
CHAPTER ONE

The Sound of Thunder

It was storming in Elsewhere.

Rain penetrated the canopy like bullets. Lightning struck, loud as gunfire. Thunder rolled in like cannons fired from a distance.

Elsie Clarke heard the rain as soon as she stepped through the Gateway in Madam Tryll's bedroom, the one hidden in the mirror in the corner. The other Gifted students trailed behind her as their teacher led them through the halls of the empty school – an almost perfect replica of the real Miss Coleridge's Academy for Gifted Youths. They reached the front doors and stepped out onto the porch.

The world of Elsewhere stretched out before her – the Place Where Lost Children Go. The place where Elsie had learned what she really was. Tryll had once described Elsewhere as 'a physical collective consciousness', but

Elsie still wasn't sure what that meant. All she knew was that Elsewhere was an endless forest with soft green grass, fireflies that danced in the air, and colossal trees that housed the souls of the Gifted – the people chosen by Elsewhere to possess powers far above ordinary human abilities.

Elsewhere tried its best to mirror the real world, but it often got details wrong. There was no breeze, for starters, no sun or moon, and flowers that usually grew on bushes bloomed from the trees instead.

Elsie had never seen it rain in Elsewhere before, so the heavy downpour immediately struck her as odd. The concerned look on Tryll's face confirmed it.

They stood under the shelter, staring out into the vast, open emptiness, watching as fat raindrops pounded against the dirt. The trees were drenched with water, their branches swaying incessantly as though caught in a hurricane.

'Why is it raining?' Elsie called over the thunder.

Tryll's pale blue eyes studied the horror landscape before her. She wrapped her purple coat tighter around her. 'I think it's a message of some kind. Elsewhere is trying to warn us.'

'Warn us about what?' asked Yasmin Amara, Elsie's best friend, but Tryll didn't have the answer.

The sky was darker than Elsie had ever seen it – no stars, no moon, nothing but black – until lightning struck and Elsewhere lit up like a lantern, filling the world with white.

It was usually daytime in Elsewhere – or the illusion of it anyway – with morning dew adorning the leaves and dampening the grass, never drying. The replica school stood tall and proud, watching over the clearing where Elsie and her classmates had been taking their Gifted lessons for almost a year now. But now the clearing was filled with shadow. The place where Elsie had always felt safest suddenly felt eerie and dangerous.

She made to step out into the rain, but Tryll put a hand on her shoulder and held her back. ‘Not yet, darling. Just let me think.’

But Elsie had only moved because she’d spotted a figure in the distance. He’d appeared from around the school’s right side, hurrying through the rain, holding onto his cap whilst his ginger hair plastered itself to his forehead.

‘Jack, hurry!’ she shouted.

He must have been in his treehouse when the rain started. Unlike Elsie and the others, Jack O’Connor wasn’t a student at the academy and had been living in Elsewhere for the past year. He sprinted towards the sheltered porch, kicking up water as he went, then clambered up the steps, shivering with cold.

‘Oh, darling, are you alright?’ Tryll fussed, pulling him further under cover.

‘Not really. I hate thunderstorms,’ he admitted. ‘But where’s it coming from? It never rains here.’

‘I know. I’m still figuring that out.’

‘My treehouse is going to be *ruined*.’ Jack pouted and Elsie put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

The others – Maisie Finch, Lili Xing, Jonas Reed, Nicholas Whitby, Aria Roberts and the twins, Klaus and Klara Müller – looked just as confused. They’d all arrived at Tryll’s office that night, excited for another lesson in Gift mastering. Elsie guessed they wouldn’t be having their lesson today.

‘I hear something,’ Aria murmured. She’d covered her ears with her hands because the rain and thunder must have hurt her magically oversensitive ears, but now she pulled her hands away, staring into the distance.

She took off down the steps and into the downpour, ignoring Tryll’s shouts to return. Elsie watched as Aria reached a tree, wrapped her arms around its wet trunk and pressed her ear to the bark.

A minute later, she turned back with an expression so horrified, it made Elsie shiver. Aria ran back towards the porch, her shoes sloshing in the deep puddles, shouting all the while. But her faint voice was hard to hear and Elsie strained to make out the words.

‘London! They’ve reached ... The Germans ... attack. They’re ... London!’

‘What?’ Jonas called back.

Aria reached the porch. ‘The German airships have reached London,’ she repeated. ‘They’re going to attack. They’re going to bomb London!’

Elsie's spine stiffened. Ever since the war had broken out last year in 1914, its shadow had loomed over her life, darkening it in ways she'd never imagined. It was bad enough that their last headmistress had tried to turn the academy into a military school, training children in the art of war, leaving Elsie and her friends no choice but to intervene. She'd hoped that that would be the worst of it but now, on the thirty-first of May 1915, it seemed the war had found her again.

The other children stood still, paralysed by fear. All except for Klaus and Klara, who retreated into the safety of the hallway behind, away from accusing eyes. Their German heritage had made them the target of bullying in the last few months, but Elsie had long since learned her lesson about that. Klaus and Klara were not guilty by blood, no matter what the papers said. They couldn't help where they came from.

Elsie put them out of her mind as a new, more insistent thought occurred to her.

Mum. Dad. Our house. In Kensington. Right in the heart of London!

If bombs were about to fall, then Elsie's parents were in the firing line.

Everyone looked to Tryll for answers. 'What do we do, miss?' asked Nicholas.

'There's nothing we can do,' Tryll replied.

'You're giving up?' Maisie cried, tears pooling in her eyes.

‘But miss, we’re Gifted,’ Lili argued. ‘Surely, there must be *something* we can –’

‘No!’ Tryll roared over the thunder, lightning flashing in her eyes. ‘There is *nothing* we can do. This is not like stopping Miss Coleridge. This is *real* war, and I will not be the one to drag you into it. Now please, get inside, all of you! Back to the real school, back to bed. Go on. Go!’

The children argued with her as she ushered them inside, but Elsie stood still, counting every lightning strike and wondering if each one indicated a bomb that had fallen in the real world. Her hands shook.

‘Elsie, are you coming?’ she heard Yas say from behind her.

Elsie didn’t answer. Instead, she ran.

As she darted out into the rain, Tryll shouted after her. ‘Elsie! Stop! Don’t you *dare* –’

But Elsie didn’t listen and once she was far enough away, the others’ voices were drowned out completely. She bolted for the nearest tree, lifted her palm, and directed it at the trunk, preparing for the motion that would open her Gateway. Like Tryll, Elsie was a Guardian, one of the few Gifted capable of entering and exiting Elsewhere at will. She wasn’t supposed to use it without her teacher’s permission, but that had never stopped her before.

Despite her terror, she kept her focus, curling her fingers around an invisible key and turning it. An archway carved itself into the tree’s trunk before swinging open

like a door and she headed straight for it, racing into the dark and emerging in her bedroom back home.

The magnetic pull in her chest broke apart, like two halves that had been separated. The force of it caused her to stumble (or perhaps her knees were shaking too) and her shoes left muddy stains on the carpet.

She went to the window. It was not raining here; the night was clear and moonless. The only light emanated from the city itself – a perfect target.

All was quiet. After the torrential downpour of Elsewhere and the fear it had struck into her heart, this was peaceful in comparison. Where were the Zeppelins? Where were the bombs? Where were the screams?

Elsie ran from her room, dripping water all over the floor – her mother would kill her for it, but then again, so might the bombs. She went to her parents' bedroom first, ready to shout them awake, but the room was empty, the bed still made.

She returned to the hallway, padding down the staircase to see a light on in the sitting room. The clock on the wall read eleven pm. She burst into the room so suddenly, the door smacked against the wall.

'Mum! Dad! They're coming! We have to go. Now!' Elsie cried.

A startled cry came from Mrs Clarke, who'd been sitting in an armchair by the fire with a cup of tea. The sudden arrival of her daughter – who was supposed to

be in Wales – had caused her to spill her tea all over her front, staining her housedress. Mr Clarke looked up from his book, his mouth hanging open.

‘What on earth ...’ Mrs Clarke stammered. ‘Elsie, what are you doing here? How did you get here? And why are you dripping water on my carpet?’

‘There’s no time to talk,’ Elsie replied, knocking the now empty cup out of her mother’s hand. ‘You’re in danger. We have to go!’

‘Go where? What for?’ Mr Clarke asked, standing now.

‘Just follow me.’

Elsie pulled her mother out of the chair and over to the door.

‘Elsie, stop it! Let go of me.’

‘I can’t. You have to come!’

‘Where?’

‘This way!’

Her parents, distressed and confused, followed her out of the sitting room and up the stairs to her bedroom.

‘You said we had to leave,’ Mrs Clarke said. ‘Why are we going upstairs?’

‘Because this way is quicker,’ Elsie replied and this time her parents didn’t bother to argue. Perhaps they thought this was all a dream, that the heat from the fire had caused them to doze off without realising. Elsie hoped so because that theory worked in her favour.

The theory was further cemented upon entering

Elsie's bedroom, where her Gateway stood wide open in the wall, revealing nothing but darkness beyond. Her parents halted, pulling back.

'Elsie,' Mrs Clarke began, her voice trembling. 'What is *that*?'

'It's ... never mind. Just come on.'

When her parents didn't move, Elsie pushed them from behind. They all stumbled forward, into the Gateway, into the darkness, into the safety of Elsewhere. Except ...

They weren't in Elsewhere.

Instead of emerging in the familiar evergreen forest, they found themselves out on the streets. Another London street, by the looks of it, not too far from Kensington.

Elsie's parents turned in circles, breathing hard, as though unable to comprehend this shift of environment.

'We were in the sitting room. I was having tea. How did we get *here*?' Mrs Clarke mumbled to herself as she staggered on the spot.

'This is Stoke Newington,' Mr Clarke muttered as he examined the street. 'Elsie, what are we doing here?'

'I don't know,' she replied honestly. She hadn't even been thinking of Stoke Newington, so why had Elsewhere diverted her?

The street was like any other residential London street – packed with symmetrical brick houses squished together on either side of the road. Each one had steps leading to the door and a brick fence at the front of the

yard. A nearby street sign read, 'Alkham Rd'. Everything looked normal.

At this time of night, the street was empty. The windows were dark. There wasn't a sound to be heard, not until ...

A strange, unearthly whistle, not like any sound a human could make. It was the sound of something falling from the sky.

Elsie couldn't see it in the dark, but she saw what came next.

Halfway down the street, a bright light flashed, followed by an explosion that almost burst her eardrums and shook the ground under her feet. At first, she thought lightning had struck, but the sound of thunder that followed turned out to be the rumble of bricks collapsing. Flames illuminated the house, drawing her closer.

Mr Clarke grabbed her arm. 'What are you doing? Stay back!'

Elsie wriggled out of her father's grip, eager to get closer. She had to see for herself.

She ran down the street, her parents calling after her. She counted the house numbers as she went, before stopping at a distance from the wreckage.

House number sixteen lay in ruins. The roof had caved in and the top floor was in flames, casting an eerie orange glow through the only surviving window. The front brickwork had turned to dust. The residents – a husband

and wife, their children and two guests – stumbled out the front door, coughing from the smoke but otherwise miraculously unharmed.

Elsie breathed a sigh of relief. They were okay. Shaken, perhaps, but alive. She wondered if they knew then that they'd just made history as the first building in London to fall victim to a German aerial attack. Perhaps not. In their shoes, it probably felt more like being in the wrong place at the wrong time, in the wrong house, on the wrong street.

A few doors opened along the street and those brave enough to venture outside came over to help, to ask if the family was alright or if they needed an ambulance.

Elsie's legs were shaking, and her ears were ringing, but despite her fear, she looked up. It was too dark to see anything – the sky was pitch black – but only because she knew what to look for did she finally make it out – a large, cigar-like shape that hung over London like a storm cloud, blotting out the stars.

Elsie felt her parents' hands on her shoulders as they turned her forcefully around.

'We are *not* staying here, Elsie,' Mr Clarke warned through gritted teeth. 'We have to go.'

She nodded and let them lead this time, but as they passed a side alley that was coated in darkness, she pulled back. 'This way!'

'Down there?' her father cried incredulously. 'Are you insane? We need to get somewhere safe.'

‘What do you think I’m doing?’ Elsie shot back and broke free from them. She ran into the alley, leaving them no choice but to follow.

Another whistle reached her ears as she summoned a new Gateway, knowing the old one would close in its place. She held the door open. ‘Come on. Get in,’ she said, but her parents just stared blankly.

A second explosion sounded nearby, causing another earthquake that travelled up through Elsie’s legs and into her chest, settling in her heart, which pounded harder than ever.

She took her parents’ hands and shut her eyes as she pulled them into the dark once more and only opened them again when she felt the world shift under her feet.



They emerged in the dining hall of Miss Coleridge’s Academy for Gifted Youths. All was quiet as the students – well, *most* of them – were in bed and fast asleep. Elsie closed her Gateway before anyone else could stumble through by accident. Meanwhile, Mr and Mrs Clarke staggered into a seat at the nearest table, clutching their chests and breathing hard, eyes ready to pop from their sockets.

‘Elsie,’ Mrs Clarke said weakly as she regained her voice, ‘are you at *all* planning on explaining any of this?’

‘Uh, in a minute,’ Elsie replied, hurrying to the hall’s

great doors. She peered out into the darkened foyer, listening for footsteps. She couldn't be sure where the others were, if they'd gone to bed already or if they were out looking for her. Only one plan came to mind, so she begged Elsewhere to help her accomplish it.

Hello? the voice in her mind called out, reaching for someone to pick up on the other end. *Klara? Klaus? Can you hear me? I'm in the dining hall. Bring Tryll. And Yas!*

A second later, she received a response.

We're coming, just stay put!

Elsie exhaled, turning back to her parents, who watched her with dazed expressions. Now that she had a chance to breathe, she worried she'd gone too far. The bombs had fallen in Stoke Newington, not Kensington. Her parents might have been safe after all. Yet she'd broken Elsewhere's trust to rescue them – just *them*, not even the victims of the attack – and now she'd brought them here, to school, where they would have endless questions. She only hoped that Yas's Gift could smooth this all over.

Her parents remained silent, too afraid to speak. Finally, the clatter of footsteps echoed through the foyer and in came Tryll, followed by Klara and Yas. Tryll rushed to Elsie's side, taking her face in her hands. 'Never, ever, ever do that again!'

Elsie flicked her eyes towards her parents. 'Bigger problems right now.'

Tryll straightened up and faced Elsie's parents. Mr

and Mrs Clarke looked pleased to be in the presence of another adult – someone with *real* answers.

Mr Clarke stood, smoothing his wrinkled shirt. ‘I don’t know what kind of nightmare I’m a part of right now, but there better be a damn good explanation for all this ... this *chaos!*’

Tryll put on her best smile and replied gently, ‘Mr Clarke, you really ought to stay sitting. You’ve been through a lot tonight and I’m afraid it’s only going to get worse.’

‘Worse?’ Mrs Clarke cried, looking faint. ‘What could possibly be worse than having my daughter appear out of nowhere, staining my best housedress *and* finding myself in the middle of an air raid in central London?’

‘What’s worse is you won’t remember any of it. I’m sorry.’

Mr and Mrs Clarke exchanged a look. ‘Won’t remember?’ they echoed.

Tryll glanced at Yas, who stepped forward, looking nervous herself. Elsie took her best friend’s hand and held it tight. Yas took a deep breath, looked directly into the eyes of the grown-ups, and said, ‘You must be tired. You came such a long way to see Elsie. It’s a shame the train arrived so late.’

Mr and Mrs Clarke stared at Yas, taking her in for the first time. Their eyes became cloudy.

‘The train?’ Mr Clarke repeated. ‘Yes, it must have been held up.’

‘You mentioned they served nice pastries, though. What was it? Jam tarts?’

Mrs Clarke nodded along. ‘Yes, raspberry jam. I remember.’ She licked her lips as though she could taste it.

‘And some tea, by the looks of it.’ Yas pointed to the stain on Mrs Clarke’s dress. ‘Elsie hasn’t been feeling well lately, so it was good of you to come all this way to see her. You just arrived later than we expected. But that’s okay, you can take one of the spare teacher’s rooms. I’m sure Madam Tryll won’t mind.’ Yas looked at Tryll, who nodded encouragingly.

Mr Clarke glanced down at his feet. ‘Where is our luggage?’

Yas’s smile faltered. Elsie had always been impressed by Yas’s ability to spin a story out of thin air and have her listener magically believe it, but she supposed that sometimes it was tricky to get the lie just right. The believability relied on the details.

‘You weren’t carrying any luggage when you arrived,’ Yas said. ‘This was only supposed to be a short trip, after all. Though you did say something about a carry bag. You said you’d left it on the train somewhere. Someone might have nicked it by now.’

Mrs Clarke let out a soft exclamation of despair. ‘Not my soaps.’

‘Don’t worry, we’ve got plenty to go around. You do look awfully tired, though. Ms Tryll can show you to your room if you’d like to rest.’

‘Yes, I think we might,’ Mrs Clarke replied, stifling a yawn.

Tryll took them gently by the shoulders and led them from the dining hall. They followed obediently, not even glancing at Elsie, whom they had supposedly come all this way to see. They needed sleep. Sleep would make the past disappear. Tonight would be nothing more than a dream.

‘Thanks for the help,’ Elsie said once the adults were gone. ‘I really screwed up this time.’

Yas shook her head. ‘I would’ve done the same if I could.’

‘Tryll’s not really mad,’ Klara said. ‘She was just scared. We all were.’

‘So was I,’ Elsie admitted. ‘Only I don’t feel like a hero. I saved my parents but they weren’t the ones in danger. I didn’t do anything to help those that were. I could have at least tried, I could have ...’

‘You can’t save everyone, Elsie,’ Yas said, and though she was right, it didn’t make Elsie feel any better.



When Yas and Klara finally went to bed, Elsie went to Tryll’s office. She found her teacher in her bedroom, unlacing her boots. Her long blonde hair hung loose over her shoulders, a delicate curtain. Elsie remembered the first time she’d entered this bedroom, spurred on by the magnetic pull in her chest directing her towards the

standing mirror in the corner. It had been a shock to see the glass open inwards and Tryll's head pop out from the other side. The biggest shock had come upon stepping through the mirror to the world beyond it.

Elsie knocked on the open bedroom door. 'Sorry, miss. Can we talk?'

Tryll glanced over with weary eyes and nodded. 'Come on in.'

Elsie stepped inside, noting the freshly picked violets on the nightstand and the mirror in the corner, which hid Tryll's Gateway. She sat on the end of the bed. 'Are my parents alright? Did they believe Yas's story?'

Tryll moved on to the next boot. 'Yes, they did. They'll wake up tomorrow, believing that they only came to see you for a few days due to your poor health. They'll have no knowledge of the bombings, not until they read it in the papers. Then they'll head on home, back to London to check on the house, I expect. They'll be fine.'

Elsie fiddled with the end of her long, blonde braid. 'Do you think I did a good thing? Or was it foolish?' she asked, dreading the answer.

'It was absolutely foolish,' Tryll replied sternly. 'But foolish doesn't always mean wrong. You had good intentions, Elsie, though you clearly didn't think it all through. Bringing Ungifted through a Gateway is ... well, it's a risk, to say the least.' She removed her boots and placed them by the wall next to her gardening wellies.

‘Yes, well, it didn’t quite go as planned,’ Elsie began, then told Tryll exactly what had happened – how the Gateway had skipped over Elsewhere entirely, diverting her to Stoke Newington, right in the line of fire, before taking them back to school, skipping Elsewhere yet again. ‘Why couldn’t I get back into Elsewhere?’ she finished. ‘Do you think it’s mad at me?’

Tryll sat against the headboard and brushed her hair over one shoulder. ‘Elsie, your parents are Ungifted adults. They aren’t *allowed* to see Elsewhere. I don’t believe they have the imagination for it. Exceptions are sometimes made with Ungifted children, though it is rare. Elsewhere allowed you to save them, but it did so on its own terms, I think.’

‘Then why did it take me to the site of the bombing? Was it because I was thinking about it? Was it my fault? Or was Elsewhere trying to teach me a lesson?’

‘Hm. I think so, yes,’ Tryll mused.

Elsie blanched. ‘So Elsewhere was trying to kill me?’

Tryll looked scandalised. ‘Heavens, no! Elsewhere would *never* put you in danger. It did its best to keep you away from the blast. I suspect it merely wanted you to witness it. You see, Elsewhere plays by its own rules. Sometimes it doesn’t take you where you want to be but to where it thinks you *need* to be.’

‘Why would I *need* to be on that street?’

‘It’s a message, I think. A reminder that the war is real. It’s not in your head. It’s out there and it’s coming.’

Something you really ought to start coming to terms with, my dear.'

Elsie felt a sudden need to defend herself. 'I know it's real. It's in all the papers.'

'Exactly. And so far, that's all you've known about it. It's just a story to you. Words on a page that people read aloud to each other because it sounds important. But it *is* important. It's about real people fighting real people and real people are going to get hurt. Elsewhere and I want you to understand that. It may be the most important thing you ever do.'

'Why?'

'Well, I know I've said we can't stop the war but maybe there are other things we can do. Little things,' Tryll replied. 'If the Gifted represent goodness, then that's what we'll do – spread a little more goodness into the world.'

Elsie leaned forward expectantly. 'How?'

Tryll smiled. 'However you like. Now, that's enough questions for one day as I suspect you'll get plenty more of them in the morning. Off to bed with you.'

Elsie slid off the bed, disappointed but too tired to argue. 'Goodnight, miss.'

Tryll waved her out. 'Goodnight, darling.'