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## Sleeping dragons

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# **Sleeping Dragons**

By

Samuel Gordon Travis

Accepted in Partial Completion  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Masters of Arts

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

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## **MASTER'S THESIS**

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# **Sleeping Dragons**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of  
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Samuel G. Travis  
May 2011

## Abstract

In six months Wyce has learned almost nothing about the research compound that has become his prison. That there are mages amongst his captors can only mean that someone within the Magister's Council endorses this facility, but while this fact disturbs him deeply as a student of magic himself, it leads him no closer to understanding. His reality has become a waking nightmare, and over time constant experimentation and abuse degrade even his natural curiosity. He fights an impending sense of complacency, internally outraged at his failure to act in his own interest, constantly reminded that because of his spell stutter – a magical disability – he is less of a threat to the soldiers that guard him than a well-educated child. When the woman in the cell next to his proposes an escape Wyce pledges his loyalty and assistance in spite of her refusal to share the details of her plan. Escaping seems to be the only thing that matters, but in the full course of time Wyce must realize that there are always other considerations.

The chapters herein form the opening to a novel-in-progress that imagines a world where modern science forges magic instead of machines; where commercialism is rampant and apathy is a default state of being. The novel follows Wyce and Reina in their escape from the compound until their status as wanted criminals finally lands them in the hands of a young fortune hunter named Spades, whose decision not to hand the two over to authorities forces him into taking a stand on issues that he's made a career out of avoiding. How to navigate the growing tide of modernity is a question that speaks to all of us, and the struggle of these three companions to do just that is a story *for* all of us.

## Acknowledgements

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## CHAPTER 1

### ***The Gram Shell, an Era of Mass Production:***

*When Lucas Reddiger and Gregory Meyer first designed the formula for what they were then calling the Atemporal Shell, they couldn't have begun to imagine how much their work would change the modern world. Basing their theories on the most advanced work in quantum physics and space-time manipulation, Reddiger and Meyer conceptualized an incantation that, if constructed properly, would create a small pocket of space-time, inside of which, molecules could be safely accelerated to near light speed for an indefinite period. They theorized that inside this shell, traveling at near light speed, time would all but cease to exist. For them, this was the key to prolonging the life of certain short-lived quantum particles for the purposes of study. It was also the breakthrough that would bring magic to the forefront of political and economic discussions worldwide.*

*Less than five years after their first successful test Lucas and Gregory sold the secret of the incantation to a small group of ambitious entrepreneurs headed by a man named Alexi Gram. Gram and his business partners liquidated the whole of their current assets and used the money to finance Gram Industries, soon to be the single most lucrative company in the world. Their flagship product was the Gram Shell, in essence a modified version of the Atemporal Shell incantation, that resulted in a solid, tangible pocket of space-time, about the size of a large marble.*

*By employing some of the most brilliant mages of the time, Gram Industries began producing and selling Gram Shells that contained other generally mundane incantations inside of them. With their molecular structures accelerated to near light speed, the spells contained inside of a Gram Shell could linger inert for months while still functioning perfectly in the moment that the Shell was broken. For the first time in the history of magic, anyone with spare coin could experience the convenience of spell casting.*

*Almost overnight the production and sale of magic became the most successful business in operation, changing the face of the world in the process. People's lives became more comfortable, work became more efficient, and the number of young men and women desiring to study magic, to see if they had what it took to become a mage, tripled. During the birth of Gram Industries there had been only three schools that specialized in a magical education. Two years later there were five, and by the end of the decade there were ten, each officially sanctioned. A new era was dawning.*

From *The Evolution of Modern Magic*, by P. T. Virell.

Wyce started awake to darkness and the sound of keys turning in a stiff lock. The night air was cold, crisp in a way that only mountain air can be, but still sweat broke out on his forehead as the keys continued to rattle. *Please, let it be someone else they're after.* He felt ashamed almost

before the thought was complete; it was terrible of him to wish what that sound heralded on someone else, but shame made the plea no less sincere. Since his arrival at the Advanced Cognitive Research Facility he'd come to dread the rattle of keys almost more than he feared what came after, though he knew that the aftermath was what made the sound so terrifying.

He had only moments to wait in dread before the door to his cell burst open and light shattered the darkness. A pair of guards shuffled in, edging awkwardly past the foot of his bed and struggling to find ample room to stand in the tiny cell. Wyce had sat up on his cot when the noise began, the moth eaten blanket that was his only source of warmth gathering at his waist. Now he kicked the blanket away and shrunk instinctively into the corner at the edge of the cot, his hands thrown up against the light that intruded from the hall outside.

"Get up." The voice came from the stocky guard nearest the door, a short man with a broad chest and shoulders that strained the coat of molecular armor that framed them. Wyce recognized the voice; it belonged to a man named Garret, but when he lowered his hands and looked up, the man's face was lost in darkness and he could see only the dull outline of a molecular helmet, silhouetted by the light spilling in from the hallway.

"Where are you taking me?" The moment the words were out he wished that he could take them back, but before he could move or say anything else he heard the sound of air whistling nearby and a fraction of a second later the back of a gauntlet struck the left side of his temple, knocking him over sideways and leaving colors dancing on the backs of his eyelids. He managed not to touch his forehead as he righted himself, but he was sure he felt something damp sliding down the side of his face.

"Get up," Garret repeated. Wyce kept his mouth shut and clambered out of the bed as gracefully as he could with armored guards on either side of him. Once up he tried to edge past Garret to get at the foot of the bed where he'd piled his clothes, but the man grabbed hold of his

arm and Wyce saw the silhouetted head shake back and forth. "Leave those." Wyce cringed. It was stupid; clothes wouldn't offer any protection against whatever they had planned for him, but at that moment he wanted to get dressed more than he'd ever wanted anything.

The guards ushered him out into the hallway, barefoot and wearing only his underwear, and took up positions in front of and behind him. The man behind him gave Wyce a shove to start him moving and then stepped off right on his heels, threatening to tread on the backs of his feet with heavy boots if he didn't move quickly. This was how it always worked. There were always two guards, and they always walked one in front and one in back, marching him through the frigid hallways and corridors of the research facility toward whatever lab or test room they had prepared for him. If he tried to run they would catch him and beat him until he quieted. If he refused to walk, well, the outcome was much the same.

The passageways of the research facility underwent drastic transformations as they walked. The top two floors of the building had been constructed above ground and for these, the walls and ceilings were man-made and orderly, fashioned out of dull, grey limestone. The cells and holding rooms that housed the prisoners made up the center of these first two floors, surrounded by the barracks that housed the guards. Beyond the barracks the outer wall, complete with several squat towers, insured that escape was impossible. The rest of the facility had been built into a naturally existing cavern system, however, and each descending staircase took you further away from the corrupting influence of man. Jagged, natural rock began to replace carefully cut blocks, and the mathematical orderliness of the top floors gave way to the random dementia of organically twisted stone.

Some work had been done to shape the caverns of the lower floors to the needs of the researchers, but no more than had been absolutely necessary. The result was an eerie collage of man-made structure and natural bedrock that made navigating the compound difficult.

Passageways routinely narrowed to less than a meter across, and many ended abruptly in moist stone. Stalactites and other natural cavern formations crowded the hallways and rooms and lent everything the feel of nightmare.

Wyce kept a good pace but it didn't seem to matter, he was pushed and prodded along anyway, down stairways and along corridors until he had a hard time keeping track of how far they'd come. The floors immediately below the cells were used primarily for storage due to the presence of several large, natural caverns. Little work had been done to modernize things here. The hallways were dark and cramped and seemed to lead in no particular direction, and though the caverns that held foodstuffs and other consumables had been tightly sealed with thick, iron doors, the occasional rat wasn't an uncommon sight. Wyce paid little attention to this part of the trip. He had tried without success to memorize all the twists and turns and eventually he'd stopped caring.

When they hit the sixth floor, though, his heart started to race. The sixth floor marked the beginning of the research labs. The cramped hallways of the storage floors morphed into spacious, well lit tunnels, though still obviously fashioned from the natural stone of the caves, and the number of branching passageways and large, wooden doors seemed to triple. As they descended further, the labs grew larger and thick panes of glass began to appear in place of stone. Glass gave the illusion of open space where it clearly didn't belong, deep under the surface in the arid dark, and Wyce resented the image of freedom where he had none. With each new staircase downward his heart sank another inch and in a moment of perverse humor he wondered why it was that no one ever *ascended* to meet their doom.

His escorts stopped him, finally, in front of a large, iron door at the end of a short corridor on the tenth floor. He recognized the door; he'd been here a number of times since his arrival. The guards called this place the viewing room and Wyce had been silently praying since the moment

they'd set out that he wouldn't end up here. Struggling was useless, of course, but when the stocky guard who had preceded him swung open the door and stepped back to let Wyce pass, he struggled.

He took a step, putting his full weight on the outstretched foot as if moving forward obediently, and then suddenly pushed off hard in the opposite direction, lowering his shoulder to ram the man behind him in the gut. The guard went down with a satisfying thud – Wyce spared a moment to hope that he'd been knocked unconscious by an outcropping of stone – and then he was running full speed back down the corridor. He was a hands breadth from the first turn in the passageway when the remaining guard threw a Gram Shell at him. The Shell cracked and well spaced molecules of air suddenly found themselves irresistibly attracted to each other. They gathered in dense clusters, bonding into complex, crystalline patterns that only naturally existed under immense pressure. The latticework of reality reshaped itself until what had been an open corridor moments before became a solid wall. Wyce ran headfirst into the newly formed barrier. The impact didn't quite knock him out, though it left him very dizzy. The following impact with Garret's fist completed the job.

The blow to his head left him feeling spacey and disconnected, as if he'd been hit so hard that his consciousness had been shaken loose from his body and now floated separately in the corridor. From this outside perspective he watched the guards drag his limp form into the viewing room, wrestling briefly with the heavy door before hauling him inside and depositing him in a large, metal chair with thick arms and a high back. The arms and front legs of the chair were equipped with restraints, and Garret set about locking him while his companion rummaged through miscellaneous items on a small table near the door, returning a moment later with a roll of paper adhesive. Roughly, the guards peeled open his eyelids and secured them with adhesive so that he couldn't blink. His disconnected consciousness shrieked, but no sound passed his lips.

Eventually the two guardsmen left and Wyce was plunged into silence and darkness, sure that his eyes were open only because he couldn't have closed them if he'd tried. In a way he savored this solitude; with nothing to focus on, he could relax his eyes so that they wouldn't dry out quite so fast. His respite was brief, though. Out of the darkness exploded the image of a storefront window complete with flashing orange letters etched into the glass, which read "Silvia's Fine Silk and Embroidery." He recognized the shop front; it belonged to a store in the wardrobe district of the city where he'd grown up. The lettering on the window was wrong, though, in real life it was gold. After dozens of sessions like this one, he had yet to determine why the researchers made these changes to the illusions they produced. The inconsistencies couldn't be a mistake in the spell casting – the images were too precise. As always, he stopped wondering when his eyes began to water.

A second image followed the first, this one unfamiliar to him, and a third illusion quickly followed the second. Color and texture, font size and style all varied wildly until his head would have ached under the onslaught even without the added pain of his aching eyeballs. In time he began to feel as though he were looking directly at a light source, which in a way he was, because the illusions were created by manipulating light. If he could have closed his eyes he was sure the shop fronts would display on his closed eyelids, their color inverted by his optic nerves. Storefronts and show windows, corner signs and smiling street vendors paraded through the empty viewing room until his eyes dried and cracked like the neglected soil of a desert wasteland. At some point during the session he wished for death, but it was an old, tired prayer, worn from long use over the past months.

Finally the images came to a stop and the guards returned to escort him from the viewing room to the sensory deprivation chamber floors below. As agonizing as the sessions in the viewing room were, they were only preparation for further research; the sensory deprivation and the interrogation that followed were the real tests. Wyce made the transition to the lower gallery with

his eyes firmly shut and his jaw clenched against the fire that consumed the backs of his eyeballs, finding his way by holding tightly to Garret, who walked in front of him. He was unsure if it was sympathy or lack of interest that led the man not to shake him loose. When at last he felt able to look at the world again they were just entering the gallery that housed the sensory deprivation chamber.

The gallery was immense, easily dwarfing any of the compound's other chambers or labs. The first time he'd been brought down this far, Wyce had speculated that this cave could have contained the entire facility. Because the walls stretched backward into a darkness that his vision couldn't penetrate, he still wasn't certain that his first impression had been wrong. The ground had been cleared of stalagmites, though stumps of chipped and broken rock were still visible here and there. Connected columns, formed when stalagmites and stalactites grew into each other and fused to form a single structure, had been left standing; dotting the chamber like immense muscle fibers as if this were the stomach of some massive beast. Jagged walls swept upwards from the floor; up, and up, disappearing into distance and darkness far above. The sharp, stone points of stalactites seemed to hang suspended in mid-air, like stars in the night sky, their physical bases lost in the unreality of the distance between floor and ceiling.

The center of the cave was dominated by a large, steel square with a massive, circular door at its front. This was the sensory deprivation chamber. There was absolutely no light inside the chamber, and the walls were completely soundproof. The temperature was carefully regulated to match that of the body's internal temperature, so as to give no impression of hot or cold. The inside of the chamber had been ionized to erase any smell and the floor and walls were as smooth as science could make them.

He was stripped of his underwear and given a bottle of water, which he gulped greedily because he knew it was likely to be some while before he had anything else to drink. Then with a

hiss of escaping air, the massive door swung open and he was ushered inside. He stood just inside the door while it closed, refusing to turn and watch the light from outside as it was slowly squeezed from view. Not until he heard the massive bolt that held the door slide into place did he sit, back against what he knew to be the wall, though he couldn't feel it. During his first few stints in sensory deprivation he had tried to explore the limits of the chamber, but it was a waste of time. The chamber closed out all sensation: sight, sound, smell, and touch, perception of time or temperature. You could walk into the slightly rounded wall and feel nothing, and once you gave up *trying* to feel something it became as though you could walk forever.

Wyce hated sensory deprivation. The experience was an eternity of agonized waiting as the brain struggled to estimate how long it had been confined and how much longer it might have to wait before being released. Not for the first time he considered calling on his magic to break out of the chamber. He even went so far as to call to mind the formulae that would superheat the metal walls, melt them into ruined puddles, but even as the numbers clicked together in his head he knew that the spell would fail. The part of him that was scared of magic, scared of stuttering, told him without question that if he tried, he *would* stutter, and so he relented, bullied into submission by the tiny voice in his head that told him he was a failure. This was how it had been since his arrival at the compound. Every spell he prepared, he knew before casting would fail. His one, angry attempt to work through his stutter had left him blind for several days as the light that he was trying to bend around himself, to make himself invisible, rebounded and struck him in the face.

Wiping angrily at his face where tears threatened at the corners of his eyes, he crossed his arms and legs and set himself to waiting. As far as he could tell it wasn't long before images began to take shape out of the primordial darkness. He knew from experience that these visions were the product of his mind's struggle to fill the vacuum of lost sensation, but they still disturbed him.

Watching them was like looking through a window into the past, reliving moments of his life more vividly than any memory could produce.

Now, as he watched, his mother grew out of the void. She was just the way she always had been, her russet hair falling in gentle waves over her shoulders and down her back, her narrow, angular face made somehow softer by an omnipresent smile. It seemed to be snowing and as the world of the vision solidified, Wyce recognized the sloping streets and sluggish canals of his home. Snow powdered the street centers as citizens bundled in warm clothes kept to the superior safety of the sidewalks and storefronts. The canal banks had frozen, narrowing the flowing water to small runlets. In the crisp air overhead, the buzzers left frozen trails in their sonic wake as they carried their urgent messages to the reception centers of the city. Wyce couldn't see himself, but he knew that he was dutifully trailing after his mother, bundled tightly against the cold and eager to complete their errands so that he could go sledding, as had been promised if he behaved. The chill bit at his cut lower lip, the result of being punched in the face earlier that morning by another boy at his new school, but his attention was focused solely on the oval shaped sled dragging behind him.

"Wait here," called his mother, ducking into a low building with big picture of a cinnamon stick on its door. "I need to pick up some spices for dinner." She flashed him the smile that was his best memory of her. "Maybe they'll have a treat for us to share."

In the chamber, floating in emptiness and memory, Wyce buried his head in his arms and cried.

\*\*\*

Garret and his companion helped Wyce back to his room, carried him really, as he didn't seem able to stand on his own, let alone climb the flights from the lower labs to his cell on the top floor. Head sagging against his chest, he slumped between the two shorter men, one arm flung around the shoulders of each. The soft light of the corridors caused his eyelids to flutter and the

faint reek of damp stone filled his nostrils. He stubbed his toes constantly as he struggled to negotiate uneven stairs, and the sharp pain only served to add insult to injury.

The guards carrying him began to wheeze and puff as his not inconsiderable weight took its toll with each new staircase. Soon they were cursing in between gasps of air and their steadily souring mood did nothing to soften their hold on his arms and waist as they hauled him bodily up the final flight of stairs and along a corridor of grey stone that dead ended at the wooden door to his cell.

Garret took his full weight for a moment while his companion, an angry man with thin, bloodless lips and a bulbous nose, fumbled the door open. The two of them upended him onto the flagstones of the tiny room. He landed at the foot of the cot and one of the guards kicked his legs over the threshold before slamming the door shut. Before he could move, a sharp pain uncurled from somewhere behind his forehead and began scraping the insides of his skull like barbed wire. The single light that illuminated his prison blossomed into a tiny super nova, so bright it threatened to sear his retina if he dared open his eyes. Helpless, he folded in on himself, hugging his arms to his chest and rocking slowly back and forth on the cold stone floor. When the pain finally subsided, he hauled himself weakly onto the cot and lay with his face buried in the lumpy pillow, breathing hard.

“So? How was it?” The voice echoed hollowly from the bottom left corner of the tiny room, where careless masonry had resulted in a thumb sized crack between the stones that made up the wall. Wyce curled into a ball on his cot and wished that he could ignore the voice. The sharp pain of the migraine still reverberated off the inside of his skull and he clutched weakly at the wad of cotton that passed for a pillow. Conversation felt like the last thing he wanted right now. Oddly, it was also the only thing that could potentially soothe hours of solitary confinement. “Wyce?” With a groan he rolled off of the cot and scooted over to the corner, laying his back against the cold stones of the

wall and pressing the heels of his hands into his forehead in an effort to smooth away the pain that lurked just behind his eyeballs.

“Do we always have to talk right away?” His own voice sounded hollow to him now, after eons of silence. He shifted, searching in vain for a more comfortable section of wall. Or at least a less jagged one. “Maybe we could wait just a little while.” There was a short pause from the other side of the wall.

“I thought that the talking helped.”

“It does. It’s just...”

“We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”

“No, I do!” He rubbed again at his forehead. This conversation wasn’t developing well, and he was getting flustered. He groped for the right words. “I’m glad that you’re here to talk to, but it’s not easy to talk about... that. I can’t just laugh it away like you do.” Harsh laughter sounded ironically from the other side of the wall.

“What you’re hearing is a survival instinct honed over years of abuse, not something you should envy. Before you got here I had only myself to talk to and if you hadn’t noticed, I’m quite dull.” Underlying the sarcasm in the words was a sharp bitterness that never ceased to surprise Wyce. He didn’t believe that Reina was angry at him, but she *was* angry about the years she had spent in silence and solitude and sometimes that anger got thrown his direction if only because she had no one else to share it with. Throughout their conversations he’d learned not to take it personally, though it pained him to think that a housewife and mother of three should have to carry such rage; the impression was too much at odds with his own mother’s gentle disposition.

“I’m tired,” he confessed, after a moment’s silence. “I think I should try to sleep.”

“The escape starts tomorrow.” Wyce froze in the act of getting up.

“What?”

“Everything’s in place,” Reina continued. “We’re getting out of here tomorrow.” Wyce remained in a half crouch, too stunned to do anything else. Reina had been talking about an escape plan for several weeks now, but she wouldn’t share the details and she’d never admitted when she intended to put things into motion. Now that the day was here he wasn’t sure how he should feel. Emotions crowded in on each other: excitement, joy, fear, doubt, each clamoring for his attention. After a moment he rediscovered his voice.

“Will there be fighting?” He worked hard to keep the reservation out of his tone, but Reina’s response suggested that he hadn’t been entirely successful.

“They’re not just going to let us leave, you know that.” Wyce frowned, pale lips compressing into a thin, white line. “Get some sleep,” Reina suggested, as though she could see the expression on his face. “Worry about tomorrow, tomorrow.” Wyce chewed his lower lip and considered the situation. After a moment he spoke again.

“You found it, then?”

“What?”

“You mentioned that you were looking for something, part of your plan.”

“Oh, right. While you were gone... hey, speaking of, where’d they take you? You were gone for three days.” The question derailed Wyce’s train of thought and thinking of the sensory deprivation chamber brought back the weariness and the ache in his temple.

“Sensory dep.,” he answered quietly.

“I thought as much. No wonder you’re out of sorts.”

“I think I’ll go to bed now.”

“Goodnight.” Wyce attempted a mumbled answer, but he couldn’t be sure, as he sank swiftly into the ambiguity of sleep, whether the words actually came out or not.

## CHAPTER 2

Wyce woke to the sound of the lunch bell, a sort of hollow clang reverberating through the top floors, letting everyone know to be up and ready to be escorted to the mess hall, or mess cave, as it was in this case. In the months since his arrival he had concluded that none of the guards or researchers believed in breakfast, or at least that none of them believed their captives might enjoy breakfast, but lunch and dinner were regularly scheduled affairs. He rolled woodenly off of his cot and began pulling on his clothes, a matching shirt and pants of brown cloth, of which he had two sets.

“Wyce? Wyce!”

“I’m here,” he called, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“You remember the signals I taught you, right?” Reina’s voice was pitched low and urgent.

“Of course.”

“Good. When we get to the mess hall I want you to alert as many people as you can.”

“What am I supposed to tell them?”

“We need a distraction.” Wyce shrugged, trying to stretch his shoulders blades. Failing, he clasped his hands behind his back and raised his arms until they were parallel to the floor. He couldn’t seem to ease the tension. What’s more, the urgency in Reina’s voice and his own anxiety seemed to be adding to the problem.

“A distraction. Can you be more specific?”

“Look, we just need a distraction, ok? Start a food fight for all I care.” Wyce considered a snappy retort, but said nothing. Reina had been closed mouthed about her plans for escape from day one, and he had accepted that he simply had to trust her. The tiny voice in the back of his head told him that he had to trust her because he was too weak and frightened to do anything on his own.

“I’ll do my best.”

“I know you will, that’s why I’m counting on you.” There was something deeply sincere in her words, almost tinged with regret, but Wyce put it up to the pressure of the situation. In truth he was touched by her faith. She was hard to get close to, sort of like one of those spikey rodents that he’d seen in picture books as a child, but she was the only friend he had right now.

Footsteps in the hallway signaled the arrival of his escort and a moment later the door opened on the silhouette of an immensely fat man in the molecular armor of the guards. Wyce was sure that he’d never encountered this particular guard before; he wouldn’t have forgotten the man if he had he was almost too wide to fit through the door. Not for the first time, he wondered how many soldiers the compound held. It didn’t take two hands to count the number whose names and faces he recognized, and it would take pen and paper to list the number whose names he did not know.

“Out.” The fat man’s voice was a rough baritone and he stepped back from the doorway as he spoke, waving for Wyce to exit the room. Wyce stood obediently and shuffled out into the hallway. As usual during mealtimes, the hall was lined on either side with guards at steady intervals where cell doors up and down the line were opening to disgorge battered, unwashed prisoners in dull brown. It looked to be midafternoon, judging by the pale sunlight that poured in through high windows and lent the corridor a hazy luminescence.

Wyce caught sight of Reina just ahead of him in line. She was a short woman, only about shoulder height to him, with long, black hair touched here and there with grey. Her back was to him as she trudged down the hallway in line with all the rest, but he could easily picture her carefully lined face and sharp, green eyes. She had a crooked nose; one of the guards had broken it the first time she had tried to escape.

The mess hall had been set up in an out-of-the-way cavern on the fourth floor. The cave was eerily regular in shape, oval, with a wide base that narrowed steadily as it approached the ceiling. No effort had been made within to smooth the natural stone of the cavern walls, or to curtail natural cavern formations. The jagged stalactites and stalagmites that erupted from the floor and dripped down from the ceiling made even the business of eating uncomfortable. Wyce could never shake the mental image of some ancient, spiked torture device.

According to Reina, there hadn’t been a mess hall when she’d first arrived here. In the beginning, food had been brought to the prisoners in their cells. As the compound had grown, however, it had eventually acquired too many subjects for the researchers to waste time and man power delivering individual meals to people that they considered little different from lab rats. Instead, they had excavated this cavern, carved new tunnels wide enough to accommodate significant traffic to and from the place, and filled the space with rough, wooden tables and

mismatched benches. Somewhere they'd gotten a bell and this they took up ringing to signal meal times.

The initial transition to group meals had been chaos and some of the first major escape attempts had taken place in the week after the mess hall was opened. Reina's own first flight had occurred on the second day, when she and a number of other prisoners managed to lose themselves in the confusion of escorting hundreds of people through dark tunnels. They had been caught when they tried to breach the outer wall and most had died in the fight that ensued. After that first week the guard was tripled during meal times and one out of every two prisoners who had attempted escape was summarily executed, to make an example. Reina wouldn't talk about how the selection had been made or whether she felt lucky to be alive.

A change in the quality of light as they neared the hall roused Wyce from his speculation. The line of prisoners exiting the narrow tunnel leading into the mess hall split into two, one half following the curve of the wall to the right, and the other half keeping left. Workers from the kitchens, which were housed near the bottom of the facility where a natural, geothermal vent provided some of the heat necessary to do the cooking, brought food up from below and arrayed it on tables along the cave walls. Wyce saw Reina peel off to the left several places in front of him, and though he still wasn't sure what her plan was, when he reached the split he too veered left.

A young woman with a pinched face and dirty, yellow hair handed him a battered tin plate and a worn fork and spoon as he neared the front of the line. Ahead of him, Reina was already dishing, moving from table to table with purpose, ignoring him and everyone else. He was still puzzling over her suggestion when he caught a whiff of the food laid out on the tables. In stark contrast to what he'd imagined when he had first arrived here, the food wasn't bad. It seemed that whatever the researchers were hoping to learn from their subjects, it couldn't be gleaned from men

and women who were mentally unresponsive as a result of malnourishment. Physical injury didn't seem to impede the studies in quite the same way.

The table nearest Wyce was piled high with roasted vegetables, potatoes and carrots and parsnips. From the smell they were unseasoned, save for a little salt, but his stomach had quite firmly communicated to his nose that this was unimportant. He began piling his plate with food, already looking ahead to the other tables, seeing slices of beef and bread and cheese and having forgotten for the moment about Reina's instructions and the impending escape attempt. Wyce had been an only child, but as his mother had often confessed, he ate like the smallest of seven, fighting for every last scrap of food on the table. She admitted to often doubling and sometimes tripling recipes to make enough for his black-hole-of-a-stomach. The abuses that he had suffered since his arrival at the compound had changed many things, but they hadn't curbed his appetite.

He was just piling a last slice of bread on top of the massive pile of meat and vegetables on his plate when Reina's voice sounded close to his ear.

"Don't forget what we're here for."

"Right." Wyce stuffed a piece of beef into his mouth as he began angling through the milling crowd of prisoners, aiming for one of the fuller tables on the far side of the cavern. It was slow going. Balancing a tray while walking always slows things down and Wyce wasn't prepared to sacrifice his lunch for the sake of expediency. Besides, he was supposed to look natural. More importantly, gathering all of the prisoners together in a large space, surrounded by guards, had a sort of numbing effect on many of them. The desire not to appear to be doing anything wrong made everyone overcautious, slower than usual to make up their minds or to follow through with decisions once made.

Wyce concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths, working to calm his thudding heart, which tried to be faster to counterbalance the sluggishness enforced on the rest of his body. His mind, too,

was racing. In an hour he might be free. But he *had* to look natural, avoid attracting attention, and so he struggled to walk slowly and breathe deeply, while noting the irony that people tend to look the least natural when they *try* to look natural.

Finally, he succeeded in crossing the thorned cavern and took a seat at a table full of older men, all eating quietly with their heads down and their eyes fixed on their plates. Talking during meals was strictly forbidden. After the riots that had followed the opening of the mess hall, the officers of the guard had recognized that conversation often brought unity, and unity was the first step to rebellion. Men and women in molecular armor and often carrying molecular broad blades walked up and down between the tables, visibly enforcing silence. Under such scrutiny the prisoners had developed alternate means of communication. Hand languages had been around for hundreds of years and over time the community of captives had agreed upon symbols and definitions enough to begin conversation. Through trial and error they incorporated utensils into these gestures, to maintain the illusion of eating in silence.

Climbing onto the bench next to a wiry man with iron-grey hair Wyce, set his plate before him and scraped his fork and spoon together several times, as if preparing to eat. In reality this was the signal for “please pay attention.” Over the course of the next few minutes Wyce conveyed Reina’s request for a distraction. There was some hesitation from the men at the table when Wyce was unable to explain the details of Reina’s plan, but after one of them remembered Reina as amongst the survivors from some of the earlier escape attempts, the rest of the table seemed to come onboard. There was an underlying assumption that Reina wouldn’t attempt another escape unless she was prepared. Wyce concluded the conversation by asking that some of those present make their way to other tables and spread the message, then he himself climbed to his feet, his plate emptied, and made to return for seconds. En route to the serving tables he passed Reina and in hurried whispers he relayed his initial success.

“When it happens,” she whispered, “stay close to me.” And then she was gone. Wyce proceeded to refill his plate and find a new table.

Slowly, by ones and twos, men and women from various corners of the cave got up and began making their way towards the center of the mess hall. It had been agreed, as Wyce conversed with that first table that he’d joined, that a general fight was the only sort of distraction they could stage easily that would be large enough to pull the guards from their positions around the perimeter of the room. Key people had been selected from the general population, those with a reputation for bad behavior or who were particularly eager to get into a scuffle with the guards; these had agreed to be the fight starters. The rest of the room would pile in once the fight was going, milling around the edges and impeding attempts to break up the fight. Wyce himself was on his way to the room’s center when Reina stepped out from behind a large outcrop and grabbed his arm.

“Come with me,” she ordered, not waiting for an answer before starting forward. Wyce followed, trying to shake her grip on his shirt sleeve. In spite of his efforts he couldn’t shake her off, her fingers were like a vice, and in his preoccupation he didn’t notice until she stopped where she’d been leading. “Officer?” They’d come to a halt in front of a group of guards clustered near the entrance into the mess hall. Amongst them were Garret and the fat man.

“Shouldn’t you be eating? Get lost.” The man who responded was tall and visibly muscular, even encased in armor, and his helmet bore the red plume that signified an officer’s rank.

“I’m sorry.” Wyce gave a start at the wheedling supplication in Reina’s voice. “I came to warn you, the prisoners gathering in the center of the hall, there,” she pointed over her shoulder at the slowly growing mass, “are about to try and escape. They’ve been communicating with others around the room. They hope to overwhelm you.”

“What!”

“*What!*” Wyce and the officer both spoke at once, equal measures of surprise in both voices.

“Shut your mouth,” the officer barked at Wyce, at the same instant that Reina stepped down hard on his foot. He managed to stifle a yell under the baleful glare of the officer, who then turned his attention to Reina. “Why should I believe you.” Reina’s gaze dropped to the floor and to Wyce’s mounting disgust she maintained the meek attitude of servility with which they’d first approached the group.

“Watch the group at the center,” she explained. “They’re planning to start a brawl, to distract you. If they start fighting in the next few minutes...” She trailed off. An oppressive tension filled the air as all turned their attention on the considerable jumble of prisoners that had gathered, per instructions, near the center of the mess hall. Wyce found himself silently wishing that the plan had been misunderstood, that the gathering prisoners *would not* begin fighting. He couldn’t begin to understand Reina’s intentions. She must have approached the guards as part of her plan – he refused to believe otherwise – but he couldn’t see the logic. Heartbeats later chaos erupted among the milling prisoners, and not a moment following the officer with the plume in his helmet began barking orders.

“Robert, Ian,” he said to the overly fat guard and a shorter, round-eyed man standing next to him. “Gather everyone in from the perimeter and break up that fight.”

“Yes, sir!”

“And don’t kill anyone. Yet.”

“Yes, sir.” The two hurried off while the officer gathered the others around him.

“Gentlemen,” he began. “We’re going to plug the tunnel leading out of this place. Not a soul gets through, do you understand?” The resounding affirmative made Wyce’s ears ring. “You two” continued the officer, jabbing Reina in the shoulder as he spoke. “Stay out of the way.” He paused a

moment and took a long look at Reina, gaze traveling from the top of her still downcast head to the bottom of her grubby shoes. "People like you disgust me." He spat vehemently at her feet. "Sell your own people just to get a leg up." He turned and ushered the others into a trot, headed for the entrance to the cavern.

The moment the guards were out of earshot Wyce turned as if to make for the center of the room.

"Wyce!" Reina grabbed him by the arm, stumbling a few steps before she got her feet set sufficiently to restrain his momentum. He rounded on her.

"What's your deal?" Fear and anger mixed together inside of him, colliding, spiraling into a vortex like high and low pressure air fronts. "What part of the plan is this? How are we supposed to escape with the tunnel blocked?"

"This isn't an escape." He gaped at her. "We can't escape yet, ok. You asked me last night about that thing I was looking for? Well I haven't found it, and we *need* it if we're going to make it out of here."

"So, what?"

"Good behavior." Her voice took on an edge, but it didn't seem to be directed at him. More like she was angry with herself. "If we're lucky, we'll get to work in the kitchens or something for tipping off the guards. I've seen prisoners do it before, like the officer said."

"I don't believe I'm hearing this." Fury vibrated the muscles in Wyce's body until he was sure he must be visibly shaking. "Those people trusted me because of you, because *I* trusted *you*." Reina gave no answer, no sign that she had heard him other than a slight tightening around the eyes. In a moment of absurd rage, Wyce ripped away from her. Years of inbred fear and resignation warred with an overwhelming sense of responsibility to the men and women fighting, maybe for their lives in the center of the hall.

“Don’t do it.” As though she could see the conflict taking place inside of him Reina, reached out to him, beseeching, and in that moment he made up his mind. Spinning he plunged himself into the chaos raging around the edges of the fight, chest out and arms up, like a man forging upstream. He heard Reina call his name once over the din, but he pushed on, toward the fighting.

### CHAPTER 3

*It's unclear at this time whether or not magic has always existed. Certainly common myth and folklore would seem to suggest that it has as stories of magical figures have been common amongst the vast majority of human civilizations for the duration of written record, but to date it remains impossible to verify these accounts as anything more than fairytales. The first verifiable, recorded presence of magic dates back nearly six centuries and arises unmistakably in tangent with the evolution of modern science, though a full century passes before historical record is able to verify that the most prominent mages working at the time were in fact the most prominent scientists as well. The tandem of these two, closely related fields is anything but a mistake, though there remains a great deal of argument over the nature of the relationship between the disciplines.*

*It is historically clear that increases in scientific knowledge led invariably to increases in magical power, a fact that has led many to suggest that the roots of modern science rest with mages*

*intent on fueling their own growth. Complicating this claim is the indisputable fact that the mathematical basis for modern science existed well before and independent of early records of magic use, suggesting the possibility that science may have evolved irrespective of magic, had mankind not developed a tangible understanding of the power of magic. Many speculate on what science might have become had magic never been discovered, a speculation that has spawned a popular genre of fiction within literary circles.*

*Today it is commonly accepted that magic shares its developmental origins with roughly the same areas of the brain that are responsible for the development of language. While behavioral theories of language acquisition have long been considered insufficient to account for the complex speech learning process evidenced by children, more recent empirical models based on statistical learning theories have surfaced to demonstrate the integral role of environmental factors on speech acquisition and have led researchers to believe that the absence of environmental magical factors is responsible for the large amount of time that it has taken humanity to come to grips with magic in comparison to language.*

*The close relationship between speech and magic development seems to account for why early mages believed that speech or other sign systems were necessary for the casting of spells. Early magical textbooks describe elaborate verbal incantations or complex rune diagrams as necessary to the act of spell casting, and though modern theory has come to understand this verbal component as unnecessary, many beginning students continue to make use of language during spell casting until broken of the habit by repeated practice and instruction.*

*With the recent development of Shell technology the environmental presence of magic has grown exponentially, and researches are already beginning to predict the future generations of*

*magicians will be much more innately adept than has previously been the case. How this will affect the future development of the field remains largely unclear.*

From *A Brief Treatise on Magic*, by Dermot Cole.

Wyce spent the next three days lodged in a vertical stone chute, a cleft in the rock about a meter and a half wide at the top that narrowed drastically as it plunged away into darkness. In the aftermath of the fight in the mess hall he had considered himself lucky to be alive; more than a few people had died before the storm quieted and there was whispered talk of executions like those that had taken place the last time. Then the fighters had been sentenced to solitary confinement and his sense of luck diminished. As it happened Robert, the obese guardsman who had released him from his cell earlier in the afternoon, was assigned to take him a cell. *Cell* was a bad choice of words. In addition to his obesity Robert also possessed a perverted sense of humor. He took to being a guard much the way a fat boy takes to a candy shop. He actually giggled as he tied a solid length of rope around Wyce's waist, and slowly lowered him into the earth.

"Stop squirming," the fat man had said, as Wyce sunk into the crack. "You'll just scrape yourself up." He giggled again. "Besides, if I drop you, you might break something and I'm not pulling you back out until someone orders me to." Wyce had stopped squirming. The chute narrowed; the cracked, moss ridden walls coming steadily closer until Wyce could go no further and slack rope began piling up around his head and shoulders. "Well," called Robert from above, "enjoy your stay." He was still giggling as his voice faded away.

For the first several hours, Wyce tried yelling for someone to pull him up, hoping in that half-crazed way often born out of desperation that this was all a cruel joke. When it finally became obvious that his hope was not half-crazed but fully so, he gave up and lapsed into shocked silence.

Insects and other small, cavern dwellers crawled up and down the chute, sometimes burrowing under Wyce's clothing, likely in search of food. At first these intrusions had terrified him almost out of his mind, but in time even they became mundane as his brain sunk into hibernation.

He drifted in and out of consciousness, lost in memories of his recent years at Rosenthraum. He'd first come to the academy in Denora just over three and half years ago. Roensthraum was the first, and so far the only, Academy for Magics and Sciences to be constructed on the new continent. It had sent Magisters to all of the surrounding cities and even to some of the larger towns, searching for students to fill out its enrollment. Wyce had been eking out a living as a stable hand for a small inn when one of those Magisters had arrived in Wain Harbor with an offer that changed his life. It was only now, wedged between jagged walls of stone, that he began to wonder if the change had really been for the better.

He missed the academy dearly. Oh, not everything, of course. Wyce was barely 18 when he had enrolled at the school. His mother had passed away four years prior, leaving him on his own, and he was not what you might call the most socially well adjusted boy. He was tough, he'd had to be tough to survive, but on the inside he was soft spoken and nervous. He found that he had little in common with many of the students at the school, most of whom had come from fairly well to do families, and he was slow in making friends. To make matters worse, Wyce was not a good mage.

At its core, magic was nothing more than an extension of those forces present in the natural world; a directed extension to be sure, purposeful, but there was nothing produced by magic that might not just as easily be produced in nature, save that nature seldom saw much use for many of things that mankind chose to do with magic. Learning to manipulate the planet's natural forces was a process closely analogous to learning to speak, though there were a number of major differences that modern science still didn't quite understand. Like speech, the organs necessary for the use of magic were present at birth, but their development required extremely careful nurturing.

The single biggest obstacle to this development was the current lack of early models, though with recent developments in Gram Shell research this was becoming steadily less of an issue. Infants learn to speak by imitating adults. They are exposed to language, surrounded by it in fact, during their most crucial stages of early development. Until the invention of Gram Shells this constant immersion was hard to achieve for magic unless you happened to be the child of a mage. This fact explained why early chroniclers had so fervently believed that magic ran in certain bloodlines, rather than existing as a learned behavior.

Of course, to really *use* language, to manipulate it beyond simply repeating the phrases and structures that exist in your native environment requires diligent study. Grammar, syntax, non-native languages, these things require careful examination and constant practice, and the same is very true of magic. The first mages in recorded history had been purely native speakers in the sense that they knew only those spells that their forebears had known, and those likely to have come about by accident, more than anything else. It wasn't until mages began to study the natural world that they came to understand the extent of their abilities. Thus was science born, and the distinction between the two subjects illustrated Wyce's fundamental problem.

Wyce was good at science, but his ability to cast spells was underdeveloped. He suffered from what researchers called a spell stutter, during which brain signals integral to the construction of incantations would become waylaid and rerouted to the wrong areas of his brain. He understood what was *supposed* to happen better than most of his fellow students, in fact he'd been punished more than once for working on formulas and theories that the Magisters argued were "beyond him," but what was supposed to happen and what actually happened very rarely synced up in his case.

Fire, for instance, was a byproduct of an exothermic chemical reaction between a fuel source and an oxidizing agent. Hydrocarbons – methane, propane, butane, etc – serve as some of

the more readily available and reliable fuel sources. By definition hydrocarbons are simply a combination of hydrogen and carbon atoms, both of which are available in the atmosphere, hydrogen in the form of water vapor and carbon in the form of carbon dioxide.

By manipulating the planet's electromagnetic field a mage combines hydrogen and carbon and pressurizes them to create propane. He contains and directs the propane using the same electromagnetic field, aims it at his target, and then sets it on fire by vibrating the molecules within the liquid. Molecular vibration causes elemental friction between molecules, a byproduct of which is heat. When the liquid reaches its flash point – the point at which it is sufficiently heated to release enough gas to form an ignitable mixture with air – it combusts, causing a small explosion and creating a fireball.

He could write and solve the formulas for the fireball incantation in seconds, with his eyes closed, but he only managed to make a fireball in one out of every five tries, and this constant failure had led to a good deal of jeering among some of the less mature students. It didn't help that Wyce was so often praised for his abilities in the classroom, in spite of his many failures on the practice field. For all his deficiencies he had loved learning, and would give almost anything to be able to return to school. Given his current position, a return to the academy seemed beyond impossible, and he hated the Magisters and the researchers at this facility more for that than for anything else.

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“Mr. Guntair? Mr. Guntair?” Wyce opened his eyes to find a nearly translucent cave beetle skittering across the wall right in front of him. He tried to jerk away in surprise, but the effort produced no result unless he counted the fact that it had reminded him of where he was. He blinked. For some reason he had the distinct impression that someone had been calling his name, a man, and for several moments now. “Mr. Guntair?” Wyce jerked again and managed only to scrape

the back of his head on a particularly sharp outcropping. He tried to speak, but found that his mouth and throat were too dry for the task. He licked a pair of cracked lips and struggled to produce some saliva.

“Who’s up there?” he managed, after several minutes of work.

“Ah, Mr. Guntair. Good. I was beginning to fear that we’d lost you permanently.” Wyce might have laughed, but there wasn’t room in the chute for him to get that much air.

“Personally, that seems a pretty logical thing to worry about when you drop a man into a crack in the earth and then leave him there.”

“Oh, and you’ve retained your sense of humor, too, how wonderful. You’ve been down there three days, did you know that? Many people become incoherent from dehydration after that length of time.”

“Do I win a prize?”

“Oh yes, as a matter of fact you do.” Wyce grimaced at that. He was beginning to think that the sarcasm that he’d been steadily cultivating since his arrival here wasn’t really serving him quite the way he’d hoped. “You are a mage, are you not Mr. Guntair?” Wyce swallowed.

“Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I like to keep track. Only a few mages have been left in possession of their powers, you know. For diversity in the experiments. Besides, I feel a special kinship towards brother mages like yourself.”

“You’re a Magister.” So far Wyce had been careful to keep his emotions in check, to avoid exhausting what little energy he had on silly things like anger, but the knowledge that the man in the corridor above was one of the Magisters who endorsed this vile place, who devised and carried out the experiments and the torture, sickened him. Bile welled up in his throat and he tried futilely

to hoist himself up the slick, stone wall, only to settle back into place a moment later. “You bastard. Why are you doing this to us?”

“Why?” The man’s voice sounded legitimately puzzled. Wyce noticed for the first time that it was an oddly high pitched voice. “Ah, of course. You lack understanding. You should consider yourself fortunate, Mr. Guntair. You and your fellow subjects have been instrumental in the advancement of modern magic and science. We understand so much more than we did, thanks to you.”

“So much more about what? What is this all for?”

“Why, the brain, Mr. Guntair. We’ve been studying the brain. We’ve developed some very interesting new theories, and we’re close to what may be the first incantations that can legitimately affect the mind of an individual.” Wyce froze with his mouth open. Mind control? Was this for real? “Yes, you should be very proud of yourselves. Of course, I suppose that most of you won’t survive the testing, at least not with all of your faculties intact, but there is always a price for advancement, isn’t there. Of course.” It seemed almost as if the Magister were talking to himself at this point. “And we’ve just finished developing our latest trial, thanks to the materials that we recently received from Mr. Gram and his associates. That’s why I’ve come to see you, of course. I was hoping that you would volunteer for our latest experiment. We have reason to believe that mages will be particularly suited to this trial.” Wyce remained silent.

“Oh, you don’t have to, you know,” continued the Magister. “Volunteer, I mean. You will be part of the trials, but you don’t have to do it voluntarily. As I understand it, the research labs on the ninth floor have already been prepared.” Wyce’s head spun. Could the man be talking about the research shipment that Reina had caught them unloading a few weeks earlier, the shipment that she’d been trying to locate ever since? He was not a religious man and had never believed in fate, but this apparent stroke of luck seemed uncanny to him. “In any case, I won’t keep you any longer.

I'm sure that you've got better things to do than listen to me carry on." Wyce thought that he could hear the man smiling, and while this was realistically impossible, the impossibility didn't change his perception. "I imagine that someone will be along to collect you in the not too distant future. Enjoy your stay." He listened to the man's footsteps echoing off the walls of the cavern until they faded into the distance.

## CHAPTER 4

*Of course it is perfectly natural to liken neurological spell casting deficiencies with communicative disorders, given the extremely close relationship shared by the areas of the brain responsible for both communication and matter manipulation. Research in speech and auditory pathology has clearly demonstrated the degree to which these phenomena are governed by complex motor skills. Areas of the brain previously thought reserved to motor function are also active during instances of communication and indeed non-communicative motor movement often aids communicative fluency. A communicative stutter, for instance, is often eased by rhythmic motions such as dancing.*

*That matter manipulation, which we call magic, should prove to be the result of complex motor function is likewise perfectly natural. It would seem perfectly natural in light of the absurdity of previous speculation on the subject, if for no other reason. It is little wonder that magic,*

*historically, has been the subject of derisive disbelief given the state of early attempts to explain its existence. Many of these attempts we now understand to be a byproduct of the overlap between areas of the brain responsible for communication and those responsible for magic. The inclusion of complex gestures in early spell casting, for instance, results from the same left hemisphere motor function overlap that causes us to gesture when speaking. Dr. Franklin Silverman found himself ahead of the curve when he wrote that “the beginnings of the purposeful use of the speech mechanism for communication [are a way of] manipulating the environment” (105, original emphasis).*

*For the above outlined reasons we feel justified in classifying neurological spell casting limitations as **manipulation disorders**, and include among these disorders both **stuttering** and **aphasia** while reserving the right to include further disorders as we come to better understand the psychology and neurophysiology of magic. For now we limit our discussion to these two major disorders, and speak in brief about each.*

From *An Introduction to Manipulation Disorders*, by Stern and Willow.

It was everything that Wyce could do to contain himself as he was escorted back to his cell. *Research labs on the ninth floor, research labs on the ninth floor.* He had been repeating this litany to himself almost from the moment the bizarre Magister’s footsteps had faded into silence. In truth he wasn’t particularly worried that he would forget the information – you didn’t forget the clue that might lead to your escape – but repeating helped him hold onto his sanity. He was severely dehydrated from his time in solitary, though the guards who’d finally come to fetch him had brought water with them, and his weakened state combined with the disturbing information that he’d acquired while listening to his strange visitor was almost more than he could handle.

Wyce knew little about the field of psychology. It wasn't considered a hard science like physics or chemistry, and as such it wasn't generally included in the study of magic. With the possible exception of neurology, the field of psychology had little information to yield about the natural world. Why, then, would someone invest all of this time and money in researching it? Was it possible to develop incantations that could affect the brain? What would a spell like that accomplish? These questions troubled him deeply, though he was no closer to an answer now than he had been hours before when the strange Magister had left.

The guards who had rescued him from the chute had been forced to help support him during the first portion of the trip back to the top floors. Every inch of him hurt in one way or another. Bones ached, tendons throbbed, muscles burned. Once free of the confining rock, Wyce had discovered more than a few bites and scratches where the chasm's natural inhabitants had decided to sample him as a possible meal, and several of these small wounds were bright red and angry looking, suggesting that a few of those sets of teeth had contained a poison or other chemical. *I suppose I should be grateful that none of them liked the taste of mage well enough to take more than one bite.*

They ascended the last flight of steps to the second floor, Wyce walking mostly on his own now as movement dislodged most of the aches and cramps from his body. *I just have to act normal until I'm back in my cell. Of course, that's assuming that Reina's plan is actually any good.* He frowned at that thought and pushed it quickly from his mind. Speculation of that sort could only lead to harm at this point.

They rounded the corner into the hallway that held his cell and Wyce nearly collided with another pair of guards coming the opposite direction. They were escorting a balding, middle aged man with sunken cheeks and a hollow expression who shuffled along lifelessly between them. Wyce

felt an overwhelming surge of sympathy for the man, and for the first time he wondered whether Reina's escape plan had room for anyone else.

He made himself count slowly to ten after the soldiers had deposited him back into his cell and locked the door, and then he scurried to the corner and pressed his face up to the gap in the masonry.

"Reina!" There was no response, and after a moment he tried again. "Reina?" Seconds thudded past, measured acutely by the roaring of his heart beat, the pounding so loud that he worried irrationally for a moment that he might not hear Reina's response over the beating. *Where is she?* "Reina?" When there was still no answer he started to panic. He started pacing up and down the room, struggling for some reason to catch his breath. *She's just being tested, that's all. Obviously. The experiments always take place more or less randomly; it's not at all odd for her to be gone. Unfortunate, but not strange. She'll be back in a few hours.*

He forced himself to sit down on the cot and take slow, deep breaths. The soldiers that had escorted him back from the chute had left him with a nearly full bottle of water – he might have thanked them if he hadn't been sure that they'd only done it to preserve his effectiveness as a test subject – and he retrieved it now from corner where he'd dropped it and took a long swallow. He felt suddenly exhausted both mentally and physically, bone weary in a way that he hadn't been even after a round in the sensory deprivation chamber. He decided that what he really needed was a few hours of sleep. Hopefully he would wake up to find Reina returned so that he might share what he'd discovered. He stripped down to his small clothes, glad in truth to be out of the sweat stained garments that he'd been confined to for the last three days, and stretched out on the bed. His feet hung well over the edge, but he'd gotten used to it over the last six months. Lying on his back he watched the shadows writhe on the ceiling until he drifted off.

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Two days later Reina still hadn't surfaced and Wyce was beginning to feel panicked again. Increasingly he worried that someone would come to collect him for a trial of his own before she got back. Worse, if there was such a thing as worse, it might well be the research labs on the ninth floor that they came to shepherd him to.

## CHAPTER 5

### ***Spell Stuttering:***

*As with a communicative stutter, there seems to be an anticipatory element to spell stuttering. This is to say that mages who suffer from a spell stutter find it increasingly difficult to perform magic when they expect that they will stutter, and this expectation is often reinforced by social and environmental cues. If the spell caster perceives that others around him are expecting him to stutter he may well adopt this expectation himself, often causing him to stutter and in so doing reinforcing his expectation and the expectations of those watching.*

*Research into the causes of spell stuttering has been slow. Communicative stuttering not labeled as either neurogenic (deriving from abnormal central nervous system function) or psychogenic (deriving from psychological disturbance) begins early in life, with few exceptions. While*

*the root cause of communicative stuttering is still up for debate, the vast majority of research agrees that communicative stutters develop in the same time frame and possibly for some of the same reasons as basic speech development and language acquisition. Because spell casting is still not a naturally acquired behavior for most (though this number decreases every year) it is difficult to understand what causes the onset of spell stuttering during formal training. Research so far has shown no substantial difference in the percentage of formally educated mages who suffer from stuttering in comparison to the percentage of natural mages (those who acquired some magical aptitude as result of observing magic present in their developmental environment) who suffer from stuttering.*

*There is some evidence of crossover between communicative stuttering and spell stuttering. For instance, research shows that heightened emotional states (predominately anger) often reduce instances of spell stuttering, just as they do for communicative stuttering. Such crossover has yet to demonstrate a quantifiable pattern, however. Instances of rhythmic motion reduce communicative stuttering, as we mentioned above, but do nothing for spell stuttering.*

From *An Introduction to Manipulation Disorders*, by Stern and Willow.

Wyce was standing beneath his cell window when they came to get him. With all that had happened since his arrival here he hadn't consciously considered the changing of the seasons, but winter had come and gone and spring was blooming for the outside world. A narrow, rectangular beam of light poured into the room and then diffused, chasing away the shadows and filling in their vacated spaces. He found a moment's amusement in the image of tiny sunlight soldiers sweeping through the room, routing shadow warriors from their fortifications in the crevices. He felt it would

make a good story, maybe, “The Battle of Light and Dark.” Well, he’d need a better title, but that didn’t mean it was a bad idea.

On impulse, he raised a hand high over his head and laid his fingers on the rough, stone ledge that formed the bottom of the window, delighting in the warmth that enveloped his weathered skin. The presence of sunlight filled him with a vibrancy that he hadn’t realized was missing. It buoyed him, made him feel safe, and he marveled at the profound depth of this change. Pain and anger and remorse were still with him – for a moment he faced the reality that he might never be free of such sordid emotions – but for a few moments they faded into the background with the shadows.

When the door opened he turned calmly to face the form that entered, keeping his eyes carefully lowered in a gesture of docility that came naturally and left him with the taste of bile. He grimaced, swallowed, and kept his eyes fixed on a small abrasion in the stone floor. Downcast eyes and slumped shoulders had been a mainstay of his for years and this was hardly the time to get upset over it. All that mattered was surviving, and in this instance surviving meant servility.

“Come on. Out.” Wyce took a second, surreptitious look at the guard when he realized that the voice was a woman’s. There were women stationed among the soldiers, but under all the armor it was difficult to tell on first glance. “ “Move your ass.”

Still watching the floor, Wyce hurried into the hallway. Sunlight illuminated the cobblestone in small intermittent pools, competing with the artificial light for the right to brighten the passage. Wyce took up the expected position behind the woman who’d come to retrieve him and a short guard with dark skin and a puffy lower lip fell in behind him. The three of them stepped forward in near perfect unison, Wyce watching his feet carefully to keep himself in step. He tried to recall the first time that he’d ever watched his feet with such intensity while walking and couldn’t place the

event. It was before he'd gone to school at the academy, though he'd surely done a good deal of foot watching during his years at the campus in Denora.

Foot watching, along with dropping his gaze and slumping, seemed to be something he'd always done, a facet of his existence without origin or precedent that yet somehow defined his character in terms far more concrete than those localized events to which he could point with historical accuracy. He'd once succeeded in warping light around his body in such a way as to make himself invisible to the naked eye. He remembered that day in detail, and yet he was Wyce the foot watcher, not Wyce the light warper. He was Wyce the spell stutterer.

The sunlight faded as they descended a gently curving staircase leading below ground to the third floor. Wyce looked over his shoulder for an instant, unwilling to leave the comfort of the light behind so soon, but the guard following bared a row of dark, stained teeth. Wyce hastily returned his gaze to the pitted flagstone steps.

The corridor into which they emerged was unfamiliar to him, even when seen out his peripheral vision. The ceiling was especially low here compared to those he considered standard, and stalagmites hung at frequent intervals from the porous rock above. Some of these hung low enough that they threatened to puncture the top of his head if he didn't pay attention, in spite of his slumped shoulders. He found himself forced to watch both his feet and his head, an uncomfortable task, and as they continued down the passage, he found that he couldn't help seeing an illusion of monstrous teeth. The colloquial phrase "in the belly of the beast" began to take on a disconcerting potential for reality.

To take his mind off of the mineralized teeth and, in truth, off the fact that he didn't know where they were taking him, he focused instead on the resolve that he'd reached earlier this morning. Sitting with his legs crossed beneath him on the floor of his cell he had come to a conclusion. Short of Reina being dead, a possibility that he refused to acknowledge in spite of his

anger at the way she'd manipulated him and so many others into starting that cafeteria brawl several days ago, the researchers would have to return her to her cell eventually. Taking that as fact, short of him dying, a possibility he refused to admit on the grounds that it was unhealthy, he would get his chance to reveal what he'd learned to Reina sooner or later. Whatever happened in between sooner and later, he could deal with. What of dealing with it? Eyes down and shoulders slumped, he made it to tomorrow and to the day after and so on. Nothing they did to him now was going to change his tenacious acceptance of his place in life. It might not be an enviable place, but it was his.

He dodged another stone incisor and felt the sudden urge to scream defiance at it. He might have laughed if the fire that he'd been stoking since the morning wasn't the only thing keeping him sane. They entered a branching passage that snaked back and forth every handful of meters such that twice the number of usual torches were necessary to keep the hall adequately lit, and as they walked, Wyce tempered his determination. It was obvious by this point that he was being taken to parts of the compound he'd never seen before. The corridor, in addition to weaving back and forth as though carved by a drunken sailor, also had a distinctive downward slope to it. Wyce thought they might be as deep as the sixth floor by this point, but he recognized nothing. He could only believe that they were leading him to the glass enclosed labs on the ninth floor, as he had been promised while he hung suspended between natural stone, and he could only believe that what waited there would not be pleasant. He had to hang on.

The accordion passageway, down which they'd traveled for the last ten minutes, narrowed and then opened suddenly on a poorly lit gallery in an oval shape that could only have been created by tools, or, more likely, magic. Wyce counted six passages leading back out of the gallery before it dawned on him that this must be some sort of hub that connected disparate parts of the facility, or at least its underground floors. He couldn't understand how in the past six months he'd never crossed through here. How extensive was the facility? How much of it had he never seen?

The woman who'd led them with visible purpose from the floors above had come to a stop as they entered the gallery. She appeared now to be examining the hallways leading out of the hub as if not sure which to take. Maybe she would make the wrong choice, lead them down a passage that didn't go anywhere near the ninth floor labs. Maybe they would get completely lost and be forced to return to the test subjects' quarters on the top floors. This fantasy brought Wyce a certain amount of satisfaction and as seconds of indecision continued to tick past, a genuine flicker of hope spouted in the remote corner of the brain where dreams live. That hope was extinguished moments later by a shout from the far side of the gallery.

"Sarin!"

The female guard looked up from chewing a fingernail in contemplation. At the sight of a pair of guards with a pale figure between them approaching from across the cavern she brightened visibly,

"You're lost again, aren't you?"

"No! I'm headed that way." Sarin started toward the trio making their way across the gallery, pointing past them down the hallway from which they'd just emerged. She sounded both amused and annoyed, with a hint of relief thrown in for good measure. Wyce hesitated a moment before following until a face full of stained teeth crowded into vision. He then hurried after Sarin, double stepping until he closed the small gap that had opened between them.

"Bullshit. You were clearly lost." The speaker was a short, balding man with the widest pair of shoulders that Wyce had ever seen. His companion was Garret. He had on a broad smile and as the two groups came together near the center of the gallery, he and Sarin clasped forearms. Their conversation continued but Wyce didn't catch anything more than general noise. He shared a brief moment of commiseration with the pale prisoner who seemed barely able to keep her feet between her escorts. Then, the vague sense of familiarity that he hadn't noticed, but that had been with him

since the moment he first caught sight of the pale prisoner across the cavern, clicked into place: the pale woman was Reina.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Aphasia:**

*Communicative aphasia takes a wide variety of forms that describe difficulties in communication ranging from understanding speech, to reading, to remembering and ordering words, and beyond. Manipulative aphasia, in contrast, has to date only two forms. These may be readily understood in close association to **Dysnomia** and **Disfluent Communicative Aphasia**, both of which are generally caused by trauma to the left hemisphere of the brain.*

### **Dysnomia:**

*In instances of dysnomia the affected mage has difficulty accessing and manipulating the specialized physical and mathematical knowledge necessary for complex matter manipulation. She*

*may learn and understand these concepts effectively, but when called to use them she will often find that she can't recall what she just learned. As with patients who suffer communicative dysnomia the knowledge often seems to be "on the tip of her tongue," but will remain beyond reach indefinitely.*

***Disfluent Aphasia:***

*In instances of disfluent manipulative aphasia the affected mage has no difficulty calling to mind the complex formulae that govern magical interactions, but instead is unable to access the muscles that produce magic. We use the term muscles as a commonly accepted part of the nomenclature, though no bodily muscle has been identified as contributing necessarily to spell casting. As noted earlier, previous beliefs about muscle or motor activation during spell casting stem from the proximity of the manipulative part of the brain to certain motor function. Mages suffering from disfluent manipulative aphasia are unable to activate their abilities in much the same way that disfluent communicative aphasiacs are unable to activate their tongue or vocal cords. They may continue to contribute to the scientific development of magic, but they are no longer spell casters themselves.*

*While a variety of methods currently exist for the treatment and mediation of communicative disorders the same is not true for manipulative disorders. This is due in large part to the fact that we are just now beginning to understand magic and its workings, but as magic continues to dominate the evolution of our society these and similar subjects demand our most conscientious attention, and the authors of this text hope that it will serve as a challenge to the field at large.*

*From An Introduction to Manipulation Disorders, by Stern and Willow.*

She didn't look like Reina. For one, they'd cut away all of her hair and had shaved down the scalp until only stubble remained. Revealed beneath the missing hair was a pair of twin half-circle scars on the right and left temples. The left was old and faded, little more than a shiny abrasion on the skin, but the scar on the right temple was a wheel of fire, red, raw and angry. In addition to the scars a sickly, yellow bruise covered most of one eye and her lip looked to be split in several places. Worse, if that were possible, he didn't see anything behind her narrow, green eyes that suggested she was aware of her surroundings. She blinked awkwardly, as though in slow motion, and out of sync.

Sarin had drifted as she conversed with her fellow soldiers, unconsciously falling into a loose triangle in relation to the other two. In a moment of delayed recognition, Wyce realized that he had learned the soldiers' names amidst the buzz of conversation. The fellow with the bear's shoulders was Jon, and his partner, it turned out, was Garret, whom Wyce had recognized while his attention was elsewhere. The only guard whose name he hadn't picked up, who thus far hadn't joined the conversation at all, was the angry, black man with the penchant for smiling. He remained solidly at Wyce's shoulder, with one hand resting casually on the hilt of the molecular blade hanging from his belt. Wyce wasn't convinced that grip was as casual as it looked, but even as he registered this mental concern, he was aware that emotions beyond his control were propelling him into action. His gaze returned to Reina's bruised and disfigured face. He thought of all the injustices that he had witnessed here, of the things that had been done to him and to others: hours spent with his eyelids taped open, days in sensory deprivation, static shock spells administered alongside meaningless questionnaires, being dropped into a bottomless cavern and left to rot, stuck between stone faces, food for the skinless, eyeless creatures that inhabited the depths of the world. Pain and anger and

confusion and loneliness manifested themselves in a pair of awkwardly blinking green eyes, and before he could stop himself, he lashed out.

Reaching inside, he flexed the muscles that controlled the world, stretching them consciously as he had so many times before, but this time, for the first time, confident that he *would not* stutter. He reached across the cavern, probing for atoms of oxygen and hydrogen, and these he brought crashing together to form water molecules. The release of energy as molecular bonds formed rippled outward from the reactions in tiny shockwaves, stirring the stale air of the cavern. Working quickly, he drew heat away from the forming liquid, slowing the particles until they began to arrange into crystals. He shaped as he went, rearranging the crystals and chipping away excess until three perfectly shaped spears of ice hung motionless in the air before him. With a bestial roar that was part rage and part unbearable sadness, he hurled the icicles at Sarin and her companions.

He didn't stop to watch the results of his attack, turning instead to deal with the man at his back. As he had expected, the soldier drew the blade at his hip even as Wyce was turning and with the same motion he'd used to draw the weapon he swung it at Wyce's exposed neck. On instinct, Wyce reached out to stop the blow and the razor sharp molecular field that formed the blade bit deeply into the palm of his left hand, which went instantly numb. Ignoring the blow, Wyce brought his right arm up and forward. He still had control over the entropic energy that he'd removed in order to freeze the icicles, and the laws of physics demanded that this energy go somewhere. Churning through thermodynamic formulae that he was sure he'd never studied, he brought the total entropic force produced by his previous attack to bear on the grinning black man, focusing it into an impossibly dense ball at the edge of his outstretched palm. The swordsman froze in the act of lining up another blow when Wyce's open palm struck the center of his chest. Within instants the armor beneath Wyce's hand began to glow with an eerie, orange light that whitened quickly to a

blinding glare. The soldier's eyes widened and, he began to shriek in pain and confusion as the heat Wyce had brought to bear melted through his chest plate and into the flesh underneath.

The man's anguished wailing went on longer than Wyce ever could have imagined, even after he'd wrenched his hand out of the swordsman's ribcage. He very staunchly avoided thinking about removing his hand from the man's seared chest, and he avoided looking at the hand even more firmly. Some distant part of him was sickened beyond belief, but he was determined that that part remain distant for the time being. He stooped and retrieved the fallen soldier's weapon, though he had no idea how to use it. There was something psychologically reassuring about being armed.

He was straightening up with the light, molecular blade cradled in his arms, since his left hand was unresponsive and he still couldn't look at his right, when a blow from behind sent him skidding across the rough stone, loose bits of gravel shredding the skin on the left side of his face as effectively as sand scoured away mountains.

"You should always check to see that the fight is over before you stop to collect trophies."

Wyce rolled over with considerable effort to see the brutish form of Jon bearing down on him, pausing only a moment to collect the sword that Wyce had lost in his tumble across the floor. A steady stream of blood ran from a neat hole in the big man's gut and a visible limp on his left side said the injury was more than superficial, but it wasn't fatal. It should have been. It seemed to Wyce unfair on a cosmic scale that he spend the last moment of his life mentally solving math problems in an attempt to explain why he was about to die, but such was the case all the same. He was still staring stupidly at this executioner when a pair of pale, slender arms wrapped around the man's muscular neck and a wrinkled hand holding a molecular dagger drew an oozing smile just below his chin. Jon gurgled unintelligibly, his free hand wrapping around his neck in a vain attempt to stop his existence from pouring out in dark red spurts. He kept his feet only a moment before sliding sideways in a slow, almost comical, avalanche of flesh and bones. There where he'd been standing,

the front of her shirt spotted with blood, was Reina. They stared at each other. The situation didn't seem to call for more, but at the same time it called for nothing less. They stared. Eventually Wyce realized that the wavy film that he seemed to be looking through was actually tears. He had a strong desire to curl up in a ball and cease to exist. If Reina said anything, if she hugged him, if she touched his shoulder, he knew that he would crack into a thousand disparate pieces, but she did nothing. She stared at him and the moment passed in silent agony.

## CHAPTER 7

“You never told me that you were a mage.” Reina’s voice was oddly weak, breathy as though she had been running.

Neither of them moved, but the tears had dried and Wyce was beginning to believe that he might be able to bear living after all. His lacerated hand was regaining sensation and throbbed, though the pain seemed far away and couldn’t belong to him.

“I’m not.”

“Then what the hell was that?” She gestured around the cavern, at the bodies and, more telling, at a solid, opaque wall in the center of the space that hadn’t been there before. One of the guards must have thrown a Shell with a spell similar to the one that had trapped him in the hall earlier that week. Sticking out of the center of the wall on either side was a slender icicle. That explained how Jon had escaped with a puncture wound when he should have been impaled.

“I’m just a student,” Wyce insisted, struggling to keep down years of insecurities about magic.

“Bullshit.” She took a few steps forward and bent down to stare into his face. “If it was just the ice I might believe you, but not the rest. I’ve never seen someone turn the byproduct of one spell into the raw material for another.”

“I...” He trailed off, “How do you...”

She stood and turned her back to him.

“You’re a mage, too!” The realization stunned Wyce, but it was the only explanation that made any sense. Reina couldn’t possibly have understood the physics behind his spell casting otherwise. A long silence gripped the room, compacting the stale air as though a giant fist were closing around them.

“I was.” When she spoke the words were raw edged and angry, full of unexorcised bitterness. “Not anymore.”

“But you run a bakery in Malden. You have two little girls and a husband who...”

“I lied,” she yelled. “So did you. We’re even.” The disgust in her voice pierced him as solidly as one of the spears that he’d hurled at the guards. He imagined that he could feel a chill radiating outward from the wound.

“I have a stutter. I can’t cast most of the time.” An equal measure of disgust filled his own words, all self directed. “I didn’t set out to lie.” When she rounded on him her face was full of the pity and misunderstanding that he’d come to expect from kind but misguided sympathizers, and it filled him with an anger that chased away the imagined cold. “Don’t you dare feel sorry for me!” He pushed himself up from the floor and without realizing began advancing on her, fists clenched at his sides. His injured left hand pulsed with terrible intensity. “People always want to feel sorry for me.” He bumped into her and kept right on going, pushing her backward. “They pat me on the head and

tell me that I've done a good job just for trying, like I'm some kind of child, while over my shoulder they mouth 'poor Wyce. He's got a problem, he's challenged.'" He mimicked a high pitched, simpering voice. "Well, fuck you!" Reina backed into the smooth, curved wall of the cavern and he held her there with his fury, a hair's breadth of space between them. "I killed these soldiers, me! I melted through that grinning bastard's chest until I could crush his heart in my fist! I..."

The anger spilled out of him like air into a vacuum as the impact of these statements sank in alongside self loathing and righteous indignation and he choked on the surge of emotion. Coughing and red faced he stumbled away from a wide-eyed Reina and struggled towards another section of wall where he leaned his forehead against the cool stone. He couldn't seem to catch his breath. Moments passed while he felt dangerously close to throwing up.

"Hey..." He felt Reina move up behind him with that spatial intuition that everyone has but no one can define.

"Don't," he said, choking on the word. "Just... don't."

"Fine." Wyce closed his eyes and concentrated on the moist warmth of his breath, bouncing off of the rock wall and spreading out along his cheeks.

"Say something to distract me," he murmured, without turning around.

"When I got here, they performed some kind of operation on me. I can't cast spells anymore." Wyce considered this. An hour ago a statement like this would have made his insides crawl, but his nerve endings were too dull for that right now. He wished that he could go to sleep and forget all of this.

"How?"

"Something they did when they cut this hole in my head." He sensed a shrug and imagined her reaching up to touch the fading scar on her left temple.

"And the new incision?"

“I’m not sure. I don’t feel different, aside from beat up.”

“When I first saw you,” Wyce whispered. “I thought that you were lost, you looked like an empty shell.”

“More lies.” Wyce lapsed back into silence for a moment. He knew that he wasn’t digesting all of this information, that it was only touching him on the surface, but he had trouble understanding why that mattered.

“What part of you is real?”

“Two holes in my forehead, two years in this prison, and two daughters who probably think that I’m dead.” There was no hesitation in her answer, and while the words carried some heat it was well organized anger, rather than blind rage. The depth of her calm reminded him why he had agreed to follow her.

“Did you come from the ninth floor labs?”

“Yeah.”

“And the materials that you need to get us out of here are down there?”

“I saw them.” Somewhere overhead, through tens of meters of stone the meal bell rang. Wyce found that he was a little sad to miss lunch. He wasn’t sure when he would eat next, if ever.

“Then we should go.”

The echoes of the lunch bell continued to reverberate off of the walls of the gallery as they started down the corridor from which Reina and her escort had emerged less than an hour earlier. Wyce noticed that she had acquired a belt and sheath for her stolen dagger, which she now wore at an angle on her hip. He gave a parting glance to the fallen sword that had belonged to the nameless soldier, but he decided with little regret to leave the weapon where it lay. It hadn’t done him much good last time, and he didn’t relish the thought of trying to wield it with only one hand. He did stop

to tear a strip of cloth from the padded shirt beneath Sarin's armor, and this he wrapped tightly around his crippled palm.

"You remember where you're going?" Reina had grabbed a light from one of the wall sconces, apparently not satisfied with their spacing along the passage and was hurrying down the corridor with the glowing ball thrust out in front of her. Here in the confines of the tunnel Wyce's voice seemed much louder than it had in the open gallery, and he winced as it ricocheted off of the limestone walls.

"Just keep up," she whispered. "And be quiet." They moved at a jog inside the oval pool cast by Reina's torch and after a short time his head began to pound with the exertion. The rag that he'd tied around his hand seemed disturbingly wet already, and he wondered how much blood one had to lose before passing out. Was he feeling dizzy? He shook his head to clear it and regretted the effort when it only made the pounding worse.

"How far is it?" He tried to keep the concern out of his voice, to give the impression that he didn't care whatever the answer, but he must have failed because Reina's answer was encouraging.

"It's not far. You can make it." The tunnel that they were in split left and right and Reina took the right fork into a passage so narrow that he could have touched both walls at once just by stretching out his arms to either side. The light from their torch danced erratically in the confined space and Wyce again felt that he might be sick. To his relief the tunnel widened after several minutes into one of man-made variety with carefully squared walls and a ceiling free of hanging protrusions. He took a slow, deep breath. Moments later they began passing wooden doors set into the stone, and it wasn't long after that the sections of stone gave way to the double thick glass windows that characterized research labs. Reina had been true to her word, this time.

She led him easily down a complex series of short passages that had appeared out of nowhere, never hesitating when faced with a choice of direction. To him each of the glass paneled

labs looked the same, filled with the same long, metal tables cluttered with blown glass vials and beakers, some connected to one another by tubes or hose, but when they reached their destination it was unmistakable. There were no vials here. Instead the aluminum tables were covered with instruments and tools that Wyce had never seen before, a number of which he was sure were quite sharp. A small, metal blade with distinct teeth reminded him of a lumber saw, except that it was no longer than his forearm.

Reina pulled open the door to the room and swept through, determination radiating from her every step.

“The stuff that we need is in there.” She pointed to a smaller room fashioned entirely of glass in the far corner of the lab. “But it’s been warded, someone’s left an alarm or a trap inside of a temporal shell. I’ll need your help to get in.” Wyce studied the small chamber from just inside the lab door. He’d seen the like at school, a hermetically sealed chamber. Magic had been used to remove the atmosphere from the room and replace it with argon gas. It was the kind of place that one kept chemicals too dangerous to be exposed to normal air. From here he could just make out the halo of distorted light that outlined the pocket of altered space-time.

“How did you plan on getting in before you found out that I was a mage?”

“Before I found out that you were a mage I didn’t know they’d be keeping the vials in a warded room.” Wyce grunted but he didn’t have a counter argument to her line of reasoning.

“I can’t remove the temporal shell without setting off the spell inside.” Wyce was churning formulae as he spoke, considering various approaches to the problem.

“I don’t think you need to. I can’t be sure, but I think the shell is rigged to dissolve if it changes temperature. If you can put me into thermal equilibrium with it I should be able to walk right through.”

“You *think*?” Reina glared at him over her shoulder as he spoke.

“Believe it or not I was good at this sort of thing before they cut open my head.” Wyce flushed.

“Sorry.” Together they crossed the open expanse of the lab, taking care to avoid the tables with their grim tools. Wyce worked very hard not to imagine what some of those tools were used for.

“You’ll have to isolate the shell from your field when you start moving molecules around. Any activity could alter the temperature enough to set it off.”

“What if I stutter?”

“You won’t.”

“What if I do?”

“Don’t.” Thinking about performing magic was making him anxious and Reina’s responses weren’t helping.

“I can usually tell ahead of time if I’m going to screw up. I’m telling you I don’t think I can do this.” They had reached the sealed chamber at the back of the room. The outline of the temporal shell hung two dimensional in the air just before the door.

“Stop bitching and do it!” Reina had one arm outstretched, her fingers wiggling in anticipation of grasping the door handle. “Do it or I’m going through anyway and whatever happens hits us both. I’m not staying here any longer.” Beside himself with anxiety, Wyce was shaking like a man immersed in freezing water, but he flexed his magic, becoming instantly more aware of the molecular makeup of the room. The temporal shell was considerably colder than a human body, he could see that at once. He would have to cool Reina much the way that he had cooled water molecules to form the ice spears. He hazarded a temperature based on his impression of the temporal shell and set to work solving the equations that would drain entropic energy from Reina’s

body and disperse evenly throughout the room. Excluding the temporal shell from the dispersion of heat was more difficult, but he solved the math easily as only someone like him could.

When he set the spells in motion something went wrong. He felt the magic twist and warp as it always did when he stuttered. Heat poured away from Reina's body much faster than it should have. Her extremities began to turn blue and Wyce watched in horror as she exhaled tiny crystals of ice. She was freezing from the inside out. Without a second thought he abandoned the work mid spell, abandoned his grasp on nature and pulled his power in tight against himself until he could hardly sense anything. A small funnel sprang into existence as two wildly different temperature zones sought equilibrium and the resultant blast of air knocked him off of his feet. The temporal shell shattered and the spell inside crashed back into normal time. Wyce expected to be electrocuted or burned to a cinder, but he realized as a high pitched ringing filled the air that the researchers would never risk a destructive spell so near a sealed chamber.

From his position on the floor he saw Reina stagger to her feet. Her lips were still slightly blue and she moved as though stiff from head to toe, but she wrenched open the door to the chamber and flung herself through the opening, taking a ragged breath and holding it as she crossed into argon-filled space. She was only inside the chamber for a moment before she came charging out, clutching a small, wooden box to her chest. She stopped as she neared him, grabbing a fistful of his tunic and trying weakly to haul him to his feet.

"Run!" The next minutes were little more than a blur of hallways and staircases. Reina led them away from the labs at a full run, heedless of what might lie ahead. She was calm enough not to take them back the way they had come, though, sticking instead to narrow passages and tight, twisting staircases that Wyce recognized as those predominately used by workmen. He tripped and fell once during their flight but Reina was instantly at his side, tugging on his collar and screaming at

him to get up. He climbed to his knees and took off like a runner from blocks, pulling ahead of Reina until he realized that he didn't know where they were going and then dropping back behind.

Eventually, after so many twists and turns that Wyce was hopelessly lost, Reina slowed to a jog as they neared the center of a small gallery with a cracked and chasmed floor that might have been a microcosm for an active fault line. Wyce collapsed onto the floor in a heap of ragged lungs and aching muscles, and lying on his back he saw that the ceiling, too, was criss-crossed with open chutes not much different from the one that he'd spent solitary in.

"We don't have time to rest." Wyce rolled heavily onto his side and spotted Reina working the latch on the box she had retrieved from the lab. "I'm sure that the only reason we haven't been found already is that a good portion of the guards were watching the cafeteria." With fingers still stiff she managed to pry open the latch and then flipped up the box lid. Reaching inside she withdrew a handful of vials filled with a viscous silver liquid.

"What's in those?"

"Caesium." It took a moment for Wyce to recall his periodic table.

"Wait, isn't that stuff pyrophoric? How is that getting us out of here?"

"These thermal vents run all the way to the bottom of the facility, to the kitchens. That's why they cook down there, the shafts carry the heat and the smoke up to the surface. When I drop these vials there isn't going to be very much left of 'here.' By definition we'll be out." Wyce gaped.

"What are you crazy?" He scrambled to his feet and leapt at Reina, reaching for the vials, but she stepped easily out of his way and he had to drop to all fours to avoid pitching into a chute. "Enough of that stuff could bring the whole place down. You'll kill us all." She faced him calmly, one hand holding the open box and the other clutched around a fistful of combusive metal.

"Not all of us. We're very near the surface here. By dropping the vials down the thermal vents I should give us plenty of time to escape."

“What about the others? There are hundreds of people down there!”

“And how would you save them?” The question caught him off guard. When he’d first realized what she was planning to do he had begun to believe she might *be* crazy. She had admitted herself that she didn’t know what they’d done to her head this last time. But the face on the other side of the vent, with lips just parted and cheek muscles standing taut, while a thin veil of moisture distorted the light around the eyes until they shined, was a face twisted with pain rather than madness. “What would you do!” She screamed the words at him, hurled them like stones.

“I...”

“Nothing.” Wyce froze as she took a step forward and extended her fist over the empty expanse of the vent. “You’ve been here for six months. I’ve been here for *two years*.” She dropped the empty box and raised her hand to touch the angry wheal that stood out on her right temple. “There’s nothing you can do for them, and that’s exactly what you *will* do.” She dropped the vials. Wyce thought about snatching them. He thought about casting a spell to stop their fall. He thought about a dozen things, and he did nothing. The vials tumbled into the abyss, farther than the inevitable sound of shattering glass could reach. “If you want to live,” Reina murmured, her voice emotionless, “Then I suggest you start running.”