BLOOD OVER BRIGHT HAVEN



M. L. WANG

Author of *The Sword of Kaigen*

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The Sword of Kaigen

Blood Over Bright Haven

The Volta Academy Chronicles (as Maya Lin Wang)

Girl Squad Volta

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Girl Squad Volcanic

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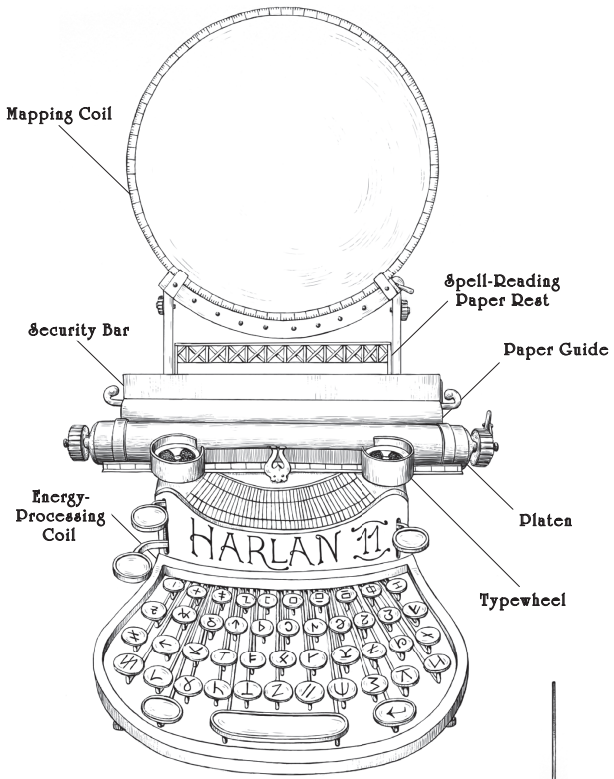
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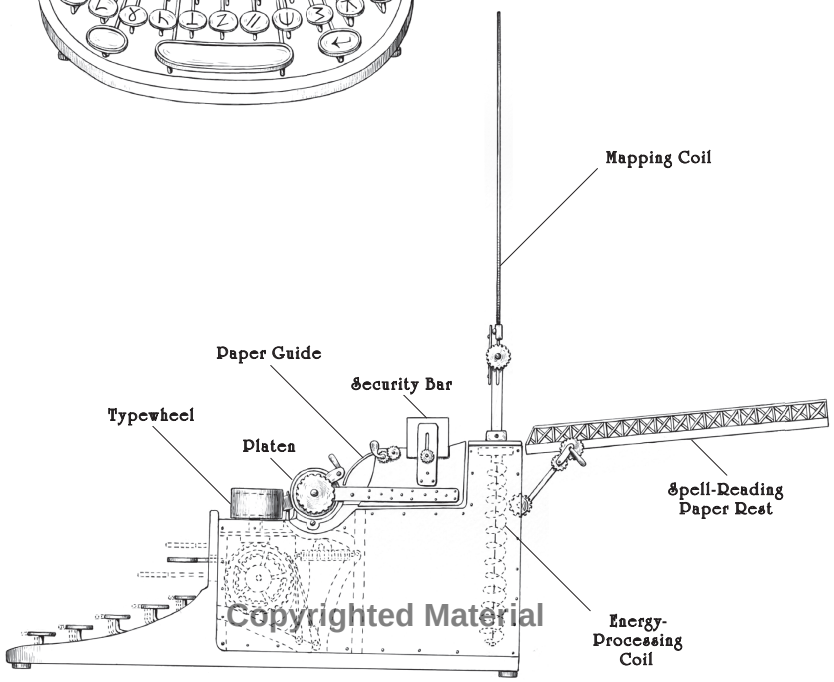
To the DNF Crew
for helping me through the Deep Night

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SPELLOGRAPH





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1

A Field of Flowers

Thomil had taken the long way back from scouting. Against his better judgment, he let down his wolfskin hood and welcomed the wind's needles as he pressed through the howling dark. Thomil's gods were in this cold, as they were in the snow and the crocus stem promise of color fast asleep beneath the freeze. If this was the last time they ever wrapped their arms around him, he wanted to feel it.

What was left of Thomil's tribe waited in a huddle at the edge of Lake Tiran. Massed in the dark, the Caldonnae were alarmingly small against the expanse of ice. Of the several scouts who had peeled from the group to look out for direwolves, snow lions, and rival tribes, Thomil was the last to rejoin the clan, his return bringing their number to forty—forty people left of a nation that had once numbered in the tens of thousands.

"No pursuers," Beyern said as Thomil passed him. It wasn't a question. The lead hunter inferred everything he needed from Thomil's body language.

With life ever dwindling across the plains of the Kwen, scouting for danger had come to feel more like a formality than a necessary precaution. It had been six months since the Caldonnae had encoun-

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tered another clan and years since Thomil had seen a direwolf. The most prolific killer on these plains didn't stalk on earthly feet, and the best scout in the Kwen could never sense it coming.

"Join your family." Beyern nodded to where Maeva and Arras leaned into each other in the dark. "And put your hood up, fool."

"Yes, Uncle." Thomil smiled and drew his hood over his numb ears, trying not to think that this might be the last time Beyern ever snapped at him.

Maeva was quiet as Thomil slipped into a crouch at her side. Thomil had been taller than his older sister for half a decade now, but to him, she would always be a shelter, a hearth light when all other love had gone from the world. She met his eyes, then turned to the glow beyond the lake, inviting him to follow her gaze and share her hope.

Everything about the country on the far shore was alien—the buildings taller than any tree, the spires piercing the sky like teeth, the boom and whir of machinery. The city of Tiran would never be home, but it was a chance at survival. Magical shielding glittered around the metal metropolis, forming a dome that stretched from the sun-eating mountain range in the west to the lower barrows in the east. That bright work of sorcery protected those inside from winter and Blight—everything that had driven the Caldonnae to the brink of extinction.

"Are you ready?" Arras asked, because that was the kind of inane question he liked to ask.

"No." Thomil tried not to sound exasperated with his sister's husband, but really, how ready could a person ever be for near-certain death? And if not death, then the enormity of the unknown. The plains of the Kwen were the only mother Thomil had ever known—brutal but comprehensible if one had the stillness to listen and learn her mysteries. Even as he beheld the city across the lake, his mind couldn't accept the idea that safety could lie within the incomprehensible sorcery on the other side of that barrier.

Maeva reached over and squeezed Thomil's hand, her grip as reassuring as it had been when they were children and he came crying to

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her with nightmares of wolves with many mouths. He wanted to slip his deerskin mitten off and grasp her hand in earnest, in case this was the last time. But there was a silent agreement among the Caldonnae not to say goodbye. They had to keep believing, however irrationally, that they would all live to see the sunrise.

"Thomil," Maeva said with the soft confidence that told him she could see straight to the doubts massing beneath his composure. "The worthwhile run is never the short one." Old hunters' wisdom, based on the days it could take to track and hunt the largest prey—followed by the kind of abstract wisdom only an elder sister like Maeva could give: "You know we're not running from oblivion. We're running toward hope."

Maeva and Arras's daughter mumbled sleepily on her father's shoulder, and Maeva betrayed her own anxiety by clutching Thomil's hand a little tighter.

"And you know Carra's going to be all right," Thomil said, wanting to return his sister's reassurances. "If nothing else, Arras can run."

"Was that a veiled dig at my intelligence?" Arras raised a bushy red eyebrow at Thomil.

"Was it veiled?"

"I swear, little brother, if my girl wasn't sleeping, I'd deck you so hard."

"I know." Thomil grinned up at his broad slab of a brother-in-law. "Why do you think I waited until she was asleep?"

It was a stupid exchange, but it got Maeva to laugh. And that was all that mattered: that their last moments as a family here on this shoreline be warm ones.

"It's nearly time." Elder Sertha's voice creaked like an oak above the murmurs between family members. "Get the blood moving in your legs."

"Leave your tools and weapons," Beyern added. "They're just deadweight."

As instructed, Thomil unslung his bow and quiver and set them in the snow. The simple act of lifting hands off weapons was harder than he had expected. For a thousand years, the Caldonnae had defined

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themselves by their hunting prowess. Leaving their bows and spears behind felt like the final concession that they were no longer the apex predators their ancestors had been.

"Up." Beyern walked along the shoreline, pulling the sickly and sleepy to their feet. "It's not getting any colder tonight. If the ice at the warm end is ever going to hold, it will be now."

Already, the sliver of returning sunlight had conspired with the warmth from the barrier to weaken the lake ice between the plains and the city of Tiran. Eventually, the heat of summer would melt the impassable snowdrifts at the feet of the mountains, opening marginally safer land avenues into Tiran, but even the most optimistic among the Caldonnae knew the tribe wouldn't last until then. Blight had taken too many of the animals they hunted and the summer crops they would have stored to hold them through the Deep Night.

Crossing the lake now was their only chance.

Four-year-old Carra woke as Arras adjusted her weight in his arms.

"Papa," she said sleepily, "is Uncle Thomil back?"

"Yes, sweetling. He's right here," Arras said, and when Carra still looked worried, he put his nose into her mess of auburn hair to whisper something that made her giggle. "Now, hush, my heart. Everything will be all right."

The children Carra's age and younger couldn't run through the shin-deep snow and would have to be carried. Thankfully, Arras had retained his mammoth strength through the lean months of the Deep Night. He could make the two-mile run under the extra weight if fate allowed it. But that, too, was a slim hope. The greatest danger out on that lake would not be cold, exhaustion, or thin ice.

It would be Blight, magnified tenfold.

"While you can still breathe, keep moving," Beyern said. "Stop for nothing. Turn back for no one. Not even your own blood." The words turned white and hung in the air like a mourning shroud. "We are one blood now, one name, with one purpose: *cross.*"

"Everyone, ready," Elder Sertha said as the last of the Caldonnae took up position along the rocks.

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Numbers were supposed to help. No solitary runner ever made

this crossing in one piece, but in big groups, sometimes, there was a chance. Prey mentality.

"Move!"

As one, the Caldonnae surged onto the lake.

The moment Thomil's boots hit the ice, something changed. Normally, Blight did not announce its arrival to the mortal senses, but this time, Thomil picked up a slight shift in pressure, a promise of evil in the air.

White ignited the dark before Thomil, catching one of the teenage hunters who had struck out ahead of the rest of the group. As the light hit the boy's sleeve, he jerked to a stop, and when it flared to illuminate his face, Thomil recognized the Blight's first victim: Drevan, an orphan of the last winter, a gifted small game trapper, a quiet boy . . . He was not quiet now. No one was when Blight pierced their flesh.

Magnified by the uncaring expanse and sharpened by the cold, Drevan's shriek was the sound of nightmares. Skin unraveled from flesh and flesh from bone like unspooling thread. A few of the adolescent runners nearest Drevan stumbled to a halt in horror, even as the elders at their backs cried, "Keep running! He's lost! Keep running!"

Drevan had left the shoreline at a sprint, meaning the whole tribe was behind him. They all saw him disintegrate, screaming, until the ribbons of light peeled the lips from his teeth, the skin from his ribs, and at last unmade his lungs. In seconds, the little trapper had crumpled to a pile of cloth, hair, and stripped bones. The blood that had spun from his body made the impression of a flower on the snow.

"Forward, sons!" Beyern grabbed two of the young men who had stopped and hauled them back into motion. "Look back for no one!"

The next to die was Elra, an eight-year-old boy struggling through the snow near the back of the group. A woman—in the periphery, Thomil couldn't see if it was Elra's mother or one of his doting older sisters—wouldn't let go of his hand, and the light took her too. Not sated with the body of a malnourished child, Blight spun straight to its next meal the same way it jumped from one wheat stalk to the next when wind brushed them together. Boy and woman unraveled one after the other, overlapping flowers on the lake's surface.

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Thomil couldn't blame the younger Caldonnae who retched and wept at the sight of their fellows in ribbons. But at twenty, he had lost enough loved ones to Blight that he was hardened to it. He forged ahead alongside his sister and her husband, pacing himself carefully, no matter what he heard, no matter whose cries pulled at his heart.

He tried not to recognize one scream as belonging to Mirach, his last surviving friend from childhood and the last practitioner of their tribe's traditional woodwork. He tried not to see the light claim Rhiga, who had breastfed him in his mother's absence; Tarhem, who had taught him to hunt after his father was gone; Landair, whose impeccable memory kept the tribe's oldest songs alive.

Mercifully, as the screams multiplied and echoed, they merged into one rending, all-encompassing howl in which the keenest ear couldn't discern an individual voice. Instead of letting himself wonder how many Caldonnae were still left running, Thomil focused on Arras several strides in front of him and Maeva at his side. As long as they were with him, he could keep going. And if, at some point, they weren't . . . well, Thomil had tried to steel himself for that too.

As they neared the middle of the lake, the youths who had sprinted at first were flagging. It was the seasoned adult runners like Thomil, Maeva, and Arras who pulled ahead now. Arras led their cluster, outpacing everyone, even with little Carra in his arms. All Caldonnae were winter runners, but even the best-conditioned lungs could draw in only so much air at these low temperatures before the cold overcame the runner. Thomil was starting to feel the freeze dangerously deep in his chest. He had just fallen a few paces behind Maeva in the hopes of slowing his breathing and easing the damage when, ahead of them, the white struck again.

Right between Arras's shoulder blades.

Maeva's *"No!"*—more plea than denial—couldn't stop the inevitable. Arras turned back to his wife, and Thomil had never seen such terror in those steel eyes. The hunter's roar was barely recognizable as words. *"Take Carra!"*

Primal maternal desperation animated Maeva's body in an impossible acceleration over the last few feet of snow to her husband. She

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snatched Carra from Arras's great arms just as he came apart in a spiral of light, blood, and unfurling muscle.

Carra shrieked as a stray loop of the light clipped her face, then she went abruptly quiet, falling unconscious—Thomil prayed to the gods, *Please, just unconscious.* The light had only grazed her face; it hadn't successfully jumped from Arras's body to hers.

"Arras!" Maeva wailed as her husband fell to the snow in a red flower indistinguishable from any other. "Arras, no! No!" But the only thing she could do for him was keep running. Clutching a limp Carra to her breast, she staggered forward through her sobs.

"I'll take her!" Thomil called, recognizing that his stricken sister wouldn't make it under the extra weight. "Maeva, I've got her!" He fell into step with Maeva and pulled Carra into his arms without breaking stride. "Just focus on running."

The frozen air had turned from a searing to a stabbing in Thomil's lungs, but it no longer mattered what damage he sustained. Not now that he was responsible for getting Carra to safety.

The remaining runners were at least three-quarters of the way across the lake now. Almost there, and there were still a few of them left. Thomil didn't look, but whenever there was a break in the screaming, he could hear their feet crunching snow. That snow grew thinner and wetter as the glow of Tiran's barrier loomed closer, radiating warmth that would have been a welcome reprieve if Thomil had not already burned his lungs raw.

Beneath his boots—falling too heavily now that Carra was in his arms—came an echoing twang like a snapping lute string. The sound was meaningless to him until it grew louder, and someone far behind cried, "The ice! It's giving way!"

Thomil looked back just as the first person crashed through the surface. It was Beyern, the hunter—turned prey in the jaws of the lake. Jagged ice gnashed him like teeth, and as the cracks shot outward from his position, the men and women behind Thomil stumbled—all six of them.

Gods, were there only six left?

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No.

No, that couldn't be right . . . But the snow behind the fracturing ice showed the truth in a meadow of red flowers. More than thirty Caldonnae had been reduced to blood on the snow, leaving only these few—and the ice beneath their feet was breaking. It happened in terrible succession, like the Blight jumping from one living thing to the next; the ice split along many seams, pitching the remaining Caldonnae into the water.

"No!" Thomil gasped as the indifferent lake swallowed his sister whole.

After Thomil's mother had died giving birth to him, Maeva had been there to hold her new brother. When Blight had taken their father, Maeva had scrubbed the blood and tears from Thomil's face. After all their aunts and siblings were gone, Maeva had been there. The single constant.

Thomil's world broke with the ice. His legs gave out. Dark and cold closed around him, even though the ice beneath his knees had yet to split. He drowned with his family.

Then a *"NO!"* like a spear pierced the smothering dark.

Maeva was submerged except for her head, the chill of death already clinging to her lips, fiery hair frosted to her cheeks. She had clawed her way up a tilting pane of ice—not to live, but to scream, *"Thomil! RUN!"*

And a truth snapped painfully into place in Thomil's heart: Maeva had carried him all this way for this moment. So that, at this last stretch, Thomil could carry her daughter. Here was a reason to live greater than all his grief and fear.

The water lit up bright white in three—then four, five, six—places that quickly turned a churning red as Blight claimed the drowning victims. And so went the last of the Caldonnae.

But not quite. Thomil clutched his niece close, and the feel of her head on his chest drove him to his feet. *Not quite the last!*

We are one blood. Beyern's voice resonated even as the hunter and Maeva and all the rest slipped into the blazing jaws of death. *One blood, one name, one purpose.*

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Empty of all things but that purpose, Thomil turned and *sprinted* for the city.

No longer caring if he destroyed his body, he ran as no human had run before. Carra's weight, which should have slowed him down, pulled him forward as though all the fickle gods of the Kwen had thrown their strength into this last sprint for the far shore. Siernaya of the Hearth made strength from the burning in Thomil's lungs, Mearras of the Hunt lent him stamina beyond his physical form, Nenn of the Waters held the ice firm, even as cracks bit at Thomil's heels. The rocks along the edge of the lake glowed gold with the magic of Tiran. Salvation. And Death Herself seemed to let Thomil slip by.

His boots went through the ice at the last few paces, where the warmth of the barrier had reduced it to a thin sheet. It didn't matter. The water here reached only to his shins, and he crashed forward, cutting his legs on the breaking ice but unable to feel the damage through the cold. He reached the rocks a madman and scrambled up them into the golden glow of safety. The magical barrier didn't resist Thomil's entry—just washed him in light that prickled on his chilled skin.

Then he broke through the other side into pure spring.

They had made it.

Thomil fell to his knees on the flattest ground he had ever seen. Not ground, he realized. The stuff beneath his knees was a Tiranish invention. *Pavement*. He set Carra down as gently as he could on that unnaturally flat surface. Her little face was pale with cold and oozing blood where Blight had burned a crescent across her left eye. With shaking hands, Thomil fumbled to yank his mitten off and pressed two fingers to the side of her neck.

"Please . . ." he murmured, "please, please . . ." And even here, where none of the gods could reach him, they granted him this one mercy. A heartbeat answered.

Carra was going to live. With that understanding, the animal strength fled Thomil's body, and he collapsed beside his niece.

Blight had gone from the air, but so had any whisper of Thomil's

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gods, leaving behind only a terrible absence. He opened his mouth to sob, but he was too weak to do more than wheeze. Tears trickled from his eyes into the hair at his temples, melting the crystallized sweat on his skin, and he hated himself for not being able to scream. The Caldonnae were gone, along with all their skills and songs and love for one another. The Earth should be shaking. The sky should tear open and wail for their loss. And here Thomil lay, gulping like a beached fish, unable to muster a sound.

He didn't know how long he had been lying there when a bootheel dug into his shoulder.

"Hey!" a voice said with the impatience of someone who had repeated himself several times. A foreign face swam into focus above Thomil, green-eyed and snub-nosed under a thatch of short brown hair. *"You awake, Blighter?"*

Tiranish grew from the same tree as the languages Thomil knew—Caldonnish roots with an Endrasta texture to the syllables like the serration at the edges of leaves—but it took his ears a moment to adjust to the mismatch of sounds. The sun peeking over the eastern hills was not the sun Thomil knew. The barrier had altered its color, and the straight lines of Tiran's buildings broke its light into stark alien rectangles. Even the air felt wrong now that Thomil's lungs had stopped burning enough for him to taste each breath—smoky, but unlike a campfire or prairie burn, this smoke carried a tang of acid like bile.

"Hey, Benny!" the barrier guard called over his shoulder. *"We got a Kwen over here!"*

"Just one this time?" said a second voice.

"Well, two, counting the little one, but I think it might be dead."

No! Thomil tried to say, but all that came out was a burning gurgle.

A second figure appeared above him, distinguishable from the first only by the smattering of freckles across his nose; Elder Sertha had warned that Tiranish could be difficult to tell apart. These two were dressed identically in stiff brass-buttoned uniforms. They bore metal weapons on their backs, longer than clubs, shorter than spears. Guns.

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"If they're too weak to work, we don't have space for them," the freckled guard said coolly.

Did that mean . . . ?

"Want me to throw them back out?"

"No!" Thomil finally managed and grasped the first guard's boot. He might not be able to stand or even speak above a grating rasp, but his grip was powerful from years of stitching leather and stringing bows. It should speak for itself. *"I can work."*

They were among the few Tiranish words Thomil had learned before the crossing. Elder Sertha had said that anyone who made it to this side of the barrier would need them to stay alive.

"I can work!"

"Yeah?" The freckled Tiranishman seemed unconvinced. *"You don't look it."*

"He's got quite the grip, though." The first guard grimaced down at the hand on his boot. *"Can't hurt to take him to the camp and see if he recovers."*

"Fine," the freckled guard said impatiently. *"I'll get rid of the girl."* He reached down for Carra.

"NO!" Desperation reanimated Thomil's body, pitching him forward over his niece.

"Oh, for Feryn's sake!" The first guard placed a boot against Thomil's shoulder to shove him aside.

But there was one last thing Elder Sertha had said about the Tiranish: they couldn't knowingly separate parents from children. Their religious laws forbade it. So, braced over Carra, Thomil rasped a Tiranish word the Caldonnae had little use for:

"Mine . . . my daughter."

It felt viscerally wrong to deny Maeva and Arras's existence when their blood was still fresh on the lake. But the Tiranish gave strange power to words and claims of ownership.

The boot lifted from Thomil's shoulder.

"Your daughter, huh?" the freckled man said. And apparently, the Tiranish had the same trouble with Kwen faces as Thomil had with

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theirs; neither guard questioned why Thomil shared precious few features with his niece. That they both had gray eyes was enough.

"Fine, then, you can go to the camp together. See how you like it."

When Thomil looked at the freckled guard in confusion, the Tiranishman clarified spitefully, *"Good luck feeding the little rat. It'll be your funeral."*

If his words were meant to intimidate Thomil, it was a poor attempt. Did this man not understand? Thomil was already dead. His whole being lay on the other side of the barrier in bloody shreds that would vanish with the next snowfall. But Carra was alive. And while Thomil's husk drew breath, by all his silent gods, she was going to stay that way.

In his heart, he doubted it was possible to raise a Caldonn child in this city of metal and gears, but he would be betraying all his ancestors if he didn't try. As long as the two of them stayed together, he could tell himself that the carnage of the crossing hadn't been for nothing.

The Caldonnae still lived.

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All present watched in wonder as Stravos stood upon his crooked leg and raised the barrier from spellwork the like of which even Lord Prophet Leon had scarcely seen—one layer to guard from winter, one layer to guard from bitterest Blight. And within this golden cradle, made by God's Will and maintained by His mages, we set our nation of the Chosen.

—*The Tirasid,* Foundation, Verse 3 (56 of Tiran)



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A Woman Wanting

Sciona pressed her forehead to the seat in front of her and failed to slow her breathing.

"Come on, honey," Alba coaxed. "Sit up and have a scone."

"Can't." Sciona squeezed her eyes shut, trying to quell the awful squirming in her gut as the train hummed onward. "Not yet."

"You're not going to throw up."

"No," Sciona said through clenched teeth. "I still might."

"You barely touched your breakfast."

"I perform better on an empty stomach."

"That doesn't make sense," Alba said before crunching into one of the scones herself.

"Maybe not to you." Hunger had a way of focusing Sciona on days like this—when she needed to operate at maximum capacity. Satisfaction was the enemy. Comfort was the enemy. She'd picked at her egg scramble this morning to placate Aunt Winny, but ultimately, she *needed* this aching hollow in the pit of her stomach.

"Look, I understand you being anxious—"

"You really don't," Sciona said to the back of the train seat. "No one does. Literally. No woman of our generation has attempted this exam."

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"So dramatic!" Alba laughed, and Sciona didn't need to look to know her cousin was rolling her eyes. "It must be hard to be you! How terrible to be so singularly talented!"

Not talented, Sciona thought. *Insatiable. Insane.*

"And, look, being a woman should make this easier for you, shouldn't it?"

"Easier *how,* Alba? Enlighten me."

"I mean, no female's ever passed the exam before, so if you fail, there's no shame in it."

No shame. Of course Alba would think that. To have shame, one had to have pride, and Alba had never had Sciona's unreasonable excess of that.

"It's not shame I'm worried about," Sciona said, although there would be plenty of that after how hard she had worked. "You know why the Council only considers a woman for testing once every decade, right?"

"I know," Alba said with the kind of long-suffering tone that Sciona couldn't stand. "They say testing women is a waste of time."

"Right," Sciona said, "meaning the Magistry only trots out a female applicant every ten years to prove the truism—that women aren't worth the Council's consideration. So, you see my problem? If I fail, I'll *be* that proof. I'll have ruined magic for the next decade of female research mages."

"I think you're overthinking this."

"I think you're *under*thinking it. Tests like this are political, and performative, and just—fraught, you understand?" Not that political nuance was Sciona's strong suit; some functions of the Magistry were just glaringly obvious. "This exam *will* have consequences for people who aren't me."

"Okay, but come on," Alba said. "Since when do you really care about people who aren't you?"

"I *care,*" Sciona protested, immediately aware that her tone was too defensive to convince.

"Yeah? Where'd these scones come from?"

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"Sorry—what?"

"Who made this basket of scones?"

"Aunt Winny?" Sciona assumed.

"Do you remember her baking last night or this morning?"

"Why would I remember that?" Sciona snapped. "I was a little busy preparing for the most important test of my life."

"The scones were a gift from Ansel . . . the baker's son," Alba added when Sciona just looked at her blankly, "who's waved to you with a big grin on his face every morning since his family set up shop on our street. He dropped them off last night before you left the table." When recognition still didn't register on Sciona's face, Alba continued, "We were listening to election predictions on the radio when he came in. You looked right at him. You really don't remember?"

"I didn't realize the exam was starting," Sciona said sourly. "Am I going to be tested on the color of his cap too? Some insipid comment he made about the weather?"

"You could stand to be nicer to Ansel." Alba frowned in that judgmental way that Sciona never quite understood but that always hurt. "You remember that he lost his brother last year?"

"Of course I remember." The sight of that much blood on the cobbles was difficult to forget. "But what does that have to do with me?"

"I'm just saying, you *barely* pay attention to the people right in front of you. I'm sure your passing the exam would be good for other women and all that, but I don't think you can say you're doing it *for* them. I mean, can you even *name* a practicing female research mage—or *any* practicing research mage—you actually care about?"

Sciona tilted her head, opened her mouth—

"Your mentor doesn't count."

Sciona closed her mouth. Maybe Alba had a point. Was Sciona really upset that women might not be allowed into the High Magistry or at the idea that *she* might not be allowed in? After twenty years of reading every night instead of sleeping, scribbling formulas instead of touching her meals—

"Oh, Sciona, you have to sit up!" Alba slapped at her cousin's arm, her olive-green eyes wide in wonder. "Sit up and look! It's so pretty!"

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The train was racing across the highest bridge above the city just as the sky blushed with the promise of sun over the eastern hills. Even after a thousand train rides along these tracks, there was nothing quite like watching the greatest civilization in the world waking with the dawn.

Tiran's holy forty-sector energy grid ran all night but only lit up in the early morning, and this was the perfect time of year to appreciate the sight. With the midnight sun of summer long gone and the lightless winter still to come, the sun rose at the same hour as the industrious Tiranish people. Electric lights blinked on in the windows of the work districts first, then in the mansions beyond, creating a sea of sparks that trailed off into the blue-black expanse of the farmlands to the north. Spells flashed like lightning across the skyline as alchemists siphoned ore for the day's steel production. Below the train tracks, cars bearing morning milk and fruit deliveries for the wealthy trundled along the roads like a procession of bright-shelled beetles. With Archmage Duris's new rubber compounds for their wheels and smooth alchemical cement replacing the cobblestones of most major streets, vehicles moved faster now than ever, but the "magic-drawn carriages" still seemed slow and small from the train.

Sciona liked the city best from up here, all its technical marvels on display without the mess of its human inhabitants, no one to bother her with their chatter or attempts at eye contact—well, no one except the excitable woman in the seat next to her.

"Praise Feryn, what a view!" Alba hung on Sciona's arm as the train climbed. The clock and radio repair shop where Alba worked was only two blocks from their apartment, so she had little occasion to see the wider city of Tiran. "I can't believe this is your commute!"

"Possibly for the last time." Sciona had promised Aunt Winny that if the exam didn't work out, she would get a real job teaching magic to children at one of the local schools. No more university, no more research, no chance at a real legacy, just hordes of snot-nosed schoolboys like the ones who had made her childhood hell.

"Don't say that, Sciona! You're going to do amazing."

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"Nobody does *amazing* on the High Magistry exam," Sciona said, determined not to torment herself with hope. "They just pass, or they don't."

By the time the train slowed at the University of Magics and Industry, the sun had crested the hills to sparkle off the dome that protected Tiran from Blight and insulated it through the dark winter.

A few people eyed Sciona's dark plum robes in surprise as she picked her way down the train aisle and stepped onto the platform. It wasn't that women never reached Sciona's level of study; it just wasn't common. And of the few women who *did* make it to a graduate degree in magic, most donned green robes and went into teaching. Why pursue research, after all, when its highest levels were inaccessible to you? Better for a lady mage to employ her talents training the next generation of great male innovators—unless she was a perpetually unsatisfied monster like Sciona, always after what wasn't hers.

While Alba marveled at the bustle and majesty of the University train station, Sciona's appreciation landed where it always did—on the sheer magical power of the train itself. She never tired of watching the masterfully designed pressure conduits glow along each of the doors, pushing them closed. As those conduits dimmed, the engine at the front of the train blazed, siphoning energy from the Reserve to turn those great wheels on the tracks.

Sciona felt the train shudder with the massive energy intake—like a thrill down a spine—before it continued west with its remaining passengers. Years ago, she had tugged on Aunt Winny's worn, lacy sleeve and asked what made the trains move. What had the power to animate a machine the size of a dragon?

"The mages make the trains move, dear," Aunt Winny had said and, when she saw that the answer hadn't satisfied her niece, clarified, "Clever men who study very, very hard."

Sciona remembered the shock as she absorbed this revelation: mages were just men . . . men who had been boys once. She remembered thinking that she was cleverer than any boy in her primary school. She studied harder than any of them. So why not her?

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Why not her?

Her pace quickened, making her cousin jog to keep up. Alba had the longer legs, but she kept pausing, clearly intrigued by the commotion around them—which, in fairness, was more intense than usual. Whenever possible, highmage examinations were timed to coincide with the election of city chairs, the idea being that new mages and politicians entered the hallowed halls of the theocracy at the same time—the will of God and the people moving as one. Sciona just wished the public election end of the process didn't have to be *so loud* when she had magic to concentrate on.

The train platform teemed with activists flinging pamphlets around and shouting about their chosen city chair candidates.

"Ladies! Ladies! Exercise your rights! Vote Nerys for women's advancement!"

"Widmont, I say! A chair for the people!"

"Tiran stands on its traditions!" A mustachioed man with an "Elect Perramis" button on his lapel brandished a pamphlet at Alba.

But Sciona got there first. "She's not interested." Sciona swatted the paper from the man's hand and it fluttered to the pavement. This probably would have been the beginning of a fight, but the sight of a purple robe made the Perramis campaigners back off without escalating. "Thank you." Taking her cousin's arm, Sciona trod on the fallen pamphlet, leaving an impression of her square-heeled boot on that face—with its upsettingly familiar thin brow and large, hungry eyes.

Beyond the train platform, the crowd thinned as mages, staff, and students took their separate paths into the labyrinthine campus. The current University of Magics and Industry extended more than a mile in any given direction, but the westbound train bore its passengers past the modern concrete towers at the fringes of campus to the ancient architecture at the heart of Tiran. Here stood fortresses from the Conquest, long since converted into dorms and classrooms, with honeysuckle climbing their ramparts and lichen crowning their turrets.

Alba's mouth hung open as she beheld the antique splendor under the light of the rising sun.

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"You've been on campus before, haven't you?" Sciona vaguely re-

membered Alba accompanying her to a few interviews during the application process many years ago.

"Yeah, it's just . . ." Alba trailed off as the Magicentre came into view and words failed her. The dome of Leon's Hall—the seat of all magic in Tiran—blazed white and gold in the morning light. With each step they took, the spires of the library rose higher behind the dome like a crown while Tiran's two tallest siphoning towers stood on either side like ancient sentries.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Sciona smiled, as proud as Aunt Winny showing a guest into her busily decorated sitting room. Maybe it was silly, but the University really was home to Sciona in a way no hearth or kitchen ever would be.

While the larger additions to the Magicentre had come later, the great stone entrance had stood unchanged for three hundred years. Tiran's five Founding Mages loomed between the columns—Leon, Stravos, Kaedor, Vernyn, and Faene the First—each three stories of benevolent stone. The art of sculpture had advanced in the intervening centuries, but there was something inimitably mighty about these works from the dawn of Tiran, their rough-hewn features and wise eyes inlaid with peridot to give them life.

Founding Mage Leon's words glinted in polished alchemic gold above the doors:

To Tiran, the Bounty of the Otherrealm.
To my Mages, all its Power.
May you ever be good Stewards to this Bright
Haven in a world of darkness.

Carved below that was Faene the First's motto and mission statement of the University:

Truth over delusion. Growth over comfort. God over all.

Sciona had to gather her skirts into a great bundle to climb the steps to the double doors. She never would have worn such a fine bit

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of frippery to a test, but Aunt Winny had balked when her niece had come downstairs in her usual study blouse and pinafore. To go before the archmages, Aunt Winny insisted, Sciona must look a proper lady. How else would she get them to take her seriously? Sciona could have pointed out that her spellwork was supposed to do that, but she had been too dazed with nerves to object as her aunt manhandled her into the layers of petticoats and printed velvet.

The security conduits in the foyer registered the bronze clasp of Sciona's robe, and a second set of doors opened to allow the women through. This front chamber of the Magicentre was accessible to all staff, students, and guests. Some undergraduate classes were even held in the two recently renovated additions between Leon's Hall and the siphoning towers. This made for an assortment of mages flurrying about the space in preparation for the coming term, robes flapping dramatically behind them—mahogany for undergraduates, fern green for schoolmages, purple for labmages, white for the highmages and the archmages who commanded them all.

The High Magistry exam would take place in Leon's Hall beneath the dome where Tiran's first Council had assembled. Unlike the front of the Magicentre, the historical chamber was off-limits to the public, meaning Sciona and Alba had to pass a green-robed secretary sitting behind a desk at the security gates. The elderly woman eyed Sciona's robe for a beat before lighting up.

"Oh, you must be Sciona Freynan!" Her emerald eyes were all atwinkle as though she'd just seen a unicorn. "You and your friend can go right on through there. And good luck!"

The gossip mill had been at work within the Magistry if even the first-floor secretary knew there was a female applicant taking the exam this year; the Council was usually secretive about who they were considering.

The way the schoolmage raised her fist in encouragement made Sciona wonder if this same secretary had been at that desk the last time a hopeful woman passed these doors to break on the challenges beyond. Perhaps she herself had once dreamed of the High Magistry

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but had succumbed to the pressures of tradition and practicality and let those dreams go.

Stop that, Sciona, the voice of reason warned. *You're spinning worst-case scenarios where they don't exist.*

But was she? How unreasonable was it to expect failure where no woman had ever succeeded? Realistically, Sciona's *purpose* was to fail here. Realistically, her future would be the same as that secretary's—trapped behind a tiny desk, serving her male superiors until her quick hands slowed and her mind rotted from idleness. Could Sciona live that sort of future? Could she bear it?

Her steps slowed as she reached the antechamber, which was already half-full of purple-robed applicants and their male relatives. These men all belonged to good families. Old magic. Old money. *They* were the ones meant to succeed here, while Sciona was meant to backslide neatly into her predestined position. Secretary. Assistant. *Wife.* The shadowy truth had been gnawing at the edges of Sciona's consciousness for weeks. It swelled now, darkening the way ahead. There was no life beyond this exam. If she didn't pass, she couldn't go on living. And yet, how could she pass? Existential terror seized Sciona, swarming her vision with blackness. The floor was blurring, rushing up to meet her—when a swish of white drove back the dark like Leon before the Horde.

Archmage Derrith Bringham.

Sciona stumbled, found her feet, and looked up at her mentor.

The archmage was in full regalia, gold ropes of distinction hanging from the shoulders of his white robes. Holy light.

"There she is!" He beamed, arms outstretched. "My soon-to-be highmage, Miss Freynan! And Miss Livian, delightful to see you."

"Y-you remember me, Archmage?" Now it seemed that Alba might be the one to faint.

"Miss Freynan's lovely cousin? How could I forget?"

Alba flushed pink beneath her freckles like she was a schoolgirl. Maybe it was just that men didn't often call Alba lovely; she was on the tall side for a woman, with a squarish jaw and more muscle in her

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arms than most men liked. Given that, Sciona supposed even a compliment from a man old enough to be her father was something to treasure.

"Chin up now, child." The archmage turned back to Sciona. "They're going to want to see a little confidence."

"All right," Sciona breathed. *Just not too much confidence,* she thought, or the testers would think her arrogant. Half of Tiran probably thought it arrogant for a woman to attempt the exam at all.

"You look ill, Miss Freynan. Are you going to lose your breakfast?"

Maybe. Sciona shook her head. "It's just nerves, sir. I'm fine."

"Since when is Sciona Freynan nervous for any test?"

"I . . ."

"Since when is she afraid of a challenge?"

"I don't know." Since the road map had vanished. Since she'd reached the line past which no woman had advanced.

All obstacles to this point had been within Sciona's control—conquerable with deep thought and hard work. Earning an advanced degree in sourcing had been hard, but other women had done it before. Working as an archmage's assistant had been grueling, but students younger than Sciona had done it before. There was precedent. Highmagehood was the first mark that seemed out of reach, no matter how perfectly Sciona performed.

"Freynan." Bringham's voice brought her firmly back to the present. "Listen to me. This is a task like any other. It is within your power."

Of course Bringham had the right words. Whether those words were true was a different matter.

"No nerves, now," he said as if it were that simple. "We both know nothing can stop you once you get your teeth into a spell. Just wait. My fellow archmages are going to eat their words about you."

"There were words about me?" Sciona said, wishing the thought didn't make her quite so queasy.

"They're paying attention. For the purposes of this exam, that's a good thing."

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"Is it?"

"It *can* be. But that part of the game is for me to worry about. You just focus on giving the usual Freynan over-performance, yes?"

And, Feryn, Sciona wanted to be worthy of the confidence in his smile. Archmage Bringham had staked his credibility on her when he pushed so hard to have her application considered. If she fell short today, she wouldn't just be ruining opportunities for other women. She would be damaging Bringham's reputation—after everything he had done for her.

"I'll try not to disappoint you."

"Not possible," he said. "Now, I should get back to the other archmages. As always, we have a great deal of needless last-minute squabbling over the particulars of the exam. You'll want to be in there soon, too, Freynan." He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "I get the feeling you'll be less nervous after you take stock of the competition." He winked and turned in the direction of Leon's Hall.

"All right." Sciona gave Alba's hand a last squeeze. "I guess I'll see you on the other side."

"I'll be right here when you're done," said Alba.

"Oh, Miss Livian." Bringham turned back as though just remembering that Alba was there. "Wouldn't you like to watch?"

"Watch?"

"Applicants often bring fathers and brothers to their examinations, and you're Miss Freynan's family, aren't you?"

"Yes . . ." Alba said, "but women don't usually go in, do they?"

"There's no law prohibiting it. And one exception has already been made"—Bringham inclined his head toward Sciona—"so what's the harm?"

Through the next set of doors, Leon's Hall told a story in three parts. Tiran's future sat on the crescent of tiered benches along one side of the chamber: purple-robed research mages like Sciona, hoping to join the ranks of the city's highest innovators. Opposite them sat Tiran's present in the form of the white-robed archmages of the Council. The soaring dome above was painted with Tiran's past, rendering all the living small by its glory. There was Archmage Leon bringing the Founding Texts down from the peak, then another de-

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piction of him with his staff held aloft to banish the Horde of Thousands from the Tiran Basin. There was copper-haired Archmage Stravos erecting the barrier that had saved civilization from the foretold Blight. There was Faene the First as a young man, transcribing the *Leonid* at Leon's feet, then as a wizened elder, composing the *Tirasid.* There was Mordra the Second at his forge inventing steel.

Normally, Sciona would have paused to admire the magnitude of the history on display and contemplate her place in it. But the moment she entered, her consciousness sucked inward in self-defense, making the rest of the world fuzzy. She barely felt herself sit on the bench between Alba and another examinee. The purple-robed man looked younger than Sciona—he was maybe twenty-four? The subtly expensive waistcoat beneath his robes said that he came from money, but he was the only applicant in the chamber who didn't have a single relative with him.

"Hello," Alba greeted him, ever friendly. "I'm Alba Livian. This is Sciona Freynan."

The man nodded at Alba and gave a little grunt before turning away in what was either nervousness or extreme rudeness.

"It's fine," Sciona whispered as Alba gave him a sour look. "Ignore him."

Emotionally, Sciona was at capacity. If she started worrying about her competition, her head would explode, and Alba would have to scrub her brains from the bench. For now, the only mages in the chamber she could afford to contemplate were the examiners.

The twelve mages of the High Council sat raised up behind a long desk, all of them busy conferring, shuffling through their notes, or adjusting their multi-purpose conduits. Their murmurs were too low to make out from the examinee seating but seemed to fill the chamber with their gravity all the same. Only one hundred mages ever practiced in the High Magistry at a given time. Of those hundred, only the twelve greatest sat on this High Council and bore the title of archmage. These were the men who turned the wheels of Tiran, as their forefathers had since its founding.

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Archmage Bringham was the sole Council mage Sciona knew in

person, but she knew all of the others almost as intimately through their books on a breadth of magical disciplines. Archmage Supreme Orynhel, Head of State and Clergy, sat in the highest seat. At his right hand sat Archmages Thelanra, Mordra the Ninth, Gamwen, Lynwick the Fourth, Eringale, and Scywin. At his left sat Bringham, Renthorn the Second, Duris, Capernai, and Faene the Eleventh. Sciona had read every word these men had ever written, down to the footnotes, and structured her life around their teachings.

"So, those are the archmages?" Alba whispered in awe.

"Yep." Having worked with Bringham for so long—having seen him on his off days, when he spilled tea on his notes, got his mapping coordinates backwards, or stubbed his toe on lab equipment—should have taken some of the mystique from the Council. But beholding them all seated together in this hallowed hall sent a thrill up Sciona's spine.

"They don't look how I expected."

"Did you think they were as big as the statues outside?" Sciona joked. "Or that those white robes actually radiated light like in the paintings?"

"No. I'm not five. I just—I guess I thought they'd be carrying staffs?"

"Staffs are wartime conduits," Sciona said. In battle, a mage needed a supple yet robust conduit that wouldn't blow apart with the explosive energy expenditures of combat. But Tiran hadn't been at war since the Founding Mages defeated the Horde three hundred years ago. "Most highmages still train with staffs as private religious practice since it's mandated in the *Tirasid*"—a text Alba hadn't read in Leonite school—"but conduits that big aren't really practical for day-to-day magic." In the years Sciona had worked for Archmage Bringham, she had never seen him take his staff out of its display case.

"Then how do they do their magic?" Alba asked. "All with spellographs?"

"No, no," Sciona said. "Typing up every spell on the spot would get time-consuming, wouldn't it? Staffs are just one kind of multipurpose conduit. Highmages all use different objects to implement

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their pre-written spells. Archmage Duris uses those white gloves. Archmage Orynhel has his ring, though most of the older mages still prefer wands."

"How does that work?"

"You'll see."

All seating in the hall faced inward, overlooking a circular floor where the applicants would demonstrate their skills. This circle had hosted a hundred turning points in Tiranish history. It was where the traitor mage Sabernyn had been tried for dark magic and put to death. It was where Renthorn the First had showcased the magical lightbulb that had led to the development of Tiran's entire electrical grid. Careers were born, nurtured, and slaughtered within this circle.

Today, the pale limestone floor was empty save for an unassuming oak desk at its center. On the desk sat a stack of spellpaper and a top-of-the-line Lynwick spellograph with a standard mapping coil the size of a dinner plate. Other items would be involved in the testing, but the archmages would summon those as they became relevant.

"Jerrin Mordra!" was the first name Archmage Orynhel called into the tense hush, and the applicant beside Sciona stood. "Please step forward!"

Mordra?

Sciona glanced sideways at the young man as he nervously straightened his robes over that fancy-boy waistcoat. This was Archmage Sireth Mordra's son? All at once, Sciona hated him for displaying any nerves at all. There were no stakes for him here. He would pass the exam on the basis of legacy, as the sons of Council members always did. There were only two spaces open within the High Magistry since Highmage Kamdyn had retired and Scywin had been promoted to the Council following Archmage Ardona's passing during the last Deep Night. If Archmage Mordra's son met the basest of standards on the testing floor, one of those spots belonged to him.

Sciona glared at the legacy's back as he faced the Council, thanked them for their consideration, and stated his mission.

"Archmages of Tiran, I humbly stand before you to test for the rank of highmage. I have previously studied magic at Danworth Acad-

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emy and here at the University of Magics and Industry. My areas of specialization are mathematics and mapping theory."

In other words, nothing. The theory of magic without the application. Anyone with an important enough father could get good grades in mathematics and theory since neither required proof of efficacy in a lab, let alone a factory.

"With your permission, I will approach the testing desk."

As Archmage Orynhel nodded, Sciona leaned forward, keen to see if this little bastard would live up to his forebears. Mordras past had revolutionized Tiran's transportation and communications systems, so it was a tall order.

Archmage Renthorn the Second was the first to set a prompt. Drawing a hickory wand from his sleeve, he executed a subtle flourish, barely perceptible from the examinee seating. Light flashed at the wand tip, and a bowl materialized on the desk.

"In the vessel before you, you will find four hundred paper strips. Compose and activate a spell to disperse them throughout the chamber."

A laughably easy prompt. There were a hundred ways to deliver and precious few ways to screw it up. Sciona supposed an excess of energy might create a spark that set the paper ablaze, but Renthorn the Second hadn't demanded that the applicant keep the pieces undamaged, only that he disperse them.

Jerrin Mordra attacked the spellograph with the hands of a seasoned composer, fingers punching the steel keys so fast that the individual clicks merged into a cascading clatter. The silence in the hall magnified the sound and made Sciona's own fingers twitch. After a half minute of typing, Mordra hit the break key with an audible *clack* and began his mapping composition.

Here, his fingers slowed just slightly, betraying indecision. A simple mapping sub-spell would have taken Sciona half as long to write, but *she* had served her time since her undergraduate days in Bringham's labs, handling raw energy as well as numbers. It was hard to predict how those numbers would translate to energy when you had only ever worked on paper. Finally, Mordra hit the mapping key.

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The spellograph clacked again and displayed the fruits of his tentative fiddling.

Alba gasped and gripped Sciona's hand so hard it hurt.

"What?" Sciona whispered.

"That's . . . I—is that . . . ?"

Sciona forgot that the sight of the Otherrealm was novel to nonmages like Alba, who rarely witnessed the magical processes behind their machines. To Sciona, the grayscale visual in Mordra's mapping coil just looked sloppy. The lights were dim where they should have been bright, fuzzy where they should have been crisp. It would be hard to nail down the right energy source in that muck. And Jerrin Mordra knew it, his fingers shaking with apprehension before locking in the siphoning coordinates that would power his action spell.

When he hit the siphoning key, an explosion went off in the bowl, sending paper confetti raining through the chamber and making the idiots murmur in wonder. One of those idiots, of course, was Alba.

"Amazing!" she marveled, plucking a bit of paper from where it had caught in her dark brown curls.

"That's not a hard spell," Sciona said under her breath. "Just flashy." Sciona could have done it in her sleep, and she was appalled at the uneven quality of the energy. A shred of paper that had stuck to her skirt was torn, and she noted that Mordra scrambled to restack the papers by the spellograph, which had blown out of order. "There's no reason to use that much force to disperse paper." It spoke to a lack of clarity in Mordra's mapping and, worse, a lack of precision in his targeting. To be expected of a *mathematics and mapping theory* major.

As the archmages gave Mordra his next prompt, Sciona found her hands itching anew. Even knitting her fingers together in an attempt at a dignified posture, she couldn't keep them from squirming. The keys beneath Mordra's too-slow hands were calling to her, and the knot of dread in her stomach was rapidly unraveling into a mad tangle of eagerness. What had she been anxious about before, anyway? She could do everything the Council was asking Mordra to do. Perfectly. Elegantly. They just needed to let her at that spellograph so she could show this fool how it was done.

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