

Unbinding

“From Alstrad’s School of Arcana: Dorian Moray!”

The crowd erupted in cheers. For the four years he’d been participating, Dorian never quite got over that sound. He was the champion of the Eight Bands Tournament, where all the magical schools from the world would convene. They’re greatest students would face various challenges: challenging both their skill and creativity. Battle mages had their place, but squaring off against something like an ‘unbreakable’ safe was much more appealing to the academics. Dorian figured that his championship this year would give him a strong introduction to the headmasters of the surrounding schools. His name was already on their lips as the name to beat and certainly a name when it came to perspective teachers.

More champions were announced and cycled out: Miranda and William were back again, but there were new faces that Dorian didn’t recognize. Their names were powerful, though. Etheridge was a freshman upstart, but he had skills that Dorian didn’t get until he was a sophomore. The eighth competitor was a shy girl from Moridan Hall named Esther, but Dorian knew better than to discount the quiet ones. The crowd was eager to see the competition begin when all eight champions—

“And finally,” the announcer said, “from...really? Are you sure? Alright, from a... self-taught school: Heather Valin!”

The cheering was replaced by confused murmurs from the crowd. Dorian looked toward the entrance and saw the young woman walking out confidently. She didn’t need cheers or support. The way she walked commanded the entire arena. She wasn’t wearing a school uniform, only jeans and a leather jacket. She didn’t have a staff or a wand, so Dorian guessed one of the chunky medallions around her neck was a magical focus.

“Welcome, one and all!” The announcer said, trying to engage the group, “to the Eight—er, Nine Bands Tournament!”

Dorian tried not to let the news bother him. It was one more person to beat. The tournament board had already shuffled, awkwardly shoving the new girl into the

branching matchups on the right side. She wouldn't even make it to the semi-finals, so Dorian doubted he'd ever see much more than a peripheral encounter.

Miranda appeared at Dorian's side, scowling at Heather as the competition prepared for the first round. Heather sat alone, but Dorian felt a bit more friendly with Miranda and William on a bench. Dorian nudged William and jutted his chin towards her. "Who the hell is the new girl?"

"No clue," William said. "No school, no history...just decided 'Hey, I'm going to enter this elite tournament for a giggle?'"

"She's from the city," Miranda said. "She's some punk who never made it into a school and decided to learn magic from Gentlemen Mages and then make a mockery of the event."

"What's her specialty?" Dorian asked.

"She doesn't have one," Miranda said. "Like I said, she's a nobody. Some joke mage who thinks that she can impress the championship with card tricks."

"Some people will do anything for a better seat," William smirked. "Ten bucks says she tanks it in the first competition."

"Fifteen says she makes it one," Dorian said. "She might surprise us."

"Dream on," Miranda scoffed. "She's a nobody."

"You're only saying that cause they're pitting you two for her first fight," William said.

"It's insulting! I've been in second place for three years now and they're giving me a matchup with street trash? Unbelievable."

"I might have to take back that bet. Miranda's out for blood."

"Nope, I'm making my money," William smirked.

The first horn sounded as a couple of freshmen were pitted in what amounted to magical dodgeball. Ethridge was in the game, which kept Dorian's attention. This had been Dorian's event his first year, though he'd only ever played again once. The competitions were usually some arrangement of the same events with some new game added or an abandoned classic resurrected. As the event crawled on, Dorian

checked Miranda's match with Heather. It was a duel designed by battle mages. Dorian could see Miranda reviewing the most lethal spells allowed and he was so distracted by her choices that he barely noticed when the match ended.

After another event went by, it was time for Miranda and Heather to face off. Heather's cool indifference seemed to hold some sway over the audience, the crowd cheering for her louder than when the announcer called Miranda. The women squared off and gave polite, but terse nods to one another. The horn sounded and the fight began.

Miranda's spell was already charged and off the tip of her wand before Heather had even raised her arms. The sphere of crackling, blue energy rushed across the battlefield, casting twitching shadows into the stands. Heather raised a hand as the sphere was feet from her—not nearly enough time to defend herself.

The silence was unsettling, the energy dissipating in a loud hiss like a scream. The lights flickered, but Dorian could still make out the clear figure of Heather standing in the middle of the field. An attack like that should have knocked her off her feet, but the only movement she made was a slow step towards Miranda.

Miranda fired off more attacks, smaller, but more rapid. Magical knives flew from the end of her wand, spinning through the air until they reached Heather. A slow wave of her hand made the knives drop from their trajectory. Heather calmly picked up one, turning it in her hand as Miranda gazed across the field.

There was more fighting as Miranda's spells became more desperate. No matter how complex the spell, how threatening the hex looked, or how dirty the jinx was, Heather knocked each attack aside with a wave of her hand. Some of the audience was cheering for Heather, but many more were in stunned silence as the gap between them closed. Miranda's expression shifted from anger to surprise to terror as the gap closed between them. By the time Miranda thought to back away, Heather had grabbed the collar of Miranda's shirt and pointed the knife under her chin. Miranda's hands flew up, signaling her surrender.

The next few minutes were an argument between Miranda's mentor and the

competition judges. It set back the length of the tournament by almost half an hour. In the end, Heather was allowed to advance, despite never having cast a spell. Dorian was less interested in the outcome of the argument as to how Heather had survived. Miranda's attacks were proficient and her spell work was strong. Heather had moved to defend herself but survived Miranda's attack. Miranda looked ashamed, hanging her head sadly when she was formally removed after the first round.

Heather became the competitor to watch. Dorian was able to focus on his events but felt Heather creeping up behind him in the rankings. She managed to effortlessly sidestep animated golems, un-cursed a boy who'd been turned into a dog without much more than a touch and was able to unbind and read an enchanted encryption as if it was a child's book. Dorian had a duel of his own, a transfiguration competition, and breaking a curse on a woman trapped in a stone statue. The other matches stopped mattering since Heather had bounced Miranda out of the rankings. Dorian's focus was on Heather's gradual ascent to the final round.

"Well, folks, it's been quite the competition upset! Coming into the final match: Dorian Moray and Heather Valin! It's all come down to the ultimate event: Magic Safecracking!"

Dorian almost cheered. This was his specialty. There was no truly secure spell that could hold a lock together and Dorian had taken a special interest. The safes were brought in, big enough that Dorian could live quite comfortably inside. The vault locks were covered with runes, glittering chains, and an imposing lock that Dorian could fit his hand inside.

The final horn sounded and Dorian started to work on his safe. As he considered the runes and chains, he looked to his left to see Heather. She casually walked up to the vault and held one of the chains in her hand. Like rust at high speed, the chain in her hand lost its luster as it unbound in her grasp. The lock dulled and opened as the magic disappeared.

Dorian felt the sweat pouring down his brow. He focused back on the lock, fighting the enchantments as he went. His vault was weakening, but each cheer for

Heather's successes was a frigid knife in his back. Dorian dropped into tunnel vision, breaking the chains before starting to manipulate the magic lock. He clambered up the side of the vault and started reversing the rune work on the vault's handle. He made it halfway when he heard a click. The vault handle didn't move, but a sickening screech made Dorian's stomach drop. The crowd cheered as Dorian looked to his left and saw Heather's vault door open.

The reception was a little less jovial than usual. Heather had taken the championship trophy and the ring, as well as most of the attention from prospective employers. She didn't seem interested though. For all her excitement, she might as well have been given a copy of the newspaper.

Dorian forced his way through the room and cornered Heather at a table. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"All of it! Every event, you just...walked through like it wasn't there!"

"Are you accusing me of cheating?"

"No, cheating in the games is impossible. I want to know how!"

Heather took a deep breath and thought over the question. "I was never accepted into a magic school. I didn't even think I had magic until I was nearly eighteen. In a way, I don't have magic of my own. My magic is...breaking other people's magic."

"Breaking?"

"I'm an Unbinder. I see the fibers of magic around an object or person or a spell and I just..."

Heather struggled with the words and turned to a floating candle in the room. She reached out and waved her finger around it. The flame sputtered out as the candle dropped from the air. "Unbind it," Heather said. "Gentlemen Mages are full of Unbinders, so I learned from them."

"Any spell?"

"I got lucky with my events," Heather said. "Sorry if you lost out on anything for it. I was trying to make a point."

“What point? That you’re better than us?”

“That I’m as good as you,” Heather said. “I’m as talented as any mage in this room with the right task. The tasks, however, are geared toward those who want to control magic. I free it.”

Dorian thought for a minute, frowning. “Can you show me how?”

“To break spells?” Heather said. “It might not be easy to learn.”

“Depends on the task, right?” Dorian smiled.

Heather smirked a little and took a sip of the champagne in her glass. “I suppose there’s room in the Gentlemen Mages. Are you ready for that?”

“I’m ready to try.”