

INK ON DEAD PAPER
By Kelly McGlade

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CHARACTERS

PROFESSOR HELENA, 38, a teacher at a mage academy and a high-level conjurer. Her left hand is an intricate white prosthesis.

ALEXEI, 15, a student at the mage academy and one of PROFESSOR HELENA's students.

TIME

Reminiscent of real-world late 19th century. Midnight.

SETTING

Western-based fantasy world. Between the stacks in the shadowy Restricted Wing of the mage academy's Gothic-style library.

(Single light on ALEXEI as he enters the blue-tinged shadows of the library. The atmosphere is creepy. There is a door blocking entry to the Restricted Wing. ALEXEI looks over his shoulder before holding his hand out in front of the door's lock.)

ALEXEI

(Whispered)
Unlock.

(The lock magically unlatches. ALEXEI winces at the noise and cautiously pushes open the door, slipping into the dense stacks of books. He scans the spines with one finger.)

ALEXEI

Come on, come on, where is it... Just give me something... Necromancy, necro- ah!

(ALEXEI goes for a thick tome bound in old, white leather. At the same moment, PROFESSOR HELENA passes by the Restricted Wing door, still cracked open.)

PROFESSOR HELENA

Who's there?

(ALEXEI snags the book off the shelf and makes a break for it. PROFESSOR HELENA rushes in and spots him down the aisle.)

PROFESSOR HELENA

Hey! Stasis!

(PROFESSOR HELENA extends her good fist towards ALEXEI as she casts the spell. He freezes on the spot, clutching the book to his chest.)

PROFESSOR HELENA

Light.

(PROFESSOR HELENA twists her prosthetic wrist as if screwing in a lightbulb, and a light illuminates her palm. She approaches ALEXEI.)

PROFESSOR HELENA

(Recognizing him)
Alexei.

ALEXEI

Hey! Professor! Funny running into you here. Who'd have thought we both like taking strolls through... silent libraries when we can't fall asleep, huh?

PROFESSOR HELENA

Who indeed. And *very* funny we should make such an acquaintance in the Restricted Wing.

ALEXEI

Well... it's the silentest part of the library.

PROFESSOR HELENA

That's because it's off limits to underclassmen, not to mention after hours. How did you even get in here?

ALEXEI

Someone left the door unlocked.

PROFESSOR HELENA

Try again.

ALEXEI

(Mumbling)

I cast Unlock on the door.

PROFESSOR HELENA

You cast... That spell is only taught to senior abjuration students. How did you get your hands on it?

ALEXEI

Look, you got me. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come in here. Can you just let me go and we forget this ever happened?

PROFESSOR HELENA

(Noticing the book)

What have you got there?

ALEXEI

What? Nothing!

(PROFESSOR HELENA takes the book out of ALEXEI's arms and dispels the Stasis spell with a wave of her hand. ALEXEI goes to grab it back but winces in defeat as she turns over the cover and reads it.)

PROFESSOR HELENA

"The Advanced Principles and Applications of Necromancy, Volume Three."

ALEXEI

Is that what it was? I was reaching for the Illusion 101 Study Guide.

PROFESSOR HELENA

Your illusions *could* do with some brushing up if you thought this little misdirection would work. (*Disappointed*) Alexei, what is the meaning of this?

ALEXEI

Well... you know, I always make top marks in class. Nathaniel, too. And sometimes class gets boring, so every once and a while he and I... read ahead.

PROFESSOR HELENA

Did Nathaniel put you up to this, then?

ALEXEI

No! I mean... well, no. No, he didn't.

PROFESSOR HELENA

You sure of that?

ALEXEI

Yes!

(*PROFESSOR HELENA sighs and tucks the book under her arm.*)

PROFESSOR HELENA

I don't think I need to explain to you the severity of your poor decision tonight.

ALEXEI

(*Unusually solemn*)

No. You... really don't.

PROFESSOR HELENA

These books are restricted to students for a reason. Most of them cover topics that only professors and the highest mages should be researching. Especially necromancy.

ALEXEI

I know.

PROFESSOR HELENA

I appreciate your enthusiasm towards your studies. Believe me, I know how frustrating it can be when you feel like your classes aren't moving at the pace you'd like. But magic isn't like any other academic study. Reading years ahead in mathematics might only confuse you. Reading ahead in the magical arts could backfire in unspeakable ways.

ALEXEI

I know, I know. I'm sorry.

PROFESSOR HELENA

I hope this is only your first foray into this wing.

ALEXEI

(Eyeing up the book in her arms)

No, it is. I promise.

PROFESSOR HELENA

And the Unlock spell?

ALEXEI

We got that from some upperclassman who left their notes out in the study lounge downstairs.

PROFESSOR HELENA

I see. Well, Alexei, I'm willing to let you off with a stern warning for this time only. As far as I can tell, you're an avid scholar who's stumbled too far down the path of curiosity. If you leave now, I won't inform my superiors of this little run-in.

ALEXEI

Please, just... can I have that book back first? It's... important.

PROFESSOR HELENA

Nothing can possibly be so important as to permit you to walk out of here with this. Advanced Necromancy? Absolutely not.

ALEXEI

You don't understand.

PROFESSOR HELENA

You're right, I don't. I'm not a necromancer. This book contains powerful magic that even I couldn't even attempt safely, let alone any of my students.

ALEXEI

Please. Just this once. I really need it.

PROFESSOR HELENA

For what?

(ALEXEI hesitates. PROFESSOR HELENA nods slowly in a "that's what I thought" manner. She raises her prosthetic left hand.)

PROFESSOR HELENA

Have any of the upperclassmen ever told you how I came to use this hand?

ALEXEI

No?

PROFESSOR HELENA

Interesting. I'd have thought someone would have used it as a nice scare tactic.

ALEXEI

For real?

PROFESSOR HELENA

I wasn't in your scholarly shoes that long ago, you know, I know how those power dynamics work. In fact, my sister and I were very much like you and Nathaniel back then. Top of our classes. Eager to learn every spell in the books.

ALEXEI

I guess.

PROFESSOR HELENA

She and I were both interested in conjuration from a very young age. Portal magic, especially. Instantaneously transporting something from place to place. We wanted to be pioneers into the frontier of high-level teleportation... so we conducted our own research.

(PROFESSOR HELENA walks back to the shelf from where the book was taken as she talks. ALEXEI follows right on her heels. She shelves the book and ALEXEI fights his frustration.)

ALEXEI

Trust me, the last thing I need is a warning about this...

PROFESSOR HELENA

I'm trying to help you, Alexei. I don't want to see any of my students hurt by making the same mistake I did.

ALEXEI

(Worried, hesitant)

What mistake?

PROFESSOR HELENA

My sister bartered a senior-level conjuration textbook from a recent academy graduate. I don't know how she did it, but we got our hands on some of the most complex spells I'd ever seen. We set up all the components, memorized all the vocalizations. We just overlooked one thing.

ALEXEI

Yeah?

PROFESSOR HELENA

(Smiling sadly)

Stamina. All spells drain stamina; you know this from your very first semesters here. The more powerful the spell, the more stamina it takes. That's why our curriculum is structured in such gradual but specific increments. Lists of components and vocalizations are just ink marks on paper if you don't have the stamina to back up your spells. And if you give out mid-casting...

ALEXEI

The spell'll get out of hand.

PROFESSOR HELENA

(Nodding)

My sister passed out while we were trying to open a portal. We never reached the other side. When the energy settled down, both her legs had been swallowed by the void we'd opened up... and so had my hand.

ALEXEI

(Blurting)

And what if we already got hurt?

PROFESSOR HELENA

I'm sorry?

ALEXEI

What if your students already made that same mistake, and already got hurt before you had the chance to warn them?

(PROFESSOR HELENA slowly looks to ALEXEI, then the necromancy book, then back to ALEXEI, whose true fear and guilt is finally clear on his face.)

PROFESSOR HELENA

What happened.

ALEXEI

We were just fooling around. We didn't think the spell was as powerful as it was. None of the others were. Unlock wasn't, we knew that already.

PROFESSOR HELENA

(Understanding dawning)

The upperclassman notes.

ALEXEI

Nathaniel wanted to get into necromancy anyway once we got older, and when we saw a necromancy spell under the papers we just had to try it out...

(Tearing up)

I was right there with him, I was *right there*, but it got out of control and Nathaniel collapsed and there was this awful, haunting howl and all this white wind pouring out of his body and it... it killed him.

(Silence and horror sinks in.)

ALEXEI

I'm so, so sorry. It was an accident. We were both in on it.

PROFESSOR HELENA

(Whispering)

Where is Nathaniel now?

ALEXEI

He's still in our room. I didn't know what to do, the spell just sucked out his soul or something, so I ran here as fast as I could cause I thought... maybe, there'd be something that could bring him back before anyone had to find out.

PROFESSOR HELENA

Stay calm. There are protocols in place for student magical malfunction. Though I admit, this situation is more dire than any I've had to mitigate before.

ALEXEI

I'm sorry...

PROFESSOR HELENA

I believe you. We'll resolve this, though I'm going to have to bring Professor Sandor into this. He's the strongest necromancer in the faculty.

ALEXEI

Fine. Bring in whoever you have to. Punish us however we deserve it, just... please help me bring him back. I'll never do any of this again.

PROFESSOR HELENA

We'll discuss punishment later. Right now, we should move quickly.

(PROFESSOR HELENA takes the book off the shelf and hands it to ALEXEI.)

PROFESSOR HELENA

Professor Sandor will be needing this. Let's bring it to him, and then we can both explain everything that's happened.

(ALEXEI takes the book. PROFESSOR HELENA takes him by the shoulder and guides him swiftly out of the Restricted Wing. She closes the door behind them and holds out her hand to the lock.)

PROFESSOR HELENA

Lock.

(Blackout.)