



the
SPELLSHOP

SARAH BETH DURST

THE SPELLSHOP

SARAH BETH DURST



BRAMBLE

TOR PUBLISHING GROUP
NEW YORK

[Begi Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Tor Publishing Group ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you without Digital Rights Management software (DRM) applied so that you can enjoy reading it on your personal devices. This e-book is for your personal use only. You may not print or post this e-book, or make this e-book publicly available in any way. You may not copy, reproduce, or upload this e-book, other than to read it on one of your personal devices.

Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.

*For Adam,
with love and raspberry jam*

CHAPTER ONE

Kiela never thought the flames would reach the library. She was dimly aware that most of the other librarians had fled weeks ago, when the revolutionaries took the palace and defenestrated the emperor in a rather dramatic display. But surely they wouldn't touch the library. After all, there were *books* here. Highly flammable, irreplaceable books.

The Great Library of Alyssium, with its soaring spires, stained-glass windows, and labyrinthine bookshelves, was the jewel of the Crescent Islands Empire. Its hallowed stacks were filled with centuries-old treatises, histories, studies, and (most importantly, in Kiela's opinion) spellbooks. Only the elite, the *crème de la crème* of the scholars, were allowed to even view the spellbooks, as only the rarefied few were permitted, by imperial law, to use magic.

She was responsible for the spellbooks on the third floor, east wing. For the past eleven years, she'd worked, slept, ate, and lived between the shelves, which perhaps explained why, when she first smelled smoke, she thought she'd simply left toast on the cookplate.

Just to be on the safe side, earlier in the week, Kiela and her assistant Caz had begun securing some of her favorite tomes in crates and stowing them on one of the library boats, though she'd never truly believed evacuation would be necessary. Cocooned within the stacks, far away from any whiff of politics or violence, it was a pleasant game: if she were stranded on a deserted island, which books would she most want to have with her? Certainly *The Grimoire on Plantwork*, compiled in the year 357 by scholars Messembe and Cannin, as well as *The Manipulation of Weather Patterns, a Study of the Effects of Spellwork on the Breeding Habits of Eastern Puffins*, which was a fascinating and groundbreaking work that—

Caz swung by his leaves into the aisle where she sat, cross-legged, in front of a pile of books. A spider plant, he was roughly the size of a farm dog but comprised entirely of greenery, with a knot of roots holding soil at

his core. He was the smartest assistant she'd ever had, though also, perhaps not coincidentally, the most anxiety-prone. "We're going to die," he informed her, his leaves rustling so badly that it was challenging to pluck out the words.

"The fighting won't come here," Kiela said in the soothing voice she'd perfected after years of working in such a sacred space. She added another book to the pack-in-the-fifth-crate pile, then reconsidered and shifted it to the pack-only-if-it-fits pile.

He shook his leaves at her. "The fighting is *already* here. They've battered down the front door and are ransacking Kinney Hall."

"Goodness!"

The door to Kinney Hall was a monstrosity built of brass and secured with bolts made of the sturdy lumber used for the ribs of ship hulls. She tried to calculate the amount of force required to batter down a thirty-foot door, then blinked. "Ransacking, did you say?"

She'd expected the rebels to secure the library and its treasures—that was only sensible—but *ransacking*? These were freedom fighters, not feral animals. She wasn't even opposed to their goals. On Caz's recommendation, she'd read a few of their pamphlets in the early days of the revolution, and the call for elections and the sharing of knowledge seemed quite appealing ...

"The North Reading Room is on fire," Caz said. "They lit the tapestries first, and it spread to the scrolls."

She felt sick. All those old manuscripts!

He tugged on her sleeve with a leaf. "Come on, Kiela, we have to leave."

Leave? Now? But she hadn't finished—

"If you make a leave-leaf joke," Caz warned, "I'm going without you."

She got to her feet. The fifth crate was only half-filled. Kiela dumped an armload of books into it without even checking what the titles were—"Enough, Kiela!" Caz said as she went for a second armload—and then maneuvered it toward the lift. On wheels, it scooted between the shelves, and she felt a lurch in her stomach as they passed all the full shelves of beautiful, wonderful books. She snagged a few more favorites as they hurried past.

Reaching the lift, she shoved the wheeled crate inside and yanked down the gate. Caz pushed the button with a leaf and turned the crank. The lift

lurched and then descended.

As they traveled between the floors, Kiela heard the sound of metal clashing on metal, and her stomach flopped. She didn't know firsthand what a battle sounded like, but she *did* know what a library was supposed to sound like, and all of this was terribly, horribly wrong. Caz crept closer to her, and she wished the lift would go faster.

What if it stopped on one of the floors with fighting?

What if it stopped altogether?

She pushed the sublevel button again and again, as if that would encourage it. The lift continued to inch downward with clanks and squeaks and whirrs. The stench of smoke grew stronger. Looking out through the grated gate, she saw haze shrouding the stacks.

"We should have taken the stairs," Caz said.

"We'd have never been able to carry the books," Kiela said.

"We won't save any books if we're dead." He shook so hard that several of his leaves detached and floated to the floor. "Gah, I'm shedding!"

"You need to think about something else," she said. "Oak trees are struck by lightning more often than any other tree. Apples can float because they are twenty-five percent air. You can count the number of cricket chirps per second to calculate the outside temperature."

"Unless the outside is on fire," Caz said. "How fast do they chirp if it's all on fire?"

The lift lurched as it reached the lowest level. Kiela yanked the gate open while Caz maneuvered the crate with his tendrils. Shoving the crate outside, they exited the elevator.

This far down, water-level, she couldn't hear the clang of metal or smell the stench of smoke. It was overwhelmed by the ripe fish odor of the canal that flowed beneath the library. All of the city of Alyssium was riddled with canals. It was part of what made it one of the world's most beautiful cities, the jewel of the empire. Kiela remembered when she'd first arrived, very young, before her parents died, and how impressed she'd been by the sparkling canals, the lacelike white bridges, the spires, and the flowers that blossomed on every balcony, draped from every window, and framed every door. She wondered how much of the city she remembered was left.

Hurrying through the narrow stone passageway with the wheeled crate, she listened for any other movement. But all she heard was the slosh of

water against stone and the drip-drip-drip of a leak somewhere nearby. Ahead were the boats.

Anchored in slips beneath the library, the boats were used to transport books to and from select patrons on nearby islands. Each had silver sails, tied tight around its boom, and a black-cherry hull wide enough to transport multiple crates of books but sleek enough to be sailed by a single librarian. She herself had used one just last winter to deliver a full set of scholar Cypavia's *Examinations of the Function of Forest Spirits in Fact and Fiction* to a bedridden emeritus sorcerer. He'd had his housekeeper offer her a cup of tea as thanks, but she'd declined, wanting to hurry back to the comfort of her stacks. *At least those books are safe.* That was only a slight consolation, though, compared to the wealth of knowledge in peril above her.

She'd already filled her boat with the first four crates of books, secured beneath a tarp. Maneuvering the half-filled fifth crate onto the boat, she strapped it in. There was room for at least three more crates, but there wasn't time to fetch them. She wished she'd sorted books faster. Or been less picky. She wished she'd packed more provisions. She'd stowed a few jugs of water, as well as jars of preserved peaches, a bag of dried beans, and a sack of pecans. For Caz, she had a tub of fresh soil that he could replenish himself in, and she'd also hidden a couple changes of clothes for herself, as well as a few blank notebooks just in case. But she hadn't emptied her cubicle in the library of her personal items. She thought wistfully of all she'd left—her old journals, her best quill set, a wooden carving in the shape of a mermaid that her parents had given her when she was a child. But Caz was right: better to save themselves. And the books.

We'll come back when it's safe, she thought. *This is just temporary.*

Climbing into the boat, Kiela untied the line and pushed off. She pulled out the pole for navigating the watery tunnels. The sails were wrapped up around the boom. They'd stay down until they reached the open water.

She wasn't technically supposed to take the boat. Or the books. Or Caz. But there had been no one left to ask, and she reassured herself that they'd thank her later, when she returned. It wasn't theft. It was her job: taking care of the collection. *I'm just ... broadening the definition.*

She poled through the tunnels until they flowed out into the open canals of the city.

“Well, this is absolutely horrible,” Caz said.

Kiela had to agree.

The stars were blotted out by the smoke that rose from the bridges and spires. The flames cast everything in a ghoulish light, and the sour taste of the smoke coated the back of her throat. She felt it invading her lungs with each breath. Her sky-blue skin looked sickly in the unnatural light, and her dark blue hair soaked up the scent of smoke. Down on the canals, Kiela and Caz were free from the worst of it, but they weren't free from the sights and sounds of death.

Later, she'd block out most of that horrible night: the screams, the corpses in the canals, the fear that choked her worse than the smoke. The trip through the canals felt endless, and the sounds traveled across the water even as they broke into the open sea.

With Caz's help, Kiela raised the silver sails once the water was too deep for the pole. She'd learned how to sail as a small child and had delivered enough books scattered over the years to stay in practice, so she thankfully didn't have to think to perform the tasks. Her hands remembered what to do, how to catch the wind in the canvas, how to speed away, away, away.

Behind them, the great city burned, with its people (both good and bad) and its history (both good and bad) and its books and its flowers. And she knew she wasn't coming back.

★ ★ ★

As the sun rose over the sea, all pink and yellow and hopeful, Kiela resolved to look forward, not backward. There was no one in Alyssium who'd miss her—which was a depressing thought in and of itself. Really, no one?

Absorbed in her work, she hadn't left the library for anything but the occasional book delivery in ... Had it been years? Yes, years. After she'd finished school, she'd simply moved directly into a cubicle sandwiched between the stacks. It had been simpler that way. She hadn't had to waste any time traveling to and from her work.

She had no family in the city, and she'd lost track of her classmates—they'd drifted off into their lives, and she'd fallen into the routine of hers.

All her meals were delivered, prepared fresh at any hour. Scholars often kept odd hours, and therefore so did librarians. She merely had to send a request down the chute, and everything would arrive via lift in a timely manner. No interaction with anyone required. She'd considered it the perfect system.

The other librarians ... They had their own work on other floors and in other wings. Kiela never liked to disturb anyone, and she had gently—so gently that she hadn't even realized she was doing it—discouraged others from disturbing hers. As the sailboat bounced over the waves, she realized she hadn't even spoken to another soul besides Caz in three weeks. The last person she'd talked to was a janitor whom she'd shooed away for stirring up dust near some particularly fragile manuscripts.

It wasn't that she didn't like people. It was only that she liked books more. They didn't fuss or judge or mock or reject. They invited you in, fluffed up the pillows on the couch, offered you tea and toast, and shared their hearts with no expectation that you'd do anything more than absorb what they had to give.

All of which was very lovely, but it left her in a bit of a quandary: where to go, now that her old life had quite literally burned down. "Caz..." she began.

"Mmm," he said, muffled.

She glanced across the boat to see he'd wedged himself between two of the crates and had wound his leaves tight around his root ball. "Caz, what are you doing?"

"Fish eat plants," he said.

"Some fish, yes." She wasn't overly familiar with the dietary preferences of fish. She knew there were fish who liked kelp. She supposed they ate plankton too. Also, insects? "Some fish eat other fish."

"Who eat plants?"

"I suppose so."

"Everything eats plants," Caz said. "But barely anything eats books. That's why I'm positioning myself between the crates. No one will think of looking for a fresh, tasty morsel of green next to so many dead trees. So I am just going to stay here, with the books, until we get to wherever we're going, which I hope won't have fish, sheep, cows, or goats." He shuddered at the word "goats," and Kiela wondered if he'd had a bad experience with

a goat or had just read about them. *Most likely the latter.* Livestock wasn't permitted in the Great Library, for obvious reasons.

"That is what I wanted to talk to you about," Kiela said. "We need a destination."

"You ... didn't plan that out?"

"I didn't think we'd really have to leave," she admitted. "Or I thought, if we did, it would be just for a few hours or days. A week at most." She'd thought they could rent a slip in a harbor at one of the nearby islands, perhaps Varsun or Iva, and stay for a couple days at one of the charming inns where the lesser nobles liked to vacation.

Caz sagged, his leaves drooping as if they'd never tasted water. "So did I."

They sailed silently. It was a gloriously beautiful day for a sail. Light breeze. Cheerful lemon light flashing on the water. Seagulls flew overhead, cawing to one another. The many islands of the Crescent Islands Empire—if it was an empire anymore, thanks to the revolutionaries—looked peaceful from the distance, if you didn't look back to where smoke still stained the sky over the capital city. The islands' gray, white, and black cliffs were majestic, and the sweet little fishing villages looked quaint, with their brightly painted houses, cheerful gardens, and cobblestone streets. She and Caz could sail into one of their harbors and then—do what? She couldn't afford an inn for more than a couple days. The coins that Kiela had brought with her wouldn't go far. Even if she could pay the harbor fees, she didn't relish living on the boat, day in and day out.

She resolved not to panic. She'd think as she sailed. And an answer would come to her.

Across the water, she saw a herd of merhorses rise and fall with the waves. Her breath caught in her throat. Half horse and half fish, they were a magnificent sight. She watched, mesmerized, as they cantered through the water. Their hooves crashed through the waves as their powerful fish tails propelled them forward. Covered in jewellike scales and made of solid muscle, they were the living embodiment of both beauty and strength. *Like the sea itself*, Kiela thought. One of them tossed its mane, and droplets sprayed up and caught the light—a flash of rainbow.

"Caltrey," Kiela said.

"Excuse me?"

“It’s an island.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“I’d be surprised if you had,” Kiela said. “It’s tiny and remote. Far to the north. It doesn’t fall on any of the shipping lanes. The locals herd merhorses to aid with their fishing.”

Curious, Caz lifted himself up between the crates and perched on one to look out across the ocean. “Why do you know about it? Oh, don’t tell me—you read about it.”

“Actually, no. It’s where I was born.” She heard a hitch in her voice, and she swallowed hard. She hadn’t thought about Caltrey in years—she didn’t know why just thinking of returning would make her feel so jumbled.

Her parents had left as soon as they could afford it, to seek a better life in the capital city—they’d wanted to experience life in Alyssium, and they’d wanted Kiela to have the kind of opportunities they, growing up on a remote island, never had. She’d been barely nine years old at the time, but she still remembered the island with its cliffs and farms and gardens. The sole village on the island, also called Caltrey, was three cobblestone streets wide with a mill by a waterfall and a school that was housed in an old barn. She remembered the way it looked at sunset, with the island’s winged cats perched on the rooftops, and the way it smelled at dawn of fresh-baked bread. In spring, wildflowers sprouted everywhere—the roofs, the cliffs, the fields. In winter, snow blanketed everything in thick white fluff. She used to drink hot milk with chocolate mixed in and watch the snow fall on the sea

“Uh, Kiela?” Caz prodded.

“I think ... I have a house there.” She knew her parents hadn’t sold it. So far from the heart of the empire, it wouldn’t have sold for much, and Kiela’s father had wanted to hold on to it, in case they decided to retire there after they’d had their fill of city life, though Kiela’s mother had loved the city too much to ever want to return. *I suppose that means I inherited it.* Certainly there was no one else who could have. She had no other family. “If no one has moved in. And if it hasn’t fallen down. It’s small. Just a cottage. But...” It was beautiful. At least it was beautiful in her mind, preserved in her memory as lovely and fragile as a soap bubble. Now, it was probably infested with bats, mice, and bears, and the roof had most likely caved in. “I just never expected to go back there.” *At least not without them.*

“Is it nice?”

“Very. I think. It could have changed.” *I’ve changed.* She’d lost her magenta freckles and the blue pigtails years ago, and she’d gained an advanced degree in library studies and a host of antisocial tendencies.

“Okay then,” Caz said. “Let’s go to your island.”

Catching the wind, she steered the boat north.

“Just to be clear—they don’t have goats, do they?”

“I am sure there are no animals anywhere on Caltrey that eat plants,” Kiela said, as they picked up speed. The boat bounced over the waves.

“Excellent! Wait, are you just saying that to make me feel better?”

“Yes,” she said.

Grumbling, he squished himself back between the crates of spellbooks as they sailed northward, toward their future and her past.