

# Patchwork Magic

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## Introduction:

*In a city of magic it seems only obvious, to anyone who stops to think about it, which really is almost no one at all, that there would be such a thing as a Spell Dump. A junkyard of magic and a wasteland of toxic byproducts.*

*If you asked any of the 'proper' people of New Istar City where one might find such a place, they almost certainly couldn't tell you. At best, the most thoughtful, informed, or well-connected might say you could probably find them in the undercity. Deep in the undercity. And so you could. But if you braved the depths of that undercity you might, just might, get someone to tell you about the dumps, and more the point, about the truly fascinating people called "Patchwork Mages." Mages who, lacking the resources and means of the upper or middle classes but being possessed of an undeniable talent, have combed those spell dumps for useful magic. Sometimes the magic they've managed to scavenge is recognizable, sometimes odd, and almost inevitably much of it is incomplete or useless. The very best of them, mages with more raw power or talent in their little fingers than the mage that tossed away a failed experiment had in his or her whole body, sometimes even manage to make powerful abandoned magics and ideas work.*

*Of course, as one might imagine, the less lucky or gifted of these souls might only find poor and useless magics, blow themselves up experimenting, or simply die from the poisonous concoctions they stumble into in the dumps. Still, it's truly amazing what these people can accomplish. The difficulty comes in getting them to tell you about it.*

*-Alexander Bramehin, on the subject of Exotic Magiks*

## Chapter 1:

Alya panicked as her consciousness returned. She couldn't move. She flared her magic and something shifted, some half-felt pressure faded away. Her eyes opened but she still couldn't see anything. No, wait, the black wasn't completely black? It was an extremely deep purple. Dark, yes, but there was color there. She struggled and her hand moved forward with the effort. Crystal? Why was there a crystal wall in front of her? Another flare of magic, smaller, as she activated her mage sight. She yelped and almost shut it off again. The light was blinding, chaotic. The very air was saturated with wildly surging currents of magic. She paled as she realized she could have blown herself halfway to the moon just activating her mage sight, let alone the surge she'd created to free herself. She tried to calm her racing heart, the last thing she needed was a burst of emotion-fueled accidental magic. That hadn't happened in years...well, in months at least. That would be a *really* embarrassing way for an adult mage to die.

She focused on the crystal in front of her, studying it with her mage sight. Best she make use of it since it hadn't blown her up. Containment magic? Was it protection? Or a trap? There didn't seem to be a way to dispel it from the inside, so maybe a trap. She'd have to break her way out. She bit her lip. That would almost certainly kill her. She was amazingly lucky her earlier bursts of magic hadn't set anything off. Well, nothing she could see at any rate, she supposed she may have torched half the city instead.

Where the hell *was* she anyway? This place looked worse than the aftermath of that fool twit in her second year who delved into chaos magics. They'd been dodging explosive rubber ducks, sheep that had once been furniture, and random bursts of skin-coloring bubbles for weeks, and the moron's private room was *still* sealed two years later. They said he might still be alive in there. Even if the room was mostly made up of pulsing red goo now.

She shook off the memory. This place was actually worse than that. Much worse. Had the lab exploded? The magic all mixed? Perhaps the crystal *was* a defense mechanism, after all, and she should wait for help?

The crystal shattered. *Outward.*

Her mind was still struggling to process that fact when a woman's voice spoke, followed by a tattooed arm reaching in through the shattered crystal. The voice that came with it sounded irritatingly amused. "Evening stranger, seems you've gotten into a tight spot."

Alya boggled just a moment at the arm as her eyes adjusted to the light. It was quite heavily tattooed and she recognized more than a few arcane symbols in there, almost like spell formula. How odd. She shook herself and grabbed the offered hand, allowing the unexpected strength behind it to pull her out.

She blinked, expecting pain as her eyes adjusted, but there wasn't much. The light here was dim and a quick glance up showed why. Somehow, she was in the lower city. Huh. She was still concerned about where she was, but her present company was more important and so she filled her vision with her rescuer, taking her in.

She was quite the sight, easily two inches over Alya's own five foot eight and very...*well formed*. But that was almost incidental. The tattoos covered much more than just her arm and were joined prominently by lip, nose, and eyebrow piercings. A shock of deep purple hair tipped in an iridescent blue, tight, worn leather pants and a body hugging halter top, which revealed a belly button piercing Alya had almost missed, completed the image of her rescuer.

"Looking's free Red, but you're not my type. Wrong gender, just for starters. A thank you might be nice, though."

Alya almost blushed at being caught gawking. Almost. Quickly gathering herself, then almost choking on her words when what the girl had said properly processed, she nevertheless managed a fairly friendly tone. She hoped it was friendly, at least, she was still a little off kilter.

“That you can have. The thanks, that is.” She finally took a proper glance around...and quickly realized she was far more lost than she could possibly have imagined. Even if her mage sight hadn't still been active she'd have never risked magic in this place. There were heaps of magical detritus and debris taller than her, surrounding her on all sides. She was even standing on the shallow slope of one such heap. “Okay, seriously, thank you, but...just where the hell *am* I exactly?”

Her companion looked startled for a moment but the expression disappeared with lightning speed, her response coming fast and incredulous. “The fuck are you doing in a spell dump not knowing where you are? How the hell did you get into the heart of the biggest dump in the city without knowing that?”

Alya blinked. “Spell dump? I've never even heard of a spell dump. I was in the lab just a—” she stopped herself. How long *had* it been? She'd been unconscious, but for how long? “— Well, it seemed like just minutes ago, to me at least. I suppose I don't really know how long I was trapped in there.” She waved at the broken crystal. “I only regained consciousness a few minutes ago.”

Her rescuer shook her head in disbelief. “You don't even know what a spell dump is? You're damn well right in the center of the largest one in New Istaral!”

Alya grimaced. “I can guess. I just never imagined anything like it.”

“Wow, I knew you uppers were out of touch with reality, but really....” She trailed off before turning noticeably pale. “Wait, so when you flared your power earlier...?”

Alya shrugged. “Pure luck I didn't blow half the city up. I had no idea where I was, or that using magic would be dangerous. Not until I activated my mage sight, anyway.”

The girl took a deep breath and heaved a huge sigh. “Shit, I assumed you must be really good to use that much magic in here, weaving it between or into the chaos.” She shook her head again, causing her hair to sway a bit with the abruptness of the motion. “Alright. I don't know if you have the best or worst luck I've ever heard of. You end up here, by some form of teleportation that *shouldn't* even be possible into *any* Spell Dump, let alone *this* one. Not only do you survive, but you don't blow us all up using magic without knowing the safe ways to do it in here, probably.”

Alya shook her head, she couldn't imagine how magic could *ever* be safe in here.

The girl blew a strand of hair out of her face in annoyance. “Right. Not so much.” She glanced at the crystal chamber she'd pulled Alya from and frowned. “So, did you get here as some sort of seriously epic accident? Or...?”

“Or was I sent here?”

The girl nodded in acknowledgment, looking wary of the answer. Clearly, she knew what

kind of skill that would take. Most likely she knew it better than Alya herself did.

Alya bit her lip and thought it over for a moment before she answered. “I...don't know. Last thing I remember was walking into the University lab—”

“University!”

Alya blinked. “Er? Yes? Reyalin University. Why?”

The woman across from her grimaced. “Reyalin! Shit Red, I knew you must be an upper from the clothes, even if they look like you've gone ten rounds with an abomination. But Reyalin? We know that name even down here in the lower city.”

She clearly seemed to be revising her, probably painfully low, opinion of Alya, but Alya found herself latching onto the bit about her appearance. She hadn't really taken stock of herself yet and now even a quick glance told her that her clothes were a write off. Already saturating in magic, torn in multiple places small and large alike. Her red lab-wear shirt –huh that must be where the girl had gotten the nickname from– had a major gash over her left breast, showing clearly the thankfully undamaged black bra beneath. Other, more minor, rips and tears littered the loose shirt and pants. Thankfully none were worse, in either severity or placement, than the one at her breast. She seemed to have been bleeding from a few scrapes at one point, though they had since stopped, and she could feel what she was sure was a pair of bruised or cracked ribs.

The woman grabbed her shoulder and shook her slightly. “Hey, don't zone out in here! We're damn lucky nothing has gone wrong with us standing in one place like this.”

Alya shook herself. Apparently, now was not the time. “Sorry. I'm still trying to figure out what happened.”

Her rescuer grimaced. “Best wait until we get out of here for that.” She paused for a moment and seemed to resign herself to something. “I'd feel like an ass if I just left you here. I'm one of the only patchers that can navigate safely this deep into the central dump. Well, mostly safely. The name's Sae, by the way. Figure you ought to at least know my name if I've got to nursemaid you out of here.”

Alya swallowed her pride at that last comment. The woman was right, after all. “Nice to meet you Sae, and thanks for this. The name's Alya, Alya Sulwyn, I owe you big time and I won't forget.”

Sae grinned. “Sure, Red. Now let's get moving.”

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Alya was glad, *very very* glad, that Sae hadn't simply abandoned her to her fate. The chaos had started not fifteen steps from the crystal trap and hadn't let up for more than a few minutes at a time since. Apparently, her earlier indiscretions with magic had attracted some of

the more unfortunate populace of the spell dump. Unfortunate for said populace that was. A pair of heavily mutated ghouls had been waiting in ambush and only Sae's magic, as well as her tripping Alya to keep her from participating and possibly blowing them all up, had gotten them out in their, much preferred, uneaten state. Her initial mental picture of the spell dump had also been proven woefully inadequate. It was much, much, larger than she had originally assumed. They had been trekking through debris fields, as well as carefully working their way around or through cesspools of toxic potion failures, minefields of malfunctioning magic traps, and nests of feral golems, for well over an hour and a half thus far.

Thankfully, after Sae had been forced to save her from an embarrassing incident with an enchanted kitchen sink, the tattooed mage had begun instructing her on how to read the ebb and flow, shifts, swirls, and spirals of chaotic mixed magics, at least well enough to manage some simple cantrips. It wasn't much, but it was something, and it made her at least marginally less useless. Also thankfully, she'd been able to manage a mending cantrip to make some, admittedly rather ugly, repairs to her wardrobe. It was still with a huge internal sigh of relief that she greeted the information that they were near an exit.

She tried not to let on how desperately relieved she was, trying to project at least some small amount of dignity. "Oh thank the Almighty! Wait, is that why it's been getting easier to cast magic?" A *very* small amount of dignity. She didn't have much left after the sink incident.

Sae grinned at her, seeming to find her relief amusing. "It is. It's also why I waited to get out of the dump core before I started trying to teach you anything. The deeper you get into the spell dump the older and more degraded, and thus less stable and orderly, the magics get. Out here near the edge any decent patcher can manage at least a few spells safely." She paused before admitting, "You picked it up amazingly fast though, I admit I wasn't expecting that." Surprisingly, there wasn't a hint of condensation in her voice, sounding instead to be genuinely impressed. A little bit, anyway.

"Hmm. You keep mentioning that term, 'patcher.' I get that it's some specific subclass of mage, but what does it mean, exactly?"

Sae looked surprised for a moment, then the mild confusion on her face settled. "Right. You're an upper-city brat. I suppose you don't have any patchwork mages. That's an odd thought, we're just about the only kind of magic user down here on the ground."

"Patchwork mages?"

"Yeah. That's where the term 'patcher' comes from, obviously. I suppose you are sorta right, calling us a subclass of mage, but you're sorta wrong too."

"Oh? What are they then?"

"It's basically just a title for any mage who teaches themselves magic without the benefit of any proper instruction. Not dabblers you understand, but dedicated mages who scavenge their collection of magic from anywhere and everywhere they can. Hence 'patchwork' as there is very

rarely any rhyme or reason to the magic they know. Most of it comes out of the spell dumps, with either the mage themselves combing through the dumps for magic they can use, or else buying it from specialty shops that the scavenger patchers sell the stuff they don't want or can't use to."

Alya balked. "Wait, people actually use magic from this place?"

"Sure. What did you think I was doing in here? I was looking for useful magic. Either stuff to add to my own collection, or stuff I could sell to the patcher shops." She dug in the small bag she carried over one shoulder with one hand, pulling out a scroll to show Alya. "Like this. It's a pretty basic variation of a fire spell. Probably something a bored university mage drew up as practice then threw away as having no practical purpose. It's complete, though, which means even as a low-level spell it's worth a pretty penny. The better patchers, like me, can finish partial spells. But the newbies need stuff like this to work with."

Even just the glance she got told Alya why it had been discarded. The flame spell as written had a purely cosmetic change of color and cost a solid 5% more mana as a result. Making something of the sort would have been a routine assignment for a second year at the university, but virtually none of the students would keep the spell afterwards. Only the fact that the parchment was clearly old and detailed a somewhat archaic form of runic script, kept her from wondering if it had been one of her own classmates that had discarded it.

"So there is no formal education for magic down here at all? Don't these patchwork mages share spells?"

Sae shrugged. "Sure, sometimes. With the basic stuff, at least. We aren't likely to share the good stuff, though, since we have to keep an edge somehow. And no, there really isn't any education down here for magic. Hell, there's barely a regular education, for that matter. I suspect there wouldn't be even that much if it wouldn't hurt the various refineries for their employees not to have basic literacy and math skills."

Alya uncomfortably shrugged off the latter observation, knowing it as probably true. Ignoring it as best she could, she chewed the idea of these 'patchers' over for a few moments before nodding her head. It all made a sort of sense, though she wondered just how much practical magic they could get in such a haphazard way. "You said they weren't really a subclass. Is it because they are too different from each other?"

"Right in one, Red. No two patchers are alike. The only similarities are the source of their magical knowledge and a certain predicable randomness."

"Huh."

A comfortable silence descended as the conversation trailed off. Sae had been surprisingly pleasant, if embarrassingly teasing, company, but both had their own thoughts as they neared the exit. Sae had admitted that this detour would likely set her back a week, as paths through the dump were almost never stable enough to use more than once, and Alya's own

thoughts turned once again to how it had all happened. Had it truly been an accident? Or was it an enemy? Was it safe to return to the university without knowing? Or even to the upper city in general?

Suddenly, Sae broke their silence with a low curse. It was too quiet for Alya to make out the exact words, but it sounded vicious enough to grab her attention. She followed Sae's line of sight and almost missed a step as she saw the focus of the other girl's attention. They were drawing near what was clearly an exit, a gated archway with dingy streets visible beyond. Unfortunately, there were also four rough looking men waiting in front of it.

“Trouble?”

Sae let out a sigh, seeming exhausted for just a moment before she steeled herself and answered Alya's whispered inquiry. “Yes. That's Rocco and some of his crew. They're part of the Cursed, and this particular exit is in their turf. They'd be a typical street gang, if it wasn't for the top lieutenants all being patchers. That makes them dangerous, not to mention unpredictable. They've been trying to pressure me into joining for years. Most of the time I can just shrug them off, but catching me coming out of the core with an unknown? Even worse, a gorgeous female unknown? This isn't going to be pretty. If you get a chance, run.”

“They're that dangerous?”

Sae scowled. “No. Not even close. Alone and outside the spell dump I could take all four of them without any trouble. But with someone else to look after it'll be harder and some of my magics are better not used this close to the dump. Too much risk of a backlash.”

Alya raised an eyebrow but didn't get a chance to respond. They had closed slowly with the men and Rocco, a rough looking mid-sized fellow, remarkable only for a nose that seemed to have been broken and improperly fixed at least twice, spoke up.

“Well well, looks like you broke your rule, Sae. Don't you keep telling us you're a loner? That you don't play well with others? Not that I blame you. She's hot. Too many clothes, though.”

Alya scowled at the comment and accompanying leer as Sae brought them to a stop a good fifteen feet from Rocco and his thugs, striking a relaxed but irritated pose with one hand on her cocked hips. She spoke before Alya could lash out with a suitable retort.

“Knock it off Rocco, she's just someone I found in trouble down near the core. Offered to help her out.”

Rocco's face twisted in disbelief. “Bullshit. Nobody but you goes anywhere near the core alone.”

Sae snorted. “Believe what you want, I don't give a shit. Just get out of the way, I've had a long day.”

The group of four looked at each other, and from the thug's expressions it was clear it wasn't going to be so easy as that. Alya glanced around with her still-active mage sight, taking in the state of the ambient magic. It wasn't that chaotic here, not bad at all really, and with what Sae had shown her.... She tipped her head forward, concealing a vicious little grin as she twisted slightly, concealing one hand behind her body. She would look like she was cowering and half ready to run back into the dump. Good, that was a nice bonus. Her fingers began twitching as she mentally ordered the energies for a spell. What she had in mind would have a long build up, but if she separated out the verbal component, shaped the energy mentally and prepped it in her hand, they'd not notice until it was far too late, when she added the verbal trigger after it was already formed. It took a god-awful amount of control and not a little raw power to split a spell like that. But she'd always had both of those in spades.

The gang members were done assessing each other. They all shifted position a bit, clearly getting ready for a fight. It wasn't Rocco that spoke up, but rather a squat man in torn leathers with what looked like a silver rod in one hand. He growled out, "Don't think so, Sae. Not this time. You've put us off one time too many. We think your welcome is all worn out here. Maybe you'll change your mind about joining up after a few days in the Den."

Whatever that meant couldn't be good. Sae's calm had completely shattered, though she looked angry, rather than afraid. "If you small dicked fuckers think you've got big enough balls to—"

They'd never find out what she would have said, for Alya's spell was ready. She set herself, thrust her arm forward and shouted, "**Divebianl Niktate!**"

Her arm was covered in blood red lightning, arcing dangerously off her skin as it was thrust forward. She timed the words to end with the full extension of her thrust and the lightning leapt forward and spread out in a wave. There was no time for the thugs to dodge and as all four men were struck by the advancing wave it became clear that this was no simple elemental attack spell. A blast wave tossed them from their feet, throwing them clear of the gate, screaming in agony as they flew, the lightning racing through their bodies and burning out nerves. As they impacted with the ground the final component of the complex spell fired, the lightning sinking into the ground as it made contact. The transferred magic animated the stonework to bind the thug's hands and feet. The men were already blissfully unconscious from the pain when the new bindings constricted, shattering bones with a sickening crunch.

"Holy shit!" Sae looked between Alya and the trapped men.

For a moment Alya thought maybe she'd gone too far.

"You prepped everything but the verbal component separately? Without being able to see it? That takes seriously hardcore control! Not to mention the power requirements, the fact that I've never even *heard* of a spell that can do all of that and, oh yeah, we're still in the bloody chaos zone! Even if we're just on its edges. Just who the hell *are* you?"

A bit taken aback at the lack of reaction to the violence, Alya was surprised how good the mischievous smirk spreading across her face felt. “I already told you my name, but I guess that wouldn't mean much to anyone outside the upper city, huh? Maybe if I told you I'm only a couple of steps and a single test from becoming the youngest archmage in three centuries. Would that help?”

Sae gawked at her, composure disrupted for the first time since she pulled Alya out of the crystal. Then, abruptly, she laughed. It was a deep, rich, full bodied sound that held no mockery, just surprised delight. It was beautiful and Alya smiled properly for the first time since regaining consciousness. “What, you don't believe me?”

Sae, wrestling her laughter under control with some effort, waved the thought off. “Oh no, I believe you. It's just that I'd pegged you for some neophyte at that school of yours. Pretty sure they thought you were a newbie non-entity too, what with looking like that and not being recognized.” She smirked. “I think you and I are going to get along just fine. If you're still worried about what's happening up above, you can crash at my place for a few days. If you want.”

Alya hesitated. How much could she really trust this woman? She'd met her less than two hours ago. Still...

Perhaps misinterpreting her hesitation, or perhaps merely adding to the temptation, Sae added. “Consider it repayment for dealing with those assholes for me. You can get a couple of free meals while you figure things out. Plus, it'll keep you out of reach while their friends are pissed off. Give 'em a couple of days to cool down and they probably won't bother you over it. The silver lining about a gang led by patchers is that their leaders are all at least moderately intelligent. They aren't likely to bother someone who handed them their ass, particularly if you're known to be a friend of mine. Once they have a chance to calm down the worst they'll do is try to recruit you.”

After a few more moments pause Alya made up her mind, firmly nodded her head, and answered the unspoken question hanging between them. “Sure Sae, I'd appreciate it. Besides, whatever you say about repayment, I still owe you for getting me out of the dump alive.”

Sae shrugged but didn't bother to deny it. She abruptly threw an arm around Alya and started them walking, Alya stumbling along for the first step or two. “Alright then, Red, let's get you some food, and maybe some clothes that don't scream “upper city,” yeah?”

Alya looked back. “Uh, shouldn't we do something about them?”

Sae's gait didn't falter and she didn't look back. “They gonna die?”

“No, the spell is designed to be painful but non-lethal. Going to need magical healing before they can move much, though. For the nerve damage, mostly.”

“Perfect. Lots of people around here have been screwed over by them. Someone will drag

them to a healer...eventually. After they've stolen their clothes and maybe broken a few more bones.”

Alya shrugged and let Sae drag her off. It sounded like they probably deserved it.