Dear Reader,

If you’re like me, you rarely confine yourself to what’s on the pages of any book you love. You want to explore the world the characters live in and discover its hidden truths—the things that didn’t make it onto the page or maybe even into the author’s mind. You find yourself imagining what studying magic in Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea really would entail, or what attending Hogwarts must be like for all the kids who aren’t Harry Potter. Thoughts like these are the seeds from which stories grow. They’re where this book started, in the same way that *Spinning Silver* began between the lines of “Rumpelstiltskin,” and *Uprooted* came out of a thicket of old Polish stories and songs.

One of the oldest legends of a school for witchcraft and wizardry is the story of the Scholomance, a hidden institution said to be run by the Devil himself, where the students are cloistered for years, never seeing the sun while learning the darkest of arts. Ever since I first read about this mysterious place in my middle school library, I’ve been imagining its story. Who are the students in its classrooms and why would they or their parents accept the price the school exacts?

*A Deadly Education* is the first volume in a trilogy that presents the answers I’ve imagined to those questions. But my hope is that you will find it a world whose mysteries you will want to explore and inhabit and imagine for yourself, long after you turn the final page.

Naomi Novik
I decided that Orion needed to die after the second time he saved my life. I hadn’t really cared much about him before then one way or another, but I had limits. It would’ve been all right if he’d saved my life some really extraordinary number of times, ten or thirteen or so—thirteen is a number with distinction. Orion Lake, my personal bodyguard; I could have lived with that. But we’d been in the Scholomance almost three years by then, and he hadn’t shown any previous inclination to single me out for special treatment.

Selfish of me, you’ll say, to be contemplating with murderous intent the hero responsible for the continued survival of a quarter of our class. Well, too bad for the losers who couldn’t stay afloat without his help. We’re not meant to all survive, anyway. The school has to be fed somehow.

Ah, but what about me, you ask, since I’d needed him to save me? Twice, even? And that’s exactly why he had to go. He set off the explosion in the alchemy lab last year, fighting that chimaera. I had to dig myself out of the rubble while he ran around in circles whacking at its fire-breathing tail. And
that soul-eater hadn’t been in my room for five seconds be-
fore he came through the door: he must have been right on
its heels, probably chasing it down the hall. The thing had
only swerved in here looking to escape.

But who’s going to let me explain any of that? The chi-
maera might not have stuck to me, there were more than
thirty kids in the lab that day, but a dramatic rescue in my
bedchamber is on another level. As far as the rest of the
school is concerned, I’ve just fallen into the general mass of
hapless warts that Orion Lake has saved in the course of his
brilliant progress, and that was intolerable.

Our rooms aren’t very big. He was only a few steps from
my desk chair, still hunched panting over the bubbling pur-
plish smear of the soul-eater that was now steadily oozing
into the narrow cracks between the floor tiles, the better to
spread all over my room. The fading incandescence on his
hands was illuminating his face, not an extraordinary face or
anything: he had a big beaky nose that would maybe be dra-
matic one day when the rest of his face caught up, but for
now was just too large, and his forehead was dripping sweat
and plastered with his silver-grey hair that he hadn’t cut for
three weeks too long. He spends most of his time behind an
impenetrable shell of devoted admirers, so it was the closest
I’d ever been to him. He straightened and wiped an arm
across the sweat. “You okay—Gal, right?” he said to me, just
to put some salt on the wound. We’d been in the same lab
section for three years.

“No thanks to you and your boundless fascination for
every dark thing creeping through the place,” I said icily. “And
it is not Gal, it has never been Gal, it’s Galadriel”—the name
wasn’t my idea, don’t look at me—“and if that’s too many
syllables for you to manage all in one go, El will do.”

His head had jerked up and he was blinking at me in a sort
of open-mouthed way. “Oh. Uh. I—I’m sorry?” he said, voice rising on the words, as if he didn’t understand what was going on.

“No, no,” I said. “I’m sorry. Clearly I’m not performing my role up to standard.” I threw a melodramatic hand up against my forehead. “Orion, I was so terrified,” I gasped, and flung myself onto him. He tottered a bit: we were the same height. “Thank goodness you were here to save me, I could never have managed a soul-eater all on my own,” and I hiccuped a pathetically fake sob against his chest.

Would you believe, he actually tried to put his arm round me and give my shoulder a pat, that’s how automatic it was for him. I jammed my elbow into his stomach to shove him off. He made a noise like a whoothing dog and staggered back to gawk at me. “I don’t need your help, you insufferable lurker,” I said. “Keep away from me or you’ll be sorry.” I shoved him back one more step and slammed the door shut between us, clearing the end of that beaky nose by bare centimeters. I had the brief satisfaction of seeing a look of perfect confusion on his face before it vanished away, and then I was left with only the bare metal door, with the big melted hole where the doorknob and lock had used to be. Thanks, hero. I glared at it and turned back to my desk just as the blob of soul-eater collapsed the rest of the way, hissing like a leaky steam pipe, and a truly putrescent stink filled the room.

I was so angry that it took me six tries to get a spell for cleaning it up. After the fourth attempt, I stood up and hurled the latest crumbling ancient scroll back into the impenetrable dark on the other side of my desk and yelled furiously, “I don’t want to summon an army of scuvara! I don’t want to conjure walls of mortal flame! I want my bloody room clean!”

What came flying out of the void in answer was a horrible tome encased in some kind of pale crackly leather with
spiked corners that scraped unpleasantly as it skidded to me across the metal of the desk. The leather had probably come off a pig, but someone had clearly wanted you to think it had been flayed from a person, which was almost as bad, and it flipped itself open to a page with instructions for enslaving an entire mob of people to do your bidding. I suppose they would have cleaned my room if I told them to.

I had to actually take out one of my mother’s stupid crystals and sit down on my narrow squeaky bed and meditate for ten minutes, with the stench of the soul-eater all around me and getting into my clothes and sheets and papers. You’d think that any smell would clear out quickly, since one whole wall of the room is open to the scenic view of a mystical void of empty darkness, so delightfully like living in a spaceship aimed directly into a black hole, but you’d be wrong. After I finally managed to walk myself back from the incoherent kicking levels of anger, I pushed the pigskin book off the far edge of my desk back into the void—using a pen to touch it, just in case—and said as calmly as I could manage, “I want a simple household spell for cleaning away an unwanted mess with a bad smell.”

Sullenly down came thump a gigantic volume titled Amu-nan Hamwerod packed completely full of spells written in Old English—my weakest dead language—and it didn’t open to any particular page, either.

That sort of thing is always happening to me. Some sorcerers get an affinity for weather magic, or transformation spells, or fantastic combat magics like dear Orion. I got an affinity for mass destruction. It’s all my mum’s fault, of course, just like my stupid name. She’s one of those flowers and beads and crystals sorts, dancing to the Goddess under the moon. Everyone’s a lovely person and anyone who does anything wrong is misunderstood or unhappy.
She even does massage therapy for mundanes, because “it’s so relaxing to make people feel better, love.” Most wizards don’t bother with mundane work—it’s considered a bit low—or if they do, they hunt themselves out an empty sack of a job. The person who retires from the firm after forty-six years and no one quite remembers what they were doing, the befuddled librarian that you occasionally glimpse wandering the stacks without seeming to do anything, the third vice president of marketing who shows up only for meetings with senior management; that sort of thing. There’s spells to find those jobs or coax them into existence, and then you’ve provided yourself with the necessities of life and kept your time free to build mana and make your cheap flat into a twelve-room mansion on the inside. But not Mum. She charges almost nothing, and that little mostly because if you offer to do professional massage for free, people will look at you sideways, as well they should.

Naturally I came out designed to be the exact opposite of this paragon, as anyone with a basic understanding of the balancing principle might have expected, and when I want to straighten my room, I get instructions on how to kill it with fire. Not that I can actually use any of these delightful cataclysmic spells the school is so eager to hand out to me. Funny enough, you can’t actually whip up an entire army of demons on just a wink. It takes power and lots of it. And no one is going to help you build mana to summon a personal demon army, so let’s be real, it takes malia.

Everyone—almost everyone—uses a bit of malia here and there, stuff they don’t even think of as wicked. Magic a slice of bread into cake without gathering the mana for it first, that sort of thing, which everyone thinks is just harmless cheating. Well, the power’s got to come from somewhere, and if you haven’t gathered it yourself, then it’s probably coming
from something living, because it’s easier to get power out of something that’s already alive and moving around. So you get your cake and meanwhile a colony of ants in your back garden stiffen and die and disintegrate.

Mum won’t so much as keep her tea hot with malia. But if you’re less of a stickler, as most people are, you can make yourself a three-tier cake out of dirt and ants every day of your life, and still live to 150 and die peacefully in your bed, assuming you don’t die of cholesterol poisoning first. But if you start using malia on a grander scale than that, for example to raze a city or slaughter a whole army or any of the thousand other useless things that I know exactly how to do, you can’t get enough of it except by sucking in mana—or life force or arcane energy or pixie dust or whatever you want to call it; mana’s just the current trend—from things complicated enough to have feelings about it and resist you. Then the power gets tainted and you’re getting psychically clawed as you try and yank away their mana, and often enough they win.

That wouldn’t be a problem for me, though. I’d be brilliant at pulling malia, if I was stupid or desperate enough to try it. I do have to give Mum credit there: she did that attachment parenting nonsense, which in my case meant her lovely sparkling-clean aura enveloped mine enough to keep me from getting into malia too early. When I brought home small frogs in order to mess with their intestines it was all supremely gentle, “No, my love, we don’t hurt living creatures,” and she would take me to our corner shop in the village and buy me an ice cream to make up for taking them away. I was five, ice cream was my only motivation for wanting power anyway, so as you can imagine I brought all my little finds to her. And by the time I was old enough that she couldn’t have stopped me, I was old enough to understand
what happens to sorcerers who use malia.

Mostly it’s seniors who start, with graduation staring them in the face, but there’re a few in our year who’ve gone for it already. Sometimes if Yi Liu looks at you too quickly, her eyes are all white for a moment. Her nails have gone solid black, too, and I can tell it’s not polish. Jack Westing looks all right, all blond smiling American boy, most people think he’s a delight, but if you go past his room and take a deep breath in, you get a faint smell of the charnel house. If you’re me, anyway. Luisa three doors down from him vanished early this year, nobody knows what happened to her—not unusual, but I’m reasonably sure what’s left of her is in his room. I have a good sense for this sort of thing even when I’d rather not know.

If I did give in and start using malia, I’d be sailing through here borne on—admittedly, on the hideous leathery bat wings of demonic beasts, but at least there’d be some kind of wings. The Scholomance loves to let maleficers out into the world; it almost never kills any of them. It’s the rest of us who get soul-eaters popping under our doors in the middle of the afternoon and wauria slithering up out of the drain to latch onto our ankles while we’re trying to take a shower and reading assignments that dissolve away our eyeballs. Not even Orion’s been able to save all of us. Most of the time less than a quarter of the class makes it all the way through graduation, and eighteen years ago—which I’m sure was not coincidentally near when Orion was conceived—only a dozen students came out, and they were all gone dark. They’d banded into a pack and taken out all the rest of the seniors in their year for a massive dose of power.

Of course, the families of all the other students realized what had happened—because it was stupidly obvious; the idiots hadn’t let the enclave kids escape first—and hunted the
dozen maleficers down. The last one of them was dead by the time Mum graduated the following year, and that was that for the Hands of Death or whatever they called themselves.

But even when you’re a sneaky little fly-by-night malia-sucker who picks his targets wisely and makes it out unnoticed, there’s nowhere to go but further down. Darling Jack’s already stealing life force from human beings, so he’s going to start rotting on the inside within the first five years after he graduates. I’m sure he’s got grandiose plans for how to stave off his disintegration, maleficers always do, but I don’t think he’s really got what it takes. Unless he comes up with something special, in ten years, fifteen at the outside, he’ll cave in on himself in a nice final grotesque rush. Then they’ll dig up his cellar and find a hundred corpses and everyone will tut and say good lord, he seemed like such a nice young man.

At the moment, though, while fighting through one page after another of extremely specific Old English household charms in crabbed handwriting, I felt strongly I could have gone for a nice big helping of malia myself. If my unshucked oats were ever being eaten by leapwinks—your guess is good as mine—I’d be ready. Meanwhile the puddle of soul-eater kept letting out soft flaring pops of gas behind me, each one like a distant flash of lightning before the horrible eruption of stink reached my nose.

I’d already spent the whole day in a deep slog, studying for finals. There were only three weeks left in the term: when you put your hand on the wall in the bathrooms, you could already feel the faint chunk-chunk noises of the middle-sized gears starting to engage, getting ready to ratchet us all down another turn. The classrooms stay in one place in the school core, and our dorms start up at the cafeteria level and rotate down each year, like some enormous metal nut whirling...
round the shaft of a screw, until down all the way we go for
graduation. Next year is our turn on the lowest floor, not
something to look forward to. I very much don’t want to fail
any exams and saddle myself with remedial work on top of
it.

Thanks to my afternoon’s diligence, my back and my bum
and my neck were all sore, and my desk light was starting to
sputter and go dim while I hunched over the tome, squinting
to make out the letters and my arm going numb holding my
Old English dictionary in the other hand. Summoning a wall
of mortal flame and incinerating the soul-eater, the spell-
book, the dictionary, my desk, et cetera, had rapidly increas-
ing appeal.

It’s not *completely* impossible to be a long-term maleficer.
Liu’s going to be all right; she’s being a lot more careful about
it than Jack. I’d bet she used almost her whole weight alloca-
tion to bring a sack of hamsters or something in with her and
she’s been sacrificing them on a planned schedule. She’s
sneaking a couple of cigarettes a week, not chain-smoking
four packets a day. But she can afford to do that because she’s
not completely on her own. Her family’s big—not big enough
to set up an enclave of their own yet, but getting into throw-
ing distance—and rumor has it they’ve had a lot of malefi-
cers: it’s a strategy, for them. She’s got a pair of twin cousins
who’ll be turning up next year, and thanks to using malia,
she’ll have the power to protect them through their first year.
And after Liu graduates, she’ll have options. If she wants to
quit, she could put spells aside entirely, get one of those dull
mundane jobs to pay the bills, and rely on the rest of her fam-
ily to protect her and cast for her. In ten years or so, she’ll
have psychically healed up enough that she’ll be able to start
using mana again. Or she could become a professional ma-
leficar, the kind of witch that gets paid handsomely by en-
clavers to do heavy work for them with no questions asked about where the power comes from. As long as she doesn’t go for anything too excessive—as in, my kind of spells—she’ll probably be fine.

But I don’t have family, not aside from my mum, and I certainly don’t have an enclave ready to support me. We live in the Radiant Mind commune near Cardigan in Wales, which also boasts a shaman, two spirit healers, a Wiccan circle, and a troupe of Morris dancers, all of whom have roughly the same amount of real power, which is to say none whatsoever, and all of whom would fall over in horror if they saw Mum or me doing real magic. Well, me. Mum does magic by dancing up mana with a group of willing volunteers—I’ve told her she ought to charge people, but no—and then she spreads it out again freely in sparkles and happiness, tra la. People let us eat at their table because they love her, who wouldn’t, and they built her a yurt when she came to them, straight from the Scholomance and three months’ pregnant with me, but none of them could help me do magic or defend me against roving maleficaria. Even if they could, they wouldn’t. They don’t like me. No one does, except Mum.

Dad died here, during graduation, getting Mum out. We call it graduation because that’s what the Americans call it, and they’ve been carrying the lion’s share of the cost of the school for the last seventy years or so. Those who pay the piper call the tune, et cetera. But it’s hardly a celebratory occasion or anything. It’s just the moment when the seniors all get dumped into the graduation hall, far below at the very bottom of the school, and try to fight their way out through all the hungry maleficaria lying in wait. About half the senior class—that is, half of the ones who’ve managed to survive that long—makes it. Dad didn’t.

He did have family; they live near Mumbai. Mum man-
aged to track them down, but only when I was already five. She and Dad hadn’t exchanged any real-world information or made any plan for after they graduated and got turfed back out to their respective homes. That would’ve been too sensible. They’d only been together on the inside for four months or something, but they were soulmates and love would lead the way. Of course, probably it would have, for Mum.

Anyway, when she did find them, it turned out his family was rich, palaces and jewels and djinn servants rich, and more important by my mum’s standards, they came from an ancient strict-mana Hindu enclave that was destroyed during the Raj, and they’re still sticking to the rules. They won’t eat meat, much less pull malia. She was happy to move in with them, and they were all excited to take us in, too. They hadn’t even known what had happened to Dad. The last time they’d heard from him was at term-end of his junior year. The seniors collect notes from the rest of us, the week before graduation. I’ve already written mine for this year and given copies to some of the London enclave kids, short and sweet: still alive, doing all right in classes. I had to keep it so small that no one could reasonably refuse to just add it to their envelope, because otherwise they would.

Dad sent one of those same notes to his family, so they’d known he’d survived that long. Then he just never came out. Another of the hundreds of kids thrown on the rubbish heap of this place. When Mum finally unearthed his family and told them about me, it felt to them like getting a bit of Dad back after all. They sent us one-way plane tickets and Mum said bye to everyone in the commune and packed me up with all our worldly goods.

But when we got there, my great-grandmother took one look at me and fell down in a visionary fit and said I was a burdened soul and would bring death and destruction to all
the enclaves in the world if I wasn’t stopped. My grandfather and his brothers tried to do the stopping, actually. That’s the only time Mum’s ever really opened the pipes. I vaguely remember it, Mum standing in our bedroom with four men awkwardly trying to make her step out of the way and hand me over. I don’t know what they were planning to do with me—none of them had ever deliberately hurt so much as a fly—but I guess the fit was a really alarming one.

They argued it over a bit and then all of a sudden the whole place went full of this terrible light that hurt my eyes to look at, and Mum was scooping me up with my blanket. She walked directly out of the family compound, barefoot in her nightie, and they stood around looking miserable and didn’t try to touch her. She got to the nearest road and stuck out her thumb, and a passing driver picked her up and took us all the way to the airport. Then a tech billionaire about to board his private jet to London saw her standing in the airport vestibule with me and offered to take her along. He still comes to the commune for a weeklong spiritual cleanse once a year.

That’s my mum for you. But it’s not me. My great-grandmother was just the first in a long line of people who meet me, smile, and then stop smiling, before I’ve even said a word. No one’s ever going to offer me a lift, or dance in a woodland circle to help me raise power, or put food on my table, or—far more to the point—stand with me against all the nasty things that routinely come after wizards, looking for a meal. If it weren’t for Mum, I wouldn’t have been welcome in my own home. You wouldn’t believe the number of nice people at the commune—the kind who write long sincere letters to politicians and regularly turn out to protest for everything from social justice to the preservation of bats—who said brightly to fourteen-year-old me how excited I must
be about going away to school—ha ha—and how much I must want to strike out on my own afterwards, see more of the world, et cetera.

Not that I want to go back to the commune. I don’t know if anyone who hasn’t tried it can properly appreciate just how horrible it is to be constantly surrounded by people who believe in absolutely everything, from leprechauns to sweat lodges to Christmas carols, and who won’t believe that you can do actual magic. I’ve literally shown people to their faces—or tried to; it takes loads of extra mana to cast even a little spell for starting a fire when a mundane is watching you, firmly convinced that you’re a silly kid with a lighter up your sleeve and you’ll probably fumble the sleight-of-hand. But even if you do get some sufficiently dramatic spell to work in front of them, then they all say wow and how amazing and then the next day it’s all, man, those mushrooms were really good. And then they avoid me even more. I don’t want to be here, but I don’t want to be there, either.

Oh, that’s a lie, of course. I constantly daydream about going home. I ration it to five minutes a day where I go and stand in front of the vent in the wall, as safely far away as I can get from it and still feel the air moving, and I shut my eyes and press my hands over my face to block the smell of burnt oil and finely aged sweat, pretending that instead I’m breathing damp earth and dried rosemary and roasted carrots in butter, and it’s the wind moving through the trees, and if I just open my eyes I’ll be lying on my back in a clearing and the sun has just gone behind a cloud. I would instantly trade in my room for the yurt in the woods, even after two full weeks of rain when everything I own is growing mildew. It’s an improvement over the sweet fragrance of soul-eater. I even miss the people, which I’d have refused to believe if you’d told me, but after three years in here, I’d ask even
Philippa Wax for a cwtch if I saw her sour, hard-mouthed face.

All right, no, I wouldn’t, and I’m pretty sure that all my sentiments will revert within a week after I get back. Anyway, it’s been made very clear I’m not welcome, except on sufferance. And maybe not even that, if I try to settle in again once I’m out of here. The commune council—Philippa’s the secretary—will probably come up with some excuse to throw me out. Negativity of spirit has already been mentioned more than a few times just at the limits of my hearing, or well within them. And then I’ll just have wrecked Mum’s life, because she’d walk away without a second thought to stay with me.

I’ve known even before I came to the Scholomance that my only chance for a halfway decent life—assuming I get out of here to have one at all—is to get into an enclave. That’s me and everyone else, then, but at least most independent wizards can find friends to club together and watch each other’s backs, build mana, collaborate a bit. Even if people liked me enough to keep me, which no one ever has, I wouldn’t be any use to them. Ordinary people want a mop in the cupboard, not a rocket launcher, and here I am struggling desperately for two hours just to turn up a spell to wash the floor.

But if you’re in a lush enclave of a few hundred wizards, and a death wyrm crawls out of the depths of the nearest cavern, or another enclave decides to declare war, you really would like somebody around who can slit a cow’s throat and unleash all the fires of hell in your defense. Having someone with a reputation for that kind of power in your enclave usually means you don’t get attacked in the first place, and then no cows have to be sacrificed, and I don’t ever have to take a psychic pummeling and lose five years off my life and worse yet make my mother cry.
But that all depends on my having the reputation. No one’s going to invite me into an enclave or even a graduation alliance if they think I’m actually some sort of pathetic damsel in distress who needs rescuing by the local hero. They certainly won’t do it because they like me. And meanwhile Orion doesn’t need to impress anybody at all. He’s not even just an enclaver. His mother is one of the top candidates to be the next Domina of New York, which is probably still the single most powerful enclave in the world right now, and his father’s a master artificer. He could just keep half an eye out, do the bare minimum of coursework, and walk out and spend the rest of his life in luxury and safety, surrounded by the finest wizards and the most wonderful artifice in the world.

Instead, he’s been spending his school years making a massive spectacle of himself. The soul-eater behind me was probably his fourth heroic deed of the week. He’s saving every dullard and weakling in the place, and not a thought given to who’s going to have to pay the price. Because there’s absolutely going to be a price. For all that I want to go home every minute of every day in here, I know perfectly well it’s actually unbelievably good luck to be here. The only reason I’ve had that luck myself is because the school was largely built by Manchester enclave, back in the mists of the Edwardian era, and the current UK enclaves have managed to hang on to a disproportionate number of the spare seats to hand out. That might change in the next few years—the Shanghai and Jaipur enclaves have been making threatening noises about building a new school from scratch in Asia if there isn’t a significant reallocation soon—but at least for the moment, any indie kid in the UK still automatically goes on the induction list.

Mum offered to get me taken off, but I wasn’t insane enough to let her. The enclaves built the school because outside is worse. All those maleficaria creeping through the vents
and the pipes and under the doors, they don’t come from the Scholomance—they come to the Scholomance because all of us are in here, tender young wizards newly bursting with mana we’re still falling over ourselves learning to use. Thanks to my freshman-year Maleficaria Studies textbook, I know that our deliciousness goes up another order of magnitude every six months between thirteen and eighteen, all wrapped up inside a thin and easy-to-break sugar shell instead of the tough chewy hide of a grown wizard. That’s not a metaphor I made up myself: it’s straight out of the book, which took a lot of pleasure telling us in loads of detail just how badly the maleficaria want to eat us: really, really badly.

So back in the mists of the late 1800s, the renowned artificer Sir Alfred Cooper Browning—it’s hard to avoid picking up his name in here, it’s plastered all over the place—came up with the Scholomance. As much as I roll my eyes at the placards everywhere, the design’s really effective. The school is only just barely connected to the actual world, in one single place: the graduation gates. Which are surrounded by layers on layers of magical wards and artifice barriers around them. When some enterprising mal does wriggle through, it’s only got inside the graduation hall, which isn’t connected to the rest of the school except for the absolute minimum of pipes and air shafts required to supply the place, and all of those are loaded up with wards and barriers, too.

So the mals get bottled up and spend loads of time struggling to get in and get up, and fighting and devouring each other while they’re at it, and the biggest and most dangerous ones can’t actually squeeze their way up at all. They just have to hang around the graduation hall all year long, snacking on other mals, and wait for graduation to gorge themselves. We’re a lot harder to get at in here than if we were living out in the wide open, in a yurt for instance. Even enclave kids
were getting eaten more often than not, before the school was built, and if you’re an indie kid who doesn’t get into the Scholomance, these days your odds of making it to the far side of puberty are one in twenty. One in four is plenty decent odds compared to that.

But we have to pay for that protection. We pay with our work, and we pay with our misery and our terror, which all build the mana that fuels the school. And we pay, most of all, with the ones who don’t make it, so what good exactly does Orion think he’s doing, what does anyone think he’s doing, saving people? The bill has to come due eventually.

Except nobody thinks that way. Less than twenty juniors have died so far this year—the usual rate is a hundred plus—and everyone in the whole school thinks he hung the moon, and is wonderful, and the New York enclave’s going to have five times as many applicants as they’ve had before. I can forget about getting in there, and the enclave in London isn’t looking very good, either. It’s maddening, especially when I ought to be news. I already know ten times more spells for destruction and dominion than the entire graduating class of seniors put together. You would too if you got five of them every time you wanted to mop the bloody floor.

On the bright side, today I’ve learned ninety-eight useful household charms in Old English, as I had to slog through to number ninety-nine to reach the one that would wipe out the stink, and the book couldn’t vanish on me until I’d got to it. Every now and again, the school does shoot itself in the foot that way, usually when it’s being its most awful and annoying and petty. The misery of translating ninety-nine charms with a stinking dead soul-eater gurbling behind me was good enough to buy me the extra useful ones.

I’ll be grateful in a week or two. At the moment, what I had to do was stand up and do five hundred jumping jacks in
a row, in perfect form, keeping my focus tightly on my current storing crystal the whole time, to build enough mana so I could wash my floor without accidentally killing anything. I don’t dare cheat at all, not even a little. There’s no ants and cockroaches in here to suck dry, and I’m getting more powerful by the day, like we all are. With my particular gift, if I tried to cheat on a cleaning spell, it’s entirely possible I’d take out three of my neighbors to either side and this entire hall would end up the horrible gleaming clean of a newly sanitized morgue. I’ve got mana saved up, of course: Mum loaded me up with crystals she’d primed with her circle, so I could store mana for later, and I put some away every chance I get. But I wasn’t going to use one of those to clean up my room. The crystals are for emergencies, when I really need power right away, and to stockpile for graduation.

After the floor came clean, I added on fifty push-ups—I’ve got in really good shape over the last three years—and did my mum’s favorite smudging spell. It left my whole cell smelling of burnt sage, but at least that was an improvement. It was nearly dinnertime by then. A shower was more than called for, except I really didn’t feel like having to fight off anything that might come out of the drains in the bathroom, which meant that something was almost sure to come, if I went. Instead I changed my shirt and plaited my hair again and wiped my face with water out of my jug. I rinsed my t-shirt in the last of the water, too, and hung it up so it would dry. I only had the two tops, and they were getting threadbare. I’d had to burn half my clothes my first year when a nameless shadow crawled out from under the bed, the second night I was here, and I didn’t have anywhere else to pull mana from. Sacrificing my clothes gave me enough power to fry the shadow without drawing life force from anywhere. I hadn’t needed Orion Lake to save me from that, had I?
Even after my best efforts, I still looked wonderful enough that when I came out to the meeting point at dinner time—we walk to the cafeteria in groups, of course, it’s just stupidly asking for trouble if you go alone—Liu took one look at me and asked, “What happened to you, El?”

“Our glorious savior Lake decided to melt a soul-eater in my cell today, and left me to clean up the mess,” I said.

“Melt? Ew,” she said. Liu may be a dark witch, but at least she doesn’t genuflect at Orion’s throne. I like her, maleficer or not: she’s one of the few people here who doesn’t mind hanging out with me. She’s got more social options than I do, but she’s always polite.

But Ibrahim was there, too—carefully keeping his back to us while waiting for some of his own friends, making clear we weren’t welcome to walk with his group—and he was already turning around in high excitement. “Orion saved you from a soul-eater!” he said. *Squealed,* really. Orion’s saved his life three times—and he *needed* it to be saved.

“Orion ran a soul-eater into my room and sludged it all over my floor,” I said, through my teeth, but it was no use. By the time Aadhya and Jack joined us and we had a group of five to go upstairs, Orion had heroically saved me from a soul-eater, and of course by the end of dinnertime—only two people in our year vomiting today, we were getting better at our protective charms and antidotes—everyone in the school knew about it.

Most types of maleficaria don’t even have names; there are so many varieties of them, and they come and go. But soul-eaters are a big deal: a single one has taken out a dozen students in other years, and it’s an extremely bad way to go, complete with dramatic light show (from the soul-eater) and shrieking wails (from the victims). It would’ve made my reputation to take one out by myself, and I could have. I’ve got
twenty-six fully loaded crystals in the hand-carved little sandalwood box under my pillow, saved for exactly a situation like this, and six months ago, when I was trying to patch up my fraying sweater without resorting to the horrors of crochet, I got an incantation to unravel souls. It would’ve taken a soul-eater apart from the inside out—with no stinking residue—and even left an empty glowing wisp behind. Then I could have made a deal with Aadhya, who’s artificer-track and has an affinity for using weird materials: we could have had it patrolling between our doors all night. Most of the maleficaria don’t like light. That’s the kind of advantage that can get you all the way to graduation. Instead all I had was the unwanted pleasure of being one more notch on Orion’s belt.

My not-very-near-death experience did at least get me a good seat at dinner. Usually I have to sit alone at the far end of the half-filled table of whoever else is being most socially rejected at the time, or else people change tables away from me in groups until I’m sitting completely alone, which is worse. Today I ended up at one of the central tables right under the sunlamps—more vitamin D than I’d got, apart from a pill, in months—with Ibrahim and Aadhya and half a dozen other reasonably popular kids: there was even one girl from the smallish Maui enclave who sat with us. But I only got angrier, hearing them talking reverently about all the wonderful things Orion had done. A few of them even asked me to describe the fight. “Well, first he chased it into my room, and then he blasted open my door, and then he incandensed it before I could say boo and left a stinking mess on my floor,” I snapped, but you can guess how well that went. Everyone wants to believe he’s a magnificent hero who’s going to save them all. Ugh.
After dinner, I had to try and get someone to come with me to the workshop, so I could get some materials to patch up my door. It’s an extremely bad idea to leave your door unlocked at night, much less with a gaping hole in it. I tried to make it casual, “Does anyone need anything from the shop?” But no one was buying. After hearing my story, they could all guess that I needed to go down, and we’re all alive to the main chance in here. You don’t make it out unless you use every advantage you can get, and nobody likes me enough to do me favors without payment in advance.

“I could come,” Jack said, leaning forward and smiling at me with all his shiny white teeth.

I wouldn’t need anything to crawl out of a dark corner if he went with me. I looked him straight in the eye and said hard, “Oh really?”

He paused and had a moment of being wary, and then he shrugged. “Wait, sorry, just remembered I’ve got to finish my new divining rod,” he said cheerfully, but his eyes had narrowed. I hadn’t really wanted him to know that I knew about
him. I’d have to make him pay me for my silence now, or else he’d think he had to come after me to shut me up, and he might bet on that anyway. Yet another thing Orion had now cocked up for me.

“What’s it worth to you?” Aadhya said. She’s the sharp and pragmatic sort; she’s one of the few people in here willing to make deals with me. One of the few people in here willing to talk to me at all, really. But she was also brutally hard-nosed about this sort of thing. I normally appreciated that she didn’t beat about the bush, but knowing I was hard up, she wasn’t going to put herself on the line for anything less than twice the going value of a trip down, and she also would certainly make sure I took all the significant risk. I scowled.

“I’ll go with you,” Orion said, from the table next to ours, where the New York kids were sitting. He’d kept his head down all dinner even while everyone at our table talked loudly about how massively wonderful he was. I’d seen him do the same after his other notable rescues, and had never quite decided if he was making a pretense of modesty, was actually modest to the point of pathology, or was just so horribly awkward he had nothing to say to people complimenting him. He didn’t even lift his head now, just spoke out from under his shaggy overhang of hair, staring down at his cleared plate.

So that was nice. Obviously I wasn’t going to turn down free company to the shop, but it was going to look like more of the same, Orion protecting me. “Let’s go, then,” I said tightly, and got up at once. Here at school, you’re always better off going instantly as soon as you’ve got a plan, if your plan is to do something unusual.

The Scholomance isn’t precisely a real place. There are perfectly real walls and floors and ceilings and pipes, all of which were made in the real world out of real iron and steel
and copper and glass and so forth, and assembled according to elaborate blueprints that are on display all over the school, but if you tried to duplicate the building in the middle of London, I’m reasonably sure it wouldn’t even go up for long enough to fall over. It only works because it was built into the void. I’d explain what the void is, but I haven’t any idea. If you’ve ever wondered what it was like to live in the days when our cave-dwelling ancestors stared up at this black thing full of twinkly bits of light with no idea whatsoever what was up there and what it all meant, well, I imagine that it was similar to sitting in a Scholomance dorm room staring out at the pitch-black surroundings. I’m happy to be able to report that it’s not pleasant or comfortable at all.

But thanks to being almost completely inside the void, the school doesn’t have to fight boring old physics. That made it much easier for the artificers who built it to persuade it to work according to the way they wanted it to work. The blueprints are posted so that when we look at them, our belief reinforces the original construction, and so does all our trudging along the endless stairs and the endless corridors, expecting our classrooms to be where we last saw them and for water to come out of the faucets and for us all to continue breathing, even though if you asked an engineer to look at the plumbing and the ventilation, probably it’s not actually sufficient to handle the needs of several thousand kids.

Which is all very well and good and extremely clever of Sir Alfred et al., but the problem with living in a persuadable space is, it’s persuadable in all sorts of ways. When you end up on the stairs with six people rushing to the same classroom as you, it somehow takes you all half the time to cover the distance. But the creepy anxious feeling you get if you have to go down into a damp unlit basement full of cobwebs, where you become convinced there’s something horrible
about to jump out at you, that works on it, too. The mals are more than happy to cooperate with that particular kind of belief. Anytime you do anything out of the routine, like for instance going to the shop alone after dinner when nobody else is down there if they can help it, the stairs or the corridor might end up taking you somewhere that doesn’t actually appear on the blueprints. And you really won’t want to meet whatever is waiting there for you.

So once you’ve decided that you’re going somewhere out of the ordinary, you’re better off going as fast as you can, before you or anyone else can think about it too much. I headed straight for the nearest landing, and waited until Orion and I were far enough down the stairs that nobody else was in ear-shot before snapping at him. “What part of leave me alone didn’t you understand?”

He’d been walking along next to me with his hands shoved in his pockets, slouched: he jerked his head up. “But—you just said, let’s go—”

“I should’ve told you off in front of everyone, then, after they’ve all decided you saved my life?”

He actually stopped right there in the middle of the staircase and started saying, “Should I . . .” We were between floors with no landing visible, and the nearest light that wasn’t completely burnt out was a sputtering gaslight twenty steps back, so our shadows darkened the stairs below us. Pausing for as much as a millisecond was a grand invitation for something to go wrong up ahead.

I’d kept going, because I wasn’t an idiot, so I was two steps down before I realized he hadn’t. I had to stretch out and grab him by the wrist and tug him onwards. “Not now. What is it with you, are you actively trying to meet new and exciting mals?” He went really red and fell back in with me, staring at the floor even harder, as if I’d scored an actual hit, no mat-
ter how stupid that was. “The ones that come your way in the ordinary course of things aren’t enough?”

“They don’t,” he said shortly.

“What?”

“They don’t come my way! They never have.”

“What, you just don’t get attacked?” I said, outraged. He shrugged a shoulder. “Where’d that soul-eater come from, then?”

“Huh? I’d just come out of the bathroom. I saw the tail end of it going under your door.”

So he had actually come to my rescue. That was even worse. I stewed over his revelation as we kept going. Of course, it made some sense: if you were a monster, why would you attack the blinding hero who could blast you to pieces without half trying? What didn’t make sense was his side of it. “So you reckon you might as well make a name for yourself, saving the rest of us?” He shrugged again, not looking up, so that wasn’t it. “Do you just like fighting mals or something?” I prodded, and he flushed up again. “You’re unbelievably odd.”

“Don’t you like practicing your affinity?” he said, defensive.

“My affinity is laying waste to multitudes, so I haven’t had much opportunity to try the experience,” I said.

He snorted, as though I was joking. I didn’t try to persuade him. It’s easy to claim to be a massively powerful dark sorceress; no one’s going to believe me until I prove it, preferably with hard evidence. “Where do you get all the power, anyway?” I asked him instead. I’d often wondered. An affinity makes certain spells considerably easier to cast, but it doesn’t make them free.

“From them. From the mals, I mean. I kill one, then I save that power to fire off the next spell. Or if I’m low, I borrow some from Magnus or Chloe or David . . .”
I ground my teeth. “I get the idea.” He was naming off all the other students from the New York enclave. Of course they did power-sharing, and of course they had their own power sink to boot, like my crystals, except some enormous one that every student from New York had been feeding into for the last century. He literally had a battery to pull on for his heroics, and if he could pull mana from killing maleficaria—how?—he probably didn’t even need it.

We reached the landing for the shop level then. The senior hall was still further below, and there was a faint glow of light coming up the stairs from there. But the archway opening onto the classroom corridor itself was pitch black; the lights had gone out. I stared at the open maw of it grimly as we came down the last steps: that was what his moment of hesitation had netted us. And if mals never went for him, that meant whatever was lurking around down there was going to go for me.

“I’ll take the lead,” he offered.

“You’d better believe you’re going to take the lead. And you’re holding the light, too.”

He didn’t even argue, just nodded and put out his left hand and lit it up using a minor version of the same incandensing spell he’d used on the soul-eater. It made my eyes itch. He was all set to just march straight into the corridor; I had to yank him back and inspect the ceiling and floor and prod the nearby walls myself. Digesters that haven’t eaten in a while are translucent, and if they spread themselves out thinly enough over a flat surface, you can look straight at them and never realize they’re there until they flap themselves around you. The landing is a high-traffic area, so it’s especially popular with them. Earlier this year, one of the sophomore boys rushing to get to class on time got caught, and he lost a leg and most of his left arm. He didn’t last for long after that,
obviously.

But the whole area round the landing was clear. The only thing I did turn up was an agglo hiding under one of the gas lamps, shorter than my pinky and not worth trying to harvest even for me: only two screws, half a lozenge, and a pen cap stuck onto its shell so far. It scuttled away over the wall in a panic before diving into a vent. Nothing reacted to its passage. At night, in a dark corridor on the shop level, that wasn’t a good sign. There should have been something. Unless there was something especially bad up ahead that had scared the others away.

I put a hand spread out on the back of Orion’s shoulder and kept my head turned to look behind us as we headed onward to the main workshop entrance, the best way for a pair to walk together when there’s an imminent threat. Most of the classroom doors were standing ajar just enough that we wouldn’t get the warning of a doorknob turning, but not enough for us to get a good look into any of the rooms as we passed, dozens of them: aside from the workshop and the gym, most of the bottom level is taken up with small classrooms where seniors take specialized seminars. But those all end after the first half of the year; at this point all the seniors are spending all their time doing practice runs for graduation, meaning the seminar rooms are the perfect place for mals to snooze in.

I hated having to trust Orion to watch where we were going. He walked so casually, even through an unlit hallway, and when he got to the shop doors, he just pulled one open and walked on inside before I realized what he was doing. Then I had to follow him or else be stuck out in the dark corridor alone.

As soon as I stepped through the door, I grabbed a fistful of his shirt to stop him going on further. We halted just in-
side, the shining light in his hand reflecting off all the gleam-
ing saw-blade teeth and the dull iron of the vises and the
glossy obsidian black of the hammers, and the dull stainless
steel of the shop tables and chairs lined up in neat rows filling
the massive space. The gas lamps had all been turned down
to tiny blue pilot dots. The squat furnaces at the end of each
row had tiny flickers of orange and green glowing through
the vent slits, the only sickly light. It felt weirdly crowded
despite having not a single person in it. The furniture took up
too much room, as if the chairs had multiplied. We all hated
the workshop more than anything. Even the alchemy labs are
better.

We stood still for a long moment in which nothing what-
soever happened, and then finally I deliberately stepped on
the back of Orion’s heel just to pay him back. “Ow!” he said.

“Oh, sorry,” I said insincerely.

He glared at me, not entirely a doormat. “Will you just get
the stuff and let’s go,” he said, like it was that easy, just go
wild and start rummaging through the bins and so forth,
what could go wrong. He turned to the wall and flipped the
light switch. Nothing came on, of course.

“Follow me,” I said, and crossed to the scrap metal bins. I
picked up the long tongs hanging by the side and cautiously
used them to flip open the lid. Then I reached in and took out
four big flat pieces, shaking them thoroughly and banging
them violently against the side of the nearest table. I wouldn’t
have tried to carry that many myself, but I’d make Orion
carry them, and then I’d have extra to trade someone another
time.

After getting the scrap, I didn’t go for the wire, because
that would’ve been an obvious choice; instead I had him
reach into one of the other bins for a double handful of
screws and nuts and bolts, which wouldn’t be much use for
repairing my door, but were worth more, so I could trade them to Aadhya for some of the wire I knew she had and even have some left over. I put them into the zip pockets of my combats. Then there wasn’t any help for it: I had to have a pair of pliers.

The tool chests are large squat containers the size of a body, which they have in fact contained on at least two occasions since I’ve been here. You can’t keep the tools you take out during class time—if you try, it’ll come after you—so the only time you can get a tool for private use is after hours, and it’s one of the best ways to die, since the kind of mals that climb into the tool chests are the smart ones. If you open one incautiously—

Orion reached out and lifted the lid while I was still debating strategy. Inside, there was absolutely nothing but several neat rows of hammers, screwdrivers of all sizes, spanners, hacksaws, pliers, even a drill. Not a one of them leapt up to smash him in the head or rip off one of his fingers or poke out his eyes. “Get a pair of pliers and the drill,” I said, swallowing my seething envy in favor of maximizing the value of the situation. A drill. No one in our entire hall had a drill. I hadn’t heard of anyone other than a senior artificer even seeing them more than once or twice.

Instead he grabbed a hammer and in one smooth motion whirled and smashed it down right over my shoulder, directly into the forehead of the thing that the dull metal chair behind me had turned into: a molten grey-colored blob with a maw full of jagged silver teeth opening along the seam where the seat met the back. I ducked under his arm and behind him and slammed the lid down on the tool chest and got it locked before anything else could come out of it, and then I turned round and saw four more chairs had pulled up their legs and were coming at us. There had been too many of them.
Orion was chanting a metal-forging spell. The nearest mimic started glowing red-hot, and he hit it with the hammer again, beating a huge hole into its side. It made a grating shrieking noise out of its sawtooth mouth and fell over. But meanwhile the others had all sprouted knife-blade limbs and charged—at me.

“Look out!” Orion shouted, uselessly: seeing them was not the problem. I knew a terrific spell for liquefying the bones of my enemies, which would have done nicely in the given circumstances if I’d wanted to blow a tankful of mana and if there hadn’t been any Orion around to be liquefied right alongside the more immediate enemies. There was only one spell I could afford to cast. I shouted out the Old English floor-washing charm, and jumped aside as all four of the chair-mimics skidded on the wet soapy slick and shot past me straight at Orion. I grabbed two of the pieces of scrap and ran for the door while he fought them. I’d use my bare hands to wrap on the wire if I had to.

I didn’t have to. Orion caught up to me on the stairs, panting, carrying two more pieces of scrap, and the pliers, and the drill. “Thanks a lot!” he said, indignantly. He had a thin bloody slice across one forearm and no other damage.

“I knew you had them,” I said, bitterly.

The climb up the stairs to our res hall took fifteen solid minutes of trudging. We didn’t talk, and nothing pestered us. I knocked on Aadhya’s door on the way back to my room, swapped for wire and also let her know I had a drill now—a lot of people who wouldn’t trade with me would trade with her, and if I had something she didn’t, she would usually broker for a cut—and then had Orion keep watch while I fixed my door. It wasn’t fun. I laboriously drilled holes in one piece of scrap and wired it in place over the hole he had left in the door, securing it thoroughly. I then sat there and wove some
of the thinner wire around four thick strands to make a wider band, and I used it to wire the dented remains of my door-knob and lock roughly back in place. Then I pulled the door shut and did the same on the inside with a second piece of scrap.

“Why don’t you just use the mending charm?” Orion ventured tentatively, about halfway through the agonizingly boring process, after he looked round to see what was taking me so long.

“I am using the mending charm,” I said through my teeth. Even with the pliers and the drilled holes, my hands were throbbing. Orion kept watching with increasing confusion until I finally twisted down the last ragged end of wire. Then I put my hands flat on either side of the double-layered hole and shut my eyes. A basic version of mend-and-make is one of the spells we all learn, in shop class. The classes are the only way to get the most critical general spells. Mending is pretty obviously on that list, as you can’t get anything into the school but what little you’re allowed to bring in at induction. And mending is one of the most difficult spells, too, with dozens of variations depending on the materials you’re working with and the complexity of what you’re trying to fix. Only artificers really master it completely, and even then only within a specialized range of materials.

But at least you can usually do it in your own bloody vernacular. “Make and mend, to my will bend, iron thrust and steel extend,” I said—we all knew a lot of rhymes for mend and make—and mapped in seventeen knocks around the words, somewhere between the twenty-three you use for sheet metal and the nine for wire. Then I tapped into the mana I’d built up by doing all that excessively nitpicky hand work. The charm grudgingly went churning through the materials. The pieces of scrap slagged into something like a
thick metallic putty, which I pushed into place to fill the gaping hole in the door, and as the surface went smooth and hardened under my hands, the doorknobs on either side made a rude noise like a belch and finally hooked themselves back together, the dead bolt shooting back into place with a solid *thunk*. I dropped my hands, panting, and turned round.

Orion was standing in the middle of my bedroom staring like I was an exotic zoological specimen. “You’re *strict mana*?”

He made it sound like I was a member of a cult or something. I glared at him. “Not all of us can pull from maleficaria.”

“But—why don’t you pull from—the air, or the furniture—everyone’s got holes in their bedposts—”

He wasn’t wrong. Cheating is a lot harder in here because there’s no small living things to pull from, no ants or cockroaches or mice unless you bring them in with you, which is awkward since the only stuff you can bring is what’s physically on you at the moment of induction. But most people can pull small amounts of mana from the inanimate stuff around instead: leach heat from the air or disintegrate a bit of wood. It’s a lot easier to do that than to pull mana from a living human being, much less another sorcerer. For most people.

“If I pull, it won’t come from there,” I said.

Orion was eyeing me with a growing frown. “Er, Galadriel,” he said, a bit gently, as if he was starting to think I was a lunatic, one of the ones who’d just gone crazy inside. I’d had a wildly horrible day anyway, thanks to him, and that was the final straw. I reached out and grabbed at him. Not with my hands—I grabbed at his mana, at his life force, and gave it a hard deliberate yank.

Most wizards have to work at it to steal power from a living thing. There are rituals, exercises of will, voodoo dolls,
blood sacrifices. Lots of blood sacrifices. I barely have to try. Orion’s life force came away from his spirit as easily as a fish on a line, being tugged out of the water. All I needed to do was keep pulling and it would end up in my hands, all that juicy power he’d built up. In fact, I could probably have followed his power-sharing lines to pull malia from all his enclaves. I could have drained them all.

Even as Orion’s face went wide with appalled shock, I let go again, so the mana went snapping back into him like a rubber band. He staggered back a full pace, his hands coming up defensively like he was ready for a fight. But I ignored him and sat down with a hard thump on my bed, trying not to cry. Whenever I let my temper get away from me like that, I always feel rotten afterwards. It’s rubbing my own face in how easy everything would be if I just gave in.

He went on standing there hands raised, looking a bit silly when I didn’t do anything. “You’re a maleficer!” he said after a moment, like he thought he was prodding me into doing something.

“I know this is going to be a challenge for you,” I said through my teeth, still fighting back the sniffles, “but try not being an idiot for five minutes. If I was a maleficer, I’d have sucked you dry downstairs and told everyone you died in the workshop. It’s not like anyone would’ve been suspicious.” He didn’t look like he’d found that particularly comforting. I rubbed the back of my sooty hand across my face. “Anyway,” I added desolately, “if I was a maleficer, I’d just suck all of you dry and have the whole school to myself.”

“Who’d want it?” Orion said after a moment.

I snorted a laugh up into my nose; all right, he had a point. “A maleficer!”

“Not even a maleficer,” he said positively. He did lower his hands then, still warily, only to take another step back again
when I stood up. I rolled my eyes and made a little jump at him with my hands raised like claws and squeaked, “Boo!”

He glared at me. I went over to where he’d put the rest of the supplies on the floor. The rest of the scrap pieces got shoved under my mattress where they couldn’t be replaced by something unpleasant during the night without my noticing. The drill and pliers got strapped securely down to the lid of my storage chest next to my two knives and my one precious small screwdriver. If you keep things strapped to the underside of the lid, then if they’ve come loose, you can see the straps dangling when you crack it a bit. I’m really systematic about checking, so I haven’t had a tool go bad for a long time: the Scholomance doesn’t waste its time.

I went to the basin and rinsed off my hands and face again as well as I could: I was down to just a tiny bit left in my jug. “If you’re waiting for a thank-you, you’ll be here awhile,” I told Orion after I finished drying off. He was still standing in the corner eyeing me.

“Yeah, I noticed,” he said with a huff. “You weren’t kidding about your affinity, were you. So you’re—what, a strict-mana maleficer?”

“That doesn’t even make sense. I’m not a maleficer at all, and as long as I’m trying to not turn into one, maybe you’d better go away,” I said, spelling it out since that was evidently necessary. “It’s got to be nearly curfew by now, anyway.”

Bad things happen if you’re in someone else’s cell past curfew. Otherwise, of course, we’d all double and triple up and take shifts on watch, not to mention that seniors would be en masse shoving freshmen out of their rooms on the top floor and postponing graduation for a year or two. Apparently there was a rash of incidents like that early on, after people started to realize about the gigantic horde of mals waiting down in the graduation hall. I don’t know exactly what the
builders did about it, but I do know that having two or more kids in a room makes you a horrible magnet. And forget about running out into the corridor trying to get back to your room once you realize what trouble you’re in. Two girls just down the way from me tried it in our first year. One of them spent a long time screaming outside my door before she stopped. The other one didn’t make it out of the room at all. It’s not the sort of thing anyone sane wants to risk.

Orion just kept staring at me. Abruptly he said, “What happened to Luisa?”

I frowned at him, wondering why he was asking me, and then I realized—“You think I did for her?”

“It wasn’t one of the mals,” he said. “My room’s next to hers, and she disappeared overnight. I’d have known. I stopped mals going in after her twice.”

I thought it over fast. If I told him, he was going to go after Jack. On one hand, that meant Jack would probably cease to be a problem for me. On the other hand, if Jack denied it, which wasn’t unlikely, I could end up with him and Orion as problems together. It wasn’t worth the risk when I didn’t have any proof. “Well, it wasn’t me,” I said. “There are practicing maleficers in here, you know. Four in the senior class at least.” There were six, actually, but three of them were openly practicing, so saying four would hopefully make me look like I had a tiny bit of inside knowledge, believable but not enough to be worth interrogating. “Why don’t you pester one of them if you don’t have enough to do looking out for the sad and gormless.”

His face went set and hard. “You know, considering I’ve saved your life twice,” he began.

“Three times,” I said coldly.

It threw him off. “Uh—”

“The chimaera, end of last term,” I supplied even more
coldly. Since I was obviously going to stick in his head now, he was at least going to remember me correctly.

“Fine, so three times, then! You might at least—”

“No, I mightn’t.”

He stopped, flushing. I don’t think I’d ever seen him angry before; it was always just aw-shucks hunching and resolution.

“I didn’t ask you for your help, and I don’t want it,” I said. “There’s more than a thousand students still left in our year and all of them gagging to swoon over you. Go and find one of them if you want some adoration.” The bells rang in the hallway: five minutes to curfew. “And if you don’t, go anyway!” I grabbed my door and flipped the shiny new—well, dull new—bolt and opened it.

He obviously wanted to leave on a snappy comeback, but couldn’t think of one. I suppose he wasn’t ever called on to produce them in the ordinary course of things. After a moment of struggle, he just scowled and stalked out.

I’m delighted to report my repaired door slammed shut on his heels beautifully.
I was exhausted, but I spent another half hour doing sit-ups in my room and built up the mana to cast a protective barrier over my bed. I can’t afford to do it every night, but tonight I was shattered, and I needed something to keep me from being the lowest-hanging fruit on the vine. Once I had it up, I crawled into bed and slept like a rock, barring the three times I woke with warning jabs from the trip wires round my door: par for the course, and nothing actually tried to come in.

The next morning Aadhya knocked to get me for showers and breakfast company, which was nice of her. I wondered why. A drill was valuable, but not that valuable. Thanks to her company, I was able to take my first shower in a week and refill my water jug before we headed to the cafeteria. She didn’t even try to charge me for it, except watching in turn-about while she did it, too.

All became clear as we started down the hallway. “So, you and Orion did all right in the shop last night,” she said, in an overly casual, making-conversation way.
I didn’t stop short, but I wanted to. “It wasn’t a date!”

“Did he ask you for anything? Even a fair share?” Aadhya darted her eyes at me.

I ground my teeth. That was the usual rule for distinguishing between a date and an alliance, but it hardly applied. “He was paying a debt.”

“Oh, right,” Aadhya said. “Orion, are you going to breakfast?” she called—he was just closing his door behind him, and then I realized she must’ve put a trip wire on his door this morning, so she’d got a warning when he went to brush his teeth. She was trying to get in with him through me, which would have been funny if it hadn’t made me want to punch her in the head. The last thing I needed was for people to get even more of an idea that I needed him to look out for me. “Walk together?”

He threw a look at me—I glared back, trying to hint him off—and said, “Sure,” inexplicably. It wasn’t as though he needed company, so evidently he was just doing it to spite me. He fell in on Aadhya’s other side while I contemplated various forms of retribution. I couldn’t just fall out, either: there wasn’t anyone else waiting for a group, and then I’d be vulnerable. Breakfast isn’t half as dangerous as dinner, but it’s still never good to walk alone. Hope in your heart doesn’t count.

“Anything unusual down in the shop last night?” she asked him. “I’ve got metalwork this morning.”

“Um, nothing much, really,” he said.

“What’s wrong with you!” I said. You’re not obliged to go out of your way to warn others, we all have to look out for ourselves, but if you start misleading people and setting them up, you’re really in for it. That’s a long step down from maleficer in most students’ opinions. “There were five mimics hanging about as chairs,” I told her.
“They’re dead!” he said defensively.
“Doesn’t mean there aren’t more of them who were waiting for leftovers.” I shook my head in disgust.

Aadhya didn’t look happy about it. I wouldn’t have either, if I was going to be first into the shop with a potential mimic or two lingering. But at least with the information she’d be able to make sure she wasn’t literally first in, and possibly put a shield on her back or something.

“I’ll hold us a table if you’ll get the trays,” she said as we came into the cafeteria, being too clever for my own good. I couldn’t blame her, really. It wasn’t stupid to want to be pals with Orion if that looked like a real possibility. Aadhya’s family live in New Jersey: if she got into the New York enclave, she could probably pull them all inside. And I couldn’t afford to alienate one of the vanishing few people who are willing to deal with me. Sullenly I got on the line and loaded up a tray for myself and for her, hoping faintly that Orion would spot one of his enclave friends and ditch us. Instead he put a couple of apples on the extra tray, and then reached ahead of me and said, “Ç’est temps dissoudre par coup de foudre,” and fried a tentacle just beginning to poke out from under the steam tray of excessively inviting scrambled eggs. It dissolved with a horrible gagging smell, and a wafting green cloud leaked up from all around the tray and settled immediately over the eggs.

“That’s the stupidest spell I’ve ever heard, and your pronunciation is terrible,” I said, nasally. I skipped the now-stinking egg tray and went on to the porridge.

“Thanks, Orion, I didn’t see that blood-clinger about to grab me,” he said. “Don’t mention it, Galadriel, really, no problem.”

“I did see it, and because there was only half an inch out, there was enough time I could’ve got a helping of eggs if you
hadn’t shoved in front of me. And if I was still stupid enough at the tail end of junior year to go for a tray full of freshly cooked scrambled eggs without checking the perimeter, not even your undivided attention would get me out of this school alive. Are you a masochist or something? Why are you still doing favors for me?” I grabbed the raisin bowl, covered it with a small side plate, and shook it until two dozen of them had come out one at a time. I poked them all thoroughly with my fork and went on to the cinnamon shaker, but one distant sniff was enough to tell me that was no-go today. The cream was also a loss: if you tilted it to the light, there was a faint blue slick over the surface. At least the brown sugar was all right.

I took a quick look both ways after coming off the line and then carried the two trays back over to where Aadhya had set us up at a good table, three in from the door: close enough to get out if they started to shut us in, and far enough not to be in the front lines if something came in through them. She’d laid a perimeter and done a safety charm on the cutlery and even got us one of the safer water jugs, the clear ones. “No eggs, thanks to Mr. Fantastic here,” I told her, putting down the trays.

“Was it the clinger? One of them got a senior pretty badly before we got here,” Aadhya said, nodding over at a table where an older boy was leaning half conscious between two of his friends with a series of huge bloody sucker-marks wrapped around his arm twice like a twining bracelet. They were trying to give him something to drink, but he had a clammy going-into-shock look, and they were already trading resigned anxious glances across him. I don’t think anyone ever gets used to it, but only the most sensitive flowers still burst into tears over losses by the time they’re staring graduation in the face. By then they’ve got to be locking down alli-
ances and planning strategy, and however critical he’d been to theirs, they were going to have to find a way to patch it—tough with only three weeks to end of term.

Sure enough, the first bell rang for seniors—we leave meals at staggered intervals, oldest kids first, and if you think that it’s worse to go first, you’re right—and the two of them gently eased him down slumped onto the table. Ibrahim was sitting at the end of the neighboring table with Yaakov—his best friend here in our goldfish bowl, although they both know they’ll never speak to each other again if they live to get out of it—and one of the seniors turned to them and said something, probably bribing them to stay with their friend to the end. They must have had a time slot down in the gym they couldn’t afford to lose: it was going to be bad enough for them losing a member of their team this close to graduation. Ibrahim and Yaakov traded looks and then nodded and switched tables, taking the gamble. It’s not safe to skive off this close to finals, but lessons aren’t as important as graduation practice.

“Still sorry I took it out?” Orion said to me. His face was unhappy and wrenched, looking at them, although I’d have given any odds you like that he hadn’t even known the boy. No one else was looking anywhere in that direction. You have to ration sympathy and grief in here the way you ration your school supplies, unless you’re a heroic enclaver with a vat of mana.

“Still sorry I was done out of my scrambled eggs,” I said coolly, and started eating my porridge.

Ibrahim’s deal turned out okay: the senior died before our first bell rang. Ibrahim and Yaakov left his body there, arms folded on the table and head pillowed facedown, like he’d just drifted off for a nap. It wouldn’t be here by the time we came in for lunch. I marked off the table mentally, along with the
ones surrounding it. Some of the things that clean up messes like that will stay around hoping for another meal.

I have languages every morning: I’m studying five of them. That sounds like I’m some mad linguistics fiend, but there’re only three academic tracks here: incantations, alchemy, or artifice. And of those three, incantations is the only one you can practice in your own cell without having to go to the lab or the shop more than the minimum. Alchemy or artifice tracks only make strategic sense if you’re someone like Aadhyia, with a related affinity, and then you get the double advantage of playing to your own strengths and the relatively smaller number of people going for it. If she does get out of here alive, a smart, trained artificer with an affinity for unusual materials and a lot of good alliances, she might even be able to get into New York. If not, she’s got good odds for New Orleans or Atlanta. The better the enclave you get into, the more power you have to draw on. The artificers in New York and London had the power to build the Trans-Atlantic Gateway, which means if I did get into New York, I could be back in Birmingham New Street, an easy train trip from home, just by walking through a door.

Of course, getting into New York wasn’t on the cards for me unless I pulled off something really amazing, and probably not at all given that I was with increasing passion contemplating the murder of their darling star, but there’s plenty of solid enclaves in Europe. None of them will take me, either, though, unless I come out of here with a substantial reputation and a substantial spell-list. If you’re doing incantation, either you have to go languages-track to build yourself a really good collection of spells, or go creative writing and invent your own. I tried the creative writing track, but my affinity’s too strong. If I sit down to write modestly useful spells, they don’t work. In fact, more often than not they
blow up in my face in dangerous ways. And the one and only time I let loose on the page instead, stream of consciousness the way Mum writes hers, I came up with a highly effective spell to set off a supervolcano. I burnt it straight away, but once you’ve invented a spell, it’s out there, and who knows, someone else might get it. Hopefully there’s no one garbage enough to ask the school for a spell to set off a supervolcano, but no more inventing spells for me.

So that means my main source of unique spells is whatever I get out of the void. Technically I could ask for spells nonstop, but if you don’t at least read over the ones you’ve got, by the time you do go back, they’ll all be rubbish or not what you asked for or just blank. And if you read too many spells without learning them well enough to cast them, you’ll start mixing them up in your head, and then you’re sure to blast yourself to bits. Yes, I can learn a hundred closely related cleaning cantrips in a row, but my limit for useful spells is somewhere around nine or ten a day.

I haven’t found a limit for spells of mass destruction. I can learn a hundred of those just by glancing at them, and I never forget any of them. Which is lucky, I suppose, because I have to go through a hundred of those before I ever get one of the useful ones.

If you’re collecting spells instead of writing your own, languages are absolutely critical. The school will only give you spells in languages you at least theoretically know, but as previously demonstrated, it’s not particularly invested in meeting your needs. If you know a dozen languages and you leave the choice up to the school, the more likely you’ll get the actual kind of spell you want. And the more languages you know, the easier it is to trade spells with others to get ones you can’t wheedle out of the void.

The big ones are Mandarin and English: you’ve got to have
one of those two to come at all, since the common lessons are only taught in those two. If you’re lucky enough to have both, you can probably use at least half of the spells in wide circulation at the school, and you can schedule all your required lessons to suit. Liu’s taking history and maths in English to count for her language requirement; she uses the room in her schedule to take writing workshop in both languages. As you can imagine, most wizard parents start their kids with a private tutor for one or the other the minute they’re born. Of course, Mum put me on Marathi instead, because of Dad. Thanks, Mum. If only all the kids from Mumbai didn’t treat me like a leper because they’ve heard whispers about my great-grandmother’s prophecy.

To be fair to Mum, I was two when she started me on the language, and she still had hopes of going to live with dad’s family. Her own family were right out. Just before she went off to school—we don’t talk about it much, but I’m fairly certain that’s why she went to the Scholomance—she acquired an evil stepdad, literally: one of those cautious professional maleficers, on the edge of shriveling. He almost certainly poisoned her dad—no proof, but the timing was extremely coincidental—in order to glom onto her mum, who was also a really good healer, through her grief. Any spell that only attacks one person at a time is a bit beneath me, but I know the type. She spent the rest of her life taking care of him, then died of an unexpected heart attack when I was around three.

The stepdad is still doing all right last we heard, but we’re not what you’d call close. He used to send sad wistful letters once in a while, hidden inside innocuous envelopes, trying to catch Mum in turn, but when I was six, I opened one by accident, felt the mind-tugging spell, and instinctively snapped it straight back at him. It probably felt like having a splinter jammed directly into your eye. He hasn’t tried since.
After things didn’t work out very well with dad’s family either, Mum still clung to the idea that the language would give me a sense of connection to him, at some unspecified future date. At the time, it was just another thing that made me different, and even as a kid, I already felt really strongly I didn’t need any more of those. We don’t live in Cardiff or anything; my primary school wasn’t what you’d call a hotbed of multiculturalism. And the commune isn’t exactly better. No one there will whisper a racist insult at you in the playground; instead I had grown adults wanting ten-year-old me to sign off on their decolonized yoga practice and help them translate bits of Hindi, which I didn’t know.

Of course, I should be grateful to them: that’s what woke me up to the idea that Hindi was more popular. When I got old enough to understand that languages were going to keep me alive, I stopped moaning about going and demanded lessons in that, too, just in time to get reasonably fluent before induction. Hindi isn’t as good for flexibility, because most of the kids who speak it also have English, so they usually ask for spells in English to have better trading material. But you want languages across the spectrum. In rare or dead languages, it’s a lot harder to find anyone else to barter with, but you’re also more likely to get really unique spells, or a better match for the rest of your request, like my stupid Old English cleaning spells. Hindi is common enough that you can find lots of people to trade with, and as it’s not one of the big two, people don’t ask for spells in Hindi, they just get them that way, so the spells are a bit better on average. I got to know Aadhya by trading Hindi spells.

At the moment, I’m studying Sanskrit, Latin, German, and Middle and Old English. The last three overlap nicely. I did French and Spanish last year, but I’ve got enough of those to muddle through the spells I get now, and they’re on the same
popularity scale as Hindi, so I moved to Latin instead, which has the benefit of a really big backlist. I’ve been thinking of adding Old Norse for something really unusual. It’s just as well I hadn’t, yet, because I’d probably have been handed a book of ancient Viking cleaning incantations yesterday, even if I’d just tried a single exercise on the subject, and then I’d be blocked until I managed to beat my way through it. The school takes a lot of liberties with the definition of “knowing” a language. It’s safer to start new ones over the first quarter so you don’t end up stuck on something near finals.

Orion walked me to my classroom. I didn’t notice him doing it at first because I was too busy keeping an eye out for the group I usually walk with in the mornings: Nkoyo and her best friends Jowani and Cora. They’re all doing heavy language like me, so we’re on almost the same schedule. We’re not friends, but they’ll let me walk to class with them to have a fourth at their back, if I leave at the same time they do. Good enough for me.

When I spotted them at the tables, they were already halfway through breakfast, so I had to wolf down the rest of mine to catch up. “Got to go in five,” I told Aadhya, to give her fair warning. She waved over a couple of her friends from the artificer track who were just coming out with trays: given my report about the shop, she wasn’t in any rush to get to class early, anyway.

I managed to get out of the cafeteria with Cora, who grudgingly let me catch up with her before going through the doors—so generous—and we were outside the doors before Nkoyo did a double-take over my shoulder and I realized Orion was right behind me.

“We’re going to languages!” I hissed at him. He’s in alchemy track. In fact, alchemy track was twice as big as usual in our year, because kids were trying to stick close to him
even if they didn’t have an affinity. In my opinion, it wasn’t nearly worth the additional lab time. He did still have language class sometimes, just like we all have to do some alchemy—we do get to ask for schedule changes on the first day of the year, but if you ask for too many easy classes or try to go too single-track, the school will put you in classes other kids have avoided. But only languages-track kids get the language hall first thing on a Monday: it’s one of the big perks, being this high up when you’re a junior and senior.

He looked at me mulishly. “I’m going to the supply room.” We get building materials down in the workshop and alchemy supplies in the labs, but for everything less exotic like pencils and notebooks, you have to forage in the big stockroom at the far end of the language hall.

“Can we come with you?” Nkoyo asked instantly. Cora and Jowani were both just gawking, but she’s sharp. And it was obviously worth getting to class towards the late end to have a big group for company going for supplies, even leaving aside Orion himself—if only I could have left him aside—so I went along, stewing. I grabbed paper and ink and took some mercury for trading and a hole puncher, and I even found a vast ring binder for my increasing pile of spells. I spotted three eyes peering out at us from a crack in the ceiling, but it was probably just a flinger, and there were too many of us for one of those to make a try.

Afterwards, Orion walked us all back to the nearest language hall, even though there wasn’t any reason. The narrow stairwell next to the stockroom does disappear sometimes—it’s not on the blueprints, it got added belatedly when they realized it was inconvenient to have to go a quarter mile back to the next nearest stair—but today it wasn’t just present, the door was actually standing wide open and the light inside was working.
“What are you doing?” I demanded, taking a risk to stay in the corridor: the others had already dashed in to claim decent booths. “Please tell me you aren’t trying to go out with me.”

It didn’t seem likely: no one ever has. It’s not that I’m ugly; on the contrary, I’ve been growing increasingly beautiful in a tall and alarming way, as befits the terrible dark sorceress I’m meant to be, at least until I presumably collapse into a grotesque crone. Boys often think for about ten seconds that they might want to go out with me, and then they look into my eyes or talk to me and I suppose get the strong impression I’m likely to devour their souls or something. Also, in Orion’s case, I’d been aggressively rude to him and nearly got him killed by mimics.

He snorted.  “Want to date a maleficer?”

I had a moment of indignation over that, about to snarl at him yet again that I wasn’t, and then I got it. “You’re keeping an eye on me? In case I start doing evil things and—what, you need to kill me?”

He folded his arms across his chest and regarded me with a cool, righteous expression: enough of an answer. I was violently tempted to kick him in the goolies. One of the things people do believe in at the commune is about seventeen different forms of Westernized martial arts, and though they’re surrounded with a huge pile of mumbo jumbo about your inner center and finding your balance and channeling your spiritual force, the actual kicking and punching gets taught, too. I wasn’t an expert, but I could definitely have made Orion Lake extremely unhappy right then, given the wide-open way he was standing.

But there was a classroom full of kids behind me watching us, most of whom would have been glad for any decent excuse to completely ostracize me, and the first late bell was about to ring, at which point the door would swing shut and
leave me stuck in the hallway for the whole class period. Nobody would let me in. So I had to just stalk away from him seething and take one of the empty language booths.

There aren’t any teachers at the Scholomance. The place is filled to capacity with kids; there are two applicants for every spot as it is, and our dorm rooms are less than seven feet across. Anyone who gets in doesn’t need external motivation. Knowing how to make a potion that will heal the lining of your stomach after you’ve accidentally drunk some lyesmoke-infused apple juice is its own reward, really. Even maths becomes pretty necessary for a lot of advanced arcana, and history research brings you loads of useful spells and recipes that you won’t be handed in your other courses.

So in language class, you just go to any one of the eight language halls arranged around the third floor and put yourself into one of the booths. Choose wisely; if you try the ones closest to the loo, or the really good one next to the stairs so you can get to lunch in under ten minutes, you’ll have a harder time getting a decent booth, or a booth at all. Assuming you do get one, you sit inside the soundproofed cocoon, hoping you aren’t missing the footsteps of something coming at your back, and read textbooks or work on exercise sheets while disembodied voices whisper to you in whatever language you’re studying that day. Usually they tell me horrible gory stories or describe my death in loving detail. I had meant to work on my Old English, to try and get more use out of the spells I had learned from the household charms book, but I didn’t make much progress. I just hunched over the same single page of my notebook, boiling with resentment, while my whisper tenderly recited an epic alliterative poem all about how Orion Lake, “hero of the shadowed halls,” was going to murder me in my sleep.

Which would make it self-defense when I killed him,
which I gave some newly serious thought to doing: it was starting to seem like I might really have to. People seem to have no trouble convincing themselves that I’m dangerous and evil even when they aren’t actively looking for reasons. Of course, I could have killed him just by draining his mana, but I didn’t want to actually become a maleficer and then go bursting out of this place like some monstrous butterfly hatching from a gigantic chrysalis of doom to lay waste and sow sorrow across the world as per the prophecy.

The problem was Luisa, I realized abruptly. He hadn’t bought my answer about her. Just like I have a good sense of who’s using malia, what they’re doing, he’s almost certainly got a sense for—I don’t even know. Justice? Mercy? The pathetic and vulnerable? Anyway, he knew I was lying to him about Luisa, without knowing exactly how I was lying, so he’d probably decided that I really had killed her. I’d taken his question about her as a minor point, but he hadn’t. I didn’t know much about her, except that she’d been one of the deeply unlucky few who don’t have wizard parents. The ability to hold mana does pop up in mundanes every so often, but usually they don’t get in here, they just get eaten. Probably a kid who lived near her was slated to come, got eaten before induction, and she got sucked up instead because the parents didn’t bother notifying the school, I can’t imagine why. So in some sense she was lucky, but from her perspective, one morning she just found herself sucked up out of her ordinary life and dumped without warning into a black hole of a boarding school, surrounded by strangers, no way to get in touch with her family, no way out, and a horde of maleficaria coming to kill her. I’m sure her plight was calculated to pull on every one of Orion’s finely tuned heartstrings.

And thanks to my own fit of temper the other night, he’s also just discovered I’m a potential dark witch of apocalyptic
proportions. Put all of that together, probably every instinct he had was now going wild with the desire to put a stop to my not-yet-begun reign of terror.

Naturally that made me want to go and launch said reign of terror immediately, but first I had to sit through two hours of language and one of Maleficaria Studies, everyone’s favorite, which is held in a massive hall on the cafeteria level. We all get lumped into the room together regardless of language, as there’s no lecture. The walls are covered with a huge and vividly detailed mural of the graduation ceremony, set in the moment when the senior hall rotates down. The landing is just coming into view, and the marble hall is crammed full of the various delightful creatures waiting ravenous for the buffet to begin. We each get a textbook in our mother tongue, and read along while the current mal we’re studying comes alive off the walls and prowls around the stage demonstrating all the ways it might kill us. Occasionally the animated version will try to upgrade itself from being a temporary construct by actually killing someone in the front rows and consuming their mana.

I almost always have to sit in the front rows. It keeps my attention remarkably focused.

Today, though, I was able to get a seat about halfway up, and no one around it said oh sorry that one’s saved. It helped me to calm down to sullen irritation before lunch. The initial damage was already done, in terms of people thinking Orion was saving me, so it was time to take a deep breath and find a way to rescue the situation. And as soon as I’d forced myself to do that, my revised strategy became obvious.

So at lunchtime I made a point of sitting down next to Aadhya and whispering to her, “He walked me to class!” and followed it up with, “He can’t really like me, though,” just before he came out of the line, spotted me, and came over to
our table and sat down across from me with narrowed eyes.

Orion’s never dated anyone, or so I concluded from the fact I hadn’t heard about him dating anyone. Unsurprisingly, the news that he was apparently gone on me bolted through the entire school at even more lightning speed than the story of his rescuing me in the first place. By the time I had to go down to the alchemy labs for my last session of the day, a boy named Mika whom I’ve never even spoken to—I think he’s Finnish—had saved two seats at a prime table, and when I came in, he called, “El, El,” and pointed to the one next to him.

That certainly was a change. I always rush to get to lab early despite the higher risk of being one of the few there while the room’s mostly empty, because if I don’t arrive while there’s still a decent table open, everyone will have saved the good seats for their friends, and then I’ve got to sit at one of the bad tables, the ones directly underneath the air vents or closest to the door. I can’t wheedle for a spot, it makes me too angry, and threatening makes me feel equally terrible, just in the opposite way. So it was very nice to walk right into a half-full room and still get a seat at the best table, without having to barter for it.

Of course, this happy state of affairs was dependent on Orion playing his part, but he came in just before the bell, looked round the room, and came straight to the seat next to mine. Mika craned his head around me to peer at him and smile hopefully. Too bad for him the gesture was lost on Orion, who was too busy studying all my ingredients and the reaction I was working on.

Most people get alchemy assignments to produce antidotes and preventive elixirs, or the good old standby of producing gold out of cheaper elements. I’m never set recipes for anything that useful; I’ve got to trade for them. I had al-
ready rejected several assignments this week—turning lead into radioactive palladium, producing a deadly contact poison, and converting flesh into stone—before I got my current assignment to produce a jet of superheated plasma, which might be useful under at least some circumstances. For example, it would have been absolutely ideal for charring bones into ash, which you wouldn’t think would be the first thing that would jump to a person’s mind, except Orion looked at it and said immediately, “That’s hot enough to disintegrate bone,” with hard suspicion.

“Oh, have you done this one already?” I said, insincerely. “Don’t tell me, I want to learn it for myself.”

He spent most of the class watching me instead of doing his own work. It made me angry, but being angry’s always good for my work. My ingredients were iron, gold, water, a chunk of polished lapis lazuli, and half a teaspoon of salt, which had to be arranged at distances proportional to their relative quantities. Woe if you’re off by a millimeter. But I got them lined up properly on the first go. I could hardly embark on an exercise routine in the middle of my class, so instead I softly sang three long complicated songs to raise the mana, two in English and one in Marathi. The sparking-flame bloomed inside my cupped palms, and I managed to edge my ritual tray nearer to Orion before I tipped the spark over the ingredients and jumped back. The thin blue flame swallowed them all in a gulp and roared up mightily, so hot that a sweltering wave rolled out through the entire classroom. There were even a few alarmed shrieks from inside the air ducts, and scrabbling noises went overhead.

Everyone instinctively ducked under their desks, except Orion. The paper twists he was using to hold his own ingredients had all caught on fire just from proximity, and he was desperately dousing flames. It made me feel much better.
So did having Nkoyo invite me to dinner on the way out of the lesson. “We usually meet at thirteen minutes to six, if you want to join us,” she said. I didn’t bother making sure Orion was overhearing; she’d have made sure of that herself.

“If I can bring Yi Liu.” Hopefully Orion would get bored with my lack of actual evildoing at some point, and I didn’t trust all my new friends not to ditch me as soon as that happened. But Liu would be happy to broaden her circles—she doesn’t have the same effect on people that I do, but she’s still not a popularity queen like Jack; you have to really go the whole hog before the malia starts to cover up—and she’d remember I’d done her a favor when I had a chance.

I caught Liu in our hall going back to her room after class and told her; she’d been at an afternoon workshop section herself. She nodded and looked at me thoughtfully and volunteered, “Orion was asking questions about Luisa in writing workshop after lunch.”

“Of course he was.” I grimaced. Jack would definitely blame me for that, what with Orion following me around. “Thanks. I’ll see you at thirteen to six.”

I didn’t see Jack anywhere around, but I checked for any malicious spells on my cell door and did an especially thorough look over the room before I went inside, just in case he’d got ambitious. But there wasn’t anything, so I buckled down to my mana-storing exercise routine until dinner time.

My plan has been to fill crystals throughout this year unless an emergency or a really golden opportunity presents itself—like that soul-eater could have been!—and then use a few of them judiciously to establish my reputation just before the end of term, so I can get into a solid graduation alliance early next year. We all stockpile mana as much as we can, in between near-death experiences; even enclavers. It’s about the one thing you can’t bring in with you, even stored
tidily in a power sink like Mum’s crystals.

Or rather, you’re very welcome to bring all the filled-up power sinks you want, but they’ll get sucked completely dry by the induction spell that lands us all in here, which is massively mana-hungry. In fact, you get extra weight allowance in exchange. Not much extra, so it’s not worth it unless you’re an enclaver and can casually throw away thirty filled power sinks for an extra quarter-kilo. But Mum’s never had more than ten filled crystals round in my life, and the last few years we had less. I came in with my one small knapsack and my empties instead.

And I’m ahead of the game at that. Most power sinks are a lot bigger and heavier than Mum’s crystals, so lots of kids can’t afford to bring empties in, and most of them don’t work nearly as well, especially when they’ve been built in the shop by a fourteen-year-old. I’m in a decent position, but it’s really hard to get on when I’m constantly having mals flung at my head. And it gets harder and harder to fill them with exercise, because the older I get and the better shape I get in, the easier the same exercise gets. Mana’s annoying that way. The physical labor isn’t what counts. What turns it into mana is how much effort it costs me.

Next year I desperately need people watching my back and helping me fill more. If I can only make it to graduation with fifty full crystals, I’m confident I can single-handedly blaze a path for me and my allies straight to the gates and out, no more clever strategy required. It’s one of the few situations in which a wall of mortal flame might actually be called for: in fact that’s how the school cleans out the cafeteria and does the twice-yearly scouring of the halls. But I’m not going to get there unless I stick to my pace. Which currently means, drumroll, two hundred push-ups before dinner.

I’d like to say I didn’t give Orion a thought, but actually I
lost a good chunk of my push-up time pointlessly calculating the odds that he’d follow me to dinner. I settled on sixty–forty, but I admit I would have been disappointed if I hadn’t seen the flash of his silver-grey hair at the meeting point when I came out. He was waiting for me. Nkoyo and Cora were both waiting, too, failing not to stare at him. There was a wild struggle between jealousy and confusion going on Cora’s face, and Nkoyo just looked woodenly blank. Liu joined me halfway down the hall, and Jowani came out of his room and hurried to meet us just in time for the walk. “Any of you know anyone else studying Old English?” I asked as we set out.

“There’s a soph, isn’t there?” Nkoyo said. “I don’t remember his name. Anything good?”

“Ninety-nine household cleaning charms,” I said, and the trio all made noises of sympathy. I was probably the only student in the place who’d gladly have traded a major combat spell for a decent water calling. Of course, no one else can cast the combat spells I get.

“Geoff Linds,” Orion said unexpectedly. “He’s from New York,” he added when we looked at him.

“Well, if he wants ninety-nine ways to clean his cell in Old English, send him my way,” I said sweetly. Orion frowned at me.

He frowned more through dinner, during which I was excessively nice to him. I even offered him the pudding I’d snagged, a treacle tart—not much loss there, I hate treacle tart—and he obviously wanted to turn it down, but he’s also a sixteen-year-old boy who has to inspect every calorie he can get for potential contamination. All the heroic power in the world won’t save you from dysentery or a charming bit of strychnine in the sauce, and it’s not like he swaps his rescues for anything useful in return, like an extra helping or some-
thing. So after a moment he grudgingly said, “Thanks,” and took the tart and ate it without meeting my eyes.

Afterwards he followed close on my heels as we took our trays over to the conveyer belt under the enormous sign saying BUS YOUR TRAYS, which even after three years I still think is a mad phrase that makes no sense. Admittedly, that’s less of a concern than the actual busing process, which involves shoving your dirty tray into one dark slot of a massive metal rack that is slowly rotating while the conveyor belt carries it along. The safest place to do it is towards the far end, as the dishes and trays are all cleaned using jets of mortal flame, which scares off the mals, but it’s almost impossible to find an empty slot at that point, and an extra minute exposed and hunting around the busing area isn’t worth it. I usually aim for just short of the midpoint area, which has the benefit of a shorter line.

Orion considered this a perfect place for private conversation. “Nice try,” he said over my shoulder, “but it’s too late. I’m not going to forget about it just because you started pretending to be friendly. Want to try again telling me what really happened to Luisa?”

He hadn’t even realized that he’d convinced everyone in school that we were dating. I rolled my eyes—metaphorically only; I wasn’t fool enough to look away from the rack for even a moment. “Yes, I’m passionately excited to share more information with you. Your demonstrated sense and good judgment just fill me with confidence.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he demanded, but right then a six-armed thing vaguely like the offspring of an octopus and an iguana burst off the empty busing rack that had just rotated in, aiming right at the head of a sad-eyed freshman girl, and Orion whipped round and went for it, grabbing a knife off the girl’s tray even as he hurled a spell of engorge-
ment. I saw the writing on the wall, and also an empty slot, so I got rid of my tray and dived clear before the thing swelled up like a bloating corpse and burst all over everyone in range.

I went back to my room unbesmirched, with plans to have breakfast with three kids from the London enclave—they’ve completely ignored me before now—and an offer from Nkoyo to trade Latin spells in language lab tomorrow. Orion slunk off to the showers, wafting a putrid stench. I didn’t feel quite even with him yet, but it was coming on nicely. So when he knocked ten minutes later with the lingering miasma wafting under the door, I felt magnanimous enough to open up and say, “Oh, all right, what will you give me for the information?”

I didn’t get past Oh, though, because it wasn’t Orion: it was Jack, smeared with a handful of the octopus thing’s guts for the smell—clever of him—and he shoved a sharpened table knife right into my gut. He pushed me collapsing backwards onto the floor and slid the door shut behind him, smiling with all his white teeth while I gasped around the shock of agony, yelling stupid stupid stupid at myself in my head. I’d already got ready for bed; I’d hung my mana crystal over the bedpost, where I could reach it in the night and where it was uselessly out of reach right now. He knelt down over me and brushed my hair away from my face with both hands, cupping my cheeks. “Galadriel,” he crooned.

My hands were wrapped around the hilt of the knife, involuntarily, trying to keep it from moving, but I made myself let go with one hand and tried to fumble it towards the other mana crystal, the half-full one I’d been working on this afternoon. It was hanging from the side of my bed right where my head went when I was doing push-ups, a few inches above the floor. If I could just reach it, I could connect to all my stored mana. I’d have absolutely no regret liquefying Jack’s
bodies.

It was just out of reach. My fingers were straining. I tried to shift my body over just a little, but it hurt a really huge amount, and Jack was stroking my face with his fingertips. It irritated me almost as much as the knife. “Stop that, you colossal dick,” I whispered, my voice thready with effort.

“Why don’t you make me?” he whispered back. “Come on, Galadriel, just do it. You’re so beautiful. You could be so beautiful. I’ll help you, I’ll do anything for you. We’ll have so much fun,” and I found my whole face crumpling like a sheet of cheap tinfoil. I couldn’t bear it. I didn’t want to know that I was going to say no. I didn’t want to know that I was going to refuse, even with this sack of putrescence crawling his fingers down my ribcage towards the knife he’d jammed into my guts so he could get on with butchering me like a hog.

I’d told myself it was just common sense—going maleficer meant dying young, grotesquely. But that still ought to beat dying right now, only it didn’t. It didn’t, and if it wasn’t an option now, it was never going to be an option, and even if I survived this, I wouldn’t survive the next thing, or the one after that. There’d always been a safety valve in the back of my head: I’d always told myself if all else fails, but all else had failed, and I wasn’t going to do it anyway.

“Fuck you, Great-Grandmother,” I whispered, so angry I could have cried, and got ready to shove myself up onto the knife so I could reach the mana crystal. And then I heard the knock on the door. A knock on a school night, with everyone else sane in their own cells and study groups by then—

Talking was difficult. I pointed a finger at the door and thought, Open sesame. A stupid kid spell, but it was my own door, and I hadn’t locked it for the night yet, so it shot open, and Orion was standing in the doorway. Jack whirled round, his hands wet and red with my blood. He’d even smeared
some on his mouth to make the finishing gruesome touch.

I laid my head back down and let the mighty hero get on with it.
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