



Chapter 5

Monday, April 3

Studio of Morning Time Daily. Profundia.

Wherein Zoe finds her voice and gets a job. Good for her!

Zoe was feeling raw and unsettled that morning, a state of mind that made her overly sensitive. The band's awful attempt to perform at the AgeMixxer had only been three days ago and thinking about it still made her sick, but it had been weeks since the Day of the Dragon, and going to work at Morning Time Studios was an extended exercise in avoidance, or so Zoe thought.

For example, the back parking lot. It was where the dragon had come in from, and where the powers that had been had staked out the ill-fated magic generation project. Someone had used to maintain that place as part of their job, Zoe supposed, but whoever it was, they were doing something else now. Zoe wondered

how they hid that particular work experience on their current résumé. “Grounds maintenance supervisor” if they were hoping to hide the job under the banner of banality, perhaps, or “magical input technician” if they were going for something more professional.

Compared to how Zoe had labeled some of her work experience on some of her résumés, that actually wasn’t too bad.

But the dragons were gone, as far as Zoe knew, and so were the kitties (former dragons) and bats (former maidens), still no one parked in the back parking lot. Anyway, there were always plenty of free spots at the front of the building. Her internal calculus suggested that the first row from the front door was worth a small cookie. Unless she was running late and had to dash. Then the stress and the dash together would earn her a medium-sized cookie.

Zoe, passing through the lobby at a pace that was probably good for a big bite of something gooey, noticed that the iconic, golden statues of Ambrosia and Artifice in their heroic newscaster poses had finally been taken down. The pedestal where they had stood all those years had left a mark on the carpeted floor, but Zoe thought even that would soon be worn away. The new nature of the business of the studios was to let dust cover things that weren’t useful without comment. Not commenting and thus leaving a memo trail was the new normal.

“OK,” the new studio head, Mindy Maxim-Fnort, was alone in the breakroom. Her award-winning hair was pulled up into a head-straining knot and her brows were drawn low over her reading glasses. She was looking at a printout of figures and talking into her phone when Zoe walked in. Zoe hesitated, but Mindy absently waved her into the room without breaking the stride of her conversation. “I hear what you’re saying, but viewership is down. If we’re relying on advertising revenue, we need

a way to get eyes on the products, and we can't raise rates for the sponsors if we don't have those eyes. Just find me something—" she broke off. To Zoe, the voice on the other end of the line sounded like a desperate bumblebee, all apology and buzz, but it must have made sense to Mindy. "See that you do," she said, and disconnected the call.

Zoe expected her to leave after that. The woman was in charge of rebranding and directing programming for the whole studio, and had to be busy, but Mindy stayed, drumming her fingers on the scuffed employee table and staring into the middle distance, presumably chasing inspiration. Zoe didn't think Mindy even realized someone else was in the room, and was so surprised to find out otherwise that when she was filling the teapot at the sink and Mindy asked her a question, Zoe jumped.

"What are you doing?" was Mindy's question.

"I'm making tea," said Zoe, reaching for a towel to wipe up the water she'd spilled. "We don't do coffee anymore, not since..." she shrugged. Among things that they avoided in Morning Time Studios was talking about the incident out loud, let alone giving it a name.

"No," said Mindy. She came closer, standing beyond the splash zone and pointing, first at Zoe then at the pot of water in her hand. "Why are you doing this. It's not your job to make tea in the breakroom, is it? I thought you were the crafty-table girl. Zellie?"

"Zoe," said Zoe.

"Yes, that's right," said Mindy.

"The teapot was empty," said Zoe, by way of explanation. "Someone has to fill it up, so that when people come in, thirsty,

there's hot water for tea. Not everyone gets to eat from the craft table," she added, not sure whether the president of the studio didn't actually know this or if she, Zoe, was being tested in some weird way. "It's not hard to fill the pot when I see it's empty, and it makes things run more smoothly all around." She gave a little, half-embarrassed shrug.

"You're good at that, as I remember," said Mindy thoughtfully. Her eyes were focused on Zoe, sharp and intelligent, but they were also narrow, as if she were imagining Zoe as a piece that somehow fit into a puzzle of her own making. It was not a comfortable place to be standing, and Zoe could feel herself starting to sweat.

"Making tea?" she asked nervously.

"Organizing things," said Mindy. "I sign the paperwork, and I noticed that since you took over the craft service, the lines have been smoother, talent's been happier, and there's been less waste. You did the same sort of thing on day one," she added. "Weren't you in charge of organizing the first aid stations?"

"It just seemed like a nice way to help," said Zoe.

"It was," agreed Mindy, still giving her that sharp stare. Zoe's armpits prickled as the silence dragged out. "You heard me talking on the phone just now?"

"Well, yes," said Zoe. Of course she had. They were the only two people in the room. "But I wasn't trying to eavesdrop," she added hurriedly.

Mindy waved her worries away. "Obviously not," she said. "But you seem like a person who has useful ideas, and I don't want to have to explain myself again if I don't need to. You know what the problem is, Zoe?"

Zoe nodded and answered without thinking, “Our shows are boring.”

Mindy paused, mouth half open and whatever she’d been intending to add remained forever unsaid.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean...” The words trailed off. Zoe had no idea why that had come out THAT way, but it had. And besides, part of her brain insisted that the shows these days WERE boring.

Mindy folded her arms and her face bloomed with the sort of condescending smile that meant she was going to be amused now, and possibly make an example of how wrong the young person in front of her was about to be. Dimly, Zoe realized this was her One Big Chance and she might as well go down saying what she thought.

“People just aren’t interested in what we are putting out there,” she said quickly. “And they don’t like us. Not anymore. After what happened here, and the Homecoming, well, we haven’t earned any trust back, and if they don’t like us or trust us, why would they want to listen to what we have to say? We’re just talking heads not saying anything interesting. Or at least anything they want to hear from us.”

Mindy hesitated, and gave a thoughtful nod. Her eyebrows lifted in query. “Go on, Organized Miss Zoe. You have an idea of something wonderful and new that we ought to be bringing to people’s homes in these turbulent times?”

“Well,” said Zoe, diffidently. “I don’t know if it’s wonderful, and it isn’t all that new.” She realized she was still holding the teapot full of water in a defensive position and turned to set it on the hot plate, then began, mechanically, to sort the tea bags. “It’s old, really, I suppose. I mean, it’s the sacrificial maidens I was

thinking of. People are curious about them. I was talking about it with my Grandpa Wallace and, umm, well, I'm sure plenty of people would be interested in knowing how the maidens are getting on with their families and whether they're happy to be home again."

"Would they?" asked Ms. Maxim-Fnort, in a slow drawl that implied she, personally, didn't think anyone would.

"Well, they can't all be opening Optical Factories for Charity," insisted Zoe. "One or two of them might be worth talking to, that's all I mean. At least, it would give us a chance to do something positive, instead of ignoring the problem. At the very, very least, we could tell them, or at least imply, we're sorry."

"Mm," said Mindy. It was not an agreement, but not an outright laugh, either. "And you're Wallace's kid, right." More of a thoughtful noise, after which she went silent, deep in thought, and Zoe almost wanted to hold her breath. She decided to alphabetize tea instead, and involved herself in replacing empty flavor boxes with new ones from the supply shelves. She had refilled the sugar bowl when Mindy drew breath again to speak.

"All right," she said. "Here's what we're going to do. It's almost the hundredth day since the first maiden was reunited with her family." Zoe nodded; they had a sign up in the lunchroom that read "_____ days since being burned up by dragons." She wondered if Mindy had ever noticed it. "We'll track down those ladies and princesses and peasants and send a camera crew to record their transitions back to the people, and..." Mindy pointed a finger directly at Zoe's face. It wasn't holding a magic wand, but Zoe didn't appreciate the gesture at all. "And...we'll get advertisers to donate prizes. Our sponsors can sponsor a maiden and have key promotion points in that week's broadcast."

"Yes, ma'am," said Zoe, who felt that some response was called for.

“And you had better brush up on your work and broom skills, Zoe,” Mindy said with a smile. “Because someone has to go along with the film crew to make sure all the details come together.”

“What?” Zoe blinked and took a step back, wishing she had some file folders to hold protectively to her chest.

“You want me to go on camera?”

As aghast as she was about the prospect, it still stung that Mindy laughed. “Goodness, no. Not that. But I’ve been in this business a long time.”

This was true. Some wizards, and Mindy was one of them, used magic or were magic or somehow were able to resist the march of time. Her work at Morning Time Studios predated television.

“The point is, Zoe,” Mindy took off her glasses in a theatrical gesture. “We need you more than we need a magical superstar. The time for magic has passed. We have junior reporters who could use some time in the field, and someone has to go along to make sure they don’t get lost in the woods or forget the script. Someone has to arrange for hotel stays and road maps and meal vouchers and make sure the sponsors don’t forget to send samples of their products on ahead, and that the director doesn’t forget to place them prominently in the picture during the interview. Someone,” a little jab with the hand holding her glasses, “who pays attention to the little details.”

“We need you, Zoe.”