

SNEAK PEEK



HELL
BENT
LEIGH
BARDUGO

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HELL BENT

Leigh Bardugo



Ignorant they of all things till I came
And told them of the rising of the stars
And their dark settings, taught them numbers, too,
The queen of knowledge. I instructed them
How to join letters, making them their slaves
To serve the memory, mother of the muse.

Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound
Inscribed above the entrance to
Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University

Culebra que no mir morde, que viva mil anos.
May the snake that doesn't bite me live a thousand
years.

Sephardic proverb

PART I



As Above

November

Alex approached Black Elm as if she were sidling up to a wild animal, cautious in her walk up the long, curving driveway, careful not to show her fear. How many times had she made this walk? But today was different. The house appeared through the bare branches of the trees, as if it had been waiting for her, as if it had heard her footsteps and anticipated her arrival. It didn't crouch like prey. It stood, two stories of gray stone and peaked roofs, a wolf with paws planted and teeth bared. Black Elm had been tame once, glossy and preening. But it had been left on its own too long.

The boarded-up windows on the second floor made it all so much worse, a wound in the wolf's side that, left untended, might turn it mad.

She slotted her key into the old back door and slipped into the kitchen. It was chillier inside than out—they couldn't afford to keep the place heated, and there was no reason to. But despite the cold and the mission she'd come here to fulfill, the room still felt welcoming. Copper pans hung in neat rows above the big vintage stove, bright and ready, eager to be used. The slate floor was spotless, the counters wiped clean and set with a milk bottle full of holly branches that Dawes had arranged just so. The kitchen was the most functional room of Black Elm, alive with regular care, a tidy temple of light. This was how Dawes dealt with all they'd done, with the thing lurking in the ballroom.

Alex had a routine. Well, Dawes had a routine and Alex tried to follow it, and it felt like a rock to cling to now as fear tried to drag her under. Unlock the door, sort the mail and set it on the counter, fill Cosmo's bowls with fresh food and water.

They were usually empty, but today Cosmo had tipped the food on its side, scattering the floor with fish-shaped pellets, as if in protest.

Darlington's cat was mad at being left alone. Or frightened by not being quite so alone anymore.

"Or maybe you're just a picky little shit," Alex muttered, cleaning up the food. "I'll pass your comments along to the chef."

She didn't like the sound of her voice, brittle in the quiet, but she made herself finish slowly, methodically. She filled the water and food bowls, tossed out the junk mail addressed to Daniel Arlington, and tucked a water bill into her bag that she would take back to Il Bastone. Steps in a ritual, performed with care, but they offered no protection. She considered making coffee. She could sit outside in the winter sunlight and wait for Cosmo to come find her, when he saw fit to leave off prowling the messy tangle of the hedge maze for mice. She could do that. Push her worry and anger aside, and try to solve this puzzle, even though she didn't want to complete the picture emerging with every new and nasty piece.

Alex glanced up at the ceiling as if she were able to see through the floorboards. No, she couldn't just sit on the porch and pretend everything was as it should be, not when her feet wanted to climb those stairs, not when she knew she should run the other way, lock the kitchen door behind her, pretend she'd never heard of this place. Alex had come here for a reason, but now she wondered at her stupidity. She wasn't up to this task. She'd talk to Dawes, maybe even Turner. For once she'd make a plan instead of rushing headlong into disaster.

She washed her hands at the sink, and it was only when she turned to reach for a towel that she saw the open door.

Alex dried her hands, trying to ignore the way her heart had leapt into a run. She had never noticed that door in the butler's pantry, a gap between the pretty glass cupboards and shelves. She'd never seen it open before. It shouldn't be open now.

Dawes might have left it that way. But Dawes was licking her wounds from the ritual and hiding behind her rows of index cards. She hadn't been here in days, not since she had set those holly branches on the kitchen counter, making a picture of what life should be. Clean and easy. An antidote to the rest of their days and nights, to the secret above.

She and Dawes never bothered with the butler's pantry, its rows of dusty dishes and glassware, its soup terrine the size of a small bathtub. It was one of the many vestigial limbs of the old house, disused and forgotten, left to atrophy since Darlington's disappearance. And they certainly never bothered with the basement. Alex had never even thought about it. Not until now, standing at the kitchen sink, surrounded by tidy blue tiles painted with windmills and tall ships, staring at that black gap, a perfect rectangle, a sudden void. It looked as if someone had simply peeled away part of the kitchen. It looked like the mouth of a grave.

Call Dawes.

Alex leaned against the counter.

Back out of the kitchen and call Turner.

She set down the towel and drew a knife from the block beside the sink. She wished there were a Gray nearby, but she didn't want to risk calling one to her.

The size of the house, its deep silence, sat heavy around her. She glanced up again, thought of the golden shimmer of the circle, the heat it gave off. *I have appetites.* Had those words excited her when they should have only made her afraid?

Alex walked quietly toward the open door, the absence of a door. How deep had they dug when they'd built this house? She could count three, four, five stone steps leading down into the basement, and then they faded into the dark. Maybe there were no more stairs. Maybe she would take a step, fall, keep falling into the cold.

She felt along the wall for a light switch, then looked up and saw a ratty piece of twine dangling from an exposed bulb. She yanked on it, and the stairs were flooded with warm yellow light. The bulb made a comforting hum.

"Shit," Alex said on a breath. Her terror dissolved, leaving nothing but embarrassment in its place. Just stairs, a wooden railing, shelves stacked with rags, cans of paint, tools lining the wall. A faint, musty smell rose up from the dark below, a vegetable stink, the hint of rot. She heard the drip of water and the shuffle of what might have been a rat.

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She couldn't quite make out the base of the stairs, but there had to be another switch or bulb below. She could go down there, make sure no one had been rooting around, see if she and Dawes needed to set out traps.

But why was the door open?

Cosmo could have nudged it on one of his ratting expeditions. Or maybe Dawes really had popped by and gone down to the basement for something ordinary—weed killer, paper towels. She'd forgotten to close up properly.

So Alex would shut the door. Lock it tight. And if, by chance, there was something down there that wasn't meant to be down there, it could stay right where it was until she called for reinforcements.

She reached for the twine and paused there, hand gripping the string, listening. She thought she heard—there, again, a soft hiss.

The sound of her name. *Galaxy*.

"Fuck this." She knew how this particular movie ended, and there was no way she was going down there.

She yanked on the twine and heard the pop of the bulb, then felt a hard shove between her shoulder blades.

Alex fell. The knife clattered from her hands. She fought the urge to reach out to break her fall and covered her head instead, letting her shoulder take the brunt of it. She half-slid, half-tumbled to the base of the stairs, and hit the floor hard, her breath flooding out of her like a draft through a window. The door above her slammed. She heard the lock click. She was in the dark.

Her heart was racing now. What was down here with her? Who had locked her in with it? *Get up, Stern. Get your shit together. Get ready to fight.*

Was it her voice she was hearing? Darlington's?

Hers, of course. Darlington would never swear.

She pushed herself to her feet, bracing her back against the wall. At least nothing could come at her from that direction. It was hard to breathe. Once bones broke, they learned the habit. Blake Keely had cracked two of her ribs less than a year ago. She thought they

might be broken again. Her hands were slippery. The floor was wet from some old leak in the walls, and the air smelled fetid and wrong. She wiped her palms on her jeans and waited, her breath coming in ragged gasps. From somewhere in the dark, she heard what might have been a whimper.

“Who’s there?” she rasped, hating the fear in her voice. “Come at me, you cowardly fuck.”

Nothing.

She fumbled for her phone, for light, the blue glow vibrant and startling. She directed the beam over shelves of old paint thinner, tools, boxes labeled in a jagged hand she knew was Darlington’s, dusty crates emblazoned with a circular logo: *Arlington & Co. Rubber Boots*. Then the light glinted off two pairs of eyes.

Alex choked on a scream, nearly dropping her phone. Not people, Grays, a man and a woman, clinging to each other, trembling with fear. But it wasn’t Alex they were afraid of.

She’d gotten it wrong. The floor wasn’t wet from a leak or rain-water or some old burst pipe. The floor was slick with blood. Her hands were covered in it. She’d smeared it on her jeans.

Two bodies lay heaped on the old brick. They looked like cast-off clothing, piles of rags. She knew those faces. *Heaven, to keep its beauty, cast them out.*

There was so much blood. New blood. Fresh.

The Grays hadn’t abandoned their bodies. Even in her panic, she knew that was strange.

“Who did this?” she asked them and the woman moaned.

The man pressed a finger to his lips, eyes full of fear as they darted around the basement. His whisper drifted through the dark.

“We’re not alone.”

October, One Month Before

Alex wasn't far from Tara's apartment. She'd driven these streets with Darlington at the start of her freshman year, walked them when she was hunting Tara's killer. It had been winter then, the branches bare, the tiny yards crusted with dirty mounds of snow. This neighborhood looked better in the still-warm days of early October, clouds of green leaves softening the edges of the rooflines, ivy climbing over the chain-link fences, all of it made gentle and dreamy by the glint of streetlights carving golden circles into the soft hours of dusk.

She was standing in the well of shadow between two row houses, watching the street that fronted the Taurus Cafe, a windowless lump of brick decorated by signs promising keno and lotto and Corona. Alex could hear the thump of music from somewhere inside. Small rings of people smoked and chatted beneath the lights, despite the sign beside the door that read *No loitering police take notice*. She was glad of the noise, but less happy at the prospect of so many witnesses seeing her come and go. Better to come back in the daytime when the street would be deserted, but she didn't have that luxury.

She knew the bar would be packed with Grays, drawn by sweat, bodies pressed together, the damp clink of beer bottles; she wanted someone closer to hand.

There—a Gray in a parka and a beanie, hovering by an arguing

couple, undisturbed by the heavy heat of a too-long summer. She made eye contact with him, his baby face an uncomfortable jolt. He'd died young.

"*Come on along,*" she sang under her breath, then gave a disgusted snort. She had that goofy song in her head. Some a cappella group had been practicing in the courtyard when Alex was getting ready to leave the dorm.

"How are they already starting that shit?" Lauren had complained, sorting through her crates of vinyl, her blond hair even brighter after a summer spent lifeguarding.

"It's Irving Berlin," Mercy had noted.

"I don't care."

"It's also racist."

"That shit is racist!" Lauren had called out of the window and put AC/DC on her record player, turning the volume all the way up.

Alex loved every minute of it. She'd been surprised at how much she'd missed Lauren and Mercy over the summer, their easy talk and gossip, the shared worry over classes, the arguments about music and clothes, all of it like a tether she could grasp to bring her back to the ordinary world. *This is my life*, she'd told herself, curled up on the couch in front of a noisy fan, watching Mercy hang a garland of stars over the fireplace in their new common room, quite a change from their cramped rooms on Old Campus. The couch and recliner had made it into their new suite, the coffee table they'd all assembled together at the start of freshman year, the toaster and its seemingly inexhaustible supply of Pop-Tarts sent courtesy of Lauren's mom. Alex had asked Lethe for a bike and a printer and a new tutor at the end of last year. They'd been happy to agree, and she wished she'd asked for more.

Their freshman dorm on Old Campus had been the most beautiful place Alex had ever lived, but the residential college—JE proper—felt real, solid and elegant, permanent. She liked the stained glass windows, the stonework faces in every corner of the courtyard, the scuffed wood floors, the heavily carved fireplace that didn't work but that they'd decorated with candles and a vintage globe. She even

liked the little Gray in an old-fashioned dress, a child with hair done up in crisp curls who liked to linger in the branches above the tree swing.

She and Mercy were sharing a double because Lauren had won the single in their draw. Alex was sure she'd cheated, but she didn't much mind. It would have been easier to come and go if she had a room to herself, but there was also something comforting about lying in bed at night and hearing Mercy snore across the room. And at least they weren't stuck in bunks anymore.

Alex had planned on hanging out with Mercy and Lauren for a few hours before she had to leave to oversee a ritual at Book and Snake, listening to records and trying to ignore the annoying *mmmm ooh* of a singing group punishing "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

Come on along. Come on along. Let me take you by the hand.

But then the text from Eitan had appeared.

So now she was eyeing the Taurus Café. She was about to step out of the shadows when a black-and-white drove by, a new cruiser, sleek and quiet as a deep-sea predator. It flashed its lights and gave a brief belch of the siren, a warning that the New Haven PD did indeed take notice.

"Yeah, fuck you," someone growled, but the crowd dispersed, drifting into the club or weaving down the sidewalk to find their cars. It wasn't properly late yet. There was still plenty of time to find another party, another chance at something good.

Alex didn't want to think about the cops or getting caught or what Turner might say if she got dragged in on a B&E or, worse, an assault charge. She hadn't heard from the detective since the end of her freshman year, and she doubted he'd be glad to see her under the best of circumstances.

Once the cruiser was gone, Alex made sure the sidewalk was clear of possible witnesses and crossed the street to an ugly white duplex, just a couple doors down from the bar. Funny how all sad places looked the same. Trash cans overflowing. Weed-choked yards and junked-up porches. *I'll get around to it or I won't*. But there was a new truck in the driveway of this particular house, complete with

personalized license plate: ODMNOUT. At least she knew she had the right spot.

Alex drew a mirrored compact from the pocket of her jeans. When she hadn't been mapping New Haven's infinite churches for Dawes, she'd spent the summer digging through the drawers of Il Bastone's armory. She told herself it was a good way to waste time, get familiar with Lethe, maybe eye up what might be worth stealing if it came to that, but the truth was that when she was rummaging in the armory cabinets, reading the little handwritten cards—*the Carpet of Ozymandias; Monsoon Rings for calling rain, incomplete set; Palillos del Dios*—she could feel Darlington with her, peering over her shoulder. *Those castanets will banish a poltergeist, Stern, if one plays the correct rhythm. But you'll still walk away with your fingers burned black.*

It was comforting and troubling at the same time. Invariably, that steady scholar's voice turned accusing. *Where are you, Stern? Why haven't you come?*

Alex rolled her shoulders, trying to shrug off her guilt. She needed to stay focused. That morning, she'd held the pocket mirror up to the TV to see if she could capture a glamour from the screen. She hadn't been sure it would work, but it had. Now she popped it open and let the illusion fall over her. She jogged up the steps to the porch and knocked.

The man who answered the door was huge and heavily muscled, his neck thick and pink as a cartoon ham. She didn't need to consult the image on her phone. This was Chris Owens, also known as Oddman, record as long as he was and twice as wide.

"Holy shit," he said when he saw Alex at the door, his eyes trained on the space a foot above her head. The glamour had added twelve inches to her height.

She raised her hand and waved.

"I . . . Can I help you?" Oddman asked.

Alex bobbed her chin toward the apartment interior.

Oddman shook his head as if waking from a dream. "Yeah, of

course.” He stepped aside, sweeping his arm out in a grand gesture of welcome.

The living room was surprisingly neat: a halogen lamp tucked into the corner, a big leather couch with a matching recliner arranged to face a massive flat-screen tuned to ESPN. “You want something to drink or . . .” He hesitated, and Alex knew the calculation he was making. There was only one reason a celebrity would turn up on his doorstep on a Thursday night—any night really. “You looking to score?”

Alex hadn’t really needed confirmation, but now she had it. “You owe twelve large.”

Oddman took a lurching step back as if he’d suddenly lost his balance. Because he was hearing Alex’s voice. She hadn’t bothered to try to disguise it, and the dissonance between her voice and the glamour of Tom Brady created by the mirror had caused the illusion to waver. It didn’t matter. Alex had only needed the magic to get inside Oddman’s apartment without a fuss.

“What the fuck—”

“Twelve large,” Alex repeated.

Now he saw her as she was, a tiny girl standing in his living room, black hair parted in the middle, so skinny she might slip straight through the floorboards.

“I don’t know who the fuck you are,” he bellowed, “but you’re in the wrong damn house.”

He was already striding toward her, his bulk making the room shake.

Alex’s arm shot out, reaching toward the window, toward the sidewalk in front of the Taurus Cafe. She felt the Gray in the beanie rush into her, tasted green apple Jolly Ranchers, smelled the skunk smoke of weed. His spirit felt unfinished and frantic, a bird slamming itself against a windowpane again and again. But his strength was pure and ferocious. She put up her hands, and her palms struck Oddman square in the chest.

The big man went flying. His body slammed into the TV, shattering

the screen and knocking it to the floor. Alex couldn't pretend it didn't feel good to steal the Gray's strength, to be dangerous just for a moment.

She crossed the room and stood over Oddman, waited for his dazed eyes to clear.

"Twelve large," she said again. "You have a week to get it or I come back and break bones." Though it was possible she'd cracked his sternum already.

"I don't have it," Oddman said on a groan, his hand rubbing his chest. "My sister's kid—"

Alex knew the excuses; she'd made them herself. *My mom is in the hospital. My check is late. My car needs a new transmission and I can't pay you if I can't get to work.* It didn't really matter if they were true or not.

She squatted down. "I feel for you. I really do. But I have my job, you have yours. Twelve thousand dollars by next Friday or he'll make me come back and turn you into an example for every dime bag hump in the neighborhood. And I don't want to do that."

She really didn't.

Oddman seemed to believe her. "He . . . got something on you?"

"Enough to bring me here tonight and to bring me back again." Alex's temples gave a sudden throb, and the oversweet tang of apple candy burst into her mouth. "Shit, man. You look bad."

It took Alex a second to realize she was the one speaking—with someone else's voice.

Oddman's eyes widened. "Derrick?"

"Yeah!" That wasn't her voice, wasn't her laugh.

Oddman reached out to touch her shoulder, something between wonder and fear making his hand shake. "You . . . I went to your wake."

Alex stood, nearly losing her footing. She caught a glimpse of herself in the reflection from the broken TV, but the person looking back at her wasn't a scrawny girl in a tank top and jeans. It was a boy in a beanie and a parka.

She shoved the Gray out of her. For a moment, they stared at each

other—Derrick, apparently. She didn't know what had killed him and she didn't want to know. He'd somehow pushed to the forefront of her consciousness, taken over her face, her voice. And she wanted none of that.

“*Bela Lugosi's dead,*” she snarled at him. They'd become her favorite death words over the summer. He vanished.

Oddman had pressed himself against the wall as if he could disappear into it. His eyes were full of tears. “What the fuck is happening?”

“Don't worry about it,” she said. “Just get the money and all this goes away.”

Alex only wished she had it that easy.

Rete Mirabile

Provenance: Galway, Ireland; 18th century

Donor: Book and Snake, 1962

The “wonderful net” was procured by the Lettermen c. 1922. Specific date of origin and maker are unknown, but oral histories suggest it was created through Celtic song magic or possibly seidh (see the Norse sea giantess Rán). Analysis indicates the net itself is ordinary cotton, braided with human tendon. After a loved one had been lost at sea, the net could be thrown into the ocean while attached to a stake on shore. The next morning, the body would be returned, which some found comforting and others distressing, given the possible state of remains.

Gifted by Book and Snake when their attempts to recall specific corpses failed.

—*from the Lethe Armory Catalogue as revised
and edited by Pamela Dawes, Oculus*

Why is it the boys at Book and Snake don't seem to be able to cook up anything that works the way it should? First they resurrect a bunch of sailors who can only speak Irish. Next they empty their not insubstantial coffers to get their hands on an authenticated letter from the Egyptian Middle Kingdom before Wolf's Head can drum up the cash. A letter for the resurrection of a king. But who do they get when they light that thing up in their tomb? Not Amenhotep or good ol' Tutankhamun, not even a headless Charles I at their door, but Elvis Presley—tired, bloated, and hungry for a peanut butter and banana sandwich. They had a hell of a time getting him back to Memphis with no one the wiser.

—*Lethe Days Diary of Dez Carghill
(Branford College '62)*

The walk back to campus was long, and the heat felt like an animal dogging her steps, its breath moist against the nape of her neck. But Alex didn't slow her pace. She wanted distance between herself and that Gray. What had happened back there? And how was she supposed to keep it from happening again? Sweat trickled down her back. She wished she'd worn shorts, but it didn't feel right to wear cutoffs to a beatdown.

She paralleled the canal trail, counting down her long strides, trying to get her head straight before she was back on campus. She'd walked part of that trail last year, with Mercy, to see the leaves turn, a flood of red and gold, fireworks captured in their fullest bloom. She'd thought how different it was from the LA River with its concrete banks, and she'd remembered how she had floated in those dirty waters, flush with Hellie's strength, wishing they could both drift out to the open sea, become their own island. She'd wondered where Hellie was buried and hoped it was someplace beautiful, someplace nothing like that sad, scraping-along river, that collapsed vein.

The canal trail would be green now, choked with summer growth, but Grays loved it and Alex didn't want to be anywhere near them just this minute, so she stuck to the dull parking lots and faceless office buildings of Science Park, hurried past the industrial lofts, and on to Prospect. Only Darlington's ghost chased her here. His voice telling stories of the Winchester family and how their descendants had mixed and married with the Yale elite, or the hulking mass of

Sarah Winchester's grave across town—an eight-foot lump of rough-hewn rock, a cross pressed into it like a child's school project. Alex wondered if Mrs. Winchester had chosen to be buried at Evergreen instead of Grove Street because she knew she wouldn't rest easy right down the road from the factory where her husband had produced barrel after barrel, gun after gun.

Alex didn't slow down until she'd passed the new colleges and crossed Trumbull. It was comforting to be back near campus where the trees grew over the streets in shady canopies. How had she become someone who felt more at home here than on the streets outside the Taurus? Comfort was the drug she hadn't understood until it was too late and she was hooked on cups of tea and book-lined shelves, nights uninterrupted by the wail of sirens and the ceaseless churning of helicopters overhead. Her Tom Brady glamour had shaken loose completely when she'd let the Gray enter her, so at least she didn't need to worry about causing a stir on campus.

Students were out enjoying the warm night, waddling along with couches jammed between them, handing out flyers for parties. A girl on roller skates coasted down the middle of the street, fearless, in a bikini top and tiny shorts, her skin gleaming against the blue night. This was their dream time, the magical early days of fall semester, the happy haze of meeting once again, old friendships rekindling in firefly sparks before the real work of the year began. Alex wanted to wallow in it too, to remember that she was safe, she was okay. But there wasn't time.

The Hutch was only a few blocks away, and she stopped to try to get her head together, leaning against the low wall in front of Sterling Library. How had that Gray overtaken her? She knew her connection to the dead had been deepened by what she'd had to do in her fight with Belbalm. She'd called them to her and offered them her name. They'd answered. They'd saved her. And of course rescue had come at a price. All her life, she'd been able to see Grays; now she could hear them too. They were that much closer, that much harder to ignore.

But maybe she hadn't really understood what salvation would cost

her at all. Something very bad had happened in Oddman's house, something she couldn't explain. She was meant to control the dead, to use them. Not the other way around.

She pulled out her phone and saw two texts from Dawes, both exactly fifteen minutes apart and in all caps. *URGENT CALL IN.*

Alex ignored the messages and scrolled down, then typed out a quick *It's done.*

The reply was immediate: *When I have my money*

She really hoped Oddman got his house in order. She deleted Eitan's messages, then called Dawes.

"Where are you?" Dawes answered breathlessly.

Something big must be happening if Dawes was ignoring protocol. Alex could picture her pacing the parlor at Black Elm, her knot of red hair sliding to one side, headphones clamped around her neck.

"Sterling. On my way back to the Hutch."

"You're going to be late to—"

"If I stand here talking to you, I will be. What's up?"

"They've selected a new Praetor."

"Damn. Already?" The Praetor was the faculty liaison for Lethe, who served as a go-between with the university administration. Only Yale's president and dean knew about the real activities of the secret societies, and it was Lethe's job to make sure it stayed that way. The Praetor was a kind of den mother. The responsible adult in the room. At least he was supposed to be. Dean Sandow had turned out to be a murderer.

Alex knew a Lethe Praetor had to be a former Lethe deputy and had to be a member of the Yale faculty or at least reside in New Haven. That couldn't be easy to find. Alex and Dawes had assumed it would take the board at least another semester to find someone to replace the very dead Dean Sandow. They'd counted on it.

"Who is he?" Alex asked.

"It could be a woman."

"Is it?"

"No. But Anselm didn't give me a name."

"Did you ask?" Alex pushed.

A long pause. “Not exactly.”

There was no point needling Dawes. Much like Alex, she didn’t like people, but unlike Alex, she avoided confrontation. And really, it wasn’t her job. Oculus kept Lethe running smoothly—fridge and armory stocked, rituals scheduled, properties kept in order. She was the research arm of Lethe, not the harass-board-members arm.

Alex sighed. “When are they bringing him in?”

“Saturday. Anselm wants to set up a meeting, maybe a tea.”

“Nope. No way. I need more than a couple of days to prepare.” Alex turned away from the passing students, staring up at the stone scribes that guarded the Sterling Library doors. Darlington was with her here, picking away at Yale’s mysteries. “Egyptian, Mayan, Hebrew, Chinese, Arabic, engravings of cave paintings from Les Combarelles. They covered all their bases.”

“What do they mean?” Alex had asked.

“Quotes from libraries, holy texts. The Chinese quote is from a dead judge’s mausoleum. The Mayan comes from the Temple of the Cross, but they chose it at random because no one knew how to translate it until twenty years later.”

Alex had laughed. “Like a drunk dude getting a kanji tattoo.”

“To use one of your turns of phrase, they half-assed it. But it certainly looks impressive, doesn’t it, Stern?”

It had. It still did.

Now Alex hunched over her phone and whispered to Dawes, knowing she probably looked like a girl in the middle of a breakup. “We need a delay.”

“What good is that going to do us?”

Alex didn’t have an answer for that. They’d been searching for the Gauntlet all summer and come up empty. “I went to First Presbyterian.”

“And?”

“Nothing. At least as far as I can tell. I’ll send you the photos.”

“Gateways to hell aren’t just lying around for people to walk through,” Michelle Alameddine had warned when they’d all sat down together at Blue State after Dean Sandow’s funeral. “That would be

way too dangerous. Think of the Gauntlet as a secret passage that appears when you say the magic words. But in this case, the magic words are a series of steps, a path you have to walk. You take your first steps in the labyrinth, and only then does the path become clear.”

“So we’re hunting for something we can’t even see?” Alex had asked.

“There would be signs, symbols.” Michelle had shrugged. “Or at least that’s one theory. That’s all hell and the afterlife are. Theories. Because the people who get to see the other side don’t come back to tell about it.”

She was right. Alex had only been to the borderlands when she’d made her bargain with the Bridegroom, and she’d barely survived that. People weren’t meant to move between this life and the next and back again. But that was exactly what they’d have to do to get Darlington home.

“There are rumors of a Gauntlet on Station Island in Lough Derg,” Michelle continued. “There might have been one in the Imperial Library of Constantinople before it was destroyed. And according to Darlington, a bunch of society boys built one right here.”

Dawes had nearly spit out her tea. “Darlington said that?”

Michelle gave her a bemused look. “His little pet project was creating a magical map of New Haven, of all the places where power ebbed and flowed. He said some society members had done it on a dare and that he intended to find it.”

“And?”

“I told him he was an idiot and that he should spend more time worrying about his future and less time digging into Lethe’s past.”

Alex found herself smiling. “How’d that go over?”

“How do you think?”

“I actually don’t know,” she’d said at the time, too tired and too raw to pretend. “Darlington loved Lethe, but he also would have wanted to listen to his Virgil. He took that seriously.”

Michelle studied the leavings of her scone. “I liked that about him. He took me seriously. Even when I didn’t.”

“Yes,” Dawes had said quietly.

But Michelle had only returned to New Haven once over the summer. All June and July Dawes had been researching from her sister’s place in Westport, sending Alex into the Lethe House library with requests for books and treatises. They’d tried to come up with the right series of words to frame their requests in the Albemarle Book, but all that came back were old accounts of mystics and martyrs having visions of hell—Charles the Fat, Dante’s two towers in Bologna, caves in Guatemala and Belize said to lead to Xibalba.

Dawes took the train from Westport a few times so they could sit together and try to find someplace to start. They always invited Michelle, but she only took them up on it that one time, on a weekend when she was off from her job in gifts and acquisitions at the Butler Library. They’d spent all day poring over society records and books on the monk of Evesham, then had lunch in the parlor. Dawes made chicken salad and lemon bars wrapped in checkered napkins, but Michelle had only picked at her food and kept checking her phone, eager to be gone.

“She doesn’t want to help,” Dawes had said when Michelle left and the door to Il Bastone was shut firmly behind her.

“She does,” said Alex. “But she’s afraid to.”

Alex couldn’t really blame her. The Lethe board had made it clear they believed Darlington was dead, and they weren’t interested in hearing otherwise. There had been too much mess the previous year, too much noise. They wanted that chapter closed. But two weeks after Michelle’s visit, Alex and Dawes had gotten their big break: a single, lonely paragraph in a Lethe Days Diary from 1938.

Now Alex pushed off from the wall outside of Sterling and hurried up Elm onto York. “Tell them I can’t meet on Saturday. Tell them I have . . . orientation or something.”

Dawes groaned. “You know I’m a terrible liar.”

“How are you going to get better if you don’t practice?”

Alex dodged down the alley and entered the Hutch, welcoming the cool dark of the back stairs, that sweet autumn smell of clove and currants. The rooms were spotless but lonely, the battered plaid

couches and scenes of shepherds tending their flocks trapped in gloom. She didn't like spending real time at the Hutch. She didn't want to be reminded of the lost days when she'd hidden in these secret rooms, wounded and hopeless. Pathetic. She wasn't going to let that happen to her this year. She was going to find a way to keep control. She snatched up the backpack she'd loaded with supplies earlier—graveyard dirt, bone dust chalk, and something labeled a Phantom Loop, a kind of fancy lacrosse stick she'd pilfered from the Lethe armory.

For once, she'd done the homework.

Alex loved the Book and Snake tomb because it was across from Grove Street Cemetery and that meant she wouldn't have to see many Grays, particularly at night. Sometimes they were drawn there by funerals if the deceased had been especially loved or loathed, and Alex had once been treated to the grim sight of a Gray trying to lick the cheek of a weeping woman. But at night the cemetery was nothing but cold stone and decay—the last place Grays wanted to be when there was a campus right next door, full of students flirting and sweating, drinking too much beer or too much coffee, alive with nerves and ego.

The tomb itself looked like something between a Greek temple and an oversized mausoleum—no windows or doors, all white marble fronted by towering columns. “It's meant to look like the Erechtheion,” Darlington had told her. “At the Acropolis. Or some people say the Temple of Nike.”

“So which is it?” Alex had asked. She'd felt like she was in moderately safe territory. She remembered learning about the Acropolis and the Agora and how much she'd loved the stories of the Greek gods.

“Neither. It was built as a necromanteion, a house to welcome and commune with the dead.”

And Alex had laughed because by then she knew how much Grays hated any reminder of death. “So they built a big mausoleum?”

They should have built a casino and put a sign out front that said *Ladies drink free.*”

“Crude, Stern. But you’re not wrong.”

That had been almost a year ago exactly. Tonight she was alone. Alex climbed the steps and knocked on the big bronze doors. This was the second ritual she’d observed this semester. The first—a rite of renewal at Manuscript—had been easy enough. The new delegation had stripped down to nothing and rolled a grizzled news anchor into a ditch lined with rosemary and hot coals. He’d emerged two hours later looking red-faced, sweaty, and about ten years younger.

The door swung open on a girl in a black robe, her face covered by a sheer veil embroidered with black snakes. She pulled it up over her head.

“Virgil?”

Alex nodded. The societies never asked about Darlington anymore. To the new delegates, she was Virgil, an expert, an authority. They’d never met the gentleman of Lethe. They didn’t know they were getting a half-trained pretender. As far as they were concerned, Alex was Lethe and always had been. “You’re Calista?”

The girl beamed. “The delegation president.” She was a senior, probably only a year older than Alex, but she seemed like a different species—smooth-skinned, bright-eyed, her hair a soft halo of curls. “We’re almost ready to start. I’m so nervous!”

“Don’t be,” said Alex. Because that was what she was supposed to say. Virgil was calm, knowledgeable; she’d seen it all before.

They passed beneath a stone carving that read, *Omnia mutantur, nihil interit.* Everything changes, nothing perishes.

Darlington had rolled his eyes as he gave the translation on one of their visits. “Don’t ask me why a society built around Greek necromancy thinks it’s appropriate to quote a Roman poet. *Omnia dicta fortiori si dicta Latina.*”

“I know you want me to ask, so I’m not going to.”

He’d actually smiled. “Everything sounds more impressive in Latin.”

They’d been getting along well then, and Alex had felt some-

thing like hope, a kind of ease between them that might have grown into trust.

If she hadn't let him die.

Inside, the tomb was cold and lit by torches, the smoke gusted away by small vents high above. Most of the rooms were ordinary, but the central temple was perfectly round and painted with brightly colored frescoes of naked men in laurel crowns.

"Why are they climbing ladders?" Alex had asked when she'd first seen the murals.

"Not *Why are they all naked?* Symbolism, Stern. They're ascending to greater knowledge. On the backs of the dead. Look at the bases."

The ladders were propped on the bowed backs of kneeling skeletons.

At the center of the room stood two towering statues of veiled women, stone snakes at their feet. A lamp hung from their clasped hands, the fire burning a soft blue. Beneath it two older men were huddled in conversation. One wore robes of black and gold, an alum who would serve as high priest. The other looked like someone's very strict dad, his gray hair in a tight crew cut, his button-down tucked neatly into pressed khaki trousers.

Two more robed figures entered, carrying a large crate. Alex doubted it was a couch from Ikea. They set it down between two brass symbols on the floor—Greek letters that fanned out in a spiral over the marble slabs.

"Why did you lobby so hard to have a ritual sanctioned this week?" Alex asked Calista, eyeing the crate as the Lettermen used a crowbar to jimmy the top open. Most of the time societies took the evenings assigned to them in the calendar or occasionally petitioned for an emergency dispensation that invariably threw the whole schedule into upheaval. But the Lettermen had been very clear that Book and Snake needed *this* Thursday night for their ritual.

"It was the only day . . ." Calista hesitated, torn between pride and the demand for discretion. "A certain four-star general has a very tight schedule."

"Got it," said Alex, glancing at the stern-faced man with the crew

cut. She took out her chalk and her notes and began to draw the circle of protection—carefully, precisely. She didn't realize how hard she was gripping the chalk until it snapped in two and she had to work with one of the stubs. She was nervous, but she didn't have that panicked, never-studied-for-the-test feeling. She had reviewed her notes, drawn the symbols again and again in the shadowy comfort of Il Bastone's parlor, New Order on the tinny sound system. She'd felt like the house approved of her newfound diligence, its doors locked and secured, its heavy curtains drawn to keep the sun out.

"Are we ready?" The high priest was approaching, rubbing his hands together. "We have a schedule to keep."

Alex couldn't remember his name, some alum she'd met the previous year. He'd oversee the ritual with the new delegation. Behind him, she saw the Lettermen lifting a corpse out of the crate. They laid it on the floor, naked and white. The smell of roses filled the air, and the priest must have seen Alex's surprise because he said, "That's how we prepare the body."

Alex didn't think of herself as squeamish; she'd been too close to death her whole life to shy away from severed limbs or gunshot wounds—at least when it came to Grays. But it was always different with an actual body, stiff and silent, more alien in its stillness than a ghost could ever be. It was as if she could feel the void where the person should be.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"No one anymore. He *was* Jacob Yeshevsky, Silicon Valley darling and friend to Russian hackers everywhere. Died on a yacht less than twenty-four hours ago."

"Twenty-four hours," Alex echoed. Book and Snake had requested this night for their ritual back in August.

"We have our sources." He bobbed his head toward the cemetery. "The dead knew his time was coming."

"And predicted it to the day. Thoughtful of them."

Jacob Yeshevsky had been murdered. She felt sure of that. And even if Book and Snake hadn't planned it, they'd known it was going

to happen. But she wasn't here to cause trouble, and Jacob Yeshevsky was beyond her help.

"The circle is ready," said Alex. The ritual had to be protected by the circle, but she'd set a gate at each compass point, and one would be kept open to allow magic to flow in. That was where Alex would stand guard, in case any Grays tried to crash the party, drawn by longing, greed, any powerful emotion. Though unless things got really exciting, she doubted Grays would want to be this close to a fresh corpse and all of this grand funereal gloom.

"You're a lot cuter than that girl Darlington used to run around with," the priest said.

Alex didn't return his smile. "Michelle Alameddine is way out of your league."

His grin only deepened. "Absolutely no one is out of my league."

"Stop trying to fuck the help and let's go," barked the general.

The priest departed with another smile.

Alex wasn't sure if it was ballsy or creepy to hit on someone within spitting distance of a dead body, but she intended to get well away from Book and Snake as soon as she could. She had to remain the good girl. Do the job. Do it right. She and Dawes didn't want any trouble, didn't want to give Lethe any reason to split them up or interfere with what they had planned. A new Praetor getting in their way was going to be messy enough.

A deep gong sounded. The Lettermen stood outside the perimeter of the circle, their veils drawn over their faces, mourners in black, leaving only the general, the high priest, and the dead man at the circle's center.

"*There studious let me sit,*" intoned the priest, his voice echoing through the chamber, "*and hold high converse with the mighty dead.*"

"For what it's worth, that quote is about libraries, not necromancy," Darlington had whispered to her once. It marked the start of every Book and Snake ritual. "It's written in stone at Sterling."

Alex hadn't wanted to confess that she spent most of her time

at Sterling Library dozing off in one of the reading rooms with her boots propped on a heating vent.

The priest tossed something into the lamp above them, and bluish smoke billowed up from the flames, then seemed to settle, sinking onto the bare feet of the statues. One of the stone snakes began to move, its white scales iridescent in the firelight. It slithered toward the corpse, undulating across the marble floor, then paused, as if scenting the body. Alex choked back a gasp when it lunged, jaws wide, and latched on to the corpse's calf.

The corpse began to twitch, muscles spasming, bouncing off the iron floor like hot kernels in a pan. The snake released its grip and Yeshevsky's body sprang into a deep crouch, feet wide, hands cupping its knees, waddling like a crab but with a speed that made Alex's skin crawl. Its face—*his* face—was stretched into a grimace, eyes wide and panicked, mouth pulling down like a theatrical mask of tragedy.

"I need passwords," said the general as the corpse capered around the temple, "solid intel, not . . ." He waved his hand through the air, damning the domed crypt, the students in their robes, and poor, dead Jacob Yeshevsky in a single gesture. "Fortune-telling."

"We'll get you what you need," the priest replied smoothly. "But if you're asked to reveal your sources—"

"You think I want oversight sniffing around this Illuminati bullshit?"

Alex couldn't see the priest's face beneath his veil, but his scorn was clear. "We are *not* the Illuminati."

"Posers," muttered one of the Lettermen standing near Alex.

"Just get him talking," said the general.

It's a front, Alex thought. That brusque, grunting, all-business act was cover. The general hadn't known what he was walking into when he'd hatched his agreement with Book and Snake, connected by some high-powered alumnus. What had he imagined? Some muttered words, a voice from the beyond? Had he thought there would be dignity in this? But this was what real magic looked like—indecent, decadent, perverse. *Welcome to Yale. Sir, yes, sir.*

A string of drool hung from Jacob Yeshevsky's mouth as he waited

in that deep, unnatural crouch, rocking slowly side to side, toes wiggling slightly, eyes rolling in his head, a grotesque, a gargoyle.

“Is the scribe ready?” asked the priest.

“I am,” replied one of the Lettermen, veiled and perched in a small balcony above.

“Speak then,” boomed the priest, “while you may. Answer our questions and return to your rest.”

He nodded at the general, who cleared his throat.

“Who was your primary contact at the FSB?”

Yeshevsky’s body crab-walked left, right, left, with that unnerving speed. Alex had done some research into golems and *glumae* last year, but she had no idea how she’d fight that thing if it came running at her. It was moving from brass letter to brass letter on the floor, as if the whole room was a Ouija board, the corpse skittering over it like a planchet, the scribe documenting each pause from above.

Every so often, the body would slow and the priest would add something to the fire, producing that same blue smoke. The snake would rouse itself, slither across the floor, and bite Yeshevsky again, juicing him with whatever strange venom it possessed in its fangs.

It’s just a body, Alex reminded herself. But that wasn’t entirely true. Some part of Yeshevsky’s consciousness had been drawn back into it to answer questions for the blustering general. Would it vanish beyond the Veil when this sick bit of business was done? Would it be whole, or would it return to the afterlife damaged by the horror of being crammed back into a lifeless corpse?

This was why Grays steered clear of Book and Snake. Not because their tomb looked like a mausoleum, but because the dead weren’t meant to be treated this way.

Alex considered the veiled and bowed heads of the Lettermen, the scribe. *You’re right to hide your faces*, she thought. *When your time comes, someone’s going to be waiting for payback on the other side.*

It turned out taking dictation letter by letter from a reanimated corpse took a long time, and it was 2 a.m. when they finally finished the ritual.

Alex wiped away the chalk circle and made sure to stay far from the eyeline of the high priest. She didn't think it would be good for her new and improved make-no-waves policy if she kneed some esteemed alum in the nuts.

"Calista," she said quietly, flagging down the delegation president.

"Thank you *so* much, Alex! I mean Virgil." She giggled. "It all went *so* well."

"Jacob Yeshevsky might disagree."

She laughed again. "True."

"What happens to him now?"

"The family thinks he's being cremated, so they'll still get his ashes. No harm done."

Alex cast a glance at the crate where Yeshevsky's body had been stowed. When the general had gotten his answers and the ritual concluded with a final strike of the gong, the body hadn't simply collapsed. They'd had to wait for it to tire, clambering over the letters. Whatever it was saying, no one was bothering to transcribe it, and the sight of that corpse dancing frantically over the floor, building word after word, maybe gibberish or a cry from beyond the grave or the recipe for his grandmother's banana bread, had somehow been worse than anything that had come before.

“No harm done,” Alex echoed. “What was he spelling out there, at the end?”

“Something about mother’s milk or the Milky Way.”

“It doesn’t mean anything,” the high priest said. He’d removed his veil and robes and was dressed in a white linen shirt and pants as if he’d just sauntered off of a beach in Santorini. “Just a glitch. It happens. Worse when the corpse isn’t fresh.”

Alex slung her backpack over her shoulder, eager to be gone. “Sure.”

“Maybe it was a reference to the space program,” Calista said, glancing at the alum as if for approval.

“We’re having drinks in the—” the high priest began.

But Alex was already shoving her way out of the temple room and down the hall. She didn’t slow her steps until she was free of the Book and Snake tomb and the stink of roses, the air still warm with the last gasp of summer, beneath a starless New Haven sky.

Alex was surprised to find Dawes waiting at the Hutch, sitting cross-legged and barefoot on the rug in cargo shorts and a white T-shirt, her index cards arranged in neat piles around her, her hair tucked into a lopsided bun. She’d placed her Texas neatly by the door.

“Well?” she asked. “How did it go?”

“The body got free and I had to bring it down with the Phantom Loop.”

“Oh God.”

“Yup,” Alex said as she headed into the bathroom. “Lassoed that thing and rode it all the way to Stamford.”

“Alex,” Dawes scolded.

“It went fine. But . . .” Alex stripped off her clothes, eager to be rid of the smell of the uncanny. “I don’t know. The corpse kind of ran down at the end. Started in about the Milky Way or mother’s milk or milk for his undead cereal. It was fucking grim.” She turned on the shower. “Did you tell Anselm we can’t meet with the new Praetor on

Saturday?” When Dawes didn’t answer, Alex repeated the question. “I can’t meet with the new Praetor on Saturday, okay?”

A long moment later, Dawes said, “I told Anselm. But that only buys us a week. Maybe . . . Maybe the Praetor will have an open mind.”

Alex doubted it. There were plenty of rogues in Lethe’s history—Lee De Forest, who had caused a campus-wide blackout and been suspended as a result; hell, one of the founders, Hiram Bingham III, hadn’t known anything about archaeology and had still scurried off to Peru to steal a few artifacts—but there was no chance Lethe had chosen some kind of maverick to serve as Praetor now, not after what had happened last year. And not with Alex in the mix. She was too much of an unknown, an experiment they were still waiting to see play out.

“Dawes, trust me. Whoever this guy is, he’s not going to sanction a field trip to hell.”

She lit the censer filled with cedar and palo santo and stepped under the water, using verbena to wash away the stink of the uncanny.

In their months of searching, she and Dawes had found exactly one clue to the location of the Gauntlet, a cramped bit of text in the *Lethe Days Diary of Nelson Hartwell*, DC ’38.

Bunchy got drunk and tried to convince us some of Johnny and Punter’s friends built a Gauntlet so they could open a door to the fiery furnace, if you please. Naturally I demanded proof. “No, no,” says Bunch. “Far too chancy to leave any record.” They swore each other to secrecy and all they let slip was that it was built on hallowed ground. A bit too convenient, I say. Bet they all just skipped chapel and ended up well sauced in a crypt somewhere.

Hallowed ground. That was all she and Dawes had to go on, a single paragraph about a drunk named Bunchy. But that hadn’t stopped them from trying to visit every graveyard, cemetery, synagogue, and church built before 1938 in New Haven, hunting for

signs. They'd come up empty, and now they'd have the new Praetor looking over their shoulder.

"What if we say fuck the Gauntlet and try Sandow's hound-dog casting instead?" she called over the rush of the water.

"That didn't go very well last time."

No, it hadn't. They'd almost been eaten by a hellbeast for their trouble.

"But Sandow wasn't really trying, was he?" Alex said, rinsing the soap from her hair. "He thought Darlington was gone forever, that there was no way he could survive a trip to hell. He thought the casting would just prove Darlington was dead."

It had been a horrible night, but the ritual *had* brought back Darlington, or at least his voice, to accuse Sandow.

Alex turned off the water and grabbed a towel off the rack. The apartment seemed impossibly quiet.

She almost thought she imagined it when she heard a faint "Okay."

Alex paused, wringing the water from her hair. "What?"

"Okay."

Alex had expected Dawes to protest, start throwing up obstacles—it wasn't the right time, they needed to plan, it was too dangerous. Had she spread her tarot cards out in front of her in the living room? Was she reading something other than calamity?

Alex pulled on a clean pair of shorts and a tank top. Dawes was in the same spot on the floor, but she'd pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

"What do you mean, 'okay'?" Alex asked.

"Do you know what the Greeks called the Milky Way?"

"You know I don't."

"*Galaxias.*"

Alex sat down on the edge of the couch, trying to ignore the sliver of cold in her gut.

Galaxias. Galaxy. Was that the word the corpse had been spelling out again and again?

"He was trying to reach you," said Dawes. "To reach us."

“You don’t know that.” But it had happened before. During the prognostication ritual the night that Tara was murdered, and again during the new moon ritual when Darlington had tried to warn them about Sandow. Was that what he was trying to do now? Warn her? Blame her? Or was he crying out to her from the other side of the Veil, begging for her help?

“There’s . . . something . . . we could try.” Dawes’s words came in stutter stops, Morse code, a distress signal. “I have an idea.”

Alex wondered how many catastrophes had begun with those words. “I hope it’s a good one.”

“But if the Lethe board finds out—”

“They won’t.”

“I can’t lose this job. And neither can you.”

Alex didn’t intend to think about that right now. “Do we go to Black Elm?”

“No. We need the table at Scroll and Key. We need to open a portal.”

“To hell.”

“I can’t think of anything else.” Dawes sounded desperate.

They’d been trying all summer and had nothing to show for it. But had Alex really been trying? Or had she felt safe tucked away with her research at Il Bastone? Walking the streets of New Haven, searching for churches and sacred places, seeking out signs of the Gauntlet and finding nothing? Had she let herself forget that somewhere Darlington was lost and suffering?

“Good,” Alex said. “Then we open a portal.”

“How do we get into Scroll and Key?”

“I’ll get us in.”

Dawes chewed on her lower lip.

“I’m not going to hit anyone, Dawes.”

Dawes tugged at a strand of her red hair, gone curly in the heat.

Alex rolled her eyes. “Or threaten anyone. I’m going to be real polite.”

And she would be. She had to find a way back to the game of pretend she’d played last year, had to find a new sea level. They would

bring Darlington back. They would make everything right again. As far as the Lethe board knew, she was just a student who'd had a very bad freshman year. They didn't know about the grade bump Sandow had granted her, or the part she'd played in his death, or the kills she'd racked up one awful night in Van Nuys.

But Darlington did. And if he wanted to make a case against her, that would be the end of it. What would she do then? What she always did. Locate the exits. Get out before the real trouble sticks. Nab a few expensive artifacts on the way out. That litany had become a kind of comfort, a chant to keep her fear of the future at bay. But it was all more complicated now. Her options had been bleak before, but now they were downright ugly, and she was all out of places to run. Because of Eitan. Because whether Gauntlet or gate or bus to the beyond, there was always hell to pay.