed to make his own trouble. He wondered if his brother would be proud. He wondered what Aris's grin would look like now—still magnetic as ever, but in a grown man's face?

Leo shook his head to clear those futile musings. It was just the broken mask that had him thinking of his childhood, and all he'd lost. He perched himself on his favorite tall stool at the high worktable and resolved to focus on the repairs.

“I love what you've done with the place.”

He glanced up; it was Porzia, stepping through the gaping hole in the wall where the door had been. When Leo had activated the training bot, it had plowed its way out of the laboratory, taking the door and part of the walls with it. Now there was nothing to deter visitors.

Porzia lifted her skirts to pick her way through the rubble and entered uninvited.

Leo frowned at her. “What do you want?”

“Why do you always think I want something? Isn't it enough that I came to say hello?” Porzia said, but she motioned with her eyes, casting a significant look at the worktable. With feigned

casualness, Leo reached over and flipped a switch on the top of a device shaped like a cube.

“The scrambler’s on,” he said. “It’s safe to talk.”

Porzia glanced at the ceiling. “Casa? You’re a dusty old junker with grinding gears. I wouldn’t spit on you if you were on fire.” She paused, waiting for a response. “I guess it works.”

Leo tapped a finger on the top of the box. “Like I said— instant blind spot. Casa can’t monitor us when it’s on. So what’s happening?”

Porzia settled herself primly atop a packing crate, as if it were a fine-upholstered settee. “Papa’s friend Alek de Vries brought us a new girl today.”

“I know, we met in the foyer,” Leo said, omitting the part about battling the runaway bot.

“Yes, well. There’s something odd about her. Do you know which rooms Casa prepared for her? Uncle Massimo’s old rooms—with the scriptology study opposite the bedroom.”

Leo frowned. “Perhaps Gia . . .”

Porzia tilted her chin down and gave him a scathing look. “Mamma would not instruct Casa to prepare *those* rooms for a guest. Really, her deceased brother-in-law’s rooms?”

“Right.” He leaned forward, planting his elbows on the workbench. “That means Casa is taking initiative, and the house only makes independent decisions when something significant is going on. Do we know for certain the girl’s a scriptologist?”

A lock of hair had come loose from Porzia’s elaborate updo, and she wrapped it around her finger thoughtfully. “Mamma didn’t give us much of an introduction, but why else would Casa choose those rooms? She’s a scriptologist, I’ll bet, and Casa thinks she’s here to stay.”

“Mm,” Leo agreed noncommittally. He hadn’t missed the way Elsa had stared—like a woman possessed—at the cleaner bots, or the way she’d neatly targeted the one system that would cripple the training bot.

Could she be a scriptologist . . . *and* a mechanist? A polymath in hiding? Better to keep what he’d seen to himself for now, at least until he knew what it meant.

The thought of polymaths called up the image of Aris’s face as he leaned over Leo’s shoulder to watch Leo struggling at a scriptological problem. *What’s wrong, little brother? It’s so simple I bet Pasca could do it, and he’s hardly out of swaddling clothes.* The memory had edges as sharp as broken glass, and Leo shook his head to dispel it. What was the point in thinking about his brothers when they were dead?