

A Cry of Magic

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“Am I boring you, Miss Squallheart?”

I startle and knock my knee against the desk. My legs are too long for everything in Strixhaven, and Uvilda’s office chairs are no exception. The Dean of Perfection sits with her hands folded delicately, perfectly matching the cool, controlled magic she wields. And, just in case anyone needs reminding, her office is the same. Cobalt walls, cerulean rugs, and gauzy azure curtains that tremble in the chilly breeze. The only discordant note in the decor is the candelabra. And me, I guess.



Art by: Chris Rahn

“Sorry,” I say. “I’ve got a song stuck in my head.”

Uvilda cocks a thin brow. “Anything I’d know?”

“I don’t think so.” It’s soft—a distant lilt I can’t quite catch hold of. Just a single line of melody, repeating since I woke up this morning. “I can’t really remember the words.”

“Indeed? Memory seems to be an issue this semester, doesn’t it?”

I twist one of the bangles on my wrist. “I guess I should write stuff down.”

She chuckles like I’ve made a joke. I fidget with the bangles on my other arm. I mostly wear them to stop myself from biting my claws.

Uvilda is okay. As senior mages go, I've met much worse, sitting through parties full of my mother's friends and admirers, enduring hours of gossip and backstabbing and social climbing. The dean just has a tendency to talk to people like they are complex magical computations that can be unraveled with the correct trigger phrase.

"I'm not here to discourage you, Miss Squallheart. On the contrary. I want to enable you to do the best work you can here at Prismari College."

"I know that."

"You are the only student who hasn't yet applied for a critique, and my professors tell me that it's because you have, so far, failed to finish anything." She pauses, waiting for me to make an excuse. I don't have one. "It's been almost a month since term began, Miss Squallheart."

She looks pointedly at my jingling bracelets, and I force myself to let them go. "That's not actually true. I've finished stuff. I just haven't turned anything in."

"And whatever not?"

I hesitate. "It's not right. Not ready."

"Shouldn't you let me be the judge of that? That's what a critique is for."

I shrug. I want to tell her that I already know exactly what she'd criticize, but I know she'd find that impertinent. My mom always does. Beside Uvilda on the desk, one of the candle flames catches my eye. It's behaving oddly, flickering slightly out of time with the others.

"Miss Squallheart?" She gives me a thin smile. "Another song stuck in your head?"

I take a deep breath. Strixhaven campus is drenched with the taste of magic, but this building is especially pungent. I hold back a sneeze. "I don't have anything prepared for a critique, and I don't have a good excuse. I'm not sure what else to say."

I'm expecting anger; what I get is fathoms worse. Uvilda adopts a grandmotherly countenance. It looks like hard work. "Is there anything you'd like to discuss, Rootha?"

I pause. "What do you mean?"

Her expression doesn't change, but her fins ruffle with annoyance. All the candles on her desk flicker with the displacement of the air, except for one. "Things on your mind, emotional disturbances? Problems at home?"

I take it back. Uvilda is exactly like the rest of them. Heat crawls up my neck. "This has nothing to do with my mother."

"Your mother was an incredibly talented and delicate caster." Either Uvilda hasn't noticed my anger, or she doesn't care. "She was what, the third generation of Prismari students in your family?"

My eyes are drawn irresistibly to one of the art pieces on display in the office. A perfect replica of a snowflake, down to its delicate crystalline structure. Cold, but never melting. A flawless, secure bit of spellcraft. My mother made it her first month in Prismari. I want to tear it apart with my bare hands.

"Fourth," I say. "She was the fourth. I'm the fifth."

A Squallheart mage, unable to even finish a project. The candle flames shudder again, dancing in the breeze. I sink into the movement, letting Uvilda's chattering about my family wash over me.

"And out of respect for your mother and in deference to the talent I *know* you possess, I'll allow you a chance to redeem yourself."

I bite down on a snide retort. A side effect of growing up with no friends your own age is you have a tendency to address authority figures as if they're peers. "Oh?"

"Bring me a completed project by tomorrow—"

"*Tomorrow?*" The candles flare with my temper.

Uvilda's expression goes decidedly sour. "You said yourself you have finished work. Bring me some. Or I'm afraid I can no longer guarantee a place for you at Prismari college."

The candles flame higher. *Calm down, calm down.* I knew something like this was coming, there's no reason for me to lose control. The candles settle. All except for one, which continues to dance.

I'm unsurprised when, as soon as I clear the threshold of Uvilda's office, there is a whoosh and a flare of red light, followed by a squawk of annoyance.



Nassari, Dean of Expression | Art by: Jason Rainville

"Oh, cool down," says a voice that crackles at the edges.

"Hello, Dean," I say dully, glancing over my shoulder. "Do you make it a habit to lurk in candle flames during student critiques?"

"Ugh, call me Nassari. 'Dean' was my father's name."

"Wait, really?"

"No." Prismari's other senior mage taps a dark finger against their chin. "I'm not sure why I said that. Regardless, call me Nassari. Efrete don't stand on ceremony."

"Nassari," I say, because I've never been great at ceremony either. "Same question, I guess."

"Hmm? Ooh, no. Most of Uvilda's students are astoundingly dull."

Nassari's feet don't quite touch the ground, flame gathering between their heels and the mosaic tiling of the floor. I half-expect to see a trail of scorch marks, but their magic is far too controlled for that.

After all, they are the Dean of Expression, and they keep a tight rein around exactly what that expression entails.

“But you interest me, Rootha. And I wanted to extend an offer of assistance, should you ever desire any advice that is less, shall we say “

“Practical?”

“I was going to go with ‘naggingly tiresome,’ but that’s far more even-minded.”

We’ve reached the top of the stairs, and I’m not sure if Nassari intends to follow me down them. Their office is high up in Conjurot Hall, along with their apartments and workshop. If I ask for Nassari’s help, they could probably get me an extension. They could probably get me more than that. A reprieve.

“I know your family’s magic boasts a signature style,” they say. “But I don’t think it suits you.”

“What does that mean?” It comes out sharper than I intend.

Nassari leans in close. I almost pull away due to their skin flushing red and orange, and the flames blooming in their eyes. Efrete have a reputation for being tricky and unpredictable. But, then again, orcs have a reputation for being violent. I hold my ground.

“There’s more to you than you let on,” Nassari says, eyes hot enough to burn. “There’s wild magic in you.”

The memory hits me like a slap, the same words spoken in a different voice. *Wild magic*. Green leaves, blue sky, and red. Red rage, red blood. A scream in my ears and a sick, giddy euphoria bursting through my veins.

I stumble. Nassari catches me before I can tumble down the stairs.

“I’m alright,” I gasp, before they can ask. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ll be fine.”

At least one good thing has come of Dean Uvilda going on about my mother: I remember where the song stuck in my head comes from. Not the words or the name, but its source. My mother used to sing it to herself as she worked. A palette in one hand, a paintbrush in the other, leaning close to her easel and humming softly. I would sit on the rugs and mix pigment for her while my siblings ran around outside with the neighborhood children.

“Yellow, Roothie,” she’d say, “as bright as you can make it.” And I’d do my best to mix the paints the way she wanted. Even when I got them wrong, the paintings were always beautiful. Everything she did was beautiful.

All Prismari students have their own set of rooms—a living space and a studio. Mine is on the west side of campus, overlooking the edge of Opus Walk. When I get home, one of the suns is setting above the lake, sending spangled light across its surface. I pour myself a splash of dry amaranthine liquor over ice, taking tiny sips and humming my mother’s old song to myself as I try to find the ideal candidate for Uvilda’s critique. Though, if I get drunk enough, I might just decide to pack up and run.

A line of canvases leans against the studio wall—generic landscapes and portraits. All of them done in the last month, and none worth the pigment they’re painted with. In theory, I was practicing technique, but nothing here is worth a critique. Like I told Uvilda, I already know everything she is going to say.

I step up to my worktable, strewn with drafting paper, paintbrushes, and a chisel dented from when I threw it against the wall last week. My most recent piece from arcane sculpture class sits amidst the detritus. I sigh. That one is probably going to be my best bet.

The piece is a deep, cool blue. It would fit right in with Uvilda's office. But beyond that, there's nothing to recommend it. It just looks like a chaotic burst, a wave frozen mid-splash, because that's exactly what it is. I filled a bucket with water and poured it onto the studio floor, freezing it as it splashed back up at me. The effect is not anywhere near as spectacular as I was hoping.

My mother weaves intricate, glittering sculptures from water and ice, braiding each molecule together at a base level to build the most delicate, glimmering structure. All I can do is flash freeze it all at once, meaning I have no control over how it looks. No nuance, no artistry. Just raw, unfiltered magic thrown in an uncoordinated burst. Wild magic.

I shudder, pour myself more amaranthine, and recast the freezing spell because the surface is looking a little drippy. The magic comes when I call, but it's sluggish and blurry. I would like to blame it on the alcohol, but

My mother had a bowl of marbles in her studio, and I used to play with them as she worked, pouring them onto the carpet to make shapes. Cats, dogs, dragons, orcs, all dressed up for battle. I loved to spread my hands out over them and feel the little glass spheres against my palms, mix them up, push them together. But if I wanted the outlines to be precise, I had to line the marbles up one by one, slowly and carefully.

That's what doing my mother's sort of magic feels like to me. Slow, careful, and dull.

I'm beginning to feel the liquor when someone knocks on my door.

"I know you're in there, Rooth. I can sense the melancholia."

In a daze, I unlock the door. A woman stands on the threshold, eyes shiny black in the witchlight lining the corridor.

"Felisa?"

She grins, lopsided and brilliant, revealing the point of a sharp eyetooth. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

I clear my throat. "Come in."

She glides past me smoothly. Felisa Fang is dressed to go out in a silver and black dress, her hair pinned up high to reveal a slender neck and softly pointed ears. It's the same dress she wore last year, when the two of us spent the night in the pub, drawn together through the necessity of not knowing anyone else. Felisa, because she's from halfway around the world, and me because my friend-making skills were pathetically atrophied. We drank too much and told each other our histories. Or lied about them, at least. I told her a gilded picture of growing up with Samara Squallheart, lauded artist-mage, and she told me about the Fang clan and their sprawling mansion.

Whether or not it was true, she lived up to the fiction—a vampire, elegant and keen, with a brutal wit unique even among others of her kind. I liked her so much when we met.

I still do. At least in theory. In practice, we've barely spoken since we chose our colleges.

"Well, this is just massive!" Felisa announces, spinning in the center of the room so that her skirt flares out. "You have a whole extra room! How is that equitable? I'll have to complain to the dean it's completely unacceptable that I don't have a studio of my own, even though I can't paint to save my life. Oh, were you working?"

"I was just about done." The two of us stand on either side of my worktable. "Is there something you needed?"

"I haven't seen you in ages—I thought I might as well check up. You haven't been coming to the Bow's End."

I'm immediately suspicious. Not because we parted on bad terms, but because there's a rehearsed quality to this conversation. "I haven't really felt like drinking much lately," I say cautiously.

Felisa cocks her head at the glass in my hand.

"I haven't really felt like drinking in public recently," I amend.

"Uh-huh." She reaches for the sculpture, and I have to force myself not to knock her hand away. "Did you make this?"

I nod.

"It's pretty."

"Pretty." My voice sounds like it's coming from somewhere outside of my chest.

"Yeah." Felisa's eyes glitter beneath the studio lights. "Not as pretty as you, though." She laughs—a warm, musical sound. It's so addicting that I want to laugh with her. "I don't even know why you're here." She takes a step closer, until I could reach out and touch her. "If I was as pretty as you, I wouldn't even bother with university."

Heat hits my cheeks, then my chest, then my gut, hard, as irritation curls inside me like a fist. "Don't."

"What?"

"Don't use magic on me." I pull away from her. "I know better than to trust anything anyone from Silverquill says."

Felisa's fangs gleam in a snarl, before she wrestles herself back under control.

"Wow. Well, fine. I was just offering some encouragement—you looked like you could use it."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I snap back.

Felisa is a Vainglory—she uses words to inspire or reproach, which can result in intense dips and peaks in a target's emotional stability. It's a complex sort of magic that isn't easy to teach. Either you have the knack for it, or you don't. I feel the strain of it against the insides of my eyelids and the back of my throat.

The anger that has been simmering in the pit of my stomach since the office today blooms back into an inferno. "Stop it! I don't need your lies or your encouragement or anything else you can offer." The magic swirls inside me, pushing at the architecture of my bones. I see red blood and blue sky and hear the screams surrounding me. And then I just see Felisa, looking at me like she doesn't know who I am. "Maybe you should go."

She goes.

I'm shaking. I feel the little tremors in my arms and legs. I splash more amaranthine into the glass and down it in a gulp. Pretty. Pretty. What good is pretty going to get me? My mother's art is more than pretty. It's transcendent. It's powerful. If I bring something pretty to Dean Uvilda I know exactly what she'll say.

When my hand reaches toward my project, it's like it belongs to someone else. My claws glint and my bangles clang together. My sculpture chimes out like a thousand tiny bells as I smash it to pieces on the studio floor.



Art by: Bayard Wu

The Opus Walk is deserted at night, but the witchlights burn along the path, guiding my way. I stagger past rows and rows of past art projects, beautiful and impossible, gifted to the college by grateful students. Everyone leaves something behind when they graduate—it's tradition.

It isn't hard to find my mother's. I know her magic by sight.

Her greatest creation: an endless waterfall pouring out of nothing and disappearing back into nowhere. The magic is flawless, but easy to disrupt. With a touch of my fingers, I feel all the ways it's held together for decades. I could unwind it thread by thread, or I could just smash it.

Vindictive glee rises inside me. Samara Squallheart is famous, beloved, but her work will be just as easily undone as her worthless daughter's.

"I wouldn't. It would be a *mess*."

A slender cord of flame entwines my wrist, more vapor than fire. But then I strain against it and it heats, hotter and hotter until I cry out, scalded.

Dean Nassari releases me and holds out a patient hand. "Let me see."

They don't sound angry, but there's enough effortless command in their voice that I don't even dream of disobeying. Not magic. Just authority. Their skin is perfectly cool to the touch, and when they smooth a thumb across my wrist, the burn is gone. "Good as new."

I pull away. I feel so empty that I'm echoing. "Were you following me?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

I wasn't expecting honesty, and I certainly wasn't expecting it without admonishment attached. *And it's a good thing I was following you.*

"Did you set Felisa on me, too?"

Nassari's glowing coal eyes narrow. "I don't know who that is."

"She's Silverquill. A Vainglory. We're—we were friends. She came over out of nowhere and started using encouragement magic on me."

Nassari makes a sound in their throat that reminds me of fire devouring parchment. "That sounds more up Uvilda's street than mine. Did it work?"

I snort. "I don't like having my emotions toyed with."

"Nobody does."

"Some people must," I say. "Otherwise no one in Silverquill would have a job."

Nassari's eyes burn even brighter. "Hmm, but does one visit a Vainglory because they want to, or because they've no choice?"

I'm not sober enough for this. "I don't know! Why does anyone do anything?"

"Ah, the eternal riddle. Let's discuss it away from delicate works of art. I love a bit of destruction, but the gardening golems will have my hide if I let you trash the lawn."

After a moment's hesitation, I take their offered arm and let them lead me from my mother's waterfall. "So you're telling me that Uvilda made my friend use magic on me for what? The whole point of a critique is I do the work myself!"

"Hm." Nassari's mouth flattens out. "Maybe it's less your success she's courting, and more the notice of an interested party."

I struggle to parse what they mean, and when I do, anger ratchets back up inside me in tightening spirals. "My mother. Of course."

"The Squallhearts have been generous with donations in the past," Nassari says.

I know that. Of course I do. But it had somehow never occurred to me that I might have only been accepted into Strixhaven because of my mother's fame. I would go to Strixhaven because that's what Squallheart women do, but I'd assumed, maybe idiotically, that I would get there on my own merits.

I'm glad Nassari is here because I'm not sure what I would do if they weren't. I know they feel the suppressed violence inside me. The wild magic.

"Can I tell you a secret?" The witchlight turns their flames ghostly.

"I guess? I'm not great with secrets."

"That's alright, I trust you." They tap a finger against their mouth, miming a whisper. "I never liked your mother."

"What?" "Of everything in the world they could have said, I hadn't been expecting that. "But she's a genius. Do you know how much one of her paintings goes for?"

Nassari sticks out a molten orange tongue in a childish show of dislike. "Eh. Sure. But the woman herself no offense to your family, but she was always stuck-up and prickly in my class. All grins while she needed you, a blank pane of glass when she didn't."

I stare at them, because I don't think I've ever heard anyone sum up my mother so brutally and accurately. "Then why are you doing all this?" It's louder than I mean it, frustration welling up. "If I'm not your student and you don't care about my mother, why waste your time on me?"

The breeze whips Nassari's flames around their ankles. "Do you know how an earthquake feels? Not the shakes themselves, but the potential before they begin. The taste of the air before a storm, the receding tide before a wave. That's what you feel like to me. The magic that you're doing in your classes—clean, tidy, ordered magic. It doesn't suit you."

The words open a pit inside me, horror bubbling out. That Nassari can stand there and say this to me, can reach out and grab at all the things inside that scare me the most and wrench them out into the open.

I sway backward. "You don't understand."

"Explain, then." That command again. No compulsion, only will tempered in flames.

My breath shudders in my chest. "I don't know where to start."

"Anywhere."

I close my eyes briefly. "I came into magic early. When I was about eight. That's very young for an orc. I was a clumsy child. Big hands, big feet, and with the magic, it just got worse. I had a terrible temper. I would throw things. Break them. Scream if I didn't get what I wanted. Which is normal for a kid, I guess. But I was a kid who could set things on fire with my brain." I force a laugh. It hurts. "I was in the yard playing with my brothers. One of them—Tomlin, the youngest I was angry with him. I barely even remember what he was doing. Probably poking me with a stick, something stupid."

"I was so angry. I wanted to hurt him, and I did." I clench my jaw against the memories. "It felt—good. Right. Like it was what I was meant to be doing. He survived, he's fine, but nobody ever trusted me again. None of the nearby families would let their kids anywhere near me. So while my brothers and sister were out in the woods running around with kids our age, I was inside. Being taught to control my magic." *Say it, Rootha.* "Even if it doesn't come to me naturally. I can do it. I have done it. Until now."

Nassari makes a soft noise beside me. My agitated strides have brought us across the entire length of Opus Walk, and we stand at the edge of the inhabitable section of Prismari campus. Beyond is darkness interspersed with hazes of magic—Furygale. A graveyard of abandoned projects and half-cast spells that were not happy to surrender themselves back to their base particles. No one is supposed to come here, but people do. Felisa used to attend honor duels here regularly, watching older students solve their problems with magic when words were no longer adequate.

Exactly the place to dump a broken thing that doesn't work as it ought.

"You've never told that story to anyone, have you?"

I stare out across the dark. "I don't want sympathy."

"Good. Because you'll get none from me."

I look round at them, expecting a grin. Just another joke. But there is nothing joking in their expression, nothing kind.

Bafflingly, I start to laugh, even as everything inside me pulls tighter and tighter. "Well, great! Thanks for the encouragement."

Nassari lifts a shoulder. "If I thought encouragement would help, I'd have sent you back to your Vain-glory. You think you're the only mage with a story like that? Magic isn't a clean discipline."

"Fantastic," I sneer. "Good to know how average I am. And I suppose these mages have all grown up to lead happy lives?"

“On the contrary.” Nassari lifts up the rope separating the end of the Walk from Furygale, flowing under it with otherworldly grace. “Many let it ruin them, like you’ve done here.”

That hurts like a slap. “I haven’t done—!”

“You made one mistake, and you vanished into yourself.”

“*One mistake?*” My voice echoes off into the hollows. “I could have killed my brother, and I enjoyed it!”

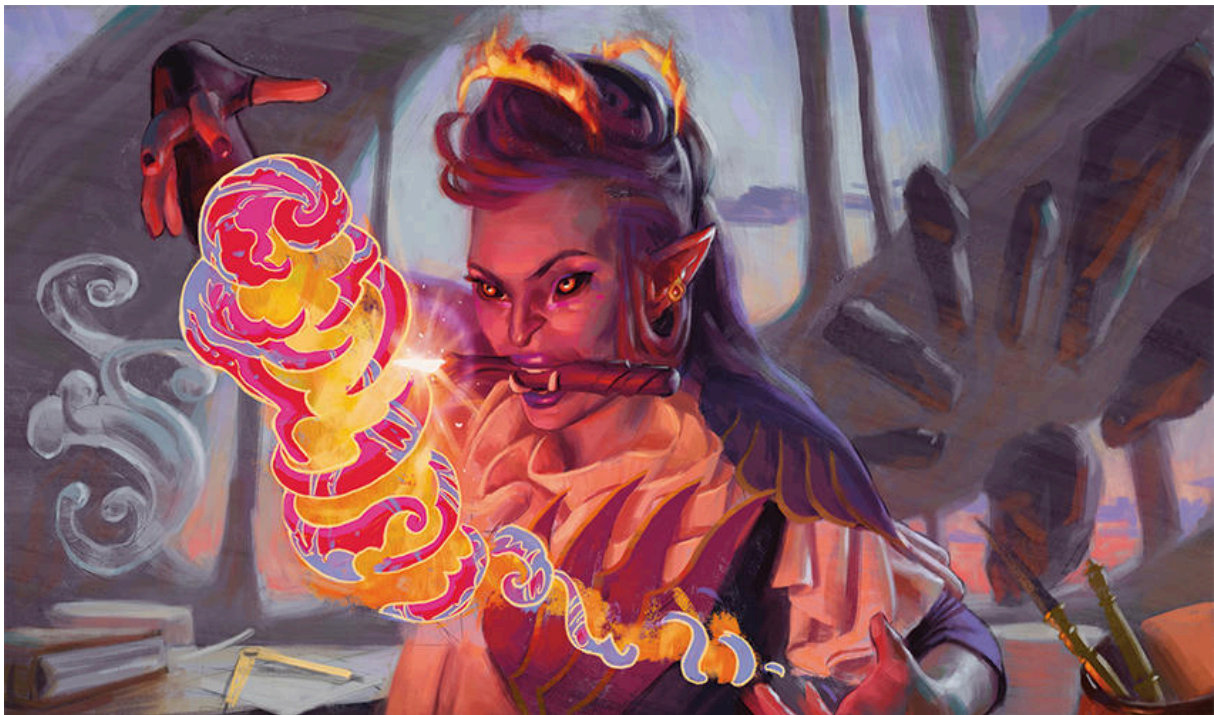
Nassari lets the rope slowly drop, separating us. “Well, you won’t kill me. No matter how much you enjoy it.”

I bare my fangs. “Are you so sure about that?”

They match my smile, vicious and raw with power. “Try me.”

They are goading me. I haven’t let anyone do that in over fifteen years, but I can’t stand the disdain in their eyes. The disappointed letdown. They thought I was something worthy, interesting. Something valuable. I’d proved them wrong.

It makes me angry. It makes me *burn*.



Art by: Colin Boyer

Power bursts hard and blazing from my diaphragm, a hot gout of magic that comes out in a shout. Not even really an incantation, just a raw discharge of emotion. Utterly uncontrolled, primed to kill.

Nassari moves faster than I have ever seen a creature move. Like flame igniting dry grass. They spring backward into the air and catch my magic between their palms. The force of it knocks them higher into the air, shockwaves hitting the ground and whipping my braids around my head. They turn an elegant flip in the air and tumble back to the ground. The magic they siphon away and out into Furygale, where it hangs in the air, crackling like static.

My knees hit the pavement. “No, no, no.” All of my insides have been scooped out. I echo like the upper galleries of the Biblioplex. I attacked a dean.

"Get up," Nassari says.

I swat my hair out of my eyes. Their calm is infuriating. "I attacked you!"

"I told you to."

"That doesn't matter!"

"I'm not going to throw you out of Prismari, Rootha Squallheart. And neither is Dean Uvilda. If you want to leave, you have to do that yourself."

I stare up at them, silhouetted against the discharge of my magic still hanging in the air. Throughout my life, all anyone has ever offered me is vague encouragement and methods of control. Nassari offers me a hand up and over the rope into Furygale.

"I still don't have a project for Uvilda," I say. I'm shaking. I try to hide it by curling my fists.

In the dark, Nassari's whole body blazes. They are the brightest thing here. "Nothing?" They glance toward the spray of magic. "That doesn't look like nothing."

I snort. "Yeah, that's not art. That's a tantrum."

"Do you know what I turned in for my first project?"

"No. What?"

Nassari's molten tongue gleams behind their smile. "An earthquake."

I laugh, again not sure if they're joking. I step closer to the magic hovering in the air. It's not exactly formless. There's a consistency to it, a constellation. I put out a hand—

And yank it backward. The song. My mother's song rings in my ears when I touch the magic. Far too loud—it's practically a shriek and there's still no words—but I think I can hear them somewhere deep inside it. I could pull them out—I know I could.

But not in one night.

I shake my head. "I can't bring this to Uvilda."

"Of course not." Nassari's eyebrows are made of flame, but they can still appear extremely sardonic. "Didn't I say? You aren't leaving as long as you still want to stay. Uvilda isn't your advisor anymore. I am. And I say you pass."

I am momentarily speechless, my mouth working. "Uvilda won't be happy about that."

"I'll deal with her."

"Why?" I burst out. "Why are you doing this for me? I'm not exceptional. I'm not unique. I'm—"

"One of mine," Nassari says, and pierces me with a look so intense I want to flinch away. "The magic inside you is what I am made of, body and soul. And I will not let it burn itself away to nothing."

I swallow, all of my doubts crowding me. "I'm not worth that."

"Maybe not yet." Nassari's mouth is crooked. "But I have a head for long-term investments."