

Chapter 1

Let me tell you how I died five times in one day.

We were on the planet Nezarín, and I don't blame you if you haven't heard of it. If you're not a student of rare astronomical phenomena, there's no reason you should have. Standard blue-green planet with a mid-sized yellow sun.

Its native sentient population moved on centuries ago, but they left behind records of an unexplained Aetheric occurrence. Every thousand years or so, the planet experiences something you might call a kind of eclipse.

For reasons unknown, the Aether gathers around the planet, forming a concentration of magic that manifests itself in the sky. In this case, a natural spell blots out the sun regardless of the viewer's perspective.

But you don't see the sun as a black disc. Instead, it's like the sun is cut out, and you can see...beyond.

The sun of Nezarín becomes a clear lens, through which you can see the future.

Wizards throughout history have left behind a sizeable body of work about this phenomenon, which the locals had a dozen names for, from the Eye of God to the Future Fall.

All mages have a particular interest in unique magical events, as they can be used to magnify spells.

Which was why I came to Nezarín in the first place.

Employees in the silver-and-blue uniforms of the Vallénar Corporation bustled around me, setting up equipment in a wide circle. Industrial lights loomed overhead, ready to activate when the sun gave up. Aluminum crates were stacked at specific points around the circle, precisely where I had indicated.

The circle was one hundred yards in diameter, drawn in ancient stones placed by the locals. This was one of the thousands of sites around the planet where they had come to view the Eye of God, in the days before they'd abandoned their home planet entirely.

In the center of that circle, I had marked out a new pattern. An intricate seal of complex magical meaning, with lines workers now traced by carefully pouring glittering dust from open containers.

The dust was made of powdered diamonds. No, let me rephrase, because just about any planet has diamonds. These were made from Dornoth night-diamonds, one of that planet's most prized natural substances. We'd had to negotiate an exemption with the planetary government before they would allow us to purchase a single night-diamond.

Every half-second that a worker dispensed that glittering dust, they dumped out treasure worth more than the city of their birth.

And the night-diamonds weren't even close to the most valuable component the Vallénar Corporation had found for this ritual. The expense would bankrupt many civilized systems.

Which was why I had double-checked, triple-checked, and had a team of experts in orbit verify my placement of every inch of the magic circle. And still, my stomach churned with worry and anticipation.

I was about to reach beyond the limitations of the universe. To get a glimpse further into the Aether, further into magic, than anyone ever had. And to bring knowledge back with me.

But we only had one shot.

The sun started to fade from view, light dimming gradually. Our Vallénar Corporation camp occupied a large outcropping close to the peak of a mountain, but the air was still; magical barriers kept the wind from getting anywhere close to us. To an outside observer, it would look like a subtle, invisible dome over our entire operation.

I pointed out directions to my team, guiding them through steps we'd practiced hundreds of times. As an experienced Archmage of sealing and binding magic, I had designed the program they were following. I'd written the spell we were all about to cast. They didn't need my guidance, but still I drummed fingers on my thigh.

In less than an hour, my life's work would be complete.

A shuttle slowly lowered from the sky, landing outside the wind-barrier so it didn't kick up dust. A ramp extended and more workers in silver and blue came out in pairs, each carrying another aluminum crate or massive work of art between them.

After six or seven pairs, my father strode down the ramp.

All the members of the Vallendar Corporation straightened at the sight of him. He wore a tailored gray suit and carried himself as though he owned everything here.

Some would say he did.

We weren't a military organization, but still some people saluted. Most of them had never seen the President of the Vallendar Corporation in person. Though, since everyone here was part of my team, they saw another Vallendar every day.

Benri Vallendar ignored everyone else and marched my way. He looked like the older version of me: his dark skin had more wrinkles, and the sheen of his silver hair and eyes had faded slightly with time.

Neither the eyes nor the hair were natural, of course. Our resemblance was no accident, either.

My parents had been eager to design the perfect heir to the Vallendar Corporation, which was a virtual copy of my father.

He ignored everyone else until he reached me, and even then, he didn't immediately speak. He stood next to me, looking over the bustling swarm of scurrying workers. He pulled out a cigarette, lit it with a snap of his fingers, and put it into his mouth.

Only after letting out a long puff of smoke did he say anything. "How's our condition, Varic?"

If I had eaten anything, I would have vomited an hour ago from sheer nerves. At the same time, I had never looked forward to anything quite so much...nor had I ever been so afraid that something would go wrong.

"We're ahead of schedule," I reported. "I've confirmed the structure of the spell and the Aether is strong. It all looks good." I raised my hand and blocked out the sun, trying to get a glimpse of the approaching Future Fall. "Won't be long now."

"I saw you went over budget on the Kyraxian Spirit-Orbs." He took another drag of the cigarette.

I had hoped he wouldn't discover that until after the ritual was over. "Now's not the time to hold back. With the Spirit-Orbs, I'm confident we can get five reflections."

"That's up to you, isn't it?"

Benri Vallendar's silver gaze wasn't focused on me, but I felt pierced as though it was. In the same way, he didn't need to remind me how much expense went into this ritual.

There was no practice run. No second chance, and no refunds. Magic didn't function that way. The spell would work as intended, but that didn't mean we would like the results.

Either we completed something that no one in galactic history ever had or we threw a thousand fortunes into a black hole.

And it all came down to me.

Everyone else there wore blue and silver, but I alone wore a white, padded jumpsuit. Aetheric sigils covered the cloth, magic symbols I'd drawn myself in black marker.

I may have been the second-best mage on this planet, and the one who had designed the ritual, but I wasn't the caster.

I was the target.

“Don’t think about the money, Dad. Think about the magic!” Between my fingers, I gazed up at the sun. “Even if we don’t make a profit, we’re going to make *history*.”

“It’s all about the money. That’s our family motto.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Then I’ll pay to have it changed.” He glared at me through a cloud of smoke. “You’re on the hook for all this. Don’t forget.”

“I’m the one in the chair!” I took a deep breath. “Never mind. Dad, if I...if something goes wrong...”

Spells never went *wrong*, exactly. They always worked as intended if you cast them correctly. But they often had unintended consequences.

We had done everything to minimize risk, but it was still possible that the Varic Vallenar who walked out of that circle wouldn’t be the same *me* that walked in.

As I tried to put my feelings into words, my father turned to me with raised eyebrows. “What do you mean, if something goes *wrong*?”

“No, everything looks good, I mean—”

He jabbed a finger into my chest. “I’m investing a hundred billion standards in *you*. Don’t show me doubt, show me *skill*. Show me confidence. If you can’t handle it, you’d better say so right now.”

I started to snap back at him...but deflated. He was right, after all. As usual.

I was a Galactic Union-certified Archmage of sealing and binding. This was *my* ritual, my magic, and there was no room left for doubt.

After steadying myself, I pointed to the head of the circle. “Finish your preparations and get in position. Preliminary incantation begins in twenty-four minutes, so I want you with staff in hand ten minutes early.”

He released another breath of smoke. “That’s more like it.”

I took my own advice, walking the edge of the magic circle as the sun overhead gave off less light. It wasn’t being obscured, but rather fading. Now that it was dim enough to glance at, the star gave the impression of collapsing in on itself. Like it was a sinkhole, slowly crumbling into a tunnel beneath.

Every ritual component rested in its designated spot around the circle, most still inside the aluminum crates in which they’d been shipped. I passed a tank of water with one gleaming fish inside. Its mirror-bright scales reflected different versions of me, possibilities unrealized, and I couldn’t resist a quick glance as I strode by.

One open crate held golden coins heaped inside, a massive chest of treasure from an ancient empire. Each coin contained a day of life, and I ran my hand over the gold without touching it.

A stone slab, taller than me, that had once rested on the tomb of an ancient wizard now stood propped up by a titanium frame. It bore an Aetheric formula that allowed for rebirth and faced the center of the circle.

Everything I passed was a priceless artifact that had turned out to be not-quite-so-priceless when the Vallenar Corporation threw open its bank account. Any one of these could become the cornerstone of a once-in-a-lifetime ritual, and they were all great mysteries of magic. It felt disrespectful not to give each the admiration it deserved.

We had forty-nine of them. Seven sevens.

They spiraled inward to the center of the circle, all facing one very mundane item at the center: a padded chair.

When I'd finished tracing the complex symbols within the circle, I finally reached the middle and lifted the console strapped to my left forearm. The device's screen flickered as it shifted to transmission mode.

"Ritual subject in position," I said. "Ten minutes to preliminary incantation."

Then I unstrapped my console and handed it to an attendant. There couldn't be anything on me that might interfere with the spell.

I sank into the chair and leaned back. Now, in one sense, my part was over. Years of research, planning, calculation, and preparations culminated in this moment.

Excitement and worry wove together until I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began, but there was nothing else my concern could accomplish. The mages performing this ritual were professionals, and I'd trained them myself. They wouldn't make a mistake.

Now, I just had to lean back and enjoy the magic.

"Oh, wait!" I said, before the attendant left. "Do you have a marker? I think I left one by the—oh, you do! Thanks, just let me..."

The man handed me the marker and I leaned over to a set of lights next to my chair. It was just a box of seven lights at the top of a waist-high pole; my team hadn't wanted to put it there, but I'd insisted.

The number of shining lights would show me how successful the spell was.

Currently, only the left-most light was lit. One was the default state, and seven would mean the spell had gone perfectly.

One light, because I had mastered one magic.

I started to circle the fifth light but stopped after putting the marker to glass. I could be a little more optimistic. After another second of hesitation, I circled the sixth light. Then I capped the marker and handed it back to the attendant before settling into the chair again.

I had never expected the full seven. Five would be excellent, and six would exceed all our hopes.

My father hadn't wanted me to have the light. It was an unnecessary distraction. But the initial incantation took long minutes, and I needed something to distract my mind. This, at least, would give me something to watch.

A voice from a nearby speaker echoed over the ritual site. *"All personnel in place. Thirty seconds to ritual initiation."*

Six mages spread around the outer edges of a circle, evenly spaced from each other, but leaving a gap for the seventh: my father.

The silver-eyed Archmage, the President of the Vallonar Corporation, carried a silver staff topped by a blue crystal. At precisely the correct moment, my father slammed the butt of his staff into the ground and began to chant.

All around him, above and beneath physical reality, the Aether shook.

Benri Vallonar's every syllable resonated with magic itself, silver-gray symbols flickering in the air around him as the Aether responded to his call.

Though it would make no difference, I ran over the entire ritual in my head. I couldn't help it.

The spell my father chanted was a variation on his signature spell: the Mirror of Silence. Ordinarily, he could manifest temporary copies of his targets, reflections of possibility brought into being.

I could see the influence of that spell even now, as flickering gray ghosts began to appear like shadows around all the artifacts in the circle. They buzzed like static, appearing and disappearing.

The spell functioned by manifesting alternate possibilities. Dreams made real.

This time, we were reaching further than that. Instead of bringing shadows of myself *out* of me, we were going to summon them *into* me. I was about to channel knowledge from my alternate selves.

Spells I *could* have known, but never did. Skills I *might* have trained. Talents I never developed. Sights unseen, lessons unlearned.

Wizards each specialized in a single magic. The more they advanced in skill and power, the more focused they became. One mage could only ever master one discipline.

Until this ritual.

We were about to break that rule.

If everything went well, I would unite the skill of seven wizards in one body. I would see further into magic than any mortal ever had and master more spells than anyone else in history.

Here, today, I would glimpse the heart of magic itself.

As the chanting reached a crescendo, the entire circle around me shone bright silver. All the artifacts were surrounded by black-and-white reflections, like holographic duplicates. I should have been relieved—the spell was on track—but I had left my analytical mind behind. Initial success only heightened my nerves.

Especially when restraints wrapped around my wrists and ankles and the chair began to lean backwards.

That was all part of the plan I'd devised myself, but it still wasn't comfortable being strapped into place and made to look into the sky.

Until I saw God's Eye slowly open. Then I was left with only wonder.

The sun crumbled into nothing more than a bright ring, leaving me looking into a tunnel beyond the world. A hole into eternity.

The spell reached its apex, the voices of the seven chanting mages blending into a transcendent song echoing through the Aether itself. The mundane world fell away, and finally I saw past the limits of mortal magic.

And there I saw...

...failure.

I was someone else. No, I was still myself, but another version. I'd lived an entire life, and I remembered it all. In fact, I forgot the version of myself strapped to a white chair, and this became my entire reality.

I knelt on the sticky floor of a disgusting chamber, one that was equal parts grown from bioengineered flesh and hammered from steel. I wore a suit of powered combat armor, but my visor blared crimson warnings. It was all damaged, just dead weight holding my body down, and one of my eyes was glued shut with blood.

My weapons were empty, I was exhausted from casting spell after spell, and my wand was shattered beyond repair. Disgusting abominations of cybernetics and undead flesh held me down. They forced my head up, looking at the edge of a metal table.

I shuddered back from the Aetheric symbols that shone over that table. Or rather, at the monster those symbols crowned.

A ten-foot-tall fusion of man and machine rose from the table. He opened blazing eyes and looked at the woman next to me.

Because of the angle of my head, I could only see glimpses of her, but I heard her struggle. She screamed at him, and I felt the total failure seeping into my soul.

We had fought a long crusade to stop the Iron King. First, to stop him from being born in the first place, then to stop him from gathering power, and finally to stop him from eating through the galaxy like a raging fire. We had suffered through too many defeats. And now, one more.

Still without looking at me, the Iron King put his metal hand through my chest.

I died in failure, leaving the galaxy to be killed and raised again as an army of the shambling cyborg dead.

Then I came to, gasping while strapped to a white chair.

I strained and struggled, trying to get out. The Iron King had strapped me down! Where was I? How did I get here? I tried to cast a pathfinding spell, but my navigational magic was restricted by binding circles on my restraints. I had to get out.

As I wrestled with the straps, I saw the seven lights.

Two were lit.

That triggered a memory, and I froze with realization. Somehow, I had gone back in time. It wasn't too late, the King hadn't been born yet, I could still stop—

Then more memories came back, and they struggled with one another.

I hadn't traveled backwards. I had seen another life, one that was years further into the future than this one.

But that wasn't how the spell worked.

I wasn't supposed to be summoning memories of entire lives, just the spells. This wasn't even on my list of possible outcomes.

Now, I remembered living two lives. Was this a memory? Was it still a vision? Which set of memories was the real one?

I had mastered two disciplines of magic, sure, but it did not feel at all like a victory. Had the Aether decided for some reason that I *needed* to live two lives? Why?

Before I figured it out, the collapsed sun drew me back in.

This time, I wore solid blue. I piloted a massive humanoid mech of the same color, and I fought side-by-side with others of my order.

We were the Knights of the Titan Force, and we defended the galaxy from monsters.

As the Blue Knight, I clashed with alien magic and wielded elemental water as a weapon. I provided balancing wisdom to our hotheaded leader, the Red Knight. He and I were opposites in many ways, but our united purpose forged us into friends.

Until, one day, we failed.

A planet-sized insect bit down on the Yellow Knight, swallowing her and her mech whole. The Swarm-Queen raised one titanic claw, and fire from a nearby star began to stream into its mouth. As the creature fed on the corona of a local sun, swarms of insectoid monster-spawn rushed past us and began to strip the biomass from the closest planet.

We were defeated. I took off my armor and retired.

Insects from beyond the universe ruled the galaxy, and I lived the rest of my life knowing I had failed to stop them.

Once again, I woke in a panic, sweating and staring into the third light. I wanted to scream the abort code, but I couldn't remember what it was. I could barely remember who *I* was.

I remembered my name. That was one of the only things consistent through every life.

But what it meant to be Varic Vallenar changed. I had three different definitions. And three different magics.

The vision swallowed me again.

I saw the Galactic Union, the largest interplanetary government in civilized space, take over and start a civil war in pursuit of galactic dominance. Freedom became a distant memory, and I was executed in a secret prison.

Four lights.

I fought a crusade against an invincible warrior, hailed as a hero, as he turned his powers against those he once defended. He killed me to send a message, but at least I died before I could see the galaxy bow to him.

Five lights.

I guarded a towering Karoshan queen, whose power was so great I sometimes wondered why she needed bodyguards at all. Until genetically altered super-soldiers came for her. I told her I could defeat them with curse spells. No one was my equal in magic. She trusted me, and I died knowing that my pride would be her downfall.

Six lights.

Six childhoods, six apprenticeships, six sets of fears and hopes. I learned more lessons than anyone else, and I learned the same lessons more times. I saw myself die and I saw the galaxy fall.

Six lives swirled in my head, and I cried out to the Aether for mercy.

At that moment, all the lights went out. The motors in my chair screeched. The phenomenon in the sky dimmed.

And I blacked out.