



## CHAPTER

# 1

Life as a Mage can often be a difficult one. From the earliest ages, Mage-children are expected to train and learn the idealism that is the nature of their birthright. It is claimed that there is no greater education in the realm, and many believe that that claim should extend to the entire world.

The courses taken at the Mage's Academy are complex and demanding. The Mage Masters that serve the Academy as its faculty are carefully selected so that they can properly guide the next generation of Mages through their studies and daily lives.

For a child being raised in this environment, they are used to the expectations and demands upon their time and efforts. Even still, not every child that is born with the abilities and potential of a Mage can handle the strain and discipline of the Academy. Those children find themselves in other roles, serving the Mage's





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Council, ranging from employees of other Mages, all the way to Gatherers, the highest position that they could hope to aspire to.

This lifestyle is a true test of endurance, abilities, patience, and perseverance. Only the strongest and most gifted students advance with ease. These are the students that believe in the founding principles of the Mage's Council, and strive to embrace them and master them. Many of the most-renowned members of the Council—including several of the ruling body, the Council of Elders—could claim to have been one of these elite students at one time.

There are other students, just as dedicated, but not as strong and gifted in their abilities. These students have to work to succeed. They will study and prepare; they will spend hours making sure that they have a grasp of what they are learning; they take a great sense in pride in their achievements, and know that they have earned their accomplishments.

Then there is Kyria—a child born outside of the Mage's Council, raised by human parents and in a human society for the first twelve years of her life. A child that grasped life and lived every moment as if it were her last. A child that would never look back and regret doing the things that she had done. Yet this same child



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was also a Mage, and when she was brought to the Academy, she found herself struggling to fit in, always fearing that she would fail.

It was not an easy task for her to accomplish. Kyria had to adapt to the lifestyle of the Mages, the demands of the students, and the expectations that were placed on all students her age. She struggled far more than any of the other students, never feeling that she had quite grasped what was assigned or being discussed.

Just moments before, her outlook on the Council and her life had drastically changed. She had been summoned before the Review Board, a Council of five Mage Masters that would review her progress at the Academy to determine whether she was able to advance to the subsequent school year or not. Kyria had never before faced such an inquiry, and felt certain that her time with her friends had come to an end.

Then, miraculously, the ruling came back, and Kyria passed. She could hardly believe it; no matter how many times she examined the parchment with her grades on it, they were always the same. The Academy required a cumulative grade point average of a 3.5 to pass, and Kyria had a 3.78.

Kyria giggled happily to herself as she held the parchment in front of her face.

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*Kyria. Academy year twelve - thirteen:*

*Art (Decious) ~ 5.0*  
*Culture of the Races (Tadros) ~ 3.0*  
*History (Forales | Balfour) ~ 5.0*  
*Language of the Races (Hdronion) ~ 4.0*  
*Philosophy (Abbas) ~ 3.0*  
*Quadrimum (Rika) ~ 3.0*  
*Science | Alchemy (Ferdish) ~ 4.0*  
*Self Defense (Lystra) ~ 5.0*  
*Trivium (Critchley) ~ 2.0*

*Cumulative for Academy year twelve – thirteen ~ 3.78*

There was no mistaking it. She had passed! Even with Master Critchley giving her only a 2.0 for a grade, and three other professors marking her below the standard passing mark, she had averaged-out and passed!

The grading-scale, Kyria learned, was based upon six possible grades: a 5.0, Mastered; a 4.0, Impressive; a 3.0, Acceptable; a 2.0, Marginal; a 1.0, Effortless; and even a 0.0, Skill-less—or as Kyria considered it, hopeless.

Kyria couldn't believe that she was considered as 'Mastering' three classes. Self Defense she could accept—not because she knew how to use a wide variety of weapons and enact training techniques, but because she



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had an innate instinct that let her triumph in combat situations. She could hardly recall a class—other than once when she was recently sparring with Traina—when Kyria had been out-dueled in a Self Defense class.

Art was a bit of a surprise, too. Master Decious was always very pleasant and helpful, but up until her final group project, along with Mica and Sartir, she had not felt like she was doing very well at all. Then, under Sartir's prompting, Kyria had created finger-sized images of dwarves to populate their scaled-replica of the Halls of Vorstad. Not only were the dwarves images, but they spoke and acted very much like the dwarves that they were recreations of, impressing Master Decious. Kyria wondered what she would have gotten if she hadn't been able to create the images—or worse, if she handed in the project with hundreds of naked dwarves, as they had been when first created.

The biggest surprise of all was History. If Master Forales had survived the full year, Kyria suspected that his grade would more closely resemble that of Master Critchley's. Conversely, Master Forales's replacement, Master Balfour, had been working with Kyria to help her master her own mystical powers, and to not be as drained physically when she used them. She wondered if her grade was truly deserved, or based more on his personal interaction and friendship with her.

As Kyria stuffed the parchment with her grades into a pocket, she giggled happily again, and came to a halt.



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For the first time since she had come to the Mage's Council, she did not have to be somewhere. It was a remarkable feeling. A freedom that she was determined to embrace and make the most of.

For most students, there is one week of the year where they have a break from classes, and celebrate the founding of the Mage's Council. For Kyria, the Founding Celebration was a dream come true. It may only be a week long, but it was a week she would savor every moment of.

This was Kyria's first Founding Celebration. She was not certain exactly what to expect, but knew that an entire week without classes was a solid-enough foundation for a good week.

The Founding Celebration itself was an annual holiday at the Mage's Council, celebrating the discovery of the mystical spring and the birth of the Mages. Kyria felt somehow involved in the origin of this tradition, not that she had been part of the expedition to find the mystical spring, but with the help of the Shard of Time, she had been there to witness part of it and see what the eternal were doing.

Of course, her reasoning for being there was to learn more about her nemesis, Zoldex, but Kyria felt somehow connected to the holiday—perhaps it was the week off, full of celebration and fun, but she still felt particularly strongly towards the week.

Even more than the discovery by the eternal expedi-



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tion, the Founding Celebration also was in tribute of the pair of representatives from each race that had initially drunk from the mystical spring, creating the forefathers of the Mage's Council. It was this pair that agreed to the principles of the Mage's Council, and bound their race forevermore to the Council. By sampling the waters, they agreed that any and all future generation that displayed signs of mystical abilities would be gathered and brought to the Mage's Council.

Whether Kyria completely agreed with the binding principles of the Council or not, she was very glad for the time off. Giggling again, she began running towards the walls of the Tower, hoping to spend some time in the early afternoon sun.

“Kyria, Kyria—wait up!”

Kyria turned at once, spotting Kruskall chasing after her. Kruskall was Sartir's roommate, and apparently was very interested in her. He may not have admitted his feelings to Kyria, but he and Traina—who had been a couple—separated because of Kruskall's interest in Kyria.

Kyria wasn't sure at first what to think, but seeing Kruskall now, his cropped reddish-brown hair blowing slightly as he ran towards her, his indigo eyes fixed on hers, Kyria had to admit that her heart was beating faster, and she was not in any way disappointed to see him.

“Kyria—hi—glad I caught up to you,” Kruskall said as

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he reached her. He looked like he wanted to hug her, but hesitated and held out his hand. Kyria shook it slightly, trying her best to suppress a giggle.

“Did you already see the Review Board?” Kyria asked.

“Oh yeah,” Kruskall said. “I got a 4.89.”

Kyria winced at the high mark, and suddenly felt a bit embarrassed by her 3.78. She was so glad that she had passed, but never really stopped to consider how barely passing would appear to others.

“What can I do for you, Kruskall?” Kyria asked quickly, trying to change the subject away from grades. She suspected that she would have to hide her marks from Sartir as well, although he would probably pry until she told him.

“I wanted to introduce you to Master Bargada,” Kruskall said.

Kyria spotted the Drelenkin’s Fin coach standing behind Kruskall. He swept forward in a graceful move that forced Kruskall back and had him bowing before Kyria. His fur nearly matched the shade of Kruskall’s hair; his nose a chilling blue, like ice; and his gaze so intense that Kyria suspected that very few people would ever question something that Master Bargada said.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Master Bargada said in the same deep and scratchy voice Kyria remembered from when he accepted the Lumnia Championship trophy from last season.



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“Hello,” Kyria replied, glancing at Kruskall for some inclination about what Master Bargada wanted with her. Kruskall only replied with an insuring grin and nod.

Master Bargada’s eyes quickly moved up and down Kyria’s robes, and then returned to look her straight in the eyes. “Do you practice magic?”

“W-what?” Kyria stammered, suddenly defensive. She worked regularly with Masters Balfour and Cali, but wasn’t sure if this was supposed to be common knowledge or not. She didn’t even know Master Bargada, so why was he asking her this?

“With that much gold...” Master Bargada let his words trail off as he reached out with an orange skinned hand and gently rubbed his pointed fingernail over her golden robes. “Surely you must know magic.”

“I know some,” Kyria said, trying to sound calm. Even if Master Bargada was a Mage, her experience with hobgoblins had been less than pleasant. She definitely did not like him touching her at all.

“Excellent,” Master Bargada said. “We should talk, you and I,” he said.

“We are talking,” Kyria sarcastically replied.

Master Bargada snickered, as if amused by her sarcasm. “I meant, personally.”

Kyria’s eyes met with Kruskall’s. He was still smiling. If he really liked her, then he wouldn’t let her do something that would be dangerous, would he? “What is it about?”



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Master Bargada did not seem pleased that he had to explain himself, and stood up straight. “Well, it is officially the Founding Celebration, so there is no rule that says I cannot openly recruit right now. I would like you to consider joining Drelenkin’s Fin for this upcoming season.”

“Drelenkin’s Fin?” Kyria asked, bewildered that this conversation was all about Lumnia.

“With your magic added to the team we already have, our team would be unstoppable,” Master Bargada said.

“I don’t know,” Kyria replied, not wanting to offend him; but if she played, she would rather play for Master Hdrorion and with Sartir.

“Before you decide, let me tell you this: there are some perks to playing for Drelenkin’s Fin,” Master Bargada said.

“Perks?” Kyria asked, suddenly intrigued.

“Let us just say—when selecting your classes for next year—there are certain Masters that would be receptive to helping you along if you played for us,” Master Bargada said matter-of-factly.

“Helping me along?” Kyria asked. “I don’t understand.”

Master Bargada took a step back and let Kruskall back into the conversation.

“Kyria, I see that you’re frequently tired in class. You also struggle a lot. With Master Bargada’s recom-



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mendations, that would become a thing of the past,” Kruskall said.

“You’re talking about *cheating*,” Kyria gasped.

“Don’t consider it cheating; consider it the Masters valuing your extra-curricular activities,” Kruskall said.

Kyria glared at him, wondering if he was really the boy she thought he was. She also found herself wondering if he really earned a 4.89, or whether that was somehow manufactured for him because he played Lumnia.

“You need time to think,” Master Bargada said. “I advise you to do so. But do not take too long. You will be selecting your courses for next year soon.”

Kyria was speechless. Master Bargada bowed again, and then walked away. Kruskall grinned encouragingly, and then followed his coach. Kyria watched them both go, wondering if the Mage’s Council was as stringent and disciplined as she had once thought it was. If the Academy would turn a blind eye on academic performance for those engaged in sports, then how could anything that the Mage’s Council strove for be taken at face-value?



## CHAPTER

# 2

“How did you do? Well, don’t make me guess, how did you do?”

Kyria giggled happily as Mica soared around her head, pestering her to hear about her session with the Review Board. Unlike Sartir, Kyria had no problem telling Mica exactly how she had done. “I passed,” Kyria said.

“Me too!” Mica beamed. “How narrowly did you make it?”

“Close, very close,” Kyria winced. “I got a 3.78.”

“3.89,” Mica shrugged. “You almost got just as good as me.” Mica paused, grinned deviously, and then hovered close to Kyria’s ear as if she was afraid that someone else might hear. “What did you get in History?”

“A 5.0,” Kyria said.

“Me too!” Mica cheered. “Oh my god, you will not believe this,” Mica snickered uncontrollably. “Sartir is absolutely livid!”

“Why? What did he get?” asked Kyria.

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“*Only* a 4.0,” snickered Mica.

“Yeah, *only*,” sneered Kyria.

“He’s been complaining about it all afternoon,” Mica said. “I am so glad right now that he has Traina to complain to, because that was becoming way too much for me.”

“Why is he upset about a 4.0?” asked Kyria.

“He got a 5.0 in everything but two classes. History is one of them. He’s planning on going to Master Balfour to protest and argue about his grade.”

“What was the other class?” asked Kyria.

“Philosophy,” Mica snickered. “He’s upset about that too.” Mica cleared her throat and tried to sound as masculine as she could. “It simply is not just for Master Abbas to downgrade me because she disagreed with my interpretations of the topic-matter. I was always well prepared, prompt, and ready to participate.”

“That is *so* Sartir,” snickered Kyria.

“Isn’t it?” said Mica, laughing so hard that she had trouble staying aloft.

“Why do you think Master Balfour didn’t give him a 5.0 like he did to us?” asked Kyria.

“I bet it has a lot to do with Sartir’s attitude when Master Balfour first arrived,” guessed Mica. “Remember how pompous and smug he was?”

“Mica!”

“What? He was!”

“Still, we shouldn’t say such things,” Kyria said.

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“Next thing you know, we’ll be as bad as Shelby and her friends. Talking behind people’s backs like that.”

“Good point,” Mica said. Tossing her arms out wide, she spiraled into the air. “I don’t deserve to live any longer. Strike me down in retribution for speaking so!”

Both girls began giggling again, savoring the moment. Pookie stretched in a corner and lifted his head from a pillow, checking to see that everything was all right. Once he was satisfied, he yawned and lay back down again.

“So, a whole week to do whatever we want,” Kyria grinned triumphantly. “What should we do first?”

“Whatever we do, we do *not* go see Sartir,” warned Mica.

“Why not?” asked Kyria. “Because of the grades?”

“Oh no,” Mica said. “He already wants to pick his classes for next year: go pick up the new books and get an early start.”

“I don’t think so,” Kyria growled. “He can have all the fun he wants doing that. I, for one, plan on doing absolutely nothing but relax and have a good time.”

“Well, first is the feast,” Mica said.

“The feast?” Kyria asked. “What feast?”

“You haven’t heard about the feast?” Mica asked, stunned.

“Nope,” Kyria returned. “Fill me in.”

“Well, it’s the grandest, greatest, most wonderful



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feast of the year!” Mica cheered. “It’s also when we get to advance to the next table for the first time. Everyone from the Academy is there, even all of the professors. It’s a celebration of everyone advancing, and honoring the group that has graduated from the Academy.”

“Graduated? Does that mean they all took and passed the First Trials?” Kyria asked.

“Not yet, but they will this week,” Mica said. “They are the only one’s who don’t really get to enjoy all of the festivities.”

“Festivities,” Kyria repeated. “I like the sound of that. When do we leave?”

Mica glanced at the chronometer. It was quarter past three. “We’ll go at 5:00.”

Kyria nodded and sat down. Then, she remembered her little encounter with Kruskall and Master Bargada. She quickly gave the details to Mica, who listened intently to every word, just as shocked as Kyria was by what had happened.

“Are you going to do it?” Mica asked.

“Do what?”

“Play for Drelenkin’s Fin and get good grades?” Mica clarified.

“I may struggle at the Academy, but I *earned* that 3.78. I’m proud of my 3.78. I’m not going to let some coach take away the meaning of it because I’m playing some stupid game,” argued Kyria.

“It’s not stupid,” Mica quickly objected. “You just

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need to play for the right coach.”

“Master Hdrorion?” Kyria asked.

“I would choose him over Master Bargada any day,” Mica agreed. “You have to tell him what Master Bargada did.”

“I’m not going to do that,” shrugged Kyria. “What’s the point?”

“*What’s the point?*” scoffed Mica. “The players of Drelenkin’s Fin might be *cheating!* They might have players that are *ineligible!*”

“You think Kruskall is really cheating?” asked Kyria, her voice quivering slightly and not as confident as she wanted it to sound.

“Maybe not Kruskall, but I bet that cyclops, Rygarg, is. He just seems way too out-there to be passing on his own,” Mica speculated.

Kyria shuddered briefly at the thought of Rygarg. If she did play for Drelenkin’s Fin, having him as a teammate and defending her was definitely a perk. Facing a sixteen-foot cyclops wasn’t her idea of a good time. He also was quite intimidating—as she had learned when he had glared at her and Mica once for making jokes about Kruskall and Traina breaking up. She never wanted to have him angry enough to look at her like that again.

“You have to at least tell Sartir,” Mica said. “He and Kruskall are so competitive with each other. Maybe if he knew that Kruskall might be cheating, he wouldn’t



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be so hard on himself.”

“I don’t know if Kruskall *is* cheating,” Kyria protested. “He just *might* be.”

“I bet he is,” Mica said definitively after thinking about it for a moment. “We *definitely* have to tell Sartir.”

“Maybe,” Kyria said. “Maybe I will.”

“You *have* to,” Mica said. “Even though I don’t want to see him and risk his telling us to start picking out our classes for next year, maybe we should go find him now.”

Kyria thought about it for a moment. She didn’t want to get anyone into trouble, but she also had no desire to keep secrets from Sartir. “Okay, let’s go.”

“Great!” Mica said.

The two left their room and rushed towards Sartir’s. They neither noticed the elf with sable-colored hair beckoning them, nor saw him follow them at a discreet distance to their friend’s room.