

## SILVERGLEN: CHAPTER ONE

EMBER SENSED THE trap before she saw it, like the scent of a cold and unmoving predator.

When she turned the corner into the short, dark hallway, the trap was visible, a crystalline cage that gleamed in front of the oak door. She had caught the rank smell of the fish bait several minutes ago, and had so far done an excellent job of ignoring it. But as she neared the trap, the smell invaded her cat-mind, making it difficult to concentrate on the door behind it.

Behind that door lay clues, answers to her questions. Were there any shifters left alive? What had her father been up to these last months while she was away at the Academy? Power through knowledge.

*Change now*, she remembered. The hallway was empty, and so was the corridor beyond it. Now was her chance. She focused her cat-mind on her human form and dove into the swirling sensation of shifting skin and bone and muscle, an uncomfortable, unbalanced feeling that jolted her into nausea.

She opened her eyes in a crouch, intensely missing the warm fur and sharp senses of the cat. The stones beneath her feet were icy cold, and a draft crept over her bare skin, raising swathes of goose-pimples. She always felt dumb upon returning, and always felt the need to do some mentally challenging task in order to remember the strengths of being a human.

*Planning and reasoning. A powerful intellect*, she reminded herself. She evaluated the trap against the door. It was made of wrought iron, just like the ones from her father's study, but the edges of it shone with a vivid silver light — a light that any other person would be unable to see. The light was a type of Blinding spell, a unique twist that made the viewer see what they expected to see rather than what was actually there. A harmless spell, unless you were an animal.

*Or a shifter.*

A soft footstep echoed down the corridor.

She slid the trap-door closed so that no animals would be tempted to enter, and flashed the hand-signs to undo the Binding spell that kept the study

door locked. She turned the handle, stepped into the study, and closed it neatly behind her, motioning again so the door would lock. She listened in the dark for noises from the study and the hallway.

Silence. Her father, Arundel, had left Silverglen today, so she could be sure it wasn't him in the corridor.

*Fletch.*

Ember's skin prickled along her neck and arms. Fletch was too keen, and far too close to Arundel for her to risk being seen by him. She waited against the door, ready to lunge toward her usual emergency exit—a dingy window over the desk—if she needed to.

After an endless period of silence, she eased away from the door. Whoever was out there had likely been a servant, probably checking the torches along the corridor to be sure they would last through the long night.

The trap worried her. She found it hard to believe that Arundel would be having a rodent problem; he went to great pains elsewhere throughout his castle to eradicate them with his traps. But she never remembered him placing one here, three floors above ground-level, directly in front of his study door.

*And on the night of my return.* The thought made her stomach twist with anxiety. Was it a coincidence? Or did he suspect that someone visited his study and knew that it was her?

When she left for the Academy in Pemberville nine months ago, he had acted normal. Distant, distracted, and in one of his melancholy moods. He had even given her a new dagger before she left, tipped with a strong freezing spell. There was a possibility he had found a clue of some sort while she was gone, some hint that his daughter was a shifter.

*Mother.* Ember's heart thumped in her chest.

Her mother was the only one who knew. Or at least, the only one besides her closest friend, Gregory. But he would never tell, she was certain of it, and her mother wouldn't either. Exposure of the truth would mean her mother's death, not just Ember's. But Ember hadn't yet seen or spoken to her mother, Salena, since her return from Pemberville. She wasn't ready to speak to her yet. *That may be another trap, all on its own.*

Ember shivered and walked into her father's dark study, the wood floor cool beneath her bare feet. The space remained the same as always, cluttered on

one side with a desk, a stuffed chair, two sofas, and a table, the walls lined with shelves upon shelves of books.

On the other side, the study transformed into a small armory. Glass cases reflected the dim moonlight that filtered through the window, and various weapons glowed with spells on their mounting stands, looking sharp and conspicuous among the shadowy furniture. From behind a closed door in one corner of the armory, she sensed the cold emanating from a hidden heap of spelled traps. The traps were used to capture shifters during the rebellion, but Arundel gave them to his patrols and used them in the castle under the pretense of managing Silverglen's rodents.

On a long wooden table in front of the glass cases lay sheaves of papers and a metallic device.

She crept over, straining to see in the dim light.

The device was a snare, but unlike any she had seen before. The long rope she was accustomed to seeing was replaced with strands of metal, like the ones used in musical instruments. Ember pushed her fear down and picked up the delicate-looking wires, braided together to form a long tether and loop. The snare had been skillfully made, the wires flawless and perfectly wound together: a rather admirable display of Arundel's skills in forming and manipulating metal.

*No chewing through this one.* She fingered the strands, which had yet to be spelled. She remembered when she was seven, and Arundel had come back from hunting. Ember and her sister had been waiting eagerly for him to arrive, and he had been grinning and happy and proud, and it wasn't until he lifted up his brace of rabbits that she understood. Rabbits could be hunted with a bird, or they could be trapped with a snare.

*You see, her father had told them with gleaming hazel eyes, rabbits like to run. They have powerful legs, and when their neck gets caught in the snare, they try to run. The loop tightens the more they struggle —*

Ember shuddered and forced the memory away.

She set down the snare, went to the glass cases and worked her way through each weapon, careful not to touch spelled areas. She was familiar with all of them — pole axes, old foot and neck snares, lethal body traps, spears, crossbows, steel jaws, and restraint poles. Arundel had welded his own small

collection: a sword whose end curved like a scythe, a lance with a spear on one end and a hammer on another, and a staff with two serrated blades protruding from one end. Each weapon held at least one spell. Freezing, Blinding, and weight spells, some simple one-handed spells that were already fading, others highly complex two-handed spells that radiated cold light.

Ember glimpsed her pale reflection in the glass cases. Naked. Uncertain. Vulnerable.

She repressed a shiver and grabbed her first weapon, easing into the fluid motions she had known since childhood. The strong, controlled thrust of the spear, the heavy draw and quick release of the crossbow, the smooth arc of the pole axe as she brought it down and twisted it into a jab at the last moment.

Ember breathed a sigh as she set down the last weapon. There were so many things she was unsure about, but coming here always made her feel better. *Power through knowledge.* Arundel's words, though he had no way of knowing how she would use them. She must always be ready, always alert to new traps and weapons. It was the only way to stay alive and hidden.

A flash of light caught her gaze.

There, on the desk just beneath the window. Ember drifted to it. Papers, quills, ink pots, and books cluttered the desk. Her father was an industrious man, often busy being a Lord of the Council, and if not that, overseeing the smelter or welding some new weapon or trap for hunting. His latest project was still being sketched. It was some sort of tiny guillotine, as beautiful and delicate as any of Arundel's work, meant for quick decapitation of rodents. Another sketch of a smelter furnace, and another of a network of mine shafts delving into the earth. Ember pushed the drawings aside and reached for the item she had seen from across the room.

A chill emanated toward her fingers and she snatched her hand back before she touched it. The small key pulsed with an incredible spell.

*No, three spells, woven together as one.* A Blinding spell, a Freezing spell, and a Binding spell. Too strongly forged for her own magic to undo. The spell was strong enough to trap her for hours, paralyzing her, making her senseless and stupid while it stuck to her like her own skin. She would have been caught red-handed by a servant. *Or Fletch.*

The length of her hand, the key was rather simple, with a small head and

only a few notches at its tip. A slight chain threaded through the key loop and gathered at its base. Like any other key Ember had seen, but why the spells? If her father had created the spells, they wouldn't affect him when he wore it. But they would affect anyone who tried to steal it.

Such a strongly spelled key could only mean one thing. *What are you hiding, Father?* Coins? Traps? Rare metals or jewels?

Ember shuffled through the books on his desk, looking for clues. One fat book opened to a page about Blinding spells. The binding creaked as she looked at the cover. *Spells of Old*. She studied the table of contents, noticing nothing unusual. The book reminded her of the texts she had been required to read at Pemberville, only much older.

She flipped through the first few pages, and a sentence caught her eye. Her heart stopped, then banged in her chest.

"...Ineoc is the god of shapeshifters," she whispered, "that group of people whose ability to shift into animals is passed down through the blood from parent to child..."

Ember read on, learning more about Ineoc but nothing else about shapeshifters. She clapped the book shut, ignoring the dust that billowed into a cloud around her head.

The book should have been destroyed with the others during the rebellion. Arundel himself had ordered that anything with information about shifters was to be burned. Ember had spent her entire life searching for ones that might have been missed, but Arundel had been thorough. How many other unlawful books did he keep? Was that what the key was hiding? Ember stared at the tome, barely seeing the leather cover, barely feeling the rough edges, and blind to her trembling hands.

*If what this book says is true, my mother has been lying to me my whole life.*

The thought shocked her. Her mind seemed unable to move beyond that single realization, as if it were frozen in a heartbeat that rippled through her past. Memories became dreams from which she was now waking, and it felt terrible.

Scratching at the door broke her paralysis.

*Fletch.*

The door to the study loomed up before her, candle-light filtering in

through the edges, shadows flickering as he made the signs to unlock the Binding spell.

Ember tore her gaze away. She reached across the desk, unlatched the window and shoved it open, strangling thoughts of panic into submission. Frigid air gusted into the room, stealing her breath and scattering papers to the floor.

*One step up the desk, one step up the sill*, she thought while she imagined a mockingbird, light and small and quick. The door handle squeaked as it turned, but she hardly gave it thought as she sank into familiar nausea.

She vaulted from the window.

END SAMPLE

SILVERGLEN is available for purchase in print at [www.amazon.com/author/eaburnett](http://www.amazon.com/author/eaburnett). The Kindle edition of SILVERGLEN will be released on June 1, 2017. You can visit the author at [www.eaburnett.com](http://www.eaburnett.com) and follow her on Twitter (@eaburnett3) or Facebook (@eaburnett.author); she'd love to hear from you!