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# Off the Record

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From set *Secrets of Strixhaven*  
09. 03. 2026

A trio of inklings darted between the meticulously groomed plants flanking the Silverquill pathways near Grandloft Hall, irritating Jilesa with their frivolousness. Unlike them, she moved with purpose, her flash artist Esmun keeping pace with his longer legs. This assignment was also frivolous, but she wouldn't undermine her professionalism by arriving late to her appointment.

"This puff piece is utterly unworthy of my journalistic talents," she grumbled, shooting the cuffs of her silver and black coat.

Esmun dodged a stray aspirated plosive, using his body to shield the cylindrical case holding his rolled-up canvases. "Anything can be a learning experience."

"I should be learning more lumimancy, not how to flatter faculty egos." Too bad her advisor, Professor Goss, seemed disinclined to encourage her ambitions. Call her overconfident and impetuous, would he? The man wouldn't acknowledge potential if it were introduced to him by Shadrix Silverquill personally.

"Maybe there's a story angle that will let you practice your skills?"

Jilesa flicked her silvery hair out of her face. "Not unless this new instructor has secrets worth exposing."

"Maybe he does."

Her blistering march slowed. "Maybe." She sped up again, pursing her lips. "Why is he here? Does it have something to do with Professor Vess, or that Planeswalker, Goldmane? If so, how is he involved? What does he intend to do?"

"All good questions you can ask him."

Depending on his answers, she could write a feature that would finally win her the Argent Star award for investigative journalism, after losing twice to that hack Namivi Dens. How did he keep conveniently stumbling into perilous situations involving ethical controversies? And worse, surviving to tell the tale in precisely five thousand words?

They reached the Hall of Lost Steps, a busy corridor leading to the chambers and mock courtrooms where Silverquill's flourishing legal minds practiced rhetoric. Currents of students flowed in both directions as classes ended and began; Jilesa's interviewee had office hours now.

"Do you see him?" she asked her taller companion.

Esmun scanned the crowd. "I think so. There."

The instructor stood beside a column listening to a student, arms crossed, expression suggesting boredom. He cut a stylish figure in black, white, and gold; his black-streaked white hair brushed back from his face, mustache and goatee sharp as a paper's edge. Every inch the law mage.



Art by: Billy Christian

“Those are the most profoundly lackluster excuses I’ve ever heard,” he told the student. “Let’s see whether you can scrape together something more compelling before we next meet. Write me a five-page report analyzing historical failures in law spells relating to imprecise punctuation, and yes, every period, semicolon, and Orzhov comma will impact your grade.”

The student stalked off. Jilesa slipped into the space he’d vacated.

“Jilesa Clarus,” she said, holding out her hand. “Reporter from the *Strixhaven Star*, here for the interview. A pleasure to meet you, Professor Zarek.”

“I’m sure it is,” he replied, raking her with a cold gaze that would have made weaker knees tremble.

Jilesa turned the aborted handshake into a gesture at Esmun. “Picture, please.”

A roll of canvas emerged from his case and unfurled to hover in front of him. “Smile for the painting,” Esmun said.

Professor Zarek barely had time to pose before the sulfurous flash of the spell startled a flock of birds into the sky.

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Professor Zarek’s office shed no light on the dark corners of his character. A glorified closet, its bookshelves stood mostly empty, as did the wooden desk dominating the space. The instructor lounged in a high-backed leather chair, while Jilesa sat primly across from him, her recording prism hovering between them, notebook open on her lap. Esmun propped up the wall next to her.

“What do you do on Ravnica?” Jilesa asked.

“Argue with people, mostly,” Professor Zarek replied, smirking. “Not so different from here.”

Vague. “And in your spare time?”

“Time is money. You use it or you waste it. I hate to be wasteful.”

That was a pull quote if ever she'd heard one. But it still told her nothing about the man. Under the guise of making notes, she drew the sigil for Felizia's Illuminating Inquiry on a blank page. She delivered her next question with careful control of her airstream mechanisms, the lumimancy spell flying from her lips in a swarm of syllables, hovering around Professor Zarek's head like a cloud of invisible mites.

"Why did you decide to come to Strixhaven?" she asked.

"Maybe I wanted to educate inquiring young people like you," he replied.

A spot of darkness at his temples signaled he was hiding something. Interesting.

"Is that your only goal?" Jilesa pressed.

Professor Zarek smoothed his hair with one hand, then snapped his fingers above his head. Jilesa's spell burst, her ears ringing and her mouth tasting of blood.

"Not many students would dare to cast an interrogation spell on an instructor," Professor Zarek said.

"I'm not many students." Jilesa swallowed apprehension. "If you're sending me to Detention Bog, I'll have to use an allergy charm first."

"I have a better idea. You remind me of myself at your age. Talented. Curious. Driven." He steepled his fingers. "I could use your assistance with a ... special project."

Jilesa's disdain for this assignment dissipated like her spell. Finally, someone who recognized her worth. "What is it?"

Professor Zarek quirked an eyebrow. "It's a secret. I need total discretion. Can you two handle that? If not, there's the door."

"I'm in." A secret project sounded ideally suited to her skills, and it might eventually make an incredible story for the *Star*, depending on how it unfolded. "Esmun, you can get another flash portrait and go. I know you have other homework."

Esmun shook his head. "Two mages are better than one. Maybe I can help, too."

Jilesa turned back to Professor Zarek with a bright smile. "Souls of discretion, that's us. So?"

Professor Zarek leaned back, stroking his beard. "I've been searching the Biblioplex for a Blood Age tome about the birth of the elder dragons. It's referenced in a few places, but I can't find it."

"Why do you need it?" Jilesa asked.

His expression grew serious. "I think the leylines of Ravnica may have been destabilized by ... well, me. It's a long story. Arcavios has unique leyline configurations that may provide insight and solutions."

"The snarls?" Esmun asked.

"Exactly." Professor Zarek rapped his knuckles on the desk. "Unfortunately, your library is, in layman's terms, too blasted huge. It's also still being rebuilt and reorganized since the Phyrexians wrecked it. I can't find the book, the library assistants can't find it, so I need someone good at ferreting out secrets to try."

Library work? Far less intriguing than Jilesa had hoped. "Why not ask Isabough, or someone in Lorehold?"

"Honestly?" The professor smiled ruefully. "I'm avoiding Ajani. Goldmane, that is. We're not on the best terms, and if he finds out about this ... Look, you're clever and self-reliant. When you make a spell mistake, do you run to your instructors for help, or try to fix it yourself?"

“Fix it myself,” Jilesa agreed.

“Plus, with everything going on at the school, I don’t know who I can trust. I’m taking a huge chance telling you and Esmun, but a lumimancer of your caliber seems like just what I need.”

Of course. Jilesa resisted the urge to preen. “You could try Fain, but he’s ... unscrupulous. A last resort. Have you asked Codie?”

“Who’s Codie?”

“The Codex Vocifera,” Esmun said. “It hates being called Codie.”

“It knows almost everything about the Biblioplex,” Jilesa explained. “It can probably tell you where that book is, or where to start looking.”

Professor Zarek stood. “Excellent idea, Clarus. You’re already proving yourself invaluable.” He stepped past his desk and threw open the door, casting a look over his shoulder. “Don’t just sit there, you two. We’ve got a codex to catch.”

Jilesa put her things away and hurried to catch up to Esmun and her rapidly vanishing interview subject.

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The Codex Vocifera often disappeared in a puff of smoke only to reappear elsewhere, finding people who needed it—or at least, it acted as if anyone it spoke to eagerly awaited its wisdom. Today, it was disinclined to make Jilesa’s life simple. She walked the length and breadth of Central Campus searching for it, interrogating students around the Biblioplex, in Bow’s End Tavern, and finally in Firejolt Café, which she’d been avoiding so she wouldn’t be wrangled into working an extra shift.

“Try the Void,” her fellow barista Mina suggested. “Someone just complained about seeing Codie there.”

“Thanks, Mina. You’re a charm.” Jilesa darted for the door, Esmun and Professor Zarek close behind.

“What’s the Void?” Professor Zarek asked as they trod the torch-lined path toward the northern side of the Biblioplex.

“An accidental side effect of a duel,” Jilesa explained. “It’s basically an area enchanted with a modified spell of silence.”

“People scream into it,” Esmun added. “You can hear yourself, but no one outside can hear you.”

“Why not use the vocal practice rooms?”

“Only Silverquill students can reserve those.”

They found Codie lecturing a Quandrix student who waited in line for their turn with the Void.

“That is how Mantissa proved logarithmic decimals are always positive,” the Codex said grumpily. “She also—”

“Enough!” the student exclaimed, cutting in line and leaping into the Void, where the student already inside proceeded to yell at them silently.

The Codex ruffled its pages, then ambled away on creaky metal legs. Jilesa stepped in front of it.

“Excuse me,” Jilesa said. “We have questions for you.”

The students in line groaned.

“Some privacy is in order,” Professor Zarek said. “Into the Void.”

They entered the zone of silence, Professor Zarek clearing the arguing students out with a flick of his fingers.

“Codex, I’m told you may know where a book is located,” he said.

“Possible,” the Codex replied. “Which one?”

“*Accounts of the Dawning Age: Vortex Formations and Egomagical Adaptations*, by Scavrana the Oracle.”

The Codex’s pages rustled as if an invisible finger moved them.

“I know where that book can be found,” Codie said. “But I cannot tell you.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” the professor asked.

“Cannot!”

A student poked their head into the Void. “Can you hurry up?”

Professor Zarek snapped his fingers; the student stumbled back out as if zapped.

“You can’t tell the professor, or you can’t tell anyone?” Jilesa asked.

The Codex did a nervous dance, metal legs clanking. “The page containing that information is redacted. I can sense what is there, but I cannot show or tell you what it contains. Typically, redaction spells are only used for knowledge deemed especially dangerous to students—”

“You know what else can be dangerous?” Professor Zarek’s eyes darkened as if filling with ink. “Me, if you don’t tell me what I need to know.”

“It’s against protocol!”

“You can stick your protocol in your—”

“Perhaps you can make an exception,” Jilesa said. “Since it’s for a professor, not a student.”

“Perhaps.” The Codex sounded unconvinced. “Even so, I cannot remove the redaction.”

Haltingly, brow furrowed, Jilesa said, “I know a lumimancy spell ...”

Esmun waved his arms, cutting her off. “How are you going to undo something cast by someone with more experience and power?”

“If you need power,” Professor Zarek said, “I’d be happy to offer a boost.”

Another student stepped into the Void, but before they could speak, the professor loomed in front of them with a stormy expression. They retreated, and he followed them out, wagging his finger threateningly at the queue.

*A ritual would definitely be more effective*, Jilesa thought. She retrieved her grimoire from her knapsack and flipped to the necessary page.

“Esmun, will you help as well?” she asked. When he didn’t answer, she peered up to find him leaning over her.

“You’re not wondering why that page was redacted?” Esmun asked. “Maybe we shouldn’t do this.”

Jilesa clicked her tongue at him. “Nothing good ever came of keeping secrets. I want to be a lumimancer to reveal the hidden. Anyway, we’re helping an instructor.” A smile teased her lips. Unlike Professor Goss, Professor Zarek valued her skills. Perhaps, when this was over, she could request a change in advisors.

Professor Zarek re-entered the Void, dusting off his hands. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Jilesa said. “We’ll draw a triangle with the Codex at the center and one of us at each point ...”

Soon, the necessary diagrams floated above the ground, brightening as Jilesa repeated the ritual’s verbal components. The recitation reached its peak; power flooded into her with a sensation like she’d stood in a cold room for hours and suddenly stepped into warm sunshine. A burst of light enveloped the Codex, which gave a surly squawk.

“I see!” it said. “The tome was taken from the Mystical Archive to the Vaults of Turrau, where many Blood Age artifacts are kept in stasis for safety reasons.”

A funnel of wind spun around the three mages, sucking the light up into the cloudless sky. Jilesa doubled over, breathless and enervated.

“The Vaults of Turrau,” Professor Zarek repeated. “I’ll make preparations to depart immediately.”

“No. You can’t,” the Codex said. “The vaults are at the base of the mountains below Hookiver. They’re hidden by a maze and patrolled by dangerous constructs. No one is permitted inside without the permission of the Founders.”

“I don’t have time to get my permission slip signed. Is there a passcode or something similar to open the doors?”

“Yes, it’s ‘Ascend, sages of sky, to soar in secret,’ but—”

The professor was already walking away, past the few students who’d stubbornly stayed in line. Jilesa thanked Codie over her shoulder as she chased after him, Esmun at her heels.

“Professor, what about us?” Jilesa called.

He turned to regard her with an arched eyebrow. “You should go back to class. This is much too dangerous.”

Jilesa bristled at the dismissal. “Lumimancy is useful for finding secrets. How will you locate the book once you’re inside the vault? It doesn’t sound like anyone there will help.”

Esmun touched her shoulder. “Maybe we shouldn’t—”

“I want to see this through,” Jilesa insisted.

“But if the Founders don’t want—”

“That’s probably to keep out thieves,” Jilesa lowered her voice. “You can go, but I’m not leaving until this is finished.” If Professor Goss wouldn’t let her prove herself, she’d do it on her own terms, regardless of the danger.

Before Esmun could reply, Professor Zarek said, “Your skills would be very useful. Are you sure you’re up to the challenge?”

“Absolutely.” Jilesa let her confidence shine. Not her relief that he’d capitulated so easily, though. That she kept to herself.

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While Jilesa had been to Detention Bog—for an incident that was not remotely her fault—she’d never traveled elsewhere beyond her home village and the Strixhaven campus. Transportation magic could be temperamental because of the snarls, walking only took her so far, and the one time she’d tried to ride a winged lion its yawn left her acutely aware that her entire head fit inside its fang-filled mouth.

Professor Zarek acquired a transport spell, so her aversion to mounts was not exposed. The stomach-twisting sensation of porting and reappearing in another part of Arcavios thankfully didn't elicit an embarrassment of regurgitation, either.

She did experience a frisson of fear at the mountains closing around her like stone fists. Clouds massed around the owl-in aerie cities of Hookiver above, blanketing the sky in a uniform gray that softened the shadows, turning the landscape into an ethereal realm suspended in time.

"The vaults should be up ahead," Professor Zarek said. "This was as close as I could get us."

They hiked through rocky terrain until they reached an open area littered with pairs of tall stone carvings and grass-covered skeletons. At the other end of the space, massive doors led into the sheer side of a cliff, covered in spiraling blue sigils that exuded an eerie mist, as if their surfaces were far colder than the surrounding air.

"We have to cross that clearing to reach the doors," Jilesa said.

The professor considered the skeletons. "Something killed those people. I don't see any obvious traps, though."

"Is it elemental?" Jilesa asked Esmun.

Esmun stretched, shook out his limbs, then performed a tightly controlled dance. He ended it with an outflung arm, and a spray of color flew from his fingers, covering a third of the clearing. The dazzling rainbow of hues swirled over and around each other, then sank into the ground and faded.

"Not elemental," Esmun said.

Professor Zarek stepped up to two of the carved stones. "I suppose we'll have to figure it out the hard way." He quirked a challenging eyebrow at Jilesa. "Are you coming?"

Esmun cleared his throat. "I'll stay here. Maybe I'll see something that helps."

Jilesa refused to let her own fears stop her from experiencing this part of the story, so she walked next to Professor Zarek across the clearing.

They moved slowly, cautiously. Jilesa kept a spell ready on the tip of her tongue to deploy at anything that might suddenly spring out at them. The farther they walked, the heavier her limbs felt. Her breathing slowed, her eyelids drooped—

With a jerk, Jilesa stumbled and found herself next to Esmun, who grabbed her before she sank to the ground.

"You barely made it ten steps in," Esmun said. "You passed the second set of stones, I blinked, and you were back here."

Professor Zarek squinted at the clearing. "Ah. It's that kind of maze. The stones must mark the turns."

Jilesa's strength slowly returned. "Two parts," she murmured. "One drains us, the other ports us out. If we persist—"

"We'll end up like those poor fools," the professor said, gesturing at the skeletons. "We need a way to determine the maze's path without walking through it."

Jilesa tapped a knuckle against her mouth. Most Silverquill students mastered the spell to summon an inkling, if only to pit them against each other in sidewalk competitions. But would they pass through the maze unhindered or would the enchantment dispel them? Only one way to find out.

Tracing the appropriate glyph in the air, Jilesa snapped an insult so vicious that Esmun winced. Out of the sibilants and plosives, the creature formed and turned its viscous shape toward Jilesa.

“Cross that clearing,” Jilesa ordered.

It flew at her bidding, reappearing at her side with its color faded like an old book left in the sun.

“Inklings can run the gauntlet,” Professor Zarek said. “Excellent plan. We need more than one, and a way to chart their course.”

Jilesa swallowed her nerves. “We’ll need to share power again.”

“By all means.”

Esmun raised a hand. “I’ll find a higher vantage and make a map.”

Professor Zarek’s smile was lightning-quick. “The two of you are truly outdoing yourselves today. Top marks for ingenuity.”

Flushed with pleasure at the compliment, Jilesa traced two connected circles and a series of symbols onto the ground. She stepped inside one circle, and Professor Zarek occupied the other. The syllables of the spell flowed from her like light from a lamp, engulfing her in a burst of energy.

Rather than a single glyph, she drew a half dozen in the air, each bright and clear. She hurled insult after insult at them, and one by one they spawned inklings of different shapes and sizes. Despite the assistance from Professor Zarek, her dizziness from the energy drain nearly made her tip sideways.

Jilesa locked her knees and gestured imperiously at the assembled inklings. “Into the maze!”

Off they flew, with Jilesa calling commands as they traversed the clearing. Each time one returned, she sent it after the one that had gone the farthest, replicating the appropriate turns. The maze’s energy-sapping eventually dispelled the inklings, until only one remained.

If this one failed, would she be able to cast the spell again? The maze had drained her so much ... But the thought of giving up now was inconceivable. She sucked her teeth and waited for it to fade away or—

The last inkling passed through the final set of stones. It swirled in the air triumphantly.

“Did you get it, Esmun?” Professor Zarek called.

“I did!” Esmun jogged back down holding a canvas with a realistic image of the clearing and the path marked in luminous red ink.

Jilesa sagged in relief. Now they only had to follow the map, and they’d reach the doors to the vaults.

They began to traverse the space, Esmun in the lead, turning as needed when they reached a new pair of standing stones. Jilesa realized the obvious skeletons weren’t the only ones littering the ground; more had sunk into the earth over time, only the curve of a skull or the pale line of an arm marking where they’d fallen. Had so many attempted to access the vaults without permission?

She shivered. Maybe Esmun was right. Maybe they should have stayed at Strixhaven.

No. Even if she could never write this story for the *Star* without breaking her promise to keep this secret, she’d at least prove Professor Goss was wrong to hold her back. Someday, when she was a famous lumimancer, she would—

Jilesa stumbled on a depression in the ground and nearly veered off the path. Strange that she hadn’t noticed it, but then again, she was fatigued.

Movement to her right caught her eye. Nothing there except a half-buried skeleton, arm outstretched. Creepy. Jilesa scurried to catch up with Professor Zarek, but her foot caught on something else. This time she went down, landing hard on one knee and both hands.

Bony fingers gripped her boot. Eerie, dark flames flickered within the eyes of an otherwise empty skull, and a jawbone rattled as if attempting to shape words.

Jilesa screamed and kicked out with her other boot. The skeletal hand released her. She stumbled away, pushing herself to her feet.

“I don’t have time for this,” Professor Zarek snapped. “Get through the maze, you two. I’ll have a word with these pests.”

Esmun grabbed Jilesa’s arm. They stumbled across the misty field, pausing to check the map so they wouldn’t be transported back to the beginning. More skeletons hauled themselves out of the earth, fleshless phalanges clutching at grass and dirt. Some revealed tattered remnants of their living selves, moldering clothes or rusted weapons, while others had long since lost any clues to their histories.

Hissed syllables from Professor Zarek preceded a chilling rush of power that made Jilesa’s skin break out in goose bumps. Another skeleton seized her calf and raised baleful, dark-fire eyes to hers.

“Smile,” Esmun said, flinging a canvas toward the undead.

Its teeth clattered as a flash of magic threw Jilesa’s shadow into stark relief. The skeleton’s image appeared on the front of the hovering canvas; as it did, the skeleton itself burned away, leaving nothing but ashes and a whiff of sulfur.

The canvas rolled itself up, and Esmun stuffed it into his case, again reaching for Jilesa. They continued their flight, dodging increasingly aggressive enemies. The final pair of stone markers beckoned, and with a surge of energy they dashed through.

Jilesa skidded to a halt, pressing a hand to the stitch in her side. The vault doors towered over her, cold mist caressing her exposed skin, blue sigils whispering in a language she didn’t understand. Unnerved, she looked back at the maze.

Professor Zarek strode briskly along the unseen path, limned in shadow, cloak flaring like wings. His close-mouthed smile unsettled Jilesa—but, of course, a powerful mage like him wouldn’t be troubled by a few undead.

“Excellent work,” he said. “If this were being graded, you’d both pass with flying colors.”

It wasn’t, though. This extra credit project wouldn’t improve either Jilesa’s or Esmun’s academic standing. But proving her worth as a lumimancer ... Jilesa clung to that prospect like the knot at the end of a rope dangling over a pit.

Professor Zarek raised his palms toward the vault doors. “Ascend, sages of sky, to soar in secret.”

Nothing happened.

“Maybe the Codex was right,” Esmun said. “Maybe we need permission from one of the Founders before—”

Slowly, silently, the doors cracked open just enough to allow them to slip inside.

“—or not.”

Professor Zarek’s cold smile turned on Jilesa. “Time for that secret-seeking magic of yours to serve us again.”

The prospect of showing off no longer thrilled her.

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Inside, the Vaults of Turrau seemed more like some ancient temple than a storage structure. The doors opened into a round vestibule with an archway leading into a much larger space beyond. Copper-gilded pillars etched with meticulously precise symbols held up ceilings high enough to accommodate a dragon's form, though the relative airiness did little to relieve the oppressive weight of the mountainous rock pressing down on them. If there were other rooms or tunnels, they weren't readily visible in the flickering glow of ever-burning torches whose flames shed no smoke.

Recesses in the walls each held a single object. Some were larger than others, some had shapes Jilesa could identify from a distance—a scroll, a vase, a glistening prism. Others were too small, or hidden deep within their nooks, or were simply beyond her ken. Large stone statues stood at intervals, vaguely humanoid but with flat, blank faces and deep pits instead of eyes, each holding a round shield and spear.

A flash and sulfurous scent announced that Esmun had committed an image to canvas. A pity they couldn't use it for the story in the *Star* unless they were released from their confidentiality promise.

"Let's get that tome," Professor Zarek said. "Remember, it's *Accounts of the Dawning Age: Vortex Formations and Egomagical Adaptations*, by Scavrana the Oracle."

"Right," Jilesa fumbled with her spellbook, flipping through it until she found the page she wanted. Swallowing her nerves, she traced the necessary symbols in the air while speaking the incantation in a precise, firm tone. Each syllable brightened her sigil until it glowed fiercely: the light of truth a beacon to follow. Which she had to, because it darted away, down the length of the room.

Deeper into the vaults it flew, Jilesa chasing after, beyond exhausted from expending so much magic and evading the undead. Whatever priceless treasures and artifacts she passed were of no consequence. Her companions' footsteps beat against the stone floor behind her, their harsh breathing the only other sound breaking the sepulchrous silence.

At last, the light stopped in front of a recess that held a book. Its cover resembled smoky glass or crystal rather than leather, featuring snarl-like engravings filled with a silvery metal. Jilesa found herself loath to touch it, as if her dirty hands would desecrate the sanctity of the artifact.

"This is it?" Professor Zarek asked breathlessly.

"The spell says it is," Jilesa replied.

"Excellent." He didn't hesitate to take the tome, opening it carefully. Inside, thin sheets of metallic paper were covered in a language Jilesa hadn't learned.

A grinding, scraping sound filled the empty space. It reminded her of the mortar and pestle she used to crush coffee beans at work.

"What was that?" Esmun whispered.

Professor Zarek ignored him, continuing to read, a finger tracing the page.

More grinding yielded to a thud, then another. A pair of the towering stone humanoids stepped away from the walls and turned to face Jilesa and Esmun. Their eyes glittered like cut crystals catching sunlight; their spears and shields shifted into a clearly aggressive posture.

"The statues," Jilesa said. "They're the constructs Codie warned us about!"

"Intruders," a hollow voice intoned. "Return the stolen item or be destroyed."

Jilesa looked in horror at Professor Zarek. “You have to put that back. They think we’re thieves!”

“A moment, I want to be sure—yes, there it is.” Professor Zarek closed the book and tucked it under his arm. “Alas, not quite what we were looking for, but I think this clarifies our next steps. Thank you again for all your assistance, you two.”

Jilesa’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Your combination of skill and spiteful ambition was invaluable, as I’d expected, though it did take some maneuvering to get that story assigned to you.” The professor’s blue-gray eyes were cold as a winter sky as he smiled at her. “Alas, I have business elsewhere, but with luck perhaps you’ll make it back to Strixhaven. If not, even better. We wouldn’t want all of this to end up in the *Star*, now, would we?”

Still smiling, Professor Zarek vanished in a swirl of shadow dotted with bursts of light.

“He left us,” Esmun said, disbelieving.

Jilesa stared at the empty recess, ice in her veins. This had all been a plot to steal that book? Had everything he told them been a lie? All his flattery, his compliments, mere manipulations designed to use her and her magic?

The constructs continued their inexorable march toward her and Esmun. More were behind them, and still more came from the other direction. What could they do? Surely if they explained, the constructs would understand.

Nonsense. Such guardians were not designed to grasp nuance. Nor were they likely to be defeated by mere students.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “If I had just written the puff piece ...”

“Apologize later,” Esmun said. “How do we get out?”

She didn’t know. Lumimancy was no help, and they had no means of contacting anyone in Strixhaven for backup. Even if she and Esmun escaped the vaults, they still had to travel through endless mountains filled with monsters.

Exhausted, magically depleted, Jilesa prepared to run for her life one last time, hopeless as it might be. She’d failed to prove Professor Goss wrong, and the dead didn’t earn the Argent Star, but she’d been right about one thing, at least.

Nothing good ever came of keeping secrets.