

# ROOM 369



The Spell Book No One  
Was Supposed to Find

**Please note: This is not the entire book, it's just an excerpt so  
you can see the quality of writing:**

## **Chapter 1: The Book in Room 369**

By the time Elena Vale arrived at Rookwood Academy, the rain had turned the whole hill to silver.

It glazed the iron gates. It darkened the stone lions at the entrance until they looked almost wet enough to breathe. It ran in thin ribbons down the windows of the main building, blurring the light inside so the school seemed less lit than haunted by a steady golden glow.

The taxi left her with one suitcase, one duffel, and the familiar feeling that everyone else in the world had been handed instructions she had somehow missed.

She stood for a moment at the foot of the steps, looking up.

Rookwood was the kind of place designed to make ordinary people feel temporary. Too much stone. Too many towers. Too many narrow windows staring down like patient eyes. The brochure had called it historic. Historic was one word for it.

Threatening was another.

Elena tightened her grip on the strap of her bag and went inside.

The entrance hall smelled of old wood, damp wool, and fire smoke. A man sat behind a long oak desk with a ledger open in front of him and half-moon glasses low on his nose. He looked bored until she gave her name.

“Elena Vale.”

His pen paused.

Not for long. Just long enough.

“Vale,” he repeated.

Elena had learned a long time ago that adults revealed the most when they thought they had concealed everything. “Yes.”

His expression smoothed out. “Of course. Transfer student.” He reached beneath the desk and produced a brass key tagged **214**. “North Residence. Second floor. Miss Damaris will take you.”

A woman stepped from a side corridor as if summoned by the sound of her own name. She wore charcoal gray from collar to shoes and looked as though she had never once in her life misplaced a thought, a button, or a student.

“This way,” she said.

Elena followed her through the hall, past portraits and glass cases and a staircase broad enough for a cathedral. On the walls, generations of Rookwood students stared out in oil and sepia with the solemn confidence of people who had always expected to be remembered.

Miss Damaris moved quickly. “Meals are announced by bell. Curfew is at ten on weekdays. Students are not permitted in the west archive stairwell, the bell tower, or the east sealed corridor.”

Elena glanced at her. “The east *sealed* corridor?”

Miss Damaris did not slow. “That is what I said.”

It was the kind of answer designed to end a question. Elena filed it away anyway.

They turned into a narrower hall lined with classroom doors, then another lined with tall windows and old lamps. As they passed a painted campus directory, Elena caught a break in the numbering.

Third floor: **361–368, 370–382**

She slowed. “There’s no 369.”

Miss Damaris looked at the directory only once. “No.”

“That seems specific.”

Miss Damaris’s mouth barely moved. “At Rookwood, Miss Vale, you will find many things are specific.”

That should have been strange enough to hold Elena's attention all evening.

It was not.

Her room was at the end of a long corridor overlooking the inner courtyard. Room 214 had two narrow beds, two wardrobes, and a fireplace too elegant to be useful. One side had already been claimed by neat stacks of books, pinned postcards, and a navy sweater folded so precisely it seemed almost theoretical.

A girl rose from beside an open trunk when Elena entered.

She had dark curls tied up in a scarf, sharp eyes, and the kind of face that looked built for excellent judgment and occasional bad ideas.

"Oh good," she said. "You're real. I thought they might have assigned me an imaginary roommate to cut costs."

Miss Damaris deposited Elena's suitcase. "Miss Sen. This is Elena Vale."

"Hi," the girl said.

"Hi."

Miss Damaris left. The door clicked shut behind her.

The girl crossed the room and held out a hand. "Priya. I'm very normal about new people. That was my normal greeting."

Elena shook her hand. "Elena. I'm extremely good at pretending awkward things didn't happen."

"Perfect. You'll survive here."

Priya helped her get settled with the speed of someone who had already worked out which drawers stuck, which floorboards complained, and which lamp only turned on if you threatened it correctly. She talked while Elena unpacked.

“The clocks are wrong all over campus,” Priya said. “The dining hall is loud, the library is colder than the grave, and if a boy named Julian Cross starts talking to you about tradition, fake your own death.”

“That feels aggressive.”

“It’s preventative.”

Elena smiled despite herself.

Dinner came and went in a blur of names, uniforms, and the unsettling realization that prestigious schools contained exactly the same amount of gossip as everywhere else, just in better lighting. Students stared at her openly enough to be rude and discreetly enough to deny it. At the staff table, a silver-haired man with a narrow face and a still, severe posture looked at her once and looked away.

When she asked Priya who he was, Priya said, “Headmaster Harrow,” in the tone other people might have used for a weather system.

By the time they returned to Room 214, the rain had thickened again. Priya disappeared into the bathroom with a towel over one shoulder, calling through the door that Elena should claim the left wardrobe because the right one smelled faintly like history.

Elena laughed, set her notebook on the desk, and opened the top drawer.

It jammed.

She pulled harder. The drawer lurched free with a splintering sound, and something small and metallic hit the floor.

Elena crouched.

A key lay half under the bed.

It was old, darker than modern brass, with a long narrow shaft and a round bow worn smooth by use. A small metal tag hung from the ring.

For a moment Elena only stared at it.

Then she looked toward the bathroom door, where water was already roaring through old pipes.

“Priya?” she called.

“Unless the room is on fire, I reject reality for at least six more minutes.”

Elena picked up the key.

It was colder than it should have been.

She turned it over in her palm, then looked back at the half-open drawer. The back panel sat slightly crooked. When she pressed it, it gave with a soft click.

A false compartment.

Inside lay a folded strip of black ribbon and a scrap of thick cream paper.

The paper held one line in faded ink.

**If it calls your name, don't answer.**

The words sent a clean, unpleasant current down Elena's spine.

From somewhere above them, a heavy thud echoed through the building.

Not a door. Not footsteps.

Something deeper.

The bathroom water shut off.

Elena folded the paper and slipped both note and key into her blazer pocket just as Priya emerged toweling her hair dry.

“What was on fire?” Priya asked.

“Maybe nothing.” Elena hesitated. “Where's the east sealed corridor?”

Priya stopped drying her hair.

“That,” she said carefully, “is not a question people ask on their first day unless they’re planning to make my life difficult.”

“Good news, then. I’m only planning to make my own difficult.”

“Elena.”

She took out the key.

Priya’s expression changed at once.

Not confusion. Recognition.

“Where did you get that?”

“In the desk.”

Priya crossed the room and took it from her. When she saw the number on the tag, the color left her face.

“No,” she said softly.

“That’s helpful and mysterious. Keep going.”

Priya looked up. “There’s a story. About a room on the third floor that was sealed years ago. Students talk about it like it’s a dare, or a joke, or a ghost story for first-years. Staff don’t talk about it at all.”

“Room 369.”

Priya handed the key back as if she disliked the feel of it. “You really are trying to kill my sense of peace.”

“And the corridor?”

Priya let out a breath. “Old east wing. It’s blocked off now. Locked gate, painted-over door, prefect warnings, the whole dramatic package.”

“What happened there?”

“That depends who’s being dramatic. Fire. Expulsion. A breakdown. A student who vanished. Take your pick.”

Elena took out the note and showed it to her.

Priya read it once and looked even less pleased. "I hate this."

"That makes two of us."

"That is an obvious lie."

It was. Elena could feel it.

Not excitement exactly. Something sharper. The sense of standing near the edge of a hidden structure and knowing that one more step would show the shape of it.

The rain struck harder against the windows.

Then, faintly, from somewhere far up in the school, came the sound of metal dragging across stone.

Priya went still.

Elena heard it again.

A long, slow scrape.

"Tell me that's pipes," Elena said.

"It's an old building," Priya replied too quickly.

"That's not what I asked."

The sound came a third time.

Elena was already moving for the door when Priya caught her wrist.

"No."

"You heard it."

"Yes, and unlike you, I'm taking that as a warning."

Another scrape. Then silence.

Elena looked at the key in her hand.

“Five minutes,” she said.

Priya stared at her. “You cannot be serious.”

“You can come with me.”

“I absolutely can, because I apparently have lost all instinct for self-preservation.”

The third floor was quieter than the floors below, as if even ordinary sound became cautious there.

The lights were dimmer. The corridors longer. Their footsteps softened by old runners and swallowed by stone. Elena followed the numbered doors along the east side with Priya close behind her, muttering that this was a terrible bonding exercise and not the kind she had wanted.

They passed **364, 365, 366.**

At **368**, the corridor ended in a stretch of blank wall hung with a single oil painting: a dark lake under moonlight.

“And there,” Priya whispered, “is why sane people go back to bed.”

Elena stepped closer.

The painting was wrong.

Not visibly at first. It was beautifully done, all cold water and blurred trees and a little white boat near the shore. But the frame sat too far from the wall. And behind it, she could hear something.

Not the building settling.

A whisper.

She put her hand against the frame.

It was freezing.

“Please don’t do that,” Priya said.

Elena slid her fingers along the side until they found a narrow gap. Then she pulled.

The painting swung outward on hidden hinges.

Behind it stood a door.

Black wood, iron-banded, old enough that the grain had risen under the varnish. No plaque. No handle on the outside. Only a keyhole and three numbers carved deep into the center of the panel.

**369**

Neither of them spoke.

The whisper came again, clearer now.

Not words. Breath shaping almost-words. A voice trying to remember how.

Elena took the key from her pocket.

Priya actually grabbed for it. “No.”

The key was cold enough to sting.

“Elena.”

“If there’s a chained book behind that door, I’d rather know now than later.”

Priya stared at her. “Why would you say that?”

Elena had no answer.

Only certainty.

She put the key into the lock.

For one terrible second nothing happened.

Then the whole door shuddered.

The sound that followed was not the sound of an ordinary mechanism. It was iron under pressure. Old metal dragged unwillingly aside. Something sealed. Something resisting.

The lock turned.

The door opened inward by an inch.

A wave of air hit them—dust, ash, and something faintly sweet underneath, like old paper singed at the edges.

“Elena,” Priya whispered.

But Elena had already pushed the door wider.

Room 369 was not a classroom.

It might once have been. There were outlines where desks had stood and long windows now covered from the inside by dark fabric. But the center of the room had been cleared completely. A circle had been cut or burned into the floorboards, ringed with symbols Elena didn’t know and black candle stubs melted flat with age.

And in the middle of that circle, on a stone stand, rested a book wrapped in chains.

It was larger than any book had a right to be. Bound in black leather that caught the thin corridor light like wet ink. Metal corners. No title on the cover. Just an embossed sigil pressed so deep into the leather it looked scarred there. The chains were wound around it again and again, crossed over the spine and fastened by a lock the size of Elena’s fist.

The whispering came from the book.

Priya made a sound Elena had never heard another person make before—a frightened, involuntary step backward made audible.

“We should go,” Priya said at once. “We should absolutely go.”

But Elena was already inside the circle.

The air changed the moment she crossed it. Warmer, somehow. Charged. The fine hairs along her arms lifted.

The book fell silent.

Then, very clearly, a voice breathed from somewhere inside the chained leather:

“Elena.”

Priya grabbed her sleeve hard. “Don’t answer.”

Too late.

Elena had flinched at the sound of her own name, and the motion drove her hand against the chain.

A bright snap cracked through the room.

Pain lanced across her palm. She jerked back.

A bead of blood welled where the metal had sliced her skin.

It struck the lock.

The entire chain system ignited in white-gold light.

Priya cried out and threw up an arm against the glare. Elena staggered back as symbols on the floor blazed alive, one after another, racing around the circle like fire chasing itself. The lock on the book split clean down the middle with a sound like a bell struck underwater.

Then the chains fell open.

The book opened by itself.

Pages fanned violently in a wind that did not touch the rest of the room. Ink lifted from the paper in dark twisting lines, spiraling up into the air like smoke made of language. The black curtains over the windows snapped outward. Every candle wick in the circle flared blue.

On the open spread, words appeared in fresh, wet script.

Not printed.

Written.

A spell.

Elena couldn't read all of it. The letters shifted too fast, old and sharp and wrong. But one line rose above the others, burning briefly brighter than the page itself:

**THE DOOR REMEMBERS THE BLOOD THAT OPENED IT**

The whisper in the room became a hundred whispers.

Then one.

Close enough to touch her ear.

**Too late.**

The door behind them slammed shut.

## **Chapter 2: The First Spell**

For a second, neither of them moved.

The room had gone blue with candlelight.

Not warm blue. Not soft. A cold, mineral light that made Priya's skin look silvered and Elena's own hand look ghost-pale except for the blood bright across her palm. The book lay open on the stand, its pages still lifting and settling as though it were breathing.

"Elena," Priya said, very carefully, "I need you to tell me this is the part where you close it."

Elena swallowed. "I'm thinking about it."

"That is not nearly enough thinking."

The symbols burned around them in a complete circle now. The whispering had stopped, but the silence felt worse. Attentive. Listening.

Elena took one step toward the stand.

Priya caught her arm. "No."

"It opened for a reason."

"Yes," Priya said. "A terrible one."

On the page, the shifting script slowed.

The old black ink ran into lines that held their shape. Some of the words were unreadable, written in a language Elena had never seen. Others were suddenly, unnervingly clear.

**Binding. Threshold. Witness. Name.**

At the bottom of the right-hand page, in a different script—sharper, newer, almost hurried—someone had written a warning.

**Do not let it teach you alone.**

Elena stared.

Then the letters beneath the warning began to move again.

A new line wrote itself, stroke by stroke, directly under the first.

**Too late for that.**

Priya made a strangled sound. “Absolutely not.”

She reached past Elena and slammed the book shut.

The instant the covers met, every candle went out.

Darkness dropped over the room so fast Elena lost her balance and caught herself on the stone stand. Something in the room hissed. Not at them. In anger.

Then, from the sealed windows, a faint red light pulsed once.

Twice.

And every chain that had fallen to the floor rose.

Not high. Not gracefully.

They jerked up like snakes waking.

Priya backed straight into Elena. “Tell me that’s not real.”

“I would love to,” Elena whispered.

One chain lashed across the boards and wrapped around the stand with a metallic shriek. Another struck the circle line and recoiled as if shocked. A third rose higher than the others and pointed—not blindly, Elena realized with a sick kick of understanding, but deliberately.

At her injured hand.

The chain snapped toward her.

Elena ducked on instinct. It slashed through the air where her wrist had been, smashed into the wall, and ripped a long gouge through plaster.

“Move!” Priya shouted.

They ran.

The circle flared under Elena's feet as she crossed it. Behind her, the chains crashed and whipped over the floorboards, fast now, furious. Priya reached the door first and grabbed the handle.

It didn't move.

"Open," Priya hissed, shaking it.

A line of script blazed across the inside wood.

Not carved. Not painted.

Written in light.

### **SPEAK TO BE HEARD**

"Elena," Priya said. "I hate everything about your life."

Another chain tore across the room. Elena snatched up the book from the stand before she even knew why she was doing it. It was heavier than it looked and hot through the leather, as if something deep inside it had begun to burn.

"Why did you pick it up?" Priya demanded.

"I don't know!"

"That is not reassuring!"

The glowing words on the door shifted.

Elena looked down at the open edge of the book in her arms. A single page had slipped loose enough to show one line in English among the stranger script.

Not a warning this time.

An instruction.

### **Speak the opening.**

Beneath it were three words.

She did not know how she knew how to pronounce them.

She only knew that she did.

The chains were almost on top of them now, iron shrieking against stone and wood.

“Elena!” Priya cried.

Elena spoke the words.

The effect was immediate.

Light burst from her mouth like breath on winter glass turning suddenly gold. The door shook once, violently, and every written mark on it ignited. A shockwave rolled through the room, not strong enough to throw them but strong enough to stop the chains mid-strike.

For one suspended second, the whole room held its breath.

Then the door flew open.

Priya did not hesitate. She grabbed Elena by the sleeve and dragged her into the corridor. Elena clutched the book to her chest as they stumbled out. The moment both of them crossed the threshold, the door slammed behind them with enough force to rattle the painting on its hidden hinges.

The corridor lights flickered.

Then steadied.

Silence.

Only Elena’s ragged breathing. Priya’s too.

The book lay black and closed in Elena’s arms, its chains hanging broken and loose around the cover like dead metal.

Priya bent double, hands on her knees. “I want,” she said between breaths, “to go back six minutes and refuse to know you.”

Elena was staring at the cover.

“What?” Priya asked.

“There’s a title now.”

Priya straightened slowly.

There had been no title in the room. Elena was sure of it. But now silver letters gleamed across the leather, thin as knife cuts catching moonlight.

### **THE NINTH GATE SPELLBOOK**

Below the title, the scar-pressed sigil had changed. What Elena had taken for ornament before was a crest: a narrow doorway ringed in thorns, with an eye drawn at its center.

Priya looked from the title to Elena’s face. “That was not there before.”

“No.”

“That is somehow worse.”

Footsteps sounded at the far end of the corridor.

Both girls froze.

Julian Cross came around the corner at a run, stopped short when he saw them, and then saw the book.

For the first time since Elena had met him, his composure broke.

“What did you do?” he said.

His voice came out low and sharp.

Priya straightened defensively. “Excellent timing, by the way.”

Julian barely glanced at her. His eyes were fixed on the broken chains draped over the black cover. “You opened it.”

Elena tightened her grip. “You know what it is.”

“Yes.”

“You could’ve started there.”

He reached them in three quick steps, then stopped just short of touching the book. “Listen to me very carefully. If anyone sees that in your hands, you won’t get a warning. You’ll get searched, separated, and watched for the rest of the year.”

“Why?”

A humorless laugh escaped him. “Because Room 369 was sealed for a reason.”

“That’s everybody’s favorite sentence tonight,” Elena said. “Try a better one.”

Something flickered across his face—not irritation, exactly. Conflict.

Then his gaze dropped to Elena’s palm.

Blood had smeared across the edge of the cover.

Julian went very still. “It marked you.”

“Elena,” Priya said, not liking the sound of that at all.

“What does that mean?” Elena asked.

Julian looked up. “It means it’s awake.”

The corridor lights dimmed.

Not from weather. Not from age.

From the book.

Thin silver lines began to appear beneath Elena’s skin, starting at the cut in her palm and traveling like luminous veins toward her wrist. Priya made a sharp sound and grabbed Elena’s arm.

“It’s on you.”

Elena stared.

The light did not hurt. That was the worst part. It was cool, almost numb, like holding ice too long.

Julian glanced once toward the stairwell. “We need to move.”

“Where?” Priya demanded.

“My room. For now.”

Priya barked out a disbelieving laugh. “Absolutely not.”

“You have a better place to hide an illegal sentient spellbook?”

That shut her up for one second.

Then footsteps echoed from below. Not students this time. Slower. Measured. Adult.

Julian’s expression changed at once.

“Too late,” he said.

At the end of the corridor, Headmaster Harrow emerged from the stairwell shadow with Miss Damaris behind him.

They stopped together when they saw the three students.

Then Harrow’s gaze dropped to the book in Elena’s arms.

His face did not visibly change, but the air around all of them did.

“Elena Vale,” he said quietly.

No one answered.

His eyes moved to the broken chains.

Then to the faint silver light climbing Elena’s wrist.

When he spoke again, his voice was calm enough to be frightening.

“Bring me the book.”

Elena did not move.

For one impossible moment, neither did anyone else.

Then the spellbook pulsed once against her ribs, like a second heartbeat.

And a whisper rose from inside the closed cover, meant for her alone.

**Don't.**

### **Chapter 3: The Headmaster's Office**

“Elena Vale,” Headmaster Harrow said again, his voice low and steady. “Bring me the book.”

The corridor had gone very still.

Not quiet. Still.

The kind of stillness that felt arranged, as if the school itself were waiting to see what she would do.

Elena stood with the spellbook pressed against her ribs, its broken chains hanging over her wrists. The silver marks under her skin had climbed past the heel of her hand now, thin pale lines threading toward her sleeve like light searching for a path. Priya's fingers were locked around Elena's arm. Julian had gone rigid a few feet away. Miss Damaris stood just behind the Headmaster with the calm expression of someone who expected disorder and had already decided how to survive it.

And inside the black leather cover, too faint for anyone else to hear, the book whispered again.

**Don't.**

Elena looked straight at Harrow. “Tell me what it is first.”

Miss Damaris moved half a step forward. “Miss Vale—”

Harrow lifted one hand, and she stopped.

His eyes never left Elena. “That book is a restricted magical text.”

“‘Restricted’ feels like a weak word for the thing that just tried to strangle us.”

Priya's grip on Elena tightened in fierce agreement.

Harrow inclined his head by a fraction. “Fair.”

“Then try a stronger answer.”

For the first time, something unreadable shifted in his face. Not surprise. Not anger. A kind of reluctant assessment, as though she had answered a question he hadn't asked aloud.

"The stronger answer," he said, "is that the Ninth Gate Spellbook should never have awakened."

Julian let out a breath through his nose, like that sentence landed where he expected it to.

Elena caught it. "You knew it was there."

Julian did not answer.

Harrow did. "Some of us did."

The words hit harder than they should have. Maybe because Elena had already known it, somewhere under the surface. The sealed corridor. The missing number. The way adults had gone still around her name. The scholarship that had arrived too neatly, too conveniently, just when home had started to feel like a place with doors closing.

None of this had been an accident.

"You left it there," she said.

"We contained it there."

"It called my name."

A shadow crossed Harrow's expression.

Miss Damaris spoke quietly. "How many times?"

Elena glanced at her. "Twice."

Julian swore under his breath.

Priya looked from one adult to the other. "Okay, everyone's doing the same unhelpful face again."

Harrow stepped closer, not enough to threaten, just enough for Elena to see how tired he suddenly looked under the cold corridor light. “Miss Vale, the mark on your hand is not ornamental. If the bond deepens, the book will become harder to put down, harder to refuse, and easier to hear.”

Elena’s stomach tightened. “Hear what?”

“Whatever it wants you to hear.”

The whisper brushed the inside of her mind like a fingertip.

**He lies carefully.**

She flinched.

Harrow noticed. Of course he noticed.

“It is speaking now,” he said.

That wasn’t a question either.

Elena hated that he was right. She hated more that part of her wanted to ask the book what it meant.

Priya looked at her face and went pale. “Elena?”

“It’s fine.”

“That is such a terrible sentence.”

“It’s not fine,” Julian said sharply.

All four of them looked at him.

He seemed to regret speaking the second he had done it, but he did not take it back. His gaze was fixed on the silver lines at Elena’s wrist.

“If it’s already in her head,” he said, “standing in the corridor arguing is stupid.”

“That,” Priya said, “is somehow the first useful thing you’ve said.”

Harrow gave one short nod. “My office. Now.”

“No,” Elena said.

Miss Damaris’s eyebrows lifted.

Elena shifted the book in her arms. It had grown warmer, almost imperceptibly, as though it approved of the refusal.

“I’m not walking into another room in this school because an adult tells me to after finding out all of you have been lying since I arrived.”

Harrow’s expression did not change, but his voice cooled. “Miss Vale, this is not a negotiation.”

“It became one when you hid a sentient spellbook behind a painting and let me walk around above it.”

A dangerous kind of silence opened between them.

Then Harrow said, “If you remain here, every ward on this floor will start reacting to that book within minutes. Students will notice. Staff will notice. The board will notice. And if the board notices before I control this, your choices will become much, much smaller.”

Elena stared at him.

The book gave one slow pulse against her chest.

Priya leaned closer and murmured, “I hate that he might be making sense.”

Julian glanced down the stairwell. “He is.”

There were footsteps below now. Distant, but real. Voices. Students changing floors between evening study and dorm check.

Harrow saw Elena calculate it.

“My office,” he repeated. “You may bring Miss Sen. Mr. Cross as well, since he has already made himself part of this disaster.”

Julian’s jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

Elena should have refused again.

Instead she heard herself say, “If you try to take it from me before I understand what’s happening, I walk.”

Harrow held her gaze a second longer than comfortable. “Understood.”

The whisper came again, silk over a blade.

**Do not trust the room with the clock.**

Elena said nothing.

They moved.

Harrow led them down the third-floor corridor and into a stairwell Elena had not used before, one narrower than the grand central stairs, with dark wood paneling and windows that showed only blurred rain and black branches outside. Miss Damaris followed at the rear. Priya stayed close enough for their sleeves to brush. Julian walked on Elena’s other side, hands in his pockets, posture controlled, as though control itself were the only habit keeping him upright.

The book was heavier now.

Not physically heavier, exactly. More present. Elena could feel the shape of it even through the fabric of her blazer, every corner and chain link pressing into her awareness.

At the first landing, Julian spoke without looking at her.

“Did you read from it?”

Elena kept her eyes ahead. “Why?”

“Because it matters.”

“It taught me three words.”

Julian’s expression changed, just slightly. “That fast.”

Priya looked between them. “You say that like there’s a normal speed.”

“There isn’t.”

Elena glanced at him. “How much do you know?”

“Enough to know you should not have been left alone near Room 369.”

“That sounds suspiciously like you’re saying this is everyone else’s fault.”

Julian’s mouth tightened. “Not everyone else.”

Before she could push, Harrow opened a heavy oak door at the end of the next hall.

His office was not what Elena expected.

No grand desk in a pool of firelight. No walls buried in trophies. The room was large, yes, but austere: tall shelves full of leather-bound volumes, a long table instead of a desk, two narrow windows overlooking the dark courtyard, and a black clock mounted above the mantel. Its hands moved in perfect silence.

The instant Elena crossed the threshold, the whisper inside her head sharpened.

**Not this room.**

She stopped.

Harrow turned. “Miss Vale?”

The clock.

She had no reason to trust the book. Less than no reason. But the warning struck her with such sudden force that she could not ignore it.

“I’m not going in there,” she said.

Miss Damaris exhaled. “Headmaster—”

Harrow’s gaze moved once around the room, then to Elena, then to the clock above the mantel.

And for the first time, he seemed caught.

Only for a heartbeat.

Then he looked at Miss Damaris. “The antechamber.”

Whatever that meant, it was enough to make Julian glance sharply at the clock too.

Interesting.

Harrow shut the office door again without comment and led them two doors farther down to a smaller room with no windows, a round table, four straight-backed chairs, and a cabinet built into the far wall. No clock. No fire. Just pale lamplight and stone that seemed to hold the day’s chill.

The whisper receded at once.

Elena hated how relieved she felt.

“Better?” Harrow asked quietly.

It took her half a second to understand what he meant.

She refused to let that show. “Depends what happens next.”

Harrow gestured to the table. “Sit.”

This time Elena did, mostly because her legs had started to feel unreliable. Priya took the chair beside her. Julian stayed standing until Harrow looked at him, then leaned against the wall instead, arms folded.

Miss Damaris placed a shallow iron tray in the center of the table.

Harrow said, “Set the book there.”

Elena hesitated.

“It is lined against ignition, echo, and summoning,” he said. “If it reacts, it will do less damage.”

“That is not comforting.”

“Nothing I say tonight is likely to be.”

Priya muttered, “At least he knows.”

Slowly, Elena lowered the spellbook onto the tray.

The iron rang softly under the weight.

For one awful second, the cover seemed reluctant to leave her hands. The chains gave a tiny metallic pull, like something breathing in after a long sleep. Then the book settled.

The room stayed intact.

Priya sank back by half an inch.

Harrow took Elena's injured hand gently but without softness, turning it toward the light. The cut itself had closed. That was bad enough. Worse were the silver lines beneath the skin, now reaching nearly to the inside of her wrist.

"A reciprocal tether," Miss Damaris said.

Priya looked appalled. "In English?"

Harrow released Elena's hand. "The book recognized her blood and answered it. She opened the lock. It opened in return. Now it has a path."

"A path to what?" Elena asked.

"To you."

The answer landed cold.

Julian pushed away from the wall. "Can it be broken?"

Miss Damaris said, "Sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Priya repeated.

Harrow ignored both questions. "I need exact answers, Miss Vale. What did it say to you?"

Elena looked at the black cover.

Silence now. Dense and watchful.

"It said my name," she said. "Then after it opened, it said 'too late.'"

Harrow's face revealed nothing.

"And after that?" he asked.

She thought of the line on the page. *Speak the opening.*

Of the words she had somehow known.

"No."

Priya turned to her. "Elena—"

"I'm already the only one at this table who didn't know this thing existed," Elena said.

"So no. Not until you start answering things too."

Harrow was silent for a long moment.

Then he gave one slow nod, as though he had expected resistance and had decided not to waste effort pretending otherwise.

"Very well," he said. "The Ninth Gate Spellbook is older than this school in its present form and younger than the stone beneath it. It is not merely a collection of spells. It is a teaching text—one designed to imprint threshold magic directly into a reader. Doors. Locks. Wards. Memory seals. Binding."

Priya stared. "That sounds horrible."

"It can be," Miss Damaris said.

"It always is," Julian said.

Harrow's eyes flicked to him. "Not helpful."

"It's true."

Harrow returned his attention to Elena. "Room 369 was converted into a containment room seventeen years ago after an incident involving this book and four students."

Elena's pulse gave a hard kick.

“Four,” she repeated.

“Yes.”

“What kind of incident?”

No one answered at once.

That was answer enough.

Priya looked between them with growing anger. “No, actually, I hate this. You don’t get to do the quiet, haunted pause. She opened the thing. You explain.”

Miss Damaris’s gaze sharpened, but Harrow only folded his hands behind his back.

“One student was killed,” he said.

The room went colder.

He did not soften the sentence. Elena almost respected that.

“Two more were marked by the book,” he continued. “The fourth helped seal it. Afterward, records were altered, access was restricted, and the room was erased from public plans of the school.”

Elena swallowed. “Why keep it here at all?”

“Because some objects become more dangerous when moved.”

The book gave the faintest metallic sound, like a chain settling.

Elena looked up. “And you thought letting students live above it was the safe option?”

“No,” Harrow said. “I thought sealing it under every ward this school possessed was the least catastrophic one.”

That felt like a distinction built out of other people’s fear.

Julian’s voice cut in. “Tell her the rest.”

Harrow turned to him.

Julian did not look away. For the first time, Elena saw the shape of their dynamic clearly: not student and Headmaster, exactly. Not equal. But not simple either. Old obligation sat between them like furniture.

“She deserves that much,” Julian said.

A long pause.

Then Harrow crossed to the built-in cabinet and unlocked it with a key from inside his sleeve.

He took out a flat archival box and set it on the table beside the iron tray.

Elena’s mouth had gone dry.

Harrow opened the box.

Inside were photographs, yellowed records, a broken strip of black ribbon—and on top of them all, a formal class portrait in a stiff black frame.

Four students stood in front of a stone doorway.

Even before Elena recognized the doorway, she knew which one it was. The same wall. The same carved trim. The same place where the painting now hid the entrance to Room 369.

Only in the picture, there was no painting.

And one of the students was a girl Elena knew immediately.

Dark hair. Serious eyes. A face a little older than the one in the photograph Elena kept hidden in her desk drawer at home, but unmistakable.

Her mother.

Elena stopped breathing for a second.

Priya looked from the photo to Elena and back again. “Oh.”

Julian watched Elena, not the picture.

Harrow’s voice was even when he spoke. “That is Mara Vale.”

Elena did not take her eyes off the photograph. “My mother never said she went here.”

“No,” Harrow said. “She didn’t.”

The edges of the room had started to feel distant, unreal.

In the photograph, Mara Vale was not smiling. None of them were. One boy stood with one hand jammed into his pocket and open dislike on his face. A fair-haired girl beside him looked exhausted even in stillness. And on the far end, half in shadow, was a dark-haired boy with a prefect pin and a guarded expression Elena found suddenly familiar.

She looked at Julian.

His face had gone unreadable again.

“That’s your father,” she said.

Julian said nothing.

That silence was answer enough too.

Harrow rested one hand lightly on the archive box. “The scholarship letter we sent you was not random, Elena.”

Elena turned to him slowly.

“We sent for you,” he said, “because the last time the Ninth Gate Spellbook woke, it answered to a Vale.”

The words seemed to hit the table and keep going.

Priya made a small sound under her breath.

Elena looked back at the photograph. At her mother’s unsmiling face. At Room 369 unsealed behind her. At the dark-haired boy who must have grown up to be a man who raised sons on warnings and silence.

She thought of the paused pen at the front desk. The stares. The sealed corridor. The careful lies.

“You knew,” she said.

Harrow did not insult her by pretending otherwise.

“Yes.”

Rage arrived clean and bright.

“You brought me here on purpose.”

“We brought you here where we could watch the book if it stirred.”

“You used me as bait.”

Miss Damaris said, “That is not how I would phrase it.”

Elena looked at her. “I don’t care.”

The book moved.

Only an inch.

But all four of them saw it.

The black cover shifted against the iron tray with a soft scraping sound, as though it had leaned toward Elena’s voice.

Then the clasp-less front cover lifted by itself.

Just enough for one page to show.

Ink crawled across it in fresh black lines.

No one in the room spoke.

Elena rose halfway from her chair before she realized she had done it.

The writing finished.

Three words.

Large enough for all of them to read.

**SHE WASN’T FIRST.**

No one moved.

No one breathed.

Harrow's face changed.

Only then did Elena understand that whatever he had expected tonight, it had not been that.