

Brennan Mulligan

Snow falling over endless white sand and a tower made of glass, [Thunder rolls] in the image of night and day, as spells fire across the sky. For a moment the sun, captured against the horizon while stars gleam as the heavens cannot seem to agree, in the face of endless magic what the truth of this world should be.

Brennan Mulligan

These images are captured in the mind's eye as memory, perhaps of dream, or perhaps of waking life, or perhaps of something in between. By Suvi.

Brennan Mulligan

Suvin Kedberiket right now, if you open your eyes, all that you would be able to see is the inside of your mother's cloak. And you can feel her hand on your shoulder. This patch of your mother's cloak, I won't lie, has a little bit of snot on it.

Aabria Iyengar

Yeah, it's mine.

Brennan Mulligan

It's Suvi's. And you can feel her hand on you. So you don't have to see anything occurring outside, because right now you are underneath her cloak. Both literally but also, of course, in the deeper meaning of that, she has you. You can feel the presence nearby of your father preparing a working of great magic.

Brennan Mulligan

Having grown up in the Citadel, how does Suvi feel witnessing her parents work magic? How do you think of magic if that's what you've grown in and through and around; the water that you have been swimming in your whole life? In this moment, you can tell that something has gone wrong. But your parents have done a lot to hide you from that. As the spell starts to weave, what is Suvi feeling.

Aabria Iyengar

It's to... to her, to me, magic has always been a thing that belongs to adulthood and to, like, it feels like a birthright, but not a part of me. So it's always been a subject of, like, endless fascination. And I know that I want to look and see what he's doing because it's hard not to feel it and want to react to it. But there is something in that slight offness and wrongness that instead of that, I think I'm just going to bury my head into my mom a little more and just nuzzle and trust.

Brennan Mulligan

You nuzzle, you trust your mother's voice, soft as can be, in contrast against the sharpness of the noises of what you can only hope are spells. Because if they are not, then something truly monstrous and alien is occurring outside the doors of this chamber. She whispers to you.

Suvi's Mother [Brennan]

It's going to be all right. Stay right here. Don't look up. Keep your eyes closed for a moment. Very shortly, we are going to be far away. Don't keep your eyes open while we go. You'll get sick. I'll let you know when you can open your eyes.

Brennan Mulligan

You hear voices in the room your father is speaking to. And then with a flash that you can perceive even with your eyes shut tight and buried in your mother's cloak, you are momentarily blinded and feel a tug and sudden pressure moving so quickly, that you don't even experience the feeling of moving forward in the way that when you are falling through the sky, the feeling you feel is the feeling of being pushed up from the rushing wind.

Brennan Mulligan

A fraction of a moment later, you hear screams and heat and fire. In this moment, you feel a twitch of reflex from your mother. Give me an insight check.

Aabria Iyengar
Eleven.

Brennan Mulligan
Something is wrong. You don't know more than that. And you cannot see your mother's face. But you know that your mother is surprised, which is all of the fear that you know how to process.

Aabria Iyengar
Definitely, she's got her fingers, like, knotted in her mother's clothing. But turn and look.

Brennan Mulligan
As you turn to look, you see three figures, one of which is your father, two of which are not family to you, but one of them, to the right, could almost be described as family. A woman who is as close as your mother has to a sister.

Brennan Mulligan
The other is a man who works with your father. And that is how it has always been described to you. Of these three figures as you turn to look because your mother's face is directly above you. Of these three figures, who do you turn to look at first? Your father? Your family friend or this colleague?

Aabria Iyengar
I think because it's, no, I'm looking back at my dad.

Brennan Mulligan
Aabria what do we see in this memory of SUVs? What does your father's face look like?

Aabria Iyengar
He's got dark skin, and you can tell he's very handsome and angular, but he's got just maybe like a week and a half of stubble coming in that obscures a lot of his lower face. I hate his beard because it's like, painfully itchy like whenever he hugs me, so I kind of crinkled my nose of that.

Aabria Iyengar
He's got pale gray eyes that are always a little bit shut when he smiles. Like, his cheeks kind of take over his face. He's incredibly tall on the leaner side of things, but you can tell that he is, like, strong and wiry under his billowing cloaks.

Brennan Mulligan
Your father is, in this memory, confident, capable, ready to do what is needed. And the flickering mist leaving his hands, which are themselves covered with a number of powerful rings, one of which you know to be special somehow. It is the ring he has shown to you when he has, you know, cradled you on his lap and talked to you about magic and shown you the ring that is on the index finger of his right hand. And it has a brilliant green gem and is set in beautiful gold and brass, triangular and geometric. And he has often shown it to you and said:

Suvi's Father [Brennan]
No matter how complicated the spell, it always starts here. No matter how complicated the problem, it's always just the first step to start solving it.

Brennan Mulligan
You see the spell of traveling, the potent teleportation that has taken you to this hellish place. And in the moment before your father can notice that you are looking at him, he surveys where you are. Everything is orange, everything is hot. There is fire all around. And it takes a moment you can't even fully collect because there's so much smoke here that you can't open your eyes all the way.

Brennan Mulligan
It's hot and it's hard to see things moving because sparks and embers are flying and there will be loud

pops of wood that will suddenly burst and sparks will go. And catching any movement or rhyme or reason to any of this is therefore quite challenging. But in your memory there is something that stays with you. The bottom half of a mural on a plaster wall that shows perhaps the hands or arms of a family smiling. The smoke has already charred away their faces. But you see in flowery script words, not in imperial, not in the language you speak.

Brennan Mulligan

But you are a bright enough young child that you know that word in another language means tea. Perhaps it means a tea shop. Perhaps this was a sign on a building that let people know that they could come here and sit together. No one's sitting here now. You catch your father's eye in this burning place and see him pointing, saying:

Suvi's Father [Brennan]

There in the harbor.

Brennan Mulligan

And so, you know, you must be near the sea. And he catches your eye.

Suvi's Father [Brennan]

It's alright. This is going to be alright, Suvi. You're going to be alright.

Brennan Mulligan

And he kneels down and swoops you up in his arm. When you think of a word that describes your father, you need not answer quickly. When you think of a word that describes your father, what's a word that comes to mind for you?

Aabria Iyengar

I think, weirdly, it's soft. Because even though his beard is scratchy and he's muscular, his skin is always really soft, like around his neck where I hug him. And his clothing smells of this same blend of flower and some weird wood. But it's also he put a little satchel of whatever he uses for his clothing under my pillow. So I associate the smell with both him and being safe in bed.

Brennan Mulligan

As your father goes to pick you up, you hear a growl from behind him.

Colleague [Brennan]

We have to move.

Brennan Mulligan

You see the colleague of your father. There is something about this man that has always turned your stomach. There's a smell he has that is a wrong smell. What do you think Suvi would smell on this man that would even make a child who has been told to trust him regard him with some anxiety?

Aabria Iyengar

It's something that is the opposite of the way her dad smells. It's like acrid and metallic. And I don't think she knows what blood smells like, but it's that, but worse.

Brennan Mulligan

Your father turns to address the man. He's not looking like a man much anymore. His ears move to a point behind his head and you hear a snap in his jaw as his jaw grows larger and tusks begin to extend from his mouth and something painful shudders in his arms as they grow to reach the ground. And he is something monstrous, disturbing. And you smell that smell as blood drips from his open mouthed

Colleague [Brennan]

Soft, we have to move now.

Aabria Iyengar
He growls and I start crying immediately.

Brennan Mulligan
His eyes dark to you and narrow. You see your father turn and say

Soft [Brennan]
We have to find the carriage. There's a wagon somewhere here at the edge of town.

Colleague [Brennan]
Wagon? You're out of your mind. They found us. It's a trap. They clearly knew we were coming.

Brennan Mulligan
You feel a hand on your body as well. This is your mother's friend, sister in all but blood. What does this woman look like? What is the memory you have of this woman in this moment?

Aabria Iyengar
She's so pretty, even stressed and in this weird orange glow. She's got long, just incredibly shiny auburn hair and sort of ruddy freckled features and pale skin but she's sort of glowing in this room that's so dangerous and hot and wrong but she looks like she's in her element.

Brennan Mulligan
She wears a long azure cloak and shining silver scales in her armor with a long jewel hilted sword at her side in addition to a tome of spells. You see her put a hand and address the man who is maybe now a monster and says

Family Friend [Brennan]
Eoighorain, calm down. If you want to be of help, move and move quickly. Here, follow me.

Brennan Mulligan
She looks down at you and says:

Family Friend [Brennan]
Don't be afraid of him. I've got you.

[Door creaks open, sounds of booms and yelling]

Brennan Mulligan
She starts to run.

[Clash of swordfighting, tense music, and the sound of heavy breathing]

Brennan Mulligan
As you run you see lights moving through the sky slowly at first and then faster and you begin to realize how large the seaside town is that you are moving through. You only realize how large it is when the far reaches of it are illuminated in flame as they come roaring out of the black night, and are only made visible in the moment of their destruction.

[Dramatic music, the sounds of explosions, crackling fire]

Brennan Mulligan
As you exit from this place as fast as you can you see the buildings grow smaller in stature but also hear shouting coming from the waterfront behind you. Up ahead you see a wagon covered, it is wood on all sides with again bright paint of a woman drinking from a glass of wine with beautiful floral script.

Brennan Mulligan

Some merchant's cart advertising a life of carefree, wonder and of times kinder than the one you now remember. As you arrive at the back of the wagon your father opens the door and your father addresses the woman with auburn hair who whispers quickly to your mother and he says

Soft [Brennan]

[Muffled] Steel, we need help now. This was not supposed to happen in this way.

Brennan Mulligan

She turns and says:

Steel [Brennan]

[Muffled, slowly becoming clearer] I understand. I didn't think they would get here in time. But what we need to do is keep the plan. We need to-

Brennan Mulligan

You see, she says:

Steel [Brennan]

Perhaps, perhaps it's just better if Suvi comes with us.

Brennan Mulligan

And you hear, you hear a snarl.

Eoighorain [Brennan]

She'll be dead. Slow us down.

Brennan Mulligan

You see Steel whips around and says,

Steel [Brennan]

Eoighorain, I'll cut your head from your neck if you speak about Suvi.

Eoighorain [Brennan]

I don't want the girl to die. But die she will if she comes where we're going.

Brennan Mulligan

And you see your mother raise a hand and Eoighorain drops and does not look up. And you look up to see a face that you knew your mother was capable of pulling on you being applied to what looks for all the world like a monster.

Brennan Mulligan

And the monster has the same reaction you have to it. We see your mother. What does your mother look like?

Aabria Iyengar

She's got round, almost like a heart shaped face. She just looks very pleasant and kind and that if she was sort of left to her own devices would probably run to, like, curviness and voluptuousness. But none of that is there. She's got long, curly, coiled hair and dark skin. Her eyes are brown and just so large that I think I just kind of always try to play with her face because her eyes are so expressive that I get lost in them all the time. And, yeah, she's a little on the shorter side too.

Brennan Mulligan

Her stature is in inverse proportion to the amount of presence she wields in this moment. She looks at Eoighorain and says,

Suvi's Mother [Brennan]

Do not frighten my daughter.

Brennan Mulligan
And then she looks at Steel:

Suvi's Mother [Brennan]
My friend, he is right. Suvi cannot come with us. We have to stick to the plan.

Brennan Mulligan
Steel raises her eyes and goes:

Steel [Brennan]
Stick to the plan?

Brennan Mulligan
And gestures to the fiery city and says:

Steel [Brennan]
We can try to stick to the plan, but I don't think the plan is trying very hard at all to stick to us.

Brennan Mulligan
And you see that your father speaks again, and I'm going to ask for the word you most associate with your mother.

Aabria Iyengar
I think it's Stone. Not in a bad way, but in a sturdy way. That she is solid and strong and cool. She's always so cool.

Brennan Mulligan
Your father, still holding you, turns to your mother,

Soft [Brennan]
Stone, how can we do this?

Brennan Mulligan
Your mom looks at you and says,

Stone [Brennan]
I know this is frightening, but I need you to be brave, okay?

Brennan Mulligan
She turns and says,

Stone [Brennan]
Steel, talk to the driver. Eoighorain, keep us safe.

Brennan Mulligan
You see that the monstrous figure of Eoighorain looks at you one last time and prowls off, further extending his arms and dropping to all fours. Simian almost, or like a hyena, where the legs are not of equal lengths. The arms in the front extend far longer, prowls off towards the front of the carriage. And you see Steel goes around the other side and says,

Steel [Brennan]
Hail, driver.

Brennan Mulligan
And begins to speak to the driver of the carriage in front of you. Your father, through the open door puts you on a small little bench with a folded piece of hard canvas cloth on it. And he kisses you once

on each cheek, and he says,

Soft [Brennan]

I'm going to go back into the town. There are survivors and other people here who need help. Alright, you are going to be safe. You are going to be safe.

Brennan Mulligan

He turns to Stone, kisses her on the cheek, and says,

Soft [Brennan]

I'll hold them off. We have time.

Brennan Mulligan

She steps up into the carriage with you, sits across from you, sort of crouched on the balls of her feet to get just as tall as you are sitting. And she wipes the tears from your face. In your memory, what do you look like?

Aabria Iyengar

Oh, God. Yeah. I feel even smaller than I must have actually been. A black girl with poofy coily, dark brown hair that I've just have a weird habit of jamming stuff into it. There's, like, a pencil and some flowers that I found and a very cool leaf. I have giant oversized glasses that I wear most of the time, but I'm not wearing them now because I already dropped them and they're already a little broken.

Aabria Iyengar

So I'm just holding them, and I can feel the metal kind of bending under my hands. I don't even remember what I was wearing. It was probably red because that's my favorite color. But I don't know, I just feel small, with eyes as big as my mom. And I want to yell, but I know I need to be good, so I'm just quiet.

Brennan Mulligan

She looks at you smiling. You see tears streaming down her face. But your mom, you've never seen your mom weep, although you've seen her cry often. And in this moment, she is not weeping. She is simply crying, as she often does when she is moved by powerful feeling. She wraps her hands around yours and whispers words in a language you cannot speak. But your mother has promised that you one day will, and you can feel the glasses mend within your hands.

Stone [Brennan]

You need to be careful with these glasses, because I won't be around to fix them for a little while. Okay? You're going somewhere safe. You're going to meet a very wonderful woman. Her name is Grandmother Ren. And I am asking you to be respectful when you meet her. She is a kind and dear woman, but she is not to be crossed. You will be polite when you arrive, and you will do as you are told. Is that understood?

Suvi [Aabria]

[Sniffling] Yeah.

Stone [Brennan]

I know that your father has explained these rules to you before, but I will say again, in the laws of magic, there are few errors more grievous than being unkind to a host or ungrateful for a service done. So, make sure you are respectful, and if any chores are asked of you, see that you do them.

Suvi [Aabria]

Okay.

Brennan Mulligan

She reaches around her neck, unclasps a necklace and a perfect sapphire blue raindrop made of glass at the end of a silver chain is placed around your neck and she clasps it. You see her look and

she, holding your hands, goes,

Stone [Brennan]

It's all right to be frightened, but we're not ever going to let that stop us from doing what we need to do.

Brennan Mulligan

Appearing at the door once more, Steel moves her head around the corner and says,

Steel [Brennan]

Stone, it's getting to be time.

Brennan Mulligan

You see. Your mother nods and says,

Stone [Brennan]

Alright.

Brennan Mulligan

She kisses you again, holds you close and looks down at the little patch of snot on the inside of her cloak and goes.

Suvi [Aabria]

[Quietly] Sorry.

Stone [Brennan]

We must respect when a fellow wizard has marked something as their own.

Brennan Mulligan

And she takes the cloak off and wraps you up in it, because aside from the fire,

[Off-mic yell]

Brennan Mulligan

Our listeners cannot see Lou waving.

Lou Wilson

Get this out of here. Get this, this is how we're starting? Are we supposed to go up from here?

Brennan Mulligan

I mean, we sort of have to go up from here.

Lou Wilson

How? Whew.

Brennan Mulligan

She wraps the cloak around you. It is filled with the familiar smell of your mom, of all of the smells of home, of the flowers she keeps, of the things that are cooked with by her and your father in your home, of all the familiar library dust and scraps of books and parchment.

Brennan Mulligan

And it wraps you up. And you can tell that beyond the heat of the fire here, at the edge of town. It is a cold night, so the warmth is something you are grateful for. Your father appears at the door, his irises flickering with light. You have seen this before only once or twice, but you know that it means that your father has cast some magic that is not the type of magic he ever wants you to see. As the magic fades, Steel looks at you and says,

Steel [Brennan]

Kiddo, you're going to be all right. I don't know anybody tougher than your mom and dad. If I was these people out here, I'd be scared. I don't think you should be scared. I think all of them should be scared.

Brennan Mulligan

Your father puts his hand behind Steel's head and they touch foreheads in a solemn moment, even though she has been in your mother's life since childhood, your father has become very close with her as well. She draws her sword and walks out towards the fire again. Your dad looks at you and says:

Soft [Brennan]

You're going somewhere safe. Your mother's told you about Grandmother Ren?

Suvi [Aabria]

Yeah.

Soft [Brennan]

You know how you need to behave.

Suvi [Aabria]

Yeah.

Soft [Brennan]

It might be a little while, it might be until the end of the summer before you see us again. I know that it would be happier if we were all together, but Grandmother Ren can keep you safe in a way that she can't keep us safe. It's one of those rules of magic.

Suvi [Aabria]

Okay

Soft [Brennan]

I love you, darling. [Echoing out]

Aabria Iyengar

When I remember this part, this is the regret. That I wish I had said I love you back. I wish I had hugged him or climbed out of the cart and followed him and refused to not go with them wherever they were going. But I was so worried that I would start crying again, that I wouldn't be good, that I just sort of sat there and let all of this happen. And I didn't say anything or do anything.

Brennan Mulligan

Your father looks at your face, smiles. He is soft. And your mother touches his hand and touches yours, and for a moment you are all connected. And she is Stone. She kisses you one last time.

Stone [Brennan]

We'll see you soon.

Brennan Mulligan

And she steps from the carriage. She turns, her brow furrowed for a moment, as if she has one last thing to say. She points to the amulet around your neck.

Stone [Brennan]

I wouldn't share that with anyone, darling, because

Brennan Mulligan

and you hear

Eoighorain [Brennan]

Now, they're coming now!

Brennan Mulligan

You hear a leap and a crush of clay tiles and storms, as Eoighorain, who is now something truly monstrous, perhaps 12ft long, from his haunches to his head, lands on a clay tiled roof in this seaside town. Skidding across the shattering thing, you can see flesh hanging from his teeth.

Eoighorain [Brennan]
[Roars loudly]

Brennan Mulligan

Your mother turns around, closes the door, and the last thing you hear is her speaking in the language of magic itself. And a wind more powerful than you have ever felt rattles the sides of the carriage, and you hear a cry from the driver and these horses move like no beast has ever moved on this earth before or since.

Aabria Iyengar

I pull the cloak over my head and just wrap myself up in all of those smells. And instead of sitting on the little bench, I just lay down and try to remember the words. Because if I can focus on something I can think my way through, I can back myself down from how terrified I am. So I try to remember the words, and push to understand the language of magic because that will make me closer to them. Even as we're speeding far away.

Brennan Mulligan

The words move through your mind again and again, until eventually, after what seems like forever, you drift off to sleep.

[Slow, somber piano music plays]

Brennan Mulligan

That's where we're going to stop.

[Off-mic, Erika starts screaming while Lou yells "Woo" over and over. Aabria's laughs turn into raspy and emotional exclamations]

Brennan Mulligan

After the ceremony, you are once again surrounded by other archmages, and Silence is sort of speaking with some of the other wizards who are here, and a few, probably out of the, like 60 wizards that came home, probably only five of them are highly decorated enough now to be here in this private luncheon. The room you are in is actually in a dome of water. So you see that there is a hovering lapis lazuli disc, probably about 90ft in the air. That is a small conjured portal that is connected to some kind of ocean or some source of water and is summoning water into the Citadel that comes down in a large dome, almost like a glass cover for a cake.

Brennan Mulligan

And so it is cool and misty in here and the sunlight's just coming in through the glass of the exterior and then through this like, water dome. You're in this garden and you see that there are a number of servants moving throughout the space that are handing out food and refreshments and looking at the archmages. There's again, probably like five or so of these returning heroes, one of whom is Silver.

Brennan Mulligan

But you also see a surprising figure here which, walking in as the water sort of parts, is Steel. We see an older woman. She wears brilliant golden armor, filigreed, embossed, covered with many arcane runes within the lingua arcana that you recognize. Normally, this kind of armor historically would have been completely useless. But of course, this armor is, for all of its decoration, incredibly practical. She has a high collar on a white cloak, a jewel hilted sword at her side, and a iron and silver bound black spell book attached and holstered at her hip.

Brennan Mulligan

Her skin is a ruddy pink that's still a little bit—some crows feet and some age here. Her bright red hair has started to gray a little bit, but it's kind of hard to see because of course she has a strange kind of marking, of long streaks of white through her red hair and four wavy tapering white streaks across her face, one of which covers an eye. And that eye is white in the iris, which gives her a little bit of a striking and kind of unsettling vibe, which is not a bad vibe for someone who is ultimately the Sword of the Citadel.

Brennan Mulligan

She walks in in this moment. What do you think Suvi is up to in this luncheon celebrating these returning heroes?

Aabria Iyengar

Suvi's foregoing food and trying to cut a fine and deeply unapproachable figure in the corner, hoping that Silver would come by and they could speak. But then the moment Steel walks through, she hustles over with the same speed an excited child would be to go see someone and immediately rushes over and stops short of embracing her.

Brennan Mulligan

Steel turns to look at you and says,

Steel [Brennan]

Suvi, I hope that you were not too burdened this morning with your exhausting responsibilities.

Brennan Mulligan

And she darts her eyes over to the Archmage Silence.

Suvi [Aabria]

[Quietly] Heh, rude. [At normal volume] I have done my duty to keep an old man awake while watching heroes return. So I'm having a great day. How are you doing?

Brennan Mulligan

I'm doing fine. I relish my ability that my station is high enough that I don't have to go to those.

Suvi [Aabria]

Rude.

Steel [Brennan]

Well, hey, I love when the heroes return and I'm glad that they return. And I'll go tell them that I'm glad that they returned. But ultimately they're going to be going back out again very shortly.

Suvi [Aabria]

Yeah, at least they get a little bit of time here to remember what we're fighting for and what's waiting.

Steel [Brennan]

Well, I don't want to take you away from your duties unless you—

Suvi [Aabria]

There are no duties. You know there's no duties. I know there's no duties. I'm going to go back and do his paperwork while he takes a nap, or eats a very soft cookie.

Steel [Brennan]

Suvi. Suvi, you know how enormous of an opportunity it was that you're the first wizard in the history of the Citadel that was moved into a leadership track upon entering the Citadel?

Aabria Iyengar

Right. So why does it feel like they're locking me in a little room and forgetting about me?

Steel [Brennan]

You're not forgot—look at the other apprentices of the archmages, and you do look out and see there are other apprentices here. All of those apprentices either came from the war-wizard track or from the researcher track. And the next youngest one is, like, 40.

Suvi [Aabria]

They treat me like a child.

Steel [Brennan]

You're very young.

Suvi [Aabria]

Okay. They treat me like a child. And yet I know that if I had one chance, they would know how incredible of a talent I am. But I am wasted sitting in a room reading books. Please do something. I'm dying.

Steel [Brennan]

[laughs]

Suvi [Aabria]

[Sarcastically] Ha ha ha, we make jokes.

Brennan Mulligan

She smiles and looks at you and goes,

Steel [Brennan]

You have endless potential. And I know that tending to the ministrations of a tired old man does not utilize your gifts to the best of their ability.

Suvi [Aabria]

I'm one of the best wizards that have ever come through Citadel, and I'm a nurse. I'm a nurse, but go on.

Steel [Brennan]

Your mother and father were each recognized in time for their talents. Your father became a Provost of the 8th, one of the most gifted tactical geniuses the Citadel's ever produced. Your mother was the Sage of the Fundament, and when they were your age, they were still grinding away as a junior apprentice buried in a library. What they would have done to be the apprentice of an archmage at your age, I can't even imagine

Suvi [Aabria]

They got a chance to prove themselves,

Steel [Brennan]

A chance that you were so recognized for your gifts that you were able to bypass. We recognized your talents immediately.

Suvi [Aabria]

It's all very honorable, and I am very proud.

Steel [Brennan]

Let's take a walk.

Suvi [Aabria]

Thank you.

[Upbeat imperial marching drums kick in]

Brennan Mulligan

The sun begins to set, and, boy, does the energy in the Citadel change. As the sun begins to set, the stars will come out, and all of a sudden, you know, without that, the ceaseless beating of the sun, a night that will suddenly feel like you'll be floating, you know, a half a mile up within the eerie and surrounded by beautiful buildings and flowers. And it has the buzzing feel of an academy brought to life, of people talking about important things and all these brilliant minds brought to this one place.

Brennan Mulligan

As the sun sets and golden light filters in through the glass, you pass room after room of either a small cafe where students on break sit and sip small coffee from little brilliant blue and white cups that some foamy caffeinated drink passes their lips. And they talk excitedly about some fiddly magical problems, some minor bit of the lingua arcana. A new symbol, a new word discovered.

Brennan Mulligan

You walk past a massive hangar building. These, like, big silvery ribs of a white arcane canvas. And within it you can see artificers working alongside wizards. These, like, powerful wrapped white gloves with chain mail on the inside as they built some massive structural automaton, some strange silvery chrome centipede with some insectoid mechanical structure.

Brennan Mulligan

Who knows what it will do? And you begin to walk through the big doors of the building that has these brilliant ever-burning torches that are completely cool to the touch. No risk of fire breaking out within the Citadel. You walk past and hear a lecture going on as evening classes begin. And you see a group of younger, like, 16 year old wizards that have not yet taken their test to formally enter the Citadel. As an old droning lecturer wizard points and says,

Lecturing Mage [Brennan]

We understand within the formal taxonomy of the world of spirits the delineation between certain classifications of spiritual entity vis-a-vis the axis of celestial to themes. But wherein within that delineation do we find form for those spirits of nature best known to—[Speaking fades out]

Brennan Mulligan

The lecture drones on. You see half the class wide awake and riveted by this. And the kids that you cannot help but somewhat relate to in this moment that are either falling asleep because they don't have what it takes or falling asleep because they already know this.

Aabria Iyengar

I just want to make eye contact with any of the ones whose eyes are wandering and just give a little like, I know, man, I know.

Brennan Mulligan

As you move through, Steel speaks to you and says,

Steel [Brennan]

I can try to talk to—

Suvi [Aabria]

Yes, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Steel [Brennan]

What do you want me to say? I mean, you can't ask to be moved out of the apprentice position.

Suvi [Aabria]

No, what an honor, what a gift, what a joy.

Steel [Brennan]
Suvi, it is an honor to—

Suvi [Aabria]
Yeah, I know.

Steel [Brennan]
You're a step away from being in the leadership of the Citadel.

Suvi [Aabria]
Yeah, okay. Okay, that, that! So this is the most beautiful, incredible place in the world, and I don't know anything but this. How are you supposed to lead when your entire world was libraries and lecture halls and papers for ten years? Ten years. All I've done is study. I'm so tired of just knowing—what if, is there like a, can you go just do, like a walkabout? Can I just go do anything? My heart rate jumped up today for the first time in a month. Please let me go outside.

Brennan Mulligan
Please give me a perception check.

Aabria Iyengar
A natural one.

Brennan Mulligan
Perfect.

Lou Wilson
Hot damn. There it is. The first one. You hate to see it

Aabria Iyengar
Oh, no.

Lou Wilson
At least it's on a perception check.

Brennan Mulligan
You're so tunnel vision, you don't even notice that you are now on a balcony on a sort of third story of this building. There are beautiful, like, hyacinth, like flowers around. You see, there's a couple like you're sort of like, there's an arch and a balcony, so you're sort of held in this little cradle. There's some bird baths around here, and you see a couple of birds come into the bird baths. It doesn't bother you that these birds are partially fixed illusions, there, the ecosystem here is hard to manage, and people didn't so these birds are fabricated, but that's okay. They're very pretty. Steel looks at you and says,

Steel [Brennan]
Well, you're about to get your wish.

Suvi [Aabria]
[Quietly] What? Huh? What? [Clearing throat]

Aabria Iyengar
She immediately tries to regain some sort of posture and bearing.

Steel [Brennan]
It's, there's uh. Oh, Suvi. I'm very sorry. There's been too many times in my life that I've had to give you bad news, and I'm doing it yet again. Grandmother Ren is very ill.

Suvi [Aabria]
[Softly] Oh. No.

Steel [Brennan]
Grandmother Ren is very ill. I'm not sure how much, but I've spoken to the archmages, and given everything that you have given for the Citadel, given what your parents gave for the Citadel, an allowance is going to be made. We have license to open a traveling door to allow you to return. We can place you at Silbry, and then it's a short ride to Toma.

Suvi [Aabria]
Okay. I never got to—oh, God. Silbry. Thank you. I don't know what you had to trade or—thank you. How long do I get?

Steel [Brennan]
There's not there's not a hard and fast on it, I mean, I would assume, I would love for you to be there. I would love for you to be there for as long as it takes, if you understand. I think the important thing is just to stay in touch with us. We can send a speaking mirror through with you, and you can stay in touch with us.

Brennan Mulligan
And actually, speaking of, you see the stuff that you rolled a nat one perception on. She hands you a speaking mirror, which is just a way to sort of stay in touch, it's a communication device. She hands you a book and a scroll case. She says:

Steel [Brennan]
These are for grandmother Ren. If you would be kind enough to give them to her.

Suvi [Aabria]
Of course.

Brennan Mulligan
You see, the book has a title on it that says, "Stars of the Southern Skies," and then a sealed scroll case. She then looks and says

Steel [Brennan]
And...

Brennan Mulligan
And reaches into the ivy and pulls a tall wrought glass staff.

Suvi [Aabria]
[Yelps excitedly] Sorry. Very normal about this.

Brennan Mulligan
In the light of day, the glass of the body of the staff will seem sort of clear and radiant, reflecting sunlight from many angles. At night, a small helix of starlight, as though a small patch of the nighttime sky was encased within it, circles up to the top of the staff, which spreads into a pair of crystal wings containing a rounded sigil of the Citadel.

Suvi [Aabria]
That's for me? That's for me. Gimme. Give it. Give it. [More forcefully] Give it!

Steel [Brennan]
You're not really supposed to say "Give it" when presented with a staff of the—

Suvi [Aabria]
Look, there's no one here. It's just you and me. Give it.

Brennan Mulligan
You little gremlin.

Suvi [Aabria]
Yes. Look at me. Look at me, I look dope. This is cool and I'm, thank you.

Aabria Iyengar
And she looks around one more time and then just absolutely like tackles Steel with a hug.

Brennan Mulligan
Steel laughs and embraces you and immediately starts crying. She just goes

Suvi [Aabria]
Don't cry! I'll cry, what are you doing?

Steel [Brennan]
I'll cry because you're– [deep sigh] it's very meaningful to me. Soft and Stone should be here. Growing up with your mother, I made so many promises to her that I would take care of her. And getting to look after you makes up for the fact that I didn't get to keep those promises.

Suvi [Aabria]
[Voice quivering] You told me years ago that what you put your magic in, a little bit of you, stays there. And she put her magic in the world and you've been protecting it. So you've been keeping your promise. And I don't know if I've ever said it, and I know I wasn't maybe the easiest kid, but thank you. You didn't have to take care of me, but you did.

Brennan Mulligan
She wipes tears from her eyes and goes,

Steel [Brennan]
When you believe in a cause like your mother and father did, I don't know that there's much of a difference between the things you have to do and the things you choose to do. Maybe that's what peace is, is when your heart unites the things that you choose to do and the things that you have to do so that duty becomes a choice, and one that you are glad for.

Suvi [Aabria]
It's really deep, for a person that hits stuff with a sword for a living.

Steel [Brennan]
You are going to see what I do one day and you're going to be so sorry for all the times you made fun of me. Everyone–

Suvi [Aabria]
[Laughing] No I will not!

[Triumphant horn music lilts upward]

Steel [Brennan]
Here's what I don't understand. I also have a book, I have a book and a sword. You just have a book? Someone–

Suvi [Aabria]
Excuse me, I have a book and this dope ass staff

Steel [Brennan]
Don't take the things I gave you as points against me.

Suvi [Aabria]
It's mine now.

Steel [Brennan]
I gave you that staff. I put your father's ring on your finger and I—

Suvi [Aabria]
It looks good on me. I look great right now.

Brennan Mulligan
She scowls and says

Steel [Brennan]
You are a piece of work. Honestly, I don't know why it took us so long to get you the hell out of here.

Suvi [Aabria]
That's your fault. Speaking of which, when do I get to go?

[Upbeat imperial marching drums kick in over jubilant horns]

Brennan Mulligan
You make your way to one of the many halls of teleportation. You see a runic circle in the ground and nearby there is a teleportation specialist, deep blue robes. You see that their eyes are already sort of rolling back in their head as they begin to sort of calculate the different symbols. Up above you see there are moving constellations painted against the roof that, as the teleportation specialist below begins to chart the trajectory of where you're going, the projected sky in the dome moves to reflect the sky of where you will be going.

Aabria Iyengar
[Whispering] Oh wow, that's really cool.

Brennan Mulligan
You arrive, your teal hair in a slightly different configuration than the last time I saw you. Steel stands there and says

Steel [Brennan]
When you arrive there, I would prob—

Brennan Mulligan
And she hands you a purse of 40 gold pieces. 40, like, Imperial gold coins. Says,

Steel [Brennan]
You're going into a land that is— I know you remember from when you were young, but as an adult, you should know that while this is technically under the sphere of the Empire, this is very far from Kehmsaraza's shores. And so normally, if we were in the heart of the Empire, you would be able to go up and just ask for a horse and get one.

Steel [Brennan]
It will probably be better if you ask to buy one rather than simply get one. Yes. And there's a good reason for that. I can't promise you that there will not be agents of the Dominion or the Protectorate there. This is at the far edges of the Empire. And so I would say

Brennan Mulligan
and here she moves a hand over your glass staff, and the small cantrip goes into effect, a little minor spell, and it looks like a sort of brass, banded, wooden walking stick. She says,

Brennan Mulligan

So when you need it, use it. And if you don't need it, a little bit of a glamour just to be aware of the situations where it is important to let people know who you are and be aware of the ones where, maybe it's important that they not know who you are. This is what you asked for.

Suvi [Aabria]

Yeah. No, I won. This is great. I am a proud daughter of the Citadel, and I will make you and everyone proud. I could do this. I could do this. It's going to be fine.

Brennan Mulligan

The traveling door begins to open. [Sounds of something powering up] Give me an insight check.

Aabria Iyengar

Please. Please. Dice. [Gasps] Natural 20.

Lou Wilson

There it is.

Brennan Mulligan

Ooh, wow. Big spread.

Aabria Iyengar

What is the story we're trying to tell? Who could say?

Brennan Mulligan

You see Steel looking, you clock it really like, right as the traveling door is getting open for you to step through, Steel sort of has a moment of lost focus where she's lost in memory, and you can see her face goes into that neutral, where you're not even putting a facial expression, you're so replaying a memory that there's not even a sort of emotion on your face, and she's just staring at your forehead.

[Slow piano plays against the background sounds of powerful arcane spellwork]

Aabria Iyengar

And I just want to squeeze her hand the same way I do to bring Archmage Silence kind of back to the world and say,

Suvi [Aabria]

It's going to be okay.

Steel [Brennan]

[Sighs] I just—young wizards love to talk and here in the center of the desert we made, who could question the might of wizards?

Brennan Mulligan

And she squeezes your hand this time and gets really close, and you realize that your mother's greatest friend, and a woman who raised you after the unthinkable happened, is a very intense woman. And she gets close and says,

Steel [Brennan]

Don't let the fraternizing of patriotic students blind you to how much there is in the world that is not us.

Aabria Iyengar

And I think Suvi's face goes completely— she's been straddling that line of, like, adulthood and childhood and she's just lost momentarily in that childlike, open, a little afraid, a little pensive expression before she reschools herself and gives a little god.

Steel [Brennan]

One of the smartest things your father ever said that snapped me out of a trance when I first met him and admittedly, when I first met—I grew to love your father very, very much. But I knew his and your mother's reputations and I was very protective of my friend, as I had every right to be. And one of the first things your father said that charmed me due to its insight, which your father had in great quantity the entire world of wizard craft from the first elders that reached into the shadow and wrought the first secrets of the lingua arcana from the depths of ignorance into the sudden light of insight and realization. The most common of their downfalls has been seeing the humility and serenity of witches, and underestimating it.

Suvi [Aabria]

Fair. I'm no stranger to witches.

Brennan Mulligan

Suvi, standing in the center of the stone circle. The wizard to your right finally finds the constellation of stars to arrest with points of light at the end of each of their fingers, and materializing from motes of light that begin as nothing more than specks of dust, a rose and purple doorway of light that begins only as the faintest halo and begins to spool across a doorway; iridescent film of magical energy. The path navigated by the stars moves forward.

Brennan Mulligan

This road moves upon you. The door of light surrounds, envelopes and closes upon you. And as it constricts, you are already gone, such that the collapsing nexus of light vanishes in a burst. And nothing of the door nor the wizard that it carries is left except for a tiny spiral of vapor. Steel regards it. And then it is gone.