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KIRA SAKURA
The First Glyph

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«Издательские решения»

**Sakura K.**

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In a world where magic was once reserved for the chosen few, young Taren gets a chance to change his fate at Avalon Academy.But behind its majestic walls lie secrets even the masters dare not reveal. Ancient runes, forgotten catacombs, and dangerous discoveries will change his life forever.What if the greatest power lies not in magic itself, but in truths lost to the centuries?Sometimes, a single step can change the fate of an entire world.

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# The First Glyph

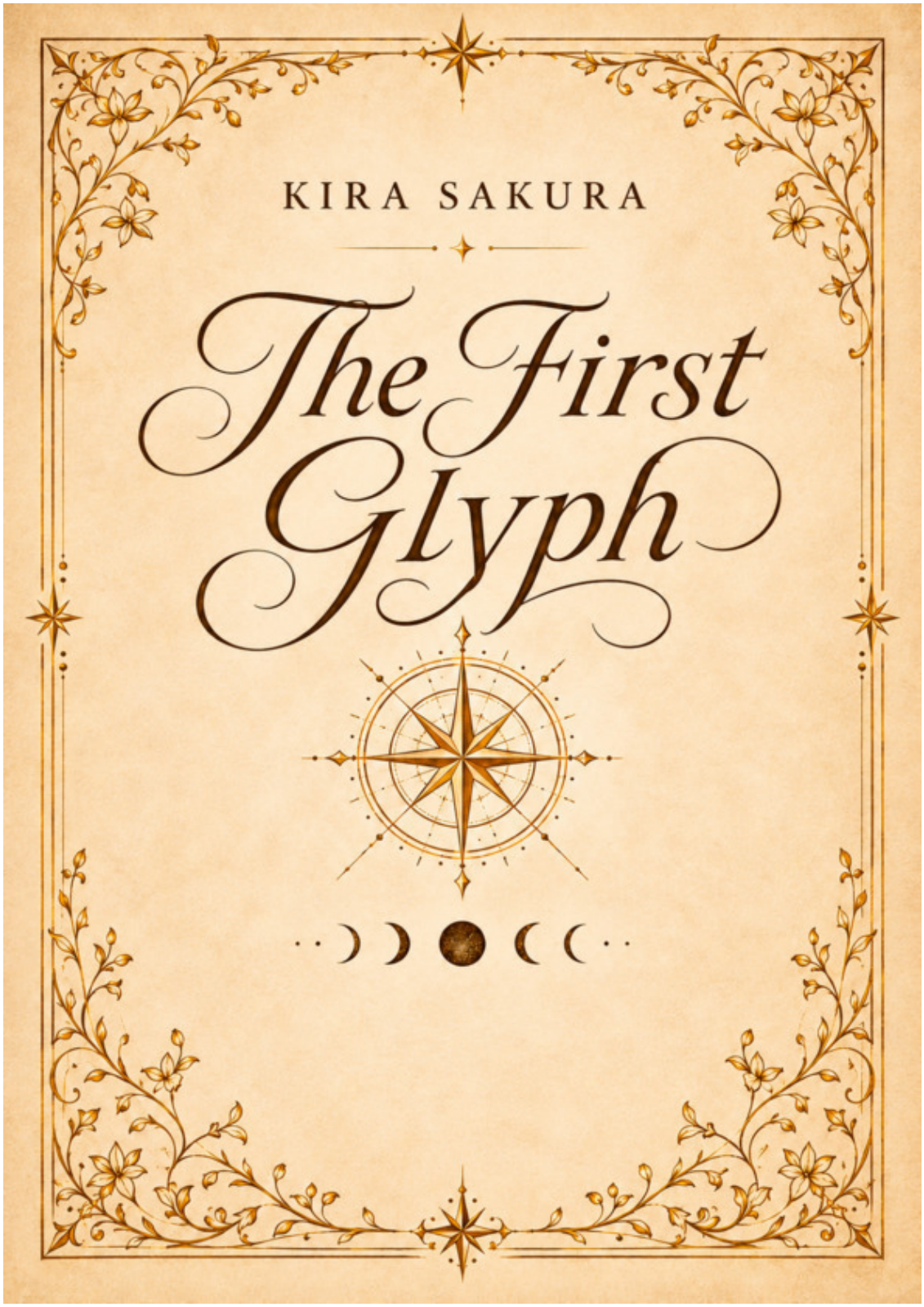
## Kira Sakura

*“The greatest battles are fought not on the battlefield, but within our hearts.”*
***— An Unknown Sage***

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KIRA SAKURA
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# Introduction

The year was 503, reckoned from the Passing of the Star of Creation.

For centuries, magic had remained a privilege reserved for the chosen few, its secrets carefully guarded by noble families. But three years earlier, everything had changed. In the kingdom of Avalon, the first Academy of Magic had opened its doors to anyone with the talent and determination to pursue knowledge.

Among its students was Taren, a young man from a small village nestled at the foot of the Roderick Mountains, near the borders of three kingdoms. Since childhood, he had dreamed of becoming a great mage, yet nature had granted him only a fraction of the power available to others.

Now, surrounded by the Academy's most gifted students, Taren would have to forge his own path toward his dream and prove that greatness is measured not merely by magical power, but by the strength of one's resolve.

After all, the most extraordinary discoveries often begin with those from whom the world expects the least.

# Chapter 1. A Dream Against the Odds

Flames flared in Taren's palm, briefly illuminating his face, taut with concentration. Yet the moment they left his fingers, they scattered into a shower of dim sparks, never reaching the wooden target. He let out a frustrated breath, trying to ignore the weariness slowly creeping through his arm. He had attempted this elementary exercise more times than he cared to count. Most of his classmates had mastered it within their first months at the Academy, but his results never changed. No matter how hard he tried, the little fireball always died halfway to its destination, as though magic itself refused to obey him.

Around him, the practical lesson in magical arts continued. The vast training grounds of Avalon Academy rang with voices, the whistle of wind cutting through the air, and the crackle of flames springing to life above students' hands. Some practiced conjuring fiery projectiles; others struggled to hold enormous boulders aloft. The most gifted were already working on intricate sequences of spells that wove the elements together. Magic could be felt everywhere. Sometimes Taren imagined that even the air was steeped in the power he so desperately wanted to command.

He extended his hand once more and focused on the familiar sensation of mana flowing through his body. A warm current rose slowly from his chest to his shoulder, then rushed toward his fingers, gathering into a faint point of light. Taren held his breath and tried to maintain its shape, but the magical current faltered and almost immediately began to disperse. The last sparks vanished before he could send them toward the target.

"Damn it…" he muttered, lowering his hand and glaring at the entirely unscathed target.

"Try to maintain a steady flow of magical energy," the instructor called as he walked slowly between the practice stations. "Remember, a spell's strength depends not only on how much mana you put into it, but also on how well you direct it. Don't attempt to use more energy than you can control."

Taren couldn't help smiling bitterly at those last words. If poor control had been his main problem, perhaps he would have overcome it long ago. But no matter how much he practiced, how many books he reread, or how many methods he tried, one fact remained unchanged — one that even the most relentless training could do nothing to alter.

His mana reserves amounted to just ten percent of the accepted norm.

There lay the peculiar cruelty of his gift. Unlike many students, who could wield only one or two elements, Taren could call upon every primary element of magic. Fire answered his will; water took the shapes he gave it; air obeyed the movements of his hands; and earth allowed him to reshape its surface. Yet whenever it came to casting a real spell, the same problem emerged: he possessed so little energy that even simple acts of magic demanded tremendous effort.

Where others summoned roaring streams of flame, he had to settle for a few sparks. Where his classmates raised heavy stones into the air, he could barely budge a small rock. And the harder he trained, the more clearly he understood that determination alone might not be enough to bridge the gulf between them.

"Well, well, great wizard. Failed to light a campfire again?"

The mocking voice made Taren's shoulders tense. He knew exactly who it belonged to without even turning around. Closing his eyes for a moment, he silently counted to three.

Rein stood nearby, flanked by his usual companions: tall, sneering Vin and stocky Lord, who rarely missed a chance to join in the ridicule. Rein's expensive uniform, trimmed with fine silver embroidery, fitted him impeccably. His assured posture and customary smug smile marked him as someone who had grown up believing himself superior to everyone around him.

Unlike Taren, Rein came from a noble family and had studied magic under skilled tutors since childhood. His mana reserves were considerable, and he truly was among the strongest students in

their year. That was what annoyed Taren most of all: beneath his rival's arrogance lay genuine talent, and denying it would have been foolish.

"With a flame like that, you might just manage to light a candle," Rein continued, strolling toward his practice station. "Although, judging by what I just saw, even a candle might be too formidable an opponent for you."

Vin burst out laughing. Lord folded his arms and watched Taren's reaction with interest. Taren turned slowly toward his uninvited audience, doing his best not to show how much their words stung.

"Still watching me practice?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "I had no idea my magic fascinated you so much."

Irritation flashed across Rein's face, but his familiar self-satisfied smile quickly returned.

"I'm merely curious how long it takes someone with no real talent to understand the obvious," he replied. "Some things can't be fixed by wanting them badly enough."

"Then you'll have to wait," Taren said evenly, though anger was already simmering inside him.

"Wait for what, exactly?" Rein asked with a mocking tilt of his head.

"For the day I become stronger than you."

For several moments Rein stared at him in silence, as though deciding whether he could possibly be serious. Then he laughed, and his friends promptly joined in. Taren saw nothing amusing about it.

"Stronger than me?" Rein repeated, savoring the words. "Do you have any idea how far apart our abilities are?"

Without waiting for an answer, he raised his right hand. A fireball formed almost instantly above his open palm, blazing so brightly that nearby students turned to look. Flames coiled in tight rings, seeming to answer every movement of Rein's fingers. Its heat could be felt several paces away.

With a casual flick of his wrist, Rein sent the spell toward a training target.

A deafening boom shook the grounds. The fireball struck the wooden structure dead center, blasting it into charred splinters and leaving only the smoking remains of its supports. Several students whistled in admiration. Rein did not even glance at the ruined target before turning back to Taren.

"When you can so much as repeat that, we'll talk," he said with icy certainty. "Until then, don't make promises you can't keep."

With that, Rein turned and walked toward the edge of the training grounds, his friends trailing behind him. Vin threw one last taunt over his shoulder, but Taren barely heard it. He was still staring at the smoking fragments of the target.

He wanted to argue, to prove Rein wrong, or at least to make him shut up. Yet every possible reply seemed meaningless in the face of such unmistakable superiority. He slowly curled his hand into a fist, feeling a miserable sense of helplessness displace his anger.

On one point, Rein was right.

A vast gulf separated them, and Taren had no idea how he was ever going to cross it.

By the time the lesson ended, the students had scattered to classrooms, practice halls, and dormitories. Some excitedly discussed spells that had gone well, others argued about the approaching competition, and the most diligent stayed behind to repeat the exercises a few more times. Taren had no desire to continue his fruitless attempts. He returned to the academic building and took his usual seat at one of the back tables in an almost deserted classroom.

An open notebook lay before him, its pages crowded with magical formulas, diagrams, and notes. Over the past few months he had tried countless ways of strengthening his spells, from the simplest methods of controlling mana to elaborate sequences found in advanced textbooks. Occasionally he managed a slight improvement, only to run into the same old limitation whenever he attempted a more powerful spell.

Leaning wearily against the back of his chair, Taren looked through the tall arched window. Beyond it rose the slender towers of Avalon Academy, bathed in the gentle afternoon sunlight. Magical lanterns adorned the pale stone walls, neatly pruned trees lined the paths, and students hurried between

buildings in robes of different colors, each bearing the insignia of their faculty. From time to time bells rang in the distance to announce the start of another class. Everything around him was a reminder of what an extraordinary place the Academy was.

Only a few years earlier, Taren could never have imagined himself here.

He had grown up in a small village near the Roderick Mountains, where three countries met. Life there moved at a measured pace, seldom bringing anything that could surprise its inhabitants. Taren had known no parental care from early childhood, but he had never been entirely alone. The village elder had raised him with the help of kindly neighbors who considered it their duty to look after the orphaned boy. Some brought him food, some offered him small chores, and others simply found time to listen to his endless questions about the world.

Taren remembered especially well the long evenings when the villagers gathered around the great hearth to tell old stories. The children would settle near the fire while the elder, comfortably seated in his chair, recounted legends of great heroes, mighty mages, and astonishing events from ages past. Sometimes his voice grew quiet and mysterious; at others it rang with solemn grandeur, until even the adults stopped talking to listen.

Taren was always among the most attentive listeners.

He loved stories about mages who could stop a storm with a gesture, raise an impregnable fortress, or defend an entire city against its enemies. He imagined towering spires, lost ancient ruins, and wondrous artifacts capable of true miracles. Sometimes the tales seemed so incredible that he doubted their truth, but that only made them more enticing.

One evening, after the other children had gone home, little Taren stayed by the hearth, watching the elder slowly rearrange the logs.

“Do mages like that really exist?” he finally asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

The old man turned his head and regarded the boy thoughtfully for a while before answering.

“So they say, Taren. But stories seldom tell us how much toil and how many mistakes lie behind great deeds,” the elder said, tossing another small log into the fire. “People prefer hearing about victories, not the long years it takes to earn them.”

Taren frowned, trying to imagine a powerful mage making mistakes, then voiced the question that had troubled him for so long.

“Could I ever become like them?”

The elder smiled and affectionately ruffled his hair.

“Who knows, my boy? You haven’t even tried yet. But if you ever decide to, remember this: a dream alone is not enough to make it real.”

To Taren, those words had felt almost like a promise. He returned to them in his thoughts again and again, imagining the day he would leave his village to study magic and accomplish something so remarkable that people would tell stories about him beside their own hearths.

Three years earlier, word had spread of the founding of Avalon Academy of Magic. For the first time, its doors were open not only to privileged families but also to ordinary people with the necessary aptitude. Suddenly his childhood dream had become a real possibility. Taren seized the opportunity with the determination of someone whose entire future depended on it. He prepared, studied everything he could get his hands on, and eventually earned his place at the Academy, overcoming his doubts and countless obstacles along the way.

But the stories of his childhood had never warned him how painful it could be to find himself the weakest among those who dreamed of greatness.

“Do you always sit here alone?”

The familiar voice pulled Taren from his memories. He turned to find Elis standing beside the neighboring table, several notebooks in her hands. Long fair hair fell loosely over her shoulders, and her green eyes regarded him with their familiar mixture of curiosity and teasing amusement. Tucked

under her arm was a small notebook with pages of magical diagrams sticking out of it — an almost constant companion to her studies.

"It's quieter here," Taren replied, trying to sound indifferent.

Elis slowly surveyed the half-empty room, then the table buried beneath his notes, and nodded with an exceptionally serious expression.

"Or are you hiding from everyone again?" she asked, stepping closer.

"I'm not hiding," Taren protested, putting down his pen.

"Of course not," Elis agreed in a tone that told him she was about to tease him. "You're just sitting in the farthest corner of an almost empty classroom, pretending you're working on research that will determine the fate of the entire world."

Without waiting to be invited, she perched on the edge of his table and set her notebooks down beside her. Taren was about to protest at her presumption, but merely shook his head. He had grown accustomed to such antics.

"By the way," Elis continued, leaning a little toward him, "people on the training grounds are still talking about your latest argument with Rein. Did you manage to annoy him again?"

"More like he decided he didn't have enough spectators," Taren grumbled. "Although I have to admit, he destroyed that target rather impressively."

"I noticed," Elis said, holding back a smile. "But to be fair, I think he was more interested in showing off than doing the exercise."

Taren shrugged and found himself looking down at his notes.

"What difference does it make why he did it? The point is, he succeeded. I spent an entire lesson trying and couldn't even hit my own target."

Elis studied him for a few moments, then noticed the densely written pages of his notebook.

"Still trying to work out your mana consumption?" she asked, indicating his calculations.

"I'm trying to find a way to make my spells stronger," Taren answered with a heavy sigh. "So far I've only proved one thing: filling enough pages with numbers doesn't make your magic any more powerful."

She laughed softly and reached for the notebook.

"Let me see what you've been calculating."

Reluctantly, Taren pushed his notes toward her. Elis examined several pages, paused at one formula, and thoughtfully traced a finger along the magical sequence. Unlike him, she had a keen interest in magical engineering and often took pleasure in complicated calculations that most students would rather never open.

"I think I see what you're trying to do," she said at last. "You're calculating how much extra energy you'd need to make a stronger spell. But isn't the whole problem that you don't have any extra energy to spare?"

"That's why I'm trying to increase my reserves," Taren replied, faintly irritated by how obvious her observation sounded.

Elis shook her head and turned the notebook toward him, pointing to one of the formulas.

"What if you approached it differently? Instead of increasing the amount of mana, you could change how you use it. Sometimes the right magical sequence produces much better results than simply pouring in more energy."

"Are you suggesting I take up magical engineering?" Taren asked suspiciously.

"And what would be wrong with that?" Elis raised her eyebrows in surprise. "At least then you might stop arguing with your own palm every time a spell goes wrong."

Taren smiled but almost immediately shook his head.

"You see, Elis, I want to become a great mage, not an engineer. No offense, of course, but ever since I was little, magic itself has been my dream."

“What a dreadful fate,” she said with exaggerated sympathy. “I can only imagine how terribly you’ll suffer if you ever learn to make something useful.”

“You’re impossible,” Taren said with a laugh.

“Right back at you, dummy,” Elis shot back, handing him his notebook.

They were silent for a few moments, and Taren looked thoughtfully at his calculations again. Elis’s words were not entirely without merit, though admitting that aloud would give her far too much satisfaction. He still believed that true greatness lay in mastery of magic, but for the first time in ages, he allowed himself to consider that his usual training methods might not be the only ones.

“By the way, you do remember the competition is coming up?” Elis asked, noticing his thoughtful expression. “Have you decided whether you’re entering?”

Taren rolled his pen between his fingers for a while before answering.

“I don’t know yet. Part of me wants to try, but another part… Well, you saw what happened on the training grounds today.”

“I did,” she agreed calmly. “But I don’t see why one bad training session should make you give up on the competition altogether.”

“It’s not just one session, Elis,” Taren said, looking up at her. “I have only ten percent of the normal mana reserve. No matter how talented I might be, that simply isn’t enough against someone like Rein.”

Elis studied him closely and frowned a little.

“Taren, surely you understand that competitions aren’t just about seeing who has the most magical energy? There’ll be trials that require knowledge, quick thinking, and the ability to make decisions under pressure.”

“Try telling Rein that,” Taren said with a wry smile. “I’m sure he’d be delighted to explain why raw power is everything.”

“Why do you care so much what Rein thinks?” Elis asked suddenly.

The question caught Taren off guard. He was about to offer his usual answer about his rival’s arrogance, but for some reason the words stuck in his throat.

Elis noticed his discomfort and went on more gently.

“You’re constantly comparing yourself to him when you’re completely different people. Yes, he has enormous mana reserves and excellent training, but you have abilities most students don’t possess. You can work with several elements, you understand complicated spells quickly, and you’re always trying to learn something new. Maybe instead of trying to become like Rein, you ought to find out what your own strength really is.”

Taren fell silent. He had grown so used to measuring his achievements by the amount of mana he possessed that he had almost stopped noticing anything else. Every success seemed inadequate because someone else could always achieve the same result faster, more powerfully, or with greater flair. And the harder he tried to catch up, the more frustrated he became by his own limitations.

“You have a way with words,” he said at last, smiling faintly.

“I can think, too. Imagine that,” Elis replied without missing a beat. “You should try it sometime. It can be useful.”

Taren laughed, and Elis smiled in satisfaction, plainly pleased to have lifted his spirits a little.

At that moment, loud laughter came from the classroom doorway. Taren turned automatically and spotted Rein with Vin and Lord. They were talking animatedly and occasionally glancing toward the tables at the back. Although he couldn’t hear a word, he had little doubt that their conversation somehow concerned him.

Elis followed his gaze and sighed quietly.

“Don’t start again,” she warned. “You do realize that’s exactly the reaction they’re hoping for?”

“Easy for you to say,” Taren replied, looking away from Rein’s group.

“Try ignoring him for once,” she suggested, sliding off the table and gathering her notebooks. “After all, you want to become a great mage, not a professional rival of Rein’s.”

Taren couldn’t help smiling. Once again, there was some truth in her words, though he was in no hurry to admit it.

Elis tucked her notebook under her arm and headed for the door, but after a few steps she turned back.

“Please think about the competition, all right?” she asked. “I think you’re deciding you can’t do it far too soon.”

“I’ll think about it,” Taren promised.

“Just don’t think too long. You’ll oversleep again and miss the registration deadline,” Elis added with a mischievous smile.

“I’m not late that often!” he protested.

She stopped, slowly turned her head toward him, and raised one questioning eyebrow. They stared at each other in silence until Taren finally surrendered.

“All right. Maybe a little often,” he admitted.

Elis laughed, waved, and made for the door.

“See you tomorrow, great mage. And don’t forget to get some rest!”

Taren watched her leave, feeling noticeably lighter after their conversation. He sat still for a while, considering what she had said, then slowly drew his notebook toward him and looked over the written pages again.

Perhaps Elis really was right. If his usual attempts to improve his magic produced no results, it made sense to look for something different. He simply had no idea where to begin.

The library at Avalon Academy occupied several spacious halls connected by long arched passageways. Tall bookcases stretched almost to the ceiling, with narrow ladders between them for students to reach the upper shelves. Magical lamps mounted on stone pillars gave off an even, gentle glow, illuminating endless rows of books, scrolls, and ancient manuscripts. A special kind of quiet always reigned here, disturbed only by rustling pages, hushed conversations, and the occasional scrape of a moving chair.

The library was one of Taren’s favorite places in the entire Academy. Unlike the training grounds, where every success or failure immediately drew attention, nobody here cared about a student’s background or the size of their mana reserves. Books did not mock weakness, compare readers, or demand proof of superiority. They simply held knowledge, waiting for someone curious enough to seek it out.

After passing several shelves, Taren stopped at the section devoted to magical energy. A small sign bearing the carefully lettered words Fundamentals of Mana and Magical Energy caught his eye. He studied the spines of the textbooks for a while, chose a fairly thick volume bound in dark material, and carried it to an empty table beside the window.

The opening chapters were familiar. They discussed the nature of mana, methods of storing and distributing it, the properties of magical currents, and the rules governing spellcraft. Taren scanned the pages attentively, lingering over certain formulas, until at last he came across a paragraph that made him stop.

“A person’s mana capacity is determined at birth and cannot be altered. A mage may improve their control over their existing supply of energy, but increasing the reserves themselves is considered impossible.”

Taren read the passage again slowly, as though hoping to discover some other meaning hidden in the familiar words. Then he turned the page, examined the next section carefully, and returned to the paragraph. But however long he searched, the textbook’s verdict remained unchanged: a person’s mana reserves were an inborn trait, and modern magical science knew no means of increasing them.

He felt the encouragement born of his conversation with Elis gradually give way to a heavy, unpleasant feeling.

Had everything truly been decided before he was even born?

It meant that no matter how hard he worked, how much he learned, or how many years he spent training, he could never match mages born with greater stores of energy. Even if Taren learned to control his mana perfectly, his abilities would still be limited by that same ten percent he hated thinking about.

He leaned back and stared through the tall window, beyond which the sun was slowly descending. For a moment he saw his home village again, the elder sitting by the hearth, and a little boy listening in wonder to stories of great mages. Taren smiled ruefully, remembering how certain he had once been that getting into the Academy was all it would take for the road to greatness to open before him.

That childhood faith now seemed both naive and strangely precious.

He looked at the open book again. If increasing his mana reserves truly was impossible, then spending all his time trying to achieve the impossible was pointless. Yet even the strictest textbook did not claim that the quantity of magical energy was the only measure of power.

“A mage may improve their control over their existing supply of energy…”

Taren thoughtfully traced the line with one finger. Elis’s words returned to him, and for the first time he tried looking at the problem from a different angle. Perhaps he didn’t need more energy. Perhaps he needed to learn how to achieve more with what he already had.

He imagined an ordinary fireball, which required a certain amount of mana to create. If there were a way to change how the spell was formed, reduce wasted energy, or strengthen the result by using additional tools, then even a weak mage might become far more dangerous than others imagined.

The idea was so intriguing that Taren hurriedly opened his notebook and wrote down several possibilities. Yet the longer he considered them, the clearer it became that his own knowledge was not enough for such research — not yet.

He needed to speak to one of the instructors.

Returning the book to its shelf, Taren gathered his notes and headed for the library exit. He still had no idea whether a way around his limitations existed, but for the first time in ages, he felt that his search might lead somewhere more useful than endlessly repeating the same exercises.

By then the Academy’s corridors were beginning to empty. Most students had finished their classes, while those who remained hurried about their business, discussing the upcoming competition or arranging evening practice sessions. Warm sunlight streamed through the tall windows, laying long strips of gold across the stone floors. Magical wall lamps glimmered softly, ready to illuminate the corridors when twilight came.

Taren was heading toward the Department of Magical Arts, hoping to find an instructor who could tell him about unfamiliar ways of strengthening spells. But as he passed a magical engineering classroom, he unexpectedly slowed. The door stood ajar, and the lively voice of a lecturer, so absorbed in his subject that he could be heard out in the corridor, drifted through the opening.

“…and that is precisely why ancient artifacts remain of such great interest to us,” the instructor was saying. “Despite the considerable advances of modern magical science, many discoveries possess properties we cannot yet fully explain.”

Taren couldn’t resist peering inside.

A lesson was underway. Students sat at long desks, examining the unusual objects arranged on the instructor’s lectern. Among them were an old metal bracelet, a fractured crystal, and a small plate covered in delicate magical symbols that glinted faintly beneath the lamps.

Taren spotted Elis in the front rows. She was so engrossed in taking notes that she paid no attention whatsoever to the doorway. Every now and then she raised her head to study another artifact, then returned to her notebook, adding small diagrams to what she had written.

Taren was about to continue down the corridor, unwilling to interrupt the class, when he heard something that stopped him in his tracks.

“Certain ancient finds can amplify their owner’s magic, allowing effects that would otherwise be beyond the limits of their own mana reserves.”

He stood motionless, listening to every word.

The lecturer picked up the metal plate and turned it so the students could see the symbols engraved upon it.

“Some artifacts can shorten the time required to cast a spell,” he continued. “Others can redirect a magical current or enhance the effect of a spell already formed. Naturally, not all such discoveries are equally useful, and some are genuinely dangerous if handled improperly. Yet even the simplest help us better understand what magic can do.”

One student raised a hand.

“Does that mean a weak mage could use spells normally beyond their abilities if they possessed a powerful enough artifact?”

The instructor turned the plate thoughtfully between his fingers before replying.

“Not quite. An artifact does not necessarily increase the mage’s own strength, but it can greatly expand what they are capable of doing. Imagine an ordinary person unable to lift a heavy stone with their bare hands, yet able to move it easily with the help of a properly designed mechanism. Magical engineering operates on a similar principle: sometimes how you use the energy available to you matters more than how much of it you have.”

The words struck Taren like lightning.

He glanced instinctively at his palm, remembering the tiny flame he had failed to sustain during the morning’s practice. If tools existed that could amplify magical effects without increasing his own reserves, perhaps they held the answer to his years of struggle against his weakness.

Meanwhile the instructor continued, describing ancient ruins and strange discoveries made by explorers across the continent. Some artifacts could be restored and adapted for everyday use. Others remained mysteries even to experienced specialists. A handful, the lecturer claimed, might completely transform the way people understood the very nature of magic.

Taren listened, almost forgetting that he had intended to visit an entirely different part of the Academy.

Ancient ruins… Artifacts that could strengthen magic…

In his mind he saw forgotten underground halls, ancient writing on stone walls, and mysterious objects waiting to be discovered. He knew perfectly well that not every expedition uncovered valuable treasures, and that most artifacts already found had probably been thoroughly studied. But even the smallest chance of discovering something unusual seemed far more appealing than another evening of fruitless calculations.

His gaze returned to Elis, who was still listening intently to the lecture.

Her advice about changing the way he used magic had suddenly taken on an entirely new meaning.

“So engineering after all…” he murmured, smiling despite himself.

Still, he had absolutely no intention of abandoning his dream. He wanted to become a great mage, master powerful spells, and one day prove to everyone that having little mana did not make a person useless. Only now was he beginning to suspect that the road to that goal might be considerably more interesting than he had imagined.

When the instructor mentioned the Department of Exploration, which organized expeditions to ancient structures and ruins, Taren knew exactly where he was going next.

The explorers' office was located in one of the Academy's more distant wings. Taren almost ran through several long corridors, scarcely noticing the surprised looks of students passing him. With every step, his imagination conjured increasingly thrilling scenes: ancient dungeons, forgotten artifacts, and remarkable discoveries of the kind he had previously encountered only in books.

Of course, he understood that an inexperienced student was unlikely to be admitted to a serious expedition straightaway. More probably, he would begin with simple errands, studying old documents or accompanying experienced researchers. But even that possibility seemed irresistible. If a single artifact he found could help him overcome his shortage of mana, all his efforts would have been worthwhile.

At last a massive wooden door came into view, bearing a small plaque. Taren quickened his pace, already rehearsing how he would explain his interest in exploration. But as he drew near, he stopped short.

Carefully lettered on the door were the words:

"Office Hours Have Ended."

For several moments Taren stared at the sign in disbelief, as if hoping he had come to the wrong door. Then he knocked cautiously and, receiving no answer, tried again a little louder.

Silence reigned on the other side.

"You've got to be kidding me…" he muttered, leaning his shoulder wearily against the wall. "The moment I finally come up with something useful, everyone decides to go home."

He checked the sign once more, but its message had not changed. For a while he considered searching the neighboring rooms for someone from the department, yet the increasingly deserted corridors persuaded him to give up for the day.

Disappointed, he was about to leave when his eye caught a small emblem decorating the door. Carved into the wood was an open book surrounded by several interwoven magical symbols. The design struck Taren as unusual, and he studied it for a while, imagining the knowledge and secrets that might lie behind the office walls.

How many people had set out from this very place to explore real ruins?

Most of the explorers surely had far more experience than he did. Some might be powerful mages able to confront any danger, while others had devoted decades of their lives to studying antiquities. But an explorer needed more than strong spells. They had to notice the unusual, ask questions no one could answer, and remain patient even when their searches yielded nothing for a long time.

And patience, Taren liked to think, was one thing he had in abundance.

He looked once more at the closed door, as if committing its location to memory, then slowly turned away.

"All right," he said softly, adjusting the bag on his shoulder. "I'll try again tomorrow."

By the time Taren reached the dormitory, evening shadows were gathering over the Academy. The last rays of sunlight painted the tower tops in warm shades of gold, while magical lanterns along the paths lit up one by one, bathing the grounds in a gentle glow. Students' voices drifted from open windows as they discussed the coming competition. Somewhere in the distance, the muffled sounds of practice spells could still be heard.

Entering his room, Taren shrugged off his jacket, tossed it carelessly over the back of a chair, and sank onto the bed. The day had been far more eventful than expected, and now everything that had happened seemed to demand his attention at once. His failure on the training grounds, another clash with Rein, his conversation with Elis, the harsh verdict in the library textbook, and the lecture on artifacts he had overheard by chance swirled together in his mind. Slowly, a new idea began to take shape amid the confusion.

For a while Taren lay motionless, staring at the ceiling. Then he slowly raised his right hand and concentrated. Familiar warmth ran through his fingers, and a tiny flame appeared above his open

palm, barely lighting the room. He watched it closely, trying to sustain the magical current for as long as possible. But after a few moments the flame flickered and went out, leaving only a faint sense of exhaustion behind.

"Ten percent…" Taren whispered, lowering his hand.

That morning the words had seemed almost like a sentence passed upon him. Now, after everything he had heard, they were beginning to mean something different. Yes, his abilities were limited, and no amount of wishing could instantly change the mana reserves he had been born with. But did that mean he was condemned to remain weak all his life? Perhaps there were methods that ordinary lessons never covered. Perhaps ancient mages had known things that modern researchers had yet to understand.

Taren remembered Rein's enormous fireball, which had effortlessly destroyed the practice target. Then he pictured Elis bent over his notebook, patiently explaining that sometimes the way magic was used mattered more than how much of it there was.

I need to find my own path…

He rolled onto his side and looked at a small stack of notebooks beside the bed. Reaching out, he took one, opened it to the last page, and held his pen thoughtfully above the blank paper. Finally he made up his mind and carefully wrote a few words:

"Ask about expeditions. Study ancient artifacts. Find a way to strengthen my magic."

Reading them back, he felt pleased, though he knew how vague his plan remained. He did not know whether he would be allowed to join an expedition, what dangers might lurk in ancient ruins, or whether his search would yield anything at all. But for the first time in a long while, he had a goal that went beyond endless practice and trying to imitate other people's achievements.

After another moment's thought, Taren added a final short note at the bottom of the page:

"Never give up."

He smiled at the words, then carefully closed the notebook and set it beside his bed.

"Not a bad plan for a future great mage," he murmured, feeling exhaustion gradually overcome his excitement.

He extinguished the lamp, settled more comfortably, and closed his eyes, but sleep was slow to come. Images of mysterious dungeons, forgotten chambers, and ancient structures whose walls were covered in unknown writing rose before him. He imagined discovering an artifact that would change everything he thought he knew about magic, then returning to the training grounds as a completely different person.

Of course, part of him still dreamed of seeing the look on Rein's face when he finally surpassed his arrogant rival. But something greater now lay beneath that desire. Above all, Taren wanted to prove to himself that he had not made a mistake when he left his village behind to pursue his childhood dream.

Amid these thoughts, the image of Elis unexpectedly returned. He remembered her teasing smile, her attentive gaze, and the ease with which she could turn even the most unpleasant conversation into something almost amusing. For some reason, her words stood out more vividly than anything else that had happened that day. Taren smiled to himself, imagining how she would react if he truly began researching ancient artifacts.

She'd probably tell me she was right again…

He chuckled softly and turned onto his other side, pulling the blanket up to his shoulders. Outside, the students' voices gradually faded, while magical lanterns bathed the Academy's walls in tranquil golden light. A clock chimed somewhere far away to mark the hour, and before long even the last sounds of practice had dissolved into the silence of the night.

Taren listened to the distant noises for a while longer, until at last his thoughts began to blur and give way to drowsiness.

Tomorrow he would wake again as an ordinary student with only ten percent of the normal mana reserve. He would go to class, face Rein's mockery once more, and watch others effortlessly cast spells that demanded so much from him.

But now he knew what he intended to do next.

And although countless uncertainties lay ahead, for the first time in a long while Taren fell asleep with the feeling that his journey toward true magic was only just beginning.

# Chapter 2. The Explorer's Path

Morning came to Avalon Academy with gentle sunlight spreading across its high towers and the stone walls of its academic buildings. The first rays streamed through arched windows, gilded the dormitory roofs, and stretched in long bands across the well-tended paths where students were already hurrying to class. Birds sang somewhere in the gardens, muted conversations drifted through open windows, and the clock tower above the central square steadily marked the beginning of another day.

The Academy was waking, filling with the familiar bustle of lessons and training. In classrooms, professors prepared magical instruments for their lectures; on the practice grounds, the first spells were already flaring to life. Students hurried through long corridors, reciting formulas before upcoming tests. Everything seemed to be following its customary routine — except for one resident of the men's dormitory, who had no intention of joining in.

Taren slept soundly, sprawled across the bed and almost completely tangled in his blanket. He had lain awake late into the previous night, thinking about ancient artifacts and possible expeditions. Now that sleep had finally claimed him, neither the sunlight nor the distant ringing of bells could disturb him. Even the noise of students outside his window seemed part of a strange dream in which he wandered through endless underground halls searching for a mysterious magical object.

Before long, however, the familiar sounds of morning were joined by something entirely unexpected.

First Taren felt a slight weight on his chest, as though someone had placed a little bag of sand on top of his blanket. He shifted irritably and tried to turn onto his side, but the mysterious weight moved with him. Then came an insistent cooing right beside his ear, accompanied by tiny claws scratching at the fabric.

Taren grimaced and cracked one eye open.

A pigeon was sitting on his chest.

At first glance, it looked perfectly ordinary: gray feathers with a faint silvery sheen, a small head, and round eyes fixed on the sleepy young man. Yet a pale bluish glow shimmered around its body, and tiny sparks of magical energy occasionally danced along its wings.

For several moments, Taren stared silently at his unexpected visitor, trying to decide whether he was still dreaming.

"Where did you come from…?" he mumbled, cautiously lifting his head.

The pigeon tilted its head as though listening carefully to the question, then spread its wings and suddenly shrieked in an unmistakably human voice:

"You overslept, dummy!"

Taren shot upright so violently he nearly fell out of bed. The pigeon beat its wings in protest, but instead of flying away, it planted its feet more firmly and began pecking at his shoulder as though determined to wake him at any cost.

"Ow! Stop that!" Taren cried, swatting at the persistent bird. "What in the world is going on?!"

The pigeon gave a short, triumphant coo and spread its wings again. This time Taren noticed its magical glow growing brighter. With one deft movement, the bird rose from the bed and flew toward the open window. A thin, sparkling trail like scattered stardust lingered in the air for an instant, then vanished without a trace.

Taren sat motionless on the bed for a little while longer, trying to make sense of what had happened.

"Dummy…?" he repeated aloud.

The familiar word made him narrow his eyes.

"Elis…"

He had no idea how she had made an ordinary pigeon speak in her voice, but he had almost no doubt who was responsible for such an unusual awakening. It was just the sort of prank Elis enjoyed: an opportunity to tease him while testing another of her engineering ideas.

Taren was about to sink back onto his pillow when his eyes drifted toward the window. The Academy's clock tower stood beyond the glass, and the position of its hands drove every thought of sleep from his mind.

Professor Alirina's lecture had already begun.

"Damn!" he shouted, throwing off the blanket. "Not again!"

Taren scrambled out of bed and began getting dressed in a frenzy. The jacket he had thrown over a chair the night before was tangled up with several pages of notes. One boot lay near the door, while the other had somehow ended up under the bed. As he struggled to make himself presentable, he cursed his habit of staying awake too late and imagined the professor's displeased expression when yet another late student appeared.

Alirina taught the study of magical creatures and the ways people interacted with them. Her lectures were among the Academy's most engaging, for she did far more than repeat what was written in textbooks. She often showed students rare researchers' records, ancient illustrations, and unusual magical specimens. Taren particularly loved her classes: stories about creatures from distant lands always reminded him of the tales he had heard beside the village hearth as a child.

And of all days, this was the one on which he had managed to sleep through the beginning of her lesson.

Buttoning his jacket as he walked, Taren grabbed his notebook, shoved it into his bag, and hurried toward the door. With his hand already on the handle, he stopped and cast a suspicious glance at the window through which the magical pigeon had disappeared.

"All right, Elis," he murmured with a reluctant smile. "I'll get you back for this."

But the smile vanished as soon as he remembered the time. He darted out of his room and almost ran down the corridor, doing his best not to knock over the students coming the other way.

The journey to the classroom felt much longer than usual. The Academy's corridors were already bustling: students hurried to lessons with textbooks and scrolls under their arms, several professors talked beside a tall window, and small groups gathered on stair landings to argue enthusiastically about the upcoming competition.

Ordinarily, Taren enjoyed watching this commotion, feeling himself part of the remarkable place he had once longed to enter. Today, however, he could think of only one thing: could he slip into the lecture unnoticed and avoid yet another reprimand from Professor Alirina?

Reaching the correct wing, he stopped beside the classroom for a moment to catch his breath. Through the heavy wooden door came the professor's calm voice, accompanied by the quiet rustle of pages and the scratching of quills. The lesson was clearly well underway.

Taren cautiously pushed the door open.

Almost every seat in the spacious lecture room was occupied. Students sat at long tables facing a raised lectern where several books and magical crystals had been arranged. A large map of the continent hung at the back of the room, marked with mountain ranges, forests, and ancient settlements.

He spotted a vacant seat beside the aisle and was about to slip toward it when a familiar mocking voice destroyed every hope of going unnoticed.

"Well, look who's decided to honor us with his presence," drawled Rein, seated nearby with Vin and Lord. "Our great mage has finally woken up."

Several students turned around, and Vin hastily covered his mouth to smother a laugh. Rein made no effort to conceal his enjoyment as Taren stopped in the aisle.

“Perhaps he thought a lecture about magical creatures would be particularly useful,” Rein continued, lowering his voice just enough to pretend at discretion while remaining clearly audible. “Maybe he’ll learn how to become a little stronger.”

“Or find some creature willing to lend him its mana,” Lord added, prompting another snicker from Vin.

Taren felt irritation sweep away the last traces of sleepiness. After yesterday’s argument, he had no desire to become their target again — especially in front of half the class. Nevertheless, he forced himself to stop and look calmly at Rein.

“Missed me already, I see,” Taren replied. “Don’t worry, I’m here now. You can get back to listening.”

Rein narrowed his eyes, ready with a retort, but he never had the chance to deliver it.

“Gentlemen,” came a stern woman’s voice, silencing the room at once. “If you’ve finished discussing one another, perhaps we may return to the subject of the lesson?”

Professor Alirina stood beside the lectern.

She was a tall woman with an attentive, almost piercing gaze. Her red hair, already streaked here and there with gray, was gathered into a neat bun, and her dark teaching robes accentuated her upright bearing. She slowly surveyed the students before turning her attention to Taren, still standing in the aisle.

“Mr. Taren,” she said evenly, “am I to assume you have decided to test the limits of my patience?”

Taren felt his cheeks warming treacherously.

“My apologies, Professor. I overslept.”

“What an extraordinary surprise,” Alirina observed dryly, indicating an empty seat beside Elis. “Take your place, please. And in future, try to arrive at my lectures before they end.”

A ripple of stifled laughter passed through the class. Taren nodded quickly and headed toward the desk, carefully avoiding Rein’s eyes. His rival looked rather disappointed that the exchange had ended so soon.

Elis sat near the front and watched him approach with a barely perceptible smile, which she was clearly attempting to conceal behind an expression of perfect innocence.

When Taren sat down beside her, she leaned closer and whispered:

“So? Did the pigeon help?”

“If by ‘help’ you mean trying to peck me to death, then absolutely,” Taren whispered, pulling out his notebook. “Do you have any idea what a commotion it caused?”

Elis covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

“But it woke you up.”

“And I still almost missed half the lesson.”

“Then I’ll send it earlier next time,” she concluded serenely.

Taren shook his head, unable to think of an answer. Before they could continue, however, Professor Alirina turned unexpectedly toward them.

“And by the way, Miss Elis,” she said, making the girl straighten at once, “I must admit that your idea of a magical pigeon is quite intriguing. Controlling the behavior of a living creature with a small magical construct requires very precise calculations.”

Elis blushed slightly, but genuine pleasure at the praise shone on her face.

“Thank you, Professor. I haven’t finished refining the sequences, but the first tests have been successful.”

“I have no doubt,” Alirina replied, casting a brief glance at Taren. “Especially given how convincingly your invention has demonstrated its effectiveness. Come and see me after the lesson, please. I believe we have something to discuss.”

Elis nodded in satisfaction. Hearing a muffled laugh from the next desk, Taren sighed and finally opened his notebook. He was already beginning to suspect that the story of the magical pigeon would provide material for jokes for quite some time.

When the room finally fell silent, Professor Alirina approached the large map behind the lectern. She passed a hand over one of the magical crystals, and thin lines of light raced across the map, picking out mountain ranges and national borders.

“Today we shall discuss one of the most mysterious creatures known to us largely through ancient legends and fragmentary researchers’ accounts,” the professor began. “Some regard it as a myth. Others believe such creatures truly existed. So far, however, no one has presented evidence convincing enough to settle the matter.”

She pointed to a place on the map where three countries met.

“I speak of the chimera, which legend places in the Roderic Mountains.”

At the familiar name, Taren instinctively looked up. He knew those mountains well; his native village stood at their foot. Ever since childhood he had been accustomed to seeing their immense rocky peaks in the distance, nearly white in the sunlight on clear days and lost behind dense storm clouds when thunder rolled in.

The Roderic Mountains had always occupied a special place in local stories. The elders often spoke of strange noises carried down from the high slopes, and hunters preferred not to climb too far, even when their prey’s tracks led toward inaccessible ravines. Some blamed the danger of rockfalls, others spoke of unknown beasts, but most simply believed that certain places in the mountains were best left alone.

Taren had never given those warnings much thought. Hearing the familiar name from his professor now, however, awakened an unexpected curiosity.

“According to the most common descriptions,” Alirina continued, “the ancient chimera possesses a body combining the traits of several formidable creatures. It is said to have a dragon’s head, enormous eagle’s wings, a lion’s paws, and a heavy tail ending in a bony club. Some sources also describe extraordinary physical strength and an ability to withstand ordinary magical spells.”

The professor touched another crystal, and a translucent image of the creature appeared above the lectern. Its elongated dragon’s head towered above a massive body, huge wings spread behind its back, and its long tail did indeed end in a heavy, club-like swelling.

The students stirred as they examined the magical projection. Someone whistled in admiration, several girls exchanged glances, and a student in the back row murmured that even an experienced mage would hardly welcome a meeting with such a beast.

Taren studied the image closely. He had seen old drawings of chimeras in village books, but none had looked quite so formidable.

“Could a monster like that really live in the mountains?” a student asked, raising a hand.

Alirina turned toward him and clasped her hands thoughtfully before her.

“That is precisely why I call the chimera a mystery,” she replied. “Most descriptions were written many years ago, and modern researchers have yet to confirm the existence of a creature resembling the one portrayed in the legends. But a lack of reliable evidence does not necessarily mean every account was invented.”

She paused to let the students finish their notes, then continued.

“Equally intriguing is the chimera’s supposed diet. According to old sources, its favorite delicacy is a rare plant known as the Starblossom. It is believed to grow on the high slopes of the Roderic Mountains and to possess unusual magical properties that modern scholarship has not yet fully explored.”

At the mention of the Starblossom, Taren’s expression changed visibly.

Unlike most students, to whom the name sounded mysterious and even beautiful, he knew exactly which plant the professor meant. He immediately pictured small flowers with pale petals that

shimmered faintly in sunlight. They grew in certain mountain meadows near his village. Though the locals treated them with a degree of respect, for the village boys the flowers had more often been an excuse for some foolish contest.

Taren could still remember the day he and several friends had challenged one another to eat as many of the strange flowers as possible. At the time, it had seemed harmless enough. The plant looked perfectly innocent. But the instant he bit into the first petal, an appalling bitterness flooded his mouth, so vile that he nearly brought up everything in his stomach.

Ever since that day, Taren had firmly believed no act of heroism was worth tasting a Starblossom again.

"Aside from its presumed magical properties," Professor Alirina continued, "the plant is known for its extraordinarily bitter flavor. Some ancient records even claim it is almost impossible to eat without processing it first."

Taren grimaced involuntarily.

Elis noticed and leaned closer with interest.

"Are you all right?" she whispered, careful not to distract the others.

"Never better," Taren murmured. "Just remembered something unpleasant."

She raised a questioning eyebrow. After making sure the professor was busy with another illustration, Taren continued.

"Those Starblossoms grow near my village. My friends and I once decided to taste them."

"Was it really that bad?" Elis asked, intrigued.

"Believe me, you'd be better off eating a rock," Taren answered in perfect seriousness. "At least a rock wouldn't leave that bitter taste in your mouth for days."

Elis struggled to suppress a laugh.

"A rock, you say? Now I'm actually curious to try one of these flowers."

Taren turned to her in genuine disbelief.

"Were you listening to a word I just said?"

"Of course," she replied calmly. "I'm simply curious whether they're really as terrible as you claim."

"If you ever come to my village, I'll show you an entire meadow of them," Taren whispered. "Just don't say I didn't warn you."

Elis smiled and returned to her notes, but Taren noticed her carefully writing the plant's name in the margin. Apparently, her researcher's curiosity had already found a new target.

Meanwhile, Alirina continued her account of the ancient chimera, drawing the students' attention to contradictions between the sources. Some chronicles claimed that these creatures had arisen through unknown magical processes, while others suggested that their origin involved forces whose nature lay beyond human understanding.

"Some researchers have even suggested that chimeras came from somewhere else entirely," the professor said, her keen gaze traveling across the room. "But we have insufficient evidence to make any definite claims. However appealing such theories may be, scholarship must rest on evidence, not merely on beautiful legends."

Taren looked thoughtfully at the map of the Roderic Mountains. He suddenly remembered a small meadow where he and his village friends had often played as children. In spring, countless Starblossoms bloomed there, their petals glimmering in sunlight as though a thousand tiny stars had been scattered across the earth. The place had always seemed wonderfully peaceful, with a beautiful view of the village and surrounding forests from the higher slopes.

Back then, none of the boys had wondered why such strange flowers grew only in certain places. They simply played among them, collected oddly shaped stones, and argued about who would one day reach the highest peaks.

Now, listening to the professor, Taren wondered for the first time how many unknown wonders might be hidden in the land he had considered perfectly ordinary since childhood.

Alirina concluded by reminding her students that even the most incredible legends sometimes preserved fragments of knowledge about the past. She invited anyone interested to consult the ancient sources in the Academy library and announced that their next lesson would continue the study of creatures mentioned in old chronicles.

When the bell signaled the end of the lecture, lively conversation filled the room. Students discussed the chimera's image, argued over its possible abilities, and speculated whether so powerful a creature might truly exist somewhere in the mountains.

Taren was in no hurry to gather his things. He studied the map of the Roderic Mountains for a while, trying to match its features to places he remembered from childhood. Then he turned to Elis, who was carefully packing her notebooks into her bag.

"You wanted to speak to the professor, didn't you?" he reminded her. "Now would be a good time."

Elis looked up, as though only just remembering Alirina's invitation, and nodded quickly.

"That's right. Come on. You might find it interesting, too."

Once most of the students had left, Elis approached the lectern and Taren followed her, although he wasn't entirely sure why she needed him for a discussion of engineering projects. Professor Alirina was sorting through her notes, packing magical crystals into a small case, and occasionally making entries in her journal.

Seeing them approach, she put down her pen and nodded in greeting.

"Miss Elis, I'm glad you remembered our conversation," she said. "I confess that your little invention involving the pigeon has piqued my interest."

Elis smiled, clearly pleased that her professor had taken a genuine interest in her work.

"Thank you, Professor. I merely wanted to test one of my sequences for controlling animal behavior," she explained. "It occurred to me that with precise enough adjustments, a bird could be made to carry out simple tasks without being harmed."

"And for your first experiment, you decided to wake Mr. Taren?" Alirina asked with a faint smile.

"He was a very convenient volunteer," Elis answered with absolute seriousness. "Although he didn't know he was volunteering."

Standing beside her, Taren threw up his hands in indignation.

"Excuse me, Professor, but nobody asked me to volunteer. What's more, that bird nearly pecked a hole in my shoulder!"

Alirina laughed softly, while Elis gave an innocent shrug.

"But the experiment was a success," she pointed out. "You woke up, didn't you?"

"I can't argue with that," Taren sighed, realizing that further protest was useless.

The professor questioned Elis a while longer about how her construct worked. Enthusiastically, the girl explained how she had linked a simple magical sequence to the bird's behavior, showing her notes and diagrams. Taren listened with unexpected interest, gradually appreciating how much work lay behind what had seemed like a simple prank.

Before long, the discussion turned to more serious matters.

"We are currently working with the Department of Magical Engineering on a device intended to make exploring ancient ruins and dungeons considerably easier," Alirina explained, closing one of her journals. "We hope it will detect hidden magical constructs, unusual traces of energy, and certain kinds of traps before an explorer approaches them."

Elis immediately brightened and asked several questions about how the device was intended to function. The professor explained that the project was still in its early stages and required further testing, since magical currents in ancient structures sometimes behaved unpredictably.

Taren, who had been listening silently, suddenly remembered the closed researchers' office he had failed to visit the day before.

"Excuse me, Professor," he said during a brief pause. "Are you a member of the Research Department by any chance?"

Alirina turned to him with interest.

"I work with them, Mr. Taren. Why do you ask?"

The young man hesitated for a moment, then decided to explain his idea.

"I'd like to join an expedition," he said. "I tried visiting the researchers' office yesterday, but it was closed. I was told you could sign up there to explore ancient ruins, and I've become interested in the artifacts that are found in them."

The professor studied him for some time, as though trying to judge how serious he was.

"Exploring ruins is fascinating, but not always safe," she warned. "Even sites that have been studied for years sometimes present unexpected obstacles. That is why beginners are usually admitted only to the simplest expeditions, under the supervision of experienced staff."

"I understand, Professor," Taren assured her quickly. "I don't expect to be sent anywhere especially dangerous straightaway. I'd just like to begin studying ancient discoveries and perhaps, one day, learn how they work."

Alirina nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, I can only applaud a desire for knowledge. Most research parties have already departed for their assigned destinations, but there are catacombs near the Academy where we regularly conduct training expeditions for beginners. As far as I know, the next group leaves tomorrow."

At those words, Taren felt a familiar excitement stirring inside him again.

"How can I join that group?" he asked eagerly.

"You need to find Gilbert, the expedition coordinator," the professor replied. "He handles the arrangements, assigns students to groups, and makes sure beginners don't venture underground without proper authorization."

"And where can I find him?"

Alirina paused, then gave a barely perceptible smile.

"I suspect he's already in town by now. Try the tavern beside the central church. Gilbert has a habit of spending his free hours there — and sometimes hours he ought to spend working."

Elis looked at the professor in surprise.

"Do you mean the expedition coordinator spends his working hours in a tavern?"

"I'm afraid that's exactly what I mean, Miss Elis," Alirina replied with gentle irony. "Still, one shouldn't judge a person's abilities by his habits alone. Gilbert has been involved in research for a long time and knows very well how to handle novice adventurers."

Taren thanked Professor Alirina and was about to leave when she stopped him with a small gesture.

"One more thing, Mr. Taren. If you do take part, listen carefully to the coordinator's instructions. Curiosity is an excellent trait in a researcher, but carelessness can undo even the most exceptional abilities."

"I promise I'll be careful, Professor," he replied earnestly.

Elis gave a quiet snort beside him.

"Especially if someone wakes him up in time."

Taren cast her a reproachful look, but the professor merely smiled and returned to her notes.

After leaving the classroom, Taren and Elis headed along a long corridor toward the next academic building. Students once again hurried past them on their way to lessons, and the sounds of training drifted through open windows from the nearby grounds. The sun had climbed high, turning patches of stone floor almost golden wherever its light fell.

Taren walked a little faster than usual, still thinking about the unexpected opportunity to join a real research expedition. He wanted to go straight into town, find Gilbert, and put his name on the list, but first he had some unfinished business at the Academy.

Elis watched his thoughtful expression in silence for a while before nudging him gently with her elbow.

“Well then, great mage,” she said with a smile, “are you going to become an explorer now?”

“I’m not planning to become anything but a mage,” Taren replied. “I just want to see what artifacts might be hidden in those old dungeons.”

“Of course,” she nodded. “And your sudden interest in magical tools and research, right after yesterday’s conversation, is a complete coincidence.”

Taren chuckled.

“Don’t start telling me you were right.”

“But wasn’t I?”

“Perhaps a little,” he admitted reluctantly.

“Excellent,” Elis said with satisfaction. “Then I suggest your next step should be attending a magical engineering lesson. One starts very soon, as it happens.”

Taren stopped and stared at her in genuine surprise.

“Are you serious?”

“Entirely serious. If you’re going to study artifacts, it would help to understand at least the basic principles of how they’re made.”

He scratched the back of his head thoughtfully, then shook it.

“I think I’ll skip it today. I’ve got a few other things to do before I go into town. If I’m late again, the expedition coordinator might have left the tavern.”

Elis raised an eyebrow.

“Do you really think a man who spends his free time in a tavern is in such a hurry to leave it?”

Taren laughed.

“All right, you might have a point. But I’d still better hurry.”

She studied him a moment longer, then stopped abruptly at a fork in the corridor.

“Then at least do one more useful thing before you run away from the Academy,” she said. “Finally sign up for the competition.”

Taren frowned slightly.

“Still going on about that?”

“Of course. If you want to test your abilities, why not try? Besides, you’ll still have time to prepare.”

He remembered their conversation yesterday, his struggles on the training grounds, and Rein’s mocking smile. He still suspected the competition could end in an unpleasant defeat, but after the lecture and his conversation with the professor, his prospects no longer seemed quite so hopeless.

Perhaps it really was worth a try.

“All right,” he said at last. “I think I’ll register today.”

Elis smiled with satisfaction and adjusted the strap of her bag.

“Wonderful. So you’ll manage at least one sensible decision today.”

“One?” Taren protested. “Are you saying all my other decisions were foolish?”

“Let’s not start that conversation,” she replied with her most innocent expression. “Otherwise I’ll be late for class, and unlike certain people, I don’t enjoy explaining myself to professors.”

Taren laughed, knowing perfectly well what she meant.

At the next classroom, Elis stopped and turned toward him.

“Good luck, great mage,” she said more gently. “And try not to get into trouble while I’m not around.”

“No promises,” Taren said with a grin.

“That’s exactly what I was afraid you’d say,” she sighed, then smiled and disappeared into the classroom.

After watching her go, Taren stood in the corridor a while longer. Then he adjusted his bag and headed for the Department of Magical Arts, where registration for the competition was being held.

On his way, Taren passed an open practice ground where a small group of novice swordsmen were training. Unlike most mages, who practiced with staves and spells, these students wore light armor and drilled with real weapons under their instructor’s watchful eye.

He slowed without meaning to.

One swordsman lunged, and his blade flashed blue for an instant. Another student, armed with a spear, channeled a little magical energy into its tip and tried to pierce a practice shield. Metal rang out, and the instructor nodded approvingly, though he immediately corrected the student’s footwork.

Taren watched with interest. Swordsmen occupied a special place among the Academy’s students, for their abilities differed from conventional spellcasting. Their mana reserves were relatively small, and they rarely had the power for large-scale spells. Instead, they could channel magical energy directly into their weapons, strengthening their blows, reinforcing their blades, and allowing ordinary metal to resist certain magical effects.

A lecturer had once explained that this technique demanded not only mana control but serious physical training. That was why a skilled swordsman could sometimes be every bit as dangerous as a mage possessing far greater reserves of energy.

Taren glanced thoughtfully at his own hands.

So I’m not the only one trying to make the most of a small amount of mana…

Suddenly the familiar division between strong and weak students seemed less clear-cut than he had always believed. Magic could manifest in different ways. What one person saw as an insurmountable limitation, another might turn into the defining feature of a technique.

He watched the swordsmen a little longer, then continued on his way. Thoughts of ancient artifacts and unconventional uses of magic were gradually coming together into a single idea, though he still needed time to think it through.

At the Department of Magical Arts, Taren found a spacious reception hall. Behind a heavy writing desk sat a friendly-looking middle-aged man with a thick beard. A large registration ledger lay open before him, beside a neat stack of scrolls tied with thin ribbons.

A small nameplate read: “Alric Devereaux.”

Taren approached the desk and greeted him politely.

“Good afternoon. I’d like to sign up for the upcoming competition,” he said, trying to sound as confident as possible.

The man looked up from the ledger and studied his visitor.

“Good afternoon, young man,” Alric replied warmly. “A commendable ambition. Your name and faculty, please.”

“Taren. Faculty of Magical Arts.”

Alric made several quick notes and turned a page in the large ledger.

“Excellent, Mr. Taren. Now I’ll need your age, magical reserve level, and any distinctive abilities. It’s standard information for assigning competitors to the various trials.”

Taren hesitated. He knew all too well the reaction his mana reserve usually provoked, but there was no turning back now.

“I’m eighteen,” he replied. “My mana reserve is ten percent of the accepted norm. But I can use all four primary elements.”

Alric’s pen stopped for a moment.

Slowly, the man looked up, examining Taren as though wondering whether he had heard correctly.

“All four primary elements?” the clerk repeated.

“Yes, Mr. Devereaux,” Taren confirmed. “Fire, water, air, and earth. Unfortunately, with so little mana, the strength of my spells leaves much to be desired.”

Alric stroked his beard thoughtfully, then gave a short chuckle.

“An intriguing combination, young man. You might say good fortune and bad decided to meet in one person. Not every mage can command such a range of elements, but from what you tell me, nature chose to limit you elsewhere.”

Taren gave an awkward smile, expecting the usual ridicule, but Alric seemed neither irritated nor dismissive. If anything, there was a flicker of curiosity in his eyes.

“In any case,” the man continued, returning to his ledger, “competitions exist so students can demonstrate their abilities. Sometimes the most unexpected participants achieve remarkably interesting results.”

He finished the entry, put a small mark beside Taren’s name, and handed him a registration scroll.

“Here is your document. The qualifying trials begin in a week and a half. I recommend watching the Academy’s announcements and continuing to prepare. There will be several stages, and not all of them will depend solely on brute magical strength.”

Taren felt his last doubts beginning to give way to excitement.

“Thank you, Mr. Devereaux,” he said, taking the scroll. “I’ll do my best to prepare.”

Alric nodded approvingly.

“That’s the spirit. Entering the competition is already a fine opportunity to test yourself. And if you manage to surprise the professors, who knows what doors might open for you?”

After saying goodbye, Taren left the office and stopped beside a tall window. He unrolled the scroll once more, checked his name and the competition date carefully, and tucked the document into his bag.

The decision was made.

He really would compete, despite his feeble mana reserve and the likelihood that Rein would be among his strongest opponents. The thought both unsettled and excited him, but he had no intention of backing out.

A week and a half remained before the trials.

And if his planned expedition went ahead, perhaps he would have time to find something useful for his preparation.

After registering, Taren headed for the Academy dining hall to have a bite before going into town. By now, he could certainly feel the effects of having missed breakfast in the morning rush, while all the talk of magical creatures, artifacts, and research had only sharpened his appetite.

The dining hall greeted him with its usual clamor. Students from various faculties sat at long wooden tables, discussing lectures, training assignments, and the latest Academy news. Kitchen staff hurried between the rows carrying dishes and collecting empty plates, while the scent of warm bread and fragrant herbs drifted from the serving counter.

Taren took a bowl of soup and several slices of bread, then settled at a free table by the window. He breathed in the appetizing aroma, scooped up his first spoonful, and was just about to swallow when he suddenly grimaced.

An odd, bitter taste filled his mouth.

For an instant, Taren felt as though he were back in that meadow near the Roderic Mountains, foolishly tasting a Starblossom as a child.

“What on earth…?” he muttered, examining the spoon. “Surely they haven’t managed to put that stuff in here too?”

He tried a little more soup and breathed a sigh of relief. No, it was nowhere near as revolting as a real Starblossom. Most likely the cooks had simply added too much of some bitter seasoning.

"Well," Taren concluded quietly, returning to his meal, "compared to a real Starblossom, this is practically a delicacy."

Amused by his own thoughts, he continued eating, checking the time now and then. The main gates would soon open, and he had no desire to be late again — especially now that he finally had a chance to join a genuine research expedition.

When he finished, he returned his dishes, adjusted his bag, and headed toward the Academy's central square.

Avalon's main gates were a massive stone structure adorned with magical patterns and metal plates bearing the Academy's crest. Watchtowers rose on either side of the passage, while an intricate system of magical mechanisms above the gates controlled their opening and protection.

By the time Taren arrived, a small group of students had gathered nearby. Some were heading into town for textbooks and supplies, others planned to enjoy their free time outside the Academy, and several senior students were animatedly discussing upcoming research assignments.

At the appointed hour, magical symbols gradually lit up across the stone gates. A low hum sounded deep within the mechanism, and the massive doors slowly slid apart, revealing the wide road to the city.

Taren joined a group of students heading for the wagons waiting nearby. Finding an empty seat, he settled his bag on his knees and watched the Academy's majestic towers slowly recede behind him.

The journey into town was not especially long, but Taren had always enjoyed it. Beyond the Academy lay a different world altogether. Craftsmen, merchants, farmers, and travelers went about their daily business, scarcely giving a thought to the magical lessons and competitions that seemed to occupy the whole universe for students.

The closer they came to the city, the busier the road became. Merchants passed in wagons loaded with cloth and food, little houses with tiled roofs lined the roadside, and the tall spires of the central church were visible in the distance, rising above the surrounding buildings.

The city of Avalon greeted Taren with the bustle of marketplaces, the smell of fresh baking, and brightly colored shop signs. Narrow lanes opened onto broader roads where carts and riders passed, while small fountains decorated with stone figures stood at the crossroads. Compared with the Academy's disciplined order, everything here seemed a little chaotic, but that very disorder gave the city its charm.

Taren jumped down from the wagon and headed toward the central square, using the church spires as his guide. He had visited the city several times before but still hadn't properly explored its many streets and alleys.

Soon the large stone church came into view, with its heavy doors and tall stained-glass windows. Nearby stood a tavern, several horses tied outside and the sounds of laughter, conversation, and clinking dishes spilling from its open windows.

Taren quickened his steps, but as he approached the entrance, he suddenly spotted familiar figures.

Rein, Vin, and Lord were standing outside the tavern.

The three were arguing heatedly about something. Rein looked displeased and kept gesturing sharply; Vin was attempting to explain something, while Lord observed with his customary mocking expression. Taren caught only scraps of their conversation, but they were enough to tell him that the group's mood was far from friendly.

He stopped.

What are they doing here?

After the morning's confrontation, he had no wish to run into Rein again, least of all in town where no professor would step in to end an argument. He decided to avoid attention and carefully skirted the group, staying close to the building's wall.

Fortunately, the quarrel had so thoroughly absorbed the three that none noticed him passing.

Reaching the tavern door, Taren breathed out in relief and went inside.

The tavern was spacious but noisy. Wooden tables lined the walls, occupied by merchants, travelers, and townspeople. Several men were discussing local news at the heavy bar. The smell of roasting meat mingled with fresh bread from the kitchen, while a faint scent of beer and hearth smoke hung in the air around patrons warming themselves near the fire.

Taren paused at the entrance, wondering how he was supposed to identify the expedition coordinator among so many people. He had expected a solemn figure in an explorer's clothes, surrounded by maps and documents, but most of those present looked utterly unconcerned with ancient ruins or magical artifacts.

Deciding not to waste time, he approached the bar.

Behind it stood a solidly built middle-aged man who expertly filled tankards while chatting with regular customers. Noticing the approaching student, he set down a mug and raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"What can I get you, young man?" the innkeeper asked. "Food, drink, or are you looking for someone?"

"The last one, actually," Taren replied, raising his voice above the noise. "Could you tell me where to find Gilbert, the Academy's expedition coordinator?"

The innkeeper thought for a moment, then chuckled and nodded toward a table in the far corner.

"Ah, looking for our explorer, are you? There he is, in the corner by the window. Fair warning, though: he's become quite well acquainted with the local ale today. You may find him difficult to talk to."

Taren thanked the man and made his way toward the indicated table.

Sure enough, a man sat there who bore little resemblance to Taren's idea of a seasoned researcher. He was middle-aged, with tousled graying hair and a short, unkempt beard. His worn jacket bore traces of road dust, and before him stood an almost empty bottle and a large tankard from which he took slow, occasional sips.

He stared toward the window with a contemplative expression, as though trying to solve some exceedingly difficult problem entirely unrelated to the noise around him.

Taren stopped beside the table and coughed politely to attract his attention.

"Excuse me, are you Gilbert?" he asked. "My name is Taren. I'm a student at Avalon Academy, and I'd like to sign up for an expedition into the catacombs near the Academy."

The man gave no response.

He continued gazing through the window, slowly rotating his tankard in his hands, as though he hadn't heard a word.

Taren waited, then repeated his question more loudly.

"Mr. Gilbert? I'd like to join tomorrow's expedition!"

The coordinator slowly turned his head and fixed Taren with a somewhat unfocused gaze. For a while he stared at the unexpected visitor, then frowned irritably.

"What are you shouting for, pup?" Gilbert grumbled, setting down his tankard. "I'm not so old that you need to yell as though I'm standing on the other side of the square!"

Taren felt awkward.

"Sorry, you weren't answering, and I thought…"

"Then stop thinking so much about whether I can hear you," the man interrupted. "Just tell me what you want."

Taren drew a deep breath and tried once again to explain himself calmly.

"I'm an Academy student, and I want to register for a research expedition. Professor Alirina said you assign the participants and could help me join a group."

At the mention of the professor, Gilbert raised an eyebrow ever so slightly, but quickly returned to his irritable expression.

“Alirina, is it…?” he muttered, scratching his beard. “That woman never stops sending curious youngsters my way.”

He examined Taren for a while, then suddenly nodded toward his empty tankard.

“Fine. You want to sign up? Bring me more ale. Then maybe I’ll send you on an expedition. I’ll even send you to fight dragons if you ask nicely!”

Taren blinked in astonishment.

He had expected questions about his magical abilities, his training, or at least his experience exploring dungeons. Being asked to buy beer was hardly how he had imagined admission to a research organization would work.

For a moment he hesitated, trying to decide whether the coordinator was joking or genuinely intended to demand such a payment for registration.

But Gilbert had already turned back to the window and evidently had no intention of explaining himself.

Well, at least it’s easier than an entrance examination…

Taren turned and headed back to the bar.

“Two tankards of ale, please,” he told the innkeeper.

The man looked distinctly surprised.

“Two? One for you and one for Gilbert?”

“No, both for him,” Taren explained. “He said he’d register me for an expedition if I brought him more ale.”

The innkeeper was silent for a moment, then burst into laughter.

“Well, if that’s what he promised, who am I to interfere with important academic research?”

Carrying two full tankards, Taren cautiously returned to the table and set them before Gilbert, trying not to spill a drop.

“Here, as requested,” he said. “Can you register me now?”

Gilbert slowly looked from one tankard to the other, then at Taren, squinting in disbelief.

“Good grief, I really must have had too much,” he muttered. “I’m seeing double.”

Taren couldn’t help smiling.

“No, Mr. Gilbert. There really are two.”

The man stared silently for a few moments, then roared with laughter.

“You’re a sharp one, pup! All right, if you can manage an assignment that difficult, let’s see how you fare in the real catacombs.”

He reached into a small bag beside his chair and began rummaging through it. Amid scrolls, metal plates, and battered notes, Gilbert finally found a small medallion hanging from a dark cord.

“Here,” he said, holding it out to Taren. “An explorer’s medal. Without it, they won’t let you join the group, so try not to lose it.”

Taren accepted the medallion carefully and examined it. The metal was engraved with a familiar emblem: an open book surrounded by intertwining symbols. It was exactly the design he had seen on the door of the researchers’ office at the Academy.

“Does that mean I’m accepted?” he asked hopefully.

“For tomorrow’s training expedition, yes,” Gilbert replied. “Just don’t go thinking you’re a great explorer after a single stroll underground. First learn to turn up on time when you’re told to.”

He took a sip of ale, then continued in a more businesslike tone.

“Be at the Academy’s main gates tomorrow at eight in the morning. Bring food, water, and something warm. The catacombs can get damp, and catching a cold down there isn’t my idea of a good time. Most important of all, if you’re late, nobody will wait for you.”

Taren listened carefully and nodded solemnly.

“I’ll be there on time, Mr. Gilbert.”

The coordinator gave him an appraising look and smirked.

"You all say that. Then we have to drag you out of your dormitories. All right, off you go before I change my mind."

Taren thanked him and hurried toward the exit, still scarcely believing he'd obtained permission to join a real expedition. At the door, he glanced back at Gilbert's table and noticed the man studying some papers from his bag with surprising concentration, despite his relaxed posture. For an instant, the coordinator seemed far more alert than he had during their conversation. Then he reached for his tankard again, and the impression vanished.

Outside, Taren breathed in the fresh evening air with pleasure. After the tavern's noisy, stuffy interior, the coolness felt wonderfully refreshing, and the last rays of sunlight softly lit the stone walls and cobbled street.

He took out his explorer's medallion and held it up before his eyes.

The metal glinted faintly in the setting sun, and the engraved symbols seemed almost solemn. To another student, it might have been nothing more than a small token proving permission to join a training expedition. To Taren, it meant much more.

Only yesterday, he had no idea how he might overcome the limits of his magical reserve. Now he had an opportunity to see ancient ruins with his own eyes and encounter knowledge that perhaps wasn't recorded even in the Academy's most comprehensive textbooks.

"Well then," he said softly, slipping the medallion around his neck. "Looks as if the adventure really is beginning."

He still had some time before the last wagons left for the Academy, so Taren decided to stroll through the city market. The evening trade was winding down, but the square remained fairly busy. Merchants tried to sell their remaining goods, shoppers moved from stall to stall, and boys darted between the rows offering to help carry heavy baskets.

Taren wandered past the stalls, examining the wares on display. Almost anything needed for daily life could be found here: fabric, clothing, tools, books, small magical devices, and an assortment of potions whose uses were not always obvious from their appearance. He was particularly drawn to the stalls selling magical items, but most of the artifacts were far beyond his means.

At a clothing stall, he noticed a simple traveling cloak made from thick, dark cloth. It looked sturdy enough to keep out wind and damp, and its generous cut would cover his shoulders and upper body completely.

Remembering Gilbert's warning about the cold catacombs, Taren decided to ask the price.

"Excuse me, how much for that cloak?" he asked the merchant, pointing to the one he liked.

The elderly man studied Taren, then lifted the cloak from its hook and handed it over.

"Ten silver coins, young man," the seller replied. "Good cloth, thick and soft enough. It'll keep out the dust and wind, and if you're caught in a light shower, you won't be soaked through right away."

Taren ran his fingers carefully over the material. It was good quality, though the cloak itself was plain and had no decorations.

He took out his purse and counted the remaining coins.

For a student accustomed to watching every expense, ten silver pieces was no trivial sum. But tomorrow's expedition made the purchase seem sensible, especially after Gilbert's warning about the damp and cold belowground.

"All right, I'll take it," Taren said at last, counting out the money.

The merchant smiled and helped him try it on. The heavy fabric sat comfortably on his shoulders, and the wide cut left his arms free to move. Taren turned several times, testing how it felt over his ordinary clothes, and was satisfied with his choice.

"An excellent purchase, young man," the seller said approvingly. "Where are you heading, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Tomorrow I'm exploring the catacombs near the Academy," Taren answered, unconsciously straightening his shoulders.

The merchant nodded knowingly.

"Ah, a future explorer. Well, good luck to you. Just be careful not to get lost down there. Old places can be far more confusing than they look from the outside."

Taren thanked him and, adjusting his new cloak, headed back to the square where the Academy wagons departed.

As he walked, he touched the explorer's medallion beneath his clothes and smiled to himself.

In a single day, he had registered for the competition, found the man responsible for research expeditions, and gained access to catacombs whose existence he had barely known about the day before.

Now came the hardest part: proving genuinely useful on the expedition itself.

By the time Taren reached the departure point, the sun was sinking behind the city's rooftops. The sky gradually softened into shades of orange and pink, and the first magical lanterns were lighting the streets with steady golden light. Students returning from their errands gathered around the wagons, discussing their purchases and the day's adventures.

Taren took an empty seat near the edge of a wagon and set his bag beside him. His new cloak warmed his shoulders pleasantly, and the explorer's medallion glimmered faintly beneath the cloth whenever he adjusted his collar.

He barely joined in the other passengers' conversations during the return journey. His thoughts were fixed on the expedition ahead, and the more he imagined the next day, the more keenly he felt a mixture of anxiety and anticipation.

He tried to picture what real catacombs might look like. Perhaps there would be ordinary stone corridors amid the remains of ancient buildings, or perhaps forgotten magical instruments and strange symbols had genuinely survived within. He knew a training expedition was unlikely to be as thrilling as the adventures in his favorite childhood tales, but the very prospect of venturing underground with researchers felt momentous.

At one point, he recalled Professor Alirina's warning to be careful. Naturally, catacombs intended for beginners ought to be relatively safe, but that was no excuse for carelessness. If he wanted to prove himself capable of such work, he would need to listen to the supervisor, obey the rules, and stop indulging in fantasies of grand discoveries.

He chuckled when he realized that for the past several minutes he had been imagining himself uncovering a legendary artifact and returning to the Academy under the professors' admiring gazes.

First learn to get to your lessons on time, he reminded himself.

The thought conjured Elis's satisfied expression, and Taren smiled involuntarily.

What would she say when she learned he had actually joined an expedition? First, she'd probably call him a dummy. Then she'd deliver a little lecture on the dangers of dungeons. And finally, she'd insist on knowing what magical tools the explorers used down there.

After all, it was partly her curiosity and persistent advice that had helped him take this step.

The wagon gradually approached the Academy's high walls. When the familiar towers came into view, Taren felt a slight relief mingled with renewed excitement. Not long ago, every return journey had left him feeling no closer to his dream than before. Today was different.

He was still a mage with only ten percent of a normal mana reserve. His spells had not grown stronger, and the gulf between him and Rein had not narrowed. But for the first time in a long while, Taren had taken several steps toward the unknown instead of endlessly repeating the same fruitless attempts.

When the wagon stopped beside the main gates, he jumped down, said goodbye to his fellow travelers, and headed for the dormitory.

By then, evening quiet had settled over the Academy. Far fewer students remained on the paths, the lights in the academic buildings were gradually going out, and magical lanterns glowed above the

central square. A few distant voices and the muted sounds of training could still be heard, but most students had gone to their rooms to prepare for the next day.

Taren went upstairs to his room and first placed the explorer's medallion on the desk beside his notebooks. He studied the small metal token in silence for a moment, then took out a clean sheet of paper and began making a list of things to bring.

Food for the journey, water, warm clothing, a notebook, a pen, spare sheets of paper.

He read the list several times to make sure he had forgotten nothing, then laid out his new cloak and checked his traveling bag. For the first time, ordinary preparations felt like part of a real adventure. Even packing his belongings carefully gave him unexpected pleasure.

When everything was ready, Taren sat on the edge of the bed and paused to think.

Tomorrow he would enter real catacombs for the first time.

Perhaps he would find nothing special. Perhaps the whole expedition would consist of examining familiar passages and collecting old fragments that researchers considered useful only for teaching. But even if that was all it amounted to, it would be a first step in an entirely new direction.

He picked up the medallion, turned it over in his fingers, and set it on the desk again.

"Eight in the morning," he said softly, trying to commit the hour to memory. "Just don't oversleep."

Remembering that morning's awakening, he glanced toward the window.

"And preferably no pigeons," he added with a grin.

He removed his jacket, folded his clothes neatly, and settled into bed, pleasantly tired after a long and eventful day. Outside, the breeze barely stirred the branches, and the Academy's towers rose in the distance, softly lit by their nighttime magical glow.

Taren closed his eyes, but dark stone passages, unknown symbols, and mysterious objects hidden deep within ancient structures immediately filled his imagination. He pictured himself carefully studying dungeon walls, recording unusual discoveries, and gradually coming to understand things that had once seemed beyond him.

For now, these were only dreams.

But at last he had the chance to make them part of his real life.

And with that thought, Taren finally fell asleep, utterly unaware that tomorrow's expedition would prove far more important than he could possibly imagine.

# Chapter 3. Beyond the Walls of Darkness

For the first time in ages, Taren woke before the Academy's morning bells. Outside, darkness still lingered, and only the eastern edge of the sky had begun to turn pale pink with the promise of dawn. An unfamiliar quiet filled the dormitory, broken by the occasional footsteps of the attendants and the muted creak of wooden floorboards. Most students were still asleep, enjoying their last hours of rest, but Taren was already sitting on the edge of his bed, carefully examining the things he had laid out before him.

Today, for the first time, he was going on a genuine research expedition.

Only yesterday, the prospect had seemed unbelievable. Now Gilbert's metal explorer's medallion lay on his desk beside a neatly folded map, his travel bag, and his new cloak. Taren checked the contents of the bag several times, though he knew perfectly well that he had packed everything the previous evening. Inside were food, a flask of water, a small notebook, spare sheets of paper, and writing supplies. Just in case, he had also brought an old folding knife he normally used for household chores, reasoning that even something so simple might come in handy underground.

Once he was ready, he went to the window and looked out at the awakening Academy. The academic towers rose in the distance against the slowly brightening dawn, and magical lanterns along the paths still shed their gentle golden light. Beyond the dormitory walls, another ordinary day of lectures, training, and familiar student concerns was beginning. For Taren, however, it promised to be anything but ordinary.

He remembered yesterday's conversation with Professor Alirina, his strange introduction to the expedition coordinator, and his own vow to find a way to strengthen his magic, whatever it took. Granted, training catacombs were unlikely to contain a treasure capable of instantly transforming a weak student into a mighty wizard. But the possibility of touching ancient knowledge was exciting enough in itself.

"The important thing is not to oversleep," Taren said softly, amused by his own thoughts. "Though I seem to have managed that part this time."

He put on his jacket, fastened the explorer's medallion around his neck, grabbed his bag, and headed out. But he had scarcely opened his door and taken a few steps down the corridor when a familiar, sleepy voice called from ahead:

"Can I really believe my own eyes?"

Taren stopped.

Elis stood near the entrance to the dormitory wing. Her fair hair had been gathered carelessly, with several strands escaping to fall across her face, and her green eyes regarded him as though she still hadn't decided whether she was fully awake. She wore a light robe over her usual clothes and kept covering a yawn with her hand.

"Elis?" Taren asked in surprise. "What are you doing here so early?"

She slowly looked him up and down, her gaze pausing on his travel bag and new cloak.

"Investigating an incredible rumor," she replied, trying to sound solemn. "Apparently a student I know actually signed up for an expedition. And apparently he woke up by himself today, without the help of my pigeons."

"You can believe it," Taren said with a grin. "I'm all ready to go."

"Amazing," Elis drawled. "The world really is changing."

Taren shook his head but couldn't help smiling. Over the past few days, he had become accustomed to these remarks and almost expected her to find some way to remind him of his habitual lateness.

But Elis hadn't come only to tease him. After rummaging through the small bag slung over her shoulder, she produced a round metal badge a little larger than a coin. Fine engraved lines formed

a familiar magical symbol on its surface, and a small movable plate at the center could be pressed with a finger.

"Here, take this," she said, offering him the badge. "I think it might be useful underground."

Taren accepted the unusual object carefully and turned it between his fingers.

"Is this the device you were discussing with Professor Alirina?" he asked eagerly. "The trap detector?"

Elis rolled her eyes wearily.

"Dummy, that device is nowhere near finished. An entire department is working on it, and even the professors are still having trouble with the calculations. This is something I made myself a while ago."

"And what does it do?"

"It helps you find your way in the dark," she explained. "There's a small magical sequence inside, based on the Rune of Light. Activate it properly, and the badge will light up the space in front of you. It's much more convenient than an ordinary spell. Just don't expect it to work forever without being supplied with energy."

Taren studied the metal surface again. Unlike the familiar educational tools sold in the Academy shops, the badge looked distinctly unusual. The engraved lines were so delicate that some were almost impossible to see without close examination, and the entire construction was remarkably compact.

"You made all of this yourself?" he asked, unable to hide his admiration.

Elis straightened proudly, obviously pleased with his reaction.

"Of course. The adjustments took a little work, but now it should function quite well."

"Should?" Taren repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, you're about to go into a dungeon," Elis replied serenely. "What a perfect chance to test it."

Taren laughed.

"So after the pigeon, you've decided to use me for another experiment?"

"What can I do if you keep turning up in exactly the right place?" Elis replied with a grin.

She took the badge back and stepped closer to pin it to the front of his jacket. As she fiddled with the tiny clasp, Taren noticed that her movements remained surprisingly precise despite her sleepiness. Elis always treated her inventions with great care, even when she pretended they were merely toys.

"There," she said, stepping back to examine her handiwork. "Now you won't lose it."

"Thank you, Elis. Really."

She looked up at him for a moment. A flicker of warmth crossed her eyes, but she quickly resumed her usual teasing expression.

"Thank me when you come back in one piece. And please don't go testing every suspicious thing you see."

"I'll try," Taren promised.

"That's exactly what worries me," she sighed.

Elis took a folded piece of paper from her pocket and slipped it, still folded, into the inside pocket of Taren's jacket.

"And don't lose this either. There are some instructions, in case you forget how to use the badge."

Taren nodded, though his thoughts had already returned to the expedition. Elis noticed his distracted expression but chose not to lecture him further.

"All right, off you go, great explorer," she said, stifling another yawn. "I think I'll try to get a little more sleep."

"I promise I'll bring back something interesting," Taren replied.

"Just come back without getting into trouble. The discoveries can wait."

She waved and headed toward the women's wing of the dormitory. Taren watched her for a moment, then touched the badge on his chest. Feeling an unexpected warmth at her concern, he hurried toward the Academy's main gates.

By the time Taren reached the meeting place, the sun had risen above the academic rooftops, and a group of students had gathered in the little square near the main gates. Some chatted animatedly while checking their equipment; others stood apart, studying maps and notes in silence. Near the massive stone gates stood a small table covered with registration lists and several metal cases containing explorers' instruments.

Gilbert stood beside the table.

Taren slowed when he recognized the coordinator. Gilbert looked nothing like the man he'd met in the tavern the previous evening. His hair was neatly combed, his worn jacket no longer showed yesterday's disarray, and his gaze, formerly dull and unfocused, now moved alertly over the gathered students. Several small pouches and a rolled map hung from his belt, and the emblem of the researchers' organization gleamed on his chest.

When he saw Taren approaching, Gilbert smirked.

"Ah, the lad who buys two tankards at a time," he said loudly enough to make several students turn around. "Well, would you look at that. You're not even late."

Taren smiled sheepishly.

"Good morning, Mr. Gilbert. I did promise to be on time."

"Promises are all very well," the coordinator grunted. "But in research, what matters is whether you actually do what you promise. All right, show me your medal."

Taren removed the medallion and handed it over. Gilbert inspected the emblem, checked his list, and nodded for Taren to join the others.

It was then that Taren noticed the person he least wanted to see on the expedition.

Rein was standing nearby.

He wore comfortable travel clothes and a dark cloak fastened with a silver clasp. Several other students stood with him, talking quietly. Unlike during normal lessons, Rein seemed serious today and paid little attention to those around him. But the moment he spotted Taren, his familiar haughty expression returned.

Their eyes met.

For a while they stared at one another, as though waiting to see who would begin their customary quarrel. This time, however, neither said a word. Rein lifted his chin slightly and turned away, while Taren, determined not to ruin his morning, went to stand in an empty space among the other participants.

Just don't pair us together, he thought.

Once everyone had arrived, Gilbert stepped into the center of the square and clapped his hands loudly for attention.

"Right, future explorers, listen carefully," he began, surveying the group. "Today you'll be entering the training catacombs near the Academy. Our people have studied this site fairly thoroughly, so we don't expect any serious danger. But let me warn you: 'training' does not mean you can behave as though you're on a pleasant stroll."

He paused to make sure everyone was listening, then continued.

"You'll move in pairs. Your task is to explore accessible passages, record anything you find, and draw simple maps of the chambers. If you discover something unusual, don't immediately try to see how it works. Record the find and report it to me first. That goes double for old magical constructs and unknown symbols."

Taren listened closely. He was eager to get inside the catacombs, but the coordinator's stern tone reminded him to take the expedition seriously.

“You’ll have five hours to explore,” Gilbert continued. “Don’t go too far, don’t damage the walls, and don’t touch suspicious mechanisms. The known corridors contain old guide markers to help you find your way back. If you think you’ve lost your bearings, don’t go running around in a panic. Try returning to the last crossroads you recognize.”

One student raised a hand.

“Mr. Gilbert, what if we find a real trap?”

The coordinator regarded him as though the question was both sensible and faintly amusing.

“Then don’t be foolish enough to test it with your own head,” he answered. “Mark it on your map and come straight back. Those old dungeons have been around much longer than you have, and I’d like you to still be around after today’s little excursion.”

Several students laughed, but Taren noticed that Gilbert himself remained perfectly serious.

After the briefing, the coordinator unfolded the registration list and began assigning pairs. Names were read out one after another. Students gathered in small groups, checked their equipment, and discussed their routes.

Taren listened intently, doing his best to hide his nerves.

“Vin and Lord,” Gilbert read without looking up.

The two immediately stepped aside.

Taren felt a small surge of relief. At least now there was a chance Rein would be assigned to someone else.

But the coordinator’s next words shattered that hope.

“Taren and Rein. You’re together.”

Taren slowly raised his head.

“Excuse me… together?” he repeated, hoping he’d misheard.

Gilbert looked over the top of his list.

“That’s what I said. Any objections?”

Taren was about to answer when he noticed Rein approaching with an expression of extreme displeasure.

“None, Mr. Gilbert,” he said quickly, deciding not to begin the expedition with an argument.

Rein stopped beside him and gave a short, derisive laugh.

“Wonderful. Apparently I’ll have to babysit the weakest members of the expedition as well.”

“Don’t worry,” Taren answered, adjusting his bag. “If you get lost, I’ll do my best to lead you out.”

Rein gave him a cold look but chose not to continue the exchange.

Meanwhile, Gilbert finished assigning pairs and led the students down a road stretching away from the Academy toward old, rocky hills. Low slopes dotted with grass and scattered shrubs appeared ahead, and among the stone outcrops they could make out several dark openings leading underground.

As they approached the catacombs, the students gradually fell silent. Even those who had been joking a moment earlier now studied the strange entrances closely, as though only just realizing that they were about to descend into genuine ancient structures.

Taren felt curiosity pushing aside his irritation at the unexpected partner. He had never joined an expedition before, and everything around him seemed extraordinary: weathered stone arches, small metal plates bearing researchers’ marks, and dark passages concealing unknown corridors.

Rein walked in silence for a while, but then, unexpectedly, he was the first to speak.

“Listen, Taren,” he said, lowering his voice slightly. “I’m not pleased Gilbert paired us together, and I imagine you aren’t either.”

Taren turned toward him.

“For once, we agree.”

Rein gave an irritated smirk but went on.

“So I suggest we put our differences aside for the duration of the expedition. I have no desire to waste time on pointless arguments, particularly underground. If we cooperate, we’ll finish the assignment sooner and get back.”

Taren studied him for a moment. The proposal was so unexpected that he couldn’t immediately think of a response.

“Agreed,” he said at last. “Let’s try acting like proper partners, at least for today.”

“I won’t promise to make a habit of it,” Rein replied dryly.

“I wasn’t counting on that.”

They exchanged a brief look and continued walking. The tension between them remained, but for the first time in a long while it wasn’t accompanied by an urgent desire to prove which of them was superior.

Soon Gilbert stopped the group before the first entrance. It was a broad stone opening framed by massive slabs bearing faded images of unknown symbols. Cold, damp air drifted from the depths, and only the first few paces of corridor were visible before everything dissolved into shadow.

“The first two pairs will go here,” the coordinator announced, pointing to the broad passage. “It’s a fairly simple route, but don’t venture beyond the marked areas. I expect everyone back at the entrance in five hours.”

The students acknowledged the instructions and disappeared beneath the stone arch.

Gilbert led the others farther along to a second entrance set a little apart. This passage was much narrower and looked considerably less imposing than the first. Fine cracks ran through its stone walls, and above the doorway remained traces of an ancient ornament almost completely worn away by time.

“Taren and Rein, you’re going in here,” Gilbert said, stopping at the entrance. “This section is a little more confusing, but there are more interesting finds. Just don’t test the strength of the old masonry, and keep track of your route.”

Taren felt another surge of excitement.

Beside him, Rein examined the entrance carefully and frowned.

“Why isn’t there a research marker here like the one at the previous passage?” he asked.

“There used to be,” Gilbert waved him off. “I suppose one of your predecessors decided to take it home as a souvenir. All right, enough talking. Time’s moving.”

He gestured toward the dark corridor and stepped aside.

Taren drew a deep breath, adjusted his explorer’s medallion, and stepped beneath the arch first. Rein followed, muttering something about the excessive haste of village-born adventurers.

Within moments, the sounds of the outside world faded. The birdsong and distant voices were replaced by the echo of their own footsteps against stone. The cold air smelled of damp, dust, and ancient rock, while the narrow passage led them steadily deeper underground.

Rein was the first to take a short wand from his bag, its surface engraved with the Rune of Light. He fed a little mana into it, and a gentle white glow blossomed at the tip, illuminating the nearest walls.

“Much better,” he said, raising the wand. “At least now we won’t break our legs on every stone.”

Taren looked at the magical tool, smirked, and held out his hand.

“Don’t worry, you’re not the only one here who can light the way.”

He focused, directing a small amount of mana into his palm. After a few moments, a tiny golden light formed above his fingers, lifted slowly from his hand, and hovered in the air. It wasn’t very bright, but it was enough to reveal the nearest obstacles.

Rein cast him a brief glance.

“I hope you don’t intend to spend your entire mana reserve lighting the corridor.”

“And I hope you don’t intend to comment on everything I do,” Taren shot back.

“Only the particularly foolish things.”

“Then you’re going to have a lot to say today.”

Rein snorted but said nothing more.

Gradually, the details of the ancient catacombs emerged around them. Old frescoes decorated the walls: scenes of battles, long processions of people in strange garments, and mysterious rituals whose purpose was impossible to discern. Some paintings had survived well enough to make out individual figures and objects; others had almost vanished beneath dust and crumbling plaster.

From time to time, Taren noticed familiar symbols on the stones, resembling the Runes of Light used at the Academy. Most had long since ceased to show any magical activity, however, and there was no way to know whether they had once provided illumination.

“I wonder how old this place is,” Taren said thoughtfully, stopping beside a fresco. “It was probably built long before the Academy existed.”

Rein came closer and inspected the cracked surface.

“Obviously,” he replied. “What interests me more is why almost nothing here has survived in good condition.”

“Maybe earlier researchers took away most of the valuable finds.”

“Let’s hope they left something interesting for us.”

Taren pulled out his notebook and began recording their route. He marked the corridor’s direction, the approximate distances between intersections, and the locations of notable images. Meanwhile, Rein examined the walls and stone recesses, occasionally picking up an object to see whether it might be valuable.

As they moved deeper into the catacombs, the passages grew increasingly labyrinthine. One long corridor led to a small fork, then a tight bend opening into a chamber of broken columns, followed by yet another tunnel. Some branches ended in dead ends, while others reconnected, forcing them to retrace their steps to familiar places.

Taren gradually realized how useful his decision to draw a map had been. Without it, they would probably have lost their way several times already.

“It’s astonishing how much time building a place like this must have taken,” he said, marking another turn. “There’s a whole network of passages down here.”

“Less talking, more marking,” Rein replied, directing his wand toward a distant wall. “If you start confusing the turns, I’m not carrying you out.”

“Don’t worry,” Taren grinned. “If necessary, I’ll mark your route as well.”

Rein shook his head irritably, but didn’t argue.

During their exploration, they found several old objects unusual enough to warrant attention: a broken dagger with almost illegible engravings, black ceramic vessels, and small fragments of unknown metal that retained an odd dull sheen beneath thick layers of dust.

Taren carefully sketched the most interesting finds, taking care not to damage them, while Rein examined another cracked jug with obvious disappointment.

“If these are the great treasures of antiquity,” he remarked, “I’m afraid we’ve chosen a rather unprofitable profession.”

Taren laughed.

“Were you expecting legendary artifacts to be lying just inside the entrance, so every student could take one home?”

“It would have been nice,” Rein replied without a trace of irony.

Despite their customary barbs, they gradually worked more smoothly together. Rein had excellent magical skills and easily noticed traces of old spells. Taren paid closer attention to small details and didn’t mind recording even discoveries that seemed useless at first. They exchanged observations, checked directions, and even agreed with each other several times, though neither seemed eager to acknowledge it.

At last they reached another fork.

Two narrow corridors branched off in opposite directions and faded into darkness. Small fragments of stone lay between them, and an old crack at the foot of one wall climbed upward out of sight.

Rein stopped and studied both passages.

“If we explore them one after the other, it’ll take too long,” he said. “Let’s separate briefly and see where they lead. If one turns out to be a dead end, we’ll come back here.”

Taren looked uncertainly at the fork. After Gilbert’s warnings, splitting up seemed unwise, but the passages appeared fairly short, and they would still be within earshot of each other.

“All right,” he agreed after a moment. “Just don’t go too far. If you find anything suspicious, call me.”

Rein smirked.

“Are you giving me safety advice now?”

“Someone has to.”

“Fine, village hero. I’ll go left, you go right.”

They separated, each directing his light down his chosen corridor.

Taren moved forward slowly, studying the walls. This section seemed considerably older than the chambers they had explored. Some of the masonry was almost buried beneath dust, and small fragments littered the floor as though part of it had collapsed long ago. He stopped several times to mark the route on his map before noticing a peculiar stretch of wall ahead, its surface different from the surrounding stone.

He approached and raised his golden light.

At that very instant, Rein’s muffled voice sounded behind him:

“Taren! Wait!”

Taren turned, trying to see what had happened.

Rein had appeared at the fork several dozen paces behind. He was turned toward Taren and pointing overhead at the ceiling between them. His expression had changed so sharply that Taren immediately sensed something was wrong.

“What is it?” he shouted.

Rein never had time to answer.

A dry crack sounded somewhere above their heads.

At first it was quiet, like wood breaking, but almost immediately it deepened into a thunderous rumble that rolled through the underground passage. Dust sifted from cracks in the ceiling, followed by small falling stones.

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