



Maeve ambled along the cliff path the following morning with a splitting headache and two letters tucked inside her pocket. One with her real name scrawled across the top.

Couriers could use scriptomancy to deliver letters with just a first name, but the fact that it was done on her felt unsettling. That courier had found her. All the way in Alewick. She'd stayed up far too late last night worrying about it all, unable to pry her eyes from that letter.

It was indeed seven years old, dated six months after the Written Doors burned—one week after she turned twelve. Edding's Close was a covered alleyway near Professor's Row—three blocks east of the Sacrifict Orphanage, where she had lived all those years ago. Only three blocks! It would have been simple to meet with her letter-writer then. They probably waited for hours, and she never showed up. It was cursed luck that she didn't receive this letter until now.

You father was innocent.

The words felt impossible.

Maeve inhaled stark ocean air and tried to dredge up a good memory of her father—something that didn't make her want to retch. It was difficult.

His soft features came to her first: a mess of chestnut hair that never stayed put, wheat-colored skin that smelled of the herbs used in scribing pigments. He had her wide hazel eyes, and callused fingers always ink-stained from hours spent scribing.

She had watched him do just that on their last night together, while she sat tucked like a kitten to his side. Halfway through a scribing, he'd rolled his shirtsleeves, revealing a paragraph of what looked to be notes scribbled along his forearm. Maeve had grazed a fingernail over a word, then pushed her index finger through a moth hole near his elbow. "You have a tear in your shirt," she'd said.

Her great-aunt Agatha had clucked her tongue from across the room. "See? Your own daughter is noticing how shabby we've become." Aggie came to stand beside Maeve, her knobbed fingers knotting together. "Jonathan, you could be a steward and make twice the pay you do now. You could afford new shirts for yourself and a better school for Maeve if you only spoke up."

"I have spoken up, Agatha," her father had said softly. "They offered me a promotion last week, but I decided to turn it down."

Aggie drew back. "You did what? If Aoife knew . . ."

Her dead mother's name caused a painful ripple in the room. Her father looked down at his crow quill. He never angered, always went about the world as gently as a lapping lake, but there was a firmness to his next words. "I told the stewards that I wish to remain in my current role as a scriptomancer. And they agreed, so long as I teach the occasional class. I'm relieved about it all, and I had hoped you would be as well."

Anger simmered across her great-aunt's features. "I can't say that relief is what I'm feeling, Jonathan, but congratulations, I suppose," she said, then stormed off.

Her father turned to her. “Don’t listen to your aunt. Save for you, darling, I would give it all up to practice scriptomancy. When you discover what it is you love, you must clutch on to it with your whole heart and never let it go.” His ink-stained fingers then turned liquid, dancing over the toothy vellum as if to prove a point. Maeve watched him write until her eyes grew heavy and she fell asleep against his chest. She woke the next morning already hoping her father would visit again that night.

The same day the Written Doors burned. The day he was lost to Inverly.

In the seven years since, Maeve had gone from the Sacrifict Orphanage to a life of moving between vacant rooms across Gloam, picking up whatever odd job she could find and then leaving before she could catch her breath. Her rules kept her safe: never stay anywhere for too long; never start conversations that couldn’t be ended quickly; never speak to anyone outside of work. All to keep her identity a secret—her father’s identity. The rules were easy to follow, save for that time a boy at a job asked her to drinks at the neighboring tavern. He had clear blue eyes and an easy grin that made her heart skip, but she’d turned him down and quit the next day.

Maeve faced the gray ocean. Already, ominous clouds leaked across the sky like runnels of sealing wax against a crisp envelope. It would be fifty minutes, give or take, until the storm hit.

She pulled out her new letter and drew a finger over the last line.
An old friend.

This friend had likely made a mistake by sending her this letter. Or maybe they hadn’t.

Maeve tucked her bottom lip between her teeth, considering

the possibilities. The letter was probably a lie, and she was likely better off to forget all about it. But now that it was in her possession, would she ever be able to forget about it?

If this stranger could somehow prove her father's innocence, it would change everything for the better. Heavens, it could change her life.

For a breathless moment, Maeve let herself wonder *what if*. What if she searched for this old friend? What if she discovered the letter was true? What if she told others? The answers were enough to send her to her knees, and she knew without a doubt that she had to find a way to speak with this person. Whoever they were.

Tucking the letter down her pocket, Maeve started at a clip toward the center of town, until she stood before the sleek black letterbox on Main Street with a bead-eyed pigeon clutching a quill embossed across the front.

There were thousands of these letterboxes scattered throughout Leyland. Once, they were all sunny yellow and painted with the initials L.L.S. for the Leyland Letter Service. After the Written Doors burned, a company came around with gallons of black paint, turning them into the frightful little coffins they were today.

Eight tiny words were etched below the seal:

Postage must be fully paid before depositing letters.

A door rattled.

A middle-aged woman scurried from Alewick Grocery & General with a stack of letters in hand. Maeve stepped back, watching as the woman slid each of her letters through the mail slot before dashing off.

Maeve peered into the general store.

Nosey Mrs. Findlay sorted a display of shaving soaps at the front counter beside a large sign listing postage fees. Four shills

to merely send a letter wasn't too obscene, but a whole hallion to commission an otherwhere courier to come out and enchant one felt like robbery.

Our menu of specialty enchantments is vast, the sign read. Using scriptomancy, our couriers can add emotions to a letter that your loved one will feel in their hearts, scents they can smell, or memories for the letter to conjure.

There was more tiny writing. Maeve squinted but couldn't read it from outside. She waited for Mrs. Findlay to walk to the back room, then slipped through the door.

The shop smelled of lemon water and tasted like fresh soap. Maeve ducked past a rack of cooking herbs to a display of mirrored arcthiometers. Their floral packaging promised the wand-shaped contraptions could make use of arcane magic to cure everything from feminine hysteria to fits of the vapors.

It was all a lie. Her father used to complain about how arcthiometers were junk, meant to prey on superstitious people. Arcane magic was real, of course. It was an invisible element that existed everywhere like the air one breathed—but *only* scriptomancers could harness it. And they created their enchantments by writing, with extensive training and special pigmented ink. Not by waving wands.

Maeve scanned the front counter. Mrs. Findlay popped out, and Maeve ducked down, covering her mouth.

"Is that you, Isla?" Mrs. Findlay called. "What in the worlds are you doing here this early?"

Maeve considered running out the door, but she needed answers. She looked around and quickly snatched a bar of soap from a display. "I was looking for one of these," she said, bringing it to the counter.

Mrs. Findlay's brow wrinkled. "You wish to purchase shaving lather?"

So it was. The pale violet woman's soaps were all perfumed and cost more than she could afford at the moment.

"It's for a dog," Maeve said quickly, then pulled a shill from her pocket and set it on the counter, hoping it was enough.

Mrs. Findlay took the shill. "Do you need anything else, dear?"

Maeve hesitated. "Do you know how someone might find the sender of an anonymous letter?"

"Why? Did you receive one of the old letters?" She leaned forward. "Mr. Braithwaite will be pleased to hear it. He worries about you all by yourself."

Did the two plucking hens spend all their free time gossiping about her loneliness?

"Can I see your letter?" Mrs. Findlay held out a hand.

Maeve caught the flutter of a black cloak from the corner of her eye. Outside, an otherwhere courier stood beside the letterbox, emptying everything into his saddlebag. He would be able to answer her questions better than ten Mrs. Findlays. He shut the letterbox and began walking away, turning a corner off the road.

"Isla, now don't rush away from me!" Mrs. Findlay shouted as Maeve fled the shop. She ran down the side street, searching all directions. Where had he gone?

Turning in a circle, she spotted him standing before a strange black door that hung a foot off the ground on the side of the Alewick Apothecary. She had never seen a door there before. It was a courier's door, she realized. One that would take him directly back to Blackcaster Station on the north end of Gloam the moment he stepped through it.

A door only *he* could step through.

“Stop!” Maeve shouted above the wind, but the courier was half a block away and couldn’t hear her. She lifted the bar of shaving lather and threw it as hard as she could manage, aiming for the wall to get his attention. It hit him square in the back of the head.

Heavens above.

Maeve raced over puddles to the man, then realized just how much she loathed running when she doubled over with her hands fisted against her knees. She fixed her gaze on the hideous tassels of the courier’s expensive shoes, biding her time before she had to face him. “Are you all right?” she asked between pants.

“As good as can be expected, considering someone attempted to murder me with a bar of soap,” he said in a flat tone.

Maeve’s neck burned hot with embarrassment. She considered apologizing, but then bit her tongue; she could never admit to it and expect him to help her.

“I saw it happen,” she said. “A terrible crime.”

The courier was silent for a long moment. “You mean to tell me that you merely *witnessed* the soap being thrown?”

“I did.” Gathering courage, Maeve stood and faced her victim: a tall young man, no older than twenty. His heavy-lidded eyes were bruised from lack of sleep and hidden behind rounded spectacles that sat crooked across his nose.

He straightened them and raised a dark eyebrow. “Interesting. I could have sworn I heard a frantic *woman* shout for me a moment before the soap hit.”

So he had heard her. And yet he didn’t bother to turn?

“Yes, that was me. I shouted because I needed your help. But then a man came out of nowhere and threw the soap. He ran off quickly.” She shrugged. “I’m afraid I failed to get a good look at him.”

The courier gave her a searing look, then pushed his spectacles

up his nose, smudging what Maeve had thought were freckles. But no—they were ink splatters. More ink splotched the brass-buttoned vest peeking from beneath his cloak.

He was filthy. Perhaps she should have offered him the soap instead of flinging it at him.

“Now, what was so important that you felt the need to chase me down the alley?” he asked, still rubbing his head.

She touched the outside of her pocket. “I received a letter from someone who lives in Leyland,” she said, then realized her *old friend* might very well work at the Post. Her father used to live on the grounds, after all. But then why wouldn’t they simply admit to that? Maeve set the idea aside for the time being. “It’s one of the old letters from seven years ago, but the sender didn’t leave their name. I need to speak with them most urgently.”

“And you believe that I can somehow help you?”

“You are an elsewhere courier, are you not?” There were other types of couriers, but none wore black cloaks or took letters from letterboxes.

“Yes, I suppose I am.” He dragged in a long sigh. “Let’s see this mysterious letter of yours, then.”

“Certainly not.” It was addressed to her real first name, and she could never let anyone see it. “I left the letter at home.”

“Well, that complicates things a bit, doesn’t it?” He considered her for a moment. “I’m afraid that even with the letter, there isn’t a lot you can do.” He looked toward the door. “I should be on my way. Busy day ahead.”

He was leaving? But he couldn’t—not yet.

“Wait,” she said, studying him. He was almost handsome beneath the ink splatters, with large features that were likely disarm-

ing if he ever decided to bathe. She wished she had been born with the charm to coax information from him, but the mere thought of flirting with anyone made her decidedly queasy. She still had her wits, however. They'd brought her this far. "You said there isn't *a lot* I can do."

"Yes, I know what I said. And?"

"That implies there is something."

His mouth pulled flat.

"How does one find the sender of an anonymous letter? Please. I must know."

He tugged a strand of brown hair badly in need of a cut. "There might be a scribing to track down someone who doesn't leave their name."

Commissioning a scribing was all it would take? If she combined her skills, she had just over a hallion. It was everything she'd saved to go south, but she would pay it in a heartbeat to get her *old friend's* name. She rifled through her bag. "Let me gather the coins."

"Oh no. I believe there's been a little misunderstanding."

Her head snapped up. "How so?"

"There's only a small handful of people who practice that level of scriptomancy, but the stewards of the Otherwhere Post don't exactly take scribing commissions. And I'm not even positive a scribing exists that would do precisely what you're asking. I only said there might be."

"Then is there some other way to find the sender?"

He ran his thumb along his full bottom lip. "There could be old records of who paid for the postage, but it's impossible to know without digging."

"Records?" Maeve stepped closer. "How do I dig?"

“You can’t, I’m afraid. If you were a courier, with access . . .” His eyes traveled from the popped buttons on her too-small coat to the fraying lace edging her sleeves.

Her fingers curled under reflexively. She was obviously dressed for shabby stockist work, and not as someone who spent their days in an expensive upper school toiling over their writing, hoping to gain enough skill to be selected for the prestigious courier apprenticeship at the Otherwhere Post. She couldn’t even afford a left-handed quill.

He must have realized it, because his eyebrows drew together. “Forget I said that. Access to those records is difficult to come by these days.” He squinted up at the darkening clouds. “Oh dear. It’s going to rain soon, and my shoes are brand new. It would be a crime to ruin them in a puddle.”

“But it rains constantly. I just—”

“Good luck and all with that letter of yours.” He opened the courier door and stepped through.

“Please wait,” Maeve said, but the door shut with a snick. The handle disappeared before her fingers reached it, along with the door.

She beat a fist against the cold stone wall.



MR. BRAITHWAITE WAS in the midst of helping customers when Maeve ducked into the shop and headed straight to the back room. She dug through soiled blotting papers in the waste bin until she found yesterday’s newspaper, covered in coffee stains. Flipping to the back page, she skimmed through the Postmaster’s newsletter until she found the large paragraph that appeared every year

around this time: the listing for the courier apprenticeship. All writing students interested in trying out were instructed to bring their writing program completion certificates to one of the testing locations on September seventh.

Less than a week away.

It was unfair that you had to complete a writing program to test. All the programs Maeve knew of were absurdly expensive. There were a handful of city-funded programs, but those grew to have years-long wait lists after the Written Doors burned and people realized the only way to cross worlds was to become a courier.

She pushed her feelings aside and continued reading about how you could only test within the two years after graduating upper school, otherwise you forfeited your opportunity—the House of Ministers' rule. They only had so many trained scriptomancy instructors and refused to waste a spot on anyone whose career might be stifled by old age.

It seemed money, youth, and a burning penchant for writing were the requirements. Maeve had two and could easily fake the third with the right clothing and snobby attitude.

It could work. Except for the fact that she didn't have a writing program completion certificate.

Maeve walked past the tall chest of drawers filled with blotters, to where a piece of paper hung in a dusty frame. Mr. Braithwaite's completion certificate for an upper school merchant program. It was handwritten, with a pair of stamped seals at the bottom that she could easily recreate in a few days with all the inksmithy's tools at her disposal.

She could make her own certificate in no time—for a writing program somewhere far away.

Maeve stepped back to the newspaper and quickly scanned the remainder of the paragraph. Her mouth pulled into a frown at the last line.

All those who pass will be immediately brought to the Otherwhere Post to begin a year-long instruction in the scriptomancy needed to deliver letters.

The idea of learning scriptomancy brought to mind the image of her father, hunched over his notebook at their old kitchen table.

She took a long breath through her nose. Maybe scriptomancy was a necessary evil. If she could win herself a spot in the apprenticeship, she would have all the access she needed to track down her *old friend*. That courier had said as much.

She chewed on her cuticle, thinking through logistics. The past seven years had taught her how to keep her identity a secret. After Inverly, the newspapers all reported that she had perished with her father and Great-Aunt Aggie. Most of her father's old scriptomancer colleagues probably worked for the Post, but she'd never met them. Even if someone had seen the old sepiagraph of her that her father used to carry in his coat pocket, they wouldn't recognize her now; she used to be stick thin with a gaunt face and shorn hair that Aggie would style into ugly pigtail ringlets.

Her unwieldy braid had lightened over the years to the pale orange color of cast iron rust. Her hips and face had filled out, and her hairline was freckled from hours spent journaling at the Alewick cliffs without a proper hat.

That pigtailed girl was long gone. Maeve had gone by Isla Craig for the past eight months. What harm could a few more weeks do? She had paid a handsome sum for her forged paperwork so no one would question it.

THE OTHERWHERE POST

It was perfect, save for the unsettling fact that she would have to try out for a spot in the godforsaken courier apprenticeship.

At least she could write. It was her greatest asset, aside from knowing when to run.

Maeve read over the Postmaster's announcement a second time. A third. A fourth. Then she opened her journal and scribbled across the top:

There has been a change of plans.