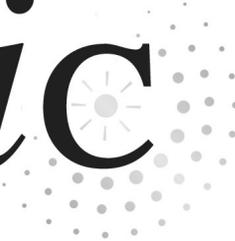


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S.R. CRICKARD


CHRISM
PRESS

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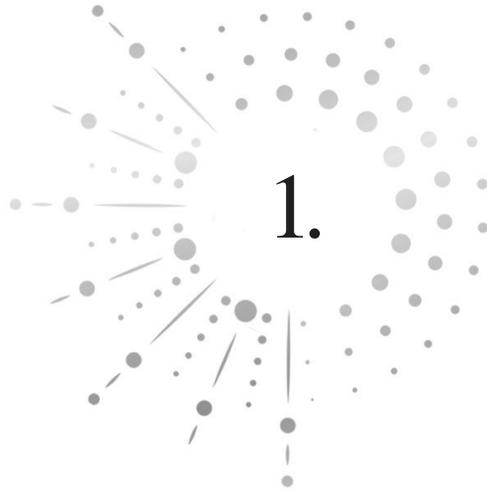
“Since the hour Christ despoiled Hades, men have
danced in triumph over death.”

– Gregory Thaumaturgus

To my mom.

Thanks for always encouraging me to do things
the hard way instead of settling for what's easy.

I love you.



Library books had always been full of women who had changed history, defied fate, and spoken words of magic that could shake the very foundations of the earth. As Adelina stood blinking up at the endless shelves of books, she could imagine the collective hiss of these important women's disapproval in the rustling pages. She herself was ordinary. Did she really belong among the records of great women of the past?

"Come along," Melitta stood a few meters ahead, holding an oil lantern to light their way through the dim library. Her gray hair was pinned in ringlets pulled away from her wrinkled face.

Adelina lifted her skirt a few inches so her sensible shoes wouldn't catch it as her heels clicked on the cobbled floor. "So, is Linza here, or..."

Melitta didn't answer but continued at a hurried pace down the narrow aisle until it joined a wider one. She glanced at Adelina as if she half-expected the girl to have disappeared. She didn't answer Adelina's question.

Adelina was used to it.

It crossed her mind to simply turn and explore the aisles. Thick dust and the smell of old leather hung heavily in the air. Through the gaps above the books, Adelina could barely make out the adjacent aisle, where shadows cast by her lamp flickered and played tricks on her eyes. Tilting her head, she squinted at the distant coffered ceiling. What might she find when she was free to read the beckoning volumes? But she forced herself to walk faster, catching up to Melitta as they passed a ladder affixed to the shelves by some machinery that allowed it to roll side to side. How would she ever learn to find books in the labyrinth of the history section?

Something fluttered above her head, and Adelina looked up to find a floating book. It moved like a bird sailing past, its cover open like wings.

It was moving the same direction she was, but it passed out of sight in moments.

Among the wilderness of volumes, a well-lit clearing appeared. A solid wooden desk sat straight ahead, looking awkward against the space behind it. Several feet past the desk, a row of glowing blue stones were inset into the floor. Beyond them stood more bookshelves. Behind Adelina, the corridor from which she had just emerged was lined by shelves, their polished wooden end-caps standing like soldiers at attention along the walkway. To her left, light poured through a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that framed a scattering of desks for patrons to use. To the right, the shelves continued, and Adelina couldn't see far enough through the gaps above the books to see how far they went.

Melitta stopped. "This is our desk. You cannot go farther into the library." Directly behind the desk lay the area surrounded by the blue stones—the place that interested her most, so of course she wasn't allowed.

By the light of the windows and the electric lamp on the desk, Adelina surveyed the shelves beyond. Through the gaps, the sea of books continued. A corridor like the one behind her led farther into the library. In the distance, above the shelves, lights danced, casting a glow against the ceiling. She wondered what was back there. "Is that it, then? The place where the spell books go when they float away?"

Melitta pointed at the line of mosaic stonework along the floor, comprised of glowing, blue oval stones placed end to end. Upon each, engraved script scored the surface of the rocks. "Beyond that boundary is the spell section. Those books have nothing to do with us and are sorted by...another. You may not cross it." She stared out at the expanse before looking down at the desk. "We are working on converting our system. It's slow going, but at least we'll be able to find things faster when it's finished."

Adelina wished Melitta would go on about the spell section, but she moved on to describing the layout of the history section.

Behind them, something shuffled, and Linza appeared. "I just finished the fourth century. You can cross it off. Oh, Adelina, you're finally here." Her brown hair was combed and secured with no regard for style. She wore a very simple white shirtwaist and brown walking skirt, which did nothing to hint at a feminine figure beneath.

Adelina exhaled, relaxing at the sight of her family friend, yet Linza's familiarity only heightened the sense of strangeness around her. Linza hadn't missed a single holiday, ceremony, or birthday since Adelina's mother had died when she was nine. With baffling accuracy, a package containing stur-

dy clothes arrived whenever Adelina began noticing holes in her socks or loose threads in her shirtwaists. The packages also came with a handful of interesting books. These Adelina read in earnest, preparing for the few times a month when Linza would visit. She'd arrive in the evening, a large bag laden with food slung over her shoulder. Adelina would tell her which book she liked best while Linza refilled their dinner plates and asked after the family's affairs.

As her graduation loomed, Adelina had begun to consider where she'd like to work. What would she do when her life wasn't chosen for her anymore? But she didn't want more school either. For three years, she'd tried a handful of apprenticeships. None of them had been bad, but with each attempt, she'd grown more mystified about her purpose. Linza had finally stepped in on Adelina's twenty-first birthday. She'd put Adelina's name in for a job as a librarian. So here she was.

Melitta crossed out an item on one of the various lists on the desk. "Move on to the Knowledge Wars next."

"Weren't the Knowledge Wars in the eighteenth century?" Adelina asked.

"It's my lunch break," Linza replied to Melitta. She set the lantern down and opened one of the drawers to retrieve a satchel.

Once again, Adelina had been forgotten. She tucked her copper-brown hair behind her ears, squinting through her round, wire-framed glasses. She'd worn a mossy green skirt trimmed in blue ribbon and a white shirtwaist, thinking she'd make a good impression on her first day. It felt frivolous now.

Like every other child, she'd spent her rainy summer days in the library—the more public areas, at least. The college preferred that ordinary folk did not come into the history section. The spell section was forbidden to everyone except mages, even some students. Adelina hadn't imagined that the quaint library of her childhood was a thin façade for such a strange and massive space.

Meilletta gave an audible sigh. "Well, I'm meant to be leaving for the day."

"Yes, yes. Go on. Leave Adelina with me." Linza had already tucked into a sandwich, sprinkling the yellowed lists and tomes on the desk with crumbs. Melitta returned the way they'd come. Adelina watched her go, knowing that soon, Linza would leave her to walk these corridors with only a book cart for companionship.

A wild-haired woman in a bright tunic came down the corridor and

nodded to the librarians as she passed. She paused at the line of glowing stones, then pulled out an amulet hanging from a chain from beneath her shirt and recited something over it. It began to glow blue like the stones in the floor. She stepped over them and moved out of sight behind the bookshelves.

In the distance, something shrieked. The primal sound set Adelina on edge.

Linza hooked a thumb over her shoulder. “Did Melitta warn you not to go past the line?”

Adelina pried her wide-eyed gaze from the spell section to look at Linza, who watched her with a slight smile on her lips. She was teasing.

“That woman just did.” Adelina pointed.

“She’s a mage, wearing an enchanted amulet. You’re ordinary.”

Adelina wrinkled her nose and opened her mouth to protest but decided to change tack instead. “What’s out there?” she asked.

The older woman chewed slowly, turning to look behind her. “Those are the magi’s spell books, and they have nothing to do with you. You have no reason to go there.”

Adelina looked past her friend at the upright spines of countless books. She walked around the desk and stopped a few feet from the line of glowing stones. The volumes were small, the same size used for Adelina’s written exams. She squinted, attempting to read the titles of the nearest ones. She’d always had a knack for languages, but the books were covered in foreign characters, too small to read. Were they moving, or was it just the strange atmosphere of the spell section that made it appear that way?

Linza stared at her, chewing. She set the sandwich down. “I know you’d never break the rules, but just in case...there is also the cervara out there.”

“The what?”

“You could say it’s the librarian in that section. Anyone caught wandering out there without protection gets captured by it. As far as you’re concerned, that line and everything beyond it doesn’t exist.” Her tone brooked no argument.

As if to punctuate Linza’s statement, a low thumping sounded somewhere behind the nearest shelf laden with magic. It was almost too low for Adelina’s ears to register, but she felt it rattling through her ribs. She took a step back, her eyes widening. “You...you work here, knowing that?”

“You do too, now.” Linza wiped crumbs off her palms, then stood up.

“I have to sit with my back to it?” Adelina eyed the desk. It was far too big and heavy for her to turn or move.

Linza waved away the concern. “Don’t worry. It’s easy and safe work if you don’t cross the line. We only deal with the history section.”

Adelina glanced again at the strange, magical volumes. Her chest tightened, but with the fear came something new. Curiosity made her heart thump too. She tucked the thought away for later.

Linza smiled and got up from the chair. She placed her hands on Adelina’s shoulders. “Are you ready to learn?”

“Yes.” Adelina bit her lip. *I know you’d never break the rules...* Adelina was trustworthy, dependable...forgettable.



Adelina kicked off her shoes in the entryway of her home. Her feet were sore. She hadn’t done so much walking in a single day in a long time.

Her father’s angry voice sounded from the kitchen. As Adelina came down the hall, she heard her sister speak up. “You always make such a big fuss over such little things, Pa, really.”

“Little? You know we’re tight on funds right now, and still—”

“I got a discount!”

Adelina entered the kitchen, where her sister Sappha sat at the table with a magazine in front of her face.

Pa leaned against the counter, red-faced. “And how exactly did you do that?”

Sappha sighed. “I know the clerk, Pa. He’s a friend.”

Adelina cleared her throat. “I’m home from work.”

“I’m not too keen on the *friends* you choose,” Pa replied to Sappha. He glanced at Adelina and gave the smallest of nods before turning to his older daughter. “Why do you even need a new dress?”

“Our company is raising funds for a new production, and I need to look nice at the fundraiser.” Sappha snapped the magazine down to glare at her father. She wore a lacy white dress, with her hair pinned up in the latest style.

Adelina took a deep breath. “I said, I just got home from my first—”

An even deeper shade of red suffused Pa’s face. “You spend more money than you make, Sappha. The point of having a job—”

Adelina retreated up the stairs. The bickering fell quiet as she closed her bedroom door and flopped onto her bed with a sigh.

Her room had seemed so big when she’d been young. Lying on her narrow bed at an angle with her feet hanging off the edge, she wondered if she’d ever outgrow the life she was living, or if she’d eventually just turn invisible.



Within two weeks, Adelina had mastered the new filing system. She'd grown accustomed to the strange noises in the magic section, and even to the fact that the corridor that led beyond the first wall of books was in a different place every day. Sometimes the shelves were closer to the boundary, or farther away. Nobody explained why or how.

She often finished the day's tasks long before her shift ended, which left plenty of time to pause and skim the books as she reshelfed them. History was vastly more complicated than what she'd been taught in school. Tyrants' personal journals contained love letters to their wives. The great heroes had penned notes that were often pettier than those of adolescent girls.

She took a book off the cart she'd just assembled and opened it—a very dry account of what must have been a very important meeting. One of the founders of the college of magic, Ayden Luckey, had developed a spell more complicated and wide-reaching than ever before. It might have averted the Knowledge Wars, except master Luckey and his spell had both disappeared. Adelina kept reading, trying to figure out what his spell was supposed to do.

Someone cleared his throat. Adelina found a middle-aged mage standing before the desk, eyeing her. She put the book on the cart. “How can I help you?”

“I need the writings of Ailbe Aine.”

“What year?” Adelina glanced at the map Linza had scribbled on a piece of paper to help her. Behind her, in the expanse of the spell section, a strange wind whistled through the bookshelves, then stopped. Adelina jumped at the sound.

The man before her crossed his arms, unfazed. “I'm a mage, not a historian. The third century, I think.”

Adelina bit her lip. “Okay. Spell it, please.” He did, and Adelina wrote it down. “I'll be right back.”

She walked behind a shelf and then paused to sigh. The third century was to the left, right? She ran her fingers along the spines of the books, searching for Ailbe Aine.

Wiggling letters caught her eye.

She froze, her finger hovering centimeters from a narrow volume. She had never seen one up close, but there was no mistaking the wiggling, foreign letters on its spine; it was a spell. Why was it here?

She checked the aisle to confirm she was alone. A person without magic

couldn't control a written spell. As a child, she'd been warned away from spell books just as she had from gas lanterns and poison ivy.

She poked the volume to confirm it was real and solid. Nothing happened. She slid it off the shelf. The letters on the cover shone in glossy ink—letters she couldn't read. She opened the book to find that the calligraphy inside squirmed on the thin paper. She adjusted her glasses, wondering if it was the flickering of her lantern that made the letters move. She checked to make sure no one was looking, then knelt down and slid the book between the floor and bottom shelf. She took note of the volumes just above its location to be sure she could find it again. The name Ailbe Aine was embossed upon one. She grabbed it and straightened up.

"Here it is." She rounded the corner and approached the desk. "To whom shall I lend it? How long do you expect to keep it?"

"I only need it for three days. I'm Master Williric." When she didn't react, continued, "Of the Magi's College."

Adelina wrote it down. "It's nice to meet you."

He took the book from her hands and waited.

She had the sense he was waiting for her to say something, but she had no idea what it could be. "Was there anything else, Master Williric?"

He scoffed and walked away.

Adelina waited until his footfalls had disappeared before taking one of the canvas satchels from a peg on the side of the desk and rushing to the spot where the spell book was hidden. It was still there. It hadn't floated away.

She opened the satchel and put the spell book inside, glancing around to be sure she was alone. Librarians often used satchels when they needed to carry many books at once. No one would be alarmed to see her walking around with it.

She returned to the desk, holding the strap of the satchel close. The spell inside bumped against her hip. Adelina's shoulder slumped under the weight. Why was it so heavy? A book so small shouldn't weigh so much. Adelina wondered what other strange attributes spell books might have.

I know you'd never break the rules.

It was her job to put away misshelved books, wasn't it?

Those books have nothing to do with us and are sorted by...another.

Whoever it was had missed a book. Returning it was the right thing to do. Or so she told herself as she stepped over the line of faintly glowing stones embedded in the floor.

A smile broke over her face. She'd really done it. She glanced over her

shoulder to be sure she was still alone, then pushed forward to stand in front of the first wall of books. The shelves were parallel to the boundary, always obscuring her vision of whatever lay beyond. Today, the break in the shelves that formed a corridor stood to her right.

On the thin spines of the spell books, neat letters flowed into one another in a foreign script. Adelina tried to find a pattern or clue, something that would help her figure out where the misshelved book belonged. She sighed and took the book out of the bag to examine the letters on its spine.

Behind the shelves, something shuffled and moved in her peripheral vision.

Adelina dropped the spell book and darted across the line. Her heart leapt into her throat. When she turned around, there was nothing there.

Not even the book.

She bent down to see if it had tumbled or slid, but it was nowhere. Had she imagined the whole thing? She went to the shelf on which she'd first found it.

The spell sat there, between two ordinary history books. She picked it up and stared at it.

She could put it back and go on with her life. She *should* do that. But instead, she squared her shoulders and ignored her shaking hands.

This time, she crossed the line without hesitation, the spell book hugged to her chest. One of the books nearby shifted. She halted, her breath catching in her throat, and watched as the book slid toward whoever had pulled it from the other side.

Adelina gripped the strap of her bag. Gooseflesh sprang up along her arms.

Whatever had taken the book paused long enough for her to catch a glimpse of a shape akin to a face—but it was white, diaphanous, and its eye sockets were hollow. Yet Adelina knew it saw her because it stared at her—and she at it—for many seconds.

Then Adelina spun on her heel and raced to the desk, hands extended. When her fingers made contact with the worn wood, she turned to see if the monster was chasing her.

From behind the shelf, through the space left by the missing book, the hollow eyes still stared, their deep sadness settling over her like a blanket. Then movement. A white tendril appeared and floated through the gap. A finger. Pointed at her.

She held up the spell. “You want this?” Her voice shook.

The spectral head tilted.

The floor rumbled under her feet, sending vibrations up her legs. The creature vanished. Adelina blinked at the empty gap in the shelves, gripping the book tighter with trembling hands.

Suddenly, she was blinking at a row of books.

She'd moved. She was standing in the aisle where she'd first found the misplaced book. Her hands were empty, and the book was on the shelf. She looked around, mouth agape. What had happened to the creature, she wondered as she returned to the desk and peered at the gap where she'd seen the...thing.

It was gone.

There is also the cervara out there, Linza had said.

Somewhere in the distance, something flashed. Adelina leaned forward, held her breath, and waited.

Nothing happened.

As the seconds ticked by, her pounding heart slowed. Adelina forced herself to straighten up. Her chance at seeing the cervara...it was the librarian of the spell section, wasn't it? Her chance to see it was gone.

But the misshelved spell had returned to the same place—the wrong place. She went to the aisle where she'd first found it. If Linza or Melitta discovered it, they'd tell a mage and have it taken away.

It fit perfectly in the space between the bottom shelf and the floor, where no one would see it. She stared at its spine a long time. Would it move? Would the cervara come get it?

She couldn't let it be taken, not before she knew more about the cervara. It had tried to communicate something to her. Why else would it have pointed? But she wouldn't find answers sitting in the aisle of the history section.

Eventually, she returned to the desk. Melitta was there, eyeing a stack of books that needed to be reshelfed. "Where did you leave off?"

"I finished the Knowledge Wars."

Melitta nodded.

Adelina patted her shirtwaist into place. She hoped she didn't look suspicious. "Hey, have you ever...seen the cervara?"

Melitta looked up sharply. "Why?"

"I heard something." Adelina studied the items on their desk. Stacks of books, ledgers, pens; these were familiar things. "I thought I could see it. What is it?"

Melitta glanced over her shoulder. "All I know is that it calls the spell books to itself and keeps them organized. It throws out anyone who goes

beyond this point without an amulet. It can't cross the barrier. The second years keep the line charged with a spell. Even the magi only go in there when they have to."

Was that what had happened? The cervara had moved Adelina to where she'd found the spell? No, Melitta had said *throws*. "Could it do magic of its own and cross the line?"

"It never has."

Adelina took a shuddering breath. "Does it just throw people out of the spell section or...has it ever hurt someone?"

"Stay on this side, and you'll be fine. You didn't go over there, did you?"

"No."

She had. Twice. What was she doing? When had she become a person who lied?

"Then you won't become the first person to be killed by the cervara. You can go."

Adelina collected her belongings and left without another glance at Melitta. It was irrational, but she worried the woman would see on her face that she'd crossed the boundary. She passed through the fiction section, then children's books, nodding at her fellow librarians as though nothing had changed. But everything had. How could everything in the library be so ordinary when the cervara lurked mere yards away? It had a face, and more perplexingly, facial expressions. Terrifying though it was, it had seemed... sad.

Adelina didn't want the bright daylight outside to dim the memory of the creature she'd seen. She brought it up, held the picture tight.

Forget it and just do your job, habit whispered. But she couldn't forget the cervara's face, the way it had looked at her.

A horseless, magic-propelled carriage rolled by on the busy city street, a sign of a bygone era. More and more, motorcars were replacing carriages. She pushed her glasses up on her nose and tilted her face toward the sky. As usual, books floated through the air, descending toward the glass cupola atop the library before disappearing. She tried to picture the books floating to the creature she'd seen to be sorted. In her lifetime, she'd watched countless books return to the library this way, but the little spell she'd found was afraid to go.

Adelina shook her head. She needed to know more. With a puzzled grimace on her face, she went home.