

A college education. Mandatory for all mages over hedgemage level. Structured to give young mages the training they need to use their magic wisely and make sure they understand the ways magic should be used to support their obligation to their country. It also helps drive them into fields that will enable bright futures. ~ Draft promotional brochure

My freshman year at GAMageTech. A chance to make friends, get my degree, use the mage draft to create an entry to the career I wanted. I smiled, hefting my backpack up a bit higher on my shoulder, and headed towards the location of my Magic 101 class, making sure not to jostle the hood of my hoodie too much.

That I had emerged as an archmage and had a familiar still surprised me. Those things didn't go with the idea of me being Charles Wainscot, kid from the wrong side of the tracks. Well too bad. I was here now and I'd be damned if I wasted the lottery I'd just won.

"Well, well. Looks like we just got invaded by the fatties. Better watch your food guys—with Chunk around you might have to fight for it. Merlin knows, he has to keep eating to maintain that fatso effect."

I stiffened as her voice registered, destroying my rare hopeful mood. I knew that voice like I knew the sound of my mom's crying. And I hated it more. I'd thought I'd never have to hear her mocking sneer again after I graduated high school. Apparently, I wasn't that lucky. All silver linings have lightning hiding at the edges, ready to strike you.

With slow precision I turned to see my tormentor and the person I'd love to have die in a freak accident. Daniela Morrison. She had strawberry red hair, pale cream complexion, grass green eyes, and a tattoo in greens and pale yellows on her temple indicating she was an Entropy mage. By all accounts she was stunning, men tripped over their tongues to get her attention. All I saw was ugliness and cruelty. As usual she had an entourage of men fawning over her.

"Daniela. Why are you here?" I kept my voice flat. I knew she would spot any reaction and pounce on it. "You decided on Alabama Magics after you emerged as a wizard." My mother made sure I was kept abreast of her actions, no matter how many times I told her I didn't care. More accurately I'd told my mother, Mrs. Margaret Wainscot, abuse survivor, that I only wanted to know if Daniela died. However, Mom thought pretty people were nice, even though living with the gorgeous asshole that was father should have destroyed that delusion. But because Daniela was pretty, she must be nice, and therefore her only son would love to know about her.

The only thing I want to know is the day she dies. I'll throw a party.

She sneered, nose in the air. "Alabama Magics didn't understand how Purity works. This place is only moderately better. Housing had the audacity to stick me with a declared lesbian. Really." She huffed, her sneer warping her into a gargoyle. "Everyone knows you play in college, but if you're a mage you need to have babies, it's the only way to keep the magic bloodline going." She fluffed her hair, preening. Daniela was the epitome of what any good mage should want—pretty, smart, and magical. Too bad her soul had no beauty.

A flickering desire to give her the stats that proved while magic did tend to run in families it was only by a fifteen percent increase over the average emergence rate sparked for a moment. But that would mean I cared what she thought. I didn't.

"I see. And you are talking to me, why?" I wanted her to go away but getting out of social situations had never been my strong suit. Plus, any sign of weakness would amp up her bullying. Hell, dealing with people had never been anything I gave a damn about—computers were much easier. They didn't hit you or call you names.

"I just wanted to make sure the right people knew to stay away from you. After all, they might think you were decent or something, instead of a lying cheat." She spoke more to the sycophants around her than to me, using me to up her standing.

My jaw clenched and eyes narrowed, and the temptation to use my magic fought at my self-control, but using magic to hurt others was an instant death sentence if convicted. And I had no desire to die at this time. There were too many things to learn.

~Ch-ch danger?~ Arachena's voice rippled through my mind, her cool logical mind pushing back my anger. Arachena had issues with my name, either Charles or Wainscot. So we'd settled on Ch-ch—she said it meant Efficient Builder. I'd figured she meant logical. That I could live with.

Her words, though, reminded me of a few things. "Come on out, Arachena. Meet my not-friend." While Arachena understood English, or at least understood me, in the three months before this semester started I'd figured out there were lots of words that did not make sense to her. And calling Daniela my prey or enemy would be a mistake.

Huh, maybe I should have called her a waste of webbing? I'll have to remember that.

"What? Talking to yourself now, Chunk? I'm surprised you got past hedgemage. What, you make magician?" She referred to the ranks of mages. Hedgemage, magician, wizard, archmage, merlin.

"No. I emerged as an archmage. Specifically, a Pattern mage with Earth and Transform," I replied in a cool voice even I as lifted up my arm so Arachena could walk down it. "And I was speaking to my familiar." My tattoos told her my classes, but I enjoyed rubbing in my rank. Reminding her I was a more powerful mage than one Daniela Morrison, the Purity darling. Plus, Pattern and Transform was a requested combination, meaning I'd have job offers the second my draft was completed.

I kept my eyes on her and I saw the flinch as I mentioned my rank. It felt sweet. The gasp of horror and fear from her and her cronies that followed Arachena's appearance on my arm tasted like the sweetest chocolate I'd ever eaten. I turned to admire my familiar, Arachena.

Her body was mostly a pale pinkish white that darkened to indigo at the tips of her twelve legs. The fine hairs coating her legs, allowing her to sense vibrations, were a dark purple, while her two large eyes were an inky black. I thought if you looked hard you could see flecks of white in their depths. Besides, the subtle grays and blues of my tattoos matched Arachena and weren't as garish as Daniela's tattoo.

She found me the day I emerged and said she would help be my focus, that we were alike. I had no idea why I was her mage, but I'd known right then I'd found my best friend.

"What is that creature?" Daniela snarled as she took a step back and I let myself smile the tiniest bit.

"This is my familiar." I didn't bother to introduce them to her, they weren't worth her time. "And I'm sure you know that means she is protected under the Familiar Act. Besides, she's capable of protecting herself." That I only suspected, as I'd watched her hunt. She was fast and deadly, and though I hadn't verified if she could kill a human as easily, they didn't need to know that most of her prey had been small rodents.

"Figures. A fat waste of space like you would get something creepy and useless. Whatever. Stay out of my way, Chunk." She sneered at me and spun, her wave of strawberry hair flowing like a cape around her as she headed off.

I watched her and her associated flunkies flee. How was she here with me? She'd emerged a year before me at nineteen, which meant she should be a

sophomore and not in my freshman classes. I sighed and dismissed her. With luck I shouldn't run into her often. One could hope.

"Come on, Arachena, back into the hoodie. I need to finish exploring the campus and school starts next week. I want to make sure I know where everything is."

Arachena bobbed up and down on her legs, then scurried back up my arm and under my long hair to dive into my hood. She was about the size of a softball when she drew in her legs. With them extended she took up about the size of a serving platter. Her three segmented sections made her look like a cross between an ant and a tarantula. I simply thought she was the most elegant creature I'd ever seen.

I wore mostly hoodies, and had purchased a few sleeveless ones to deal with the Atlanta heat and provide for her. Arachena thought they were wonderful nests and curled up in them allowing her to remain hidden most of the time. I didn't braid my hair, as it only reached my shoulder blades. But between my loose hair and the hood, it created a suitable hiding place. People had odd reactions to anything that looked like a spider, and Arachena was much bigger than most terrestrial spiders. And she was very intelligent, and therefore more dangerous.

In the months since she'd claimed me, and it was a better word than anything else I could come up with, we'd talked a lot. She said she was from the Pattern realm and her kind were called Chitterians. They could have anywhere from four to twelve legs. While there didn't seem to be much like castes or races in her realm, the number of legs you had added to your attractiveness. In passing, she'd mentioned she had hundreds of children and many mates, and now it was time for her to explore the worlds. She told me our minds resonated well together and she wanted to see my realm.

As far as I was concerned, I'd give her whatever she wanted. She was the best thing to ever happen to me.

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Monday morning, I showed up early for the first class of my college career, partly to get the seat I wanted but also to scope out my peers. I'd learned a long time ago to make sure I was near the door. Easier to flee tormentors. While everyone assured me that didn't happen in college, I knew better. Daniela was proof. And while I had an inkling of how easily I could kill someone, a death

sentence didn't sound appealing. It meant I'd break my promise to Arachena to explore the world.

Settling in, I set my eyes to just be open the smallest slit as I watched the other students. People were interesting and you lived better if you knew how they would react. They had characteristics that let me know if they were bullies, victims, or just sheep. A girl walked in, too pretty and thin to be anything but stuck up, but what caught my attention was the cat in a carrier strapped to her chest.

Another mage with a familiar. Interesting. Too bad she'll be like most girls.

When class started, I shifted my attention to the teacher, though I felt he was a bit of a blow hard. Arrogant and full of himself, he couldn't be more than an archmage. However, having him ask about each mage's strengths and then calling out the girl meant I realized who she was.

The savior of the SEC. This summer, the media had been filled with stories about her double merlin status, her familiar, and how she'd fought off a gorgon and a unicorn in a stadium full of spectators.

I'd expected something different. Not sure what, but the slight woman looking nervous and embarrassed wasn't it.

~Cath. Excellent hunters. Good friends.~ Arachena stroked my hair from underneath, but I sensed she'd peeked out to look at the girl and the cat.

I gave her one more look, then dismissed her from my mind. Women like her never had time for men like me. Except she was in my next class too. Interesting that she was also a freshman, but then to confuse everything I hadn't seen her in any of my other classes. I took that bit of information and filed it away. I filed everything away. You never knew when it would be helpful.

The school year continued and to my disgust I found it no different than high school, except now, rather than popularity based on your parents and looks, it was based on power and looks. Daniela played up both, though she rarely admitted what her rank was. As the government paid for everything, getting to choose my roommate wasn't an option. But they did provide a decent apartment. Unfortunately, my assigned roommate was a member of the same Purity church as Daniela. What had started as an okay roommate situation quickly devolved into contempt and petty sabotage.

By the end of the first month, I kept a lock on the door to my room, carried my computer with me at all times, and found other places to be the majority of the time. Which is where I was when I ran into the savior of the SEC again, but this time she spoke to me.

Coffee isn't my favorite drink, too bitter. But a decent mocha will get my attention. Which is why I was in the Blue Donkey that night, doing homework and nursing my mocha. Arachena had fallen asleep in my hood and I'd just finished outlining the paper I needed to write, though I hadn't pulled out the next book I needed to read. Who chose these books anyhow? Were they determined to make sure magic was the most boring and pedantic thing on the face of the earth?

Either way, I needed to decide between what to read next, running to the bathroom, or getting another mocha when she walked up. I repressed a sigh, waiting for the brush off, the insults, and the arrogance. Striking first seemed like a better option. I already had enough issues with women who thought their looks or magic gave them power.

"So what does the savior of the SEC want with me?" I waited for the preening and arrogance.

Instead her face flushed and she looked down at her feet. "Oh, please, that name is so stupid and inaccurate. I was there. I did what I could. I'm frankly relieved the unicorn didn't eat me and that thing from Chaos left with only the jerk." Her face colored as she spoke.

It took everything I had not to laugh. I'd expected more pride and bragging about what she'd done. Not this embarrassed flush and dismissal of her efforts. I'd seen the news footage, but much of video had been fuzzy and swung about wildly making it hard to follow. Though the unicorn had been memorable. I found the comment about not eating her interesting.

"That didn't answer my question," I pointed out, still not sure where this was going.

This time she flushed even more and pulled on her ponytail, clearly nervous, and I had no idea what to expect by this point. She didn't follow any of the normal behaviors I'd come to expect from pretty women. I glanced over at her two friends who were just as pretty, each in their own way.

"This is super rude, and I'm sorry to even ask, but some lawyer wants to meet me. I don't trust him, so I chose some place public. My friends refused to let me come alone." She motioned towards her friends. "And I'd really like a table out of the way." She pulled a twenty out of jeans and thrust it at me. "I can pay for the inconvenience, and, I mean, you don't have to say yes, but please?"

Whatever I had expected, that had not been it. I'd need to reassess this odd woman. "Huh, not all pretty girls are bitches or full of themselves. Come on,

Arachena." I grabbed my stuff. I might as well go home. Hopefully the roommate wouldn't be there. "Keep the money. I needed to head home anyhow. Good luck with the meeting."

I noticed Arachena waving at the woman, but then she snuggled back down into my hood as I headed out. It was petty of me, but I enjoyed the look of confusion on their faces as I left. It also gave me a lot to think about.

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School continued, with my roommate and me reaching a mutual agreement. He ignored me and in return he wouldn't wake up with Arachena on his chest, hissing. It worked for all of us, especially as she thought he smelled like poison. Only thing I could figure was he drank like a fish, but that wasn't my problem. I kept to my schedule, and watched the double merlin. I was curious, but not that invested. I had too much to do and no time to worry about others. I wanted my degree in computer databases with my minor in patterns and psychology. I figured I'd be offered a job with one of the alphabet agencies as an intelligence analyst, and that was what I wanted. I already had my Oracle and Python certifications. Those certifications would fit well with my skills and degree goals, which in turn would let me get a quiet job where no one noticed me and provide me a chance to see what data patterns could reveal. The biggest frustration right now was that they didn't teach me any specific spells that were Pattern related until my junior year, well, outside the magic they included in the 101 classes. I wanted the specific Pattern magic spells, but they stressed over and over how many people died because they didn't understand what they were doing. So they wanted to wait. As dying was one aspect of magic I wanted to avoid, I tried to be patient.

While I knew lots of people crammed to get through their degree and probably their master's as fast as possible, I was in no hurry. The government would pay for it, and in return they'd get my services as recompense. So the idea of killing myself to go immediately to serve in the draft didn't excite me. But then, staying in college any longer than I absolutely had to didn't excite me either.

Either way, it meant I had more than enough homework to do. Wednesdays were odd in that I had a morning class then nothing until the midafternoon. Studying would be the best use of my time, and I had my computer with me to work on notes. But the library didn't interest me. A covered patio by one of the

nearby restaurants sounded good. I ordered appetizers and something hot and sat outside to work.

The weather was still brisk, but I'd never minded the cold, and the low sixties made it perfect for my hoodie and a hot drink. I sat out there munching away and typing when her voice pulled my attention away.

"Great, no wonder the patio stinks. Don't you know how to use deodorant? Or maybe it's how to brush your teeth? Oh, I know what it is. It's your lack of magical talent that stinks."

I raised my head to see Daniela standing there, glaring at me, a girl on one side of her, and a boy that was obviously trying to get in her pants on the other.

I looked at her. She didn't even upset me anymore, mostly, just annoyed the daylight out of me. "You're twenty. I'm nineteen. Why are you still acting like we're in high school? It's a big campus. Go away and leave me alone." I crossed my arms, staring at her.

She sneered and leaned close enough I could smell the sweet perfume she wore. Jasmine? Maybe some other flower. It amazed me that only her personality was ugly, the rest of her shined with beauty. You'd think there'd be some indication of what lay beneath that exterior.

"I will never quit. You made my life hell in high school, and I'll be magic-less before I quit making you pay." Her voice had such venom in it I pulled back, surprised and off balance. What in the world was she talking about? Other than her picking on me, I'd had nothing to do with her. Our friends didn't even overlap.

The snarl on her face was the only warning I had as her hand came flashing towards my laptop. Before it impacted, Arachena was there in her way, legs outstretched to her fun size, making her look huge. With her forward mandibles spread, she hissed so loud I flinched back and Daniela screamed and jumped back.

I blinked, as I'd never seen Arachena so intimidating. Spiders didn't freak me out, and obviously they didn't bug Daniela either, but right now Arachena looked like something that was about to take off her face. I couldn't swear to it, but it even looked like there was poison dripping from her fangs.

Daniela held her hand to her chest as if it was wounded, but I was sure she'd missed hitting my laptop. It hadn't moved and I didn't think that Arachena had done anything but posture.

"Your creature attacked me. I'll have charges brought up against you," she hissed. Which was a bit impressive.

"You know, with the amount of hissing and snarling you're doing, maybe you should try out for theater. I hear they always need someone to play a wicked witch. You should be a shoo-in for that role. Merlin knows you're too ugly to ever play Glinda."

She reacted like I had slapped her, pulling back, her face flushing in anger. It annoyed me that even that made her just prettier. The boy, because why would a man be with someone like her, pulled her into his arms glaring at me and my familiar.

"You'll pay for this. Now people will finally see what you are, a monster." She started to weep, crocodile tears I was sure, and her two sycophants lead her away.

I groaned and looked down at Arachena. "You okay? She didn't hurt you, did she?"

Arachena chittered at me. ~No hurt. She soft flesh. Pierce. Drain. Feed for many days.~

"Oh don't tempt me. Wonder what fresh misery she's going to unleash on me now."

My familiar didn't have answer for me, but she pulled her legs back in, going from something large enough to make most monster movie fans run in terror back to her normal softball size. She scurried up my arm and nestled back into the hoodie, though I swore I could just barely hear her muttering about wasting a meal. I dismissed the incident from my mind, working on homework and getting ready for a quiz the next day.

The next morning I settled into my Magic 101 course. I could follow what the professor said about magic; but I needed to figure out how to leverage that into a good career in intelligence, since my magic was more the ability to see and manage patterns. As I headed out, the professor, Bernard Smythe, waved me over.

Frowning, I went to him. I knew I wasn't late with any assignments, and I wasn't stupid enough to call attention to myself for subpar work either. Invisibility really was my ultimate goal. To get the draft over and live a life where I rarely had to deal with anyone.

Well that was my current dream anyhow.

"Yes?" I asked once I got close.

"Here," he said as he handed me a sealed envelope. "The administration office had this delivered for you." He seemed ultimately disinterested, turning away as soon as I took the envelope.

I just nodded, slipping it in my pocket as I headed out. It took me a few minutes to get someplace quiet where I thought I could read it in peace. It was a summons from the office for a hearing tomorrow afternoon at three regarding an unprovoked attack on Daniela Morrison. I groaned.

"I knew she'd make me pay for it." I shoved it into my bag and shook my head. "Get ready to see bureaucracy at work. You can escape if they try to take you?" That was the only thing I ever worried about.

~Home you. Escape if needed.~

I looked over my shoulder, but I couldn't see her. Either way I didn't figure they could catch her if she didn't want to be caught, but it also gave me something to research. Oh well, it would make a good paper when I had to take magic law. I headed to the library and prepared my arguments for this most recent attack. Some day that wench would pay.

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I walked into the room at three minutes before the time. I saw two people in suits standing and talking at one end of the conference room. They both looked like lawyers and I narrowed my eyes—nothing in the note had indicated anything about needing lawyers. Her antics were getting old, quickly.

They noticed me coming in, both men and older than me, otherwise they came across as privileged white males, though neither were mages. That was a point in my favor.

"Mr. Wainscot?" the younger one said as the older one took a seat at the end of the table.

I nodded, watching them. This had all the feeling of an ambush, and that made me even more wary.

"Excellent. Please come sit." He waved his hand at the table with a smile that looked as fake as a ten-dollar Rolex.

"Where's Daniela?" I countered. This whole situation had me ready to turn and walk away.

"Oh, we don't need her for this. We just want to talk about the incident and how to deal with your dangerous familiar."

"Yes, we do. Per the bylaws of the university, any hearing requires the accused, I believe that is me, to hear the charges from their accuser. There is no room for hearings without her here."

"I did mention that the rules didn't allow for this. Not all college students are ignorant." The man seated at the table gave me a long gaze, the amount of calculation on his face disturbing. "Mr. Wainscot, would you bring out your familiar?"

"No. And I believe we are done here." I didn't have a clue as to what was going on, but no way was I letting them even get within an arm's reach of Arachena.

~Yes. Treat as prey. Prove power,~ she murmured in my mind, but that sounded like a very bad idea. Arachena never mentioned what her limits were, but I didn't figure there was any good side of letting these men see her. She was mine.

"Please sit and we'll explain," the young one offered and I narrowed my eyes even more. This whole thing stunk.

"I don't think so. I'm headed to the administrative offices right now. If you want to accompany me you may, but I'm not doing anything without an official college administrator."

They fell silent at that, then the older one spoke. "That won't be necessary. We wanted to make sure you understood the seriousness of the charges. But nothing else needs to happen."

"Well since my accuser isn't here, there aren't any charges. I'm allowed to protect myself, as is my familiar. Since my accuser seems to be absent, I'll take this note to the office of the president and let them know all charges were dropped." I had never moved far into the room and the door stood open behind me.

"See? I knew he was too stupid to even realize when he is being threatened. Move it, Chunk," Dani muttered from behind me. It took everything I had not to jump and Arachena muttered in my mind about the waste of web that was Daniela.

I turned and looked at her. "I understand exactly what this is, I just don't care. If you want to bring charges against me, go for it. But be aware all familiars can talk to anyone they want. And it is believed they cannot lie. If I asked Arachena, she would tell her version of the story to any arbitrator."

Daniela crossed her arms and glared at me. "That thing attacked me!" I sensed the other two men standing and moving more than saw them, but I didn't take my eyes off her.

I let my eyes slowly scan down her body then back up. "Huh. Everything I've ever seen her attack is dead. You don't seem to be dead, so I say you weren't

attacked. I don't see obvious signs of being poisoned, so I doubt she ever touched you."

"You're saying your familiar could kill people?" one of the men—I still thought they were lawyers—said, his voice outraged.

I glanced over my shoulder at him and there must have been something in my expression because his jaw snapped shut. I turned back to Daniela. "Are we done? Because at this point, I'm about to press charges, and I think when I do that, I'll make sure to contact the press and some of the Anti-Purity groups. I am sure they would love a story about the darling daughter of the star Purity Bishop trying to railroad a poor college student." I didn't even try to stop the pleasure I took from seeing her pale at that.

"I will destroy you one of these days. You are nothing," she snarled and once again I had to wonder at the amount of hatred she had for me when I'd never done anything to her but get better grades.

"Maybe, but I'm the archmage with a familiar." I gave her a nod and turned and walked out, the sound of her sputtering followed by the lawyers talking to her in harsh tones the best music I'd ever heard. Too bad I had no doubt that it wouldn't be the last I'd hear of her. The idea that she would go after Arachena made my blood boil. I'd have to work harder to ignore her.

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Meeting Cori Munroe, aka the savior of the SEC, in the library a week later and watching her shut down Dani's vitriol by promising to accuse her of slander and have her expelled proved to be the highlight of my week. Arachena liked her familiar, the Cath named Carelian, and I actually didn't mind the girl. She seemed unaware of her cuteness though from her stress levels I doubted she had time to care about anything outside of her own problems.

I sat there for a long time after Cori left trying to figure out exactly what Dani's issue was. Yes, I'd earned better grades than her and beat her out for Valedictorian—though all of that came down to one paper where she didn't pay close enough attention to the requirements and submitted it in the wrong style, MLS vs APA. Again, not my problem, but losing that full letter grade bumped her two points below me senior year. None of it made sense. Other than school, our worlds didn't cross. Yes, my mother knew her mother, but more in the say hi in the store sort of way, not friends.

I looked at Arachena. "Daniela is becoming an issue. And I dislike having to struggle with outside influences."

~Take home. Feed to family.~

I narrowed my eyes at her. "While I am not opposed to the idea, killing people is generally thought of poorly on Earth. I'll think of something else. Preferably something that won't get me put in jail." Transferring schools was always an option, just not one I really wanted to deal with.

Things would work out, they usually did, and for now I needed to make sure I passed the classes I needed to ensure I was able to follow the career path I wanted. And a life where I was left alone.

The rest of the week I got strange looks from other students and the few friends I'd started to make faded away. It should have upset me, but mostly I didn't have time for this bullshit high school stuff. Running into Cori occasionally and having our familiars talk became one of the brighter spots because she either didn't care what Dani was saying or didn't know.

I suspected the latter. Cori had enough problems that I doubted she paid any attention to school gossip. Which made me like her even more.

School tension ratcheted up as finals approached and I had papers to turn in. I made it a point to get all of my work in weeks early so that if there was a serious issue—there never was—I had time to repair or alter my course.

I'd turned in my History of Magic class paper a week ago. With the final approaching, I just needed to pass and I should have a solid A in the course. While it was a basic course, Cori had taken one at a different time so she wasn't in my class. It would have been nice to have someone semi-friendly to talk to in class, but at least we could bounce ideas off of each other as the course work was the same.

"Mr. Wainscot, if you would?" The soft voice of my professor called as I headed out. I pivoted and moved over to him. An older man, hair going silver, a Pattern mage, probably archmage if I had to guess.

Arachena chattered softly in my hood. Most of the time she hid. People tended to prefer the pretty familiars like Carelian, but I thought my Arachena was incredible.

"Yes, Professor Listerman?"

He had a paper in his hand—why we still needed to turn in physical copies for this class I didn't understand, but printing work was easy enough. Not like I didn't keep an electronic copy.

"You wrote your research paper on the evolution of draft laws in the United States as compared to the United Kingdom?"

I frowned at that question. "Yes. My paper was titled "US vs UK: The Evolution of the Mage Draft". Why?" A roiling worry started at the back of my mind, but I focused on the teacher. Leaping to conclusions or making assumptions never led you down the correct path.

"I've received a disturbing report that you plagiarized this from a paper turned in two years ago at a college in Maine."

The slow wave of anger rose, but I nodded calmly. "No. I did all my research and have the notes from the rough drafts if you wish to see them. I can also answer any question regarding the content of the paper. I thought it would have made an excellent magical law thesis paper, so I kept everything with the idea of leveraging it later on as a full thesis and expanding on the conclusions."

The man looked at me, brows drawn together and lips pursed. "If you don't mind showing me?"

"Of course not," I lied through my teeth. While I didn't mind sharing my research, the idea I needed to do this, that anyone would think I plagiarized, had my temper flaring. I spent the next twenty minutes answering questions about my research, my sources, where I'd gotten the idea. It would have been a pleasant conversation at any other time as Listerman asked interesting questions and raised some thoughts about where else I could have gone with the research. If the purpose of the conversation hadn't been to prove it was my work, not someone else's.

"Obviously the claims were false, Mr. Wainscot. I apologize. It if helps any, you will receive an A on this paper. It is well thought out and brings to light some issues I haven't seen discussed before." Where earlier he'd been stern and almost frowning, now he smiled at me.

I wanted to be excited or at least pleased with that information, but the idea I'd been accused ate at me. "Professor, who exactly said I'd plagiarized this paper."

"I'm sorry but that is confidential." The professor's smile was icy and a hint of malice glittered in his eyes. "But rest assured that her accusations will not have any weight with me from this point on and I will endeavor to make sure my colleagues feel the same way."

The use of the single pronoun told me everything I needed to know and I nodded. "Thank you, Professor Listerman. Is there anything else?"

"No, but I thank you for your patience. I'll see you next class." The man nodded at me and turned back to the podium, the papers being very carefully placed back inside.

I headed out to my next class, tearing apart the issue that was Daniela. So far, my only saving grace had been she wasn't very clever or subtle. If she had been either of those, I could have found myself in much more trouble. Her family's position both in Purity and their personal wealth and meddling in politics made her dangerous.

~Waste of webbing?~ Arachena muttered in my mind though the image was of a barely wrapped insect discarded to rot.

"Yes," I said, my voice low as I walked. This was becoming disruptive to my life. I didn't like disruptions.

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I doubled down on my studies, then ran into a crying Cori in the library. That shook me, but my grandfather had always stressed that a gentleman never leaves a lady in distress. He had a few other words of wisdom that might have seemed to counter that, but either way it provided the incentive for me to sit and listen to her problems.

After she spilled it out, I leaned back looking at her. On the surface our issues had nothing in common. I mean I had a little bitch trying to ruin my life, she had assassins from another country trying to kill her. But bottom line was we both had bullies. From long experience I knew how bullies acted. I'd been hamstrung by mine being a girl. But I told Cori and I needed to remember myself, bullies never go away by ignoring them. You had to make them stop.

Easy to say, but I hadn't figured out how to heed it myself. I said I was waiting for the right time, and I was, but maybe I needed to quit waiting for the 'perfect' time and make that chance happen.

~Must teach mind talk. Carelian discuss?~ Again images for Cori's familiar rather than a name, well there was a name, but it sounded nothing like what Cori had called him, more a collection of purrs and hisses.

"I would like that. Maybe this summer?" The offer surprised me as I only thought those of Spirit could learn telepathy. My confusion must have filtered through to my familiar.

~Many way learn. You powerful. I chose. I focus. You learn mind talk.~

I didn't understand that completely, but I wasn't going to argue. Instead I turned my mind to the problem of one Daniela Morrison.

Unfortunately, no matter how much I thought and twisted and turned the problem over in my mind, I couldn't come up with a way to deal with her. Most people would have gotten bored or backed down by now. Why was she so determined to make me miserable? There was always the option to transfer schools, but I hated the idea of doing that. I'd figure something out. Running away was not an option.

Inevitably time moved on and while I kept my eyes and ears open about Cori's little, okay huge, problem, I didn't hear anything new. Monday morning, I headed to Magic 101 class for finals, and I was moving slow. With a last name of Wainscot—and they assured us it would be alphabetical order from A-Z—there was no reason to be there super early, but still I wanted to talk to Cori and watch some of the other experiments.

Our final was to use a branch we were pale or null in and show what we could do with the least amount of offering required. Pale was what they called our weak branch, while null was the branch we supposedly had no affinity for. It wasn't exactly the case.

It had been an interesting challenge. As always, the most visible and inspiring displays tended to be the elemental branches, and while I had some affinity for Earth as a pale, it seemed too plebeian to create a final out of. Keeping my mind on what I wanted, I'd taken a look at my null branch, something that with a familiar I should be able to utilize, but Air was difficult to make look flashy or impressive.

I'd struggled with it, as what can you do with air? Push things around? Fly? With Arachena we'd managed to prove my null still let me do things, but I wanted to come up with something truly impressive for Professor Humbert. After many nights locked in my room, we'd come up with a dramatic display of controlled air. Arachena would spin mini webs—they almost looked like doilies—and I'd grab them and build a dodecahedron. Since the individual aspects were literally cobwebs, the level of precision and control of the Air should impress them. And I could leverage my strong ability in Pattern to make sure everything lined up correctly.

I headed up the steps, the classroom door right ahead of me. It felt like I was late, and I hated that sensation.

"You useless piece of flesh. I should have just made sure you couldn't exist in my world after you got that first award instead of me."

The rage-filled voice of Daniela pulled me out of my reviewing exactly how carefully I'd need to manipulate the area to create my performance art. I looked at her, her face contorted into a snarl, all but spitting at me.

"What by Merlin's balls is your problem?" I demanded, my temper flaring as she stepped even closer. Why wouldn't she just leave me alone?

She had her backpack slung across her back, her hair twisted into lots of tiny braids that would have looked silly if her hair hadn't been so thick, but what I couldn't pull my eyes away from was the look of loathing as she glared at me.

"You cost me a full letter grade in my History class. I knew you'd cheated on that paper but somehow the teacher bought your pathetic sob story and felt like you did the work. So in my History of Magic Law class he dropped me a grade for false accusations." I had to step back as spittle flew from her mouth.

"I did do the work, and I proved it. Why would you think I would be so stupid as to plagiarize now? And for a basic course?" I would never understand this woman and my patience had about vaporized.

"Oh please. You're lazy. Anyone as fat as you is always lazy. And look at your acne. That just proves you're lazy and don't have good hygiene. I'm amazed you don't stink too. Your parents probably couldn't wait to get you to college so you would be out of their basement."

Rage bubbled up and the desire to see if I could create a new pattern in her body, maybe reroute her spinal nerves to go different places, tempted me. But I was all too aware of the various people passing by, students and professors. That made doing anything much too dangerous.

"Daniela, did it ever occur to you that if you left me the fuck alone, you wouldn't have half these problems?"

"I don't care," she snarled, leaning in so close I could smell the scent of her shampoo. "One day I'm going to see you suffer the way I suffered." She pulled back, flipped me off, and stormed away.

I just stood there trying to control my breathing. It didn't work, so instead I headed through the open door to the classroom and headed up the stadium seats to where Cori and her friend Jo sat. At least going up the stairs fast would cover my desire to kill the spoiled brat.

They looked at me curiously as I climbed past them. "That woman is going to regret her choices someday. And I can't wait for the day."

Jo flashed a brilliant and captivating smile at me. "Sable will join you in making Daniela suffer. She is a piece of work."

Sable was Jo's girlfriend, and from what I understood at one point she'd had the misfortune of rooming with Daniela. Sable had my sympathy.

I growled and dropped into an empty chair behind them. Arachena jumped off me and headed to Carelian, beginning to work him over with her legs. It looked like she was giving him a massage. And from his purrs it must have felt wonderful.

As Jo, Cori, and I chatted, I watched the teachers. There were three of them. Two men I didn't recognize, and of course Indira Humbert, the teacher for the class. I frowned and was about to ask Jo or Cori if the two men were guest testers or friends of Indira when Jo's phone rang.

Jo Guzman was Cori's best friend and if you just looked at her, she was stunning, smart, and you got the feeling she didn't know how to not get things done. But while I wanted her as a friend, she didn't do it for me, besides the fact that she had a girlfriend just as impressive as she was.

Cori snickered at the fart ring tone and Jo headed out of the classroom to answer. I went back to watching the presentations, still wondering about the two men. Jo came running back up the stairs, babbling about her parents and explosions. Before I could ask a single question, Cori had her bag and was running down the stairs towards the doors, Carelian following behind her.

~Why fear?~ Arachena asked as I stood up, concerned and flashed to fear mixed with anger when the two men attacked Cori. Everything happened so fast that I stood there way too long, stunned to see anyone attacking someone else with magic.

~Ch-ch, flee, attack, choose!~ Arachena scolded in my mind. That provided the jolt I needed to get my butt in gear and I ran.

In the time that it took me to get down to the bottom of the classroom, Cori had ended up on the other side of the room, which made no sense. I turned back towards her, not sure why, but the rush of students pushed me out of the door and into the hall. People screamed and ran and I got pushed into a corner, where I stayed trying to figure out exactly what was going on.

Okay I knew what was going on. They were trying to kill Cori and were probably from Japan. That didn't tell me what I should do, besides escape. This wasn't my fight. Was it?

Think, how can you help?

I had no answer to that. My abilities were something I was working on understanding, and while I excelled at my computer classes, using magic was

still dicey. Yes, I could move earth to a small extent, but fight two assassins? That didn't seem likely.

Nope, time to get out—all you'd do is distract her and probably get you both killed.

~Choose, Ch-ch.~ Arachena was insistent, hiding in my hood, and I agreed with her. Sitting here was stupid, get out and get away from the crazy.

I stepped into the hall. The crowd had thinned, though I saw students still coming down from the upper level. There was a crowd at the front door, so I turned, headed towards the side exit. At this point I didn't care if the door had an alarm on it, this qualified as an emergency.

The building began to shake and the stairs collapsed. I heard people screaming and tried to move faster but stumbled over the moving floor. The world exploded in noise and dust. I huddled, pulling Arachena around and crouching over her as we fell. My head slammed into something and the world went dark.

~*~

"Wake up! You got me into this, you're going to help me get out," said an all-too-familiar and unwelcome voice as my body shook from the force of her hand on my shoulder.

"Why you? Of all the blasted people in the world, why you?" I muttered as I opened my eyes, wincing at the pain, and then realized the only light was a bit of red and green flickering from a broken exit sign. I sat up slowly from the hunched position I'd been in, looking at the odd colors the lights made on my familiar.

"Because the world hates me," Daniela spat as she pulled back. "What happened?"

I ignored her and checked on Arachena. "Are you okay?"

"Of course I'm not okay, I'm stuck here with you."

~Not hurt. We leave?~ Arachena said, crawling out from where I'd crouched around her.

"Ugh, if something had to die, why couldn't it be that thing." Daniela's disgust coated her tones, and only the fact that my head still throbbed prevented me from lashing out and decking her. My hands were scratched and there was a cut on my lip, and I was damn sure I'd have a black eye in a bit, but I didn't seem badly injured.

I stood, then stopped as I realized the space we were in didn't allow for me to stand straight up, though Daniela could, not that she could move very far. I glanced at her and resisted smirking. Her normally perfect appearance was tattered, there was blood on her shirt—at least that was what I assumed the dark smear was—her braided hair was in disarray with bits of dirt and other things in it, and her pants were torn, revealing dark smudges, most likely abrasions. For once she looked almost normal, if still a bitch.

"We must be in the basement. I don't remember seeing any classrooms down here, so heating and maintenance. We'll need to find an opening." I turned, my eyes having adjusted to the low lighting and looked around. Besides the crumbled stonework and dust, the remains of what looked like duct work hung from the ceiling, with a tiny crack of light in the far corner. I hunched over to check it out, and sure enough I could see the first few stairs under the mess of debris.

"Well, how are you getting me out of here?" The amount of arrogance in her voice was slightly mitigated by a touch of fear. That prevented me from losing all control on my temper.

"I have no way of getting myself out of here, and at this time that is more important than you. However, as I would like to leave this building before three or maybe more mages kill us by collapsing the building even more, working together sounds wise." As much as she seemed to stick her nose into my business, I hadn't paid much attention to her magic sets other than noting she was an Entropy mage. "I know you're a wizard, you have Entropy and what else?"

There was a long pause, then she muttered, "Water and Fire." She paused again. "But I'm really only good with the Entropy. The elementals are hard and I'm better at Water."

I wanted to just stare at her. Elementals were the easiest, and Fire tended to be strong for everyone. But again, I didn't care that much.

"Fine." I closed my eyes and paid attention to my Air magic. I heaved a sigh when I got the answer I needed. "There is still air coming through the cracks, and if I need to pull more in or make it move faster it won't take much. We need to move the debris from the stairs and crawl up them."

She sniffed and put her arms across her chest. "I'll wait. I'm not some common laborer."

I gave her a hard look. "You help, or I'll have Arachena bite you, tell everyone you were panicking and scared her, and let you die in absolute agony." I kept my

voice absolutely flat and uncompromising. Arachena for her part had crawled up on some of the debris blocking our way, and lifted her front legs and hissed, looking big and scary in the dark space.

"I'll see you pay for this," she hissed out, but she moved over and looked at the pile.

"Oh, I'm sure you will," I muttered. I started pulling out smaller stones and bits of concrete, tossing them behind us. While I had Earth, I couldn't do much but shake things and occasionally break off little bits. Not anything near like what we'd just seen. And much of what blocked the path up the stairs was the remains of the building, not pure earth, though there was an odd spike of stone hanging over us and pointing up, jagged and imposing. It had probably caused more damage than the quake itself.

"Fine, what do you want me to do?" She sounded like a sulky brat and I had to remind myself that slapping her would only create more problems in the long run.

I'd been working steadily while she made her decision. I thought Arachena moving across the rubble towards her helped speed up her thoughts.

"Entropy—you know how to break the bonds?" I asked her as I knelt, looking at the first of the big lumps of cement blocking the stairs. If I had a lever maybe I could have moved it, or if I didn't need to worry about bringing the rest of the building down on me, I might have had the guts to open up the earth and swallow the chunk. As it was, it needed to be moved out of the way.

"Yes," she admitted, reluctance clear in her voice.

"Then see if you can use it to break the bonds on some of these bigger cement pieces so I can move them. They are just too big for me to pull out." I wasn't in shape, though magic was helping as I burned energy, but some of these had to weigh a hundred pounds or more. That wasn't anything I could move. Up to fifty pounds probably, but the rest, the rest I couldn't budge.

"Fine," she mumbled and moved over. I stepped out of the way, and she stared at the block. A wisp of offering from the ends of one braid vaporized and the first block cracked into three pieces. The rest moaned like a living object and I took another step back, but they stayed in place.

"An inch?" She had grabbed the end of her hair and was staring at it. "That cost me an inch. You'd better make this worth my while, fat boy."

"I figure getting out of here alive will be worth it." I managed not to sneer. At this rate I should earn awards for keeping my cool. The woman annoyed the magic out of me.

She didn't respond, just sniffed as I moved back to grab the pieces. We worked quickly. The shaking had stopped and I had no idea what that meant. The fear and uncertainty made me move faster, using my Earth magic to loosen up chunks of debris where I thought it would help.

Daniela barely spoke to me, but did break up blocks when I asked, though she bemoaned every offering. The amounts of her offerings confused me. An inch was a lot, but then I didn't have that magic branch so maybe I didn't understand what I was asking her to do.

Or maybe she sucked with magic as much as she did with interpersonal skills.

"I can't believe I'm stuck here with you of all people. Why couldn't it be someone that I could forge a connection with or network for future opportunities. No, it has to be the loser that destroyed my senior summer!"

Her words came just as I was about to get to the last few pieces. Her assistance had been minimal but I'd ignored that as it had helped break down pieces I couldn't. I could hear sirens above and I wanted to be close enough to get out before the people up there triggered anymore insanity. Dying by being crushed was not on my top ten ways to die.

But at her words I stopped and turned to look at her. Senior year, a few papers, one presentation, and I'd been awarded valedictorian, but I couldn't remember having any more interaction with her than her glaring at me in the hallway or class and one nasty smear campaign that I'd ignored.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I snapped at her, taking a break. It looked like one more big one to break down and move and we'd be in the stairwell. And maybe close enough we could yell for help.

In the flickering green and red light, she glared at me, her beauty turning almost ghoulish as those colors did not compliment her at all. It added to the horror victim stains on her clothes. It was the glare of outrage on her face that turned her into something from the depths of hell that really caught my attention.

What the hell did I do to make her so mad?

For the first time I almost cared. I sat down, tired, the adrenaline rush fading, and looked at her. Waiting.

Her gasp of outrage made me roll my eyes. Prima donna much?

"Because you cheated." She paused as I growled at her. I didn't cheat, ever. She jutted her chin out. "You cheated and stole my valedictorian award from me. Because of that I didn't get the BMW my father had promised me. Instead I got a Volvo. Do you know how embarrassing that was? I'd told everyone I'd have a

BMW to drive around in the summer of my senior year, and I had a Volvo. A four door VOLVO!" She screamed that last part.

I looked at her and my mind stuttered and stopped for a moment. Because I'd worked my butt off in school and gotten better grades than she did it was my fault? She got a high-end car but not the fancy one she wanted and it was my fault? She'd been dogging me three years after we graduated because she had to drive around in a car that my parents STILL couldn't afford.

My incredulity went to icy rage, then flat nothing. On the other side of the room Arachena had spread out her legs and crouched down, disappearing in the flickering shadows, her hunting mode.

"You're right. And I should solve this issue permanently. I promise you'll never have to worry about me again." My voice remained calm, almost conversational as I sat on the stairs, and made my offering. It was so little no one would notice the quarter inch that disappeared from the ends of twenty of my hairs.

"Oh? How are you going to repay me for the humiliation I suffered driving around in a brown Volvo?" She stood there, arrogant and so proud. The huge piece of cement buried in the spear of earth above her gave way and fell. It must have weighed close to seventy pounds and made a dull thwap as it slammed into her skull.

I'm pretty sure she was dead before her body hit the ground. I took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of blood, dust, and musty earth as I settled down in the stairway.

Arachena came scuttling over the torn-up room and crawled up my shoulder. ~Webbing waste. Good kill.~

"Arachena, wasn't that little tremor awful? It shook loose that chunk of concrete and it hit Daniela. Killed her. It's so horrible. And now we'll have to sit here with her dead body and wait for them to rescue us." My voice never changed inflection as I looked at Arachena.

I felt her looking at me, the weight of all her eyes heavy, and I hoped she got the message.

~Earth shaking dangerous. Buildings fall. Kill people.~ Her voice had a tone of smugness and I fought down a smile. Odds were with something like this lots of people had been hurt. They wouldn't think it odd that she had died.

If they did? I looked around the area and shrugged. Unless they truthed everyone there would be no reason to even suspect it was technically murder. But no need to give them anything to be suspicious over. It took a bit but I

finally worked up some tears and let the trails cut through the dust on my face then wiped them away. Then I curled up, Arachena in my arms, and I waited, my eyes never leaving her dead body.

~*~

By the time they found me and got me out, my exhaustion and shellshock were real. I'd had to stare at her body for hours and the changing smells in that dark oddly lit space left me barely functional. When they asked what happened I just muttered, "It fell. Killed her. Blood." That had shocked me. I don't know why but I hadn't imagined death to be quite so messy. Or smelly.

They wrapped me in a silver sheet and got us up to the top. The place was totaled and I saw people wandering around, everyone looking almost as stunned as I felt. I just wanted to sleep.

I looked around, wondering who else had been hurt or killed. I saw Cori being hugged by Jo as Professor Humbert, who looked like she'd been put through the wringer, spoke with authorities. People were arguing everywhere, but I ignored all that. The few people I could almost call friends were safe. The thorn in my side had been permanently removed. I'd deal with everything else later.

The EMTs said I was fine, just needed sleep and food and they sent me home. I found out later Daniela had been the only casualty. That worried me as I had expected more people to die and for her to be just one in the crowd. But the story never went anywhere. The university simply said they had received funds to make reparations to everyone and rebuild the building with the assistance of draft mages.

And that was it.

I never did throw a party for her death, but I did hear more than a few people raised celebratory drinks. I kept waiting for guilt or something to hit me, but Arachena just waved one leg the one time I mentioned it, in a place where no one else could hear.

~Death is past. You live, all good. Hunt now?~

I laughed, the first one that had passed my lips in ages and we went hunting. I figured the next few years would be interesting. I had places to go, and things to do.