

"Sir, if this spell turns a target to stone and we are using this on each other, how do we turn back?" a student asked the guild master.

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Hanna looked up, wondering this herself. Petrification was different from any of the other spells she'd learned since joining the heroes guild, and manipulation of the body wasn't a common spell for those of the northern realm.

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"A good question, young neophyte," the guild master said, with wisdom in his voice. He pointed to the guild seal, a large shield-like object hanging in the centre of the guild. "The seal allows us to honour powers and train, without having to worry about the permanent properties of a spell. For a powerful spell, the effects can last a few hours or even days. Otherwise, we would have quite the collection of statues around the place by now, and far fewer heroes in the world."

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Hanna summoned the courage to ask her question. "Sir, is there a practical use for a petrification spell on the outside? I understand how the effects of it can be used, but to my understanding, spells of this level are highly energy expending." She'd read about witches and wizards using such spells in ancient battles, but as a last line of defence, or to take down a large target such as an ogre or troll.

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"Another wise question. There are uses for spells such as this, more than just using this spell on an enemy. There is a reason we still teach this, and it may come in handy if you must ever infiltrate a stronghold. That said, there have been incidents of students using this inappropriately on their classmates, which I strongly advise not to do."

That sounded a little disconcerting, that these spells had at times been used as practical jokes. Not that it mattered right now. Hanna wasn't really bothered by any of the other students. Although she was native to the northern realm and stood out with her pale skin, red hair, and a face full of freckles, she somehow fit in with those native to Alanthorp.

Hanna's mentor from the senior year approached. Aurelia - native to Alanthorp - tall, with dark skin, dreadlocks, hazel eyes, and about to be awarded the title of "Hero." Thanks to her help, Hanna had been so fortunate to be in the situation she was, being foreign and accepted into the guild.

"Master, what assistance can I provide to the class?" Aurelia asked, standing proudly before the students.

The guild master smiled. "A spell you excelled at, young Aurelia. We are demonstrating and teaching the spell of Petrification."

She grinned, walking towards the centre of the class and standing next to Hanna. "Ya gonna have to move a little, sweetie," she said, flicking her hands in Hanna's direction.

A circle formed around the girl, with an opening in front of the guild master. He pressed his staff against the dirt, and a small rock started to drift upwards, glowing around its edges.

Aurelia stood calmly as her hair slowly began to lift, the same dim light around her, the guild master had forced around the rock. "The guild master is about to demonstrate the effects of the spell. His energy is

being focused from the stones around me into my body. As you can see from the light around me and the stone, he is channelling its energy. For demonstration purposes, this is being done a lot slower than the actual spell would truly be performed."

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"Does it hurt?" Hanna asked, noting the minor twitching in Aurelia's body.

She shook her head. "No, a little uncomfortable as the shift is conducted, readying my body for the spell, but the transformation itself is rather fast and seamless. I am ready now, Master."

Hanna's eyes trained from Aurelia to the guild master. His eyes turned a ghostly white and appeared on fire. A cracking sound came from the Aurelia's direction, and as Hanna turned her head back, the girl's skin changed from her normal dark colour to that of polished marble. And there she was, just as she'd stood before, a smile on her face and a relaxed stance. She looked like a stone carving but with perfect edges and curves. Far, far better than whatever any stone mason could do. Hanna reached out and ran her hand down Aurelia's face.

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"Young neophyte, be careful where your fingers wonder. She may be made of stone, but she is still aware of her surroundings and everything you do."

Hanna's hand shot back, and a look of shock crept across her face. Could Aurelia really tell Hanna had touched her? She stepped back and looked into Aurelia's pale stone eyes. Colour slowly returned, and within moments, the girl's body lost the hard stone appearance and reverted to her normal dark tone. Her chest began to rise and fall as life had returned to her body.

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"As you can see, neophytes, the guild seal has restored Aurelia to her former self. Being farther from the seal, however, would result in a longer-lasting effect. Now, neophytes, pair up, and we can run through the process of execution for the spell. Thank you, young Aurelia, your services are no longer required with this class today."

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Aurelia curtsied, then smiled at Hanna, disappearing into the Guild's main hall. The guild master started walking towards the chicken farm, students in tow. "Today, neophytes, we will be practising the spell on chickens, but come assessment, you will be practising on other students."

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"Other students?" Hanna asked, confused.

"Yes, those of the senior year, like Aurelia. You will be attempting to cast the spell on them; however, if it's not within a particular time frame, the spell will be cast on you. If that happens, consider the component a failure. However, points will be awarded for ingenuity."

At least chickens don't fight back, Hanna thought, following the crowd of students. She stopped short and watched one of her classmates casting the spell on an unsuspecting chicken. Like before, a stone rose from the ground and began to glow, just as the guild master's stone had. One of the chickens began to glow, just as Aurelia had. Then it snapped in place, its body grey and rigid, giving the same appearance as Aurelia had. The other students in the class began casting spells in quick succession of one another, turning the pen into what looked like a garden filled with statues of chickens. Only a few still ate from the trough.

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Hanna closed her eyes and focused her energy. As instructed with previous spells, she visualised the chicken made of stone. With the image in her head, she opened her eyes and looked at one of the many

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small rocks on the ground. It began to lift from the path and glow, then the chicken did the same. Then nothing. The chicken flapped its wings₂ and the stone fell to the ground.

“What happened?” she said out loud. All the students looked at Hanna. They, unlike her, had all been successful in casting the spell.

The guild master approached. “Young one, you lost focus. Try again. This time don’t lose sight of the goal at hand.”

Hanna nodded and once again closed her eyes. She focused her energy on the chicken and the stone. It lifted like before and then, nothing. It didn’t make sense. She was doing everything right, but when it came time to actually enact the spell, it failed. This had never happened before. Not once since she had been at the guild.

The guild master said nothing, just stood watching Hanna as she repeatedly tried to turn the chicken to stone, each successive spell failing. She continued on until the other chickens started to return to their normal form, jumping and flapping after being encased in their tombs, returning to their simple lives.

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She turned to the guild master, lost. “How do I cast the spell₂ sir? I don’t understand what I’m doing wrong.”

“Young one, this isn’t something everyone gets straightaway. Most here are talented, and this is not to your disadvantage₂, but more of a learning curve. You will see soon enough why you are failing. You must maintain your focus, and the spell will come.”

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She looked back at the chickens and wondered what it was she was doing wrong. She didn’t want to advance with the rest of the students, if they would be trying the spell on each other after lunch, but a meal did sound pleasing, and perhaps skipping breakfast that morning was contributing to her failing to cast.

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Sitting in the guild’s hall, Hanna chose solitude to help clear her head. This wasn’t a day where sitting with the other guild trainees would help, and the constant mocking wouldn’t help her either. Not that it was bad, just playful banter, but the cause of the spell not working did play on her mind. She lost herself in thought, practising the feeling of focusing her energy on a loaf of bread sitting on her table.

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“Hey, Hanna, how did you go?” Aurelia asked, tossing her lunch down on the table opposite her.

“Not the best, A. Each time I would focus and attempt to cast, the spell would fail. We are all moving on to each other after lunch, and I can’t even turn a chicken to stone. It’s got me baffled, and I have no idea what I am doing wrong. Do you have any tips?”

Aurelia scratched her head. “No, sorry, Hanna. I haven’t ever really had this happen to me, but I have a free period after lunch if you want some help. I would be more than happy to cast the spells with you and try to help you. I am a little rusty on the Petrification spell anyway.”

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At least she knew Aurelia would help and not just play with her like a toy. Also she'd point out issues with her technique, since this wasn't exactly the easiest of spells to cast. "You would do that for me?"

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"Yeah." She nodded. "I mean, I wasn't always as good as I am. I needed help too. Sometimes you just need some help from the senior years, and then if you really get stuck, you can always practice the spell on yourself in your room." Aurelia winked.

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It was an odd suggestion, but it sounded plausible, especially after what the guild master had stated about other students using it on each other.

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"Thanks, then. I'm not used to being helped."

"No problem, I told you, Hanna, if you need help, just ask me." She smiled.

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Standing in the courtyard, the students paired off with one another and took turns, focusing their energy and casting their spells on one another. For a few moments each, they would be encased in stone, then revert and rest to regather their energy.

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Hanna stood before Aurelia. "Okay, so how do I do this then?"

"You're silly. Just focus your energy and visualise me as a statue, then focus on me and the transition will commence."

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Hanna closed her eyes and focused her energy. As instructed with previous spells she visualised Aurelia, made of stone. With the image in her head, she opened her eyes and looked at one of the many small rocks on the ground. It began to lift from the path and glow, then Aurelia did the same. Then nothing. Just like with the chicken. "It didn't work?"

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Aurelia stared at her blankly. "It felt right, like everything was happening. I felt the tingling and then it stopped. It was like you lost focus."

"Lost focus? What do you mean? I did everything as I did before, and it didn't work. This keeps happening!"

"Have you ever had this spell cast on you?"

"No," Hanna said, shaking her head.

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"Okay. I am going to cast the spell on you now and show you what I mean." Aurelia closed her eyes.

Hanna felt an odd sensation across her body. Her limbs began to tingle, and she looked at Aurelia as everything grew tight.

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All the students looked at Hanna. They, unlike her, had all been successful at casting the spell, but Hanna had failed.

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"Can you feel it? I'm taking this really slow, so you know what the sensation should feel like."

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Hanna nodded. "Yeah, my feet are starting to feel heavy." She watched Aurelia nod, then focused on the feeling. Slowly, she felt a sensation rise from her feet and creep up her body. It was like her feet had been dipped in silk, and it slowly began to climb up her legs. She looked down, watching the texture of

her legs change from a pale white to grey and smooth. It continued to creep, **sinking** through her pelvis and into her gut. She felt heavy, and then she heard the odd sound of liquid hitting the ground.

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Hanna's cheeks flushed red as the class looked on, beginning to laugh at her. Never once did they mention wetting yourself as a possible side effect of having a spell cast upon **you**. Or did Aurelia cast another? All focus of why Aurelia was casting the spell on her slipped from her mind as **humiliation** flooded in.

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"Oh, I forgot about that," Aurelia said with a chuckle.

It didn't matter anyway; Hanna was powerless to do anything as the stone crept higher on her body, and with a final stare from Aurelia, the transformation was complete.

Hanna couldn't move, speak, make a noise. She could hear the laughing, the taunts, and make out the movements of everyone around her, but to them, she appeared nothing more than a garden ornament. Her once athletic body, **was** now that of the finest polished stone, **as if** cut by the finest of stone masons in all the land, and with godlike precision.

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The afternoon sun travelled across the sky, casting long shadows from Hanna's body. The class had **reverted** and moved on, leaving Hanna the only one still imprisoned, waiting and thinking about what had happened, or more so, why the other students had been restored so quickly, yet here she was, still a statue more than an hour on. *Was the guild seal broken or turned off? Could it be turned off?* Her thoughts wandered until a tingling sensation started to flood back over her body. Within moments the tightness of her stone form was gone, and her knees met the dirt.

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"That was a little longer than expected." Aurelia's voice sounded from behind.

Hanna took a few moments, breathing heavily, looking at the dirt in front of her. "You made me wet myself."

"I forgot that happens if you cast the spell slowly. Normally it's done so fast, and I think you were a little too relaxed." She chuckled.

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"So why did it take so long for me to change back? Was the guild seal broken or something?"

Aurelia shook her head. "No, the guild master said the effects of the spell are determined **by** its power or something. I guess **casting** it slowly meant there was more power used to retain it. Who knows?"

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"The guild master."

"Ugh, yeah, figure of speech. Of course, he knows. I just never had a reason to ask him."

Hanna stood up and dusted the dirt from her knees. "Well, I'll ask tomorrow, and we can find out then."

"If I'm around. I have an exam in the morning on another spell. I'll probably be **chilling out** for a while."

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"Ice?"

Aurelia nodded. "Yeah, freezing spell. Slightly more complex than Petrification. Hey, try a chicken again. You know what the spell feels like now. Give it another shot."

Hanna looked at the chickens. She picked one, closed her eyes, steadied her breathing, and felt for it. Her eyes opened, she sucked in a breath. She could feel the energy slowly bleed through her body.

Aurelia walked forward_s, her attention on one of the small birds. "That's it, keep going, Hanna. You've got this."

Hanna focused her energy once more, the tingling sensation flooded through her body. The chicken stopped moving—standing still. Then it fell over onto its side, flapped its wings and in a puff of feathers ran away.

Aurelia burst out laughing. "What was that? Did you scare the crap out of it with your spell or something?"

It wasn't funny, at least not to Hanna. She still couldn't get it. Why wasn't the spell working? Whatever the reason was, it would have to wait. The daylight was fading, and dinner would only be on offer for a short time in the hall.

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She dragged her feet, wondering what the issue was and why she could not complete the spell. She knew what it felt like, concentrating her energy and centring it on the target. The feeling of heaviness and the restriction of movement. Yes, when she shifted her thought to the transition of the target, her mind would wonder from the chicken, and then she would lose focus on the energy. She knew what the final push felt like, when Aurelia had used the spell on her. She could feel the influx of energy forced into her body from the rock_s, but not push it herself. She scratched her head, wondering why and looked up at the guild seal. Could it have something to do with it?

Her mind wandered as she ate her meal, hardly noticing the ruckus of the guild hall. She didn't mind; nobody was bothering her. It gave her the opportunity to study some more. She rolled a carrot to the centre of her plate, then took a small pebble and placed it on the table in front of her. She closed her eyes and focused her energy. As she opened them, the pebble began to levitate with a small glow. The carrot began to glow and in a blink, made the transition to stone.

Why now? Why did this work and not the chicken? She had done everything the same as before but this worked. Did it have something to do with the chickens or even Aurelia?

"Ugh, Hanna?" Aurelia called out from nearby.

Hanna looked up, away from the carrot. "Yeah, what's up?"

"That spell's not meant to be used on inanimate objects. You've just turned your dinner to stone."

Laughter erupted from the hall, with the same faces now amused_s and fingers pointing as earlier in the day. It was enough. She was over it and didn't care. She stood up and made her way towards the dorm. The day had been long, and it was now twice Aurelia had embarrassed her in front of the rest of the

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class. For someone who was supposed to be the ideal Hero, she wasn't the nicest person, even if that appeared unintentional.

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Moonlight filtered in the window to her room onto the dresser. The room was small, a bed on one wall and a dresser with a small hanging cupboard on one side of it and a mirror. Hanna sat on the bed, looking at her reflection, wondering why the spells hadn't worked. What she was doing wrong? It was tomorrow that she had her test. She still couldn't use the spell on anything more than static objects. Determined to achieve what was required, she withdrew a stone from her pocket, placing it on the dresser, then stared at herself in the mirror. *Would it even work?*

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Slowly, Hanna one by one shifted from object to object, casting the spell, turning the items on her desk to stone. This was easy, and the more she did it, the faster the spell could be cast. She stood up, dressed in her night gown in front of the mirror. *You could always practice on yourself*, she remembered hearing from Aurelia. She closed her eyes and focused her energy once more on the stone. Upon opening them it slowly lifted, floating and glowing. She stared into her own eyes, and felt a tingling sensation start to engulf her body. She looked at her left hand, noticing the texture of her skin slowly changing a dark pale colour. She felt heavy, but pressed on. It was working.

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The sensation extended down her legs, and she felt the cool brush of air against her skin, although it felt different from normal. That's when Hanna noticed it. Her legs were now cast in stone. Excitedly she pressed on, as more and more of her body changed. It crept up her torso to her chest, and then her arms locked in place. She couldn't move.

Then panic set in. In all her wisdom she never gave the entire practice much thought. Turning herself to stone meant she would be there for a while, a statue in her own room. She closed her eyes, breaking focus. The stone fell from its place above the dresser. It clattered against the tabletop and skidded across the floor. It was too late. In a desperate attempt, Hanna began to frantically try to find a way out of her tomb, but it was no use. The spell was cast and within moments, the statue of Hanna stood staring at herself in the mirror. The upside was that she had managed to cast the spell. The downside was that was a stupid idea.

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At least now she knew what she was doing, what it felt like to cast the spell. Her thoughts drifted to Aurelia. Could it have been intimidation? It played on her mind. Was the reason she couldn't cast because of Aurelia? There was something about the girl, something that Hanna found made her uneasy, and something had made her uncomfortable since the demo, when Hanna brushed her hands against Aurelia's body. The guild master's words about sight and sound, well they were true, and here Hanna was staring into the eyes of her stone self.

She was unable to do anything, spending the night just as she had earlier that day—as a statue. This was her own doing, however. A small amount of joy crossed her mind followed by the annoyance that for some reason, it took a long time for her body to shift back to its normal form. Her mind drifted to the guild seal, knowing it must have had something to do with it. As each hour passed, so did the moon and stars out of the corner of her eye. The sensation of being turned to stone felt odd. She was aware of

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everything, and at the same time felt detached from her body. Like sleep had never come, never needed to come, and she didn't feel heavy or cold. She felt a little annoyed that she was locked in place, and hoped she would revert before morning.

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As the moon began to set, Hanna's body began to glow, and little by little she felt herself again. Her arms shifted from their position in front of herself and feeling returning to her extremities. Knowing she had a few hours until she had to wake, she grabbed her night gown and snuck out of the dorm towards the chickens.

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Standing before them, she raised her hand. A stone on the floor ground lifted, glowing, and within a moment, so did one of the chickens, the same as the previous day with Aurelia. Hanna closed her eyes and focused her energy, picturing the chicken statue. She felt a small weight push her forwards. She opened her eyes, and there it was, a chicken turned to stone.

A smile curled from Hanna's mouth; she had done it and with ease. She turned to another chicken and cast the spell once more. Within moments it, too, was stone. With each successive chicken, the spell got faster. A smile crept across her face. It had to be something to do with Aurelia, although she couldn't put a finger on it.

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Hanna returned to her room, and looked down at the table, taking hold of a stone pencil and placing it in the now-stone vase. She turned and lay back on her bed, looking up at the ceiling, waiting for the sun to peek through the shutters on the room's window and wondered: *how many others tried to cast a spell on themselves like that?*

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Warm rays of sunlight filtered through the shutters onto Hanna's robes. She opened her eyes and moved towards the window, looking down at the chicken coop below. All the chickens still stood just as Hanna had left them. A small crowd of students and the guild master had gathered around the pen. Seeing this, Hanna pulled on her boots and sprinted down to the coop.

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"Someone was busy last night it appears," said the guild master, looking at Hanna. He turned and walked towards her, pressing his staff against the stone path in front of him. "A very powerful magic lies within you, young neophyte. You just need to learn to control it, and I don't recommend practicing on yourself in your room. It takes a lot out of the guild seal to revert someone like yourself from a spell like that."

He knew? How could he know? She'd told nobody, not about the room, not about the chickens. She hadn't talked to anyone from the moment she woke up. How could he know, unless he was linked directly to the seal? Either way, he knew, and he must have watched her with the chickens. Hanna guessed it must have been a common thing to happen. Regardless, this was her grading, and the rest of her class was now waiting. The first test was the chickens once again.

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Each student turned a chicken to stone with ease. Up last was Hanna. The practice from the night before helped. She didn't even have to close her eyes. Her energy focused on a stone, and within the time it

took to barely levitate, the chicken was cast as a perfect stone carving. The other students looked at her, almost shocked. Overnight she had gone from being the only neophyte unable to cast the spell to the fastest in the class. She smiled; perfection had settled in upon her.

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With a tap on the shoulder from the guild master Hanna was pulled to the side. "Neophyte, you will attend a special grading. I am happy with your progress, nothing more is required for you here."

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Really, why? What does he know? She nodded and followed the guild master's instruction, watching the remainder of the class complete their assessments against the seniors. "So, what does this mean for me? Have I passed?" Hanna asked the guild master.

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He nodded. "This assessment would not do you justice, and the power that lies hidden needs to be observed. I have something special in order for you; just wait and see."

This was odd; in the history of the guild she had never heard or read about someone bypassing the final grading of a spell. What did she do? Her mind started travelling back to the previous day. *Did this all have something to do with Aurelia?* She shook her head; no, that would be silly, or would it?

With the turn of her head, there she was, Aurelia.

"You summoned me?" she asked the guild master.

"Yes." He walked in front of both of the students, turning and staring at them. "You two will be required to duel."

The heads of all of the students turned, and Hanna felt a burning sensation of hot flushes through her body. Sweat pooled in her palms, and her fingers felt tense. *What is going on? Is the final grading a duel with Aurelia?* As if things weren't awkward enough, the six grand mages of the guild had made their way to the training grounds.

"Aurelia of Alenthorp and Hanna of Calador, you two have shown an extraordinary amount of power. Power that has been lost for many generations within the guild. I hereby call upon you two to duel, under the protection of the guild seal. The rules are simple, first one to complete the spell is the victor. Aurelia you will use of the Freezing spell whilst you Hanna are to the use of the Petrification spell."

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Ice vs stone, an interesting combination. Hanna wondered if the effects of ice would feel similar to stone. She looked Aurelia in the eyes then positioned herself towards the north of the courtyard, with Aurelia taking post opposite her. Both girls stood at the ready. Hanna looked into Aurelia's eyes again, her pupils frosted like ice. She had begun the process of casting. Hanna guessed she wanted the upper hand, and started to do the same, finding a stone and focusing her energy on it.

The ground began to shake, small tremors emanating from Hanna's body. An intense chill suddenly hit her and forced her to take a deep breath. She locked onto Aurelia's energy and pushed through but started to feel the ice as it crept across her body. Pushing it out of her mind, she focused and attempted to look into Aurelia's mind. What was it she was seeing? It were almost as if time stood still, and only Hanna and Aurelia stood facing each other. Everything else was white, for as far as the eye could see.

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"Where are we?" Hanna asked.

"I'm not too sure myself, but I have seen this place several times. It always comes to me in my dreams."

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“Your dreams?” What an odd thing for Aurelia to say. Her dreams weren’t a possible nor practical place for Hanna to be; it didn’t make sense. Regardless she was here now and ready to deal with whatever she needed to do. Something sprang to her mind; her focus continued to draw back onto Aurelia, and then it hit her. *A decoy, this whole subconscious thing is a decoy.* She wasn’t in Aurelia’s mind at all.

Hanna dropped to her knees, feeling the ice beginning to take its toll, creeping up her legs. It felt different from the tingly sensation of being turned to stone. Hanna’s mind again began to wonder. She closed her eyes and focused on the ground around Aurelia. Cracks formed in the soil, then two large boulders began to push themselves through the surface as the ground began to shake more intensely.

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Hanna yelled, forcing her hands against the ground. She was determined not to lose, but with every passing moment ice crept over her body, locking her against the ground. She knew this was it, and looked up at Aurelia, eyeing a grin across her face before becoming encased in a tomb of stone.

Hanna’s arms gave out and she fell to the ground, breathing heavily and feeling sensation coming back into her limbs as the ice quickly thawed. Had she done it? She looked up at Aurelia’s stone figure still standing as she had been at the other end of the courtyard.

Hanna sprang to her feet and looked around at everyone. The guild master approached, stopping short of her. “Well done, that was quite impressive. You will make a fine hero and do the people of Calador proud.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said. With the dismissal of the guild master, the other students followed, leaving Hanna and Aurelia alone again in the courtyard.

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Hanna walked up and touched Aurelia’s face, wondering what would be the next major hurdle she would encounter. What was the significance of the duel, and why were the grand mages present? She turned around as the feeling of piercing eyes fell upon her, to find the guild master standing at arm’s length. He stood before the girls, holding a scroll and a pair of necklaces stamped with the guild seal.

“You two have a prophecy to fulfill.”