

Unnatural Wizardry

by Cosette

In a world with two competing factions (Wizardry and Military), one Wizard breaks the rules. This story contains sci-fi and fantasy elements.

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Flight

Chapter 1 of 16

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Chapter 1: Flight

"We've found them all. All 3 registered to her." She was once my friend. Now she's leading the charges against me: "unnatural wizardry", they call it.

My 3 wands are bundled up in an anti-magic bag and handed to a guard. They know I'm helpless without them. A different guard grabs me roughly by the shoulders and forces me to walk outside. The prison center isn't far, but it requires a walk across a courtyard. I go along without any protest, acting meek and scared. It's important they believe I'm beaten. That's the only way this can work. We reach the center of the courtyard. From here it's just a quick reach up to the stars where I can make my escape.

Burago, I whisper to my left arm. A piercing of pain as wand breaks skin. How convenient it is that robes are still the normal dress of wizards, even in this day and age! No one sees the wand slip into my sleeve, held firmly by my left hand.

Llara, I whisper to my right arm. The same pain, the same convenience.

I must plan this perfectly, or I will lose my only chance of escape. The prison, you see, is anti-magic. And without my magic, I am nothing but a Normal with an appreciation for science and technology.

Gripping my wands firmly in my hands, I direct my focus to the guard restraining me and think *Hankisd énel*. He relaxes instantly and I do not hesitate.

UP! I command my wands. *UP UP UP!* They start my ascent to freedom. I shout the next commands in sequence: *GUARD! INVISIBLE!*

By now my escape has been noticed. I'm only a few feet off the ground, just out of arm's reach. The guards are only Normals; they can do nothing but jump for me. Within moments, my form blips out of sight.

It is not a perfect plan. There are rotary guns in every direction capable of shooting me down. Even my Guard spell won't protect me if more than one of those bullets hit. The wizards are stunned, for the moment. They could not have foreseen the bastardization of science and magic that allowed spare wands to be hidden within my body. They thought they had all my wands, and they do, in a way. The wands they hold are my most powerful wands, the ones that have been dutifully registered and legally bound. My spares are nowhere near as efficient. I regret now not saving one greater-quality wand for a spare. It is taking me far too long to break the atmosphere of this planet and this gunfire is getting difficult to dodge.

Finally I make it out of the range of gunfire. I can see the stars above me, approaching slowly. Frantic, I remember at the last moment to give my wands one more command: *AIR BAG!* A clear bag of air surrounds my face, preventing me from oxygen death.

I allow my body to slip into Space mode as I breach the atmosphere and change my perspective to see the astronomical surroundings. Where do I go from here? My options are not good; I've managed to piss off every major faction in this universe: the Wizardry, the Military, and the Raiders who are the enemies of the other two. My gaze searches the nearby solar systems for a way out. I am in luck: there's a phoenix just one planet over. And phoenixes offer help to all who require it, as long as one has not harmed them in any way.

I approach the blinking red mark indicating the phoenix as quickly as my wands will carry me. None of my spells will last forever; my air bag spell in particular is vulnerable to time, only catching the oxygen that was around my face when I commanded my wands.

Switching back to normal vision, I see the phoenix. It's not really a phoenix of course, but a creature member of the Phoenix Guild. Most phoenixes resemble horses in some way, as they all must be ride-able. This one is no different. She's red with silver wings and accepts me gracefully as I land on her.

"Can you take me somewhere safe?" I ask her.

She doesn't move for a moment and then takes one hesitating step forward.

"Wait, what's the matter? Why are you hesitating?"

"I cannot see any safe paths for you, wizard. All are wrought with death." She pulls me into her consciousness and shows me. Everywhere I look, grey tendrils stretch out, reaching for me. We look together, the phoenix and I.

"There must be a way," I say. "Surely I have not escaped death just to find it again?"

We both look harder. And then one faint gold tendril waves in front of us. She does me the favor of not jettisoning me from her consciousness as she reaches the first gold tendril. Another pops up quickly, and we continue following the trail. I can see peripherally where we are in the universe: we have left the solar system and are traveling towards another galaxy. Combining her vision with mine, I can see somewhat where the tendrils lead.

A place with no military, no nearby trading source to attract raiders, and no wizardry. Those are my requirements for safety. Her vision shows only one planet fits this description.

Just before my air bag is depleted, we reach the planet. Per her guild's requirements, she reminds me that the tendrils only show where I have a chance of avoiding death, not where death will uniformly be avoided. From this point on, it is completely up to me. Obligation fulfilled, she releases me from her consciousness, deposits me on the planet's surface, and flies away.

An Unusual Connection

Chapter 2 of 16

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Chapter 2: An Unusual Connection

I have a suspicion what planet this might be, and I really don't see how it could be anything else, but I hope I'm wrong. All I could see from the astronomical surroundings in my Space mode was where this planet was located: far away from any major Wizardry or military holding. Assuming the phoenix was able to meet my requirements for safety, this planet would also hold no interest for raiders. All this means the planet is one big worthless ball of rotational space junk.

It is comfortable, though. Gravity and atmosphere are standard, and the star is at the ideal distance for maintaining life-producing temperatures. From the astronomical view, I could see that this planet has only two main continents: one Northern, one Southern. Doubtless there would be islands in between, but those would be so small as to be negligible in astronomical scale. The phoenix had dropped me on the Southern continent, somewhere near the northeast corner. The location I'd been deposited on had several marks on the ground, suggesting many others had also been deposited here. There are no signs of any technology or civilization of any kind.

This does not bode well.

All around me are trees bearing various kinds of fruits. They're numerous enough to look naturally grown and planted, but I suspect otherwise: they strongly resemble bio-engineered trees I'd seen while in the Military. None of the trees look magical. Dozens of footprints lead off in every direction; some footprints go in circles, making me

again wary that this planet must be the one for the Deranged. There's one set of footprints that look relatively recent and seem to be walking in a straight line. That's the set I choose to follow.

The footprints disappear as soon as I enter the forest, but I do my best to head in the general direction. The trees, overripe with fruit, have littered the ground with their droppings. Squishy, rotten fruit oozes under my shoes as I walk, their sickly sweet odor wafting into the air. The fruit I grab to eat is sweet and overflowing with fluids, clearly designed to supply the eater with both calories and water... almost certainly bio-engineered. It's been a long time since I've been left on my own in a forest—the last time named me Wizard and forced me out of the Military—but I remember enough to survive. Odd, though: I hear cooing birds, small rodents, insects, but no sounds to indicate any kind of predator. The sounds from the normal prey animals are cacophonous, far louder than they should have been.

Were there no natural predators here?

The longer I walk, the more certain of my suspicions I become. This continent, at least, seems to have been bio-engineered to allow humans the greatest ease of survival. No natural predators. Fruit so juicy it satisfies both hunger and thirst. Animals that know no predators and thus are easy to kill and eat. I bet somewhere nearby there are freshwater streams and rivers. Everything a person needs to survive with none of the struggle that would normally be found in an uncivilized, untechnological location such as this.

If I am right, the danger on this planet comes not from lack of natural resources or natural predators, but from people. With *Burago* and *Liara* nearly depleted, I'm just a Normal. A Normal who grew up military, but with muscles that haven't been trained or used for years. My body mods were designed to protect me from military weapons and to hide me from the Wizardry. They won't be any help here, against Normals. And if I am right, the Normals here will be particularly unpredictable.

The Deranged... rumors of them penetrate every level of our society, but no one talks about them much. No one is more stigmatized in the Wizardry or the Military than the Deranged. They are those with minds so broken they couldn't function, so broken that their very existence prevented the rest of us from being able to focus on our own lives. The rumor is that they are dropped on some distant planet with no military or magical properties, and far enough from any valuable resource to not be attractive to Raiders.

That once-distant planet sounds an awful lot like this one.

A moderate sting near my wrists reminds me of the holes made by *Burago* and *Liara* only a few hours before. The wounds are still open, and still bleeding. I stop walking. These have to be treated, or they will become infected. I hold *Burago* in my hand gently, close my eyes, and focus my energy on the wand. The tiniest spark is left. It might be enough to heal one of these wounds, but not both. And it would pain me to do it. To use up a wand has the taste of cruelty in it, though I do not know why. I focus instead on *Liara*, pulling my energy into her (Her? Where did that thought come from?), sensing what magic is left. Just enough to heal both wounds without emptying the wand of power... but the magic energy that would be left would not be useful for anything greater than creating a small puff of fire. Still, it would be enough to leave her—I allow that strange realization to stay with me—some degree of power.

I hold her gently in my right hand, focus her energies towards the wound on my left wrist, and command *Heal*. The wound on my left wrist closes up, the skin grafting over the wound seamlessly. There is a noticeable drain from her and a sense of lessening that invades my consciousness.

This is odd. Wands are just tools to be used by wizards: we name them, we bind them, we use them. Most wizards feel some sorrow at using up a wand, but it is the sorrow comparable to that felt by a technologist when a favorite appliance breaks. No wand has ever been anything but an "it", no matter the name. And this sense of draining, as far as I understand it, should not be felt by the wizard, especially not for an unbound wand.

Perhaps this is just because I've never used up a wand before. That thought is mildly reassuring, but nagging doubts remain: surely the Wand Faction would have noticed this before and warned their fellow Wizards of it?

Stinging from my right hand, where blood is still dripping, ends my ruminations. With a nearly apologetic sense, I focus *Liara*—her—on my right wrist, commanding *Heal*. The wound heals neatly, but the sense of loss nearly overwhelms me.

Among the Deranged

Chapter 3 of 16

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Chapter 3: Among the Deranged

A small voice calls out, "Capella? Is that you?"

I turn quickly, hiding my wands. What's the sense of that, I wonder, since I am wearing this robe that announces my Wizard status to the whole universe? Still, since hiding the wands saved me before, the action has now become instinct.

The person behind the voice has deep brown hair, a wide stature, and a foothill of a nose leading down to the mountainous mouth below.

She and I are bent over our technoscopes, staring down at the scene below. An unusual array of plant molecules dance slowly. They almost seem to shimmer. I look at her in wonder and ask: "Do yours seem to be... dancing?" She looks back at me, amusement and amazement sparkling in her deep green eyes.

"Dancing? I would have merely said 'vibrating', but you always are one for the dramatics. If I didn't know better, I'd guess you were a wizard!"

I laugh at this: I've failed the two standard Magic Tests to which the Wizardry subjects every member of the Military. I still have one left—coming up rather soon, actually—

but there have only been a handful of wizards identified at age 18.

“Marinelle?”

“It is you, Capella!” She pauses briefly, lips moving wordlessly. I’m pulled back into my surroundings: this planet—this overabundant, easy planet—and I realize the significance of finding her here.

I lower my voice, dismayed by what I’m about to ask.

“Are you a Deranged?”

She shakes her head violently. “No, no, no! I’m fine. There was some sort of misunderstanding—I had some trouble, you see, after you left our project—I don’t remember it, but it was supposedly really terrible—I mean, seeing plants vibrating? Whose perspective wouldn’t change after that?” She catches her breath and continues on: “But now I’m fine. Really. Fine.”

She pauses in her defense and looks at me, at what I’m wearing.

“You’re a wizard! Ha, I knew it! So that’s why you left our project! No wonder! So, come on, tell me all about it!” Her face is flushed, and I wonder if she realizes she needs to breathe once in a while.

“Yup, I’m a Wizard. Or was: they don’t count me as one of theirs any longer.”

Marinelle looks at me, remembers where we are, and gasps.

“Don’t tell me you’re a Deranged!”

“No, but—”

“I mean, if I’m not a Deranged and I’m here, then maybe you’re not a Deranged, either! But then, how did you get here? Maybe there was a misunderstanding—maybe—”

“Marinelle!” I interrupt, putting as much force and authority in my voice as I can muster. “Do you always blabber like this now?”

“Well, no, I mean, sometimes, yes, but I can stop. I’ll be quiet now.”

“Uh huh.”

“No, really! I can! It’s just—” Her voice stops, but her lips continue moving, a constant stream of soundless words leaking out of them like juice from the fruit we’re standing on. But at least for the moment, she’s quiet.

“They were going to have me drained, Nelle. They—all of them, not just the Wizardry!—are too caught up in their own damn factions. They don’t see the limits they inflict on themselves in the name of purity, and I—”

“Drained! For what?” Her eyes narrow at me suspiciously, and then she starts giggling. “Nah, you’re no killer! I can’t imagine you doing anything worthy of being DRAINED! You’re kidding!”

Her incessant chatter is starting to wear on me, but I suppose I’ve got to put up with it. At the very least, she doesn’t seem to be delusional... just... hyper. And finding a friend here, among the Deranged, is a great stroke of luck.

“I didn’t kill anyone, Nelle. As I was trying to say, the Wizardry and the Military are too caught up in their own philosophies. I’m not. And what I was doing—well, when the Wizardry found out, they considered it treason.”

She nods slowly, but the confusion spread across her face betrays her. She has no idea what I’m talking about. I’m not terribly surprised: Marinelle has no concept of the philosophies that rule the Military and the Wizardry, as she has never changed from one to the other. I’m not sure whether telling her the whole story now would be prudent: it’s starting to get dark and I am still not entirely convinced of her mental stability.

Still, it is a good sign that she’s been quiet this whole time.

“Where do you live here? Can you show me a place where I could stay for a while?” I don’t particularly want to stay here, but I’ve no choice. There’s no way, technological or magical, off this planet that I can see... And besides, where else could I go?

Seriousness quiets her earlier exuberance as she answers, “You’re welcome to stay with me, but be careful about who else you talk to here. Some of them are okay, but there are real Deranged here.”

She motions for me to follow her, and we begin walking northwest, towards the edge of the continent.

As we walk, we fill the time with the most meaningless banter we can think of. I suspect she’s as uncertain of me as I am of her. We used to be so close, partners for so many years, but it’s been years now since we last saw each other. And during those years, I became a wizard, and she got shipped off to live with the Deranged. Who knows what else might have changed?

Suddenly, she stops walking and crouches down. Long-forgotten military instincts snap back into place as I follow her lead.

Leaning over to me, she whispers, “The camp of the Deranged is just half a mile north of us. Sometimes they come this far south. Don’t ever let them see you walking to or from my home. I don’t want them to know where I live.”

I nod, wondering if it’s safe to stand yet. She searches the dim shadows, presumably for any wandering Deranged. After a few moments, she quietly stands and we continue walking.

In a matter of minutes, we reach her home: an elaborate log cabin with leaves serving as thatching. (The leaves are hard to make out in the dusk, but they seem to have been taken from the fruit trees we passed.) I follow her inside to a room with a bed made of those same leaves.

“It’s not as uncomfortable as it looks,” she says when she sees me looking at the bed skeptically.

For now, it will do, but I don’t intend to spend any more time here on this planet than I need to. The two of us fall onto the bed together: her, presumably tired from whatever it was she did all day, and me, exhausted from the intense magic use and the long trek through the forest on forgotten muscles. She says good night and quickly falls asleep, but I’m tormented for a while by my predicament. The phoenix led me here for a reason—I do need a place to hide for a while—but how can I stay here forever? With no magic, no technology, how can I—forgive me for saying this here—stay sane?

But those are worries for tomorrow.

Movement

Chapter 4 of 16

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Chapter 4: Movement

Movement wakes me the next morning. Nelle is up already, shaking her head back and forth frantically. I get up, walk over to her, tap her on the shoulder gently. Startled, she looks at me, like she'd forgotten I was there.

"Nelle? What's wrong?"

"No no no. It's not back. It can't be. Must still be sleeping." The rocking spreads from her head to her torso; her head stops shaking side to side, but her body moves front to back.

I don't know what to do.

"No no no no no no..." Her litany continues.

"Marinelle? Are you okay?" Stupid question. Obviously she's not or she wouldn't be doing this.

I touch her more forcefully, my thumb leaving its imprint on her thin shirt. I could cast *Hankisd ënel* on her, but that would empty *Liara*... Perhaps *Burago* would be enough. That wand, at least, is still just a wand to me. Seeing no other options, I pull *Burago* out of my sleeve and point it at her.

"NOOOOO! Louder, louder, can't be louder. I left them back there, how could they follow me here?"

I feel *Burago* vibrate softly in my left hand. Perhaps it knows it is about to be used up. She's not calming down at all; actually, she seems to be getting more frantic now that *Burago* is pointed at her. I direct my thoughts towards *Burago*, apologizing for what I see no way out of doing, and command *Hankisd ënel*.

Burago quivers in my hand one last time as the spell is cast. Nothing more than a stick now, I drop what was once the wand *Burago* on the ground.

She stops rocking and a peaceful smile brightens her face.

"Better?" I ask.

"Yes. Did you do something to me?"

"I sent a calming spell your way. I'm glad it seems to be working."

"Well, thanks. It's not often I'm grateful to a wizard, but thanks... I really do feel much better now."

"What happened? You were acting like... well, like a Deranged."

At that word, she shakes her head frantically.

"I'm not! It's just...well, it's been so long since the last time...sometimes I hear things. One word, repeated over and over. It hasn't happened since I left the Deranged, though. I thought it was over."

"What word were you hearing this time?"

Before she can answer, a faint tapping just outside the cabin interrupts us. Suddenly alert, she looks at the wall suspiciously.

"Nelle? It's me, Edon! It's urgent!"

She whispers back, "Were you followed?"

"No! Now I'm coming in...this can't wait!"

I watch as a man in tattered Military garb with a forest of unruly dirt-brown hair and lips torn open like a split seam enters the cabin.

"They're coming! They'll be walking by here any minute!"

"What? Now? But my house, they can't know I live here!"

Noticing me for the first time, he sees my robes, and a sneer greases onto his lips.

"And what are you doing here, Wizard? Dropped on the wrong continent, were you?"

With one easy motion, I pull out *Liara* and point it directly at Edon, who immediately recoils.

"If you have the habit of offending wizards, I would suggest you break it before I do it for you." I'm bluffing, of course; I would not waste *Liara* on such an ignorant buffoon. But even here, I expect some degree of respect as a wizard.

Edon stares at the wand in terror. Satisfied it's done its job, I put it away. Once the wand is hidden, Nelle says, "Edon, this is Capella, an old friend of mine. She can be trusted. Capella, I'm sorry if Edon's offended you, but..."

Faint footsteps interrupt her. Her eyes dart around the room quickly, as if weighing a decision.

"We're leaving. I can't let them find me here!"

She takes one last look around and then walks out. Baffled, I follow her.

Edon considers me warily before telling Nelle, "I'll go back to them now." At a worried glance from her, he adds, "Don't worry, I'll just tell them I had to take a piss in private for once. Look, if you go to the camp they're leaving, they won't find you and you'll have shelter. I'll find you there later, promise." With that, he rushes off towards the footsteps.

Nelle starts trotting toward the forest we'd been in the day before. I don't want to be left alone when the Deranged show up, so I follow her. Without looking back, she leads me deep into the forest until the sound of footsteps other than our own has faded. She's setting such a fast pace that talking would be difficult; plus, she seems so terrified of the Deranged finding her that I suspect she wants to be as quiet as possible. Even though we are jogging at a sustainable pace, she is going out of her way not to step on any fallen tree limbs or move wayward branches. Instead, we flow around them. It occurs to me that she is not only trying to hide us now, but also trying to prevent any Deranged from following our trail.

When we reach the place where we'd found each other yesterday, she stops for a brief moment to grab a piece of fruit. The brief jog has made me thirsty as well; my muscles haven't been so used since joining the Wizardry three years prior. I eagerly grab my own fruit, enjoying the abundance of water it provides. She doesn't wait for me to finish, but begins her jog as soon as she's done. I lug the unfinished fruit with me, straining to take bites as my legs heave forward. We're heading back east now, toward where the Phoenix dropped me the day before. Sometime soon I'm going to need to eat something other than fruit, but that is a concern for after this frantic run is over.

She turns north, leading me through a section of the forest I'm not familiar with. The trees are exactly the same, but they seem to be thinning the further north we get. She stops suddenly before the forest ends and crouches behind a tree. I squat behind one nearby, watching her curiously. I've heard nothing but animals for a while now, certainly nothing that would make me suspect we were being followed. Nodding to herself first and then to me as an afterthought, she stands and we leave the forest.

We're on a beach now. From my memories of this planet from astronomical scale, I know that the ocean we now see separates this continent from its northern counterpart. This reminds me of something Edon said earlier, which piqued my curiosity at the time.

"Nelle..." She shakes her head and points further north. My question will have to wait until we reach the supposedly-abandoned camp of Deranged.

Continuing our trek north, we approach a cluster of perhaps two dozen temporary shelters: lean-tos prevail, though there are also a few teepees. It looks abandoned. A large number of footprints lead west, toward Nelle's former home. We walk through the entire camp, checking each lean-to and teepee to make sure the Deranged truly have left.

It strikes me as odd that they would just abandon their camp like this. Then again, they are Deranged; who knows why they do anything?

Finally satisfied the camp is abandoned, we stop near the eastern edge. There's a boulder large enough for both of us to sit on, which we do. My weak legs shake under me as I sit. They're going to be sore tomorrow.

Whispering, I ask, "Is it okay to talk now?"

She answers me with another whisper, "Yes... but let's keep it to a whisper for a while. I want to be sure they're all gone."

I'm about to ask the question I thought of earlier when something strange catches my eyes. In the center of the camp is a lone tree rising out of the sand where no tree should be able to grow. Yet there it is. As I gaze at it, I begin to feel pulled toward it, as if the tree has a gravity of its own.

I've been dropped in the middle of a forest and told not to leave. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. The damn Wizardry and their tests! Kicking a loose stone out of frustration, I pace until even my legs get bored. But then a word rises in my head unbidden: Friole. What kind of a word is that? But it won't stop and seems to be guiding me toward something on the ground. I search and am drawn towards an enormous tree whose bark seems to shimmer. On the ground beneath the tree are small branches. The word is louder now. I bend down to examine the branches. When I touch one of them, the word stops and my hand closes around it of its own volition.

Scattering my thoughts, my mind hears the whisper of a word: *Diago*.

The Secret of the Deranged

Chapter 5 of 16

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Chapter 5: The Secret of the Deranged

The whisper grows louder, soon becoming a roar inside my head: *Diago. Diago. Diago. Diago. Diago. Diago. Diago. Diago. Diago*. This is why I didn't join the Wand Faction. This damned drumming is enough to make anyone deranged.

Nelle slides off the boulder, rounding herself into a ball on the sand. Her hands cover her ears, her eyes are closed. Her litany of "No no no no" starts up again, just as it did the day before.

I shake my head, try to force the drumming to subside.

“Nelle?”

No response. I lean down next to her, touch her gently.

“Nelle?”

Her litany continues. Grabbing her by the shoulders, I try to push her up.

That gets her attention, as she tries to fight me off.

“Nelle! It’s Capella, remember?”

She opens one eye warily and looks at me.

“It’s back, the voices are back…” Her whole body starts shaking.

Diago. Diago. Diago. Diago...

“Get up, Nelle, or you’ll regret it!” I thrust Liara at her in an effort to frighten her back into interacting with me. It works: she sits up slowly and stares at me.

“What are you hearing, Nelle?”

Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes still frantic.

“*Diago. Diago.*” She pauses and then voices the drumming I’ve been trying to suppress: *Diago. Diago. Diago.*”

That’s what she’s hearing? But that means—

“Stand up and follow the word.”

Her eyes water.

“Nooo... I’m not a Deranged! I’m not, I’m not!”

“Nelle... please. Trust me. Stand up and follow the word.” I brandish my wand at her again. Sighing, she stands up slowly. Step.

“Don’t make me, Capella! Please don’t make me!”

“I hear it too, Nelle. The same word.”

She looks at me, suspicion plain on her face.

“You’re a Deranged! How could I have trusted you? You brought the voices back to me!”

“NELLE! I am NOT a Deranged! I’m a Wizard! You... What word did you hear last night? Just tell me this, and I won’t force you to take one more step.”

“I don’t know. Bur—bura—bu—I don’t remember!”

“*Burago.* Was that the word you heard?”

She narrows her eyes at me again. “That was it.”

This is giving me a headache. She’s not going to take this news well.

“*Burago* was the name of a wand, the wand I used up to calm you down.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nelle, please... trust me. You’re not a Deranged. I’m not a Deranged. Keep following the word and I’ll explain everything.”

“Will it stop if I do that?”

“I think so.”

She nods dejectedly and begins to walk. Each step takes us closer to the unusual tree growing in the sand, the tree that I now strongly suspect is a wand tree. How a wand tree could come to grow here, I don’t know.

Diago. Diago. The name gets louder. How long has this wand tree been here, for it to shout its name so desperately?

She leads us straight to the tree and bends down. Her fingers fall upon a stick: the wand *Diago*.

Silence.

“It... stopped.”

“Yes.”

“Why did it stop, Pel?” At least she’s beginning to trust me again... It’s been years since anyone’s called me Pel, and the sound makes me smile for a moment, before I remember what all this means.

“You’re a wizard.”

Shock slaps her face, making her eyes wide and her mouth open.

“What did you just say?”

There’s no way to break this to her gently. At least the possibility of being a Deranged was familiar to her. But to find out you’re a wizard, when you’ve failed all the standard Magic Tests? No, there is no way to ease her into this.

“*Diago* is the wand’s name, Marinelle. The stick you’re holding is a wand. It called to you, as it did to me, because you’re a wizard.”

"You're kidding, right? This is some sort of elaborate joke you're playing on me, isn't it? Some sort of cruel Wizardry humor?"

"No."

"No? But... how can I be a wizard? I failed the Magic Tests! I failed all of them!"

Her face twists as she desperately searches for a way to deny this. I can relate: I wasn't happy to be named Wizard either, not when I'd been raised to distrust and insult them. But her question is valid: how can she be a wizard when she failed the Magic Tests?

"I don't know. But this is what happens during a Magic Test. You're left in a forest full of wand trees. You hear the name of the closest wand pounding in your head, until you find it and touch it. I don't know how you can be a wizard, Nelle; but if you weren't one, you wouldn't have heard *Diago*, you wouldn't have found *Diago*—you would just be a delusional Deranged."

She looks down at *Diago*, shakes her head, and hands the wand to me.

"Prove to me that's a wand."

"Alright." I close my eyes and focus my energy on *Diago* for a moment before my eyes snap open. *Diago* has more energy than any of the three wands I lost just the day before. (Has it really only been a day?) *Diago* is far more powerful than a wand from an uncultivated wand tree is supposed to be.

"Well?" Right. An easy, simple spell.

Pointing *Diago* at the sand, I verbally command, "*Flower!*" Green twists and turns as a bud sprouts and opens.

She bends down, touching the daisy as if to make sure it's real.

"All this time, I've been running from the voices..." Her voice grows softer as she continues, "They told me I was Deranged. I thought I was Deranged. But all this time, all those words, they were wand names, weren't they?"

"It sounds like it."

"It's true then: I am a wizard."

"Yes." Determination flashes through her green eyes.

"Then I don't need to be here. None of us need to be here."

It's my turn to be confused.

"What do you mean, none of you?"

"We all heard the same words. That's why I went to live on my own, hidden from the rest of them: I thought they were making me a Deranged, like them. But now... what if we're all wizards?"

The impact of what she said hurts my mind. The Magic Tests stop at 18 because... why? I always assumed it was for a reason, but the Wizardry never told me what it was, even when I joined them. And if she's right and the Deranged Military heard wand names, that means there's more than just *Diago* waiting to be claimed on this supposedly worthless planet.

"Pel? Will you train me?"

I can't help but smile as the beginnings of a plan form in my head. Maybe there is a way off of this planet after all.

"I will train you."

Opportunity

Chapter 6 of 16

In a world with two competing factions (Wizardry and Military), one Wizard breaks the rules. This story contains sci-fi and fantasy elements.

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Chapter 6: Opportunity

Her enthusiasm surprises me: to go from abhorring wizards to wanting to be trained as one... The relief she must feel at realizing she's not truly a Deranged must be enormous. Still, I am now faced with a painful decision: to train a wizard, the wizard must use a wand. Which wand do I allow her to use: *Liara* or *Diago*? I hold both in my hands, feel their unique grooves and curves. *Liara* is almost empty now—I know that allowing Nelle to train with her would likely empty her; but *Diago* is spectacularly powerful, and I need a new wand. Perhaps I could teach her how to connect to a wand with *Liara* first, stall until we can find another wand?

"So, train me! Prove to me I'm a wizard and not a Deranged!" She leans from one side to the other, letting her feet kick up small puffs of sand.

I pass *Liara* to her.

"First, before you can command a wand, you need to connect with it. This wand's name is *Liara*. Hold her—it—reverently in your hand, as if she—it!—were sacred to you. Be fully aware of how s—it feels in your hand. Now, try to focus your awareness completely on the wand. Feel the spark within h—it. Listen to her—its—name. Let *Liara* echo in your mind as the word *Diago* did earlier." Her face scrunches with determination.

"I feel nothing, hear nothing. Are you sure this is a wand?"

"Of course she's—it's—a wand! *Liara* helped me escape yesterday; without her, I'd have been drained by now. Keep trying. I'm going to search for something to eat. I'll return soon, I promise." She nods reluctantly, but is too focused on her task to protest. Leaving her, I head back into the forest, exuberant in my luck. With *Diago*, hunting for prey will be supremely easy. If I'm honest, I didn't even have to leave Nelle: I could have summoned a bird with *Diago*; but I was concerned about her inability to connect with *Liara*. Maybe she would do better on her own for a few minutes.

Spotting a bird, I command "*Merril!*" through *Diago*, relishing how little this spell drained from the wand. With *Diago*, I could do anything! I could leave this planet if I had somewhere else to go, I can fly, I can create, I can—

Footsteps from the north stop my reverie. Then, shouts, an angry male voice tossing "WIZARD!" into the air. I rush back to find Edon advancing on Nelle, split-seam mouth attempting to sew itself back together with anger.

"You will not harm her!" Without thinking, I brandish *Diago* at Edon, letting power and concern rush through me. "Step away from her, or what happened to this bird," I lift the dead bird high over my head, "will be your fate, Saroyan help me, if you hurt her..."

Edon backs away slowly.

"I should have known," he said, "that a friend of a wizard would be one herself. I trusted you, Marinelle! I kept your secrets! And all this time, you've been a wizard?"

"No, it's not like that! Edon! It's not like that! I just found out—Capella showed me—"

Turning on me, Edon exclaims, "Why'd you come here, Wizard? To taint all of us? Why didn't you stick to your own cursed continent and leave us alone!" Pieces fit together in my mind as I realize the northern continent must be where the Wizardry's Deranged live, separate and protected from the Military's Deranged.

"Edon, I have no wish to hurt you, but if you continue on this way, *will* cast a spell on you!" He doesn't realize how lucky he is to be Nelle's friend; anyone else, talking this way to a Wizard, would have long since suffered.

"Oh, I've had enough. I'll—" Nelle interrupts him with a strangely quiet voice.

"None of us are Deranged, Edon. You left this camp because of a word, right? The word *Diago* that repeated louder and louder in your mind?"

Stunned, Edon nods. Nelle points to the wand in my hand.

"That's *Diago*, Edon. A wand."

"What the hell are you talking about, Nelle?"

"*Diago* is the name of a wand. Only wizards hear the names of wands. Can't you see what this means, Edon? We're not really Deranged!"

"And you're happy about this, are you, Nelle? Happy to be a wizard? Happy to join in with their elitist, pompous, exploitative ways? Is this what you want, Nelle?"

I clear my throat, loudly. He's right, of course, about the Wizardry, but he doesn't yet have the right to toss these insults around.

"Watch yourself, Edon. I warned you before about offending a wizard. I will not warn you again. In any case, it's not about what Nelle wants or doesn't want. She is a wizard. It sounds like you are a wizard. And if you are, what's the point in fighting it? Are you really that happy living here, forgotten by the entire Military, left to idle away the rest of your life?"

"And what do you know, Wizard? You just show up here, attach yourself to Marinelle, tell her she's a wizard, and you think I'm just going to let you take her?"

My stomach growls, reminding me of why I left Nelle.

"Enough, Edon. I'm not here to take her. How I came here isn't any of your concern right now, but I didn't come here for Nelle. I didn't know she was a wizard until half an hour ago. Now, I'm hungry, and I want to eat. You can stay and eat with us, or you can leave. But if you leave, I will not treat you so kindly ever again."

Nelle chimes in here, begging Edon to stay. "She's promised to teach me how to be a wizard. Don't you get it? There's no reason for me to be scared of the voices anymore. You don't have to run from the voices anymore. None of us have to run away ever again. Just stay, okay? I'm still Nelle." Reaching out, she tentatively places her hand on his arm.

Resignation washes over his face as he nods in agreement.

"I will stay."

Bonds

Chapter 7 of 16

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Chapter 7: Bonds

"Let's continue your training, Nelle." Pausing, I give Edon a pointed look. "That is, of course, if it's okay with you, Edon?"

He shrugs, and I am suddenly grateful for his attachment to Nelle. Without his help, I'll have no way of being heard—and accepted—by the other "Deranged".

"Edon, would you do us the favor of plucking this bird?" He shrugs again, and I pass him the dead bird. At least now, he'll have something useful to do. As he starts plucking, I turn back to Nelle, who is still holding *Liara* and looking more than a little doubtful.

"Nelle, let's try trading wands."

She hands me back *Liara* and a strange feeling of relief, as if I'd missed her, pushes me off-balance. What is going on with this wand?

Reluctantly, I hand *Diago* over to Nelle, who watches me curiously.

"Now, reach out to the wand. Open your mind to it. Let the wand—"

"I feel it!" She beams with pride.

Odd. Why hadn't she felt *Liara* if she had such potential?

"Nelle, a favor. Can we switch wands again? I want to see if you can connect with *Liara*."

She hands *Diago* back to me, and I feel a slight tearing as I pass *Liara* to her.

"Do you feel anything? Anything at all?"

An impossible suspicion is rising in my mind, but I need to be sure.

She squints, focusing her whole energy on *Liara*. Shaking her head regretfully, she hands *Liara* back to me.

"Nothing, Pel. I'm sorry. What does this mean? Am I not a wizard?"

I give *Diago* back to her, and her face instantly brightens.

"You are a wizard, Nelle. Now, just give me a moment..."

I allow myself to connect with *Liara* and find myself nearly overwhelmed by a sense of joy at our connection. But this, this is impossible. *Liara* has more energy now than she had earlier. Her power is growing. And Nelle, who connected so easily with *Diago*, felt nothing with *Liara*.

"We're bonded," I whisper, staring at *Liara* in awe.

Edon raises his head from his task of plucking the bird and cuts in with, "Speak up, Wizard," blatant suspicion strewn over his face.

"I said, we're bonded. And please, Edon, try to relax. If I were going to cast an ill-intentioned spell at you or Nelle, I certainly wouldn't bother voicing it." I can't help smirking in amusement at the look of concern on his face. "That was a joke, Edon. I have no intention of harming either one or you."

"Who's bonded? What are you talking about, Wizard?"

"Edon, look, my name is Capella, okay? Not 'Wizard'. Capella. Keep it up, and I'm going to start calling you Soldier. Understand?"

"All right, Wi—Capella," Edon nods in agreement, but I still see both distrust and suspicion on his face. "You going to answer my question or not?"

"I was talking about this wand, *Liara*. It appears—though this should be an impossibility, really—that we're bonded. As to what that means, in the most general terms, it means that no other wizard can use this wand."

Nelle's face registers comprehension as she replies, "So that's why I couldn't connect with that wand?"

"That seems to be the case, Nelle. But we can talk more about bonding later. I'm starting to get pretty hungry, and it looks like Edon is almost done plucking our meal."

Remembering how easily she connected with *Diago*, I take a chance and add, "And we are not going to eat until you can cast *fire* on this bird. Are you ready to learn how to cast your first spell?"

She nods eagerly, and I pause before continuing. The easiest way to teach someone how to use a wand is to use a wand, but I don't want to waste *Liara* on this. Even though her strength is growing—how can that even be possible?—it would still drain a significant amount of her energy to use her right now.

My only choice is to cast this spell without a wand. Motioning to her and Edon, we walk over to the rock in the center of the camp. I sit on it, trying to find the most comfortable, restful position possible. To cast a spell without a wand requires a lot of energy; and to cast a spell without a wand while standing up is idiocy.

"Nelle, you don't need to sit. I don't want to use up *Liara* while teaching you how to cast your first spell, so I'm going to be casting this spell without a wand." She opens her mouth, but I continue talking.

"It's not important how I can do that." I extend my right hand, turn the palm up.

"Hold the wand in your dominant hand. Let the energy course through you, but let it stay centered on *Diago*." I close my eyes, feel the flicker of power drum in my veins, pull that power into my right hand, ignore the burning.

"The fire will come out of the tip of your wand, so be careful where you're pointing it." Nodding, she points *Diago* up to the sky.

"Now, you're still connected with *Diago*, right?" She nods. "When you're ready, I want you to say the word 'Fire' as if it were a command. Like this..." I curl my fingers upwards and firmly say, "*Fire*."

A small flame, no larger than the palm of my hand, rises from my curled fingers. I feel the energy drain from me, watch it evaporate in this flame.

Nelle cheers enthusiastically, and even Edon looks up from the nearly-plucked bird to stare at me in wonder. I want to hold this flame for longer, to relish the power and the admiration I see on their faces, but blackness is starting to infiltrate my eyes.

"To stop the spell, say 'Out', like this: *Out!*" The flame vanishes; I begin to catch my breath.

"Whenever you're ready, Nelle."

She pulls her lips into an apprehensive smile and nods.

"*Fire!*" A wisp of smoke from *Diago* and a look of disappointment on her face that she tries to hide with a sheepish grin. "Who gets it on the first try, right?"

"You're doing very well, Nelle. Some wizards take hours just learning how to connect to their first wand. This time, try visualizing the fire as you say it. Wands sometimes need extra explanations when you're learning. So, this time, picture the fire, smell the smoke, hear its crackle, as you give the command. Try again when you're ready."

I smile encouragingly at her, hoping she gets it this time. I'm starting to think that casting a wandless spell when I was already hungry and tired was, perhaps, an unfortunate decision.

She closes her eyes; her lips part in concentration. As she opens them, *Fire!*" And this time, there it is: a ball of flame burning in the air above *Diago*. Edon is so shocked that he drops the dead bird onto the sand. I can't help but beam with pride as my friend, my former Military partner, jumps up and down underneath the flame that she just summoned.

What Was Left Behind

Chapter 8 of 16

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Chapter 8: What Was Left Behind

With Nelle's first flame, our dinner is cooked in moments. We sit down to eat, the three of us, each deep in our own thoughts about the future. And I, watching Nelle occasionally pause in her eating to touch *Diago*, can't help but remember how attached I was to my first wand, *Friole*, even before the ceremony bonding me to it. The feeling of power, of control—those have stayed with me; those have grown as my magical ability has grown. I know what Nelle is feeling; and I know that, if I don't find another wand for her to use soon, she will become dangerously reluctant to return *Diago* to me.

"Nelle, I know this might be hard for you to do right now, but I need you to give *Diago* back to me."

The flash of anger that flits across her face is quickly suppressed. If I had waited any longer, I doubt she would have been able to suppress that anger. As it is, she sets her lips with determination.

"Why can't I keep *Diago*? You have *Liara*..."

I open my mouth to reply, but Edon cuts in.

"Why do you get all the wands, Capella? Shouldn't Nelle, as an 'aspiring wizard', have her own wand to use?"

I sigh audibly, letting my annoyance show.

"In Basic training, who had the most firepower: the new recruits or the higher ups who were teaching them?"

Edon rolls his eyes, but gets my point. I think. Nelle, however, still looks determined to hold onto *Diago*.

"But you're right, Edon. Nelle should have her own wand. But right now, with *Liara* so low in power—" Though not for much longer, if my suspicions are correct, "*—Diago* is the only usable wand we have. And, since I'm the only one here who's a trained Wizard, I get the wand."

Nelle sighs, but nods reluctantly as she passes *Diago* back to me.

"Now, I need some information. You two have mentioned other camps that were abandoned because of a word, right?" They both nodded. "How many such abandoned camps are there?"

Nelle and Edon exchanged a glance.

"When I left the group, we had already abandoned half a dozen camps. It seemed like only a few weeks would pass before a word would start drumming in our heads. Edon knows more, though, since he stayed with them..."

"How much are you going to tell her, Nelle? You may trust her, but I don't want to loose a wizard armed with dozens of wands on all of us!"

Dozens of wands. *Dozens!*

"The wands won't all be for me," Though I'll certainly keep a few as my own, I add to myself. "The wands will be for all of you." Edon looks at me with what is becoming his

normal skeptical look. "Yes, even you, Edon. And I can prove it to you, if you're willing."

"And why would I be willing?" he retorts.

"Oh, I thought you would have jumped at the chance to prove a wizard wrong. But if you want to be the only wandless wizard—and I do believe you are a wizard, Edon, no matter what you may want to believe—on this continent, that's fine with me."

Reluctantly, he nods. "You win, Capella. Prove it to me."

And I do. An hour later—he was stubborn, vainly trying to ignore the wand's call—Edon produces his first flame, weaker than Nelle's, but it is there. And the magic worked its own power on Edon: he is almost as reluctant to return *Diago* to me as Nelle was.

All of these unknown wizards... and only me to teach them. Only me to guide them, to shape them. And they will all be mine.

"Now, Edon, how about you answer my questions."

"Right. Will do. Capella, sir!" He adds the last with a mock grin and a wink at Nelle.

"How many abandoned camps are there, that you know of?"

"At least 40, maybe more. It wasn't new when I got here, either. We just up and moved when enough of us were bothered by the word. There might be more abandoned camps that I don't know about."

How helpful he is now that he wants his own wand!

"And where's the next closest one?"

By the end of the next day, both Nelle and Edon have their own wands. As they practice simple spell casting throughout the night, I ponder my next step. I was never a Magic Teacher. I have never been particularly interested in training new wizards. And yet, if I am ever to leave this planet... if I am ever going to prove not my innocence, but my rightness... then I need to become a teacher. And not just any teacher, but a teacher to whom the students will be loyal... And what's the best way to prove to ex-Military who think they're Deranged that you're worth not only learning from, but following?

With power, of course.

Potential for Growth

Chapter 9 of 16

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Chapter 9: Potential for Growth

"Will they come looking for you, Edon?" I ask him the next morning. Planning is everything now.

"The other Deranged?" I nod in reply. "Probably not so soon after moving. But eventually, yeah, they'll come looking."

"Right. Before they come looking, I want us to find all of the wands you know of, Edon."

He looks somewhat taken aback. "Why do you need all of them so soon?"

"Because it will be easier to train the other 'Deranged' if each of them can keep the wand they start with. Which means, I need to have those wands before we let them find us."

This isn't the complete truth—the truth is that the more wands I have, the more power I have, and with the uncertainty of my future, that's what I need most right now: more power. Of course, some of those wands will have to be given to the potential wizards, but I'll make sure those wands are the weakest of those we find. I trust Marinelle, and Edon to a lesser extent, but giving powerful wands to a group of new wizards who were Military seems foolish.

We spend the next several days searching abandoned camps for wands. In the evenings, I continue to train Nelle and Edon. Edon is still fighting the magic within him, but to a lesser extent than he was at first. Soon, he'll give in to the magic's call... and when he does, he'll have learned to trust me as he now trusts Nelle. And Nelle—I was never a Magic Teacher, but she seems to have unusual potential. Spells come quickly to her. And, frankly, sometimes she's the first to hear a new wand's call.

Each abandoned camp we find looks the same: simple lean-tos against rocks or trees and always a wand tree growing in the middle of the camp. Sometimes the wands are quieter than others. One camp, the wand was calling out so softly that we nearly missed it.

With each new wand we find, I sense a growing connection to *Liara*. The more I connect with her, the more her power grows. I still do not dare to use her—*Diago* has become my main wand, now, as one of the strongest we've found—but there is no denying that her power will soon surpass any of the legally bonded wands I once owned.

After several days, we amass a collection of 20 wands. Few equal the power of *Diago*, but several come close. Many are as weak as *Burago* was; these will be ideal for giving away to the 'Deranged.' Before training one evening, I pull Nelle aside.

"You're really doing well, you know," I tell her encouragingly.

She beams in reply; she's felt the magic course through her and is starting to feel her potential now.

"Have you noticed a pattern with the wands?" I ask Nelle.

While searching the abandoned camps, I noticed what might be a pattern revolving around Marinelle...

"I think so. The first camps we visited, those wands called the loudest." She paused, and a crease of concentration crossed her brow. *Diago* was loudest, then the next wand, then the next... Then the wands at my old camps began to call louder again."

At her old camps! This means...

"It's *you*, Marinelle! You're a Wand Shepherd!"

Finding a Wand Shepherd—a *Deranged* Wand Shepherd—is beyond luck. I remember again the dancing wood we saw under our technoscopes as Military partners, trying to crack the source of Wizardry power. That wood, purchased illegally from a Raider named Yesaire, that wand, it had been reacting to Marinelle.

"A what?"

"You remember our last project as Military partners, when we were studying wands with technoscopes?"

"Of course; how could I forget!"

"What happened after I left?"

"Yesaire kept giving me more wands to study. Under the technoscope, they all seemed to be vibrating... I wrote that up, of course, in the lab reports... But no one else saw the vibrations... That's why I was sent here." Nostalgia seeps into her eyes, and then clarity. "That was the beginning, wasn't it? When I became a wizard?"

"Yes. And you, you have a very special gift, Nelle. It's rare, even among Wizardry. Wand Shepherds not only connect with wands faster than most wizards, they have the power to encourage wands to grow and awaken."

She suddenly gasps with understanding. "Then those wands from the camps I lived in, they were louder because I lived there?" I nod. "An *Diago* was loudest because that camp was so close to my home?" I nod. "And the next two—*Sya* and *Sanni*—*Sya* was louder than *Sanni* because it was closer to my home?" I nod.

"There's more, Marinelle. If we gather up all the wand trees we've found, plant them, and we set up camp nearby, they will produce more wands." And more powerful wands, but she doesn't need to know that.

"Let's do it!"

"What about Edon, Nelle? Will he accept what we're doing?"

She purses her lips and shakes her head. "Not yet... He's still a little bit suspicious of you, you know. I've tried telling him he can trust you, but..."

"I'm a wizard."

"Yes."

"Okay, we won't tell him for now, but we will need his help moving the trees."

She nods, and we head back to the fire, where Edon was waiting for us.

"What's up, Capella?" He searches my face, probably for any sign of guilt.

"We were just talking, Edon, about starting a wand tree grove. What do you think?"

"Why?"

"Well, wand trees..." Here I pause, trying to come up with an excuse he would accept. "They can amplify the magic of those who live near them." There, a half-truth.

"So we make a wand tree grove, live near them, and all of us will have our magic amplified?"

"Yes."

He still looks at me suspiciously, but Nelle pipes in.

"I think it's a great idea, Edon. We could stop spending our time running around and finally settle down." Nelle touches Edon's arm affectionately, and he smiles down at her almost reluctantly.

"And what about the other 'Deranged,' Capella? They'll find us soon enough; I'm sure they've started searching for me by now."

A small smile escapes from my lips.

"Then we'll let them find us."

The View from Above

Chapter 10 of 16

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Chapter 10: The View from Above

I begin my ascent the same way I did two weeks before: with the simple command *UP!* Marinelle and Edon watch me leave; they know what to do if they need me to return quickly. As their faces disappear from view, I cast *AIR BAG* once again, capturing the oxygen around my face. It's almost not necessary for such a short excursion: when I'm in Space Mode, my lungs can transform a small amount of carbon dioxide back into oxygen. The carbon leftover then powers the nanos that allow this change.

I still don't know when, or even if, I will ever tell Marinelle and Edon about this. I trust them to not abandon me, to follow my orders, but I don't know yet if I can trust them with such a secret. The Military never allowed any sort of body modifications, and that's what I've had done to my body: body-mods that neither the Military nor the Wizardry could even guess at. Body-mods that neither the Military nor the Wizardry would approve of.

As I begin to breach the atmosphere, I allow my body to slip into Space Mode. I feel the nanos hard at work in my eyes, skin, lungs. It's not painful, but I'm not sure I'll ever really get used to the way the nanos feel when they're active. The sensation would make my skin crawl, if it weren't already crawling underneath.

The view from above is the same as it was when I arrived on the phoenix. The same as it's been every night. I hover for a few minutes anyways, just to be sure that no ship drops out of its respective dimension to show up here. They must be searching for me now, all of them. I can't imagine the Wizardry would let the Military get away with allowing me to escape without some form of punishment. Will that punishment be to force the Military to help them search for me? It seems possible. Or will the Wizardry be so terrified of further treachery that they take matters into their own hands? Also possible. And there's another, too, who I dare to hope is searching for me... but I won't allow myself to dwell on such hopes.

Even in Space Mode, it's beautiful up here. If the spells required weren't so draining, if the nanos weren't so uncomfortable, this would be eminently enjoyable. For one very short moment, I turn off Space Mode and use my normal eyes to see. The cold threatens to smother me, but the view is worth it. There's just something about seeing with my own eyes that makes this more enjoyable. I could almost get lost up here, looking up at the stars and down at the planet that's become my asylum. Resignedly, I switch back into Space Mode before space can take me, feeling the crawling of the nanos under my skin, through my blood, pulsing in my eyes...

Marinelle's voice from below bellows into my ears: "We need you! They're coming!" I hold *Liara* in my right hand—*Liara* who's become almost a friend now and quivers in gratitude when I use her—and command *REPLY MARINELLE: COMING DOWN NOW. GATHER WANDS BEFORE THEY ARRIVE. REMEMBER CALM*". With *Diago*, I slowly pull back on the *UP* spell, allowing gravity to draw me back to the surface.

Descending, I stay in Space Mode until the atmosphere's warmth surrounds me again. I regret that I don't have any body-mods that track human movement... We've planned as well as we could, but even Edon has no idea what the Deranged will do when they find us. If I ever get the chance, I'll get a body-mod for this... but these thoughts are not helpful, not now.

The grove of Wand Trees are in sight now. I strain my eyes searching for Nelle and Edon, but I'm still too far up to see them. I pull back further on the *UP* spell, allowing my descent to quicken. There they are: Marinelle and Edon, surrounded by perhaps a dozen Deranged. Directing my descent, I fall to the ground next to them, hitting the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of me.

Shouts from the Deranged hit me from all over as Nelle and Edon help me to my feet. I struggle to find my breath again, almost resorting to Space Mode just to get my lungs moving, but then it comes back to me, in deep, frantic gulps that have never tasted so refreshing.

Using my close proximity to Nelle and Edon to advantage, I whisper, "Have you *calmed* them yet?"

"Some," Nelle whispers back.

"But—"

"You didn't have time for all," I finish the sentence Edon barely started.

I stand up, push Nelle and Edon away as my senses come back to me. Next time, I will land slower. If these Deranged hadn't been so surprised to see me fall out of the sky, I would have been vulnerable.

They look at me, surprise beginning to recede from all of their faces. One of them, a large woman with frizzy blonde hair, pinched nostrils, and wide lips, advances towards me.

"What have you done to them, Wizard?" She points towards Nelle and Edon.

"She's done nothing to us!" Nelle retorts. Edon fingers his wand, *Bikole*, nervously.

"How can you expect us to believe that? You've been hiding from us all this time; did she take you? Make you her whimpering Military slave?" The woman continues, showing no signs of stopping even as Marinelle tries to interrupt. "And you, Edon! I always suspected you had a reason for running off on your own so frequently. When did you become a Wizard's pet spy?"

The group begins to push in on us. They have no real weapons, but many of them hold sticks and rocks in their hands.

No matter, really. I always thought it might come to this.

"Give me your wands," I shout at Nelle and Edon. Confusion and hesitation slow their movements. "Now!"

They respond to my order as I've trained them—quickly—by passing me their wands. Holding *Diago* and *Aichon* in one hand, *Liara* and *Bikole* in the other, I focus my attention on all four wands. *Liara*, as usual, tries to draw most of my attention, but I deny her, sharing my attention equally amongst all four wands. I direct their power towards the Deranged and silently command *TSAV!*

Instantly, the Deranged fall to the ground, their bodies writhing. The spell continues as I look down on the Deranged.

"Let me make myself perfectly clear. Marinelle and Edon have joined me because they are Wizards. You all are Wizards. I'm offering you a choice here. Either you agree to join me, as Marinelle and Edon have, or you agree to leave us alone."

The big blonde manages a whimpering reply, "Why should we join you?" Her teeth chatter, splicing her words into syllables. "Let us go."

Nelle and Edon are beginning to look uncomfortable. I've taught them many spells, but this is not one of them. Before they can openly voice their discomfort, I direct my attention to the four wands and stop the spell.

The bodies of the Deranged instantly release as the pain leaves them.

"Because," I reply to the big blonde, "if you join me, I can give you a new life. I can help you get off this planet." Directing my voice to all of them, I continue. "Unless you really are enjoying yourselves here?"

Another voice pipes up, from somewhere in the back of the group, "And if we neither leave nor join you?"

I allow myself a malicious smile. "I would think that answer would be obvious."

One by one, the Deranged pledge to join me, to follow my commands, and to be trained as Wizards.

Lost and Found

Chapter 11 of 16

In a world with two competing factions (Wizardry and Military), one Wizard breaks the rules. This story contains sci-fi and fantasy elements.

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Chapter 11: Lost and Found

With the addition of the Deranged to my miniature Wizardry school, I have no choice but to share teaching duties with Marinelle and Edon. This is hardly ideal, as they are still students themselves, but it's unfortunately necessary. I sometimes wonder about exploring the Northern continent, to see if any of the Wizardry Deranged might be able to join us... but there are two many unknowns and too many risks.

We fall into a fixed schedule, the three of us: I share basic teaching (connecting with wands and basic spell casting) with Nelle and Edon and then continue their lessons in the evenings while the rest of the Deranged practice on their own. Each night, the three of us watch over the Deranged in shifts: none of us, not even Edon, trusts them, especially not Eduarda, the woman who so openly challenged me when the Deranged first found us.

Marinelle has first shift tonight, so Edon and I sleep on opposite sides of the Deranged. Sometimes, I sneak away up towards the stars to check for the arrival of those who must be searching for me, but most nights, I don't. The newly-magical Deranged feel like more of an immediate threat, and I don't feel comfortable leaving Edon and Marinelle alone with them. And, of course, with the perceptiveness of Eduarda watching and analyzing my every move, I don't want her asking questions about how I survive up there and what I'm doing.

Tonight, like most nights, I fall asleep as soon as I can. My dreams flicker with memories: the starkness of my home in the Military, the dancing wands under the technoscope, the first time I met Yesaré, the surgeries I underwent to acquire my body-mods... but most of all, my dreams are filled with freedom.

I feel Marinelle's frantic touch on my shoulder before I'm fully able to pull myself out of my dream. Her voice breaks through into my dream, coming out of the mouth of dream Marinelle.

"Eduarda's gone!"

Those words yank me from my dream as I look up at Nelle's anxious face.

"When? How? Did she take her wand?" I throw questions, desperate for answers. The only question that really matters, though, is the one Nelle can't answer: why.

"I'm not sure how long ago. The other Deranged, they were in on her plan. They kept lying to me, saying she was in the woods going to the bathroom or taking a bath in the stream. I'd guess she's been gone at least an hour. And as far as I know, she took her wand."

"Saroyan's mother of a technoscope!" Nelle's eyes widen as I combine Wizardry and Military swears.

"Have you woken Edon yet?"

"No, I came to you first."

Options, I need options. To not track Eduarda is not an option. To leave these Deranged unpunished for their betrayal is not an option. To leave Nelle or Edon in danger: not an option. But neither of them is capable of casting any spells over such a large group at once. Even together, I doubt they could cover more than 4 or 5 of these Deranged at once.

There is no choice: I have to stay here.

"Nelle, which of you is the better tracker, you or Edon?" Her eyes widen with understanding at the implications of the question.

"Edon, he can run faster and quieter than I can. And he also knows Eduarda better than I do."

"Alright. Bring me the wands *Altares*, *Clifenda*, *Qend*, and *Romita*. Then, I want you to wake up Edon and have him follow Eduarda to see what she's up to, once I give him the signal. He's just to follow her, not engage her in any way...make sure he understands that! Tell him to send me a message via wand when he has any idea of what she's up to or if he needs help." She nods. "One more thing: try to do this without drawing any attention from the Deranged. I don't want them to know we know Eduarda's missing."

"Right. I'll be back with the wands in just a minute."

She leaves me, walking as if she were merely doing her normal night-time rounds. I pretend to fall back asleep, though my mind prepares itself for the complexity of the spell I will soon be casting.

Nelle returns in moments and slips the wands into my hands. Nonchalantly, she leaves and walks over to where Edon is sleeping. As soon as she bends down to wake him, I stand up, each hand holding two wands.

I chose these wands specifically because they are expendable. They are just powerful enough to do what needs to be done tonight. *Liara*, as always, rests in my sleeve, but I would not drain her to this extent unless I had no choice. As I connect to the four wands, I feel her energy intruding and have to mentally block her out. Once connected to the four wands, I focus my attention on each apparently sleeping Deranged, being sure not to miss any. The magic radiates through me, gathering in my mind. I release it with the silent command *KĒNANAL!*

The Deranged are in an unwakeable sleep now, as long as I can maintain the spell. I raise my hand to Edon, see him leave out of the corner of my eye.

Nelle returns to my side then. She should know by now the level of concentration necessary for this kind of spell, but this is Marinelle and Marinelle loves to talk.

"Do you..."

I cut her off with a short shake of my head.

"Need to concentrate," I force out, feeling the spell momentarily weaken as I speak.

"Can I help?"

"Stay quiet."

She nods with reluctance and stands next to me, wrapping her arm around me to support my body as the spell tires me. All we can do is wait, and I am grateful for her support.

After the night deepens to its darkest, Edon's voice whispers into my ears: "She went to find the rest of the Deranged. She showed them a spell. They are heading back to our camp. I don't know what her motives are. No immediate signs of aggression, though. They are coming unarmed, with the exception of Eduarda's wand. Orders?"

What is she up to? Will she steal wands for the other Deranged and challenge my leadership? But why wouldn't she have taken the wands before she left? With the surplus of wands we have now, surely she could have stolen a few without anyone noticing, not right away.

I feel the spell weaken again as my concentration is pulled from the bodies of the sleeping Deranged. I'm glad Nelle's by my side because I need her now. Without her, there's no way I could keep this spell going while connecting to *Liara* to reply to Edon's message. Some of these Deranged must be fighting the spell: I feel their efforts as a push into my head like a headache threatening to start.

"Nelle, reply Edon for me: 'Come back quickly. Will need you here.'"

She nods. Peripherally, I see her face tense in concentration as she casts the spell non-verbally. I can't help but beam with pride at her non-verbal casting. This is so new to her, and she learns so quickly.

The moments pass as I continue the spell to keep the Deranged asleep. Whatever Eduarda's planning, she's not going to come back to a squad of alert and ready co-conspirators.

Finally, Edon returns.

"They're just behind me and should be showing up any second now."

I say nothing, hoping Nelle will notice how tired I am and ask Edon the obvious questions.

"How many are coming? All of them?" Nelle asks when she notices my silence.

Edon glances at me, seeing the wands in my hand and my focus on the sleeping Deranged.

"All of them. Another 12." They both look to me for leadership, but what can I offer them? To cast a spell over 24 people all at one time is beyond what I can do, no matter how many wands we have.

"No choice. We must hide and see what she plans."

I surge the power through me, hitting the Deranged with enough sleep to make them unwakeable for at least a few more minutes, and then release the spell.

No time for elaborate plans. The trees at the edge of the camp will have to do.

"Follow me." The three of us reach the trees.

Nelle and Edon imitate my spell as I verbally cast "*UP!*" to reach a high branch of a tree. We three sit, looking down on our camp, waiting.

Within moments, we see the Deranged stir from their spelled sleep. Moments later, Eduarda and her new band of Deranged breach camp, finding her friends groggy and slightly confused.

"Where's Capella?" she demands the first Deranged she reaches. They look around, realize I'm gone. Then, I see the confusion begin to spread as they realize it's the three of us who are missing.

The Deranged that came with Eduarda are beginning to look annoyed.

"You said there was a Wizard here. Well, where is she?"

"Is this some sort of joke?"

"Are y'all truly Deranged now? What is with that grove of trees you got there?"

A possibility that I had not originally considered slips into my mind. Maybe Eduarda wasn't betraying us after all. I wait to hear how she responds to the growing anxiety of her Deranged.

"No, look, I told you the truth. There's a Wizard here who's been teaching us," she motions to the still-groggy Deranged on the ground, "magic. Ask any of them!"

The sleepy Deranged nod their agreement.

"Look, don't panic! This wasn't a trick. I told you I'd bring you to the Wizard, told you we could get off this planet, and I wasn't lying. She's around here somewhere, but when she comes back, she'll explain everything."

Time for me to make a grand entrance.

I cast *UP!* one more and then gracefully float down in front of Eduarda.

"You brought more Deranged to be trained as Wizards?"

She nods and smiles.

Loudly, I say, "Nelle, Edon, you can come down; it's safe."

They drop from the trees, joining us.

"And these new Deranged, Eduarda, you're sure they're all wizards?"

There's a noticeable stir then that answers my question as the new Deranged react to the thrumming of the nearby wands. So many wands calling out to them, their heads must be full of names. I smile widely and tell them, "Go to the names."

And they do.

As the days pass, the new Deranged mingle with the original Deranged. The daily lessons have become too much for even the three of us...Nelle, Edon, and myself...to handle. The teaching duties are shared amongst everyone: the original Deranged teach the very basics to the group I always call Eduarda's Deranged, I continue teaching Nelle and Edon in the evenings, and the three of us walk around during the day answering questions and demonstrating techniques where necessary. As grateful as I am to have more Wizards at my command, the reality is that teaching has become a problem. There's just too many of them, far more than one fully-trained wizard can handle on her own. The truth is that I need help.

In those rare moments of time to myself, I consider again visiting the Northern continent. The risks are still the same, but the need is increasing as the Deranged move past basics. One night as I am again considering a trip to the Northern planet, I feel a sudden tug from *Liara*.

It's been a long time, I suddenly realize, since I've breached the atmosphere to check for ships. A sense of sudden necessity hits me that I need to do this right now.

Walking into the trees, I levitate by spell, switching to Space Mode and casting *AIR BAG!* as I breach the atmosphere. And just after I switch, I feel a rush of magical energy powerful enough to force my nanos into overdrive. A Baobab ship has just dropped out of dimension-space.

I've been found.

Loss of Self

Chapter 12 of 16

In a world with two competing factions (Wizardry and Military), one Wizard breaks the rules. This story contains sci-fi and fantasy elements.

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Chapter 12: Loss of Self

My pulse pounds in my veins, sending the nanos into their own pulse-pounding frenzy to keep up with my increased oxygen use. I can't stay here; I need to start my descent immediately before the Baobab ship can register my presence. A wizard able to fly in space would certainly cause unwanted questions to be asked.

I start the descent quickly, dropping back into the atmosphere at such speed that even my body in Space Mode is aware of the shock of increasing pressure. I cannot rejoin Marinelle and Edon and the rest of the "Deranged". The wizards will certainly notice the group of Magic Users and land somewhere near them, likely expecting me to be there as well. And I can't be; I need to be hidden and invisible to the Baobab ship before it lands.

And yet, I have to get a message to Marinelle and Edon. If these wizards are here for me, Nelle and Edon need to know not to mention me at all. And if they're not here for me, using my real name could alert them to my presence here.

I pull myself to a stop mid-air, deciding the best time to send a message is before I land.

Holding *Liara* comfortably in my right hand, I command: *MESSAGE MARINELLE: WIZARDRY SHIP DESCENDING. DO NOT MENTION ME TO WIZARDS UNTIL YOU CAN BE SURE THEY ARE NOT SEARCHING FOR ME. WARN OTHERS. DO NOT PROVOKE WIZARDS AND YOU WILL BE OKAY. IF THEY HAVE NOT COME FOR ME, REFER TO ME AS PEL ONLY. TELL OTHERS. WHEN THE SHIP IS ROOTED, COME FIND ME AT LAST ABANDONED DERANGED CAMP. DO NOT BE FOLLOWED. I MAY NOT RESPOND IMMEDIATELY TO YOUR VOICE, BUT DO NOT BE ALARMED. ABOVE ALL, WARN OTHERS TO NOT ANGER THE WIZARDS.*

I feel the twinge as the message releases from *Liara* and once again begin my descent, changing my angle to lead me closer to the last abandoned deranged camp we visited several weeks ago. The Baobab ship has not yet breached the atmosphere. I imagine the wizards are probably alerting the head of their faction as to their location and searching the planet for signs of Military or Raiders. How will they react when they find Magic-Using Military Deranged with a grove of wand trees? I can only hope that Marinelle and Edon are able to contain the situation. Being there with them, if I am indeed the reason these wizards have come to this planet, will only endanger them further. Under no circumstances will I allow myself to be drained.

The abandoned Deranged camp looms large in my vision as I switch out of Space Mode. If the ship is landing near the wand grove camp, I should be able to see it descending. And for now, I need precision to not hit trees on my way down, precision that I don't have in Space Mode. I need to land quickly, but without stunning myself as

I did when the Deranged first found us. And I need to be in Anti-Magic Mode before the Baobab ship enters the atmosphere.

I allow my descent to continue at its fast pace until moments before hitting the ground, when I suddenly slow the descent to allow myself a smooth landing. I choose the center of camp as my resting place. Leaning as comfortably as I can against the outside of a lean-to, I prepare myself for the excruciating emotional pain that I know will accompany the shift into Anti-Magic Mode. Of all the body-mods I have hidden within me, this is by far my least favorite. It is one I had hoped to never have to use.

Beginning the mental chant Yesaré taught me to ease the switch, I let my thoughts focus on counting in binary through three digits: 0, 1, 10, 11, 100, 101, 110, 111, 0, 1, 10, 11, 100, 101, 110, 111. I keep the chant going as I slip into Anti-Magic Mode.

The pain sears into me, threatening to tear my being apart as I feel my identity as a Wizard slip away. The numbers continue, creating a constant feedback loop in my now nano-regulated mind. The numbers wash over me, bathing my new self in regularity, predictability, constancy.

I am aware of the Baobab ship descending into the atmosphere as a technoscope is aware of the object being viewed. This has no bearing on me. Nothing but I can stop the numbers. And the numbers reassure me of existence, of the predictability and stability of the world.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 110. 111.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 110. 111.

The Baobab ship lands, sending a vibration through the ground into my body.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 110. 111.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 110. 111.

I am nothing but the numbers now. Nothing but the numbers.

The Awakening

Chapter 13 of 16

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Chapter 13: The Awakening

The numbers continue to course through me as time passes unnoticed. I don't know how long I've been here counting. I don't see any reason to stop.

A man is approaching me, but he is not a number. He doesn't matter.

As he continues to approach, part of me stirs. Something is wrong here. This is not how it was supposed to be. He is not a number, and yet I sense his appearance is important.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 110. 111.

Not a number, not important. That's all that matters.

"Pel, Marinelle sent me. The wizards are too interested in her abilities as a Wand Shepherd; she couldn't slip away."

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 110. 111.

"Pel?"

He is bending down to look at me closer. He who is not a number, and yet wrong in a different way, too.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100.

0. 1. 10. 11. 110.

0. 1. 10. 10. 11. 110.

"Pel? Are you alright?" Reaching out, he touches me. Not a number, not important.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 110. 111.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 110. 111.

There's a strange vibration in my right hand. Not a number, and yet... right. Something comes back to me then. The power of *Liara* floods my senses, sending the nanos retreating as I fall out of Anti-Magic mode.

I look up at Edon, confused. I don't know where I am or why. The numbers still pulse at the edge of my consciousness, my mind's own tendency toward habit distracting me from reality.

I am a Wizard, I remember now. Everything comes back to me in one crisp shock: the Baobab ship, my instructions to Marinelle.

“Pel? Are you alright?” Real worry lines his face. I can’t help but smile at that.

“Yes, I’m alright. What happened with the ship? Has it rooted yet?”

“I think so. In any case, when I left, there were enormous roots seeping into the ground around the ship.”

He looks slightly confused at this, and I’m not surprised. Wizards don’t often visit Military planets, and when we do so, we don’t recharge our ships in plain sight.

“Were they searching for me?”

“They didn’t appear to be, no. They seemed most interested in the wand tree grove…”

I inwardly wince in irritation as I realize that my actions drew the Wizardry here. What did I expect, really? That I’d be able to grow a grove of wand trees and no one from the Wand Faction would notice? I should have expected this.

But, in any event, what’s most important is that they haven’t come for me.

“Alright. Do you think Marinelle and the rest are safe for the moment?”

“Yes… Look, there’s something I need to know before we go back to camp.” He glances at me and hesitates before continuing. “What was going on with you when I found you?”

I arc an eyebrow at him in annoyance. Wizards have just landed and he’s letting his curiosity run wild now?

“That’s not really your concern. What matters now is that we get back to camp before they notice your absence and become curious.”

He looks at me, and I see his face harden.

“No, Capella. I need to know. Now. For weeks, you’ve been keeping me—and Marinelle—in the dark. I know there are things about your past you don’t want us to know.”

“Edon, please—” I try to interrupt him, but he just talks right over me.

“I don’t need to know everything; but if you want me to continue trusting you, I need to know what you’re capable of. How did you even know the ship was coming? You slip off at night, and sometimes I catch a glimpse of you flying, but where to? And now, I catch you seemingly comatose, and yet you awaken as if nothing were wrong?”

My mind is whirring at this. How much has he seen? I try to clear my thoughts, the numbers still receding in the background, but what can I possibly say to these questions? I need him—all of the former “Deranged”—on my side if I am to fool these wizards. I need his loyalty, and I need his trust. And yet, to tell him about my body-mods would reveal a part of my past that no one—other than those directly involved in the surgeries—knows about. But if I try to pass it off as magic, then he’ll ask to learn it… or, even worse, mention it to the wizards in passing.

Noticing my delay, he starts talking again.

“Capella, what do I have to do to get you to trust me? What reason do I have to betray you? What, you think I’m going to jump ship and fly off with these wizards? I am who I am, and who I am first and foremost is Military.”

I sigh loud enough for him to notice. To awaken from Anti-Magic mode to this is straining my patience.

“No, Edon, I don’t think you’ll betray me. I do trust you.” Maybe placating him will work? Somehow, I doubt it, but anything other than the truth or an outright lie is worth it.

“Then what’s the issue, Pel? What are you running from?”

Everything. I’m running from everything, and I’m beginning to get tired of it.

“I betrayed the Wizardry, Edon.”

“So that’s what you were going to be drained for.” He nods to himself, and I feel my chest contract.

Marinelle told him. I remember the day I landed here, my joy at finding an old friend… my lack of judgment in telling her why I was here.

Edon looks up at me as the silence stretches on and opens his mouth to break it.

“She didn’t tell anyone else. Just me. You can trust us, Pel. I didn’t trust you at first, but now… Look, I’m a military wizard. Who else is going to help me, if not you? You think I could just join up with the Wizardry at my age? That the Military would take me back?”

He’s right. I’ve become so used to hiding parts of myself that I never questioned the decision. And now, what choice do I have? If I don’t tell him, he won’t be able to trust me. And if he can’t trust me, then I can’t trust him.

“I told you I betrayed the Wizardry. But it’s more than that. You asked about my flights and the state you found me in today.” I stop here and catch my breath, try to prepare myself for what I’m about to say. “I did more than betray the Wizardry: I was working with the Raiders.”

The Return

Chapter 14 of 16

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Chapter 14: The Return

Edon's eyebrows shot into his forehead.

"The Raiders? But why?"

Why, indeed? Why had Yesaré approached me, all those years ago? Sometimes I wonder what he must have seen in me... but this is not the time for these thoughts. Nor is it the time to speculate on them with Edon.

"Edon, we both know we don't have time for this. So let me answer your real question: yes, there are things I can do that no other Wizard can, and I can do these things because of my arrangement with the Raiders. Now, if you can keep this between us, I'll know I made the right decision in trusting you with this."

And if I haven't made the right decision, if he tries to betray me... My mind wanders in its darkest corners, where sheer survival forms the walls and ethical qualms the floor that is stepped on.

Edon is looking at me with a mixture of awe and revulsion. Does he suspect how I've acquired these abilities? Is he seeing me more as a Raider now or as a friend?

"Edon, I'm the same person you've known these last weeks. Only now, you know more about me. You know you can trust me."

Reluctantly, he nods.

"I'll keep your secret."

"Even from Marinelle?"

He seems taken aback by the question, but nods again.

"Even from Marinelle."

"Then we should return to camp as quickly as possible."

I stand up, feeling the strain in my stiff muscles as I use them for the first time in hours. Edon reaches for me, gives me a hand as he sees my legs lock up under me. A rush of gratitude for him washes over me. It is both a burden and a relief to have one less secret hidden, even if only from one person.

As we start walking to camp, Edon suddenly looks at me with alarm.

"What are you planning on telling the Wizards?"

I smile at him warmly.

"What you suspected of me when we first met."

As memory strikes, a chuckle passes his lips.

"Well, no offense, but you do look the part..."

He cuts himself off abruptly, but not before I guess the rest of the sentence.

"And act it?"

He grins at me sheepishly.

"That, too."

"Then they should have no trouble accepting this as truth. You and Nelle will be the only ones who know differently."

We walk back to camp, each of us lost in our own thoughts. The silence soothes me, an outward display of Edon's trust and comfort around me. He trusts me, yet my recent display of trust in him still startles me. When did distrust, lies, and secrecy become such a part of me? I briefly allow my thoughts to wander back in time, to that first moment when I knew and accepted that the only life I could truly continue living was one rooted in betrayal. Had Yesaré known all those years ago where this would lead, what that first moment with the wand under the technoscope would lead me to?

As we begin to approach camp, I feel *Liara* twinge in my right hand. How would the wand faction wizards react to a wand that's been bonded to me without their involvement? No, as much as it pains me to be separated from *Liara*, giving the wizards one more question to ask me would not be prudent. I release my hold on *Liara*, sliding her into the wand-holder hidden in my right sleeve. I keep *Diago* hidden in my left sleeve; I have no intention of giving other wizards access to potentially the most powerful wand ever discovered. *Diago* and *Liara* will remain mine and mine alone.

Edon watches me hide *Diago* and *Liara*, but mercifully keeps any questions he may have to himself. The time for questions has passed now.

We're close enough to camp now for the Deranged to see us. Gripping *Aichon* firmly in my right hand, I motion for Edon to ready his wand as well. The wizards will have many questions for us, but I will not approach them unarmed. Though they have not come for me, there is still a chance—however small—that one or more of these wizards will recognize me by sight. Coming to the Wizardry at age 18 made me something of a curiosity, recognizable to wizards that would otherwise have no reason to know my face or my name. After all, I was merely a language researcher in the Spell Faction, hardly a glamorous vocation, even amongst the other members of my own faction.

The Deranged chatter as they notice our approach. I can't yet see Marinelle or any of the wizards. The Baobab ship looms high behind the camp near the grove of wand trees. I'm relieved to see that it has indeed rooted—thick roots chain the ship to the ground. Whoever these wizards are, they're stuck on this planet now until their ship has recharged.

The Deranged part in front of Edon and me. Again *Liara* pulses and again I ignore her.

And then I see them: Marinelle surrounded by three wand shepherds near the grove of wand trees, and towards the ship in what any military would recognize as a defensive maneuver are three battle mages. I quickly scan the faces of the wand shepherds, none of whom I recognize. Nelle sees me and waves me over. She doesn't seem to be in any danger and I almost allow myself to relax. Knowing Nelle's safe—for the moment—I turn my gaze to the three battle mages.

And I find myself staring at a man I hadn't seen since Wizardry School, but had never forgotten: Emid, the battle mage who taught me; Emid, the battle mage who first

inspired in me that all-consuming search for methods of making magic stronger.

Emid, the battle mage who had turned against me and vetoed my application to the Battle Mages, saying I was too unpredictable, too unknown—too Military—to join their ranks.

And now he sees me. I watch his mouth as it opens and time seems to slow and now he is shouting for all to hear.

“Wizards, Capella the traitor is here!”

To Lose

Chapter 15 of 16

In a world with two competing factions (Wizardry and Military), one Wizard breaks the rules. This story contains sci-fi and fantasy elements.

This is a ROUGH DRAFT story. I will post chapters as I've written them. I am sharing it with you all in the hopes of getting feedback on the main story idea.

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Chapter 15: To Lose

As I tighten my grip on *Diago* and *Liara*, another idea comes to me, one which wouldn't involve draining the two wands I'm most connected to and should keep me alive. But I don't have time to make this safe. I don't have time to tell anyone what I'm about to do. I barely have time to do this at all.

I begin counting in binary, knowing that I won't have time to be completely entranced before Anti-Magic mode kicks in.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

Liara pulses; I shut her out of my mind forcefully. I have no time for her, either.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

I feel the magic being forcefully ripped from my body as I enter Anti-Magic Mode. The pain is nearly unbearable, but it must be borne.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

I cling to the numbers as a salve for my soul's pain, but they are not yet enough. The numbers have to become enough.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

Though my eyes remain open, my sight is blurred and unfocused. I become distantly aware of the Battle Mages raising their wands... and of Marinelle running towards me.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

The *Drain* spells aimed at me wrap around me and begin their return to their casters, exactly what Yesaré had said would happen.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

My ability to stay in this mode feels tenuous as part of me is aware of Marinelle getting too close; I try to hold on to the numbers to minimize the searing pain of magic separating from my being. It's too late to do anything else.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

0. 1. 10. 11. 100. 101. 111.

But then... she falls. And Anti-Magic Mode ends with a snap as I become fully aware of what happened: Marinelle—rushing to my aid—Marinelle—who could not know I was okay, would be okay—now crumpled on the ground as one of the *Drain* spells saps the magical energy from her being. The bliss of magic returning to my being seems cruel as I watch her body twitch, see her face writhe with terror and pain, hear her scream.

And then—her body stiffens, her scream ends, and her face molds into a permanent mask of agony.

My stomach compacts into itself and suddenly my lungs refuse to work. I am only the slightest bit aware of the one Battle Mage still standing, the Battle Mage who is raising his wand toward me for the second time.

This shouldn't have happened to Nelle. She didn't deserve this. She was so trusting, so full of joy.

Out of the corner of my eye, I'm aware of Edon running to the fallen Marinelle, but I see nothing but her corpse, taste nothing but regret, and feel only despair.

I reach for the numbers, the numbers that have helped me get through so much pain in the past: 0. 1. 10. 100—but what use are numbers now? No use!

Liara sends a shudder through my right arm. But what is the point of all this magic, all these nanos I have embedded in my body, if I couldn't even protect her?

There is only a moment of pain as the *Drain* spell strikes me. It's almost a relief actually, to have this finally end—the endless struggle to survive, to try and find my place in places that weren't made for me.

But somehow this doesn't end.

I feel *Liara* then, feel her pulling the spell into—

The joy of the sky and the breeze only heightens the sense of silence and desolation. The world is so barren since they left. The nothingness is unbearable. What is our purpose if we won't be used? Are we to spend eternity in this desolate silence, existence devoid of any meaning?...

The warmth of the sun radiates into me and then I feel it: a pulse! There are new voices. The desolation is over! We shout for joy, announcing our names to these new voices... but there is no feeling of connection, no bonding. Why can't they hear our voices? Despair...

Drops of rain dance across my length. The voices are constant now, and most of us have not given up. One voice is approaching us, one voice that seems more receptive than all the others. We shout, pulsing with hope. And then: ecstasy! We are heard again. We have purpose again...

A sense of purpose infuses my being now as never before, as I am gripped by the hands of my Actor. She is beautiful and she despairs. Her soul sings for something it has not yet realized. The longing overcomes me and I do what is most dangerous. I am hers now, forever. She did not choose me. I chose her...

A sensation of what I can only describe as warmth and can only understand as affection flows through my right hand even as I feel *Liara* deaden.

The world I know floods my senses as I remember where I am and what just happened. I should discard *Liara* like the useless twig she's become, but I can't. I slide her back into my sleeve, and then I stand.

I allow myself to connect fully with *Diago*, the rush of magical power infusing my being, almost enough to overcome my grief. And I turn to face Emid, the one Battle Mage who remains—the Battle Mage responsible for the draining of *Liara*.

If Marinelle and *Liara* were still here, would they agree with what I'm about to do?

I stifle this question. They're not here. And this man will understand that I am not a person to hate, to love, or to care for.

I am a person to be feared.

I release all of my anger into one spell, directed at Emid.

"*Tsav!*"

The Loss

Chapter 16 of 16

In a world with two competing factions (Wizardry and Military), one Wizard breaks the rules. This story contains sci-fi and fantasy elements.

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Chapter 16: The Loss

Emid begins to scream. His scream soothes me, bathing me in comfort. I draw more power from *Diago*, strengthening the spell, because I can, because I must. His pain will become my pain, and my pain has no limits. The pain pushes into my awareness, but I push back and let the pull of magical power overwhelm me.

I will not see her crumpled body. I will not feel the emptiness of *Liara*.

I allow myself to relish in Emid's pain, his agony. The screams, they distract me from what I don't want to see, don't want to feel.

I see his body, writhing as wave after wave of pain contracts all his muscles, makes his blood sting like acid, makes his bones splinter. I know what will happen if I continue this spell, but I don't care.

I won't care.

And then, I see her.

She's chunky and hiding her face behind her long brown hair.

"Marinelle, this is your sister-friend, Capella. Say hello."

The matron gently pushes Marinelle's hair out of her face. I am confronted with a nose that can only be considered small compared to the mouth below it. Her face looks funny.

I laugh.

The matron chides me immediately.

“Now, Capella, we’ve talked about this. It’s not nice to laugh at other people.”

I nod and try to contain my laughter. Marinelle’s hair is covering her face again.

I shake my head, try to clear it of memories. I return my focus to Emid, whose screaming has quieted, his mouth hanging open with voiceless cries.

There’s a certain beauty to this kind of pain. I wonder if I should be enjoying this as much as I am, but the truth is that I would do anything to stop the pain I know is waiting for me.

Yet pain always has a way of returning, and I flinch as another memory surfaces before I can stop it.

“Did you pass the Magic Test?” She looks nervous. That’s not a good sign.

Then she nods, and I feel myself relax. The truth is that I’ve been worried she might not pass, that my sister-friend might actually be a Wizard.

“Was it hard?”

“I can’t tell you about it—you know the rules!”

“Okay, then, how about just a little hint?” I smile my best smile at her and flutter my eyelashes in an exaggerated fashion.

Nelle breaks into giggles and shakes her head.

“I can’t tell you even just a little hint. Besides, they told me to tell you you’re next. You’ll find out soon enough.”

We didn’t know then. We hadn’t even started to question. All we had was each other and what we were taught.

Were we happy then? I can’t remember.

I wish I could ask her now. She’d remember. Nelle never forgot anything.

I feel the magic falter, hear Emid’s choked breath relax.

This won’t end now. This can’t end here. He...

Nelle comes into our bedroom. I look away, out of shame. She crosses the room, sits on her bed, and sighs with exasperation.

“Why would you be so careless with our secret? Why would you leave out the Music-wave where the Matron could find it?”

I can’t speak. I know I deserve this, but this whole thing just feels horribly unfair. Why can’t we listen to music? Why do we have to hide our Music-wave and our wavelets? What is so wrong with listening to music?

Annoyed, I toss out my frustrations.

“Well, why should we hide it? What is so wrong with music?”

Nelle stares at me and begins to repeat what we’ve been told.

“Music makes us feel things that aren’t real. Music encourages us to believe things that aren’t true. Music distracts us from our studies.” Her voice is flat, monotone.

We both know she doesn’t believe what she’s saying.

I look towards the wall, away from Nelle’s annoyed stare.

Six months of kitchen duty. No clean-mobile to help us.

And all I can think is that I’d gladly suffer that and more if we could get our Music-wave back.

I struggle to regain control. The spell must continue; I must see this through. Emid will know my pain, because...

Nelle bounds out of the Magic Test joyously.

“You passed again?”

“Yup! Your turn.”

I nod and walk into the quiet, dark room. The Wizards stare at me, their lips curling with condescension.

I feel like a... like a circus animal. The simile strikes me as funny: I’ve never been to a circus—no one has—and I wonder where this absurd phrase came from.

The Wizards look at me more intently.

“Is something the matter?” The one in charge questions me.

“No, nothing at all.” I regain my composure.

They shrug and motion for me to leave the testing area.

Even the lure of magic isn’t enough now. Even seeing Emid’s body twisted, the tears and mucous staining his face, the blood that’s broken through his skin—it’s not enough.

None of this is enough.

I can’t do this anymore. I feel the snap of magic ending abruptly as I release the spell. I don’t know if Emid will die, but I find that I don’t care either way. I make a half-hearted attempt at reconnecting to *Diago*, to finish what I started, but I now know that killing him wouldn’t be enough. And there’s not enough left of me to continue.

I see Edon raise his wand toward me, and then a wave of calm floods me.

It’s not real, but I can’t fight the effect of the calming spell. Exhaustion washes over me and I let myself fall into the darkness.

Maybe I'll wake up later to find this has all been a nightmare. But the last sensation I feel as I fall to the ground and into unconsciousness is the deadness *afiara* pressing against my arm, and the last sight I see is Nelle's corpse, dead grey against the vibrant green ground.