

CHAPTER ONE

## Unit 919

### Winter of Two

On a glossy black door inside a well-lit wardrobe, a tiny circle of gold pulsed with light, and at its centre was a small, glowing *W*.

*Come in*, it seemed to say with each gentle beat. *Hurry up!*

Morrigan Crow finished buttoning her starched white shirtsleeves, pulled on a black overcoat and carefully fixed her gold *W* pin to the lapel. Finally, she pressed her fingertip to the shimmering circle and, just as if she'd turned a key in a lock, the door swung open onto an empty train station.

These quiet, still moments had become Morrigan's favourite time of day. Most mornings, she was the first to arrive at Station 919. She liked to close her eyes for just a few seconds, listening to the distant rumbling of trains in the Wunderground tunnels. Like mechanical dragons waking from slumber. Ready to carry millions of people all over the city of Nevermoor on a complex tapestry of tracks.

Morrigan smiled and took a deep breath.

Last day of the autumn term.

She'd made it.

The rest of her unit began arriving, shattering the peace and quiet as the remaining eight doors were flung open up and down the platform – from Mahir Ibrahim's ornate red door at one end, all the way to Anah Kahlo's small, arched, unvarnished wooden one at the other – and the tiny station filled with chatter.

Hawthorne Swift, Morrigan's best friend, arrived in his typical morning state – unbalanced by armfuls of dragonriding gear, grey shirt not quite properly buttoned, unbrushed brown curls sticking out at wild angles, blue eyes sparkling with some mischief he'd either just dreamed up or just committed (Morrigan didn't want to know which). Archan Tate – who was always impeccably mannered and dressed – took half of Hawthorne's teetering pile of kit for him without a word and gave the badly buttoned shirt a discreet nod.

Cadence Blackburn was the last to make it this morning. She ran in with seconds to spare – thick black braid whipping behind her, long brown limbs taking great strides – and arrived just as a single, slightly battered train carriage chugged into view, trailing puffs of white steam. Painted on its side was the familiar *W* symbol and the number 919, and hanging halfway out the door was their conductor, Miss Cheery.

This was Hometrain, a mode of transport and home-away-from-home exclusively for them, the 919th unit of the Wondrous Society. Inside were beanbags, a lumpy old sofa, piles of cushions, a wood-burning stove that was always lit in winter and a ceramic polar bear biscuit jar that was rarely

empty. It was one of Morrigan's favourite and most comfortable places in the world.

'Mooooorning!' the conductor shouted, beaming from ear to ear and waving a handful of papers at them. 'Happy last day of term, scholarly ones!'

Miss Cheery's role as Unit 919's official 'conductor' was an interesting one – part transport operator, part guidance counsellor. She was there to smooth a path through their first five years as members of Nevermoor's most elite and demanding organisation. The Wondrous Society was made up of extraordinary people with extraordinary talents, but most of them were too absorbed in their own extraordinary endeavours to pay much attention to the Society's youngest inductees. Without their conductor, Unit 919 would be lost in the wilderness.

Miss Cheery was the only person Morrigan knew who utterly lived up to her name: she was pure sunshine. She was fresh linen, birdsong at twilight, perfectly cooked toast. She was all rainbow-coloured clothes and impeccable posture, deep brown skin and enormous smile, and when the light shone through the edges of her cloud-like halo of curly black hair, she made Morrigan think of an angel . . . though, of course, she would never say anything so cheesy out loud.

As their designated grown-up, the *one* thing she probably ought to have had was a bit more decorum. But 919 liked her exactly as she was.

'Last! Day! Last! Day! Last! Day!' she chanted, kicking her legs out from the train door in celebration, before it had even come to a halt.

Anah shouted back in a fretful voice, ‘Miss Cheery, that is NOT safe!’

Miss Cheery responded by contorting her face into something comically terror-stricken and flailing her arms as if she was going to fall out – and then actually falling out onto the platform when the train suddenly stopped.

‘I’m okay!’ she said, jumping up to take a bow.

The others laughed and applauded, but Anah turned to glare at them one by one, pink-faced, her blonde curls swinging dramatically. ‘Oh yes, very *funny*. Except who’ll be expected to stop the bleeding when she falls onto the tracks and snaps her tibia in half? I bet none of you even *knows* how to splint a leg.’

‘That’s why we have you, Anah.’ Archan smiled at her, his pale cheeks dimpling, and bent down to help Miss Cheery pick up the scattered papers with his free hand.

‘Yeah, *Dr Kablo*,’ added the brawny Thaddea Macleod, nudging Anah in the side and nearly knocking her over. (It was a gentle nudge by Thaddea’s standards, but sometimes she forgot her own considerable strength.)

Anah made a face as she straightened up, but seemed somewhat mollified by Thaddea’s use of the word ‘doctor’.

‘Miss, what’s . . .’ Archan was staring at one of the papers, frowning in confusion. ‘Are these new timetables?’

‘Thanks, Arch. Help me pass them out, will you?’ the conductor replied, waving Unit 919 onto the train. ‘Come on, everyone aboard or we’ll be late. Francis, put the kettle on please. Lam, hand round the biscuit jar.’

Hawthorne gave Miss Cheery a puzzled look as she handed him his timetable. It was the last day of term, and they usually

only received new timetables once a week. ‘You gave us these on Monday, Miss. Remember?’

He dropped into a beanbag while Morrigan settled on the sofa between Cadence and Lambeth, scouring her own timetable. As far as she could tell, it was identical to the one she’d been given at the start of the week: there was Tuesday’s workshop in *Undead Dialects*, and Wednesday’s masterclass in *Observing Planetary Movements*, followed by a class in the Sub-Five espionage wing called *Cultivating and Handling Informants* (that had been Morrigan’s favourite lesson of the week so far – turned out she was quite good at spy stuff).

‘I *do* remember, yeah,’ said Miss Cheery. ‘Despite my advanced age of twenty-one, Hawthorne, my decrepit brain *does* still allow me to reach into its vast memory bank to the distant past of four whole days ago.’ She smiled, raising an eyebrow. ‘These are *new* timetables. Please note where today has been updated.’

Morrigan skipped to Friday’s column and, spotting the difference, asked, ‘What’s *C&D*?’

‘I’ve got that, too,’ said Hawthorne. ‘*C&D*, Level Sub-Two. Last class of the day.’

Mahir put his hand up. ‘Me too!’

There was a general murmuring and comparing of schedules, and the scholars found they all had the same class. Mostly their timetables were individualised – tailored by Miss Cheery to help each of them develop their unique talents and work on their weaknesses – and it had been a couple of months since Unit 919 had had any lessons together as a group.

‘Miss, what does *C&D* stand for?’ asked Francis Fitzwilliam, sounding slightly worried. His brown eyes grew large. ‘Does Aunt Hester know about this? She says she has to approve any changes to my timetable.’

Morrigan raised an eyebrow at Hawthorne, who made a face back at her. Francis’s family went back several generations in the Wondrous Society, on both sides – the famous Fitzwilliams and the admired Akinfenwas. His patron – the Society member who nominated him for admission and therefore had a stake in his education – was his aunt on his father’s side, Hester Fitzwilliam. She was very strict and, in Morrigan’s opinion, a bit of a cow.

‘And she says I’m not to do anything that could put my olfactory instrument at risk,’ Francis went on.

‘What about your old factory?’ asked Thaddea.

‘My nose,’ he clarified. ‘What? Don’t laugh – a chef’s sense of smell is his greatest asset.’ He nervously pressed on the end of his light brown, gently freckled olfactory instrument.

‘No need to worry about your schnoz, Francis,’ said Miss Cheery, with a mysterious sort of half-smile. ‘But I can’t tell you.’

Nine eager faces shot up to look at her, their interest immediately piqued.

Hawthorne sat up straighter. ‘Is it . . . Climbing and, um . . . Doing . . . something?’

‘Nope. Solid guess, though.’

‘Camouflage and Disguise!’ said Thaddea. She twisted her long red hair into a topknot and rolled up her grey shirtsleeves, as if keen to get started immediately. ‘We’re going to learn evasive combat techniques, aren’t we? *Finally.*’

‘Costumes and Drama?’ was Mahir’s guess.

‘Ooh! Cats and Dogs!’ Anah clapped her hands, bouncing up and down on her cushion. ‘Are we going to play with cats and dogs?’

Miss Cheery laughed at that. ‘Lovely thought, Anah, but not quite.’ She held up her hands for quiet. ‘Now everyone stop guessing, please. My lips are sealed. I am a vault.’

Anah’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, and she passed the biscuit jar on to Mahir.

‘*Lef’selah,*’ he said, which meant *thank you* in Jahalan, one of the thirty-eight languages he could speak with native fluency. Lately he’d been teaching the rest of the unit what he considered the ‘important bits’ of his favourite languages – mostly how to ask for directions, *pleases* and *thank yous*, insults and rude words. (More rude words than anything else, Morrigan had noticed, though that might have been because Hawthorne kept making requests.)

‘*Hish fa rahlim,*’ was Anah’s glum response as she bit into her biscuit.

Mahir looked up at her in mixed shock and amusement, and Morrigan’s mouth fell open.

‘What?’ Anah said through a mouthful of custard cream.

‘That’s not “you’re welcome”, if that’s what you meant to say,’ said Mahir, trying and failing not to laugh.

‘Oh, you *know* I’m no good at languages.’ Anah made a petulant little huffing sound. ‘What did I say?’

Mahir, Hawthorne and Thaddea shouted the vulgar translation in gleeful unison. Anah’s face turned bright red, Miss Cheery looked scandalised, and the rest of the unit

didn't stop giggling for the rest of the journey to the Wondrous Society.



It was a wrench to leave the cosy warmth of Hometrain when they arrived at Proudfoot Station. Huddling close against the wind, Unit 919 waved goodbye to Miss Cheery and dashed for the dubious shelter of the Whinging Woods.

Wunsoc – the Wondrous Society's one-hundred-acre campus, in the heart of Nevermoor – had plummeted into winter earlier than the city outside its walls. It was now several weeks deep into a cold snap that could freeze the snot from a runny nose. The mysterious 'Wunsoc weather' phenomenon meant that Nevermoor's days of drizzle were more like days of pouring rain and sleet inside Society grounds.

In fact, whatever the weather outside Wunsoc, inside was always just a little bit *more*. If Nevermoor was having a mild thunderstorm, the sky over Wunsoc was black and electrified, flashing like a disco, and to walk across the grounds was to risk becoming a lightning rod.

Today they felt the cold bone-deep, but it was made more bearable by a weak showing of winter sunlight and the knowledge that as soon as their last lesson was over, they'd be leaving Wunsoc behind for two weeks of festivities. Morrigan couldn't wait. There was no place like her home, the Hotel Deucalion, at Christmas. She'd been dreaming of eggnog, roast goose and spiced chocolate rumballs all winter long.

To take their minds off the chill, Unit 919 spent the long

walk up to Proudfoot House making increasingly outlandish guesses about what *C&D* might be.

‘Ooh – what about Creation and Destruction?’ Hawthorne’s face lit up as he thought of it. ‘Maybe they’re going to turn us into ALL-POWERFUL GODS.’

‘Or Chanting and Dancing,’ said Lam.

‘Or Chips and Dip?’ said Francis.

They all lost the plot at this last, hopeful suggestion, but even through the shrieks of laughter, Morrigan didn’t miss the sound of someone hissing *Wundersmith* as a group of older scholars overtook them on the woodland path.

She was used to it now, but it still made her flinch. Almost two months had passed since her secret was revealed to the entire Wondrous Society. Sometimes when Morrigan needed courage, she thought of Elder Quinn’s words: *She may be a Wundersmith, but truly from today onwards, she is our Wundersmith.*

Most people at Wunsoc had the kindness and common sense to heed the High Council of Elders and accept Morrigan as one of their own, even if they weren’t thrilled to have such a ‘dangerous entity’ among them. There were some who still took every opportunity to make her feel unwelcome, but it didn’t matter much. Morrigan was getting better at ignoring the whispers and glares, and knowing her unit had her back helped a lot. Over the last year Unit 919’s loyalty had been tested to its limit. There had been a time when Morrigan felt she would always be an outsider, but now she *knew* she belonged.

Cadence had heard the whisper too. Without missing a beat, she called out, 'Bite your tongue,' and a second later there was a cry of pain and a muffled, 'Ow!' as the perpetrator obeyed. Cadence smirked sideways at Morrigan, who shot back a grateful smile. She couldn't help feeling a *tiny* bit pleased; there were benefits to having a mesmerist for a friend.

'I saw that, Cadence,' said Anah quietly, coming up beside them. 'You know we're not supposed to use our knacks on other students.'

Cadence groaned and rolled her eyes. 'And *you're* not supposed to be a boring cry-baby who's constantly telling everyone what to do, but here we are.'

Anah scowled at her. 'If you do it again, I'll tell your Scholar Mistress.'

As she stomped up the path ahead of them, Cadence muttered to Morrigan, 'I liked her better when she couldn't remember who I was.'



If Anah really *was* inclined to tell the terrifying Scholar Mistress for the Arcane Arts, Morrigan thought she'd have her work cut out for her. She'd been trying to speak with Mrs Murgatroyd herself for weeks now, but it was proving impossible. Every time she saw her in the halls of Proudfoot House, she seemed to get lost in the crowd, or even worse, to suddenly transform into her School of Mundane Arts counterpart, the awful Ms Dearborn. It had happened so often lately, Morrigan was beginning to wonder if Murgatroyd was deliberately avoiding her . . . or if Dearborn was trying to interfere.

Until about six weeks ago, Morrigan had been a grey-sleeve – a scholar of the Mundane Arts, just like Hawthorne, Anah, Mahir, Arch, Francis and Thaddea. Overseen by Scholar Mistress Dulcinea Dearborn, the School of Mundane Arts was the largest of two educational streams in the Wondrous Society, comprising three departments: the Practicalities on Sub-Three, Humanities on Sub-Four, and Extremities on Sub-Five.

The School of Arcane Arts was much less populated, but still had its own dedicated three subterranean floors, deep beneath the red-brick five-storey building of Proudfoot House and only accessible to Arcane scholars.

They were much harder to navigate than the orderly Mundane floors. They weren't divided into three departments so much as countless covens, workshops, clubs, labs, top-secret mini-societies and top-*top*-secret guilds dedicated to various esoterica – none of which seemed to acknowledge their own existence, or each other's. There were an awful lot of locked doors and unanswered questions in the Arcane school, but in the past six weeks Morrigan had learned to simply go where her timetable sent her and nowhere else – certainly not, for example, down a mysterious fog-laden hallway that hadn't been there the day before. Detours like that were guaranteed to make you late for class.

Dearborn had been *furious* to learn that Murgatroyd had swiped Morrigan from the Mundane into the Arcane Arts. Not, of course, because she had any warm feelings towards her – just the opposite, really. Dearborn didn't think she should be in the Wondrous Society at all; she couldn't tolerate the idea of Morrigan learning anything more than the absolute

bare minimum. It would be *so* like the icy, silver-haired Scholar Mistress, she thought, to sabotage her education from afar.

‘You’re being paranoid,’ Cadence said when Morrigan mentioned it later that afternoon. They were lurking in a hallway on Sub-Seven waiting for Lam, so they could all head to their final class of the term together. ‘Anyway, why would you *want* to talk to Murgatroyd? Personally, I try to avoid it as much as possible.’

Morrigan found that *most* people tried to avoid the unsettling Mrs Murgatroyd as much as possible, and with good reason . . . but she still preferred her to Ms Dearborn.

‘Look at this.’ She sighed and held out her timetable, pointing to that morning’s roster of lessons. ‘*Peering Into the Future. Finding Your Familiar.* Yesterday it was *Opening a Dialogue with the Dead.*’

‘You said you loved that class! You love spooky stuff.’

‘I did,’ she admitted. ‘I *do*. I just don’t know why Murgatroyd keeps putting me in all these weird subjects, when she’s the one who said I should be learning –’ Morrigan paused, glancing around to make sure nobody could overhear. She lowered her voice a little ‘– the *Wretched Arts.*’

A brief look of discomfort crossed Cadence’s face. She knew as much as Morrigan did about the Wretched Arts – which was to say, not very much at all.

Morrigan knew the Wretched Arts were the tools of the so-called ‘accomplished Wundersmith’, and that she’d have to learn how to use them if she was ever going to understand what it really meant to *be* a Wundersmith. She’d picked up a few little scraps, and she’d been practising them on her own.

But there was only one other person in the entire realm who could properly wield the Wretched Arts . . . and it was an uneasy feeling indeed, to have something so important in common with *him*.

‘I just mean . . . I’m not a clairvoyant!’ Morrigan went on. ‘Or an oracle, or a sorcerer, or a witch, or . . .’

‘Yeah, I know, you’re a mighty Wundersmith. Dry your eyes, mate,’ Cadence replied quietly. She spotted Lambeth emerging from her transcendental meditation class in her usual daze and waved to get her attention.

There weren’t nearly as many Arcane students as Mundane, but with teaching staff, graduates, academics and researchers, as well as visiting members of the Royal Sorcery Council, the Paranormal League and the Alliance of Nevermoor Covens, the Arcane halls were usually busy. Today they were filled with junior and senior scholars celebrating the end of term, in ways that most of them were strictly forbidden to do so outside the School of Arcane Arts. Illusion scholars could practise their craft anywhere in Wunsoc, because illusion – in the words of Murgatroyd – was ‘a bunch of tediously innocuous trickery’. (Morrigan thought this freedom was wasted on the illusion scholars, because they mostly used it to gross people out, creating false images of dog poo and scurrying rats in the hallways. Even Hawthorne, who loved grossing people out, was unimpressed with their efforts, declaring them ‘unimaginative in the extreme’.)

But if a junior scholar was caught practising – for example – sorcery or witchery anywhere outside of the Arcane floors, they’d almost certainly regret it. Some of Murgatroyd’s

favoured punishments included cutting the arms off winter coats, shaving eyebrows, and dangling people by their ankles over the side of the footbridge above Proudfoot Station.

In the Arcane halls, however, nothing was off-limits.

This afternoon, in some sort of bizarre end-of-term celebration, a group of sorcery scholars had stolen a case of unlabelled elixir bottles from the Witchery Wing and were shaking them up, daring each other to drink them, and howling at the results, either with laughter or pain. One of them burned her throat breathing piping hot steam for a solid minute, one burst all the capillaries in his eyeballs, and another fell deeply and publicly in love with the first inanimate object he laid eyes on – a fire extinguisher.

‘Lam, hurry *up*, will you,’ Cadence groaned as she saw their friend dawdling several metres behind.

‘Stop,’ Lam said, holding up one hand. Morrigan and Cadence both halted instantly, just before they reached the intersection of two long hallways.

Lam was a gifted short-range oracle . . . which meant she had visions of the future, but only the *immediate* future – mere moments ahead. Unit 919 had realised by now that heeding Lam’s warnings often helped them avoid some minor disaster like stubbed toes or spilled tea. Sometimes it even saved lives, as Morrigan had learned last Hallowmas night, when she’d deciphered Lam’s cryptic predictions and shut down the illegal Ghastly Market – just in time to save Cadence and Lam from being auctioned off to the highest bidders.

If Morrigan hadn’t figured it out, someone would almost certainly have paid a lot of money to steal Cadence’s knack

from her . . . but Lam's fate could have been much, much worse. Because their friend *Lambeth Amara* was, in fact, the Princess Lamya Bethari Amati Ra, of the Royal House of Ra, from the Silklands in the state of Far East Sang. She'd been smuggled into the Free State illegally from the Wintersea Republic to trial for the Wondrous Society, just like Morrigan – but unlike Morrigan, her family had been in on the plan, and if their treason against the ruling Wintersea Party was ever discovered, they could face execution. Nobody in the Republic was even supposed to *know* the Free State existed.

Unit 919 had vowed to keep Lam's secret. There were certainly others out there who knew – Lam's patron, of course, and Miss Cheery and the Elders. A few wretched people who'd escaped the destruction of the Ghastly Market and scurried away into the night. But there was a feeling in Unit 919 that if they buried the secret between them and never said it aloud, they could protect Lam from anyone who might wish her harm.

Cadence heaved an impatient sigh, looking at her watch. 'Lam, we *really* need to—'

'Wait.'

*SPLAT! Bzzzzzzzzzz . . .*

Morrigan and Cadence watched in horror as, farther down the corridor, one of the boys from the Sorcery Department sprayed a shaken-up elixir bottle all over a passing senior scholar. The older girl was engulfed by a wave of black tarry liquid which, on contact with her skin, turned into . . . *bees*. Angry, buzzy bees that swarmed to her as if she were covered in pollen. She ran down the hall, shrieking and trying to bat

them away, while the sorcery boys chased after her and tried to help, half laughing and half horrified.

Lam finally lowered her hand.

‘Carry on,’ she said, sauntering past Morrigan and Cadence with a very *I-told-you-so* look.



Morrigan hadn't ever had a class on Sub-Two before – although she went there most days as that was where the dining rooms, kitchens, and the Commissariat were. The rest of Unit 919 was already waiting outside the assigned classroom when Morrigan, Cadence and Lam arrived.

‘Crime and Donuts,’ said Hawthorne, turning around to face the others as he held out an arm across the door, barring their entry. ‘That’s my final guess. Anyone else? Last chance.’

‘Oh, just *open the door*,’ Thaddea groaned, pushing past him.

The room was small – maybe a quarter of the size of a regular classroom – and empty. It was also very dark. Morrigan felt around on the wall as the group made their way inside.

‘Where’s the light switch?’ she asked.

‘Ow! That was my *foot*, Francis, you klutz.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t see—’

*BANG*. The door swung shut behind them, and the group fell silent.

‘Where’s our teacher?’ Anah whispered in a voice that shook a little.

‘Shhh,’ said Lam quietly. ‘Watch the wall. It’s about to begin.’