

THE GOLD KEEPERS

THE GOLD KEEPERS TRILOGY
BY ELIZABETH FALKENBERG

The Gold Keepers

The Gold Prince

The Gold Agent

THE GOLD KEEPERS

BOOK ONE



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Content Notice: *The Gold Keepers* trilogy is intended for readers aged eighteen and older. This novel contains mature themes, including physical and sexual violence, as well as direct depictions of self-harm, primarily in the form of cutting. Please take care when deciding whether this story is right for you.

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*For Noah Chamberlain, who believed in the magic even when
I didn't.*

O, it is excellent to have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant.

William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*

This book is written in British English to reflect its setting and characters. To my American and Canadian readers: differences in spelling and phrasing are intentional and meant to deepen immersion. Additionally, this trilogy contains mature themes. A fuller content notice appears in the front matter.

Onwards, then.

Prologue



THERE WAS, naturally, a gap between reading about such violence and being witness to it. To behold such brutality—even if it was in some sort of dream—was a door thrown open inside Eileen. A disturbing awakening.

Calum came up protectively behind her. He planted the two swords she didn't know he had in the snow.

"They're taking them to the king's camp," he observed. "We'll follow them to it."

CHAPTER ONE

A New Assignment



Eight Months Earlier, or Eight Centuries Later

EILEEN BINCHY RAISED her hand to knock, but the door swung open before her, seemingly on its own. Her fist hovered, frozen in place like a child stopping short at the boundary between beach and frigid sea.

A familiar but unexpected voice called out, “Miss Binchy, come in.”

Eileen took the plunge. Inside the office, Dunroven Headmistress Rhona Caldwell stood by an imposing fireplace. The bright flames reflected off the woman’s silver hair and cast dancing shadows on the grey, windowless walls. Though spacious, the chamber managed a strange intimacy, like one might imagine within the drawing room of a fortress.

Behind Eileen, the door latched itself shut with a soft, almost sentient click.

“Where’s the Lord Chancellor?” Eileen asked, frowning. This was, after all, the very man’s Council office, and he had written the letter requesting the meeting.

"Brodie won't be joining us. Off on urgent business," Caldwell answered, setting her teacup neatly into its saucer on the mantelpiece, beside a pot of English ivy trailing dark green vines.

A small disappointment rolled through Eileen as Caldwell crossed the stone floor to pull her into a stiff embrace.

"He may well be," she said into Caldwell's shoulder, "but is he happy with us being in here? Without him?"

The Council governed every Weaver in Britain and Ireland from the shadows. Its Lord Chancellor—Domhnall Brodie—was part fixer, part statesman, and full-time guardian of their secrets. Needless to say, entry to his office was by invitation only.

"He doesn't have a choice," Caldwell answered. "I'm using it."

She released Eileen with a pat and approached the pedestal desk. Caldwell lowered herself into Brodie's chair as a victor claiming new territory, then flitted her hand towards an armchair opposite.

"We haven't got all morning," Caldwell added.

The fire popped, in approval or perhaps complaint. Either way, the office seemed to know who ruled it that day.

Eileen sat. Even nine years out of school—nine years out from under Caldwell's supervision—she felt compelled to heed the professor's directions.

Caldwell perched her elbows on the desk and steepled her fingers. Her gold ring glinted in the firelight. It sat tight under the bulge of her knuckle, as though it had grown there and would not be coaxed off. The sight of it drew Eileen's eyes to her own Weaver ring.

"What has he told you about this meeting?" Caldwell asked.

"Very little," Eileen said, her eyes still cast down, aimed

at where her fingers fiddled with the edge of her wool skirt. "Well, practically nothing."

"Kept you in the dark, has he?" Caldwell's lips curled. "Disappointing, but not surprising." She dropped her hands and rifled through the papers on Brodie's desk, then plucked what looked to be a half-written letter from a stack, tore it, and selected a fountain pen from a gold chalice. "It also complicates what comes next," she added, spinning the pen between her fingers.

"I'm sure I can follow."

"Aye, so I'm told."

Eileen felt cornered, rather than flattered.

"How are things with your government work, by the way?" Caldwell didn't converse in straight lines. She spoke in digressions, each comment a probe for weakness, each question another cannon loaded for the broadside.

"Things are grand." Eileen tried to sound firm. The wobble in her voice betrayed her.

"Really? Is it true *Andrews* was just promoted to Archives Provost?" Caldwell's tone lifted with mock surprise.

Eileen didn't respond. She had nothing to add.

The headmistress continued, "He was such a terrible student, that one. Unlike you." She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and leaned back.

Caldwell didn't need to shout for dominance. She simply assumed it, and the conversation arranged itself around her. Weavers were trained to believe control was the highest virtue, and Caldwell was absolutely dripping in it.

"Are you asking me why I was passed up for the position?" Eileen planted her feet, hoping to dispel the sting that she was surprised returned so quickly.

"If I wanted to know that I'd ask the promotions

committee. I want to know why Brodie selected you for this particular assignment.”

“By that logic, you should ask him.”

“As we’ve established, he’s not here.” Caldwell jotted down a phrase, then stilled her pen. “Brodie wants you to help at Dunroven Academy.”

The waves of anxiety rose. Every word from Caldwell churned the waters, and Eileen was too far from shore to know which way to swim.

“Help with what?”

Caldwell lifted her hand and waited. Steadily, silently, her cup and saucer floated from the mantelpiece. She plucked it from the air as she answered.

“We are a school. Teaching would be the natural assumption.”

Of course Brodie would send Eileen away; why confront a thing when you can relocate it? He was filing her somewhere out of the way.

Caldwell tipped the teacup, quickly finishing the rest of her drink. “How silly of me. Would you like tea?”

Eileen hadn’t had time for more than a sip that morning, thanks to the half hour she’d spent standing before her wardrobe deciding what to wear.

“That would be nice.”

Caldwell gave a curt two-finger salute towards the tea tray in the corner. The suggestion was clear enough. Eileen rose from the desk to pour herself tea, adding sugar and milk, all the while thinking about how the devil she knew at least had a familiar desk and predictable hours.

By the time she returned to her seat, Caldwell had packed most of the torn paper with stately script.

“He is sending you to Dunroven for the year to co-teach Protective Energetics.”

Eileen’s heart pounded as she thought of lessons in

elemental shields and duelling. The subject of Protective Energetics was by no measure her strength—neither as a student nor as an adult.

“There must be a mistake.”

“Evidently not.”

A flush crept up Eileen’s neck. Brodie’s absence, which had seemed incidental a moment before, now looked horribly like foresight. “Well... I’m hardly qualified.”

Caldwell’s eyes remained fixed on her writing. “That is neither here nor there. Autumn term starts the day after tomorrow and I need someone immediately. Congratulations, Professor.”

“What happened to the previous teacher?”

Caldwell raised her stony gaze. “Unfit to continue.”

“Were they cursed by the Gold King?” Eileen hoped, despite the riskiness of her joke, to make Caldwell laugh and maybe delay the spiral of bad news; Scottish Weavers of a certain age loved to blame the fictitious royal for even the most minor of inconveniences.

Caldwell’s eyes only narrowed. “What do you know about the Gold King?”

Eileen had just spent three weeks organising the Council’s collection of tales and fables. She was familiar with the legend. “It’s a story to scare children,” she said, shrugging.

Eileen could have sworn she heard a tut before Caldwell muttered, “Precisely.”

The headmistress attempted to sip again from her cup but found it empty. It didn’t stay that way for long. With a point of her finger, a jet of hot tea shot from the teapot on the tray in the corner through the air and into her cup.

Most Weavers would have brought the teapot to their cup, whether by magic or walking, as Eileen had done. With Caldwell’s talent for water weaving, it was, in fact,

easier for her to bring the scalding tea across the room *to her*.

"This isn't exactly fair. I've already got a job and it's here." Eileen pointed downwards, in the general direction of the Records and Archives office. "Besides, it's rather short notice for preparing a curriculum."

"Take the former up with the Lord Chancellor. As for the latter, you Irish always land on your feet somehow, so that's what I'm counting on." Caldwell winked. "I did mention you'd be *co-teaching*. Your new colleague has already made his lesson plans."

Eileen dug her fingernails into the soft skin of her palm, just deep enough to stay anchored. "Then why doesn't he teach the course himself?" Her ring warmed on her finger, and the inscribed words seemed to stamp into her skin, mocking her.

"Public opinion," Caldwell replied.

"He's unpopular?"

"If anyone would understand that it's you."

A tendril of green surged across the desk—a vine of the English ivy from the pot on the mantelpiece. It darted at Caldwell's teacup, aiming for the handle like a snake about to strike. Caldwell reflexively smacked her palm down on the tabletop, and the ivy slithered away, chastised.

"Oh, don't be so sensitive, Miss Binchy."

Eileen shouldn't have let that happen. She herself had been educated for nearly a decade at Dunroven Academy of Magic, where she'd trained hard to prevent such slips.

Eileen brought her own cup to her lips, hiding her face. She investigated the far wall of the office, avoiding Caldwell's judgemental eyes. There, a stack of leather-bound books sat perfectly squared on the floor. Trust Brodie to be both meticulous *and* mildly disrespectful. Too orderly to

leave the Council's holdings strewn about, but not enough to keep them off the floor.

Caldwell let out a deep breath. "Though the other person I've hired is qualified to teach the material... I expect hesitation among the parents. Some good old-fashioned Council presence in the classroom should ease concerns."

A cold wave of panic nearly pulled Eileen under completely. *This isn't a personality issue*, Eileen realised. It was a political one. Which led her to an uneasy hypothesis. "You hired a Bleeder?"

It was a controversial choice. Dangerous, even. The Bleeders had tried to drag magic into a fight that wasn't theirs and, a decade later, the few who'd survived were apparently forcing their way into places they didn't belong. Like Dunroven. Again.

"Someone as quick as you, Miss Binchy, really should have been promoted by now."

Before Eileen could retort that someone as old as Caldwell really should have been retired, a tap at the door interrupted. The Lord Chancellor's assistant, Astrid Hummel, entered, saving Eileen from her own impulsivity.

"Headmistress," Astrid greeted with a voice as polished as her posture. "Justice Gordon is ready for you."

Eileen blinked. The Justice Department's work was largely corporate in practice, full of contracts and compliance, as well as administering how Weavers were permitted to move—and make money—among Flatlanders. She couldn't imagine what Caldwell wanted with him.

"Send him in," the headmistress answered.

"Justice Gordon has his own office on the fifth floor. If you follow me, I—"

"I'll hold the meeting here."

"But this is Domhnall's office," Astrid blurted. She was

a rare member of the Council to refer to the Lord Chancellor by his first name.

"I'll happily vacate it upon his return. Now, send Gordon in. If you would be so kind, please also fetch Miss Binchy's train ticket."

Caldwell turned back to her notes, skimming the paper before her. Satisfied, she thrust it forwards at Eileen. "You've been in Records and Archives too long. Let them see you do something bold. Unless you want to be overlooked again next year?"

That word... *overlooked*. It wasn't a blight, not exactly. But it had followed Eileen for years, clinging to her like foxing on an old book. It seemed to have passed from diagnosis to easy insult.

Eileen's teacup shook, but her free hand was steady enough as she accepted the paper. It carried a list of terse instructions, including an early train she was to take from Edinburgh Waverley railway station the next day.

Astrid showed Eileen out into the antechamber. In a daze, Eileen traded her rattling teacup for the ticket in question, before drifting into a bustling atrium. The air hummed with footsteps and chatter. Above, a ceiling painted dark blue stretched high. Gold stars dotted it and caught the glint of gas lamps along the curved wall. The painted sky was a poor substitute but, down there, it was all they had.

The Council offices lay entirely underground as a hidden lattice beneath Edinburgh. Weavers' pubs and schools—like Dunroven Academy—remained buried, too, even as more of their kind increasingly took flats and townhouses above ground, next to Flatlander neighbours.

Eileen dodged a rolling tea cart and wove through the crowd of arriving Council employees. A line of clerks cut her off. They carried bundles of files stacked so high they

threatened to topple. Cigarette smoke curled among the throng, adding to the morning stink of perfume and aftershave.

At the far side of the lobby, Eileen adjusted her stride to avoid where the stone dipped underfoot, and brick inserts sat loose. The gallows had once stood on that exact rectangle and, while the structure was long gone, the floor clearly remembered.

Past the relic of the gallows, two arched doorways sat side by side. Eileen took the left, leaving the narrower arch to the old holding cells—now mostly used for storage—unvisited as she descended to the lower depths of the subterranean offices. Few ventured down either path, most preferring their freedom, and to send their book requests via intra-office post.

On the way down, she passed the Publishing Department's office. Eileen's own team dealt in that which was fixed and finished: memos, transcripts, tomes, the blunt reports of what had already happened. But, slightly above them, the publishers handled analysis and interpretation, the shaping of events into a pattern that could be read with sense. Each week their work descended to the Archives to be bound and shelved, and Eileen felt the familiar mix of awe and resentment. They made history; she alphabetised it. Even that was being taken from her now.

The floor sloped steeper beneath her feet, twisting and narrowing as it burrowed deeper. Minutes passed before Eileen reached the heavy door of the Records and Archives office. She pushed it open and, for the second time that morning, was startled by who she found waiting for her on the other side.

CHAPTER TWO

Records and Archives



“THERE YOU ARE!”

“Hiya, Kenny,” Eileen replied, forcing a smile.

Eileen and Kenneth Lamont had been thrown together in their first year as students at Dunroven. His head had been big, back then, at thirteen. Now, at thirty-one, his body had caught up.

“I was worried you were off sick,” Kenny said as he lifted himself off the edge of her desk.

“No. Just had a meeting upstairs.” She squeezed past him.

Kenny often took up more than his fair share of space and attention, not just with his broad shoulders, but with that peculiar gravity some men are gifted and never think to question.

Eileen slipped behind her desk, shrinking without meaning to. She tucked the instructions from Caldwell and her train ticket into the top drawer, the one that locked, before Kenny could spot them. They landed atop a redacted audit report on Weaver business practices, its blacked-out

lines dark, almost menacing. She'd meant to review it a third time, but it was no longer her main concern. She slid the report out from under the ticket and page of notes, before depositing it into the outgoing box on her desk.

"I have a favour to ask," Kenny said, pulling a folded paper from his pocket. With it, a packet of Kensitas slid halfway into view. His eyes darted to Eileen's, and he tucked it back immediately, for even Kenny was wiser than to flaunt having cigarettes—even unlit—in the Archives. He handed her the paper. "Can I check out these two books?"

She took it and read the titles.

Annihilation Arts: A Treatise on Magical Unmaking

Identifying and Tracking Weaver Imprints

"The first is in the Special Collection," she said. "There are only two known copies of it still around. It honestly shouldn't even leave its section without proper leadership approvals."

Kenny checked his watch. He had been busier since his latest promotion last year. "I don't have time to read it now. Any chance I can just slip it out for a few days?"

"I'm not supposed to..."

"Brodie has a significant interest in the case, is all."

Eileen restrained herself from rolling her eyes. The Lord Chancellor again. "All right. Fine," she acquiesced. The books, effectively, weren't under her charge anymore. If a detective inspector wanted to take them out against explicit rules, who was she to stop him? "But return them as soon as you can," she tacked on, anyway.

She passed her colleagues' four empty desks on her way to a small lobby at the back, where a rickety lift waited behind a gold-plated gate. The lift was the only one of its

kind in the Council offices. It was a necessity for managing their twenty-one levels of books, covering centuries of Weaver history and Council activity. To her left, the door to the bindery studio was closed, and its small interior window unlit. Even when she was late, Eileen was usually the first one in.

Eileen entered the lobby, then stepped into the lift. She pulled the gate shut behind her, harder than necessary, and shoved the lever left. It groaned in protest, descending with jerks and rattles. Several floors blurred past as it sank through the spiralling bookcases carved into stone. At the fourth level, she released the handle, and a ding marked her arrival. The lift, however, shuddered to a stop a foot too high. Eileen sighed, jumped down, and shut the gate. The corridor beyond was dim, lit only by widely spaced electric bulbs that left shadows pooling in between.

The Special Collection encompassed four floors of looming shelves encased in glass. It was a vault of history designed more like a war bunker than a library, triggered to purge all oxygen in the event of a fire. Eileen doubted the safeguard could stop an experienced Weaver set on immolation, but it might prevent damage from accidental sparks. Her colleagues often complained about working in the Collection, but Eileen found the potential tragedy oddly seductive.

At the door she waved her right hand and her gold ring warmed. The lock returned a glow and clicked open. As she walked through the criminal history section, her thoughts snapped back to Caldwell's assignment. Her heart pumped, with both apprehension and anger. There had been no time to process it. Eileen was to work alongside a Bleeder for the better part of a year, and she didn't even know his name. True to form, Caldwell's instructions had neither been generous with detail nor explanation.

Eileen pressed her lips together as she walked, though her pace slowed considerably and her feet dragged. She had not done *everything* right in her life, but she had, certainly, done most of it right. Or as right as anyone could with the circumstances she had been given. Still, she was being punished, wasn't she? Eileen did not believe in God but, if there was one, the being clearly had it out for her.

She let out a hard breath and swallowed the sting rising in her throat and behind her eyes. She picked up her feet and marched, backtracking a few aisles before flinging an arm up to a nearby bulb, pulling from it a wisp of light. It remained suspended in her palm as she held it out like a beacon. Then she guided it across the shelves to illuminate the spines. She shuffled down the row until she landed on a book that could help her:

The History and Trials of the Bleeders Movement

The title grated on Eileen, adding to her overflowing annoyance. 'Movement' suggested a noble campaign, a progressive one, even. Others had called it a crisis. A coup. At the time, and still, Eileen called it an atrocity. Beyond that single word, the overall retrospective tone of the title perhaps suggested the Weavers had resolved the ordeal. In truth, it still lingered years later, in whispers and cautious glances.

She eased the volume from the shelf. Its spine bore the faint impression of the Council's circular Special Collection seal, visible only when the light struck it at a specific angle. The book felt lightweight, which surprised her. It was more like one of her landlady's romance novels than a thorough account of such a defining conflict. She opened it and the gilt-edged pages crackled as they parted. Flicking to the back,

she found the colophon. It had been printed and bound just two years prior, in 1951.

She flipped through the chapters until a list of names stopped her cold. The accused. Over one hundred British Weavers had been implicated. Most of them were now dead.

Eileen, inspired to action, tucked the book under her arm and moved on to retrieve *Annihilation Arts* for Kenny. She returned to the lift and sent it deeper, stopping on the twelfth floor. Eileen twisted between towering shelves until she reached the right section. *Identifying and Tracking Weaver Imprints* sat between two dense volumes. Eileen tugged the book free.

When she returned to the lift once more, the gate was closed, and the indicator pointed upward. Someone else had arrived and, naturally, called her transport away while she was using it. Eileen huffed and shifted the books in her arms. She turned wearily to the narrow, spiral walkway that coiled around the lift shaft and began the ascent.

As she passed the seventh floor, her name was whispered into the air. Struan Andrews—Provost of the Archives and, therefore, Eileen's official superior—peered out from between two shelves. His voice carried the hushed reverence of someone who thought silence in libraries was for the sake of the books rather than the visitors.

"Good morning," Eileen mustered, resuming her climb.

Andrews fell into step beside her, abandoning the lift as well. "I was shocked to hear about your reassignment to Dunroven. Bit of a shame, really. Out of sight, out of mind, eh?"

The words found their mark with irritating ease. Eileen screwed her face into a smile and tightened her grip on the books. "It's a wonderful opportunity. I'm looking forward to it."

"Listen," Andrews said, leaning in, "do you mind if I use

your desk as an expanded tea station? Only while you're away. I've got more blends than I know what to do with, and you've seen how cramped mine has become."

Eileen hesitated. "Sure," she relented. "Just keep it tidy."

He grinned as if she'd agreed to something far more generous. "Great! Oh, and I'm glad I ran into you; the big boss needs a book. For his wee boy."

Eileen stiffened at the mention of the Lord Chancellor. No matter where she turned that morning, someone brought him up.

"Were you looking for one there?" Eileen asked, tilting her chin down towards the level they had been on. "Because that isn't the right section. It's not even the correct floor."

Andrews blinked. "No. I simply figured you'd know best."

She tried, but not with much determination, to suppress a sigh. "I recently organised Tales and Fables. I'll get him one." She turned on her heels and doubled back.

Andrews called after her, still in a subdued voice, "One good for bedtime."

Eileen descended three floors, down to where stories ranging from light-hearted fantasies to darker, cautionary tales packed the shelves. She dragged her fingers over them until she found a simple book she recognised, something she knew would prove suitable for Brodie's two-year-old. As Eileen pulled it down, her eyes caught on another title, embossed on a faded spine.

The Legend of the Gold King

Caldwell's question rolled through her mind.

Her thumb brushed the cover. It wasn't cracked or brittle the way old bindings tended to be. If anything, it appeared almost too well preserved, especially for the open-

air section. She'd wondered about that when she last handled it. Eileen hesitated, then opened it; the binding gave a small, high squeak. On the first page, written in looping fountain-pen script, were still the words: "bound in human skin".

Eileen wrinkled her nose, but there were at least two dozen volumes in the Edinburgh Council Archives labelled as such, and she'd come across them before. She slid the book halfway back onto the shelf, then stopped. It didn't belong there, wedged among fairy tales and fables. It should have been sequestered in the Special Collection—and, if she had her way, long since rebound in cow leather or sheepskin. She'd halfway drafted the request the previous month.

She balanced it there for a moment, then sighed, pulled it free again and laid it carefully atop her stack. Her curiosity about Caldwell's question was too strong to neglect.

She exited the section and gazed upwards. The lift sat idle on the sixth floor. She pressed the call button and watched the needle tick. She got in and sent the carriage upwards, and as the gears creaked into motion, she took her first deep breath in an hour. The day had become quite the errand, ethical dilemmas and all.

The lift groaned to a stop at the top floor. Eileen exited and walked to a table stationed by the lobby door, where a sign-out book lay open. Balancing her stack on the table's edge, she copied the titles. For the children's book, she wrote Brodie's name in the Requesting Employee column. The remaining four books she attributed to Kenny. She'd find a way to return her two soon enough, but for the moment she couldn't quiet the itch of leaving things too exposed.

She returned the pen to its standing holder and then stepped back into the office. Kenny sat perched on her desk as if it were a barstool. He spoke with two archivists who

had arrived and were now most certainly pestering him for gossip from the constabulary.

Kenny stood with a flourish upon her return. "You're amazing."

Eileen handed him his two books with a pointed look. "Take care of them."

Kenny nodded as he ducked out the door. His presence lingered long after he'd gone. Eileen's colleagues, now distracted by a packet of biscuits in the corner, continued to ignore her. She gathered the pending research and summation requests from her inbox and distributed them across the four desks. Her own tray was so often left brimming that the reversal in workload gave her a fleeting, private satisfaction.

She left the largest stack on Andrews's desk. He was the most senior and, in theory, quite capable of doing the work himself. To make room for the envelopes of folded affidavits, she nudged his electric kettle aside—he insisted it made better tea than hand-boiling.

Eileen returned to her desk and crouched down to pull a small wooden crate from beneath it. There was suddenly so much to do before her train the following morning. To start, she had to pack her clothes, toss yesterday's groceries in the bin, fix the latch on her truck. She quickly filled the crate with her work essentials, throwing in her favourite pens and stationery. She stacked it all atop the books she was borrowing, along with the instructions and train ticket from Caldwell. The children's story for Brodie's son she laid on top. The sight of it gave her an idea. She dug back in the crate for a blank sheet of paper and penned a note.

Sir,

I must applaud your impressive talent for orchestrating surprise job offers. I'll carry out my assigned duties at Dunroven with my usual diligence. That said, manipulation can be a double-edged sword. I recommend you wield it with caution.

Yours,

E

It was childish, perhaps, but no more so than sending her away and delivering the news by proxy. Without a second thought, Eileen slipped it—fittingly—inside the children's book. She smoothed the cover down and placed it back in the crate. She swept the rest of her spare belongings into drawers, then lifted the crate and walked out.

Back outside Brodie's office, Astrid sat at her desk, looking calmer. Brodie must have been back, and Caldwell gone.

"He requested this for Amir," Eileen said, placing the book on the desk.

Domhnall Brodie's voice rang out from his office. "Cancel my next meeting with the Transportation Secretary." He stepped partially into view from behind his door, revealing only half his middle-aged face, his salt-and-pepper beard, and the shoulder of his tweed suit.

Brodie rarely laughed in meetings, but the lines around his eyes hinted he might, in other moments. Eileen focused on those lines.

"I'm sorry for the short notice," he added, still speaking to Astrid but looking at Eileen. "Tell her that."

Another voice called out from within the office, but Brodie lingered in the doorway, as if reluctant to turn. Or

perhaps Eileen only imagined his hesitation. At last, he eased himself back, peeling from the frame, and disappeared inside.

Eileen left Brodie's wing once more, and headed upstairs, towards the surface. She paused at the end of the dark hallway at street level with her crate balanced against her hip. She adjusted her skirt and took a deep, calming breath. She didn't want to call any attention to herself.

With a wave of her hand, the latch of the outer door clicked free, and Eileen advanced into a narrow alley. The same grey stone that lined the halls below continued up the buildings on either side. She walked forwards, and the door melted back into the wall. Ahead, the bustling High Street unfolded below faded bunting that still drooped across some windows, leftovers from June's coronation celebrations two months earlier.

She stepped out of the alley and into a sudden fog of cigarette fumes. The acrid smell tugged up a pang of nostalgia for the winter months, when the reek of smoke lingered in the slow, cold air in the streets.

Life carried on as always, and Eileen blended into the flow of people as she climbed the incline of the High Street towards Edinburgh Castle. Flatlanders hurried past, oblivious to the hum of magic beneath their feet.

Eileen had never liked the name her people had given their non-magical counterparts. *Flatlanders*. It made them sound small and unambitious, and, worse yet, it felt increasingly false to her. The term came from an old myth that claimed Weavers had once soared through the skies, riding the wind freely. When the Flatlanders noticed, their jealousy turned to violence, forcing Weavers into hiding. Centuries later, Flatlanders ruled above with their aeroplanes, while the Weavers remained on the ground. And under it.

Eileen veered off along Johnston Terrace until she

reached a stone staircase which took her down onto King's Stables Road. Desk job or not, she was in fine fettle from years of such walks.

Edinburgh wore its layers openly. It was stitched from mismatched parts: spires reflected in glass windows, ration posters clinging to walls beneath glossy advertisements. Everything spoke at once.

She followed the slope to St Cuthbert's Kirkyard. She marched in time with a tolling bell, marking the hour. Dry, brown flowers left on people's graves brightened as she went by; she was entirely alone in the cemetery, so she allowed herself the indulgence. Eileen crossed into the New Town, where symmetry and light replaced the brooding irregularity of the medieval streets behind her.

Alongside the order in the New Town, the city still pulsed with noise and movement. Princes Street was a special tangle of eras: buses belching smoke beside cyclists, motorcars nosing past horse carts. Post-war was all contradiction—memory and momentum, old ways side by side with the new.

Eileen walked another five minutes until she reached the Georgian house where she rented a small flat. At the top of the front steps, she shifted the crate against her hip and glanced over her shoulder. No one was watching. She swiped her palm clockwise, and the lock clicked open. It was easy metal weaving, unfocused, nothing like what she needed to open the Special Collection lock. She normally wouldn't make a habit out of deploying magic out on the street—or in the cemetery—but it had been a bloody frustrating day, and she didn't want to go through the struggle of setting the crate down to fish for her keys yet.

She stepped into the interior landing. The door shut behind her, and, at the sound, a memory surfaced: a small girl who had once lived in the building, clinging to the stair-

case banister when the screaming siren of a fire engine cut the air. Her tiny white knuckles bit into the wood. The girl's family had escaped the Clydebank Blitz, but the terror had followed her, even years later.

Eileen's chest tightened in sympathy. Then the stairwell lurched sideways into falling stone and scalding heat, as though her mind, not yet satisfied with the day's torments, had decided to offer another. She went still and waited for the memory to pass, until the wood beneath her hand was only wood again. She had buried the experience years before, but this fucking Bleeder, whoever he was, had not only been tangled up in the memory's making but was now effectively rousing it from its grave.

She started up the stairs at a punishing pace but was stopped again by someone yelling from below.

"Gavin? Gavin, is that you?" her landlady's voice echoed. "Ah, Eileen!" Mrs Stewart stood at the door of her flat, wiping flour-dusted hands on her apron.

Eileen had neither the time nor the patience for this. Catching her breath, she offered a polite nod and a quick greeting, but, predictably, she couldn't get away that easily.

"A courier came by with a note," Mrs Stewart said, beaming. She pulled out an envelope from her apron pocket and waved it up at Eileen. "On fancy paper, too. I thought it was an invitation, and I said to the boy, 'An invitation for our Irish Eileen? How unusual!' We had a wee giggle about it."

Eileen's stomach clenched as she reached down for the envelope. The penmanship on the front was unmistakable.

Mrs Stewart took a step up the stairs, clearly hoping for an immediate revelation. "But it's a bit wee for an invitation," the woman said. "At least, for a formal one."

"I'll have a look," Eileen said. "Cheers."

She retreated upstairs, dropping her crate by the door

and sinking into her sofa. Her flat had the cosiness of a temporary refuge, the kind of space that looked lived-in yet strangely untouched.

Eileen typically ripped right into any post. This note, however, she turned over twice before opening. She scratched at the letter's wax seal, stamped with the shape of a flame. It gave way with a snap. Inside, was a small note. Just one sentence, written in Brodie's decisive hand.

I am well aware that your tongue is as sharp as any sword, Eileen.

CHAPTER THREE

A Journey Across Scotland



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Mrs Stewart kicked out a groggy-eyed Gavin and sent him to help Eileen carry her luggage to the railway station.

Gavin Stewart slung Eileen's handbag over his shoulder, then grabbed her small travel bag in one hand and the potted plant she had debated bringing in the other. He left her to wrestle with the trunk. She dared not use any magic to lighten the load; Gavin, like his mother, noticed everything and told most of it.

Gavin looked every inch the schoolboy, in his blazer and shiny shoes, and his socks stretched up to brown-and-red scabs on his knees. His flat cap was tipped at a knowing angle, as if a bit of bravado could make him look older than a wee boy of ten.

"Can you believe Duncan MacTaggart at school said stamps were boring?"

Gavin's enthusiasm was a force of nature, bright and blustering. Eileen found it equal parts exhausting and endearing.

"I told him, 'Shows what you know about the British

Empire, MacMaggot!’ And you know what he did? Just stood there like an eejit.”

Eileen tried to muster empathy for Gavin, but he was at that age when boys were unremittingly annoying. It couldn’t be helped; not for Gavin, not for any of them.

“Did he?” she asked mildly, just loud enough to prove her attention.

“Aye. What’s to become of my generation?”

“Some people just have different tastes in hobbies.”

Mistake.

“That’s fine, but MacMaggot walks around like he’s too good for everything. I don’t think he’d know a hobby if it crawled up his trousers.”

Eileen overstated a gasp, eager to steer him towards more amusing conversation. “What kind of a hobby would do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Model aeroplanes?” The boy’s mouth twisted into a smirk, promising mischief.

He always seemed to think he was one quip or tiny act of vengeance away from toppling the social order. To Gavin, a miniature passenger jet violating his nemesis might change everything, tilt the universe in his favour. Eileen envied his optimism.

When they reached the steps of Edinburgh Waverley, Gavin freed a hand to grab one end of her heavy trunk. He set his face with the exaggerated determination a boy might imagine of a knight.

They waded through the sea of travellers to get to her platform. The crowd were dressed for the occasion: men in dark suits and ties, women in hats and tailored coats, all the children scrubbed and polished. Flatlander train passengers usually wore their Sunday best, even for long journeys. Eileen, in trousers rather than a skirt, handed over her trunk

to a uniformed porter. If she drew looks for her attire, she didn't notice—or told herself she didn't.

She took back her smaller suitcase and handbag from Gavin, looking hard at him. "Don't be a bother to MacMaggot. MacTaggart," she corrected herself.

"All he does is bother me. Somebody should bother him for a change."

"Trust me. Bullies think they're invincible. If you challenge them, even with words, don't be surprised when they turn to fists."

Gavin shifted the planter into her hands. His mouth quirked. "Mum says you live like a ghost upstairs. No fuss. No trouble," he said, shrugging. "But no stories worth telling either." Gavin turned to the exit, whistling as he went.

The coin—meant as an obligatory *thanks* for Gavin—stayed in Eileen's pocket, forgotten. She shook off his comment and queued to board the train. When it was her turn, she stepped inside and showed the attendant her ticket. He steered her to her compartment. Eileen slid the glass door aside and exhaled in relief. Six dark-upholstered seats sat empty, facing six more in rigid symmetry. Perhaps Caldwell had dipped into the school's endowment to reserve all twelve seats.

For as long as she could remember, cost had loomed large in Eileen's life. The gold that fuelled their world was never cheap and, at Dunroven, students went through it almost recklessly. Some Weaver families, however, seemed utterly unburdened. Eileen had never known that mindset.

She didn't linger for long on the ethics of Caldwell's gesture, or Dunroven's budgetary priorities. There were more pressing matters.

She hoisted her suitcase into the luggage rack and sank into a seat facing forward. For a moment, she allowed herself

stillness. With a sigh, she reached into her handbag and pulled out the two books from the day before. She turned the children's book about the Gold King over in her hands, tracing the embossed title with her thumb.

Eileen silently cursed herself for taking it. She doubted the human skin had been given freely, though posthumous donations were not unheard of. She placed the book gently down on the seat next to her and tried to push out from her mind the image of a human corpse sent to a tannery. It was irresponsible to take such a book and, besides, she really ought to have stolen a book with more utility, one that might prepare her for standing at the front of a classroom.

The History and Trials of the Bleeders Movement was, however, a more practical choice. She didn't know the name of her mystery colleague, but she knew enough. This book would have to be her tool, her shield against the unknown. Eileen flipped past the opening chapters, returning to the list of the accused. She tapped each name. Most on the first page were marked as deceased. She withdrew a small notebook and began copying the names of the living.

When she reached a pair with a particular surname, her breath hitched. The name had once cleared rooms. It still did, occasionally. Eileen's grip tightened on her pen as the memory struck her once more. A crash in the night. Cowering for cover. Stone dust filling her lungs and mouth. Hot lava flowing dangerously close.

The train lurched, snapping Eileen back to the present. Departure was imminent. She forced herself to breathe. Her pen trembled as she wrote the name of 'The Great Distractor' in her notebook.

Markaine, Calum

The compartment quivered, shaking Eileen even more.

Her pen slipped and the final letters of his name trailed off the page. She glanced at the names left in the book, counting them with a growing sense of unease. She blamed the hour, and exhaustion from being up half the night with a stomach cramping with nerves, for her faltering hand. But she knew herself better. Her heart hammered against her ribs; if she pressed on, rest would be a distant prospect.

With a sharp breath, she snapped the book closed, trapping her notebook inside. The pang of guilt was instant; it wasn't good for the spine, but she ignored the concern the best she could and hugged the book to her chest. She stretched her legs out, pressing her feet against the opposite seat. The train left Edinburgh, and fields of green and yellow rolled past the window in a hypnotic rhythm. The sight of living land settled her. Eileen let her gaze drift over the scenery, her breathing easing in time with the passing hedgerows. The familiar landscape blurred at the edges as her eyelids grew heavy. The hum of the engine and the clatter of the tracks conspired to pull her under.

When she awoke, it took her a moment to remember where she was. Sleep had come so suddenly, it felt almost like it had stolen from her.

A knocking nudged at her feet. A voice followed.

"Oi, Binchy. What do you want?"

She blinked. A man about her age sat opposite her.

After a moment, he turned to the compartment door. It was open. Another man, this one older, stood there with his hands on a tea cart, cigarette smoke wafting in from behind him and curling around his head in a dim halo. For a fleeting instant, Eileen thought of an angel.

"The lass'll have the same," said the young man opposite Eileen. "Two with milk and sugar."

"Certainly, sir."

The 'sir' made Eileen squint harder at the man seated

across from her. There was an authority about him that demanded such an honorific.

Eileen's eyes adjusted to wakefulness, and she registered his features. Freckles patterned his cheeks, and his hair was a muted red. His nose looked like it had broken a long time before and hadn't set quite right. It suited him.

She thought he was an apparition. But when he handed her a chipped cup, his finger grazed hers. He was real. He was her former classmate. He was Calum *bloody* Markaine.

Next to him on the cushion, under a brown trilby hat, sat her two books. Sweat broke out on Eileen's forehead. She hadn't left them there; he had moved them, she was sure of it. She had swiped the books in the first place, and they were her responsibility. A train ticket stuck out from *The Legend of the Gold King*.

She lunged while trying to keep her drink from spilling. Calum made a lazy show of getting in her way. Eileen snapped them up and yanked the top book open to where his ticket lay. Glasgow to Mallaig—same as her. Any Weaver who went there went to Dunroven.

"How intriguing," she scoffed. "I'm surprised they've agreed to let you back on the isle, let alone to teach."

"I'm glad I've entertained you."

His voice was a balanced blend of Scottish warmth and the clipped precision of Received Pronunciation. His accent carried no real sense of place, as though it floated above geography and time itself. To an outsider, it might sound posh and polished, even magnetic, but to Eileen, it was plain pretentious. It was a voice crafted to command. Charm. Condescend.

Calum bent towards her. "Didn't they tell you?"

She could hardly admit that, indeed, Caldwell had offered no such verification.

"Well. I see you figured it out," Calum said, waving her

notebook, which opened to the page where she'd copied his name.

"It wasn't difficult," she lied.

Eileen's fingers curled around the books she had retrieved. She held them a fraction too tightly, trying to distract herself from her desire to snatch back what was apparently still his to dangle.

Calum flipped her notebook shut and offered it over. She took it, and he leaned back, considering her.

"So, what do you do, Binchy?"

"What do I do?"

"For work." He sipped from his tea.

Eileen remembered her own tea and did the same. "Council Archives."

"You're a librarian?"

"You ask that like it's some lowly profession."

"No, not at all. I have a high respect for librarians. Do you wear those intriguing wee glasses when you look for the titles?"

"I don't wear glasses."

"That's a shame," he said.

"And what do *you* do? Besides aiding and abetting criminals."

He feigned a stab to the heart. "I teach."

"No, before this."

"Aye. Private tutoring."

"To rich English kids?"

Calum smirked. "They pay well."

"I didn't think a Markaine, or a Rosewood, had been wanting for money for centuries."

The Markaines had controlled one of the richest gold seams in the country for generations. His mother's family, the Rosewoods, were no less formidable. Their wealth was spread wide rather than deep—banking, infrastructure

investment, and an almost absurd number of Flatlander patents that kept money flowing whether markets rose or fell, in peacetime or in war.

"It's an unfortunate hobby I picked up," he said. "*Working.*"

"Some of us work to survive, not merely for the amusement of it."

"So, you don't like books?"

Eileen hugged the books even closer. "They're helpful, sure."

"And that one's a Special Collection copy?" He jutted his chin at the spine of *The History and Trials of the Bleeders Movement*. "Entirely above board, I take it, you having it with you?"

He continued to study her while tapping his fingers on his thigh.

He leaned forwards and asked, "Are you wondering why I'm here?"

"Undoubtedly to pester me."

"I am enjoying that." Calum set his nearly empty teacup down on the floor and pulled over his case from two seats over. He popped it open. "I could have taken the tunnels, but I thought you might appreciate getting these early." He handed her a thick stack of papers tied with a gold ribbon. "The lesson plans."

Eileen took them but she had the childish impulse to throw them back, preferably at his face. "If you're expecting a 'thank you,' you'll be sorely disappointed."

"Your bite's harder."

Eileen huffed. "You probably think I'm here to coast through the year and trail five paces behind you, Professor Markaine. But I am your equal and, as such, will take an equal share of the teaching responsibilities."

"I would expect nothing less. Edit those pages however you like."

Was it a challenge? An olive branch? Calum's face betrayed nothing. He stretched his feet out, sliding them between hers.

She kicked at his shoe. "*Equal* space, Markaine."

Calum retreated. He pulled a pair of tortoiseshell reading glasses and a small book from his jacket pocket.

"What's that?" Eileen asked, unable to stop herself from eyeing the little book.

"Poetry." He opened to a dog-eared page.

"Am I meant to be impressed?"

Calum shut the book as quickly as he had opened it. "Normally, I wouldn't leap to criticism, especially of a lady, but since you seem so comfortable lobbing it at me, I think I've earned a note of my own."

She stole a sip of tea. "Go on."

"I think," he started slowly, "you spend half your time thinking you're a fraud and the other half believing you're a prodigy. Must be exhausting."

Eileen held his gaze, but her chest tightened. "That's not very nice, is it? And you don't know what you're talking about."

He raised his eyebrows. "Relax, Binch. Just a helpful observation."

He opened his book again.

Eileen spun to the window to look at anything but him.

The next half hour passed in silence. When the train pulled into Glasgow, Eileen tucked her books and the lesson plans into her handbag, in case a Flatlander joined their compartment. Calum, with his long limbs sprawled out, remained unruffled, reading his poetry or possibly sleeping, his face hidden behind the book. But no one entered and soon the train rolled onwards.

Eileen watched the scenery shift as her fingers toyed with the ribbon on the lesson plans. She knew she had to open them, eventually. Eileen had only taken one year of Protective Energetics at Dunroven. It had been an elective for the upper years, and she'd *elected* not to continue with it. Besides, her penchant for plants had helped little in the skill tests in the course. She once brought a Venus flytrap to a duel, and her opponent burnt it to a crisp in seconds. That memory didn't help quell her nerves. Theory Eileen could handle; over the years, she'd read plenty about the principles of the subject. But theory wasn't the same as practice, and theory certainly wasn't the same as teaching it to a twenty-year-old.

Still gazing outside, Eileen untied the gold ribbon, freeing the pages. The paper felt impossibly soft, almost like fabric, and the ink glimmered black with a sheen. Gold ran through it, of course. It was designed to survive the volcanic tunnels Weavers used for travel—a sickeningly quick way to move large distances, but anything brought through had to be treated with gold to survive. Most of Eileen's belongings would be lost on such journeys. But not Calum's.

His handwriting, like his voice, reeked of privilege. The letters curled, showing the mark of his own private tutoring, but they weren't so ornate as to suggest valuable time wasted on flourishes.

She skimmed the curriculum. Foundational defensive weaving in Level One, ethics and advanced duelling by Level Two. By the time she reached Level Three, she felt nauseated. She was nowhere near ready for this—and Calum clearly was.

He interrupted her reading. "I can go through it all with you, if you'd like."

Eileen wanted to refuse. She didn't need him hand-holding her through material she should already know. But

then, considering the alternative of stumbling through the year, she gave a small shrug of acceptance.

He plucked the stack from her grasp and handed her back one page at a time, explaining each as he went. She resisted him at first, and still dutifully read each word for herself. But the rhythm of it soon made her relent. He fed her, one bite at a time. Eventually, she stopped even skimming and simply listened and reached for each page when he offered it.

Halfway through the lesson plans, the train slowed to a halt at the final station of the route. Eileen's legs felt stiff when she stood. Calum rose, scooped his hat from the seat and dropped it on his head. In a continuation of the same fluid motion—and without asking—he stretched up to take her bag from the rack.

They carried their belongings out onto the platform where an attendant had already placed their trunks. Again, without permission, Calum took hold of Eileen's trunk for her. He tucked his smaller bag under his arm, taking her trunk and his in either hand. He lifted them with ease and walked towards the water. But Eileen was no fool. Calum gripped the luggage handles, but they floated an inch off the ground—an arrogant choice, but subtle enough to go unnoticed by the Flatlanders around them.

They walked in silence through the coastal town of Mallaig, towards the marina. Eileen looked ahead, expecting to see the large ferry she took as a student, a gleaming monument to the school's influence. But in its place bobbed a dingy metal boat. Beside it stood a stubby man who looked as if he'd been dredged up from the seabed itself. His scowl deepened as they approached.

"Brilliant," Calum muttered under his breath. He adjusted his grip on the floating luggage. Eileen squared her shoulders and prepared herself.

She followed Calum down the dock. The creak of the planks filled the quiet between them. As they drew closer, she squinted at the figure standing by the boat, and recognition dawned. He was the farmer from Dunroven Isle. Like Eileen, he had a talent for plants. But even with such propensities, farming was hard work. Weavers could coax growth, but harvesting and preparing crops for the kitchen was another task altogether.

“Captain took the day off,” the farmer grumbled. “Had to pull this ugly thing out just to get you across. Why you two are arriving this close to term, I’ve no idea.”

Eileen exchanged a glance with Calum. He remained impassive as he heaved the luggage onto the boat. Each thud of their bags hitting the deck punctuated the farmer’s complaints. Once the last bag was loaded, both Calum and the farmer extended a hand to help Eileen step aboard. She paused, then chose the farmer’s. His grip left her palm coated in a fine layer of grit.

The boat pulled away from the dock with a lurch, sending a spray of saltwater at the three of them. It dampened the bottom of Eileen’s trousers and chilled her ankles. The farmer grunted as he adjusted the tiller, taking them out to the Sound of Sleat. Eileen wrinkled her nose at the briny, fish-laden air as Calum lounged against the railing like a man on a pleasure cruise.

Twenty minutes later, they entered a thick mist. The isle was shrouded in an ever-present fog, a deliberate measure to keep tourists and the curious away. As they drifted deeper into the haze, the dark outline of the landmass emerged. The boat nearly collided with a tiny wooden dock, but the farmer corrected course.

Through the fog, a single visible structure loomed—a crumbling tower, the folly. It marked the school’s buried location. Eileen leaned forwards without realising it, hungry

for a clearer look, until the metal deck plating beneath her feet tilted off kilter. She caught herself on the railing.

The farmer threw her an impatient glance. Calum's face, in contrast, was sharp with worry—perhaps already assessing whether she'd be dead weight all term. Eileen drew herself upright and lifted her chin. She was determined to prove otherwise.

