

Chapter One

Darek Takren, a student at North Academy and a pagomancer-in-training, found himself growing increasingly impatient. He stood on the steps of the Arcanium, the school's main building, along with the hundred and twenty other students who attended the school, as well as with most of the other teachers, too. There were only two people, as far as he could tell, who were not present, and that was the Magical Superior, the headmaster of the school, and Darek's own mother, Jenur Takren, who also happened to be one of the school's teachers.

Around him, the other students chatted and joked with each other. Some of the younger students were using their magic to perform clever little tricks they had learned in class, such as one student (whose name Darek could not recall at the moment) who was using his wand to make a ball of water transform into many different shapes. This student was so talented with his hydromancy that he could even make the water ball look like a miniature replica of the Arcanium itself, an impressive feat for so young a student.

But even while watching what his fellow students were doing to pass the time, Darek kept glancing at the sky and shifting his weight from foot to foot. That was probably because he had been one of the first students out on the front steps to greet their guests, who, according to the Magical Superior's earlier announcement, were supposed to be here any minute now.

That announcement had been an hour ago. At least the weather was nice. Bright sunshine—unusual for North Academy, seeing as it was set in the Great Berg, a massive icy wasteland located hundreds of miles north from the rest of civilization—shone down on them all, warming Darek's skin and giving him a great view of the sky and the gigantic ice Walls in the distance that surrounded the school. A cool breeze blew through, but it was not as cold as it normally was. Meanwhile, the steps beneath Darek's feet were warm, which was normal, seeing as they were made out of heatstone, a type of rock that naturally generated heat at all times. It was what the entire school was made of, in fact, which was the primary way that the students and faculty kept warm during the Great Berg's coldest months.

Purely out of boredom, he looked down at his clothes. He wore the same red-and-black robes that all students wore, as it was the official Academy uniform. The students were supposed to wear these robes at all times, but the Superior had stressed the importance of wearing their robes today in particular in order to give a disciplined, orderly, and effective first impression on their guests.

Straightening out his robes, Darek again looked up at the sky. Still no sign of the guests yet. They were supposed to arrive by airship. According to the gray ghost the guests had sent a while ago, the flying ship would be big and red and impossible to miss.

Darek had never seen an airship before. Having spent a good chunk of his thirty-five-year life in North Academy, he had only ever heard stories from the other students about the rest of the outside world. According to one of the students, who had worked as an airship engineer before making the dangerous trek through the Great Berg to reach the school, the Carnagians had designed and built the first airship, which had led to every other nation in the Northern Isles going on a mad scramble to make their own. Even the aquarians, the peoples of the sea, had joined the scramble, although their airships were different from human airships, as they also doubled as underwater vehicles they

called 'submarines.'

The guests who were supposed to arrive on the airship were students from the Undersea Institute, the best and largest aquarian mage school. This was going to be the first time that aquarians had set foot in North Academy in years, which was partly why Darek was so nervous. He had never met an aquarian before, despite having been told all about them by his mother, and so he didn't quite know what to expect from aquarian mages and how they differed from human mages.

Darek's friend and fellow student, a middle-aged man named Jiku Nium, had said that aquarian magic was different from human magic, even though aquarians derived their magic from their connection to the gods just like humans did. According to Jiku, mastery of hydromancy was far more common among the aquarians than it was among humans and the aquarians had come up with different ways to integrate hydromancy with other magical disciplines. Pyromancy was apparently not in great use among them, for obvious reasons. Jiku had also stated that aquarians didn't use talismans to enhance their connection to the gods, which made Darek wonder if aquarian mages were weaker than human mages in terms of sheer magical power.

That had been yesterday, before Darek and Jiku had gone to bed in their shared dorm room, and Darek hadn't seen Jiku at all today. The older man had said that he was going to be there—he had to be, seeing as the Magical Superior had made the welcome of the Institute mages mandatory for everyone but the sickest students—but no matter where Darek looked, he did not see Jiku's silver gray hair that always reminded him of a helmet among the crowd of students awaiting the Institute mages.

As a matter of fact, Darek had not even seen Jiku in their dorm this morning when he got up. He had assumed that Jiku was already at breakfast, but when he had come downstairs to eat with his fellow dorm mates, Jiku had not been there, either, and none of the others had seen him that morning.

Jiku probably got sick, couldn't heal himself, and had to go see Eyurna, Darek thought. I'm sure he'll be here the minute he's feeling better.

"Darek!" called out a familiar feminine, musical voice. "There you are."

Darek turned around to see a woman about his height, although much younger-looking than him, walking toward him through the crowd of students, a brilliant smile on her pearly white teeth. She had blonde hair, which actually looked good with her Academy uniform, and slung over her shoulder was her beautiful black guitar, its polished wood surface reflecting the light of the sun that shone down upon it.

"Aorja Kitano," said Darek, returning the smile as Aorja walked past a couple of younger students who were making mini ice statues fight each other. "Where have you been? The Institute mages are supposed to be here any minute. You could have missed them."

Aorja's smile didn't waver as she stopped in front of Darek; if anything, it got wider. "Oh, I just had to run back to the Third Dorm real quick to get my guitar. Thought the Institute mages might be interested in listening to some human music. Mousimancy is the language of the sea, right?"

"I'm not sure that's what that phrase means, but I'm sure the Institute mages will appreciate the thought nonetheless," said Darek. "Have you seen Jiku?"

"Jiku?" said Aorja. "No. I haven't. Why?"

"He's been missing all morning," said Darek, "even though he said he'd been here. I haven't

heard from him since last night.”

“Maybe he's sick,” Aorja offered. “I heard there were a few students in the medical wing as of this morning, but I heard Eyurna was working overtime to get them all healed up so that everyone could be present to greet the Institute mages today.”

“That's what I thought, too,” said Darek. “It's not good for a man his age to get sick like this.”

“He'll probably be fine,” said Aorja. “Jiku's a tough old guy and Eyurna is the best panamancer in all of the Northern Isles. If he's sick, I'm sure he'll be fine in no time.”

She said that with such confidence that Darek had a hard time doubting her.

So he said, “If you say so, Aorja.”

“Of course I do,” said Aorja. “Anyway, why don't we sit back and wait for the—”

“Darek, Aorja,” said another feminine voice, this one sounding older than Aorja.

Both of them turned to see a middle-aged woman walking toward them, her robes billowing behind her in the wind that had started up. The older woman had short, curly hair that was still quite black, although Darek was starting to notice a handful of gray hairs beginning to appear in a few places. The woman walked far more quickly than most women her age, no doubt due to the fact that she was quite fit due to the rigorous training exercises she practiced daily.

“Hey, Mom,” said Darek, giving her a brief hug when she was within hugging distance before pulling away. “Where is the Superior?”

Mom scratched the back of her neck. “He's almost ready to come down. He just needs to do a few more things. I was going to stay and wait for him, but he told me to go down and he'd catch up later.”

“So wait,” said Aorja, glancing up at the tower on top of the Arcanium, where the Superior's study was. “Are you telling us that the Superior, who made it mandatory for every student to be down here to greet the Institute mages, is going to be one of the last people here?”

“Something came up while he was getting ready,” said Mom vaguely. “One of the gods wanted to talk with him and you know how much those gods hate it when we mortals do not listen to them.”

Darek was not surprised. The Magical Superior was one of the few mortals—maybe even the only mortal—who had regular, daily discussions with the gods. This was because of the Magical Superior's deep understanding of magic and even deeper loyalty to the gods themselves. He wondered if the gods actually looked upon the Superior as their equal or not.

Probably not, Darek thought. The gods are greater than all of us, greater even than the Superior. Still, I do wonder what they wanted to talk with him about today. Did something happen that required them to request the Superior's aid?

Darek's thoughts were interrupted when someone pointed and shouted, “Hey, look! The Institute mages are here!”

The entire crowd of Academy students and teachers looked in the direction that that student was pointing. Just over the Walls—the massive ice barriers that separated the school from the rest of the Great Berg and were the final challenge that met all potential future Academy students—was a large red thing trailing smoke exhaust behind it that was too far away to make out at first. It was coming fast, however, and it would no doubt be easier to see very soon.

Then an ancient, deep voice called, “Students! I have received a message from the Institute

magicians informing me that they will be landing their ship in the sports field. We will go down to meet them there.”

Darek looked back toward the Arcanium and saw the Magical Superior himself standing on the top steps. As always, his gray skin, hairless head and face, and long wand—more like a staff, really—made him look as ancient as the gods themselves. The newest thing on him were his auburn robes, which were obviously freshly cleaned and scrubbed. Darek could even smell the scent of soap wafting on the wind from them.

The Magical Superior disappeared and then reappeared at the bottom of the steps in front of the students and faculty. He gestured for them to follow him and, before anyone could oblige, he was already on his way down to the sports field, walking with a quickness and lightness that Darek had never seen in the Superior's step before. That made Darek wonder why the Magical Superior was so eager to go down there and see the Institute magicians.

Maybe he's trying to make up for being late, Darek thought.

He had no time to ponder that mystery further, however, because the other magicians, including Mom and Aorja, were already following the Magical Superior in the direction of the sports field, which was located on the western side of the school grounds down a slope behind the dorms. He quickly caught up with Mom and Aorja, but he kept his eyes on the red airship in the skies above, which was drawing closer and closer to the sports field every second.

By the time the North Academy magicians had reached the edge of the sports field, the red airship was landing. The Magical Superior gestured for the Academy magicians to stand back and wait until the airship had shut off, but that was fine by Darek because it gave him an opportunity to observe the first airship he ever saw in person.

It was shaped like a beetle, although it lacked the beetle's horn on the front. Four legs popped out of its underside to act as landing gear, while smoke and flame from behind it filled the air and obscured the engine. Words written in some language—probably Aqua, seeing as the Institute magicians were aquarians, although not being an expert on aquarian languages, he could not be sure—were painted on the ship's side in big blue paint. The cockpit was like a beetle head, but the glass on it was tinted so darkly that it was impossible to see the pilot or anyone else who might have been sitting in there.

But what stood out the most to Darek was the sheer noisiness of the ship. In all his life, Darek had never heard anything quite as loud as the engine of that ship. It was like a thousand bombs were going off at once, multiple times, with a couple hundred gunshots added in for good measure. It was so loud that Darek couldn't even hear himself think, much less hear what anyone else was saying.

In fact, the ship was so loud that it honestly scared him. He stepped behind Mom and Aorja, neither of whom seemed to notice his fear (thankfully), and tried not to look scared at the airship's excessively loud engine. He just hoped that if anyone looked at him, they would not think he was afraid of what was probably a harmless machine (harmless from a distance, at least).

A few minutes after the airship touched the ground, the engine finally began to die down with a whine until eventually, it went completely silent. Darek still couldn't see whoever was inside the cockpit, but he thought he spotted some movement within, as though the pilot, whoever he or she was, was getting up.

Then, about a minute after the engine died down, a platform began to lower from the underside

of the ship. It lowered slowly but surely, until the platform landed on the ground underneath the ship. There were about a dozen or so aquarians standing on that lift, but the underside of the airship was dark, making it difficult to tell from a distance what they looked like exactly. Once the lift touched the ground, however, the Institute mages walked out from the shadows of the ship's underside into the light of the sun.

Forgetting about his fear of the airship, and excited to see the guests, Darek pushed past Aorja and Mom and the other students until he got to the front of the welcome committee. When he did, he stopped and observed the Institute mages as closely as he could from his current position.

The Institute mages did not look much like mages to him. Instead of wearing mage robes, they wore skintight diving suits that didn't restrain their movements. Their diving suits were green and silver, which he figured were probably the colors of their school.

Another thing Darek noticed was how none of them seemed to have wands of any sort. That struck him as odd. All mages were supposed to use wands. While it was possible for a mage to use magic without a wand, wands helped a mage control and channel their magic, which was why very few went without them. That these Institute mages apparently had none of their own confused Darek more than anything, although he could not guess where they could keep their wands if they had had any.

Instead, Darek noticed what looked like bracelets, each one filled with a different colored stone, attached to the bodies of the Institute mages in various places. Some had the bracelets attached to their wrists, while a few had them on their ankles, and others in other parts of their body (such as the jellyfish-like mage who had his bracelet wrapped around his neck like a collar).

Maybe those stones are what they use to channel and control their magic? Darek thought. *I should ask the Superior about that later. He'll probably know.*

Then there were the Institute mages themselves. As a group, they looked far bigger and stronger than the Academy mages. In a one-on-one fight with no magic, Darek wasn't sure that he or any of the other Academy mages could even defeat the Institute mages. He found their inhuman faces—which resembled sea creatures ranging from goldfish to manta rays and everything in between—disturbing, despite the fact that none of these Institute mages appeared threatening or even unkind in any way.

Another thing he noticed about the Institute mages was that he couldn't sense their magical auras. That was strange. All mages gave off magical auras that could be sensed by other mages. Yet these Institute mages, apparently, either did not have magical auras at all or had somehow figured out a way to hide them from him and possibly the others as well. It made it difficult to gauge how powerful the Institute mages were, a fact which unsettled him.

At the head of the group was an older female aquarian, much older than the rest based on how bent over she was and how slowly she walked in comparison to the others. Her diving suit, too, was different, being much looser around her body and being colored a solid green rather than green and silver like the attire of her students. Her head was vaguely whale-like in appearance, although she was nowhere near as large as an actual whale. She did, however, have a piercing, intelligent look in her eyes, one that made Darek understand that he couldn't fool her even if he had been planning to. She had a small bracelet around her left wrist with a rainbow-colored stone set within it.

The Magical Superior spread his arms wide as the Institute mages approached. “Welcome, wel-

come, mages of the Undersea Institute. I am the Magical Superior, the headmaster of North Academy, and behind me is the entire North Academy student body and faculty, aside from a handful of sick students who could not recover in time to welcome your arrival, although rest assured that they would be here to welcome you just like the rest of us if they were feeling well.”

That reminded Darek of Jiku, causing him to look around the crowd for any sign of his old friend. Seeing no sign of Jiku's balding gray head anywhere, Darek turned his attention back to the Magical Superior, who had walked up to the leader of the Institute mages and kissed her hand in greeting, although she did not look very thrilled about it.

“My students and teachers,” said the Magical Superior, turning to face the Academy mages, “may I introduce you to the Grand Magus and Archmage of the Undersea Institute, the intelligent and powerful Yorak? She and I are old friends who have known each other for years, but I believe this is the first time she has visited this school as the head of another.”

All of the Academy mages bowed their heads at Yorak, which was a sign of respect usually reserved for the Superior himself. Yorak, to her credit, returned the head bow, which meant that she was perhaps not quite as unfriendly as she looked.

“Yes,” said Yorak. She spoke surprisingly clear Divina, lacking that odd gurgly accent that Darek had been told all aquarians who learned Divina as their second language had. “My students and I appreciate the welcome party and are eager to learn more about our human counterparts in order that the bonds between our schools may be—”

She stopped abruptly, even though no one had interrupted her. A frown appeared on her whaleish lips as she looked up over the heads of the Academy students, her eyes on something behind them. The mage who stood at her side, a younger female with a goldfish-like head, was also staring up at whatever it was that caught their attention.

Puzzled, Darek followed Yorak's gaze and realized that she was staring up at the Third Dorm. His dormitory, actually, the one where he, Jiku, Aorja, and the other half dozen students who lived there slept at night and had their meals together and studied together.

“Yorak?” said the Magical Superior, his voice sounding a little concerned. “What do you see?”

“Nothing,” said Yorak. “But do you feel that?”

The Magical Superior went silent and seemed to be trying to feel whatever Yorak felt. Then his eyes widened and he said, “What is—”

And then—right in front of Darek's startled eyes—the roof of the Third Dorm exploded.