

# Chapter one

**Z**EKE HEARD THE occult door seal shut behind him, and the faint glow of the carved runes signalled the reactivation of the wards. Slipping the silver ring he had used to temporarily deactivate them into his pocket, he started out across the hall, heading toward the spiral staircase near the entrance of the Grand Tower. Warm rays of afternoon sunlight streamed in through the high windows, reflecting off of the smooth marble floor.

Zeke could hear the sound of activity all around, but he paid it little attention. He rolled his shoulders and hooked his thumbs in the loose material of his brown robes, his eyes watching the floor ahead of his feet, his pace uncharacteristically slow.

Time had passed too quickly; Zeke wasn't ready to move on yet. Time, it seemed, slowed for no one. He had to admit, if he had the choice to fight against the tides of time, to live in an unsatisfactory past – even if it wasn't an impossible battle – it wouldn't be healthy. With that in mind, he let out a sigh and increased the length of his strides.

Zeke had been called to the office of the commander of the tower guard, presumably in answer to his application to join their ranks. His studies of the mystic arts – to prove himself as a sorcerer and become recognized as a wizard of Norwich – had come to an end. Stuck, unable to progress, he'd finally had to admit to himself that chapter of his life needed to be closed. He knew it was for the best, but nevertheless his seemingly perpetual disappointment kept his head looking downward.

That was when he saw a pair of shoes, decorated with distinct embroidery, stepping in his direction. Zeke recognized them immediately and glanced up with keen eyes, to see Yvonne gliding elegantly across the marble floor.

The Grand Tower was a product of the greatest craftsmanship and some of the most powerful magic that man had to offer. It was a magnificent building, inside and out, yet it all faded around the statuesque shape of Yvonne. Her glossy, auburn hair was worn in hanging curls, which bounced with each step. She wore a bright red dress featuring lace and vertical folds – perhaps a little

too revealing of her lush figure to be considered a robe, but Zeke wasn't about to complain. Zeke had barely spoken to Yvonne in his time at the Grand Tower and knew little about her – except that she was a woman possessing the kind of beauty which enticed young men into performing displays of strength, or rendered them speechless.

“Hey, Yvonne,” Zeke greeted, putting on the best smile he could manage. He turned his head to track her movement as she passed, trying to catch her hazel eyes. Yvonne afforded him a quick, casual smile in return, before continuing without a word.

As she left his field of view, Zeke caught sight of Grant and Sebastian on the far side of the hall, sneering in amusement. Sebastian's eyes shifted from Yvonne to Zeke, and he raised both thumbs up in sarcastic encouragement.

Zeke shot him a scowl and turned back to ascend the spiralling steps, toward the upper levels of the tower. The steps were wide enough for three people, but Zeke still found himself having to stop and tuck himself in, for stubborn groups refusing to form a narrower file.

Upon reaching the third floor, Zeke spotted Wizard Crosby, a stout, young woman with a dimpled face and short, brown hair, bustling through the archway into the stairwell, with a box which smelled of burnt parchment. He stopped for her to pass, and she nodded her appreciation, moving swiftly on to the set of stairs, ahead.

“*Already?*” Zeke asked.

“Oh, yes,” she breathed, in exasperation. “It hasn't been half an hour, and the overzealous runts have already incinerated half a dozen books.”

Zeke couldn't help but feel irritated. The chances were that those “overzealous runts”, with power enough to start fires, were going to be wizards in a few years.

Zeke passed Wizard Crosby again, when she exited the stairwell on the fourth floor. After two more turns around the stairwell, he almost bumped into High Wizard Ralf.

Finding the man here wasn't unusual; Benjamin Ralf's talents were in high demand and, as such, the stairwell was practically his office. He was a tall, lean man with an athletic build; his chiselled face was flushed with colour.

Zeke had also applied – as he had done for three years, now – for an apprenticeship. Not every sorcerer undertook one or was required to; apprenticeships were primarily a safety measure, used to teach discipline to those with strength enough to be dangerous, if they lost control. On rare occasions, an apprenticeship could be granted to a person who showed signs of magical talent, but was struggling to make anything of it. A person like Zeke. Success, though, hinged on the Wizard Council deciding that the applicant had enough potential to be worth the trouble and resources.

“Hi, Ben,” Zeke greeted.

“Hey,” Ben said, without pausing.

“I don’t suppose you know what became of my application this year?” Zeke asked after him.

Ben sighed, stopping three steps down to look back. “I don’t remember your application specifically, but we’ve already begun taking on new apprentices. I’m afraid if you haven’t heard back by now, it was unsuccessful.”

Zeke had grown adept at confining negative thoughts to his inside voice, but the slow burn over the past few weeks was becoming too much. “This is supposed to be a place to advance knowledge and teach, not keep people down,” he snapped.

Ben paused for a breath, but didn’t look away. “I’ve seen you try, Zeke,” he said; “I’ve seen how hard you push yourself, and how long you’ve been pushing.” He shook his head. “Your dedication is admirable, but you haven’t shown any sign of improvement since you first applied.”

Zeke grimaced. He couldn’t argue; it was true. He checked his temper, but the familiar knot of frustration still twisted in his stomach. Ben must have noticed, because his expression turned sympathetic, and his next words came out solemn.

“You’re not alone, Zeke. With one-to-one guidance, you might eventually be able to develop...” he hesitated, not wanting to offend, but not wanting to lie, either, “...useful talents.”

Ben gestured, raising his palms upward: “The fact of the matter is that, as big as this place is, only a fraction of the people working and studying here are gifted enough to be generally considered a sorcerer, and fewer still are capable of working with enough energy to manage a significant spell on their own; most operate as part of a coven.

“Furthermore, it’s not uncommon for students with modest talents to discontinue their study of the mystic arts, once they have enough control not to be a danger to those around them. Add that all up and you’ll see that there are relatively few of us, and fewer still who are capable and willing to teach.”

“Surely that’s more of a reason to invest more heartedly in those with any sign of potential,” Zeke pressed.

Ben looked away and sighed. When he turned back, he said: “Put bluntly, Zeke, you have some talent, but can’t control it. And, because you’re not powerful enough to be viewed as dangerous, the council won’t be willing to spare a fully-fledged wizard to teach you better control. We are trying to lead our kind into an age where magic is used responsibly and respected throughout Albion – for that, Norwich needs strong and capable sorcerers.”

Zeke’s jaw clenched and his right hand formed into a fist. But, he knew anger wouldn’t do him any good; Ben was only telling him what he already knew. Ben was honest, and that had to be appreciated; giving bad news was difficult. Zeke met Ben’s forced smile with one of his own, and did his best to keep his frustration from showing in his voice: “I understand.”

Ben nodded slowly, and said: "I must be going." Then, he turned to leave, muttering something about books in need of saving. Zeke acknowledged the truth of this claim, so he turned away, too, and pressed onward.

Zeke exited the stairwell at the ninth and final floor. The entrance to the hallway wasn't shielded, most likely out of convenience for the recruits who wouldn't otherwise be able to get through. The hall was plain and business-like, relatively speaking. It still bore its magnificent craftsmanship, from floor to ceiling, and glyphs extruding from columns shaped into the stone walls, but the hallway was less vibrant than other parts. This was the administration level, where the official chambers of the tower guard commander and the high wizards were located. Only one room had its doors open.

"Good afternoon," came the deep voice of Commander Bates, as Zeke stepped into view.

"Good afternoon, Commander Bates," Zeke said.

"Have a seat," the commander gestured to the cushioned wooden chair at his desk. The commander was sat opposite it, with his back to the wall, facing the doorway.

Zeke entered, pulled out the chair and sat down. He rolled his shoulders and glanced around the room. It was cosy, which didn't fit what he had presumed of a commander's office.

Sunlight was invited into the room through a modest window. Left of the window, behind the commander, hung a majestic ceremonial sword on a simple, yet elegant mount. The stone floor was mostly covered by a large, deep-red rug, with golden embroidery around the edges. It contrasted well with the vibrant, dark-brown desk, which was covered with parchment, a large, open book and a few bottles of ink.

Zeke brought his hands together in his lap, crossing his fingers, and met the commander's eyes.

Commander Bates was powerfully built. He had a thick neck, and his imposing arms rested loosely upon the desk. His rugged face was heavily tanned and featured a rough stubble; his head was completely shaved, emphasizing the large, round spectacles, which looked out of place in contrast to his leather armour. The man looked ready to go to war – and take notes.

"Ezekiel Stone?" Commander Bates mused.

"Yes, sir," Zeke nodded. "I came as soon as I got the message."

Bates made a clicking sound in his cheek. "I understand that you're also seeking an apprenticeship in elemental magic."

Zeke wasn't well known. In fact, he was barely known at all, but he was likely the only applicant also seeking an apprenticeship, and his robes had no doubt betrayed him. "I was, sir," Zeke said, trying to keep the bitterness from his voice. "I didn't get it."

"I'm sure it'll be their loss, Ezekiel," Commander Bates said.

The comment wouldn't do him any practical good, but it somehow made Zeke feel more at ease, at that moment. Still, he didn't like being addressed by his full first name. "Zeke," he corrected.

"Zeke," the commander repeated, in acknowledgement, "I have your application to join the tower guard here." He slid his finger across to another sheet of parchment: "It says here that you started combat training with Captain Bowman." Bates glanced up from the page.

"That's right," Zeke confirmed.

"Quick reflexes," Bates read; "perhaps a natural fighter, but easily distracted. Undisciplined."

Zeke felt a twinge of doubt about his prospects. He raked the fingers of his left hand back across his thick, but short, dark-blond hair, and down onto the side of his neck, leaving his elbow sticking outward. Becoming consciously aware of his fidgeting a moment later, he let his hand drop back down.

"You've applied at a good age: eighteen," Bates nodded to himself, still looking at his records. "You have the gift of sorcery, so you likely have a long prime ahead of you. I think you have it in you to be a fine soldier, and we do have several openings in the tower."

Zeke surreptitiously eased himself into a straighter sitting position. "I won't let you down, Commander," he assured the man.

Commander Bates looked up and removed his glasses. "I believe that. It might not be what you hoped for, son, but it is an honourable station," he said, lifting his chin, slightly. "The tower guard is the first and last line of defence in the Wizard Towers. If it's a magical threat, the enforcers will come in, but opposing sorcerers often cancel out each side's spell-fire – when that happens, we're there. If they don't, then the tower's defensive ward is activated, shutting all sorcerers down, and the tower guard apprehends the hostiles with muscle and steel."

Zeke didn't have anything to say to that, so he just smiled and nodded.

The commander slid two pieces of parchment forward, spinning them around so that they were oriented for Zeke to read. One was indeed a recruitment slip, and the other an unsigned contract to join the tower guard – "Ezekiel Stone" was written across the top of each. "Sign it, if you accept the position," the commander offered. "We could use the extra coverage first thing tomorrow."

Zeke's stomach did an uncomfortable dance. This wasn't the path he had wanted to turn down, but what else was there? He quickly hid his hesitation behind curiosity: "May I ask why?"

Commander Bates's expression slipped from his face, leaving it utterly devoid of emotion. "We received a representative from London, earlier," he said; "he carried a letter bearing Algovia's seal, alerting officials within the Imperial Tower that Prince Jordan is sending an ambassador from London, to address the matter of recent attacks by our wizards on their people."

“Wait; what?” Zeke said, incredulous. “We have wizards attacking London?”

“Not to our knowledge, or by our command,” Bates said. “It is a serious allegation to make, so we have to keep our minds open to the possibility that we may indeed have a warlock problem on our hands.”

“But, if they have gone rogue, can Norwich be held accountable?” Zeke asked. “I mean, their sheriffs fight us at every opportunity, over jurisdiction in their realm. I know we have some influence, but it’s clear that they don’t want us to have any.”

“It’s not so simple where warlocks are concerned,” Bates replied. “Morally, you might have an argument, but it would hurt us politically if we don’t take some responsibility for stopping them. If the warlocks have evaded capture, we will be pressured to send enforcers to hunt them down.”

“Pressure us?” Zeke said. “Enforcing the proper use of magic as decreed by the council is what we want to do, anyway.”

Commander Bates let out a small laugh. “Yes, but that has never stopped an official from fulfilling their innate desire to tell someone else what to do.”

“True, that,” Zeke conceded, through a grin. “But, an increased guard? Do you think they will come with hostile intent?”

“It is doubtful,” the commander admitted, “but, it doesn’t hurt to be too careful. If Mercia believes we attacked them – or, worse, if they believe it was sanctioned – the idea of them arriving with intentions of hostility is not farfetched. The relationship between our states has been tense for as long as Norwich has stood.” Zeke nodded his understanding.

Commander Bates gestured anew at the papers; “So, what do you say?”

With effort, Zeke shut the door on the part of his mind screaming at him that this was not the future he wanted; he reached for the pen and signed the agreement. Bates beamed. Then, Zeke clasped hands with the commander, exchanged parting pleasantries, and took his leave.

Zeke tried to think positively, as he returned to the stairwell. He told himself that it wasn’t a complete loss: at least his work would be in the tower. He wasn’t ready to leave, and it would keep him close to the libraries and resources, during the day. He could still find time to practice and, if he made headway, he could apply for an apprenticeship again.

Alas, despite his efforts, his optimism was shortlived. Zeke knew that it was stubborn of him, but he couldn’t help it; his mood seemed to synchronize with his altitude, spiralling downward with each step he took. By the time he reached the ground floor, he was gritting his teeth.

Snatching the silver ring from his pocket, Zeke brought it up and thrust it at the occult door. The runes on the door flared, then promptly dimmed as it swung open. He stepped through and descended the steps, his feet barely touching them as he went. The staircase terminated on the first level, below, and he stepped out into the dim and musty corridor, heading back to the third chamber on the left.

## Chapter two

NATHANIEL WAS SCRIBBLING on some parchment when Zeke arrived. He turned his head of thin and greying black hair toward the sound of approaching footsteps.

Nathaniel had a long, angled face and pale blue eyes. He was taller than Zeke by a few inches, but not as broadly built; his physique was that of a traveller, rather than one who had seen a lot of heavy work. He was dressed in a long, green tunic.

“How’d it go?” Nathaniel’s voice rang out, in an annoyingly optimistic tone.

Zeke answered by letting his anger get the best of him. Zeke couldn’t craft spells with his magic, but that didn’t stop it from building up inside him. He strode to the stone table, just inside the entrance, and hammered his fist onto it, releasing some of the pressure with the contact.

The strike released more force than he had intended; the room shook, threateningly. But, it was satisfying.

“Hey! Not in here!” Nathaniel shouted, anger of his own flaring up. His face displayed anxiety, as his eyes darted about, fearful that one of the numerous relics cluttering his chamber might prove to be unstable.

“Sorry,” Zeke apologized, instantly realizing the potential repercussions of his outburst. He refrained from explaining that the release of power made him feel better – although, it would only be temporary.

When it became apparent that nothing was going awry, Nathaniel’s angled face softened. “Bah, you don’t need them, anyway,” he said; “you are what you are, regardless of what a few words on a piece of parchment might say.”

“Four years,” Zeke growled. “I’ll never make a life for myself as a magician, at this rate.”

“There’s more to being a magician than being a sorcerer,” Nathaniel offered.

Zeke’s face softened a little. “I know,” he said, with a sigh, “but research, philosophy and mixing potions isn’t for me.”

Nathaniel nodded. “I wish I could give you the guidance that you need. But, my magical talents are... well...” he gestured around him, “...specific to this.”

Nathaniel's chamber was large, and littered with items of varying sizes and shapes. Some were ordinary objects, some were scarred with failed attempts at enchantment, and some were, potentially, extremely dangerous. A large, stone table, filled with such objects and tools as Zeke knew nothing about, stood in the centre-right of the room, up against the wall, leaving a pathway of a few feet from the opposite wall, which led deeper into the chamber. A ring of glittery, white sand was drawn around the table. It created a containment barrier, preventing anything unfortunate, which might happen within, from breaking loose and wreaking havoc with the collection of potent artefacts outside.

The enchanted objects in Nathaniel's chamber were just the tip of the iceberg: the levels below the Grand Tower contained some of the most powerful wards in the state, if not the whole country. It housed all manner of artefacts, dating back thousands of years, and books of knowledge, deemed by the Wizard Council to be too dangerous to allow even fully-fledged wizards unrestricted access to. This floor was where magicians – scholars and/or practitioners of magic – came to attempt to both discover and recover knowledge and techniques, by reverse engineering spells and enchantments of various origins.

“Did you get the tower guard position, though?” Nathaniel asked.

Zeke nodded; “Yeah, I start tomorrow.”

“That's good,” Nathaniel replied; “at least you'll have a paid job, now. You'll be able to afford your own accommodation, instead of staying at the tavern.”

“Yeah,” Zeke chuckled, “there is certainly that.”

“Still,” Nathaniel added, “I'll be sad to see you down here less. I'll miss the company.”

Not being a wizard, Nathaniel couldn't offer that kind of apprenticeship. Nathaniel had very weak connections to the wells from which sorcerers drew power, which was a common side-effect of copulation between those with magical talent and those without. Such people were increasingly noticeable, if not more common, since the blows the sorcerer population had taken during and since the Battle of Camelot. Full sorcerers – or thaumaturges – had always been rare, even with two thaumaturge parents.

A weak connection still afforded certain talents, such as being able to sense magic, and thus understand it and the broader philosophy. Such individuals were called “druids” – not to be confused with the ancient Celtic priests – and Nathaniel was a particularly talented one.

Still, Nathaniel had a lot of knowledge, but no practical experience in spell crafting. Nevertheless, he had offered Zeke assistance where he could – which mostly came in the form of library books, acquired under the pretence that he needed them for his own work.

Zeke turned and moved a few paces away, looking down at the discoloured floor. “I want to actually use what I have,” he said.

“You can, with the sword,” Nathaniel offered. “I've seen you get pretty



strong when you're annoyed." He gestured at the stone table Zeke had hammered with his fist. "You can practice making yourself stronger, and perhaps faster, with consistency. It could take you far; I bet you could climb to the rank of swordsman in record time, if you tried."

Zeke shrugged; "But, I have a gift for magic. I have *the* gift: the bond to the wells of power. That's what I want to pursue."

He shook his head. "My mother has it, too, and she wanted to be a healer. Instead, she wound up running a tavern and lives above it. I feel like I'll be letting us both down if I settle for something less."

They stood in silence for a long moment. Zeke was thankful for it; he didn't want to vent his frustration at Nathaniel.

Nathaniel eventually spoke: "Come and have a look at this."

Zeke did so, welcoming the distraction. He followed the druid to the stone table, near the centre of the room, encircled by the ring of white sand which seemed to make the air around it sparkle. They crossed the sand, careful not to disturb it, and Nathaniel shuffled over to where he had set a mirror.

The mirror was square in shape, and about the height and width of a person's head. Around it was a decorative frame, with several symbols etched into it, which Zeke couldn't understand. There were depressions at the centre of the left and right side of the frame, indicating where it should be held.

"This is what I've been working on for most of the day," Nathaniel said. "It came in late, yesterday."

Zeke peered at it, curiously, meeting his own unusual blue-green eyes in the reflection. He had a hawkish gaze, a straight-edged nose and a strong jaw. His face was long, but not disproportionately so, thanks to his broad shoulders and a head of thick, dark-blond hair. He noted his need for a shave.

"Is it a functional artefact?" Zeke asked.

"Oh, yes," Nathaniel replied. "And, if I'm right, it is a rare find, indeed; most of these were destroyed with Camelot, during the war."

"So, what is it?" Zeke asked, feeling too irritable to play games.

Nathaniel beamed. "It seems to be an attuning mirror," he said. "When you grip it exactly where it says to, by the markings, it shows you something of yourself."

Zeke rolled his eyes; "That's what mirrors do, Nathaniel."

"I walked into that one, didn't I?"

Zeke grinned. "You mean to say it shows you something of *who* you are?" he asked.

"Not quite," Nathaniel said, scratching the short, greying bristles on his chin. "The spell is invigorative, which is usually a bad sign, but its nature isn't hostile. It appears to draw power from the elicitor – the user – but to no end, as though the drawing of power itself is the purpose. There are only two possible reasons to simply just draw out power: to bleed it or to read it."

Zeke's interest piqued. "Go on," he urged.

"As I said," Nathaniel continued, "it doesn't appear hostile in nature, and while I don't recognize the structure of this language, I can roughly translate some of the symbol combinations to mean 'tranquil', or 'tranquillity'."

Nathaniel touched a finger to the glass: "Then, of course, there is the mirror." "You think the mirror itself is important?" Zeke asked.

Nathaniel smiled. "Of course: objects which have been enchanted often have something in common with the enchantment," he said.

"You mean like the principle of symbolism?" Zeke asked. "I thought that only applied to invocation."

"It applies to elicitation, as well," Nathaniel confirmed.

Elicitation, Zeke knew, was activating a pre-constructed spell or enchantment, usually by giving it the required energy. Elicited magic originated and operated outside of the sorcerer, whilst invoked magic was channelled into or through the sorcerer, from an outside source.

Nathaniel continued: "Just like words or actions for invocation, objects that are used or wielded in a way which is relatable to the enchantment itself are easier to enchant, and the enchantment thus easier to elicit. For example, a defensive enchantment would ideally be placed on a shield, a door or a wall; you *could* place it on a sword, but unless the enchanter and user view the weapon in a defensive light, it will be less effective. Sometimes, symbols are inscribed to help with the process."

Zeke nodded, in understanding.

Nathaniel went on with his explanation, clearly on a roll: "Anyway, the original goal here was to produce a way of measuring the magic a person could invoke, to establish their grade on an old power-scale system, used during the previous age. However, the original tools often proved inaccurate, which eventually led to the attuning mirrors.

"As you know, emotions can affect the nature and measure of magic drawn. They can serve to empower, as well as inhibit the crafting of certain spells. Consequentially, a person's energy can tell you something about who they are.

"So, these artefacts were designed to aid the magician – to show and guide them in the drawing of magic – by inducing reflection, in order to obtain a more accurate reading.

"Naturally," Nathaniel concluded, "the object of choice, to bear such an enchantment, was a mirror."

Zeke was definitely interested now. "Have you tried using it?" he asked.

Nathaniel nodded.

"And?"

"It just showed me *me*," Nathaniel said, his disappointment evident. "I did feel a little tug, somewhere. As you know, everyone experiences their own invocation differently. Lacking the magical talent of a sorcerer, that was it for me."

Zeke fixed his eyes on the attuning mirror, finding an expression of enthusiasm reflecting back at him, as he mulled over the implications. Could this mirror really help him?

Nathaniel watched Zeke, intently. "Want to give it a try?" he offered.

Zeke snapped out of his stare. "Definitely," he said.

"Be my guest," Nathaniel said, sliding the mirror over, so that it was directly in front of Zeke.

Zeke nodded, mostly to himself, pausing for a moment to prepare. He started by focusing inwardly, calling forth the power he would need to send into the artefact, to elicit the enchantment.

Invoking magic from the wells of power was supposed to be easier while calm, but Zeke always found it harder. He always encountered resistance but, with a little perseverance, he could push through it.

Power flowed into him; it felt different for each person. Books described the typical sensation as a localized tingle, commonly in the hands or arms. For Zeke, it felt like warmth gathering in his chest, spreading through every bone in his body.

Maintaining his focus, Zeke brought his fingers to either side of the mirror, into the designated positions, tilting it upward so that he could peer directly into it.

At first, there was only his reflection frowning back at him, but it quickly became obfuscated by a silvery sheen. Zeke felt a slight tug, as though he were about to be pulled in, even though he hadn't moved. The tug had originated from inside him, caused by something foreign, venturing where it shouldn't, but then it became harmonious with the centre of his being, as quickly as he'd felt it.

It was unnerving not to have had the chance to resist it, and Zeke was sure that if he had tried to, he might as well have been trying to stop the sun from rising. He forced himself to maintain his calm, taking reassurance in his confidence that the connection would break if he released the artefact. A line of what appeared to be reflected, silver light glided over the smooth surface of the mirror and, as it did, the reflection changed: Zeke saw himself, as he had before, but something wasn't quite right.

His stomach lurched when he realized what was wrong. He tilted his head from side to side, confirming his suspicion.

His reflection hadn't moved.

It was just looking back up at him, with its own independent expression and demeanour.

As Zeke watched, the reflection shimmered, the image now zooming out, leaving his entire body visible within the glass. It rippled again, this time splitting down the middle. When the image settled, there were two of him, each whole.

Zeke felt his frown transform into complete bewilderment, but the change didn't affect either of his reflections, as they squared off against each other.

The left-side reflection's eyes then flashed red, and a shudder of something uncomfortable pierced through Zeke. Suddenly, a *third* Zeke was looking back at him, from within the glass – though, the newest addition was much smaller, and shrouded in some sort of smoke.

The right-side reflection's eyes flashed, then, creating another uncomfortable sensation: this time, a flush of heat.

A *fourth* Zeke followed.

Appearing to be the opposite of the third, it stood taller and somehow radiant.

Zeke's hands began to burn, not hot, but with a painful intensity. He released the mirror – whether out of reflex or fear, he wasn't sure. The images immediately faded, as the connection severed. Zeke panted, as the horrible impressions he had felt accompanying the images gradually subsided.

"Are you alright?" came Nathaniel's voice, beside him.

Zeke raised his right hand, to rake his fingers through his hair, but moved them away after touching his forehead. He was sweating. He was also breathing far more heavily than he ought to have been, for someone who had just been standing still. He looked over at Nathaniel and saw concern in his friend's eyes.

"I'm okay," Zeke said, trying to dismiss it all with a shrug. He glanced back down at the mirror.

"You looked tense the moment you touched it. Then, you started taking sharp inhalations, like you were in pain," Nathaniel commented.

Zeke didn't answer, so Nathaniel asked: "Did you get anything from it?"

Zeke shook his head; "I don't know."

"Well, what did you see?"

"Myself," Zeke said, "four times."

"Four of you?" Nathaniel said, frowning. "All the same?"

Zeke shook his head again. "I don't think so; they were each different. Maybe they were different versions of myself?"

"Versions? You mean like aspects, or personalities?" Nathaniel asked. "In what way were they different?"

Zeke took himself back to the image he had seen, before he broke the connection. "They were all me," he gestured toward himself, "but one was normal, one had red eyes, one was small and dark, and the other was tall and light."

"Physical differences more likely means aspects, rather than personalities," Nathaniel ventured, though the lines on his forehead deepened. "Still, it doesn't sound healthy."

"It was a mistake," Zeke said; "I shouldn't have done it. I wasn't in the best of moods, and I'm not exactly what you'd call normal, anyway."

"Don't say that," Nathaniel said, shaking his head, disapprovingly.

"Well, did you come across anything like this happening to anyone else, when you researched the mirror?" Zeke shot.

He immediately regretted the tone he had taken. He wasn't angry at Nath-

aniel – Nathaniel was trying to be a good friend; he was frustrated at himself.

Nathaniel only shrugged; “I don’t recall anything like what you described being mentioned. They talk about memories, emotions, coloured clouds and networks of light.”

“My cloud is full of rain,” Zeke grumbled.

He palmed his forehead, recalling what he had felt. Each time the reflection divided, it had been accompanied by a wrenching sensation, as though something was squeezing and twisting at his core. He shook his head; “Let’s leave it.”

Nathaniel scrunched up his face in thought. “Very well,” he said, throwing a dampening cloth over the mirror – a standard additional precaution. “I have a few more things to attend to, before the end of the day,” Nathaniel said, changing the subject. His tone flattened: “Specifically, overdue reports. Yay!”

“Fun,” Zeke smirked. “I’m sorry I snapped. I appreciate your help.”

“No problem,” Nathaniel said, putting on a smile.

Zeke turned to leave, then remembered: “Oh, here; thanks.” He turned back and extended his hand, offering up the silver ring.

“Right!” Nathaniel barked, accepting it back and sliding it onto the fourth finger of his right hand.

Some magicians who worked at the Grand Tower, but lacked sufficient magical ability of their own to pass shielded doors, were given a silver ring, which acted as a key to certain shields. The high wizards tried to avoid handing out too many, for security reasons. Since Zeke had only been studying, rather than working at the tower, he didn’t get one, but Nathaniel did. Nathaniel’s ring possessed a more potent enchantment, because his work required that he be on a sub-level.

“Do you need me to let you out?” Nathaniel asked.

Zeke shook his head. “The enforcers will start their sweep down here in a minute; I’ll get out, then,” he said, making his way to the door.

He spotted the warped wood of an old, rune-etched staff, leaning against the corner of a cabinet, full of mostly opaque bottles. He gestured toward the staff: “Hey—”

“No!”

“One of these days, you’ll let me try it,” Zeke said, with casual confidence, stepping back out into the sombre hallway.

“Don’t count on it,” Nathaniel replied, in mild amusement.