***Chapter 1: Of Mana And Mages***

Mihail was, as his parent’s had always told him, a Telepath.

He couldn’t recall the first time he’d heard someone else’s thoughts, nor the first time he saw their intentions openly visualized. Of course, this ability wasn’t all too extraordinary. Roughly a tenth of all Mages were born bearing innate powers, and his own was hardly the most capable in comparison. Whether it was the power to unconditionally copy the spells of other Mages, a passive barrier that grew denser and more sturdy as it took damage, or even the ability to outright *freeze* time itself for brief intervals, pretty much anything was possible.

In a world of mythic beasts and spellcraft, it was an unfortunate truth that the majority of a Mage’s potential was foretold from birth. Without an innate ‘Charm’, one’s room for growth was limited to manipulation of the Material Elements. While it was also true that those Elements provided a vast space for creativity, the limitations of the Physical Laws were insurmountable.

*“Arturian Drakeheart’s Principles of Mana Manipulation, Volume II”*

As he sat, textbook splayed open across his lap, the faint clinking and clattering of his mother’s cooking brought Mihail out of his pensive state with a jolt.

*Is dinner ready?* He heard her yelp in surprise, followed by a metallic crash.

“How many times do I have to say, ‘No projecting while I’m busy’!?!?” She shouted, “Gah, it feels like you’re yelling in my *ear* when you do that!” He cracked a cheeky grin at her as he rounded the doorway, only for a spoon to smack against his forehead.

“*That’s* for scaring me half to death, now come eat and I’ll quiz you on your reading for today.” His mother said, the auburn hair he’d inherited spilling over her shoulders as she flipped back the bangs in her eyes. She turned back to the cooking basin for a short moment, before lifting up a large plate of steaming meat accentuated with greens and other various sides encircling the dish.

“I still don’t see why you’re putting so much effort into cooking tonight? It’s not like we’re expecting company.” He pondered aloud while he took a seat at the dining table, pulling a band from his wrist and tying his silken, shoulder length hair into a loose ponytail. Her face turned sour as she replied.

“What? Am I not allowed to have fun when I cook? Besides, you’re going to be leaving tomorrow morning, let me dote on you while I still can.”

“I’m not just gonna vanish into the aether when I go to school, I’ll come back on weekends and holidays!” He assured her. Those sparkling, ocean blue eyes of hers twinkled in understanding.

“Oh, I know, sweetie. I’m just going to miss having you around while your father’s out on expeditions.” He thought for a moment, snapping his fingers as a solution popped into his mind.

“Well, maybe once I get good enough at Wind Manipulation, I could fly back here every day after class?”

“Sweetie, I appreciate the thought, but it’s going to take a while for you to get that kind of control.”

“No it wouldn’t, I can just read a professor’s mind and figure out how to do it.” His mother’s eyes shot open in a challenging glare.

“Absolutely *not.* Your Charm isn’t some shortcut you can just take advantage of whenever you feel like it! You are going to learn magic *properly,* understood? That’s the *whole* reason we’ve been homeschooling you up until now, remember? So you could *turn it off.”* She spoke pointedly, causing Mihail to squirm under her scrutinous gaze.

“Y-yeah, sorry. It’s just… I still have a hard time seeing the point, you know?”

“Mhm,” She hummed in understanding, cradling her chin in her palm as the food levitated to their plates. “I can’t imagine how frustrating it must feel. I mean, for you, talking is basically just a formality. But!” She smiled, “At least people can’t lie to you. I bet that’ll save you plenty of grief!”

“I guess, sure…” The moment his mood turned sullen, Mihail felt a gentle wave of warmth embracing him. It was like she was hugging him in comfort, even from across the table.

“It’ll be okay, honey. I promise.” She cooed, well aware of the effect her thoughts were having on him.

“M-moooom, stop! I thought you promised not to do that anymore!”

“I told you already, dear, this could be one of my last chances to be a doting mother before you ship off to the Center, and here you are all sad. I wouldn’t be much of a “M-moooom” if I didn’t try and cheer you up, huh?” She poked with a flippant giggle, beginning to cut away pieces of her meal.

A silence fell as the two dug in, the sound of evening crickets and the occasional hoot of an owl in the distance breezing through the open window by the table.

By the time they’d both eaten their fill, the evening had progressed into a wonderfully bright, blue night.

“Aaahhh, I can’t! Not another bite!” She exclaimed, falling back into her chair, “Okay, Mi-Mi, you ready? And remember, *no cheating!”*

After taking a moment to float their leftovers off to the garbage, his mother called upon the textbook that still lay open in his room, the dusty tome hovering through the house and into her palm.

“Now then, let’s get started. First question!” She called as she set the book down on the table. “Your telepathy and my telekinesis, what magical category do they fall under?”

“I learned about Charms *months ago,* mom!”

“Ah, ah, ah, none of that sass, please. We’re going back over this so it'll be fresh in your mind. And yes, our inborn abilities are referred to as ‘Charms’. And what exactly *defines* a magical power as being a Charm?”

“They’re a part of us from birth, and they’re able to break the conventional laws of Elemental magic.”

“How many Mages out of ten are born Charmers?”

“One.”

“What’s the biggest difference between a Charmer and a regular Mage?”

“Charmer’s are born with an awareness of Mana, typical Mages have to gradually come to comprehend and understand their Mana over time. This means most Charmers have a massive head-start when it comes to learning Elemental magic. This, combined with how powerful Charms tend to be, creates a disparity between them and regular Mages.”

“Alright, you’ve got Charms and Charmers memorized pretty well, now let’s…”

 The evening progressed much like that, his mother quizzing him on the fundamentals of Mana for what seemed like an eternity. He found it difficult, stopping himself from just plucking the answers out of her head, but that was part of why he’d been homeschooled for so long. His Charm differed from most, in that his was constantly active unless he went out of his way to turn it off. Which, incidentally, was a wall he’d only recently overcome.

He’d been told for as long as he could remember, ‘Never go near a crowd’ but for the life of him, he couldn’t understand why. Even when his parents would have friends over, the flow of thought and emotion never really seemed *overwhelming* or anything like that. Sure, it could be rather jarring, and sometimes there would be things that he simply didn’t understand, but aside from those rare instances his Charm felt perfectly manageable.

So why bother learning to turn it off?

By the time they’d gone through all of the fundamentals, he was getting rather tired, a sensation that was only amplified by the similar feeling he could sense in his mother. Her lips opened wide in a long, hearty, infectious yawn that hit him almost at once.

“Aaaaaahhhhh, I’m about ready to hit the hay. How about you?” She asked, stretching out her arms above her head, “You better get a few hours in if you wanna be in top shape tomorrow!” He rolled his eyes while he finished his own yawn, crackling his neck to each side.

“Yeah, yeah, I will. Actually, I wanted to practice with my Charm for a few minutes before bed, if that’s alright?” She eyed him suspiciously.

“I thought you could already turn it off? What, is there something else you’re wanting to try?” It was only a theory, but he figured it could be useful if it worked.

“I’m going to figure out how I can use it selectively. I mean, who knows? Could come in handy someday.” To his mild surprise, her initial reply was a heavy sigh.

“Mihail.” Uh-oh. “You know I don’t want you to feel like you can’t use your gift. Your Charm is unique, though, even among Charms, and it comes with a lot of strings attached. Just… be careful, okay?” He… wasn’t sure what to say.

“U-um… I… I’ll try?” The worry he could feel through her was so *embarrassing!* Luckily, that managed to ease her concern, smiling gently.

“That’s all I can ask. Anyway, I’m going to catch some shut-eye. Try not to stay up too late!” She chirped brightly, ruffling his hair as she strode past him towards the master bedroom.

…

“I’m *waiting?”* He jumped in his seat, turning to look over his shoulder. His mother was leaning against the doorframe, a sinister, expectant smile spread across her face.

“L-l-love you!”

“That’s better, haha! Love you too, sweetie!” With that, she turned and paced off to bed.

Mihail immediately hopped out of chair, still a little groggy, but clearer than when his mother’s fatigue was affecting him as well. He made his way outside, having to dip his head underneath the threshold.

*Nearly ten years, and I can still only barely get it to turn off.*

Granted, he’d only really started giving it dedicated effort three years back, but still…

“Wish this was easier.” So he stood out in the open yard, the dark of the night obscuring anything beyond the treeline, and simply thought.

Thoughts, to Mihail, were like snowballs. At their absolute root, every application of conscious sentience was built from a single, uniform structure, which then collided and stuck to each other in ways driven by the subconscious. On the large scale, this snowballing effect resulted in what most consider to be complex thoughts.

Mihail could not interact with that deeper, subconscious layer that put thoughts together, and so he couldn’t possibly visualize what its machinations might be interpreted as. What his Charm allowed him to do, was perceive and interact directly with anyone’s conscious thoughts and emotions.

Without input or conscious effort on his part, this usually only went as far as making peoples thoughts as prominent in his mind as their actual voice. If the thought wasn’t as defined in words, it manifested as more of an imparted feeling.

If he chose to actively pry, it got quite a bit deeper. Motivations. Ideals. That sort of thing. Long-standing perspectives and opinions that the person in question held. For example, his mother absolutely despised the very concept of cruelty. He knew this, yet not once had there ever been a time where she’d openly expressed it outwardly. They lived a very quiet, very peaceful life.

However, recently, Mihail had stumbled upon another facet of his Charm. He wasn’t sure exactly how far this new possibility went, but if it was what he thought…

He paced farther from the house, traversing all the way across the clearing and coming to a stop before two mighty oak trees. After taking a moment to clear his mind, he placed both palms gently upon the rough bark. Like before, he felt something. Not thought, or even emotion, but something… *older. Vaguer.* It was slow. Stagnant, yet never still. Before he knew it, he had to shake himself out of that sloth-like state. Blinking several times, he did his best to focus.

Next, he tried mimicking the same process he’d learned to deactivate his Charm, but cutting it short before it finished. His telepathic attention narrowed down significantly, but was able to stop the cancel just in the right moment, where he couldn’t sense the presence of one tree, while still feeling the other’s connection.

*There it is! Selective deactivation!*

*That* was a trick he’d been trying to get right for nearly as long as he’d been able to turn his Charm off. A potent wave of levity swept through him, so heavily that he fell back in laughter.

*Finally!*

***That morning…***

“I! Said! **UP!”** Consciousness came back to him all at once, his eyes snapping wide as he realized he was in a sudden freefall. He’d slammed back into his mattress before he could even react. When he raised his head to get a look at his attacker, he groaned when he realized that he had, in fact, overslept. His mother was glaring at him, hands still glowing faintly from the use of her Charm.

“Finally! Now hurry up and get your uniform on! You’re going to be late for orientation!” She snapped, telekinetically throwing the lavish box which held his school uniform at his face and leaving the room in a huff. A few seconds of silence passed, as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and stretched.

After that, he got up and started to change into his uniform. It was… a little more extravagant than he was used to, but the black fabric and gold trim looked pretty cool. There was even a button-able pocket on the chest to give it a more academic feel, instead of just some expensive suit. He had some trouble getting the little tassels and patches where they were supposed to go, but after a few minutes it was put together like the manual displayed. It did say that students were allowed to pick and choose the look of their uniforms, but… well, why not just use the example and save some time? Buttoning his collar, he sat back on his bed to work on the dress-shoes that’d come with his uniform. Just like he feared, they were as rigid and uncomfortable as they looked.

Next, he got up again and walked over to his mirror, taking a moment to put his hair up before heading out the door. They were supposed to be given the supplies they’ll need after orientation, so he didn’t sweat packing anything. According to his mother, a previous attendee of ‘Drakeheart Academy’, they’d be given dorms to sleep in and all their needs would be taken care of. She said the world cared a lot more about educating Mages than getting fixated on financial costs. He didn’t really get the whole ‘financial thing’, but it sounded nice that he wouldn’t have to fend for himself the whole time.

A knock sounded from the front door, and just from the lightness of it he knew it wasn’t his father. He pushed the boundaries of his Charm, extending the range to encompass the entire house.

*“Hope I’ve got the right house.”* Distinctly male, a bit on the older side.

*“I wonder how Mrs. Aletra is doing these days. I’m glad her son decided to come to my school.”* Ah, so it was his Academy Escort.

*W-wait,* ***his*** *school?*

“Are you ready Mi-Mi?!” His mother called as she swept over to the door to greet the escort.

*Be there in a second!*

Not wasting any more time, he jogged from his room, through the living room and kitchen, to the hall where the front door stood open, his mother apologizing profusely to the sharply dressed, maroon-clad man on the other side of the door. His ashen-gray hair was cut just short enough to not fall in front of his amber eyes, upon which he wore a pair of spectacles. He held a cane as well, a slender stalk of jet black wood with a single, thin groove about a foot from where his hand rested. Overall, he *screamed* ‘Professor’.

“Ah, is this the boy?” He asked, eyes scanning Mihail head to toe.

*“No external markings… is he not a Charmer?”* That made sense. After all, his mother was a Charmer, and his father wasn’t even a Mage. It would be rather odd if her son didn’t have one.

“Indeed, Headmaster Drakeheart. Is there a reason you came in person? You’re usually swamped in paperwork.” He smiled pensively at her curiosity.

“I believe I can make time for the son of one of my brightest graduates. Besides, you’re quite a bit further from the Center than our other applicants, so I figured it best to play things safe. You never know what ruffians might be skulking about the roads.”

*‘Or worse.’*

Worse than bandits? Mihail was suddenly quite grateful.

“So, uh,” He began, causing Drakeheart to meet his gaze.

“Yes, child?”

“Y-you’re the guy from the textbooks, right? Arturian Drakeheart?” It was so bizarre to see the very person who he’d read the work of for so long. Drakeheart was the *highest* authority among Mages, making strides unmatched in the development of Elemental Manipulation and Mana Theory. The way he wrote about magic was so… *free*. In his books, he asserted the only limits a Mage had, even non-Charmers, was the bounds of their own creativity. *Anything* could be done, if only one could open their minds enough to explore the possibilities.

“Hah! Well, it’s nice to hear you’ve been doing your homework. Yes, I am Arturian Drakeheart. Though I expect you to refer to me as ‘Professor’ moving forward.” He poked, earning a fierce nod from the boy.

“Y-yes, Professor, sir!” He felt his mother's hand smack lightly against the back of his head.

“Mihail, there’s a difference between respectful and just acting like a fool!” She badgered, turning to bow slightly in apology.

“Forgive him, Headmaster, Mihail hasn’t been around officials like you before.”

“Bah, perish the thought, Mrs. Aletra! I already have a feeling Mihail here is going to be one of my finest pupils. I’m simply teasing. Now, I suppose it’s time we left. I’ll wait by the road while you say your goodbyes.” Dipping his head in a respectful nod, he turned and began to stroll off.

Mihail felt the shift in his mother’s mood instantly, and wasn’t surprised when she practically tackled him in a fierce hug. Her chin dug sharply into his shoulder as she held him.

“You be careful, hear me? I don’t want to get a letter one day telling me you’ve hurt yourself.”

*“Goodness, I hope he’s going to be okay…”*

*Mom.* He projected, pushing all of the serenity and reassurance he could unto her worried mind.

*I’ll be alright. I promise.* Her grip loosened a bit, and he swore he felt something wet on his shoulder.

*“Oh, I know, baby.”* She let go, holding him out in front of her by his shoulders and looked up into his eyes for a moment.

“I’ll miss you, Mi-Mi.”

“I’ll miss you too, Mom.” And that was all that needed to be said. She gave his shoulders another squeeze, before stepping back to let him walk. As he moved to catch up with Drakeheart, he turned and gave her one last, happy wave. She waved back fervently, her face now beaming with a teary smile.

“You’re ready to leave, I presume?” He asked as Mihail made it over, much to the boy’s mild annoyance.

*Someone’s in a hurry.*

“Yep, let’s get a move on.” The novelty of meeting the esteemed Mage, while certainly interesting and cool at first, was already beginning to wear off. If anything, now he wasn’t very sure what to make of the Professor.

*‘Perhaps his Charm is something more subtle…’* There it was again!

“Hey.” He began, coming to a stop as they walked. The Headmaster looked back at him so innocently, it just annoyed him even more. “Why do you care so much about whether or not I’m a Charmer? In your books you make out like they’re barely a factor when measuring a Mage’s worth.” He didn’t really *care* if the Headmaster knew his Charm, if the man would just *ask* he would’ve gladly explained it in detail. It was pretty funny, the look of complete disbelief that struck the Professor’s face when he realized he’d been found out.

“You… you can hear my thoughts?”

“My Charm is Telepathy. I also get emotions, and if I’m paying attention I can see what you’re about to do the moment you decide to do it.” Like he knew two seconds in advance that the old Mage was about to drop his cane in shock. When it was just about to fall, he shot a foot out and caught it to prove his point.

The man glanced down at the sight, then back up at Mihail.

“Mind-reading, Empathic awareness, Precognition, anything else?”

“It’s also a continuously active Charm. Mom told me that was pretty uncommon.”

“Ah. Of course it is. Why wouldn’t it?” He chuckled, reclaiming his cane and turning to continue down the road. “I dare say, child, your Charm is even more powerful than my own. Teleportation may have its advantages, but you could quite easily just *know* where I might appear. You truly have been blessed.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I don’t plan on using it all that much if I can help it. I only recently got to the point where I can turn it off, and sorry, but the idea of living without it is pretty appealing.”

“Are you trying to say you don’t want to be registered as a Charmer?”

“Would I be mentioning this if I did?” The Headmaster’s head tilted pensively, eyeing Mihail with a newfound air of caution.

“You certainly don’t sound like the same wide-eyed boy I met a few minutes ago.”

“Okay? I’ve been thinking this all through for a year or two, Professor, so you’ll have to bear with my impatience.”

“No, no, I understand. Well, I suppose I cannot truly comprehend what living with a Charm such as yours must be like. Rather, I can respect wishing to separate yourself from it for a time.” With that, they started off again, and it wasn’t for several minutes of walking that he realized something was off.

“Why aren’t we just using your Charm?” Mihail asked warily, unable to think of a good reason. The Professor seemed to have expected the question, turning to face him without slowing his pace.

“Unfortunately, my Teleportation’s range is quite finite, and the further I go, the more it taxes my Mana. I could, in theory, simply blink the two of us to the Center, but it would likely leave me bed-ridden for the day. No, instead I shall simply walk with you.”

“Didn’t we just establish that I can read your mind? With all due respect, sir, that goes for *lies* too.” Again, Drakeheart flinched at being called out. This time, though, he managed to stay walking.

“This is going to be quite interesting, Mr. Aletra. It’s been some time since I’ve been seen through so clearly. Indeed, you’ve caught me in a bit of a fib. My Charm is actually almost entirely separated from my Mana reserves. Of course, I won’t just give out my greatest weakness to the one Mage who may someday outclass me. That would be the height of foolishness.” He explained, but Mihail was still skeptical.

“Then *again,* why haven’t we already teleported to the Center?”

“In truth, I had hoped to test you along the way. My deepest apologies for misleading you, it seems I’ve been accustomed to telling half-truths for far too long.” He stopped, “I trust your Charm can vouch for that, at least.” There was a genuine look of remorse in his eyes then, and Mihail couldn’t fault him. He… he *knew* why.

*‘Perhaps a shift in priorities is in order. Too long. I’ve been acting alone for far too long.’* Drakeheart’s mind was a cloud of doubt and regret, images that Mihail blatantly couldn’t interpret flashing through his mind’s eye. It was… it was *so much*. In that moment, *decades* of deceit and feelings of betrayal washed over Mihail like an ocean. The only piece he was able to latch on to, the only familiar thing in that entire sea, was an image of…

His mother? Why did she look so pale?

He shut down his Charm before anything else got through.

*Okay, note to self: Avoid reading his mind if I can. Or maybe it’s just older people in general?*

He’d never actually had to deal with so much at once. Wait, hadn’t they been talking just now?

“S-so, uh… you said you wanted to test me right? W-what exactly did you have in mind?” The Headmaster’s eye refocused, meeting Mihail’s gaze again with a refreshed smirk.

“Correct. As for how, well, just react and that should suffice.”

“Rea-” He stopped himself short, the ghostly image of the end of Drakeheart’s cane swiping through his stomach signalling the incoming attack. He shifted to the side, only for that same cane to suddenly be coming from the complete opposite direction. Again, he moved out of the way before the man had even begun to strike, reading his intent ahead of his actions. The Professor noticed, forgoing one strike for one sent from a different angle. But, again, Mihail could see the strikes before his foe even moved to act it out. To him, it simply didn’t matter how creative the movements were, or how much Drakeheart teleported about, he saw through all of it.

And then pain blossomed in his gut as a lunging stab knocked the wind out him. He breathlessly gasped, instantly dropping to his knees. The one responsible blinked into existence in front of him, looking quite amused.

“*Very* impressive, young man. Not a day of combat experience to your name, yet you can even keep up with my Charm in full swing. But, I think we’ve discovered a flaw in your Precognition.” Mihail pulled his head up.

“Y-yeah… can’t… really read… if you don’t think.”

“So instinctual movements can break through. That calls into question emotions and impulses, however. Where does your power draw the line between conscious thought and raw instinct?”

“I think it’s less specific than that.” He answered, “That last one got through because you didn’t let yourself plan for it in advance.”

“So it’s moreso reading one’s pre-constructed strategies, than actual Precognition?”

“I guess? I’ve never been in a fight like that before. It was… pretty easy, actually.”

“To be expected. You won’t meet many Mages willing to fight without some sort of plan, so think of this as the exception, rather than the rule. Would you be opposed to having lessons like these after your classes? It could work wonders for your Charm’s combat efficacy.” He offered, reaching down to help the boy back to his feet. Mihail rose with a groan, cradling his stomach.

“Ah, was that a bit excessive? Forgive me.” The apology was genuine, that much the psychic could tell easily.

“It’s fine, you didn’t mean to.” He stopped for a moment to think over his Headmaster’s proposition. “And, uh, sure. That was kind of fun, honestly.” Drakeheart’s response came in the form of a sly look.

“An adrenaline junkie, are we? Yes, the thrill of battle can be rather infectious. But.” His eyes sharpened dangerously, “I’ll not have you turn into some violence-crazed warmonger. Am I clear?” Something shifted in the air, at that moment. A kind of… incorporeal *pressure* that poured out of that heavy glare. Mihail felt his hairs stand on end.

“O-of course!” Just as abruptly, the pressure vanished. Now, the man was simply smiling happily, like the previous few seconds had never happened.

“Very well then. In that case, let us be off.” Without warning, the Professor clapped a hand on his shoulder and in a very *jarring* visual shift, they were suddenly in a large, lavish room. Emblems identical to the patches on Mihail’s uniform decorated the walls, accompanied by massive tapestries of art. The desk near the back of the room was stacked high with sheets of paper, backlit by the floor-to-ceiling window which looked out over a massive layout of monolithic architecture.

They had arrived.

“Come along, now. At this rate, we shall *both* be late for orientation.” Mihail realized he spaced out, staring amazedly out at the seemingly endless expanse of campus. He quickly turned to fall into step with the Headmaster, gazing to and fro at one fantastic sight or another.

***Chapter 2: In Session***

The halls had been empty on the way to the auditorium. The only sounds for a while was the clacking of their shoes and Drakeheart’s cane against the marble floors. After a minute or two, he began to catch faint, indistinguishable strands of thought coming from up ahead.

“Off with your Charm, young man. And, given I won’t be speaking to you for the rest of the day, welcome to Drakeheart Academy. It shall be an honor to have you.” Mihail did as the man asked, and then Arturian slapped a hand affirmingly on his back.

And suddenly Mihail was sitting in the midst of a massive auditorium. Voices innumerable bayed in a boisterous cacophony, assaulting his ears for several seconds as he tried to get his bearings. A look over his shoulder and he could see that he was in the very furthest row away from the central podium. Looked as though Drakeheart had placed him there so that no one would notice his spontaneous appearance.

“W-woah!” Someone shouted in surprise from his left. He turned, and, *just* his luck, there was a boy with raven black, shaggy hair and similarly colored eyes sitting there, staring at him.

“Uh… hi?” Mihail tried, debating whether or not it would be best to simply tell the truth. If he really wanted to seem like a non-Charmer, there wasn’t much else he could say. The other boy, however, didn’t seem to be thinking nearly as hard.

“Was that your Charm? I didn’t know people could just *teleport!”*

“Actually, it wasn’t *my* Charm. I don’t have one.” Mihail lied, looking back over to the center stage, where the responsible for this awkward situation had just come to a stop before the podium. He stood, hands draped over the end of the cane held out in front of him, gazing thoughtfully out at them. Suddenly, without any indication on his part, all sound within the auditorium simply *ceased.* Like every student present had all at once gone mute. It was… *cold*, too. So cold.

**“Ah, yes, there it is.”** Drakeheart’s voice calmly echoed across the massive room, **“Do forgive me, but I find shouting to be rather harsh on my throat these days. If you are curious, I am currently amplifying my own voice by removing excess heat in the air. As for your own voices, one of my Professors possesses a Charm capable of silencing all within its radius. I extend my greatest thanks to our dear Professor Ilumi for the assistance.”** If anyone could speak, Mihail imagined there would be an influx of ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ from the crowd. Now that he looked past the Headmaster, he could spot a number of men and women sitting at a long table in the very back of the auditorium.

**“To begin, I would like to first congratulate you all. Be it through demonstration of your skill, the recommendation of a trusted sponsor, or your sheer academic merit, you have all been evaluated and accepted by one of the most prestigious institutions on the continent of Eru.”** He paused a moment, his face painted with the same, genuine remorse Mihail had seen earlier.

**“If I may be quite plain, it has come to my attention, recently, that I have begun to walk the path of the hypocrite.”** The Professors all seemed taken aback by this turn, staring at the old Mage bewilderedly.

**“For many decades, I have expressed the ideology that any Mage, be they Charmer or not, has the potential to ascend as far as their own mind may carry them. This is a concept I have published in many a book, and also one that I usually preach at this very ceremony. But, today, allow me the honor of renewing my ideal.”** He was looking straight at Mihail now, a look the boy couldn’t understand crossing his features.

**“My eyes, blinded by the pursuit of strength, have been opened anew to the sea of potential which lies before me. Never again shall I be swayed by the illusory appeal of Charms, ignorant to the value in *all* Mages… No, the value in all of us, Mage or not.”** Again, the man paused, now gazing wistfully up at the skylights above. There seemed to be a decision made, in that moment, for when he looked down again, his eyes shone with a fierce conviction.

**“Hear me, and hear me well! Be you blessed from birth, or cursed to struggle, each and every one of us can attain the very same heights! Some may claim the sky to be the limit, but I claim them fools! Rise! Rise, and see your destinies unto the very *stars themselves!”*** Without warning, Drakeheart raised his cane, before slamming it back into the wooden frame of the podium, which then erupted into a brief, blazing corona of azure flame.

All at once, the auditorium exploded into a frenzied, yet awestruck standing ovation, cheers and inspired cries reverberating against the walls of the building.

They were dismissed shortly after that, given no real instructions aside from the statement that they would be permitted to roam the campus freely for this first day. Mihail assumed they meant for everyone to get familiar with the layout, and so wasted little time making his way down from the stands alongside his fellow students. Ideally, he would be able to memorize the most important aspects by nightfall.

“Hey, what classes did you sign up for?” That boy from before asked, but Mihail didn’t have a clue what he meant.

“Sign up?”

“Y-yeah! We all got a survey before the semester started, remember? It should’ve come with the uniform.” He explained, looking a bit confused that Mihail didn’t know what he was talking about. The Telepath outwardly shrugged, while shooting the Headmaster a pointed glare.

“I didn’t get a survey or anything. Just the uniform.”

*Professor.* The man in question looked at him from his seat at the staff’s table.

*‘Yes?’*

*Nobody told me I was already supposed to know my classes.* Drakeheart actually seemed surprised.

*‘I see. In that case, come to my office and we shall get this error sorted. My apologies, again, for the inconvenience.’*

“-ello? Helloooo?” The boy interrupted, waving a hand in his face. Mihail turned back to him, realizing that he’d seemingly spaced out for no apparent reason.

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking about what classes I want to take.” Not entirely false, not entirely true. “What about you?” The boy looked delighted at the question.

“I’m taking Mana Theory, Close Combat Proficiency, and Eruian History. I’m not a Mage, but I still think magic is *so* cool! History’s a mandatory course, but it’ll still be fun to learn as long as the Prof. isn’t boring!”

*Close Combat Proficiency?* He thought back to the Headmaster’s little ‘test’. How he’d been able to see and predict each stroke of the man’s cane before he would even move. And also, that final stab to his stomach. Specifically, the fact that he couldn’t do *anything* to stop that thoughtless action.

Not to mention, well, he’d never had that kind of rush before. It was… *appealing*.

“That second one sounds pretty interesting.”

“Hm? I mean, I guess… I’m only really taking it cause my dad said I had to. Like I said, I can’t use magic, so they want to be able to protect myself *somehow*.” He explained rather glumly, before shaking his head to himself, “Anyway, what did you think about that speech? Wasn’t the fire magic at the end *awesome!?”* What? That little nugget of showmanship was supposed to be ‘awesome’? Mihail tried not to show his lack of enthusiasm by putting on a smile.

“Sure was. I’m more impressed with that temperature-shift he used to make his voice louder, though. I can’t even imagine how fine-tuned his control must be to do something like that.” He glanced back down towards the Headmaster, only to notice that the auditorium was nearly empty. The boy next to him noticed as well, shooting up to his feet and nearly stumbling into a freefall. After catching himself, he turned and gave Mihail an expectant look.

“Well? Let’s go! I wanna check this place out!”

“Go on, then. I need to sign up for classes, remember?” Thinking his words over for a moment, he added, “I’ll catch up.”

***At Drakeheart’s Office…***

“Well, I suppose I should start by asking: What exactly are you here to learn? What boundaries do you wish to push?” The Headmaster asked, Mihail sat with his legs crossed out of sheer habit across the desk.

*What* ***do*** *I want to learn here?* It had always just sort of been a *given* that he would attend Drakeheart Academy. Problem was, they’d had to spend so long focusing on getting his Charm under control that honing it was basically all he’d ever been interested in. Everything came easy to him *because* of his Charm, and that ease cheapened the appeal.

Until that ‘test’ on the way here.

“Just give me whatever, I don’t really care. Maybe…” He drifted off, realizing he’d forgotten what that boy had called his combat class.

“Close Combat Proficiency, I presume? You did seem rather thrilled after our little bout.” Mihail could only widen his eyes at the man’s accuracy.

“I thought *I* was the mind-reader, here.” He deadpanned, earning an amused chuckle from the Professor.

“Ha ha ha, but of course you are, my boy. That doesn’t necessarily make you any harder to read.”

*‘Thankfully.’* Mihail didn’t know what to make of that afterthought. Instead, he merely got to his feet and gave his legs a decent stretch.

“So, what rooms do I need to remember? I hope you aren’t about to have me running back and forth across this labyrinth.”

“That, I’m afraid to say, depends on you. First, are you capable of manifesting or not?” Drakeheart stood as well, reaching for his cane and giving the stick a lazy twirl.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, sure.” Mihail replied, conjuring a tiny flame at the tip of his index finger as proof. “Why?” The Headmaster seemed quite amused.

“I would be lying if I said I was surprised. In that case, assigning you to First-Year Elementalism would be rather pointless. And I can only assume your mother educated you on this continent’s history?” Mihail answered by projecting everything he could remember learning about Eru into the man’s mind. Drakeheart’s eyes shut tightly at the sudden influx of information, a hand clasping his head as he used his cane to stop himself from stumbling.

“Enough!” He snapped, causing Mihail’s heart to skip a couple beats as he instantly reigned in his Semblance. Arturian was left panting for several seconds as he regained his composure.

“Avoid doing things like that. It would seem excessive injected information can very easily induce pain, possibly worse if you were to pile on even more.” He explained, to which Mihail could only fiercely apologize.

“No need for forgiveness, child, the fault is mine. I failed to remember that you are accustomed to casually using your Charm.” He assured, “Moving on, I would have you placed in Second-Year Elementalism and Eruian History. For Close Combat Proficiency, I’ll be barring you from using your Charm.”

“Wait, what!?”

“Cheating is hardly productive. Besides, we’ll be focusing on your Precognition during our sessions after class, remember?” He pointed out, Mihail only grumbling in response. “Then why don’t we go over the basics now? Unless you’d rather learn a map all day?” The boy’s mood pulled a complete about-face, an eager glint in his eyes.

“Sure!”

“Very well.” With that, Drakeheart touched his shoulder, and in an instant they were suddenly in a wide, spacious room.

“This the gym?”

“Indeed. Now, listen and internalize what I’m about to tell you.” The Headmaster emphasized by assuming that same stance he’d settled into during his speech, both hands draped over his cane, standing with perfect, meticulous posture. Mihail nodded.

“When fighting in close quarters, I have two simple goals I want you to strive for. First, if you find yourself on the defensive, *don’t get hit*.” The boy’s head tilted slightly in confusion.

“Huh?”

“You heard me, Mr. Aletra. Unless you are in a position to take the initiative, focus your efforts *entirely* on evasion. Now, enough talk. Put that concept into practice, and once I’m satisfied, we’ll move on to the second rule.” Mihail just rolled his eyes and slackened his posture in preparation.

He perceived the opening stab, aimed perfectly and savagely for his chin.

*Are you trying to knock me out cold!?*

Mihail slipped it, only to be alerted as a swing to his knees ghosted by. He leapt out and up, clearing the strike and giving himself a bit of distance.

Only for a second swing to smack against his ribs.

*Right, dealing with a Teleporter here…*

The pain was sharp and intense, Mihail hadn’t the slightest doubt that this was the intent, though. Last time, it’d only taken a single blow to his gut to render him completely winded.

*He’s going for pain over damage.* He rolled back and away, raising his head only to see the mirage of rising swipe pass straight through his chin. The boy ripped his head back a split-instant before the Headmaster followed through, *feeling* the rush of air from it as he arched his back over and tumbled backwards to his feet. By the time he was standing again, another stab ghosted through his nose. He was barely able to jerk his head to the side, only for another one to sail perfectly through his head again. He pulled his head back the other way, before he saw the cane rear back about an inch, then swing through his temple.

It was low enough that instead of just ducking his head, he needed to awkwardly twist his back over and nearly lose his balance to miss the blow. His only way of regaining his posture was to cut a tight spin to un-twist his legs. In that shift of focus, he failed to notice yet *another* stab before it speared his liver.

“Ack-!” He hacked up, the unexpected pain making him stumble a bit. His first reflex was to palm the spot, astounded when he felt no open wound. His next was the realization that he was still fighting, eyes snapping back to where he assumed Drakeheart to be. To his surprise, the man was standing motionless, an unreadable expression on his face.

“Pain tolerance is the single most essential factor in any battle. For now, until I deem you ready to move on to the second stage, I’ll be inflicting nigh-unbearable pain upon you. Do not take it personally, you simply have a late start compared to most.” He said it so *dispassionately.* The coldness in those eyes barely even resembled the kind, yet stern man Mihail thought he knew.

“Did you really have to go for *organs!?”*

“We will stop by our resident Healer after each session. You needn’t worry about any real injury. This is, frankly, the fastest way I can sharpen your resolve.” He explained, “Think of it this way: By improving your ability to evade, you will suffer pain like that less and less. On top of that, any less extreme and acute injury will lose its impact.” Mihail wasn’t very enthused.

“Well?” Drakeheart asked, completely devoid of any perceivable emotion. If he couldn’t hear what was going on behind the mask, Mihail probably would have turned tail and ran.

*‘Please forgive me, Elaine, but I will do what I must to secure this boy’s future.’*

“Do you have the strength to continue?” That. That question. The motive behind it that Mihail *knew,* beyond any shadow of a doubt. This was his out. The very last time Drakheart would go out of his way to remind Mihail that he could abandon these sessions at any time. It wasn’t that this was his last chance to get out at all, that much the boy could tell, but from this point forward, it would be nothing but *hell*.

“I promise you this, Mihail: If you place your faith in my guidance, if you pour unto me your *blood*, your *sweat*, and your *tears*, I shall mold you into a force like no other. By the end of your tenure at my Academy, I swear upon all that I hold dear that *no* Mage will be your equal.” Using his first name? Now?

“Why do I feel like you’re trying to groom me?” The Headmaster didn’t seem fazed by the accusation.

“What do you expect me to say? I *am*. Rather, I am *offering* to groom you.” The man clarified, “I am fully aware of how brutal the training I offer will be, and thus I find it prudent to give you a light at the end of that tunnel.”

“And if I say I quit? What then?” He challenged, his brow narrowing. Since when did he sign up for something like this?

“For whatever reason, I find that quite unlikely. But, if you are truly determined, I will extend this offer to the student with the next-best potential. Whether you accept is entirely your decision, Mr. Aletra.” Drakeheart answered, expression as dead as ever.

And then Mihail remembered. That image, that single still frame of memory he’d seen when they’d talked before.

Of his mother. Battered, pale, and weary. Looking back on that image, something he hadn’t noticed before struck him. The *ferocity* in those normally sweet, shining emerald eyes. Even lacking context…

*Mom didn’t call it quits when things got rough for her.*

“Fine, then. Let’s keep going.” He had a standard to hold up. Sure, he didn’t have a single clue what had happened, but compared to *this?* He could do better.

Finally, that icy look broke as the man let out a heavy sigh, leaning over in a hearty chuckle.

“Mihail, my boy, you’re even more stressful to haggle with than the Royal Family! I legitimately thought the greatest talent I’ve ever chanced across was about to walk out on me!” The open praise made the boy a little flustered.

“Come on, I’m *not* that special.” The Headmaster only scoffed.

“On the contrary, I beg to differ. You can learn faster than any other Mage, I’ve seen firsthand your potential as a close-range combatant, you can read the thoughts of your foes freely, and if any of that wasn’t enough, the thing which allows you these advantages doesn’t tire you in the least.” He pointed out, before leveling a softer look at Mihail. “I admire how you humble yourself, but do not confuse arrogance with due confidence.”

“*Anyway,* are we done for today or not?” Even if he appreciated the thought, Mihail really didn’t want to linger on it.

“But for one last lesson I’d like to impart, yes.”

“Go on, then.” The man chuckled.

“Patience, my boy, patience. Nothing is mastered in a day. My second rule is only this: No matter how trivial the encounter, no matter how pitiful your opposition, you must *always* assume your foe to be your better. It is the single most essential, life-saving notion a Mage can bear in their mind.”

“I… don’t *have* to assume things, though?” Mihail pointed out, tapping the side of his head in gesture. “You know, Telepath?” Strangely, Drakeheart’s initial response was a tired sigh.

“And what will happen, Mihail, when the time you take to peer into their mind is used to stab you in the back? What will happen, when your overreliance on this ability results in your, or even your fellow classmate’s, *deaths*? At what point is that possibility not worth the risk?” The man’s glare took on that same, hauntingly intense pressure from their first conversation. “I may have spoken ill of hypocrisy, but would you not agree that forgoing confidence in favor of better assured safety is well worth its inherent contradiction?” Mihail could only sputter in confusion at the shift in tone.

“W-woah, Professor, this is just a *school!* Why are you acting like we’re about to ship off to war?”

*‘Because yo-’* In a moment completely disconnected from anything Mihail had ever experienced, his ability to hear the Headmaster’s thoughts suddenly cut short. The man had gone from frustration to complete, *dead calm* in a matter of a few seconds. A *forced* calm, yes, but Mihail could get *anything* from him.

“The *fuck* were you just thinking?” He called the moment out with not an ounce of hesitation, pacing towards the aged man with a look of profound consternation carved into his features. “I’m not an *idiot*, just now you were-”

“I *worry,* Mihail.” Drakeheart interrupted, his own expression almost *detached*. “And can you blame me? I have seen more of the horrors of magic than any man, woman, or child on this continent. I will *not* tear from you the joys of youth, the matters of the world, as of yet, do not concern you. And yet, it would be ever more cruel of me, should I simply leave you to bask in ignorance, without the slightest hint of preparation.” He paused, turning his eyes upward, to something off in the distance. “I am the single most capable Mage in recorded history. That, in itself, grants unto me an unshakable responsibility to you children. I *must* protect you from the harshness of reality. I *must* prepare you for the struggles of the lives you have chosen. I *must* be the unflinching bulwark against which the scheming and clamoring of the wretched crash.” He smiled wryly.

“This weight is a heavy one, I’m afraid. I grow weary.”

“Then just take a *break*.” It was what Mihail figured his mother might have said, were she here. Again throwing him for a loop, Drakeheart broke into a brief fit of hearty laughter.

“Ah, the wonder of simplicity. Before you go, might I make a recommendation?” The boy could only stare owlishly. Why couldn’t he make out anything in that serene haze of a mind? The newfound twinkle in the Headmaster’s eyes made it clear the man was well aware. He turned, giving his cane an aloof twirl as he began to pace towards the center of the room. Stopping, he peered over his shoulder with a pleased smile.

“Do try talking with that Draiden boy, would you? I think the two of you would get along *famously*.” And just like that, he was *gone.* No indication, no sound, no visual cue, the man was simply no longer in the room. With the sudden lack of someone to talk with, Mihail simply blurted out loud.

“Who’s that?”

“Hey!” A familiar voice caused him to whip around to face the door, surprised to see that same guy from orientation. Only, something was a little different. Enough so that Mihail found it a bit concerning.

The left lens of his glasses was cracked.

“What’s up? Did you get your classes?” He asked, pacing over to Mihail with a not-so-subtle glance over his own shoulder. Then, his voice lowered, “Uh, you’re a Mage, right? Not like me?” Mihail gave him a confused look.

“Yeah, why?” And then, he *noticed.*

*Why.*

*How.*

*Where are his* ***thoughts!?***

It was completely *blank*. Not vague and masked, like Drakeheart, nor careful and tempered, like his mother. There was simply… *nothing.*

“Well, I… I might have pissed off some upperclassmen. Managed to give ‘em the slip, bu-”

“Found his ass!” Another student, broad in the shoulders and grinning like a feral beast rounded the doorway, the sound of more footsteps close behind. The older boy’s eyes darted between them, locking onto Mihail with a fresh wave of vigor. “Looks like he’s got a friend, too!”

*Ah.*

Maybe it was just the influence of his mother’s emotions over the years, but an indescribable feeling was beginning to bubble up in his gut. He felt his lip quirk into a disgusted scowl.

***Bullies.***

Mihail had never been subject to bullying. But, his mother had made it clear how she felt, even without words.

The moment he made the connection, Mihail stopped listening to the headstrong blabbering, instead stepping in front of the enigma they’d been chasing.

“You want help?” He asked idly, not waiting for an answer. “Then stay back and I’ll talk to them.”

Two more delinquents stalked through the door, both noticeably meeker-seeming.

*Two betas and an alpha. They really do act like animals. Alright, let’s see if they’re really committed to this.*

He took a deep, quiet breath, and then deadened his expression.

“Let’s skip the bluster and lay out your choices.” He declared as firmly as possible, donning the same blunt, clinical attitude he’d taken up with the Headmaster. They clearly weren’t expecting the confidence, stopping dead with looks of blatant confusion. “A: We fight, I lose, you get to feed your egos. Or B: We fight, *you* lose, and you become laughingstocks.” The bulky one opened his mouth to say something, but Mihail couldn’t have cared less. “I know *my* odds, and honestly? I’m feeling pretty lucky today.” He took a brazen step forward, pleased when the now unsure students stepped back in turn. He leaned in, playing up the front by slipping his hands into his pockets. “What about you? Wanna flip that coin?” Just to add a bit more icing on the bluff-cake, he manifested two balls of flame on either side of him.

*If they still want to escalate, that’s their choice. Probably going to take a beating if they do, but at least I tried.*

Again, the big guy was the first to react, closing the distance and grabbing a fistful of Mihail’s collar.

“You think you’re funny, newblood? Sure you don’t wanna take that shit back?” He growled, but Mihail just met his gaze with unfazed determination. Dropping the bluff would only make things worse. “Say you didn’t mean it, and I won’t go out of my way to make your life *hell*. Sound good?”

“Either actually *do* something, or quite wasting our time.” He knew that’d been the wrong thing to say a second later, when the visage of the boy’s fist passed through his face.

*So much for bluffing…*

He rocked back on his heels and tilted back his head, slipping the first punch before planting his foot on the boy’s stomach and pushing them apart.

“Seriously? You don’t have *anything* better to-!” The ghostly frame of the boy rushed him, indicating that a punch to his gut was the goal.

*Do I just hit him back? Seems kind of… cheap. But wait, there’s still two more ready to jump in.*

“Why couldn’t you guys just *leave?”* He sighed, before halfheartedly lifting his knee to catch his attacker right in the chin. With how violently the boy had launched, his own momentum was more than enough to leave him unconscious on the floor. He didn’t show it outwardly, but Mihail felt the initial, *stabbing* pain of the impact through his Charm. It… Well, it certainly wasn’t pleasant.

“Oh, shit!” One of the other bullies exclaimed, looking less concerned than he was reveling in the chaos. The other just stood there, arms crossed, looking rather disappointed. He glanced expectantly at his remaining partner, as if to say ‘go on, then.’

*Well, there’s the alpha.*

Without hesitation, the boy nodded and was preparing to use a shockwave of wind to knock Mihail to the floor. Instead, the Telepath read his foe’s intent and mirrored the technique perfectly. They both clapped their hands together forcefully, generating invisible gales which crashed into one another in a tremendous cacophony of sheering air that ultimately canceled itself out.

*‘Shithead! Alright, how about some fire?’* Mihail couldn’t help but crack a little grin, this was just *too easy.*

In the instant when the boy had begun to manifest a ball of fire, Mihail waved his hand, causing a sizable wave of bitterly cold water to slam into his target’s side, dousing the flame and sending him tumbling to the floor. For good measure, he dispelled the water and took hold of a floor tile with his Mana, smashing it against the boy’s head as he fell into it.

*Wow. It’s not even a fight.* He was starting to see what Drakeheart meant by being the exception to the rule. After all, active planning and thought were *essential* steps in any battle of Mages, and these were anything but seasoned fighters. On top of that, they didn’t even know he *had* a Charm.

He looked back up to the ringleader, who simply let out a bored sigh. His hair was a similar color to Mihail’s own, if a little more on the chocolate side, and cut much shorter. Strikingly red eyes looked Mihail up and down while he paced closer.

*‘This kid looks green as hell, yet he’s obviously better than most of the other newbloods this year. Managed to one-tap Braus, then read Amon like a fucking book.’* He came to a stop a few feet away, his face twisting into a weirdly cruel-feeling smirk.

“That was pretty damn impressive, kid. Granted, those bozos are basically the bottom of the barrel around here, but still, good shit.” He reached a hand out, “Name’s Fuegio, of House Alistar. I-”

“Don’t care, either take your ‘bozos’ to get some healing or I’ll drag all three of you there.” Mihail cut in aggressively, already getting a *bad* vibe from this ‘Fwaygo’ jerk. He lightly grabbed the non-Mage boy by the shoulder and stomped past ‘Fwaygo’s’ outstretched hand towards the door. The boy whirled around as they approached the hall, looking absolutely *livid.*

“Hey! Get the *fuck* back here or I’ll-” Thoroughly sick of this cliche side-villain, Mihail looked back over his shoulder, his gaze as void of remorse or emotion as he could make it.

“Idle threats as you let us walk away make you seem petty. Either *act*, or leave us the *fuck* alone.” It felt weird to swear like that. His mother would talk about how unnecessary words like ‘fuck’ were, but he’d be a liar if he said they didn’t lend a certain *emphasis* to things. Not to mention, it felt good to throw it back in this jerk’s face.

To his infinite satisfaction, Fwaygo was just standing there, a furious, twitching scowl painted across face. Looked like he couldn’t even speak anymore. Even his thoughts were mostly just indistinguishable frustration. But then…

*‘Fucked it up again, like you* ***always*** *do.’* It wasn’t a line of thought, but more like what he’d experienced with the Headmaster, a flash of memory that was just as quickly lost in the darkening sea of anger.

They’d already rounded the corner into the hallway when he heard it, and it froze him in place.

“Uh, you okay?” The boy next to him asked, causing Mihail to give his head a firm shake, reigning in his Charm to do away with the thoughts.

“Y-yeah, I’m good. What about you? Those glasses look pretty busted up.” He replied, popping his neck as they started walking again.

“Oh, it’s fine. I only really *need* them for reading and stuff, so just one lens is totally workable.”

“By the way, what dorm number did you get?” Mihail reached into his pocket, retrieving a slip of paper with ‘B1-R32’ marked in ink. He gestured it to his friend, who’s eyes lit up when he read it.

“Nice! We’re roommates!”

“Really? That’s oddly convenient. First person I meet, then happen to run into again a couple hours later, is *also* my roommate?” Had to be Drakeheart meddling. “Is your name Draiden, by chance?” If his eyes had lit up before, now they were dinner plates.

“How?! Are you from Xernas too?” Mihail smirked.

“No, no, just a totally random guess. Is it your first or last?”

“Last, actually. Call me Senin. Or just, uh, Sen, if you want, I guess?” Sen replied, awkwardly scratching the back of his head.

“Sen it is, then. My name’s Mihail.”

“Woah, *definitely* not fromXernas with a name like that. Let me guess… Ilvara?”

“My dad was born there, but I’m actually a local.” Named after a grandfather he’d only heard stories about.

“Ohhh, I get it. And, uh, thanks. I probably would’ve gotten it bad if you hadn’t jumped in.” Mihail wasn’t sure what to say, just eyeing Sen oddly. He averted his eyes and grumbled.

“It’s nothing.”

“You can call it that if you really want to, but still, thank you.” Sen seemed to let it go at that, and the fact that Mihail wasn’t sure reminded him of his earlier realization.

“Hey, Sen?” The boy looked over at him curiously.

“What’s up?”

“Didn’t you say you weren’t a Mage? What exactly did you mean?” It was like stumbling through a pitch cave, flailing his arms about to try and find some purchase against rock. How hadn’t he noticed during orientation?

“Honestly? I’m not even sure. I just… can’t feel any Mana in me. It doesn’t matter how much I meditate, or who tries to help me, it’s *never* been there.” His arms crossed as he spoke. “The Headmaster even tried to help me himself last month, but he was just as lost as I am.” Sen let out a sigh. “It’s just so-”

“Frustrating.” He shot Mihail a wide look. The ponytailed boy kept staring off into space, deep in thought. “You know how I said I didn’t have a Charm?” Without waiting for an answer, he replied, “I lied.” Sen’s eyes turned sour.

“Good for you?” Instantly, Mihail snapped out of his haze with a panicked expression.

“Wait, that’s not what I meant!” He reassured, “I, uh… Well, my Charm is…” He drifted off for a second, contemplating his options.

*I mean, this seems like just as much a mystery for him as it is for me.*

“My Charm is Telepathy.” Silence fell for a few seconds, Sen just *staring* at him.

“L-like, mind-reading and stuff?”

“Yeah. Mind-reading and… stuff.” It took a *mountain* of effort not to snort in laughter. “A-anyway, I *can’t* read yours, for some reason. Totally blank. I don’t know if it’s just that you don’t have Mana for me to connect with, but even if it was it’d be weird.”

“Why? Charms are based on Mana, so it makes sense.”

“*That’s* the thing, though. They’re *not*. Mana just fuels excessive use of them, but they don’t actually *need* it to function on a base level. With Charms, you’re literally interacting with, and *breaking*, the physical laws Elemental Magic has to follow.” Principles of Mana Manipulation, Volume I, Chapter nine. “I can connect with *trees*, which we know don’t possess Mana, so my Charm should *definitely* work on you if it’s just that you lack Mana. No, something else is going on.” A hand rose to his chin pensively.

*According to Drakeheart,* ***anything*** *is possible. And, well, I can’t think of anything else…*

“Hey, can you humor me real quick?” Sen looked rather curious.

“Sure, what is it?”

“Picture me without Mana. Like, *really* visualise me not being able to use magic.” The boy didn’t seem too convinced, but relented still. With a focused gaze, he started staring at Mihail intently.

The Telepath waited a moment, before testing his theory by trying to light a fireball.

Absolutely *nothing.* He flicked his wrist a second time, with the same result. And a third, and a fourth.

“Called it.”

“Called what?”

“Called you being a Charmer.”

“O-oh… *Oh!”* He exclaimed, before asking, “But, how? I don’t feel any different.” Focus broken, the fireball Mihail had been trying to create suddenly burst to life.

“See that? You canceled my magic just by focusing on it. I think you’ve been doing that to yourself subconsciously, so, in a way, you *aren’t* a Mage. But… you *are* a Charmer, if that makes sense?”

“Not really, no.”

“I’m *trying*, okay?” He quipped with a smile, “Anyway, I guess we figured out why you can’t feel your Mana.” Sen was quiet for a bit, looking deeply at the palms of his hands. Mihail was able to put it together that he needed a minute to take it in, and just let the silence settle as they walked.

As he occupied himself by admiring the architecture, he noticed that the structure of the halls were sort of similar to a cathedral. Tall, arching ceilings, carved meticulously to be as intricate as possible. Mounted candles brightened the gloomy space, but not enough to relieve an almost oppressive atmosphere.

*A bit much, if you ask me. Still… I guess it’s a decent change of pace.*

As much as he loved the warm, familiar setting of his home, it *could* be a bit claustrophobic at times.

Then, in the midst of their musings, a person-shaped, blinding white figure suddenly came to life before them. It almost instantly began to crack, before shattering to reveal a smirking Drakeheart. As though it was the ordinary thing in the world, he spoke. “I must say, I’m rather astounded at your acuity, Mihail. I’ve been theorizing and conjecturing for quite some time, but you were able to solve young Senin’s troubles in minutes.” Mihail didn’t hear a single word.

“W-w-what the *fuck?!* Why wasn’t there a flash like that before!”

“Ah, ah, *language,* Mr. Aletra. I’ve actually been walking with the two of you for some time. When I got news of two upperclassmen found unconscious in the very same room we’d been using to spar, let’s just say I had a bit of a hunch.” The man explained, “Anyhow, that ‘flash’ was me refracting the light around my body, relative to your perspective. Think of it as a limited form of invisibility.”

“Y-you can do that?” The way the Headmaster’s smirk deepened was enough to give Mihail a cold chill.

“My boy, I’ve found there to be *very little* Elemental Magic *isn’t* capable of. It is simply a matter of… *creativity*.” Mihail merely rolled his eyes, though the feat itself was still *fascinating.*

“Uh…” Sen’s voice piped up for the first time, looking *quite* lost. “Can we rewind for a sec? I’m still trying to make this make sense in my head.” Drakeheart eyed him with a pleasant gaze.

“Quite simple, Mr. Draiden. You are, and have always been, a Mage. Who, unfortunately, was born with a Charm which nullifies magic of any kind, including your own. Given your family history, it was rather easy to mistake this Charm for simply not being a Mage at all. I imagine Sir Draiden would have been *ecstatic* at such a pros-”

“*Okay.* Makes sense now. Thanks.” Mihail was suddenly feeling very out of place. He glanced from Drakeheart to Sen, who’s eyes were firmly locked on the floor. The Professor met his gaze awkwardly, before recentering himself.

“Ah, my apologies, Senin. That was horrifically inconsiderate of me.” The apology was just as heartfelt and genuine as it’d been back when he’d first met Drakeheart. Sen let out a heavy breath, palming his forehead tiredly.

“I-it’s fine, I just… I came here to get away from that.” He paused for a moment, seemingly stewing in thoughts Mihail couldn’t hear. “Can we do some sparring?” He asked, “I know that doesn’t make sense, but still. It’s… I don’t know… familiar?”

“I presume swordplay?” The guess was met with a quiet nod. “In that case, I have a bit of an idea. Mihail?”

“Y-yeah?”

“Would you be so inclined as to join us? I know we just finished a bout ourselves, yet I cannot help but sense a learning opportunity here.” Mihail turned the idea over in his head.

“Well, we *are* roommates, so I don’t see why not.” He sniped, giving Drakeheart a very pointed look. Projecting into the man’s mind, he thought.

*Don’t think I’m oblivious just because of my Charm. You knew he had one, but didn’t tell him. Why?* The Headmaster didn’t respond immediately, instead gesturing for them to begin their walk back to his office.

“In that case, come along. Unfortunately, nightfall is swiftly approaching.”

*“Because, this is a power we do not yet know the bounds of. Imagine, for a moment, if he accidentally silenced all Mana in Eru? Society as we know it would collapse. I simply wished to take my time in exposing him to his nature, so that such a catastrophe might be averted.”* Mihail glanced at Sen worriedly.

*You really think he could push it that far?*

*“I have no personal experience with a Charm of this variety, and so I choose not to take chances. If I must take preventative measures to possibly stop the death of all magic, then I shall.”*

*That’s… understandable. Did I…?*

*“Yes.”*

 Mihail averted his eyes, staring at the floor.

*Went from feeling good about it, to feeling like I just armed a ticking bomb.*

*“An apt analogy, but I believe we have it mostly in hand, now. That it seems to abide by his will accurately is a blessing, based on his initial use of it. Let us hope that trend lasts.”* And just like that, Mihail couldn’t make out the Headmaster’s thoughts. He could feel and hear their presence, but the exact shapes and sounds were thickly muffled somehow.

*How do you do that?*

Drakeheart cracked a conniving grin.

*“So it works? Wonderful.”*

*Wait, I mean-* He was cut short in his sputtering by Sen piping up again.

“Are you guys talking in your heads?” While Mihail was hit with *another* unexpected curveball in being found out so easily, the Professor didn’t miss a beat.

“Indeed. Mr. Aletra here has quite the habit of speaking without… well, speaking. As I’m sure you know, Charms are usually usable from birth, and his functions similarly to your own, in being constantly and freely active.” His winded explanation gave Mihail the time he needed to screw his head back on.

“Y-yep. Only just recently figured out how to turn it off. My bad.”

“Makes sense, I guess.” Then, awkward silence ensued for the rest of their commute to Drakeheart’s office.

*Just left home, and I’ve already met two people I can’t read. Mom had a point. It’s not special, it’s not something I can fix all my problems with. Just another tool I can make use of from time to time.*