

THE ARCANE WING WAS a cabinet of curiosities. Libraries have a tradition of maintaining a curio, a house of mathoms, oddities, trinkets, artifacts of inquiry. As curators of obscure and sometimes under-valued things, librarians attract the unusual and misplaced. Hell's Library was no different.

If one was to be accurate, Hell's Library was *slightly* different. What Hell would find curious, others might classify as weapons of gibbering terror.

Claire, for one, found it a refreshing break from books and authors. The objects of the Arcane Wing each had their own story, in a straightforward way. This dented crown was part of a dictator's deal with a demon, with its spot where his blood rusted through the false gold, stained when his people came for him. These ruby seeds, held under the tongue of a desperate child as she braved the underworld to find her lost brother. One is missing, accidentally swallowed, and turned the child to malachite. A sliver of her pinkie finger is cross-indexed three shelves down.

Each item held a story, but the story was done. The End. The Unwritten Wing hummed with unstarted beginnings, while the Arcane Wing was sepulchral with artifacts of untold ends. It was quiet; terrible and quiet. And it left Claire feeling like one more artifact. Like her story was done and told. Here, the disgraced former librarian of Hell's Unwritten Wing. See her shadowed eyes. And here are the cracks in her soul, flaws in her craftwork where all the purpose has sifted out. See how she moves in endless circles to avoid collecting dust.

Claire could have settled, and accepted her ignoble denouement, if she were not constantly being reminded of her ending.

The newest reminder sat cross-legged in a puddle of lamplight between tables. She was in the back of the Arcane Wing, which had been Andras's prison for Valhalla's ravens. When Andras had been Arca-

nist, the back wall had been a row of cages. Because libraries reflected their owners, that had all been smudged out of existence when Claire took over. Now, instead, smart hickory drawers lined the wall, each identified with a shiny brass nameplate.

Most bore some variation of tea leaf. Even a dead woman was allowed her vices.

Beneath the tisane collection, a damsel girl sat cross-legged, a mop of dark curls curtaining her face. She was a spry and striking shadow, dark as teak and fragile as blown glass right to the tips of her pointed ears. The romper she wore might have once been a pale gothic dress but had been efficiently stripped and tied above her knobby knees. She was a ghostly creature of bony edges, as if peeled out of a nightmare softened into dream.

“Rosia.” It was helpful that the latter half of the damsel’s name was mostly composed of a sigh. Claire rubbed her forehead. “This isn’t the Unwritten Wing. You shouldn’t be here.”

“I got lonely.” Rosia didn’t look up; all of her concentration was focused on prying the edge of her thumbnail along the dark varnish of the floorboards. Thin curlicues of flaking varnish next to her toe were the only sign of progress so far.

“How can you be lonely? You have an entire suite of other damsels. And Brevity. Talk to your friends,” Claire said with as much patience as she could muster. She tried to keep her voice soft, a feat it wasn’t used to performing. Once, she would have known how to handle a wandering character. A warning, a scalpel flick, and stories would fold back into the books that confined them. Back when they were simply that—books to be shelved—and she was simply the librarian.

Nothing was that simple anymore. Claire had been shocked out of her decades of denial when a runaway book had forced her to divert a demonic coup and face the cruelty she’d inflicted in the past. Books,

and the characters that awakened from them, might not be human but were worth a little humanity.

Rosia's twin moon eyes blinked a momentary eclipse before she turned back to toying with the flooring. "I am."

Nothing could ever be that simple anymore. "I beg your pardon?"

"*I am* with friends. They're so hard to hear, though," Rosia went on without acknowledging the question. "We play hide-and-seeks. They always win."

Claire glanced behind her, but she was patently alone. Damsels were not typically solitary characters, even ghost girls like Rosia. They were the hearts of stories that had woken up and had been allowed to remain as they were in the Library, instead of being shelved into their books again. It'd been a small mercy that Brevity had persuaded Claire into allowing when she'd been librarian. Now, under Brev's purview, the damsel suite seemed to have grown to an annex. It was a suspicious population growth, even accounting for the number of damsels and books lost during the siege.

Claire couldn't say she approved. There was very good reasoning for keeping unwritten books asleep on the shelves. Woken up, personified, characters risked changing, and change was transformative to their books. They could warp away from the story they were intended to be, or just go a little funny in the head.

Claire suspected Rosia of the latter, but it was hard to be harsh with a girl who was part moonbeam. She crouched down, attempting to be less of a, as Brev put it, "boogeyman for books." "This is the Arcane Wing. Characters don't belong here—"

Rosia's face crumpled, and she rapidly turned from eerie ghost princess to plaintive child. "But you'll still take care of us, right?"

"I—" Claire faltered over the ache that knotted in her chest. Her

voice was unsteady when she found it again. “I’m not the librarian of your wing.” *Anymore.* It made the pain worse to say that, so she didn’t.

Rosia, if possible, fluttered with even greater distress. “But you’ll take care of them? You have to.”

“Who—” Claire bit off the question as heavy footsteps creaked on the boards behind her. Ramiel came around the corner, clapping the dust off his work-hardened hands.

His rumpled trench coat was a shade grayer than normal, a result of a morning spent moving the heavier of the Arcane Wing’s residents around in the archives. He stopped short as he spotted Rosia. The pepper-colored feathers peeking from beneath the collar of his coat bristled into a disgruntled ruff. He had the perpetual look of a toy soldier sent one too many times through the dryer. Rami frowned in a way that sent his stony olive-tan features rumbling to concerned peaks. “Again?”

Claire rose to her feet and ignored the judgmental tone in his voice. “Please help Rosia back to the Unwritten Wing.”

“Will you be speaking with Brevity?” Rami asked.

“I don’t think so.”

Rami was an angel of few words but a whole catalog of looks. The one he sent her now was worth an hour of chiding in itself. His expression softened as he offered a hand to Rosia, crouching down so his broad shadow didn’t seem quite so imposing. “Up, on your feet, little soldier.”

Rosia took his hand and reached down to pat the floorboards fondly before allowing him to guide her out. Her fingers danced along the shelves as they passed, but it appeared even the Arcane Wing’s dangerous artifacts knew better than to harm one of her damsels.

*Brevity’s* damsels, Claire amended with sour impatience for her own brain. She followed Rami down the row and tried to amend his

judgment. “I am sure Brevity has her own people in hand. It’s really not necessary.”

“I’m a *people* now? Why does no one tell me when I’ve been promoted? We could have thrown a party.”

The voice was too droll, too full of self-amusement, to mistake. Hero lounged against a table, having shoved a jumble of half-assembled (now utterly unassembled) bone relics out of the way to make room for the tail of his velvet coat. Claire hoped they’d cursed his ass in the process. Out of habit, Claire’s attention went to the light scar whorling across his left cheekbone. It was a new blemish that Hero tried to downplay in his vanity, but it was healing nicely into a feature that humanized his otherwise eerie perfection, much to Claire’s disgruntlement. Hero’s assessing gaze flicked toward her for only a moment before settling on Rami with a light of interest. “Well, look at you. So paternal and domestic.”

Rami didn’t respond, but Claire could imagine the pained tightening of his stoic face. Hero delighted in having that effect on people. She brushed by Rosia to shoo Hero off the table. “Book.”

“Warden.” Hero managed to stand and make it look like his idea. He picked imaginary dust from the velour of his jacket. This one was dyed a royal blue that matched the fine seams of his ridiculously tailored fantasy breeches and set the red tones in his bronze hair glowing primly. Hero always looked one breath away from delivering a bon mot or challenging someone to a duel. “Rumor has it you’ve borrowed a damsel. We’re not a lending kind of library, as you would know.”

“‘Borrow’ is not an accurate term.” Claire twirled her hand impatiently, but Rosia seemed in no hurry to let go of Rami’s hand. “This is the fourth time in two weeks, Hero. Your stunt has obviously set a bad precedent for the damsels.”

“I’m certain the women of the Library were fully capable of inde-

pendent mischief before me, if your example is any to go by," Hero demurred.

"Yes, you just help it along," Rami muttered to the floor.