Fire Study

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Extract

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I

"THAT'S PATHETIC, YELENA," Dax complained. "An all-powerful Soulfinder who isn't all-powerful. Where's the fun in that?" He threw up his long thin arms in mock frustration.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but *I'm* not the one who attached the 'all-powerful' to the title." I pulled a black strand of hair from my eyes. Dax and I had been working on expanding my magical abilities without success. As we practiced on the ground floor of Irys's Keep tower—well, mine too, since she has given me three floors to use—I tried not to let my own aggravation interfere with the lessons.

Dax was attempting to teach me how to move objects with magic. He had rearranged the furniture, lined up the plush armchairs in neat rows and turned the couch over on its side with his power. My efforts to restore Irys's cozy layout and to stop an end table from chasing me failed. Though not from lack of trying—my shirt clung to my sweaty skin.

A sudden chill shook me. Despite a small fire in the hearth,

the rugs and the closed shutters, the living room was icy. The white marble walls, while wonderful during the hot season, sucked all the heat from the air throughout the cold season. I imagined the room's warmth following the stone's green veins and escaping outside.

Dax Greenblade, my friend, tugged his tunic down. Tall and lean, his physique matched a typical Greenblade Clan member. He reminded me of a blade of grass, including a sharp edge—his tongue.

"Obviously you have no ability to move objects, so let's try fire. Even a baby can light a fire!" Dax placed a candle on the table.

"A baby? Now you're really exaggerating. Again." A person's ability to access the power source and perform magic manifested at puberty.

"Details. Details." Dax waved a hand as if shooing a fly. "Now concentrate on lighting this candle."

I cocked an eyebrow at him. So far, all my efforts on inanimate items were for naught. I could heal my friend's body, hear his thoughts and even see his soul, but when I reached for a thread of magic and tried to use it to move a chair, nothing happened.

Dax held up three tan fingers. "Three reasons why you should be able to do this. One, you're powerful. Two, you're tenacious. And three, you've beat Ferde, the Soulstealer."

Who had escaped, and was free to start another soul-stealing spree. "Reminding me of Ferde is helping me how…?"

"It's *supposed* to be a pep talk. Do you want me to list all the heroic deeds you've—"

"No. Let's get on with the lesson." The last thing I wanted was to hear Dax recite the latest gossip. The news about my being a Soulfinder had spread through the Magician's Keep like

dandelion seeds carried by a strong wind. And I still couldn't think about the title without a cringe of doubt, worry and fear touching my heart.

I pushed all distracting thoughts aside and connected to the power source. The power blanketed the world, but only magicians could pull threads of magic from it to use. I gathered a strand to me and directed it to the candle, willing a flame to form.

Nothing.

"Try harder," Dax said.

Increasing the power, I aimed again.

Behind the candle, Dax's face turned red and he sputtered as if suppressing a cough. A flash seared my eyes as the wick ignited.

"That's rude." His outraged expression was comical.

"You wanted it lit."

"Yeah, but I didn't want to do it for you!" He glanced around the room as if seeking the patience to deal with an unruly child. "Zaltanas and their weird powers, forcing *me* to light the candle. Pah! To think I wanted to live vicariously through your adventures."

"Watch what you say about my clan. Or I'll…" I cast about for a good threat.

"You'll what?"

"I'll tell Second Magician where you disappear to every time he pulls one of those old books off his shelf." Bain was Dax's mentor, and, while the Second Magician delighted in ancient history, Dax would rather learn the newest dance steps.

"Okay, okay. You win and you've proved your point. No ability to light a fire. I'll stick to translating ancient languages."

Dax made a dour face. "And you stick to finding souls." He teased, but I sensed an undercurrent to his words.

His uneasiness over my abilities was for excellent reasons. The last Soulfinder was born in Sitia about a hundred and fifty years ago. During his short life, he had turned his enemies into mindless slaves and almost succeeded in his quest to rule the country. Most Sitians didn't react well to the news about another Soulfinder.

The awkward moment passed as a mischievous glint lit Dax's bottle-green eyes. "I'd better go. I have to study. We have a history test tomorrow. Remember?"

I groaned, thinking of the large tome waiting for me.

"Your knowledge of Sitian history is also pathetic."

"Two reasons." I held up my fingers. "One, Ferde Daviian. Two, the Sitian Council."

Dax gestured with his hand.

Before he could say anything, I said, "I know. Details, details."

He smiled and wrapped his cloak around him, letting in a gust of arctic wind as he left. The flames in the hearth pulsed for a moment before settling. I drew closer, warming my hands over the fire. My thoughts returned to those two reasons.

Ferde was a member of the unsanctioned Daviian Clan, who were a renegade group of the Sandseed Clan. The Daviians wanted more from life than wandering the Avibian Plains and telling stories. On a power quest, Ferde had kidnapped and tortured twelve girls to steal their souls and increase his magical power. Valek and I had stopped him before he could complete his quest.

An ache for Valek pumped in my heart. I touched his butterfly pendant hanging from my neck. He had returned to Ixia

a month ago, but I missed him more each day. Perhaps I should get myself into a life-threatening situation. He had a knack for showing up when I most needed him.

Unfortunately, those times were fraught with danger and there hadn't been many chances to just be with each other. I longed to be assigned a boring diplomatic mission to Ixia.

The Sitian Council wouldn't approve the trip until they decided what to do with me. Eleven clan leaders and four Master Magicians comprised the Council, and they had argued about my new role of Soulfinder all this past month. Of the four Masters, Irys Jewelrose, Fourth Magician, was my strongest supporter and Roze Featherstone, First Magician, was my strongest detractor.

I stared at the fire, following the dance of flames along the logs. My thoughts lingered on Roze. The randomness of the blaze stopped. The flames moved with a purpose, divided and gestured as if on a stage.

Odd. I blinked. Instead of returning to normal, the blaze grew until it filled my vision and blocked out the rest of the room. The bright patterns of color stabbed my eyes. I closed them, but the image remained. Apprehension rolled along my skin. Despite my strong mental barrier, a magician wove magic around me.

Caught, I watched as the fire scene transformed into a lifelike picture of me. Flame Me bent over a prone body. A soul rose from the body, which I then inhaled. The soulless body stood and Flame Me pointed to another figure. Turning, the body stalked the new person and then strangled him.

Alarmed, I tried to stop the fire vision to no avail. I was forced to observe myself make more soulless people, who all

went on a massive killing spree. An opposing army attacked. Fire swords flashed. Flames of blood splattered. I would have been impressed with the magician's level of artistic detail if I hadn't been horrified by the blazing carnage.

In time, my army was extinguished and I was caught in a net of fire. Flame Me was dragged, chained to a post and doused with oil.

I snapped back to my body. Standing next to the hearth, I still felt the web of magic around me. It contracted and tiny flames erupted on my clothes.

And spread.

I couldn't stop the advance with my power. Cursing my lack of fire skill, I wondered why I didn't possess this magical talent.

An answer echoed in my mind. *Because we need a way to kill you.*

I stumbled away from the blaze. Sweat poured down my back as the sound of sizzling blood vibrated in my ears. All moisture fled my mouth and my heart cooked in my chest. The hot air seared my throat. The smell of charred flesh filled my nose and my stomach heaved. Pain assaulted every inch of my skin.

No air to scream.

I rolled around the floor, trying to smother the fire.

I burned.

The magical attack stopped, releasing me from the torment. I dropped to the floor and breathed in the cool air.

"Yelena, what happened?" Irys touched an icy hand to my forehead. "Are you all right?"

My mentor and friend peered down at me. Concern lined her face and filled her emerald eyes.

"I'm fine." My voice croaked, setting off a coughing fit. Irys helped me sit up.

"Look at your clothes. Did you set yourself on fire?"

Black soot streaked the fabric and burn holes peppered my sleeves and skirt/pants. Beyond repair, I would have to ask my cousin, Nutty, to sew me another set. I sighed. I should just order a hundred of the cotton tunics and skirt/pants from her to save time. Events, including magical attacks, conspired to keep my life interesting.

"A magician sent me a message through the fire," I explained. Even though I knew Roze possessed the strongest magic in Sitia, and could bypass my mental defenses, I didn't want to accuse her without proof.

Before Irys could question me further, I asked, "How did the Council session go?" I hadn't been allowed to attend. Although the rainy weather wasn't conducive for walking to the Council Hall, it still rankled.

The Council wanted me well-versed in all the issues they dealt with on a daily basis as part of my training to be a Liaison between them and the Territory of Ixia. My training as a Soulfinder, though, remained a subject the Council hadn't agreed on. According to Irys's theory, my reluctance to begin learning could be the cause of the Council's indecision. I thought they worried I would follow the same path as the Soulfinder from long ago once I discovered the extent of my powers.

"The session…" Her lips twisted in a wry smile. "Good and bad. The Council has agreed to support your training." She paused.

I steeled myself for the next bit of news.

"Roze was…upset about the decision."

"Upset?"

"Fiercely opposed."

At least now I knew the motive behind my fire message.

"She still thinks you're a threat. So the Council has agreed to let Roze train you."

I scrambled to my feet. "No."

"It's the only way."

I bit back a reply. There were other options. There had to be. I was in the Magician's Keep, surrounded by magicians of various skill levels. There had to be another who could work with me. "What about you or Bain?"

"They wanted a mentor who was impartial. Out of the four Masters, that left Roze."

"But she's not—"

"I know. This could be beneficial. Working with Roze, you'll be able to convince her you're not out to rule the country. She'll understand your desire to help both Sitia and Ixia."

My doubtful expression remained.

"She doesn't like you, but her passion for keeping Sitia a safe and free place to live will override any personal feelings."

Irys handed me a scroll, stopping my sarcastic comment on Roze's personal feelings. "This arrived during the Council session."

I opened the message. In tight-printed letters was an order from Moon Man. It read, *Yelena, I have found what you seek. Come.*

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