

THE  
LADY  
ALCHEMIST

SAMANTHA VITALE



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THE LADY ALCHEMIST by Samantha Vitale

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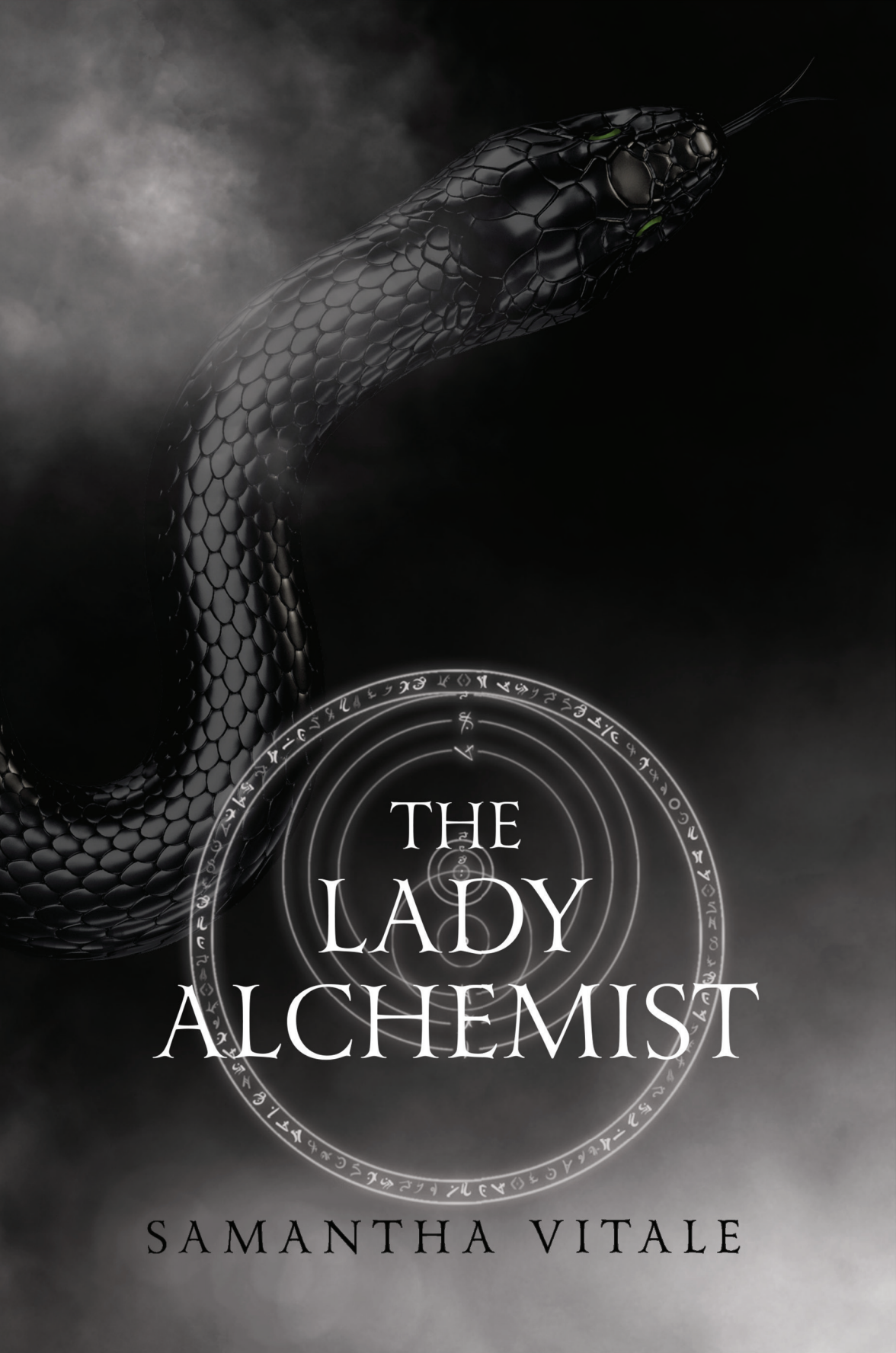
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*For my husband*





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# ONE

Sepha's boots pounded on the worn forest path. It was somewhere between cruel winter and frenzied spring, in that wet time just after snowfall and just before the great explosion of green. Soon, everything would be covered in a thick, sticky layer of yellow-green pollen, and the ground would be flooded from melted snow and perpetual rain. The River Guterahl would be swollen and roaring mad, and no one in the mountain town of Three Mills would have dry feet for weeks.

Sepha skidded on a patch of rot-slicked leaves, barely recovered her balance, and ran even faster. Her father's glare flashed behind her eyes, but she shook her head, ridding herself of the image. She would not be late. She would *not!* Be *late!*

She had spent months studying blueprints, practicing alchemical exchanges, and rehearsing the speech her father Ludov had prepared for her. Now, the day had finally come.

The Magistrate, the ruler of all Tirenica, was visiting town for the express purpose of touring Father's mill. The mill turned raw steel into parts for rifles, cannons, and armored tanks on crawler-tracked wheels. It would've closed years ago if not for Sepha's hard work and unexpected knack for alchemy.

If Sepha's demonstration didn't go as planned, it may as well close today.

The Magistrate's tour would culminate in Sepha's alchemical demonstration, after which the Magistrate would have no choice but to grant them a new contract with Tirenica's army. Or so Father had insisted. The contract would move the mill from just making parts, a pre-assembly factory, to a one-stop manufacturer of army supplies. It would halt Three Mills' rapid decline and transform the town into a real, thriving community. And it all hinged on Sepha's demonstration.

She'd stayed up late last night preparing for the demonstration, making sure everything was *just so*. This morning, exhausted from the previous night, she'd walked to the River Guterahl to clear her head.

And had fallen asleep.

Like an absolute *idiot*.

And now she had to run—and run—and *run*, if she was to get to the mill on time.

“Stupid!” she muttered angrily.

*Stu-pid, stu-pid*, her boots seemed to agree, slamming the word against the ground.

The common path unwound ahead of her, skirting the edge of the forest until it reached the ramshackle housing near Three Mills' industrial district. Past the housing were the defunct flour and saw mills, and past those, at the farthest end of the mill-yard, was the steel mill. She was too far off. She wouldn't make it.

Unless.

There was a second, much-frowned-upon path through the heart of the forest that would save her nearly a mile. Magicians used to lurk in the woods, but it had been quiet for years. Not a single attack. Anyway, she was more afraid of Father than anything that might be on that path. And fear had always spun her reckless.

When she came to the fork, she hesitated for a fraction of a second before taking the overgrown path to the right. She was so focused on the tasks ahead that she didn't notice the heaviness of the air, the strange smell, or the unnatural hush that hung like a mist over the forest.

Get to the mill. Do the demonstration. Impress the Magistrate. Save the town.

*And*, added a small and hopeful voice inside, *maybe, if you're lucky, the Magistrate will make you a Court Alchemist*.

Sepha swallowed and shook her head. That was nonsense. Unlike Sepha and every other alchemist she'd ever met, Court Alchemists were *official*. They'd gotten into the elite Institute of Alchemical Discipline—which Sepha had spectacularly failed to do—and had come out full, guilded alchemists. Which Sepha could never be, not with her—not with the way things were.

She focused instead on something useful, something real: the speech Father had written for her.



“Today,” she muttered in time with the beat of her boots on the ground, “I will show you how our mill takes common steel and transmutes it into tirenium.” The rectangular ingot in her pocket pressed against her leg as she dashed around a bend in the narrow path. “The strongest alloy in ...”

A fallen tree lay across the path, and Sepha climbed over it. When her boots landed on the other side, she looked up.

And stopped dead.

Her mind went blank, her body went numb, and her heart beat hard against her chest.

Too late, the silence of the forest impressed itself upon her: a heavy blanket of *nothing* instead of the usual racket of birdsong and small rustlings and the wind scrubbing the leaves. And she could see why it was so.

Sepha stood on the edge of a wide ring of devastation: perfectly round, perfectly silent. Fallen trees, hundreds of them, lay on the ground in a riot of lines that pointed in every direction but up. There was a sacred horror about the place, like a battlefield after the fighting is done. Sepha was afraid to breathe, afraid that the slightest sound might disturb ... whatever had done this.

Flinching at a loud crack behind her, Sepha turned and saw that the ring was still expanding. With a sound like a sigh, a pine tree shivered and shed all of its needles. A prolonged groan, and the tree crashed to the ground.

Sepha turned on her heel, slow and disbelieving, and stared at the fallen trees. This couldn't be natural. Things like this didn't just *happen*. There was no man or beast who could—who *would*—

Oh.

It *wasn't* natural.

This, whatever it was, was magic. Now that it occurred to her, she could see magic in the too-perfect symmetry of the ring, in the speed with which it expanded, in the hush and the horror.

*Magic.*

Thunder rolled long and low across the sky in emphatic agreement.

Sepha's first teacher had taught her about magicians and all the other evil magical creatures. The stories had been for practical education as much as for entertainment; children in Three Mills had to learn about magic so they could avoid dying by it. Magicians, although rare, were wicked and so powerful they were all but invincible. And the deep forests surrounding

Three Mills were perfect for practicing their dark arts.

But if Teacher had ever warned them about this, Sepha couldn't remember it.

Sepha's palms went clammy, her gaze darting in every direction.

A magician. A magician had done this. And might still be lurking nearby.

Another tree cracked, groaned, and crashed to the ground. Sepha shrieked and leapt forward, covering her head with both arms as she scrambled out of range of the falling timber.

In the sudden stillness, Sepha heard a new sound. A sort of whisper, a sort of hum, coming from the middle of the field. Sepha's head swung toward the source of the sound.

Everything went still.

There, at the very center of all this destruction, was a single living tree. Its trailing leaves were a vivid dark purple against the grayscale devastation, and it seemed at once triumphant and heartbroken. The only tree left where once there had been hundreds.

It was horrible.

It was lovely.

In fact, it was the loveliest thing Sepha had ever seen.

Sepha's knee bumped against a fallen tree, and she clambered over it. She hadn't realized she was walking toward the solitary tree, but now that she did know, she was glad. There was nothing more important than getting closer to that tree. Than stroking its vivid purple leaves and maybe sleeping beneath its canopy for a while. She was tired, quite tired.

There was a rumble overhead and a rush of cold wind, and the clouds broke open. Fat raindrops swept across the ring of devastation.

The world narrowed to the cold splatter of rain, the slick ridges of wet bark, and the hypnotic sway of those dark purple leaves. Distantly, Sepha noted an unaccountable sizzle and pop, a wave of nausea that sent acid to the back of her mouth. The far-off, frantic sound of a man shouting. Her limbs lit up as adrenaline rushed through them—but why should they? She was only walking toward a tree. A lovely, purple little tree.

Now, Sepha stood closer, with only a few fallen trunks separating her from the purple tree. Its writhing, pulsing mass of roots surged above the ground and below it again, determinedly alive in the midst of all this destruction. Inside the purple canopy was a luscious crimson moss, deep and inviting and

perfect. A lovely amber liquid seeped from the tree's branches and splashed onto the ground, where it sizzled against the rain-soaked earth.

The tree was weeping.

"Oh," Sepha murmured as pity surged inside her. She knew how it felt to be left so abruptly alone.

Sepha climbed onto another trunk and was about to leap down when a hand closed around her arm.

With one strong yank, the hand pulled Sepha backward off the trunk and onto the ground.

"Let me go!" Sepha shouted at the same time that the man bellowed, "Don't get *closer* to it!"

From where she was on the ground on the wrong side of the fallen trunk, the lovely purple tree was out of sight. Sepha could only see a pair of frantic eyes beneath a frown, could only feel that hand tight around her arm.

There was a crashing sense of *returning*.

The world exploded into wind and rain and thunder and chaos, and Sepha looked wildly around, pushing strands of wet hair from her eyes. She was forgetting—she had forgotten—

"What were you thinking?" the man shouted over the storm. "Are you insane?"

Sepha tore her arm from the man's grip. "No, I'm not *insane*! I just wanted to see that tree!" She stretched up, trying to peer at it over the trunk, but the man yanked her back down.

"Don't look at it!" he shouted, looking panicky.

"Why not?" Sepha shouted back.

"Because that's a Wicking Willow!"

Sepha's eyes widened.

A Wicking ... Willow.

Sepha's mouth went dry as she remembered everything Teacher had said about Wicking Willows. The dead trees. The purple leaves, the crimson moss. The way she'd walked toward it in a daze as soon as she'd laid eyes on it. That sizzling liquid.

The purple leaves were a lure, and the tree was a trap. That liquid seeping from the branches wasn't tears; it was acid. The acid would have burned through Sepha's flesh and sent her into a trance, so that she would fall willingly into the crimson moss. And die there.

And the Willow was so very close.

Teacher's instructions regarding the Wicking Willow were simple.

Run.

Sepha scrambled to her feet and ran. She only made it half a step before something cinched tight around her ankle and she crashed to the ground.

A pulsing gray root had wrapped around her boot. Sepha yanked her foot back as hard as she could, but the root cinched even tighter. She scabbled against the mud, fighting without effect as the root pulled her closer to the Wicking Willow. Within seconds, she was pressed tight against the trunk of the nearest fallen tree.

The man fumbled with the root, but it was cinched too tight.

The root gave a great wrench, and the fallen tree groaned. Sepha bit back a shriek as the pain in her ankle went sharp.

Get away—she had to get away.

“We need something to cut it with!” the man shouted.

*Something to cut it with?* bleated a panicky voice inside Sepha's mind. She didn't have anything sharp! All she had was her ingot and her alchem—

Oh.

*Oh!*

She knew what to do. Her mind cleared.

“Grab the root!” she shouted. “Don't let it pull me anywhere!”

The man obeyed, grabbing the root just beyond her foot and straining against it. Sepha plunged her hand into her pocket and retrieved a scrap of paper and a small, rectangular ingot. She carried the paper with her everywhere. She'd traced an alchem, a complex design of concentric circles overlaid with harsh lines and geometric shapes, onto it months ago. It had been a precaution for a circumstance exactly like this, when she would have a desperate need to perform alchemy, but none of the preparation time it required.

Fumbling a little, she flattened the paper onto the ground. Raindrops splattered against the paper, and Sepha forced herself to move faster. She had to use the alchem before the rain smudged the ink away.

Sepha placed the ingot inside the alchem. Then, settling her fingers *just so* along the alchem's outermost edge, she closed her eyes and focused.

It was silent. It was dark.

The alchem pulsed, sending a jarring vibration through her body—the

signal that her alchemy had worked. Sepha opened her eyes and allowed herself a grim smile. The metal was transformed, of course, just as she'd intended. She'd exchanged the ingot for a small, sharp axe. There hadn't been enough metal for a handle.

Sepha grabbed the axe by the head and thrust it at the man. He understood at once and hacked through the root in one smooth swing. Water spurting out of the root like blood. The man hauled her to her feet and said, unnecessarily, "Run!"

Without stopping to thank him or looking back, Sepha ran. The man, despite his enormous size, kept pace as they scrambled across the fallen trees toward the line of living wood, away from the Willow's reach.

Behind Sepha, there was a seething hiss, then a pause.

A regrouping moment.

Then the earth groaned.

There was the punctuated sound of taut strings snapping, and the clearing exploded into chaos. Long, shallow roots ripped up from the ground with such force that they flung dirt and stones and trunks into the air.

The Willow was ripping up its own roots to stop them from escaping.

The world shrank to just this breath, this step, this dodge. Sepha shouted, "Behind you!" and heard him bellow, "To your left!" A stone glanced off Sepha's temple, and the man narrowly avoided being crushed beneath a trunk that spun through the air.

They reached the edge of the ring of dead trees and skidded to a stop. There, between them and the living forest, was a writhing wall of thin roots woven closely together. The wall grew higher and higher, then crashed over them, forming a net the Willow could use to drag them to their deaths.

The net tightened around them. Grasping roots looped around Sepha's arms and legs and cinched tight. There was a ringing sound in her ears and she slowed, held in place by the ropelike roots.

"Keep fighting!" the man shouted. His voice shook her from her panicked stupor. Sepha clawed at the roots, grabbing them and tearing them away from her as she pushed through the tightening wall. From the sounds of it, the man was fighting just as hard.

The roots became thinner, weaker, as the Wicking Willow's terrible magic ran out. With one final push, Sepha and the man tumbled into the mud on the other side.

There was an echoing, enlarged sound like water dripping in a cave. The Willow's flying roots slowed, wafting in some invisible current. Then the roots curled up on themselves, collapsing toward the tree until, with a bursting pressure, the whole thing winked out of sight.

The Willow was gone. Only the ruined field remained.

Sepha and the man had survived.

With a quick, shaky breath, Sepha pushed herself up to sitting. She had nearly died—she'd been *that close* to dying—because of a godsdamned *Wicking Willow* right outside Three Mills.

Beside her, the man sat up too, swearing under his breath.

"Thank you," Sepha said, staring wide-eyed at the tumbling riot of earth and stones and fallen trees before shifting her gaze to the man. "I would've walked straight into it if it wasn't for you."

At first, he seemed not to have heard her. He was looking at her without seeming to see her, his dark eyes unfocused. Then, with a few rapid blinks, he came back to himself. "Uh," he said, flexing his right hand as if it pained him, "no problem."

A sticky silence welled up above the sounds of wind and rainfall as Sepha and the man stared at each other.

He looked twenty or so, hardly older than Sepha's seventeen-nearly-eighteen. He was tall and broad, with brown skin and dark hair that curled in loose spirals despite the heavy rain. And his clothes, dark and drenched, plastered against him—and his eyes, brightly black and rimmed with long lashes—and his lips, full and upturned—

Sepha's cheeks went crimson.

*Don't be stupid!* snapped a snide voice inside Sepha's head. She ran a hand through her wet, clinging hair, feeling foolish. The man looked away.

"A Wicking Willow!" he said, sounding as if he was half in shock. Sepha thought she might be, too. Her body felt loose, and her mind was sluggish, snagging on unhelpful details. Like the clinging weight of the man's drenched gray shirt.

"Do you—" Sepha started, but it came out hoarse. She tried again. "Do you think the magician is still around? The one who made it?"

Not that she'd be able to run, even if the magician *was* nearby.

"I didn't see anyone but you," the man said. He smiled weakly, a glimpse of crinkles beside his eyes, and added, "I might've thought you were the

magician, but then you were almost eaten by a tree.”

Sepha let out something that might've been a laugh if she hadn't been so out of breath. If she hadn't just almost died. “No, I'm not a magician, of course not,” she said. “I'm an alchemist.” Everyone knew that alchemy and magic didn't mix.

The man laughed too. “I know,” he said. “The axe.” He blinked and looked at his empty hands. “I must've dropped it.”

Sepha waved off his apologetic glance. Nothing mattered less right now than a lost axe.

With a groan, the man stood. Sepha took his offered hand, and he hauled her to her feet. “Thanks,” she murmured, craning her neck to look at him. She could see now that his eyes weren't quite black. They were an indeterminate color something like tarnished silver, a smooth and shifting dark gray. A gray that matched the roiling thunderheads overhead.

She knew him, she realized. Well, she recognized him. He'd appeared in town a few weeks ago and always seemed to be hanging about the library. She had consequently never spoken to him.

Sepha realized that she was still holding his hand and abruptly dropped it. Her cheeks heated.

Those thunderhead eyes shifted to a point on her forehead and widened. “You're bleeding!” he said. “Are you all right?”

His hand froze in the air near her face, as if he were fighting an impulse to wipe the blood away.

“I'm fine,” Sepha lied, raising a hand to her forehead, where the offending blood was trickling toward her eyebrow.

The man briefly frowned as he noted her lie and decided to let it be. “Ruhen Salmarre,” he said instead. “That's my name, I mean.”

“I'm Sepha. Sepha Filens.” The pain in her ankle was a dull ache. There would probably be an enormous bruise there, marking where the root had grabbed her. “Do you think it got anyone before we—”

Sepha couldn't bring herself to finish the question.

Ruhen gave a helpless shrug. “No way to know.”

The rain fell harder, and an icy wind reminded Sepha that she was drenched, cold, and far from home. The Magistrate was bound to think she was ridiculous for doing her demonstration in such a ... state ...

Sepha's face went very hot, then very cold.

*Her demonstration!*

“I have to go,” Sepha said. If she was late, Father would be furious.

*Furious.* “Sorry. Thanks.”

“Is something else wrong?” Ruhen asked, sounding alarmed.

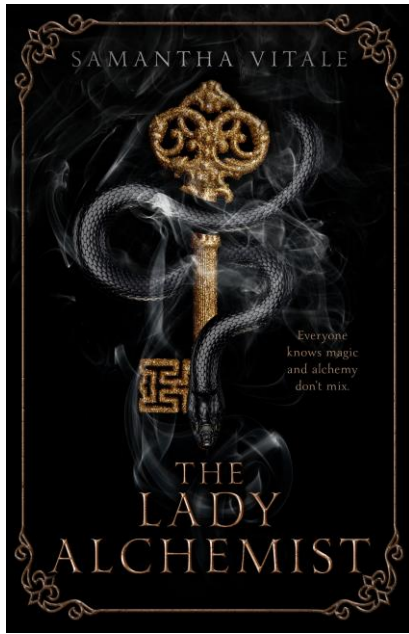
“No. Yes. I have to go. Sorry.”

Sepha turned toward town and broke into a lopsided sprint, leaving Ruhen behind.

The Magistrate was touring the mills. And the fate of Three Mills depended on the Magistrate’s favorable opinion.

Sepha had to get back for her demonstration. No matter what.





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