

Blue-Green Ribbons

Innocent Chizaram Ilo

From set *Strixhaven: School of Mages*

I.

One, one, two. . .

Zimone Wola counts the clusters of bubbles floating in her glass of Kiwano Fizzy Pop. Firejolt Café begins to fill up as news that Ellina, the resident barista, is giving out free drinks to mages to commemorate the end of session exams. An abundance of cackles and a cloud of chitter-chatter hang thick above the mages twittering about the week-long exams, how difficult or breezy some of the questions and tasks were, and, most importantly, the end-of-the-session Mage Tower game later this evening.



Zimone, Quandrix Prodigy | Art by: Ryan Pancoast

Zimone stops counting.

She directs her gaze around the rim of the glass with laser focus, splitting the drink into three overlapping, swirling hexagons. She then slows the hexagons' swirls until they crash into each other. No spill. No crack on the glass. Dean Kianne will definitely give her a perfect score for this. The girl smiles as she remembers the dean's first class with them mid-semester, Introduction to Forms and Fractals, and how she was the first person in her class to perfect sculpting solid shapes from water. Kianne had lowered the bridge of her thick glasses to the tip of her nose and said, "Please tell me you are considering Quandrix College for next year."

Three, five. . . Zimone resumes counting the clusters of bubbles.

"Zimone. Zimone. *Zimone!!!* "

On the third call, Zimone looks up to see her friends, Amaka and Nnanyielugo, waving at her as they squish into the café through the crowded doorway. Zimone's eyes light up as she beckons her friends over.

"How many stuck-up second-year mages did you have to fight to save these seats for us?" Nnanyielugo says as they grab Zimone into a hug.

"Please tell me we're not going to be stuck-up next session when the new mages come to Strixhaven." Amaka settles into the chair beside Zimone and signals to Ellina to send over one of her waiter-imps to take their order.

"Oh, we're definitely going to be stuck-up," Zimone says as she breaks free from Nnanyielugo's hug. "What kept you two so long?"

"You didn't hear?" Nnanyielugo whispers, then more audibly to the waiter-imp who has just arrived at their table, "Two Kiwano Fizzy Pops, please."

"Didn't hear what?" Zimone asks.

"Of course you didn't, because you ran off immediately after you handed in your script," Amaka cuts in.

"I wanted to come here to save seats for us." Zimone pouts.

"Anyway, all ten deans from the five colleges had a magical showoff for us. One last push to *nudge us to the right college*."

The waiter-imp returns with the drink and recites the *All Drinks Are on the House Today* mantra Ellina has programmed it to do.

"You may have even changed your mind about Quandrix "

Amaka chews up the remaining words on noticing Zimone's glare. Zimone bursts into laughter, and Nnanyielugo joins her. In no time, the three friends are laughing and talking loudly between sips. Nnanyielugo, Amaka, and Zimone met a week after they got into Strixhaven, at the Biblioplex. They were studying for their very first telekinesis task but soon got into a heated argument over which of the elements—fire, air, water, or earth—was the most important. The trio argued so loudly that the treefolk librarian, Isabough, had to ask them to leave. Now, with the year ending, the friends worry if they will still be close, as they have chosen different colleges: Zimone chose Quandrix, Amaka Prismari, and Nnanyielugo Silverquill.

"Are you Zimone Wola?" a squiggly voice asks.

Zimone, Amaka, and Nnanyielugo pause their chitter-chatter.

"Are you Zimone Wola?" the voice asks again.

This time the friends know for sure the voice is coming from the café's floor. It is Wallader the Eventual, his chestnut portmanteau filled with yet-to-be-delivered packages.

"Yes, I am Zimone Wola."

Wallader squints his eyes upward to meet Zimone's as if this will ascertain if the girl is telling the truth. Satisfied for whatever reason that this girl with yellow stains from her drink splattered around her necktie is indeed Zimone Wola, Wallader says, "A package came in for you two weeks ago. No sender's name or address. Lightweight. Wrapped with an optical illusive paper of spiraling bricks. I would have delivered it earlier, but, you know "

The diminutive turtlefolk loves indulging anyone who cares to listen to *how things are in the office*, why some packages end up delayed, how taxing it is to walk around the length and breadth of Strixhaven.

Doubtless his job would be easier and more efficient if he decided to use magic or imps like everyone else at Strixhaven, but Wallader never mentions that.

“A mystery package,” Nnanyielugo’s eyes widen.

“Your birthday was two weeks ago, Zimone,” Amaka says, nudging Zimone’s hands that are now clasped around her drink.

Zimone swallows the last gulp of her drink and belches into the cup of her mouth. She certainly knows who sent the package—she has received the same package, just like the one Wallader described, for seven years now.

“They shouldn’t be making café stools this high,” Wallader grunts. “You don’t need to reach for the ceiling for the drink to slap.” His shell scrapes against one of the stools’ legs as he adjusts his stance to open the portmanteau. “You’d have to get down from that stool to sign off and collect your package, Ms. Zimone.”

“Zimone,” Amaka tippy-taps at the table. “Let’s hurry up. The Mage Tower game is about to start.”

“Yes, people are already trooping to the stadium,” Nnanyielugo adds.

“The two of you should head off without me so you can snatch up seats in the front row.” The café is emptying out now. Zimone’s eyes, ponderous with a mixture of expectation and dread, follow Wallader as he rummages inside the portmanteau for her package.

II.

The first time Zimone received a mystery package from her grandmother, Nimiroti Wola, she was seven. It was her birthday. Her parents, Zihir and Dipo, had thrown her a big party and shown her to her new room. She was seven and could finally have a room to herself! Zihir kept whimpering beside the doorway about how *his little girl was growing up fast* and that Zimone should not be scared because *he and Dipo were just down the hall* while Dipo double-checked the locks on the window and inspected the bed for any wrinkles on the sheets, before finally drawing his daughter and Zihir into a long hug. When the door clicked shut, Zimone dived into the bed, flung the sheets into the air, and wrapped them around herself. This was one thing she always wanted to do: sleep in an unmade bed.

Something scratched against the window. Squirrels, the little girl guessed, as she crawled to the window on her knees, forgetting everything Zihir and Dipo told her about keeping it closed. She opened the window to see a package wrapped with a holographic paper of spiraling bricks crested at the corner of the windowsill. The night wind was starting to tip the package over, so Zimone scooped it up and closed the window. Thinking the package was one of the many gifts people brought her at the party, she tore it open. Inside the velveteen-lined box were eight green-and-blue-striped ribbons and a note:

Happy birthday Zimone, Let this be our little secret. Nimiroti.

Before that night, Zimone had heard of Nimiroti in snippets; tiny bits of stories Zihir and Dipo whispered about *Grandma*. There used to be a framed picture of a woman with her back turned, the graying locks of her dreads arched like a bow, hanging in the parlor. Dipo had removed it after Zimone asked who was in the picture. From the story bits, Zimone could piece together that her grandmother was an esteemed professor at Strixhaven, that something happened—she started forgetting things, mixing up spells, drifting off in the middle of classes, almost slammed an urn against a mage’s skull—and that she left Strixhaven and was never seen again. Six years after that night, when two brown-nosed imps delivered Zimone’s Strixhaven admission letter, Dipo had objected about Zimone going. It took weeks for Zihir to convince him Zimone was beyond her years and could protect herself.

The next year, another package came in with the same note, but with thirteen ribbons. Then it was twenty ribbons the year after that, then thirty-four, fifty-five now, Zimone stares at the ribbons and note inside the velveteen-lined box on her bed. The dormitory is almost empty; most of the mages are still outside arguing about the Mage Tower game. Silverquill College won even though one of their players hypnotized Quandrix College's captain at the finals. The Mage Tower Referee Council refused to flag this clear violation as a foul. Zimone puffs hot air from her mouth before she starts counting the ribbons. *Eighty-nine, one hundred forty-four, two hundred thirty-three. . .*

She cracks her cramped knuckles when she counts the three-hundred-seventy-seventh ribbon. Then she picks up the note:

Happy birthday Zimone,

It's going to be hard getting these packages to you now that you're in Strixhaven. With all the eyes lurking in the shadows.

So, this will be the last one. I hope you put the ribbons to good use.

Nimiroti

Zimone folds the ribbons and the handwritten note into the box as the dorm's door creaks open and the other students begin to troop in. Once everyone is asleep, she will plait them into the braid she's made from all her previous birthday gifts that's stashed under her pillow.

III.

Dean Imbraham squints at the array of numbers running along countless serpentine paths on the board. He mumbles to himself, wiping his sweating brow with both his wings. Then he turns back to the book he suspended in the air and ripples the surrounding wind until the book opens to a coffee-stained page. The dean snaps the chalk in his hands, flings it through the window, and then bows his head. A murmur spreads around the class but quiets as soon as Imbraham shoots up his head.

"The most important thing you have to know about *theory* is that it is just *substance* we haven't figured out yet," begins the dean. "I know, second-year Quandrix College mages, you expect to be spending your time conjuring fractals. *Real stuff*, right?" He smirks. "But you're stuck with me learning theories. Why do you think this class is necessary? Anyone?"

"Because *theory* is the building block of *substance*," a tiny voice sandwiched in the middle of the class answers.

Dean Imbraham gasps. He'd heard a similar answer from another student, long ago. "Who said that?" He scans the room, his eyeballs almost popping out. Resigned that none of the mages will own up to the answer, he slams the book closed. "We've been on this for almost an hour. Class dismissed. See you next week, when we'll try and fail again to figure out the Vorzani Conjecture. Just like we've been doing at Quandrix for decades."

The second-year mages shuffle their feet, shoving their tables and chairs as they scramble out of Torus Hall for their next class, Intermediate Forms & Fractals (Conjuring & Counter-Conjuring) by Dean Kianne, at the Cultivarium. Imbraham waves to Zimone, who is trying to slip past him unnoticed. The girl's knees buckle, and her hands, clasping a pile of books to her chest, tighten.

"Dean Imbraham," Zimone says as she begins to walk toward the dean.

"You look just like her," he notes, arching his wings.

"Like whom?"

“Your grandmother, Nimiroti Wola. Taught her in this same class many years ago.”

Zimone slackens her shoulders to ease the weight of the books. Dean Imbraham makes to continue speaking but stops as the air between student and dean becomes tense. Dean Kianne, swirling past the hallway to the Cultivarium on a ball of air for her class, softens the tension and gives Imbraham something else to talk about.

“Ah, you should be going. Kianne doesn’t like mages coming late for her class.”

The girl nods and begins to walk away but stops at the doorway and turns to Dean Imbraham. “How was she? My grandmother, what was she like?”

“The best student I’ve ever taught. And when she became a professor, an even better colleague. We all loved her until until she left.”

“Thank you.”

“She was also not afraid of owning up to her answers in class.”

The two exchange a knowing smile before Zimone rushes out of Torus Hall. She gets to the Cultivarium just in time to catch Dean Kianne asking the mages to introduce themselves. Zimone squeezes herself into the semicircle where all the mages are sitting, with Kianne in the middle.

“Zimone Wola, late on your first day,” Kianne says. “Care to introduce yourself to the class?”

Flustered at the sudden attention, Zimone stands up for the introduction.

“My name is Zimone Wola and I “

“Is your name *Zimone Wola* , or are you *Zimone Wola* ?” Kianne snaps her fingers. “Young mages always struggle to embody who they are. At this point, *Zimone Wola* is more than your name. It is now who you are.”

After the introductions, the dean begins her class with a recap of their first-year lectures before moving on to the intricacies of conjuring more complex forms from water: animals, plants, and architecture. She gathers the mages around the southern water fountain for practice.

“Remember, the trick is to mold with your eyes and not your hands,” Kianne echoes as she walks each mage through their first complex conjuring.



Basic Conjunction | Art by: Randy Vargas

IV.

The pages of the book are blotted at the edges with red ink, and the text is fading gradually; she has to tilt some of the pages toward the sunlight to read. Zimone wipes off the dust on the ripped cover jacket, opens *The Vorzani Conjecture: Extended Reading on Fractal Theory*, and settles into a chair. She remembers the look Isabough gave her when she requested the book; the librarian's branches drooped and her rust-colored leaves folded in. Zimone had peeped into the record scroll as Isabough's branches reached to the farthest shelves to find the book. The last person to sign it out was *Nimiroti Wola*, fourteen years ago. She opens her jotter to where she scribbled VC on top. Dean Imbraham has ended their study on the Vorzani Conjecture and moved on to another topic because, yet again, he and the mages have failed to solve it.

Zimone mutters the words on her jotter to herself:

The Vorzani Conjecture is an ancient magical/mathematical ritual concerning infinite sequences of unpredictable forms of mana (Dean Imbraham)

???It holds the key to unlocking the very essence of the universe; a boundless infiniteness. Never solved. Most Strixhaven professors have since stopped studying it (only Dean Imbraham teaches it for one week to second-year Quandrix College mages). Because of how powerful and disastrous it could be???

A minute crawls into an hour, and an hour to four. By the time the noon bell rings for lunch, Zimone is way past the middle of the book. Isabough, rustling her leaves to remind the mages to turn in their books before going for lunch, jolts Zimone from a world of unresolved equations and postulations to the present. She closes her jotter, ready for lunch, until her eye catches a strange paper's edge between the unread pages of the book. Zimone tugs at it. It's a handwritten note:

Packages of Ribbons. Numbers one step backward to go on forever. Living books that talk to you on the pathway of light.

There is no doubt that this is Nimiroti's handwriting. Zimone folds the note into crisp quarters, tucks it into her jotter, and hurries toward Isabough to turn in the book.

Outside, she bumps into Amaka and Nnanyielugo at the stairs. The three friends squeal as they hug each other. They have barely seen one another since the semester started. It's been from one lecture to the next assignment. When they finally quiet, they begin asking each other about their new colleges, if it is everything they dreamed of, and gripe about how deep they are buried in lectures as they head toward the Dining Hall.

"Zimone, what were you reading up on?" Amaka asks.

Zimone does not answer. Her mind has wandered back to the note inside her jotter and what Nimiroti might have meant by "living books."

"Zimone!" Nnanyielugo nudges Zimone back to the present. "Amaka was asking "

"Nnanyielugo, don't bother. She's somewhere in her Quandrix mind conjuring fractals."

Zimone rustles up a smile, masking the one-thousand-one uncertainties boiling inside her.

V.

The woman is sitting in front of the fountain with her back turned, braiding stripes of blue-green ribbons into her graying locks. Zimone races toward her to save her, because the Arithmodrome is crumbling. The towers are ripping up in the middle, and the sculptures are erupting to dust. Something keeps pulling her back, until she grabs on to one of the woman's graying locks. The crumbling stops. Just as the woman tilts her head to reveal her face, Zimone's eyes flutter open. She sighs and goes back to sleep, drenched in her own sweat.

VI.

Kianne's office is walled by twisted shelves weighed down by volumes of books. The professor is sitting at her table, scribbling notes for her next class, when Zimone walks in. Without looking up from her writing, she gestures for Zimone to sit. Kianne fills up another page before setting down her quill.

"Zimone. You decided to grace me with your presence today. How lucky of me!"

The gibe is evident in the professor's tone. It has been more than a week since she told Zimone to come see her after class.

"I "

"I know. Classes. Assignments. Fear."

"Fear?"

"Yes, fear." Kianne stands up and draws the window curtains open. "Fear that I will find out what you and Dean Imbraham have been up to."

"Dean Imbraham?"

"Yes, he's leading you on about the Vorzani Conjecture, isn't he?"

"No, Dean Kianne. In fact, Dean Imbraham has moved on to another topic in our Magical Theory class."

"Then why did you request *The Vorzani Conjecture: Extended Reading on Fractal Theory* at the Biblioplex two days ago?"

Zimone stands from her chair. “May I be excused?”

“What?”

“I don’t think I want to continue this conversation. My personal study is *my* life and shouldn’t be subject to faculty scrutiny.”

Kianne sits back in her chair and regards the young mage in front of her. She sighs. “You may be excused, Zimone.”

“Thank you.” Zimone gathers her jacket around her and makes to leave.

“You know, this is the same thing he did to your grandmother—egged her on until the Oriq got hold of her.” Kianne pauses to assess the weight of her words on Zimone. “You have a brilliant mind, Zimone, and you’re going to make a powerful mage one day. But you need to leave the unknown. There is a reason why no one has unraveled the Vorzani Conjecture.”

“Again, Dean Imbrahim has nothing to do with this.”

Zimone closes the door behind her until it laps to the doorframe, quietly, like still air.

VII.

The moon tonight is shy. It is hiding behind the clouds, biding its time for all of Strixhaven to drift to sleep before it comes out. Zimone looks around to ensure no one is following her. Students are not supposed to be outside the dorms at this hour, and she may get into trouble if anyone sees her. The Torches of Enlightenment are a stone’s throw ahead. This is where the book is supposed to talk to her, if Nimiroti’s note is right. Zimone sits at the stairs under the fourth tower and waits, twirling the braid of blue-green ribbons around her frame. An owl hoots in the distance. The night air begins to spiral around her feet.

“Zimone Wola, granddaughter of Nimiroti Wola, what brings you here on a dark and eerie night?” The voice comes from a dusty tome carried on four skittering metal legs.

Zimone stands. “Are you the one they call the Codex Vocifera?”



Codie, Vociferous Codex | Art by: Daniel Ljunggren

“Yes,” the Codex bows closely. “You look just like her, your grandmother. We used to spend so much time together on these stairs until, you know “

“Until *what* ?” Zimone asks. “Everybody keeps insinuating that something terrible happened to my grandmother, but no one ever tells me the full story.”

“Wait, nobody has told you what befell Nimiroti? Not even Deans Imbraham and Kianne?”

Zimone shakes her head.

“Nimiroti figured out the Vorzani Conjecture. When the Oriq learned about it from their spies in Strixhaven, they captured her. She came back to Strixhaven, but we noticed that the once-esteemed Professor Nimiroti was no longer herself. She had cast a memory-loss spell on herself because if she couldn’t remember the Vorzani Conjecture, then there would be nothing to tell the Oriq. And then she left Strixhaven, and never came back.”

Zimone rubs her palms to keep warm from the numbing cold, silently reflecting on her grandmother, her courage to stand up to the Oriq. Another thought flickers in her mind. What if the Codex is lying? What if all these things—the mystery notes, the ribbons, the dreams—were lies?

The Codex suddenly pivots, as if “looking” at something else. “My wisdom has been requested elsewhere. Good night, Zimone.”

“Wait. My grandmother’s note led me here. Aren’t you supposed to reveal the Vorzani Conjecture to me?”

The Codex cackles, “There is no more revealing to be done,” and vanishes in a puff of mist.

Zimone begins to climb down the stairs. One step forward, one step backward. Two steps forward, one step backward. Three steps forward, one step backward. Five steps forward, three steps backward. She continues, focusing on the stairs even as the winds begin to spin around her and a laser-like power sears down her spine, until a dark shadow falls over the Torches of Enlightenment. Zimone untwirls the braid of blue-green ribbons around her body. The braid, as if it has a mind of its own, weaves into

countless patterns. Finally, the weaving stops and the braid glides into Zimone's hands; she swirls it and then aims at the suns Karu and Ezza, shrouded by purple clouds.

A rustling sound in the shadows startles Zimone. She spins to investigate but trips and slams her head against one of the torches. As her consciousness fades, she wonders with horror if the same spies who watched her grandmother have found her, too.

VIII.

Hot bolts course from Zimone's head into her spine. She groans and tries to open her eyes, met with blinding pain. She concedes and eases into the darkness.

"She's awake now, Extus?"

"No, she's not. Give her time."

"But we don't have time."

"We waited for fourteen years, Pita; I'm sure we can wait a little longer."

One of the men in the room pulls up a chair beside the bed Zimone is lying on. The other leans on the wall and adjusts his mask. The room is stuffy, even with all the windows open. The only source of light is the purple smoke swirling out of the men's masks.

"Where am I?" Zimone asks after some time. The throbbing pain has faded a bit. She tries to cough, but her chest hurts, as if someone stuffed tatashe inside it. Extus and Pita spring up.

"Hello Zimone," Extus begins. "My name is Extus, and I "

"I know who you are. Your reputation precedes you." Zimone pulls herself up to a sitting position. "We're taught not to like you at Strixhaven."

Extus snickers. "I'm sorry. The Mage Hunter we sent startled you. We are usually more delicate about bringing in new recruits. But the thing is, you possess so much power, so—"

"You still haven't answered my question. *Where am I?*" Zimone's eyes spot the braid of blue-green ribbons heaped at the foot of the bed.

"You are where you need to be. We have followed you for years. We know about the packages and the notes."

"You sent them?"

"No, Nimiroti is always a step ahead of us. She tailors the packages and the notes so that only you can receive and read them."

"Is this the point—you torture me until I tell you about what I know?"

"No, the Oriq doesn't torture people to join us or do our bidding. We respect everyone's free will."

"What, then, did you do to my grandmother?"

"We didn't do anything. The weight of the Vorzani Conjecture was too heavy for Nimiroti to bear. It drove her into a delirium. We tried to help her relieve the burden, but she wouldn't hear any of it." Extus pauses to catch his breath and gauge Zimone's reaction.

Zimone springs up from the bed and grabs the braid of ribbons.

"Zimone, easy, we're not here to fight."

Extus and Pita raise both their hands into the air.

“Tell us what you know,” Extus continues. “And we’ll tell you what we know, and together, we can control the universe. We can control time and space.”

“Trading with the devil,” Zimone snarls, and whips the braid of blue-green ribbons at the two men, sending them crashing into the wall at the far end of the room. “You would grind Strixhaven to dust if you possessed such power.”



Decisive Denial | Art by: Lorenzo Mastroianni

“Wouldn’t it be for the best?” Pita cuts in. “Strixhaven hoards magic, clenches it with glued palms. If we destroy it, then anyone anywhere in the world can practice magic. Imagine a world like that—where magic is not left in the hands of the few.”

A blast of wind rips the door off its hinges.

“Get away from her!” Dean Kianne’s voice thunders. Behind her are Nnanyielugo and Amaka.

“Easy, easy,” Extus whispers, his voice tepid, his stance disarming.

With lightning speed, Extus forms a ball of fire and hurls it at Kianne, who stops it midway. The dean spins the fireball, fanning its embers to make it even more menacing, before redirecting it back at Extus. Zimone swirls the braid of blue-green ribbons, weaving it into the tiny cracks of time and space, until it stops the fireball a hairbreadth away from Extus. She then draws water from the aloes and ferns on the windowsill to dissipate the fireball.

“None of this is necessary,” Zimone says to Dean Kianne. “He was just about to let me go.”

Kianne’s eyes dart across the room, from the Oriq to Nnanyielugo and Amaka, and then to Zimone. She sees the wry smile forming at the ends of Extus’s lips and then a measured glance between Zimone and Pita.

“Of course,” the Oriq says. “Though I trust we’ll meet again, Zimone Wola.”

IX.

Nimiroti is sitting beside the window with her back turned, braiding stripes of blue-green ribbons into her graying locks.

“She’s not lucid today,” the sanctuary attendant says to Zimone. “On days when things make sense to her, she keeps talking about her granddaughter, the best mage in the whole world.” The sanctuary attendant smiles at her before heading off to help an old man untangle his ball of yarn so he can continue crocheting. “Just call if she needs my attention.”

Zimone remembers the excitement that coursed through her when a note came from Nimiroti telling her to come visit her at The Sanctuary of the Lost, a safe haven for those affected by magic. The note was the only thing that had brought Zimone joy since her ordeal with Extus Narr. Dean Kianne and Dean Imbraham had grilled her with questions on what transpired between her and the Oriq leader; somehow, the rumor of her being an Oriq recruit spread around Strixhaven, and her friends Nnanyielugo and Amaka started avoiding her when they would bump into each other at the Biblioplex.

Zimone trudges to the window and places her hand gently on Nimiroti’s shoulder. The old woman startles, then turns to her and smiles.

“Hello,” Zimone says. “My name is Zimone Wola.”

“Who are you?” The old woman asks through her toothy smile.

“Your granddaughter. See, I have ribbons just like yours. You sent them to me “

Nimiroti gazes at the girl sitting beside her and rummages through the blank slate of her present memory. She tries, again, to remember where she has stashed this name Zimone, so familiar and yet so strange. Nimiroti sighs in defeat and says, “I don’t know who you are, but I know you’re someone I love.”