

A Living Flame

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Sunrise over Euphony Gorge is a tipped-over paintbox, blues and purples swirling together to meet the horizon, shimmering with the ambient magic in the air. It's breathtaking. It's radiant.

Of course, no one at Summitfest is up early enough to appreciate it. Three weeks of continuous spell-casting, hiking, and hard drinking means most people are rarely conscious before noon. Ostensibly, we're meant to be preparing for the showcase at the end of the month, but it's rare to start thinking about it until a few days beforehand. Or so they tell me.

I'd be sleeping, too, if it hadn't been for a night terror so acute and realistic that I still heard the cold clang of metal every time I closed my eyes. I needed to get out into the sun. Same as yesterday. And the day before that.

The wind off the gorge attempts to lift my hair, my braids heavy enough that it can't quite manage it. *See? The plane is still here. There are no metal monsters.* I repeat it, my mantra. *Nobody here is relying on you.*



Rootha, Mastering the Moment | Art by: Lie Setiawan

Something moves farther down the ridge, a fiery silhouette. I'm not alone up here, and for a single frozen moment I think I'm still dreaming.

Dean Nassari stands precariously on a slender jut of rock. *What are they doing here? Are they here to help with final projects?* I should know the answer to that question. As a senior, I should already have

two or three Summitfests under my belt. But the thing about your home plane getting invaded by a genocidal alien force intent on assimilating those deemed worthy and butchering the rest is that it will really fuck with your extracurriculars.

I wish the sight of my former advisor didn't fill me with sick dread. I wish my time at Strixhaven hadn't been bisected by Phyrexia's invasion. But as my mom likes to say, "Can you spend wishes? Can you put them in the bank?"

Gods on high, I wish I wasn't such a shuddering wreck.

As if they can sense my anxiety, Nassari starts to turn. My body moves out of reflex, pivoting to scramble back down the ridge, and—

"Rootha, darling. What is it that you always tell me? Your worries that you'll never be good enough?"

My foot slips, and the edge of the ridge gives way in a shower of shale. Nassari might yell something after me, but the wind snatches it away. I have just enough time to reflect on what a perfect ending this would be—to survive a Phyrexian incursion only to be brought down by the unwillingness to talk to someone who was mean to me one time—before my fall is abruptly arrested.

A single thread of magic loops around my wrists and yanks me up. It only lasts a second, which is lucky. Any longer and my shoulders would have dislocated. As it is, they don't feel great.

I cough up rock dust and roll over. The edge of the gorge yawns wide just to my left, and I scramble backward, my stomach swooping. The shelf I'd been pulled to safety on is barely six feet wide. I press myself back against the cool rock, heart pounding.

I shade my eyes, trying to see back up to where I'd fallen from, and if Dean Nassari had noticed. There's nothing but the lightening sky.

Beside me, a skinny elf with a shaved head goes back to staring off the side of the cliff. He's young enough that he'd seem out of place with the rest of the Summitfest attendees. Most Prismari students aren't invited until they're upperclassmen.

"Thanks." I push shakily up to my feet. My hair is matted with sweat. "That was fast spellwork, uh—"

The kid glances at me like he forgot I was here. "Glassy. Call me Glass."

"Thanks, Glass." My arms ache, but at least I'm not a smear on the rocks of the Whale Trench.

The kid shrugs, not looking at me. All his attention is focused on the trench below, which is full of, predictably, whales. Massive beasts of elemental magic, cool blues and deep reds, moving through the narrow fissure in the mountains on their endless pilgrimage. They're unusually graceful for creatures of their size, except for one humpback whale pulsing a crystalline azure, hovering directly below Glass as he feeds it a slim, steady stream of magic.

"Uh ... what are you doing?"

Glass rubs an ear against his shoulder like he's got an itch. "Channeling."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Elementals are fairly stable as constructs go, but they're still wild magic. Anything that messes with the internal balance is going to be tricky, and potentially explosive.

Glass doesn't even bother to look at me this time. "I should hope so. It's my capstone project."

Okay, surly. I don't say it loud, though, since he did save my life. And a giant, magic-stuffed whale probably *would* be popular in the Summitfest showcase, though I'm not sure how he plans to get it onstage.

Maybe this is who Nassari is here to help. I feel a pang in my chest, somewhere between jealousy and exhaustion.

"You know that voice in your ear, Rootha?"

I grit my teeth. "How do I get back up from here?"

Glass gestures vaguely off toward his left. The cliff face lives in a world of permanent shadow from the overhang, but in the light of Glass's magic I can just make out a narrow shelf of rock leading to the top of the ridge. It looks about the size of my foot.

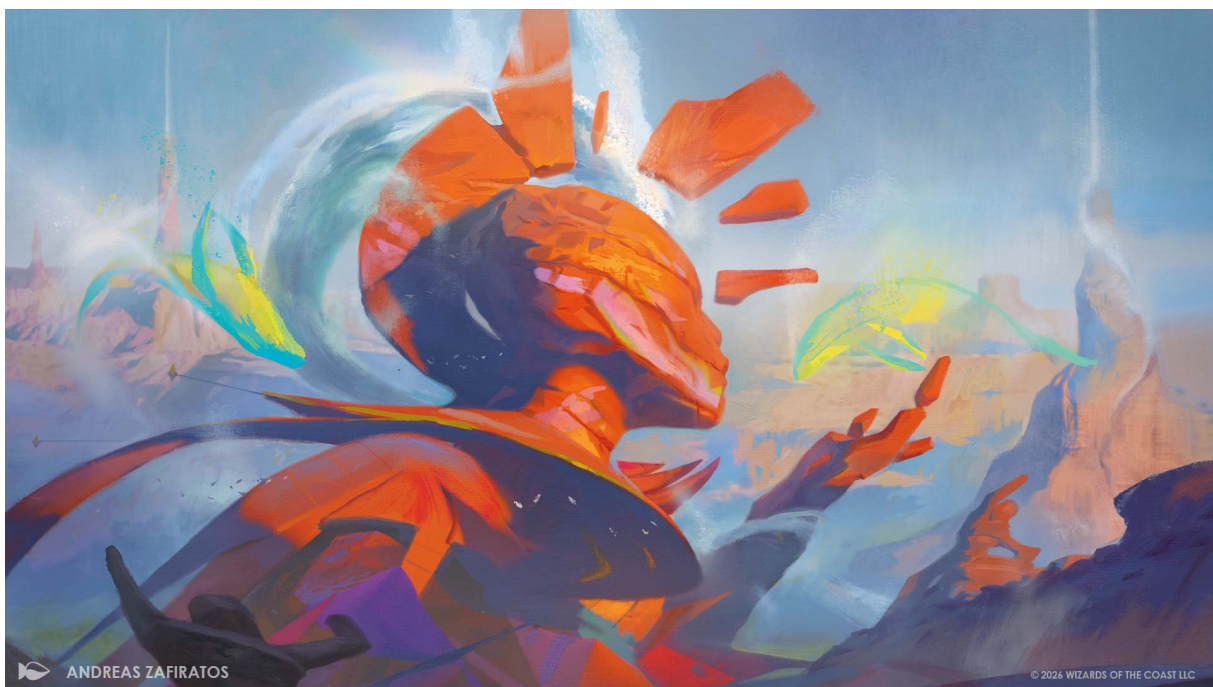
Are you kidding me?

Once again, I glance up from where I fell, feeling intensely foolish when I see that no one is there.

"They're not going to help you, Rootha. You're on your own."

By the time I return to the main festival grounds, my back aches and my elbows are scraped to hell, and it's late enough for the camp to begin stirring. Rows of red and blue pavilions gleam under the mid-morning sun, enchanted cookfires springing up in anticipation of a hundred hungry, hungover students. Most of the tents are stamped with the Prismari crest, although as the month goes on there are more and more outsiders joining the festival. Former Strixhaven students, traveling artists, or just people who like a show. There are assigned places for everyone, but that tends to fall by the wayside as the days pass and people make friends and intermingle.

Above it all stands the Muse, an enormous stone woman looking out over the side of the mountain. People say it's a natural rock formation, which seems unlikely, but if I had made something like that, I would make sure the whole world knew it, and nobody has ever claimed responsibility.



Spectacle Summit | Art by: Andreas Zafiratos

As I approach my tent, the air tingles and I am suddenly surrounded by music. The high flutter of a flute and the deep roll of a cello, punctuated with little percussive bursts. I push back the tent flap, and the music abruptly stops. Kahri, a human wind mage, looks around, her instruments floating around her like familiars. In Prismari, she's known as the one-woman band, and it only took a single night at Summitfest before we started getting noise complaints. I helped her cast the sound barrier the next morning.

"Rootha! There you are!" Her eyes widen as she takes in the state of my clothes and elbows. "What happened to you? Did you fall off a cliff?"

Slumping across the slightly hillocky floor to the enchanted basin, I sit down and begin unbraiding my hair. "Yes."

"Wait, really?"

"Kind of." I pause, two pins held between my fingers. "Well, no. I absolutely did fall off a cliff. Someone just saved me from landing."

"How did—oof."

She knocks her shoulder into the neck of the floating cello. She waves her arm, and the instruments drift gently back into their cases. "How did that happen?"

I tell her, leaving out the part about falling as a result of getting so upset at the sight of a dean that I tripped over my own feet. By the time I'm done, she's sitting on the edge of a camp bed with her mouth wide open.

"Rootha! I'd never forgive you if you were this year's Summitfest casualty!" The flute gives a desultory little toot in its case, as if reacting to her emotion. "You need to be more careful!"

I can't help but hear my mother in her voice, even though a seven-and-a-half-foot orc woman Kahri is not. She barely comes up to my sternum.

"I'm glad that Glassyk was there to catch you!"

"Do you know him?" I hadn't told her his name, just described the skinny collection of elbows and knees that had saved my life with a thread of elemental magic.

"Everyone knows him! He's a savant! He's only been in Prismari for less than a year, and his casting is better than half the professors!"

"Why haven't I heard of him?"

Kahri gives me a sad shake of the head. "Well, if you ever left your room ..."

I laugh. "Wow, Kahri. You're so honest this morning."

Kahri lifts her delicate chin. "Music is truth," she says, in that dignified way she has that makes it impossible to tell if she's making a joke.

I treat my various scrapes with charmed ointment and a fresh bandage; I've never been much of a healer. Then I sit down at my makeshift desk in the back of the pavilion, the strains of Kahri's music washing over me like an incoming tide. She hadn't been talking just to talk back there. I don't have many friends. Most of the rest of my cohort had already left Strixhaven.

When I say "most," well—a whole swathe died in the invasion, either declared unsuitable for the Machine Orthodoxy and disposed of or decomposed as their Phyrexian elements failed. And nobody would want to live like that, or so the professors told us.

After that, the campus needed to be rebuilt and restaffed, and some students simply never came back, finding magical schooling elsewhere or deciding that the whole pursuit wasn't for them. Most seniors who did come back completed their final year and then graduated, moving on to the rest of their lives.

Your advisor typically helped you through your final exams and graduation application, and after Nassari, I was supposed to find myself a new advisor, and I just ... never had. When I came back the following year, no one ever said anything. And why would they? I'm Rootha Squallheart. Don't I belong on the campus I helped save from certain destruction?

I snort and flip open a small wooden box, washing the table in red light. Trees and vines twist on its lid, two branches reaching down to form a clasp. My mother had given it to me to hold jewelry, and last year I'd spent several evenings tempering it against magical interference.

Inside rests a sphere of gleaming red and orange, a little smaller than my fist. It seethes and writhes like the surface of a sun but gives off no heat. I raise my hand, and it curls around my fingers, responding to my intention as much as the motion.

I call it the Living Flame, and it's the greatest thing I've ever made. Perhaps the greatest thing a Squallheart has ever made, wild magic brought perfectly under control of a higher will.

It's been done for six months. I haven't shown it to anyone. The idea had come to me early in my first year, when I saw a swirl of crimson and gold soaring over the old Furygale, back before I even knew the word "compleat."

"That voice, Rootha? Maybe you should open yourself up to it."

I stare into the Living Flame, and for a moment I am transported to the darkness of the Biblioplex, rank with the stink of blood and metal.

"Rootha!"

I jerk back to the present. Kahri is standing next to me with one hand on my arm. The Living Flame has expanded to fill nearly half the pavilion.

"I'm sorry," I stutter, shrinking it back down. "I zoned out."

I spend the rest of the day experimenting, which I haven't bothered to do in a while. The Living Flame has been finished for so long that there hasn't been a need. I can't stand to be alone with my thoughts, though, and pour myself into work. By the time dusk starts to fall I'm bristly and stir-crazy, my fingers cramping from the close work. So, when Kahri comes back in and asks me if I want to go to the gallery with her, I say yes right away.

She blinks. It's obvious she hadn't expected me to accept, since I never had before. She recovers quickly and claps her hands together twice, her rings flashing in the evening light.

"Perfect! I'm so glad. You look like you could use a drink." She tips her head to the side. "Honestly, you've looked like you could use a drink since I met you."

I couldn't argue with her there.

The gallery is a cluster of wagons and caravans at the edge of Spectacle Summit, close to the main thoroughfare through the mountains. It's where painters, craftsmen, and other magical artisans can gather to trade and sell, and Kahri spends some of every day there busking. I've gone to see her a couple times, though she tends to play the same things over and over. "You go for crowd-pleasers when you're looking to make tips," she always tells me.

By the time we arrive, most of the artists have closed up shop, people drifting toward the open-air bar beneath the steadily darkening sky. Sunset here is almost as spectacular as sunrise, and the enchanted blues and oranges hang in streaky nebulas over the summit.

Someone has enchanted a wide stretch of ground, turning it into white shining stone that pulses gently as a makeshift dance floor. For a moment the music catches hold of me, beating along with my heartbeat, and I remember the early days of Prismari, the concerts and the performances and the electrified, half-drunk conversations on magical theory. It hadn't even been that long ago, but I can barely remember what it felt like.

Kahri no doubt senses something inside me is wavering. She pushes me toward a round sofa ringing a fire pit. "Here. Be a wallflower for a while, and I'll go get us some drinks."

I sit, and she shimmers off, her silvery-blue skirt swaying in the evening breeze. She's only a few years younger than me, but I feel so old watching her.

I shift my gaze to the fire, which feels natural after a day spent staring at the Living Flame. This is a completely natural fire, no magic at all, but the way it dances and sways reminds me of a certain person's robes. Another hard pang moves through my chest.

"Hey. You're Rootha, right?"

I drag my eyes up from the fire, squinting as they struggle to focus. A well-built human guy with an ocean-blue tattoo snaking up one arm watches me avidly from farther down the couch.

I pretend I didn't hear, looking off behind him as if I noticed something in the distance, face heating up.

"Rootha!" He says it again.

The guy he's leaning against gives him a half-hearted shove. "Don't bother people, Lux." He's a solid and long-haired orc with silver-painted nails, and I realize that I know him. We had a planar history class together last semester. This must be the boyfriend he mentioned a few times.

"Hi, Justice," I say, because I see he's recognized me, too.

"Rootha, right?" He's got one arm stretched out across the back of the sofa, looking totally at ease. "I thought you graduated."

"Nope."

The human—Lux—has bright, slightly glassy eyes. He seems quite drunk. "Justice, you know her? She's one of the Champions of Strixhaven!"

Now I wish I was quite drunk.

Justice narrows his eyes. "Who?"

I jingle one of my bangles nervously, realize I'm doing it, and stop. "Were you asleep for the invasion?" That's all I really remember of him in class, that he fell asleep a lot.

He grins. "Worse than that. I had to go home for the harvest. My little brother eloped with some girl he just met, and the ranch was short-handed."

"Sounds relaxing," I say.

Justice pulls the drink out of Lux's grip and takes a sip, then hands it back, like his boyfriend is a coaster. "Have you ever worked a soybean harvest? I'll take the metal monsters next time."

I laugh. I don't want to, but like Kahri said, you play the songs that people like, and I've been playing the same songs since the invasion. I remember when talking to people at parties was so easy for me. I remember when I used to look forward to it.

Lux rolls his eyes. "You can't say that to Rootha! She was one of the five students who performed the invocation to drive the Phyrexians from campus. And one of them is a Planeswalker! Well, of course, we all thought he was dead for a long time—"

I stand up. "I need some air."

I hear Lux call after me, "We're outside!" I don't turn around. My face is burning, all the way down to the tops of my shoulders.

"Rootha—"

I nearly run headlong into Kahri, pulling up at the last second so I only spill her drinks instead of knocking her to the ground.

"Sorry, I—"

"Everything all right, Kahri?"

That voice makes my already pounding heart pound even harder. Nassari is suddenly in front of us, their flames as bright as any of the firepits in the gallery.

"I'm fine, Dean Nassari. There's no harm done!" Kahri looks flustered, the front of her dress soaked in liquor. Nassari hums and frowns, pointing one scarlet finger at her. The stain slowly begins to vanish from the silk.

My pulse is in my throat. I keep expecting those burning eyes to turn on me. They never do. Nassari stands right there and doesn't look at me once. They smile at Kahri, turn on their heel, and glide away.

There is a burning in the back of my throat, similar to the bite of fire magic when cast incorrectly. The ripple of Nassari's flames shimmers in front of me, and I am held frozen to the spot.

"That voice, Rootha?"

"Rootha." Kahri touches my arm, and I have to summon all my willpower not to lash out and push her away. That old anger is simmering in the pit of my stomach, the rage that has always been there, that once upon a time Nassari told me wasn't something that would go away if I continued to suppress it.

Nearby, something explodes.

For a moment, I think it's my magic. Then, as the shockwave catches Nassari, then me, then Kahri, I think it is the Phyrexian delegation returning to wreak havoc on the plane. But as I hit the ground, I realize that what I first took for an explosion is something else. Water.

"What is that?" Kahri's voice is compressed, like her fall had knocked all the wind out of her.

The thing hovering in the sky above the gallery is so large that for a second it blots out the stars. My sense of scale is thrown off, and it's like I'm standing in a void. Then it moves, spinning in the air, and I realize what I'm looking at.

An enormous cerulean whale, turned black in the dying evening light, swollen with magic and careening out of control across the summit.



Spectacular Skywhale | Art by: Serena Malyon

“Is that—from the Whale Trench?” Kahri sputters. “But they’re harmless, they’re just constructs, they can’t—”

I ignore her, pushing myself off the ground, searching for—

“I see them, too.” A smooth but urgent voice is at my shoulder. “Do you know them?”

Dean Nassari stands beside me. For a moment my stomach attempts to escape up my esophagus, but another wave of water rises from the body of the elemental whale, cascading down and taking out a line of caravans. One shop full of chimes for sale rings out in unison before all the voices are snuffed out.

Deep in the center of the whale, visible only when it flips and writhes in the air, floats a single glowing shape. When it swoops down closer, I recognize the skinny limbs and shaved head.

“That’s Glass—Glassyk. A first-year, I think? He was doing something to the elemental earlier today. I met him when I—”

I bite off the end of my sentence, but Nassari isn’t listening. “He’s lost control of it.”

Screams echo as a fresh gout of water flows toward the lines of tents. Much more of this, and the entire rock shelf is going to become a floodplain.

Nassari raises a hand. “Stand back.”

The next time the whale passes over, a jet of flame escapes Nassari’s palm, hissing into a cloud of steam where it hits the giant shape, shearing off one massive flipper.

The water that hits the ground and churns it to mud is boiling hot. I cast a haphazard barrier to keep it off Kahri and me. Up above, the whale makes a sound like the single held note of an opera, vibrating inside my chest and head. The fin grows back steadily, deformed into a bulbous protrusion. Whatever force animates the elemental, it’s no longer under Glass’s control. I doubt he’s even alive in there.

Beside me, Nassari swears. “My flames aren’t powerful enough. I need more force.” This time they shoot a gout of flame at the whale’s tail. It vanishes in another powerful hiss.

“Stop it! Stop it!” I sputter as I make another barrier. “You’re gonna boil us alive!”

Nassari spins on their heel, flaming robes crackling huffily. Above us, the whale swoops down low again, tail growing back into a misshapen lump. “Do you have a suggestion then, Miss Squallheart?”

I flush as hot as the steaming water at my feet, and suddenly I am back in the Biblioplex, body on fire with the power of the invocation as I hold up my edge of the circle. People had died to get us here, and we are the last hope of Strixhaven, of the entire plane.

There are five of us, brought together by circumstance, barely friends. Not even from the same schools of magic. But we’d kept each other alive, and we are an inch from victory.

And then ... them.

They appear from nowhere, the gleaming, solid metal of their half-completed flesh clashing sickeningly with the free-flowing dance of their flames. Dean Nassari has always been arresting, but as a Phyrexian they are terrifying.

They focus on me, because of course they do. They know me.

“You know that voice in your head, Rootha?” they purr. *“The one that tells you you’re not good enough? That insists you’ll never be all of the things you pretend you are?”*

Their mouth gleams cherry red when they smile, with blood or fire, I’ll never know which.

“I think you should let it in. It’s good to trust your instincts sometimes, isn’t it? Your instincts are right.”

“You think you’re a unique talent, someone who just takes a different approach to things?”

“You’re a burden. You cling. You can’t finish anything, and it’s not because of your perfectionism. You’re just. No. Good.”

They say it to hurt me. Of course they do. They are a Phyrexian, and everything they do is in service to the Machine Orthodoxy. I am the weakest link, and they break it.

I lose my concentration, feeling the power begin to run out of the circle. The only reason any of us survive is because of Quint, a quiet boy from Lorehold. He compensates for my failure, shoring up the casting. He vanishes after that, and it isn’t until months later that we all learn that he hadn’t died after all. He’s become a Planeswalker.

I should have been all right after that. I hadn’t killed anyone, had I? No harm done. But Quint’s survival doesn’t change the fact that among the five of us, I was the point of failure. Someone had to take up my slack. That knowledge has burned at the center of me for the last three years of my life.

And Nassari knows it. That’s why they haven’t spoken to me in so long. The power of the invocation allowed them to reconstitute their elemental body, their proximity to it restoring them the same way it restored the rest of the campus—that lack of flesh had, in the end, been their saving grace. After they came back to themselves, they’d known what I’d done.

But now they turn to look at me and ask in the same voice as they had in the Biblioplex, “Do you have a suggestion then, Miss Squallheart?” And I realize that I do.

It’s what Nassari had just said that makes me think of it. *“I need more force.”* I’m used to having their voice echoing in my head. It feels right at home.

Slowly, I raise my hand. Nassari takes a step back, like they think I’m about to cast at *them*. I close my eyes, trying to block out the sounds of water and people fleeing and the haunting, chaotic bellow of the elemental. All I see behind my eyelids is a bright, dancing, *living* flame.

“What in the—”

I feel its weight before I even open my eyes. The Living Flame is wrapped around my arm like a whip. It caresses my wrist, and when I look up, Nassari is watching me with an expression I can't parse. The Living Flame is even brighter than their own fire.

Without a word, they offer me their hand. For a moment I am braced for the metal claw, the jagged, blackened nails. But the past is over. It's dead.

I take Dean Nassari's hand, and the world around us turns to fire.

Years later, people will still tell the story of what happened next. It will become the center of future Summitfests, a tradition traded down the generations. The Night of Flame.

The berserking elemental has grown so large that it seems to blot out the sky, its tortured song ringing out across the summit. Beneath it, the gallery is awash, demolished caravans and tents sucked toward the sheer edges of Euphony Gorge. People amass beneath the Muse, pulling each other up and out of the flood.

The flames start as a single point, but they burn wider and hotter, power so raw it makes every magic user's teeth ache. At first it looks like the flames are surrounding two figures, then they coil and braid, red and orange with a deep azure core. Some people say the flames look like serpents, while others say they swim through the air like fish. Others will insist they pelted the giant elemental like a comet, evaporating it in a single cataclysmic blast.

Shockingly, beyond a few burns and scrapes, no one was hurt that night. Even the idiot student whose hubris created the rogue elemental in the first place was fine beyond a few broken ribs. A miracle.

Of course, I have to have all of this explained to me afterward. In the moment all I am aware of is heat and the euphoric burn of wild magic, and Nassari's voice in my ear. And for the first time in years, neither of those things hurt.

“Ow,” I say, rolling over in the sucking mud, pulling out one knee, then the other. There's something heavy and warm draped over my shoulders, and when I manage to peel open my stinging eyes, I realize why. The Living Flame had protected my body from the fire, but it hadn't saved my clothes, which had burned away to tattered strips. Nassari had covered me with their own mantel, made from a sheer, shifting material. I've never felt anything like it.

Nassari himself is kneeling a few feet from me, bare chested, their head bowed. For a few heartbeats I think they're hurt, but then we lock eyes.

“Rootha.”

Neither of us says anything at first. Nassari's expressions have always been hard for me to read. Not entirely because they are a djinni, although that means their features and complexion are ever-moving, coruscating with flame. But for a split second, I think I see that same core of loneliness that has lived inside me, hollowing me out. That guilt.

“Rootha, I'm ... I'm sorry.” They clear their throat. “I'm sorry that ... I haven't been keeping up with your career. That spell—”

“The Living Flame,” I provide.

They nod. “The Living Flame. Exquisite detail work. Unbelievable. I don't suppose ...” They hesitate. “You aren't looking for an advisor still, are you? I know, technically, I haven't been yours in years, but ...”

Their shoulders pull in. It's like they're trying to make themselves small. "I never ... Those things I said to you, back in the Biblioplex. I said whatever I could to hurt you. None of it was—well, it doesn't matter whether it was true then. It certainly isn't now."

My first semester in Prismari, I'd been on the verge of flunking out. Unable to finish anything, scared of being judged, I'd been so sure Nassari would reject me. Instead, they saw the talent in me and pulled me to my feet.

This time, I reach out a hand and pull them to theirs.