



The Walkers of Legend

The
Walkers
of Legend

Miles Allen

Book One

The Walkers of Legend

Series

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Chapter 9 - Crossing the line

It was the fifth day since Chayne blacked out in front of the Administrator. He'd awoken in a guarded dormitory for captured student mages, or *Magiis* as they called them. This changed after his first meeting with the master magii, Lathashal, and his passing of many tests set by the man. Now it seemed as if he wasn't a prisoner at all. He was in a private room, there was no lock on the door, nor guards posted, and he could walk freely between certain places. One of these was an immense library of books and parchments, the scale of which made the libraries of Tiburn look no better than market stalls. He was captivated by its vast supply of tomes and scrolls relating to magic. He never dreamed of such a place. It may have been wrong to bring him here against his will, but for now he was happy to stay and learn their magic. Especially so, in that Lathashal taught him often, even at the expense of the other students training. The man delighted in his ability to grasp the teachings so quickly.

There was a knock on the door. It was his newly appointed servant. They were forbidden to speak, or even look at their 'superiors'. The servant made the sign to follow and the symbol for Lathashal. At no time did his eyes avert from the floor. To get their attention you were supposed to snap your fingers. This appalled Chayne's sense of morality and had resisted signalling in such a way.

'Thank you,' he said, automatically. The servant blanched. They were punished if caught being spoken to and he held out a hand, palm down for Chayne to mark the transgression on the back so he could be *corrected*. The Empire's word for torture.

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Signalling *no – lead on*, Chayne picked up his tall stack of notes and followed the servant up two levels to Lathashal's lab. The servant knocked on the unadorned service door leading up the final stairs. The door unlocked and opened. Another servant was on the other side.

Leaving them both behind, Chayne ascended the twenty-five tightly-winding stone steps up the spiral staircase, barely avoiding his pile of notes erupting from between his hands. At the top an orange glow emanated from the lab and he stepped up looking for the source of the illumination. The sight took his breath away.

The lab's west wall was always a curiosity. It had been a polished dark grey material. Now it was replaced with lightly smoked glass, embedded with thousands of crystals. It covered wall to wall, floor to ceiling, supported by an intricate criss-cross of metal strands, inlaid into the glass in thin, flowing curves. The delicate structure gave it strength without cumbersome struts that would otherwise detract from the beauty of the view.

The window faced west and the angle of the crystals caught and refracted the setting sunlight, splitting it into a colourful display on the room's white domed ceiling. It was an achievement of creative and architectural genius. Even so, the finest efforts of man didn't match the spectacle that nature created beyond the sparkling panes. He stood transfixed by the scene. A bloated, crimson sun loomed amidst the red and orange hues of a spectacular sunset setting over snow-capped mountains on the distant horizon.

The window stood before a canyon, forged by millennia of water flowing from a vast river far below. The sunlight glinted across it in countless ripples under the light breeze. Unfamiliar birds with incredible wingspans gracefully circled on the updraft created by the gorge's steep, moss and fern-covered sides.

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‘You have more favoured treatment than you could appreciate. However, if you continue to test my patience another second, you will suffer my displeasure.’

The sound of Lathashal’s steely tones tore Chayne away. He turned to the magii who was sitting before a polished silver-golden sphere suspended from the ceiling by two wires making a V-shape. They were as fine as spider silk and seemed impossibly thin for the task. The sphere was roughly twice the size of a man’s head and with many small, evenly spaced holes over its surface. Chayne had seen it before, but learned from the first moments with his teacher that deviations of any kind, including questions or even looking at something not the focus of the lesson, brought immediate anger from the quick-tempered magii.

The other students in the dormitory said the Master would hideously torture them to make them obey. At first he didn’t believe it, as none of the pupils bore any physical marks in keeping with their claims. They insisted, all injuries were repaired by the Mage-Surgeon. It was the kind of thing new graduates were told to frighten them, and he dismissed it. But yesterday he passed Pristin, his bunk mate, being carried from a lesson with wounds that left him in no doubt of the reprimands.

He returned to the present and assessed the eyes of the magii. He was clearly expected to make amends.

‘Forgive me, Master. The wonder of the Empire’s craftsmanship surpasses anything I have seen in Mlendra.’ He bowed. Such subservience would hopefully sate the man’s anger.

‘So you acknowledge the superiority of *Straslinian* prowess?’

‘Oh indeed, Master. I have never seen its match.’

‘Very good.’

This supported Chayne’s hypothesis. He’d chosen his flattery to see if the old man would again put his city of Straslin

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before Ashnoria as an Empire. Internal rivalry was rife at all levels. It began between individuals and extended to entire cities.

The magii waved a hand at the glass wall, and it was once again replaced with the bleak grey as before.

‘Magic?’ said Chayne in wonder.

‘Of my own design,’ Lathashal replied.

This uncovered a side of the Master, Chayne would never have believed. To create such a breathtaking scene took a soul and creativity to match any of the great artists in Mlendra.

‘It was an earlier period in my life, when I had time and inclination for such things.’

There was a look of wistfulness in the man’s eyes. And was that regret in his voice?

‘Come boy!’ he said, snapping out of the only moment of humanity Chayne had detected in him. ‘In today’s lesson, you will begin to learn of manaspheres.’

Chayne balanced his stack of notes on the bench and sat, eager to learn anything from this master of magic.

‘Now tell me the highlights of yesterday’s lesson.’

Chayne didn’t hesitate. ‘Yesterday we discussed that mana is found in everything around us: plants, rocks, water and even the air. However, it is so weakly concentrated that we cannot ordinarily feel its presence. The act of forming a spell creates a concentration of mana that, with skill and practice, can be channelled in many forms from healing wounds to blasting enemies.’ How typical were the chosen examples.

‘And what happens if, for instance, we blast away the gates of an enemy’s fortification?’

‘Such a powerful spell would have depleted the mana for a great distance. Further magic would not be possible in the area for days.’

‘And if the magiis were then attacked?’

‘They would be defenceless.’

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Lathashal smiled. ‘Good. Today I’m going to expose you to a fifth gradia test.’

Chayne was taken aback. One of the first things he was taught was the magical grading structure. First gradia was for complete novices, covering the basic theory with no practical. Second gradia occurred a few weeks later, consisting of an attempt at casting the most minor of spells. At seventh gradia, which normally took five years of concentrated learning by even the most adept of students, you would be able to heal moderate wounds, levitate tables and cast a bolt of energy capable of killing a man at thirty paces. At tenth gradia you became an honoured Shenwhi Shaska, or Master – First Class. It was the lowest of the Master grades. Few people reached, even survived, to this level, as most died attempting the hazardous elevation in control demanded by casting a ninth gradia spell.

Chayne was told he possessed an exceptional talent, but even so was still only at second gradia. Lathashal, by making him face a fifth gradia test so early, made him feel honoured, but also daunted. He didn’t believe he could achieve such a feat.

Lathashal continued. ‘Although high intensity mana cannot be brought together more than once in a single place at the same time, for as you have correctly stated it suffers local depletion, it can, using the correct devices, be stored.’

Chayne was stunned. The implications for this were enormous.

‘Yes boy, I see you understand the gravity of the statement. It’s not known outside of the Empire, for it’s our closest guarded secret. It makes us undefeatable.’

The stories of the Ashnorian mages were legendary. They were capable of casting spells of great power and frequency far beyond magic users outside of the Empire.

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It was then the full implications struck him. It meant he would never be allowed to leave the Ashnorian Empire or see his cabin again.

‘Place your fingertips on either side of the sphere. I will show you how to store the mana.’

Chayne did so.

‘I want you to concentrate on the mana surrounding you, and pull it in as before.’

Chayne closed his eyes and settled into his semi-meditative state as taught. He felt the particles of mana around him and focused his will on drawing them in. The air warmed as usual and there was a tingling on his skin. Included this time though was a slight warming of the ends of his fingers in contact with the manasphere. Strangely though, it felt as if the manasphere was pulling at *him*.

‘That is good. Continue.’

His concentration deepened, increasing his range of influence over the mana, pulling it from further away. His body was now starting to feel the first effects of the magic flowing through him, like a fire was just a few feet away. This is where he previously would have completed the spell, discharging the energies before they built to a level beyond his skill to control. His hands were now hot to the point of being uncomfortable. The manasphere pulled mana through his body at an ever-increasing rate, and he felt he wasn’t in control.

‘Master I -’

‘Quiet boy, I did not instruct you to speak.’

He tried to slow the flow of mana, but to his dismay he couldn’t. It was then he first sensed something else about the object in his hands. It was as if it projected a feint malevolence.

The flow of mana was now considerable and his body was vibrating from the energy. His fingers were in pain and it was spreading to his hands.

‘My hands -’

‘*Silence!* Speak again and you will be *corrected!*’

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Hearing those words caused panic and he opened his eyes, breaking his concentration. He stared in wide-eyed revulsion at the tendrils of smoke rising from his fingers. Veins of blue energy ran over the sphere being consumed by the holes in its surface. He looked at the magii, who to his horror, was grinning with undisguised pleasure.

‘Help!’ he begged through gritted teeth. His body began to spasm, the energies growing in him as the manasphere continued to increase its pull on mana. He could feel it was being drawn from as far out as thirty paces now, emptying the entire room.

He went to call out through clenched jaws, but made no sound. His fingers were melting onto the manasphere and his body was in constant racking pain. He felt his heart was going burst. He was helpless to stop his own destruction.

Lathashal moved his face close.

‘Next time you come into my lesson boy, you pay immediate attention to *me*. And if you ever try to manipulate my favour again, I will strap you to this device and leave you until your body is nothing more than charred remains in the cracks of the stones under your feet.’

And with that the master magii placed a hand upon the orb.

The manasphere stopped and Chayne slumped to the floor finding none of his muscles would respond. His body, especially his hands, were still in terrible pain and continued to twitch. Breathing was painful and he felt damage had been done to his lungs. He heard a snap of fingers, followed by approaching footsteps. Servants handled him to his feet and he yelped in pain at their touch where his skin was blistered, the smell of burnt flesh strong in his nostrils.

He was carried down the small stone stairway, the servants displaying expert gentleness that could only come from practice. Despite this, anything they did caused him pain, and he cried out often.

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After what seemed like an age, they stopped and there was a knock on a door. It opened and he was carried through and laid down on a hard surface. He heard the servants quietly shuffle out and the door close.

‘So, what have we here?’ Chayne couldn’t open his eyes to see the speaker. The voice had a deep timbre that was both commanding and soothing.

Chayne felt a tingling over his body, and he knew meant magic was being used upon him.

‘Degenerated cellular structure, burns over most of the body, especially the hands. Looks like somebody lost control of a manasphere. You should take more care, those things will kill you, as this one nearly did. Lie still and I will repair the damage. There will be a little discomfort. It will pass.’ It was the first compassionate voice Chayne heard since arriving in the land.

The magic built up once more. The air began to grow warm and was painful to his burns. He tensed at the feeling.

‘This is delicate work. If you move I may miss some of the damaged areas.’

Chayne did his best to comply.

The magic continued to build. It felt similar to when Lathashal punished him, only many times less intense. Even so, with his body in its current state, he was suffering. It took all his effort to maintain his position while the magii performed his art. He felt his skin changing until at last the pain was receding and strength returned to his muscles. It continued for a little longer until he was finally pain-free. It became a pleasant sensation to have the magic coursing through his body.

Then it was over. He lay still, waiting his next instruction.

‘Well get up, you’re done.’

He opened his eyes and sat up, testing every movement before fully committing. Facing him was a heavy-set, middle-aged man dressed in a long cream robe. It displayed the green

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and white symbol of a hand meaning healer. The man was holding a two-foot long staff. A finely crafted wooden clasp at the top held a small version of a manasphere. He shrank away from it.

‘Thank you,’ he managed.

‘Mana isn’t free. It takes students a good deal of time to gather enough to treat wounds such as those. You can thank them by learning to control manaspheres of such power before attempting to use one again.’

Chayne’s expression dropped. ‘It was a punishment.’

‘I see,’ responded the healer, his face losing some of its sternness. ‘What happened?’

Chayne told of the encounter with Lathashal. He thought he saw momentary anger in the man.

‘You must not cross him, even in the slightest. He is the most powerful magii in Straslin and commands almost total immunity for his actions. He could have killed you and nobody would have stood forward to accuse him.’

Chayne nodded his understanding.

‘You did well though. The manasphere you mentioned is rated gradia seven. For you to lose control of such a device and survive, even for a few moments, shows you have exceptional coherence with mana and have unusual potential as a magii.’

Chayne nodded again. ‘Master Lathashal told me this also.’

‘Well, I am Stalizar, the Mage-Surgeon General. I’ll be here should you have any more mishaps. I will not be pleased if I see you here too often.’

Chayne jumped to his feet, bowing slightly, as was the custom before a Master. ‘I am Chayne, and I am in your debt,’ he said.

The magii’s expression changed.

‘So you’re the new Mlendrian recruit.’ It was a statement, not a question. ‘A word of advice. Our Empire is based on who has the greatest influence with the Emperor, and magic has long been the favoured power of Emperors. Shodatts fight

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constantly between themselves to improve their position. An exceptional potential such as you will be exploited to the full.’

The man was trying to tell him something beyond the words spoken, but he had no clue to what it was. He looked on, blankly.

Stalizar moved closer and dropped his voice to a conspiratory whisper, as if the empty room was filled with spies. ‘You will be a pawn in many a strategy and will have to learn the politics of the Empire, and become as much a master of it as your magic. And understand this; a rival Shodatt, if they cannot have you, will prefer to see you dead.’

Chayne didn’t care much for being described as a pawn, and the man was clearly delusional. There was no way the Empire, or any of its inhabitants would consider him a threat. He returned a serious nod before backing out and leaving.

All sign of pain and weariness gone he looked forward to another session in the main library. Returning to his room first to pick up more parchment for his notes, he entered to find an ornate wooden chest on his table. The lid was etched with the symbol of a staff crossing a hawk. Lathashal’s personal mark.

He wondered what torment lay within, but knew it wasn’t the man’s style. He’d want to see the suffering in your eyes, first hand. Lifting the finely crafted lid, inside were many compartments, a fine quill and a full ink well. Looking in the compartments he found spare parchment and a stack of smaller, thinner parchments. These contained the notes he’d left in Lathashal’s laboratory. They were transcribed perfectly onto the smaller area making them far easier to carry and study.

He shook his head in disbelief at this strange land. There was unreasonable suffering for the most minor of discretions, followed by great generosity.

He continued to check the contents.

There was a latched compartment containing a small book. The title of the book was written in Ashnorian and he did his

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best to translate it. He decided it read: *Magii Handbook*. He opened it.

Each page was made of impossibly thin paper that, despite its flimsy appearance, was strong and didn't tear. Each page was edged with gold, and the words and pictures within were exquisite. There was a handwritten inscription on the inside of the front cover.

May you study this book well and gain the insight you deserve.

Lathashal

Taking a moment to consider his confused feelings over the contradictory magii, he scanned through the pages. He noticed chapter twelve was underlined in the same ink as Lathashal's written comment.

It was entitled *Controlling Manaspheres*.

He shut the book and placed it within his robes along with his diminutive notes.

Closing the lid of the chest, he headed off for the library.

I hope you enjoyed this taster chapter. If so and you would like to try the whole book, please click the quick-link below.

Thanks for reading

Miles Allen

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