‘A dark, smart, delicious tale’
Kiran Millwood Hargrave

A DEADLY EDUCATION

LESSON ONE OF THE SCHOLOMANCE



NAOMI NOVIK

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

Praise for



'Novik deliciously undoes expectations about magic schools, destined heroes, and family legacies. A gorgeous book about monsters and monstrousness, chockablock with action, cleverness, and wit.'
Holly Black, No. 1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the Folk of the Air series

'A dark, smart, delicious tale, set to redefine everything you think you know about schools for magic. *A Deadly Education* is dangerously addictive.'
Kiran Millwood Hargrave, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *The Mercies*

'The Scholomance is the dark school of magic I've been waiting for, and its wise, witty, and monstrous heroine is one I'd happily follow anywhere – even into a school full of monsters.'
Katherine Arden, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Bear and the Nightingale*

Copyrighted Material

'At the Scholomance, monsters are everywhere and the breakfast might kill you, but the wonderful cast of characters will grab ahold of your heart and you'll never want to leave this deadly school. Naomi Novik skillfully combines sharp humor with layers of imagination to build a fantasy that delights on every level. I loved this brilliant book.'
Stephanie Garber, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of the Caraval series

'Eyeball-meltingly brilliant . . . Novik is, quite simply, a genius.'
Kiersten White, *New York Times* bestselling author of *And I Darken*

'Hilarious and wild! Take any fictional magic school, make it as over-the-top dangerous as possible, and populate it with a bunch of snarky teenagers; the result is pure batshit fun.'
N. K. Jemisin, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The City We Became*

'*A Deadly Education* is a nightmare from which I never wished to wake: savage, inventive, and soulful. Novik grasps the totems of childhood that linger in your mind – schools of magic, curses, cutthroat classmates, monsters – only to twist them into a grand new tale that'll make you believe in magic again.'
Pierce Brown, *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *Dark Age*

'*A Deadly Education* is a book that lives up to its gobsmacker of an opening sentence and follows right through to its shocker of an ending that promises more to come. Naomi Novik is relentlessly innovative and entertaining.'
Terry Brooks, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last Druid*

Copyrighted Material

'Friendship in spite of itself; danger that doesn't quit – what a wildly magical ride!'
Tamora Pierce, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Tempests* and *Slaughter*

'Naomi Novik reinvents the magical school story by working a strange, funny, wild, dark magic all her own. This is not just your next great read – it's your new obsession.'
Gwenda Bond, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Stranger Things: Suspicious Minds*

'*A Deadly Education* plunges into the delightfully brutal world of the Scholomance, a magic school unlike anything you've ever seen before, and introduces El, a practical, ruthless heroine with the guts and wits to survive it. Naomi Novik has crafted a transcendent academic fantasy that pulls no punches.'
Emily Skrutskie, author of *Bonds of Brass*

'In *A Deadly Education*, Naomi Novik creates a complex and dangerous world, with an equally complex and dangerous (and delightfully snarky) heroine trying to survive it without losing herself in the process. Witty, insightful, and immersive, this book is as much a dissection of privilege and power as it is a wickedly sharp coming-of-age tale.'
Melissa Bashardoust, author of *Girls Made of Snow and Glass* and *Girl, Serpent, Thorn*

'The can't-miss fantasy of fall 2020, a brutal coming-of-power story steeped in the aesthetics of dark academia . . . *A Deadly Education* will cement Naomi Novik's place as one of the greatest and most versatile fantasy writers of our time.'
***BookPage* (starred review)**

Copyrighted Material

'A must-read . . . Novik puts a refreshingly dark, adult spin on the magical boarding school . . . Readers will delight in the push-and-pull of El and Orion's relationship, the fantastically detailed world, the clever magic system, and the matter-of-fact diversity of the student body.'
***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

'The magic and mystery of this chillingly lovely novel will appeal to both YA and adult fans of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books . . . An unresolved ending leaves readers eager for the next installment.'
***Library Journal* (starred review)**

'Award-winner Novik's latest (after *Spinning Silver*, 2018) is the start of a fabulous dark and monstrous trilogy . . . The final chapter in this fast-paced fantasy introduces new characters and a surprising conflict for the next book in the series, which offers a fresh take on the magic school trope.'
***Booklist* (starred review)**

'Intricate world-building, a nuanced and diverse cast and a thrilling plot culminate in the kind of pulse-pounding ending that resolves much, but sets up the next installment with unanswered questions and dangers both new and old . . . Novik somehow conjures up a heroine perched on the line between good and evil, a protagonist readers can cheer for even as they wait for her to dip her toe into the darker side of magic. *A Deadly Education* is a spellbinding start to Novik's new series.'
Shelf Awareness

Copyrighted Material

'Novik's light touch, dark whimsy, and sense of humor make it hard to put down . . . Add to that a story that never stops moving while always remaining focused on developing the characters of both the people and the school itself – and *A Deadly Education* builds momentum that can't help but drive the reader to its end. And the end sets up the next book – this is the first in a trilogy – stunningly.'

Locus

'Naomi Novik's *A Deadly Education* is the dark, feminist magical boarding school saga we've been waiting for, sure to soothe Harry Potter fans' hearts.'

Culturess

'I loved this book. It's such a nail-biter, it's funny, it's thought-provoking, and it's such a good read.'

BuzzFeed

Copyrighted Material

By Naomi Novik

The Scholomance Series

A Deadly Education
The Last Graduate

Buried Deep and Other Stories
Uprooted
Spinning Silver

The Temeraire Series

His Majesty's Dragon
Throne of Jade
Black Powder War
Empire of Ivory
Victory of Eagles
Tongues of Serpents
Crucible of Gold
Blood of Tyrants
League of Dragons

Copyrighted Material



Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

A DEADLY EDUCATION

Lesson One of The Scholomance

NAOMI NOVIK

Copyrighted Material



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk
global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the US by Penguin Random House 2020
First published in the UK by Del Rey 2020
First published in paperback by Del Rey 2021
Published in Penguin Books 2024
001

Copyright © Naomi Novik, 2020

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom
of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing
an authorised edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property
laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling
Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Typeset in 11.33/14.57 pt Dante MT Pro by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–529–10087–7

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

FSC
www.fsc.org
MIX
Paper | Supporting
responsible forestry
FSC® C018179

For lim, a bringer of light in dark places

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material



Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material



Chapter 1

SOUL-EATER

I DECIDED that Orion needed to die after the second time he saved my life. I hadn't really cared much about him before then one way or another, but I had limits. It would've been all right if he'd saved my life some really extraordinary number of times, ten or thirteen or so—thirteen is a number with distinction. Orion Lake, my personal bodyguard; I could have lived with that. But we'd been in the Scholomance almost three years by then, and he hadn't shown any previous inclination to single me out for special treatment.

Selfish of me, you'll say, to be contemplating with murderous intent the hero responsible for the continued survival of a quarter of our class. Well, too bad for the losers who couldn't stay afloat without his help. We're not *meant* to all survive, anyway. The school has to be fed somehow.

Ah, but what about me, you ask, since I'd needed him to save me? Twice, even? And that's exactly why he had to go. *He* set off the explosion in the alchemy lab last year, fighting that chimaera. I had to dig myself out of the rubble while he ran around in circles whacking at its fire-breathing tail. And

Copyrighted Material

that soul-eater hadn't been in my room for five seconds before he came through the door: he must have been right on its heels, probably chasing it down the hall. The thing had only swerved in here looking to escape.

But who's going to let me explain any of that? The chimaera might not have stuck to me, there were more than thirty kids in the lab that day, but a dramatic rescue in my bedchamber is on another level. As far as the rest of the school is concerned, I've just fallen into the general mass of hapless warts that Orion Lake has saved in the course of his brilliant progress, and that was intolerable.

Our rooms aren't very big. He was only a few steps from my desk chair, still hunched panting over the bubbling purplish smear of the soul-eater that was now steadily oozing into the narrow cracks between the floor tiles, the better to spread all over my room. The fading incandescence on his hands was illuminating his face, not an extraordinary face or anything: he had a big beaky nose that would maybe be dramatic one day when the rest of his face caught up, but for now was just too large, and his forehead was dripping sweat and plastered with his silver-grey hair that he hadn't cut for three weeks too long. He spends most of his time behind an impenetrable shell of devoted admirers, so it was the closest I'd ever been to him. He straightened and wiped an arm across the sweat. "You okay—Gal, right?" he said to me, just to put some salt on the wound. We'd been in the same lab section for three years.

"No thanks to you and your boundless fascination for every dark thing creeping through the place," I said icily. "And it is *not* Gal, it has never been *Gal,* it's *Galadriel*"—the name wasn't my idea, don't look at me—"and if that's too many syllables for you to manage all in one go, El will do."

Copyrighted Material

His head had jerked up and he was blinking at me in a sort

of open-mouthed way. "Oh. Uh. I—I'm sorry?" he said, voice rising on the words, as if he didn't understand what was going on.

"No, no," I said. "I'm sorry. Clearly I'm not performing my role up to standard." I threw a melodramatic hand up against my forehead. "Orion, I was so terrified," I gasped, and flung myself onto him. He tottered a bit: we were the same height. "Thank *goodness* you were here to *save* me, I could never have managed a soul-eater all on my own," and I hiccuped a pathetically fake sob against his chest.

Would you believe, he actually tried to put his arm round me and give my shoulder a pat, that's how automatic it was for him. I jammed my elbow into his stomach to shove him off. He made a noise like a whoofing dog and staggered back to gawk at me. "I don't need your help, you insufferable lurker," I said. "Keep away from me or you'll be sorry." I shoved him back one more step and slammed the door shut between us, clearing the end of that beaky nose by bare centimeters. I had the brief satisfaction of seeing a look of perfect confusion on his face before it vanished away, and then I was left with only the bare metal door, with the big melted hole where the doorknob and lock used to be. Thanks, hero. I glared at it and turned back to my desk just as the blob of soul-eater collapsed the rest of the way, hissing like a leaky steam pipe, and a truly putrescent stink filled the room.

I was so angry that it took me six tries to get a spell for cleaning it up. After the fourth attempt, I stood up and hurled the latest crumbling ancient scroll back into the impenetrable dark on the other side of my desk and yelled furiously, "I don't *want* to summon an army of scuvara! I don't *want* to conjure walls of mortal flame! I want my bloody room *clean*!"

Copyrighted Material

What came flying out of the void in answer was a horrible tome encased in some kind of pale crackly leather with

spiked corners that scraped unpleasantly as it skidded to me across the metal of the desk. The leather had probably come off a pig, but someone had clearly wanted you to think it had been flayed from a person, which was almost as bad, and it flipped itself open to a page with instructions for enslaving an entire mob of people to do your bidding. I suppose they *would* have cleaned my room if I told them to.

I had to actually take out one of my mother's stupid crystals and sit down on my narrow squeaky bed and meditate for ten minutes, with the stench of the soul-eater all around me and getting into my clothes and sheets and papers. You'd think that any smell would clear out quickly, since one whole wall of the room is open to the scenic view of a mystical void of darkness, so delightfully like living in a spaceship aimed directly into a black hole, but you'd be wrong. After I finally managed to walk myself back from the incoherent kicking levels of anger, I pushed the pigskin book off the far edge of my desk back into the void—using a pen to touch it, just in case—and said as calmly as I could manage, "I want a simple household spell for cleaning away an unwanted mess with a bad smell."

Sullenly down came—*thump*—a gigantic volume titled *Amunan Hamwerod* packed completely full of spells written in Old English—my weakest dead language—and it didn't open to any particular page, either.

That sort of thing is always happening to me. Some sorcerers get an affinity for weather magic, or transformation spells, or fantastic combat magics like dear Orion. I got an affinity for mass destruction. It's all my mum's fault, of course, just like my stupid name. She's one of those flowers and beads and crystals sorts, dancing to the Goddess under the moon. Everyone's a lovely person and anyone who does anything wrong is misunderstood or unhappy.

Copyrighted Material

She even does massage therapy for mundanes, because "it's so relaxing to make people feel better, love." Most wizards don't bother with mundane work—it's considered a bit low—or if they do, they hunt themselves out an empty sack of a job. The person who retires from the firm after forty-six years and no one quite remembers what they were doing, the befuddled librarian that you occasionally glimpse wandering the stacks without seeming to do anything, the third vice president of marketing who shows up only for meetings with senior management; that sort of thing. There're spells to find those jobs or coax them into existence, and then you've provided yourself with the necessities of life and kept your time free to build mana and make your cheap flat into a twelve-room mansion on the inside. But not Mum. She charges almost nothing, and that little mostly because if you offer to do professional massage for free, people will look at you sideways, as well they should.

Naturally I came out designed to be the exact opposite of this paragon, as anyone with a basic understanding of the balancing principle might have expected, and when I want to straighten my room, I get instructions on how to kill it with fire. Not that I can actually *use* any of these delightful cataclysmic spells the school is so eager to hand out to me. Funnily enough, you can't actually whip up an entire army of demons on just a wink. It takes power and lots of it. And no one is going to help you build mana to summon a personal demon army, so let's be real, it takes malia.

Everyone—almost everyone—uses a bit of malia here and there, stuff they don't even think of as wicked. Magic a slice of bread into cake without gathering the mana for it first, that sort of thing, which everyone thinks is just harmless cheating. Well, the power's got to come from *somewhere,* and if you haven't gathered it yourself, then it's probably coming

Copyrighted Material

from something living, because it's easier to get power out of something that's already alive and moving around. So you get your cake and meanwhile a colony of ants in your back garden stiffen and die and disintegrate.

Mum won't so much as keep her tea hot with malia. But if you're less of a stickler, as most people are, you can make yourself a three-tier cake out of dirt and ants every day of your life, and still live to 150 and die peacefully in your bed, assuming you don't die of cholesterol poisoning first. But if you start using malia on a grander scale than that, for example to raze a city or slaughter a whole army or any of the thousand other useless things that I know exactly how to do, you can't get enough of it except by sucking in mana—or life force or arcane energy or pixie dust or whatever you want to call it; mana's just the current trend—from things complicated enough to have feelings about it and resist you. Then the power gets tainted and you're getting psychically clawed as you try and yank away their mana, and often enough they win.

That wouldn't be a problem for me, though. I'd be brilliant at pulling malia, if I was stupid or desperate enough to try it. I do have to give Mum credit there: she did that attachment parenting nonsense, which in my case meant her lovely sparkling-clean aura enveloped mine enough to keep me from getting into malia too early. When I brought home small frogs in order to mess with their intestines it was all supremely gentle, "No, my love, we don't hurt living creatures," and she would take me to our corner shop in the village and buy me an ice cream to make up for taking them away. I was five, ice cream was my only motivation for wanting power anyway, so as you can imagine I brought all my little finds to her. And by the time I was old enough that she

Copyrighted Material

couldn't have stopped me, I was old enough to understand what happens to sorcerers who use malia.

Mostly it's seniors who start, with graduation staring them in the face, but there're a few in our year who've gone for it already. Sometimes if Yi Liu looks at you too quickly, her eyes are all white for a moment. Her nails have gone solid black, too, and I can tell it's not polish. Jack Westing looks all right, all blond smiling American boy, most people think he's a delight, but if you go past his room and take a deep breath in, you get a faint smell of the charnel house. If you're me, anyway. Luisa three doors down from him vanished early this year, nobody knows what happened to her—not unusual, but I'm reasonably sure what's left of her is in his room. I have a good sense for this sort of thing even when I'd rather not know.

If I *did* give in and start using malia, I'd be sailing through here borne on—admittedly—the hideous leathery bat wings of demonic beasts, but at least there'd be *some* kind of wings. The Scholomance loves to let maleficers out into the world; it almost never kills any of them. It's the rest of us who get soul-eaters popping under our doors in the middle of the afternoon and wauria slithering up out of the drain to latch on to our ankles while we're trying to take a shower and reading assignments that dissolve away our eyeballs. Not even Orion's been able to save all of us. Most of the time less than a quarter of the class makes it all the way through graduation, and eighteen years ago—which I'm sure was not coincidentally near when Orion was conceived—only a dozen students came out, and they were *all* gone dark. They'd banded into a pack and taken out all the rest of the seniors in their year for a massive dose of power.

Copyrighted Material

Of course, the families of all the other students realized

what had happened—because it was stupidly obvious; the idiots hadn't let the enclave kids escape first—and hunted the dozen maleficers down. The last one of them was dead by the time Mum graduated the following year, and that was that for the Hands of Death or whatever they called themselves.

But even when you're a sneaky little fly-by-night malia-sucker who picks his targets wisely and makes it out unnoticed, there's nowhere to go but further down. Darling Jack's already stealing life force from human beings, so he's going to start rotting on the inside within the first five years after he graduates. I'm sure he's got grandiose plans for how to stave off his disintegration, maleficers always do, but I don't think he's really got what it takes. Unless he comes up with something special, in ten years, fifteen at the outside, he'll cave in on himself in a nice final grotesque rush. Then they'll dig up his cellar and find a hundred corpses and everyone will tut and say good lord, he seemed like such a nice young man.

At the moment, though, while fighting through one page after another of extremely specific Old English household charms in crabbed handwriting, I felt strongly I could have gone for a nice big helping of malia myself. If my unshucked oats were ever being eaten by leapwinks—your guess is good as mine—I'd be ready. Meanwhile the puddle of soul-eater kept letting out soft flaring pops of gas behind me, each one like a distant flash of lightning before the horrible eruption of stink reached my nose.

I'd already spent the whole day in a deep slog, studying for finals. There were only three weeks left in the term: when you put your hand on the wall in the bathrooms, you could already feel the faint *chunk-chunk* noises of the middle-sized gears starting to engage, getting ready to ratchet us all down another turn. The classrooms stay in one place in the school

Copyrighted Material

core, and our dorms start up at the cafeteria level and rotate down each year, like some enormous metal nut whirling round the shaft of a screw, until down all the way we go for graduation. Next year is our turn on the lowest floor, not something to look forward to. I very much don't want to fail any exams and saddle myself with remedial work on top of it.

Thanks to my afternoon's diligence, my back and my bum and my neck were all sore, and my desk light was starting to sputter and go dim while I hunched over the tome, squinting to make out the letters and my arm going numb holding my Old English dictionary in the other hand. Summoning a wall of mortal flame and incinerating the soul-eater, the spellbook, the dictionary, my desk, et cetera, had rapidly increasing appeal.

It's not *completely* impossible to be a long-term maleficer. Liu's going to be all right; she's being a lot more careful about it than Jack. I'd bet she used almost her whole weight allocation to bring a sack of hamsters or something in with her and she's been sacrificing them on a planned schedule. She's sneaking a couple of cigarettes a week, not chain-smoking four packets a day. But she can afford to do that because she's not completely on her own. Her family's big—not big enough to set up an enclave of their own yet, but getting into throwing distance—and rumor has it they've had a lot of maleficers: it's a strategy, for them. She's got a pair of twin cousins who'll be turning up next year, and thanks to using malia, she'll have the power to protect them through their first year. And after Liu graduates, she'll have options. If she wants to quit, she could put spells aside entirely, get one of those dull mundane jobs to pay the bills, and rely on the rest of her family to protect her and cast for her. In ten years or so, she'll have psychically healed up enough that she'll be able to start using mana again. Or she could become a professional ma-

Copyrighted Material

leficer, the kind of witch that gets paid handsomely by enclavers to do heavy work for them with no questions asked about where the power comes from. As long as she doesn't go for anything too excessive—as in, my kind of spells—she'll probably be fine.

But I don't have family, not aside from my mum, and I certainly don't have an enclave ready to support me. We live in the Radiant Mind commune near Cardigan in Wales, which also boasts a shaman, two spirit healers, a Wiccan circle, and a troupe of Morris dancers, all of whom have roughly the same amount of real power, which is to say none whatsoever, and all of whom would fall over in horror if they saw Mum or me doing real magic. Well, me. Mum does magic by dancing up mana with a group of willing volunteers—I've told her she ought to charge people, but no—and then she spreads it out again freely in sparkles and happiness, tra la. People let us eat at their table because they love her, who wouldn't, and they built her a yurt when she came to them, straight from the Scholomance and three months pregnant with me, but none of them could help me do magic or defend me against roving maleficaria. Even if they could, they wouldn't. They don't like me. No one does, except Mum.

Dad died here, during graduation, getting Mum out. We call it graduation because that's what the Americans call it, and they've been carrying the lion's share of the cost of the school for the last seventy years or so. Those who pay the piper call the tune, et cetera. But it's hardly a celebratory occasion or anything. It's just the moment when the seniors all get dumped into the graduation hall, far below at the very bottom of the school, and try to fight their way out through all the hungry maleficaria lying in wait. About half the senior class—that is, half of the ones who've managed to survive that long—makes it. Dad didn't.

Copyrighted Material

He did have family; they live near Mumbai. Mum managed to track them down, but only when I was already five. She and Dad hadn't exchanged any real-world information or made any plan for after they graduated and got turfed back out to their respective homes. That would've been too sensible. They'd been together on the inside for only four months or something, but they were soulmates and love would lead the way. Of course, probably it *would* have, for Mum.

Anyway, when she did find them, it turned out his family was rich, palaces and jewels and djinn servants rich, and more important by my mum's standards, they came from an ancient strict-mana Hindu enclave that was destroyed during the Raj, and they're still sticking to the rules. They won't eat meat, much less pull malia. She was happy to move in with them, and they were all excited to take us in, too. They hadn't even known what had happened to Dad. The last time they'd heard from him was at term-end of his junior year. The seniors collect notes from the rest of us, the week before graduation. I've already written mine for this year and given copies to some of the London enclave kids, short and sweet: *still alive, doing all right in classes.* I had to keep it so small that no one could reasonably refuse to just add it to their envelope, because otherwise they would.

Dad sent one of those same notes to his family, so they'd known he'd survived that long. Then he just never came out. Another of the hundreds of kids thrown on the rubbish heap of this place. When Mum finally unearthed his family and told them about me, it felt to them like getting a bit of Dad back after all. They sent us one-way plane tickets and Mum said bye to everyone in the commune and packed me up with all our worldly goods.

Copyrighted Material

But when we got there, my great-grandmother took one look at me and fell down in a visionary fit and said I was a

burdened soul and would bring death and destruction to all the enclaves in the world if I wasn't stopped. My grandfather and his brothers tried to do the stopping, actually. That's the only time Mum's ever really opened the pipes. I vaguely remember it, Mum standing in our bedroom with four men awkwardly trying to make her step out of the way and hand me over. I don't know what they were planning to do with me—none of them had ever deliberately hurt so much as a fly—but I guess the fit was a really alarming one.

They argued it over a bit and then all of a sudden the whole place went full of this terrible light that hurt my eyes to look at, and Mum was scooping me up with my blanket. She walked directly out of the family compound, barefoot in her nightie, and they stood around looking miserable and didn't try to touch her. She got to the nearest road and stuck out her thumb, and a passing driver picked her up and took us all the way to the airport. Then a tech billionaire about to board his private jet to London saw her standing in the airport vestibule with me and offered to take her along. He still comes to the commune for a weeklong spiritual cleanse once a year.

That's my mum for you. But it's not me. My great-grandmother was just the first in a long line of people who meet me, smile, and then stop smiling, before I've even said a word. No one's ever going to offer me a lift, or dance in a woodland circle to help me raise power, or put food on my table, or—far more to the point—stand with me against all the nasty things that routinely come after wizards, looking for a meal. If it weren't for Mum, I wouldn't have been welcome in my own home. You wouldn't believe the number of *nice* people at the commune—the kind who write long sincere letters to politicians and regularly turn out to protest for everything from social justice to the preservation of bats—

Copyrighted Material

who said brightly to fourteen-year-old me how excited I must be about going away to school—ha ha—and how much I must want to strike out on my own afterwards, see more of the world, et cetera.

Not that I want to go back to the commune. I don't know if anyone who hasn't tried it can properly appreciate just how horrible it is to be constantly surrounded by people who believe in absolutely everything, from leprechauns to sweat lodges to Christmas carols, but who won't believe that you can do actual magic. I've literally shown people to their faces—or tried to; it takes loads of extra mana to cast even a little spell for starting a fire when a mundane is watching you, firmly convinced that you're a silly kid with a lighter up your sleeve and you'll probably fumble the sleight-of-hand. But even if you do get some sufficiently dramatic spell to work in front of them, then they all say wow and how amazing and then the next day it's all, *man, those mushrooms were really good*. And then they avoid me even more. I don't want to be *here,* but I don't want to be there, either.

Oh, that's a lie, of course. I constantly daydream about going home. I ration it to five minutes a day where I go and stand in front of the vent in the wall, as safely far away as I can get from it and still feel the air moving, and I shut my eyes and press my hands over my face to block the smell of burnt oil and finely aged sweat, pretending that instead I'm breathing damp earth and dried rosemary and roasted carrots in butter, and it's the wind moving through the trees, and if I just open my eyes I'll be lying on my back in a clearing and the sun has just gone behind a cloud. I would instantly trade in my room for the yurt in the woods, even after two full weeks of rain when everything I own is growing mildew. It's an improvement over the sweet fragrance of soul-eater. I even miss the people, which I'd have refused to believe if

Copyrighted Material

you'd told me, but after three years in here, I'd ask even Philippa Wax for a cwtch if I saw her sour, hard-mouthed face.

All right, no, I wouldn't, and I'm pretty sure that all my sentiments will revert within a week after I get back. Anyway, it's been made very clear I'm not welcome, except on sufferance. And maybe not even that, if I try to settle in again once I'm out of here. The commune council—Philippa's the secretary—will probably come up with some excuse to throw me out. *Negativity of spirit* has already been mentioned more than a few times just at the limits of my hearing, or well within them. And then I'll just have wrecked Mum's life, because she'd walk away without a second thought to stay with me.

I've known even before I came to the Scholomance that my only chance for a halfway decent life—assuming I get out of here to have one at all—is to get into an enclave. That's me and everyone else, then, but at least most independent wizards can find friends to club together and watch each other's backs, build mana, collaborate a bit. Even if people liked me enough to keep me, which no one ever has, I wouldn't be any use to them. Ordinary people want a mop in the cupboard, not a rocket launcher, and here I am struggling desperately for two hours just to turn up a spell to wash the floor.

But if you're in a lush enclave of a few hundred wizards, and a death wyrm crawls out of the depths of the nearest cavern, or another enclave decides to declare war, you really would like somebody around who can slit a cow's throat and unleash all the fires of hell in your defense. Having someone with a reputation for that kind of power in your enclave usually means you don't get attacked in the first place, and then no cows have to be sacrificed, and I don't ever have to take a

Copyrighted Material

psychic pummeling and lose five years off my life, and worse yet make my mother *cry*.

But that all depends on my having the reputation. No one's going to invite me into an enclave or even a graduation alliance if they think I'm actually some sort of pathetic damsel in distress who needs rescuing by the local hero. They certainly won't do it because they *like* me. And meanwhile Orion doesn't need to impress anybody at all. He's not even just an enclaver. His mother is one of the top candidates to be the next Domina of New York, which is probably still the single most powerful enclave in the world right now, and his father's a master artificer. He could just keep half an eye out, do the bare minimum of coursework, and walk out and spend the rest of his life in luxury and safety, surrounded by the finest wizards and the most wonderful artifice in the world.

Instead, he's been spending his school years making a massive spectacle of himself. The soul-eater behind me was probably his fourth heroic deed of the week. He's saving every dullard and weakling in the place, and not a thought given to who's going to have to pay the price. Because there's absolutely going to *be* a price. For all that I want to go home every minute of every day in here, I know perfectly well it's actually unbelievably good luck to be here. The only reason I've had that luck myself is because the school was largely built by Manchester enclave, back in the mists of the Edwardian era, and the current UK enclaves have managed to hang on to a disproportionate number of the spare seats to hand out. That might change in the next few years—the Shanghai and Jaipur enclaves have been making threatening noises about building a new school from scratch in Asia if there isn't a significant reallocation soon—but at least for the moment, any indie kid in the UK still automatically goes on the induction list.

Copyrighted Material

Mum offered to get me taken off, but I wasn't insane enough to let her. The enclaves built the school because outside is *worse.* All those maleficaria creeping through the vents and the pipes and under the doors, they don't come from the Scholomance—they come *to* the Scholomance because all of us are in here, tender young wizards newly bursting with mana we're still falling over ourselves learning to use. Thanks to my freshman-year Maleficaria Studies textbook, I know that our deliciousness goes up another order of magnitude every six months between thirteen and eighteen, all wrapped up inside a thin and easy-to-break sugar shell instead of the tough chewy hide of a grown wizard. That's not a metaphor I made up myself: it's straight out of the book, which took a lot of pleasure telling us in loads of detail just how badly the maleficaria want to eat us: really, really badly.

So back in the mists of the late 1800s, the renowned artificer Sir Alfred Cooper Browning—it's hard to avoid picking up his name in here, it's plastered all over the place—came up with the Scholomance. As much as I roll my eyes at the placards everywhere, the design's really effective. The school is only just barely connected to the actual world, in one single place: the graduation gates. Which are surrounded by layers on layers of magical wards and artifice barriers. When some enterprising mal does wriggle through, it's only got inside the graduation hall, which isn't connected to the rest of the school except for the absolute minimum of pipes and air shafts required to supply the place, and all of *those* are loaded up with wards and barriers, too.

So the mals get bottled up and spend loads of time struggling to get in and get up, and fighting and devouring each other while they're at it, and the biggest and most dangerous ones can't actually squeeze their way up at all. They just have

Copyrighted Material

to hang around the graduation hall all year long, snacking on other mals, and wait for graduation to gorge themselves. We're a lot harder to get at in here than if we were living out in the wide open, in a yurt for instance. Even enclave kids were getting eaten more often than not before the school was built, and if you're an indie kid who doesn't get into the Scholomance, these days your odds of making it to the far side of puberty are one in twenty. One in four is plenty decent odds compared to that.

But we have to *pay* for that protection. We pay with our work, and we pay with our misery and our terror, which all build the mana that fuels the school. And we pay, most of all, with *the ones who don't make it,* so what good exactly does Orion think he's doing, what does anyone think he's doing, saving people? The bill has to come due eventually.

Except nobody thinks that way. Less than twenty juniors have died so far this year—the usual rate is a hundred plus—and everyone in the whole school thinks he hung the moon, and is wonderful, and the New York enclave's going to have five times as many applicants as they've had before. I can forget about getting in there, and the enclave in London isn't looking very good, either. It's maddening, especially when I ought to be news. I already know ten times more spells for destruction and dominion than the entire graduating class of seniors put together. You would too if you got five of them every time you wanted to mop the bloody floor.

On the bright side, today I've learned ninety-eight useful household charms in Old English, as I had to slog through to number ninety-nine to reach the one that would wipe out the stink, and the book couldn't vanish on me until I'd got to it. Every now and again, the school does shoot itself in the foot that way, usually when it's being its most awful and annoying

Copyrighted Material

and petty. The misery of translating ninety-nine charms with a stinking, dead soul-eater gurbling behind me was good enough to buy me the extra useful ones.

I'll be grateful in a week or two. At the moment, what I have to do is stand up and do five hundred jumping jacks in a row, in perfect form, keeping my focus tightly on my current-storing crystal the whole time, to build enough mana so I could wash my floor without accidentally killing anything. I don't dare cheat at all, not even a little. There're no ants and cockroaches in here to suck dry, and I'm getting more powerful by the day, like we all are. With my particular gift, if I tried to cheat on a cleaning spell, it's entirely possible I'd take out three of my neighbors to either side and this entire hall would end up the horrible gleaming clean of a newly sanitized morgue. I've got mana saved up, of course: Mum loaded me up with crystals she'd primed with her circle, so I could store mana for later, and I put some away every chance I get. But I wasn't going to use one of those to clean up my room. The crystals are for emergencies, when I really need power right away, and to stockpile for graduation.

After the floor came clean, I added on fifty push-ups—I've got in really good shape over the last three years—and did my mum's favorite smudging spell. It left my whole cell smelling of burnt sage, but at least that was an improvement. It was nearly dinnertime by then. A shower was more than called for, except I really didn't feel like having to fight off anything that might come out of the drains in the bathroom, which meant that something was almost sure to come if I went. Instead I changed my shirt and plaited my hair again and wiped my face with water out of my jug. I rinsed my T-shirt in the last of the water, too, and hung it up so it would dry. I had only the two tops, and they were getting threadbare. I'd had to burn half my clothes my first year when a nameless

Copyrighted Material