

Chapter 1

Loby looked away. They were all having such a good time. Praise and promotion fell on him and his friends like laurel wreaths for all their hard work. But he knew that the four remaining elemental mages would expect him to take his late master's place as the new fire mage. And he wasn't ready. He had no plans to even begin getting ready.

He studied the silent trees and incurious stones around the earth mage's castle. Occupied by these inanimate objects over here, he didn't have to think about the mages over there. But distance wouldn't protect him from that one question—that inexorable question. Still, he tried, standing off to the side, out of anyone's line of vision, but not out of their thoughts.

“So what are you going to do now, Loby?” Quintessuma approached him.

“I don't know.”

“What can he do?” Myrlo asked. “I doubt Lord Elveston prepared him to take his place.”

Loby didn't find Master Myrlo's doubts helpful, either. He didn't want their expectations or their hand-holding understanding. All he wanted was a moment to breathe and enjoy not having the fire mage's wrath searing his every move.

His friends, Jawan, Cintella and Zap, stopped their chatter and looked at him. Loby knew they were trying to be supportive. After all, they were mice, members of a group he had started. But their gazes isolated him. He turned his attention to a large cloud boiling toward the sun. He could send his mind anywhere, but gravity trapped his feet among the grasses of Hadley Town.

Quintessuma moved closer. The spirit mage's power locked into his mind, drawing it back to the world where his feet stood.

“We know you're not fully prepared. But there has to be a fire mage, and you're the closest candidate—the only candidate—to take such a mantle.”

She was making her point. Loby couldn't look away, down or up without showing disrespect for her rank as the mage of ether. But though she could force him to face her physically, she couldn't force his heart to take on this hateful role.

“I just don't know,” he muttered. His master had never planned for him to be the fire master. Lord Elveston had died trying to destroy the world with Loby in it. Now Loby was a journeyman without a master. The world needed a fire master, but Loby was still a journeyman with a journeyman's knowledge of the element. Couldn't they see that?

Quintessuma didn't touch him. As the master of spirits, she didn't need to touch him to see into his heart and mind. He unfocused his eyes until she became a blur. No good. Like licking dry lips. He knew it wouldn't help but did it anyway. He couldn't see her, but she could still see into him.

“You know how to make fire cubes.” Jawan, Master Myrlo's journeyman, felt an annoying need to remind Loby of this. “That's all the other mages need from you.”

Quintessuma shook her head. “There's more to it. We need more from him.”

“No!” Loby turned away from Quintessuma. He didn’t want to show disrespect, but he hated this. They had no idea what they were asking him to do. To them, Lord Elveston was just another mage. But to Loby, he was . . . “No!”

“But we’re mice, remember.” Jawan winked at Zap and Cintella. The three of them faced Loby and chanted.

“Though fire and rain assail us,
Though earthquake and storm impale us,
We are mice!”