

The Foreign Familiar

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Maurizio squinted against the late morning sun and probed the arcane energies around him with his wand. His teacher, Magister Meryn, had sent him to look for an important message in the back garden of the Bucalo Battlemage Academy, hidden away in the forest atop Mount Serafino.

Feeling his pulse slowing and a lull set in, Maurizio realized that the effect of his Ethereal Sense spell was wearing off. Instinctively, he flicked his wand at his face to recast the spell.

“Aetherium sensibus aperire,” he chanted with a calm monotone voice and closed his eyes.

A powerful burst of arcane wind brushed past his face, setting his heart pounding and pulse racing. Then, a wave of clarity spread from his head to his body, heightening his senses and emotions. When he opened his eyes, his vision was sharper and more attuned to the energies swirling in the garden.

Noticing a concentration of energy coming from a shrub next to the garden’s ancient carob tree, Maurizio shook his head and smiled. Magister Meryn had conjured that same illusory shrub when he taught Maurizio his first spell, the very same Ethereal Sense spell, five years ago. This meant that the supposed important message was from the magister himself.

Casually strolling to the illusory shrub, Maurizio squatted down and prodded its dusty thorny leaves with his wand, only for it to reach through to touch a smooth hard object. Waving his wand around the shrub, he saw its magical illusion disperse into a thin mist, revealing a vellum scroll tied to a bottle of grappa with a golden ribbon. Maurizio put his wand back into its leather holster and unwrapped the ribbon. He then picked up the scroll and opened it after removing Magister Meryn’s green wax seal.

Dear Reece,

As you approach the graduation exam tomorrow, I must remind you to believe in yourself and your abilities as a wizard-in-training. Do not be deterred by your

previous failures. The pressure to find your soul-bound familiar in front of the Archmage is immense, and even I at your age might have failed. Thus, do not blame yourself if the outcome is less than ideal, in which case, we will simply try again next year.

Whether you pass or fail, there is reason enough to celebrate with a drink or several! I have included a bottle of Serafino's finest with this message—please indulge away after the exam.

Yours,

Mag. Gruffydd Meryn

Maurizio neatly folded the scroll and slipped it into the side pocket of his burgundy robe. Despite his slim chance of passing the graduation exam this year, he found the message from the magister to be a kind and reassuring gesture. He slotted the bottle of grappa tightly into his leather satchel and strolled to the cliff edge close by. Looking down at the town of Serafino a thousand feet below, he watched the townsfolk scurry about the marketplace piazza, tiny as ants, and seemingly unbothered by the brutal war being waged six hundred miles to the east.

Suddenly, he felt a pair of slender hands grip his shoulders. He instinctively gasped and contorted his body around to free himself, only to see his classmate Vittoria giggling with her melodic smooth voice.

“Vita, you startled me!” Maurizio said. “You should not have sneaked up on me like that. I thought you were a backstabbing imp or some such.”

“An imp? If you had mistaken this face to be that of an imp, then perhaps you should have your eyes checked by Sister Agnes!” Vittoria pouted in jest with her arms akimbo.

“Ah, I will miss your sense of humor, Vita. The academy will not be half as lively without your presence,” Maurizio said with a wistful smile.

“Rizio, why are you speaking as if we will be parting? Aren't all academy graduates being assigned to the same battlemage battalion? We'll be together at the eastern front, fighting the demon army side by side.”

“I appreciate your faith in my abilities, Vita. But I will not be graduating with you tomorrow.” Maurizio lowered his head. “Seeing as I have failed to do so in the past three years, I would not bet a single ducat on me finding my familiar at the graduation exam.”

“Oh Rizio, surely the fourth time's the charm.” Vittoria said, brows furrowed with concern. “I wonder—have you ever lain with a woman before?”

Caught off guard by her question, Maurizio blushed as he answered, “I... that is... private information. I do not see how it is relevant to the discussion at hand.”

“Rizio, you should not be ashamed of your chastity,” Vittoria smiled. “Some women like that in a man.”

“I have yet to meet such a woman,” Maurizio said with a wry smile. “If you know of one, ask her if she'd fancy being courted by a baby-faced mediocre wizard, whose sole talent lies in devouring heaps of pasta in a single sitting.”

“Oh Rizio, you think too lowly of yourself!” Vittoria said. “Anyway, the reason I asked is because Magister Meryn taught me that finding your soul-bound familiar is much like the mating ritual of wild beasts. You must showcase your charisma and your arcane prowess to the planar spirits while calling out to them with your desire,” Vittoria explained. “If a spirit is sufficiently enticed by your display, it will come to you through the planar portal and soul-bind with you right then and there.”

“You make it sound so easy, Vita. But alas, charisma and arcane prowess are precisely the things I lack most,” Maurizio admitted. “Besides, I wonder why Magister Meryn did not explain the familiar-finding ritual in that way to me.”

“Perhaps the ritual works differently for each wizard, just as spirits are attracted to different kinds of wizards,” Vittoria said. “But I am certain there is a spirit from some plane that is yearning to pair with you, Rizio. Perhaps a kind of spirit that would want to protect a sweet innocent man like you.”

“Such a spirit sounds too good to be true. But alas, let us pray that it exists, and that it has the power to conjure a tasty magical lasagna every day,” Maurizio said as they laughed.

As lunchtime approached, Maurizio and Vittoria descended the dirt trail from the back garden to the main academy piazza on Mount Serafino's plateau, passing the stables. There, they noticed the stablemaster tending to a beautiful beige Neapolitan horse, its ornate saddle adorned with the white and gold of the royal crest.

“That’s the horse of an official from the Queen’s court,” Vittoria remarked. “I wonder what news they have brought.”

Arriving at the piazza proper now, they saw two dozen groups of students scurrying into the great hall on the east side, some stemming from the student quarters on the south side, while others, shepherded by their magister, came from the magister quarters and classrooms on the north side.

“We best hurry, Vita and Rizio.” Lorenzo, a handsome tanned student assigned to Magister Meryn, walked up behind Maurizio and Vittoria and tapped their shoulders. “Grandmagister Falcone has an important announcement to make.”

The trio snaked their way through the moving crowd and into the great hall to find Magister Meryn’s table, one of seventeen tables evenly laid out across the great hall’s expansive marble floor. Magister Meryn was already there, seated at the head of the table, with his nine other students who waited in silence, anticipating the announcement. Meryn toyed with his thick red beard, appearing pensive and uneasy—a stark contrast to his usual vibrant personality.

As the trio took their seats, they exchanged greetings with Meryn and their classmates. Vittoria tried to lighten the mood by chatting about the lunch menu, but her attempt was cut short by the sharp clang of the ceremony bell, heralding the arrival of Grandmagister Falcone.

The diminutive grandmagister, displaying the agility of a man thirty years younger, swiftly strode up to the podium planted in the center of the dais at the front of the great hall. Without delay, he commenced his announcement with his deep, raspy voice.

“Magisters and wizards-in-training of the Bucalo Battlemage Academy, thank you for gathering here on such short notice. I will make my announcement brief, for I do not wish to delay your lunch and your subsequent exam preparations.

“As many of you are aware, our realm has been resisting the invasion of the demon army for over seven years now. Thanks to the prudent leadership of General Colleoni, we have been successfully holding the eastern front.

“But this war of attrition has taken its toll on our realm’s treasury. In order to reduce spending to sustain our war efforts, our honorable Queen Caterina has made a difficult decision concerning all battlemage academies across the realm.

“As of this year, students will no longer be permitted to retake their graduation exam upon failure. In case of failure, their wizard-in-training title will be revoked, and they will be conscripted to serve on the eastern front as a foot soldier.”

The great hall suddenly erupted into a cacophony of murmurs, gasps, and sighs, as the students processed their reaction to this news with their peers. The grandmagister let it go on for several moments before signaling for the bell to be rung again, and when it did, the noise quieted down, and the grandmagister continued.

“I understand that this might be difficult news to hear for some of you, but for most of you, it should not make a difference. Trust in your faculties and you will pass the exam to become valuable battlemages of the realm—*pro regina et regno!*”

“*Pro regina et regno!*” The students and magisters instinctively chanted the academy’s motto in unison.

As the grandmagister finished his announcement and walked off the dais, two dozen servants streamed out of the kitchen and began laying out plates and cutlery on the tables for lunch. But before the servant finished at Magister Meryn’s table, the magister stood up and walked over to Maurizio.

“Reece, come see me in my office after lunch. We have much to discuss,” Meryn said with an unusually solemn voice, and then promptly strode out of the great hall.

As Maurizio approached Magister Meryn’s apartment in the second story of the magister quarters building, he found its dark oaken door ajar, giving him a glimpse of the bright sunlit office. He knocked on the door three times and announced his presence.

“Reece, please come in and take a seat. Oh, and close the door behind you, of course.” Meryn’s deep voice projected from his desk on the left side of the room.

As soon as Maurizio came in and closed the door behind him, he was overwhelmed with the pungent fragrance of foreign herbs and plants growing all around the perimeter of the room, mixed in with the comfortable earthy smell of old parchment and books.

Meryn was seated behind his office desk, head tilted forward pensively, with his hands clasped together resting on top of a jumble of scrolls and books. His familiar, a thick seven-foot-long pale snake named Bran, was curled up in a corner of the office. It moved sinuously in a slow, circular motion, making Maurizio feel slightly uneasy.

“Magister Meryn, I’m in trouble, aren’t I... after the Queen’s decision,” Maurizio said as he sat down in the padded chair in front of Meryn’s desk.

“It’s good that you realize the gravity of the situation, Reece. You will fare poorly as a foot soldier on the front. Thus, you cannot afford to fail the exam this time—to do so would mean certain death,” Meryn said. “How is the exam preparation coming along?”

“Progress has been slow, sir. I have been spending five hours each day attuning my arcane energy to match the spirits of the Desiderium Plane as per your instruction. But I still feel no greater affinity with them,” Maurizio admitted. “It’s as if they are ignoring me.”

“It is not your fault, Reece... it’s—” Meryn paused and let out a heavy sigh. “My dear Reece, I have a confession to make.”

Maurizio’s eyes widened. His heart started pounding in anticipation of Meryn’s next words.

“The Desiderium Plane is the one you are least compatible with. It is a fruitless task for you to cultivate an affinity with the spirits of that plane to find your familiar,” Meryn admitted.

Confused and taken aback by Meryn’s explanation, Maurizio blinked his eyes in rapid succession and remained speechless.

Meryn furrowed his brows and gazed at Maurizio with heavy eyes as he continued, “I have been withholding vital information and intentionally misleading you in matters related to finding your familiar. For that, I am sincerely sorry. I am the reason you failed your graduation exam for the past three years, Reece.”

As Meryn’s words sank in, a sudden rage surged in Maurizio, combining with his confusion to create a tumultuous storm of emotion. He then stood up from his chair and raised his voice, “Magister Meryn... why would you do such a thing? I... I trusted you.”

“I wanted to protect you, my dear Reece. You are a brilliant student, but you are not a battlemage. If they send you out to the eastern front to fight demons, you will not survive a week! Until now, failing the exam each time gave you another year here at the academy, safe from the onslaught of the demons.”

“Lies! How dare you presume that I am too weak to survive the battlefield? You are nothing but an old fool from the north sent here to ruin my life for a laugh.” Maurizio glared at Meryn, his hand reaching for the wand in his holster.

Meryn turned his head away and looked down in silence.

Feeling ashamed of himself, Maurizio felt his rage subside and turn into an aching melancholy. At a loss for words, he lowered his head, feeling his disappointment and self-pity arise.

Meryn slowly looked up at Maurizio with a soft gaze, and he said to him with an equally soft voice, “You are meant to be a wizard for peaceful times, Reece. Don’t you see that? Had you been born in my country, you would have made a fine druid—perhaps the best.”

Maurizio closed his eyes and held still. He let silence hang in the air for several moments, and then he looked up at Meryn and spoke, “What now, Magister Meryn?”

“Your best chance of surviving the war is to find a strong, protective familiar. Now, familiars from conventional planes will not do, for they are simply too weak. Besides, you do not have enough time left to cultivate an affinity with spirits from such planes anyway,” Meryn answered. “This means we’d have to resort to the Chaos Plane.”

“Are you sure, Magister Meryn? The Chaos Plane is known to harbor dangerous and unpredictable spirits.”

“Unpredictable? Yes. Dangerous? Only to the inexperienced,” Meryn said. “To guarantee that you find a familiar in the exam tomorrow, I will travel to the Chaos Plane myself and find you a willing spirit.”

“That will go against the laws of the Arcane Order, Magister Meryn! You don’t have to do this.”

“No, Reece. I am solely responsible for your predicament, and it is only right that I take action to fix it, even if I must deviate from the Order’s laws,” Meryn said as he stood up from his chair and picked up his large satchel. He then began to pack for his trip, methodically searching his apartment for scrolls, potions, and dried food.

“Now, as I will be actively shepherding the spirits of the Chaos Plane towards you during your exam, I will likely return to our world sometime tomorrow in the late afternoon. Should anything change, I will send a message to you,” Meryn said.

Maurizio gazed into Meryn's face as the sunlight reflected off the walls cast a warm glow, illuminating his vivid green eyes and the lines etched into his cheeks. In that light, the magister looked aged and weary.

“Thank you, Magister Meryn, for everything,” Maurizio said.

“I trust that you will do your best tomorrow, Reece. You might surprise yourself,” Meryn said with a smile and a nod. “Go now, I must continue the preparations for my trip.”

By the time Maurizio, Vittoria, and Lorenzo finished breakfast and arrived in the main academy piazza for the graduation exam, several groups of students had already begun gathering on the north side of the piazza, the first-year students buzzing with excitement and the students in their second year and beyond chatting amongst themselves nervously. The piazza had been demarcated into five equal sections separated by straight lines of chalk on the ground. In each section stood a proctor from the Arcane Order, dressed in a pristine white and gold robe. A small wooden grandstand had been temporarily erected on the south side of the piazza overlooking all five sections. It contained two dozen brown padded seats where the magisters were seated, with a single white padded seat in the front row reserved for the Archmage, who was yet to arrive.

Maurizio glanced anxiously at the empty seat where Meryn would have been seated, and wondered how the magister was faring in the Chaos Plane. Meryn had excused himself from the exam by leaving a note to Grandmagister Falcone about an emergency errand that he had to run in town that day.

Several minutes after all the students had assembled in the piazza, divided into their cohorts of twelve, Archmage Gonzaga—a tall, stern man from the north—arrived at the grandstand, flanked by two royal guards dressed in white steel armor and gold helmets.

As Gonzaga took his seat, Grandmagister Falcone stood up from his seat in the grandstand and began his announcement.

“Students, please welcome our esteemed Archmage Gonzaga, who will be overseeing the graduation of our next generation of battlemages!”

The students erupted into rapturous applause, some apparently hoping that their admiration for Gonzaga will grant them leniency in his judgment. Falcone waited for the applause to fade and continued.

“As we commence this year’s Arcane Order Battlemage Examinations, I will remind you of the rules.

“First-year students, feast your eyes and learn, for you will take this very same exam next year. But do stay clear of the testing grounds at all times.

“As for the test takers, the students from the second year and beyond, only one student shall step foot in each of the five testing grounds at a time, and each student shall be given a quarter of an hour to find their soul-bound familiar. Should they fail to find it within the allotted time, they shall be deemed to have failed the exam.

“Our proctors will cast a Reverse Hemispherical Shield spell in each testing ground to protect the spectators from any spells that may be cast. Additionally, they will assist in opening a portal to the plane of the student’s choosing, from which the student will attempt to find their soul-bound familiar.

“Wizards-in-training, you have prepared for this day for your entire life. Now, let the planar spirits decide on your worthiness to be a battlemage of the realm. Begin the examinations! *Pro regina et regno!*”

“*Pro regina et regno!*” All in the piazza chanted in response.

As the day progressed, Maurizio witnessed the familiar-finding ritual several dozen times. In some instances, the student performed a fast dance, twirling around with wand in hand and firing off a succession of offensive elemental spells; while other times, the ritual featured a slow serenade of poetry mixed in with quiet subtle spells of poison and curses.

A young student with a gaunt face and broad shoulders that Maurizio did not recognize had failed the exam. In a rage, he proceeded to break his wand in half and storm off the testing grounds and into the student quarters, tearing his robe apart and tossing it to the wind.

Vittoria and Lorenzo were each able to find a familiar with ease. Vittoria managed to soul-bind with a spirit from the Desiderium Plane in the form of a peregrine falcon, whereas Lorenzo had soul-bound with a spirit from the Inceptum Plane in the form of a red fox.

When Maurizio’s name was called by the proctor, he tightened his hand around his wand in its holster and walked forward into the proctor’s translucent Reverse Hemispherical Shield. While his heart was pounding, his mind was completely blank. He had no plan, no fancy spells to show off. He only had his faith in Magister Meryn.

“Rizio, I pray that a spirit will find you and love you like you are loved here!” Maurizio smiled as he heard Vittoria’s voice behind him. In that moment, he felt blessed to have a friend who believed in him more than he ever believed in himself.

As Maurizio stepped into position, he drew his wand with his right hand and tried to relax his body.

“Maurizio, from what plane do you wish to find your soul-bound familiar?” The proctor asked.

“The Chaos Plane, sir.” Maurizio answered without hesitation.

Surprised by Maurizio’s answer, the proctor paused for a few moments, then he nodded and chanted. “*Portas caoticas aperi!*”

The air in front of Maurizio began swirling around a point at his eye level, rotating faster and faster until it imploded a few moments later, revealing a perfectly circular portal with a seven-foot diameter. Looking into the portal, he saw shifting landscapes veiled behind a midnight blue fog, with specks of sparkling energy swiftly moving like rabbits.

Those must be the spirits of chaos, Maurizio thought.

Remembering Meryn’s advice about finding a protective familiar, Maurizio instinctively cast Ethereal Sense to make himself more emotionally vulnerable, “*Aetherium sensibus aperire.*”

Not only were his senses heightened, he also felt his repressed emotions come alive, feeling them more viscerally than ever: his fear of failure, his feeling of inadequacy, his shame and disappointment, and the most painful emotion of all—hope. They all came crashing down on him like a war hammer. He felt his knees weaken and let himself fall to the ground, curling up in a fetal position, tears quietly falling on the piazza’s cold cobblestone pavement.

Maurizio stayed locked in this position for several moments, until something in the air changed. A tender strain of energy caressed him with love and care, causing his body to relax. He raised his head to see the large reptilian head of his new soul-bound familiar in front of him.

“Splendid work, Rizio! You’ve found yourself a beige wingless dragon!” He heard Lorenzo’s voice exclaim.

“Lorenzo, you fool! That’s an albino monitor lizard,” Vittoria’s voice said. “I was right, Rizio! I was right! You’ve found yourself a protector.”

Maurizio laughed as he sat up, wiping away his tears. He then looked behind him at his friends.

“Congratulations, Maurizio. You have passed the exam,” The proctor said. “What would you like to name this beast?”

A name immediately came to Maurizio’s mind, “Gianni.”

“Gianni the Lizard it is then,” The proctor said. “Please withdraw your familiar.”

Maurizio stood up and examined his new familiar. Gianni was large for a monitor lizard, with a long tail and thick limbs. He perked his head up and looked around curiously, making a peculiar hissing sound as he looked at Maurizio.

“Gianni, *in vacuum recedas*,” Maurizio chanted as he pointed his wand at Gianni.

Gianni’s body dissolved into its amorphous spiritual form and was sucked into Maurizio’s wand.

Walking out of the testing ground, Maurizio embraced Vittoria and Lorenzo. He had not felt this happy in a long time.

When Magister Meryn failed to show up to the graduation dinner, Maurizio skipped the post-dinner celebrations and set out to search for him. Holding the bottle of grappa Meryn had gifted him, Maurizio searched every room in every building on campus and still did not find him.

Continuing his search the next morning, Maurizio hiked up to the academy back garden with grappa still in hand. He searched all corners of the garden to no avail. Just as he was about to give up and head back to the main academy piazza, he felt a shimmer of energy swirling around the cliff edge.

“*Aetherium sensibus aperire*.” Casting Ethereal Sense again, he recognized the familiar illusory shrub next to the old carob tree as the source of the energy.

With his heart pounding, he ran towards the shrub and prodded it with his wand. Just like last time, the shrub dissipated, this time revealing a lone vellum scroll sealed with Magister Meryn’s green seal. Maurizio quickly removed the seal and opened the scroll.

Dear Reece,

Congratulations are in order for your graduation. You are a true battlemage now! Although, as I have said before, you need to be careful on the battlefield, for you are not a fighter. Do not engage the demons directly, and make use of your new familiar, who will protect you to the best of his ability.

My dear Reece, I must apologize once again, for I had failed to find you a willing spirit in the Chaos Plane. As a last resort, I had to cast Soul Convergence to create a familiar for you—I know, that spell is forbidden by the Order, but what harm is there in breaking one more rule when this old fool has broken so many?

The familiar that is now soul-bound to you is the merged form of my snake familiar Bran and yours truly. I apologize if the thought of this disturbs you, my dear Reece, as there was no other way.

I hope this last act can undo all the harm I have caused you.

Yours,

Mag. Gruffydd Meryn

P.S. If you have not touched the grappa yet, perhaps a few sips will help at this moment.

Unable to accept the message he was reading, Maurizio shook his head and read it several times over. Finally, he folded up the scroll and pointed his wand at it.

“Ignis.”

A spark of ember flew towards the scroll and set it aflame. As its ashes scattered to the wind, Maurizio raised his wand again with a shaking hand.

“Gianni, ex vacuumis voco te.”

Gianni’s spirit sprouted out of Maurizio’s wand and transformed into its physical form. Examining Gianni’s appearance under the bright morning light, Maurizio was able to confirm that Gianni’s scaly limbs were shaped exactly like human limbs and that his tail resembled that of a large snake. Knowing what he knew now, Maurizio struggled to bring himself to look at Gianni’s face again. But Gianni perked up his head and turned to

look at Maurizio lovingly, his sparkling green eyes meeting Maurizio's gaze. Recognizing those eyes as belonging to Magister Meryn, Maurizio was too disturbed to maintain eye contact, and so he closed his eyes.

“Reesss, Reesss, Reesss...” Hearing Gianni's hiss again, Maurizio recognized it as an effort to call out his name.

Overwhelmed with disgust, sadness, and gratitude, Maurizio turned away from Gianni and twisted the cork to open the bottle of grappa. He took a deep breath and slowly turned to face Gianni again.

“To the old fool that I loved.” He said as he raised the bottle towards Gianni and then took a long burning swig of the strong liquor.