

THE OREWICK

BOOK I

**OLD HAND STEEL**

BY  
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# OLD HAND STEEL

## Recall A Mage

*‘Dad would never be unfair,’* Macyn fully believes as he rushes up their shanty apartment complex. In the rough side of Las Vegas, the sixteen-year-old ignores the depressing and tatted flights of stairs to the third floor as well as his sketchy neighbors on his way to the scratchy red door of his home. The two-bedroom apartment is as lackluster and drab as any other apartment in the complex, however, Macyn’s step-mother is obsessed with shiny gold and littered their home with tacky furniture and decor. The entire unit was thickly perfumed in scented oils and sometimes he would hold his breath as he rushed to his room; his only sanctuary from his step-family.

Macyn’s room was clean and neat. He didn’t want to give his parents any excuse to take his room away from him, which always scares him will one day happen. So after he empties his old and heavily repaired school bag and puts all his supplies away, he slowly takes the white envelope with his final report card of the year and places it on his small but well-organized desk.

Nervously chewing on his lower lip, Macyn is scared his grades won’t have improved since mid-terms, after all, his academics is the only reason he has his sanctuary and why they can’t take it away from him. But bringing himself to open such an important piece of document thoroughly scares him, making his brow sweat. He hadn’t expected his first honors class to be so challenging and he struggled all year because of it.

Feeling that nervous pain of uncertainty, his mismatching eyes automatically land on the one framed photo on his desk. A five-year-old Macyn was on his mother’s shoulders and they were both flexing their right arm, not that she had big muscles. She was a small woman but blessed with an abundance of energy. She was smiling, his younger self was smiling, and to remember better times was comforting. With a relaxed breath, Macyn opens the thin envelope and is relieved when he sees his grades.

At the dinner table that night, after Macyn’s parents bring up their final grades, Macyn smiles happily and couldn’t help eying his step-sister as he hands his father his report card. She was a very athletic girl as tall as he was with broad shoulders who loved to wrestle. It’s not that he didn’t like her, but as their home is only a two-bedroom, she currently has to sleep on the couch, which his step-mother hates.

“...wow, Mace,” Colin weakly hums before passing it over to his wife.  
“Straight A’s...”

Macyn wondered where the rest of his excitement was. Turning to This is the first time he’s ever gotten straight A’s, with an honors class, no less. Turning to Annette, she didn’t even seem to care, and Macyn suddenly felt anxious again. He’s not naturally good at schoolwork and the only reason he’s trying so hard is to keep his room, and so he asserts as if it’s a foregone conclusion, “so, unless June got better grades, I get to keep my room for another year... right?”

The silence at the dinner table was deafening and made Macyn breathe heavier.  
“Son... after discussing it with your mother-”

“Step-mother,” Macy knee-jerk corrects. Annette is the epitome of a cocktail waitress. Blown out bleach-blond hair, heavy make-up, skinny, and wears a lot of jewelry. Still,

in this household, it's obvious how rude and hurtful his comment is, regardless of teenage angst, yet he double-downs and explains to the table, "what? It's not like my mom's dead."

"No, she's just in prison," June cuts in.

Macyn glares at her, hoping she asks to practice later. Fantasizing about rolling her joints, Colin admonishes his step-daughter, saying, "June, that's not nice."

"But it's true," Annette points out, wiping the corners of her deeply painted red lips.

Colin says nothing to her and instead turns to Macyn. None of this is new to him, and Macyn reminds his father and Annette, "you promised. You *both* promised—"

"I know," Colin weakly interjects. "But think about what's fair. When we made that deal, we couldn't have known your sister would excel in athletics and her tournaments. Just as you earn many good grades in school, she earns as many milestones. She's a county champion just like you're an honors student. There's no difference, which means it's only fair she now have the room."

Sighing, Macyn groans, "you said the best grades gets the room. You said that, and I did that. Then you added being her practice dummy, and I even did *that*, *painfully*, if you remember." Clenching his fists, he finishes, "now you're saying none of that matters? What was the point then? You think it's easy getting these grades? Skipping out on stuff I could've done when I still had friends because I spent hours studying! Dislocating my shoulder by her so I can keep my room, and now none of that matters!"

"She's a *girl*. She needs her own space," Annette interjects. "We've tolerated your selfishness long enough, young man. We all know what this is about and it's time to stop holding onto the past because your mother is never getting out!"

Macyn has never felt so angry before in his life, nor has he ever been so daring he'd openly glare at his step-mother, but he couldn't help it. He was too angry to care about civility. What made the situation worse is his father quietly looking at his plate of food, neither coming to his defense, cautioning his wife, or even saying a word. Annette's little snide smile was the tipping point. With frantic and outstretched arms, Macyn dragged his glass of water and gold-rimmed plates of food, along with the stupid golden table cloth all onto the floor. The glass and plates break and food splashes like the water all over the carpet and wall.

Uncaring and still angry, Macyn's mismatching hazel and gray eyes glare at Annette again, her hand on June's wide shoulder, holding her back as she remarks, "if you're anything like your mother, I can see why she's in prison."

Everyone moves in that tense moment. Colin rushes to stop Macyn from doing anything to his step-mother, shoving the table and chairs loudly, and Annette holds June from meeting his anger by her elbow.

"Macyn Blende, that's enough," Colin actually yells. Macyn has never heard him raise his voice and it surprised him out of his blinding anger. "I understand you're upset—it's fine to be upset—but violence is *never* the answer!"

Pointing at June, Macyn harks back, "she's literally *trained* for violence!"

"Don't pretend you didn't pick up a thing or two—"

Cutting June off, Colin interjects, "it's time for change, Mace. This is going to happen. And regardless of your personal feelings, you *will* accept this because we're your parents."

"Parents who lie," Macyn throws back before looking at Annette and adding,

“and she’s holding your leash.”

“How can you say that,” Annette sadly voices, appearing hurt, though Macyn doesn’t believe her act for a second.

“Go to your room,” Colin sadly orders. “Gather your things. From tomorrow on, it’ll be June’s room and that’s final.”

Macyn had always thought of his father as a nurturing and fair person; slightly OCD about cleanliness but always on his side. Even after he was forced to be a single parent, he didn’t condemn or utter an ill word toward his first wife. Though Macyn can still see that affectionate and hard-working father before him, now he’s standing with them, and Macyn felt angry. He’d lost his mother to the system and now he lost his father to a leech and her muscular daughter.

‘*This is too wrong,*’ his mind yells. The rejection felt like dark poison in his chest and he didn’t want to show them how much this hurts. But leaving felt like they were right and he was wrong, and that felt suffocating. So rather than his room, he walks around them to the front door.

Maybe if Annette hadn’t had called out her daughter’s name, June would’ve successfully connected a rear chokehold, but as she’s practiced on him hundreds of times, Macyn grips her forearm before hindering her hold, drops his body to pitch her forward and raise his butt to flip her over. She easily rolls onto her feet as Colin and Annetta rush between them.

“June,” Colin calls, holding Macyn back. “It’s fine-”

“It’s most certainly *not* fine,” Annette shrieks in defense of her daughter, earning a muffled angry banging from the neighbor downstairs. Ignoring the neighbors, she yells, “he *attacked* her!”

“I *defended* myself,” Macyn hotly retorts, clenching his fists as his father holds him in place to hide the adrenaline shaking his hands. “She’s the one who-”

Colin pushes his son back and yells, “this is why I never want you to resort to violence! What would’ve happened to you if she were hurt? Do you want to end up like your mother!”

Macyn felt the sting deep within him and was stunned into silence. Feeling freshly betrayed, Macyn quietly, mournfully, vocalizes, “I want to leave.”

“And go where? The only family you have is here in this room,” Annette crossly reminds him. “And it’s high time you started treating us like it.”

Ignoring Annette, a deceived and bitter Macyn eyes his father as he declares, “I want to go to Menhir.”

Just as shocked and betrayed as Macyn was, Colin raises his eyebrows in surprise, exhaling sharply as he takes an unbalanced step back. He appeared as if the wind was knocked out of him, and from either side of him, Annette and June couldn’t understand why.

“Sweetie,” Annette called with concern.

“Why would-” Colin tries, ignoring his wife and daughter for something that was beyond them; something they could never understand. “How could you- No! I won’t allow it!”

Ignoring how increasingly worried both Annette and June become, Macyn reaffirms, “you want to go back on your word, fine. I want to go to Menhir! At least there, I’ll know why they’ll hate me.”

“I don’t hate you, son, and Menhir isn’t a place for someone like you,” Colin calls back as Annette demands to know, “sweetie, what’s all this about *Menhir*? What’re you talking about?”

Colin ignores her as he continues, “you’re angry; not thinking. You don’t know what you’re asking.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m asking to go to that giant mountain floating in the sky,” Macyn retorts. “You know, the magical place you and mom are from.”

Annette and June look at each other in complete confusion before the mother starts to demand, “Colin-”

“Well I refuse!” Colin retorts as June asks her mother, “why are they talking about floating mountains and magic?” Colin continues, “I will not allow my son to be persecuted for being born. Only the strong live there, Macyn, and Menhir will eat you alive.”

“Colin,” an exasperated Annette interjects. “Stop ignoring me and tell me what this Me- Ma- Min? ...Hmm, what was I...” Annette looks around at a loss for words before admitting with some embarrassment, “I forgot what I was going to say. What were we talking about?”

Ignoring his wife’s unsurprising forgetfulness, Colin asks his son, “why can’t you just do as I ask? You will be better for it.”

“Because you’re asking me to forget about mom,” the son returns. “And there’s nothing better about that.”

Colin orders Macyn to his room and both men took the moment of respite to reflect the last twenty minutes. The son was hot and angry and only felt more so every time his mind replays his father’s betrayals or the insults to his mother. The father is only half paying attention to Annette as he ponders why his son is suddenly so angry. Neither men sleep much and by four A.M. Colin is shaking a groggy Macyn awake.

“Come on,” Colin quietly voices.

“...Where?”

“Visiting hour,” is all Colin says as he shuffles to the kitchen. Though still hurt, tired, and angry, the prospect of seeing his mother today, put a smile on his face. He rushed through his morning ritual and breakfast before they entered the family’s old maroon sedan and began their four-hour journey to Nevada’s Women’s Correctional Facility.

Other than the loud hum of the hot wind flooding their rolled-down windows, it was silent between them the whole way. With his hair whipping in the wind, Macyn didn’t mind the silence as it gave him time to wonder about what he’ll say to his mother. They always talk up to the final second of the allotted visitation time, and so feels like leading off with asking her how she’s doing before telling her about school. It’s a joy he hadn’t expected to happen today, especially after last night and that’s when it hits him.

Turning to his father, Macyn mentally bemoans, *‘he’s going to tell her.’* Groaning to himself, he panics at the thought of her reaction. Jahmela Blende can be a very intimidating figure and she might not like his decision to escape to Menhir.

Though he doesn’t know all the details, his parents told him enough when he was young to realize that being a Stolid on Menhir is akin to blatant and widespread racism. Meaning his mother would likely be against it. Macyn has to make certain she knows why he needs to leave... why Annette and his father are forcing him to do this.



## Life Is My Fight

Macyn has never liked the decaying gray walls or yellowing flicker of the overhead lights of Nevada's Women's Correctional Facility, but he can't help but look at them as he waits. The faded and chipped gray of the walls and ceiling give off a cold and diseased feeling that always unnerves his tense stomach. He grows anxious in seconds as he and his father wait in the middle of the small visiting room, seated at a cold metal table on an unforgiving metal chair.

Colin has yet to mention anything about last night, making Macyn wonder what his father will say when they bring his mother out. Macyn grips his metal chair tightly under the humming lights of the weary bulbs as he thinks about a future without Annette, June, or a father who would choose them over him.

He hears jingling keys first, and finally, the robust guards lead in a line of women, young and old, wearing either orange or khaki jumpsuits, including his onyx-haired mother. He stands as his mother approaches their metal table and smiles to see she's not injured. Reflex prompts him to hug her, but he stops himself as physical contact is against the rules.

She returns his smile and looks at Colin who says, "our boy wants to go to Menhir." He says nothing else but the implication is in his knowing eyes. It's clear he believes it's a bad idea and he wants her to convince Macyn of that.

"How much do you remember; since your Recall," her raspy voice asks as they all sit.

"Big mountain in the sky full of mages, normal people can't remember magical stuff, you and dad aren't allowed back... uh, Stolid's can't use mana and are treated bad"

"Yes, they are, and you'd be no exception," Jahmela's scratchy voice interjects. "I'm left to wonder why you would want to go there when you know Stolid's are oppressed because they can't craft mana." Macyn couldn't help turning to his silent father and Jahmela turns cold eyes on him to ask, "Colin?"

Ignoring the query, Colin asks, "is that what you're wondering? Not how dangerous or foolhardy going there would be for him? Our son." Agitated, Colin scratches his neck before standing up and telling his ex, "there isn't an acceptable reason for our son to go to school there all because he refuses to sleep on a couch. Talk some sense into him, Jahmela." He leaves after saying he'll wait in the car.

"Is that true?"

"It's not about sleeping on a couch-" Macyn stops himself before clarifying, "he's not dad anymore. He's her puppet, and only does whatever she tells him. I won't do what they- *she* wants so they're punishing me by taking my room away from me. It's my room!" Jahmela remains silent, watching him as he calms down enough to add, "they want me to forget about you... and I don't want to let her have that."

"Stubborn," Jahmela comments, stunning Macyn. He's not surprised by her bluntness because she generally makes it up, saying, "you may be too much like me, boy." He smiles at that as she continues, "Colin's right about Menhir. That place is a spartan-society, only for the strong-minded, and they view anyone who can't craft mana as a blight upon their supremacy. Do you really believe that would be better than sleeping on a couch?"

“...Maybe,” Macyn weakly answers. “What would you do?”

“It doesn’t matter what I would do,” Jahmela returns. “You make your own choices and like I tell you-”

“I have to live with it,” Macyn finishes.

“You can go and see where your father and I come from,” Jahmela expresses.

“Though you won’t be able to use mana, you can still do other things, and if it doesn’t work out, you can always come back. Experience makes the best teacher, Mace. You want to leave in defiance, I understand that, but I feel if you did, you would come to regret it. On the other hand, but if you stay, nothing will change and you’ll have to endure. You must ask yourself what matters to you and do as best you can by that.”

Macyn didn’t want to admit as much aloud, but he knows what matters most to him and he only wants to get her out of here. He simply didn’t know how best to do that. If she’s released on parole, she’ll always be an ex-con in the states. But she might also be able to return to Menhir depending on why his parents were banished in the first place.

“Go for the summer,” Jahmela suggests. “You’ll have to do everything as if you’re intending on going to school, however, you can decide in the end if that’s what you want.”

“Yeah,” Macyn thinks out loud. His parents won’t tell him why they were cast out of Menhir but maybe he can learn why on his own. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

“Before you call your father back,” Jahmela starts. “I want you to remember something. A mindset like your father’s sees the world at face value and accepts them but you don’t have to accept what is because someone says it’s the only way.”

‘*But you’re the one in here,*’ Macyn can’t help but think and she effortlessly reads his thoughts through his eyes.

“I know how that sounds,” the knowing mother replies with a smile. “But it’s precisely because I’m sitting on this side of the table that I know there are legal ways to survive. Your time in Menhir will be difficult for you, and worse yet, you’ll have no support, family or otherwise. It’s imperative you know- you absorb these words: Life is my fight. These words are for you and no one else, understand?” When Macyn doesn’t respond, Jahmela scoots forward, leaning in more to imprint these words in his psyche. “Repeat the words,” she commands.

“Life is my fight,” he repeats oddly.

With a nod, she continues, “yes. Think of it as a personal mantra. Life will do you no favors; most especially if you do not fight for one, because you are not special.”

Macyn sits up straight, his face wretches at the foulness of her raw honesty. His mother has always had a hardened outlook but it still makes his chest tighten and his palms, neck, and armpits prick with uncomfortable heat. Harsh moments like this always make him question if he cares more for her than she cares for him. It’s always jarring to hear and then the hard lines on her face soften and she gently slides the tips of her fingers forward in order to touch his. She’s not allowed to. His head snaps to the guard who’s looking at them sternly before turning back to his mother, suddenly fearful their time together will suddenly be cut short.

As if reading his thoughts, Jahmela says, “I love you more than anything in this or any other universe. You’re my everything and nothing in this life is more special to me than you. Never doubt that. But the world will not treat you like your mother will, nor will I lie to you. I will not tell you what you want to hear simply because it sounds better.”

Feeling slightly foolish, Macyn answers, “I know that.”

“Good,” Jahmela states, daring to allow her fingers continued contact with her son's. “Means you're halfway there.”

“Just half?”

“The rest is up to you,” Jahmela gracefully tells him before asking him to call his father back. Colin was immediately upset to hear she hadn't talked their son out of his rash and immature intention. When it didn't matter to him that it would only be a month-long trial, Jahmela firmly reminded him that he owes her. To Macyn's surprise, Colin reluctantly agreed and they talked logistics for the rest of their visitation hour.

Money was the biggest concern which affected travel, room, and board, but Jahmela wouldn't take no for an answer and between the two of them, came up with solutions to many of their problems. As she leaves, Jahmela happily orders Macyn, “you better write me every day. I want to hear everything.”

As the prison guards guide the inmates out of the room, he promises to write and silently promises to himself to get her out of here. Colin is talking about the various amount of paperwork he'll have to prepare now as well as the lack of money to fund everything, but Macyn wasn't really listening. His head is leaning against the window-frame of the passenger door, wondering only about the great unknown ahead of him and how it'll try to stop him from helping his family.

If Macyn were honest with himself, he felt scared. They were ready sooner than Macyn had anticipated. While he certainly wasn't expecting his father to fight his golden wife for him to stay, he didn't expect his father to be so motivated to locate Menhir's current location, download Erudite's enrollment paperwork, fill out the Imperium's financial aid, and open a student account with the mountain's bank, Menestia. His father was a clerical expert, more motivated than Macyn expected and it didn't seem entirely due to his wife.

Annette couldn't retain any of the information. All Colin explained was Macyn had been accepted to a boarding school in another country. She disapproved instantly, arguing if only one of their children goes to a private school, it should be June. Annette supported Macyn's departure only after Colin assured her June wouldn't get accepted and that Macyn may not pass the selection process.

Their combined attitude to all this only made Macyn want to leave sooner and even stay the year regardless of how terrible he might be treated. At least those people are strangers. Macyn reasons if he's going to live in a place that dislikes him, it may as well be with people he can easily ignore.

It took three days to organize all the necessary paperwork and arrange travel. Early on the fourth morning, Macyn hoists his leather traveler's bag on his shoulder and says an awkward goodbye to Annette. June actually hugs him, though tightly, and imparts the kind words, “try to not come back so soon.”

After rolling his mismatching eyes, father and son are on the road driving for the next six hours to the Navajo Reservation in the northeast corner of Arizona. His parents had explained how the proper Airsites, like WestAir and EastAir, cost too much, and how the Tribe's Airsite is their only option. It's typically for supply runs to Menhir, but supposedly susceptible to bribes and all Macyn needs is a ride.

“It won't be comfortable,” Jahmela had told him. “But it'll get you there.”

As Colin is driving the dry, got and lonely road to the reservation, he extends a wooden container to his son. Puzzled, Macyn slowly takes the box and inspects it as Colin

answers, "it's a gift."

Shrugging, Macyn opens it and discovers his father's all wood fountain pen. "This is... Annette got you this."

"For our first anniversary, yes," he confirms. The question of why is written plain as day on Macyn's face and Colin responds, "this is the closest pen I've seen down here that reminds me of what we use to write with up there. The way it's made makes me think it'll work up there, since it's all-natural. It might not, but still, keep it with you, just in case."

Confused, Macyn asks, "why wouldn't it work up there? It's a pen."

"That's the other thing I never got to tell you," Colin begins, eyes on the road. "Most of your clothes, anything plastic, all electronics—essentially anything you can't pick off a plant, like your toothbrush—none of that stuff lasts long up there."

Brows drawn together in confusion, Macyn questions, "why?"

"Well, you could say that the atmosphere eats it up, like acid," Colin explained. "More specifically, if an object doesn't have enough mana in it—and as I've mentioned before, *everything* has mana; only, the concentration varies. If it doesn't have enough, it doesn't last long in a mana-heavy environment like Menhir and Gaiorem. Anything made here rapidly decays when you get over there. For example, plastic isn't something that grows on trees or sprouts from the dirt, but it's made of natural elements and so has mana, just not enough to withstand the rich atmosphere. Your shirt won't last more than a day, tops. Some books printed down here fade up there. Electricity works fine but circuit boards evaporate like water. The exception would be things that don't require a lot of manipulation to make, steel or wood-made items like hand-wound pocket watches, glasses, instruments."

Turning to his stuffed traveler's bag in the backseat, Macyn groans in protest, asking, "so what the hell is all the stuff on Menhir made of?"

"Some of their goods are made right there; food, clothing, a variety of things. Most everything else comes from Gaiorem."

"This sucks," he claims, pulling out his portable gaming console. "So, what do I wear when my clothes fall to pieces?"

"We'll get you a few things on the reservation that'll last longer on the Rock. Hopefully, the prices won't be an issue. When you're up there, you have to open your account quickly, so I can send you some money. Oh!" Colin bellows in laughter. "I forgot about the outfits! Man alive, that's going to be such a culture shock." At the queer look on his son's face, Colin eases his concern by admitting, "don't worry, it's not leather pants or anything too weird."

Macyn exhales at length when Colin drops the large manila envelope on Macyn's lap. "Don't let anything happen to that," Colin orders. "It's got all your paperwork."

"Seems like a lot," Macyn comments as he weights the thick packet in his hands. "I thought I was staying inside the school." Sunrise is hours away as they begin their drive on barren streets to the tribes' reservation.

"You are," his father answers. "There are three stacks of paperwork I want you to file when you get up there. One is for Imperium Hall; the government building. They assist all minors on Menhir that are without blood or legal guardianship. You'll go there first."

Macyn then asks, "and the other two packets?"

"Erudite University and Menestia Bank," Colin answers. "Even if you decide to leave at the end of the summer, Erudite will need the usual info and acceptance letter. They'll also have temporary guardianship since technically you'll be a ward of Menhir. As for Menestia

Bank, they'll make an account for you and convert your money, which won't be much. Also, I can't stress this enough, be on your best behavior when dealing with the bank. I mean it, Mace; be *very* respectful. They can be very... baneful."

Macyn whips his head at that. "What does *that* mean?"

"It's okay. It's nothing quite so... well depending on who you ask, the bankers can be... you know, there's no real proof and I never believe rumors."

"What the hell, dad," Macyn exclaims. "You're making them sound like the mafia or something."

"Listen," Colin states, turning his blue eyes on his son to emphasize safety. "I don't want to alarm you... but, that's not a bad comparison, actually. Just be *very* respectful, and you'll be fine," he relays in a pitch higher than Macyn felt comfortable with.

Colin looks away from the road a moment to study his son, only sees nervousness, and asks, "you're not having second thoughts are you?"

Feeling offended by his own nervousness and his father's hand in it, Macyn, hardens his resolve and answers, "no."

"It's okay if you want to come back sooner than the month," Colin remarks. "No one will think any less of you." Rather than voice his irritation, Macyn simply turns to his side and looks out at the early morning desert.

## Heart of a Shrew

Having fallen asleep at some point, Macyn's shaken awake by the bumpy dirt road of the reservation. Colin is looking between the navigation on his cell and the dirt path the headlights can illuminate in the otherwise pitch black of night. Soon, Colin's old sedan approaches a small faded white building that looks like it might house no more than ten people comfortably. There's a useless rusted red and white gate attached to either side of the old building that anyone can jump over as easily as walk around it. A small strip of runway is just beyond the white shack with the plane's hangar on the other end.

Before heading in, Colin gives his son black sunglasses to hide his mismatching eye color. Jahmela insisted he wear them often and no one disagreed. Shouldering his all-natural straw and brown backpack—a bag that made him feel like a gypsy—with his meager supplies, they head inside to speak with the attending. The Native American wasn't as tall as Macyn was expecting, nor broad-shouldered with long black hair, making him feel somewhat prejudicial. He observes the shorter, buzzed-cut, Indian with a weathered face and a full beard, speak with Colin.

“Hello,” Colin greets. “My son needs passage to Menhir and clothes, but it seems you don't have any here.”

The weathered-faced Native American observes the two skeptically before asking, “what's with the shades?”

“Teenage rebellion,” Colin groans and Macyn plays along as if ignoring them. “He won't listen and I pick my battles wisely now.”

Nodding to Colin, the attendant states, “we stopped ferrying the living some time ago; too many complaints. Which means no need for apparel. Why not take the mana-lift? Almost no one use Skytrains anymore, and if they do, they use those fancy AirSites.”

Macyn takes note of how deep the Indian's voice is as Colin nods in agreement, countering with, “Mana-lifting isn't the most cost-effective method of travel. I was told you could provide passage for a better price.”

Appraising them, the attending asks, “how much?”

“Fifty US?”

“No mynt?” the buzzed-cut Indian asks.

“I'm afraid not.”

“Hmm,” the tribesman hums as he ponders the trade. “Will you be shipping items or letters to him?”

Colin thought the question odd until he realizes what he means. “Oh, yes yes. We could use your service to deliver and receive our packages.”

He didn't deliberate long before stating, “well then I accept under the condition you don't file any complaints. He'll survive the trip. That's all that matters.”

Colin and Macyn look at each other, both growing increasingly concerned about these complaints. They knew cheap doesn't mean comfortable, but this is beginning to feel like gambling with Macyn's life against bad odds.

“Name's Hassun,” the Indian interjects. “Come. I'll show you our Skytrain.”

Colin introduces them as they walk to the hanger while Macyn wonders what to

expect. Maybe a small and outdated commercial liner powered in some unique way, or if he was lucky enough, a mana-powered private jet. He certainly didn't expect an old worn and weathered WWII, cargo-style, plane. The bit of red paint left was faded and the rest was scratched up metal.

Hassun's booming voice proudly asks, "impressive isn't she?"

"Quite," Colin nervously agrees but Macyn got the impression his father was simply being polite, coaxing more nervousness from himself.

Sliding his palm on his adored machine before wiping his hand of unexpected dirt, Hassun gushes, "she's a C-47 Skytrain from the war... maybe. I'm not entirely sure, but that's what my brother says and he sings her praises so much I stopped listening."

"Is your brother the pilot," Colin asks in favor of polite conversation.

"He's the mechanic," their brown-skinned attendant answers. "I'm her one and only pilot. She may not be fair on the outside but she has the heart of a shrew."

"A shrew?" Macyn stares at the stoic Indian nervously, who only nods once.

Still disturbed by the sight of the plane, Colin interjects, "isn't that a mouse?"

Also staring at the rickety plane with apprehension, Macyn asks, "do, uh, shrews have strong, stable, non-crashable hearts?"

"Couldn't say," Hassun curiously states, scratching his jaw uncertainly. "But they're crazy fast. That's what brother always says in any case. He should be along pretty soon."

Attempting for more conversation, Colin couldn't help but ask, "so what's new on the Rock? I haven't heard any news about Menhir in over for fifteen years now."

The Indian's surprised as he gruffly answers, "mnn, fifteen years? That's a long time. It's much the same for the most part. Maybe a few new buildings and people. There's a heated debate right now between the Herra party and the Quem Colimus."

"Aren't there always?" Colin huffs with a dry laugh. "Those two are the opposite end of any policy."

"True," Hassun agrees. "However, the current state is like sitting on a powder keg, and either side of the aisle are like as to blow your bottom off. The old Herra crones refuse to conform in any way while the youngish Colimus have a mind to remodel the outlook. They only reason Colimus is making any headway is on account of their budding relations between the high houses Masters and Hew."

Colin whistles at that and Macyn isn't sure why. Of everything he's heard about Menhir—before and after he recalled—he's never heard anything about politics... or sports. Then Colin asks, "what outlook?"

"I can't say I agree, but, Colimas are essentially advocating for inclusivity within the districts of Menhir. They're attempting to allow Elves and Nymphs into Erudite, but you know how ol' Herra like to keep things *'pure.'* Several years back, Colimus managed to convince the other schools to take in humans and Herra were none too happy about that. Not one bit."

"I can imagine," Colin agrees, nodding his head in surprise. "I can't see Herra appreciating humans learning from other races. I wouldn't want to be the marshal between those two factions."

"A sympathy shared by many," the older man agrees. "Some say it's the Herra who are behind the recent kidnappings as retaliation for failed appeals, though I can't see them going so far."

“Kidnappings?” Colin repeats, eyes widening in surprise.

Quirking up his old and weathered brow curiously, Hassun asks, “you haven’t heard?” When Colin shakes his head, Hassun continues. “It’s a sad state of affairs. Eight innocents have already been taken, without a trace. Only clue found is a parchment saying, ‘*Zenith has your child.*’ Poor families.” Colin’s eyes land on Macyn with unmasked worry. Hassun catches the worry only a parent can know and pats Colin heavily on the shoulder. “I have a great feeling your boy’ll be alright. The majority of the children taken range around ten years give or take.”

Colin nods in some relief before asking, “how are the Poliwicks handling it?”

With a great confident grin, Hassun answers, “they put some ace investigator on it. Trojan Meegeren to the case. He’s solved a few hair raisers I’ve heard of- Ah, I see my brother.” Walking toward the pair in the distance, Hassun suggests, “best say your goodbyes now. We’ll be off in a few minutes.” Hassun leaves Macyn and Colin to greet his approaching brother and a girl.

“Well, I guess this is it.” Colin states.

“Yeah,” Macyn huffs uneasily. He quickly registers shortness of breath around his tightening throat in addition to warmth prickling his eyes, but says nothing of his discomfort. He has to do this. Looking his father square in the eyes, Macyn feels this is about proving himself now. He’ll learn where his parents came from, he’ll send and receive letters, if he’s lucky he won’t catch too much hate, and if he’s really lucky, he’ll uncover why his parents were kicked out of Menhir. They stand there and though Macyn thinks he should hug him, he doesn’t, and neither does Colin.

“Write to us every day,” Colin states, making certain Macyn’s sunglasses are on straight. “Anything and everything, I don’t care what it is or how often you say it, just write.”

Clearing his croaking throat, Macyn answers, “I will.” Walking toward the rear ramp of the ancient warplane, Macyn voices, “wish me luck.”

“You won’t need it,” Colin confidently returns; confidence that lasts no longer than a second. “Well, maybe... Good luck, just in case.”

Macyn shakes his head at his father’s rationale, and with great trepidation, boards the rickety, WWII cargo plane that creaks loudly under his steps. He walks past the large containers of goods toward the six brightly colored seats available a few feet behind the open-view cockpit. Instead of normal airline seats, Macyn recognizes these as the same bucket-style seats on an extreme roller coaster; the sort that needs safety restraint due to twisting, turning, and rolling at breakneck speeds.

“...yeah, this isn’t disturbing at all,” Macyn anxiously mumbles to himself, trying not to speculate on why a plane needs seats that secure the shoulders as much as the waist. He takes the first seat to the right and from out of his window, Macyn can see his father waiting until they take off.

Hassun enters the plane followed by the girl he saw earlier. Facing her, Macyn admires her diamond-shaped, symmetrical face. Her features are sharp with full lips, button nose, and almond brown eyes. Macyn figures she’s around his age as she takes her own unorthodox bucket seat opposite him and eyes him curiously.

The short Indian punches a large green button that blares a foghorn-like a warning as the rear door closes. Hassun checks and secures all the merchandise for the flight as he noncommittally announces to all, “welcome aboard, little bits. If you don’t already know, I



am Hassun and-”

“Who’s he, uncle,” the Native American girl easily interrupts, unimpressed by her uncle’s professionalism as a pilot.

“He’s a boy, Onawa, and he comes complete with a mouth and voice,” Hassun answers simply, earning him an eye roll from her for stating the obvious. “He can even answer questions directed at him. As your handsome uncle, I give you my blessing to ask him yourself.” She doesn’t seem to mind his snarky remarks and just buckles up. “Speaking of which,” he continues. “This mighty bird can run fairly loud so I tend to change it to sounds of nature. My favorites are ocean or waterfall, but I do take requests. You can pick either ocean or waterfall.”

Rather than worrying about noise, Macyn broods over the whereabouts of the other pilot since there are two seats to fly the plane. As Hassun walks by, Macyn fretfully asks, “don’t you need a co-pilot?”

Hassun laughs, raising his right hand and declares, “pilot.” He then raises his left hand and states, “co-pilot. Now, buckle up. It should take us a few minutes to get there and a few hours to land... hmm, maybe I said that backwards.” Macyn grows very nervous again.

The older pilot takes his rickety, faded-red seat and starts flipping switches at what seems like random. He has an especially hard time reaching the controls to his far-right, doing nothing to ease Macyn’s feeling of doom. Twisting in his seat to look out of the circular window as each of the four engines ignite thunderously to life, Macyn spots his father off to the side of the runaway with Hassun’s brother. Colin waves and despite how childish it may be, Macyn can’t help but eagerly wave back.

The plane only starts its forward motion, but already it’s vibrating more than Macyn likes, and in almost no time at all, Macyn can no longer see his father as the plane picks up speed to attempt liftoff. He can feel his guts sink into his thighs as the plane rises, though it must’ve not been enough speed because the rickety Skytrain drops back down, lifting his stomach into his throat. Macyn bounces intensely in his seat and tries to bring down the metal brace of the roller coaster seat but it doesn’t budge. The plane attempts to lift again and again it falls. Macyn grips at the curved edge of his seat.

“You’re not the type to throw up in planes, are you?” Onawa asks, drawing Macyn’s attention. He doesn’t answer but he hears Hassun say, “Son of an owl,” before he flips a switch that converts the planes crippling tremors into a serene swinging pulse of slightly visible color. The plane instantly mellows to nearly motionless mobility and they ascend smoothly into the sky.

Feeling much safer, Macyn answers the girl, “it’s my first time on a plane, but I guess not. I’m Macyn.”

“...Onawa, of the Apache” she replies before then asking, “why are you wearing glasses? It’s not even bright?”

“It’s a choice,” he answers before scanning the interior before asking, “this jalopy is going to Menhir, right?”

Onawa eyes him suspiciously as she answers, “yeah, but shouldn’t you be taking a different way to the Rock, like all the other families do? I don’t hear about non-tribes using our AirSite any more. Too dirty for their like.”

He looks confused, though rather than comment how poor he is, he responds, “not that I know of. I’m fairly new to all of this, so I don’t know about all the options. Are you going to Erudite too?”

"I am," she answers with a pretty smile, tucking her shiny black hair behind her ear. "For the most part, the tribes prefer to home school but since I advanced so quickly I've been given special permission to enroll." Growing more excited, she asks, "this'll be your first year too, right? Can you even believe how lucky we are?"

Macyn shakes his head, asking, "how do you mean?"

She responds in simultaneously answer and question, "to be in our class?"

Macyn doesn't understand and shakes his head so she elaborates. "Don't you see the news? This is *thee* class! They're calling it the Honored Year." Again, Macyn shakes his head, painfully unaware of current events, so she continues. "This'll be the very first time direct heirs of all four Honored House will be in the same class year. It's been in the papers a few times but it's been all over Minor Mages magazine. They've even shown photos of the heirs," she squeals. "Oh mother, does Everette Masters look so strong and beautiful. I mean they all do really, but..." she sighs at the image conjured in her head.

"Oh, uh, I hadn't heard," he plainly states. Macyn takes in a breath and hopes it's not a big deal when he asks, "what are the Honored Houses?"

"...You don't even know *that*?" Onawa asks, aghast. Macyn shakes his head tightly, getting a little annoyed by how unnerved she gets. "Even people who live under rocks know the four honored families of Menhir."

Bluntly curious, Macyn asks, "are there really people that live under rocks, or did you mean the expression?"

"Both," she answers quickly before continuing. "The four honored houses of Menhir are Wang, Roth, Masters, and Hew. They're the epitome of class and power on the Rock. Each house has an heir attending our class, so it's going to be absolute chaos if you want to be their friend. Daddy told me to pick the house of the person I'd want to be around the most, just in case we instantly hit it off. So, I was thinking Aqua House, since all the members of the Masters family go there." Macyn can easily make out her blushing cheeks as she adds, "I hear they're the most wonderful people!"

"My dad told me about the school houses," he finally comments on something he knows. "He said it doesn't really matter what house you pick. He went to Terra."

"A Terra would say that," she says, brushing his input aside. "Terra House is where all the mages who don't care about position or power go. They're the mellow type, I guess."

"Yeah, that sounds like him," Macyn comments with a tight smile.

Onawa looks over to Hassun, who Macyn just noticed is sleeping in his seat. She then proceeds to make him incredibly uncomfortable when she asks, "can you craft mana yet? I've done several techniques already but they won't let me do too much on my own."

Feeling confident, relaxing the tension out of her shoulders with a deep breath, she extends her left hand. With the plane's threat to his life forgotten, Macyn leans as far ahead as he can without falling, so rapt in attention to finally see mana crafted rather than hear his father's description of it.

When the air around her left hand, wrist, and half her forearm begins to ripple with faint color, she explains, "crafting mana has a lot to do with visualizing it in your mind." Her voice is airy and clipped so as to not lose concentration. "We in the Tribe start with shapes," she explains as the air bends around her hand until he can see a colorfully oily sphere in her. Somehow, Macyn was and wasn't impressed. It isn't something he's ever seen before but it's

still just a ball.

“Then you practice other shapes...” Macyn hears as her lightly glowing left-hand transforms the sphere into a long cylinder, like a staff, and hits him with her mana.

“Oh my God, that was your mana,” Macyn exclaims, feeling weird about it, as if someone’s finger went in his ear. “Your mana touched me. It touched me-”

“Don’t make it sound weird,” she calls dismissing her mana crafting.

“I was touched by your ghost finger,” a distressed Macyn returns. “Why wouldn’t it sound weird!”

“The only weird one here is you,” Onawa returns, slumping into her bucket roller coaster chair, exhausted and out of breath. Looking at his forearm where her mana touched, it’s the first time Macyn ever felt like cheated out of something amazing. Since his parents can’t use mana either, he never really worried about it, but watching that control over her body’s spirit energy struck him with the most colossal need to do the same thing.

Macyn sticks his left hand out, trying to visualize what vibrating your mana might look like, when Onawa calls, “stop!” She wearily sits up as she explains, “if you’ve never crafted mana before, then don’t. We’re in a metal tube going a thousand miles per hour. I’d rather not die because you lack any instruction.” Macyn sheepishly lowers his left hand.

Onawa continues explaining, “crafting the shapes is how you start. Eventually, we’ll be able to make it sharp or soft, add one of the four elements; water, salt—which is earth—lightning and fire. Lately, I’ve been practicing on gripping.”

Macyn watches the ripple effect on her left hand, noticing how fluid and measured the waves look before she uses her right hand to mime grabbing. For a moment, nothing happens around him, then Macyn’s hippie traveler’s bag he had tucked underneath his seat, starts moving toward her as she pulls her right arm back. His bag moved slow but he’s so stunned that he didn’t grab it before it was out of his reach.

Onawa’s unmistakable concentration is broken when Hassun yells, “manacrafting is forbidden on my Skytrain Onawa of the Apache, whose father will most assuredly hear about this!” Hassun barrel rolls the plane for emphasis, lifting and dropping Macyn’s pack on the ground and making it slide between crates before the plane finally levels out.

“Okay, okay,” she screams, clutching desperately at her seat. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to. I was only showing him a little. Surely, you, my *favorite* uncle, don’t have to tell father.”

“I’m your only uncle,” Hassun calls passively, before warning them to, “be ready. We’re almost there.”

“Already? It’s barely been an hour,” Macyn exclaims as Onawa puts her pack on the seat next to her and secures it with the seat belt.

Hassun laughs as he calls back, “told you! Heart of a shrew.”

Macyn stands to retrieve his pack, walking around each crate and looking underneath until he finally spots it. He lays on the floor, stretching his arm as far as he can to take hold of the strap before dragging it back. He rushes eagerly to his seat when all the metal bar braces for every seat automatically descend into place, making a clinking noise as they lock, keeping anyone seated in their seat snug and safely secured in place.

Macyn gawks at his open seat for a spell before he turns to Onawa and her fearful expression sends a chill down his spine. Macyn just manages to call, “Hassun,” before

he's interrupted.

"Please nobody throw up," Hassun starts as the plane rolling to the left. Macyn desperately wraps his arms around the metal bar brace of his chair, calling out, "Hassun!" "It's not about the cleanup, Little Man. There's a Quick Clean rune on the hold. It's the smell; it always gets me!"

The plane continues to roll, like a barrel, until everything is upside down and gravity pulls Macyn toward the ceiling of the plane. Though he likes the feel of riding crazy roller coasters, this is too crazy, and while his legs dangle freely, he holds onto the metal bars for dear life. Looking over to the pilot to yell for his attention, he sees just out of the cockpit window, clear and ever-changing patterns in the thick mist of swirling rain. Rain started tapping the metal plane and soon it was like being underwater.

"We're about to enter the bailiwick!" Hassun calls with such strength in his voice, as if he's struggling with the plane.

It's not more than four shaky seconds later when an unexpected icy sensation passes through him like the freezing wave of a cold ocean. Hypersensitive to his senses, he instantly feels stiffly cold down to his bones, and for a moment, a great infusion of strength; sheer unimaginable strength. Macyn is so distracted by the bailiwick's imprint, he nearly lets go of the only thing keeping him fixed from falling to the steel ceiling braces.

Hassun yells, "we need to round up its side before we level out!"

Feeling the speed stutter, the plane enters a large amount of water and for a moment Macyn swears they're underwater again. They even burst out of the body of water, shaking the plane violently and making Macyn's tense arms and waist burn from the constant clenching. The nose of the plane starts to tilt forward, shifting the pull of Macyn's dangling legs toward the rear of the plane. Judging by the force pushing down on him and the strain of his already loosening grip, they seem to be rising higher and impossibly faster. Angry forces of gravity press down on both Onawa and Macyn as she shrieks to the extreme lift and Macyn groans loudly at his weakening grip. Seconds feel like minutes, and just when he feels like he's about to plummet to the rear of the plane, the nose of the plane angles down again, leveling them out so they're finally right-side up.

"Are you okay," Onawa asks with genuine concern. From the floor, though still hanging on, Macyn can only nod as his voice seems to have escaped him.

Hassun smiles at the view as he tilts his head to the side to see how his young passengers are fairing, and abruptly stops on Macyn. "Why aren't you in your seat, you loon?" The Native American then yells, "remember, you agreed, no complaints!"

Macyn opens his mouth, ready to respond a slew of furious words, but instead he slumps further to the floor, sore and breathing heavily. He only stays there until he hears Onawa's "wow," from her seat. The metal bar brace unlocks and lifts to their original positions annoying Macyn as he stands to look out of the window. It's one of the most beautiful sights he's ever seen. So much lush evergreen and earthy brown underneath the bluest sky with hints of pink from the rays of light passing through the bailiwick. Everything is so vibrant, he can almost taste the colors, a twinge of sweet and sour just underneath his haw.

"Thank you for boarding Tribe Skytrain to Menhir. We hope you enjoyed your trip and please think of us for all your future traveling needs... or not. Can't say I care either way."

## A Cold Welcome

The closer their plane descends to the ground, the more Macyn is amazed by the colorful birds and trees he can see out his window. As they approach their landing run, Macyn tries to absorb the new sight of colorful trees and buildings, flying carts and carpets, and any people until the touch ground and slow to a gentle stop. Unbuckling, Hassun steps past the pair and checks on a few containers along the way to the rear of the plane, where he punches the red button. The alarm blares horribly loud in Macyn's ears, marring the majesty of this incredible world.

As the door-ramp descends, Hassun asks Macyn, "you know where you're going from here?"

Macyn barely heard him as he soaks in the surrounding. The airstrip is made of red dirt, surrounded by thick vegetation; shrubs with red, blue, pink, and orange berries, grass-covered in flowers, and trees, everywhere. Further past the rising tree line is a grand mountain he has to crane his neck up to see its peak. Not only does it have the distinctive green of large groups of far-off trees, but it also has buildings in pure white. He's too far away to pick up any detail, but even from this distance, he knows they're just as beautiful and wonderful as everything else his eyes have laid upon.

Off to the side of the landing strip is a white building similar to the office they left on the reservation, only better. With his very first step off the WWII plane, Macyn's entire being is immediately struck by frighteningly cold air, instinctively making him hop back on the ramp. The cold disappeared so fast he questions whether he imagined it, but taking a tentative step off the ramp, he's hit again, like lightning, by blunt cold, shocking him down to his bones.

On the ramp again, Macyn reaches for his pack and brings out a thin sweater that will do next to nothing against the assault of this negative temperature, as Hassun asks again, though slower, "do—you—know—where—you're—going?"

Macyn shakes away his apprehension of the frigid cold as he answers, "I'm supposed to go to Imperium Hall, but I don't know where it is."

"Mnn," Hassun hums in stern contemplation before calling out, "Onawa, as punishment for crafting on my bird, you will escort... what was your name again?"

"Macyn," Macyn answers, rubbing his hands together to generate some heat in him and preparing himself to step into the cold yet beautiful world of Menhir. Onawa slumps into a funk and Macyn intercedes on her behalf. "Mr. Hassun, it was actually my fault. I was the one who asked."

"Her punishment has nothing to do with you, boy. She knows the rules and she decided to break them," Hassun replies with finality, then returns his attention to his grumbling niece. "You recall where Imperium Hall is, yes?"

Onawa sighs audibly, obviously annoyed but nods her head and answers, "yes, uncle. I remember."

"Good," Hassun says before cracking the only and largest smile Macyn has seen on the man. "Stay safe and don't go anywhere alone. I am a very proud uncle so call if you ever need anything." Onawa smiles and simply leans forward to fiercely hug her shorter uncle. The Indian pilot then returns to the cargo hold with a curt wave, likely to start unloading the

cargo.

Onawa turns to Macyn and raises her index finger. “Can you give me a minute to say hello to my family?”

Before Macyn can agree she's off towards the sizable group of friends and or family now exiting the white office building. Macyn stays on the ramp for ten minutes before she finally waves for him and his first step off the ramp was the worst. The unforgiving atmosphere felt like tiny little needles attacking every inch of him. Worst of all was the unexpected places he could feel penetrating cold; his elbows, the back of his knees, inside his throat. Groaning back the shock, he rushes toward her and respectfully nods to her family in passing, refraining from stopping as he may have done if he wasn't freezing.

“You look cold,” Onawa notes as he joins her.

“How are you not cold?” a stiff Macyn asks, his teeth marginally chattering.

Onawa lifts the collar of her tunic to show Macyn an intricate symbol. “It's a rune meant to keep you nice and warm. Most clothes automatically have them. You should get some.”

“Good call,” he tries not to say sarcastically.

Onawa leads the way while explaining, “we're on the edge of tribal land, close to the markets so it won't take long to get to the Hall.” Half of Macyn's mind felt frost-bound in the biting temperature, while the other half is taking in as much of the wonder of Menhir as possible through the shade of his sunglasses.

Walking up the deep red dirt path, adorned on either side by a crown of diverse flora, Macyn wonders if any of the colorful petals skirting the trail exist back on earth, because he's certainly never seen anything like them anywhere in Nevada. As impressive as the colorful petals and shapes of the flowers are, when he bears witness to a fluffy ginger cat, with green eyes and a small halo over its head cross them, Macyn can't help but blunder, “what was that?”

Onawa looks at him oddly, as if doubting his intelligence, answering, “it's a cat.”

“Cats don't have halos over their heads,” Macyn clarifies, watching the cat nimbly trek into the creaking forest.

“Yeah,” Onawa slowly agrees. “Someone's probably looking for their cat.” Onawa moves faster and Macyn keeps to himself as he hurries after her.

He's shivering and hunched over by the time they reach a bridge. Raising his quaking head to the beauty of the city before him just beyond the bridge, it allows him to forget the murdering cold if only for the moment. The antique lamp posts along the wide bustling bridge, the completely clear water beneath them, the beautifully nestled stacks of Victorian buildings white, brick, or dull gold, accented with dark wood or navy blue. From his approaching view, it's almost as if the entire town was the creative love-child of a single Victorian architect.

“This is Burn Market. If you go down the main street, you'll eventually head down to the lower levels where the other markets are,” Onawa explains. “The Tribe has an honored place close to Burn because our mana has always been strong,” she says proudly. “Come on. We need to head up a level to reach Imperium District.” They move effortlessly through the bustling streets of Burn Market and Macyn observes as much as he can while fighting the bitter cold by rubbing his arms.

Concerned for him, Onawa asks, “do you want to stop at a shop first and buy

something to wear? Something with a heating rune.”

“I.... c-c-c-an't,” He truthfully stutters to admit. “N-n-n-n-no m-m-m-m-m-mynt.”

Onawa looks concerned, before asking, “can you run? The faster we get there, the quicker you can get warm.”

Macyn hops at that, already running ahead of her despite not knowing where he was going in the beautiful market. Onawa laughs as she passes him to lead the way. Though he wants more than anything to take in all the vibrant sights, the sweet or spicy smells, the odd animals, the window fronts, the bewildering displays of manacrafting, such as floating crates and objects, the arctic cold feels like he's breathing in a slushy liquid instead of air, forcing him to fear for his life.

The pair speed through much of the vintage and magical market and Macyn feels deprived. He wants to ask about so much. The odd animals; some of which he recognizes from TV or books. Small koala looking animal with white fur and large ears, strange armored insects, feathered snakes, and the gorgeous rabbit with wings his father told him about; ‘*a doehawk*,’ he mentally yells. Colin was right. Learning about Menhir and seeing it are two completely different things.

His father also mentioned how odd the people of Menhir dress, but in his eyes, the combinations look tasteful, nothing at all unpleasant in his opinion, but certainly a mix of older era attire; cloaks with neck flaps that reach the jaw, tan tribal wear and headgear of feathers, pinstriped dress pants with overalls and vests, vintage newsboy and hanna hats, corset styled dresses with chokers, black and nature green military-style uniforms, but also three-piece suits that would look normal at a wedding or gala.

Some of the people they passed took note of his glasses, but no more than a cursory glance, especially as they round a final corner to a wide cobbled-stone street. Macyn rushes through the avenue toward a large building, many white pillars and a large circular dome for it's top. It reminds him a lot of the government buildings he's seen in his Government class. Despite wanting to appreciate it's large splendor, his fingers feel thick and solid.

Fortunately, leaping over the last step to the entrance, he entered an area covered by a heating rune and instantly he was enveloped in comforting warmth. So revealed to be snug, safe, and warm and unlikely to die, he couldn't stop a long groan of relief from escaping his throat. Macyn keeps as still as possible, relishing for as long as he can in the feeling of his limbs relaxing and recuperating warmth at a rapid rate.

“Wow, you're actually smoking,” Onawa notes as rolling vapors exhale from any uncovered skin. Macyn weakly turns to her, who's breathing heavily. Though he's not a big runner himself, the two-mile sprint here helped keep him from freezing and he is nothing if not grateful.

Onawa points to an elevated estate, a large palace past the Hall District and closer to the base of the mountain, and informs him, “that's Erudite University.” Finding the strength in him to straighten up, he spots the beautiful architecture past a dense and lush forest. “It'll open officially in about two months but they start the housing process early since rooms go pretty fast and no one wants to walk from home. If my family has time, we're going either today or tomorrow.” Macyn wants to comment but he would rather be toasty first and so says nothing.

“Come on,” Onawa calls, walking into the building.

Macyn's body temperature is nearing life-sustaining as they pass the tall,

pristine, white pillars, and the cold is nearly gone when they pass the extra tall automated doors. The room is large, with its ceiling four stories high and floors tiled in checkered patterned white and muted gold marble.

“We're here,” Onawa comments. “I need to go. Good luck.”

“Thanks for bringing me,” he quickly expresses his gratitude before she leaves. Even though she feels somewhat passive, he still thinks they can be friends as he liked the idea of being friends with the first mage his age he met. “Maybe we can have lunch before school starts.”

“...Don't take this the wrong way,” an apathetic Onawa starts. “But I'd rather wait until school starts and see where we land. I know that sounds harsh, but party lines are drawn quickly and I want to make sure I'm on the right side. Who you know really matters here and the earlier you make connections the better. You understand, right,” she offers with some levity, before leaving Macyn in calm bewilderment.

“I should've said some jokes,” Macyn glumly mumbles to himself before turning and heading toward the large dark oak desk. It's a semicircle with four receptionists all talking to someone. One of the people, Macyn notices, is dressed in a red flannel kilt with a biker jacket and is about to question his somewhat long ears when a receptionist becomes available.

The receptionist, a young girl with dark skin and light-purple hair moves with bored yet precise haste, setting aside parchment into six different stacks. On her index finger is a jade cap, like a thimble that she presses into the parchment. She speaks words that sound like a destination and they write themselves directly onto the document.

As interesting as that is, the matter of the most interest to an amazed Macyn is the red, black, and straw-colored fur squirrels either milling about the desktop or playfully chasing each other. As taken as he is by them when the receptionist needs one, they rush over in the blink of an eye. The receptionist folds a parchment and hands it to a squirrel. It changes from presumably flesh and blood to pure light and sprints away so fast it may as well have teleported. Macyn nearly takes off his glasses to be sure he's not seeing things.

“Hello,” the receptionist says in a tedious voice. “Welcome to Imperium Hall. How may I be of service?” Her large brown eyes narrow in on his sunglasses as she mechanically gives another squirrel a parchment before it alternates into a whitish-blue light and zips away.

“...Hi,” Macyn says slowly, still too amazed. “I'm looking- I'm here to file this paperwork but I don't know where to go. This is my first time here.”

“To Imperium Hall?” she quickly asks.

“To Menhir.” Macyn takes out the paperwork and hands it to the receptionist.

“These look a little outdated. You wouldn't happen to be from the lower order?”

“Yes,” he answers.

“That's unfortunate,” she calmly states as if he would naturally agree with her. “Did you have to stay there long?”

“Just all my life,” he answers a bit clipped, feeling offended. Judging by the way her head snaps upright and the bizarre shock on her face, Macyn has the distinct impression she doesn't meet many from the regular world. *At least she seems more alert now,* he thinks.

“That's,” the receptionist clears her throat resetting it to its original mundane droll. “Different.” Returning to the forms, she continues, “these seem to be duplicates of older



forms from our lower order tools that compute and file. You'll want to go to the second floor, look for a sign that says GSD; stands for General Services Department. They should be able to help you with these. Stairs are that way. Thank you for visiting Imperium Hall.”

“Thank you,” Macyn mumbles as he moves toward the stairs. On the second floor, he locates the General Services Department and steps inside to a frenzy of activity. The many desks are beautifully polished wood under soft lighting. There are eight windows open and each one has a line of people waiting before it. Macyn locates the shortest line and hops in place, though, annoyingly, the line with the most mages seems to be going the fastest. After twenty minutes, Macyn is in a small cubicle waiting for an agent.

A very large man walks into the much too small cubicle, reading over Macyn’s paperwork in grumbling silence. He sighs a great gust of exhaling air before saying, “take off your glasses.”

Macyn sits up straighter, growing nervous but slowly does so. The immense man sighs before nodding to Macyn to put them back on. He advises, “don’t take them off unless you absolutely have to. I won’t lie to you, you’re not going to like what happens.” Looking over the paperwork, he continues, “these are years out of date. Where are your parents? These’ll have to be corrected before we can file.”

Hoping the closed-in giant couldn’t hear his nervousness, Macyn slowly answers, “they, uh, couldn’t be here. They’re in Vegas- er, I mean they’re in the lower order.”

“Why?”

Macyn pauses a few seconds before settling on, “um, personal reasons.”

“Too embarrassed to be around a stolid?” he asks leaning his whole upper body down to take a closer look at Macyn’s offended face. “It happens more often than you know.”

Macyn swallows his irritation and answers, “I don’t think so. They just couldn’t come. Does that mean you can’t help?”

The large man almost seems put out but then he smiles and says, “Yeah, yeah I can help. Let’s see... Macyn Ethan Blende. I’m Mr. Bunker, as you already know. Now, if your parents are in the lower order than I’ll have to use a spriggan to talk to him, and have him fill out new paperwork. It’ll take a while but I can see here your parents checked for the additional assistance, so in the meantime, we can still get you fitted for an inhabitant. I’ll let the department know your coming,” Mr. Bunker says, jotting down some information on a small square parchment that might as well be a post-it note. He folds it into a paper airplane and calls out “Cultural Affairs,” in a flat mundane voice before tossing it into flawless flight. Macyn watches the parchment plane fly over the line of waiting mages and through the wall.

Macyn returns his wondrous attention to ask Mr. Bunker, “that paper went through the wall!”

“Yeah, kid,” he answers as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “They do that.”

Realizing that wasn’t the question he meant to inquire about, Macyn instead asks, “what’s an inhabitant?”

“Well,” he gruffly starts, scratching the stubble of his round chin. “The physical thing of it is either a personal relic of yours or a standard-issue wand. Inside of the wand or relic is the ghost that’ll be possessing it.”

“A ghost?” Macyn gasps. “A real- like an actual ghost?”

“... so young,” he comments before quickly adding, “yeah, an actual ghost. This

can't be news to you. I'm pretty sure there are plenty in the lower order.”

“Nothing proven maybe,” Macyn asserts. “What do I do with a ghost?”

“It helps you,” Bunker answers. “Say you have a question, and I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you probably will. If you want to know about where a thing or place might be, or you want to know who a certain person is, or the specific processes of completing common tasks. Whatever you need help with to acclimate yourself to Menhir culture, an inhabitant assists you. When you don't need it anymore you just return it. Oh, and if anyone tells you it's okay to just break your wand, please don't. I can't stress that enough. You might as well be killing them all over again, plus it's a lot of paperwork. Got it?”

Macyn nods his head in permanent wonderment. Mr. Bunker then tells Macyn where he needs to go next for his wand and to return afterward. Macyn exits the office, then the building and upon stepping a foot outside, he immediately recalls the painfully serrated cold of the temperature.

“Please don't let this be year-round,” Macyn groans as he runs three large buildings over and locates the Cultural Affairs Office to the left. Barreling inside, he groans when honey warmth seeps into his frigid body. Moving further inside, Macyn finds a lone figure, a skinny man with bright red hair slumped in his chair, head resting against the right corner of the chair and asleep. Macyn clears his throat, and when there's no response, he knocks on the desk. When that doesn't work, he calls out, “excuse me!”

The attendant hops up and immediately starts picking up and moving items on his desk around, unconsciously declaring, “ah only closed me eyes fer a second, Mrs. Ocoa, ah swear-” he cuts himself off when he notices Macyn awkwardly staring at him. “Odin's beard, boy. You scared me near to the great beyond.”

“Sorry,” Macyn replies.

“Course ya are. What can ah do fer ya?” Macyn points at the parchment airplanes lining his desk. The attendant grabs one of the perfectly aligned notes and reads it. “Miguel?” Macyn shakes his head. He grabs another one and asks, “you Bal- Balpreet?” Macyn shakes his head. The attendant picks up the last note, “Macyn?”

After Macyn nods, the attendant doesn't even read the note before abruptly standing and responding, “name's Rosston. Follow me.”

Macyn quickly falls in step behind Rosston as he leads him down the steps into a creepy cavern that hasn't been walled or floored with brick, so it's still reddish-brown dirt and mud. In the middle of the den is a large well with illuminating blue and green water and on the wall is an opening with a large hearth and roaring fire swirling like a tornado.

“We'll have ta wait fer Mrs. Ocoa ta come back,” Rosston voices absentmindedly. “She manages the spirits. In the meantime, we can make the actual wand. Go on, get in there,” he commands, and Macyn slowly steps in the cave-like basement.

“You'll want ta go ta the far end of the cavern. See the holes in the wall, like someone's scooped out dirt?” Macyn nods. “You're going to be doing the same thing. Grab a fistful, then raise it up high overhead. You probably can't see it but there's a torrent of wind just going around in a circle. Keep your grip o' dirt there until it molds ta a stick. Do those steps now and then we'll move to the fire.”

Macyn is hesitant with his first few steps but he calms down by the time he makes it to the dirt wall. Macyn does as instructed, placing his palm on the soft earth and grips a fist full of the soft mush. When he tries to pull it however he finds that he can't. He tries again

and again, harder and harder but the soft earth won't budge.

"You have ta use yer mana," a bored Rosston calls.

Growing incredibly nervous, Macyn dreads to admit, "I, uh, I've never done that."

"Ya serious? How old are ya? Why I was zippin' around in ma carpet by nine."

"I'm from the lower order," Macyn says with much exhaustion, hoping he'll suggest another way of getting a wand.

"...Fair enough," Rosston grumbles. "Clear yer mind and just feel. Trust that it's there. Ya wouldn't be here if it wasn't, unless yer a stolid of course."

Macyn wanted to stop then and there but holding the earth made his fingers vibrate. It felt like a buzzing that something in him wanted to answer back. He's felt it since he entered the bailiwick only overshadowed by the gripping cold; a sense of certainty, safety, a potent source energy that feels magnetic, like a champion in the glow of a hard-fought victory. As if by recognizing this feeling, Macyn feels the dirt in his glowing grip give way and he easily removes it.

"Holy shit," Macyn gasps, looking at the dirt he shouldn't have in his hand, and all his mind repeats is, 'why? How?' over and over.

"Good," Rosston grumbles. "Now raise yer hand high, till ya feel the current above."

Mechanically, Macyn does as instructed for the rest of the process; raising his hand and letting the torrent shape the clay; walking to the hearth and letting the flames harden it; and finally dipping it in the fountain to cool his new wand. Macyn is so flabbergasted by using mana, he didn't even question why the fire didn't burn him.

As they're walking back upstairs, the oblivious Rosston asks him why he's wearing glasses and Macyn evades the question by commenting, "I always thought wands were made out of wood."

"Oh, an expert are ya?" Rosston gripes. Macyn shakes his head before the attendant continues. "This isn't that type of wand," the young man says with a chuckle. "Those are rare and deadly, especially in capable hands. This has more to do with creating a viable medium between yourself and the spirit. Without this wand, the only other way ta combine you both is fer them ta possess ya, which is illegal and could possibly kill ya. With this, they're housed in the wand and only require some of yer mana."

"They use my mana?" Macyn slowly questions since it helps distract from trying to understand how he managed to use mana. It's possible that what he did is the bare minimum a stolid can do but Rosston's jab about stolids makes him wonder.

Rosston groans a bit before answering, "let's see, um, they use as small as possible but it's not like they take a portion. It's more like they make it harder to concentrate, like trying to solve complex number problems with really loud music playing. There's a technical term fer it but most o' us just call it blare."

As they return to his desk, Rosston informs him, "ya can wait in that seat there while I start filling out this release. Mrs. Ocoa should be here soon."

"Are you certain, señor Rosston? Or is it possible I've been here all along," booms a woman's voice, thick Hispanic accent, from the second story of the room. Rosston looks guilty as Mrs. Ocoa comments, "come along child," before returning to her office.

"On you go," Mr. Rosston says as he continues to fill out the release. Macyn

nods before making his way upstairs, wand tight in hand, then opening her office door.

“Do you not knock where you come from?” she quickly calls. Macyn is a little taken aback by the strength of her tone and closes the door before knocking. He can hear her sigh before she says, “enter.”

Macyn walks into her spacious and heavily fragrant office. The carpeting is earth green, contrasting well with the light wood furnishing and off red walls. In a corner of the room are a few squirrels playing in a little house designed for them. The most eye-catching feature in her office is a large, oval blob of tan water the size of a truck's tire floating at the very center of the room. At the site of the glossy, reflective surface, Macyn is both in awe and unnerved. It feels intense to his skin and intrusive, making his breathing quicken.

“It’s rude to wear glasses indoors,” Mrs. Ocoa says standing from her chair. She was a beautiful curvaceous woman in her forties, with long dark hair, tan skin, big red lips, and pretty green eyes. “I know you’re from the lower order but it’s common courtesy even there.”

Macyn inhales and turns to the large egg as he asks, “what is it?”

With the side of his face facing her, she turns to the floating oval as she answers, “it’s called the egg. It feels unnerving, no?”

Making sure she can only see his left side, Macyn nods, “yes, ma'am. What is it?”

Mrs. Ocoa studies him a moment before answering. “It houses many, many spirits—deceased souls unable to move on from our world; not vengeful souls, of course. Evil spirits are immediately exorcised. No, the egg houses the gentle souls, who are given the option of being a guiding force for many unfamiliar with our ways, like you, visitors from the lower order or even Gaiorem. One of them will inhabit your wand.”

“Bueno, all you must do is to put your wand inside and wait for a bite; then pull. Whatever you do, do not let go, comprende?”

Macyn swallows nervously as he answers, “yes.” Macyn takes a few deep breaths before slowly doing as instructed. He easily dips his patterned clay wand in like a stick in a bucket of paint and he immediately feels the cold sadness of the pale yellow orb.

Without intending to, Macyn pictures many unwelcomed images in his mind; the time he was ten and one of his teachers called him stupid in front of the class. Hearing friends talk about him behind his back. His father sleeping through his birthday because he'd been working two full-time jobs and was too tired to stay up. Without his permission, he recalls the first time he saw his mother in her a prison uniform, or the first time she had a swollen, black and blue lip, or the listlessness in her hopeless eyes after their latest appeal was denied.

Suddenly Macyn feels a warm palm on his shoulder, bringing him back to the present. With her heavy accent, she softly tells him, “the spirits can... they impact us all in different ways. Try to put your mind at ease, hijo.”

“Okay,” he listlessly recites but his mind wouldn’t listen. He’s bombarded by memories of his parents—his mother mostly—and he’s about to pull his hand out when he feels not quite a tug but a cool tingling sensation spread from his wand to his elbow.

“You may pull back now,” Ocoa affirms.

When he does, Macyn's arm is glowing in a patterned faint blue. It's an odd, invasive feeling that he knows shouldn't be there, but it is, like an eyelash in the eye, or cold water stuck in an ear, only in this case his whole body feels upset. Suddenly the faint blue spreads and fills out to the shape of a girl, her hand now connected to him as if she were holding

his hand and wand.

“Hello,” the female ghost says in a faint Japanese accent. She has long, dark, glossy hair in a ponytail and light-skinned. She’s wearing a more traditional Japanese dress that’s a mix between a kimono and bushido wear with a long large sleeve cuff and red tie in the middle. Alarms ring in Macyn’s head when he realizes she’s looking directly at him and can no doubt see he has mismatching eyes, but she doesn’t say anything.

With a helpful nudge from Mrs. Ocoa, Macyn remembers to replay, “Hi. I’m Macyn. Blende.”

“I’m Sen,” she politely says.

“Sen,” Mrs. Ocoa calls joyfully and smiling. “It’s been too many years! I missed you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Ocoa,” Sen says, bowing as she does. “It’s my pleasure to return to service.”

Mrs. Ocoa turns to Macyn, who scratches his right eye, and says, “Sen is one of our longest-running inhabitants and can guide you as good as any.” She walks over to her desk as she recites, “it’s Imperium policy to explain this in front of you both, and never because I think Sen would ever do so. Mr. Blende, under no circumstances is Sen allowed to possess you. It will lead to her immediate termination. In addition, she may not betray your trust unless you intend to harm or destroy others. She will keep your confidence in all things unless you give her permission otherwise. You are allowed to use her guidance for as long as you need, and when you return her, there is a small survey where you can rate your experience. Remember, your success is her sole purpose. Do you understand these statutes as I explained them?”

When Macyn nods his head, Mrs. Ocoa claps her hands once with a broad smile and states, “wonderful. That is all.” Turning to Sen as she waves Macyn bye, she argues, “come and see me, when you have time. I must tell you about Mario and the kids.”

“I would love that,” Sen returns with a smile then floats behind Macyn as they exit the office.

Down on the first floor, Mr. Rosston calls Macyn over with a wave of his hand. Macyn has his glasses back on as Rosston informs him, “you may want them to redo your paperwork.”

Clearing his throat as he nervously looks from Sen to the red-haired man and asks, “why?”

“Of all the bone-headed blunders they could’ve done, they marked you as a stolid,” he laughs, looking up from the paperwork. Macyn chuckles as Rosston says, “just need ta sign this and I’ll send this over to Gen Services.”

Macyn quickly signs the document, feeling off about the rippling chill over his bones, the idea that a ghost will constantly be following him around, and his confusion about his classification. His parents said he was a stolid, Mr. Bunker seemed to confirm it, but somehow he used his mana, which he should not be able to do.

Macyn is so lost in his thoughts, he steps outside and is painfully reminded how abominably cold it is. He immediately wraps his arms around his torso and runs as fast as he can across the cobbled street towards the Imperium building, when Sen swiftly appears in front of him. He stops, nearly stumbling over and is about to demand why she appeared like that when a large carpet silently carting many crates, vases, and baskets quickly floats right past him. The flying carpet of merchandise nearly grazes him like a silent bus, completely passing through

Sen.

“That attending should be more careful, as should you,” Sen tells Macyn. She then notes he’s shivering. “Is the turbulence causing your chill?”

“Chill?” Macyn asks incredulously. “More like being in a meat freezer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she genuinely states. “Is the turbulence causing your freezing?”

“T-Turbulence?” Macyn questions curiously.

“More commonly know as blare,” she says as she points to the wand still in his hand. In daylight, the patterns of his wand seem more vibrant and beautiful to him. “Inhabitants can cause fluctuations, or resistance, in your mana. There have been some who experience physical symptoms as a result of this bond; weak blood pressure, headaches, stomach pains, constipation.”

“Um, no,” Macyn struggles to say. “I’ve been this cold since I got here.” Sen studies him a moment and suggests they go inside. The moment Sen and Macyn step into the Imperium building, Macyn is relieved to be flooded with warmth again, cooing audibly as he thaws in the rune crafted warmth of the interior.

“You are from the Lower Order,” Sen notes aloud. He nods with a satisfied hum before she asks, “don’t you have clothes with the proper warming runes on them? Clothing from the lower order don’t last long in this environment.”

“I heard,” Macyn informs her.

At her request, he tells her what he’s done thus far and what he still needs to do. After explaining going to the bank and school, Sen tells him, “I agree with your father’s course of action. He must have a talent for administrative work. Many either don’t know of financial aid, or believe it is a symbol of inadequacy, thus weakness, and refuse to utilize the option.”

Mr. Bunker waves them over and Macyn takes a seat while Sen hovers beside him. Mr. Bunker looks Sen over before giving an approving nod and commenting, “pretty.” Macyn abruptly looks at Sen as she slightly bows at the compliment. “Now, your father and I finished off the updated forms. All that’s left is for you to run along to the bank. Your lovely inhabitant can show you where. You’ll open an account under your name, which isn’t exactly the norm for someone so young, but your father approved, so…”

“Thank you,” Macyn voices.

“Before you go, there’s something else you ought to know. We did the math with the latest exchange rate from US dollar to mynt, adjusting for inflation, and the Imperium’s aid assistance only covers tuition, room, and board, which means you’ll have nothing for supplies and whatever personal items you might need later.”

“Since when has the Imperium facilitated the financial responsibility between student and Erudite?” Sen asks in her serene voice but her eyes are studying Macyn.

“We don’t,” Mr. Bunker answers. “But since he’s a stolid on Menhir with no family or guardian, the Imperium takes enough responsibility to act as a go-between parent and school. In this case, it’s against Imperium and Menestia policy to act on the faith of loans, so I’ve arranged for you to room at the state shelter on the other side of Erudite’s campus. It’s an Erudite property shared with the Imperium, not exactly close but, what’s a little extra exercise,” he asks with a chuckle and rubbing his own belly. “I’d say you were lucky there are open bunks but there ain’t a stolid on Menhir crazy enough to go to Erudite, so…”

Truthfully, Macyn doesn’t know how to respond to Mr. Bunker about his

enigma and Sen remains silent, so all he can think to say is, "life is my fight."

## Menestia Bank

With his paperwork in his travelers' bag, Macyn and Sen leave Mr. Bunker's cubicle to the entrance hall, then terrible fear grips him. The outside looks stunning through the window but he knows how deceptive the colorful and sunny view is. The reality is that bitter cold outside feels like a thousand little knives hacking into his bones every second. Even if he knows it will do nothing, Macyn bundles up as best he can and rubs his hands together to brace for the pain.

While looking gravely at the beautiful view outside, Macyn asks Sen, "how far is it to Menestia Bank?"

"... an hour walk," Sen answers with a hint of remorse. Ever so slowly, he turns his head to her, eyes large and surprised as if imploring her to be lying. "We can walk inside shops periodically to give you time to warm up," she suggests. "All the buildings have the rune array for warmth in them."

"I need to buy better, warmer clothes," he grumbles.

"You will," she assures him.

Returning his attention outside, Macyn takes in a long and hopeful breath and nods his head repeatedly. "Oh-kay. Okay. Okay, I can do this."

"I can ask you questions while we walk to take your mind off of the cold," Sen offers. "To better understand you and your needs."

"Sounds good," Macyn agrees and he steps outside, instantly feeling biting cold seize his entire body. He grunts as he speeds walks and states, "ask away."

Macyn takes the white steps three at a time as she asks him in a quiet voice, "would you care to talk about how you're able to craft a wand as a stolid?"

"I know even less about that than you do," Macyn coolly returns.

Looking around the busy street, Sen claims, "this isn't the best time to talk about this. We'll talk about this later." Macyn hums in agreement, navigating around the Victorian people. "May I ask why your parents are not here with you?"

"They can't be here," Macyn quickly answers as he follows Sen. He appreciates her haste as they quickly make their way through the bustling Hall district.

Sen asks, "may I know why? If only to be of more help in ways I don't yet know of," she reasonably asserts as they turn the street into a much busier avenue.

Macyn hopes the mass of bodies might warm him up as he responds, "...I don't know why actually but I know they aren't allowed to come back."

Macyn is rushing faster, forcing Sen to float faster as she asks, "were they banished?"

"I... guess?" Macyn dives into his memories a moment before answering, "dad said my mom didn't do anything, so I don't know. I want to learn what happened. Is that something you can help me with?"

Sen politely admits, "I am a guide, yes, but I don't assist in that manner. I am a source of advisory information to help your choices and knowledge. That is the extent of my capacity as your inhabitant. If this is a course you wish to pursue, all I can say for now is we will have to learn more before we can proceed."



Macyn nods slightly disappointed but undeterred. After a moment he turns to Sen and says, “she’s my mom. Helping her is helping me.”

On the way to Menestia, they enter the market district which is much more lively than the Hill. In addition to all the amazing sights he’s already seen and couldn’t stop for, he spots stands and merch Macyn mentally adds to a growing list of things he wants. Next to one stand is a wall with floating three-dimensional images of children made of mist and water. The eight children are observed by all of the passing mages. Macyn braves to stop and inspect them to see it’s an altar for the kidnapped children. The mix of a photo-realistic, three-dimensional water-bubble display is amazing enough if it wasn’t so morose.

“That’s terrible,” Sen comments from beside him.

Teeth chattering, Macyn agrees, “yeah.” Recalling what Hassun spoke of with his father, he mentions, “I h-heard it s-s-s-started a f-f-few months ag-g-go.”

Sen closes in on one of the children’s three-dimensional image when Macyn is urged by a terrible gust of wind to continue speed walking, but once his legs start moving, he’s jogging instead. Hoping to take his mind off the cold, he asks, “so you’ve d-d-done this for a long t-t-t-time?”

“For nearly two centuries now,” she answers, just ahead of him to lead and talk. “I’ve counseled dozens of children and adults, successfully I feel. I hope that gives you confidence in my ability to assist you.”

“I d-d-don’t have a lot of exp-p-perience with g-ghosts... or assist-t-tants,” he jaws. “B-b-but I t-t-trust you.”

“Thank you,” she easily states, before asking, “another break?” Macyn immediately enters the nearest door, a bookstore by the name of Tom’s Tombs and the vapors escape his rapidly heating skin. Macyn hadn’t noticed he blocked a group from leaving until on calls out, “oh merciful Odin.”

A tall blond-haired boy draws Macyn’s attention as he tells him friends, “another useless gutter-mutt, with a slum-stick no less.”

The two others, one light-skinned brunette boy and one Asian girl who immediately focused on his glasses before sending Sen an icy glare. The pretty Asian girl, in particular, seems to abhor Sen the most, with a crinkled nose as if smelling something foul in the air. It’s clear the three mean to belittle him, Sen and his wand.

“Come on Jorn,” the English one with brunette hair says. “Hazel and Solomon are waiting.”

“Let them wait,” the Asian girl commands. She’s very well dressed; from head to toe in colorful red and gold silk with a style of fashion reminiscent to Chinese monarchs he’s seen in movies. The raven-haired girl has a shiny crest of gold on her fanciful coat; a bird of some kind within a circle of petals and a character he can’t read in the center. In his lower order garb, Macyn must look incredibly inferior to her coffee eyes.

Stepping closer to Macyn and Sen, she retorts, “it’s wretched piss-ants like you that hold us back and neither of you should exist.”

“Dez just wants to get back to Hazel before she throws herself all over Solomon,” Jorn responds with a smirk, nudging his perturbed friend who rolls his eyes. Dez leaves first followed by the Asian girl. Jorn narrows his odious eyes on Macyn and leans in as he states, “don’t let me catch you around campus with that pity-twig. Or I’ll have to take it upon myself to tough you up.” With a final sneer, Jorn follows his friends out of the store.

“As far as bullies go, they’re high class,” Macyn mentions offhandedly.

“Sadly so,” Sen agrees. “Try to avoid meeting them where at all possible, but specifically the Asian girl.”

To Macyn, Jorn seems more imposing than the raven-haired girl, and so asks, “why's that? I mean, I totally will, but why her?”

“She wore the crest of the Honored House Wang, one of the four honored houses on Menhir,” Sen answers. “For the crest on her chest to be gold and not silver or bronze, signifies she's from the main family and *not* someone you want to make enemies of.”

Macyn nods in grave understanding. Thirty-five more minutes and a dozen hot breaks later, they reach the only Bank on Menhir. The building was three stories tall with high arching windows and many white pillars. It seemed ancient but in very good condition, white with black and blue trim, and golden letters that read ‘*Menestia Bank.*’

It seemed busy to Macyn as he walks behind a few adults entering the pristine building. He moans happily when the heating runes of the interior sap out all the bitter cold from his body, creating visible vapor rolling off him.

As Macyn gets in line, Sen assures her ward, “soon, we’ll know how much mynt we'll have to work with.”

When Macyn finally has a chance to take in the room’s sights and luxuries, he notices that all the tellers and security have long ears. He's seen a few running through the street, but motionless and up close, Macyn swears they look like elves. Examining the tellers more closely, it seems that the majority of employees are elves, dressed in fine, pin-striped suits or some other very classy wear. Even the security erect at the entrance, like a bouncer, is dressed very neatly, minus the sword at his waist.

Ears at least two inches longer than normal ears, pointy, surrounded by lustrous silk hair, Macyn whips around to Sen and asks, “Sen? Are they-” He cuts himself off when he recalls his father’s words of respect regarding the Menestia bankers. Eyes wide, Macyn’s heart suddenly seizes and he mumbles, “mafia,” when it becomes clear these elves certainly dress like some kind of Italian mafia family.

“Are they what?” Sen asks with a curious quirk of her brow.

Macyn waves for her to float closer, praying their extended ears are mostly for show and won't hear him. She moves in close enough for Macyn to whisper in her ear. “They all look like elves. Like really good looking elves.”

Sen backs away enough to look oddly at him, offhandedly answering, “yes. They are elves... and attractive.”

“No, I didn't mean attractive, well, yeah, they are, but I meant they're... real? Elves are real?”

“Yes, Mr. Blende,” she slowly nods. “Didn't your father tell you?”

“I think this is one of those things he wanted me to see for myself,” Macyn gasps “... as if I wasn't already learning a lot on my own! Oh, I'm going to write him such a letter and he thinks he's going to like it, but he won't. Not one bit.”

“Mr. Blende. Move.”

Macyn does as he's told all the while what he really knows about elves. If all the lore is to be believed, they’re likely better in every way and that prompts Macyn to ask Sen, “why are they bankers? Shouldn't they be in a forest or... or running a syndicate, or something?”

“What?” she asks with incredulous eyes before answering, “how else do you

expect they make a living?”

“I don't know,” Macyn reasons. “Don't they just live, majestically, in a forest counseling stuff? Or war with orcs and trolls?”

“No,” Sen answers, slightly worried for him. “Not at all. They have fine warriors and students, but their main source of commerce is banking. Their biggest clients are the goblins and would never war with them.”

“...Goblins,” Macyn breaths utterly floored by this latest revelation. “Goblins,” he repeats trying his hardest to wrap his mind around the idea that he now lives in a world with elves and goblins.

“Mr. Blende?” Sen calls. When his glazed eyes find her, she says, “move.”

Macyn moves through the line automatically, and it isn't until he's in front of a real life, honest to God, elf that he's struck speechless.

“Good morning, young sir, young miss,” the elegant elf begins. “Welcome to the esteemed Bank of Menestia, where your eternal prosperity is our only ambition. I am Ederyn Nudd. How may I serve you this fine day?”

Macyn lets out a breath that turns into a guttural chuckle of some kind. A whispered, “Mr. Blende!” from Sen jostles him to speech. “Hi! Hello,” Macyn says grinning broadly. “My name is Macyn Blende. I'm here to open an account.” Macyn takes a beat to ponder if there's anything more he should say and then adds, “I have paperwork.” With an amused triumph, he takes the manila envelope out of his travelers bag and holds it up.

“I see,” Ederyn says slowly.

Macyn feels a little more comfortable when he's directed to the waiting area for an Account Agent and sits in one of the most comfortable chairs he's ever felt, but he's still so absorbed, Sen asks, “are you okay?”

“I spoke to a real elf, Sen. I know nothing right now,” Macyn airily responds. Soon, another elf enters the waiting area and presents himself to the mage and ghost. “Good afternoon, I am Dremidad Drem, junior Account Agent.” He seems older than the tellers, though that doesn't help Macyn guess his age. All the elves appear young, if not, immaculately dressed in their pinstriped mafia suits. Dremidad even had a red flower on his lapel.

“Macyn Blende,” he respectfully tells him before turning to Sen. “And this is Sen ... actually, what's your last name?”

Sen bows politely to Dremidad and informs him, “Sen is fine.”

Dremidad leads them to his desk and Macyn hands him the necessary paperwork. To his credit, Dremidad makes quick work of it. The porcelain finger glove he uses seems to light each sheet to either a faint blue, light-red, or light-green sheen before zipping away. He effortlessly explains as he works, “you will be given a signet ring, meaning you're the one responsible for your account, however, due to your age, you will only be allowed access to a fifth of your funds to ensure all monthly invoices are promptly paid for without incident.”

Dremidad reaches under his desk to the bottom drawer and pulls out a darkly polished wooden box as he explains, “please keep in mind the ring of a stolid are not as secure as the typical rings and can be stolen and duplicated.” Dremidad opens the polished box to an arrangement of rings, most of which have a flat top with simple or complex designs, and explains, “as a stolid, you're only allowed the base model. You may want to hide it as someone like you won't be able to alter it with your mana.”

Macyn looks to the more intricately designed and larger rings and wonders

what Sen asks. "Would the base ring designated for a stolid work the same with any mage?"

"Yes," the agent slowly replies before turning to Macyn and asking, "may I please see your eyes?"

Macyn clears his throat before nodding and acquiescing. With his mismatching gray and hazel eyes, Dremidad nods before saying, "Life for a stolid is hard. The sooner you accept that the... less surprising life will be for you."

Neither mage nor ghost had anything to say after that and Macyn was almost glad to be leaving the building. With his clay looking ring on his finger, he stops at the door observing the serene way the beautiful trees, colorful bugs, and birds move too and fro and knows it to be deceptive beauty. Macyn can't help but comment, "that wind looks like murder."

"Do not worry," Sen tries to comfort him. "On our way to Erudite, we'll do the same as before."

"Erudite..." Macyn ponders on the school; more specifically the distance away. He can't quite recall the distance in the middle of all that wonder, but he knows it's not close. "How long to Erudite?"

"... two hours or so," Sen answers evenly yet remorsefully. When Macyn slowly turns his saddened eyes on her, she adds, "without breaks." His shoulders slump.

Macyn returns his attention to the beautiful bone-sawing cold afternoon and eagerly asks, "can't we buy a coat on the way?"

"Would you accept failing a class or two as compensation?"

Macyn wasn't even sure if he was going to stay past the two months so he didn't care, but argues, "I'm sure we'll have enough for a coat by the end. Why not just do that now?"

"Cause and effect," Sen says easily. "If you buy this coat for temporary relief, you may not have enough funds for all your school supplies. If you can't afford a cauldron, your necessary texts, or your ingredients, then you cannot do well in your classes, thus, failing, all because of a coat."

"That seems like an exaggeration," a hot Macyn comments, irate at the thought of being unable to buy a single stupid coat.

"It's a reoccurring theme with many of the youth's I've guided and it frustrates me to no end," she freely admits. "Fashion, carpets, pets, anything of amusement matters more than what is actually needed. Your case requires a stricter oversight."

Macyn sighs, feeling annoyed by it all, but he hadn't expected it to be easy, and glumly asks, "anything else annoys you I should know about?"

"If you still require my service when school begins, do not expect me to give you the answers to your assignments. It would be a disservice to you if I did the thinking for you. Are you ready?"

"No," Macyn states, looking outside in pain as he bundles up in preparation. "But what other choice is there," he concedes, then exits Menestia. Sen guides him as they race through the beautifully kept streets of Menhir when he spots a shop named Berone's Velo Vines, displaying strutting mannequins through the window wearing what looks like school uniforms. There were four mannequins, two boys and girls, sporting winter and summer uniforms not too unlike what he might see at a fancy prep school, complete with bows, ties, and vests. Macyn turns and runs into the shop.

When Sen floats next to him, she reminds him, "I thought we agreed to wait for

the appropriate time.”

“Yeah,” Macyn hums as he warms up. “But those are the school uniforms, right?”

Sen confirms they are the school uniform and going so far as to explain, “uniforms are a practical way of teaching unity while ingraining pride in your appearance.” It's then when she realizes what his thought process. “Ah, I see. You want to purchase your school uniform now to keep warm.”

“We have to buy it anyway,” he reasons desperately, hating the idea of spending another minute walking around in that arctic weather. “Why not now, right?”

As it turns out, the reason why they can't buy Macyn's uniform there is due to Sen, his wand, and the visible clay ring on his finger, displaying his class as a stolid for anyone who recognizes it. Macyn is physically shoved out of the store by the owner. Macyn is so surprised an adult would harshly push him toward the door, he couldn't say anything. He simply held his glasses in place as Sen pleads with the owner to refrain from being physical. Once outside in the cold, Macyn instinctively runs and is yelled at to never return.

Macyn growls at the skin scraping feeling of the needle-like wind but he doesn't stop until he begins feeling a little more in control. He hadn't expected a reaction like that and he was in too much shock to know how to feel about it. Though he felt he didn't do anything wrong, he was adequately warned by many of the discrimination he would face. Looking at his ring, he wondered if he could change it to look like the others or invisible. And to his surprise, it does.

Macyn's immediate bewilderment is interrupted when Sen asserts, “don't worry. I know another clothing shop. It's been many years but I believe it's still there.” Keeping his head down and hidden from the worst of the cruel draft, Macyn follows silently behind Sen's floating heels. It seems to take a lifetime and just when the frigid Macyn is about to call out for a break, Sen states, “we're here,” and he rushes in.

Taking several moments to thaw, Macyn doesn't look up as he hears, “welcome to Lin's Apparel.” Eventually, his trembling subsides and he slumps in comforting relief. The same voice asks, “are you okay, young man?”

Macyn stands straight as the last vestiges of merciless cold soften to humanely tepid. “I'm fine,” he answers, noticing that the shop is smaller and less colorful than Barone's. “I'm hoping to purchase my school uniform.” Macyn spots Sen looking around the room, likely checking prices. “Anything in the low end'll be fine,” Macyn adds.

The Asian man with round, gold wire-rimmed glasses shakes his head, no. “I'm sorry, young sir. In order to best compete, I restore all donated uniforms to near original condition, with only a slight markdown. I can custom make less expensive attire if you like, but they will not have the latest velo runes, nor do I recommend this.”

“I just want to be warm,” Macyn bemoans. “It's freezing outside.”

“And if the warming array is tampered with by arrant crafting?” he questions, before answering, “no more warmth. This means you will have to have both anti-tamper and warming runes, but you will not have Quick-Clean for vomit, the Stay-Size rune so it automatically adjusts as you grow for the year, the Water-Resist, the Blood-Be-Gone, the Foul-Off and the Stench-Away are two very important arrays. You will not know what you need until it is too late. More cost-effective to buy the best so it lasts longest.”

Macyn looks to Sen, for an opinion and she says, “thank you for your advice.

When we decide to buy, we will come to you.”

“I appreciate your patronage. I am Mr. Lin if you need anything further,” Mr. Lin says with a bow. Sen returns the bow. Macyn does a small bow since he's unsure if he should or shouldn't.

As Mr. Lin walks back behind the counter, Macyn asks, “what now?”

Sen takes a moment to consider the options when she finally notices his ring is gone and asks, “where's your ring?”

Macyn raises his right hand and hopes as much as commands his ring to be visible, and it does, much to his surprise. Sen only looks on pensively before remarking, “you shouldn't be able to do that. Additionally, you shouldn't have been able to create that type of wand.”

“Yeah,” Macyn acknowledges as he looks at the pattern etched on his wand. “I don't think Rosston was paying attention when he took me to that basement.”

“I think I have an idea,” Sen says thoughtfully. She looks at Macyn's traveler bag and asks. “Do you have a pen?”

Macyn nods as he starts going through his bag a moment before bringing out the fountain pen his father gave him.

“Good,” Sen starts. “We're going to draw a rune on what you're wearing now, so please take off your over-shirt.”

“I know what you are doing, miss,” Mr. Lin states, surprising them both. “But you cannot do that here. This is a place of business.”

“Please, Mr. Lin,” Sen expresses fervidly. “Surely a child shouldn't be made to suffer because he has less means than others.”

“I understand, truly I do,” he sympathizes, though Macyn doesn't believe him. “But what am I to do as you attempt the very thing I sell in my own store? No, I am sorry but you cannot do that here. The new bakery next door has warm walls. Their alley is suitable.”

Mr. Lin leaves them without bowing this time. Sen sighs and shakes her head in disappointment. “Let's go. We'll do this fast.” Sen and Macyn leave Lin's Sunflower into the petrifying cold and around the store into the alley. The new bakery placed all the dregs, wood, brick, bags, other pieces, and oddments of what the store previously was in the alley, likely to be recycled later in the week.

“It's hardly warmer than anywhere else,” Macyn bellows, as he sidesteps a large solid block of steel wrapped in loose sanding tape.

Sen takes an odd, thoughtful look at the large hunk of old steel before turning to Macyn and telling him, “I know this isn't ideal but it shouldn't take long.” She then informs Macyn to follow the specter of her index finger to slowly lead his pen to write the rune array for Quick-Warm without creating a fire. “Always be careful when writing runes. If they're off by even a little, it can either do nothing, burst into flames, or in bad situations, explode.”

Macyn's concerned eyes stare at her. “There are easier ways of getting rid of me, Sen.”

“I'd like it very much if you stayed alive, thank you,” Sen replies.

Macyn smirks as he asks, “so how does it work?”

“If this works,” Sen begins. “You must gather your mana to your palm and gently press it to the rune. It has to be the right amount. Too much will destroy the rune and cause a fire. Too little and nothing happens.”

Nodding Macyn raises his arm and like the ring or pulling the clay for his wand he looked within for that feeling of hope, triumph, and enduring joy, and to his surprise, mana flows like water to the palm of his right hand.

Sen inspects his blueish-white mana closely before saying, “well, this is a first. Can you remove your glasses?” Even removing his glasses weakens his concentration as he tries to keep his mana going. “You have the eyes of a stolid but the ability to craft mana... I don’t think I’ve ever heard of something like this, and I’ve existed for many centuries.”

Macyn takes a deep breath and tries to be more patient with his spirit energy. Retaining the hazy energy ebb and flow in the palm of his hand is harder than he expected but also exhilarating to see and feel. This contradicts everything everyone said about him all because of his eyes.

“That's good,” Sen states. “Now, gently press it over the rune.”

The instant his palm touches the design drawn on his shirt, he feels a blast of hot wind burst over all of his arms and torso. Macyn *'ahs'* in glorious relief, mumbling, “yeah, that’s the stuff. Thanks.”

“You're welcome,” she returns. “Try not to use it often or your clothes will erode much faster.”

Jogging as much as he could, it pains him to ignore much of the beautiful forest and fields the trail toward university leads them through, and he promises himself to explore it all the first chance he gets. With the cold nipping at his bones, they make it to Erudite an hour and a half without Macyn needing to step into a store once for a heating break.

“...It looks a lot different up close,” Macyn gasps in awe, with a mana punch to the rune on his shirt, blasting a cloud of steam to flow with the wind as the sudden warmth of his torso does all it can to combat the cold of his legs.

Passing large magnificent gold and black gates, the wondrous school looks like a grand university campus, at least a mile or so. From what he can see, the layout is circular and from the main four-story edifice at the center, the palace architecture extends to four wings, creating an X. Every building is large and Victorian, detailed down to the statues and stone gargoyles, lions, dragons, and bears embellishing the architecture.

Upon closer look at the school buildings, pillars of fine white are all aligned perfectly and accented with black and gold lining. A few red brick walls are saturated with honeysuckles and even a few of the tall arching streetlights. Though the paths are cobbled, there are large, crisp, green lawns with all sorts of colorful flowers methodically arranged to inspire sheer awe. The amazing sight makes him forget about the painful cold of his legs.

“It's bigger since the last time I managed to come here,” Sen offhandedly mentions.

“Did you go here too?” Macyn asks in wonder, taking it all in.

“I did,” Sen states with some melancholy. “As you will learn in your histories, Erudite is well over a thousand years old; one of the very first structures built on Menhir, in fact.” As he looks around in awe, Macyn effortlessly blasts himself with enough heat to erupt steam all around him and Sen reminds him, “your sweater won't last if you continue doing that.”

“I won't last if I don't,” he answers as they make their way through the nearly empty campus.

Sen leads them to the main office and the moment Macyn suddenly wonders if he can actually attend school, he sees a large cylindrical coil levitating high above the main

building with the large dome roof. It squiggles in the air like a weightless green ribbon swirling in the wind. Inspecting whatever it is to the best his sight can, Macyn observes that the large coil is actually slithering, like a snake, and something about its face is very similar to a large lizard that's so prevalent in folklore.

"No way!" Macyn bellows loudly, causing Sen to whirl on him. Ignoring her concern, Macyn only has eyes for the dragon coiling and worming its way through the skies as if gravity or wind didn't exist.

Sen finds the source of his undivided attention and relaxes as she comments, "I suppose you did not know dragons exist as well." Macyn only nods his head, standing still as stone; that is until a strong gust of wind claws through his worn clothes and up his spine, shocking him out of his awe before he quickly follows Sen to the center of campus.

The main acropolis of the university houses many departments of faculty and student services and entering the large hall felt like entering a large play theater. As Macyn warms up, he follows Sen as best he can while trying to take in every opulence of the palace's impressive interior. His ghost inhabitant floats into a smaller hall that leads them to an unattended registrar's office.

"I guess we wait while you tell me about the dragon... dragons, wow," Macyn notes audibly.

"Dragon," Sen states emphasizing the 'n.' "Singular. There's only one in all of Menhir. You'll learn about Coral in your Primer of Creatures course."

"Coral?" he loudly bemoans more than asks. "What kind of name is that? I was expecting something a little more savage, like Fang, Lunatic, Deathclaw, but Coral? It might as well be a puppy."

"It wouldn't be a very good mascot if it inspired a fearful response from parents," Sen estimates aloud.

"Of course the school's mascot is a dragon," he gripes, offended and annoyed. "My parents are going to get the longest letter on the drawbacks of privileged information."

Not a moment passes when they hear footfalls echo through the hall and coming toward them. A young woman pauses curiously at the sight of them before she beams a friendly smile. She's dressed in a conservative pinstriped dress, with a low-cut matching vest and white dress shirt underneath. She cut a dashing figure, giving off a friendly and inviting demeanor as she greets them, "hello," with a lovely voice.

Macyn and Sen return her greeting with a smile and a bow, respectively. "I'd like to register," Macyn informs the woman, taking his paperwork out of his bag.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she says sympathetically, putting a hand up. "I don't actually work in the registrar's office. The staff is currently having an impromptu meeting."

"Oh," Macyn responds softly, holding his papers awkwardly.

"For how long?" Sen asks. "Mr. Blende's first day on Menhir has been a long one, and it would do him a world of good if he can purchase some items before the shops close... and his clothes begin to deteriorate."

"Is he-" the young woman begins to ask Sen, who nods and interjects, "from the lower order? Yes."

"Well, since you put it that way," the lovely lady says with a genial smile. "Let me have a look at those," she voices with an extended hand. Macyn hands her his day's labor and she looks it over before saying, "Mister... Macyn Blende. I am the marshal's assistant, Mrs.



Makynli.”

“Hi,” Macyn says accompanied by a loud gurgle from his stomach. Macyn smiles awkwardly and says, “it's been such a crazy day, I guess I forgot to eat.”

Mrs. Makynli smiles warmly, tilts her head up, clears her throat, and says, “it would be ever so lovely if a sweet brownie delivered an afternoon snack for a hungry child in need.” Macyn's mind is immediately confused, wondering if she's okay when not a second into his thought, a tray with a sandwich, an apple, and what looks to be milk, with an orange wedge on the glass's rim appears right in front of him. The contents wiggle a bit, as if dropped in a hurry by something faster than his eyes can see, and hasn't quite settled. Macyn is astounded and snaps his head to Sen, who automatically answers him, “that would be the work of a household spirit called Brownies.”

“They're wonderfully helpful in keeping the school clean, among other tasks,” Mrs. Makynli states as she looks over the paperwork. She pauses a moment to look at his glasses before sagging her shoulders before continuing to file and sign paperwork as she says, “unless you earn their respect in some grand way, only faculty may call on them.”

Macyn doesn't pester her with more questions and takes a bite of his sandwich, of which he nearly cries over. The sandwich in Macyn's trembling hand is the first food he's ever tasted from the fantasy world, and he was ill-prepared for the bounty of toe-curling flavors. “Thank you, Brownies,” he gasps. “It's so delicious,” he adds.

“I see you've left the supplies box unchecked,” Mrs. Makynli answers politely. “Don't you want Erudite to procure your supplies? We always ensure the best.”

“Uhm,” Macyn vocalizes, setting down the creamy milk with orange flavoring. “I was actually going to look around on my own, a little; if that's okay. So, you don't have to.”

Mrs. Makynli looks from Macyn to Sen, who nods before responding herself, “I see. Let us know if there's anything you can't find, yes?” Macyn nods at that. “And finally... would you like to choose your house or would you prefer to let us choose for you?”

“My dad went to Terra House,” Macyn ponders aloud. “But mom went to Ignis House... I think I'll go to Ignis.” Mrs. Makynli raises her eyebrows a moment, but with a curt nod, she continues her work in silence. Interestingly enough, the moment Macyn finishes his apple and sets it down, it all vanishes, astonishing him even further as he looks around.

Mrs. Makynli finishes in no time, letting them know dinner is at seven before asking, “I expect Imperium office explained Anthony building?”

“Um,” Macyn starts. “Just that you both share it, and it's a shelter.”

“Yes, well, it was a shelter, at first. Conflicts in Gaiorem had created more orphans than they had available vacancies, so we donated an unused building. Now, it's being used for students who... need more help than others.” Makynli turns to Sen and asks if she knows where Anthony Building is. When she shakes her head Makynli gives them directions, she welcomes Macyn to Erudite and wishes him luck. Now that Macyn knows he can craft mana, he's less worried about how Menhir will treat him and simply thanks her before they leave.

On their way, Macyn wanted to hold off using the heating rune on his horribly decaying sweater, but he hadn't expected his building to be so far away and ends up using the heating rune twice. A little over forty minutes of walking leads them to the dirt path Mrs. Makynli mentioned. Another ten minutes on the dirt path, left at the third available turn, and they find themselves looking at a two-story, off-white, old English style house. It's not as clean

or maintained as many of the buildings he's seen. In fact, it's the first structure he's seen in Menhir that's in heavy need of maintenance.

"...The architecture is lovely," Sen offers like a consolation prize.

Macyn tilts his head in a vague attempt to appreciate his dorm from a different angle as he lightly asks, "do you think they were going for the slum look?" Sen's expression is him unappreciative of his sarcasm. Sighing, he comments, "fine. It may not be as amazing as some, or all, of the magical buildings we've seen, but at least it'll be warm inside. What else do you really need, right?"

Stepping inside Anthony building, the initial room is spacious and empty. The ceiling is two floors high and wide stairs to the second floor is a few paces ahead of him, layered with faded and stained red carpeting. More importantly, Macyn quickly discovers it's as bitterly cold inside the house as it is outside, minus the wind shear.

"What frozen hell hole is this," Macyn bitterly calls out when he doesn't thaw and warm.

Sen floats about the walls of the entrance hall, searching for something specific, then levitates up toward the ceiling, searching quickly until she stops at the part of the wall between the tall windows. "It has the warming rune," she calls out. "But it's outdated."

"So, it's not working?" Macyn calls to her.

"It works," she answers serenely. "But there's a delay. It will take time to heat the house."

"Of course," he sarcastically responds. Macyn then desperately asks, "do you think they'll fix it?"

"We'll find the caretaker and let him know," she comments. "In the meantime, let's find your room. We don't have long before the shops close."

Resigned to freezing for a little longer, Macyn didn't need to check further than the first plaque by the first door in the hallway of the first floor. It has his last name and year but no second name underneath it. Looking down the hall to the other empty plaques and Macyn finds it odd to be living in an empty house when he came from a home with no space.

Macyn enters his room and quickly notes the simplicity of the furnishings. He has a large, comfortable-looking bed and a simple wood desk, all of which mirror the opposite side of the room. Digging through his traveler's bag, Macyn brings out a long sleeve shirt and carefully starts marking it with the same rune array Sen taught him.

"Do not activate the rune until I look it over," Sen sternly warns him as she starts to float away.

"Where are you going?"

"To explore," she answers. "And identify which rooms I can and can't enter."

"I didn't know there were places you couldn't enter."

"Of course there are," she states as if it's obvious. "Many in fact. Otherwise, ghosts would make for the perfect spies." Sen pauses a moment in thought before telling him, "I would like you to know, that even if I've never had a ward with such restrictions, I will do all I can to make certain you have everything you need to live comfortably on Menhir."

Macyn is taken aback by that. It's rare for him to have such attention from anyone. It's suddenly the first time he truly realizes she's on his side. Even if it's her job, Macyn appreciates the company and replies, "thanks, Sen. I'm glad you're here."

## The Gud Arm

Macyn and Sen trek a couple of hours to Lin's Sunflower, for his uniform. Agreeing that a quality purchase now will save more in the long run, they order the standard set of school uniforms; though to save on funds, the colors won't always stay vibrant, fading with time. He's quickly sized with measuring tape that moves on its own, then changing into his Victorian-era clothing, Mr. Lin tells him the other pair of uniforms have already been sent to his room.

They thank Mr. Lin as they exit the store, and though Macyn feels odd about wearing suspenders and a vest, the only thing that matters is that he's warm. Macyn chuckles maniacally when he removes his coat to test the runes and finds he's still warm all the way to a thin shirt and rolled-up sleeves. Sen smiles and suggests they return so they're not late for dinner.

On the way, Macyn asks, "how do I send letters?"

"Students have a mailing service you can use," Sen answers before asserting, "we'll pick up a stationery on the way."

"Is it one of those light-zipping squirrels? Or a... springend?"

"A spriggan, and I'm afraid it's neither," Sen says. "A ratatosker, the squirrel, does not travel off Menhir, and if I remember correctly, Erudite's spriggan is for official use only. Unless you purchase a doehawk of your own, which is expensive, or a spriggan, which is vastly more expensive, you will have to use the university's retro-posting for letters."

The two have enough time to purchase a simple second-hand writing stationery and make it to dinner on time, however, the dining hall is an odd experience for Macyn. Standing under the grand archway of the dark oak-furnished room, he spies on the gathering of adults before timidly asking, "Sen, why are there so many adults here?"

"They're the faculty," she slowly answers as if that was evident.

"Am I in the right room?" Macyn asks, turning his attention to her. "Where do the students eat?"

"Everyone eats together," she informs. "Isn't that the same in the lower order?"

"No," Macyn says aghast, returning his attention to seating adults. "Not at all. We stay way the hell away from teachers. Or at least in America we do."

"I see," Sen voices but she reminds him, "this cannot be more shocking than observing a dragon." Macyn begrudgingly nods before she informs him, "I have to leave you here."

"What!" Macyn bellows loud enough to draw some attention.

"You don't need me to eat," she reasons. "You'll be fine. I have to check in with the Ghost Guild, for any new developments. I'll return before you've finished and mind your manners."

Macyn wasn't with her longer than a day, and yet it already feels unsettling without her. Fretfully with his glasses, he makes his way toward the sole table in the large ballroom-sized atrium of the dining hall. Noticing him, Mrs. Makynli stands from her elegant chair and makes her way to him.

"Hello again, Mr. Brand," she says with a smile.

Macyn smiles weakly, hating it as he corrects her. "It's, uh, Blende, actually."

Face stricken with remorse, Mrs. Makynli quickly apologizes. "Goodness me, that's not even close, is it? Apologies, Mr. *Blende*. It's no excuse, I realize, but we had quite the meeting earlier; made me forget the day, I don't mind telling you."

"It's alright," he assures her, feeling a little less nervous around her carefree attitude.

"I see you have proper clothes now," she says appraising him. "Very sharp."

"Thank you," Macyn garishly says with a tinge of blush.

"Well, come along," Mrs. Makynli states, bringing him out of his thoughts. "I'll find you a seat," she offers.

Macyn is sat in of a very stern-looking man who didn't seem to care pleasantness or manners on his a resting face. Upon closer inspection, Macyn can make out a star-like scar stretching from the corner of his eye-brow, near his eye, midway down his cheek. It didn't seem like Makynli had to introduce him as all the professors around him take one look at him and his glasses and return to their conversations. They all already knew who he was and not a single one of them introduced themselves to him, making Macyn feel like an ignored fish out of water.

A hush settles in the room and several professors turn toward the great archway. Tracing their gaze, Macyn nearly laughs at the look of an unexpectedly tall and muscular old man with a perfectly maintained white beard, cut to a perfect edge along his jaw, and pointy under his chin. The white hair on his head is slick back into a bun—an odd thing for Macyn to see on an old man—and is sporting a sleek three-piece pinstripe suit. For an old man, Macyn had to admit he looks stylish beyond his years and he walked as if he owned the room without aggressively projecting so, as if everyone simply agreed he held the lead.

Everyone the old man passes nod or greets him graciously, and Mrs. Makynli walks up to the old man. Sweet as can be, she hands him a moderate stack of parchment he begins to review as he walks to the head of the table and takes the head seat.

'*He's probably crazy important,*' Macyn thinks to himself, wishing Sen were here to elaborate. Thankfully there's no further preamble as the food snaps into existence in front of him. It looks as delicious as the sandwich he had earlier and every spoon full is an experience. Before long, Sen is already back, floating beside him as he leaves the grand atrium.

"Good?" Sen asks.

"The food was amazing," Macyn honestly answers, putting his professors out of his mind. Walking back to Anthony house, Macyn asks, "did you learn much from the Ghost Guild?"

"Many things but nothing of note," she answers. "We can talk about it tomorrow."

They return to a cold dorm house and Macyn opts to keep his uniform on until the house eventually warms. In the meantime, he writes thirteen pages, back and front, filling out the envelope to its limit and the first thing Macyn does the following morning is locate the lower order post box and mail his letter. The attending informs him all receiving posts are sent to the student's room so he wouldn't have to come every time he had mail. After a quiet breakfast away from the professors, Macyn and Sen leave campus to purchase the rest of his supplies.

On their way to Maghred, Sen admits to her ward, "even purchasing second-hand materials, we're cutting it close, and should something unforeseen happen in the future, you

may not have the funds to properly handle the situation. Do you have a talent or skill that might earn mynt?"

"I take it you never had to worry about this with your other assignments," Macyn asks, watching her curiously. When Sen nods in answer, he admits, "I've never had a job before. I like puzzles and drawing but that's useless in this case. Um... I don't know. Did you have a job when you were, uh, you know..."

"Breathing?" Sen asks and Macyn nods. "I did. I performed two tasks. The first was artistry; painting to be specific."

"Were you good?" he asks, noting they both have some artistry in common.

"I believe so, however, my family was one of wealth and power. Many purchased my paintings out of obligation to our family or to seek favor with our trade. After that, I became a florist with a specialty in large bouquet arrangements."

Looking at her oddly, he asks in disbelief, "you were paid to arrange flowers?"

"Floral arrangement and design have a spiritual ability to bring happiness to those who see it," she defends with a high chin. "For many powerful families, this was a standard of elegance that no promising house could be without."

"Huh," Macyn easily says. "Well, I don't know anything about flowers, or arranging them. How well off was your family?"

"Very," she answers simply.

"Are they still well off," he wonders hopefully. "Do you think they might hire me for something?"

"My house no longer exists," she slowly responds.

Macyn deflates as he turns to her and sincerely expresses, "oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... sorry."

"It's fine," she laments to admit. "For now, let's finish our errands and I will try to think of something you can do." The rest of the trip to Maghred is made in silence but luckily not awkwardly so. Sen didn't seem like she wanted to speak and Macyn didn't want to push her to.

Without the funds for public mana-travel or a carpet of their own, it takes them nearly three hours to reach Maghred. From his first step on the red earth of the native district, there's a noticeable difference to the scenery, but oddly enough not in beauty. The clay and wood homes, shops or stalls certainly look rustic, organic, bereft of rigid symmetry, like a mixture of hard outspoken personalities, underprivileged clay homes, and all amidst a reddish-orange forest. Though not as clean and lavish as the Burn market or the Hall, Maghred, as a whole, still looks amazing.

There are mages everywhere on the streets; either selling or stacking goods, repairing cracks on clay surfaces, flying carpets, eating food from large bowls at an open kitchen, or simply walking about. Unlike the larger, more polished shops in the main market district, Maghred's market is lined with large and small stalls in every available space. Macyn finally saw his first goblin and he couldn't stop staring; Short, small black eyes, large ears and nose with dual-tone purple and green skin, wearing jeans with red sneakers and a Hawaiian print shirt.

As they walk, Macyn spots a mage posting posters of the missing children and of a wanted man Macyn didn't recognize. It seems to have enough of an effect on the populace as there is not single child unaccompanied by an adult. As if becoming more aware of the

possible danger, Macyn only then notices what his dad called the Poliwicks, Menhir's police, patrolling the streets in pairs.

Sen leads the way through the market area of Maghred as she explains the plan. “Of the six courses you’re taking, Historia, Runology and Numeralculus require the least amount of funds; simple books and parchment. Let’s start there.”

In the bookstore, Copper Tomes of Maghred, many used books interest Macyn. He's already flipped through the five allowed pages of '*Resonance, the New Mana*,' by Nica Gat, '*How to Make a Dragon Love You*,' by Ashida Cromwell, '*Slowing Down Time for Dolts*,' by Usho Do, and '*Fifty Potions to Improve You*,' by Lin Stuckheart, and is currently looking at '*How to Fight like the Warlocks of Old*' by Tian Crude. The second he flips to the fifth allotted page for previewing, the book immediately claps shut, much to his disappointment.

Now that Macyn knows he can craft mana, he’s spent a lot of time thinking if he should just stay and go to school as his parents had. It might be better than life in Nevada, however, his eye color would be an issue here. He can’t imagine anyone would care once they see he can craft like anyone else but it’s possible that they might. After all, his mother told him ‘Life is his Fight.’ Macyn wants to wait to hear back from his parents before he makes a decision. Hopefully, they’ll tell him something exciting like, ‘*stay and have fun.*’

“Mana Form and Guard Craft will need better materials,” she mentions, bringing him out of his thoughts. “It's primarily for your safety, so I insist we purchase adequate quality.”

“What are those classes like?” he asks.

“Mana Form is the discipline of connecting your mana to that of an object’s and altering its shape,” she explains. “Guard Craft is a self-defense course; using your mana for defense, like a shield, or offense, like a spear. There are many training items available for purchase that will help you become better, faster, stronger, sadly, we don’t have the funds, so we’ll simply purchase the arm and chest guards to reduce the impact from offensive mana.” Ignoring all the items they can't buy, Macyn wonders if Guard Craft will be easier or worse than being his step-sister's practice dummy.

For potions class, Sen wouldn't risk shopping at a second-hand store, insisting the quality of the ingredients had to be the best. With the last of his school supplies purchased, curiosity urges him to check his account balance. Macyn wills his signet ring to become visible, always putting a smile on his face when he does it, and presses the simple face of the ring on his palm. After a moment, the balance of his account appears like a tattoo on his skin. Macyn is happy with the seven-digit number, until he asks Sen, “how much is Erudite taking?”

Sen looks over his shoulder at the number displayed on his palm and says, “You'll have... 87.9 Myntir left, give or take.”

With a furrow groan, Macyn deflates as he proclaims, “well, so much for buying a flying carpet, or a doehawk, or anything.”

Aside from the aching burn pulsing violently in his well-worn legs, the rest of the day goes by quickly. In the letter he writes that night, he asks his parents if they know of any job he might do to earn a little more on the side. He makes sure to mention how Sen is more worried than he is, but it would be nice to get a few extra things that’ll help him if in case he does decide to stay.

The following day, Macyn asks where the campus library is, and for the rest of the day, it’s where he congregates. It's a large structure with intricate architecture similar to a

palace but with excessive columns and a gold dome on the top that reminds him of the capitol building in Washington D.C. Inside is three high levels full of numerous shelves of books with natural sunlight streaming through many tall and skinny windows. Walls empty of bookshelves had portraits of famous mages and warlocks and many of the stained-glass windows had moving and ever-changing images; from galloping horses to flying birds, fire breathing dragons, and water spitting Kappas.

The library was so big, Macyn didn't think he could explore every inch of it before school starts. Instead, he focuses on researching different models he can craft his mana in to narrow the gap between himself and students who've known about manacrafting a lot longer than he has. If he decides to stay, the idea of being so far behind feels like a nightmare, and walking around with Sen, it's too obvious how little he knows. He needs to learn something.

"As you know, your mana can lift, pull, push, form into solid objects you can use, such as barriers, spears, swords, daggers, and axes; obviously they won't be made of wood or steel, but forged from your will, your mana, and tremendous focus," she adds for clarity. "What is your dominant hand? I've seen you use both."

"I was originally left-handed, but I fell out of a tree and broke my left arm," Macyn begins to explain. "I couldn't use it with the cast, so I learned to write with my right," he answers her. "Both, I guess."

"If you were to throw a punch," Sen begins to ask. "What foot would you move forward?"

Fascinated, he simply answers by doing it. "Heh, left."

"That suggests your dominant hand is right," Sen reasons. "I want you to be comfortable with either hand but for now we'll start with your dominant. Now, when you bring your mana to your right hand, try to reimagine that energy as an invisible hand then solidify it. The hardening can feel differently for every mage. I've heard some describe it like gel thickening or a dry like baking. You're just going to have to focus, practice, and feel for yourself."

It takes Macyn the better part of the following week to learn to solidify and hold his hand-shaped mana to pick up a rock the size of his hand. Despite how amazed he is by having this ability, it isn't remarkable. Though Sen explains part of the problem is due to her blare on his mana, he didn't truly care. He was levitating a rock using nothing but his spirit. Macyn rejoiced like a child's first trip to Disney World with an all-access pass.

Aside from feeling awestruck, Macyn did exhaust himself quickly. The experience is confusing, not only in body but in mind as well. The physical hurt flares in tandem with doubt and some sense of loss, as if a fundamental part of him is stepping away from his body. It's extremely unnerving as well but Sen assured him it was normal and he would eventually become used to the sharp burning sensation. Fortunately, focus and practice are paramount in crafting and conditioning his mana.

Though tired more often than not, Macyn is too excited to stop, practicing for as many hours as he can to successfully levitate books or his backpack for nearly half a minute. In addition to his mana crafting, Macyn and Sen comb through the large campus library for anything related to legal proceedings on Menhir. Sen reasoned if his parents were banished, there would be a legal document.

"Ugh, this is way too complicated," he grumbles loudly in the empty library. He tosses the thoroughly confusing book on the desk as he calls, "Sen?" When she appears from her

clay home, he asks, "can you find out how much it'll cost to appeal a court decision?"

"Of course," she says before floating away. As Macyn continues to read complex historic arbitration proceedings between the High Council, the City Council, and advocates, he's regularly and repeatedly confused. Macyn simply doesn't know enough about how justice is served here, and reading book spine after book spine, he can't seem to find an idiot-proof explanation to Imperium's legal system. When Sen returns, her overall demeanor isn't encouraging.

"I've spoken with a guild member who has experience with advocates," she starts as he sets his large tomb down. "He says it can be as low as twenty thousand myntir or as high as three hundred thousand depending on the severity of the offense."

Macyn lets out a puff of breath like he was kicked low in the gut. "I have eighty-seven myntir..." Macyn glumly asks, "so how do we find out the offense?"

"We'll need to go to Hall's judicium records to learn more about your mother's case."

Putting his tomb back, Macyn doesn't hesitate to make the long trek to the Hall. After asking directions, they find one person behind a desk in the Records Room; a long-faced, sharp-nosed skinny woman with short and shiny black hair slicked back. The clerk gives Macyn a once over before saying, "I know the scholastic year hasn't started because my runt is still eating my food, which begs to question, why are you wearing your uniform?" Finally noting his sunglasses, she tacks on, "and glasses. That's incredibly rude."

As his old clothes have already evaporated Macyn quickly embellishes, "I grew out of my other stuff," before moving to his reason for being there. "I was hoping you can help me find-"

"Glasses," she interjects. Swallowing nervously, Macyn takes off his iris-hiding glasses and immediately the clerk is yelling at him to get out. Sen tries to calm the woman down but she's already calling security. "You have no business being here," she yells. "If a defect like you doesn't remove yourself from these premises, we will happily do it for you! Now get out!"

Macyn is gobsmacked the entire time he mechanically puts on his sunglasses and follows Sen outside. Even walking down the hall, it felt like security was going to stop him at any moment and he rushes out of the tall and pure white building. Macyn didn't return to his senses until he was well away from Hall district.

"Well, that sucked," he gripes.

Sen agrees with a nod before proposing, "with your permission, I'd like to give my friend at the guild more details of your information. It's possible he can narrow down a better estimate."

"Yeah, sure," Macyn agrees, though hums with concern. "I'm still worried about the actual mynt though. Even if we're lucky and it's the lowest possible amount, how am I supposed to make that much when I can barely afford school? What am I talking about? I can't even afford school *without* aid!"

Macyn turns to Sen when he doesn't feel her around him; an eerie ability that he's only starting to mentally grasp. Spotting her floating away, he follows her toward the market until she's hovering between the Golden Dough bakery and Lin's Sunflower. Macyn walks up to her as she surveys half the junk that used to be in the alley between the two stores.

"Wondering why the stuff is still here?" he asks.

"No," Sen answers floating closer to a large metal rectangle loosely wrapped in



sandpaper. "I believe today is the likely day of collection."

"Why are we- Wait, are you dumpster diving?"

"I don't know what that is," she comments while still inspecting the dirt and rust-covered block.

"Um, basically looking through the trash for anything that could be worth a lot," he responds as he inspects the dirt-covered and rusted block. "One man's trash is another man's treasure, kind of thing."

"Maybe," Sen says soothingly. "I... Initially, I never wanted to be a painter, or a florist," she speaks and there's a change about her that Macyn can't quite interpret but knows it has to do with the large chunk of metal wrapped in dirty and dusty sandpaper. Macyn steps closer to hear her as she softly continues, "I was more my grandfather's daughter than my father's. Father did not approve of my spending time or learning from him. He found it unsuitable for a lady of my station."

"What did your grandfather do?"

"He was an orewick; what is called a blacksmith in the lower order," she says as she fondly stares at the metal block. Now that Macyn has a clear enough understanding, the metal object holding her gaze does seem to resemble an anvil—a large anvil—with a horn and an additional square protrusion on top of the striking flat of it. The whole thing is loosely wrapped in what can only be moldy sandpaper and there seems to be some writing on the side, but it's so old, rusted and worn, reading it is impossible.

"I loved watching my grandfather work," she easily continues. "As a girl, I would spend every available hour watching him do what he mastered to perfection. He didn't need mana to forge beauty from dirt, and it dazzled me every time. It was unlike anything else in the world, but it wasn't proper for women to work in such unrefined labor. My father would not allow it.

"That sucks," Macyn affirms wholeheartedly.

"Even still, I took to it like a fish in water," she responds. "I remember my grandfather's every word; his every action."

Recalling his father, Macyn voices, "your dad couldn't see the thing that works for him maybe doesn't work for you. I bet you didn't want to disappoint him either, which makes it all the more complicated."

"Yes," Sen agrees. "Very much so."

"Too bad it's trashed or I'd say we should take it."

Sen smiles before she says, "stealing is bad Mr. Blende. Follow me."

Sen exits the alley and enters the Golden Dough, with Macyn right on her evaporating heels. The savory smell of the bakery hits his taste buds like a kicking mule, increasing a build-up of saliva in his mouth to the point he has to swallow twice. There are plenty of mages enjoying their no doubt delicious pastries and at the pay counter, there's an Egyptian looking attendant with a long nose and fine dark hair cut short. With a smile on his young face, he greets them, "welcome, welcome."

Floating to the man, Sen asks, "may I speak with the owner, please?"

The attending seems taken, but only a moment, before obliging and calling for his father.

"Hello," an older, dark-skinned, heavy-set man with graying black hair and onyx eyes greets. His son doesn't leave, leaning on the counter with interest as the father

introduces himself. "I am Ode Tehuti. How may I help you?"

"Good afternoon," Sen starts. "My name is Sen and this is my ward Macyn Blende. I'd like to buy some of your offal outside."

"I see," Ode hums, tilting his head and eying them. Macyn can feel the man running calculations in his mind as he asks, "may I ask what for?"

Sen quickly yet calmly answers with a question, "do you ask your customers why they wish to buy your pastries?" Macyn tightly presses his lips together to avoid smiling as Sen adds, "I will say I wish to take the metal block."

"Mnn," Ode mumbles. "That could fetch a fair amount with some of the metalworks."

"It's old rusted junk," Sen counters. "I'll give you twenty myntir for it." with a heavy shake of his head, Ode returns, "I could get a hundred from the metal crafters. It'd be in my interest to see them."

"It would be a waste of a day for coppers," Sen counters with confidence. "How long have you kept it out there, amassing more rust?"

"Metal is metal," Ode tries when Sen interrupts.

"Yes, just like week-old pastries are fresh out of the oven," Sen easily combats. "The metalworks would laugh in your face for trying to sell them that corroded mess. You would waste a day all to junk it in the end, earning yourself nothing more than humiliation and aggravation. Thirty is my final offer, and you know that's fair."

Ode uses silence to draw out the tension, possibly to get Sen to rattle her and shake out a better offer from her. When he sees she won't budge, he turns to Macyn. "And you, boy? Are you the type that allows your crutch to speak for you in matters of business?"

Easily hopping on the fun of pranking someone, Macyn responds, "you think she listens to me? I told her it's not even worth fifteen, but she wants to be nice. If you like, we can just leave."

Ode grunts in some amusement. "Forty myntir and it's yours."

"Deal," Sen calls, extending her hand in the excitement, forgetting she's not corporeal. Macyn smirks at her as she sheepishly floats away so Macyn can shake the owner's hand on a done deal. Ode writes the voucher and for a description, Sen tells him to write, Guds Arm. While Macyn punches the voucher, he only then realizes how little mynt he has left.

Ode is smiling as he waves the receipt of the transaction. "If only to satisfy my curiosity, what is this block of metal to you?"

Sen smiles at him and simply says, "treasure." Macyn and Sen walk outside and into the alley when Macyn asks, "Sen, aren't *you* the one always keeping *me* from spending?"

Sen broods on his question a moment before responding, "yes, you're right. I think we did spend more than would normally be responsible. I'll admit this is a gamble, but ultimately, one I feel is well worth the risk. I'll tell you more when we reach Anthony." Standing before their "treasure," they encounter an unexpected problem... it's very, very heavy.

"Well," Sen starts, sympathetically looking at Macyn. "I don't support gender-specific roles, but you are quite literally the only one of us that can lift it." Macyn stares at her in horrific disbelief and she weakly encourages him to, "just focus."

To his great dismay, the longest Macyn can levitate the Gud Arm is thirteen seconds before it's ridiculous weight decimates his focus and he can't drag it further. He has nothing to pull it with nor can he find anything with wheels that can help him transport it, and

oddly enough, not a single adult helps him move the thing from the moderately busy market.

“Do they think... I'm training... or something?” Macyn angrily asks between deep gasping breaths. Though, most seem disgusted by the sight of him and Sen.

“I don't understand it as well,” Sen comments while a sweaty Macyn rests. “When I was alive, everyone helped me with even the smallest of tasks.”

A winded Macyn musters to ask, “oh my God... you were a princess... weren't you?” She remained silent and with a crooked smirk on his profusely sweating face, he adds in good humor, “I bet you had servants... and everything.”

“Everyone I knew had servants,” she vehemently argues, turning away with a pout. A smirking Macyn holds his hand up high in submission as she asserts, “I help mages now and that's all that matters. How long will you continue to lounge? The day's dying quickly.”

Macyn grunts happily at her deliberate change of topic. “Of course, my lady. Right away, my lady,” he adds humorously until he attempts to levitate it again. All humor gone now, Macyn tries with all his might to keep the merciless weight in the air for longer than twenty seconds. It's been hours and they're on the forest path, two-thirds of the way to Erudite.

He manages to last twenty-four seconds in the air before he drags the heap of metal another thirty until his fingers burn and his mana feels as fried as being electrocuted. Macyn slumps to the earthy ground, falling on his back—chest heaving sharply—to view the blurry trees above him and the starring evening above.

“I'm sorry Macyn,” he hears Sen say from within the wand.

“...it's ... okay,” he huffs. “Tell me... what... we're doing... with it.”

“The Gud Arm is a mana-powered hammer over an anvil,” she starts to answer, adding, “I believe it to be the answer to all our problems.”

Between panting, he asks, “really?”

“I'm going to teach you the trade that greatly helped my family. The artistry I learned from my grandfather.”

“Oh,” he heaves from the ground. “Yeah... that would be... awesome. Um, how exactly will it help?” Macyn asks, pausing to exhale forcefully.

“We're going to make and sell a sword,” she answers. “A sword made by incompetent craftsmen with poor material can sell, at minimum, for hundreds of mynt. A sword made by talented craftsmen using superior materials may reach into the hundreds of thousands.”

“Are you serious?” Macyn gasps, sitting up. “That much?”

“I'll double-check current costs but I doubt it'll be less than what we need. Quality swords are hard to come by, more so when you consider a warlocks ability to craft their mana into a sharp sword.”

Macyn gets up and starts to move the anvil again, lasting a hair longer each time. “Was that why... your family was rich? ...Because of your grandfather?”

“In part,” Sen responds kindly. “He also married above his station.”

“So,” Macyn says gasping for air. “Uh, is he not a ghost... that you can talk to?”

“No. I am the only one of my family who had not moved on.”

“Well, I'm glad you're here.” Macyn can't see her since she's in his wand, but he thinks she's smiling. “Alright,” he heaves, and the alternating combination of his excitement for his ability to craft mana and physical exhaustion sandbags his entire journey to reach the school. It's late into the night when his exhausted, dirty, sweaty form reaches the school's wide gates. He feels like he could fall asleep any second but with sweat dripping from his chin, Macyn

drags the heavy anvil the last leg of distance into his room. Uncoordinated steps take him to his bed as his mind floods with feverish and reverberating prickling, Macyn is so exhausted, he knocks out the moment his face hits the pillow for a dreamless sleep.

The following morning, Macyn wakes up to merciless soreness he's never had the horror of suffering before. It's more than sore burning legs, arms, chest, and even elbows. It's a deeper ache, down to his soul, like a sickness. He recalls a similar pain when he first learned what it meant for his mom to be put in solitary. That entire month felt like she could die any moment, and that feeling of near-death is ever-present now; a weight of doom that scares him. It's only worse due to constant muscle soreness and burning of his fingers.

“Good morning, Macyn,” Sen says in a sweet tone.

“Ugh,” Macyn bemoans.

“How are you feeling,” she asks.

“Chewed up and spit out,” he mortally groans.

“That’s disturbing,” she remarks distastefully. “You've missed breakfast, but lunch won't be long now, so just rest till then.”

“No,” Macyn says struggling to get up. “I didn't write last night. If this anvil hammer thing-”

“The Gud Arm,” Sen adjusts.

“The Gud Arm,” he corrects. “Can do what you say, then this is good news I want to tell them about.”

“Wouldn't they prefer if you didn't exert yourself?” she asks with concern. “I think they will understand.”

“They can't understand what I haven't written,” he answers when he spots the large dirt-encrusted anvil in the wagon. A small smile spreads his lips before he sorely strains through his morning routine. By the time he slides another thick envelope into the lower order post box, lunch is ready. Walking into the grand atrium of the dining vastness, he halts at the scolding feeling under the collective eyes of the faculty.

It's only then Macyn wonders why no one from school came looking for him and asks Sen as much.

“No,” Sen recounts from his wand. “None of the faculty spoke to me about your whereabouts... which is disconcerting.”

“I'm like the only student here,” Macyn whispers. “How do they not care?”

“They still believe you're a stolid,” Sen reminds him.

“God, that's so wrong,” Macyn remarks as he takes a seat away from the faculty.

“Would you like to tell them-”

“No,” Macyn returns. “They don't deserve to know.”

“They will eventually,” Sen replies.

“And I hope they feel like crap afterward,” he finishes before eating his fill. When lunch ends, Sen and Macyn walk to Imperium Hall, but they find the same rude lady working and run out of the building. Sen suggests they head to the school library to research restoration runes.

As they head back to campus, Sen explains, “the Gud Arm is very old, and like any long discarded antique, we'll need to restore it. Once we've finished mending it, we can begin.”

“This is so wild,” Macyn hums with his first smile of the day despite how much it ached. “How fast do you think we can get the mynt?”

In a serious tone, she answers, “despite all we can do with mana, this will not be a quick affair, Mr. Blende. This manner of crafting will require time and dedication. There are many stages to creating a sword, and as it is, we only have two things: the Gud Arm, and ore... and we may not even have that.”

“Wait,” a confused Macyn stops her, raising his hands. “I’m just going by what you said, so... can we do this or not?”

“If I said you could be the greatest warlock since Theophilus Osgar Hew, would you believe it?”

“I don't know,” Macyn answers honestly. “I’m going to assume he's someone awesome and say, maybe. I guess.”

“He is,” she assures him, before continuing. “You would need time and training to reach his level, correct?”

“Yeah,” Macyn bemoans as he sees her point. “So in order to sell something amazing for a lot of mynt, I need time and practice, is what you're saying.”

“I know you can do this, Mr. Blende, but we need to put in the time and energy first.”

“You can call me Macyn, you know,” he tells her nearly annoyed by her insistence of calling him by his last name.

“I know,” she answers with a smile as they make their way to the campus library for some instructional guides. Back in his dorm with two promising books, *'Grime to Pristine: A Sanitation History'* by Ash E. Burg and *'Imperium Rune Clean'* by W. M. Coy, Macyn evaluates how dirty and weathered the block of metal is. It looks more earth than steel and he doubts whether any amount of restoration rune crafting could work on it. Sen has Macyn lift it with his mana on its proper base position so she can look it over.

“There's a rune on here already,” she notes aloud. “I think it has a repair and restore rune. Which means we don't need to add it.”

Nodding, Macyn reads the instructions on chapter three of *'Grime to Pristine,'* and learn how to mold his mana onto the power-hammer’s rune to perform its task, gently feeling a sublime sense of remedy, as if his soul can cleanse the soul of the massive anvil. Sensitive as his mana feels, he can sense it working and when he opens his eyes, it looks a little cleaner, but not by much.

“Don't be afraid to put more power into it,” Sen tells him. “we have a month before the academic year begins and we have to build a smelter before then. It won't be easy. You're still very new to crafting mana and my habitation isn't helping.” After regular use of his mana, he's come to notice how easily the blare can disrupt his resonance if he's not focused. She finishes by instructing, “once we're done we should move the Gud Arm to the basement.”

“What’s this we,” Macyn jests. She sighs ghost air at his antics before asking, “move it where?”

“I saw an old furnace we may be able to use.”

## First-Hand Help

The banquet hall grows livelier as more students begin their room and board on campus. Macyn's noticed many of the student mages are older years, juniors or seniors with well-established cliques, but there are a few freshmen around his age. Looking at every face through his sunglasses, Macyn's curious to find someone who doesn't care about Sen, his origin from the Lower Order, or his mismatching eye color. So far, many avoid him but he can't tell for which reason.

It didn't help that he was the only one on campus in his school uniform and the only one with an inhabitant. He can feel his social status turn more toxic with every passing hour, certain they can sense his poverty. Save for sideways glances or pointing, he's barely acknowledged, and while humiliating, it's not a new ordeal for him.

Casually walking back to Anthony house, a happily stuffed Macyn asks Sen, "so, what's a smelter, and how do we build it?"

"Rocks, have minerals inside of them called ore," Sen starts. "These minerals makeup of the sword, so the metal. Smelting is the process of using intense heat to extract the metal from within the rock, and the apparatus used is called a smelter."

"And we don't need to buy anything?"

"We do not," Sen happily answers. "But the cost of it will be a lot of time manaforming. We need to collect big boulders by the bulkhead doors that lead into the cellar of Anthony house."

Already feeling tired, Macyn plainly asks, "by *we*, you mean *me*, right?"

Sadly nodding, she continues, "you'll have to shape them into the proper form and structure before we etch heat boosting runes. Then we collect the materials to start smelting."

"All I heard was, '*lift*,' '*heavy*,' and '*boulders*,'" Macyn honestly tells her, sobering up from the euphoria of his delicious breakfast.

With an encouraging smile, she sweetly conveys, "if it makes you feel better, I have complete faith in you."

Sen leads Macyn past the field behind Anthony house to the large lush forest that elevates into the grandness of Menhir's core mountain in search of large boulders. From his altitude, he can see the lower valley and river several miles away as they search. With rolled-up sleeves, Macyn's focus is split between the beauty of the vibrant forest and finding heavy boulders he then has to levitate.

As an intangible being, Sen would have the easiest time searching independently of him however, she will not risk leaving him alone in the rich thicket of wild vegetation. She may know what they need, but considering how little he knows about the creatures or plant life on Menhir, she needs to teach him about all the ways he can die as well.

Fortunately for them, boulders are plentiful on the gigantic floating mountain. Even with the small wagon he found in the basement, it took a day for each boulder to transported to the forest's edge and then to Anthony House. After breakfast on the third day, Macyn dresses as comfortably as possible as Sen explains the next steps.

"Though I'd prefer you learn manaforming in class, we don't have an option

here.”

“There's already so much... about manacrafting I don't know... compared to the other kids... I don't want to be... more behind than I already am,” Macyn heaves, still breathing desperately from levitating both boulders a decent distance from the house to avoid any accidents but not too far from the Gud Arm in the cellar.

“Their education has nothing to do with your own,” Sen earnestly conveys to him. “Everyone learns at their own pace and not everyone is great at everything. You do not have to feel pressured to do so.”

“Maybe,” he grumbles, though he wonders when he'll receive his parent's letter. He feels like he wants to go to school, but he doesn't know how they feel about it yet.

Sen nods before continuing, “we have to manaform the boulders into cylindrical tubes with a fairly thick wall, like a water well, except instead of water coming out of the top, it'll be a geyser of flames out of a hole in the bottom.”

Macyn places the book, '*Visual ManaForming for the Modern Mage*,' by Drew Castle on a small table beside, and with Sen's guidance, he follows instructions in pensive silence. Throughout most of the afternoon and evening, the only time he doesn't ponder school and his parents is when he needs to focus his mana completely on the task. Visualizing the cylindrical chimney is the easy part. Coaxing the boulder's resistant mana to respond and reform to his mental image feels like trying to move a stubborn mule. Manaforming one of the boulders into the first stack of the furnace isn't completed until the following day, much to his dismay.

“Do not worry about how fast you can do it,” Sen reminds him in a comforting voice. “I think it's fantastic you do not quit.”

“Is it... lunchtime... yet,” Macyn heaves, laying on the ground breathing heavily, consistently thinking of his promise to his parents for motivation. After lunch, Macyn and Sen head to Imperium Hall. They had been going once a day to only find that same woman behind the counter every time. Since Sen can't pass through their walls, Macyn has to take a quick peek inside, and every time it's the same intolerant clerk either grooming her nails, hair, or makeup.

“Doesn't that hate-monger ever go home?” Macyn bellows as they walk out of the building. Though he enjoys walking the roads of Menhir, he would rather have the court recordings more, growing more discontent with every visit.

“She strikes me more as a bigot,” Sen comments indifferently. “Or supremacist, certainly an elitist. It's an unfortunate and rather active aspect of Menhir that is generally promoted by the Herra party.”

“I don't follow politics,” Macyn tells her as he eyes two flying carpets chasing each other over the market square. Racing flying carpets over the market is prohibited and Macyn smiles, wondering how long it'll be before he buys his own flying carpet to be chased on.

“You may have to,” Sen counters thoughtfully. “For instance, if we accept that anyone whose beliefs align with Herra won't help us, it's possible we may find assistance in it's opposing party.”

Watching a doehawk land gracefully on a black lamp post overhead, he rather distractedly asks, “you think maybe someone from... what's the opposing party?”

“Quem Colimus,” Sen answers from beside him.

Giving her his full attention, he asks, “you think someone from Quem Colimus might help us get the record of my parent's case?”

“That or an advocate. We won't know unless we try,” Sen theorizes. “Above all, Herra believe in strength and power. The core of their political campaign is establishing a stable kingdom on Gaiorem. Anyone who's not strong enough to survive the environment is deemed a handicap to power and progress, and thus are treated as lesser class mages. In some cases, with extreme prejudice.”

“Perfect,” Macyn grumbles sarcastically. “Mana Nazis.”

“For the most part, Quem Colimas opposes the Herra,” Sen continues. “They believe in balance and standard rights for all. It's possible we may be able to find a more sympathetic ear for our cause under Colimas.”

“It's worth a shot,” Macyn concedes.

Through sheer grit and delicious rejuvenating food, Macyn manages to reform the second boulder in less than a day. By the end of the following morning, he has both boulders cylindrical and stacked one on top of the other, resembling a stone smokestack as tall as his shoulder. Looking inside the strong cylinder, he smiles proudly at having made something of use.

With Sen's instruction, Macyn visualizes and forms two fist-sized holes a few inches up from the bottom of the stack that he extends into piping nearly a meter away from the stack—what Sen referred to as tuyère. She explains the tuyères are to feed air into the fire within the stack, like a furnace, and the long length of the piping is strictly to avoid being baked to death.

Satisfied with the smelter, he follows Sen through the bulkhead doors of Anthony building and descends into the cellar. The stone-stacked room is filled with all sorts of loose and random objects—animal cages, bells, statues, stacks of stone, crates, books and boxes, gardening tools, worn or broken toys—all disorganized throughout the entire dank and dusty room. Macyn has wondered often why this small, pitifully neglected room is dust-covered with odd décor when the rest of Erudite is so clean.

“I'm thinking the brownies don't come down here,” Macyn comments ducking under thick cobwebs Sen easily passes through.

“We can build an offering shrine,” she suggests as she waits for him to contort around the thick webs. “They love honey and milk. It's possible they will tend to the room if we offer them a token of appreciation.”

Macyn nods as they pass the stairs that lead up to Anthony's main hall. Passed the stairs and in the corner is his Gud Arm—marked as his property. Half a dozen steps away from his mana hammer is a long, ancient and rusted out furnace. Sen has Macyn open the small, aged, bronze double doors to the pitch-black interior.

“The furnace is lined with a heat accelerant,” Sen informs. “It's black, like coal, but better in all ways. An inch of this is like thousands of kilos of charcoal. Break off a handful,” Sen instructs. Macyn rolls up his sleeves high, to his shoulders, and breaks off a small chunk, blackening his hands and forearms in the process.

Though Macyn doesn't want to risk jinxing his good fortune, he has to ask Sen, “if we didn't find this coal here, how hard would it have been to get?”

“We would've been forced to purchase it,” Sen comments. “But it wouldn't cost anywhere near as much mynt as the Gud Arm. In the end, this simply saved us a step.”

Once they return to the smelter, Sen continues her instructions. “Manafarm the coal into a funnel with the diameter the size of the furnace's opening and the height... let's make



it the length of your arm.”

For visual clarity, he asks, “like the ones mechanics use to put oil in cars?”

“I don't understand that example. Think of a calla lily,” she suggests happily. “Gorgeous, funnel-shaped petal. The meaning behind that flower is purity. Fitting,” she adds with a smile.

Confused, Macyn tells her, “I don't know what that looks like.”

With a sigh, she bemoans, “it's a funnel-shaped flower that pairs beautifully with tulips, but very well. Think of a volcano, only upside down. In our furnace, the top is pointed down so the flow of molten waste is controlled and pools at the bottom.”

“Got it,” Macyn states before adding, “and by the way, that's exactly what mechanics use it to put oil in cars.”

“Fantastic,” she hollowly responds uninterested. “Now, after you place the coal funnel at the bottom of the furnace, you'll pack the ore on top, so when we light it all up, the slag, or the waste created when separating the mineral from the sediment, will gather and accumulate at the bottom. And the bloom of steel, which is what we'll use to make the sword, will stay captured in the funnel.”

Despite Macyn's sore muscles and tired mind, he easily manaforms the coal into a funnel within a minute. The shock must read on his face because Sen explains, “this material was crafted specifically to be molded however you want easily. Now, manaform the interior of the funnel into a beehive-like structure. The hexagon pockets will help distribute the heat evenly throughout the ore, leaving the bottom free for the flow of slag.”

“My hands are *so* dirty,” Macyn yips as he visualizes the intended image, however, rather than forming the honeycomb shapes Sen asked for, it's more like pockets of circles. Still, Sen approves, simply citing he only needs more practice envisioning the form. With her approval, his mana descends the funnel-shaped coal down into the smelter like an invisible hand, fitting it snug at the base.

“Congratulations,” Sen tells Macyn happily. “Step one out of a hundred is complete.”

“Ah *hundred*,” Macyn yells, whipping round to face her. Sen only smiles at him serenely, almost daring him to admit a lack of dedication. Or maybe she just knows he wants this more than the relief of quitting. In any case, he sees through her provocation. “Whatever. It wouldn't matter if it were a thousand steps. It's the best smelter I've ever made.”

With pressed, knowing lips, Sen jests, “I'll wager it's the only smelter you've ever made.”

“Sen!” he feigns indignation. “I would *never*- How could you insinuate my character has the capacity to lie... yeah, it is.”

Ignoring his odd humor, she conveys, “after dinner, we will carefully—so, so very carefully—etch the gale runes on the tuyères, which is already making me quite nervous. Then tomorrow we hunt for ore.”

“How do we hunt ore?” Macyn asks in all seriousness. “Like hunting a golem or something?”

“There are no Golems on Menhir,” she assures him. “It's just how grandfather used to phrase searching for ore.”

Macyn is a little late to dinner, as his letter grew longer than intended, but in being late, he's surprised by the number of students now lining several long tables. It's

comforting to think he'll never have to have another uncomfortable meal in the company of stuffy professors again. Though Macyn is still the odd mage out wearing his sunglasses and school uniform. Saying hello to many students hasn't encouraged a friendly exchange as of yet and he wonders what, if anything, they know about him.

Walking between tables occupied mostly with older students, Macyn spots Onawa and like everyone else, she has on informal, yet stylish, clothes tailored to her culture. It's a dress similar to an earthy colored poncho, with intricate sun patterns all over it, tucked in at the waist with a sky blue belt and it's length reaching an inch above her knee. With her blue earrings and choker, long dark hair, Macyn thinks she's too pretty to approach, but as he knows no one else, he walks to a familiar face.

She spots him head in her direction, and her eyes immediately linger on his sunglasses and uniform and she does not look happy to see him. To blend in, Macyn doesn't wear his tie, vest, or jacket, simplifying his outfit to pants, suspenders, and rolling up the sleeves of his dress shirt without succumbing to the murderous cold of Menhir.

With his tray of food in hand, he tells her with a resigned smirk, "yeah, I guess it's weird wearing the uniform so early," as a manner of answering her stare.

"I," Onawa starts before she tilts a look toward her well-off and immaculate group of friends to her left. They watch her, him, and wait for her response. Macyn expected a casual greeting. What he got was, "you liar! Don't ever talk to me again, stolid. I'm no friend of you or Ignis House."

Breaking out into prickly hot sweat, Macyn stands there for seven long seconds registering public embarrassment. His hands clam up as he realizes he's an idiot and doesn't say anything. Far too annoyed with himself to stay and be pleasant—as his father would—Macyn turns to leave. He walks away, noticing several stares, smirks, and laughter directed at him, only making him feel hotter with shame and move faster. With an annoyed shake of his head, he takes a seat towards the end of the table, wondering if this can get any worse.

"Mr. Blende?" Sen calls, her tone light but pressing. Coming to his senses, he recalls walking back to Anthony in silence and setting down the tomb on runes he had checked out earlier, '*Weiwei Runology. All-In-One for Beginners*,' by Wei Ham, in front of the smelter. They're in front of the furnace, ready to etch to gale runes on the ends of the tuyère nozzle, however, Macyn has been silent and distracted since dinner.

She calls again, "Mr. Blende?" His eyes snap to hers and she can see how absent he is on the task at hand. "Would you like to talk about it?" Simply embarrassed for expecting anything to change, Macyn shakes his head and Sen suggests, "maybe we should do this tomorrow."

"No," Macyn protests setting the book near the tuyère pipes. "I can do it now."

"This is the *Gale* rune," Sen states with heavy insinuation. "Not the easy Wind rune, or the easier Breeze rune; it's *the Gale*. It can be fickle and somewhat volatile to work with even when focused. If your etching is off, even by a small margin, the best you can hope for is nothing happening. In all likelihood, you'll rip the skin off your hands and be blown back a good ten feet. Are you sure you're not distracted?"

Her sobering description of the dangers played theatrically in his mind, making him take a deep uneasy breath and exhale slowly. Nodding, he assures her, "it's okay. I'm good."

With great reluctance, Sen accepts. Macyn brings out his etching tools purchased for class and slowly, precisely, under Sen's close attention, he carefully etches the

runes exactly like he's practiced. It's a complicated array and takes him nearly an hour but the pair make sure he aligns the segments perfectly.

Once each tuyère is etched, Macyn grips each nozzle with shaky hands. Nervously, he solidifies his mana to his palms touching the runes and a torrent of condensed wind passes through the many holes of the honeycomb funnel with a reverberating whistle—like a flute—out the top of the furnace with the strength of a cannon. The odd, high-pitched boom mixed with gale-force winds is so surprising, Macyn jumps back and immediately the gale-strength winds cease.

“Sweet,” Macyn enthusiastically calls, massaging his ears with a grin.

“At least we know it works,” Sen says floating next to him.

Macyn then adjusts the strength of his mana pressed onto the rune, varying the energy output of the gale-force wind. Once satisfied, they call it a night, and the following day, they head out to hunt ore. As they leave breakfast, Macyn asks, “so where to?”

“I have an idea where we might begin to look,” Sen states as they walk off-campus.

Sen leads them to several spots in the forest nearby Erudite that have rocks, but they're not the ore she's searching for. While he doesn't enjoy bringing back his traveler's bag full of rocks uphill, he does enjoy the beauty of traveling through Menhir's tall forest, the flowered valleys, and the peaceful streams. On top of gazing at all the different colored fireflies and birds, he's even seen an octopus on a glistening tree. To his great astonishment, Sen acted as if the Arboropus is a normal everyday animal. Every time Macyn leaves Anthony House, he's always astonished by the vibrant and lush world of Menhir. It makes the other parts of his, less than ideal, life more bearable.

Neither of them thought it would be difficult to find a rock on a mountain. However, a specific rock on a mountain is another story and it frustrated Sen. They spend close to a week learning that many of the rocks they locate are not ideal for forging, to which Sen proposes something of a solution.

“Back to Maghred?” Macyn questions as they make their way to the redbrick village. Stepping foot on the red earth, Macyn can't help but admire the charm of a down and out ghetto suburb, like a cultural heritage fair. “Why don't we just go where your grandfather went to get ore?”

“I don't know where he or his students went,” Sen responds as she looks around the market. “I was never allowed to go. I even tried to follow him once but was caught and punished for it.”

“Jeez, what'd they do?”

“Father wouldn't let me back into the forge for a whole month!” Sen proclaims hotly. “If grandfather hadn't interfered, I likely never would've seen a hammer again.”

Nodding with appreciation, Macyn comments, “I think that's about the coolest thing I've ever heard a girl say.”

“Yes, well, now we must find a clay-hand,” Sen admits, thinking of asking for help. “I was certain I saw one when last we were here.”

Macyn and Sen search for nearly two hours before they're forced to postpone their quest until after lunch. On their way back to Maghred, Macyn asks, “you said that some rocks aren't good enough, but I still don't understand what makes them good enough?”

“Technically, we can use any rock,” Sen answers, though her main focus is on

searching for the clay-hand. “However, some rocks have much more iron in them than others. The right ore is paramount or the sword will be terrible quality, and thus sell for less. Clay-hands deal with rocks all the time and they travel all over Menhir. As soon as one tells us where to find it, we’ll be ready to start.”

“School’s going to be starting soon,” Macyn comments offhandedly, wondering if he’s staying on Menhir or leaving. He still hasn’t heard from his parents.

“I’m aware,” Sen voices. “We’ll get there. I won’t leave you until we’re done. I promise,” Sen tells him. An hour into their search the following day, and they finally come across a clay-hand patching one of the clay brick buildings. Macyn is excited to the point of impatience and doesn’t notice the older man’s eyes. He simply calls Sen by applying some mana to his wand before rushing over to the slow working, hunched-over man. His square head had a large forehead with graying brunette hair and wearing broken glasses over his sunk-in eyes. He was dressed in a painter’s uniform, but rather than white, it was different variations of rusted red.

“I’m so glad we found you,” Macyn exclaims. The confused man turns at the call out, shockingly surprised by the boy in front of him and a frantic Sen rushes to Macyn.

Her anxious eyes scan him all over to make certain he’s well as she asks, “are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Macyn states ignorant of her concern. “Look who I found. Told you it was a good idea to split up.”

“No. No, it wasn’t,” she corrects him, straightening her posture to a respectable demeanor. “You’re *my* ward, remember? It was difficult to search properly imagining all the terrible things that could’ve happened to you.”

“It’s broad daylight and there’re poli-mages everywhere,” Macyn argues.

“Can this one-” the clay-hand starts but quickly shuts his unshaven mouth. His eyes are small as he stares from Macyn to Sen. “Many apologies, sir, lady. This one had not meant ta interrupt.”

Macyn immediately forgets Sen’s concern for the clay-hand and his unmistakable eye colors. ‘*He’s a stolid,*’ Macyn thought, looking under unkempt mesh of pitch mud-colored hair at one blue eye and one green eye. The older man abruptly stares at the reddish floor as he did something shameful, and Macyn reassures the elder clay-hand, “yeah, uh, don’t worry about it.” Though Macyn wants to take off his sunglasses and show solidarity, he suddenly feels hesitation and just decides to earnestly affirm, “you have cool eyes. What’s your name? I’m Macyn.”

The man doesn’t dare to look up as he asks, “s-sir wishes ta know t-this one’s name?”

“...Yeah,” Macyn slowly answers, beginning to feel uncomfortable around someone with the same condition. He continues, “we’ve been looking for a clay-hand to help us.”

The clay-hand looks up for the briefest of moments before he turns away again. “Uh, sir, well, this one’s name is- is Dog, sir,” Dog nervously tells him. “Dog Stolid, tha clay-hand, sir. If this one can be- be of service, it’d be this one’s pleasure.”

Sidestepping the urge to comment on his unusual name, Macyn says, “Uh, great.” He can’t be sure if the man’s speech is Menhir specific, or Dog may not work with his full faculties, but Macyn avoids eye contact as he introduces Sen and states, “if you can help, we’re looking for brown or yellow rocks, sometimes called lemon rock. Do you know where we

can find either?"

"Lemon rock, sir says," Dog repeats as he scratches the stubble of his unkempt graying facial hair. Macyn nods as Dog continues his slow speak, "Or Brown rock... Mn, might this one ask, and- and this one means no offense, but is sir's plan ta start makin' clay an fix these homes? You see, this one has not other means of makin' mynt, and- and-"

"There's no need to fear, Mr. Stolid," Sen interjects. "We do not wish to take your trade."

"Mnn," Dog nods appreciatively, waving his hands emphatically. "Righ'. Righ', righ'. Sir looks might too young ta work," he dares to laugh and then apprehension makes him stop. "Why does sir need yellow ore nohow? Make for poor fertilizer, ya know. Too much iron in it."

"Sounds perfect," Macyn states with a smirk.

"Hmm, iron's perfect, ya say," Dog remarks, tilting his head nearly to the point he could tip over before snapping right back up. "So, it be the- the ore sir and lady after than, innit? Lookin' ta be the next Stagmore of the Rock? Them an theirs looked fer ore till not ten years ago when Stagmore moved on ta Gaiorem."

"The who?" Macyn asks with a raised brow.

"Stagmores," Dog repeats excited. "Master orewicks. Ah team what which made some of the best weapons none could rightly imagine. Good as goblins and sought after by kings, the way I hear it."

"I don't know about Stagmore, actually," Macyn admits along with an equally uncertain Sen. "But we would like to make a sword."

"If you can tell us where we can find the ore we need, we'll leave you to your work," Sen adds.

"Oh. Oh- Oh," Dog looks sad to mutter. "Might this one speak somethin' first? Please, sir, lady? It's only, well, this might be tha longest conversation this one's had in years. No mage speak to a... well, and fer sir ta ask this one's name," Dog exhales excitedly, eying Macyn a moment. "That just means the world."

"Oh, um," Macyn can't help but say, unsure if it's just sadness, pity, or a mixture of both he feels for this man. "Sure thing Dog."

"This one can tell good sir not from here," he starts with several nods that shake his unruly patch of graying mud-hair. "Or ya wouldn't talk ta this one, ya wouldn't."

"...I don't get it," Macyn interjects, fearful this is what all stolid's become. "I mean, yeah, I'm not from here, but it's just talking. People do that. It's normal, even if it doesn't happen often. Unless... are you a criminal or something... and I just haven't seen your wanted poster?"

"No, sir!" Dog gasps loudly. "Merciful mineral no! This one may not be so smart none, nor commonly accepted, sir, but this one could certainly do no harm. No, no harm of any kind, no sir. This one's life about are a tragic one, but heard of by plenty. No more need said 'bout that."

"Uh, yeah," Macyn agrees. "Sorry."

"All this one means is that sir is very good," Dog says nodding vigorously. The man's shoulders twitch as he continues to say, "very good, sir, not like others, no sir. Not like others. Good sir speaks ta this one, cares much about mineral and sir has lovely lady. No, sir is not like monster o' Menhir. No, he not."

Eyebrows raised, Macyn asks, “what do you mean monster,” before quickly eying Sen for support. “Dog?”

“This one... this one wants to warn good sir,” Dog says agitated.

“Warn me about what-”

“Leave, sir,” the man yells, flailing his arms in the air and surprising Macyn to shuffle a couple steps back. “No! This one sorry, sir. Please don't hurt this one,” he pleads, hunched over and gripping his head. “Don't hurt this one. Don't hurt this one,” he keeps repeating until Macyn controls his panicked breathing and steps forward again, reassuring the strange older man, “hey, it's okay. I won't hurt you. I won't. I promise I won't.”

Dog changes demeanor from apologetic to fearful in a second, warning Macyn yet again, “I-leave, or- or good sir will not survive monster.”

“What monster,” Macyn asks thinking of all the types of monsters he's seen in fantasy lore.

“The monster, sir,” he repeats. “A fiend fer all children on the Rock sir.”

“A monster eating children,” Macyn asks before thinking of the abducting children he's seen. “Does this monster have something to do with the kidnapped kids? The ones on the boards? Do you know what happened to them?” If mages ignore him like Macyn believes they do, it's possible he might be a witness to something that's gone unnoticed due to his leper-like status as a stolid.

Shaking his head, agitated, the older clay-hand responds, “this one knows nothing. This one a Stolid. A dog.”

“You're not a dog,” Macyn asserts, then an errant thought forces him to quietly add, “that I know of.” Turning to Sen he asks, “are skin-walkers real?” She tilts her head impatiently as if to say, *'this is not the time.'*

“Mr. Stolid,” Sen calls for his attention. “If you know anything about the children, you must inform the authorities.”

Dog shakes his head, calming enough to reply, “this one knows nothing. This one means ta speak Menhir is not what sir believes. Menhir will be the death of us all. Sir is good, sir is kind, sir will die if sir stays...”

Silence follows Dog's ardent declaration and Macyn isn't sure what to think or how to respond. Judging by the look of consternation on Sen's ghost face, she would rather withhold her opinion. Dog continues, “this one is treated in bad ways because this one is different. If sir is different, sir will also be done bad.”

Macyn feels hurt in his heart and remains silent, hard-pressed to believe everything this strange stranger is nervously spouting. Appearing as homeless as he does and ranting the way he had, in Macyn's world, this person would definitely be considered crazy, worrying him. It's far more doom and gloom than Macyn is comfortable with, made worse by how much sympathy and alarm he feels for the slow stolid.

“Thank you for your advice,” Sen thankfully interrupts. “If you could tell us what we need to know, we'll be on our way.”

“Yes,” Dog stammers. “Yes, yes, yes, this one can. On main path toward Kuolema, midway, turn right off the path. Yes, turn right, and it won't be long before sir and lady come across a mountain of lemon rock. Sir and lady will find all what's needed there. Find it all. It's all there.”

“Thank you,” Sen conveys respectfully yet clipped. “Let's go,” she urges

Macyn with a stern tone of voice that leaves no room for debate. Macyn nods and gives the homeless looking Dog Stolid a weak wave before following Sen.

However, even that farewell requires a dire response from the clay-hand. “This Rock be ah monster, sir! It eats all what different,” Dog says with a little too much animosity. He takes a calming breath. “Sir must stay careful through wet forest. Kane Haven territory, that is. If the creatures and plants don't get sir, the nymphs will!”

Macyn raises his eyebrows a moment before leaving and once on the cobbled path with Sen, he has to ask, “can you explain some, and or, *all* of that weirdness, please? Is that how stolid ends up? And what kind of a name is Dog, for a person? Monsters? Nymphs? And let's not forget about the skin-walkers.”

Sen continues to float as she speaks, “if only to satisfy your unending curiosity, yes, there are mages who can change into animals. Yes, it's possible for you to do it as well. No, it will not happen anytime soon as it takes years, sometimes decades, to learn, and even more to master.”

“You enjoy shattering my dreams, don't you,” he interjects in dry jest. “Okay, so, is that how all stolid ends up or... or is he just a dim light bulb?”

“I don't know what a light bulb is,” Sen comments. “However, that clay-hand is simple-minded. Not all stolid ends up like that.”

“Okay,” he slowly says with relief. “I thought... I wasn't sure what meeting another one like me would be like. I wasn't expecting that.”

“There really isn't another like you, Mr. Blende,” she states before continuing. “Most stolid ends up stay out of the public eye, choosing instead to earn a living away from the discrimination of the community. Mr. Dog would be considered brave for working outside if... there was anything to gain from it.”

Incredulously, Macyn asks, “what does that mean?”

“Stolid ends up are incredibly outnumbered and at a disadvantage as they cannot craft mana,” Sen answers. “They have little options in this world which is why many travel to the Lower Order or work in the fringes of mage-kind. There's just nothing that can be done.”

“They are not slaves in the technical sense,” Sen asserts. “Though how they're treated isn't any better. They are generally viewed as less than human, very much like they don't exist, however not viewed as a source of labor. Most mages would simply prefer not to interact with them. I wouldn't say that one life is better than another, but you, Mr. Blende, nevertheless have far less to worry about than a stolid.”

Macyn can't help but relate and demand to know, “what about his parents? They just let this happen to their kid? Is Dog even his real name?”

“It's almost certainly his parents who are responsible for casting him out,” Sen admits. “I've witnessed it myself once. As is the norm with stolid ends up, Dog's family no doubt removed him from the family registry, notified the Imperium, and had him renamed with a derogatory moniker. Shunned by society and family, most tend to leave Menhir, which is, of course, by design. It's extraordinarily odd that Mr. Dog would stay and put up with it.”

“He doesn't seem to be handling it well,” Macyn states, recalling the man's erratic behavior.

“No, he does not,” Sen agrees as they start walking the wide red dirt path through the forest.

“Especially after the *'advice.'*”

Deep in his mind, Macyn is quiet for a long time as they travel, and Sen feels compelled to express to her ward, “you or may not be a stolid, Mr. Blende. But you’re not like Mr. Dog.”

“But I could be,” Macyn apprehensively admits, pondering how he might be after spending decades being wantonly mistreated.

“No,” Sen assures him. “His parents and yours are not the same,” she tells him with a smile, making him think of his tough as nails mother. “And of course you have me.”

With a weak smile, Macyn thanks her and they continue their quest for lemon rock.



## Root of Kuolema

Though enjoying the serenity of the forest trail, the odd clay-hand's warning was still fresh in Macyn's head. Macyn follows Sen with a higher sense of alertness eventually reaching a fork in the trail with an intricate wooden sign that points toward, Kuolema. The sign, a wood silhouette of a flower with repetitive wind spun petals, leaves, and even pollen, and the path toward Kuolema is paved with colorful stones, making the road give off an ambient glow with the sun's reflection. On either side of the glowing road are black trees and pink leaves, with the occasional red or purple-headed trees covered in either white or green moss.

Mage and ghost take the road leading to the nymph's lake town, admiring the floral splendor all around them. Menhir's market place was like a Victorian-era paradise with white, ivory, black, dark blue, and gold being the predominant color palette decorating the symmetrically Gothic architecture. Maghred is a red-bricked village, like a permanent sunset painted across the land. Erudite is a perfectly balanced mixture of the two. The road to Kuolema is a pink or purple forest, smelled of earthy sweet and invigorating and the sound of the millions of leaves rustling in the wind is very calming. Macyn is so enchanted by his surroundings, they reach the midway point of the bright cobble path in what felt like no time at all.

Sen stops to warn Macyn. "We will have to be very careful here," she candidly says. "This forest is not as safe as the one surrounding Erudite."

Looking up at the elevated forest surrounding the miniature school, Macyn curiously states, "I thought this one connects to Erudite's."

"It does," Sen agrees. "However, think of the land around Erudite as the shallow end of the sea, whereas this forest is the deep end." Macyn nods easily enough as she adds, "the floral life here can present a danger to both of us, so promise me you will do as I ask."

"Don't I already do what you say?" Macyn lightly jests.

"Blende," Sen sternly calls.

"Oh, it's just Blende now," he incredulously asks, to which she eyes him sternly. "Alright, alright, I promise," he agrees.

"Good," she huffs with a nod. "Should we happen to come across a nymph, let me do the talking. They have more regal eccentricities."

"Got it," Macyn salutes, then quickly asks, "what's a nymph?"

Sen sighs a bit, answering, "nymphs are mana-converts, like goblins and elves and many other humanoids. They specialize in manipulating nature's mana and are to be treated with the same level of respect you would any other sentient being, understand?"

"Got it," he answers, wondering why he's never heard of them like he has goblins, elves, and many others.

"Also, should we actually meet one..." Sen pauses, giving him the impression she's wording her thoughts carefully. "If you meet a nymph, it is more than likely you will have a physical, emotional, and possibly even a spiritual reaction to their presence. It's a side effect of their nature affinity, and our mana's attraction to it. Do not allow those feelings free reign over your decorum. It'll be difficult, but you must try to remember it's not real."

With a deep exhale, he nods before Sen takes them off the safety of the bright path and into the pink and purple petal forest. With his first foot on the grass and the tree's

nearest to him change to a normal looking green. As the green spreads from tree to tree as far back as Macyn can see, Sen explains, “it’s a defense mechanism native to the forest surrounding Kuolema. It’s so creatures within, and Haven guardians are alerted to a stranger.”

Soon into their trek, the leaves return to their pink, red, or purple color. Much like the rest of Menhir, he finds it difficult to follow Sen properly as he’s so taken with his surroundings. It’s all so new and just as beautiful as everything else he’s seen. Sen suddenly stops but, not paying attention, Macyn walks through her.

“Mr. Blende,” Sen whispers in his ear, successfully getting his attention. Macyn is about to respond when she raises a finger to her ethereal lips. Showing him the flat of her hand, she signals for him to wait before floating into the dense briar of the wilderness, gone from his sight and senses.

Alone in short notice, the beauty of this enchanted forest slowly evaporates to reveal how looming the inky black trees over him feel, swaying hypnotically ominous with the silent wind. The glow of the many floating bugs around him slowly die one by one, adding more shade of shadow with every snuffed bulb. The swaying of the trees suddenly die to stillness and Macyn is sensitive to how hyper-quiet it’s become. Increasingly curious as to why bird sounds stop, why it’s so eerily quiet, he looks from black tree to black tree, but can’t see any sign of explanation.

Macyn tried not to let the eeriness bother him but he was in a magical forest with magical beasts and everything inexplicably stopped. His heart wouldn’t stop beating nervously fast and the seconds tick on like this. Forced to stand and wait, the inaction was beginning to get to him as the forest seems to crowd him. Yelling out for Sen increasingly appears to be a great relief, however, she explicitly forbade him from making a sound.

“Blende,” she yell-whispers by his ear again.

“Gyaaah,” Macyn yell-yells with a jump. “You!” Immediately after her own wide-eyed scare, Sen waves frantically for him to lower the volume. Hand gripping his heart thundering chest, Macyn declares in a vehement whisper, “don’t do that!” With sharp and quick breaths, he assertively whispers, “you’re a ghost! There’s precedent where I’m from!”

“Sorry,” Sen apologizes but the small upward tick in the corner of her lips suggests she rather enjoyed scaring him. “I found a path but we’ll have to go around the Anchineel trees.”

After calming down, Macyn asks in a matching low tone as he follows closely, “why? And why are we whispering?”

“When it gets silent like this, it’s the forest alerting Kane Haven of our presence, but don’t worry, unless you’re destroying the land, none in the Haven will harm you.” Macyn nods as she answers his second query. “We’re whispering because it demonstrates our intent. The meek and respectful follow the flow of the forest and are overlooked because of it. The strong and boisterous do not, and that attracts the challenge of apex predators. Anchineel trees, for example, kill you if you get too close.”

“A tree does? How does a tree kill you?” he whispers his question.

“Anchineel trees are so poisonous standing under them for thirty seconds is enough time to cease your lungs from functioning. Aside from Anchineel trees, keep an eye out for Exploding trees... you can guess why. And the Rock Palm tree. Their fruits weigh forty kilos and you wouldn’t survive if one fell on your head.”

“Sen,” Macyn whispers as he inches closer to her, appearing as if they’re joined

at the hip. "I suddenly remember I don't actually know how to protect myself, you know, magically."

Still moving them slowly through the forest, she whispers, "when you start university, you'll learn."

"Won't help me much now, though," he comments, thoroughly inspecting every dark bark of tree they pass.

"Nothing would help you now," a far too lovely voice sings from somewhere Macyn can't pinpoint. "Maybe not ever," the voice continues to sweetly avow.

"Hallel Dauen to you and Kane Haven," Sen calls out in a specific direction. Macyn turns in the same direction but can't locate a single thing out of place, much less a person. "By all of Earthos, we mean you no harm."

"...Hillel Terr," the voice warily states. "State your business."

"I am Kurosawa and this is Blende. Will you consider presenting yourself? Again, we mean no harm," Sen asks as Macyn's eyes bulge at the revelation of Sen's surname. His mouth opens and mimes '*Kurosawa*,' in shock and amazement.

From the tree ahead of them, a piece of dark bark slightly shorter than himself steps away from the rest of the tree and walks toward the ghost and mage. The being cancels its camouflage with a soft, white flare of bending light, and standing present is a figure much too beautiful for his teenage mind to fathom. Taking a deep breath, Macyn can't explain how such a perfect being exists, but somewhere in the back of his mind, he felt ready to start a war in her name. He felt it in his radiating heart, he wanted to win her hand by any means necessary and be with her forever.

Macyn vaguely hears Sen sternly ask, "can you please disenchant," however, he couldn't understand to whom, for surely Sen wouldn't ask anything more of the perfection in front of them. The goddess seems to take offense to Sen's words, and in that very moment, Macyn feels compelled to break the wand and end their contract to atone for the slight.

When his goddess takes a step forward, drawing every iota of his attention, she somehow begins to feel less alluring. Her appearance seems to change inexplicably before his ogling eyes. The crimson gold of her long lustrous hair ebbs to a thick mane of auburn with streaks of blond. Macyn even wonders if she has more hair than head as she lazily ties the thick volume of lightly curly hair back into a low ponytail. Her eye color changes from a bright bluish-green to a lusterless brown and she even dons on thick, black, round-rimmed glasses. Her clear complexion loses much of its vibrancy and her full pink lips lose their glossiness to something dull, maybe even rough. She's likely his age as it seems her figure is only beginning to fill out. Over-all, she's less striking than moments before, but still one of the more attractive girls he's seen, even if she appears angry at the moment.

Macyn feels less agonized, though there's a certain "die for her" quality still lingering within him. The duller, yet pretty girl rolls her eyes in annoyance of him, then loosens her form-fitting shall and darkens her clothes so as to un-define the silhouette of her bewitching figure. When the girl snaps her fingers in his face, Macyn finally returns from his mindless gawking to some semblance of self-awareness.

Shocked and confused, Macyn yells, "what the piss-drinking hell was that?" Only then does he realize he's still gripping his wand with both hands like he's about to break it. Releasing his death grip on Sen's home, he stares at his inhabitant in disbelief while the thundering in his chest booms in his ears.

The physical manifestation of beauty smirks at his stupor, like a braggart, but she's so beautiful, Macyn can feel himself, his mind, sinking at the sight of her response to him, when Sen immediately intervenes, getting right in his face. "Blende, try to fight it. She's a nymph, remember? They can have this effect. Just remember why we're here. Why. We. Are. Here."

"Why," Macyn asks, hazy-eyed, trying to form thoughts. Sen doesn't answer but Macyn continues. "Why... we're here."

"Yes," Sen answers. "Why are we here?"

"O-ore," Macyn struggles to say. "Sword. Mynt... Mom." Slowly, more hesitant clarity returns to Macyn's eyes as his breathing demurely calms and his body reluctantly relaxes.

Sen suggests, "look down if you have to," and Macyn does so, eager to retain his self-control.

The beautiful girl chuckles deliciously, mocking Macyn's plight. "Humans. For now, you may call me Root," she tells them.

floating protectively between Root and Macyn, Sen explains, "Blende is new to Menhir and will be starting this scholastic year. Are you perhaps a springtide?"

"...I am," Root answers defensively. "I still have more right to be here than you."

"I acknowledge the forest is under Kane Haven dominion," Sen begins to counter. "However, it is still accessible to *all* of Menhir. We are here solely for lemon rocks. Once we have that, we will leave."

"What will you do with our mineral?" Root quickly asks, taking a step to walk around them.

Sen moves as well, to always stay between the nymph and her ward, answering, "we intend on making merchandise for trade."

Root asks, "what will you make?" as she continues to circle them.

"That is of no concern to a springtide," Sen responds, keeping as much edge from her tone as possible.

"Perhaps," Root admits, and continues, "but it would to the matriarch."

"Blende has as much right as any who live in Menhir," Sen defends. "We are not doing anything wrong."

"Maybe, but you and your pet annoy me," Root states bluntly. "It'd be satisfying enough just to see you detained for questioning; maybe even pay a tariff. I don't care what you're here for. Go. Now. Before I call the sentries."

Sen is so agitated her chest is rising and falling rapidly with what should be air, but then turns to him and says, "let's go. We'll ask Dog if there's anywhere else we can find what we need."

'*That's what dad would do,*' Macyn's mind ponders making the most dismal of connections to keep his mind from sinking back into her allure. He shakes his head, then has to ask, "why?" Looking from the forest floor to Sen, he continues, "you said we aren't doing anything wrong. You both did."

"I can't explain here but we should go," Sen tells him.

The beauty before Macyn is what his mother would certainly call, '*the latest enemy,*' and he can't even look at her. That realization alone annoys him enough to cautiously

turn his gaze from Sen to Root. “W-Why won't you let us get what we need?” With a hard swallow he continues, “we haven't done anything to you.”

The only evidence she's surprised is a slight raise of her perfect eyebrows before she furrows the skin between them and answers, “you being here is wrong enough. All of you in gentry think you can take whatever you want, whenever you want it, like your birth alone entitles you to it and the rest of us should all adhere to you. I'm here to happily remind you, as often as you need, that it's **not!**”

“We're not taking anything from anyone,” Macyn slowly comments.

“Aren't you,” she hotly throws back. “Didn't you just admit to the intent of stealing our mineral?”

“We're not intending to steal anything-” Macyn tries but is interrupted when Root takes a threatening step toward him, nearly clouding his mind with euphoria for her appearance alone.

Sen moves close to the auburn-haired nymph eyeing her harshly. After a couple of breaths, Root takes a few steps back as Sen asks, “would you be opposed to a trade then?” Sen inquires to know with a clear edge. “We don't have much mynt so it'll have to be something else of equal compensation.” Root seems suspiciously taken by the question. So much so, she doesn't respond and Sen cordially continues, “we've only come to collect minerals so Blende can learn a craft and hopefully gain employment. On the mother Gaea, I assure you he's doing no wrong.”

Root begins to pace in front of them, watching them and seemingly pondering the offer. After a solid ten minutes of battling with herself—to Macyn's amusement—she abruptly declares, “books!” like she's cheering for victory. Macyn and Sen shoot each other a glance before returning their regard on Root who demands, “I want all your books on runology.”

Sen reveals, “he doesn't have more than his school tomes.”

“Then I'll take them,” Root repeats fervently.

“You will not,” Sen slowly counters with just as much fervor. “How is he suppose to study without his textbooks?”

“That's not my problem,” Root retorts.

“No deal,” Sen confirms. “You may study his textbooks when he is not using them or make copies for yourself if you want them so badly. That is all we'll offer, take it or leave it.”

“And even if you leave it,” Macyn says with a hard stare to the ground. “We'll still get the mineral.”

Her pretty brown eyes shift between the pair before asking, “how many books do you have? And do not lie.”

“I've always thought lying to be pointless,” Sen states. Macyn adds, “Obvious lies can be funny though. I have nine books,” he answers Root.

“And you will allow me to make copies?”

“As long as you utilize your own materials to make your copies,” Sen stipulates.

Cautiously, Root asks, “...can you check out library books?”

“That is not a good idea,” Sen quickly tells her. “That can lead to a whole host of problems for Blende. Books purchased with his mynt is acceptable as they obviously belong to him. Books that belong to the university, however, is not his to do as he wishes.”

“...Fine, I accept,” Root asserts before they all agree to the deal.

Pushing for a resolution despite the complication makes Macyn feel a small measure of success, however, walking to the site of the lemon rock is filled with anxious and tense silence. Root leads them efficiently through the less hazardous parts of the forest and they finally find their yellow treasure. It’s as Dog said, a large cliff of iron-rich limonite. Macyn can see why they call it lemon rock, not that the exterior is yellow, but it has patches of yellow amidst the typical stone, like a yellow-freckled rock.

At the foot of the three-story cliff, Macyn walks up to a small boulder, no higher than his knees, and asks his dark-haired inhabitant, “is this enough?”

Sen smiles widely but apologetically answers, “no. Sorry to say, but we need at least three times that size. Like that one.” Sen points to a different boulder slightly taller than him, and twice as wide.

Macyn deflates at the daunting size of it, swallowing loudly before protesting immediately, “that’s going to take days to drag back.” Staring fearfully at the large boulder, he reminds Sen, “the other boulders weren’t even half as big.”

“You’re getting better,” Sen compliments, though he can’t distinguish if she’s only saying so to butter him up, or if she actually means it. “Your focus is improving and the second boulder was levitated to Anthony faster than the first.”

Before either Sen or Macyn can say more, Root walks up to the yellowish rock, places a gentle hand on its rough surface and levitates it with comical ease. Macyn is wide-eyed, embarrassed to appear so weak as she sets the boulder down again, and allows the thinly bright mana coating her hand to ebb. “If I help you bring it back, will you let me borrow your runology textbook right away? To make a copy?”

“We don’t know what his schedule is as of yet,” Sen starts, reminding Macyn he still hasn’t heard from his parents. “We will agree if you give your solemn oath to return it before the end of the weekend. He may need it for his first day next week.”

Root swears her oath and they begin their mission of towing the boulder to Erudite. Rather than return the long way through the roads of the markets, Root leads them on a straighter course through a few thin back-trails of the lush forest. The brunette beauty manages to hold up the boulder for ten minutes of walking before she needs to set it down.

Slightly out of breath, Root informs Macyn, “your turn.”

Exhaling with dreaded anticipation, Macyn’s wide eyes turn from the large stone to Sen, pleading for help. Sen shrugs her shoulders and says, “just go for as long as you can.”

With a resigned huff, Macyn places his palm on the boulder so his mana can commune with the boulder’s mana, surround it and solidify. He concentrates as best he can on levitating his mana, thereby levitating the stone’s form as well, and struggles to tow it for forty-five seconds before needing to drop it.

Incredibly surprised he dropped the heavy mineral so soon, Root exclaims, “that’s it? Oh mother Gaea, you are tragically weak.”

With an irate huff, Macyn summarily dislikes her. It’s bad enough he’s a stolid still getting his bearings together in this new world, but to be told how weak he is by a girl around his age as he is just frustrating. Macyn levitates the large boulder and holds it for another thirty seconds before he has to halt his mana, dropping the boulder on soft earth once again. Even with Root’s septic laughter crawling under his skin, provoking his embarrassment and

righteous anger, he knows he doesn't have it in him to last as long as her. With the energy of his humiliation, he lifts the large boulder for another forty seconds before dropping it again.

Sen descends on the laughing, auburn-haired nymph, and hotly demands to know, “do you also laugh and mock seedlings because they're not full-grown trees?” Affronted, Root forgets her laughter as Sen continues. “He is new to all of this, and you, springtide, are being repugnant.”

Root scowls at Sen but does not rise to the judgment. She only moves through the Asian ghost and follows the human. Macyn barely lasts thirty seconds again before he has to drop it and is no better for pushing himself as he drops to the floor. Heaving and sweating, Macyn can only watch impassively as Root lifts the boulder again and starts walking. Pushing his sunglasses back, he follows her with much effort and humility. Too tired to ask questions or even ponder what those questions might be, the nymph, mage, and ghost trek through the tall, lush forest in silence, not only avoiding the lethal flora or trees, but worst of all, levitating the large boulder in shifts up the steadily elevating forest floor. Root would levitate the boulder for nearly ten minutes every time, and Macyn would try for as long as he can so she can rest.

They don't make it halfway to Erudite before the rotation of Menhir's night begins to descend and Root has to return to the Haven. Even if the beautiful nymph disliked leaving without his runology book, they agree to meet the following day to continue the tow.

“You'll bring the book as well,” Root asserts between deep breaths.

“Are you a nymph of your word,” Sen's asks.

“Do you think I take after you dictators,” Root responds heatedly, making her gasp for breath in the process. “This isn't anything more... than the deal struck... The spirit of that trade was so I can have the book today... which is now impossible.”

“The deal was you'd help us get the boulder back for the textbook,” Sen elaborates. “The boulder isn't back, is it?”

“And who's fault is that?” she nearly yells, glaring as a heaving Macyn lays spread eagle on the forest floor. “I never would've struck such a deal if I'd known he was *that weak!*”

“But you have,” Sen plainly retorts. “Which is why I ask are you a nymph of your word. If you are, I will trust you-”

“*You trust me?*” Root spits as if offended. “As if you dictators don't break deals all the time! I trust the sleeping giant in the lake more than I trust any of you.”

“It's... fine,” Macyn heaves, half-dead on the floor. “Tomorrow... fine.”

Staring sternly at the brownish-auburn nymph, Sen reaffirms, “we'll bring it tomorrow,” before lazily adding, “Hallel Dauen.”

“...Hillel Terr,” Root heatedly whispers as she turns to leave.

They bring his runology textbook the following day and even with Root's help, it takes another two days to levitate the boulder back to Erudite. With every notable cave or hovel carved out of miniature cliffs they passed, Sen would check to see if there's better ore closer to Erudite than the cliff of lemon rock in Kuolema. Tragically, none are as promising as the ore Dog had told them of.

During their rest breaks, Macyn had attempted friendly dialog with Root only to be ignored every time. ‘*At least with her, it felt like general hatred of all my kind rather than me specifically,*’ Macyn’s mind commiserates.

After three days of dragging the large boulder up the elevated forest land of

Menhir to Anthony house on Erudite campus, the three companions are bitterly adamant about never repeating that brutal mana-intensive mission ever again.

“Never again,” an alluringly sweaty Root yells with a huff as she helps bring the lemon rock close to Macyn's dorm house. Brunette streaked auburn hair matted to her slick skin, she pushes the thick black frames of her fake glasses up the cute bridge of her nose as Macyn shows her the only thing she was curious to talk to him about, the gale rune on his smelter. She left promptly after one demonstration, and without farewell. Macyn had no time to fester in annoyance and runs through campus to the last few minutes of dinner.



## The Smelter

Bright and early the following morning, Macyn is standing in front of the Gud Arm. They're in the dank and cluttered basement and while Macyn mentally debates the pros and cons of staying or leaving Menhir, Sen lectures, "we could destroy the rock using mana but I want to give your mana a bit more rest"

"Thank you," Macyn desperately interjects, still feeling the strain of the day before.

"Also, I wouldn't want to devoid you of the supreme joy of hitting things with a hammer. I enjoyed it the times' grandfather allowed," she happily recounts with a grin. "As you can see, there are circles etched all around the base of the anvil with runes over them. Press your mana against the rune over the largest circle."

Macyn does as he's told, and after grazing the rune, a wooden handle the exact dimensions of the oval pops out. Sen explains the rune on the wooden handle allows him to extend the length from a single grip hammer to a dual grip. At her direction, he extends it to the length of a sledgehammer. "Now, to remove the actual hammerhead from the anvil, keep your mana going, then you simply twist your wrist and pull... Just... like... that. There you go. Easy."

Testing the weight of the sledgehammer in his hands, Macyn finds the metal head heavier than expected as he swings it around. Citing safety, Sen insistences he wears his coke-bottle leather goggles from the materials he purchased for Potions and wraps his arms from his elbows down to his hands tight with some white clothe Sen found in the cellar. With all the confusion in his life, wrecking the giant yellow rock is the most cathartic activity Macyn could ask for.

After some instruction on technique, his first few strikes were tentative, almost fearful, however, when Macyn recalls his father betraying him for Annette and June, his strikes against the large stone felt heavier. When he recalls the supremacist clerk at the Hall refusing to let him see public documents that could help his mother, the heavier strikes became even louder. When Onawa, the first person to show him manacrafting, ignores him every time they happen to see each other, the heavier, louder strikes become that much more satisfying. And after three exhausting days of being looked down upon by Root, Macyn made constant and competent work of the large boulder, attacking it with reckless abandon until it was nothing more than six full boxes of yellowish-gray rubble and powder.

It's late in the afternoon and Macyn wants to use an old shovel to dump a couple scoops of ore into the smelter when Sen stops him, citing, "we have a small issue."

"What?" Macyn asks out of breath, putting the shovel down. "I just need a few minutes to catch my breath and I'm good to go."

"It's not that," she starts. "We shouldn't light the smelter now. Unless you work straight through dinner, there won't be enough time. This next stage will require you to man the tuyères, continuously propelling air into the chamber for six to seven hours."

Macyn's eyes bulge as he gasps before choking out, "six to seven hours!"

"Yes, I know. I don't want you to miss dinner either," Sen states, assuming that's the point of his incredulity. "You'll definitely need the nourishment. Grandfather usually

accomplished this part with partners, so, it will be challenging to say the least.”

“Challenging, she says,” Macyn gasps affronted. “Seven, Sen! Seven! Sleeping and breathing are the only things I can do that long, let alone my mana.”

Sen nods in understanding, stating, “you would not have to hold it for the entire seven hours. In intervals, it will total to three or four hours.”

“Well, yeah, that's not seven, but I'm not optimistic either,” he answers back

“Have you tried?” Sen asks, looking at him with challenge.

Suspecting she'll use his desire to help his mother against him—her go-to move to force him to do things—Macyn eyes her evilly outing her deplorable tactic by asking, “you're going to make me try, aren't you?”

“No, actually,” Sen says easily. “In fact, I don't ever really have to worry about whether you would, or wouldn't do a task for your family's benefit since I know what it means to you, which is just the sweetest thing.”

Contesting her mushiness, Macyn simply mutters, “stop it.”

“It's also my personal belief there isn't much mages can't do given the right training and focus,” Sen continues. “You may become great one day.”

Macyn's reluctance deflates by the end of Sen's open, insightful, and slightly uplifting words. Without further fuss, Macyn mentions, “school is starting in less than a week,” as he begins levitating the yellow rock, two boxes at a time, from the backyard of Anthony, down the cellar doors, and stores them against the wall next to the furnace. “Will we- can we finish smelting the ore in time?”

“With a few days to spare,” she answers with a smile.

“And then the sword comes after that,” Macyn voices more to himself, thinking about school. He won't be able to keep his glasses on the entire time which means everyone will think he's a stolid. He'll be an immediate outcast; a social leper. He readily recalls the clerk in the records room and can only imagine it'll be worse if he decides to go to school. It makes Macyn frustrated because he still hasn't heard from his parents, even if he understands the mountain is constantly moving. But he can craft mana. It would be hard in most ways to stay; harder than living with Annette and his jui-jutsu freak of a step-sister, however, that wouldn't stop his mother.

It's then that he realizes he's not in a too dissimilar situation than his mother. She's also in a place that would do her more harm than good and all to one day be free. Macyn couldn't help thinking that if Jahmela Blende can tough it out with the hardest criminals, he can take being socially exiled. He'll be learning to craft his mana and he has Sen. Even if his mother absolutely forbids it, Macyn didn't feel like he'll change his mind and tells Sen, “I guess I'm going to school here.”

Looking at him oddly, she remarks, “well of course you are. Where did you think you were going?” Macyn simply shrugs with a smirk and the remainder of the night is dedicated to clearing a wide space around the smelter for fire safety and practicing the flame runes he'll need for later.

After breakfast the following day, Macyn prepares the smelter by dropping in a few pieces fire rune drawn parchments and light them with his mana. When they hear the coal catch flame, Macyn hustles to shovel ore in the smelter. Once Sen tells him it's enough, Macyn runs around to the tuyères and each hand comfortably grips over the gale runes.

“Alright,” Sen starts, lifting and tying back the large sleeve cuff of her ghost

Bushido kimono up to her incorporeal shoulders. “Slow and easy. We want to feed the smelter, not drown it.” Macyn adds too little wind, to which Sen appraises, “more... that’s right... then less, just like, Macyn. Like breathing. That’s it.”

Macyn stokes the building heat with weak gale wind for ten minutes until the coal within can keep incinerated on its own then rests. Following Sen's carefully planned out schedule, Macyn increases the force of the wind tunneling into the furnace from the bottom to a medium-strength at the very start of the second hour. He’s captivated by the flickers of flame and embers burst out of the top whenever he accelerates the force of the wind.

Sen has him keep up the alternating interval of medium strength winds until his breathing becomes labored thirty minutes into the second hour. Muscles sore and pained with acidic buildup, Macyn weakly adds in another three shovels of ore before resting for the remainder of the hour.

“Alright,” Sen alarms a napping Macyn. “Fasten your war mask and slap yourself since I can’t do it. We’re about to get serious.” Drowsy, Macyn huffs in humor, wearily moving around to the tuyères and clasping each one over the etched runes. Sen retreats to his wand to help reduce blare as she explains, “for this hour, I want you to go at your full strength for as long as you can or fifty minutes. Understand?”

Macyn nods apprehensively as he physically tries to psyches himself up then begins to amp up the torrent of air to its highest strength. The roar of the wind blasts a giant pillar of flames blasts out of the top forcing the extreme heat to melt rock and heat the smelter till it steams against the cold atmosphere. The sight is like standing in front of a rocket booster’s blast from ignition. Aside from the clouding steam and loud bombinate fire, Macyn was doing well for many minutes. Levitating the boulder felt much more draining than constantly consolidating his mana into the gale runes that are doing all the work.

The moment he begins losing track of time, Macyn feels a sharp rise in heat that breaks his concentration. It happens so suddenly Macyn feels he might spontaneously combust. He nearly takes his hand off one of the tuyères to block the wave of heat physically assaulting him, when Sen’s voice calls out over the loud humming of the pillar of fire.

“What happened,” she asks with concern. “Are you alright?”

“I, ah,” he tries to speak and felt the heat bake his throat. He has no choice but to lower the strength of the wind simply to communicate, “it’s crazy hot all of a sudden! I don’t know why!”

“Keep it as high as you can endure,” Sen yells as she materializes, making his mana markedly tremor, thus harder to keep focus. He can see her look over his upper body, then his midsection, before going around him and calling out over the roar of the fire. “It’s the runes on your dress shirt. They’ve warped. The array was likely not meant to withstand the excessive heatwave.”

“What do I do?” Macyn asks loudly, his tone laced with worry.

When Sen notices the flames lower, she yells over the blasting fire, “remain focused! We’ll deal with it later! Just keep it as hot as you can withstand!”

Macyn nods as she disappears into the wand again. The tower of flames isn’t as high as it was, however, it’s high enough where he doesn’t feel like he’s burning his eyebrows off. Finally reaching fifty minutes, he dials down the strength of the wind and Sen doesn’t materialize as Macyn haggardly feeds three shovels of crushed lemon rock into the flaming smelter.

“Now we know, the school uniform is no good for forging,” she voices from the wand as he lays down. “Great job. Rest, and before the next round, we’ll tap it to keep the tuyère from clogging with slag.”

Macyn can only grunt in agreement as he breathes heavily on the floor on his back. It seemed like no time at all before he has to manaform a small hole a few inches from the bottom of the extremely hot smelter. It takes a few minutes as he can't get too close, but the moment the hole opens, a steady flow of bright molten slag and other waste streams out of the hole, sizzling onto the cleared dirt ground below. Macyn shuffles to the tuyères, grips the handles, and routinely applies the necessary flow of mana. Again the heap of flames swell and rage high into the sky before Macyn slowly lowers the strength to a temperature he can breathe in. When he feels he can endure more, he raises the temperature and repeats. It's an eternity before Macyn's jittery mana finally withers and his vision blurs.

“Great job,” he hears Sen say. “No need for more ore. Just rest. I'll let you know when to start the last round before lunch, okay?”

“Mnn,” Macyn mumbles as he rests, but like before, his it's over in the blink of an eye. Though his mismatching eyes are clear and his breathing is better, he still dreads the next hour. Macyn grips the handles, and high erupts a continuous pillar of fire. Macyn sweats and struggles through the last round, holding the proper temperature a paltry amount of times. He tries until he feels like he has nothing left and lets go.

“You did an amazing job,” San calls from the wand. “Let's get that delicious food. You remember how much you love Menhir food.” Macyn remains where he lays, silent and breathing mouthfuls. After several long minutes of inactivity, Sen is so worried, she can't help but desperately call out, “my, wouldn't it be, oh, so wonderful if a brownie brought a light snack!” Seconds drag into antsy minutes and nothing happens. A light rustle tells Sen that Macyn is starting to get up, much to her great relief.

Macyn examines the roaring fire surging out of the top of the stack before he drags his feet far enough away to feel the paralyzing cold he felt his first day on Menhir. Brisk and alert, he wraps his arms around himself and walks as quickly as he's able to his cold room for his coat. Comfortably warm again, he labors for every step to the banquet hall, having never felt so wiped before.

“Almost there,” Sen's words get through the fog of exhaustion clouding his mind. Looking up, he is indeed ahead of the dining hall and efficiently expends the rest of his meager energy to make it to a seat. Macyn doesn't notice anything but food as his shaky hands desperately pile his plate with the revitalizing ambrosia.

“Chew, Mr. Blende,” Macyn vaguely hears Sen tell him. “I would not be happy if you went through all that effort only to choke on a bit of roast.”

Macyn huffs at the light joke and eats properly. A mage a few tables ahead of him catches his attention, prompting her to turn to her friends and snicker. Many mages around him are openly laughing at him and only then does Macyn feel the murky, icky, soot coating every exposed area of skin. The oily filth weighs down his coffee brown hair and he can imagine his uniform coat over his dirty undershirt must look wretched. Macyn's never looked so disgusting in his life; certainly never in teenage public.

“Of course,” he grumbles, easily marking this moment as the final nail in his social coffin. He can feel his desire to run violently out of the great hall, but his need for food is greater. Ignoring all the staring and chattering around him, he stays to eat enough to fill two

stomachs.

With his appetite is sated, Macyn rushes out of banquet hall, and on his walk back, Sen materializes to ask, "how are you feeling?"

"Better," Macyn answers in a rough voice, swaying only slightly on vibrating legs. "You think the fire kept during lunch?"

"It hasn't been too long," Sen responds, tilting her head up as if running the math in her head. "The burning coal should keep at the temperature we need. I feel confident we're okay."

"We only have one more round, right? How do we take the steel out after?"

"Manaforn the bottom stack and the charcoal out of the way and take the newly formed bloom of steel out. If it's dark, then it'll have a lot of impurities and forging that material will take longer. If it's more silvery, then forging will be much easier. Though it will still have impurities, it won't be nearly as much."

"Come on, silver," Macyn slowly comments, to which Sen smiles and nods.

As they close in on Anthony House, Sen asks, "you know, about lunch... well, my grandfather would sometimes say, '*life is very rocky when you're a gem.*' It's something silly he'd tell me when father disapproved of my interests, and I'd always feel better when grandfather said that."

"How come?" Macyn asks paying her closer attention. "What's it mean to be a gem?"

"Mnn, I didn't feel better because he's implying I'm a gem," Sen starts to say. "I felt better because I knew he understood what it is to have a hard life. He understood me. It meant I can always rely on him. I think you're like me, sometimes. That's all."

Macyn chuckles at a resulting thought. "Mom always called them enemies. Not the students or anything specifically, but in general. I think she meant those moments when things try to stop you, try to bring you down; she calls them enemies. Mom... she's a fighter. She'll always fight the enemy and I can't do any less."

"We'll help her any way we can," Sen delicately proclaims. "Of that I'm certain."

With a smirk, Macyn replies, "Let's get that ore then- ...WHAT THE HELL!"

Shrieking at the unbelievable sight, Macyn quickly slaps both hands over his mouth to avoid drawing the large snake-like dragon's attention from breathing its white flames into the top of Macyn's smelter. It's coiled as much of itself around the blazing smelter as it can, likely for the heat. Far closer than Macyn can ever imagine is a safe distance to the dangerous beast, he notes its leather looking scales, white half-moons of skin around its black and yellow eyes, moss green around its body with a tan underbelly. It has two white bones protruding backward from its forehead and what he once thought was greenish hair flowing around its head and down its central back, are actually greenish-black feathers.

Fortunately for Macyn, Coral seems too interested in its fire play to kill him for being loud and Sen whispers, "slowly... back away."

Macyn slowly back-peddles until the corner of the house blocks his view of the long snake-like dragon coiled around the smelter. Even if he can't see it, Macyn still looks in its direction as he asks, "Is this... Do we call... Why?"

"I don't necessarily know myself," Sen blatantly states. "I've read much about dragons but this hasn't happened before... that I know of... ever. I've never even been this close

to one before.”

Not being able to see the flying murdering reptile suddenly feels worse and Macyn imagines the large snake-like dragon popping its head from around the corner for a snack. He continues to back up more, hastily asking Sen, “like, what do they eat? Do you know? Have you read what their dietary restrictions are?”

“Uh,” Sen's mind sounds as she thinks floats beside him. “Ah, yes, they only eat humans if they're very *very* hungry, otherwise they just kill them-”

“...my legs feel numb,” Macyn pines.

“No,” Sen alerts him. “It's okay, Coral is one of the few exceptions. She's a different type of dragon. I mean, she's still dangerous, but a vegetarian.”

“Okay, what about the steel,” Macyn wonders, still looking at the corner of the house, fearfully waiting for its giant head to pop out. “Is this, uh, good or bad? C-Can, like, dragon fire enchant the steel in some powerful ultra-meta-mana way?”

“No, absolutely not,” she quickly answers. “It's too hot and destroys the material.”

“So, everything we've done... these past few days... Odin's hairy testicles,” Macyn just bellows.

“Mr. Blende!”

“That's the lightest of all the things I *really* want to say, Sen!” Macyn whispers. “You can't expect me to keep it all in. It's a dragon- A dragon! Bad words!” he states in place of actual bad words, waving his arms around. “So many bad words!”

“I can see, but we can't lose our heads here,” Sen tries, extending a calming hand. “This can be a delicate situation.” Macyn finally looks at her curiously, lost as to what she means. Sen answers, “dragons are revered enchanted creatures, renowned for their very presence alone.”

Nodding repeatedly, Macyn wonders aloud, “does that mean we call someone special to broom it away or something?”

“That means, among everything living, they have sacred rights. No one and nothing harms them, they're that sacred. No one touches them unless they touch you. And no one certainly kills them, not that it would be easy even for the best warlocks. The penalty for violating their sacred birthright is so severe, some wish for death instead.”

“So, we what? Ask it to move? Does it understand our language?” Macyn is desperate to find a solution.

“I don't know,” Sen answers truthfully. “It's intelligent but I can't recall any recorded history of dragons conversing with humans. And judging by how comfortable it looked, it may not go away anytime soon.”

“Oh, come on. What do we do then? Because starting over... *all over*... I just can't,” he protests.

Sen looks at him sympathetically, expressing to him, “I'm sorry, but... I don't see as we have any other option.”

“But it's right there,” he calls out in a whisper with his hand pointed directly toward the dragon. Looking at Sen desperately he states emphatically, “that's an enemy! There has to be something.”

“The only thing that could work is a lure,” she informs him. “It's a potion that's been used to lure dragons for capture; not necessarily for evil purposes, but to move them from

one location to another. It's rarer now, but it was more prevalent centuries ago between rival kingdoms, who saw it as a measure of wealth and power to have numerous dragons in one's territory."

"I don't need a history lesson! Just tell me how we get this potion and make it go somewhere else."

"Do not snap at me, Macyn Blende," Sen objects, placing both hands sternly on her hips. "Even if weren't friends, we still treat each other with respect."

Macyn rubs his face with both soot and grime covered hands, then takes a deep and calming breath. "Yeah... okay. You're right. Sorry. It's just-"

"I know. It's frustrating, and you're forgiven. As far as the lure, it's not nearly so simple. I can explain how difficult it would be but it boils down to impossible."

"Can you explain it, please," he pleads.

One look in his hopeful eyes and she slowly answers, "...there are only two ways to acquire the potion. The first is you make it yourself. The second is you buy it. I will eliminate the second because we don't have anywhere near the amount of mynt needed to purchase it. As for making it yourself, aside from being incredibly difficult for even master potioners, the main ingredient you need is a dragon scale from another dragon. As you know Coral is the only dragon on Menhir; shot and shot."

Pacing incredibly agitated, Macyn frantically grasps for any hope, spouting, "there's got to be a way to... to... I don't know! Solve this somehow."

"I'm sorry," she says. "But in this case, there's nothing we can do."

"Mom would do something," Macyn contests, staring hard at a sympathetic Sen. "I know she would."

"Maybe you should write her," Sen calmly suggests.

"It's kind of weird I haven't heard from them yet, but yeah," Macyn offhandedly comments.

"It's snail mail," Sen explains. "I'm certain you'll hear from them soon. And you'll see, I bet by tomorrow, Coral will be gone."

Coral, the dragon, did not leave and has instead drawn a crowd of curious and astounded students, most of whom seem have never been to the wooded area Anthony building resides. Staring depressed at the coiled dragon around his partly warped smelter, a morose Macyn offhandedly wonders when a perimeter of thick, white, ceremonial rope was erected, however, he doesn't truly care as, throughout the day, more mages gather around Coral to gaze at the majestic creature.

While they both stare at the cuddling dragon with everyone else, Macyn asks Sen, "so what do we do?"

"There is only one thing we can do, Mr. Blende," she answers. He looks at her expectantly but Sen does not feel he is trying enough. "There are things of this world you do not know, and I, of course, will help you with them, but this," she informs tilting her head at the dragon. "This, you already know the answer to."

Macyn lets out an audible breath, turning his attention to the dragon wrapped smelter and reluctantly reasons, "we need to steal the steel in that smelter so we can start forging."

A look of disappointment washes over her face as she plays along, asking, "is there something special about that steel?"

“Aside from the dragon-”

“Yes, yes, aside from the obvious,” Sen interrupts him frustrated with his denial.

“It's special dragon flame forged-”

“No it isn't,” she stops his little theater. “It's ruined cast iron metal now. Coral's flames easily ruined it.”

“Stupid dragon,” he mumbles with a huff of saddening defeat. Macyn reaches the only conclusion. “Fine! We'll start over.”

She eyes him sternly but decides to let his ire slide, gently reassuring him, “yes, but not completely over. We still have plenty of ore left and you've already made a smelter once. It'll be easier the second time around.”

“A whole month,” he bemoans all the time spent on this project.

“I know,” Sen agrees.

“It'll be harder because of school,” he comments.

“What choice do we have?”

The rest of the day consists of the pair locating a decent sized boulder in the forest surrounding Erudite, and Macyn dragging it back to Anthony. The following day is the last before school begins, and for Macyn, it's time spent on the mission of manafforming the boulder into a single stack smelter, half the height of his first smelter now occupied by the idiot Coral.

Exhausted by early evening, Macyn manages to form the tuyères when Sen reminds him, “time for the opening ceremony. Get ready. You don't want to be late.” Macyn looks at the smaller smelter with apprehension. “Do not worry,” she speaks to his obvious concern. “We will get this done. It will simply have to wait until your first free day.” Macyn nods and heads inside his room to get ready. Soon, he's off the Old Road and walking on cobblestone towards the main acropolis.



## Erudite University

Sunlight fades with the slow daily rotation of Menhir, and in the large shadow of the great mountain, a festive celebration of lights can be seen from a distance. Walking toward the opening ceremony with his glasses on his head, colorful rays of light shoot out playfully from the center square of Erudite campus, reaching a few of the clouds above. In full uniform with vest and tie, the closer he gets to the palace of a school, the more festive decorations blaze the path along the way with grand spectacle. Charmed sparks, streamers, and confetti; numerous floating lanterns and cumulus clouds, all vibrant red, white, blue, or green, fly and pulse overhead near or far until the school feels more like Times Square on New Year's Eve.

Macyn is delighted by the way the red confetti would dance all around him like snow in circulating wind. Out of all the colors, only the red confetti flows around him, and he noticed the same occurrence with the other mages who are marveling at the awe-inspiring celebration. Macyn reasons the confetti color matches their uniform and represents the house colors for Ignis, Ventus, Aqua, and Terra.

The sounds of the night are electric. The majestic symphony he can hear is made of sweet brass and wind instruments trumpeting in sync with many large drums, flowing harmoniously with gentle vocals. It made him feel like a gladiator marching to the Colosseum. If there's one thing Macyn has missed from his old home, it's portable music. However, listening to this powerful, instrumental bombardment of sound, Macyn wonders if hearing music so easily without speakers nearby is something he can recreate it on his own.

Nearer now to the banquet hall, the smell is so delicious it makes Macyn want to skip the many variations of lights and music on the path and run directly to the dining tables. If the powerful fragrance wafting in the air is any indication, the Brownies may have outdone themselves. His mouth salivates like he hasn't eaten in years and if not for the royal-like festival he'd miss, he would.

*'This is welcoming feast is epic,'* his mind awes as he slips his sunglasses on.

The humdrum of activity only increases as he moves closer to the banquet hall. Cliques of students meet and stick together. Everyone is excited, smiling, running, laughing, or shouting in joy, and though alone, Macyn feels exactly like them. With all the eye-catching activity and every student dressed cleanly in their posh uniforms, Macyn has an easier time blending in. Though his sunglasses tends to make him stand out, everyone is simply too thrilled not to return his smile or nod. It's the friendliest Menhir has ever felt to him.

As the groups of talkative mages bunch in tight to enter the six tall entrances of the grand banquet hall, Macyn happens to be shoulder-to-shoulder with a moderately taller boy wearing his colors. Though Macyn can't be certain they're the same year, under all the exhilarating zeal, he smiles easily enough to the boy next to him and the coal-haired boy smiles back.

Encouraged by the spirit of the welcoming feast, Macyn introduces himself. "My name's Macyn," he calls out over the music as they traverse the packed and decorated halls.

"Solo," the boy returns with savvy blue eyes and a smirk.

Macyn is instantly aware this pitch black-haired, blue-eyed boy is made of cooler stuff, but like an idiot, he couldn't stop from commenting, "we're in the same house... Ignis."

Macyn instantly knows he said something too stupid as Solo gives him an obvious look with a slant of his head, adding, "yeah."

Fortunately, the festive halls widen into the larger receiving hall and professors call out directions to the throng of students. "Please follow your house colors," professor Singh instructs in a raised voice. "Follow your House colors. Ignis is red, Aqua is blue, Terra is green, and Ventus is white," he says, repeating himself over and over.

Macyn watches Professor York, call out, "freshman, please follow your color confetti to your section. Sophomores, follow your color streamers to your section. Juniors, please follow your color fireworks to your sections." As Macyn follows the grouping-confetti, he assumes the seniors are familiar with the system to know where to sit.

The room's layout is changed to a circular seating arrangement with a stage the shape of a cross in the center and circles of tables spread about. The cross of tables at the center divides the student seating into four sections and the trim of the elegantly decorated tables is either red, green, blue, or white. The teachers that aren't guiding students are seated at the cross of tables looking on as hundreds of students enter the grand banquet hall. The banquet hall feels taller to Macyn. It's always been a gigantic room in his eyes, but with all the incredible missiles of different color sparks, confetti, streamers boomeranging around the depth of the cavernous room, it's practically another world.

Soaking it all in, an astonished Macyn couldn't help but think, *'you're a long way from Academy of Desert Burk Nevada.'*

Colored lights dancing lead the student body, separating them into the four house colors, followed by the appropriate section of tables. There were enough tables for everyone and Macyn can't help but notice the red confetti whirling around the crown of everyone's head would turn into red halos when they sit down. Around the room, every student who sat down materialized a halo above their head in the color of their house, making Macyn want to find a seat quickly.

Having been separated, Macyn searches the awestruck faces in his section for Solo. Though still distracted by the glamor of such a welcoming, he does locate the friendly boy, but rather than make a beeline for his onyx-haired housemate, Macyn pulls up to a complete halt when he notices Solo is sitting with familiar faces. The three with Solo happen to be the bullies he met on his first day on Menhir—Jorn, Dez, and the Asian girl—and to Macyn, the dilemma is clear. He can sit next to a potential friend, and be at risk of aggravating them and the honored house member, or, he can let sleeping dog's lie.

"Well, no sense in kicking a hornet's nest," mutters Macyn to himself before turning to find a far enough out of the way seat in Ignis section. The four sections arrange the freshman to sit closest to the stage, so, Macyn didn't go far to find what looked to be an easy-going table. Macyn pulls his dark, round-back chair as he observes the person next to him engrossed in his book.

"Hi. I'm Macyn," he says as he lays his wand down on the table.

The young mage with the red halo over his head lifts his gaze from his book. He eyes the wand on the table before Macyn, before casually responding, "I'm Yasuo of House Himura." Yasuo looks at the wand again before returning to his book.

Macyn isn't sure what to make of Yasuo's disinterest but attempts to initiate conversation again. "That's an interesting name. What nationality are you?"

Yasuo returns his uninterested gaze at Macyn. "Nationality? I originate from Menhir. Most of us do. Though it's clear you do not," Yasuo finishes before returning to his book.

Macyn gives the boy a single slow nod before looking around the table for any other potential friends. He finds most of the freshman mages are already chatting with others or playing cards. He's about to walk around the table to watch them play when horns blare throughout the room as loud as a foghorn. The streamers, fireworks, confetti, along with the entire body of student mages and professors begin settling in their chairs. Macyn turns eagerly to the long intersecting tables and the stylish hipster marshal in a three-piece suit walks the now elevating platform for all to see. The marshal has a stern expression; certainly not one of celebration, however, the handful of times Macyn has seen him, his expression rarely strays away from grim battle-hardened.

At the center of the plus-shaped stage, the room is so quiet anyone can hear him clear his throat. Lacking the gravely dry tone present with most elderly men, his voice casually booms throughout the entire hall, "welcome to another year of scholarly discovery."

Cheers and claps resound around the great cavity of the room then settle almost exactly when he continues. "For those of you who do not know, I am your Provost Marshal, Theophilus Osgar Hew. Your Dean of Students is none other than the heart-warming Reinhilda Von Brandt."

Marshal Hew raises his palm toward the teachers behind him and the stiff, imposing woman in question stands. Most of the room claps as she takes the stage and stops a few paces away from the marshal for all the students to see. Staring at the unsmiling, grave, and rigid woman, Macyn's mind questions the marshal's, *'heart-warming?'*

"Like many of you, I am just as eager to devour this meal, so I will endeavor to keep this brief." Macyn nods in appreciation. "First, and perhaps most importantly, safety. If you've been paying attention, there have been a series of terrible kidnappings, eight children that we know of. It isn't my intention to frighten you, however, if you are, know it is a perfectly normal response, for without fear, we're no different than our most monstrous miscreations. As your marshal, I will protect you. Your professors and our silent paladins will protect you, however, I've come to believe knowledge ought to be your first line of defense, for you cannot protect yourself if you do not know the threat. This is a dangerous world, full of peril, and should any here find themselves without institutional support, recall your peers, recall your friendships, and recall your education. They may be the only thing to save you from those that wish you ill."

Macyn has to admit, the old man's finely styled beard and topknot cuts a domineering presence and yet, somehow, makes him feel uplifted despite the clear danger he's admitting everyone is in. After the whispered frenzy among the student mages, Dean Von Brandt adds in her booming voice, "as far as safety within your courses, please follow your professors' instructions, most especially when your very life is at risk. Erudite does not shy away from simulating actionable education. I do not shy away from hard work. It will be hard, however, it will not be impossible."

"Ventus," Hew continues, and the halos of the Ventus section glows brighter. "Aqua," he says and Aqua mages halos glow brighter blue. "Ignis," he says and the same

happens with his halo; growing bright red to the point he can see red rays. “And Terra. Our four houses serve you by fostering a sense of community, an important social imperative in comparative ideologies, and internal support for those in need. Beyond that, houses are not meant to promote segregation or discrimination.” Every halo in the room, no matter what house instantly turns a golden white. “No matter what house you hail, we are all Erudite.”

The halos slowly disappear then, very much to Macyn’s disappointment.

“Fighting amongst yourselves is prohibited,” the marshal continues and Macyn’s ears perked up to hear that. Macyn was hoping the marshal would lay that rule on thick, however, he simply moved on as if he didn’t think anything would happen to the only stolid in his school.

“Now,” says the marshal with a wave of his hand, indicating a professor. “We have a new professor taking over the Wardcraft position, previously held by Professor Hermann, who’s resigned in favor of focusing on his poetry; I expect a show of support for his lovely sonnets. The warlock replacing him is the reputable Dio Malenkomas.”

Murmurs and hushed gasps break out among the students from stage to the far back wall. Macyn looks around the professors curiously. Not seeing anyone stand, he returns his confused eyes on the marshal to find a second person standing next to him when there wasn’t one a second ago. Dio Malenkomas is dark-skinned, average in height and build with a stoic expression, flat nose with something metal plate on it, and a forehead that rounds into the ceiling of his eyes, giving his pupils a darker, cavernous appearance. His straw-colored hair is cut short to the scalp, but catches the light well, making his hair look like velvet. He wears a purple and yellow kilt with a dark leather tunic and his arms are tightly gloved from hand to elbow.

Macyn leans down to his wand on the table and asks Sen, “do you know who he is?”

“I’m afraid not,” Sen’s voice responds, drawing Yasuo’s attention.

The marshal continues. “Some may know Professor Malenkomas was one of the youngest to gain the title of Warlock, a seven-time dueling champion before his retirement, and a semi-finalist in the Apollyon tournament of Gaiorem. He is a master of defense and it would be in your best interest to listen to all he has to teach. Thank you, professor.” The dark skin blond nods before disappearing; striking Macyn with a starving urge to learn how to do that. “Finally,” Hew continues. “I leave you with a few words. For those seniors leaving us this year. You will soon be taking those crucial first steps into the shores of your life. I ask you not to lead that life with reasonable expectations. Utilize practice and habit to reach a world you don’t yet have the wherewithal to imagine and most importantly, realize. Aim higher than you have any reason to expect; a lesson I learned at a young age. To our juniors, sophomores, and freshman. This is the most opportune time to make mistakes. Do not be afraid of them because by making them, you recover all the more knowledgeable. So, without further ado, welcome to Erudite, to another year, and dig in.”

Macyn claps along with the other student mages before quickly doing just as he’s told and digging into his delicious meal. Midway through his platter of delicious meats, Macyn notices the other mages at his table, except for Yasuo, are chatting while surveying a few of the other freshmen tables. Three specific tables are buzzing with crowded activity; one in Ignis, Ventus, and Aqua. He turns to Yasuo, who isn’t eating more than soup while he reads, and asks, “hey, what’s up with those tables?”

Removing his attention from his book, Yasuo answers, “I’m reading,” then

returns to his reading.

Macyn nods in annoyance before asking a tall, lanky brown-skinned boy seated at his right, “hey, what's up with those tables?”

The brown-skinned boy’s eyes flicker from Macyn’s wand to Macyn before answering, “if I were you, I'd hide that.”

Furrowing his brow in confusion, Macyn asks, “why?”

“Ignis ain’t for the handicapped,” the boy plainly answers, then looks at his sunglasses curiously before asking, “why are you wearing sunglasses?”

“I'm not handicapped,” Macyn retorts, a little taken aback by the taller mage and looking away.

“Well, then you must be stupid,” the boy returns. “If you’re going to drag that crutch around, you might as well put a cone on your head that says, *I’m an idiot.*”

“She’s not a crutch,” Macyn tells him defensively.

“Whatever,” says the brown-skinned boy. “Until you get rid of that thing, don’t come near me.” The lanky boy gets up and heads over to the table that’s surrounded by other Ignis mages.

Still looking over the pages of his book, Yasuo catches Macyn by surprise, abruptly informing him, “Ignis House has two Honored heirs. Wang Jin of Honored House Wang, and Solomon Roth of Honored House Roth. They're both sitting at that table.” Macyn follows his nodding direction to Solo and the bullies he met on his first day, surrounded by a group of clear socialites. Realizing Solo is short for Solomon, it’s painfully obvious how much cooler Solo is than he originally thought.

Yasuo continues, “Aqua House has the heir of Honored House Masters, Everette Masters.” Macyn looks over to Aqua’s slice of the circular seating arrangement and spots Onawa talking with other house members, near Everette Masters, a tall, broad-shouldered, caramel-skinned boy with black, intricately braided hair in a top knot. By the look of him, Macyn’s sure he would’ve been on their varsity football team, and though he’s dressed like any other student mage, he has a gold family crest on his chest, exactly like Solo and Jin do.

Yasuo finally nods his head over to Ventus section, citing, “House of the Eagle has the heiress of Honored House Hew, Marnamei Areia Hew, the great-granddaughter of our current marshal.” Her table is surrounded, rejecting any sight of her as Yasuo explains, “if you want to survive in Erudite, let alone Ignis, I'd suggest you read more. The marshal wasn’t lying when he said this is a hard place.”

Macyn doesn’t bother Yasuo with follow up questions and continues eating in solitude until the marshal, eating from a tiny plate of dessert, walks down the elevated center platform towards the middle of the room. When he reaches the center, Marshal Hew speaks, “so, best wishes and goodnight.”

As Macyn follows the rowdy crowd outside, the fireworks renew their poetic show in the night sky, stopping many in their place to gaze at the celebration fireworks. Macyn notices a group of older students walking running from mage to mage giving them a ball in festive wrapping paper. One of them, a shorter blond, with brown eyes, runs up to Macyn sporting a large smile and hands Macyn the round gift. “Here you go, firstie,” he says before rushing away.

Macyn smiles at the older mage before breaking the seal of his present. The wrapping ribbon swirls open and reveals more wrapping, which continues to unroll from the

ball, swirling around him in growing circles. The unfurling of the expanding wrapping ribbons don't cease and Macyn starts to wonder how much magical wrapping went into his gift when the ribbons that resemble a tornado with him at the center, start to wrap around him. Panicked, Macyn goes for the wrapping paper encasing his legs with desperate hands when the ribbons start tying up his arm. When Macyn realizes something's not right, it's too late. The paper continues to wrap him up regardless of how much he struggles before toppling him to the ground, dislodging his sunglasses.

"Sen," Macyn calls as he panics, trying with all his might to break free of the coiling paper.

Sen emerges from his wand and looks him over as he's being mummified in wrapping paper. "It's a practical joke. The more you panic and resist, the more it'll keep wrapping you up. Just calm down, be still, then it'll stop."

Macyn's mismatching eyes express nervousness as he regards her, but ultimately he trusts in her and tries to follow her instructions. Unnatural as it is to let the snake-like paper mummify him, he simply focuses on his breathing, nervously waiting seconds before the wrapping finally slows down until it halts. Slowly the paper ribbons coil back into a ball.

"Boooo," they hear a group of mages call out. Macyn and Sen turn to the group as they rush over, laughing, and pick up the wrapped ball. "Back in your cage, crutch!" one calls out. The others agree, shouting, "yeah!" Followed by, "you're ruining our fun, crutch!" They were all dressed with brown accents, so at the very least, Macyn knows they're from Terra. One of them starts to mimics the way Macyn panicked when he takes note of his eyes and calls out, "yo, guys, look! He's a stolid! Holy hell, they let a stolid in the school!"

Macyn rushes to put his sunglasses on but it's far too late. Many students heard and begin looking and whispering. The group of Terra run around and begin telling everyone as they point at him. The worst is when he spotted Solo, Jin, and their group eying him angrily. Macyn decides he's had enough of the night and speed walks away, running after he was sure no one could see him.

Nearly upon Anthony house, Macyn finally slows down and after a few minutes, Sen returns, informing him that no one is following him anymore. Macyn's mind is a whirl of worry and then pulse of pain when he's struck in the head with a pebble, extracting a yowl and, "what the hell!"

Sen scans the direction the pebble came from and points, "over there." Following her dainty finger to the tree line of the forest, she adds, "I can sense a... It's Root."

Rubbing his head, Macyn walks through a bit of tall grass and the colorful fireflies zipping about, and once near the tall trees, they witness Root appear out of her camouflage. "Couldn't you've just called out-" Macyn starts but her gorgeous appearance makes him forget his head-pain, weakens his knees, hastens his heart rate, and hazes his higher brain function.

"Either disenchant or leave," Sen sternly commands Root.

Root rolls her eyes in obvious annoyance and reverts to a homely level of stunning, complete with thick-rimmed glasses and an unflattering black cloak dress, weakening her allure just enough for Macyn to withstand it and retain awareness. She takes out his Runology textbook from inside her stylish hooded cloak and hands it to him, commenting, "it didn't have much more than I already know."

"Blende," Sen calls staring intently at him to remember what she taught him

about their greeting.

“Oh, right,” Macyn begins before turning to Root and replying, “Ha- Hallel Da-uen.”

Root droops her hair-covered shoulders and tilts her head back as if praying to the starry night above in frustration. Returning her brown eyes on him, she responds with a droll tone, “Hillel Terr. The book was practically useless. I know most of that.”

“Oh,” Macyn comments avoiding full-on eye contact with the beauty and so finds it impressive that she knows most of it already. He’ll be the first to admit he doesn’t understand runology and a rather primal side of him wonders if she might tutor him. Noting her lingering warmth on the textbook, he says, “uh, well, I can lend you another of my textbooks-”

“I want more runes,” Root interrupts. “I know it wasn’t the agreement, but can’t you copy some of the runes from the library books and give them to me? I’ll keep bringing you your rocks, of course.”

Uncertain if he’s allowed to, Macyn turns a curious eye at Sen for endorsement. His ghostly friend answers, “I suppose he can lend you his notes on Runology from the tomes he reads, let’s say... once a week. Sundays would be best.”

Root tilts her head, thinking it over, before nodding. “That sounds fine. Next week then.”

“See ya,” Macyn happily says to a girl who seems to only tolerate.

Root hesitates to leave, and while Macyn hopes he’s breaking through her cold attitude, she instead asks them, “did you know about the dragon behind your dorm?”

“Yeah,” Macyn growls, his frustration toward the creature returning in full force. “It won’t leave and it completely ruined all my hard work!”

Root appears cautiously opportunistic as she slowly mentions, “if they happen to let you keep a scale-”

“They would never allow it,” Sen interjects, cutting Root off. “And if by some miracle, they do, he will be selling it for himself.” Macyn can tell Root is a little put off by that as she whips her fluffy brown-copper hair behind her and leaves in irritation.

“That girl,” Sen mumbles more to herself than her ward.

“I take it dragon scales sell for a lot,” asks Macyn.

“That they do, but they are heavily regulated,” Sen mentions. “You need a permit from Imperium Hall to harvest them, and since it’s very rare, the tax for scales is a third of what’s collected.”

“So anything Coral sheds on my smelter-”

“Will go to the school or the Imperium,” she finishes.

“Of course,” he sighs, accepting the run of bad luck tonight. When Anthony building is not far and Macyn nervously asks, “hey, Sen, can you check to see if Coral is still wrapped around the smelter?”

“I suppose,” she nods floating ahead. “Though Root already mentioned seeing her.”

“I’m just curious and I want to get started on my letter before I forget anything that’s happened tonight.”

“Okay,” Sen says and floats away. Macyn waits until she’s completely gone before he takes a giant sniff of his still-warm Runology book. “Huh,” Macyn mutters curiously. “Smells like grapefruit.” Smelling it again as he walks into his room, he guesses, “or maybe

raspberry? With some vanilla?"

He continues the aroma breakdown until Sen returns when he quickly sets the book down and starts writing his letter. The following day is his first day of class, and though excited, Macyn is nervous. Everyone will likely know he's a stolid and he can't be sure how bad it'll be, writing as much to his still absentee parents. He writes down his reservations, and wonders why they haven't written back yet. Still, he hopes maybe he can make one friend.

*'One would be enough,'* he thinks, then glances over to his clay wand. Macyn smiles and tries to sleep. Though silencing his mind feels impossible, he's sound asleep an hour later.



## Learning The Craft

After delivering a thick letter the following morning, a hesitant Macyn eyes the entrance to the banquet hall warily. He planned to wake up early and eat when no one is around, but he likes his sleep too much. Eager for breakfast but mindful of conflict, he sticks to the walls as he walks in and appreciates the lack of seating arrangement. Though the mages still prefer to sit with their house colors, the round tables are spaced evenly throughout the room. There's enough commotion gathered in large pockets at random tables, allowing him to easily sneak in and avoid drawing attention.

Where the faculty eating with students used to unnerve him, he's now thankful for their presence as he takes a seat in the corner. With his head low and glasses off, he voices the breakfast options he would like a moment before they appear. Hoping to dine and dash completely unheeded, Macyn is nearly done when a group of Aqua and Ventus mages walk by his corner table.

While Macyn recognizes the mocha-skinned, tall boy as Everette Masters, he can't take his eyes off the beautiful Ventus girl. She isn't quite at Root's supernatural beauty, but she is very close, enough to make Macyn forget about putting on his glasses or leaving. Her blond hair looks more like gold spun blond silk, catching every ray of light as it falls in gentle waves past her shoulders. Her face is symmetric in every dainty expression. Brownish eyebrows perfectly crown her mesmerizing crystal green eyes and her smiling pink lips ingrates a smile of his own. Macyn's heart vibes incredibly at the sight of her, demanding he get to know her.

Macyn didn't realize his thoughts weren't so instant and he'd been staring longer than what might be considered civil. One of the cooler, well dressed Aqua boys eagerly calls out loud enough for everyone to hear, "oh, looks like you caught another one! A Pathos with a crutch from Ignis; Gods this is the best year ever," he says midst laughter. As if on cue, the other mages around them promptly follow in mocking laughter.

Macyn's skin breaks out in thousands of tiny beads of hot sweat and his heart beats so fast it hurts as much as seeing Onawa laughing with the others. As he realizes he's surrounded, he recalls that Marnamei Everette are the other honored heirs that are supposed to be in his class and while they're not laughing, they are smiling along with the others. The beautiful Marnamei Areia Hew at least has the decency to smack the Aqua dirty-blond, before turning to Macyn and speaking in a sweet voice.

"Don't call him that," Marnamei tells the blue-eyed, blond-haired boy who was making fun of him. He only seemed to shrug as she continues to tell Macyn, "ignore him. I just wanted you to know that if you have any problems you can come to us."

"Yes, please come to us, mate," the Aqua madcap states with an impish smirk. "That would just take the piss out of those Ignis wankers." A few snicker and murmur as an exasperated Marnamei turns to the red-head, who answers, "just setting boundaries."

"That's enough, Jay," Everette voices before leaving.

"I just want you to know I think it's very brave of you," Marnamei expresses before leaving herself.

Jay leaves Macyn with, "save yourself some pain and quit now, mate. Don't mean to put you down but you don't belong here. None of your kind do and you're only

dragging down real mages like Hew and Masters. I'm warning you now; don't."

If Jay wasn't a clear indication he had so safe harbor with them, Onawa silence was more than enough. Macyn defends himself with a weak smile and before turning and leaving, wondering all the while, *I've got to figure out what the hell is up with these houses.* Rushing out of the Banquet Hall garners a few stares in his direction; none friendly or inviting, and many more curious in disbelief or derisiveness.

He's only stopped by his head of house calling, "Mr. Blende," loudly. Professor Ryce, with his pale skin and neatly cropped, short, black hair, walks up to him and flicks a parchment the size of a postcard at him. Macyn eyes the man in disbelief a moment before picking up the parchment off the ground. The man mechanically states, "your course schedule. I expect each and every member of my house to participate regularly and do nothing to embarrass Ignis. However, as you are inferior, I expect you to do everything in your flawed ability to remain invisible. Do not disrupt the progress of mages with true potential. Do you understand?"

The stern professor doesn't even wait for a response before leaving Macyn in the hall. In front of nearby students, Macyn ignores the humiliation in his chest to rush outdoors for some privacy. Sen comes out of her wand and immediately berates the professor for his unprofessional and antagonistic behavior. Macyn can't know what more to expect but he knows this won't end until he proves them all wrong and so ignores the bias to look over his schedule.

His Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are scheduled for Runology, Numeralculus, and Manaform, and his Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays are scheduled for Potions, Historia, and Wardcraft. Sunday is a free day, however, it's noted there are electives available he can sign up for. His classmates also seem to alternate so he'll share courses with Aqua House every Monday and Thursday, Terra House every Tuesday and Friday, and Ventus House every Wednesday and Saturday, which means he won't repeat the same course with the same house more than twice a week. It's incredibly different from his schooling in Vegas and having never gone to school on a Saturday before, Macyn feels more and more out place.

Since it's Monday and Macyn isn't familiar with the classrooms, he walks to the Moto board as he calls for Sen. Without appearing, she answers, "yes."

In a low voice, he asks, "can you tell me more about the houses? Specifically, why it seems to suck wearing red?"

"I rarely ever stay this long on assignment, so I'm unaware of the current house climate," he hears her reply.

He eagerly requests, "can you find out?"

"I took a peek at your schedule," she replies. "Since Numeralculus isn't a mana demanding course, I'll leave then to check the guild for information," she informs him.

"Thanks."

"You're very welcome. Now, study hard," she salutes, giving Macyn the oddest feeling like she hung-up on him.

Macyn places his palm on the Moto board, exactly as Sen first instructed him with the board in the library, and clearly speaks, "Runology: 1st Year."

An imprint of a decorative arrow emerges on the board and smoothly sails down to the ground like a projection before swiveling in the proper direction. Macyn follows the arrow to the front door of the class and finds he's among a handful of other early mages waiting outside for the teacher, none of whom are Ingis. Apprehensively, he gives them a curt wave, only to be ignored in response.

Standing by himself, Macyn puts them out of his mind and tries to think about how he's going to show the class and his teacher that he's not just a simple stolid. He wonders how fast word will spread throughout the school and if he might earn some esteem from his peers. It's possible everyone may be impressed. If not, at least curious enough about him to talk to him. Macyn may even make another friend.

The class doors open on their own to a large, semi-circular, atrium-style classroom made mostly of dark wood and white paneling, and on each of the desks are neat stone slabs. Macyn walks inside with the other Aqua mages and finds his head of house, the vile Professor Ryce, organizing his already organized desk. His carefully cropped raven-hair and impeccably clean professors garb reminds him of a soulless mannequin.

The backs of each chair are painted to each house, so Ignis and Aqua each have an assigned side of the classroom. Macyn takes a seat in the middle of Ignis section toward the back when Ryce states with authority, "no," drawing the attention of the small number of students. "I can't expect you to grasp all you're already unaware of by sitting so far away from the board. Right here, I should think. In the very front," Ryce says, pointing to a middle seat in the front row.

*'This is **not** starting well,'* Macyn thinks quietly to himself, swallowing his panic for being called out before class has even begun. Once seated, Macyn keeps his head down as he prepares his supplies and waits for the rest of his class. Spying over his shoulder, Macyn observes the first of the three honored heirs in his first class, Everette Masters, and his entourage of five of his housemates, including Onawa and the dirty-blond Jay, enter the room. Macyn keeps his head low and hopes Jay ignores him.

When Solomon Roth and his entourage, the bullies, enter, the room grows silent and hard glares are exchanged between Everette and Solomon, which trickles down to their friends, then to housemates, prompting Macyn to wonder what the conflict between the two heirs are. The boys then make a considerable effort to ignore one another.

*'Maybe Aqua and Ignis are arch-rivals,'* Macyn wonders as the last of the mages enter the class.

The clean-cut Ryce is about to start when the door opens announcing a latecomer. Macyn and class look to see Jin Wang, the third of the honored heirs enter with a bored expression on her face, as if unconcerned with any possible repercussion for tardiness. Ryce stares a moment at the well-dressed Asian girl with her golden House crest perfectly visible on her black and red uniform before nodding to an empty chair.

"For the unprepared, oblivious or shamefully negligent," Ryce starts in a dispassionate, yet powerful voice. "I am your Runes Master Crafter, distinguished Warlock, and professor of Runology, Hildernic Ryce. And this course, this study, this divine knowledge, is the most dangerous skill you will ever gain, greater than that of a Mana Master. I will expect nothing less than your absolute best, and should I deem your ability is not nearly sufficient enough to satisfy my standards," his eyes land on Macyn long enough for all the loudmouths and instigators to notice and snicker. "Then I expect you to neglect everything else in your dull lives until I judge you competent enough to keep from killing yourselves by means of witless incompetence. Do I make myself clear?"

An uneven chorus of, "yes, professor," fills the air.

"Very well," Ryce states as he walks over to the chalkboard and upon touching it, chalk begins writing on its own. "For those that do not know, there is one among your

distinguished year who is severely handicapped through no direct fault of his own.” Everyone immediately turn their hot eyes on a rapidly humiliated and sweating Macyn. “You may be tempted to engage with such a minor existence, but know it will only be to your detriment. For example, Mr. Blende, can you tell me the most essential facet of runecrafting?”

Macyn’s so angry and embarrassed he can’t even look up. He stares at the desk in front of him just holding himself together.

“The runic alphabet,” Ryce dryly answers, earning a few muffled chuckles from the class. “If you do not know the language of access, then you can *access* nothing, and in the eyes of the truly powerful, you mean nothing.” His heart was beating in his hot ears so loudly he barely heard Ryce then ask him, “can you tell me the two types of ethical groups in rune crafting?” Macyn is stewing but Ryce doesn’t even give him a chance to answer as he continues, “the peaceful order of the White Cloaks and the selfish opposition, Black Cloaks. There is no learning one without the other, so if you wish to pursue a mastery level in runecrafting, expect to be very closely monitored by Imperium Hall; my craft is that dangerous.”

Though the danger of rune crafters made Macyn think of his dealings with Root, he couldn’t get over his anger to care when Ryce continues to single him out. “By this point, the practice of runecrafting is so ancient, we can find innovative ideas from some of the masters of old. E. Raymon’s *Doctrina of Runology*, the mysterious KDM Letters, Adriana Lamb, etc. What is an arrangement of designs referred as, Mr. Blende?”

Again, when Macyn couldn’t answer, Ryce moves in front of him and slams his palms on the table, making him flinch and glares as he answers, “a rune array, young man. Do you even know their purpose is to create patterns that can have a multitude of effects?”

Macyn is physically holding back tears from falling red-rimmed eyes when Ryce finishes, “no? In addition to the day’s homework, you will write three copies of every word of the first ten chapters of your textbook by hand, due Wednesday. Do you understand?” Macyn nods his head apprehensively. “I can’t hear you, Mr. Blende.”

With a tight throat, Macyn quietly replies, “yes.”

“Yes, *professor*,” Ryce instructs.

With what feels like a log in his throat, Macyn repeats, “yes, professor,” and can hear snickering and giggling behind him but dares not turn back.

“I will say this again class, I expect independent study from each of you, or at the very least,” Ryce says as he looks at Macyn, “tutoring.”

Ryce uses the rest of class time to demonstrate and assign tablet etching. Having practiced the Gale and Fire runes, Macyn stayed just within the learning curve, and aside from his public soul-crushing humiliation, Macyn is left alone for the rest of the course. After announcing the day's homework, Macyn is deliberately one of the last to leave only to encounter Jorn Amsel, Jin Wang, Desmond Dunn, Hazel Ryce, and Solomon Roth.

Macyn’s mismatching eyes land on Solomon, recalling how natural meeting him was, however Jorn steps in front of him, verbally assailing, “it’s bad enough you had the gall to join the noble house of Ignis, but don’t think we didn’t see you try to get in with Masters at breakfast; unforgivable.”

“Nah, you got it all wrong Jorn,” Desmond calmly states, eying Macyn just as predatory. “It wasn't Masters he was trying to get in with. It was the Hew bird he seems eager to get after.”

“My fault,” Jorn sternly admits without any remorse. “Yeah, Hew. You actually

think you register to her, you filthy Pathos? To any of us?" Jorn lets out a quick huff in laughter. "You're so small in every conceivable way that matters," he says as the resonance of Jorn's mana waves around his thick arm. Macyn's heart is racing and his muscles are tense as Jorn grins cruelly. "But I'm a nice guy. I know you don't rate and aren't worth the time, so, I don't want to see or hear you embarrassing Ignis House again. In return, I'll make sure everyone in Ignis knows how much you hate them so they won't bother you. How's that sound?"

Except for Solomon, Macyn effortlessly recognizes the amusement on their faces. The coal haired Solomon seems bored by it all. Macyn clears his throat and turns to walk away but Macyn isn't three steps away when he freezes.

"That's so rude," Jorn embellishes as Macyn panics in an invisible grip. "Isn't that rude, Desmond?"

"So rude," agrees Desmond.

Macyn is completely petrified and can barely breathe when Sen quickly materializes, and he hears from behind him, her demanding, "if you don't release him at once, I will report you to the faculty and the discourse committee for assault."

Macyn can't see them but he can hear someone leave followed by Jorn asking, "where's he going?" Followed by a, "got bored, I guess," from Desmond. Macyn is trying his hardest to break free of the vice-like invisible grip on his person, nearly to the point of pulling a muscle, but all to no avail. Jorn sighs, cutting his manacraft and drops Macyn, who stumbles to the floor but recovers like he was taught.

"Are you okay?" Sen asks Macyn who's dusting his hands. Turning around he sees the group of agitators is gone while Sen reassures him. "Don't worry, we'll report them today and they will leave you alone."

"No," Macyn grumbles as he dusts himself of dust. Though his father would urge him to tell a teacher, he instead tells Sen, "that never helps... at least not at this level. Do you know why I couldn't move?"

"It felt like a binding craft," she answers. "Solidifying your mana can do a lot, but how you solidify it can make all the difference in the world."

"Hmm," he moans in acknowledgment. "I'm headed to Numeralculus now. If you can find out more about the houses, I'd appreciate it."

"I'll consult the guild now," Sen tells him. "Do try to forget about this, Mr. Blende, and enjoy your next class."

Macyn forces a weak smile, but once she's gone, he leans his back against the wall and comprehends just how light and brittle his limbs feel from straining his muscles against the bind. He shuts his eyes and holds his shaking hands in front of his chest as his breathing rushes through half-breathes. Once the warning chime rings, he collects himself as best he can and rushes to his next class.

Fortunately, it seems like Numeralculus with professor Singh is going to be his easy course. Singh seems impartial to stolid which is a Godsend compared to Ryce and the entire course doesn't cover anything he hadn't already learned; addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, geometry, and algebra. Macyn even answers an algebra question no one else could, much to Singh's surprise. Despite his clear knowledge of numbers, no one in Ignis asks him for assistance and they completely ignore him.

By lunch, Sen returns from her trip to the ghost guild, alleviating him of that extra bit of strain on his mana. In the crowded Banquet Hall, Macyn is eating by himself at a

vacant table in the corner. Though isolated, his meal is still very delicious, but when Sen returns, he grabs a few pieces of bread and exits the dining hall, ignoring the look of derision and profanity from his fellow housemates.

Outside, Macyn speed walks toward the vast gardens. There are eight large rectangles of colorful and exotic flowers on campus around intricately cut shrubs around the central acropolis. Macyn walks the wide cobbled pathways that allow everyone to enjoy the calming flower beds as he begs Sen, “so? What’s the beef about?”

Under the sunny purple-blue sky, Sen floats alongside him admiring the floral exhibit as she says, “I don’t understand the beef reference, however, it seems, for the last twenty years, Erudite’s houses have complimented the current socio-political climate. That is to say, mages whose family support Quim Colimus—led primarily by Honored House Masters—and all loyal to them, tend to join Aqua House. Summa supporters, such as Honored House Hew and their advocates join Ventus House. The Herra party outright demand all their supporters join Ignis and those who are neutral or averse to politics, join Terra to stay out of it. However, Terra mages are generally seen as unmotivated procrastinators and dullards meant for menial or ignoble work.”

Macyn lets out the loud type of sigh that tends to annoy Sen, who frowns at him. Macyn simply replies, “sounds like I would’ve fit in better in dad’s house.”

“No, Mr. Blende,” she corrects him, picking up his attention. “This is a gross perversion of what houses really mean. While true they can be used for competition and or inspire loyalty, school houses are not for extreme seclusion like this. If you want to be Ignis, then you have every right to be. It’s as the marshal said, we are all one university, and when we compete against other universities, we all unite and support each other.”

He’s heard similar speeches from his father, who’s in love with Gandhi and replies, “that sounds nice, but that’s not how it is, is it?” Sen doesn’t answer and Macyn continues. “Since Herra is like the mana nazi-”

“I still don’t understand that reference,” Sen politely interjects.

“A long time ago, there was this political party in Germany called Nazism. They were like extreme supremacists, trying to create the ‘*superior*’ race. They felt their way was the only way and tried to conquer the world; killing anyone who wasn’t like them.”

“With the exception of the killing,” Sen pauses. “That sounds fairly accurate.”

Macyn nods somewhat proudly, commenting further, “since Herra reminds me of them, I probably don’t fit in with Ignis in the slightest- Oh jeez! I just realized it’s like I’m wearing their uniform,” Macyn says in revulsion, looking over his Ignis school uniform in a new light, a supremacist light.

“You are *not* wearing their uniform,” Sen admonishes. “What I said may not be the case currently, but it still stands. Ignis is not Herra. You are not a mana Nazi. You are wearing your mother’s house colors and she doesn’t support their superiority or elitist ideals, does she?”

“...No,” he answers in a low tone, before recalling, “actually, I think she fought a few in prison.”

“That’s...” Sen starts then doesn’t know how to respond to that, so continues. “Yes, well, as I see it, the current landscape within Ignis is highly bureaucratic and it’s mostly due to parental interference in tandem with the honored heirs. With the addition of two heirs from honored houses and a house full of members that support Herra, Ignis house—all the way

up to senior year—are likely to give heirs Wang and Roth certain freedoms to do as they wish. Ignis house members will follow family politics, which means opposing the other houses. Members of Aqua and Ventus will want to show allegiance to heirs Masters and Hew, thus their political affiliation, by ignoring or antagonizing Ignis members, if at all possible.”

With eyes squinted, Macyn attempts to wrap his mind around it all. After several seconds, he utters with a bit of embarrassment, “I understand the words you’re using, but could you dumb it down just a bit to make sure we’re both on the same page?”

Sen presses her ghost lips together to a line and takes a moment to herself before finally answering, “to put it simply, pretty much all mages don’t like you solely because of what you’re wearing and who you are.”

“...Yeah, that’s...” Macyn starts, then sighs, annoying Sen. “That’s pretty much what I was thinking.”

“Don’t allow this to mean anything,” she tells him, floating closer to emphasize her point. “Listen, you may now have a better understanding of the current social climate, but that doesn’t have to mean anything if you don’t want it to. It will be a challenge but once everyone sees you can craft mana, there’s no rule saying you can’t sit and talk with whomever you want. I’m certain there are plenty of mages you can befriend who don’t adhere to all the political nonsense. Just, keep an open mind.”

Macyn felt like he’ll be keeping an open mind, alone, for a long time. The warning chime signals throughout the school and Sen slowly reverts into the wand at his hip. As Macyn follows the elaborate arrow leading him through the campus to his last class of the day, he tells Sen, “maybe I should learn some defense. Something crazy amazing I can do?”

“I can’t comment on crazy, however, you’ll learn some amazing defense in wardcraft,” her voice answers.

“I know...” he admits as he nears his classmates gathered around their next class. Without making eye contact, Macyn is aware of a group of Ignis talking about him. Recalling his step-sister’s grappling practice and the phantom pains echoing in his elbow, he whispers to Sen, “but I want one that’s a surprise, you know? Something they wouldn’t expect me to know. Just in case.”

Sen admits to him, “I *do* know a rune you’ll need to learn that may work as a defense. My grandfather taught it to me.”

“Sweet. What is it,” Macyn asks.

“Its original name, Ten No Ne, was shortened to, Shirane.”

“How is that-”

“It makes sense in my culture,” Sen interjects. Macyn simply nods as Sen continues. “Translated, White Root of Heaven is shortened to White Root,” Sen informs. “It’s a simple rune array you’ll ultimately etch on a small metal coin. When we begin forging, you will need to weld metal together. With your mana, Shirane creates an electrical charge so intense, it superheats metal to melt and fuse.”

“Whoa, Sen, that’s way overboard,” Macyn whispers loudly, drawing a few curious stares from other mages. “I’m not trying to kill anybody,” he whispers.

“Relax,” Sen reassures him. “The rune array shorts the potency when in contact with any organic beings. With practice, you can create a non-lethal electrical sting to protect yourself. It’s not something they teach in class, so it would certainly be a surprise.”

With some hope of defense on the horizon, Macyn is upbeat as he keeps his

head down and stays as far removed from everyone as possible.

Walking into his manaform class, he can't help but notice the unorthodox shaped, rectangular classroom with a very high ceiling, thick wooden beams oddly positioned from wall to wall, and a large, two-story-tall window at the far end of the room. Nothing in the room is symmetrical or leveled properly; not the desks, the chairs, the walls, the beams, or even the tall window. Macyn wonders if a child designed it and somehow managed to get it approved as he settles into the back desk of the classroom.

Once all students are seated, professor Cherokee walks into the classroom with the help of her cane by forcing the wall to create a door-sized opening for her to pass through. She's a short, thin old woman with shiny leathery skin and white hair in a single braid down the length of her back. He learned from his time before school that she is a tribeswoman and deeply respected by her peers.

"Hallel Dauen all," her scratchy voice greets as she walks to her desk, her cane making strong clacking noises along the way. The students mumble back, "Hillel Terr," before she moves to the front of the class and continues. "Welcome to Manaform: Freshman Class. I am Professor Bethany Cherokee. You may call me professor or professor Cherokee." Though her voice is scratchy, it's strong. The white-haired elder with dark crinkled skin checks over a parchment paper on her desk. "Good all for being here on time. At my age, I don't have patience left for tardiness. If you're the sort of student that needs a lot of chances to learn how to be on time, do it in someone else's class. Do I make myself clear?"

A wobbly, "yes professor," is chanted back.

"A few first of term notices. No political discussions allowed. No incessant chatter about which muttonhead is in love with which muttonhead, or who's pampered daddy is more influential than the other. In fact, if the words coming out of your food hole has nothing to do with manaforming or mana in general, keep it shut and your ears open. Can anyone tell me why these discussions are not allowed, not that I care one way or another."

Only a handful of hands go up, and Cherokee extends the length of her cane long enough to reach Everette Masters' desk to tap it twice. He nods with a brilliant smile before easily answering, "some of those topics are intense or divisive and that hinders a mage's concentration when they manaform." Macyn can see Everette smirk at Solomon, who responds with a subtle one finger insult, exciting Macyn to learn they use the middle finger here.

The rest of the class then revolves around the theory of manaforming and the absolute focus necessary to will an object from stable to unstable and back. Professor Cherokee demonstrated with a few examples, however, she would not allow them to begin manaforming until everyone has a firm grasp on the theory. When class let out, Macyn managed to avoid Jorn and the gang, by going off the path and beside the building, however, he ran directly into Jay, Everette, Onawa, and a few other Aqua members.

Macyn immediately does an about-face and walks the opposite way when he's paralyzed for the second time that day, only this time, Macyn feels that he can move his feet and head. He thought to demand to put him down, but he remembered how to stay calm this time.

Shaking his captive around a bit for fun, Jay asks with a broad smirk, "where you off to in such a hurry, mate?"

As Macyn begins to mumble and murmur out of sealed lips, Sen appears out of his wand and demands, "release him this instant!" She is ignored by Jaylen Hawkins and the honored heir Everette.



Ignoring Sen for Macyn's tight-lipped humming, a perplexed Jay turns to Everette and asks, "aren't they usually able to talk when you Ligo? It's not full body bind, is it?"

Macyn mumbles and murmurs even louder to get the point across as he desperately and futilely tries to shake himself free.

"If you do not let him go, I *will* report you," Sen states, directing her ire at the antagonizers.

"Shut it, crutch," Onawa hastily retorts, then turns to answer Jay. "I don't know, but he's trying to say something. Maybe you should let him down."

Jay shrugs and cancels his craft, releasing Macyn from his grip. No sooner did his hands touch the earth, did he grab a hand full of dirt and flings a mist of dirt in their faces. Getting up quickly, he bolts before they can do more than cough, grunt, and yell. Sen pulls up beside him as he runs away from the building warning, "you shouldn't have done that."

Macyn ignores her comment as he burns out much of his energy to sprint at toward his dorm at full speed. He was never the fastest in any of the schools P.E. Tests, but he wasn't average either. Halfway toward Anthony, Macyn abruptly turns left toward the tree line of the forest.

"I'd very much prefer if you didn't go into the forest, please," Sen says with a hint of concern in her tone. Panting by this point Macyn continues to run into the forest, avoiding all the colorful trees, shrubbery, and fireflies. Macyn navigates the vocal greenery of the forest to a good distance before turning left again, decreasing his speed to a fast jog, and following that trajectory until he's certain another left will lead him back to campus.

As he cautiously advances to the tree line, Sen acknowledges, "you went around in a circle." It wasn't a question but he can hear the curiosity in her statement.

"Yeah," he heaves between deep breaths. "I don't know what kind of tricks they know... but I doubt they'd enter the forest... and if they did, I doubt they'd think I'd go right back to where I started."

"That was not a good idea," Sen states again. "Jaylen may not have the sway that Everette does, but they're families are very close and they are good friends."

As he walks through the fields, Macyn contends, "what's the worst-case scenario?"

Concern written all over her face, she gravely answers, "they will claim you attacked them and you will get in trouble. They may even take me away from you."

Pulling up to a stop, Macyn regards her with some scrutiny, his mismatching gray and hazel eyes upset and brows tight. If he ignores the fact that it's her job, she's easily the only good person willing to be around him and the last thing he wants is for them to take her away from him. Macyn asks her, "and they would believe them?"

"Of course they would," she exclaims. "Especially if you consider who they are and their dislike of Ignis. It wouldn't surprise me if Jaylen or Everette made an example of you simply to show up their opposition."

"...Right," he agrees, starting his walk through the field again. Though thinking of the consequences is more his father's territory, it's the second time he's been caught in a single day, and that's an enemy his mother would've stood up to. It's more than likely she would've thought of something better than throwing dirt in their eyes, before running away.

"Let just pretend I didn't throw a little dirt in their eyes," Macyn starts to say as

the reach the back of the building. All the students have left and so the pair cautiously continues through campus. “What if Jay and his pimp-”

“Pimp?” Sen interrupts with an arched brow.

“Masters,” Macyn clarifies. “What if they told the teachers that I did something to them, even if I hadn’t? Would the teachers still believe them? Even though, hypothetically speaking, I didn’t do anything?”

Sen doesn’t have to think long to answer, “yes. I suppose the right professor may take their word over yours regardless of the truth.”

“Well, there you go. That’s the main reason why,” he responds, though he won’t admit he hadn’t thought of this argument at the time. “They could say anything to nearly any professor and it’ll probably go their way. It’s bad enough I’m a social pariah. At the very least, this way, they know I won’t just stand by and be their punching bag.”

Sen suddenly realizes, “you could talk, couldn’t you? When he had you in the Ligo.”

With an easy smirk, he humorously responds with, “told you I was a good prankster.”

“I don’t believe they found it funny,” warns Sen.

“Hey, I’d avoid them if we weren’t in the same freakin’ year, but that’s not the case,” he points out, looking at the redlining of his uniform. “And if they tell someone, which I doubt, I’ve got a few things going for me that might be enough.”

Sen suggests in askance, “such as not actually knowing how to use offensive mana?”

“Yeaup,” he says, popping the ‘p’. “I’m brand spanking new, here. Plus, there were four of them and one of me. They can’t exactly say I was trying to take them all on. How much sense does that make?”

“Regardless,” Sen starts to speak. “I’m sure they didn’t take that well. We need to be more careful from now on.”

Macyn languidly concurs as they close in on the tall, open, doors of the library.

## Managuard

Macyn enters the large book repository with a mission to find his parent's yearbook and pray there's an embarrassing photo he can use, however, he learns that Sen has other nefarious plans for their time in the treasure trove of knowledge. Her trade was simple. "Complete as much homework before dinner as you are able and I'll show you where the alumni yearbooks are," she barter with no room to negotiate.

"I can look them up myself," he counters.

"Come on," Sen pleads. "Do your homework first and then we won't have to worry about it later. Professor Ryce's assignment alone is going to take many hours."

"Oh, you mean copying ten chapters three times?" Macyn asks sarcastically. Sen quirks her head in a sympathetic nod. "That's going to take all day tomorrow, so let's just save it for then."

They went back and forth for twenty minutes before Macyn eventually relents and undertakes the daunting and mundane work of writing fifty-three pages, three times. Stuck on a floating mountain with no internet or friends, there's little choice. He musters through.

A good twenty minutes before dinner, Sen leads him to the alumni section. When Macyn realizes he doesn't know what year they graduated, they count the years back and give it their best guess. After perusing the third book, Macyn asks why the images don't pop up like he's seen happen with the other mages, she simply explains it's a feature of animagraphs. His interest in buying one is immediately dashed when she reveals how much they cost. Macyn is flipping through his fourth alumni book when he finds their names and subsequent photos. His finger pressed into the page, parked right below, "Blende, Jahmela."

"I always assumed you had your father's surname," Sen states as he stares at her photo for several silent moments. Macyn chuckles through his smile at the visage of his mother as a teenager. It's so weird to think she was ever young, nothing bad or negative, simply weird. He doubts that girl knows as much as she will, and though it saddens him to think where his mother currently sleeps, Sen says with a smile, "she's very beautiful."

"Don't tell her I said so, but, yeah," Macyn agrees happily. "She's... she's just the best. She looks too young though, it's freaking me out." Macyn's mirth dries as he starts to wonder about their letters. "How long does the mail normally take? We're over two months now."

"It's," Sen starts then decides to change tactics. "If we had a doehawk or a spriggan, it would be no time at all, however, we only have one method of correspondence available to us. The post box in student services relies heavily on Lower Order mailing service, which is not fast. Not to mention, Menhir is constantly on the move circling the globe every day. Going about it the way we are will take some time, unfortunately."

Somberly, Macyn comments, "something else to change when we sell this sword."

Macyn quickly flips through and finds his father. "Oh, wow," Macyn gasps with a laugh. "He looks like a baby! Why is he so small? What was mom thinking?" Turning to Sen, Macyn asks, "do they let students check out alumni books?"

"I don't believe so," she answers. "Let's ask, and if they say yes, we'll get it on

our way back to the dorm.”

Macyn’s heart beats steadily faster the closer he gets to Banquet Hall. He isn’t sure if there’ll be a teacher waiting to take him to campus jail, or worse, to the marshal’s office to be expelled without allowing him the opportunity to explain, forcing him to say goodbye to Sen, and this new amazing world. Macyn knows bullies prefer to dish-out punishment rather than outsource it to the faculty, however, he can’t be sure it’s the same on a floating mountain in the sky. As he walks around crowds of animated cliques, to Ignis section, he finds his table with two of his housemates and takes a seat. One is about to talk to him when she recognizes him. The brunette girl promptly gathers her things, stands, and leaves. The other is Yasuo, reading.

“Hey,” Macyn says to the quiet boy.

Yasuo lifts his head out of his book, eyes zeroing in of Macyn’s mismatching eyes and is about to respond when someone else, an upper-year, calls for the Asian boy. Yasuo shrugs and leaves. Macyn nods as the bookish boy leaves, noticing in the process that Yasuo also has a family emblem on the breast of his school uniform, like Wang, Roth, Hew, Masters, and a few others he’s seen in class or around campus.

*‘Is everyone from a high-class family around here,’* his mind wonders as he starts filling his plate.

Daring a look around the hall, Macyn immediately spots Jaylen glaring at him from their table almost on the other side of the room. Closer than antagonistic blond, Jorn, Jin, Desmond, Solomon, and Hazel also walk in together. Jorn sees him first and pauses, nodding to the others in Macyn’s direction. When the others spot him, Solomon shrugs and continues walking. Ms. Ryce seems hesitant but follows after Solomon. Jun walks away as well followed by Desmond. Jorn takes a moment to resonate mana around his forearm as he glares before following the others.

Macyn remained impassive despite the growing number of his antagonizers, and only after they left does he let out a long nervous breath he hadn’t known he was holding in. Macyn hates to rush dinner, as it seems the food here is made for Gods, but better he wasn’t around when his would-be attackers were full with delicious energy.

On his way to Anthony, Macyn asks Sen if he can buy old yearbooks. “They don’t have anything from here and I want to send one to them,” he admits. “I think they might like it.”

“I’ll find out,” Sen responds easily. “Perhaps we can send them other things in the meantime.”

The rest of the night and early morning is filled with more of Ryce’s writing assignment, after which he posts his letter, enjoys breakfast despite the solitude, then follows the Moto Board’s arrows directly to his freshman’s Potions classroom in the southwest wing of the campus. With Macyn at a table by himself, the kitchen-like class began no differently than any other. Every table was prepared to look like a chef’s counter with dry ingredients and utensils hanging from the walls.

The professor, an Asian man of average height, average build, with a clean face and shiny black Mohawk fade enters the classroom quietly. At the front of the class, he uncorks a foot-tall flagon, and soon, the breathable air is filled with a sweltering stench akin to vomit. The foul medicinal odor is so strong Macyn’s eyes water as he slaps his hand over his nose and mouth. Everyone bemoans the smell and a few stand as if to leave but slowly the stench dissipates. The class learns immediately if they open their mouths the stench returns painfully

worse. Macyn feels this is abuse but won't ever open his mouth to say otherwise.

With a soft voice, the professor addresses his class, "hello everyone." Not a single mage dares to respond, which he seems to understand, if his knowing nod and smile is any indication. It's the most paralyzing silence Macyn's never heard before and the professor smiles as one of the Terra students waves his greeting instead of verbally responding. "I am Sun Huan, your potions instructor. You may call me Professor Sun."

The professor explained his Silent Scent potion and how peace and quiet is the perfect environment for concentration when brewing potions. They then use the remainder of the class to create the neutralizing counter potion to the Silent Scent. The process of brewing isn't unlike following the instructions of a cookbook, except Macyn is only the third-best cook in his house, and these recipes would give the best chefs in the world trouble to make. If professor Sun is correct, and this is one the easiest brews to prepare, he can foresee a whole series of challenges in the future. Still, Macyn pays close and careful attention to everything Sun says and does. Nearly two painfully quiet hours later, professor Sun proclaims the process complete and walks around, checking everyone's counter potion.

"It seems every one of you has learned how to cut, stir, heat, simmer, observe and listen properly today," he softly announces with a slight smile. "This is a good day. The look and scent are exactly as they should be. Go on. Take a whiff." Everyone in the class leans closer to their pot and hesitantly sniff. Macyn smells a faint amount of citrus and nothing more.

Professor Sun moves to his desk and firmly wedges plugs in his ears. The murmuring starts a second later when everyone realizes the stench won't infect their mouths. Very soon, nearly thirty students are moaning, hollering as loud as they can in supreme joy of being able to break the silence. Even Macyn is wailing, "sweet merciful baby Odin," as he opens and closes his mouth repeatedly, flexing his jaw muscles. Macyn never knew how often he opened his mouth, not even to speak until he was unable to for nearly two hours. The elation of being able to talk again reverberates throughout the stone room until Sun puts both his hands up to signal everyone quiet.

"Yes, yes, hurray," Sun sarcastically bellows as the students begin to settle. "As I've said, this is a potion of my own making. Be grateful you were not throwing up. The first design of this potion was such a mess to clean up."

Sun asks a few questions from the textbook before assigning homework then dismissing his mages. Macyn rushes out well ahead of Jorn and the others to Historia. Stopping by a Moto Board, Macyn is directed to what he expected to be a classroom but turned out to be building. Stepping inside, he realizes it's like a small museum with large animal displays, statues, busts, large paintings on the walls and bountiful smaller objects on every shelf or table in the room. At the center of the large room is a circular concave of desks, like auditorium-style seating but in a complete circle, that descends to what Macyn assumes is the instructor's desk at the center. Macyn finds a desk and takes out his textbook, *Traces of Man*, by Greer Winch.

It isn't long until class starts and their brunette, baby faced professor introduces himself as Odotus. Many of the girls in class seem hyper-focused as the younger man explains how they learn history and how important it is. Though he does enjoy the full-sized paintings displayed throughout the room, Historia is more fascinating than any history class in Vegas.

The animagraph Odotus uses animates the paintings into full three-dimensional scenes. He takes them around the room and displays a show, a piece of history that is somehow embedded in the object he touches. The closest thing Macyn has ever seen to something like this

is a hologram but without panels or projectors. This is like memories, physically realized in front of everyone, and very near to the real thing, though, upon closer inspection, something about the eyes and the bleeding tinge of color gives it away.

Lunch is—yet again—another slice of heaven, after which he heads to Wardcraft early to avoid his house. It's another building, like Historia, but upon entering the metal gate, the stone building is two stories and the wide courtyard is painted to resemble a fighting ring. The outside reminds him of a medieval barracks, however, walking through the double door entrance, the inside is very much a large dojo, complete with a matted dueling platform in the center and weapons all along the walls. Macyn immediately rushes over to an elaborate rack of weapons, complete with spears and swords.

"Hey, Sen," Macyn calls. "Check out the competition."

She materializes beside him and inspects the weapons, commenting, "they seem very well made, but it would be difficult to know unless you see the heart of the material."

Curious, Macyn asks, "does the school have an elective for making swords?"

"I'm afraid not," Sen states. "While a weapon in hand is better than no weapon at all, with enough practice, many warrior mages craft battle-hammers with their mana. The very best warlocks can craft a sword out of mana with an actual edge, but it is very difficult to do."

"I still don't see a problem using a sword," Macyn shrugs eyeing the magnificent weapons before him.

"It's a mixed bag," Sen tries to explain. "It's my belief, many hopeful warlocks admire the idea of crafting the strongest weapon out of mana, but as I said, this is very hard to do, so they see the use of an actual forged weapon as a shortcoming on their part."

"So which way is better," he asks her. "Like, will I still be able to make mynt forging a sword?"

"I believe seasoned warriors see the wisdom of not doing the enemy any favors," Sen rations. "The weapons in front of you are forged and still sell. They simply must be worth it."

Macyn eyes an impressive double-edged sword and wonders if he can create something as formidable as this, adding with a huff, "so we have our work cut out for us..."

"I would agree with that assessment," a cocoa-skinned man remarks from behind him.

Backing away from the display, Macyn turns around to meet the professor who was introduced during the welcoming feast. The bandanna over his entire forehead has what Macyn hopes is not real teeth along the bottom of the green cloth. Under his eyebrows, red paint streaks around his eyes and down to the middle of his angular jaw like a red panda. The bridge of his nose seems to be made of metal, or it's his preference to stick a plate with a pattern design on it. He has hard dark eyes under his round forehead and despite knowing next to nothing about the tall dark man, Macyn can't imagine his history is without horror and tragedy.

Whatever Macyn wanted to say, whether to apologize for being too early or introducing himself, the menacing man holds up his big hand and shakes his head. "I know who you are and I've already spoken with the marshal. You are excused from my class."

"Uh, wait," Macyn retorts. "Why?"

He tilts his head at the question but decides to answer, "unlike other courses, where crafting mana isn't always necessary, Wardcraft requires you to use your mana every day. That is not something you are capable of."

“And if I could,” Macyn quickly replies.

“Don’t waste my time any more than you already have,” The dark man throws back. “I am the standard all my students must aspire to, must train toward, and you were born destined for weakness. As a... *restricted* student, you are excused from class with the minimum passing grade.” With a final, “consider this a kindness,” the man with broad shoulders turns and leaves.

Though Macyn is stunned with feelings of inadequacy by the development, Sen voices, “stay, Mr. Blende. And show them how wrong they are.”

Half an hour later, the class officially begins and Macyn takes a seat on the floor by the window. Macyn was hoping the class would mix seats between houses but Ignis and Terra remain firmly separated. When the professor enters the spacious dojo from his office in the corner, Macyn notices that most of the class seems in awe of the straw-haired man. Even the heirs and their gang seem elated and excited in the professor’s presence.

They didn’t even allow him to introduce himself before they’re either raising hands to ask him questions or outright asking. The man doesn’t seem surprised or amused by the attention and remains stoic as he moves closer to the class. Nearly to the front, he spies Macyn and doesn’t seem amused. Jorn and Desmond notice the hard gaze and laugh.

“Settle down cubs,” he says in a gruff, metallic voice. “I applaud your spirit, however, learning more about my personal life or my accolades will do you no favors should you come across a mage or creature whose only intent is to kill you. Should you meet a dire need to defend yourself, my dueling stats will do nothing for you but ensure you a quick and painful demise, because this course, is not about me. It’s about you and your education in defense.”

The class is much more silent and refrained now but no less in awe of him. “For those of you who don’t know, I am your instructor of wardcraft, Dio Malenkomas. Now, there are many beliefs about what mana, resonance, spirit, kyngi is, but the truth is, it doesn’t matter what you name it. What matters is you have it, and most importantly, that it can be developed and strengthened. With hard work and many hours of practice, you can be as strong as I am, and for those truly talented, future warlocks as strong as Marshal Hew.”

“Unless you’re a broken stolid,” Jorn calls out, quickly singling Macyn out and making nearly all of class chuckle and laugh.

Malenkomas ignores Macyn and asks his class, “by show of hands, who here knows what a managuard is?” Nearly everyone, with the exemption of Macyn and two other Terra mages, raise their hand. Macyn avoids his housemates disapproving eyes as Malenkomas then asks, “who knows how to craft their managuard?” Two-thirds of the hands drop and Macyn is irritably aware that Roth, Wang, Jorn, Desmond, Ryce, and a few others still have their hands raised. “Those that still have their hands raised will be working on strengthening. The rest of you, the managuard will be the only technique you’ll train to learn for however long it takes you to gain my approval; the entire year if need be.”

Eyes widened, Macyn is cudgeling his brain over how hard managuard is to learn as Malenkomas continues, “I cannot overestimate how important defending yourself is, and nothing is more lethal than the attack you can’t see coming. A fist, a sword, an ax, some form of elemental attack, even gas, can all be countered at first sight, but, stand too close to a minotaur who slams its battle axes together, and the concussive blast alone will rupture your hollow organs, like your lungs, and you die. Our muscles may be strong, but our organs and soft

tissue are not. If you are thrown by a giant, a troll, a minotaur, an elf, a werewolf, virtually anything bigger and stronger than you, the only thing that will keep you from breaking bones upon impact, or rupturing internal organs from overpressure, will be your managuard.”

Macyn’s classmates were very excited, but nothing Malenkomas said made Macyn feel safe. He had no intention of fighting any creature, especially those that can kill him with a shock wave alone. Defending himself against bullying is more than fine, however, he draws the line at monsters or minotaurs.

“You all know by know crafting mana is solidifying your spirit,” Malenkomas continues. “Simply put, crafting your managuard means solidifying an outer shell around your body to absorb the damage while simultaneously softening the inside to disperse the fatal strength from what would otherwise be a killing or crippling blow. Remember, from an evolutionary standpoint, the human body is one of the frailest constitutions out there, but this does not mean we are weak; far from it. Marshal Hew is a prime example of that.”

“And a Pathos is clearly not,” Jorn whispers loud enough for the class to laugh at.

Malenkomas turns to Macyn and orders him to, “leave.”

“But I haven’t done anything,” Macyn strongly retorts.

“Nor can you,” the professor replies, netting a few laughs from his class.

“You’re a disruption I don’t need.”

“I can do it,” Macyn yells, turning to the class and adding, “you’re all so sure you know what I can and can’t do but don’t get it twisted. Just because my eyes look cooler than yours doesn’t mean I can’t do anything you can.”

Without a moment’s notice, Macyn’s right forearm is gripped by Malenkomas’ mana and he’s elevated high off his feet. Macyn quickly clutches at the shimmering mana gripping his entire forearm like a big hand. It’s so tight, it hurts and Macyn can’t get free of it.

“The only person in this room who can’t do anything about this you,” Malenkomas voices, drawing much more laughter from everyone.

Only that wasn’t true. From elbow to fingertips, Macyn’s left hand flickers and radiates a bright light. Outstretching his left arm, Macyn crafts mana for all to see; bright spirit energy with hints of rainbow colors, and to the complete surprise of everyone in the room. They all saw power he shouldn’t possess.

Sadly, Macyn doesn’t know what to do with it, however, when Malenkomas brings the student close, instinct made Macyn’s legs immediately snake around the adult’s thick neck, putting him in a choke quick as a whip and surprising the defense teacher. Reactively, Malenkomas expands his mana around his entire body, hitting Macyn with a force to knock him back several feet. The floor may be padded, but Macyn hits it hard and rolls to a stop.

Everyone in class is silent, staring between a revered warlock and a supposed stolid, unsure of how to even process the exchange. Macyn slowly gets to his feet and stares at Malenkomas a moment, crafting mana in his right hand as well before he asks, “what was that about not being able to do anything?”



## The Lone Hearth

After class, the news spread like wildfire. By dinner, everyone was sneaking glances at him or outright staring at him. He was still social toxin and no one would come near him, only now he was being watched from afar, like an attraction at a zoo. Macyn was certain a stolid who could craft mana would be the talk of the mountain for the rest of the year, however, he underestimated their dislike of mismatching eyes and the popularity of the heirs.

After the anal-retentive professor Ryce burned his homework to the amusement of the class, Macyn is silently fuming for the rest of the day. Though, he can't feel too angry since he has Runology, Numeralculus, and Manaform with Marnamei Hew and observes how nice and radiant she is. It's certainly a mellow experience than taking classes with Aqua, as their rivalry with Ignis—specifically between Everette Masters and Solomon Roth—reduces the classes to a contest of loyalty, which is tense.

Additionally, Macyn notices how Ventus, as a whole, doesn't seem to approve of Ignis due solely to Roth's interest with Marnamei Hew. It was a huge shock to everyone when the black-haired, blue-eyed Roth sat next to her throughout the day, confidently ignoring how bothered by his presence all the Ventus mages are. Despite all the hate he's catching from her house, the pleasant Hew doesn't seem to mind. Macyn can't tell if the heirs are being flirtatious or friendly, but it easily bothers Marnamei's numerous admirers, Everette in particular. Wang, Jorn, Desmond, and Hazel are not happy with their interaction either and Macyn wonders if even heirs are not allowed to be friends because of politics.

Though it's idiotic, by the end of the day Macyn is upset his revelation as a mage didn't last longer than a day. It's as if everyone preferred to think about the heirs than a stolid being able to craft mana. Macyn just stewes over his classwork in solitude. The week progresses slowly but steadily and spends most of his free time in the library doing his best not to fall behind the other student mages. It's far more difficult than Macyn anticipated, and more than anything, having classes on a Saturday completely throws him off. He's never realized how precious two days of free time away from the strain of learning can be until one of those days was taken away.

Come Sunday, Macyn dedicates the entire morning grinding to finish the remainder of Saturday's grueling homework. Being able to create light with nothing but rune characters on a piece of parchment is thoroughly amazing, however, memorizing all eleven variant characters as well as optimal surface interface is tediously mind-numbing. He's working on a letter at his desk when Sen returns, floating through the door and relaying, "found her."

Apprehensive, Macyn sighs, to Sen's everlasting annoyance. Generally, Macyn would look forward to meeting Root, however, having informed Sen of how carefully the Imperium monitor rune practitioners, Root's fixation on runology understandably make them both nervous. Macyn isn't aware of any rules they might be breaking and Sen isn't taking any chances. Before doing anything, they decide to wait until Sunday to speak with her.

"She's waiting by the tree line," Sen informs him.

"Didn't you invite her," Macyn asks as he finishes his letter, hurriedly placing it in an envelope. "It's not like anyone else is here."

"She used *choice* words but let's say she declined," Sen summarizes.

Stepping out of Anthony, the first sight they see is Coral, still wrapped around the now completely warped and blackened smelter. It seems, every time the coal within cools, Coral will raise its head and breath white-hot fire into the top opening. There's still a barrier nearly three meters away from the sleeping dragon to keep people out, however, a few students are painting the dragon without a canvas and somehow the paint keeps still, floating in the air. He'd like to try but it's just one more thing he can't afford.

Macyn turns to the left of the dragon's groupies and follows Sen toward the tree line, asking along the way, "do you think she'll be pissed that I don't have anything to give her?"

"I think you're correct to try and understand what her intentions are," Sen states from beside him. "She clearly dislikes mages and we don't want to support what may be criminal activity. That could very easily jeopardize things for you." After reaching the timberline, Sen continues in with Macyn closely following behind. They trek into the forest like this for another ten minutes before she stops and calls out, "I can sense you."

As she deactivates her camouflage, Roots beauty blooms like the most exotic flower in the supernaturally gorgeous forest and Macyn has enough sense to hamper his line of sight by turning away from Root's general direction.

"I don't see any parchment in your hand," her sweet voice pours into Macyn's ear like sweet honey. Even if he's not looking directly at her, he can feel his senses becoming more alive, more electric, radiating with beautiful energy.

"Why must I continue to remind you to disenchant?" Sen asks with a clear edge in her tone. "He's a human boy!"

"Fine," Root hotly returns. "I don't always remember," she adds as she pulls her large volume of auburn hair back in a ponytail, and dons on her thick, black-rimmed glasses. "It's not like I worry about this at home," she reasons as she loosens the bow of her dress, censuring her womanly silhouette. Cautiously turning toward the beautiful nymph, Macyn knows she's only hiding her beauty but it's enough to keep control over himself.

"...Hallel Dauen," Macyn slowly greets, causing the girl to look at him. Sen also greets Root properly, though reluctantly.

"...Hillel Terr," Root responds flatly before looking closely at his eyes. Her brow quirks curiously before she shrugs her shoulders and makes no mention of having the eyes of a stolid. Instead, she only cares to ask, "why don't you have anything with you? Are you backing out on our deal? If you do I swear by the mother spirit-"

Sen cuts her off, stating plainly, "we wanted to speak to you about a matter that's been brought to our attention first."

When Macyn feels he can handle looking more directly at her, he continues despite her obvious suspicion, "I learned a little more about Runology. That's what you're into, right?" She only shrugs her lovely shoulders and he carries on. "Black cloaks, white cloaks, runemasters, or even suspicious users; the Imperium has their eyes on all of them."

"And," Root cuts in. "I don't see what that has to do with the deal you already made with me."

Macyn is highly sympathetic which makes him look away as he pushes on. "I have something very important that I have to do. It's the reason why I need the lemon rock. So I need to know what your intentions are because I can't let you jeopardize that."

"I don't need to tell you anything," Root responds. "I don't answer to you or

your kind.”

“And he can’t be apart of anything criminal,” Sen interjects.

“You think I’m a criminal now,” Root heatedly retorts. “You all took land and broke deals and now you want to label me a criminal!”

“All we care to know is your intentions,” Sen returns standing her floating ground. “If you aren’t planning anything nefarious then there isn’t an issue.”

“What my plans are isn’t part of our deal,” Root returns. “If you wanted to know, you should’ve asked before we already struck our deal. Also, you’re both so eager to know my intentions, yet neither of you is willing to tell me what this important thing of yours is.”

“I’m not trying to do anything dangerous or bad,” Macyn interjects. “I’m trying to help someone. That’s it. But you’re being crazy defensive about this to the point I’m seriously concerned about what your endgame is and how I’m contributing. Where I’m from, we take this kind of thing seriously, or schools get shot up.”

“I- I don’t know what that means,” Root hesitantly divulges.

“It means I can’t help you if I’m not sure you’re going be a dangerous person or not,” Macyn reasons. “Just tell us, and you should know Sen can detect if you’re lying.”

“There’s no way she can know that,” Root states in disbelief, turning a suspicious eye from Macyn to Sen.

“The fact that that’s immediately what you’re disputing isn’t helping you here,” Macyn responds. “And she can tell, as easily as she can sense you.”

Sen levitates a few centimeters taller to force Root to look up at her. The auburn-haired nymph takes a moment to mull over their exchange and consider her response. When she returns her focus on Macyn, she exhales in aggravating defeat before asking, “what do you want to know?”

Macyn is surprised at her response, checking with Sen to make sure he hadn’t misheard before answering, “I, uh, just want to make sure you weren’t planning anything evil or bad. I mean, I’d rather go through your monarch, or look for what I need elsewhere than come across any unnecessary problems later on.” Her brown eyes scan him suspiciously while he adds, “I don’t even know why you don’t just buy a book on Runology from the store; seems like a pretty obvious thing to do.”

“...I can’t,” Root reluctantly admits. After several long moments, she begrudgingly continues. “My family is very strict about what is and isn’t best for us. It’s not that they believe Runology is absolute evil, but if they hear enough negatives—theft, sabotage, vandalism, other things—then suddenly, it’s all bad, no exceptions, and they don’t want me learning it. That’s why I don’t buy a book or go to anyone from the haven. I need to learn about it without any of them finding out.”

Macyn isn’t sure if he believes her, but he wants to, and so asks, “you know it can be used to do bad, right?”

Root narrows her eyes on him and crosses her arms, heatedly contesting, “*everything* can be used to do bad things.”

“So how do I know you’re not one of those people?” he asks.

“You don’t,” she states firmly, barely allowing a moment to pass before proudly proclaiming, “I just like runes, okay! I think they’re fascinating and I want to know everything about them,” she finishes with a huff of irritation.

Macyn raises his brows at her bold assertion and gives Sen a quick appraising look. With Sen's nod, he asks Root, "would it matter to you if the Imperium knew about you or not?"

"I'd rather they didn't," Root hesitantly states. "I don't want them alerting my clan. I can't even imagine what my family would do to me if they learned about this because the Imperium came knocking. They'd probably go wildfire on me. For now, it's just better this way. And just because I say that, doesn't mean I'm in it to do wicked deeds. That would only prove them right. So there! You know the truth! I don't want them learning of this any more than you." Macyn and Sen remain quiet for some time, more time than necessary, until Root cracks. "Well?!"

"Yeah, I'm good," Macyn states with a bit of a smirk. "Sen?"

"Yes, Mr. Blende," Sen replies. "I agree as well."

"Great," Root sarcastically waves her hands in the air. "Glad *you* feel so much better. Now I get to go home empty-handed."

"Maybe," Sen says with a bit of sympathy. "But we will absolutely bring you study material next Sunday, same time."

"And to make up for today..." Macyn adds with a thoughtful hum, tilting his head up for a quick idea of reconciliation. "I'll write as much as I can about... well, actually, what are you interested in? I can get you specifics on stuff like, Elder, Anglo F, Rok, PIRL inscriptions, or maybe Ruling schemes for test executions, or public arrays."

Angling her head back in evident surprise by Macyn, Root starts, "You... Well, I suppose it's not the worst thing to see you're not a complete loss."

"...Thanks?" Macyn questions the blunt compliment, before explaining, "it really sticks with you after the third rewrite. I may never forget now."

Macyn sighs and Root is momentarily confused before replying, "get as many of the inscription designs as you can, both positives and negatives."

"Alright," Macyn agrees.

"We'll be needing more lemon rock," Sen interjects. "Not as large as last time," she assures the concerned nymph. "Whatever you can carry without much difficulty will be fine."

Root nods and turns to leave, but after no more than two steps, she turns and bids them, "hallel dauen."

Sen does her customary head bow and repeats, "hillel terr."

"Later," Macyn nonchalantly adds, but a stern look from Sen easily forces Macyn to repeat the same, "H-Hillel Terr." Root tightens her lips to a line, shaking her head slightly then leaves.

"You are so uncultured," Sen says evenly as she floats back.

"Yes, my lady," Macyn states in jest. "Very uncultured, my lady."

Sen rolls her eyes before seriously asking, "what was all that about my knowing if she'd lie? I can't detect lies."

"...I bluffed," he sheepishly admits.

"You lied," Sen gasps.

"Oh don't be so shocked," he counters. "I'm from Vegas. It's called Sin City for a reason, and technically, it's not a lie. I don't actually know for sure if you can sense lies or not."

Sen closes her eyes and rubs the bridge of her nose with her fingers. She floats in front of him, halting his walk, and points a firm finger between his eyes. “The next time we see her, you will apologize and tell her the truth, do you understand? Or so help me... I will be very disappointed in you- Genuinely disappointed... to the point I would question why I’m helping you.”

Eyes wide with panic, Macyn immediately agrees, “Okay!” Macyn has seen enough period television to know Sen is the type of ghost-person who takes things like honesty, respect, integrity, and honor seriously, and to violate those ideals is a serious offense. His father and step-family raise these points in society often during dinner, and even his mother has told him she’d rather he be an honest bad person than a lying good one. While Macyn still likes to bluff, he has no issues telling the truth and genuinely expresses to Sen, “I promise you I’ll apologize the next time I see her.”

“Good,” Sen says satisfied. “We need to make our way to The Hearth. You don’t want to be late for your first House meeting.”

His face crunches like a horrid smell as he asserts, “I think we both know I do.”

Sen returns to the wand and Macyn makes his way to Ignis Dormitory, known as the Hearth, where most of Ignis stay. It’s the north-facing three-story building out of the other dormitories surround the central palace. The white and black building has red window frames, red brick steps, a tall red door, and red bevels edging the room for accents. Not unlike the Imperium’s design, it also has four white, tall pillars stretching to nearly to the roof.

Before the door, Macyn speaks the password and the double doors open. Inside are luxurious gold and red stairs, circling up to all three floors in the round atrium. On either side of the three-story-high lobby, there are also two lifts that Macyn assumes don’t operate on electricity, all of which reminds Macyn of a vintage five-star hotel.

Stepping further into the atrium, many of the older mages spot him and though it appears a few of them want to walk over to him, they’re held back, reminding Macyn he’s still excommunicated. Macyn gazes around the large hall nervously, searching for any indication of where to go when he’s suddenly shoved from behind. His neck rocks back hard, helpless against the force of the push, but quick hands and the soft carpet are kind as he rolls on the floor to his feet again.

The larger Jorn chuckles over Macyn before he rejoins his group and they walk to a corridor on the left.irate and red-faced, Macyn ignores all the eyes on him as he reluctantly follows his abusive year-mates into a moderately sized room with five rows of five chairs. The walls are dark, polished wood, with large portraits of unfamiliar people and small round tables with lamps, statues, or fire-red plants. All around the room, low glowing wires patterned in rune characters keep the room well illuminated in warm firelight. Most of his house classmates are in attendance, and ahead of his batchmates, six older Ignis mages stand on a knee-height stage. Macyn takes a seat in the back as Hildernic Ryce walks in from a door behind the stage.

“Welcome freshman Ignis members,” Ryce immediately begins after taking the stage. He ignores the six older mages on stage and continues, “as you’re all most assuredly aware by now, I am your Head of House, Hildernic Ryce, and you’ve all been summoned to the Hearth to aid your life as a true Ignis mage and to remind you what you should already know: Ignis is the best. The houses of Erudite exercise choice and only the best and brightest choose Ignis!”

When the six mages behind professor Ryce clap, everyone claps along with

them while Macyn feels like the odd-man-out who hadn't drunk the superiority Kool-Aid. The clapping dies when Ryce begins, "in Ignis, greatness is demanded of each and every one of you, and if you are unwilling to promote our values as supreme mages, then this proud house has no need of you. I am not without empathy. I am fair enough to tolerate a small margin of error. You must learn after all, and in the process, mistakes are inevitable, however, after your single error, I do expect you to never repeat the same mistake again." Macyn spots Jorn and Desmond in the second row searching around, more than likely for him, and he slides lower in his seat to avoid being seen.

"Soon, you'll all discover Ignis serves a greater purpose," Ryce continues. "Nearly two-thirds of the most powerful sectors of Menhir and Gaiorem: Imperium's vast offices of power, the trade governors, our honored and high houses," he states clearly, indicating to Jin Wang and Solomon Roth an outstretched hand. "These entities of power all establish their connections and value of unity from this very house. Make no mistake, you have not simply entered one of Erudite's four dormitories. You have chosen a path of achievement and success well beyond these hallowed halls. The highest position in all of Menhir and Gaiorem is possible to you, simply because you chose correctly."

Ryce's eyes land on a low-seated Macyn as he continues, "and so, to a house that can offer you the world, mediocrity will be viewed as the greatest insult, not only to your peers, but to me. If you lack the pedigree to be the best, leave. I'd be more than happy to sign any transfer to the lackluster house of your choosing."

Ignoring the way everyone is looking at him, Macyn's mind is already writing the letter of apology to his mother for wanting to leave her house and explaining the supremacist cult it's now become. The rest of the meeting devolves to the sophomore, junior, and senior agōgs and their responsibility of maintaining order in addition to announcing the election for the freshman agōg in a month's time. Macyn is awed by the blatant favoritism when Ryce finishes, "Solomon Roth, Jin Wang, and Hazel Ryce are the only three that have my endorsement. To anyone else intending to run, do not bother coming to me for my favor."

After Ryce leaves, the senior agōg Hunter Baron steps forward; brown hair and blue eyes, standing proudly tall and lanky with what looks like a cane at his hip. He starts with a tone that felt like an assault, easily implying to Macyn this only gets worse.

"I want every one of you wretched young tots to know how things are really run in Ignis. Professor Ryce said what he said by the book. Because of his position, he's bound by the rules, thus, he had little choice but to stop there. We," Baron indicates to his peers with both hands, finishing, "are not. In truth, we're more than the Erudite code governing us. While the weak of society prefers to keep their head in the sand, we dare to push for bigger and better. Why? Because we deserve it! If you're wondering where we draw the line, then get out of my house because I don't care if you cheat, steal, or lie to be the best. Just don't get caught. I'll say it again. Don't. Get. Caught. Because if any of you makes Ignis look bad, you can rest assured we will correct you."

Baron looks to his fellow agōgs and nods, before addressing the freshman. "Your agōgs will be having lunch in the dining suite down the hall if you'd like to ask us any questions." He looks toward Wang and Roth before adding, "who knows what mutually beneficial relationships may develop."

When everyone stands by the end of the meeting, Macyn quickly makes his way out of the room, then atrium, and finally out the large red doors. After both ghost and mage

are a good distance away, Sen exits the wand and expresses her concerns. “That is one of the worst house meetings I’ve ever heard. It’s practically brainwashing.”

Macyn nods fervently, commenting, “it did feel like they were holding a gun to your head while they welcome you to the family.” Macyn and Sen head to lunch as he adds, “I’m just glad that’s the only mandatory meeting cuz I don’t think I can do another one.”

“Agreed,” Sen affirms. Walking toward Banquet Hall within the palace, Macyn makes a mental note of how many of the mages are dressed in civilian clothes rather than their uniforms. He even notices a few seniors with similar canes to agōg Baron as Sen voices the goal of the day. “After lunch, we’ll smelt ore in the new smelter. With any luck, we’ll have something decent to work with by nightfall.”

“Will we stop for dinner?”

Sen hums in thought for a moment before answering, “you’re going to need the energy, so yes, but we’ll need to make it fast. It would be for the best if we did not give Coral time to interfere again.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he responds, and after stuffing his face and grabbing some bread to go, Macyn is ready to start smelting ore again with Sen’s guidance.

Back at Anthony, a five-foot clearing is prepared before moving the new smaller smelter he made before the school week started to the other side of the dorm house. It’s still near enough to the cellar doors but away from Coral and the dragon’s groupies. Dressed in his rune ruined slacks, freezing from the waist down, Macyn has an easier time dropping the beehive funnel-shaped charcoal funnel into the smelter, then packing in the ore. After lighting the smelter, he grips the Gale rune etched tuyère, calls on his mana, and slowly breathes life into the building heat.

Before the temperature gets too high, Macyn switches dress shirts. Now completely in his rune ruined uniform, he doesn’t worry about destroying the runes on the last two remaining uniforms. With extended tuyère’s, he’ll be near enough to the smelter to stay hot, yet not so far away that he’ll freeze in Menhir’s normal weather. Sen stays with him to oversee the coaxing of the fire for the first hour, then returns to his wand to reduce the blare on his thready mana.

Not surprisingly, Macyn feels just as tired this time as he did the first last time he’d done this. It’s a little disheartening that there’s seemingly little to no progress with his mana endurance but he hunkers down and does as he needs to for the second hour. Hour after hour, Sen gives him just enough rest to help him last for at least thirty minutes of constant propulsion. By the fourth hour, the pillar of fire is nearly twice as tall as him, spouting out of the top like a rocket’s ignition. The smelter is steaming from the cold air touching the hot stone by the time Macyn leaves for dinner. Considering how important this chance is, Sen decides to stay behind.

“Hopefully nothing will happen while you’re away,” she tells a heaving Macyn. “But if it does, I’ll rush back.”

“...G-Got it...” Macyn agrees, sweating profoundly and completely out of breath. “I’ll be... fast...” He struggles to rush inside, change into clothes that’ll protect him from Menhir’s cold climate, and wash his face of caked sweat and soot. He won’t be able to do anything about the grease in his long hair as he exerts himself to make the thirty-minute walk to dinner, so he does his best to ignore all the mocking looks or objections to his filthy appearance.

Sitting alone at a round table, Macyn is only on his second flavorful spoonful when Sen floats from the entrance of the hall toward him. Her joining him so soon can only

mean one thing, but if he held hope that her presence had nothing to do with Coral wrapping itself around his smaller smelter, her apologetic expression is all he needs to know the truth. Macyn bangs his forehead on the table in disapproving frustration. Macyn has enough sense not to yell but the gut-wrenching feeling is there. He bangs his head on the empty table twice more before Sen finally reaches him.

“I’m sorry,” is all Sen can say.

Easily registering her sympathy, Macyn simply takes a few rolls of bread and an apple, and leaves. There’s still some light in the star-filled night as his exhausted body walks the commons. He doesn’t get too far from the palace when he’s abruptly frozen in place. His first instinct is panic. Heightened anxiety speeds moments into minutes as he struggles and strains to free himself when Jaylen Hawkins steps into his wide-eyed view. Since Jay is the only one he sees, Macyn wonders if the others in his posse are right behind him, outnumbering him and cutting off any chance of escape.

“Release him this instance!” Macyn hears Sen demand. “Or I will report this. I promise you this will not continue, you hear me!”

Jay laughs at her threat, challenging in return, “good luck with that, ya broken bint! My father’s personal friends with the Hews and the Masters.” Jay then ignores Sen, turning cheerfully to the bound Macyn. “You know, I don’t know what I hate most about you; your crutch, being Ignis, or being a stolid. And I was being nice. I let that cheap shot slide. But an Iggy prat like you making light of Aqua, of Ventus, of Menhir, by *pretending* to be a Stolid... that’s just unforgivable. You’re a colossal embarrassment to us real mages! It’s hard looking at you and feeling some type of way, I tell ya. Odin’s beard, you look disgusting!”

Macyn can see the resonance around Jay’s hand and forearm shake strongly as the redhead lifts Macyn to twice his height. “I don’t want to see your crutch anywhere on campus. If I do, I’m taking that pathetic wand on your hip and snapping the damn thing myself. I’m warning you, dreg. You haven’t even seen my bad side, and you won’t survive it if you do.”

The cold choking seizure holding Macyn up releases him and he immediately falls from a height taller than him onto the hard cobble floor. Searing pain shoots up from his feet, flourishing out from his spin and even out to his fingers as he struggles and rolls on the ground. Dreading what might happen next, Macyn tries to get his feet under him, and run, however, Jay’s mana shoves an unbalanced Macyn and his head hits the stone as he scrapes his hands trying to stop his fall.

Fear, panic, and anger all fight within him, so when he vaguely hears Jay say, “careful on your walk to the orphan shack. There’re a lot of nasty things in these woods,” Macyn was desperate to hit back, motivated by fear and dark frustration. Like his step-sister practiced on him, Macyn tries to reach for Jay from his poor vantage on the floor. Any body part will do, but Jay easily hops out of reach, evading his desperate grab with a laugh. Macyn tries to manacraft levitation on the bully but is quickly rebuffed as he dances too far away. The shame, pain, anger, and contempt raging for action inside his ribcage makes him feel humiliated... worthless.

When Sen enters his watery vision, he covers his eyes with his right forearm, fighting to keep the tears of anger and helplessness from showing. Clenching his teeth shut is the most he can do to avoid reacting as weak as he feels as she sadly states, “I’ll get a professor.”

“It was a stray craft, Sen,” he begs, despite the croak in his voice. She looks at him confused and so he repeats, “it was a stray manacraft, and I fell.”



Sen did not argue with him.

## Last Hour

Macyn isn't sure when Sen left or for how long she left. It felt like forever and no time at all before he's in a bed again; aware only that he's in the infirmary and being treated but little else. Macyn stays in his head for the rest of the night, hardly sleeping and wrapped up in self-loathing, and come morning, he moves on autopilot back to his dorm to prepare for the day. He listlessly performs his mourning routine until he's about to exit his room, because on his bed, lay his wand right where he tossed it and his free will debates intensely with his instinct to survive.

"It's okay," Sen innocently relays. "You don't need me to go to school. As it is, I rarely come out between classes."

Macyn isn't happy, relieved, or sad. If he had to narrow down how he feels, he'd say detached, and so leaves his friend behind. Macyn makes it to breakfast and the food seems stale. He says nothing in class, nor does he care to raise his hand. He ignores everyone as easily as they ignore him, especially Jaylen, Jorn, and their owners. The unexpected blessing in disguise is the escape schoolwork provides him.

In Vegas, he would have the internet to help him ignore everything that's disjointed in his life. On Menhir, it's manacrafting; the struggles of manipulating his mana to guard him against powerful organ-rupturing shocks, learning to properly prepare ingredients for stir-intensive potions, learning the differences between rune inscriptions on differing mediums, tracing lineages of great warlocks and sorcerers, or manafoming a brick into clay and then a teacup.

Throughout the week, keeping Sen in his dorm, Macyn feels more alone than ever. The hardest part of the week is when he sits at his desk in his dorm room, intent on writing a letter to his parents. Staring at the parchment, all he can wonder is why they haven't written back. Can it simply be that retro posting takes this long? Macyn must've sent no less than forty-five letters by this point, a great many of them thick with pages of excitement or fake admonishment for keeping valuable information from him. The question, *'why wouldn't they write back?'* lingers incessantly in his head, making him set his wood fountain pen down over a blank page.

With no word from his parents, Sen is his only saving grace. Before every school day, she'll ask him if she can stay behind and it makes Macyn feel pathetic for being forced to leave her, for being forced to submit, despite his mother's words. Sen claims she uses the free time to find a better location for a new smelter, which he hadn't believed until she informs him she informed him otherwise.

Returning from classes on Friday, Macyn quickly asks in disbelief, "really? Where?"

"There's a cavernous depression in a cliff thirty minutes away," she answers with zeal. "It's not so deep it can be called a cave, however, it's enough to keep Coral from entering."

"Sounds kinda far," Macyn comments. "I thought we needed to be close to the forge."

"It's not absolutely necessary," she states. "Where we had it was simply ideal as

it would've allowed us to condense the bloom steel right away. As it stands, we cannot wait for Coral to leave on her own so we must start if we ever wish to finish."

The happiness that he wants to feel is right beneath the surface, and while it's better than the misery dragging him through the week, it's not enough. Macyn only nods and says, "sounds like a plan."

"Do you have a letter to post?" She asks.

"No," Macyn answers. It's been harder to write without good news to share or any friends to mention. In truth, Macyn is having an easier and easier time feeling bitter and spiteful. His dreams of late fantasize about the millions he'll make after selling his sword and keeping it all to himself for his parents forgetting about him. It's ridiculous, and with Sen's help, he always remembers they do care. Macyn simply doesn't understand why he hasn't heard from either of his parents. His mother, in particular, always agitates him when he goes too long without hearing from her. A prison is a dangerous place and anything can happen.

"Write one," Sen lightly suggests. "So we can have two reasons to go to student services."

"What's the other reason?" asks Macyn, giving her a curious look.

"We still need to learn more about your mother's case," she begins to explain.

"To do that, we need to return to Imperium Hall, and for that, we need permission to leave campus. So write your letter and we'll get a permission slip when we post it."

Macyn chuckles a little, internally accepting the activity of something to do that wasn't schoolwork. With energizing hope, he pens a short letter, and after posting it, mage and ghost head over to student services. The nameplate on the counter says Mrs. Lemont, and the woman behind the oak divide is a large, dark-skinned old woman with white, intricate cornrows and gold round-rimmed glasses.

"Hello," Macyn greets.

"Yes," she states in a powerful voice, tilting her head up as she spots him from under her glasses. "Oh, it's you. I heard about you. I know I'm not supposed to ask, but how are you a stolid and able to craft mana?"

"Uh, I don't know," Macyn slowly answers, wondering why she isn't supposed to ask.

Looking at him suspiciously, she shakes her head before asking, "what can I do for you?"

"I'd like a permission slip to go to Imperium Hall," answers Macyn.

She lifts her finger wearing the animagraph and the sheet of parchment flies from a cabinet right into her hand. "You'll need to fill out the entire thing, including reason for being off-campus, and get the signatures of your Head of House as well as the Dean of Students, Dean Von Brandt. Here you are," she states, handing him the permission slip. "She'll have availability to see you some time next week. Hmm, let me see when."

Looking over the permission slip, Macyn ponders the odds of getting both signatures. Von Brandt may not be a big deal, but Ryce is another story altogether. Returning his attention to Ms. Lemont, he asks, "do you think I can ask the Dean during dinner or lunch?"

The larger woman gives a hearty chuckle at his silly question. "Young man, have you seen anyone interrupt that woman during mealtime? The marshal doesn't even bother her when there's a plate in front of her."

"But it's really important," he implores.

"I'm sure it is," Mrs. Lemont says with a shrug. "It's always important. How about I just write your name here for next Thursday at 3:30 pm and she'll see you then." Leaning forward with her head tilted so her left eye is seeing more of him than her right eye, she raises her white eyebrows expectantly.

"Macyn Blende," he glumly answers. She calls out goodnight as he leaves the office. "So do we ask Von Brandt before or after dinner?"

"How about neither," Sen says pointing down the hall. "She's right over there."

Sure enough, Dean Von Brandt is walking down the hall, conversing pleasantly with the cheery Mrs. Makynli. With little thought to any possible fallout, Macyn runs to the two. "Wait," Sen calls, adding, "you haven't even filled out the slip."

Macyn nearly trips over his full-stop. He takes out his wooden fountain pen and follows Makynli and Von Brandt, writing what he can as fast as he can as they make their way to dinner. He's never more than a few feet away when he finishes, to then realize they're both aware and waiting for him.

"Mrs. Makynli, Dean Von Brandt," he starts. Recalling Von Brandt from his summer days of eating with the professors, Macyn's certain she's only ever nodded to him and she does the same now. "I was wondering if you can sign my permission slip to leave campus. I need to go to Imperium Hall."

Both women turn to his inhabitant floating beside him, who answers politely with a bow, "his reason is more than satisfactory."

Von Brandt takes a moment to read the slip before signing, then continuing to dinner.

"It's good to see you're better," Mrs. Makynli tells Macyn in her winning smile.

He slowly answers, "thanks," a little unsure what she means, wondering if she's noticed he's been down lately, though he isn't sure when she might see him as she's not a professor.

When Mrs. Makynli leaves, Sen informs, "she saw you in the infirmary."

Macyn hums as they leisurely make their toward dinner, then asks, "what did you tell her?"

Floating beside him, Sen unhappily states, "though I did not like it, I did as you asked and explained your injuries were due to an accident. Fortunately, she did not believe me."

Macyn slumps his shoulders as he explains, "Sen, when you lie, you have to *become* the lie if you want others to believe it."

"I will do no such thing," she quickly responds. "It is already bad enough you asked me to lie, but to risk your safety on top of that? No, Mr. Blende. I am not that sort of ghost. I wanted to tell them *exactly* what happened."

"They're leaving me alone now," he counters. "That wouldn't have happened if a teacher came into the picture interrogating the only other person there. Jaylen would've lied and things would've only gotten worse from there."

"That doesn't mean he won't bully you the next time he feels he can."

"I know," Macyn admits. "I bought time, Sen. As long as I stay invisible, they really couldn't care less about me. And besides, this sword is the only thing that matters."

After a Saturday of Potions, Historia, Wardcraft, and after school assignments, Macyn is copying as many outlines of several rune inscriptions, along with their advantages and disadvantages, as he can for Root. Sunday morning, Macyn eats more than he should, extending

his belly, and bags a few sandwiches in preparation for a long day. On the trek toward the conclave in the cliff with his sledgehammer in hand, Macyn has to manually warm his rune ruined uniform with the simple inscriptions Sen taught him. It's bitterly cold but he manages as they trek through the tall lush forest. The sun-bathed green scenery is a refreshing feeling he hadn't known he needed as he takes in the enchanting forest's sights, smells, and sounds.

Reaching the small cliff with the shallow cave, he sets all his equipment down within the conclave of the cliff before they set out to find a good-sized boulder. Fortunately for them, there are plenty nearby and he can drag one over to the entrance of the conclave in his first attempt. While Macyn prepares another smelter half his size, Sen is searching the forest for Root and the ore they'll need. He finishes etching the gale rune on the second tuyère when Sen and Root show up.

"Hallel dauen," Macyn greets a disenchanting Root, with her mess of reddish-brown hair and fake black glasses. He tests the runes once before turning to her.

"Hillel Terr," Root responds evenly, inspecting the conclave as she walks in. He leaves his smelter to help drag a large size of lemon rock closer inside.

She takes an interested look at his smelter as Macyn grabs the parchment roll of notes from his bag and hands them to her. "Sorry, my handwriting isn't the best" Macyn offers upfront. She takes the rolls of parchment gratefully, but also elegantly raises a curious brow. "I even had to redo my runes homework because of it."

Root unrolls and inspects his writing, commenting listlessly, "looks fine to me."

"I thought so too," Macyn exclaims at the reminiscent thought. "But Ryce can be such flatulent peni--"

"Mr. Blende!" Sen interrupts, eying him pleadingly. "Weren't you going to say something else? Something less inappropriate?"

The way Macyn scratches his scalp a bit, adopting a humble lean and dip of the shoulders, draws Root's attention. He steps closer, expressing apologetically, "yeah, uh, Root, last week, I said that Sen can sense if you were lying or not. That's not actually true. What I did was a bluff to get you to admit to stuff you may not have wanted to say otherwise. So, I apologize for misleading you. I regret tricking you and I'm sorry."

Root is silent, face expressing, and body shaking, with clear anger. Macyn tries to pacify her with a touch more sincerity in his apology. "I promise, I won't lie to you again, and I'll keep bringing more notes."

When she says nothing for several moments, Macyn hesitantly returns to his bag, pulls out a block of charcoal to manaform into the beehive funnel. It's then that Root finds her voice, and it's filled with righteous indignation, inducing Macyn to spring up in attention to her.

"First you lie to me and then you insult me by trying to buy me off? Nymphs are a proud, honest, and merry people who don't take dishonesty lightly! We treat lies and those that say them as harshly as our worst criminals! Looking at you, I thought you might be different, but you're no different. I may have wanted the runes, but *you* are the very thing that's wrong with your race, and why we'll never trust you!"

In her moment of breath, Sen descends between her and the shocked Macyn, shielding her ward with her words. "Hold your tongue springtide!"

"I will not!" Root glares at Sen. "He--"

"You most certainly will!" Sen fires back, interrupting her and floating a foot

higher than the auburn-haired nymph. “He’s admitted his folly, and I agree it certainly was, but, you have given him *no* cause to be open and honest, to begin with.”

“That is not-” Root tries to assert, but again, is interrupted.

“**From** the very start, your prejudice was clear; calling him a pet, expressing amusement to see him detained or pay a tariff, constantly enthralling him when you know there are strict decrees against its use on humans.” Root opens her mouth to counter-argue when Sen raises her voice to a commanding level, refusing to let the momentum go. “It’s clear you have a deep dislike of humans, and whether it’s rightly earned or not, how is *he* at fault for your imagined slights? He’s never lived on Menhir before three months ago and only recalled manacrafting at thirteen, yet you are more than happy to take your outrage out on him? That’s no less honorable than his lie. So do not dare to call him criminal again, or this agreement is over.”

Root’s glare is curbed to silence and slightly bashful by the pink in her cheeks. Macyn himself is gobsmacked and speechless. He can’t recall a single time when someone has defended him like that before, not that there are many chances to be defended since he avoids drama. Macyn has never really felt so much pride to be a person’s friend before this moment, ghost or not, and it was uplifting.

He wonders if Sen feels they’re friends before returning his attention to Root and telling her, “I’ll still bring you rune notes, and not to buy you off either. If for nothing else, then it’s to say I’m sorry. So you don’t have to worry about that.”

Through her thick-rimmed fake glasses, Root’s sharp, brownish-red eyes stare at Macyn far too intently for him. As the silence lingers, he can’t help but focus a little on the way her thick locks of hair fall in messy layers due to the tilt of her head, striking him with her unique attractiveness. His heart quickens and he swallows audibly, but after what seems like minutes of soundless contemplation, or reflection, she looks downward and lets out an audible sigh.

Root removes her thick glasses and rubs the bridge of her nose, obviously pondering Sen’s words and maybe even her role in this outcome. Abruptly, the nymph turns and leaves the mildly cavernous entrance, to which Macyn and Sen give each other puzzled glance. She paces at the entrance of the conclave so long Macyn wonders if it would be too impolite to start smelting. He has a lot of work to do, but he doesn’t want to give the bushy-haired nymph more cause to hate him. Not long after, she walks up to both of them, seemingly far less annoyed and possibly, mildly remorseful. She ties her great mane of auburn locks in a low ponytail as she speaks in a soft voice.

“I am not so self-serving that I’m unable to see my own misconduct. I admit... I may not have been as honest as I could have.” Looking directly at Macyn, she voices, “I accept your apology. I still don’t like your kind, but, I think I can be honest, if not completely respectful, so long as you’re willing to do the same.”

“...Yeah,” answers Macyn, slightly unsettled by her sincerity. Opting to break the heavy air, he leans over the smelter and drops the newly formed beehive charcoal in. “Sounds good.”

“Good,” Root oddly affirms with an uncomfortable smile to help break more of the heavy tension. “Before I go, I’m curious to know more about what you’re working on?”

Macyn takes a moment to consider before answering, “it’s a smelter and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone. We don’t exactly know what’s too young to be making

steel.”

“I understand,” she speaks with a nod. “I don’t want anyone knowing I speak to you anyway.”

“... Yeah,” he verbalizes humorlessly. “That helps and hurts to hear at the same time,” Macyn mutters to Sen who smiles.

Root is looking over the rune parchments as she easily states, “if you don’t kill yourself or quit, I wouldn’t mind some steel to etch runes on. It’s a great conduit for rune arrays.”

“I know,” he agrees, easily recalling the chapters he’s written repeatedly. “And if I don’t die what can I expect for the steel? Mynt or trade?” He casually asks as he lights to coal by dropping the piece of parchment with the light fire rune.

“Wouldn’t you rather honor our agreement with a gift?” she sweetly asks with a dainty smile and pleasant eyes.

Turning away from overlooking the building fire, Macyn is taken aback by her smile before asking, “is that a thing?” He then turns to Sen and repeats the question, “is that a thing?”

“These are your negotiations,” Sen tells him with a smirk. “You’ll have to do this one on your own.”

“Of course,” Macyn mutters. Turning back to Root, he straightens his posture before speaking. “I don’t mind honoring this, uh, partnership with a gift, but I think I can come up with something a little better than some steel, if you don’t mind waiting?” More excited than he’s ever seen her, Root nods her head and turns to leave when Macyn calls out, “I can’t wait to get your gift for me.” She looks back in some surprise and before she can say anything, Macyn bids her, “Hallel Dauen.”

Root rolls her eyes, returning her own, “Hillel Terr. And don’t burn down my forest!”

“That wasn’t so bad,” Macyn comments in the wake of the nymph’s departure.

“I suppose it could’ve been worse,” Sen states. “Nymphs are a joyous race by nature, valuing merriment and the natural world in equal respects. It’s very difficult for them to hold grudges, but when they do, it’s led to terrible results. So it’s good that she’s trying.”

“It almost sounds like you care,” he teases.

“I may not approve of her garish talk,” Sen expresses. “That does not mean I want anything bad to happen to her.”

“Thanks for defending me,” Macyn acknowledges as he picks up the sledgehammer.

“I’m here for you, Mr. Blende,” Sen easily responds, making Macyn wonder if it isn’t so much friendship as it is her job.

Macyn slams the heavy head of the sledgehammer down on the yellow rock before commenting, “right...” He raises the hammer then brings it down again with force enough to crack most of the large rock, sending chips everywhere. Sen hesitates and says nothing.

While the heat builds into the compacted coal funnel, Macyn’s achy arms continue to smash the boulder until it’s little more than dust and gravel. Occasionally, Sen would instruct Macyn to stoke the heat building in the smelter before returning to the task of breaking down the mass of yellow rock to bits of dust. With a good size pile of ore collected and ready,

Sen gives Macyn half an hour to eat for staying-power and to prepare himself mentally for the hardship ahead.

“You’ve already done this twice,” Sen encourages. “I know you can do it again.”

Ore in the smelter and a tuyère in each hand, Macyn starts to build the temperature higher than it can on its own. Even with the tuyères extended to give him enough space, it's still very hot, bordering on painful as it blankets the entire front of his body with prickling heat. Channeling his mana into the runes, he isn't sure if it feels slightly smoother than the last time or not.

As he had before, a hole is punched at the bottom of the smelter to let out the lava of slag and impurities and Sen gives him incremental points of rest by hours three and four, so that by hour five, he can push his mana into the tuyères for as long as possible. The conclave feels like an oven and the tower of flames nearly touches the slanted half-arch ceiling. After nearly five hours, Macyn drops to his knees, exhausted, regardless of how early he is to stop.

“Last hour,” Sen speaks from the wand, loudly, over the geyser of flames erupting out of the smelter. A circular torrent of soot and embers drop all around his sprawled out form on the floor as Sen yells, “stay focused. I know you can do it!”

Fighting himself up, Macyn sluggishly gets to his feet, heaving oily hot air, all the while taking a tuyère in each trembling hand and focusing his singed and buzzing mana into the runes. His vision is a spotted dancing blur and his entire body is slick with another layer of sweat that's baking over earlier sweat. His breathing is labored and no matter how deeply he inhales, he doesn't feel like he's getting enough oxygen. His mana weakens, wains and ebbs more often than not, and throughout the sixth hour, Macyn can vaguely hear Sen crying out nonsensical words of encouragement until she finally calls for the end.

“Okay, enough,” she says, however, due to the loud smelter and his obvious exhaustion, he doesn't hear her. Manifesting from the wand, she repeats, “okay! You can stop! That was perfect. You did perfectly.”

He lets go and drops to the ground to rest, intent only on breathing. Curiously, Macyn can still feel the hum of his mana pumping in his arms as he raises a shaky hand before his eyes. Just like before, the Gale rune is imprinted on his palm, and though he's curious enough to test shooting gale force winds out of his hand, for now, he's far too tired to try. He takes a moment to close his eyes as he enjoys the warmth of the cavern and well-earned rest.

“Mr. Blende! Wake up,” Sen calls snapping her ghost fingers in front of his face.

Macyn's eyes snap open and he jerks his head up as he abruptly answers, “what?!” He easily notices much time has passed in the second he closed his eyes because the starry sky is starting to darken.

Sen is kneeling at his side, leaning over him as she anxiously discloses, “we need to remove as much ore as we can in the next few minutes. Trust me, come nightfall, this is the last place we want to be!”

Easily picking up on the nervous distress in her voice, Macyn assimilates her desire to leave even though his achy body fights every movement. Sluggishly, he props his lead legs under him and moves to pick up the sledgehammer. Exhausted, he walks over to the smelter. It's no longer shooting out torrents of flame from its top, however, it's still very hot and hard to get near.



“It’s pretty hot,” he lamely tells her. Having never extracted steel from a smelter before, Macyn asks, “uh, what do I do now?”

Unable to feel the heat, Sen peers inside the smelter as she answers, “normally grandfather would manaforn the wall of the smelter out of the way and extract the bloom steel. We don’t have the time for that so you will have to break through with the hammer. Please be fast.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Macyn exclaims, trying to get closer than the tuyère. “It’s *really* hot.”

“I know,” she says with several nods. The more anxious she acts, the more fear-filled energy she gives him. “It’ll stay that way for a while because the charcoal retains the heat,” she explains.

“So, how do I take the steel out if it’s going to stay so hot?” he asks, stretching arm muscle that whines in acidic pain.

“The handle of the sledgehammer,” Sen instructs, floating to the sledgehammer in his hand. “At the very bottom, there’s a metal plate that caps the end. It’s a very strong magnet. You should be able to draw out all the metal with that.”

Macyn tries to move close enough to manaforn the stone and charcoal out of the way of the steel, however, the radiating heat bombards him until he backs away. “It’s still too hot to get close.”

“Knock it on its side,” Sen quickly answers, floating to the smelter and using her hands to animate her explanation. “You need to drag it out now.”

The panicked urgency in her attitude energizes him just enough to rush through her direction, but the night is fast approaching and there’s still a long walk through the woods back to Anthony. Macyn moves close to the smelter, and even as it blasts him with intense heat, he tries to knock it over with a distant strike from the sledgehammer, to no avail. He’s still too unsteady on his legs and feels powerless in his arms.

Seeing no other option, Sen suggests they leave it. “We don’t have enough time. We’ll have to come back another day.”

“Hell no,” Macyn calls out. He tries harder to knock it over, yet, the smelter only cracks. Rather than leave it in the conclave for a full week, an irate Macyn runs outside where the setting sunlight drops the temperature even further. He instantly begins to thaw, cool, then rapidly chill in the freezing cold.

“Macyn, please,” Sen implores as she floats beside him. “There are hellish creatures and daemons out here that can severely injure us both, and the night is their domain. We can not be here.”

When Macyn’s teeth start chattering, he breaks off in a run toward the smelter. Though physically spent, the cold is numbing and he picks up enough momentum for added strength. Withing two steps of striking distance, the lingering cold shields him from the intense heat as he recoils the sledgehammer back. Nearly losing his footing from too much twist at his waist, he stomps his right foot down as he wields a powerful blow into the stone smelter. The impact doesn’t knock the smelter over, however, he does blow through the stone wall and glowing, honey-comb charcoal of the metal-baking oven, breaking down enough of an opening to extract the glowing bloom of rough and craggy steel.

Macyn takes a knee for a quick break as Sen looks over the rubble. The steel glows a golden hue as Sen comments, “it’s a good amount. Quickly, grab your bag.”

Macyn musters energy he can't feel and moves to his bag. Putting it on, he picks up the sledgehammer and reaches into the radiating furnace. The magnet snaps onto the steel and Macyn drags out the bright bloom of alloy. It's heavier than he expected and the weight strains the muscles in his arms, shoulder, and waist, but he doesn't let go.

"Before we trek through the forest," Sen starts. "Set the bloom on the ground and throw plenty of dirt on it. That'll keep the worst of the heat from causing an easy fire."

Macyn does as she says. Slightly alarmed by the way the dirt would melt and bubble on the red hot material, he asks, "this isn't going to ruin it, is it?"

"It'll be fine," Sen responds. When enough dirt is caked on the scorching steel, she judges it to be enough and they begin to move. "Try to walk as fast as you can," she directs. "And if I tell you to run, please do so as fast as you can."

## Shirane the White Root

Navigating through the dense forest with an object that could ignite all the plant life around him is not something Sen is taking lightly. As a consequence, she'll only navigate them through the clearest path back to avoid causing a fire, extending the journey back. The worst of weaving between never-ending trees, however, is not knowing how close they are to the field behind Anthony House. Macyn feels lost and nervous about the dangers of burning himself or setting fire to the forest. Though the sweat from his constant state of fatigue makes him regularly reaffirm his grip on the heavier sledgehammer and the heat of the bloom keeps him quite warm as well as.

Unfortunately, twenty or so minutes into the darkening trek, the steel begins to cool in Menhir's supernaturally cold atmosphere, Macyn along with it. When the bailiwick's repositioned sun finally sinks below the horizon, it grows far colder, and Macyn brings the bloom steel closer to him to help combat the cold. Soon after, it's about as warm as tap water and he pleads with Sen, "okay... the steel... is cold now. Can we please... go straighter now?"

Turning to him, Sen places a thin finger to her lips, silently instructing him to stay quiet. She nods her head and hastens their hike through denser vegetation. After a few minutes of silent traveling, Sen stops abruptly, prompting his feet to halt along with her. Except for a few fireflies, it's dark and eerily silent. There should be all sorts of sound playing around him, but the wind has stopped, along with the swaying of the trees and within the canopy of the dense forest, Macyn can only see small streams of moonlight. It's not enough to identify any nearby potential threats if there are any and even the small light that Sen gives off, only serves to take light away from the already black forest looming high overhead.

Sen surveys the area and Macyn can feel the pace of his heart quicken against his waning lungs and ribs. He desperately wants to ask her if she senses something, but he doesn't want to give away his location in the ominously quiet forest. She turns to look at him, a somber expression on her face, points at him, then downward before using both palms to communicate he needs to stay here. Though he's growing more anxious, Macyn barely nods before she quickly whisks away.

His mind immediately points out how this is the second time she's left him in the forest. Macyn hadn't liked it then, and that was in daylight. It's far worse now. Still, he doesn't move a muscle, no matter how much they strain and protest, or how fast his heart is beating in his throat. Beads of sweat that has nothing to do with the cold runs down his forehead, over his cheek, to the tip of his chin. It's then when the last of the warmth evaporates from his body, and his sweat begins chilling his skin over.

It isn't long before he starts shaking, wondering all the while if Sen left him. He takes a rustling step, intent on running from this darkness when Sen floats at sprinting speed through bushes. She waves at him to follow, and he effortlessly sprints along after her. Suddenly Macyn's not so tired or breathless, he just feels pure adrenaline direct him with absolute purpose. He nearly out-paces Sen at one point but with her sharp left, he's behind her again. They keep up this mad dash until they clear the tree line and cautiously slow down bounding through the clearing behind Anthony.

"Keep going," Sen orders as she covers his retreat.

Even on familiar, safer terrain, Macyn does as he's told, but as his adrenaline begins to wane, so too does his cooperative strength. Too exhausted to even note that Coral has left, he struggles to make it to the cellar doors, and by the time he drops the bloom of dirt-encrusted steel beside the Gud Arm, Sen is by his side once again.

"What a busted day," Macyn despondently declares, wiping his brow of caked-on soot, dirt, and grime.

"Well done, Mr. Blende," Sen freely tells him, delighted by this achievement. "Really."

Setting his bag and tools down, Macyn asks, "what were we running from?" He's walking toward the stairs as he adds, "you scared me half to death."

"Oh, you know," Sen starts, only to pause a moment. A curious look from Macyn encourages her to be honest. With a sigh, she says, "a Deathless."

"...That sounds horrible," Macyn exclaims, taking the grueling stairs one miserable step at a time. "What is it?"

"A ghoulish creature, thin and long-limbed," she explains. "Alive in a sense, but dead as well. They capture women to feed on the men who rescue them. It's nearly impossible to kill which is why nearly all who see it, run right away. They're terrible creatures."

"Why are we surrounded by a forest filled with creatures and stuff that can kill us? I thought we were in the "shallow end" when it comes to deadly forests?" Macyn asks as he finally reaches the main hallway of the first floor.

"We are," Sen returns.

Arching and tired, he can't look as provoked as he feels when he comments, "you'd think that'd be like a huge safety concern for them."

"Menhir is a warrior society," she orates, indicating with two fingers. "If one is brave or dumb enough to enter the forest, especially at night, they deserve the reward or in most cases, the punishment, that results from it."

Macyn is surprised to hear that as he enters his dorm room. "And parents are okay with that?"

"From a very young age, they teach their children extensively about many forms of danger. Fear can be an adequate teacher and Menhir will not be responsible for bungling ineptitude." Macyn can't believe it and she can read so on his face. To prove her point, she asks, "how badly do you want to go back in there at night?"

"No," he quickly asserts. "No, not at all- or ever- hell, no."

"Exactly," Sen punctuates. "Of course, there have been unfortunate occurrences, however, most within our society believe the parents are at fault."

Curious concern wiggles in the back of his mind, urging him to ask Sen, "you didn't fake it, did you? There *was* an actual deathless out there, right?"

"Of course," she protests affronted. "I would not lie about such things."

"Are lawsuits a thing here," Macyn asks, wondering about the possibility of making mynt that way.

"Yes," Sen answers him. "I believe the amount of loss you must incur is seventy percent."

Throwing her an odd look of uncertainty, Macyn asks, "what does that mean?"

"In this case, if you wish to file for civil action against Erudite, or the Imperium, you'd have to lose seventy percent of your body, three of your four limbs for

instance,” Sen answers with clinical ease.

“So much for the American way,” he mutters to himself.

“There are many rare resources that can be harvested from some of the deadlier creatures,” Sen continues her lecture. “For example, that deathless that sensed you, when they live in a tree long enough, they create Ghost Trees; deathly white trees, the bark of which is used to create potions or brews that protect against vengeful spirits. Anchineel trees secrete a deadly toxin that when distilled can be used in a number of potions, medicine, or spirits. Blushood is poisonous to humans but the stems are food to doehawks. The plant life all around this mountain has nothing that doesn’t benefit Menhir in some way shape or form.”

“Alright, no more late nights in Death Forest,” Macyn proclaims. “Does anything come out during the day? Should I be worried when I walk to and from Erudite?”

“No, no. I mean yes, a creature might come out during the day, but there’s a division of the Imperium called Rangers who deal with that. This is why the lowest age of schooling begins at fifteen and why we have wardcrafting and dueling courses. Also why Inhabitants are so important,” Sen honestly maintains. “It’s the way of life. But it will get easier, I promise. Learn as much as you can, as fast as you can, because as bleak as it sounds, you’ll live longer.”

“This place is gorgeous but deadly,” he mutters as he walks to the washroom to shower. When he returns he sits at his desk and begins penning a letter to his parents; one of the longest he’s written in weeks. Before bed, he asks Sen about the next time they can work on the sword, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

Sen smiles, answering, “we’ll work on the bloom tomorrow... only if there’s enough time after your homework.”

“Ha, ha,” Macyn lightly mocks. “Night, my lady.”

Come morning, Macyn is feeling well-rested, but exceptionally hungry. Rushing through his morning habits, he grabs his wand on his way out and they’re already out of Anthony before she can muster a sentence. “Mr. Blende? Why are you taking me with you?”

“Because I want to,” Macyn tells her honestly.

Half a minute later Sen responds, “fine. But if they bother you again, I will go to the administration.”

“Deal,” he agrees. After dropping off his letter, he eagerly attacks his breakfast, nearly choking twice until he can eat no more. His classes progress with just as much hardship as his previous week, however, Macyn was more worried about Jaylen following through with his threat after class. His right leg shakes tremendously fast as Macyn waits for his classmates to leave Runology before he nervously makes his way to his hard-nosed teacher.

“Uh, professor Ryce,” Macyn calls.

The man barely pays him a sideways glance before gruffly answering, “what is it?”

Clearing his throat, it still cracks as he explains, “I have a permission slip that that I need your signature for.” Slowly turning from the board, the glum man eyes Macyn skeptically, agitating him to add, “it’s to go to Imperium Hall on my next free day.”

Ryce eyes the wand hanging at his hip, then snaps his fingers at Macyn, asking for the permission slip. Macyn hands it to him as he pulls out his quill. “Finally returning your Inhabitant. It certainly took you long enough.”

“Uh, no, actually,” Macyn shyly corrects. “I need to look up a record of my

parents.”

Before quill can touch parchment, Ryce tilts his head to eye Macyn with surprised agitation. His pause spent, he incredulously asks, “your parents? Your parents are the very least of your worries, Mr. Blende. By some cosmic abnormality, you are capable of crafting mana and yet you continue to sully these halls with your Inhabitant. You ought to know all you need to by now.”

Macyn isn’t used to an adult’s forceful opinion on his inhabitant, and can only reply with, “uh, well they said I can return her whenever-”

Ryce interjects with genuine curiosity, “what is your problem? The material cannot possibly be so difficult, you’d need to keep your Inhabitant. Would it interest you to know that you are not the worst grade in my class?” Macyn isn’t sure how to answer. His mind is blank and Ryce continues regardless of the young mage’s silence. “For the life of me, I cannot fathom why someone so ostracized would continue to work against your own self-interest.”

Clearing his mind of some its stupor, Macyn jumps to answer, “she’s still helping me with school and, uh, everything. She even told me how dangerous the forest is just last night.”

Ryce glares at his wand, commanding her, “Inhabitant, come forward.” Sen appears as commanded, head respectfully low. Ryce continues to tell Macyn, “if she’s only just warned you of the dangers the forest is home to, then that is all the more reason to excuse her services.” Turning to her he adds, “clearly her guidance leaves much to be desired and may even border on recklessness.”

“That’s not true,” Macyn quickly defends. “She’s told me before. She tells me lots of things.”

“That would indicate the fault lies entirely with you,” Ryce counters, turning his irritation on his student. “Again, I ask what is so difficult for you to grasp? Are the numbers and letters too elusive? I know you’re from the waste- the lower order, but I know they require reading comprehension in their colleges. So again, I ask, what is it?”

“I know how to read,” Macyn hotly declares in a low tone. “Professor, I just need to leave campus on my next free day. I already have Dean Von Brandt’s signature.”

“Well, you will not have mine,” Ryce snares. He keeps the permission slip, placing it in the inner pocket of his jacket. “I’ll take this and discuss it with Dean Von Brandt. Depending on how far behind you are we may need to hold you back a year.”

“I don’t need to be held back,” Macyn calls indignantly.

Ryce retorts much more sharply, “do not raise your voice at me, stolid! I am your Head of House, your Professor, and your better in *every* way. Now get out of my sight before I give you a real reason to be upset. And I expect four duplicates of chapters twenty through twenty-five by next class.”

“But I already have more homework-”

“Congratulations. Four duplicates of chapters twenty through thirty. Would you like to add on another five chapters?!”

The warning bell rings, followed by silence and glares from both parties. Turning without another word, Macyn exits the room and pumps all his frustration into his legs, rushing to his next class. On the way, Sen pulls up beside him.

“I’ll speak to the guild and see if the professor is allowed to go so far,” she informs him. “For now, try as best you can to put it out of your mind and focus on

Numericalculus.”

Too angry to speak, Macyn only nods before she floats away. Making it to class on time, he sits next to the bookish Yasuo who ignores him about as well as everyone else. Fortunately, Ryce couldn't hinder his concentration enough to solve complex subtraction problems. On his way to lunch, Sen returns, immediately entering the wand, and informs him, “I don't have the best news so it can wait until you've eaten.”

With consistent chatter all around him, Macyn sits at his empty table and eats alone. From the promotional fliers ice skating or dancing at the center of the table, all the chatter seems to be about the clubs and sporting events that will be kicking off soon. Many clubs are starting to make their bid for any of the honored heirs, regardless of political affiliation. Catching two groups of Ignis and Ventus juniors or seniors shamelessly pitching the benefits of their dueling squad to Marnamei Hew and Everette Masters, Macyn watches Ryce approach Von Brandt as she's eating. The moment Ryce leans in to speak, Von Brandt immediately cuts him off with a hand, eying him sternly. Ryce slowly backs away, much to Macyn's amusement.

Grabbing some food, Macyn rushes out, asking along the way, “so what did you find out about Ryce?”

“He's a harsh person, and a harsher educator,” she voices from within the wand. “Not the most popular personality among the professors, but he's a master of his craft and has taught many well-known students; students with influential families. I've been told even the marshal appreciates his stern discipline. As such, he's given a certain amount of leeway to run his class in a matter that produces the most success.”

“None of that-” he sighs, despite knowing how much it annoys Sen. “Your right. It's not good news. Why would they care if he singles me out or unfairly gives me a ton of homework?”

“Maybe if you start now and stay up a little later tonight and tomorrow you can finish it.

“I'm not doing it,” Macyn argues, huffing with irritation; not only about Ryce but about the way everything has been going on Menhir. “He's being an ass for no good reason, insulted you- insulted us both!”

Sen appears, moving close to her wand, and despite how the other Ignis nearby catch her, she reasons with Macyn, “I won't deny that he's a pilgarlic-”

“What's a pilgarlic?”

“A contemptible person,” she answers. “Wretched as his charm may be, it would be better for you if you completed the assignment. I know it doesn't feel that way, but I promise you it is.”

“Why? So next time he can try to top this homework assignment with even more ridiculousness? So he'll know when he says jump, I'm leaping like a good doggy? So he thinks he's right about me, and you?! Like we're nothing to him? Exactly like this whole school thinks! No, he can kiss my ass! They can all...” Macyn huffs and takes a seat on a marble bench and dragging his hands through his long hair in frustration.

Sen floats low to the ground, to be within view of his downcast sight. She places her delicate hands on the ground, being careful not to pass through and finally lowers her head to her hands. Though aware that she's a ghost, he's stunned by her unexpected kneeling, and instinctively gets on one knee to try and aid her up. When his hands pass right through her, he begs to know, “what are you doing?”

Sen remains in a formal kneeling position and calmly voices, “my culture’s etiquette: Dogeza, used to show compliance to one of a higher status, an offer of deep remorse, or to ask for an unbecoming favor.”

Amidst her explanation, Macyn can’t help but note other curious students nearby peering at them humorously, some even pointing. “Okay,” Macyn whines, narrowing his focus from his gawking surroundings to a kneeling Sen. “Okay, I can see that- it’s really impressive kneeling. Can you please get up, please?” Macyn frantically asks.

Sen remains kneeling and continues to say, “if all things were equal, you would be correct. I understand your point of contention, your anger, and I do not disagree. You have cause, Mr. Blende, however, I must ask this favor of you.”

Macyn whips his sight from one side of the garden to the other as a few other mages from each house lazily watch the show. Macyn isn’t at all worried about the Terra students watching but the Ignis and Aqua mages worry him. “Yeah, fine, ask. Whatever it is, can you please say it.”

“Unfair though it may be, I request you please complete your Rune assignment. I know it’s selfish of me to ask, as I know you have every right to refuse, however, for me, will you please do this assignment?” Sen lifts her head from her hands, beseeching Macyn with her eyes. In her genuine expression, Macyn momentarily forgets the small onlookers for the gravity of her request.

Macyn, still on one knee, slumps his shoulders and smacks his face with a hand. He doesn’t like it nor does he want to do Ryce’s hellish assignment, but for Sen to go so far, Macyn can easily tell he wouldn’t like himself if he denied her this. Just picturing the disappointment on her face if he says no is crushing, let alone continuing to make the sword together as if he didn’t just reject her heartfelt plea. Macyn can’t quite explain it well, however, the closest his mind can articulate is, he knows he wouldn’t feel *deserving* if he turned her request down.

“Fine!” Macyn calls, scarcely able to believe he’s agreeing to her deeply sincere favor. Removing his face from his hand, he sees Sen is still seated in the kneeling position but upright and smiling at him. “Come on,” says Macyn. “No thanks to you, I apparently have a ton of work to do.”

Sen follows Macyn as they head toward the library. For the rest of lunch, Macyn works on Ryce’s chapter duplications. That night, he doesn’t work on the cold bloom of steel waiting beside the Gud Arm. Instead, he stays up late to work on the pages, as well as the following night. Amazingly, and with much misery, he does finish four duplicates of ten chapters by Ryce’s Wednesday class, and exactly like before, Ryce burns the stack of parchment up in front of him, only leering at him seemingly to dare Macyn to say anything. Despite very much wanting to yell at the man, Macyn doesn’t play along and fumes on the inside as he makes his way back to his assigned seat at the head of the class.

Macyn is unable to touch the bloom of steel for the entire week, and except for Numeralculus, it seems as if all the professors unilaterally decided to amp up the difficulty of the suffocating workload. Every course now expects more from him and Macyn can hardly keep up as it is. Sen helps him whenever possible but as she’s stated numerous times, she will not do the work for him.

Sitting alone at what many now see as his table, the tango dancing fliers for all the various clubs have increased. It’s a parchment party at the center of the round dining table,



taunting Macyn with all sorts of interesting and amazing activities he won't be able to participate in. Dueling is the most popular club and it requires the signatures of each of his professors, or his parents simply to join the tryouts. Considering Ryce is one of his teachers, Macyn would have an easier time taming Coral than getting his signature. Additionally, every one of these clubs meets on Sundays and at least twice during the week. While other mages have the time for extracurricular activities, Macyn still has a hunk of bloom steel in the cellar he's yet to touch. It drives him to finish his assignments as fast as possible on Saturday, so he'll have all of Sunday for forging.

Standing in front of the Gud Arm with a belly full of breakfast and no homework to bother him, the junior orewick is ready to listen to Sen instruct him on the consolidation phase of forging she calls Tunren. The work area is prepared for efficiency and safety, the double door furnace lit and ready, a bucket of water is nearby for quenching or emergencies, and Macyn's already practiced using the heating and extinguishing runes on the furnace. Though he feels a little silly with most of his arms wrapped up in black bandages and his head wrapped in a black bandanna, Sen assures him it's necessary.

"Alright," Sen begins, calling his attention before ordering him to place the dirt and coal covered steel in the forge. Macyn settles the heavy melon-sized metal in the forge before Sen continues. "After the smelting process, the bloom steel is not clean steel, which means there are a lot of impurities in it, such as dirt, charcoal, glass. What we're doing now is heating the ingot in the furnace, and once it reaches the proper temperature, all the impurities will liquefy. We then take it out of the furnace, place it on the anvil and push out all the liquefied impurities using the hand hammer, resulting in flattened steel plates."

"That doesn't seem too complicated," Macyn notes.

"Instruction isn't practice," she replies. "The bloom steel is going to break apart because the heat is burning away the impurities holding it together. So, make sure you have a firm grip before you bring it to the anvil. It's all too easy to injure yourself when you're not paying attention. Never lose focus, or be ready for a long and painful walk to the nurse's office."

Macyn follows her instructions to the letter. As a ghost, it's much easier for her to move close into the furnace as it sprouts a veritable shower of sparks that fly and swirl over him. Enjoying the hundreds of tiny embers cascading all around him, Macyn understanding why Sen made him wrap his head in a towel. Any one of the many glowing flecks of metal can light his hair on fire. The ingot slowly breaks apart as he turns the red ingot of steel.

Taking a firm hold over one of the pieces, he whines, "this is crazy hot," as he extends his face as far away from the red hot metal as he can. Macyn brings it over to the anvil. Lifting the hand hammer, he holds it in the air above him, taking the moment to savor his very first blow, before he brings it down and strikes it soundly.

"Not so hard," Sen instructs, unimpressed with his cheerful blow. She then navigates where to strike with her ghost finger and instructs him on whether he's striking too hard or soft by the sound singing from the struck anvil. Constantly stopping for instructions may be annoying, but Macyn reasons he wouldn't know the first thing about orecrafting without her, and so does exactly as she instructs without complaint. Fortunately, the hyper-focused Sen is free with her compliments as she is with her critiques, helping the mood as they work.

Macyn and Sen continue working on consolidating the ingots, forcing out all the slag and waste from the steel, and quenching it in water to keep it clean of building scale. By lunch, they have several flat plates around the size of a slice of bread and smaller bits of cleaner

steel. There's still more to go through but Sen insists he eats first while she looks for Root. Cleaning off as much grime and soot from his face and hands as he can, he hikes to Banquet hall and eats by himself. At the not so subtle glances from Jaylen, Macyn grabs three more black bean ambrosia filled pita wraps and returns to Anthony.

Expecting Sen's return, Macyn grabs Root's copies of his runology work. Ten minutes later he's handing them to her with little more than a greeting, thanks, and farewell before they return to work. It takes them all afternoon to go through all the smelted metal.

With nine pieces of flattened plates to work with, Macyn asks, "what's next?"

"Now, we do that other thing we talked about."

"Which is?"

"Shirane."

Sen has Macyn trace her finger as he digs the rune design on the dirt. Macyn was able to pick up on the elemental and conversion runes linked in the array to create electrical shocks between mana created fingers and can already tell it's impossible to use its full power on a person. The primary function of the rune is clearly for melting through inanimate objects, however, at the lowest of voltages, he'll be able to shock people who put hands on him again. Thoughts of finally being able to defend himself raise Macyn's spirit for the rest of the night. By the end of the day, Macyn manages to finish etching the rune on a coin and shoot a trickle of lighting from his mana covered finger.

## Stolid Sacrifice

Macyn struggles through the last week of his first month at Erudite University; hiding in the library, rushing through his meals, and laboring through his studies. The silver lining of his unimpressive week occurred on Monday when Marnamei Hew broke cardinal convention and rather than sit with her house or in the company of Everette Masters, she sits with the rogue Solomon Roth. Her choice of seat sends waves of juicy catastrophe through all the social addicts in the school who engage in politics. Likewise, Macyn was as blown away as the rest of the student body but it also annoyed him because it felt even more controversial than a stolid who can craft mana.

A few days later her seating change felt like a spark compared to the inferno that was Marnamei Hew and Solomon Roth flying carpets together. That unmitigated event plunged everyone into a cabal of theories, and suddenly every student mage demanded to know why; none more so than Masters. The hostility between Aqua and Ignis intensified, not that school work was letting anyone act or even gossip to their heart's desire, but the animosity between Aqua and Ignis is always there.

Jaylen took it upon himself to find and bully Macyn whenever possible. Though it's never more than mana-shoving or launching a fleet of paper planes to attack him, it's still enough for Sen to inform the faculty; Only for nothing to come of it. As Ryce is his Head of House, he couldn't be bothered with something so trivial. Without being in legitimate threat, Macyn didn't feel right about using Shirane to stun the popular red-head. Additionally, he didn't want to draw attention to his coin with the rune for fear they may take it away.

With only enough time to properly maintain his studies, the irregular plates of rough steel sit untouched and wrapped in a cloth in the drawer of his desk. The only metalwork Macyn managed on his free day is practicing his welding using through the use of his Shirane coin. Sen explains how he'll need to weld a platform together using the plates and connect it to a long rod to take in and out of the furnace and control the hammering.

The first week of September fares little better for Macyn. His mind wavers from the sheer volume of classwork to his parents, to the full-halt of his orecrafting, to his parent's absent letters, to avoiding Jaylen, to the sore, rigid, inflammation of strengthening his mana, to sitting alone during meal times, and always back to his mother's alienating absence. It's enough to render him silent, not that he has anyone beside Sen to speak to. Even during his first free day of September, when he finally has the afternoon and evening to work on his sword, working with Sen is a quiet affair.

In the cellar of Anthony, after he breaks the plates of carbon steel into smaller tiles with his hand hammer, Sen asks him, "which ones are high carbon steel, and which ones are low carbon steel?" Breaking him out of his thoughtless stupor.

"What?" he responds, slightly more alert.

"Mr. Blende, you're not paying attention," Sen notes aloud. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he quickly answers. "Sorry. What'd you say?"

"I was explaining how to distinguish between high carbon and low carbon steel by looking at the grain along the breaking point of the tiles. Are you certain nothing's wrong? You've been acting distant lately."

“I’m fine,” Macyn assures her. “Just thinking.”

Sen takes a moment to come to a realization. “There really hasn’t been any word from them. That does seem odd, even by Lower Order posting standards. We’ll speak with someone in student services. It’s possible they might know something about the delay in your mail.” With his nod, Sen gives him a few minutes to analyze the grain of each of the broken plates, then asks, “so?”

“So... I can see it’s metal,” he musters.

Sen grumbles, “can you please put a little more effort into it?”

“...These right here,” he states as he separates the lighter gray tiles to one side. “Are high carbon steel, right? It’s supposed to be the edge of the sword?” When Sen nods, his palm indicates the other stack of metal tiles. “And these pieces that are bendier are low carbon steel which is going to be the spine of the blade. See? I remember.”

“Good,” Sen acknowledges. “It looks like we’ll have extra.”

“Cool,” responds Macyn.

Afterward, they create a long-armed platform to stack the steel tiles on. The platform looks very uneven and ugly to Macyn, however, Sen reassures him it can be fixed. With her instruction Macyn places the disjointed plank into the red hot fires in the furnace to bring up to welding temperature, leaving out enough of the pole to hold onto. Once to the right temperature, Macyn removes the bright white-hot metal and places the ember-sprinkling billet on the flat dies of the mana-powered hammer.

“Use your foot to activate the piston of the top segment,” Sen instructs, and Macyn looks below, at the base of the large anvil, a lever had extended the moment anything is placed on the flat of the power hammer.

“Easy,” Sen instructs as Macyn operates this enchanted machine to repeatedly hammer down its heavy mass of metal on the white-hot platform until the welded pieces of the platform is a smooth flat surface. The awkwardness of using the Gud Arm makes him chuckle, but a stern look from Sen reminds him how little room there is for amusement, not with a brilliantly glowing hot iron in his gloved hands.

As the metal cools, Macyn wonders aloud, “why couldn’t we manaform this? It seems like such a hassle to make. Using mana would be faster.”

As Macyn brings up the pole to view red cooling metal, Sen answers, “grandfather said orewicks should never contaminate the material using their mana to form, heat, cool, or manipulate it in any way. He believed the mana of the sword, if made properly, can form a deep connection to its wielder, thus made his without utilizing any mana. There is much documentation of famous swords from history that have been described as an extension of the swordsman. Marshal Hew has such a sword himself, that will no doubt be legend after him. He’s been reported as saying his sword is no different than his arm.”

“Haven’t I been using my mana on it?” He asks, turning to her.

“Using your mana on the tools is fine,” she informs him. “As far as Shirane, the material is responding to the high melting current. That’s not mana, that’s simply nature.” There’s little else to discuss before finishing the platform and going to sleep.

The following morning, Macyn is rushing out of the banquet hall when a familiar face catches his eye walking between tables. Macyn whips his head abruptly at the holographic image of Dog Stolid, limping in place from the pop-up image of the Menhir Tribune, as well as the scandal newspaper, The Rock Rag. The urge to know more is

immediately dashed when he realizes Aqua mages are holding the newspapers.

He wants to ask for the paper, but, he doesn't want to draw attention, and the moment he looks around, he spots Jaylen already walking over to the table. "What's this? This broken stolid bothering you, Leroy?"

"I'm just standing here," Macyn returns as Jaylen moves aggressively closer. In his pocket, Macyn grips the Shirane coin, ready to stun Jaylen if he does anything.

"Wait, Jay," Leroy calls with a French accent, folding the paper and extending it out to Macyn. "Perhaps he is willing to trade for it. Ten myntir sounds fair," she responds with a sly smile.

Without a word, Macyn walks away from them. He looks around the grand room for another pop-up image and rushes when he sees one in Ventus section. They even put it down as he closes in on the table. All of the freshmen Ventus mages observe him closing in but he doesn't care. He even feels a little safe when he notes the out-of-place Ignis mage, Solomon Roth, with them. Marnamei Hew and every other mage seated turn to Macyn when he ends up in front of them.

"...Er, sorry to interrupt," Macyn scrambles to tell the table and eager to ask, "I was hoping... can see your paper?" Under the gaze eight pairs of hugely popular eyes, Marnamei and Solomon being chief among them, Macyn couldn't help the gulp midway through his sentence. Solomon, in particular, tilts his head in bemusement at the sight of Macyn's mismatching eyes and the wand at his hip. Despite the burden of exposing himself like this, risking more hostility from anyone who may take offense, Macyn felt relief when Solomon casually hands him the paper.

"Thanks," Macyn says, quickly flipping to the article with the photo of Dog. He doesn't have an animagraph so the photo in print doesn't pop up, however, there's no mistaking the Dog's identity and Macyn quickly reads the article.

#### POLIWICK INCIDENT REPORT: DOG STOLID, KIDNAPPED AS SACRIFICE?

By Remy Jane

Age unclear, family unknown, Dog Stolid is one of the few stolids residing in our great community. While many would claim he is part of the pollution infecting the vision of a stronger and more prestigious Menhir, some have the moral conscious to at the very least, let sleeping dogs lie.

Poliwick Nathan Wynn confirms Dog Stolid was kidnapped early in the afternoon August 28th of this year.

Right away, Macyn whips his head up at the stagnant fact, angered enough to mutter to himself, "in broad daylight, really? Over two weeks ago! And they're just now-" Macyn cuts himself off with an irritated grunt and continues reading.

Left behind at the scene of the abduction, behind the home and business of Red Gold's Soler, in Maghred district, was the clay hand's no-mana equipment, blood that has been identified as Dog Stolid's, and more gruesome yet, his blood spilled and spelled to form letters. When this correspondent asked what message was left behind, Poliwick Nathan Wynn reports,

*'For the Children, He must Perish.'*

When asked for the leading theory behind this morosely cryptic message, authorities are of the official opinion grieving family members of the kidnapped children are seeking vigilante justice. Poliwick Nathan Wynn had this to say.

"The IPW is working tirelessly to locate and return Payton Tuscon, Robert Garten, Ariz Padnani, April Roskrug, Deatra Bosco, René Star, Paloma Black, and Marlaina Von Brandt to their aggrieved families. We implore any and all members of this community unfairly suffering from grief and helplessness to try and refrain from taking justice into your own hands. Let the IPW's lead investigator, Trojan Meegeren and his team bring this heinous perpetrator to justice."

Whether this investigation will be solved remains unclear, but readers far and high are urged to remain cautious, wary, and vigilant of any and all suspicious behavior, regardless of their mana proficiency.

Until next time, gentle reader, this is...

Macyn stops reading, completely confounded by the news. The shock of his face must register because a honey-sweet voice asks him, "did you know the man?" breaking Macyn out of his daze. He's never been so close to the princess of Erudite, and he needs a second to let that sink in. Though high brow-ed and hyper-aware by her lovely presence, Macyn still notes the genuine concern in her question.

"Why wouldn't he know a stolid?" the red-headed, freckle-faced Rosston calls from his seat at the table, adding to the group's curiosity. "Who else would pop in 'round their parties," he continues. The class clown tells those around him, "everyone knows they're bottomless sinkholes for mana. Get too close to one and they'll suck you dry too."

"In-breeding is real," Solomon quietly comments on Rosston's opinion, though

loud enough for everyone to hear. Rosston's cheeks turn a deep red with anger but he says nothing to the well-connected heir.

Marnamei on the other hand lightly slaps Solomon on the shoulder, intimately remarking, "be nice."

As he's only met the kooky man once, Macyn can't say he knows him, but living a few months what Dog must've endured all his life, he can't help but feel an empathetic connection to him. Macyn may have hard feelings about his parent's neglect of him, however, he still has parents to feel that for. Dog has no one because his family wanted nothing to do with him. Add to that, without Dog, he wouldn't have found the ore he used to smelt the steel he's currently working on. Even still, Macyn can't claim to know him, turning to an embarrassed Rosston and proudly stating, "he helped me out a lot."

"Got your clay shack patched up did he," Rosston spits back as Macyn returns the Tribune to a curious looking Solomon, muttering, "thanks," and leaving the table.

Walking past a table of Ignis mages laughing at the pop-up of Dog's limping figure annoys Macyn to a greater extent. It's so easy for them to laugh at the strife of anyone who they deem unworthy. He wouldn't put it past any of them to laugh at him if he ended up on the back of a milk carton. He can imagine his peers might laugh at Sen if she were destroyed, or his mother if they read about her banishment. They would laugh at the misfortunes of anyone they think has no value, and for the first time since starting school, Macyn is happy he has no friends. Clearly, they're all rotten people.

During Numeralculus, Macyn has Sen learn all she can about Dog from the guild. She returns mid-way through lunch and Macyn takes a few mini sandwiches with him as they exit Banquet Hall, noting Jay's observation of Sen with a disapproving glare as he exits.

*'Let him try something,'* Macyn thinks angrily to himself, staving off a building urge to break a limb or shock something. Under one of the brightly colored trees around the large main garden, Macyn asks what she's learned.

"It's just as it said in the Tribune," she starts. "He was missing for over two weeks before anyone thought to check on him. The only reason they had was that they were going to fire him for not tending to the businesses that employed him. The Rock Rag goes so far as to imply this was somehow his fault for staying on Menhir as long as he has. They're vile, to say the least."

"I don't get it," Macyn frustratingly argues. Leaning against the tree, looking out into the vast beauty of the forest-surrounded campus in the shadow of a great mountain floating so close to the stars, he continues. "He didn't seem bad... or at least not like murderous, or rape-y bad. He just felt like someone who broke, you know, like one of those homeless vets or something. And this is how they treat him?"

"Stolids have always had it harsh," Sen adds. "There's a long, tribal history of prejudice toward them, that has grown through the centuries to the point of systemic bias. Worse yet, these prejudicial mages that pioneer this system of discrimination seem allergic to rational deduction. Some still believe that it is contagious."

"Are they going to help him," Macyn asks. "Dog, I mean."

"...I can't say," Sen slowly remarks. "I don't know any more than what's been said in the papers."

Interrupting them both is a deep and dominating voice asking from behind Macyn, "is it fair to say you knew the latest victim of kidnapping?"

Macyn and Sen both quickly turn around and come face to face—or rather, face to chest—with the imposing Marshal Hew. Taken by the stature of the man’s upright and commanding posture with his hands clasped behind his back, broadening his shoulders, Macyn is momentarily stunned. The man looks like he hasn’t stopped working out a day in his entire life, as if his muscles refuse to go away even in his old age. There isn’t a speck of color in his white hair, and his beard is a stylist’s dream, clipped perfectly in layers to a point at the chin. His eyes are hard crystal blue and they can see a long difficult story behind them.

Standing beside the provost marshal is his great-granddaughter, Marnamei, her golden hair in a ponytail with a few strands framing her beautiful heart-shaped face. Her arms wrapped around the books at her chest, and rather surprisingly, Macyn notices the grip of a short sword at her back.

“Uh, marshal...” Macyn takes a moment to gather himself. “I... no, well, I mean, yes,” at the risk of looking like a stuttering fool, he takes a deep breath before continuing. “Kind of. I met him once. We talked and he helped us out.”

It’s only now that Macyn notices how incredibly well dressed marshal Hew is. Despite his position as the principal of a high school, in his three-piece suit with both hands behind his back, he looks as if he can model for a clothing line. Macyn finds it odd in the coolest way. The legendary Hew turns to his great-granddaughter who raises her eyebrows with a smirk in some silent communication. The act is very homely.

Marshal Hew turns to Macyn again and asks, “are you aware of anything that might suggest he could be connected, in any way, to the string of abducted children? Other than retaliation.”

Feeling hot under his gaze, Macyn answers despite his nerves, “I uh, couldn’t really say. I’m new here- to Menhir, I mean. I didn’t even know about the kidnappings until I got here.”

Tilting his head in a deductive way, almost as if scanning him for truth, the marshal asks, “would you be willing to tell us about what you spoke of?”

The fear of learning that orecrafting is illegal at his age makes Macyn unsure of how to reply, but he doesn’t feel like it’s a good idea to lie to this man, and cautiously answers, “I suppose. Am I in trouble?”

Without bearing ill intent, Marnamei asks with a genial expression, “have you done something worth being in trouble over?”

Marshal Hew tilts a glance in her direction, seemingly approves and refocuses on Macyn, asking, “have you?”

Nervous, Macyn grasps for plausible cover, answering, “uh, I’m just a common teenager... so, no, of course not.” Marnamei smiles easily. Still, in front of the marshal, Macyn quickly adds, “I don’t remember exact words but, I can tell you what I know.”

“If I may, Marshal Hew,” Sen floats forward. She had been respectful with her head bowed until now when she looks directly into his eyes. “I was with Mr. Blende for the encounter,” she states before relaying to the marshal, in accurate detail, their meeting with Dog Stolid.

After, marshal Hew gravely asks Sen, “he mentioned an unknown monster and the children, and you didn’t think he might know something about the abducted children?” His commanding tone both annoys and scares Macyn.

“He claimed to know nothing of the missing children,” Sen calmly reiterates,



keeping a respectful decorum. “He seemed to grow to care for Mr. Blende, for being nice to him, and I felt he simply wanted to warn him.”

“But you couldn’t be completely certain,” Marshal Hew sternly returns. “A fact of which could’ve easily been investigated had you informed anyone. Mr. Blende is a child and can’t be faulted for not knowing, however, you have centuries of intelligence. Enough to know that this stolid was likely taken because the kidnapper, this monster, felt he posed a threat.”

Sen says nothing in the grand face of the marshal’s scrutiny, silenced for the grand feeling of shame drowning her ghost heart... shame Macyn believes they don’t have any right to put on her. Stepping heatedly ahead of his ghost friend, Macyn hotly contests, “and what were we supposed to think?”

“Mr. Blende-” Sen tensely interjects, moving around him.

“No, Sen,” Macyn asserts, staring down Marshal Hew and Marnamei. “Dog’s lived here for how long? And I didn’t meet Dog before I got here, but none of you thought to ask him anything-” “Mr. Blende,” Sen hisses for him to stop, floating closer to him so he’d look into her warning eyes, however, he avoids her eyes, moving around her to keep his attention of the marshal as he continues to vent. “He said he hadn’t had a long conversation with anyone in *years*. I bet you didn’t know that either, and why would you? He’s *only* a ‘stolid,’ right? What would he know? A nobody with eyes and ears, who can remember things you all might need to know, but he’s not a good enough mage, so whatever. Sen told him to talk to the authorities if he knew anything about those kids, and he said he didn’t, so don’t blame her because you guys messed up!”

“That is enough,” Sen calls, floating an inch from his face, effectively halting his tirade. In the moment of peace between them, a heavily breathing Macyn suddenly sobers up to the seriousness of practically yelling at the marshal of his school and quickly begins to panic; to the point he wonders why he was so angry in the first place. Sen quickly turns to the marshal and respectfully speaks, “please forgive him, Marshal Hew. He did not mean any offense. As for our meeting with Dog Stolid, I wish to add I did not witness anything out of place, nor did I see any hidden mana pockets. Everything seemed as it should,” she finishes.

The marshal allows a moment of silence to pass before he asserts with all the gravitas of his decades of wisdom and power, “Mr. Blende, do not ever speak to your marshal with such disrespect again. Facts and logic would grant you more success with me. Miss Inhabitant, do not make the same mistake again. The lives of children are at stake.”

“Of course, Marshal Hew,” Sen quickly states.

“If you’ll excuse me,” the marshal bids, turning to leave, then pauses abruptly. He takes a small letter out of his jacket pocket and extends it to Marnamei. “Your father says to write more.”

Marnamei rolls her eyes as she nabs the letter. “He fusses so much,” she argues. “You’d think I was battling minotaurs to the death here.” The marshal’s uptick at the corner of his bearded mouth is all the reaction he gives before leaving. After his departure, Marnamei returns her attention to Macyn and Sen. “I never said this to you but I think it’s amazing you can craft mana as a... well, given your eyes-”

“It’s cool,” Macyn relieves her with a shrug.

Nodding, she offers, “it’s hard to believe you still have your Inhabitant this far into the year. If you need any help, you’re welcome to ask me. I’m not a fan of braggers, but I’ll say I’m confident in my studies.”

Macyn can't blame Marnamei for having the same opinion of Sen every other mage and teacher seems to have, but he still doesn't like it. He cordially but shortly responds, "thanks, but I'm okay."

Nodding, she stuffs her letter in the inner pocket of her white-accented vest. "I'm sorry about the stolid- er, your friend. I hope he turns up okay."

The letter she puts away makes Macyn curious if you have to go through the marshal to receive mail here or if this is some elaborate joke because it couldn't be that his family doesn't care enough about him to send a letter. He *can't* believe that. He can excuse his mother if she ending up in solitary again but that punishment doesn't last so long.

Even if Macyn knows Marnamei may not know herself, he can't help but ask her, "does anybody care about Dog? Does his family even know or care?"

Marnamei seems slightly taken aback to be asked such a question, forcing Macyn to wonder if she's ever thought of stolids as people. "I don't know," she admits. "It's possible. You seem to care, so, that's good, right?"

Macyn shakes the mild irritation infecting his thoughts. "Yeah. I hope he turns up too." It's odd for Macyn to admit that, considering he doesn't know Dog. Still, he wouldn't want anyone to be abducted or hurt so badly that there's enough blood spilled to write a message with.

"If I hear anything, I'll paramail you," Marnamei says as she waves goodbye, prompting a similar wave from Macyn.

The prospect of mail, his mind questions, '*why haven't they mailed me?*' brightens his outlook but also hurls more confusion and mistrust on his parent's correspondence. despite having no answer.

Walking toward Student services, Sen asks her young ward, "what would you like to do?"

Feeling down and negative, despite the serene day and the beautiful palace campus, Macyn sighs as he asks, "why do people hate stolids? Like, specifically, what did they do?"

Sen answers, "aside from a few revolts, they didn't do anything. I'm saddened to say, in my breathing years, I felt the same as my family and peers. It wasn't until after I passed and examined generations humanity, with much self-reflection, that I learned differently."

"What'd you learn?"

"That stolids remind us of what we fear the most," she responds with a hint of trepidation. "Except for their mismatching eyes, they look and sound like any of us. They may be unable to craft their mana, but, they can see and hear it just as well. Every time a mage, sage, or warlock sees a stolid, it's a deep-seeded reminder of how fragile they themselves can be. If you've ever visited a terminally ill person in a hospital and felt your own mortality grow shorter, it's not dissimilar to that. It's an irrational fear that many do not know how to process well, thus anger and ridicule. There's never been a stolid of note, you know." Macyn turns to her as she adds, "I don't think that would be a bad thing to see."

Macyn is quiet as they walk towards the retro-post for Lower Order mail. Stepping up to the counter, the pair find no one in attendance. He pushes the silent chime that shoots out a small paper plane. It flies in a circle a moment before it rockets off to find the attending on duty.

“They’re probably still in lunch,” Sen poses.

“I’ll wait,” Macyn answers quietly.

Nearly five minutes pass in silence before Sen asks, “Mr. Blende, talk to me. You rarely go this long without asking a question.”

Looking around, Macyn breathes in deeply before taking a seat by the wall. “I... I didn’t think this would all be so hard. We’re getting close to three months, and I don’t even know why I haven’t heard from either of them. Something bad could’ve happened to mom, or dad... or hell, even June or Annetta, and I wouldn’t know.” Saying it out loud on top of everything else going on makes Macyn’s heart race with dread and his eyes prickle with wet heat.

“Oh- no, I’m sure they’re fine,” Sen reassures him, lowering herself to eye level.

“You don’t know that,” Macyn continues, looking away from Sen and clearing his throat. “But it’s not even just that. I don’t have a single friend. Making a sword is taking forever. Ducking Jaylen is getting harder. Coral is stupid. The lady who won’t let me see my mother’s trial! When I try, nothing works. You’re important to me, but I even have to give you up at some point. Freaking hell, right now, there’s nothing... there’s just nothing.”

“No, not nothing,” she slowly and deliberately affirms. “You have me. For as long as you need me.”

“I’d like someone breathing,” Macyn sharply returns, and immediately, he regrets spouting so, turning to her concerned and ready to apologize when she easily quips, “breathing’s overrated.” Her smile does wonders to disarm his frustrations as his shoulders relax, and his eyes lose their edge.

“Sorry,” he glumly states.

“I know,” she responds in understanding. “You also have your mother,” Sen continues to tell him. “You made a promise to your family, and she needs you.”

Seated lazily on the chair with down shoulders, Macyn simply nods somberly and not at all like a boy who came to learn manacrafting in a palace on a floating mountain so close to the stars. Sen floats beside him in silence, giving him time and hoping he gets word from his parents soon.

When the clerk returns, annoyed at having to leave the Banquet hall, Macyn unsympathetically explains the problem. The clerk assures them that everything is in order. Everyone is getting their mail, and if Macyn wasn’t, it has nothing to do with the system and everything to do with the senders. At the warning chime for the start of class, Macyn leaves no closer to answers or word from his family.

## Carbon Steel

Macyn musters through another grueling week of class and come Sunday, Sen schedules a different activity for the morning.

“Ignis don’t fly carpets in the mornings,” Macyn dimly argues with his Japanese inhabitant. They walk through campus toward the Coliseum where Erudite’s physical activities are practiced. It’s a large structure, circular, similar to a gladiatorial arena, with a center field as big as a football field and seats all around it. He only follows her because he can’t continue forging the sword without her.

“It’s not as if Ignis would allow us to fly with them in the afternoons,” Sen points out.

“Nor can I fly with Ventus in the morning,” Macyn repeats, observing the Coliseum in the distance.

“That’s not true,” Sen points out. “There are designated times simply to keep the peace, however, it’s not an actual rule. You are allowed to fly whenever you want and with whichever house you want.”

“Ventus fly in the mornings and plenty of them don’t like Ignis right now.”

“Do you want to fly,” she poses without letting him answer as she continues. “And that’s hardly even a question because we both know you love all things mana and you’ve never flown before.”

Macyn sighs as he closes in on the intricately patterned grand archway leading into the resounding stone tunnel. It’s a long passageway before the pair reach the grand field dominating the center. “If Ignis finds out I flew- Scratch that. *When* they find out I flew with another house, I’m going to be social enemy number one again.”

“I promise you I will go to the faculty if anyone becomes physical with you,” Sen says as she descends into the wand. “Let’s give this a shot. I know you’ll love it.”

“Where are you going?” Macyn asks Sen, appalled. “This was your idea.”

Just walking toward the other students, Macyn first notices that even though they’re wearing their school colors, none of them are wearing the school uniform, vowing, yet again, to buy clothes the second he’s able. Worst of all, Jaylen and the other Aqua students are flying with Ventus. The majority of twenty to thirty blue and white, casually clothed freshman, take notice of Macyn, and the moment he wants to turn back, a familiar face breaks away from the group to meet him. Onawa seems anxious as she hastens up to him, yet he can’t pinpoint exactly why. There are just too many reasons.

“What are you doing here?” she gasps, stopping a few feet away from him and well away from the group. “If you’re looking for heir Roth, he’s not here.”

“I’m not,” he tells her. “I just came to fly a carpet.”

“Now?” Onawa pauses. “With us? Ignis have their own time for flying.”

Exasperated, he returns, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m the most unpopular guy since ever.”

“Look, no offense, but you weren’t really going to matter anyway,” Onawa replies, crossing her arms. “I know it’s harsh, but everyone thinks you’re still a stolid from the waste- Lower Order on top of still having your inhabitant. It’s too lame. How do you expect to

ever fit in with a security blanket? You're not a child and you can't be here."

"Have we got ourselves a latecomer?" A small albino professor asks, walking to them with Everette Masters towering beside the skinny man. Macyn recalls seeing professor Roberts during the summer. Though albino, he dresses in as much brightly colored and puffy garments as he can, has on multiple rings on each finger, gold & silver bracelets, several earrings, and even an eyebrow piercing. Somehow all the color and glitter make his festive black eyes, pale white skin, and white hair stand out more. "Or a paramour, perhaps?" The colorfully thin albino asks Onawa with a wolfish smirk.

"Definitely not, professor," Onawa exclaims looking offended. "I think he got the house times wrong."

"Is he a friend of yours," Everette innocently asks in a deep voice, looking at Macyn for the briefest of moments. He can tell he doesn't even register in Masters' eyes and isn't surprised when Onawa quickly responds to the honored heir, "no! I mean, no, we're not friends either."

*'Well, we're not,'* Macyn's mind argues before he voices, "I just came to fly carpets. I've never ridden one before and I'm busy in the afternoons," Macyn adds to preempt any counter-arguments. "So it has to be now." Macyn turns to Onawa. "Not that I care about all the house politics."

"Well, good on you, young man," says the diminutive professor, raising and waving his palms in welcoming fashion. "Right this way, right this way." Macyn moves around Onawa and follows the instructor. "I am professor Robbins," he happily says. "And I must say, I love the eyes." Macyn smiles before he continues. "I am most obviously one of the flight instructors, as well as Head coach for the school's kanonball team, so you may call moi professor or coach as you like. Come, come."

Macyn is a little swept by Coach Robbins' robust enthusiasm and follows gladly. The professor turns to his gathering of students and yells, "everyone, everyone, come and gather. For those absolutely aching with bristling need to feel the wind rip across your chest, away with you! Go! Fly! For the rest of my precious jewels who have yet to master flight comfortably, and would cherish a vertical ascension, please hop on the brobdingnagian!" The man feels like a circus showman, as he points to a ridiculously large carpet on the field with the dimensions of a small classroom.

Macyn finds coach Robbins so rhapsodic, it's suspicious, and eyes the exuberant little man with some scrutiny as he asks, "what's a barbdingnag?"

"Brob-ding-nag-i-an," Coach Robbins enunciates with a wide smile. "Saying it fast is a dessert for the tongue! A brobdingnagian," he says very quickly, "is what large flying carpets are titled, my dear boy. Though I have taken to calling my personal brobdingnagian, Chestnut. Very industrial and rigid things, certainly not ideal for sport, but, absolutely wondrous for mass travel above the serenity of the forest top."

Macyn watches all the Ventus and Aqua mages who haven't mastered flying on carpets rush over to the very large carpet floating a few feet off the ground. Onawa, Everette—who pulls Jaylen away with him—Leroy from Aqua and Rosston, Barone, Tehuti, and Marnamei all climb on their personal carpets. Upon quick observation, he notices that they're thinner than normal carpets, more like snowboards, except a little wider.

Watching them take off in wonder, Macyn is nearly left behind, called on by Coach Robbins to get on or as he put it, "lament the day!" Macyn takes a tentative step on the

fragile-looking floating cloth, expecting his foot to sink through, but surprisingly, finds a solid purchase when pressing down.

An impolite, “any day now,” from an Aqua, Peters, if he remembers correctly, and Macyn quietly rushes through his amazement onto the carpet, which easily holds twenty mages. He moves closer to the gathering at the center of the large floating fabric.

“Now!” Coach Robbins bellows. “For those new to carpet flying, the rules! No personal carpets are allowed to be flown unless approved by myself or the other instructors.” Macyn is paying attention until he feels a gentle contest against gravity as they rise upwards into the air. Everyone acts as if the fall of all the Coliseum seats, then the trees around the arena as they rise on a thin flowing carpet is the most natural thing in the world, so Macyn tries to keep his geek-out to a minimum.

“The reason for that is Erudite carpets are smartly regulated with a certain amount of safety features to ensure none of you fantastical would-be kanonballers break your neck trying to reach your grand dreams of going pro earlier than rightfully makes sense. Secondly, the school carpets are hard-charmed with the Heroism rune. Should you fall off, for example, attempting a spin rather than a cut, our carpets will most certainly catch you. A personal carpet may not have such a rune, for obvious reasons; the drag, the wasteful mana, weight disruption, etc.”

Macyn hardly understands Robbins explanation, not necessarily because of his long-winded speech but because they are now and truly high in the air, and he can't pay attention to anything else. He's higher than he's ever been that was not inside of a crazy plane. More and more of the acropolis of campus minimizes it's grandeur to a viewpoint relative to his state of growing shock and astonishment. The aerial view of Erudite is breathtaking, and yet, Robbins continues to rise to heights that don't seem to bother anyone else, even less, the racing mages on their carpet.

Onawa, Masters, Hew, Hawkins, and the others are all flying an aerial skirmish. It's not enough to say they move like fighter jets or even regular birds. The way they rise, swoop, dive, barrel roll, full stop, is more along the lines of a hummingbird, with people standing on their backs. It's the most addictive sight Macyn has ever seen, and he vows to do the same one day.

“...it's very dangerous,” Macyn's ears perk up and he returns his focus to coach Robbins. “So under no circumstances are you to ever pass beyond the bailiwick. And that's pretty much it for safety so always keep that in mind my little jewels.”

Macyn wonders if he should ask Robbins to repeat the safety instructions, but another student raises his hand and without being prompted asks, “why can't I keep my carpet steady?” Langston continues to say, “it shakes and jumps nearly all the time.”

“Mr. Langston brings up a very common point of run-in when one first attempts to soar the skies,” Coach Robbins before lecturing the finer points of flying a carpet.

On the carpet, everyone is unsurprisingly grouped together, talking joyously amongst themselves with the majestic backdrop of this side of Menhir Mountain behind them. Macyn moves closer to the edge, and even though the thin fabric is the only thing keeping him from a four hundred meter drop, his adrenaline-laced heartbeat feels comfortable enough for him to sit on the edge with his dangling feet flowing off the edge in the strong gusts of wind. He happily calls out to his friend, “hey Sen, check this out.”

“You don't need me to enjoy the view,” she voices.

“Just come out,” he urges her. After a moment of silence, Macyn adds, “if they were going to be my friends, they’d also have to be friends with you too, so you might as well.”

Ghost and mage enjoy the serene picture that is red, white, or navy rooftops interlaced trees, rivers, and then deep blue for several minutes before Robbins eventually descends Chestnut. Sen returns to the wand with a thank you, and much too soon, he’s on solid field again with a variety of carpets awaiting them. The carpets are well used, faded in earthy colors. Looking at the selection, Macyn is sure these carpets must’ve have been the baseline model decades ago, yet the Ventus and Aqua mages run to their pick. In front of his carpet, Macyn becomes aware of yet another first moment on Menhir that his parents will never see or advise him on. Taking a step on, and then another, nothing happens.

“It’s not going anywhere without mana,” Onawa calls from above, getting a laugh out of Rosston and Jaylen near her.

“Ignore them,” Sen’s voice asserts. “Just have fun.”

At first, he simply practices applying his mana. Though he’s always been well balanced, Macyn falls on his back the first few times. Recalling the time he broke his left arm on his skateboard, he wonders how much worse the injury from riding a flying carpet could be. While Sen’s blare does make it shake, he does understand the mechanics of it. It’s similar to the way he applies mana to the tuyères of the smelter.

‘*Like breathing,*’ he recalls Sen’s words.

In his first two-hour flying session, Macyn is already airborne; sadly, he’s about as high as the second floor of a building and slower than a sloth. He’s far from a professional athlete, or even the most moderately skilled mage in the air, doing no more than ascending and descending on his hands and knees the entire time, and yet his unsightly display on a carpet does nothing to take away the thrill of actually flying. Amidst his struggles with school, the delays of forging, being ostracized by everyone, and no word from his parents, flying on a carpet is more fun than he had any expectation to feel.

Soon after putting his carpet away with the others in the equipment room, a clear-headed Macyn meets with Root by the tree line past the field behind Anthony. Their exchange is just as short as any have been the past few weeks, though without any hostility either. Aside from a verbal tiff between Solomon and Everette that nearly got physical, lunch was as delicious as ever. Watching Marnamei admonish Everette was interesting, like a soap opera that he sadly couldn’t overhear or ask anyone about.

Currently, in the cellar of Anthony, the forge is lit and bluish-red hot. In the middle of stacking the tiles of high carbon steel on the platform that will eventually be the billet, Sen asks Macyn, “will you be returning me after we make and sell your sword?”

Wearing a grungy towel on his head again, Macyn lets slip the metal tile he had in hand from the unexpected question. Indeed, he hadn’t given that question much thought, pushing it away like the chore promised to be done and never is. If he’s completely honest with himself, he’d rather ignore that question and anything related to it for as long as he can.

Macyn responds with a question of his own. “Do you... want me to?”

Sen doesn’t respond right away and Macyn continues to stack the metal tiles as she instructs. He’s already built up four levels out of these broken metal tiles about the height and width of a large bar of soap. Once the broken pieces of metal are arranged on the platform with the handle attached to it, Sen instructs Macyn to carefully wrap it in wet parchment to keep the tiles from falling off when it’s within the forge. She then comments, “I have never been on

assignment this long and I don't know if that's a good thing or not. Keep your distance when you slide the billet in the forge."

Feeling like a baker sliding a pie in a very hot oven, the heat of the forge is astounding. The parchment quickly burns up but the intensity of the flames and very high temperature keep the pieces joined.

Sen informs her protege, "keep watch for the appearance of embers that'll flow out. That will tell us the billet is at welding temperature."

Macyn stands several feet away from the intense heat. As the billet begins to glow, his mind starts to process a little more of what Sen is saying, or trying to say. As always his first thought is she must want to leave, making him feel a different kind of sweat break out over his skin, making him ask, "why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to leave?"

She softly sighs, and clearly hates herself for doing so before she replies, "Mr. Blende, you must see that it's hurting you to have me; to have an inhabitant. Your mana hasn't been stable since you've been here."

"So," Macyn responds with force. "I'm still doing everything. It's not like I'm aiming to be valedictorian here. You're better than all of them."

"That's not how it should be," Sen responds, and Macyn stares at her in disbelief. "You were right before. You should have friends your own age to talk and play with or at the very least are still breathing."

"Breathing's overrated, remember."

"I'm serious," she sternly asserts.

"So am I," Macyn throws back, outspreading his wrapped up hands.

Sen continues nonetheless. "You need to have friends your own age and it's fairly evident that I'm a hindrance to that. Your eyes aside, when they see me with you, they think: helpless. They think: weak. They think you're too imperfect for them and the only way to give you a *chance* is if I wasn't around."

"No, we don't know that, at all, actually," Macyn responds. "My stupid eyes aside--"

"They're not stupid--" she tries to say when he continues, "*nothing* says they'll be good friends if they're only willing to be friends with me under that condition. Sen... please, I'm barely keeping it together," he sadly voices, eying her with genuine worry. "Why bring this up now? Without you, I'll have nothing."

The silence stretches between them until sparks start dancing out of the furnace, swirling around them like tiny fireflies. Macyn is about to grab the rod that's welded to the billet when Sen interrupts. "Wait a few minutes. You want to let it remain at welding temp for a few moments." Macyn stands back as they both silently watch more sparks swirl in the air, snagging on his pants, shoes, or the floor ahead of him. Sen floats ahead and turns to him, with the light of the flames behind her and the embers passing through her uninterrupted, momentarily giving her a golden glow.

"I won't leave," she admits, though he looks skeptical. "Really, I won't, at the very least, not until we've sold the sword. However, you have to promise me you won't substitute me for real- for *living* friends."

Macyn finds the glow of flames through her ethereal body almost gives her a



warmth he might see in a living person. It seems like a fair request, even if it means he might lose her partnership someday. He hates thinking about that more than anything.

“It’s not like I’m being picky here,” Macyn argues. “I’m not turning them away left an right... but I promise you won’t be a substitute.”

Sen isn’t thrilled with his lackluster response, but nods, nevertheless. Returning her focus to the white-hot billet, she indulges in her professionalism, instructing Macyn as well. “Alright. Test the handle to make sure it’s not hot.”

Touching the long handle sticking out of the furnace with the tip of his finger, he hissing loudly as he pulls back, cutting off her worried concern by admitting, “I’m kidding, it’s not hot.”

She doesn’t share his gleeful smile. “I am not amused,” Sen haughtily claims, before quickly continuing, “carefully, grab the handle—and I don’t care if it burns—take it out and place it on the flat dais of the anvil.”

Macyn swivels the large rings of the sanders out of the way like a revolving door activating the Gud arm so the top metal box mechanically elevates and a pedal-like lever extends from the bottom. With the white-hot billet on the flat head of the anvil, ready for the strike to come from the top block of metal, Sen guides him further.

“Now, with the hand hammer, you’re going to lightly tap the top of the billet.” Macyn does everything she tells him to, striking the soft scorching metal with the hand hammer as she floats around the brilliantly heated metal inspecting every inch of it. “Remember,” she continues throughout his strikes. “We’re just consolidated the metal like we did earlier with the bloom. That’s good. Soft taps. Don’t put any strength behind the hammer.”

True to her word, they do several heats, consolidating the billet more and more after each striking session, forcing Macyn to hit at it harder and harder. Throughout, Sen happily lectures, “remember, you can’t bully the metal. You have to feel for how it needs to be hit. Try as best you can to focus on the return feedback of the strike and the feeling you get back. It’s very much like a partnership. Work with it.”

At a point, Sen has Macyn switch to the mana powered Gud Arm to hammer the fiery billet, which is a Godsend to Macyn’s aching arms. He had to switch from left hand to right several times, which led him to wonder how weak his arms, shoulders, and core muscles are, but the mana hammer is a big relief. With the few hours left before dinner, Sen moves them on to the process of heating and folding the billet she calls, *kitae*.

“In the first few folds, you’ll see the material is rough and doesn’t like to fold properly. That’s normal. The folding process is the stage that purifies the metal of slag and impurities, making it much more malleable.”

Sen directs Macyn to fold the reheated consolidated billet by its length by hot cutting it down the middle with a metal wedge and using the mana hammer’s strikes in tandem with his angling to force the super-hot material to easily fold over, making the billet thick again. When he thins the billet back down, he has to fold it by its width using the hot cut dais of the Gud Hammer, then fold it by the dented seam he created, making it thick again. After he hammers it down to a thinner billet, he does it again diagonally from the left, then diagonally from the right, and then repeats it all over again, all the while constantly returning it to the furnace to keep the temperature of the metal over nine hundred degrees. Macyn felt his nervousness evaporate in the middle of the taxing forging, losing completely to the relaxing nature of being so laser-focused on one task.

At the start of heating and folding, the billet was full of impurities and did not like to fold, however, after twenty folds, Sen finally gives him leave to stop. “Fantastic work, Mr. Blende. Really, you’re doing amazing. Can you feel it? Isn’t it amazing? As the carbon travels through each fold, it eventually evens out and gives us a homogeneous billet that we can use to draw out into a sword!”

Leaning over exhausted and unwrapping the cloth around his arms, he smiles weakly. “So,” he starts to say between deep labored breaths. Both arms and shoulders are tight with lactic acid, along with his sides and even lower back. “Are we... almost done?”

“Not even close,” she says enthusiastically, giddy as she inspects the cooling billet on the anvil. “But we are closer if that helps you feel better.”

“It doesn’t,” he claims, long-winded, wiping grime from his forehead. “But that’s fine.”

“We will have the low carbon tiles to do,” Sen chimes, far more happily than he feels. “Which will be the edge of the blade. Now that you know what to expect, it will go much faster.”

Dinner is as expected and his famished stomach and taste buds thank him gratefully. So hungry was Macyn, he only noticed Everette Masters in Ignis section to face Solomon who’s talking with Marnamei, after the fact. He didn’t mind the entertaining drama unfolding close enough for him to get the gist of it, however, his ravenous stomach didn’t care for anything that wasn’t edible. From a distance, he’s able to discern that both Solomon Roth and Everette Masters are warring for Marnamei Hew’s attention.

*‘Whatever, it’s not like I ever had a chance with her anyway,’* his mind states, safeguarding his heart with grounded reality while simultaneously feeling like he lost something he never had. Before he goes to bed, he writes a letter to his parents; the shortest letter he’s ever written. One sentence.

*Why haven't you written?*

## Dark As Night

The week proves it isn't going to be easy on Macyn as early as Monday morning, waiting in his seat for first period to begin. Walking by him, Yasuo warns Macyn that Ignis, and by extension, Jorn, Desmond, and their owner, Wang or Solomon, had learned from the multitude of witnesses that he went flying carpets with Ventus and Aqua. Yasuo quickly explains that the rumors weren't kind and that Jorn is furious.

"Like a Hel-hound off its leash," Yasuo colorfully expresses. "A few of the agōgs wanted to 'talk' with you, but Jorn convinced them that he would take care of you personally."

Reserved frustration drops Macyn's head back as if gazing pleadingly at the heavens for mercy.

"Yes," Yasuo agrees with Macyn's impending defeat. "He's also been told that you're trying to befriend Everette Masters and Marnamei Hew to embarrass Ignis."

Dismayed to irritation, Macyn can't help but hotly ask, "how? Why would he believe that?"

Ignoring his question, Yasuo looks over to his friends who are calling him over. Cleaning his glasses he nods and cautions Macyn, "I don't think Ignis house is for you. You don't have the grades, the pedigree, the connections, or the mynt. I only wished to inform you of Jorn, so you can better prepare yourself."

"Can't you help me?" Macyn asks, worried. He truly only worried about Jaylen and never caused Jorn this much anger. Macyn can't even imagine what his housemate will do. "Come on, you tell me stuff all the time. We're practically friends."

"No, thank you," Yasuo winces to say. "My friends and family wouldn't be pleased with me for taking on Jorn; he's too closely associated with Solomon Roth and Jin Wang. Also, my friends don't like you. I mean it, speak to the faculty and leave Ignis. It's your best option."

When Ryce's class nearly begins, Yasuo sits with his other more studious peers while Macyn slides low into his seat in an attempt to be invisible. When the stragglers file in, Jorn, Desmond, and Wang all eye him sinisterly. Roth seems to only be at odds with Masters, so that's one less worry. Macyn does his best disappearing acts in between classes by either rushing out of class before the chime even finishes or waiting in class until just a few minutes before the start of the next class. Though difficult, he sticks close to buildings, pillars, and shadows, employing Sen as a spotter to prevent Jorn and his ilk from catching him.

It happens to Macyn soon; Wednesday, during Runology and Numeralculus, Thursday during Potions, Historia, and Wardcraft, and again in the same courses Friday and Saturday. It starts with a push. Not a strong one but certainly unexpected. Looking around, he doesn't see anyone near enough who could've done it. Later in class, it's a much stronger force that drives his head into his textbook on his desk. The loud bang of which draws everyone's attention, as his head bounces back up. He grips his nose, sure it's broken, and checks his palm multiple times to see if he's bleeding. The book may have softened the blow, but his face continuously feels smashed in. His sight sparkles like a kaleidoscope of tiny lights, but he can still make out Jorn, Desmond, and Wang laughing within their group.

It was a series of these gorilla-style mana attacks throughout the week; only in classes with professors they knew wouldn't do anything and always at a distance so nothing can be directly tied to them. Professors Ryce and Melankomas seem to believe it builds character, Professor Singh and Historia's Odotus feigned ignorance—Macyn always felt they were nerds anyway—and professor Sun seemed to be in some sort of cold war with Wang. Macyn can't make heads or tails of it but it didn't help him. His only moments of peace come at mealtimes and out of classes.

The pain from their mana-push isn't worth seeing the school nurse the four times he had to go to the infirmary for a broken nose, burns on his skin, constantly leaking eyes, or endless coughing, but if he has to be there, he'll gladly enjoy the presence of Nurse M'Curre's insane beauty. It was on the third trip that he asked if she was a nymph. She smiled elegantly and confirms she is from Kane Haven. She never asked him why he keeps getting injured, a question he's sure would have come up by the fourth visit in one week. She only smiles delighted—causing him to not care either—and gives him a potion, salve, or performs her healing craft.

His Sunday is for flying and orecrafting. He has one day out of every week to do something he enjoys and he makes the most of it. Sometimes he's a little too zealous when he's flying, however, after the first time his school carpet caught him, the rush of adrenaline and his excitement made him continue to do crazy and often disastrous maneuvers, much to Sen's agitation. It felt like when his father would throw him as far as he can into the pool, only in this case, the carpet would always catch him.

"That recklessness is not flying," Sen tells him with chagrin. "It only takes the one time for the carpet's rune to malfunction and splat! Dead. Is that what you want? Is it?" After Sen's anxious tirade, Macyn mellows his flying to normal high-speed drops and barrel rolls. Aqua and Ventus still keep to themselves but they don't try to hurt him and he's fine with that.

After meeting Root, Macyn repeats the process of kitae, stacking the low carbon tiles, then consolidating the white-hot, sparking billet with the Gud Arm's power hammer. It's just as hot and hard on his arms as the previous week, though wildly unexpected was the low carbon billet which houses more iron in it, creating extremely flamboyant sparks that shoot everywhere with every single hammer strike. He's surprised nothing caught fire, and by the end, he has a homogeneous billet that he'll draw out into a sword later.

Clean of grease, sweat, and soot, Macyn heads to dinner with a happy Sen floating alongside him. "Now that we have both parts of this sword, what's next?"

"As you know," Sen begins to explain. "The high carbon steel, or Kawagane, is going to be the blade of the sword, and the low carbon steel is going to be the spine of the sword, or the Shingane. We simply envelope the high carbon steel around the low carbon steel until it completely envelopes it."

"...mnn, like a corn dog," Macyn interjects curiously.

"...I suppose," Sen begrudgingly accepts. "We weld them together and that will give us the best combination of a hard edge with a strong and flexible spine."

"Why would you want a flexible spine?" Macyn wonders aloud.

"Try not to think of flexible as bending," she lectures. "Steel is naturally hard. Hit it hard enough, and it will crack or break. You want a flexible type of hardness so that it can absorb strikes without breaking."

“Let’s stay up a little longer after dinner,” Macyn says as they make their way up the cobblestone pathway to dinner. “Keep working. If we’re not even halfway done, then we should do as much as we can while we have the time.”

“Wouldn’t you rather write a letter?” Sen softly suggests. “You haven’t written at all this week.”

“I’ll write when I get a damn letter,” Macyn bluntly explains, and though upset, she says nothing. Macyn wouldn’t admit it to Sen, but his vitriol over his parent’s silence is how he can endure the abuse from his antagonizers. Fortunately, in the following two weeks, the breathing room Macyn was growing desperate for finally forced Jorn and Jaylen’s attention elsewhere. A fight between Everette Masters and Solomon Roth made Macyn invisible again.

Macyn has lived in Menhir long enough to know this society prides itself in prosperity and achievement; from mediwicks for the ill to caretakers of fantastical creatures to arbitrators of justice, to powerful warriors. The battle between these honored heirs clearly showed the gathered crowd they are combat specialists. Macyn hasn’t been privy to the gossip or the inside scoop, however, anyone with eyes can see the contention between the boys has everything to do with Marnamei Hew.

In Macyn’s mind, it only makes sense. Marnamei is the closest thing to royalty in school and some would even claim in all of Menhir. She’s adored, intelligent, and outside of a nymph in full enchanted regalia, the easiest on the eyes. Even as she attempts to stay between the hotheaded heirs without a care for her safety, her group of admirers is yelling for her to stay out of harm’s way. It’s clear to everyone but her that nothing is going to stop Roth and Masters.

Jin Wang delaying Marnamei from continuing to intercede was all the window Roth and Masters needed to have at each other and they weren’t simply clubbing each other. The first time Macyn witnessed two mana solidify like battering rams scared him when they collided, thundering painfully and shocking the air around them. Amidst the cheering crowd, Macyn can tell the concussive shock hurts the two heirs even though they’re shrouded in their managuard, however, it doesn’t stop the heirs.

They were moving in close, stepping as best they can around each other to look for an opening to exploit all the while striking each other’s guard with solid mana like a cannon. Macyn’s shocked when Roth lifts the earth underneath Masters. The large dark-skinned boy launches himself high into the air, drawing his short sword from his back on his dissent to meet Roth’s drawn sword with a loud clang and quick sparks of fire. Somehow, the drawn swords amaze Macyn more than the manacrafting. The mana-assisted sword strikes are blinding and so lethal, Macyn can’t help but think, *‘these two are really trying to kill each other.’*

Seemingly frustrated being matched evenly with sword and mana blasts, Masters skips back for distance, and Macyn notices the rune on the guard of his short sword before he applies mana to it and laserjet of water blasts out of the rune. Roth takes the strike, dropping his short sword from the devastating impact. As students move out of the way, Roth yells as his mana warps and twists even in solid form. Rather than evade another two strikes, a gasping and sweating Roth raises his swordless hand, guarding himself with his mana, and stands firm as he takes the rocking hits of water cannon attacks.

Masters may have had a chance to end it but the faculty show up just in time to separate the two and disperse the crowd with authority. Macyn did manage to catch Masters stomp on Roth’s sword, adding his solidified mana to break it, sending Solomon in a rage-filled attack. Melankomas kept Masters away while Ryce and Von Brandt held Roth back.

The entire affair was the talk of the school, shoving Macyn into complete obscurity. Everyone was so passionate about the Clash of Heirs and defending their house's heir that Macyn could happily walk into class with Sen waving at everyone and no one would say anything. For weeks, contentions loom in the air and sporadic altercations recur as Macyn's ghostly existence continues to strut about nearly carefree. Without friends, his orecrafting becomes his world away from everything.

After enveloping the low carbon steel with the high carbon steel and fuse-welding them together for a single homogeneous billet, Sen approves his work and they proceed to the next stage, what she calls Sonobe, or stretching out the billet into a sword length bar. Staring amorously at the glowing red bar being squared and stretched repeatedly by Macyn's hammer strikes, Sen can't help but gasp loud enough to draw upon his attention. "There must be over three million layers in there! Beautiful!"

Macyn couldn't quite hear her over the clanging strikes of his hammer and pauses to yell out, "WHAT?" Her only response is to vigorously wave for him to continue. Before dinner, they manage to draw out the billet effectively to the length of a proper sword. Even if it is far too thick, it feels good in Macyn's hand and for the first time since he started forging, he ponders about making a blade for himself.

"The next stage is shaping the blade," Sen tells him as they walk back to Anthony from dinner. "Which is very difficult so I feel we should start next Sunday."

"Why," Macyn counters. "Let's just start now."

"I thought you might want to write before-"

"I don't want to write a letter, Sen," he apathetically interjects.

Sen only nods but is notably not satisfied with his decision. Continuing a little more formally, she says, "this will be your biggest challenge yet."

"How big a challenge?" he wearily asks, eying her suspiciously. She seems deep in thought and he can almost see her planning out this next step for him.

She hums a moment, taking that time to organize her thoughts as they near Anthony. "First we form the tip of the blade, then we start beveling. This phase takes patience, focus, and attention to detail. You have to start on the spine of the blade, which forms the back edge. From there you form the back bevel. That will allow you to hammer in the distinguished central ridge of the sword. Only then can you finally form the cutting edge. Keep in mind the entire time you'll be in and out of the furnace for proper forging. Every part of the sword's geometry is very specific and you cannot deviate from the procedure."

Scratching his head withdrawn in brows and concerned eyes, he comments, "that... actually sounds complicated."

"It takes true skill," she points out. "Grandfather always said beveling is where an orewick's talent truly lies."

Macyn exhales, adding playfully fearful, "no pressure then."

"I'm certain you'll be fine," Sen assures him with a pressed smirk. "You have me after all, and grandfather... but just in case, how about we smelt some bloom steel early next Sunday. We'll start right away, make as much as we can and be done well before dinner."

"Ugh," Macyn bemoans. "That's just soo exhausting."

"If we mess up this next stage, it might be nearly impossible to fix."

"Jeez, is it that bad?" Macyn exclaims. "Mess up once and bam, no redos or do-overs? That's some real jail-house rules."

“I don’t know what that means,” Sen honestly tells him before answering, “I don’t think so. It’s just, well, grandfather never made a mistake when beveling a blade. He was a master orewick after all. Little to no mistakes meant that I never saw how he might go about fixing a problem.” Macyn stares unimpressed at a proud granddaughter. “We’ll go slow,” she offers with a smile.

By the third Sunday of October, Macyn successfully completes the Hizukuri stage of the blade, properly shaping it with only a handful of minor scares, giving him a great sense of accomplishment. Not only did having Sen watch the entire process like a hawk, but using black ink to draw straight lines where the bevels should be helped Macyn visualize his hammer strikes. With the lines and her explicit instruction, they shaped the geometry of the blade slowly, and it startled Macyn how good it came out. He had no idea the type of sword they were making was the popular Japanese Katana.

“Why isn’t it curved?” he asks after admiring his work. “I’ve seen katanas before and they always have a curve to them.”

“That is a three-part answer: the claying of the sword, the differential heat treatment, and the quenching,” Sen answers from beside him, also admiring their work. At Macyn’s confused face, she answers his unasked question. “The entire blade will be heated to about one thousand five hundred degrees, then rapidly cooled in water. The curving of the blade happens when the edge cools down faster than the spine and that only happens through differential heat treating. There’s still much to do before then, however. For now, we remove the roughness of the surface and refine the blade.”

With that, Sen proceeds to instruct Macyn on how to use the sander of the Gud Arm. Tapping the sanders wrapped around the top dais activated that feature of the Gud Arm, quickly unfolding and vertically rounding out around the large anvil like a planetary ring as tall as him that spins like a large spinning wheel. Macyn can increase or decrease the grit of the wheel-like belt as well as the speed of the rotations simply by lifting or lowering his hand beneath the rotating belt. Facing the outer face of the belt with a towel wrapped around his nose and mouth and wearing large goggles he found in the cellar, he uses a smaller grit to remove the excess material from the surface of the blade, making a large number of sparks, and with Sen’s vigilant instruction, refining the geometry of the sword.

Macyn knew it was coming but, nothing could mentally prepare him for the volley of tests the entire week consists of. Though it’s exams week, Ventus, Ignus, and Aqua are still on edge from the Clash of Heirs, while Terra mages enjoy the drama from a distance. Masters and Roth were given detention along with a warning and Marnamei seems to be the only one very upset with their behavior, going so far as to ignore them both.

It’s no surprise Macyn’s best grade was from Numeralculus and considering how many times he has to duplicate runes, he does fairly well in Runology. His most challenging test is in Wardcraft, utilizing his managuard against Melankomas himself in something he affectionately calls The 33 Taps. A mage can either hold a complete managuard for thirty-three minutes, or, take thirty-three mana push from Melankomas.

Ever since the Clash of Heirs, everyone wants to defend against thirty-three of Melankomas’ mana push. Most make it to twenty, however, only the conclusively strong in Saturday’s class are able to successfully defend against all thirty-three of their champion professor’s mana push; Wang, Roth, Jorn, Ryce, Hew, and Rosston. Afterward successfully

defending against all thirty-three pushes, Melankomas would ask if they would like to try and guard against a more powerful push. Of all six consenting mages, none but Marnamei could hold his push back.

Having manned a smelter for hours, Macyn is the only one who chooses to hold a heavy bucket of sand over his head on a platform constructed of his mana for thirty-three minutes. Holding his shock-resistant guard isn't so different from constantly feeding a rune, and though just as tired, seconds before he reaches thirty-three minutes, Melankomas asks if he would like to guard against a strong push after his time. Just as worked up by the Clash of Heirs as everyone else, he accepts, and at minute thirty-four, Melankomas' right hand open palm pushes his robust mana. Macyn's guard is immediately obliterated, shaking his brain and knocking him off his feet. On his back against the soft-charmed stone, his ears are ringing and his balance inverts every second, making him feel like he's swimming.

He's disoriented as Melankomas helps him up and the professor pats him hard on the shoulder, relaying, "very good. I count endurance among the best advantages, however, it can also be used against you. If you pair creativity with your endurance, you would be someone to fear."

As it was only October, Macyn had wondered about the odd timing of the tests, until his head of house, Ryce, explains, "all students must turn in a permission slip before week's end; signed by your head of house and your parents if you wish to attend the second festival day of Samhain. If you are caught off-campus without consent, you can expect the most severe punishment. Is that understood?"

The well-rehearsed, "yes, professor," chorused to perfection. On his way to Numeralculus, Macyn asks Sen, "Per usual, Ryce doesn't explain things for people who weren't born here. What's Samhain?"

"Samhain," Sen begins to say from her wand. "Is a festival; Gaelic in origin. It signifies the end of the harvest and the start of winter. Every year, the festival lasts three days—the 29th through the 31st—so there will be no school on those days. It's what the lower order calls Halloween."

"And with Sunday..." Macyn's eyes widen in clear disbelief. "Oh. Oh, oh, oh. Four days off... Four days!" he calls excited, fanning himself with his hands. "I don't even know what to do with myself!"

"This is the best time to finish the sword," Sen suggests. "If we can find some Red Buckeye wood, get our hands on some leather, maybe create some ornaments for decorative appeal, we can finish. It'll be hours of work but I have little doubt we can do it. We may even have a spare day to sell it."

"Wait," Macyn gasps, turning around only to realize Sen is in the wand. "Are you saying you want to sneak out and sell the sword?"

"Of course not," Sen tells him. "Breaking the rules is bad. The three days of Samhain start with a student festival, here on campus, followed by a Menhir festival in the Square of the market and a final grand festival for every mage, student or parent here in Erudite. There will be stalls everywhere. We can pick a spot, put a sign up with the price, and if we're lucky, a mage in a festive mood with a good eye may buy it for more than we need."

"Finally!" Macyn yells so loud, everyone within earshot turns toward the sudden shout. Embarrassed but unable to wipe the smile from his face, he picks up the pace. "Okay. Done. The plan is set. We're getting everything we need this Sunday. Finish. Sell. Then



we get my mom an arbitrator and we get her back here so I can totally ignore her for not writing. See how she likes it.”

“I’m sure there’s a perfectly good reason,” Sen sympathetically argues.

“We’ve been over this,” Macyn huffs. “Your guild can’t help, there’s nothing wrong with the post, phones don’t work here, and there’s no other way of contacting them. There’s nothing wrong on our end!”

Refusing to let the argument lie, Sen demands, “is this how your mother would want you to fight the enemy?” Macyn whips around again, and again realizes she’s still in the wand and not floating beside him. Rushing off the path, he steps behind a tree.

Once Macyn searches the area, he declares, “out.” Sen manifests, levitating much higher than him and staring him down. “No, no. Don’t do that!” But Sen crosses her arm and stays at her elevated height. Refusing to look up at her, he speaks while moving, pacing back and forth. “You understand more than anyone that I can’t do anything without mynt! And I won’t have any until I sell this sword! How is that not fighting? Not to mention, she’s not fighting. Nothing has come from her end.”

Looking down at him pacing by the tree’s trunk, she descends a little and softly says, “there’s very little she can do from where she is, but I don’t doubt whatever she can do, she’s doing it.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Macyn shrugs, growing more irritated by this same conversation. “I don’t know, do I? It’s prison! She could be dead for all I know!”

“Don’t say that,” Sen passionately asserts, rushing down to stringently meet his eyes. “We don’t know where the problem is or what’s happening, but maybe we can ask.”

“Ask?” Macyn looks at her skeptically. “We’ve already asked. Who else but the retro-post is going to know if there’s a problem with the post?”

“We can ask Erudite,” Sen returns, but with an extra second of thought adds, “maybe they can lend us their spriggan to contact your father.”

“I- You said, it’s for official use only.”

“It is, and we’re fighting it,” Sen implicitly states and Macyn can see the appeal in her ghostly eyes as she continues. “We can make a case, can’t we? We can say this is for official use. You never know, they might say yes.”

“But they might say no.”

“Think about it from different angles,” she responds ardently. “If we make a compelling case, how can they say no?” Macyn is mulling it over when the warning chime sounds. “So?” Sen raises her eyebrows in question. “Sunday?”

Macyn huffs in defeat, then nods his head, holding out his wand so Sen can return to it.

Early Sunday morning, with the white sun’s reflecting rise, Macyn makes his way to the administration building at the center of campus. Before reaching the entrance doors, he spots Mrs. Makynli and Marnamei, both in lovely casual clothes; corset gray and white dress for the lady and black and white vest and jeans on Marnamei. They were leisurely walking the gardens in the first courtyard in front of the palace and at the sight of Mrs. Makynli, Macyn decides she’s the best person to plead his case to. He walks toward them without any intention of interrupting as they seem deeply engrossed in conversation.

Macyn and Sen wait a respectable distance away as the two are having a

conversation, though Macyn finds it odd he can't even hear the faintest sounds of their voices. Looking on as their mouths move without uttering a sound, a dragonfly swoops and buzzes around but every time it gets near them, the buzzing stops. It takes him a beat to realize they have a privacy ward around them, so no one can overhear them. Fortunately, it's not an especially long wait.

Makynli waves her hand in a semi-circle, no doubt clearing the privacy charm, and they walk out of the regal garden toward ghost and mage. Macyn takes no more than a couple of steps toward them when Marnamei immediately states, "please don't ask me about Everette or Solo or prophecies, or anything. It's not your business and it's disrespectful to pry."

It's the first time Macyn wonders how much pressure she must be under to lose this much composure as she's always seen as poised and friendly. Macyn clears his throat, mismatching eyes flickering between the two before landing on Makynli. "I actually wanted to speak to Mrs. Makynli."

Marnamei visibly shakes a spell in surprise, then embarrassed, she turns to Makynli, who smiles and says, "just give us a minute." Marnamei nods before turning to Macyn, offering an apologetic smile and walking a few meters away to give them privacy. "What can I help you with?"

"Well, as you know, mail is very important to a student when they're crazy far away from home. It's..." Macyn pauses to gulp and rethinks what he rehearsed to say. "The thing is, I want to speak with my family and I can only use the retro-post. But there's no word from my family. Since I haven't heard from them, I wanted to ask if I can use Erudite's spriggan to send them a message... and, maybe, get one back?"

"Right," says Makynli, with a nod, pursed lips, and squinting eyes. "I'm afraid that is out of the question. The policy is very clear on the use of school services for students and the use of the university's spriggan is not one of them. If you have a doehawk, you're more than welcome to use it, or ask a friend to borrow theirs."

"...I," Macyn is confused about what point to address first. "No. I mean, I don't have- Hasn't there ever been an exception to that rule?"

"There has, but not since Marshal Hew's tenure," Makynli answers. "He's a stout believer in the rules."

"Of course he is," Macyn mutters under his breath. "I don't- What if I didn't have any other options besides retro-post? Couldn't there be another way for me to contact my family? It's been over four months. I haven't heard from them since I got here. There's got to be something we can do."

"Oh, my," Makynli starts with raised eyebrows. "That's quite some time. I understand how you must feel, but I still can't allow you the use of the university's spriggan. It's just one of those things."

"I..." Macyn starts, pausing a moment to be sure of the fight before rolling the dice. "I don't think you understand," he alleges with a lot of nervous effort. "I don't have anyone here on Menhir. No family, no friends, besides Sen. This isn't a normal situation."

Mrs. Makynli's warm eyes are a beacon of sympathy but she shakes her head again. "I'm really, truly sorry to hear that." She looks over to Marnamei before returning her attention to Macyn. "Let me speak to the Dean of Students. I can't guarantee anything, but if you'll give me some time, I may be able to do something. Is that okay?"

"I, uh, yeah," Macyn says in fortunate shock. He looks over to Sen, who nods

in support. His excitement nearly relieves him of his courtesy, but he turns back to Makynli and states, “yeah. That would be great. I’ll be in Anthony later if anything comes up. Thank you.”

Mrs. Makynli nods to him before he hurries away, giving Marnamei a quick wave on his departure.

“Look at you,” Sen enthusiastically whispers. “Slaying enemies.”

Macyn laughs as he hurries towards breakfast, expressing, “maybe I should write a letter, just in case something good happens.”

An hour after breakfast, Macyn is by the cliff manafoming his broken smelter back into working order. With the ore Root has been leaving in the conclave for them, Macyn has everything he needs to begin the tortuously long smelting process. On his third hour of manning the tuyères, he begins his third shovel of ore when Root shows up. She’s unable to get his attention as his focus is completely on the smelter, and blasting high-intensity flames out the flute of the smelter creates a lot of noise. It isn’t until Sen gives him leave to rest that he’s marginally startled to see her sitting on a rock at the entrance, waiting for him.

“Hallel... dauen,” he greets her between deep breaths, as his slurry-like legs take him to his bag.

“Hillel Terr,” she warily responds, eying him with mild concern.

Wiping his hands on his rune-ruined pants, he grabs the rune notes and hands them to her, then slumps down against a large boulder. Leaning on a rock far from the raging heat of the smelter, Macyn can feel his body start to pleasantly cool in the freezing atmosphere. Root takes the notes, and per usual, looks them over. The slightest uptick at the corner of her full pink lips is the only indication she’s happy with them.

“This is good,” she responds and is about to leave, however, she asks a question instead. “Do you think you can bring more than four pages next week? It’s just, I go through them all in a day or two. Then I have to wait five or six days for more.”

Macyn wearily rotates his loopy head in her direction, barely seeing her through heavily hooded eyes. “...I’ll try,” he heaves.

“How can you stand that heat?” Root can’t help but ask, looking past Macyn at the calmer yet still fire flaring smelter.

As he cools down, Macyn mentions, “I like... the heat.”

“You look terrible,” she flatly states. Macyn just grunts, though she can’t tell if it’s an agreement, disagreement, or he just didn’t hear. “Are you... going to be okay?”

“Yeah,” he exhales audibly. “Just a few more... hours. Actually... just give me a second... to catch my breath.”

Root looks conflicted. With clear reservations, she lowers herself to his eye level. “I’m not doing this to help you, or your kind,” she declares to a curious Macyn. On her knees, she extends her left hand and gathers moisture from the air until crystal clear water grows to a large blob, sloshing to and fro. “This is- This is for more pages of notes,” she sternly assures him. Her consternation is so strong her thick glasses slide some down the bridge of her nose as she says, “here. At least stay hydrated.”

Moving the bubble of water toward his mouth, Macyn is genuinely dazed with astonishment. With a sudden uptick in energy, he leans forward. His lips meet the cool crystalline water and instantly, he feels the mineral in the life-sustaining liquid tickle his whole mouth and jaw. His brow relaxes, his eyes close, and he can’t ever remember revitalizing water tasting so good, drinking down to her skin, which she quickly pulls away upon contact.

“Okay,” Root asserts loudly, standing and wiping her hand on her loose, form concealing white and tan clothes. “Okay, so. You were saying.”

“Thanks,” Macyn conveys with a smile. “I feel much better. How’d you do that?”

“Nymphs have a certain affinity for forests and water,” she casually answers. “You were about to say,” she rushes uncomfortably.

“Uh, yeah,” Macyn starts, pushing against the boulder to hoists himself up. “I was going to ask if you’d like to trade. We need leather or lace... how long Sen?”

“Several feet,” Sen’s voice sounds from the wand.

“We also need wood,” Macyn continues. “Red Buckeye wood, if you know where some might be. Do that and I’ll bring you... ten pages?”

“Twenty.”

“Twenty?” he gasps outraged. “That’s-”

“I can get you what you need today, it might take me a few hours,” she assures him. “You have days off for Samhain, don’t you? You could copy it then.”

“...Fine,” Macyn begrudgingly agrees, already dreading the hours of writing twenty pages. “But only because I’m finding some cool stuff on intent runes and warding runes. There are whole books on just those two subjects.”

Root posture wilts a little as she suggests, “I was hoping you might lean more towards organic rune integration.”

“No,” Macyn energetically reacts. “No, no. From everything I’ve been told and read, applying runes to complex living organisms is bad; *very* bad. I’m drawing the line there.”

“Alright,” Root concedes disgruntled before walking away.

Accepting the sad feelings of watching her go, Macyn asks Sen, “you think she’s starting to like me?”

From the wand, she answers, “I believe the less we think about her, the better.”

“She gave me water,” he can’t help but say with a grin and can almost feel Sen shake her head in irritation.

Root doesn’t return by the time the bloom steel cools. With sufficient daylight to make it back to Anthony, Macyn has little worry of night creatures or deathless’ stalking him through the trek back. Still, the sledgehammer with a cumbersome globule of dirt-covered steel at the base is very heavy, egging him to move with purpose. However, with Macyn’s next step, the forest falls abruptly silent.

The howling wind stops often enough, ending the rain of falling leaves and the rustling of treetops and shrubbery but never for minutes. The eerie lack of wind and noise has a nervous Macyn begin to question if a Deathless is stalking him. Looking around, all he observes is a maze of forest stillness, offering no answers. Walking at a quicker pace with hyper-vigilant eyes scanning the dense vegetation, he can’t understand why the birds have stopped calling, or the bugs have stopped clicking. In the solitude of the forest, no sound exists but Macyn’s rustling feet and labored breathing.

At a snap, Macyn stops to look around the tall trees, asking Sen, “is it Root?”

Sen searches the immediate area for the beguiling nymph. “I sense mana,” Sen states, floating higher and looking toward the left. “...I can’t say if it’s her. It seems larger... and running?” Sen slowly floats closer to the anomaly her ghostly sight can detect when every colorful firefly around them extinguish their light all at once. Curiously looking left and right,

Macyn hasn't a clue what to make of the lights out when Sen abruptly turns to him, yelling sharply like a whip cutting through the silence, "RUN!"

Startled by her scream, he turns to see if she's alright as she quickly floats to him. "A Deathless-" he starts to ask but she's yelling in his face now, "Leave! Drop the hammer and go! Go, go, go!"

Robust panic sets deep in his spine and adrenaline as powerful as the fear on Sen's face coat his muscles. Macyn drops the hammer with the bloom steel at the end and runs. Kicking dirt, Macyn is sprinting with everything he has for seconds, wondering hopelessly if he's running in the right direction when he's suddenly mana pushed in the back harder than Melankomas ever has. His chest rockets ahead from the force of the blow and his bone creaking torso forces his forward momentum face-first into the rough skin of a tree, opening a large gash above his eye and busting his lip. With a wet thud, his feet slid off the floor and he lands on his back before rolling and skidding to a stop. The biting collision dazes him and adds multiple blurs of Sen who's desperately pleading with him to move.

"Please, please, please, move!" she pleads, craning her neck up to look somewhere he can't discern. "Macyn! He's coming!"

Alarm and confusion rush his senseless mind as he forces himself to get to his feet. With a harrowing grunt and whimper, he pushes himself away from the blood-stained floor into a broken gallop. His knees wobble and somehow his waist feels disjointed. His breathing is coarse and scratchy, and by the time he passes the nearest tree, his ears are flooded with the sound of his racing heartbeat, yet he can still hear a loud snap of a twig behind him. Without thought, Macyn turns to the sound.

"NO-" Sen screams as the next mana blast hits him square in the chest. Macyn grunts gutturally as the wind is kicked out of him. His vision blurs until he hits the grass and rolls until he only sees treetops pointing at the stars above. Deprived of any oxygen, his throaty scream of pain is hollow and hardly audible. A spiking hot pain spreads from his chest like hot liquid leaking, radically expanding to his aching ribs, his hollowed-out lungs, and down his feverishly cold spine, Macyn screams much loudly. His gasping coughs feel like a thousand little needles stabbing him all over his torso.

Macyn's body doesn't know how to react. He doesn't know how to think. Pain is his only motivation, and in his desperate need to relieve it, he attempts to roll over in hopes for such relief. He forces his legs under him, but on his paper-thin knees and wobbling elbows, Macyn's hit yet again with another mana push, blasting him down into the hard ground, rolling and skidding for several feet.

Sliding to a stop on hard cold dirt, his agony renews and intensifies, erupting like an explosion from his right leg and hip and heightening his open mouth scream to a decibel human ears can't hear. The veins on his tense, dirt sweat neck thicken as he desperately attempts to escape the pain but only enhancing it.

*'Something's broken,'* his blaring mind panics. *'Broken! Broken! Broken!'*

He can hardly hear Sen begging him to move from beside him over his wailing. His vision made him feel like he was in a lopsided tunnel and the sparkling stars of Sen's desperate face darken by the second. Macyn's coughing rips an explosion of pain from his ribs, making him turn over for any relief. With half his vision gone dark, the other dimming and oddly red, Macyn can reluctantly make out the daunting danger approaching him. It wasn't a Deathless, as he feared. It's a tall, hooded and cloaked silhouette, dressed dark as night and very

much human.

But for the simple thought, *'I'm going to die,'* pure fear inexplicably pushes him to force his limbs to push away from this cloaked evil. Coughing blood, Macyn grips the dirt savagely to try and pull himself away when he's suddenly lifted off the ground and hauled backward recalling every iota of pain he had temporarily forgotten. The abrupt stop against a tree stuns him still. Annetta and June sitting at the dining table, his father cooking, Sen rolling her eyes, his mother's smiling face enter his mind's desperate pleas, yet they're all silent. There will be no help for him. All he can feel is his weight in boiling dull pain, and then nothing but black.

Macyn passes out in his attacker's grasp.

"Go away," Sen bawls as she attempts multiple times to pass through the man but his cloak is enchanted to protect him even from her. With Macyn hanging from the man's grip on his dress shirt, battered and broken, the cloaked man begins to teleport.

Sen can sense the patterned water-waving form that'll allow the kidnapper to disappear from Menhir without a trace. She knows no one is coming, no help can be relied on, and her desperation grows exponentially. Sen breaks at the only thing she can think to do. Hovering behind Macyn's bleeding limp form, she quickly plunges one hand into his chest cavity and her other into his head, and with a moment of concentration, she pulls her shade into him.

The glorious responses of her, of Macyn's senses, overwhelms her spirit fantastically. Sen has felt nothing for so long that even the immense pain throbbing from her-his chest feels great. Opening her-his eyes, the likeness of the normal forest scenery is now dreary, cloudy, and dark, and looking up she-he sees an inversion of liveliness in the black sky. The hooded figure is about to disappear with her-him when she uses Macyn's dirt-covered hand to touch the closest part of the unsuspecting attacker, his chest, and unleashes a tsunami of burning electrical charge into her foe unlike anything Macyn has ever produced. She can hear the grown man's scream sing its beautiful sensation in her-his ears for several long seconds and she-he only stops when they both drop like dead weight to the floor.

Her body, Macyn's body, is cracked and broken, leaking red from his swelling face and chest, but she moves nonetheless. Slowly to her side, to her hands, then knees before rising to uncoordinated feet. Not to escape or flee, but to destroy. The possessed boy is surprised when the cloaked figure manages to struggle to his knees after the attack she administered. For a moment, Sen wonders how enchanted that cloak is before she lunges at him, tackling the larger man to the ground.

With more strength than Macyn possesses, she tries to rip off the cloak to get at the man's weak frail skin and manages to get as deep as some necklace before she's mana pushed hard, nearly five meters away. Macyn's possessed body moves in inhuman ways as it cartwheels and lands on all fours, backward. Tilting her head nearly parallel with the ground, she glares hungrily at the attacker, more adamant than ever of destroying him. She crawls to him on hands and feet with the efficiency of a spider, before extending her hand and returning a mana push of her own, hitting the struggling man with the force of a cannon into a tree.

There's an audibly satisfying crack before she sprints and leaps meters high to clamp herself to groaning and bleeding man. A single spark is the only warning before she hits him with another mana converted electrical burst. In the man's scream, the tree bracing this skirmish splinters and cracks off large chunks of bark unable to handle the channel of electricity.

They're both propelled from the explosive energy, hitting the dirt ground with large knife-sized splinters punched and poking out of their backs.

The man struggles and Sen can hear that he's hurt before he takes off into the denseness of the forest. With large splinters of bark poking out of her arm, shoulder, and back, Sen takes her body away. Unaware of the boy she's possessed, Sen decides to head to a safe place and hunt for a new host. She can't recall exactly what the safe place is but she moves instinctively, opposite the attacker's direction.

Sen makes it to a field and her impression of the direction of her safety is comfortable. Despite it breaking down, she continues to move the ravaged body and makes it to a domicile that gives her a semblance of asylum. When she hears a scream, her neck twists further than it should to find two females, one holding a winged animal of sorts. It's entirely possible they would make a better host than her current inhabitant, and takes a step toward them. One female covers the other in a protective stance, but it doesn't matter to Sen. She'll take her prize by force if she has to.

The one protecting the other begins to chant and the words spoken much too fast instantly tell Sen they're evil words. Words that should never be spoken. Before Sen can attack her, however, everything turns black, and then the feeling of sound, sight, touch, pain, hemorrhaging, temperature, is all gone. Sen is floating above the body of a boy... a badly hurt boy... and then she recalls it all.

"Macyn!" is all she manages to cry out before Sen is forced and sealed into the wand.

## Seclusion

The smell of cinnamon is the first thing that baits Macyn to open his weak gray and hazel eyes. The darkness of the oak vaulted ceiling is the first thing he sees and his grumbling voice slowly alerts him to how sore and dry his throat is. Breathing in, he can sense the foul taste in his dry mouth, like it's been days since he's brushed. The irritation of his eyes needs to be rubbed but he finds he can't lift his right hand. His left seems okay to move but shakes terribly, like he's never used those muscles before. His right arm feels itchy and his head hurts. His whole body aches with pin-pricking sensations when he attempts to sit up, but he's interrupted by Nurse M'Curre elegantly walking in with a tray of potions for the bedside table.

"Nur... M'Cu," Macyn's croaking voice struggles to say.

Gracing the boy with a reassuring smile, she says in her sing-song sweet voice, "welcome back, Mr. Blende." She brings over a vial of orange liquid. Placing her soft palm at the base of his skull, she tilts his head back as she brings the vial to his dry lips. A sudden swirling rush of warmth coats his mouth and throat, helping relieve some of the skin splitting strain. She asks, "how's that feel?"

"...Better," Macyn croaks barely above a whisper. "This is the infirmary."

"Yes," M'Curre answers. "Do you remember what happened?"

Macyn closes his eyes a moment to recall the incident that led him there, but he can't remember. "Did someone... kick my ass?" Macyn wonders aloud, though more to himself than Nurse M'Curre.

"It'll come back to you soon," Nurse M'Curre guarantees. "In the meantime, I want you to have plenty of rest. There are many potions in your system, so rest, and soon, some sages are going to want to speak with you."

Before Macyn can ask M'Curre who, she passes her palm over his eyes and he falls to slumber. In no time at all, Macyn wakes again, though, more because of the dull throbbing pain at his chest than anything else. Ever the vigilant healer, Nurse M'Curre is there to place her gentle hand on his forehead, asking him, "how do you feel?"

"...Like crap," Macyn honestly tells her.

"Good," she answers. "The blood vessels surrounding the RBA- ah, that's rapid bone accelerant seem to be developing nicely. That's good medicine. I don't imagine you'll continue to feel pain for much longer. Care for some water?"

Macyn isn't especially thirsty, however, if she's going to feed him, then he's more than okay with that arrangement. Nodding his head, she hands him a glass of water and he smirks at his unreasonable disappointment. Hold the glass of water with his right hand shakes so badly, he has to take it with his left, which is only a marginally better grip. Taking a few gulps he hands a shaky glass back to her.

"There are some people here who want to ask you some questions," Nurse M'Curre slowly explains. "But if it's too distressing, in any way, I'll be right here to kick them straight out. I don't play nice when it comes to my patients and they know that, so they'll be on their best behavior, okay?"

Macyn nods his head with a weak smile. Seconds after his consent, two poliwick, a man with slick black hair in a long dark cloak holding a briefcase, Hildernic Ryce,



and Reinhilda Von Brandt all walk and station themselves around the foot of his bed. It's an unexpected crowd but true to her word, M'Curre stays by his side. Before anyone can ask anything, the man in the black cloak steps forward, and almost immediately, Macyn forgets about everyone as the black-cloaked stranger brings it all back.

Macyn's body immediately tenses. Somehow his breathing constricts in his desperate need for more air. He takes loud deep breathes however he can't even tell if his lungs catch the air or just spit it back out. He feels the strong grip of M'Curre on his shoulders and he immediately wants to push her away but an ominous bell goes off in his head, warning him it would be a bad idea to push her away. In fact, the more he looks at her the more comforted he feels. Her shimmering green eyes convey safety along with her words. "Everything is alright now, Macyn. You're alright here. This is a safe place."

Macyn dumbly nods along with M'Curre's head movements, and slowly his rash of nerves is miraculously soothed. Finally taking a deep breath, he looks around for Sen, however, he can't see her, prompting him to ask, "where- where's Sen?"

"They will explain that," M'Curre easily explains, keeping her comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Mr. Blende," Von Brandt starts, drawing his attention. "These are IPW Haruni and Rosston." Haruni is caramel-skinned with black hair and Rosston has freckled, pale skin with bright red hair. They both nod at him. "They will be taking your statement. And this," she indicates to the blue-eyed dark-haired man in the cloak, "is arbiter Amsel from Imperium Hall. He'll also be filing this meeting with the Hall. We're all here to discuss with you the circumstance behind your possession."

"Wait," Macyn whips his head back, shaking his head. "No. I wasn't possessed. I- I was attacked," he yells, recalling fragments of his ordeal. "Where's Sen?" He asks, adding, "she'll tell you."

"Inhabitant Sen Kurosawa," Amsel starts, taking notes with an old fashioned pen and notepad. "Is in containment awaiting exorcism."

"What?" Macyn exclaims, trying to sit up but for the strong hand on his shoulder. Macyn's mind tries to make sense of why Sen is the one in trouble.

"She possessed you," the female poliwick states, Haruni states. "By law, that carries a heavy punishment."

Amsel tacks on his logic. "We only need your recollection of the incident and then we'll destroy her for illegal possession."

"Are you crazy?!" Macyn sits up, despite M'Curre's hand. "You can't do that!"

"Stolid," Ryce starts. "You should be grateful Mrs. Makynli was there to save you or you would most assuredly be dead."

Macyn glares at Ryce, yelling back, "I'd be dead or taken if it wasn't for her!" This is enough to give the room pause and Macyn pushes on as he follows his train of fragmented memories. "I... I was in the woods... when I was attacked by someone dressed in black. I ran. Sen told me to run, and, I really tried, but... I couldn't get away. He-" Macyn's eyes start to prickle with wet heat as he forces his croaking voice to convey, "he had me when I passed out. I don't know if Sen possessed me or not, but if I'm here, it's only because she saved my life!"

In the silence of the room, so much is being said through the eyes as each adult stare at one another, likely to see if anyone believes him or not. The doubt in their eyes says it

all and Macyn further yells, "I'm telling the truth! Ask Sen. She'll tell you."

Von Brandt's stern voice is the first to ask, "are you saying someone tried to kidnap you?"

"Yes," Macyn stresses with a tired heave. "You said you needed my recollection, like in Historie. That'll show you what happened, right? So take it. Whatever you have to do, just don't exorcise Sen."

The adults all turn to Nurse M'Curre, who answers, "it's possible, but I wouldn't be surprised if the recollection doesn't manifest. His injuries were extensive and he ingested many potions, not to mention possession can be a memory altering event. If he is willing, I will allow it."

"I'm willing," Macyn declares quickly. "Just bring Sen back."

The adults all look at each other but it's Von Brandt who takes the lead. Turning to them she assuages, "I think we all have immediate superiors to contact. If what Mr. Blende says is true, someone tried to kidnap a student directly from campus." Von Brandt turns Macyn and relays, "we will speak to your inhabitant."

"And then bring her back?" Macyn asks but with a hint of desperate demand.

"After we learn everything we talk can about that. A decision will have to be made on this matter," is all the decisive woman is willing to say at the moment. Except for Ryce, the rest leave as M'Curre tries to get Macyn to relax. Ryce takes a seat nearby but mostly ignores Macyn.

"Professor Ryce, I don't believe I can allow that negative energy so close to my patient," M'Curre looks at him like she's trying to look through a dense fog. "Would you like a cheerio or would you prefer to step outside?"

"If you'll excuse me," Ryce stately states before getting up.

"Cheer up professor," M'Curre totes. "It's not like you lost a student. And there's always next Samhain."

Ryce nods to her sternly before quickly exiting. M'Curre mumbles something intelligible as she hands Macyn another vial of dark green potion to drink but his slumber is a terror. He recalls flashes of his battered and scraped hands, running endlessly through the confining forest, and the black daemon it trapped him with. The worst of it was how certain of death he felt. That consuming feeling is greater than him, like he can't hope to contain his helplessness, his weakness, his birthmark. He's nothing and no one to the people that matter to him and the only thing that wants him are vile murderous villains.

A palm on his cheek brings him back to the infirmary, only now M'Curre is wiping the tears from his eyes. His hand snaps to his face and feels the wetness there, but when he expects to see tears, all he sees is blood on his hands. He jerks back and M'Curre easily takes his shoulders again. He looks at her and again, a feeling of genuine comfort washes over him. She seems even more beautiful as she eases him into the comfort of warmth and well-being.

Suddenly his resolve withers and his face cracks sorrowfully as the tears storm out. M'Curre takes him in her arms as he lets it all go, crying like he never has, not simply for the traumatic event he went through, but for his isolation on Menhir, for his lack of letters, his lack of family.

"Shhh," she whispers. "It's okay. You're okay. Just let it all out."

His eyes feel dry, puffy, and rounder by the time he's done, and she steps away. In the absence of her warmth, he can feel the loss of solace but he no longer feels like his doom

is a step away. “Was that your allure?” He sullenly asks.

“It is,” M'Curre easily answers.

Curious enough to blush he still asks, “I thought they only make you feel... uh, well, you know.”

“That is the enchantment of untrained Nymphs,” she answers him with a wide smile. “Our unique genealogy allows us to exhibit a sense of serenity and emotion to others, not unlike being entranced by the sight of a beautiful landscape. Have you met a springtide from the Haven?”

“What?” Macyn looks away, which he immediately realizes is the wrong cue to give out. “No, I read about them, er, you, or I mean Nymphs, because, you know. You're beautifu- Oh, no, not- just shoot me now.” Macyn is flustered by his word vomit trying to cover for Root. He slides into bed and raises the covers over his head.

“Thank you for the compliment,” she says in her sweet voice. Like a sudden loss of warmth, in the dark quiet under the covers, Macyn sees it all happen again and a chill up his spine brings his legs to his chest, wrapping them with his arms. He has no way of shutting off the replay in his mind, and after a few minutes, Macyn learns he hates the silence.

Hours later, he's visited by two strangers. He meets a pompous man by the name of Trojan Meegeran, who is the lead investigator in the recent kidnappings and something of a celebrity. He seemed to ask his questions like there's always a microphone in front of him and more than anything he simply couldn't believe Macyn was a stolid who could craft mana. His assistant intervenes after the third time Trojan asked Macyn to craft mana. A large man with a bald head but has a full red beard by the name of Bushkey.

“Perhaps we should relocate a copy of his memory, sir.” But Meegeren is suddenly far more interested in Nurse M'Curre, who ignores the lead detective to give Macyn a small meal. As Meegeren attempts to engage in conversation with the beautiful nurse, Bushkey asks, “have you ever given a memory before?” Macyn shakes his head no. “Oh, it's the easiest thing in the world,” he continues. The large man with large hands delicately places a round piece of parchment the size of a thumb on the table in front of Macyn, then instructs, “you take that. It's got a solution on it. You place it right at the center of your forehead, craft your mana around you as you think of that time. Takes no more than a couple of seconds.”

“Do I have to think about it?” Macyn asks.

The big man shakes his red beard and answers, “not in detail. Simply think of the time and your mind and mana'll do the rest.”

Apprehensively, Macyn does as he's told, taking the parchment in hand and placing the oily thing on his forehead. Calling on his mana to spread a thin layer all around him, he hesitantly thinks about the time they wish to know more about.

Taking the suddenly patterned parchment, Bushkey states, “we'll keep this for our investigation. Only those who need to see it will, you have our word.” Macyn can't return the man's smile.

Dean Von Brandt speaks with both investigators for a few moments before Bushkey and Meegeren leave. The Dean of Students stands before his bed and reports, “everything has been examined by the investigators as well as qualified faculty, and does indeed align with the event as you described.”

Feeling some relief for being believed, he still cares more for his friend, asking, “and Sen?”

“First, you must understand,” the Dean begins. “It’s the law to exorcise all spirits who possess a human, no exceptions. However, when we all came upon the same truth we spoke with her and she further corroborates your statement.”

“Where is she,” Macyn demands. “What did you do to her?”

“The Hall has final say on her fate,” Von Brandt softly states. “Regardless of her reasons, she broke the law.”

“To save my life!” Macyn wails.

“I understand,” she admits. “But there’s nothing we can do. I’m here to inform you, you’ll be escorted to your dorm shortly.” She leaves without even giving him a chance to ask for more details.

It’s evening when a deeply frustrated Macyn is escorted back to Anthony by Poliwick Haruni and his head of house, Ryce. Eyes downcast, the young mage ignores the small sporadic pockets of students that see him. He ignores the beauty of Erudite, the mountain of Menhir, and when his head of house left. IPW Haruni is professional enough to take him straight to his room, but upon closing the door behind him, to the emptiness of his blank off-white room, Macyn sees it all differently now. It’s not comfortable, it’s not safe, and more clearly than anything, it’s not home. This is the first time he’s ever been anywhere without Sen, and thought his mana feels much better for it, it sickens him to feel so balanced.

He hardly sleeps that night. Every minute feels like a struggle yet every time he feels a sense of slumber, anxiety of the unknown jolt him back awake. The following night is no better, and with the exception of meals brought to him and bathroom breaks, Macyn stays in bed either going over every way he’s responsible for his failings, zoning out on time, or waking from a nightmare.

Saturday afternoon finds Macyn in bed finally close to being exhausted enough to sleep, when an unexpected knock on the door jerks him up and alert. He opens the door to find his runes professor staring him down with clear annoyance. He steps aside, allowing Arbitrator Amsel to come forward, and almost immediately, Macyn realizes the Hall has decided Sen’s fate. Certain it’s not good news and they’ve only come to inform him that she’s been exorcised, he’s already contemplating what further need there is to staying on Menhir.

Amsel interrupts his thoughts, opening his briefcase as he greets, “afternoon.” The man pulls out a silver tube and bids the young mage, “just one moment, if you would.” After he removes the sealing ward of the silver tube with his mana, he opens the top and removes Macyn’s patterned clay wand.

Sen immediately rushes out, crying out, “Macyn!”

“Sen!” he calls feeling the eerie blare that’s unmistakably her distorting his mana. Naturally rushing for a hug, they meet in the middle, however, she simply passes through him. Turning, he tries again, but she raises her palm, halting him, then slowly bows. Smiling, he imitates her, bowing as well.

Ryce’s voice interrupts, “that’s quite enough of that, if you please. Some of us would like to keep our appetite.”

Upright, Sen voices her happiness. “Thank the stars you’re alright. They wouldn’t tell me anything.”

“Yeah, me neither,” he parallels.

“If I may,” the arbitrator interjects. “Imperium Hall ruling is nolo contendere, which essentially means we do not wish to pursue this investigation. They’ve taken into account

the circumstances behind Mr. Blende's possession, witness testimony, as well as the lead into the kidnappings. In light of all that, the Imperium is willing to overlook this one-time offense, however, any future infractions will be met with swift and unequivocal destruction. That is all."

Ryce and Amsel leave and Macyn finds small comfort in holding his clay wand again when Sen asks, "you're okay, aren't you?"

She's in his room again, finally returned to his side, and yet his dorm continues to feel out of place. A dreadful feeling slowly crawls up his from his stomach. He's breathing shortens and quickens as Macyn walks to his bed and sullenly states, "I don't feel... the same." He drops face-first into his bed.

"Macyn talk to me," he hears her say, but he can't. It hits him as it did with M'Curre, however, without her enchanting persuasion. He grabs and holds the pillow to his face. The pain, the sadness, the anger, the isolation, the stress of it all is far more than his small body can contain. All his mental fortification, his humor, his pacifism, his distractions, none of it can hold his emotional demand for release and he does. His cries like a beat and broken man and he hates himself for it, which ironically makes him cry more. Nothing can stop it and it takes only a second of wailing into his pillow to realize that he doesn't want to.

It's night by the time he responds to the outside world, waking from under the pillow. Sitting up he finds Sen patiently waiting for him. She's kneeling at the foot of the bed while he wipes his face of dried snot and tears and goes to the restroom to clean up. When he returns, Sen asks if he's feeling better.

With a bit of reflective thought, he understands it wouldn't be accurate to say he feels better, however, he feels every second has a less strenuous emphasis on it, as if time was too heavy to pass. Finally, he answers, "I don't know. It's..."

Cautiously, she asks, "it's what?"

"It feels like it sunk in," Macyn tries, searching for his own answer.

"What did?"

Macyn shrugs uncommitted. "Like Dog said," he suddenly tells her, shuddering to think of the kidnapper who so nearly had taken him. "The Monster I think Dog meant is Menhir. This place is wrong. Mages are cool with Deathless' in the forest, killer trees, gangster elves, emotion controlling nymphs, and no one thought having a dorm a couple of miles from campus was a bad idea with a kidnapper on the loose! It's just like Dog said, this place isn't for me."

"No," Sen tries to say, despite how very serious his eyes are. "Menhir is no different than anywhere else. All you need is a little more time to adapt."

Macyn snorts humorlessly before retorting, "would you have done what you did if I wasn't in serious danger? You knew what possessing me would mean and this place made you do it anyway."

Floating a little closer, leaning in she genuinely expresses to him, "I did what I did because I didn't want to lose you. If there was any other way... I'm so sorry I did that. I could've killed you just as easily, but-"

"You don't have to apologize for anything," he assures her. "I know why you did it. And it almost got you exorcised."

"I'd risk it again if it meant saving you," she assures him, angering him enough to yell, "you shouldn't have to!"

"Macyn," Sen starts, watching him pace his room.

“I can’t stay here anymore,” he exclaims with finality, silencing the very air around them.

“This was an *extreme* case,” she argues. “Certainly not a sound basis for this rationale.”

“Coming here was not what I thought it was going to be,” he insists. “...What I *hoped* it would be.”

With sympathy, Sen attempts to pacify him, expressing, “I know how difficult this has all been. How impossible it might seem, but if you can hold on, just a bit longer, I’m certain it’ll all turn around.”

“What makes you say that?” he solemnly asks. “Things just keep getting worse. This is not a place worth living in, at least not like this. I’ve never felt so stupid in my life trying to keep up with everyone. My only friend is a ghost and the only other person who was close to friendly is some old guy who was kidnapped and possibly killed; the same thing that nearly happened to me! Four months and I still haven’t heard one word from my parents... because we’re too broke to afford a better way of contacting them. I miss my mom, my dad, my stupid step-sister, hell I almost, nearly, maybe even miss Annetta... maybe. That’s how messed up everything is! I almost miss Annetta!”

Sensitive to his state, Sen gently asks, “what about learning to craft your mana? Don’t you want to continue exploring this side of yourself?”

“Not like this,” he replies, shaking his head. “I was born in Vegas and honestly, the lower order may be different but they have a lot of fun stuff there too. I told you about YouTube.”

“I don’t mean flying carpets and duels,” Sen points out. “Mana is as much a part of you as your mind and heart, and there’s nothing in the lower order that can connect with that intrinsic part of you. How will you feel knowing that such an important part of yourself will never be able to express itself?”

“It’s not like I can’t use it down there,” he reasons turning from her. “It’s just harder.”

“Using mana in the lower order is like a blind man seeing your face with his hands. Unless you’re master level, it’s far more stagnant and polluted to be used effectively. Now that you know what it is to manacraft, you will feel that impurity more if you go.”

“There is no *if*, Sen,” he slowly says. “I was so stupid to think coming here would somehow work out. Being treated like a stolid, I thought I could handle, but this... this is just too much and I can’t do it anymore. It’s not worth it.”

Sen hesitates to ask, “what are you going to tell your mother?”

“No, no,” he whirls on her, pointing an accusatory finger at her. “Don’t do that. She won’t be disappointed for a second when I tell her I was nearly killed being kidnapped. I’m sure she’d rather I stay alive thank you.”

“...As would I,” Sen slowly admits, eyes welling with wobbly moisture. “I didn’t mean to imply otherwise.”

“...I know,” he glumly responds. Even if he can’t understand to what extent, he knows she feels hurt by his decision. “Look, I made the decision days ago. You can’t change my mind. I just wanted to make sure you were okay first. Without you, I never would’ve made it this far.”

“...It would have been easier if you were born here,” she sullenly admits with a

pitiful smile. “With a familial support system and mynt.”

Macyn shrugs his shoulder in a ‘maybe’ sort of fashion before nervously attempting to broach a sensitive topic. “So, um, do you have to stay here? I mean, obviously you work for the Hall, but I thought I’d ask if you might go... with me.”

Sen allows a small tickled smile before it descends to disappointment. “I exist better here. The populous of the Lower Order tend to negatively affect our psyche. Even while I was possessing you, I completely lost my sanity. It would not be a good idea if I went with you.”

Getting his answer, he sadly responds, “sorry.”

“I know. I don’t want to see you go,” she admits like a heavy burden. “But, I am happy you will be safe with your family.”

Walking to his closet, he asks, “so what now? You think they’ll let me keep the clothes?”

“You paid for them,” she tells him by way of answer. “However, before you pack, I think the first order of business is selling the sword.”

Quirking his right brow curiously, he asks, “how? It’s not done.”

“True, but the next step is deferential treating,” she orates with a hint of levity. “What remains is sanding, the final grind, sharpening, and the polish. Any sufficiently experienced orewick can do that.”

Macyn can’t help but ask, “wouldn’t they try to low-ball us because we didn’t do the guard and handle?” It could be a waste of time to attempt selling it and he wouldn’t mind keeping it as a cool memento.

Sen nods with certainty. “What matters most is the blade. If they can recognize what you did—combining high and low carbon steel—it will mean they know quality. In a sense, it’s as if we are testing them and I’m certain any orewicks worth their metal will see it. An incomplete blade should sell well enough to at least afford a ProPort to the West Coast AirSite.”

“You think it’s that good?”

“I think you did a fantastic job. I’m sure grandfather would’ve been very proud.”

He smiles a small genuine, “thanks.”

Macyn grabs the thick sword from his closet and they head down to the cellar. Descending the steps and navigating the cellar full of remnants of past tenants to his Gud Arm, Macyn feels light with a sense of easy finality. Stress felt like a distant memory in the wake of his decision and every step is lighter as he prepares the clay slurry for the following day. Storing the clay in his one of his potions container and before bed, Macyn writes himself a letter to post in the morning.

Sen reminds him, “it’ll probably be several weeks before it’s delivered.”

“I know,” he chirps. “I just want to see how long it takes.”

Come morning, Sen is laying out the plan. “Wrap up the blade to keep it safe. After breakfast, we’ll have to let the university know you’re withdrawing, then we can head to all the armories; Wang, Oshiro, Tehuti, Lemont, the Stagmore Brothers. We’ll visit them all to find the best deal.”

“Sounds good,” Macyn agrees as he dons on his third uniform. Popping his head out of his dress shirt, he asks, “you think I can take the Gud Arm with me?”

“It’s possible, though I can’t say how well it will work in the lower order,” she responds from her wand.

With the sword wrapped in cloth and tied to his back, he walks the vast path back to campus alone. Before, traveling through Menhir felt like an amazing exhibit in a million variations of beauty. Now, he can see all the soft lines and flats of darkness between the scenic artistry and feels the eerie danger within. Happy to leave it all behind, Macyn picks up his pace, anxious to see his family. Walking through the courtyard, Macyn spots a group of Ignis, Ventus, and Aqua opposite Banquet Hall. In the center of the circle of mages are Roth, Masters, and Hew. Macyn can’t hear them but finds he won’t miss the Shakespearean drama between the heirs and ignores it for his last meal—possibly second to last meal if they can’t sell the sword fast enough.

Macyn enjoys every morsel of food more than he anticipated and sooner than he expected, he’s stuffed and on his way toward the administration ward of the palace. With some direction, Macyn rises to the top floor and steps up to the marshal’s secretary’s desk, greeting Mrs. Makynli, “hello.”

“Good day, Mr. Blende,” she easily bids him with a radiant smile. She sets down her papers and sits straighter to attention. “I’m so happy to see you’re doing better. Really, it’s wonderful.” Turning to his wand at his hip, she adds, “And thank you as well, Lady Kurosawa. Because of both of you, they are much closer to catching this kidnapper.”

Macyn gives her a tight smile, and though it looks more forced than he’d like, at this point he doesn’t care. “Thanks,” he quietly says. “It was all Sen.”

Sen emerges from the wand, bowing respectfully to Makynli, before stating, “we are both happy to do whatever we can to prevent that from happening to anyone else.”

With an uneasy chill twisting his recently filled stomach, Macyn moves the conversation along, requesting, “I’d like to speak with the marshal, please.”

Her darker eyebrows raise at the request and tilts her head as she asks, “and what may I say it’s in reference to? Did you recall any new information?”

“I’m withdrawing from school,” he answers bluntly.

That raises her solid eyebrows higher. “I see.” Mrs. Makynli looks over a rotating parchment, that ticks like a clock, but with times and names written on it. “Mnn, I know he was planning on paying you a visit when this, eh, terrible business has required less of his attention—lots of meetings after it all happened, you see. It’s early, but let me check if he’ll see you now.”

“Thanks,” Macyn responds, removing the sling keeping the wrapped blade on his back and takes the nearest available seat. Makynli stands from her desk and saunters over to the large double doors of the marshal’s office. When they’re alone, Sen looks at the portraits of the men lining the wall.

“Know any of them?” Macyn asks.

“No,” Sen answers. “I know they are former Provost Marshals, however, these grand mages were after my time. I enjoy reading the names anyway.”

Nearly five minutes later, Mrs. Makynli steps out and holds the door for him. “The marshal will see you now.”

With Sen close by, Macyn is escorted in, and both are astonished by the grandness of the large and long room. It’s more reminiscent of a museum exhibit with the walls a different combination of color, white, dark green, navy blue, and rich oak brown. The entire



length of the richly carpeted office is wine red and lined gold and the bookcases run to the very end of the room, full with weathered or new books. There's a sword and an ax display, portraits, full-figure statues that move in place, dignified busts of seemingly important people moving their lips as if they were talking, yet no sound can be heard. The ceiling held in place a skeleton of a snake that slithers above as it tracks Macyn's movement. Many tiny colorful paraplanes enter and exit through the walls, landing on a large desk at the end of the room.

It's nearly thirty feet of awe and wonder before Macyn reaches the marshal's opulent wood desk. The marshal is sat in his high backed, oak, and navy chair, reading some parchment. He seems busy enough to make Macyn feel guilty for taking up his time when he could simply fill out some withdrawal paperwork and be done with it. Without taking his eyes off the parchment, the marshal asks in his weighty voice, "would you like anything to eat, drink?"

Taking the offered seat, Macyn shakes his head a little, before realizing the marshal likely didn't see it, and responds, "uh, no. Thanks. I just had breakfast," he adds as he leans his wrapped blade against the plush chair's left arm while Sen floats by his right. The marshal excuses Makynli with a nod and she gives Macyn a friendly wave before recrossing the long carpeted path back out to her desk.

"Mr. Blende," he starts with his thick voice, setting the parchment down. "I'd first like to express my deepest sympathy for what you've suffered through under my supervision. If I could have prevented it, please believe I would have done everything in my power to do so. I'd also like to apologize for the reversal of our roles." At Macyn's curious eyes, the marshal explains, "after what you been through, you shouldn't be the one to seek me. To my utmost displeasure, I've been quite thoroughly detained since then. It's certainly no excuse but that is the truth."

Macyn didn't know how he should respond for a second before quite simply saying, "thanks."

"How are you feeling?"

"Much better," Macyn answers. He was about to continue when the marshal speaks.

"I witnessed your," the marshal eyes Sen less than a moment as he says, "state, as you were admitted into the infirmary. Nurse M'Curre even deliberated on sending you to the Hippo, a serious testimony to the severity of your condition. That woman thrives on the power of healing and for her to differ a patient illuminated to me just how grievous your injuries were. Fortunately, she rose to the task quite admirably."

"Yeah," Macyn states evenly, recalling the pain and his screams. He'd noted days prior in the mirror, the wounded parts of his body were red while the surrounding skin was yellow and healing. He agrees, "I'm glad she's so good."

The imposing and dapper man clasps a paraplane that descends within reach, and he sets it to the side as he asks his student, "what can I do for you, Mr. Blende?"

With the memories and nightmares in mind, Macyn easily answers, "I'd like to withdraw from Erudite and go back home. Do you guys offer transportation back, like a school bus, or will I have to catch my own ride?"

Placing his elbows on the table, making his biceps bulge in the process as he leans in and interlaces his fingers in front of him, Theophilus responds, "I see. May I inquire as to why that is?"

Macyn thought that couldn't be more obvious and simply answers, "I was nearly kidnapped, marshal. And this place- well, it's just not really for me."

"Codswallop," Marshal Hew quickly asserts. "If you have mana, then this is the place for you."

"...It doesn't really feel like that," Macyn nervously yet cordially argues. "Maybe it's not for everyone."

"All the more reason to stay," he firmly states eyeing Macyn sternly, though without aggression. "Or would you prefer one of our neighboring institutions? They can be a little specialized, well, very specialized if I'm being honest, still, they offer valuable education."

Macyn is beginning to feel slightly more disregarded than usual, and slowly answers, "uh, no." He's certain he's speaking clearly, yet it's as if the marshal isn't taking him seriously. "This doesn't have anything to do with Erudite, marshal. The detectives told me it was weird that the kidnapper would try to take me considering I'm a lot older than the kids that were taken, so going to another school wouldn't really matter."

The famous warlock then asks, "do you know who my favorite type of mage is?"

Macyn shakes his head no, but with a cordial, yet insistent tilt of the marshal's head, inviting him to speak nonetheless, he warily answers, "your family?"

"Fine answer," the marshal nods. "Most days, that response would be ninety-one percent correct."

Frustration gears Macyn's mouth to ask, "do you even have a hundred percent person?" without thinking.

"Yes I do, Mr. Blende," he says after a pause that's little more than a silent, *'check your tone.'* Macyn clears his throat as the marshal continues. "Mages who persevere. I can understand your desire to leave Menhir, to be safe. I can imagine how moving away from such a traumatic event can help set you at ease or allow you to forget your experiences entirely. It would an enticing option, however, I ask you to reconsider. I am responsible for the safety of every life on this campus, an oath I take quite seriously. The campus security has been doubled since then, and as your Provost Marshal, I pledge to you they will stay that way until this perpetrator is apprehended. I'm a man of my word."

"...Thanks, but, it didn't happen on campus-" Macyn starts and changes tactic. "That's great, I think. Do that, for sure. For the campus, for everyone, but, my leaving is more than what happened to me, sir. I just... I just, don't really belong here. Um, except for Sen, I don't have anyone here. So, I want to leave."

"Do you know the difference between seclusion and isolation?" The marshal asks and a somewhat irritated Macyn shakes his head, no. "Come now, give it your best guess. This is a school after all."

"I," a heavier breathing Macyn begins to express a twinge of frustration but reconsiders. Attempting to answer the marshal, he says, "they both mean being alone to me."

"Both denote loneliness, yes," he instructs. "Isolation is rather straight forward; a house in the middle of nowhere, a single tree in the desert, a small island in the ocean, and so on, whereas seclusion suggests an element of hiding. A house in the middle of a city can be secluded if tall walls or shrubbery cut it off from the world. A young mage can feel secluded from a room full of his peers if he or she has no friends. Seclusion via exclusion; there are worse things young mage. Whether you see over these walls or not, the populous is still there. Unless

you say otherwise, I'll assume this is the contributing factor to your decision.”

Macyn exhales audibly, before arguing, “it’s not my fault-”

“I’m not interested in assigning blame, young mage,” the marshal quickly asserts. “What matters is what is. You’ve stated you have no one here aside from your inhabitant, correct?” Macyn slowly nods, yes. “It’s common to rely on others, friends, and family, after such a traumatic event, yet you feel you cannot rely on those who are around you. Why is that?”

As he looks on, not responding to the marshal’s query, Macyn is starting to wonder why the grand formality. The marshal stands from his chair and walks to the front of his desk, leaning against the edge in front of his student. He seems to take no offense to Macyn’s silence and continues, “isn’t this the root cause of your seclusion? Of this decision?”

“What is, is, right,” Macyn huffs with a small helping of his agitation. In his mind, Macyn’s ready to sign whatever forms allowing him to leave, yet the marshal insists on contending a decision that’s already been made. He tells the marshal, “I just miss my family. Isn’t that why you’re saying all of this? I don’t know if you read my file, but I’m not from Menhir. My family’s in Vegas, and you what, want me to stay in isolation instead?” Feeling his anger breach and vent in relief, he adamantly adds, “I haven’t heard one word from my parents since I got here. They could be- Something bad happened to me and I can’t even imagine what might’ve happened to them. So, thank you, sir. I appreciate you trying to keep me safe, or in school, or whatever, but, I’ve already made up my mind.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate to hear, young one,” his grave voice asserts. “This has been a trying year for us all on Menhir. I must weigh my obligations to you carefully. Should I grant you your withdrawal, it’ll obviously be for your utmost safety, as your life and safety are equally as valuable as any other on the Rock. If it were so simple to grant you your furlough, I would, however, that then sends a message, doesn’t it? Do you know what that message is?”

Truly screaming in his mind, *‘what’s with all the questions,’* Macyn answers, “no, sir.”

“Think,” he punctuates.

Another twinge of frustration within Macyn felt like mouthing off at the well dressed old man but he just manages to hold his frustration in. “I… don’t know.”

The marshal presses his lips together and pushes himself from the edge of his desk. Walking back to his chair and taking a formal seat, he interlaces his fingers once again, and continues, “it would promote to the parents and citizens of Menhir that I cannot protect the student mages under my charge. How can I then not allow another child to withdraw and return to their family for their safety? Who’s to say they’ll be safe if they leave? As you said, your unfortunate event did not happen on campus. I tell you this because I want you to understand why I must deny your request to withdraw from Erudite.”

Macyn barely heard through to the end of the sentence when his eyes bulge in disbelief and shock. He’s momentarily speechless as the marshal continues to heap on more misfortune, “rest assured all the appropriate changes are implemented to further protect our students and the future of this great community. You’re excused from classes for two days, however, I expect your return on the third. Do we understand each other?”

“No!” Macyn calls, dashing to his feet. “No, you can’t do that!”

“The fact of the matter is I can,” he bluntly returns. “You are a minor, a ward of Menhir and I am your academic guardian. Only your parents can withdraw you from Erudite

and since no such forms have been filed with us, you will remain under my guidance and protection until they have.”

“I- Sir, please!” Macyn moves to the desk, placing both palms on it. “I don’t want to be here anymore. I’d just really like to be with my family again.”

“Should he not be able to speak with his parents, marshal?” Sen interjects, making Macyn suddenly remember she was there. He knows Sen has his back and defers to her lead. “He was nearly kidnapped, after all. Wouldn’t that merit a conversation with his father at least? To let them know he’s alright.”

“The investigation has taken the responsibility of alerting your family from Erudite. Lead investigator, Meegeren, along with an Imperium representative, Mr. Dunn felt alerting your parents now would do them little good as they are exiled and thus unable to step foot on Menhir. I also agree with his assessment. It would be a different story if heavens forbid Mr. Blende were taken. As it stands, he wasn’t, and until this criminal is apprehended, informing his parents now would only cause needless stress they can do nothing about.”

Upset to hear that Sen floats closer to the marshal, but to her surprise, is unable to pass through the desk. Still, she balls her fists and asserts her displeasure. “You cannot take that decision from them, marshal Hew. They are his parents! They have every right to know what has happened to their child.”

“But we can Miss Inhabitant,” he responds coldly. “We have guardianship by proxy signed by his father, however, that does not imply that we will keep this from them. Trust they will be informed, personally by me, and only when I’ve deemed the time appropriate. Not simply for his protection, but for theirs as well, or did neither of you think the kidnapper may want to strike his parents in retaliation for you defying him. Will his parents be outraged, yes. Will I fear such wrath in the face of what must be done, no. Unlike the families of abducted children, Mr. Blende’s parents will not have to suffer day in and day out because he is safe and sound. Speaking to them at the moment is pointless. Accept it.”

“No!” Macyn bellows, pushing away from the dark oak desk. Sen floats away, seemingly to lower herself by the marshal’s speech, but Macyn can’t believe him. He knows with absolute certainty once he’s with his parents, everything will be fine. “I’m done!” Macyn would’ve said more, but Sen moves ahead and turns to him, warning him with sternly pleading eyes at the same time marshal Hew raises to his feet.

“Remember yourself, young man,” he raises his voice, cutting Sen off. “What you’ve gone through is terrible, trust that in my long life I more than understand, but do not for one second think that gives you leave to selfishly place yourself above everything you don’t agree with simply because you are now painfully aware of true fear and helplessness. If it falls upon me to enlighten you to the fact that you are not the only one suffering at the hands of this criminal, then so be it. Life is war, young mage; whether you are on Menhir, in the Lower Order, and especially in Gaiorem. What you do not seem to grasp is there is no escape from suffering, and to think you can run from it is absolute folly. You were tagged. It happens. Shake it off, because, you are safe now, and on my word, will remain so.”

The marshal retakes his long-backed seat and begins looking through the paramail on his desk, ignoring Macyn as he reaffirms, “you have two days before your return to class. Thank you for your visit. You’re excused.”

Like his smelter, Macyn’s ribcage of charcoal is lit, and every breath he streamlines into his hot lungs is like adding fuel to a growing fire. Shock at the hard rejection

gives Macyn enough presence of mind to grab his cloth-wrapped weapon and silently exit the marshal's long office. Fist tight to the point of pain around his sword, shoulders tense, gray and hazel eyes fierce, Macyn slams the door behind him.

## Those Who Persevere

Macyn shuts the Marshal's door with more force than he cares to worry over. He can hear Mrs. Makynli ask if everything is alright, however, he only continues stomping away, ignoring her and Sen as his ghost floats to the secretary to say something. When Sen returns to his side, he wants to ask what she said to Makynli, however, he's too angry to speak without cursing far more than Sen could stomach. His father would be upset about how he's conducting himself. He would want Macyn to listen to Sen, to just allow the latest unfairness to pass and move on, but he can't. Not this time. His mother would figure something else out. He knows she would because she's a fighter and the fact that he's failing her makes him all the angrier.

Speed-walking out of the administration wing, down the great domed chamber and out the palace, Macyn would like nothing more than to scream and blow something away while Sen tries her hardest to calm him down.

"Macyn," she calmly calls, floating in front of him with both palms out. "Try to relax."

"How!" Macyn bellows walking around her even though he knows he can go through her. "That- That son of a-" He growls the rest as a shadow sweeps past him, followed by a strong gust of wind. Looking up, Macyn spots three large Eagle Hawks with people riding them. He can't make out who the mages are but they're likely wealthy or important students. He's only seen them a few times since he's been on campus and every time enjoyed the large animal's beautiful dirty-golden plumage. At the moment, however, their flight inspires a drastic plan, and so without hesitation, Macyn heads toward the Coliseum.

Sen asks, "where are we going?" When Macyn doesn't answer, she calls out, "Macyn!"

He continues toward the Arena when he sees Solomon Roth coming towards him. With the notable exceptions of wardcrafting, Marnamei Hew, and Everette Masters, the raven-haired boy is normally very blasé about everything—nearly to the point of boredom. At the moment, with his fists balled, shoulders hunched, and knitted eyebrows, he seems like a mage to avoid. Upon approach, Macyn ignores the honored heir's quizzical eye and keeps pace past him, until four steps later when he's frozen in place.

"Let him go this instant," Sen demands, but with an extended grip, as if holding Macyn in place with his hand, Roth ignores Sen as he walks around to Macyn's front. While Macyn is frozen in place, Roth unties the rope keeping his cloth-wrapped sword at his back, removes then unwraps the blade.

"I knew it!" the aggressive heir calls out with a smile, extending the length of the rough, half-finished blade with a practiced arm.

"That does not belong to you, Mr. Roth." Sen heatedly declares in Macyn's frozen place.

Again, Roth ignores her in favor of inspecting the blade-in-progress and asks, "where'd you get this, I wonder?" Solomon eyes the length of the thick edge and notes how straight it is. "This is a good looking sword. It's a bit thick, but it's not finished, is it?" He lifts the blade high before slicing downward with practiced ease. "I've been to a few forges myself,

so the weight doesn't worry me but the length of it." Outstretching his arm, Roth extends the full length of the blade straight ahead, remarking, "it's perfect for me."

"That is not yours," Sen insists, floating in front of the honored heir. "And if you do not let him go this instant, I will be reporting you!"

Again, her words fall on deaf ears as Roth turns to Macyn. "You, er, um... not dreg," he mutters to himself, thinking a moment before finally giving up. "Whatever your name is, where'd you get this? Do you know who it belongs to? Or did you steal it?"

The entire time, Macyn is flexing every muscle near to tearing, pouring in all his rage and ire to break free of the heir's invisible binding. No matter how much it hurts, it's futile and only makes him angrier. Macyn glares at Roth who rolls his eyes. "Alright, mate, look, don't tear your shirt on me or anythin'. I'm going to let you go, but, you have to tell me where you got this, alright?"

Solomon loosens his grip and his strong mana and Macyn drops on his knees from the strain of tensing for so long. He quickly gets to his feet, shouting, "give it back!"

"Easy, mate," Roth smiles as if he's done nothing wrong. He keeps the blade away from Macyn as he asks again, "just tell me who I can talk to about this here blade... unless you *did* steal it." He takes a predatory step toward Macyn, adding, "I'm kinda hoping you did steal it, then I can liberate it from you free and clear."

"I didn't steal it!" Macyn bellows, his fist balled now, clearly not backing down.

"If you didn't, that's fine," he claims with his ever-present smirk as he swipes with the blade. "Just point me in the direction of the owner and you can go along your merry way."

"He is the owner," Sen calls from beside Macyn, her expression an agent of anger.

"Yeah, sure, I don't believe you," Solomon chuckles.

Macyn wants to cry, wants to yell, wants to break something, growing absolutely fed up with being overlooked, under-appreciated, and most of all, ignored by everyone. It's bad enough the only person interested in him is a serial kidnapper on top of an entitled rich kid doubting his ability to create something he worked so hard for. The last thing Macyn needs at the moment is honored heir Solomon Roth taking his sword.

Macyn takes a few deep calming breaths, unclenching his fist and easing his shoulders. Roth eyes his fellow Ignis member as he calms down when Macyn nods, as in saying, '*I'm good.*' "Here," Macyn calmly asks, extending his right hand for his blade while sliding his Shirane coin in his left grasp. "I'll prove I made it."

With a wary eye, Roth holds the tip of the sword and places the tang in Macyn's outstretched hand. The moment the cold metal touches his palm, Macyn concentrates his mana on using a feeble amount of the electrical charge for welding, igniting a stunning shock of energy through the length of the metal. Even a decrepit amount of Shirane is enough power to blast Roth back several feet and landing hard on the ground. Macyn grabs the towel and rope, and repackages the blade, tying it to his back as he makes his way toward the stadium.

"That was not wise," Sen says, though she didn't seem too offended by it. Even if Sen doesn't like to repeat the obvious, she maintains, "you know every reason why you shouldn't have done that." When her comment is met with silence, she frustratingly states, "Macyn, speak to me."

“There’s nothing to say,” Macyn informs her. “I said I was leaving and that’s what I’m going to do.”

They walk into the stadium, and Macyn avoids the Aqua and Ventus mages mingling on their flying carpets and secretly grabs a carpet. As they leave, Sen apprehensively asks, “what are you doing!? You can’t leave with that.”

“Says who,” Macyn retorts as he hops onto the carpet and takes off into the sky. “I’ve seen mana used in and out of Menhir,” he tells Sen who stays beside him. “There’s nothing saying a flying carpet won’t work.”

“There’s nothing saying that it will either,” Sen proclaims. They rise further and further ascending the lamp posts, the stadium, and trees as more of the campus grows into view. “Maybe with more experience manipulating mana, you could, but not now. This is incredibly reckless. If the turbulence to your mana is too much, you’ll fall and die! You need to stop.”

“No!” Macyn yells. “I’m tired and I’ve had it!” Creeping into the gust infested sky, he slows down enough to take his wand from his waist and presents it to her. “If you want, I’ll drop you off somewhere, or you can come with me, but I’m not staying!”

Sen stares intently into Macyn’s determined eyes. After a few moments of silence, Macyn takes off again, Sen floating right beside him, though valiantly attempting to change his mind. “You don’t even know where in the world you are. You could be thousands of miles from Vegas, or in the middle of the ocean. How tired do you think you’ll be using mana to fly thousands of miles in the lower order?”

The winds begin to pick up and he lowers himself on the carpet to become more aerodynamic and avoid getting blown off. “All I need is a phone,” Macyn answers her, focused only on the purple-blue above the large mountain’s peak. “Once I call dad, it’ll be fine.”

The torrent of wind is stronger the closer he moves to the height of the grand mountain top and the bailiwick after. Macyn grips the edge of the worn carpet as the force of winds is strong enough to mercilessly batter him and his carpet from side to side. Staying by his side is a great deal harder as the violent winds shove him to and fro, urging Sen all the more to change his mind.

“You don’t have any currency to pay for food or shelter,” she tries to reason with him. “What are you going to do if you have to wait for days? You could starve or be forced to live on the streets.”

“I won’t,” Macyn loudly counters over the sweeping wind. “It’ll be fine! Everything will be fine as soon as I talk to them!”

The gale of freezing wind is so strong, the runes on his uniform’s pants fail, and his legs are instantly assaulted by millions of tiny cold needles, slowly invading their way into the very core of his bones. Macyn grunts gutturally as he grits his teeth against the burning pain and continues to combat the forceful wind to rise steadily higher. As his upper body is still warm, he wonders how long they’ll last before they fail as well.

“Macyn, please!” Sen yells as they nearing the frosted tip of the mountain. “This isn’t a good idea. I’ll stay as long as you want! We’ll work something else out! We’ll do anything we can, just, stop this, please!”

Her heartfelt pleas are easy to hear, resonating like an echo through his veins, easing his burn to leave. As his carpet slows, Macyn tilts his head down, taking his focused eyes away from the transparent goal ahead and starts to wonder. Though it’s impossible to keep the carpet steady, he turns to a crying Sen, curious to ask what she has in mind. He’s been through a



lot recently, however, through it all, Sen has been by his side. Much of it he credited it as her job, but he knows she cares about him or she wouldn't have risked destruction by possessing him to save his life. She's telling him to stop; to stay, and he wonders why.

He couldn't voice his thoughts, however, when an icy wall of daggers slams into him, cutting deep enough into his uniform to draw blood from his left arm, shoulder, and side of his back as he cascades off the foothold of the carpet. His vision dims and swirls as he spins with slurry whites, blues, and greens of the earth below. Quickly losing focus and possibly consciousness, it's hard to tell if he's falling as it feels closer to being pushed and pulled randomly than actually falling.

When he hears a deep scream of his name, he returns to some awareness, and in the sobering chill, he realizes he's falling without his carpet or his wand. Looking around, he sees a distorted Sen pointing at the wand which is a good distance away now. Macyn's desperate mind zeros in on the carpet, expecting it to catch him if its rune hasn't failed as well. Sen is fading as the wand moves further from him and the flying carpet fights its hardest against the gale-force winds to reach him. Ignoring the carpet and his escalating pain, he tucks his arms and legs in, angling and streamlining his freezing body to torpedo as near he can to the wand. Free-falling from that height, he's certain will break his wand, killing Sen.

Following Sen's pointing direction, Macyn extends his hand to bring the wand in with his mana when he's yanked painfully hard by his leg; so bad it feels like it dislocated from the hip. He cries out horribly but it's drowned out by the torrent of wind filling his ears. Looking at this new sensation of being dragged, he sees a golden hawk has his left leg in its talons, however, that's the least of his concerns. Whipping his head back, he sees Sen's image distort and finally disappear.

Macyn's too far from his wand. Rightly or not, he instantly kicks the talons holding him with his functional leg, but the large golden avian creature refuses to let go. Growing fatally desperate, Macyn mana pushes the stallion-sized bird and its rider away, releasing him back into freezing free-fall. The screeching caw fills his ears and he feels completely numb in the whipping of icy air, yet he continues a frantic search for his friend in his rapid descent. The forest canopy is quickly growing larger, filling his view and Macyn panics worse than he's ever felt in his life. Speeding through the air, the carpet finally gets close enough to him to bring in with his mana as he looks for the wand. Planting his feet on the carpet, he surges faster through the air pushing to reach max velocity.

In his steep dive, regardless of how alarmingly close he's getting to pulverizing his body plunging into the dirt, Macyn searches the withdrawing skies for what might as well be a needle, calling out, "Sen!" Burning his squinted eyes, he finally spots a flicker of an image. The rocky face of the mountain behind him, he sways left and sees nothing, then sways further right and finally Sen materializes. She points to the wand, spinning and flipping in the air far closer to the ground than he's comfortable with, closing in on the treetops.

"Come on!" Macyn yells, shooting after it as fast as he recklessly can, dropping the carpet's angle and burning his mana for top speed. The wall of frosty wind fights against him the faster he goes, slashing sharply at his skin, carving scratches of skin and bits of blood but he's gaining on it. He outstretches his shaky and icy hand, shouting, "Sen!"

"Macyn!" she cries back, frightened as they clear the tall treetops.

His face feels frozen solid and hurts to keep his eyes open, but the clay wand is close, and the fear it'll shatter, killing Sen, is agonizing. The wand and earth all look flat in his

vision. Shooting straight down on his carpet, he only needs just a bit more to catch it with his mana. Shifting to put his feet under him, Macyn kicks off of the speeding carpet, hand outstretched with mana further beyond it. His eyesight now full of oncoming grass and dirt, but with some luck, his mana grips the spinning clay wand seconds before it smashes against the hard ground. He stares at the seconds he has left before his demise with no confidence his mana can soften his fall when his carpet swoops in from the side at the final second to catch him.

It wasn't a clean catch. Due to the momentum of his fall, the carpet could not completely keep all of Macyn's accelerated weight from hitting the ground inches below the carpet. The intercepting catch turned a perfectly straight drop to a sweep that couldn't keep all of his weight from bouncing off the floor like pebble skidding across a pond. He hears a horrible snap at his back and feels more pain as he rolls and tumbles along with the force of a landslide until he finally skids to a stop dozens of feet away. Macyn is conscious enough for a moment to experience the expanding pain and cold of the fallout—of his breakdown—before blacking out.

Macyn wakes up in the infirmary ward to the scent of cinnamon before opening his eyes. Lazily, he sits up despite the numb feeling of his hips, the tight pulling of the surrounding muscle, and oddly enough, a strange line burning across his back. Macyn sighs when his memories began recalling his recklessness, and couldn't believe he almost killed himself.

*'Why did I even think I can escape the bailiwick,'* he wonders, before offhandedly questioning if this is the same bed he was in last week. The lovely Nurse M'Curre then opens the curtain concealing his bed.

"Good," she says sweetly. "You've awakened right on time. I made you some Lavinger tea," she says setting the tray of tea down on his bedside table. "It's a very basic brew but it does wonders for soreness and the spirit. How's your leg?"

Macyn didn't hear the question because on the same table she placed the tray of tea on, is his wand, mercifully unbroken, and his katana, broken in two pieces. The very thing he put so many hours of hard work into, for weeks and weeks, the thing he was hanging all his hopes on, is now broken on his bedside table. Weakly, he reaches over and grabs both pieces, placing them on his lap as he stares in utter devastation.

With Macyn's loss on his lap, broken like his promise to his parents, it felt like his just deserts for foolishly believing he can get his way. It was more punishment for—as he sees it—trying. He's silent for an untold amount of seconds before M'Curre finally coaxes him back to reality with her comforting aurora.

"I see that blade was very special to you," she easily estimates. "Was it a gift?"

Macyn shakes his head, no. "I made it."

"I see," she affirms with sympathy. "Maybe it can be fixed?"

Macyn looks at her comforting appearance, saying, "with my luck, I doubt it." He looks around but can't see Sen. When he doesn't sense her in the wand, he asks, "where's Sen?"

M'Curre extends her hands over his injured leg, manacrafting a blue light mixed water vapor designed to look like an exact copy of his leg. He may not understand what she's looking for but, he's simply amazed enough to see it as she answers, "she said she'll be back as soon as she can. How's your leg?"

"It's feeling..." He wiggles his toes and rotates his leg a bit, feeling a soreness to every movement. "Well, I can feel it so, you did great... again," he glumly states, the loss of

his hard-earned work heavy on his mind.

His leg shaped mist evaporates as M'Curre insists he drink his cup of tea, which Macyn reluctantly does. "The marshal will be here momentarily. For now, Dean Von Brandt wishes to speak with you." After his nod, the nurse leaves, presumably to alert the dean, and Macyn suddenly feels doomed, like realizing he's been found guilty of sin and is awaiting his sentencing. With the curtain still open, it's hard to miss the two mages across from him. Sitting in a chair by the bed is his head of house, Ryce and in the bed itself is an upright Solomon Roth leaning against the headboard of the bed, staring at him.

With slightly singed eyebrows, similar fuzzy blown-back hair, and a stern look on his face, Roth completely ignores Ryce, who's trying to discuss something Macyn can't easily hear. When their attention lock, Macyn tries to get a sense of how angry the honored heir might be, to determine how bad the retaliation could get. However, he can't presume anything more than an expression of deep thought from him. Macyn speculates it could mean any number of things and none of it good.

Macyn doesn't worry about it long when Dean Von Brandt and three others approach his bed. In his destitute state, Macyn is moderately taken to see, Everette Masters, Marnamei, and Jaylen standing behind the stern woman. Immediately, an irate Jaylen steps ahead of the other two, right beside Von Brandt, and points a hard pasty finger at him.

"That's him, Dean Von Brandt. He's the one who attacked Swiftblade." Macyn is clueless until the hotheaded Jaylen continues to explain. "We were out flying when we saw this idiot falling from as high as the bailiwick. *I* did the right thing and manage to snag him before he got himself killed, but that's when he attacked my great hawk! Nearly killing me in the process! Swiftblade didn't do anything wrong. She wouldn't hurt anyone. Everette and Marnamei can back me up. They'll tell ya."

Gripping the shards of his blades hard enough for his knuckles to turn white, Macyn is completely aware life is just piling it on thickly and repeatedly. His mother was right; *'Life is a Fight.'* He very nearly laughs at how much worse the absurdity of this whole experience continues to become, and smiles as he imagines what his mom might think of an enemy like this; a never-ending quicksand of crap he's nearly drowning in.

Marnamei walks around the space beside his bed, as she asks, "what were you thinking going that high?" She stares directly in his mismatching eyes in disbelief, admonishing him. "You realize how easily you could've died? I'm serious, I want to know what were you thinking," she adds with a hint of concern.

"Mr. Blende," Von Brandt intercedes, asking, "are their reports of this event true? Did you attempt to pass the bailiwick and assault a Great Hawk?"

As Macyn formulates a sound response, he watches Masters tell Roth, "you've seen better days," with a full mocking grin.

Marnamei looks around Masters and sees Roth for the first time. Walking over to him, Macyn can hear her ask with concern, "and what happened to you? Are you okay?"

"Precisely what I'd like to know, lady Hew," Ryce interjects, however, Roth remains silent on the matter, making Macyn wonder if he prefers the personal approach when dealing out retribution. Ryce asks the students, "would any of you be able to shed some light on who attacked him?"

"Someone attacked you," Marnamei gasps and Masters snorts with clear amusement.

Macyn can't help grow still, staring at Roth in panic, and still, the dark-haired heir maintains his silence.

Von Brandt turns to Ryce, "I'll expect a full report on whatever you find." Ryce nods once before she returns her focus on Macyn. "Answer me young mage," she demands. "This is very serious and I must hear the truth of your words."

Macyn exhales all the caution he couldn't care to give and glumly answers, "yes."

"Is that all you have to say?" the dean asks, though it seems like she wants to ask more. "Or would you perhaps care to speak in private?"

"What for," Jaylen retorts, balling his pale hands. "The broken stolid already admitted it!"

"Watch your tone, Mr. Hawkins," Von Brandt warns.

"But maybe there's a reason," Marnamei suggests tellingly. The quick look of burden in her beautiful greenish-blue eyes tells Macyn she knows something and is unwilling to tell. His best guess is she found out what happened, though he can't imagine how that is. Turning to Von Brandt, she adds, "it's what I've been trying to say," and the two share a knowing look.

"The only thing I saw him doing was catching his stupid crutch," Jaylen righteously points out.

"That's Inhabitant to you," Von Brandt corrects Jaylen.

"Quite the crowd we have here," Marshal Hew comments as he walks into the hospital ward, squared shouldered and hands behind his back. Beside him is Mrs. Makynli with a stack of paper held in her arms, and to his complete surprise, Sen, who quickly floats above everyone and straight to his bedside.

Sen urgently asks him, "how are you feeling?"

Macyn solemnly shakes his head, defeated as he raises the broken pieces of blade. He can't say anything, nor does he have to, because if there's anyone in this entire planet who understands, it's Sen. She floats closer and with a smile whispers in his ears, "it's okay." Macyn looks at her, confused as she adds, "we can fix it. Grandfather has had to restore broken blades before."

"Really?" Macyn gasps hopefully.

"Yes," she states with a smirk. "It's one of my favorite lessons of his."

When the marshal and his secretary join the group, Marnamei is the first to greet them. "Grandsire. Auntie Aless."

Von Brandt gives the marshal a respectful nod before speaking. "I've just received confirmation from Mr. Blende. It's as misters Masters and Hawkins stated. The three were enjoying their recreational time on Great Hawks when they encountered Mr. Blende free-falling from the bailiwick! When they tried to rescue him, he... refused."

"More like *attacked*," Jaylen interjects, eying Macyn angrily.

"Mr. Hawkins, please," Von Brandt sternly warns. "The end result is one bruised ego--"

Jaylen retorts to the group, "he attacked a great hawk! They're protected creatures."

"And what injuries did your hawk sustain, Mr. Hawkins," Von Brandt easily asks, cutting through his ire like a hot knife through butter.

Jaylen struggles to argue, “I- Well, Auntie- Professor Hawkins says Swiftblade is fine, but why should that matter?”

Von Brandt returns her attention to the marshal and finishes her report. “It seems Mr. Blende did not want to damage his wand, refusing to be rescued, thereby saving his inhabitant. He sustained quite the tumble in his meeting with the ground.”

As ever, the marshal remains dignified in his expensive-looking three-piece suit while Mrs. Makynli is arranging parchments for him to sign. “I see,” he quickly states, automatically signing his signature on every parchment Mrs. Makynli positions in front of him. He turns to the three student mages. “Thank you. You’re excused.”

Hawkins’ dirty blond head quickly whips to the marshal as the strong elder signs another document, yelling, “that’s it! Shouldn’t he be punished? Great Hawks are the honor of House Hawkins, the pride of Erudite, beloved by all of Menhir. You, yourself have one, marshal. Father is not going to like this.”

“Noted,” is all the marshal murmurs callously, not even looking at the boy. He seems more involved by the parchment’s Makynli is easily revolving for him to sign.

“On you go, the three of you,” Von Brandt says, waving her hand to urge them on. Hawkins is clearly the most enraged, so much so, his face reddens, and Masters just pats him on the shoulder to comfort as well as force him to move. Marnamei lingers a little longer but with a tilt of the marshals head, she follows after the other two, giving Roth a final wave upon her exit.

“What would you like to do, marshal?” Von Brandt asks.

“Clearly, this is a cry for attention,” Ryce interjects from his place at the foot of Roth’s bed. “It makes me wonder if his supposed abduction isn’t simply an elaborate hoax.” It’s the first time Roth reacts as Macyn, who is far from caring about anything at the moment, much less etiquette, glares at his professor.

Von Brandt turns to the head of Ignis house with a sense of exasperation. “Don’t be so dense Ryce. There’s evidence that supports his statement,” Von Brandt returns. “Please continue to attend your student,” she orders. Without further argument, the man slowly takes his seat like a soldier and Macyn rolls his eyes.

Marshal Hew moves closer to Macyn’s bed and closes the curtain behind them. With a gentle wave of his hand and a delicate closing of his fist, the marshal’s mana erects a nearly translucent barrier Macyn can only assume is for privacy. “That was reckless,” the large elder starts.

Macyn’s heart automatically beats faster, not at all ready for expulsion or worse. At the look of disappointment on his parent’s faces when they learn he was expelled, Macyn grips his steel shards as he feels his eyes moisten and warm, however, he tells himself he will not cry and he will not apologize. Not to this man. Not to someone who refuses to let him go to his family.

His cleanly cut and layered white beard moves as he speaks. “I’d wondered if this was all a ploy to get yourself expelled or if you were foolish enough to believe you could actually pass the bailiwick on a carpet.” The marshal looks at Mrs. Makynli for more paperwork to sign, but she closes her eyes, shakes her head no, pressing the stack closer to her bodice. Marshal Hew seems disapproving but in no way does it appear to intimidate the small smile off Makynli’s face. Seeing her almost jubilant smile calms Macyn down considerably.

The marshal rears his palms behind his back once more, widening his broad

chest and shoulders, and continues. “The right rules are meant to be followed and you’ve broken them in spectacular fashion, however, in light of you’ve suffered through, I will ignore this one infraction. This will be your only pass with me, Mr. Blende. You will not attempt such foolery again, do I make myself clear?” Through his low and quick breathing, Macyn nods a few times in quick succession.

Hew shifts his regard from Macyn to Sen and back. “Your inhabitant has spoken in detail with Alessandra concerning your plight. Ultimately, moved by your inhabitant’s diligent care, she pursued the reason behind the lack of correspondence with your family, and had informed me there was indeed a problem.”

His heart now quickens for an entirely different reason as Macyn states, “wait, you believe me now?”

“Your case may be in a worse way than most, Mr. Blende, however, you phrased the problem incorrectly. Instead of saying you were much too segregated from your family, you should have framed your argument to question why you weren’t receiving any mail from them at all. It is the duty of the school to ensure the lines of communication between child and parent are always open. Upon investigation,” Marshal Hew outstretches his hand, and Mrs. Makynli puts a thick brick of rubber-bound letters in it.

Macyn’s eyes bulge, observe and analyze the weight of the stack as it slams into Hew’s large hands. His breath leaves him, his shoulders weaken and slump along with the rest of his muscles, and he couldn’t help his eyes prickle and heat with tears he knew he wouldn’t be able to stop this time. He rubs his eyes to make sure they are letters, and if he can believe it, letters from his family.

“We discovered your post was not being secured by the Imperium as is the standard, but by the tribe. There was a disagreement between the tribe who port in supplies from the lower order, and one of the university’s minor suppliers. The tribe withheld everything due to our supplier’s strife; ink, feed, parchment, wood, other odds and ends, and, your mail. That is until Alessandra informed me, and half an hour ago, I retrieved your letters.” The marshal presents Macyn with a large stack of handwritten words from his family, and with a shaky hand, he weakly takes them. It’s heavy with every noted regard he’s been missing.

“Rest assured this error will not happen again,” Marshal Hew declares. “You have my word.”

Curious, Marshal Hew takes the liberty picking up a piece of the broken sword and examines the breaking point of the blade. His eyebrows raise a moment as he analyzes the broken edge, and promptly returns the piece. Before he exits the curtain, he mentions to his stunned student, “even my favorite kind of people need encouragement from time to time.”

Mrs. Makynli gives Macyn a smile and Sen a wave before following the marshal, Von Brandt right alongside her. Macyn didn’t hear the marshal or see Makynli smile at him. The only thing he has any attention for is the thick stack of letters on his lap kept together with rubber-bands. Feeling anger, concern, love, joy, shame, and despair all storming within him in equal parts, it’s more than he can handle. Through watering eyes he can see Sen float closer to him, kneeling on the bed a foot away.

“...They wrote,” she says softly.

Macyn coughs a laugh and smiles. A quick sniff of his nostrils and his voice cracks as he adds, “yeah. I guess they did.”

“That’s wonderful,” Sen replies, her own eyes watering at the sight of his great

smile.

Absentmindedly, he nods while admitting, “it’s so weird. I haven’t even read ‘em, but, I feel better.”

Feeling a great swell of empathy, Sen argues, “I don’t think that’s weird at all. You love your family. It’s only natural you’d be happy to hear from them.”

Macyn snorts as he admits, “I came out here to get away from them and now look at me.”

Judging by the number of letters, it seems they wrote at least three letters a week, however, Macyn won’t read them right away, reasoning the infirmary is no place for his pseudo-family reunion. After pleading with M’Curre to be released, she only allows it if they promise to return so she can do a follow-up. After agreeing, she hands him three vials to drink, and an hour and fifteen minutes of limping later, he’s in his dorm, washing, changing, and snuggling into bed, ready to soak up every word repeatedly. He gleefully organizes the letters by date and places them face down for the small surprise of who it’s from. One by one he goes through each of them.

From his mother.

*To my beautiful boy,*

*It’s a fine line between sticking to good behavior and being a pushover, and the women here seem intent on testing me. I swear the girls want to fight now more than ever, but I won’t give them cause to ruin our plans, because I believe in you. I know you’ll find a way to bring me back. And I’ll do anything to see and hold you again...*

From his father.

*Dear son,*

*I miss you every day. Your absence has left me with a great ache and it’s made me realize how far from you I’ve allowed myself to drift. The reasons why is no excuse. You are my firstborn, my first treasure, and I didn’t take care of that as well as I should have. For that, I am eternally sorry...*

Just a few letters in and Macyn already has to take a sensitivity break or run the risk of losing himself again. A firm believer in boys don’t cry, Macyn wrings his hands frantically, cracks his neck, exhales forcefully, and clears his eyes of unnecessary moisture. “Alright,” he says, psyching himself up and shadow-boxing for a moment, much to Sen’s confusion. The letters are mostly from his parents but there is a good amount from his step-family. Annetta sent him four letters and June sent him eight longer reads.

*What up, Training Dummy,*

*I see you send a lot of letters. Are you bored there? Dad says they don’t use the internet, and instead rely on books so you can stay focused. Sounds ridiculous to me. How can you learn anything without the internet? You better still be training. I don’t want a fat training dummy when you get back. You should send pictures. I’m curious to see what boarding school looks like...*

Annetta kept her letters very safe and cordial. It made Macyn wonder how much help dad had given her. Still, anything from her was fine to read. He reasoned, at least she cared enough to send letters.

*Dear Macyn,*

*I hope all is well with you. Your father says you haven't started school yet, so how's the city? Have you made any friends yet? Remember, honesty is the best policy. Your father is very happy to receive your letters. He speaks about you often and we all miss you...*

In some of his father's responses, there were many moments that he couldn't help holding his gut from laughing so hard.

*...What do you mean you can craft mana?! How is that possible? Of course I didn't know. I couldn't even check. Well, isn't that a kick in the pants.*

*...Son, I am so SO sorry! I completely forgot it can be a bit cold if you don't have the proper attire. Everyone wears the right clothes all the time so it's easy to forget. It wasn't too bad, was it?*

*...For the love of Odin, son, do NOT disrespect the Elves!*

Or his mother's responses.

*...I have never heard of a stolid being able to craft mana. You always were sickly when you were a baby. I just accepted it. This has made it all worth it. I'm so happy for you, son. Now you don't have to take any crap from anyone. Make me proud.*

*...I don't care if it is a dragon! No one and nothing takes from my boy! Dragons are sensitive to smell. Have they taught you stink-pellets yet? Represent, son!*

*...I think that's an unhealthy coping mechanism, son. Just hit them back. I give you permission. Ambush them if you have to. It's okay to be humble, but let those daddy-long-legs know you have teeth too...*

Some of the letters from his father are informative.

*...At some point, far back in history, a treaty between the waring men and elves formed to stop the severe loss of life. Elves were the stronger cohesive unit if I remember correctly, but they don't procreate as much, and mankind can be numerous. This treaty employs the elves deal in all financial matters whether it be, inheritances, businesses, checking, savings, personal account holders, government officials, and heads of houses, but the deal is never for their gains...*

*...When I was growing up, the theory was mana was incapable of growing. It's not like muscles in where the more intensely you use it the more it grows. It's your spirit, your*



*anima, and the theory for a long time was you have what you're born with and that's it, however, some of the studies going on at the time couldn't explain how death, love, and loss could impact a mage's mana to such an extent that no amount of training should reach. There's no true defining method to work on getting stronger quality mana. Most mages work on enhancing the body, but I'd recommend talking to someone very strong and pick their brain.*

But some of the letters from his father were informative and interesting because they could help with his mother's case.

*...I'm not proud of what I did. I turned a blind eye to injustice and sabotage for mynt. And in doing so, not only had I lost my principles, but when I was eventually caught, so too did I lose my freedom. Your mother had the integrity to honor our marriage vows and stood by me, and rather than telling her the truth, I took solace in the strength she always provided me. She paid the price for her loyalty with banishment, and to this day, it is my biggest regret, as well as the greatest shame of my life.*

*We have to help her, Mace. I have to make this right, but I can't do that without you. I wish that I was a better man and a father..*

The dried teardrops in that long letter filled Macyn with intense anger toward his father. He couldn't completely hate him because at least he seems regretful but he's still angry at him. Their lives could've been so much more different if not for his father's mistake and it's disheartening to see him as a weak person. It's so jarring, Macyn stops reading for an hour as his mind goes round and round with questions of his parents that won't receive a concrete answer anytime soon.

The letter from his mother is a little more helpful.

*...I feel like those vultures didn't even see us. We were nothing more to them than a 'thing' that needed disposing of. It was unbelievable how fast it went. One week we're happy newlyweds enjoying a good life, and the next, I'm defending my husband, unsuccessfully as it happens, against what I believed to be deceptive charges that turn out to be true. The following week, our very bones are etched to permanently hinder our mana, and we're promptly banished. It was so fast I could barely process what happened when we were dropped in a world we knew absolutely nothing about with little more than the clothes on our backs.*

*Colin didn't take our banishment well. He grew timid, wracked with guilt. I needed to figure out how we survive, and that sort of desperation can lead to illegal decisions, especially in Vegas. Is it any wonder I am where I am today? I am so sorry your parents couldn't be better for you, but life is the greatest fight. Fortunately, you give us hope we'll win in the end...*

Macyn reads each of the letters at a leisure pace, enjoying the sentiment, empathy, humor, or fondness he finds in them and it takes him all day and most of the night to read all fifty-eight letters. Unsurprisingly, he couldn't keep the moisture in his eyes from spilling and he's more than happy with that. Among the letters, he has a favorite, from his mother, and sets it atop the others. The whole experience leaves him feeling at ease, satisfied, drained, and perfect for the best sleep he's had since coming to Menhir.

## Live and Let Live

In the first hours of his forty-eight hours away from school, Macyn knows exactly what he needs to do. He needs to write a letter, and it takes him nearly two hours to fill six pages with everything that's been going on. He excludes the attempt-of-kidnapping, only to devote more time to that topic in a future letter. It'll be a tricky one to word, but reading a letter before that one should ease the hard news. Macyn feels energized, encouraged, loved, and it's more than he needs to continue working.

Wearing his last good uniform, mage and ghost head to campus when Sen communicates, "you know, I've been meaning to mention, while it is much better if you don't break your wand, it's not like I would've completely ceased to exist if it had. The worst that would've happened is months of wandering without memory of who I am before finally returning to the egg."

Though happy to know she wouldn't have died completely, it didn't change his opinion on what he did. It was certainly the craziest thing he's ever done, but he didn't regret it. "That still sounds kind of terrible to me."

"It is," she agrees. "But I never want you to risk your life like that again. I am already a ghost and a fall from that height nearly made me die all over. So, please be *much* more careful."

Happy by her compassion, Macyn nods. "Yes, my lady. You and me both, my lady."

With a quick, flustered intake of phantom air, Sen tries to hit Macyn multiple times in the shoulder for the never-ending 'my lady' jabs, however, her ethereal hands simply pass right through him. He couldn't help the smile fastened to his face as he drops off his letter, and on the return trip, Sen suggests they start over with a new sword rather than salvage the broken one.

"Making another blade will aid your development as an orewick," she reasons. "I think we should turn the two pieces into Kodachi or Tantō—they're short swords—to help you practice grinding, creating the guard, grip, and pommel."

"Can we sell the daggers too," Macyn asks, hoping to get something out of the hard work he put in.

With Sen's, "of course," Macyn is surprised how okay with it he feels. It's as if a heavy weight's been lifted off his shoulders, and at that moment, he realizes they're missing something. Concerned, Macyn asks, "uh, Sen, where's the hammer?"

She halts, then he does and they turn to each other. When she realizes where they last left the hammer, her shoulders suddenly sag, and she suggests, "let's look through the cellar for a hammer we can use."

Macyn looks at her skeptically, to which she softly offers, "we don't have to go back out there today," knowing what going back out into the forest means for both of them.

Looking high into the sky, Macyn still feels great and comments, "better now than later. Besides, I really love that hammer."

"...No," Sen finally says. "It's not worth the risk. We can't be certain what happened before won't happen again."

“Maybe,” he agrees, then continues walking toward Anthony again. “But what choice do we have? As you and everyone else have made abundantly clear, this place is dangerous. I just can’t hide away in my room hoping nothing bad ever happens.”

“Macyn, the same dangers that were out there before you received your letters, are still there now,” she points out, following after him. Understanding where his daring is coming from, she adds, “letters have no say on how well you defend yourself.”

“And yet, it’s still something I have to do,” he expresses. “Look, we’ll be careful, yeah? I’ll stay on high alert every second I’m in there. I have my Shirane coin in my pocket, and I’ll do everything you say.”

Sen seems to deflate a little and sighs with light frustration, asking, “how about a compromise?”

Macyn eyes her with mild skepticism. “What do ya have in mind?”

“Allow me to search beforehand?” Macyn is vexed by the proposition as she explains, “I know more or less where it landed and I could search through the area faster. Also, there are much fewer threats for a ghost to worry over.” He silently thinks it over as she adds, “plus, it would also save time if a certain someone started preparing the materials... a certain someone with an actual body.”

Her smirk is cocky enough to make Macyn want to argue on principle alone but he prefers her mirth much more than her listlessness. “I don’t like the idea of you being out there alone,” he willfully admits. “But I’ll agree if I stay close by the tree line.”

They stare at each other for a tense moment before Sen nods in agreement. As ghost and Mage exit the back door of Anthony building, they notice the thick roped barrier surrounding his first smelter is gone. While Sen checks their second smaller smelter beside Anthony house, Macyn walks over to the chard husk of melted stone left and whistles in amazement.

When Sen returns to show him something, Macyn happily proclaims, “thank God, the dragon’s gone.”

“I wonder what caused that,” Sen wonders aloud. Walking to the second smelter, she alleges, “maybe Professor Hawkins built something in Coral’s den to keep it there?”

“Professor Hawkins is related to Jaylen right?” he asks, happy to see the second smelter is accessible as well.

“Yes,” Sen answers as she moves around to the spot she wants to show him. “She teaches Animalia and assists Marshal Hew with Coral’s care. The Hawkins family have been the caretakers of the great hawks on Menhir for hundreds of years now.” Sen points to the dirt near to the black mound of melted stone and steel and comments, “it appears the search is over before it even began.”

Looking at the soot-covered dirt, Macyn reads a message, “Hammer. Smelter. R,” and Macyn turns to Sen in shock. “Root found the hammer.”

“Seems so,” Sen affirms with some disbelief of her own.

“I always had a good feeling about her,” Macyn asserts confidently.

Sen shakes her head before they head for the tree-line. For forty minutes of walking through the forest, it seems no different than before his attempted kidnapping. The fireflies dance around the grass and bushes, the birds sing from the treetops, and the smell of pine and wood permeates the breeze of the wind, yet Macyn’s breathing is quick, his eyes dart to everything that makes a sound or moves a shadow, and his hands gripping his pack’s straps

tightly. It's straining to be so hyper-aware for such a long trek but he finds it less alarming by the time he makes it to their smelter in the larger wedge of the cliff.

Macyn didn't have to search long before he found his sledgehammer inside the actual smelter with the bloom of steel he had smelted still attached to the magnet at the end of the handle and calls out to Sen, "found it!"

Sen floats to him and is surprised to see the hammer and bloom steel in Macyn's tight grip, stating in astonishment, "I almost can't believe it's here."

Nodding in agreement, he adds, "we definitely need to thank her for this."

Back in the cellar of Anthony, Macyn follows Sen's instructions to the letter. Though he's condensed bloom steel before, he feels better with her instruction in his ear, and so, with his longer coffee-colored hair covered, Macyn repeats the process. In the first day, he consolidates the impure ingots into flat plates, thereby removing the slag sand and bits of charcoal, he breaks the plates to determine which of the pieces will be the edge of the blade and which will be the spine, and works into the night to create the first billet of high carbon kawagane. Macyn utilizes the majority of the following day to create the low carbon billet shingane, forge welding the two parts together, and finally stretching the combined bar to sword length with a combination of the Gud Arm and his hand hammer. It's peaceful, distracting work, and Macyn enjoys it for the ore crafting, Sen's company, and the goal.

The third day saw Macyn walking to the post, pondering on a solution to the lack of music. The natural sounds of metal hammering against metal and sanding metal off of metal, just can't compete with some Hip-Hop or K-Pop. Keeping his head low, Macyn can easily avoid the populous of self-absorbed mages. Many students, if not nearly all, sneak a peek at him behind hushed whispers and snickering as he passes. Aside from Jaylen Hawkins's death glare, it's hard to place some of the other looks.

Some mages seem curious at the sight of him, which has Macyn wondering if they know about his kidnapping. But judging by the angry stares, he guesses the news floating around is, '*that weird mage attacked a great hawk,*' and not of his kidnapping. With all of Menhir's attention on these abductions, Macyn's certain his near kidnapping would've spread like wildfire had it been revealed.

Before class begins, Macyn asks Sen, "can you check the guild during Numeralculus for any news? Everyone's acting weirder than usual."

"Of course," Sen voices from the wand.

Soon after Macyn takes a seat in Runology, the weirdness continues. Instead of sitting with either his Ignis posse or Marnamei Hew, Solomon Roth takes the seat right next to him. He plops down naturally, without a care in the world, casually nodding at a bewildered Macyn's direction. Despite Macyn defending himself via electrocuting Roth, the popular heir says nothing as he calmly takes his materials out of his bag. Macyn expected some form of retaliatory act, for he was certain there could be no other reason for being there.

Confused, he looks around the class to make sure the mega-wealthy heir sitting next to him isn't pranking him in some way. Not only does it seem straightforward, but Ryce's strenuous class begins and ends without the raven-haired heir intimidating him, mana shoving him, or giving him a single dirty look. The honored heir simply sits in his seat at the front of the class as bored and uninterested as he ever is. After class, Solomon thoughtlessly places his supplies in his bag and is about to leave when he turns to Macyn, who's temporarily forgotten the oddity of the day for the amount of homework Ryce tripled specifically for him.

Roth curiously raises an eyebrow, asking, “you alright, mate?” Remaining in silent shock, Solomon snaps his fingers in front of Macyn’s face as he calls, “oi.” Macyn looks to him as he states, “we’re going to be late if you don’t move your arse.”

Solomon turns to exit the room, seemingly unperturbed by the multiple pairs of eyes on him. Desmond, Jorn, Hazel, and Wang all stare at Roth like he’s lost his mind as if trying to understand a joke they aren’t in on. Professor Ryce himself can’t help but eye the interaction as he reorganizes his already neat desk. On his way out, Macyn even notices Marnamei Hew pay closer attention to him as well, though she seems more pleased than anything else.

Head low, Macyn covertly sneaks off to his next class, hands itching at the ready for any surprise attacks that come his way. Sen’s voice manifests from the wand on their way to Numeralculus, “do you still want me to go? I don’t trust Mr. Roth.”

“Neither do I,” Macyn agrees. “This could just be an act to get me to drop my guard. The moment I trust him for anything, BAM, all sorts of unimaginable horrors.”

“Unimaginable horrors aside, my thinking is similar enough,” Sen states. “However, I don’t believe he’ll do anything during class.”

“That you know of,” Macyn argues. “Potions or runes can do about as much damage without being caught.” With her silent agreement, Macyn notices more staring from Everette Masters, Jaylen, and Onawa as they pass him, further reminding his inhabitant, “for now, I’d rather know what’s going on, please.”

“I won’t be long,” she tells him, exiting the wand. Before floating away, she imparts, “if Mr. Roth tries anything, shock first, ask questions later.”

With a smirk, he answers, “deal.”

In Numeralculus, Solomon Roth, again, sits in the empty seat beside Macyn, and again, continues his strange behavior by acting normal. He even asks Macyn for help with a particularly complicated abstract multiplication problem. Macyn stretches his hand to show him the solution, all the while ready to defend himself if needs be, however, nothing happens. The silence between them and Macyn’s constant unease is constant throughout the class.

By Sen’s returns at the end of class, Macyn is fully agitated and rushes to lunch, bursting through the doors before anyone. Sen is about to explain what she’s learned when she spots their company only a few paces behind them. Macyn stops to allow Roth to move on, when instead, Roth stops as well. Macyn grows nervous still as he then rushes to a crowded lunch hall. Even at Macyn’s generally empty table, Roth sits with him, easily stunning all of the older Ignis mages and the politically-minded.

Macyn takes a small amount of initiative to ask a feeler question. “Are you okay?” A brilliant question, he feels, that can be taken multiple ways while also answering whether he should or shouldn’t be worried.

“Yeah,” Roth states easily. “You?”

Macyn hadn’t expected that. He feels handled, annoyed, and growing more stressed. He carelessly answers, “I don’t know.”

“I bet,” Roth replies, nodding with mild interest. “We ought to head outside. Too bloody crowded to talk in here.”

“One might say there’s just the right amount of witnesses to talk in here.” Macyn counters, glad for the public protection.

Tilting a low brow absurd eye at Macyn, Roth states, “mate, I’m just looking to

talk is all, I swear.”

Macyn mulls it over a moment, skeptical but ultimately nods. After grabbing a few sandwiches from the middle of the table, Macyn follows Roth outside down the courtyard toward the Ignis building, prompting Macyn to ask, “are we going to the Hearth?”

Roth tilts his head back and answers, “yeah.”

Macyn counters, “do we have to? I’ve never liked it since the first, and only, time I’ve been in there.”

Turning to Macyn, Roth seems uncertain, “...right. Doesn’t matter; ton of posers yanking about anyway. Annoys the hell out of me. How about the Coliseum then?”

Suspicious of the suggestion, Macyn asks, “can’t you say whatever it is you want to say here?”

“Would that I could, mate,” Roth easily replies. “You know any good privacy crafts?”

“None,” Macyn quickly answers.

“Thought not. Come on.”

Roth leads Macyn to the sports stadium where they avoid the field and navigate underneath the stands until they reach ornate double doors with long gold handles. Roth places his palm on the door a moment before they open on their own. The room automatically lights up with floating bulbs of orange and red light, illuminating red carpet over marble, white walls, and carpeted stairs. Macyn mimics the casual Roth as he steps on a single step before the stone steps ascend like an escalator, rotating them a hundred and eighty degrees at every level, going higher and higher until they reach the top floor. Roth leads them to a long private box with a perfect view of the pitch below and the sky above.

Macyn gasps at the high view and the luxury of the opulent room. The seats are plush, black, and red, giving Macyn the distinct impression he can get swallowed whole sitting on them. The room is made of the same stone much of the stadium is made of, except with a sunny sheen luster and the tables are all crafted to float on their own. Two small trays float near the mages without being in the way.

In a daze, Macyn asks, “how do you have access to this?”

“Room’s reserved for my family’s accommodations,” Roth responds like a mage bored by wealth. “It’s not a big deal. Masters, Wang, and Hew all have theirs too. You’ve never been inside one?” He asks from what seems like genuine curiosity, rather than self-serving pride.

“I’ve still haven’t seen a game yet,” Macyn easily admits, still in awe of the amazing view to the entire stadium outside.

“No!” Roth bawls, mostly breaking through Macyn’s astonishment and garnering his attention. “You’ve never- ugh, Gods, it pains me to even think it. Never seen a- Oh, mate, you’re in for the greatest treat since mana. It’s the best sport there could possibly be! It isn’t even possible for me to completely encapsulate how utterly fantastic kanonball is.”

“If you say so,” Macyn starts, unsure how to answer. “So, we’re in here for privacy? Not that I don’t enjoy the anxiety, but what’s this about?”

“Before that,” Solomon proclaims before asking, “What was that manacraft you hit me with?” Roth ops to ask instead. “Burned off my eyebrows, mate. They haven’t taught anything like that in class, not that I’d expect them too. I was super chase about Melankomas teaching, but it’s all defense, defense, defense with the bloke. My sister’s taught me more than

what he's covering in our first year."

"Um," Macyn hesitates, wondering if this is the moment of retaliation. Rubbing his fingers together for an impending mana cast, he answers simply, "it's just something I picked up."

"Nice trick with the sword," Roth hypes with a big grin. "This goes without saying but how about we don't do that again?"

"Then don't bind me," Macyn argues in return, quickly adding, "or try to take my stuff."

"Fair enough," Roth heaves, throwing his palms up in mock surrender. "Now that all that ugliness is behind us," he asserts, rubbing his hands together. "Let's talk about that sword."

"What about it," Macyn asks.

"I want it," Solomon demands.

"No," Macyn quickly asserts.

Solomon laughs before waving Macyn off. "Good. I'm tired of the sheep. And relax. I know the blade broke. Bloody sucks that. It was the perfect length for me. Anyway, if I could talk to the orewick who was making it, maybe get his design, or have him talk to my family's orecrafter, they can start forging another one for me. Don't know if you heard, but I'm recently in the market for a new sword."

Confused by all the right words regarding connection, trade, or possible mynt, a confounded Macyn asks, "and you want my sword?"

"I *wanted* that sword, sure," Roth knowingly states. "I saw the pieces, remember. Don't try to hustle me. I appreciate that a hell of a lot less than getting electrocuted."

Despite Roth's genuine warning, Macyn argues, "I'm not trying to sell you on anything. I'm still trying to figure out why you're not getting your revenge. Aren't you mad I sent you to the infirmary? Like, how is this not the best place to pay me back?"

"First," a mildly amused Roth begins, holding up three fingers. "You have trust issues or think too much, or both. Don't know which, and can't say as I care, to be honest." Putting down a finger he adds, "second, nah. Have you seen Healer M'Curre? I should be thanking you for giving me an excuse to go see her. I played that visit for all it's worth too, mate." Dropping his hand, he finishes, "and it's not like I haven't been bested before. While I don't fall for the same thing twice, it's nothing new. I imagine it'll happen again and I actually have a little more respect for you now. Standing your ground against a Roth is something sheep don't have the balls to do. You were sheep. Now you're not."

"...Thanks," Macyn absentmindedly states, suspicion abating. His speechlessness nearly keeps him from forming a proper reply, but what he says isn't much better. "I was having a bad day."

"I figured," Roth calmly states with a nod. "So, the orewick?"

"Uh," Macyn throats, unsure what he should say. He may get in trouble by what he admits to, however, Roth and the Marshal already saw him with his weapon and no one has made a point to prohibit a sixteen-year-old from making weapons.

Roth exhales exasperated before asking, "are you trying to hold out for a deal? Cuz, mate, stuff like that annoys me and I don't want to regret bringing you here if you're scheming for a cut."

"Chill out. That's not it," Macyn retorts. In a luxurious room with one of the

honored heirs talking about his orewick when Macyn used to be looked down on by all of Ignis as a broken stolid, he rhetorically asks, “I’m not a sheep? Big deal. That doesn’t actually change anything. I clearly remember you being there when your pals manhandled me.”

“I also remember me not caring one way or the other,” Roth calmly responds. “I’m not some white knight hell-bent on saving everyone from ‘*injustice*,’ or ‘*unfairness*.’ Something bad happened to you? So what. It happens to everyone. Do something about it or don’t; it’s as simple as that. To you, mate, I say the same thing I tell every other sad sod looking to be bailed out; Rescue your damn self. Cause hero-ing ain’t my thing.”

Though he finds Roth to be even cooler for some reason, Macyn starts to wonder more and more if this is some trick he’s just not able to see. It’s possible it could be exactly what Roth is saying. Roth did care the least when it came to Jorn and Desmond manpushing him. Macyn takes another moment to wonder if Roth has ever spoken to him after the opening ceremony. He seemed nice enough then, going so far as to introduce himself as Solo rather than Honored Heir Solomon Roth. Macyn had even thought they could be friends before status and poverty thoroughly crushed that possibility.

“Okay,” Macyn announces, and before Solomon can reply, Macyn asks, “can you give me a second,” before walking over to the other end of the lavish room. He brings the wand closer to his mouth. “That was unexpected. What do you think?”

“I don’t believe he’s lying,” Sen slowly admits, choosing to exit the wand, and float close to Macyn. “He seems arrogant, though not in the worst way. I still prefer not to reveal too much. As it stands, he’s only interested in ‘*the orewick*.’”

“Which is you,” Macyn states.

“Which is us,” she corrects. “And honestly, I’d rather no one know about that if we can help it. I don’t believe there are any rules against it, however, if there is, I want us to be done with at least one sword before they demand we stop.”

“At least one,” Macyn repeats. After a short moment, he apprehensively asks, “you wouldn’t mind staying to... I mean, did you want to make another sword after this one?”

“I’m staying, Macyn,” she pointedly tells him. “I’m staying.”

With a smile he fails to hold back, he continues with a potentially problematic question. “So, how are we going to sell it if we don’t tell people we made it? They’d probably think we don’t know what we’re selling, right? And try to nickel and dime us?”

“It’s possible,” she answers honestly. “My original plan was to sell it to a weapon shop. I don’t mind if those in the business know about us, as it’s pure business. Selling to a family feels much riskier. Do you trust him?”

Scratching his head a moment, he huffs and honestly answers, “I’m leaning in favor of. Whether that bites us later on...”

“Aside from being very political and well off, I’ve never heard great things about his family,” Sen admits, turning to the honored heir, who’s chosen to lie down in one of the plush couches. “It’s a risk, but... he hasn’t asked you anything about being kidnapped, and I’m fairly certain he knows. In this case, I feel it’s worth taking.”

Macyn nods his head and ghost and mage return to Roth lazily laying out on the fluffy looking couch. After the heir gets up, Macyn looks the heir in the eyes and extends a hand. “I’m Macyn Blende.”

Roth looks slightly taken aback, though well humored by Macyn’s welcome, and grasps his hand with a firm handshake. “Solomon Roth. But you can call me Great and



Honorable Heir Roth.”

Macyn scoffs at that, before genuinely replying, “sure, but only every time I want to make fun of you.” Floating beside him, Sen seems nervous by her ward’s relaxed attitude toward the powerful heir but says nothing. Macyn can’t claim to be the best judge of character, however, he has his mother’s healthy suspicion and gets the impression that Roth might be okay.

“Or Solo if you want,” Roth adds, stepping back. “So, this seems like a lot of unnecessary pomp and stance for one orewick, mate. Is he legendary or something?”

“She,” Macyn corrects with emphasis. “Is private. And wants to stay that way. She’s the one teaching me. That sword you like? I couldn’t have made it without her.”

It’s Solomon’s turn to eye Macyn suspiciously before looking over to Sen who is floating beside him, searching for answers he might gleam. Sen only nods her head, implying Macyn’s truthfulness. “Okay,” Solo evenly accepts with a shrug. “Wasn’t expecting a lady orewick, but whatever.”

“She’s the best,” Macyn remarks. “I’m close to getting the new one to the same stage as the old one, and she’s even helping me turn the old one into daggers.”

“Alright then,” Solomon challenges. “Let’s have a look-see.”

Macyn starts walking to the stone double doors when Sen speaks out. “Class is starting in twenty minutes. There’s not enough time.”

“Ugh,” Solomon grumbles, turning irately toward Sen. “You sound just like our spook. Seriously, mate,” he starts, turning to Macyn. “Why do you still have her? Things can’t possibly be that hard.”

Macyn whirls around and irately stares him down. “Because, Solo, she’s my friend and I am sick and tired of you all you talking about her like she doesn’t matter. Ghost or not, she still has feelings. And while we’re at it, you show her the same respect you would me, go it?”

Macyn doesn’t wait for an answer before he storms out of the room and takes the self descending stone stairs down two at a time. Sen floats beside him as they go down several floors, cheerfully expressing to him, “thank you, Macyn.”

The coffee haired mage smiles slightly with a stiff nod and they say nothing more as he heads to class. In Manaform, Solo takes the seat next to Macyn again, who then mildly turns to the unexpected heir. Solo turns to him and seems sincere when he conveys, “sorry, mate. I wasn’t trying to be an arse. I didn’t know she was your friend.”

Before Macyn can say anything, Sen speaks from the wand, “apology accepted, Mr. Roth.”

Macyn isn’t sure if she means it or not for the sake of peace, but he follows her lead and shrugs his shoulders. Since Macyn has been playing catch up with Runology, and now Manaform, class is as difficult as always. Trying to extend an object longer than it is, is something he’s done for forging with his metal rods, but never quite so fast and without break. Pushing his mana in that manner brings about that familiar icky, gunky burn circulating through his body like thick gel for blood. Fortunately, most in the class seem to have trouble extending a branch of wood, with the notable exception of Marnamei Hew.

“She’s always been good at manaforming,” Solomon mentions when he notices Macyn staring at Marnamei helping some of her housemates, urging him to look away embarrassed. “You’re alright, mate. Everyone looks at her. Nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Red in the cheeks, Macyn still isn't used to being noticed in such a casual way. Usually, he can feel the pockets when no one notices him. Preferring to move along from his getting caught, he notes aloud, "she's good with manaforming? Better than you?"

"We all have our strengths," Solo casually states. "She's particularly good with anything nature related. It's her bread and butter. So, ya' know, unfair," Solo says with a smirk. Macyn lightly smirks as well, though simply because it's the first time anyone has ever talked gossip with him in class. It's so alien to him, he can't respond with more than a nod and a smile before returning to his assignment.

Macyn only just manages to increase the size of the branch to the instructed length by class's end, letting out a tired breath when Solomon asks, "I'm not trying to be a jerk here, but the blare from your inhabitant is a sure bet why all of this hard for you. Didn't they warn you it affects your crafting?"

Macyn eye's him skeptically a moment before amiably answering, "her name is Sen. I've had her since I got here, so I don't know any other way. Not that I'd return her just so I can use my mana better."

"Just?" Solomon exclaims with a laugh. "'*Just*,' he says. This guy," Solo points a thumb, chuckling some. As the pair exit class together, drawing many curious stares, Roth explains, "using your mana better than everyone is like the premiere thing any mage can do on Menhir or Gaiorem. It's literally everything!" Macyn tries to ignore the odd looks as effortlessly as Solomon seems to as the heir continues to say, "not the only important skill to have, for sure, but you can get crazy far here doing the very thing you currently suck at."

Macyn know he's only joking, he responds, "it's year one. With the exception of the 'great and powerful' heirs, how advanced can any mage in our class actually be?"

"A good amount, mate," Solomon answers. "Any of the stragglng families who realized their ugly little mouth breather is going to be in the same year as an heir, definitely made sure their kid knows more than normal; you know, to impress and whatnot. I'd say fifty to sixty percent of our class is advanced in some way."

Macyn doesn't know why it's frustrating to hear Solo's, more than likely, accurate estimates, but he's rubbing his face roughly, annoyed and grumbling, "of course."

Deeply curious, Solomon asks, "you never noticed why most of the class finish so fast? That ain't normal. Even though mages laugh at you for being slow, if the heirs weren't here raising the bar, they'd probably be just as horrible."

"What a pleasant thing to say," Macyn sarcastically replies.

Smirking, Solo asserts, "let me drop off my stuff, then we can check out the sword."

"Macyn," Sen calls her ward, exiting the wand to get his attention. "You have roughly thrice the amount of work this week. Time is limited."

"Miss Ghost," Solo chimes, looking up at her. "This is hardly going to take all day. I think he's got time."

Macyn thinks about it for a moment. "Come by Anthony building after you drop your stuff off. I'll be out front."

"Odin's balls," Solo gasps. "You stay way the hell out there? That's got to be an hour's walk at least."

"Close," Macyn feigns with enthusiasm. "Forty-five, fifty minutes. But you're right! How could I ever think a most honored and powerful heir would debase himself like some

lowly commoner by using his precious feet to travel?” With articulate fingers reaching dramatically for the high heavens, Macyn cries, “oh, the injustice!”

Solomon raises an eyebrow high, surprised at his sarcastic performance, and Sen sways her head from side to side, grumbling, “that was fast.”

Solomon huffs in amusement, then chuckles. With a smirk, Solo relays, “wanker. Fine. See you in a bit.”

Sen and Macyn watch Solomon leave and none too far away, he’s joined by the Hazel, Desmond, and Jorn, but he seems to ignore them. The mage and inhabitant watch as something is said between them. It turns heated fairly fast and Macyn feels he’s seen too much when Jorn turns around, spotting them and give him and Sen a sneer of pure disdain.

Ghost and Mage quickly leave as Macyn voices, “this day is so bizarre.”

“Now that we have some time, I’ve learned a bit about why everyone seems more aware of you,” Sen says as she floats beside him on their way to Anthony. “You’re in the paper,” she states, clearly irate by that fact. Macyn whips his head around toward Sen, surprised by her sore tone as much as being in the paper. “There was a press release a few days ago, by that fool Meegeren. He stated there was another kidnapping attempt that was not successful, but with this failure, the kidnapper is now within his grasp. They did not identify you by name, but just as bad, they reported it was a first-year male student of Erudite. With your absence, I’m certain every one of the freshmen think it’s you. I’d say it’s only a matter of time until your name is callously reported.”

“That’s...” Macyn isn’t sure if this complicates things or not, but since his arrival on Menhir, unrelenting difficulty has been his constant companion. “I don’t know what that means for me.”

“It means we need to speak with the dean or the marshal. Revealing your name and or photo to the public may place you in higher danger. The kidnapper may plan better next time. They know his cloak was incredibly well warded which shows he has a great grasp of runes and is likely intelligent. For them to put you in danger like this...” Sen pauses to try and calm herself down. “Instead of investigating the information, it’s a show of ego for that baboon.”

“How likely is it that he might come after me again,” Macyn asks. “Especially in a school with more protection.”

“It doesn’t matter how likely it may or may not be,” Sen protests. “You do not live close to campus, Macyn. It’s far enough to be the easiest thing to just take you.”

“You’re the one who always warns me about how dangerous Menhir can be,” Macyn states. “That it’s something to prepare for in order to live here. What’s changed?”

“Why are you arguing with me about this?” Sen heatedly questions. “This is an enemy beyond the acceptable level of danger; beyond harmless dragons and school bullies. This is... this is significant. Not for children.”

Shrugging without a proper response, he simply asks, “so what do you want to do?”

“We should ask for some form of escort from Anthony to campus,” Sen reasons.

Macyn can understand Sen’s words and the weight behind them, but his family is waiting for him. “Look, I get that. But what if we need more ore but they ground us from going into the forest? Let’s just wait and see what happens. In the meantime, we’ll stay indoors near crowds.”

Sen takes several moments to consider his suggestion before adding one of her

own. “And we’ll be using the smelter behind Anthony.”

“What about that idiot dragon,” Macyn asks hotly, still cross with Coral the dragon for wasting so much of his time.

“I know what Coral did is unforgivable but she didn’t know what she was doing,” Sen contends.

Macyn shrugs before asking, “and Root? Are you okay with her walking out further to meet us?”

“She’s a nymph,” Sen answers. “There’s no cause for concern since the kidnapper hasn’t taken a single one.”

Leaning his head back, he asks, “why not? They still look human, regardless of how attractive she- they are.”

“Nymphs are notoriously protective of their springtides,” Sen begins to explain. “They have difficulty reproducing, as such their youths are substantially more important to them. Every nymph would be up in arms if they believed a mage kidnapped a springtide. Not unlike our Root, some nymphs are not happy with mages and would use this as an excuse to demand excessive compensation. It goes without saying, the Imperium would not want this to happen either.”

Searching the tree line along the way, Macyn points out, “we don’t know if he might change his mind and start abducting Nymphs.”

“It’s been nearly a year since the first abducted child and not a single one have been nymphs. She’ll be fine, Macyn. With her abilities, very little can take advantage of her.”

“My point is we don’t know. This guy sounds like a sick freak. I mean, supposedly he wants the kids alive, right? But he nearly kills me trying to take me? We don’t know what this guy’s after, and Root could be a target too.”

“Can we please stop speculating on how this kidnapper may be thinking?” Sen asks. “It’s very grim, and the day has been going moderately well.”

“Fine, but we meet Sundays just as before, and- and- and-” Macyn repeats, putting his hands up in submissive acceptance when he notices Sen preparing to counter-argue. “And we also smelt behind Anthony... assuming that fire-humping lizard doesn’t come back.”

Sen gasps, “Macyn! That is a divine creature. I know it’s been somewhat inconvenient but have some respect, please.”

Macyn rolls his eyes and eventually they reach Anthony. Walking up the gravel road, they see Solomon waiting for them, sitting comfortably on a very impressive looking flying carpet. While the school’s carpets are wide, thick, sluggish, and mana heavy, this carpet looks light, sleek, and very responsive. Solomon’s carpet is also intricately designed, stitched in high-quality reds, yellows, and black threads, for a flame-like effect. Macyn is very impressed and eager to see his first kanonball game.

Hopping off his luxurious floating carpet, Solo calls out, “bloody hell, took you long enough. I’ve been waiting here for like five minutes.”

“Oh wow,” Macyn feigns concern. “Like five *whole* minutes? If I’ve accidentally made you a patient person, I do apologize.”

“As long as you understand where you went wrong, my child,” Solomon artfully waves his hand in a grand forgiving gesture.

“Mr. Roth,” Sen greets with a small bow.

“Miss Inhabitant.” Solomon returns before snatching up his floating carpet and

casually wrapping it around his neck. “I can’t believe this is where you stay,” Solomon says after following Macyn inside, scanning the moderately clean two-story building. Swiping his sight from left to right, scanning the whole of the small common room, Solomon gasps as he asks, “there’s only one fireplace? And no couches?”

“I’m the only person who lives here,” Macyn states as he walks to his room. “Wait here,” he says, and a moment later, he returns with his un-beveled blade, presenting it to Solomon with both hands. Macyn catches how Solomon’s eyes widen at the sight of the weapon he made and it felt good to see appreciation.

Solomon takes the sword in grasp by its tang and tests it with a few swipes, enjoying the reach of it. “It’s... nearly identical to the first one,” he notes with genuine bewilderment. “It’s still heavy, but I get it’s not done yet.”

Sen turns to Macyn with a sharp gaze that tells him he needs to answer. Her smirk also alludes to a curiosity in hearing how much her ward has learned. “Yeah, well, I still have to refine the shape to its final form with the sander, clay heat treat, then the handle and sheath.”

“How much longer till it’s done,” Solomon asks.

“Um, well, there’s a lot to the handle... I don’t know. It’ll be done when it’s done.” Macyn looks a little despondent in realizing how much more there is to do. “Hopefully not more than... a month,” he says looking at Sen, who sympathetically raises two dainty fingers. Feeling like he’s been punched in the gut, Macyn corrects himself, “maybe two months.”

“Why so long?” Solomon cries. “My family’s orewicks can make a whole sword in an afternoon.”

Macyn doesn’t know how to answer, motivating Sen to do so in his place. “Macyn is learning Old Hand Steel from his orewick. You should ask your smiths if they know what that is and why it differs from mana crafted weapons. More than that, Macyn only has Sundays to work which delays him significantly.”

Solomon gives her a nod, before continuing his regard for the work in progress in his combat trained hand. “It feels so different than the mana forged swords. Sometimes those are so brittle when it’s made by amateurs. They always have a hard time getting the quantity of the materials just right.” Solomon slices the air clean, creating a crisp, yet hollow whipping noise. “This, on the other hand, is pure.”

Macyn turns to Sen with a smirk, who seems appreciative of Solomon’s comment, replying himself, “yeah, it’s actually pretty fun. Lots of hard work, but it’s nice to see the progress.”

“Mate, you have to let me see it when it’s closer to being done; lighter, with a handle and all,” Solomon extends the blade to Macyn. The moment Macyn touches it, Solomon sounds a loud buzzing noise, startling Macyn to hop back. Macyn lets out a long breath as Solomon laughs happily.

“Now, we’re even,” Solomon states as Macyn snatches his blade back and wraps it up. Macyn parts with Solo at the library after a ride on his expensive carpet, and wonders, *‘did I just make a friend?’*

## Sins of the Father

Macyn doesn't know what to make of Solomon's seemingly friendly attention. The rich, popular heir only has one reason to be associating with him, yet he hangs around during class and meals. Though Macyn should be suspicious, he isn't, recognizing a certain similarity in the coal-haired boy's attitude that he can bond with. Macyn decides it's much easier to go with the flow than stress over maybes, and throughout the week, the mages become quick cohorts.

Macyn finds the heir is certainly different than he expected. He doesn't lord his wealth and access over him and ignores all conventions associated with his family name and title. It rarely comes up unless he doesn't even notice, or it's a joke. After only four short days, conversations between the two primarily revolve around class, classmates, and teachers. For Solomon, he finds every class aside from Wardcraft to be, for the most part, useless.

"I don't mean useless, as in, they don't have *any* use," he casually explains as Macyn checks over his historia essay. The pair are lounging in a room in the library, struggling through their homework, to Solomon's great annoyance. "I mean useless, as in they have no use to *me*. Think about it, mate. Not trying to brag but the truth is, anything I need, I can just pay for, couldn't I? I can buy the best runemaster and have him tag everything I own to do whatever I need. The same with a potion master and any other master I need selling their craft. Not to mention, my convenience keep others employed."

"You can't buy a sense of humor," Macyn quickly chirps as he looks over his essay and spots a mistake.

Solomon scoffs as he counters, "I can pay them to laugh," to which Macyn snorts at. As Sen tries to get her ward to focus, Solomon continues, "the one thing I absolutely *need* to know myself is how to fight, cause no matter how much you pay someone to do the job for you, I reckon they won't want to die defending some posh twat from some crazed minotaur, would they? That means they either win or run, and I can't take the risk of someone running on me. And triple the bonus, it feels good knowing I can kick anyone's arse I come up against."

"Anyone?" Macyn looks up, asking in a knowing tone. "Even if they were tall, dark, and wearing blue trim on their uniform?" The pair of housemates have had enough conversations about nothing of note, that Macyn feels confident inquiring about a topic of more significance. The only tidbit of juicy gossip Macyn knows about Solomon Roth and Everette Masters is the duel to win Marnamei Hew's heart, and that remains unconfirmed since he had no one to ask.

Solomon effortlessly grasps and emphatically asserts, with balled fists, "anyone!" Macyn presses his lips together to hold in a smile, but the line of his mouth and the sideways glance of his eyes is enough to set Solomon off. "Were you there? Did you see what that idiot did?"

"I was there, and I saw him shatter your sword," Macyn responds. "That must've--"

"No, not that," Solomon retorts. "Which trust me, that riled me up pretty good. But I mean before that." Macyn shakes his head and Solomon sits up to actively explain, "okay, we're in the middle of it, yeah? Keep in mind, we've duelled before, but that day was more like a

fight, plain and simple. In the middle of it, that colossal wanker loses his bloody mind all because he couldn't take me down like when we were kids, and uses the Aqua Slice rune on his guard! There were people all around us and he uses a dangerous rune he can't completely control cause he lost his head? Yeah, I did something stupid, but only to keep the fight between us. That's the only reason I 'lost,' and not only does he know it, but Marny does too! Which pisses him off even more."

Curiously, Macyn follows up with, "how often do you guys fight?"

Solomon doesn't seem keen to answer, and settles with a simple, "much less now." Macyn leaves it at that.

During Sunday breakfast, at a table by themselves, Solomon asks if he wants to join him and watch one of the University's clubs, to which Macyn answers, "can't. Today's forging day. I never really have time during the week, so I have to do all my orecrafting on Sundays. What club are you apart of?"

"I usually head over to the dueling pits but it's always crowded, which annoys me. Plus they don't let freshmen do more than watch and study. It's always theory, theory, theory with those tosspots."

Suddenly, from behind Solo, a lovely and familiar voice explains, "theory interrelates concepts that can help explain the unexpected, and predict movements or maneuvers, just by being mindful of all the related variables."

"I knew you were behind me," Solomon responds, turning to the radiant smile of the university's gem, Marnamei Hew.

She turns to Macyn and he's surprised when she greets him, "hello," before extending her hand. "We've never properly met. I'm Marnamei Hew."

Macyn eagerly takes her graceful hand and upon doing so is quickly aware of an odd and delicious feeling, similar to Root's enchantment though not as strong. Macyn slightly shakes his head and registers how rough and calloused her hand is as he quickly responds, "hi. I'm Macyn. Blende."

She narrows her brows curiously a moment, then nods and returns her attention to Solomon. "Ready?"

Macyn turns to Solomon expectantly, exhales audibly with a smirk before raising a chin and declaring, "we're going on a **DATE!**" Yelling 'date,' loudly attracts the stares and interest of everyone nearby, annoying Marnamei as she shoves him for his goofiness.

"Fekking peon, shut up," she casually hollers, however, the uptick corners of her pink lips betray her embarrassed anger. He laughs at her playful pushing as she bemoans, "it's not a date. You're just trying to rile him up and I don't appreciate you using me like that." The last statement rings with more sincerity, as Macyn wonders who this *him* is.

"Really?" Solomon returns, smirking at her the entire time. "I reckon he shouldn't have any reason to get mad, you know, since you're not but friends and all. Unless, he's built this conceited fantasy in his head about the world and you're feeding him this minotaur dung-" "I am not feeding anything-" Marnamei tries to interject but Solomon continues regardless. "**-by not** being honest with him."

"I'm *always* honest," she strictly states, before turning to Macyn who has been watching the small exchange with bewilderment and a little jealousy. The mocha-haired mage can easily feel the history between them, and wonders how long they've known each other when Marnamei tells Solo more than asks, "can we talk about this later?"

With laid back eyes, Solomon turns from Marnamei to Macyn, and back, asking, “why? I’m just going to tell him later.”

“No, you will not,” Marnamei buoyantly states at the same time Macyn says, “no he won’t.”

Macyn and Marnamei share a look of the unexpected accord, though Macyn looks away first before he can fall too hard for her amazing features. Turning to Solomon, he quickly informs his housemate, “I gotta go. Meeting the president of the Brownies Association.”

Marnamei startles with uncertainty as Solomon easily plays along, “Odin bless you for all your efforts on our humble behalf. What’s on today’s agenda?”

“... Uh, there is no Brownies Association,” Marnamei announces to the two with near certainty.

Quirking his head to the side and questioning her statement with more confidence than fact, Macyn returns, “isn’t there?” Marnamei turns to Solomon who’s shaking his head at her with fictitious disappointment as Macyn confidently continues. “To answer your question, dear Solomon, we’ll be discussing how food eaten at dusk tastes no different than food eaten at dawn.”

As Macyn departs with a dramatic flap of his jacket, Solomon tells a confused Marnamei with feigned earnestness, “don’t you see how important his work is?”

On the walk back to Anthony, Sen can’t help but comment, “you two get along far too well.”

With a snort, Macyn agrees as much. “Yeah, it’s weird, isn’t it?”

“It’s not,” Sen states, the optimism clear in her tone. After many moments of silence, however, she adds, “and I’m happy for you.” After a moment of silence, she adds, “he’s still paying for the sword.”

“Oh, no doubt,” Macyn quickly agrees.

Macyn labors over the forge for the rest of the morning, but happily so. A good attitude keeps him company throughout Sen’s beveling instructions, making the back and forth from the furnace to the anvil to form the spine, back bevel, central ridge, and finally, the edge of the katana move much faster. It was grinding work but he was upbeat and kept going until his second ever blade was ready for claying and heat treating.

Grabbing the jar of clay slurry he previously made from beside the Gud Arm, Macyn curiously asks Sen, “can we use the steel that idiot- ...I mean, that *nice* dragon ruined?”

Though inspecting every inch of the blade laying on the anvil, Sen is exasperated by his disregard for the majestic Coral before eventually responding, “not to forge a sword, but it can be used to for other things. Why?”

Setting down the jar, Macyn smirks before withdrawing the Gud Arm’s sledgehammer from the base of the anvil. With a brisk pace, Macyn and Sen exit out of Anthony’s cellar through the rear exit, toward the first smelter he made. With his sledgehammer in hand, he slams the dense head of metal against the smelter dozens of times, breaking through the stone wall and getting to the metal within. He removes the heavy cast iron with the magnet at the end of his sledgehammer and returns to the furnace in the cellar.

As Macyn lays the steel in the already blazing furnace, he explains the present he wants to make for Root. With minimal instruction from Sen, Macyn spends the next hour heating the material to welding temperature, flattening it on the Gud Arm, and breaking off the pieces needed for a set of chisels.



He's sanding the pieces when Sen asks, "will you be fine to continue while I look for Root?" So focused on the task of getting the metal chisels to look like the ones he uses in runology, Macyn only hums in agreement. Before Macyn knows it, there is an unexpected tap on his shoulder so shocking, Macyn instinctively whirls around and away. The sander automatically stops, but the rough sanding belt catches his hand and rips some skin off. Macyn yells in pain at the scrape deep enough to bleed readily.

Root hisses regretfully and Sen angrily berates the auburn-ish springtide. "This is why I told you not to! But you are so impatient."

"I-I'm sorry," Root tries, turning from made to ghost, her plethora of hair flowing. "I didn't mean for that to hap-"

Sen interrupts Root, asking Macyn, "how bad is it?" He's gripping his bleeding hand before his worried inhabitant, hissing at the icy burn stinging his nerves up his arm. Sen beckons, "let me see."

With a shaky left hand, Macyn shows her his bleeding scrapped knuckles. "Well, it's not as bad as it looks. It scrapped off some skin but you'll be fine after we visit healer M'Curre."

Root blinks in surprise at the name mentioned, asking, "M'Curre? About this high, blue eyes, cherry red hair?" Sen ignores her and tells Macyn to grab a coat. "Wait!" Root calls, rushing over to Macyn, holding him by the shoulder. It surprises him how remorseful she looks behind her thick black glasses. She quickly takes his hand in hers, before utilizing her mana to create a swishing ball of water from her mana, and immerse their hands in the clear globular solution. Macyn winces by the cold temperature, and the blob quickly dyes pink mixing with his red blood. Root's eyes are closed as she concentrates her serene mana on the injury, and as moments pass, so too does the pain. After several minutes, Macyn feels cool relief where throbbing pain was and the now reddish water globe drops, splashing on the cellar floor.

When she lets go, Macyn stares at his previously injured knuckles. There's still a small tint of red from a bit of blood trying to escape his wound, but his hand is no longer bleeding freely. Macyn is surprised and grateful, as he remarks, "thanks."

"It's not healed completely, but I stopped the bleeding," Root roughly asserts, turning her head and stepping away. "You'll still want to see M'Curre, but at least you won't be bleeding everywhere."

"We couldn't get your attention," Sen explains to Macyn, relaxing after the medical treatment. "Have you finished?"

"Almost," Macyn answers in a daze, before realizing Root is standing in his foundry. "What are you doing here? I thought we were meeting at the usual spot."

"I asked if she'd be willing to come here," Sen explains and raises herself when she sees the disapproving expression on his face. "And she said she would!"

"That just puts her in more danger," Macyn answers back before turning to Root. "I appreciate you coming all the way here, but it's not safe."

Taking a few more steps back, Root clears her throat as she admits, "I heard what happened."

"I guess everyone read the article," Macyn groans.

"No..." Root hesitantly claims. "I- I mean, I heard you. I was nearby when you were-" Her eyes are wider and brows draw together as she clears her lodged throat and clarifies, "when the kidnapping happened, I *heard* you." She looks away and downcast, whispering, "I'm

sorry,” with more grief than he’s ever heard from her.

Macyn hesitates and the room turns stone-cold silent. Not simply because voicing what happened to him feels like reliving it, but because it reminds him of how pathetically helpless he is. It’s a complete damper on his otherwise merry day, making him dread the inevitable nightfall and the nightmares he’ll repeatedly have. Certain speaking about that day directly correlates to more nightmares, Macyn softly implores, “don’t be. There was nothing you could’ve done.”

“That’s not true,” she argues, though her voice cracks. She looks to him and Macyn can see the gloss of unshed tears layered over her eyes behind her fake glasses. “I heard you in terrible pain, and, I did nothing. I couldn’t... move. I froze- No... worse. I hid.” Eyes fixed on each other, her pause leads to a long stretch of silence. Macyn’s unwillingness to say more about that event conflicts directly with Root’s need to confess.

Sen interrupts the silence, floating beside Macyn and stating, “it was good of you to keep the hammer safe for us. Macyn wanted to give you something as a token of gratitude.” Sen looks to Macyn who’s all too eager to do something else.

Macyn grabs the set of chisels he’s nearly finished and extends the gift to Root. She makes no move to take them and instead observes the two as if expecting a prank. “Smelted from dragon fire,” Macyn proclaims. “It’s tough metal, good for chiseling runes.”

Brows rise above the black rims of her glasses as her eyes widen and Root’s jaw drops in surprise. “I can’t accept that! Dragon fire? This is much too good for... for a coward.”

With a layer of irritation, Macyn genuinely asks her, “what could you have done?”

“Something is better than hiding,” she returns.

“That could’ve made it worse,” he argues. “Look, what’s done is done. I don’t blame you for anything.”

“Well, you should,” Root fires back. “I certainly would’ve,” she freely admits, and as if fed up with the bottle she’s kept everything in, she vents, “I- I’m better than you! I am, and everyone knows it. You’re a human and I’m the descendant of the mother spirit! You lose yourself to me! You all lose your minds to us! Our merriment, our allure, our spirit; all shows how much better we are than you. In that moment, I should’ve shown you how much better we are; shown you your weakness, but- but, I only saw my own. Days of walking around the Haven and all I could think was how I failed everyone around me for... for hiding. I froze... and in doing so I’ve shamed my kin... and the mother spirit. How? ...How is it *you* fought more than *me*?”

Wide-eyed, Macyn can’t help but point out, “...girl, you’ve got some serious issues.” For some reason, she snorts an unladylike sound. He continues, “listen, words weren’t going to stop that guy. Whatever you believe doesn’t change the fact you shouldn’t expect to do something you’ve never done before. If you have no experience fighting off crazy kidnappers, don’t expect to know how to for no reason. Weird as you are, I think you’re being too hard on yourself.”

“Or not hard enough,” Root mutters in failure.

While he finds it odd that he wants to cheer up someone who’s been a real witch to him, Macyn casually points out, “you’re doing something right now, aren’t you?” Like a moping puppy, she turns to meet his curious eye. “It’s still pretty early for me to try some of

the awesome runes out, but you're pretty good with them, aren't you? Maybe later on you can help me. Blood coded swords for identification would probably sell for a lot," he challenges her, to which she looks a little amused by. "Take the chisels, Root, and let's leave the bad stuff in the past." Macyn extends the set of chisels and she reluctantly takes them.

"...Thank you for the gift," she says in a small voice. "And I will meet you here from now on."

"You don't have to," Macyn conveys with a little heat. "You already travel farther than me--"

"In the forest," she interjects. "I'm in less danger than you are. I agree with Sen. Trust, that my nature allows me to read the forest's many sights and sounds as well as you can read a book. I'll be fine."

Macyn looks very reluctant but ultimately nods nevertheless, to which Sen seems relieved over. "If you can wait a moment I was just finishing a couple more pieces and a tablet for you to practice on. I'll make you more later."

At her nod, Macyn returns to polishing the surface of the iron tablet with the sander function of the Gud Arm. Twenty minutes later Root bids them farewell and Sen forces him to go to the infirmary. Macyn uses the rest of the day to clay the blade, applying a thin layer over the edge and a thick layer over the spine before heating the weapon.

"Remember to keep the heat uniform. If we overheat the blade, it'll be brittle. If we under heat it, it won't be hard enough," Sen would tell him, and compliment him with, "very nice," and, "good," as they use the forge to bring the metal to the perfect clay-encrusted, orange-red temperature. Taking the angry orange sword from the furnace, Macyn plunges it in warm water, quickly erupting a thick cloud of steam around them as it sizzles and spits superheated water. When Macyn removes the still hot blade from the bath of water, both Sen and Macyn check the straightness of the blade.

That step took up his day and by nightfall, Macyn decides to work through the night. While Sen objected, citing his sleep is more important, however, Macyn remained adamant finishing the sword is his top priority and she relented. With her instruction, he flips the sanding belt around to use the sharpening belt, and he slowly works for several more hours, sharpening the blade to Sen's eventual approval. By its completion, Macyn can take a piece of parchment and with only the weight of the sword to easily slice through with laughable ease. "I can't believe I made an actual katana."

"Congratulations, Macyn," Sen announces happily. "It looks fantastic. Now, to bed."

"Oh, come on," Macyn argues. "I'm not even tired. Shouldn't we just finish making the handle?"

"The handle alone is made of six parts, the guard is another four, and the scabbard has another six elements to it," Sen quickly states, shutting down his impatient exuberance. "That's a total of sixteen labor-intensive steps before we're truly done."

"Of course there are," Macyn huffs in defeat.

"Now," Sen reiterates. "To bed."

Macyn utilizes some of his short but free time during the week to add a tang and repeat the heat treating and polishing steps on the daggers. For his three blades, he now has more work ahead of him to complete three handles, guards, and scabbards, and add to that his school load, however, everything is bearable now that he has his letters and a friend. It's jarring

sometimes, but Macyn had to admit, he and Solomon were thick as thieves. Solomon even asks to see him work on the sword. It's in Anthony's cellar where Solomon reveals to Macyn just how prevalent swords are, not just in Erudite, but in Menhir.

"You never noticed Marny's dagger strapped to her lower back? That bird never goes anywhere without it," Solomon shares as Macyn prepares the forge. Macyn and Sen hadn't used all the material Coral ruined in the first smelter, and on top of making a couple of guards, Macyn wanted to produce another couple of tablets and a small chiseling hammer for Root to engrave with before she arrives at noon. In preparation for Root's preference to remain anonymous, he's already discussed with Sen meeting the mass of auburn hair by the tree line in the event she also wants to keep her identity private from Solomon.

Macyn lights the furnace as he answers with a bit of thoughtful ponder, "you know, I did wonder why all the heirs have swords and the rest of the pampered rich kids don't."

"One, wanker," Solo responds. "Two, it's incredibly expensive. Before it used to be loads of us had swords, but one too many deaths made it political. Now only the richest can afford the permit and tariff to carry one. So, maybe one percent of the student body carry swords."

Only then does Macyn recall a few seniors and other older mages walking with thick white canes, though he assumed they were sports-related, like walking around with a baseball bat, since not many have them. Curious about the market for his craft, Macyn asks, "so mages really use swords here?"

"Oh, like you wouldn't believe, mate," Solomon states with bug-eyes.

"Everyone here wants the next Excalibur: legendary Sword of Kings, Ulfberht: the Stream of Anguish, Kusanagi no Tsurugi, Goujian the Ageless, Masamune, Marshal Hew's Absolon: the God Spear. It's kind of a big deal if you want to be anything like Theophilus Osgar Hew."

"Um, I get Marshal Hew is a big deal, but I still don't know why," Macyn sheepishly admits. "Is he from a long line of warlocks or something?"

Solomon stares at Macyn like he's broken, sadly expressing, "you poor bitty. How deprived you were."

"Starved," Macyn plays along. "Starved I was!"

"Ends here, mate," Solomon fiercely cries, swiping the holding stick so it points directly at Macyn. "The marshal is a big deal because he did something that hadn't been done in over five hundred years."

Waiting for the furnace to heat, Macyn asks, "what'd he do?"

"On Gaiorem, there's a global tournament called Kratopan," Solo begins before asking, "you know about that at least-" Macyn shakes his head, no, to which Solo naturally responds, "no, of course not," in disbelief. "It's *thee* tournament of tournaments, like, wars have been fought over it. Come to think of it, wars have been settled because of it too... whatever. Kratopan's just built into our way of life, like mana, death, or taxes. It just is, mate."

Sen cuts in adding her perspective. "While I've always felt Kratopan is little more than an excuse to indulge in mindless hate and aggression, it can also be thought of as an essential leg of the global economy. Several trades flourish and survive on the tournament alone. My family had as well."

Solo picks up right after her. "Who cares about the mynt. It's about the combat! The glory! Everyone will remember Theophilus Hew, not just as a Kratopan Champion, but as a legend! Impossible stakes are put on winners and it's the easiest thing in the world to die. I

mean, you have to face masters among masters made up of all sorts; warlocks, elves, dwarfs, titans, minotaurs, centaurs, sirens, nymphs, anything, everything, whatever enters. Needless to say, you have to be, like a bloody God of combat to win, but winning the Kratopan means you can have practically anything you want. So long as it's feasible, whatever you want is yours."

"And the marshal won," Macyn finishes.

Nodding in agreement, Solomon expands on his zeal. "No human of Menhir or Gaiorem had won the Kratopan in the five hundred and twenty-something years before Marshal Hew came along. More amazing than that, the Hew family were *complete* nobodies before that day. No one saw him coming; total underdog. They were a common house like any other, then 'bam,' Theophilus wins the most un-winnable tournament in existence, and instantly becomes an honored house, marries way above his class, gets a high seat in the Imperium, Trade, and Civilian councils, and his children's children's children are set for life. He didn't have to be the marshal of EU, but he showed a nugget of interest in teaching, and the last marshal resigned out of respect. That's why he's a big deal. He brought life-long acclaim, not just Menhir, but to all humankind. The other races take us more seriously now because of him."

"Wow," Macyn moans. "I had no idea. No one else has won in..."

"Fifty-six years," Sen finishes for Macyn, to which Solomon adds, "not a single human. Not even close, mate."

Macyn gets the jitters, physically shaking as he audibly recalls, "and I mouthed off to him..."

With an impressed smirk, Solomon wishes happily, "would've loved to have seen that."

When the furnace is close to ready, Macyn grabs the sledgehammer before making his way through the cellar as he cheerfully admits, "I wouldn't mind seeing the next Kratopan. When is it?"

"It used to be every year," Solomon answers, following after Macyn up the steps and outside, behind Anthony. "But they changed it to every four years. Next one isn't for another four years."

A mild groan of disappointment escapes his mouth before he casually asks Sen, "you think one of our swords could be used in Kratopan?" Standing before the second smaller smelter he made, Macyn places his non-dominant foot close to the smelter to help aim in the swing.

He whirls the hammer behind him with a twist of his waist and brings the heavy head diagonally down on the stone as Sen answers, "it's possible. So long as you continue to practice, I'm certain many would request our services."

"So you really are the female orewick he mentioned," Solomon accuses, halting Macyn mid-swing when he realized they'd slipped. Macyn and Sen give each other a cursory glance, as Solomon continues to argue his case. "I saw the way she was looking at everything you were doing. On top of that, you said your orewick was a she. It wasn't hard to figure out."

With Sen's consenting nod, Macyn asks, "can you keep it a secret? I'm talkin' ultra-bro secret status here."

"What's a bro," Solomon abruptly asks.

"Just a close friend, like, I have your back, and you have mine," Macyn answers hopefully.

"Whoa," Solomon gasps, placing an exaggerated hand over his heart. "I feel so

special. You reckon matching jewelry might be too soon?”

“Shut up,” Macyn bellows amiably, picking up his hammer again. “I don’t want to hear that from someone who calls me his ‘mate’ all the time.”

“It’s not *that* kind of mate, mate-” Solomon tries to say when Macyn interrupts him.

“I just want to make sure this stays between us,” Macyn states striking bits of stone from the wall of the ruined smelter, widening the hole. “This is important and if there’s a rule saying I can’t do this because of my age then I don’t want to get caught.”

“I reckon underage ore crafting does fall under a gray area,” Solomon mouths as Macyn moves rubble out of the way. “I ain’t recalling any specific rule per se, but then again, rules are more like suggestions to me. I won’t say anything, mate.”

“Thanks,” Macyn responds before striking the second smelter continuously until it all crumbles. As Macyn removes the iron bloom steel within, he listens to Sen and Solomon argue the advantages of mana forged weapons compared with old hand steel like talk radio, making him wish he had a portable music player. When their argument boils down to craftsmanship versus consumerism, Solo surrenders the debate before bidding them farewell. After meeting Root to exchange materials, Sen helps Macyn sand the wood scabbards for the rest of the day. The following morning, while eating breakfast, Solomon suddenly drops a paper-wrapped package the size of a pillow on his lap, taking his seat to eat.

“Whats-” Macyn starts but is quickly interrupted.

“Just open it,” Solomon orders, filling his plate.

Macyn looks from the heir to the pillow sized package on his lap with a curious brow. Slow and silent, he unties the bowstring, then unwraps the brown paper to find a well-folded heavy-duty crafting outfit within, complete with thick gloves, a brown leather apron, and boots. As he stares at the tough-looking, greenish-brown slacks, and off-white long sleeve shirt, Macyn couldn’t believe this protective apparel for ore crafting is a gift for him. Each item may have been old and stained past the point of ever being brand new, but it was all new to him and Macyn whips his head to a bored Solomon, who’s chowing without a care in the world.

Macyn starts, “you didn’t have to-”

“Shut up,” Solomon gums without any animosity. “You looked like you could use some gear and this stuff’s been lying around our estate long enough. It was either give it to you or throw it away.”

“It’s lovely, Mr. Roth,” Sen states, surprising Macyn as he didn’t notice when she emerged from the wand.

“It’s nothing, really,” Solomon expresses, before adding, “and will you please stop with the Mr. Roth crack. Solo’s fine.”

For minutes, Macyn spaces out in awe at his gift before eventually responding with, “how do you feel about hugs?”

“Bloody homicidal, mate,” Solomon whirls on him, completely serious. “Solomon Roth doesn’t do hugs unless it’s from a cute female. Sadly you don’t meet the criteria.”

“Just pretend,” Macyn argues, gazing at his friend with wide-eyed, cherished gratitude.

“I’m not pretending you’re a-” he sputters before suspiciously asking instead, “are you yankin my tail?”

“I don’t know what that means,” Macyn says with a knowing smirk, settling back down. “Seriously though, thank you. I just, can’t believe it.”

Relaxing in his chair, Solomon waves it off, “your welcome, but really, mate, think nothing of it.”

Replaying the exchange in his head, Macyn can’t help but ask, “did you refer to yourself in the third person?”

“So you never told me why this is so important to you,” Solomon presses past Macyn’s question.

Macyn hesitates to be asked, ending the cheery back and forth. He can’t tell if it’ll be better or worse to share something so personal nor does he want Solomon thinking their friendship was a mistake. He’d rather put it off until he’s sure Solomon wouldn’t regret getting to know him, however, he can easily hear his father’s voice in his mind urging him to, *‘trust. Take a leap of faith.’* While another paranoid side of his mind voices, *‘you could get burned.’*

“Um,” Macyn starts. “It’s uh... it is really important.”

“Mate, I was just curious,” Solomon claims, easing Macyn of unexpected pressure. “It’s not state secrets or anything. You can tell me whenever, or never.”

With a slowly growing level of relief, easing the tension from his shoulders and clearing his apprehension, Macyn voices, “my mom’s in prison,” doing an adequate job of raising Solo’s eyebrows. “She used to live here, on Menhir, with my dad, but they both got banished. I was born in the lower order in a place called Vegas.”

Recalling with a big smile, Solomon asks, “in America?” Surprised the heir knows about Vegas, Macyn nods, to which Solomon answers, “we’ve taken a few holidays down there. Mums a degenerate gambler.”

Macyn chuckles mirthfully as he continues, “yeah that’s a good place for that. Anyway, my mom got incarcerated when I was nine and she’s been in a correctional facility ever since.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Solomon expresses with some sympathy.

“Thanks,” Macyn voices with a nod. “My dad and I want to help her, so he’s trying to get her conviction overturned or reduced to time served through an appeal. And I’m trying to revoke or lift, her exile from Menhir. I need an advocate for that which is obviously going to cost mynt. That’s why Sen’s helping me craft a sword to sell. It’s the other reason why I don’t return her to the Imperium.”

“Bloody hell,” Solomon swears.

Looking over his amazing gift, Macyn suddenly feels a great need candidly point out, “just so we’re clear, we’re not friends because I want to use you or your family for anything.”

“Aw, no worries there, mate,” Solomon susses with a shrug. “My family’d never help a soul if it didn’t benefit them more. It’s how they operate, except for yours truly, of course. So don’t expect the Honored House of Roth to help.”

“Cool,” Macyn states with a chuckled smirk.

“Why were they exiled,” Solomon asks. “That’s not exactly easy to do. Most here get sent to Hellbury if they’re guilty of a crime. Exile isn’t heavy enough for Hellbury, but bad enough you’ll be paying for the rest of your life.”

“Let me guess,” Macyn asks. “Mages think living like ‘dregs’ is worse than death?”

“Some do,” Solo admits.

“Right,” Macyn states. “I don’t the specifics of their banishment. Every time I try to go to the records room in the Hall, this whacked-out mana nazi- er, this crazy lady won’t let me.”

“Why?”

“She hasn’t *deemed* a ‘stolid’ important enough to spend her time on.”

“We’ll go and check it out. Let’s see that hag say something to me.”

For a second time in a single breakfast, Macyn is stunned by his friend's aid.

“Why?” he can’t help but ask. “It’s not like you have to.”

Solomon tilts his head curiously at the question before shrugging his shoulder, answering, “why not? Mate, you’re acting like I’m giving you my firstborn here. I’m literally just going to stand there. I’m not even going to say anything.” Solomon returns to his meal and after several seconds Macyn tells him, “have you changed your mind about that hug?” Choking a bit with laughter, Solomon just shakes his head and they return to their breakfast.

With little more than Solomon’s silent presence beside Macyn, it didn’t take more than two days for them to get both Ryce and Von Brandt’s signatures on their permission slips to leave campus. Solo didn’t have to say anything more than, “I’m going with him,” and they signed it, astonishing Macyn by the sheer level of access his friend effortlessly has. It’s even easier in the record’s room of the justice department in Imperium Hall. Solomon never even paid the evil clerk attention; only making sure she saw the Roth family crest on the breast of his cloak, and Macyn’s jaw dropped when the harpy supremacist bowed down to him.

Walking out of the tall white capital building, shaking his head in denial at how different their lives are, Macyn carries in his hand a copy of the court transcript of Jahmela Blende and Colin Mortimer. Solomon brings out his sleek carpet and soon they’re above the trees, riding back to back, on their way back to campus. At the library, the only thing Macyn cared to study were the transcripts, followed by the loophole he needed to discover to revoke the exile, however, Sen and Solomon had convinced him it wouldn’t be so easy, and he should continue to focus on his studies. So it wasn’t until after dinner that Macyn finally has a chance to read the ever-expanding parchment.

Sitting legs crossed in bed, he can finally uncover a mystery that’s never been far from his thoughts. With the transcript of his parent’s exile on his lap, he initially wasn’t sure who to start with as he’s eagerly dreading to know what his father did to get them exiled just as much as he wants to know what his mother said to end up banished alongside him. Ultimately, to understand his mother better, he started with his father.

The beginning of their court transcript starts formally and he feels nervous as he reads, ‘*Imperium Superior Court of Menhir. Mages of the Provence of Menhir - against - Defendants: Colin Mortimer, Jahmela Mortimer née Blende. Indictment No. 13112221.*’ The transcript not only mentions all the agents in the court, like a cast in a movie but the duration of the trial including jury deliberation. The judge, Nyx Diederick, the Imperium Attorney, Ubel Amsel, and his parent’s public arbiter, Ottah Wamukota didn’t seem to feel his parent’s future merited more than an hour’s worth of their time.

‘*An hour,*’ Macyn mentally sighs, astonished that’s all the time it took for their lives to be taken away.

Macyn reads further, noticing the format is very much like a play, only shorter and more concise. The opening statements start with the Imperium’s attorney, Ubel Amsel,



likely related to Jorn Amsel.

Imperium Attorney Amsel: Your honor, mages of the jury, the defendants, Colin and Jahmela Mortimer, have been charged with evidence tampering, bribery, theft, and obstruction of justice. The evidence will show Imperium employee Colin Mortimer acted with corrupt intent to engage in quid pro quo with criminal elements. Utilizing his unique access as an inventory supervisor in Poliwick headquarters, he illegally removed and tampered with vital evidence related to an ongoing and prevalent capital trial. It is due to Mr. Mortimer's direct involvement that alleged crime boss, elfi Abramo Baldassar will be free to rejoin our community. The prosecution will further show Mr. Mortimer's wife, Jahmela Mortimer, also an Imperium employee, knowingly obstructed justice to protect her husband.

Macyn falls flat on his back, his head swimming as it hits the pillow with an audible plop. No matter how many times he repeats to himself that it happened a long time ago, he can't help the anger rising in him now. "How could they be so stupid!" he yells to the ceiling. Depressed and angered at the prospect of reading more, Macyn reasons the evidence must've been iron-clad if the entire trial took less than an hour to conclude. Why subject himself to what he's certain will only make him hate his parents. His mind swirls with notions of how different his life could've been if they hadn't done something so completely moronic.

"That bad?" Sen asks, floating into his view of the wood ceiling.

"Evidence tampering, bribery, and theft for father of the year," Macyn grumbles without looking at her. "And mom didn't snitch so, apparently, she shares in the punishment."

"I'm sorry," she expresses. "You'll have to keep reading if we're to learn the terms of their exile. There may be stipulations we can exploit."

Weakly, as if the words were poison upon speech, he asks, "do I want to?"

"Macyn-" Sen tries when he cuts her off.

"They did the crime," he tells his floating friend. "Dad may have turned it around but mom did even more crime when she got to the lower order. How am I suppose to... they did crimes- I feel like I'm either a terrible person for excusing the crime so she can get released or a terrible son for just accepting this as justice and letting her stay in prison."

Softly, sympathetic to his confusion, Sen responds, "all I can say is write to her; an honest and open letter. You don't have to do more than that. Hopefully, her response will help you find an answer you can live with."

Macyn takes her guidance to heart, nodding his agreement before informing her, "I might as well read the rest. I'll probably skip the really heavy details though." Sen yields in silence until he's ready, watching him struggle to absorb the information or grumble, or sigh in clear disappointment.

Macyn was angered yet again when he realized his parents never even took the stand to defend themselves. Neither the prosecution nor the defense called them to the stand. He wasn't sure if that was normal, or not, but it didn't show his mother fighting in the slightest. How could she allow them to decide her fate without even putting up a fight, while at the same time, always telling him to fight? It was more than confusing, and Macyn couldn't reconcile with it. Reading his mother's silence was the worst shock of all. When he finally sets the parchment down, Sen tentatively asks, "well?"

"Well, it looks like they were banished because they were Imperium Poliwick

employees,” Macyn answers her. “The Arbiter said if they were imprisoned in a place with a bunch of career criminals, mom and dad probably wouldn’t survive.”

“Makes sense,” Sen points out. “Sounds like mercy. Were there any terms placed on their exile?”

Macyn nods glumly, like expecting a bike for Christmas and getting socks instead. “Uh, dad was convicted on all counts, and-” Macyn pauses, bringing up the transcript to refresh his memory. “Let’s see... sentenced to expulsion from Menhir, Giaorem, and or any mana enhanced location, to the Lower Order without delay or the possibility of amnesty.” Turning to Sen, he claims, “I think that’s a pardon.”

Sen nods, replying, “it is. And your mother?”

With a tight chest and hot eyes, Macyn returns to the parchment, answering, “Wamukota- that’s their lawyer, argued that she shouldn’t be convicted of any crime since they’re married and she can’t be made to testify against dad. But they did prove she lied and as an agent of the IPW, she was convicted of obstruction. Expulsion just like dad, but she does have the possibility of amnesty after fifteen years.”

“It’s been sixteen years,” Sen remarks.

“Yeah,” Macyn responds with a weak smile.

“Well, that’s good news,” Sen offers, though neither of them feels very good about the situation.

“Yeah,” he lamely agrees, turning his miserable stare to the offending parchment. “But, they added a restriction. The Imperium put permanent runes on their bones to stop them from crafting mana.”

“The tether,” Sen clarifies. “It hampers their ability to manipulate mana.”

“Yeah, that,” he concurs with a nod. “It can’t ever be removed.”

Sen feels the continued pressure Macyn is constantly under, and though her voice is gentle, the grievous meaning behind her words feels like a specially designed attack for him. She only starts to say, “a mage on Menhir unable to use their mana...” unable to finish what’s clear to both of them.

“She’ll be exactly like a stolid,” Macyn concedes in a horrible measure of defeat. To stand by his mother means to stand beside Menhir’s grossly abused, treated little better than a repulsive animal. Macyn whispers with finality in the silence of the room, “exactly like Dog.”

## The Monk of Sinai

Macyn was silent all of the following day, barely acknowledging Solo, and letting Sen explain some of what they had learned. His mind would think of nothing else; not of school work, not of his sword, not even his newfound friend. Questions constantly plagued his mind. Could his mother have a life on Menhir as a stolid? Would she come even if she knows what it means? Did she already know? Thinking back, she never explicitly stated she wanted to come back, only that they would make an effort... an effort she may have known was futile all along. It's possible she was aware she was never coming to Menhir and let him think otherwise to give him more drive.

Macyn couldn't finish his letter to her the following night, or many nights after. Aside from trite observations, he had no idea what to ask, or how to ask it. His emotional thoughts were chaotic at best, changing mid-sentence so he could never relieve his building stress. It was all stuck in his head, shifting him from side to side like a little dinghy in a storm-torn ocean, and he was ready to throw up.

"You look like crap on top of vomit, mate," Solo yaks with curled lips. Macyn doesn't even react, finding the easy connection to his humor all but lost. With a sigh, Solo continues, "listen, mate, I realize this isn't what you want to hear but it's been four days now and I don't know how to handle this. You're moping like someone killed your pet wolf and this isn't something I typically deal with."

"As I've told you, Mr. Roth, you have to give him space," Sen sternly tells Solo. "When Macyn is ready, he will unburden himself."

"That's taking too long," Solo retorts to her before shifting his gaze back to Macyn. Solo suggests, "look, how about I trade you for the sword? My family has an Effigy I can trade for the blade. You don't even have to finish it. I'll have our orewicks do the handle and whatnot."

"Mr. Roth-" Sen raises her voice, to which Solo interrupts to remind her, "it's Solo, Sen. How many times do I have to tell you? Call me Solo."

"I was nearly kidnapped and possibly killed before Sen finally started calling me by my name," Macyn grumbles from the desk. "I wouldn't expect her to call you Solo anytime soon."

"How are you feeling today," Sen asks, ignoring Solo for a rare response from her ward.

"What's an effigy," Macyn dully asks his inhabitant.

Happy to hear him ask a question, Sen gladly answers, "an effigy is an enchanted object that can house an Inhabitant independently of the 'master's' mana, which in this case would be you. If you have an effigy there is less turbulence taxing your mana."

"It's super expensive," Solo interjects. "Ask *Sen*. She'll tell you it's a good trade."

"While I agree with, *Mr. Roth*," Sen retorts, irritating Solo. "An effigy is indeed expensive, I don't believe it would be ideal for you-"

"Because you don't want to live with me?" Macyn weakly interrupts.

"No, Macyn," she quickly tells him, flying as near to him as possible. "That's

not it. An effigy is tied to the home of its master, and the inhabitant draws mana from the home. In essence, an effigy performs better if you have a home with multiple mages living in it to draw residual mana from. Which is why I didn't want Mr. Roth—"Solo," Solo squawks in. "To offer that trade. Very little would change if you received an effigy at the moment."

"It would still help the blare," Solo cites. "At the very least you'd, be doing better in class."

At long last, Macyn makes genuine and attentive eye contact with one of them, turning to Sen, he weakly asks her, "if I had my own home, would you want to live with me?"

Sen's eyebrows raise as her chest expands to inhale ghost air. After a moment of absorbing his more receptive state through his large light-brown eyes, Sen answers what Macyn means to ask, "from everything you've told me about your mother, I believe she's not that young, naive girl anymore. It might have taken her a lot of pain and heartache to realize that, something I'm certain she's trying to protect you from, but in the end, I feel she would still come to Menhir to live with you... and fight anyone who said otherwise."

Macyn takes in Sen's words, measuring them against the mother he thinks he knows and finds them stirring within. It may be that his mother is crazy enough to fight everyone to be with him—he isn't completely sure—but he certainly feels ready to know. Macyn turns to Solo, and asks, "since I can't hug Sen, can I hug you in her place?"

"Eat dragon dung," Solo answers, before promptly adding, "but I'm glad your back."

Macyn chuckles, noting how long it's been since he's expressed his amusement. Macyn stands up, faces Sen, and properly bows his head, just like she showed him, in gratitude. She returns the bow when Solo interrupts by asking, "so about the effigy..."

"Sorry," Macyn states with some sympathy. "I need the mynt to hire my mom's arbiter."

"Fine," Solo grumbles, though not upset. "But you'll probably need more than an arbiter to help your mom."

Piquing his interest, Macyn asks, "what do you mean?"

"Even if you get the appeal, I think you're going to need a sponsor," Solo explains. "Someone to vouch for her, because even if her exile is suspended, you're still talking about letting someone live on Menhir who can't use mana. That's not a very popular point of view here."

"Trust me, I know," Macyn agrees. "Thanks for not calling her a stolid."

"Sen nagged me plenty about it," Solo gripes. "Four days, mate." He puts up four fingers for emphasis. "Four!"

Macyn nods and smiles, asking, "so I need to get a sponsor on top of an arbiter? Could the arbiter find a sponsor for her?"

"I don't see why not," Sen answers.

"You should probably do it yourself," Solo argues. "If the families hear from an any ol' arbiter, their first thought'll be, '*how much?*' What you need is someone who'll care enough to do it because they believe in you. Hence why you should do it yourself."

"That is a very good assessment," Sen tells Solo, who shrugs.

"I know how to manipulate mages," Solo claims with a smug grin, to which Sen rolls her eyes for ever agreeing with him.

With Solo's help, Macyn performs better in his classes and he's pleasantly

surprised when Solo offered to teach him basic sword fighting techniques. Solo is holding the wooden sword Macyn made to practice grinding wood to shape when he mentions, “you should make some practice swords. It’s better to get accustomed to as close to the real thing as possible, but this’ll work for now.”

In the fields behind Anthony, the pair would practice with wooden swords Macyn made, and at Sen’s insistence, only after their school work. She made it clear to them she will not guide Macyn as an orewick if his classwork was not completed. Though Macyn and Solo hate finishing their assignments to do something fun, Macyn was still motivated by the fact this was a whole new world he was now experiencing with a friend.

Still, even in their practice bouts, Macyn gains some perspective on what makes for a better sword. Both Sen and Solo explain how the grip, guard, and pommel are a great counterbalance for sword strikes, or how more handle for single or double grip swords means more leverage for a stronger strike.

Except for Sundays, Macyn and Solo spend much of their time together, a fact that annoys Jorn, Desmond, Hazel, and heir Jin Wang. They wait for them after classes. Nothing happens right away as a small crowd lingers to witness anything of note. Hazel, Desmond, Jorn stand by as Wang tells Solo, “it can be here, or at the Hearth, but it’s going to happen.”

Marnamei and Rosston stay and watch along with a few other members of Ventus and Solomon jests, “what makes you think I care what sheep think of me,” before reverting to his typical disposition as he asks, “and what’s this that’s going to happen?”

“Your decision,” Jin insists. She eyes Macyn with a sneer for a moment before continuing to tell Solo, “you’ve had your fun, but enough is enough. We can’t continue to support this shame upon Ignis and Herra. It’s unbearable and you need to make a choice.” Turning toward Macyn, Jin affirms, “it’s either the house or the broken stolid. Loyalty or waste.”

“Odd choice, that,” Solo hurls back, unconcerned about the Chinese heir’s psychotic stare toward his friend. “Considering he’s also Ignis,” Solo points out.

Macyn ventures to say, “don’t drag me into this.”

Humored, Solo crunches his face as he tells Macyn, “pretty sure this is about you, mate.”

In a sadly drawn out, defeated voice, Macyn agrees, “yeah, I know.”

“I don’t abide being ignored,” Jin slowly speaks, making Macyn feel like he’s walking on dangerously thin ice. Her chilly black eyes gazed through Solo as she tilts her elegant head to demand, “Ignis or the pathos; pick!”

“That’s not even a choice,” Solo tells Jin before turning to Macyn and adding, “let’s chase the wind, Mace.”

Surprised, Jin can’t stop herself from retorting, “are you actually going to choose that filth over-” However, Solo cuts her off.

“How long you’ve known me, Jin?” Despite appearing unconcerned, his voice is strong and demanding as he casually continues. “Through the years of dinners, dances, and dares, does this really fekking surprise you?”

“Are you sure,” Macyn can’t help but ask Solo, to which the coal-haired boy laughs.

“Whose side are you on,” Solo asks amused.

“Yours, but you said years,” Macyn asserts. “I just don’t see how you can be

cool with losing your friends like that. Didn't you guys hang out all the time? I mean, that has to mean something, right?"

Solo takes a moment to consider Macyn's words before answering, "yeah, but, they're giving me an ultimatum and that I just can't tolerate. It'd be like if I told you we couldn't hang out unless you got rid of Sen."

"Oh, yeah, no that wouldn't happen," Macyn quickly asserts. "Do as you will, sir."

"You're doomed, Solomon," Jin hotly levels at Solomon. "We all know it, but rather than go out with dignity-"

"He's not doomed," Marnamei states, challenging Jin with fierce blue eyes. "And he's not going anywhere. I don't care if you don't appreciate his friends, but I most certainly take exception with anyone who talks about Solo like he's already dead. He won't. I won't let him."

"I can't wait until your father accepts our offer," Jin eerily states. "I'm going to enjoy teaching you your place among your betters."

"Jin," Solo states, aggressively stepping forward. "You're really starting to piss me off."

Taking a look at the pair of united heirs, Jin smiles like an executioner who loves their job before turning to Solo, "find another color to line your uniform, traitor. Ignis is far too good for you."

"But red's rather my color," Solo quips, looking over his uniform before turning to Macyn and asking, "isn't red my color?"

With raised eyebrows and fake astonishment, Macyn questions, "are you asking a guy how you look?"

"Right, right, slip of the tongue," Solo nods before turning to Marnamei and asking her the same question, however, everyone is more concerned with the threat Jin levels against Macyn.

"Enjoy being his pet while it lasts," Jin starts. "Because the moment he meets his prophesied end, your only path is to run and hide where the great House of Wang can't find you, because you won't survive-"

Understanding the gist of Wang's threat, Macyn ignores the rest and turns to Solo, asking with his eyes what his voice elaborates, "what's Jinny talking about? What prophesied end?"

While Jin retorts, "don't call me Jinny," Jorn, Desmond, Hazel, Hew, Rosston, and Solomon all turn to Macyn as if crazed, and Solo happily guffaws, "you don't even know that?"

"Hasn't anyone told you about the prophecy," Marnamei asks. Recognizing that familiar feeling of being left out, a confused Macyn shakes his head as Solo happily adds, "and this is why we're best mates."

"Allow me the joy of ruining it for you," Jin states, before turning to Macyn. "There's a prophecy-"

"That's enough," Solo yells ready to attack when Marnamei holds him back. It's the first time Macyn has ever seen Solomon so angry, however, Jin simply envelopes her person in her protective managuard as she continues. The echo of sound carried through Jin's managuard heightens the ominous pitch of her words as she recites, "I stand in equal measure of

night and light, one spring savors the journey's might, one spring will bring upon all certain blight. I see one power untold for our savior, and death, death for all should the wrong son fall."

Silence descends the room, and though Solo is visibly angry, Macyn cannot contain himself from asking, "is that it?" Macyn looks from mage to mage, further asking, "what does that even mean?"

"...I know right," Solo stumbles to tack on, griping, "grim and vague as all hell, ain't it?"

"It means he's going to die," Jin refutes, adding, "along with the security his name casts over you."

"Does it though," Macyn questions. "I didn't exactly hear, '*Solomon Roth, stop this ultra-vague thing from happening or die.*'"

"...Ignoramus," Jin shoves Macyn, and Solo gets between them, itching for a fight, however, Marnamei resonates her mana from elbows to fingertips brilliantly. Her sky-blue eyes focus on both Solomon and Jin as the room feels suffocating, begrudgingly settling the heirs of their mania. Rather than further provoking the top student in their class, Jin unclenches her fist as she glares at Macyn, declaring, "no matter how much you doubt it, the Monk of Sinai is never wrong," Jin asserts.

"He's the greatest prophet alive," Desmond adds. "Six of his seven prophecies have all come true."

Jorn maintains, "prophecies are a big deal here, dreg. Wars have been predicted; major trade deficits, calamity on a planetary scale, warning of the dead man scrolls which very nearly raised the dead."

"When a prophecy is made by the Monk of Sinai, everyone listens," Hazel to imparts, backing up her housemates.

"Your owner is going to die, dreg" Jin gruesomely assures Macyn. "And I'd be surprised if you last any longer."

Solomon snickers as he wraps his arm around Macyn's neck, telling Jin as he tows his friend to the exit, "if you were any other posh git, I'da kicked your arse a long time ago." Solo and Macyn exit the class and though Solo appears upbeat in his jaunt, Macyn knows they're both distracted and concerned. Silence is their companion and it isn't until they reach the library's private room that Macyn blurts out, "what was Jinny talking about? Are you going to die? How do people think that prophecy means you, specifically?"

Solo calmly talks out his study material and lays them out on the polished oak desk as he quips, "I'm definitely calling her Jinny from now on."

"Solo," Macyn frustratingly calls as Sen leaves the wand, prompting Macyn to demand of her, "did you know about this?"

"I did not," Sen asserts staying by the side as Macyn rushes Solo and snatches the parchment from his grip, eyeing his friend impatiently for answers.

Solo sighs, before finally speaking, "some sixteen years ago, the Monk of Sinai made his seventh ever prediction."

"Who is this monk and how do you know he's legit," Macyn interrupts. Though Solo looks annoyed by having to talk about this, Macyn needs answers.

Sen informs her distraught ward, "every year in Gaiorem, on Mount Sinai, one hundred of the most highly respected leaders and rulers are invited to a feast at a temple. They are hosted by twenty-seven monks and from what I've been told they either serve a banquet of

food or make a prophecy. As the prophecies are never good, most prefer to dine, however, I haven't heard anything since I've returned."

"No one knows which of the twenty-seven monks is the true prophet," Solo weakly informs. "They all sorta look alike and one of them makes the prophecies while the others are decoys for his protection."

Macyn asks, "and he made a prophecy about you without actually using your name?"

"I stand in equal measure of night and light, one spring savors the journey's might, one spring will bring upon all certain blight," Solo repeats. "'*Equal night and light*,' plus the '*one springs*' bit means the spring equinox, so that day was highly anticipated. You can imagine the ruckus when Everette and I were both born on the spring equinox. Everything about our lives from then on was held up against this prophecy by everyone and their mothers."

"So... so it could also mean Everette might die," Macyn points out, not sure how he feels about callously substituting someone else's death.

"One spring savors the journey's might, one spring will bring upon all certain blight. I see one power untold for our savior, and death, death for all should the wrong son fall," Solo recites. "Everette has been all about this banana prophecy since they told him. He can't wait to be this great hero, so it's safe to say he savors the journey's might, which means the other spring," he says raising his hand before continuing. "Will bring upon everyone certain blight. Oh and let's not forget certain death to all unless I die, so, yay me."

It takes an hour of stagnant studying for Solo to realize the glum Macyn is going to take this silently to heart, and so he gets up, calling out, "let's go!"

Macyn startles as he looks curiously at his doomed friend walking around the desk to the door and asks, "where?"

"Outside," Solo answers, opening the door for Macyn.

Without objection from Sen, Macyn exits their private study room, and the pair and ghost exit outside where Solo brings out his flying carpet from his coat. After sitting back-to-back, as they often do, Solo effortlessly elevates them high first over the library, then trees and then high enough to see all of the campus grounds and even Burn Market.

Before Macyn can ask anything, Solo begins explaining, "there are over thirty thousand mages on Menhir alone and hundreds of millions in Gaiorem." Macyn looks over the small squares of white, red, or dark buildings and the circular architecture of EU's campus. He spots Kuolema lake in the distance, where Root lives, and it's an all-around breathtaking sight as Solo continues.

"Regardless of how much I want to live to the ripe old age of thirty, I'm absolutely certain it wouldn't be a life worth living if I sacrificed all their lives for it," Solo proclaims, making Macyn's throat swell in discomfort. His friend adds, "I'm made to live fast and die young, mate. I've already made peace with that, but, I can't have you constantly reminding me of what's ahead. So, I'm asking ya, can we just be regular mates without all the doom and gloom? It's tougher if you're thinking about it all the time."

Though Macyn continues to feel the despair, he's now ashamed of his selfishness, expressing a glum, "sorry."

"It's okay," Solo tells him. "I get it. Had to go through this with Marny; not that she's let it go much."

Sniffing, Macyn mentions, "you know, before I came here, my mom gave me a



saying. She called it my mantra. It goes, *'life is my fight.'* She meant that life isn't obligated to treat you well and that I should always fight." Macyn chuckles heartily as he adds, "and it's been a hell of a fight so far... but you and Sen made it easier... bearable."

"Mate..." Solo tries and they can both feel great empathy for each other.

Macyn registers their brotherly emotional tolerance and nods as he clears his throat, agreeing, "yeah. I'm just saying, I believe her, and I'm going to fight, and you have me."

Back-to-back as they are, Macyn can feel Solo nod several times before he rattles his frame of overly emotional sentiment and states, "well, you might regret that when Winter Solstice comes around. An entire week of gala after gala, ugh, just kill me now."

As unaware as ever, Macyn asks his friend, "what's a winter solstice?"

"...How is it you don't know things," Solo laughs as Sen explains it's Menhir's winter holiday. Throughout the school week, Macyn is consistently excited to hear Solo or Sen explain how they'll be spending their winter solstice, a week-long celebration as all of Menhir is drowned in the moon's light for an entire week.

"Floating lanterns or ornaments are lite with orange light to symbolize the return of the sun in the long night," Sen informs him during his break from Historia's essay. "They're placed everywhere in the market, EU, the mountain. It truly is a sight to behold."

Opposite Macyn, working over his essay before he cracks his stiff neck, Solo adds, "there's also a yule log that's torched at the beginning of the witching week, and everyone helps keep it going for the entire week by adding wood until the sun finally comes back. Normally they'd get a group of kids to man the fire, but they canceled that this year."

Macyn didn't need to be told the reason why as he instead asks, "does the entire week have to be in moonlight?" Macyn asks.

Sen explains, "there is a crystal above the bailiwick called a gnomon dial that centers Menhir and reflects the sun's light so it appears to flow like night and day. This crystal is inspected every year on the winter solstice, shifting the light away, hence why it's night the entire week."

"There's also a giant tree that you can climb," Solo happily tells. "And it has food hanging from every branch. It's a pretty festive week."

"Sounds like Christmas," Macyn points out. "Does the school have a Christmas party?"

"Generally there are many solstice galas," Sen answers. "However, that will depend on what Erudite decides to do. Students are generally allowed to return home for the winter break, thus there's never a real need for one on campus, however, it may be deemed safer to keep all them within the university. Should that be the case, I wouldn't be surprised if Erudite had one."

Macyn's eyebrows whoop as his head tilts back, thinking aloud, "I can't even imagine what an honored house throws for one of these galas." Macyn turns to a rather glum Solo and pulls up short, asking his friend, "hey, you alright?" Rather than his resting bored face, Solo appears glum to Macyn, prompting him to ask, "don't you like the holidays?"

After several moments of eye-rolling or head rolling, Solo sighs before answering, "the time off I don't mind. I'm just not crazy about all the fanfare, and because I know you're going to ask, I don't care for it because they're absolute rubbish. Every year, every holiday, mum and dad make me go to all the stupid galas and utterly ridiculous ceremonies to do all the publicity that's expected of me."

“I can’t pretend to know what that’s like,” Macyn tells him. “But I guess you don’t want to be paraded around like the prophecy in a bikini pageant. What about Everette? Does he hate it too-”

“Ha!” Solo laughs heartedly. “That arse revels in it! The wanker probably doesn’t even dream about girls. It’s all blood and steel in that dreaded head of his. Bloody twat.”

“So, you don’t want to go to the parties,” Macyn casually asks.

“Don’t have much of a say, really,” Solo answers, and quickly adds, “actually neither of us do. I was there for you with your mum, you damn well better be there for me in this. If I have to suffer, my best mate’s going to suffer there with me.”

## The Winter Solstice

Macyn is blown away by the floating mountain of Menhir under the moon's bluish-white light of the starry night, and the hundreds of the lit lanterns and ornaments freckling all of the campus and markets just as much as the fireflies bespatter the forest in hundreds of little lights. The lack of repetitious daylight on the otherwise mostly dark mountain gives Macyn a sense of being on another planet. It was still cold and far more intimidating than in the daylight, but it was beautiful. With Sen and Solo, Macyn endeavors to enjoy his first winter holiday on Menhir.

December allowed Macyn to study and work on the three handles for his swords without much interruption, however, his exams showed as much improvement as working on the more ornate and complicated parts of the katana handle. The metal spacers between the guard were easier to make than the metal scabbard sleeve, the metal wrap sleeve, the guard, the ornaments that are wrapped within the handle wrap, and the wrapping. It was tedious work and Macyn didn't like it as much as forging, hammering, sanding, and polishing. Sen assures him once he can make the pieces without mistakes, he'll enjoy it more, but he's not so certain.

Through the combined efforts of Solo and Sen, Macyn's exam results netted him a personal best of seventy-eight, raising him from Division IV to Division III, or average. Numeralculus is still his best subject, followed by Historia. It seems Macyn truly struggles when it comes to classes that require the strict use of his mana. It isn't as if he has enough time to practice with all the work from his other classes. Fortunately, he's not the worst student.

With the final grueling week of classes behind them, the majority of the student mages are enjoying walking aimlessly around campus, training in their clubs, completing their winter homework, or preparing for the festival on campus for students and parents. As Sen predicted, no student-mage is allowed to return home for the two weeks of vacation while the state of emergency remains in effect. With all students staying during vacation, there are several patrols of poliwickers on campus, Haruni among them.

Along with Sen and Solo, Macyn enjoys the leisure of the first week, practicing fighting with their wooden swords, finishing all their holiday assignments, and working on the handles of the three fully polished blades. A true joy capping the end of exams and the start of his holidays was meeting Root on Sunday. The bonny nymph graciously gifted him a necklace with a simple black braided string with a delicately designed wooden triangle with a hammer design top-layer fastened to it. She explained the design she etched on it marked him as a welcome guest in the forest, which he greatly appreciated. She also handed him a bamboo canister for water.

"I put one of our Kane stones at the bottom to add minerals to the water and I etched the Adamantine rune on the bamboo so it won't break easily," Root finishes. The blushing mix between nervousness and aloof indifference was an adorable give away that she's never given a human a gift before and she can barely look at him. The week continued wonderfully for Macyn, then the sunlight went out for the start of the second week. Practicing with their wooden swords in the field behind Anthony building while Solo explains the first of the seven parties they'll have to attend, the skies brighten with a brilliant flash before it begins to

dim to eventual darkness.

“And so it begins,” Solo glumly states looking at the dimming skies. Turning to Macyn, he reminds his friend, “my sister should be here in a few. It’ll take four or five hours before it’s all moonlight, mate, then we’ll be neck-deep in pompous pricks. Hope you enjoy feeling like you’re the dung scraped off the bottom of their slippers.” Though, Macyn pays more attention to the brobdingnagian carpet descending toward them and the coolest most imposing person he’s seen. Dio Malenkomas and Marshal Hew give off a similar feeling.

Too young to be in her thirties, but near there, with her long black hair, braided and in a ponytail, she steps off the large carpet before them as Solo listlessly calls out, “the great Furie and my sister, Warlock Mara Roth.” Solo tilts his head toward Macyn, finishing the introduction. “This is my mate, Macyn Blende.”

Macyn extends his hand, looking directly into her deep navy blue eyes, greeting her, “hi.”

“Hello,” Mara politely calls, focusing on his mismatching eyes. “I was told you can craft mana.”

“Uh, yeah- yes,” Macyn replies with a nod.

She’s silent for several moments before turning to Solo and informing him, “we should go.” With an eye-roll, Solo and Macyn rush on the carpet, before taking to the skies.

As Mara explains to Solo the leading business names at the function, Macyn feels like an ornament on the carpet as they rush through the moon-lit sky faster than a brobdingnagian typically moves. He simply watches the warm glow of lanterns being lit before hovering throughout campus as more and more bluish-white light illuminates the ground. The large carpet travels over the forest for thirty minutes to a side of the mountain Macyn has never seen before, and from a distance, he can see a large mansion folded into the descending mountain ridge.

The expansive five-story manor was red brick with black window frames and a white rooftop. There are at least sixty windows that he can see, white stone balconies every other window, a white railing floating around the property, and tall manicured bushes. What amazed Macyn the most is the unexpected classic car on the circular driveway because there’s no road leading away from the stately home. The car itself was black and red and wouldn’t look out of place in 1930’s Germany.

“It’s a Bugatti,” Solo informs Macyn. “Dad likes those Lower Order autos but none of the new ones will work up here.” Passing the barrier, Macyn feels a shock through his system, making him gasp in a chilling breath, to which Solo comments, “that’s the ward we passed through. Anyone not invited gets blown back to bits if they’re not careful.”

Mara drops them off on the stone driveway that leads to the front entrance stone steps. Solo thanks his sister for the lift and Macyn follows his bored friend up the perfectly white steps and into his luxury home.

“Welcome to Roth Manor,” Solo starts and Macyn is speechless by the sheer size and the grand entrance of Solo’s opulent home. As they walk, Solo fills the silence with innocuous recollections of room after room. According to Solo, there are sixty rooms, including twenty bedrooms, twenty-five bathrooms, a ballroom, a wine room, a training room, a library, several studies, a gallery, a conservatory, a greenhouse, and a garage for more of Mr. Roth’s cars. The interior is even more amazing than the exterior; with polished wood floor and high walls that alternate between off white and tan. A tray with water, orange juice, or root beer have

been following them since they entered the large double doors, but, Macyn doesn't dare grab a drink as they walk through the largely decorated halls for fear of accidentally spilling.

Many gala staffers are rushing to and fro preparing the entirety of the first two floors for the large celebration as Solo explains all four honored houses will be throwing parties. "My family will be first, followed by Marny's, then Everette's, and Jin's barmy family close the Solstice."

Avoiding bumping into rushing staff, Macyn follows Solo to the fifth floor while trying to absorb every lavish detail. Lining the ascending stairs to Solo's room are many great portraits Solo explains to be ancestral relatives. Walking into his friend's room, Macyn hadn't expected the rusted red brick and black metal loft with a living room, a bed that likely fits ten people, signed portraits of kanonball players, many carpets lining the wall, and high arcing windows that open onto a spacious balcony. Sen exits the wand when Solo points out a few decorative swords and spears exhibited around the large space to inspect them and Macyn can tell she wasn't impressed.

"We also have a townhome in the market," Solo states. "But all the honored families will throw their galas in their manor... well, maybe not Marshal Hew. He's not big on extravagance, which I absolutely agree with."

"How exactly do you guys make mynt," Macyn asks as he follows Solo into a large room that is his closet.

"Trade deals, patents, real estate, politics," Solo lists as he grabs a white folded jumpsuit and tosses it to Macyn, adding, "a heap of really boring stuff." Macyn folds out the jumpsuit with broken black threads lining the limbs of the one-piece suit and looks at his friend confused. Solo tells him, "what? I can't exactly let you attend one of our parties in your uniform, mate. Go on, put it on. Mum's insisting on four changes," he says with a sigh.

Macyn follows Solo's example with his white jumpsuit as he asks, "what do you mean four changes?"

Solo removes his uniform, tossing it to the floor, before donning on the jumpsuit as he answers, "as the night progresses, everyone is expected to change into different tones or themes, for instance, dinner attire is different than entertainment attire."

Completely confused by this, Macyn asks, "wait, so, everyone stops what they're doing and rush to the bathroom to change?"

Snickering, Solo nods to the five knobs between ten mirrors that is the left side of the room. "You see those knobs with the runes on the face?" Slipping on his jumpsuit, Macyn inspects the runes on the knobs. "Touch one and the white bespoke you're wearing will show you what the attire looks like on your scrawny person. Twist the knob and the Bespoke tailors itself to the attire you selected. It usually takes twenty minutes to finish tailoring itself to your dimensions while you trot about."

Cautiously touching the knob, Macyn's white bespoke changes into a tuxedo, prodding a bout of laughter from him before he quickly begins playing with the instant preview feature, commenting, "if my family saw me now, they'd wonder where I stole the clothes."

"Well, that's yours now," Solo tells him as he selects the five formal wear, after which, the linen of the Bespoke begins to weave its programed attire. Deciding to simplify his life by doing as Solo does, Macyn just marvels at the world his friend comes from. Soon a barber arrives and styles their hair for the next hour. Macyn looks at himself in the mirror and can't believe how different he looks, clean-cut, in a pristine suit, looking like a million bucks.

Macyn wonders if he can send his family a photo as they walk back downstairs to the central corridor of the imperial entrance to meet Solo's parents.

The first sight of Mr. and Mrs. Roth's immaculate presence said they've never been poor of means or poor of mind in their entire life. They were dressed like start-of-the-century royalty; Mr. Roth in a ceremony black tuxedo with a red sashed House emblem, lapel, and pocket square, and Mrs. Roth in a puffed out red dress with black House emblem sash, black diamond jewelry, and elbow-length gloves. Mr. Roth didn't even bother acknowledging Macyn and Mrs. Roth's sharp gray eyes took a single look at his eyes, seemingly discovering the penury on his soul before shaking her head as if nauseous. Macyn acutely felt his presence was a burden to them, and with a dismissing wave of Mrs. Roth's hand, their inhabitant, Masema, leads Macyn away from the regal family.

Macyn is moved to a faraway table in the expansive waiting room. Despite Solo's warnings, Macyn couldn't exactly picture their snobbish arrogance until this moment. Leaving his family a moment, Solo walks up to him and candidly confesses, "don't even bother shaking their hand. Unless you're a peer or someone of significant prominence, they're just going to ignore you."

Solo returns to his parent's side to greet their guest at the door and Macyn sits on the cushioned chair of his clean table and watching the waiting staff line the far wall and ready to serve. Macyn asks Sen to repeat the plan, to which she responds from the wand, "just relax."

"How," he retorts. "Everything in this place looks more expensive than me."

"That's absurd," Sen voices from the wand. Macyn takes a sip of his water, eyeing the craftsmanship of the intricately designed glass cup as Sen assures him, "regardless of the impressive collection of craftsmen, a soul is always more important."

"It doesn't feel like it," Macyn gasps as he nervously stands when the first noble guests begin arriving.

"Though Mr. Roth can afford not to care, you cannot," Sen starts as she feels Macyn's nervousness. "Remember, etiquette is very important to the noble class, so be on your best behavior. The program for the evening proceeds as follows. We'll remain in the Waiting Room until the scheduled time for guests to arrive ends, after which the floor-managers will commence the music and we'll change into our ballroom attire--"

"Already," Macyn gasps turning his head to no one around.

"Yes," she answers. "Once the music begins, you change and we all move into the ballroom. The scheduled dance has its own rules. All ladies must dance at least once and cannot refuse an invitation. Gentlemen bow often, so if you greet someone, bow first. They must also not dance with the same lady more than once, and when they lead, they must be mindful of collision as a lady's dress can be large or intricate."

"I'm not dancing so no worries there," Macyn tells her.

"Oh, please, you must reconsider," Sen pleads with levity to her voice she only gets when they're orecrafting. "It's very fun," she remarks with a melancholy tone.

"It's not that I don't like dancing," Macyn speaks surveying the room as more and more colorful gowns and rigid gentlemen enter the large room. "I've just seen enough movies to know the dancing going on here isn't going to be the NaeNae, the Wobble, or the Stanky Leg."

"I don't even want to know what that is," Sen responds and Macyn can imagine

her shaking her head. “However, if they are the modern-day waltz, foxtrot, or tango, then you must dance!”

“Ugh, I’ll think about it,” Macyn tells her before quickly changing the topic. “Do we get to eat after that?”

“After another wardrobe change, yes,” Sen answers. “There will also be announcements by honored guests, and, of course, the hosts. After dinner, we change again for the fireworks display, and finally, we retire for the night.”

Before Macyn can reply to her, a trumpet paired with a French horn precedes the arrival of the first of the four most honored houses. Though guests gather near the entrance, Macyn can still see the Masters family walk from the large entrance corridor into the well-parted nobles. Sen whispers, “leading the dynasty is Everette Masters’ father and mother, Maynard IV and Avyanna.”

To Macyn, Maynard is simply an older, taller, more muscular version of Everette. Avyanna is tall and quite strong looking herself, with pronounced shoulders, long black, braided hair, full lips, and brown eyes. Avyanna was dressed in a gradient white and vibrant blue sequin dress with white gloves and diamond earrings and necklace. Maynard was dressed like Mr. Roth, however, with a blue accent rather than red, and the couple both wore their house emblem and a finely decorated sash.

“Following them,” Sen continues, “is, of course, their firstborn, Everette II, twins Iolani III and Esme, and the youngest, Alyxandria.”

They were all just as immaculately dressed and very regal as the crowd lining either side of the honored family bow or curtsy to the honored family as they pass. Macyn wondered who the final pair behind little Alyxandria are when Sen automatically answers, “the young boy’s name is Beorn Masters Jr. and he’s escorting his mother, Kaytlyn Masters nee Wang. From the honored house of Wang, she married into the family but her husband, Beorn Sr, passed away.”

After the Masters family, houses Sen swears are important begin arriving; Jorn’s house Amsel, Moreno, Hazel and Hildernic’s house Ryce, Volkov, Yasuo’s family house Himura, Desmond arrives alone, and the largest family Macyn had seen yet, Jin’s honored house Wang.

“Jin is the firstborn of Head of House, Wang Chen and his second wife, Xuilan,” Sen begins to explain as the long line of Wangs enter the drawing-room.

“Wait, *second* wife,” Macyn interjects, eying the two Chinese women walking together behind the head of their house. “They- Jinny’s dad has two wives?”

“The Wangs are notorious for having many daughters,” Sen quietly explains, and Macyn can easily confirm it as out of sixteen family members, six are either old or adolescent men. “Marrying them off ensures a network of support among other families, however, there have been a handful of times when they did not have any male heirs to continue the name.”

“So their big solution is multiple wives,” Macyn gasps.

“Only the head of house may have a second spouse,” Sen informs him. “The Wangs are responsible for far too much to be opposed. More importantly, Chen’s younger brother, Mu, actually has a son older than Jin, however, he is from the branch family and cannot inherit unless every member of the main branch dies, which is, of course, unlikely.”

“You seem pretty comfortable in all this,” Macyn notes, joking, “almost like

you prefer a ballroom to a dirty old forge.”

“Don’t tease,” Sen lightly admonishes. “I made certain to learn all updated information and though I’ve attended many of these celebrations, my heart will always be in the forge.”

The Von Brandt family and the Hawkins arrive next, and unlike honored houses Masters and Wang, everyone in the room is positively buzzing when honored House Hew is announced. Leading the elegantly clad brood is the dapper Marshal Theophilus Osgar Hew. “That’s the marshal’s son, Absolon and his wife, Henrietta,” Sen informs Macyn as he looks overhead from the back of the room. “Absolon and Henrietta are Mrs. Makynli’s parents, along with her younger brother, Turner, and her older brother, the current head of house, Christian Hew, Marnamei’s father.”

While Sen continues to name the honored family members as they walk in pairs, Macyn can’t help but feel like this family stands in a league of their own. Like most in the room, they have silky hair, a young and attractive appearance, the best tuxedos and gowns, and yet, the Hews stand apart. It wasn’t long ago that they were middle class, and now, everyone is drawn by them. To Macyn, they simply feel more wholehearted, charming, and empathetic, as if they understand hardship from all walks of life.

The marshal’s tall figure receives the most attention, however, Marnamei has her a sizable crowd of supporters as well. She’s wearing a sleek and fluent, multi-layered white, sleeveless dress with blood-red flower patterns from hem to bodice, blood-red gloves matching the strings on her corset, and a ruby necklace. Her silky blond hair is wavy and done in a braided low bun with small white flowers in them. She was so beautiful, Macyn didn’t even realize he’d been gazing until Solo taps his shoulder, startling him with a mangled gasp and a hop.

“Easy, mate,” Solo snickers, empty palms up. “Didn’t want to intrude on your love gaze but I’ve been standing here for ten minutes already.”

Settling his breathing, Macyn replies, “knowing you, you probably meant ten seconds.”

“Near enough,” Solo shrugs as he takes the seat beside Macyn before commenting about the crowd around Marnamei, “did you know that there aren’t enough songs for every bloke around her?”

“What,” Macyn asks, hungry for context.

With a smirk Solo explains, “if you don’t ask Marny to dance within the first five minutes of her arrival, then you won’t be able to. There just aren’t enough songs to be her dance partner. You missed your chance this time, but there’s always the next solstice bash.”

Returning his attention to the room of upper-class citizens grouped around Marnamei, Macyn asks, “aren’t you going to ask her?”

“And deny these blokes their tiny bit of heaven,” Solo asks before dramatically adding, “do I look so cruel?”

“I’ve been told not to say anything if I have nothing nice to say,” Macyn wisecracks when the trumpet and French Horn go off again for the night’s hosts, Honored House Roth. Ignoring the light shoulder shove from a smirking Solo, Macyn asks, “shouldn’t you be strutting down the cat-walk with your fam?”

“Meh,” Solo sounds with a shrug, slapping that idea away with a flick of his open palm. “They all know what I look like. These things are really for the houses who don’t get to see the four families often anyway. Come on,” Solo asserts walking toward the immense gold,



black and red ballroom, pressing the emblem at his chest to begin his tuxedo's second change.

"Shouldn't we wait for everyone," Macyn asks, following Solo and pressing the emblem on his tux. He can feel his suit shift and alter, lighten and limber for the dance room as he states, "Sen says I need to follow etiquette-" "No you don't-" Solo starts but is interrupted as Macyn finishes, "*more* than you do because I'm not a most honored heir. I can't get away with that."

Solo pulls up short, and turns miserably toward Macyn, whining, "but I don't wanna. Do you know how hard it is to tell some posh snob to shove off without being accused of being rude? I mean, I'd, obviously, still say it, but then I get such a talking to by my parents."

After giving it a second of thought, Macyn asks, "is there a way I can bail you out?"

"How do you mean," Solo questions.

"Like if you don't want to talk with someone," begins to answer. "You say the code word and I'll say something that gets you out of it, like, '*honored heir Roth, a table collapsed under the weight of all your solstice gifts. I'm sorry to say you only have four tables of presents left.*' Or some other rich people emergency."

After a snorting chuckle, the smiling Solo responds, "fine. The codeword is cattywampus and how about something simple like pretending to see my mum or sis and saying they're waving for me."

"I mean, it doesn't sound as genuine as mine, but it should work," Macyn jests, and the pair of friends are happy to learn throughout the night that the codeword works. Though Macyn couldn't save Solo while he danced with an offensively bubbly socialite, they use the code word for nearly everyone who tries to bring up a business proposition, a marriage proposal, gossip, gush about their fortune, or any other topic Solo has no patience for. More than any other topic, none is avoided more immediately than Sinai's Prophecy. During dinner, the inflated and bombastic guests all want to know if Solo's gained any new insight as to what the great calamity might be, and except for Macyn and Marnamei, Solo actively ignored everyone.

After dinner, the coal-haired heir acted as if he was expecting the worst to happen, and sure enough, when the revered nobles were invited to speak to the guests, the only one who didn't bring up the prophecy was marshal Hew. The Masters were proud their son, Everette, was chosen to save mage-kind. The Wangs pledged to do all they can to ensure Menhir and Gaiorem survive some coming apocalypse, and even Solo's father assured all, that no matter how great the sacrifice to their family, they choose life for all. It was a standing ovation, and all at the expense of Solo's prophesied death.

Macyn didn't like that at all, and despite the amazing food, the way they all embrace Solo's death readily ruined it. Solo and Macyn go up to the heir's room and watch the fireworks from his balcony in silence; neither one needing to speak much for the rest of the night. They simply watch the colorful lights dance around Coral in the moonlit sky until Masemo arrives to signal the end of their first of four solstice celebrations.

House Masters hosted the second solstice celebration in their mansion as well, farther up the mountain and built into the grand stone wall. The itinerary for the evening was similar to the Roth's party with the exception that Macyn arrived with Solo and got to shake Everette's family's hand upon entering their lavish and grand stone home. Macyn didn't get a chance to dance with Marnamei then or even at the Wang's solstice celebration as he was quietly snatched up and asked to leave while Solo was busy dancing. It wasn't long until Solo found

him outside the Wang large district, wondering how he was going to navigate the dark and dense forest back to civilization. Happy to leave early, Solo's sister Mara escorted them via flying carpet to Anthony Building where Solo and Macyn spar against Mara in the field with wooden swords.

"I can't believe how good your sister is," Macyn gushes the following day. They're walking toward the Banquet Hall wearing the tuxedos for the school-wide solstice celebration the honored house Hew is throwing on campus.

"She's a warlock and a furie," Solo argues, upset at the fresh memories of how badly they lost to Mara. "They're the most elite combat unit on Menhir. Of course, we're not going to beat her. And mate, work on your feints. She could read your offense with her eyes closed."

They go back and forth on sword strategy and combat in general as they walk the bustling campus grounds under numerous golden-glowing lanterns and wide-reaching silver-blue moonlight. The campus is a much more relaxed solstice celebration and Macyn is much more comfortable in familiar surroundings. With the entirety of the student body and their family of all classes in attendance, the Hews avoid all the typical formalities Macyn had encountered at the other parties and it feels much more festive. Though Marnamei tends to draw in mages, she joins Macyn and Solo and the three enjoy all the activity around the stalls of the main promenade.

The final celebration of the winter solstice is filled with laughter, joy, delicious food, and extreme nervousness when Solo mentions to Marnamei that Macyn always wanted a dance with her. Even telling her he doesn't know the steps, she insists they dance anyway. What heightened Macyn's unease was that no one else was dancing in the gardens and the area had many other groups of students around. He hasn't practiced nearly enough with Sen to feel comfortable dancing in public with the princess of Menhir.

Stepping close to one another, Macyn had never been so close to her. The streamers, confetti, lanterns, music, student-mages all seem to blur around her and little else exists in his mismatching gray and hazel eyes but the stars, the moon, and this beautiful girl. Holding her calloused hand, bracing her warm shoulder blade through her white lace corset dress, Macyn becomes sharply aware of his rapidly beating heart, the raspy log in his throat, and the heat rising in his cheeks.

Dancing crudely in the gardens, Macyn was more than happy his hands remained dry, his height was slightly taller, and he hasn't stepped on her toes, however, the way he'd lose himself in her sky-blue eyes made him struggle to flow properly. Though he apologized after every misstep, she would always dismiss it, however, when he's improving moments later, she stops. She stares behind him and the crowd soon follows suit. Macyn turns to the watch the night sky light up with fireworks and Coral the dragon dancing in the sky like a coiling snake, as if gravity did not affect it.

They've stopped dancing but Macyn doesn't mind, nor does he care about the fireworks display or Coral the dragon because Marnamei is still holding his hand, causing him to hold his breath. In a grand effort to preserve the present for as long as he can, Macyn doesn't move until he's hit hard from behind. He's shoved forward and hears the sound of glass breaking as he kicks his foot out to catch himself before he falls.

"What the hell," Macyn yells at hot pain blooms from the back of his head, and reverberates up and down his spine.

The heirs spot someone in black running away, fast, and Solo yells, “I got em,” as Macyn feels a thick liquid on his fingers. Bringing it to his face, he’s happy to note it’s not his blood, as he feared. Instead, it’s a clear and oily substance that smells like hot metal and wood.

“What is that,” Marnamei asks as she picks up the corked top of the broken vial and smells it, asking herself, “where do I know that smell from?”

“Should we help Solo,” Macyn asks.

“He can handle it,” she slowly responds. Macyn doesn’t like how determined she becomes, gently waving the scent of the cork beneath her button nose. An upset Macyn can tell most of the liquid has stained the suit Solo gave him and is wondering if the brownies can clean it like they do his school uniforms when he hears someone nearby yell, “look, she’s coming over.”

Macyn turns to witness Coral indeed begin to fly closer to the gardens, then Marnamei curses, throwing the cork to the ground before yelling, “Macyn, you need to run!”

“What-”

Turning to Coral moving faster, Marnamei grabs Macyn by the arm and pushes him opposite the nearing dragon, yelling, “that’s dragon lure! You need to run! Now!” Macyn’s legs dawdle on the danger approaching until his eyes saucer at the sight of Coral nearing him widening its maw to bare long fangs. Macyn’s entire being panicked and takes off as he hears Marnamei call out, “go indoors and I’ll get the marshal!”

Macyn was already taking off his jacket as he was sprinting desperately through the gardens toward the nearest building. He rushes to take off his jacket like it was on fire but with so many mages around he refrained from throwing the dragon luring jacket on anyone. Cursing to himself he held it as he bolts, but over the thundering beating of his heart, he can hear the cascade of dry dragon scales scratching with the twisting of its body as it slithers, the gullet’s grumble descend deeper into his ears with every second, and the air heat around him.

Macyn couldn’t kick his burning legs hard enough or exhaust his mind with panic but he wasn’t far from a side entrance to the sophomore building. Hearing a horrible snarl on his neck Macyn hums a cry of sheer terror as he throws his jacket in the air before diving into the safety of the side entrance and sliding on the floor. Regardless of the pain shooting from his shoulder and his temple, Macyn shoots up off the floor and sprints toward the staircase leading to the second floor. Taking the steps three at a time, Macyn just clears the bisected staircase when he hears stone chipping, then wood breaking loudly before a powerful reverberating growl.

Reaching the second floor, he bolts to his left and spots two figures, one he knows as Jaylen’s aunt, Professor Hawkins, and the other, a stranger.

Macyn yells, “professor!” Her male company, Asian by the look of him, is startled by Macyn’s frightful cry. “It’s Coral! It’s Coral! It’s Coral,” Macyn calls sprinting to her as the great revered dragon’s head clears the stairs. “Help, help, help, help, help,” Macyn runs around the dark-haired professor and he quickly adds, “someone hit me with a lure! Now it’s trying to eat me!”

“Remain calm,” Professor Hawkins states as she looks out of the window to her left looking out into the square. As her male companion runs away, Hawkins heats the corner of the window with her mana until it warps and breaks, sending lightning cracks up the tall window. Grabbing Macyn by the collar she jumps out of the shattered opening. Wind rushes in his eyes and ears before she mana eases their descent, however, Coral is nearly on them when

she throws Macyn out of its jaw's line and into the statued water fountain.

“Hold your breath,” she directs him before she holds him under with her mana while she kneels. Professor Hawkins doesn't dare look up as Coral is sniffing the air around Macyn's desperate thrashing. The stern woman doesn't let up, exerting all her strength to keep Macyn from resurfacing. After what feels like minutes, Macyn is weakened and stills, and moments after that, Coral slowly turns its large head and ascends to the night sky, slithering away with complete disregard for the law of gravity. Once a sweating Hawkins is certain Coral is far enough, she quickly negates her mana, and Macyn shoots out of the water, violently coughing out suffocating globs of water.

While a commotion surrounds a wetly heaving Macyn by curious mages, concerned professors, the marshal, Marnamei and Solo, and eventually Sen, on the path leading toward the market, a single small shoe is the only evidence that remains of a child abduction.

## To Expect

Macyn left out his latest brush with death from the letter he's written to his parents. He simply wished them Merry Christmas, Happy New Year, and sent them a retro photo of himself and Solo in their high-class tuxes as they can't use mana to display the general three-dimensional imagining.

Walking out of Anthony, Solo is waiting for Macyn lying on his back on his carpet with his legs dangling. Upon seeing Macyn, Solo grumbling, "mate, I'm telling you we can figure out a place for your equipment. You don't have to stay out here."

Though Macyn appreciates the offer to share his large dorm room, as it can easily accommodate five mages, Macyn already meets Root here and he doesn't want to change that. "I appreciate you coming out here but you know we're still bros even if you didn't, right?"

"Obviously," Solo states, scooting forward for Macyn to hop on. "Do you need to see professor Sun today?"

"Nah," Macyn answers as they leave for the first class day of the new year. "No more masking potions."

Rising higher than is permitted, both boys enjoy gliding by treetops when Solo declares, "I'm going to teach you how to fight."

Quirking his brow confused, Macyn asks, "don't you already?"

"No, not that play stuff we do in the fields," he responds. Sitting back-to-back, Macyn doesn't have to turn to see how serious Solo is. Macyn can feel it in his friend's tone as Solo continues to explain, "I mean how to *really* fight; to be a combat specialist. I'm not always going to be around, mate, and even if I were, it's not like we can't be separated. What's your plan then? It's just plain idiotic to know there's danger ahead and do absolutely nothing about it."

Silent and pensive, Macyn wrestles with mortality his best friend is constantly faced daily. Aside from corrupting his day, it always makes Macyn question when he can do. Everyone seems so certain of the prophecy that it makes him uncertain if putting on a brave face and doubting the grim prediction would just be a lie; if it would only hurt Solo more. Regardless of his combat ability, Macyn wouldn't think of denying him this, and so, the coffee-haired boy asks his best friend, "you want me to make practice swords?"

"No need," Solo comments. "I already paramailed Masema. He'll send me the ones we use from home."

Looking at the long dark-rooted trees below, Macyn welcomes the idea of further developing his combat ability to defend himself, and asks Solo, "have you heard anything about..."

"Jaylen's little sister," Solo finishes. "I haven't heard anything."

Sora, Jaylen's little sister, was abducted during the commotion with Coral. Her mother was physically assaulted and knocked unconscious before she knew it had happened. Recalling the pain and horror of his near abduction, Macyn can't help but imagine Sora's terrified scream as the kidnapper ripped her away from her mother before disappearing into the night. It was a terrible end to Macyn's first Solstice on Menhir.

Throughout the school, all of Aqua, Ventus, and Terra Houses were in support

of Jaylen by pinning Sora's favorite purple rose to their lapel, while Ignis empathized enough to keep their comments to themselves. With many warnings from all of their professors, Ignis and Aqua are let out for the day. Poliwick's are patrolling campus in more force than ever and yet, it was hard to truly feel safe. Macyn and Solo aren't more than thirty feet from the library when Jaylen rushes them from behind.

The pale dirty blond grabs Macyn's shoulder and spins him around, but Solo is already shoving Jaylen back, stepping ahead of his friend as he warns Jaylen, "you got words, you best spit em out before I take offense." Solo stares at a distraught Jaylen and his taller more collected house-mate, Everette.

"Easy, Jay," Everette calls as the taller muscular boy pats Jaylen's shoulder with a heavy hand. Nodding to Solo, he informs them, "we just want to talk."

"About," Solo replies as Sen exits Macyn's wand to observe. Though Everette observes the inhabitant, he ignores her as Macyn steps beside Solo.

Glaring directly into Macyn's gray and hazel eyes, a perturbed Jaylen sternly retorts, "you were nearly taken," shocking Macyn and Sen, and angering Solo. "Tell me everything that happened to you."

Macyn's brows rise at the peripheral memories as the dread casually rotates his stomach. His palms and armpits prickle with unwanted heat and moisture as his memories flare with images of desperate running, complete helplessness, unbridled pain, and terrified screaming. Despite the uneasy fever to flush his system, Macyn recognizes the angered desperation in Jaylen's dark-blue eyes.

*'He needs answers,'* Macyn thinks, recalling his own parent's reaction via letters. He hadn't written much detail, yet his mother was angry and his father was desperate to know he was okay. It took many letters and even a paragraph written by Solo to assure them all is well. After a deep exhale, Macyn informs Jaylen, "I don't actually know a lot. It happened fast."

"I don't care," Jaylen calls out, drawing a few eager eyes. "Just tell me everything!"

"Okay, whatever happens next, isn't happening here," Solo asserts, noticing several groups of students eying the drama. Solo adds, "and you're going to want to calm down, Jay."

"I agree," Sen states and Macyn suggests, "we're headed to the library-"

"Take me where you were taken," Jaylen hotly demands, angrier than Macyn's ever seen him. "Now!"

"Hell no," Macyn hotly counters as Solo warns Everette, "you better control your mate."

"We just want to see if the IPW missed anything," Everette defends.

"They didn't," Solo retorts.

"There's nothing wrong with double checking," Everette claims, leaning in closer to Solo as he says in a lower voice, "look, he just... it's Sora, you know? You remember her, always wanted to play. We *need* to do something."

With a slow exhale, Solo turns to Macyn and says nothing, clearly leaving the decision to him. Macyn doesn't need more than a moment to see Jaylen is desperate for this, and nods in acceptance, though Sen adds, "Sunday."

Turning to her offended, Jaylen asks, "what about Sunday?"

“We will take you to the scene of the abduction on Sunday,” Sen clarifies.

“No. Today,” Jay tells her before turning to Macyn and emphasizing, “today!”

“Macyn needs to study,” Sen declares.

“Oh, fekk your Odin-be-damned studying, you broken Crutch,” Jaylen calls when Macyn takes a bold step forward, glaring at Jaylen as he quickly asserts, “she’s not a Crutch. She’s my friend. You want my help, don’t disrespect her again! That being said, I don’t mind taking you both now, but-”

“Macyn,” Sen starts, however, Macyn effortlessly conveys to her, “if it were my family, I don’t think I could wait a minute let alone a couple days. We can take carpets, show them where it happened, then leave. It won’t take longer than an hour.”

Sen begrudgingly acquiesces and thirty minutes later, Jaylen, Everette, and Marnamei meet Solo, Sen, and Macyn in the field behind Anthony. Macyn is surprised to see Marnamei and assumes Everette invited her. During their approach Macyn overhears Everette ask Marnamei, “just let us know if you sense anything.”

Macyn wonders about the comment and if she’s a tracker on top of the best fighter in their class. Walking up to them, her beautiful greenish-blue eyes convey sympathy as she tells Macyn, “regardless of what we find, I think it’s brave of you to go back there.”

Jaylen huffs loudly in impatient frustration and Macyn expresses to her, “he’s an ass, but I get it.”

With a nod, she gracefully boards her carpet, followed by Everette, Jaylen, and Solo. Though the others stand on their carpet, Macyn sits back to back with Solo as Sen slowly leads the group into the tall expanse of magical trees. In the rear of the group, Macyn watches the colorful fireflies below as he asks Solo, “is Marnamei a tracker too?”

“She’s part nymph,” Solo answers, resting comfortably against Macyn’s back. “The marshal married a nymph after he won Kratopan. Even though Marny’s not a full nymph, she still has an affinity for nature energy and might spot something we can’t.”

“Can all nymphs do that,” Macyn asks, wondering if Root might’ve noticed anything.

“Not sure,” Solo admits. “Other than Nurse M’Curre, I don’t get to chat up many of them. Quite a few of them don’t like mages much and they can easily control our minds, so if you ever see one, do yourself a favor and run the other way.”

The group of carpet riding students soon reach the spot Macyn was nearly abducted and survey the area for anything out of place, which turned out to be a lot. Branches were broken, squares of grass were cut away, and sections of tree bark were skinned off. Everette explained the IPW collect evidence to check if anything in the area might have retained a memory of the event. He used his connections to inform the group that some items did retain a memory but like Macyn’s, it didn’t reveal an identity.

They hadn’t learned anything in the thirty minutes they search the area. Jaylen didn’t want to leave and it wasn’t until Marnamei and Everette consoled him and assured the boy nothing more could be done, that they all decided to leave. Macyn had nightmares that night and the couple nights to come, and when he awoke his tired mind would wonder about Jaylen, his sister Sora, the other taken children, and Dog. Thinking about his near kidnapping makes him uncomfortable but thinking of those already taken makes him feel worse.

Finalizing the second handle he’s ever made, Macyn is sanding the wooden scabbard when a mess of auburn hair enters his vision with a bit of a hand wave. Removing the

scabbard, Macyn waves his hand behind the spinning sandpaper to turn it off before pulling down his mask and greet his business partner.

“Hillel dauen,” Macyn greets.

“Hillel terr,” Root responds. She thumbs the wall beside the furnace, informing him, “I brought more material.” Grabbing the latest pages of runes he copied, he hands it to her while thanking her gratefully. “I heard about the girl that was taken,” Root continues. “We may have our issues with mages but even nymphs wouldn’t wish harm on a child.”

Macyn only nods, unable to help thinking about Sora and his near abduction, before rushing to ask, “when you were out there, um, did you see anything, or maybe sense anything with your abilities?”

“No,” Root answers. “At the time, I wasn’t thinking... nothing but the usual *terror* popped out at me. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Macyn shakes his head, feeling regret and gloom in his chest. “The girl who was taken, her brother asked me to take him to where I was nearly abducted. He’s always been a... but like you said, I wouldn’t wish bad stuff on his sister, so I thought you might’ve seen something that a mage couldn’t.”

“Did you tell them I might’ve-”

“No,” Macyn quickly answers, raising his palm. “I didn’t tell them about you. I know you’d rather keep this between us.”

Nodding thankfully, Root begins to depart when she turns and remarks, “you know, I have noticed someone else.”

Curious, Macyn asks, “what do you mean?”

Pushing up her thick-rimmed fake glasses, Root answers, “whether I’m meeting you or heading home, I have a habit of camouflaging when I sense anyone nearby. I think a month ago now, I saw someone searching the woods.”

Pensive, Sen asks, “why is that noteworthy?”

“First,” Root starts, “I’ve seen him on three separate occasions, and each time, he’s always dressed in black rune-enhanced garb. I know it’s rune-enhanced because it masks his body heat, mana signature, and dampens sound around him. His face, hair, and hands were also concealed, but he wasn’t an adult... unless he was a small adult. Also, the area he’s always searching is the general location you were nearly kidnapped,” Root answers.

“That seems suspicious,” Sen alarmingly notes, before asking, “why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“It’s not the kidnapper,” Root quickly asserts. “I was there, remember... even though I just hid.” When Macyn is about to remind her she couldn’t do anything, Root quickly moves on to say, “the height. The man who nearly took you was *much* taller. That’s how I know they’re not the same.”

Sen nods with acceptance. Wondering about this mysterious person, Macyn asks, “um, how do you know he’s a he if he was all covered up?”

“Narrow hips,” Root answers. “Didn’t sway when he walked,” adding a little sway of her hips, instantly hypnotizing Macyn. When his eyes glaze, Root’s head and large mop of auburn hair drop back in disbelief. Already dressed in unflattering attire, she snaps her fingers in front of his hypnotized face a few times to reassert his higher brain function.

Still deep in thought, Sen doesn’t even notice Macyn’s mental stupor as she asks Root, “and you’re certain he was looking for something?”



Macyn is shaking his head for clarity as Root answers, “he was rooting through the grass and bushes looking for something. I didn’t think anything of it because I thought it was just an EU student farming for something he shouldn’t be. I promise you it’s not the same ambiance I got when I saw the kidnapper.”

Turning to a pondering Sen, Macyn asks, “what are you thinking?”

“Something... I might remember,” Sen states in deep distracted thought. “I need a moment,” she slowly voices before floating in silence for so long, Root leaves with a wave goodbye and Macyn returns to work on the scabbard. It wasn’t until the following morning on the way to school that Sen recalls what’s preoccupied her mind for nearly a day. Interrupting Macyn and Solo as they fly twenty feet above the ground, she declares to her ward, “I *finally* recall what it is that was troubling me.”

“What’s what,” Solo asks before Macyn simply answers, “Sen was trying to remember something about that day.”

“I wasn’t in my right frame of mind which is why it was very hazy,” Sen explains to her ward. “But through various memory techniques—the same ones I taught you,” she reminds Macyn with triumphant eyes. “I was able to recall a necklace on the kidnapper with a pendant on it. It was... well, I can’t be certain, but I feel as if it came undone during our altercation.”

“...A pendant,” Macyn hums a moment before comprehending, “you think that’s what this person was searching for,” to which Sen nods.

“Uh, feeling left out isn’t fun,” Solo says waving his hand for attention. While omitting Root as the source, Macyn recounts what they learned the previous day as they close in on the school. The Poliwick that was following them from a distance wave at them as they make it to the main grounds of campus. After some thought, Solo remarks, “so this person, a small person that may or may not be a student, but is definitely not the kidnapper, is trying to find this pendant-”

“Because it’s more than likely evidence,” Sen interjects.

“Evidence that can possibly help catch him,” Macyn speculates with growing wonderment.

Sen adds to the theory, “with the numerous IPW patrols on campus and the Rangers in the forest, it’s much more difficult for the kidnapper to return safely-”

“Which means he has someone else searching for him,” Solo finishes.

“He’s got help,” Macyn speaks aloud.

“We need to tell the authorities,” Sen tells the boys, looking for the nearest poliwick.

“...Um, I reckon we ought to think about this some more,” Solo replies with careful concern. Closing in on the banquet hall, Solo slows them down to stay in the privacy of being high in the air.

Quirking her brow in confusion, Sen asks, “what is there to think about?”

“Opportunity,” Solo answers her.

Macyn and Sen glance at each other before he comments, “I don’t get it.”

With something of a sigh, Solo explains to them, “the reason my family is where they are is because they saw opportunity when others couldn’t see past tragedy or unfairness.”

Shocked by the implication, Sen’s quick intake of air is immediately followed

by, “how can you possibly think to use *this* for your own gain?”

“Not *my* gain,” Solo defends before nodding to Macyn. “But there’s someone here that needs patronage in order to lift his mum’s banishment.”

Imagining his mother’s reaction instantly felt like a bad omen to Macyn who slowly responds, “if my mom ever found out I used kidnapped kids as leverage to repeal her banishment, I don’t think she’d ever like me again.”

“I certainly wouldn’t,” Sen adds, making her opinion known.

“But she’d be allowed back,” Solo maintains.

“It’s still risking the children’s lives for personal gain-” Sen starts but is interrupted.

“Then let’s save them,” Solo hotly declares. With animated palms out, he asks them both, “what do we really have? Some bloke who *was* in the forest **over** a month ago, looking for something we reckon *may* be a pendant that *may* belong to the kidnapper; who has since stopped going according to your source. Think about it and tell me that doesn’t sound pretty thin. I’m not saying we shouldn’t go to the IPW but let’s get something a little more substantial first.”

“...Substantial like what,” Sen cautiously asks.

“Like the identity of the person searching,” Macyn slowly answers with concentrated drawn-in eyebrows.

“Exactly,” Solo remarks with a smirk. “Let’s figure out who this person is-”

“And if,” Sen interrupts. “And this is a big if. *If* the identity is indeed significant, we go directly to the IPW with what we know, and nothing more.”

Eying the unyielding ghost, Solo begrudgingly agrees, “sure, fine, but right now, we have the element of surprise and we need to use that.”

“How do we intend to locate this accomplice,” Sen asks. “He was completely covered up.”

“Your source, found him, right,” Solo considers aloud. “Which by the way, doesn’t thrill me your keeping secrets.”

“If this turns out to be dangerous, I’m not going to put my source’s life in that position,” Macyn returns, quickly adding, “and the secrecy is their thing, okay? I don’t question, I just respect it.”

“I don’t want anyone risking their life that isn’t trained specifically to do so,” Sen announces, eying Macyn specifically.

“If the accomplice comes back, how about you wait in the forest,” Solo suggests, looking toward Sen. “You wouldn’t be risking your life. You learn who it is, tell Mace, and he informs IPW... or better yet, the marshal. You’ll look brilliant.”

“*If* this accomplice comes back,” Macyn laments.

Sen argues, “it’s possible the accomplice hasn’t had a chance to go back and search?”

“What if we use the pendant,” Macyn cautiously asks. Curious, Sen floats nearer and Solo hums, prompting Macyn to clarify, “we think this person is looking for the pendant, right? If we pretend we have it, then it’s possible he’ll come straight to us. Sen can still check in the forest, but as a backup plan, wouldn’t using the pendant be better?”

“We don’t actually have it, mate,” Solo reminds his friend. “How do we lure someone with bait we don’t have?”

“We make it,” Macyn answers, looking at Sen. “Do you remember how it looks?”

“...I’m not comfortable with this,” Sen starts and when Macyn tries to interject, she asserts over him, “no, Macyn! You can’t expect me to be okay with risking your life like this.”

Solo’s voice cuts between concerned stares as the heir states, “if we figure out this person’s identity, Mace would abso-bloody-lutely have a better chance of gaining support for his mum.”

“...I will think about it,” Sen tells them, however, every day leading to Sunday was a challenge. They’re no closer to discovering the identity of this mystery individual and concentrating on anything but this thin possible lead was next to impossible. Schoolwork, orecrafting, or Solo’s mandatory combat training simply didn’t mean quite as much to Macyn as the possibility of helping the authorities rescue the kidnapped children. On Sunday, Sen flew high or stayed near the forest floor in the general vicinity where Macyn was nearly abducted, however, neither Root nor his inhabitant discovered anyone.

“He has to be someone with mynt,” Solo states in a private room of the library. With their school work on the table sitting untouched, Solo continues to speculate. “Someone who can afford changeable attire, like a bespoke, and change into a mage’s uniform, a professor’s, or even an IPW’s.”

“Or they found the necklace already,” Macyn suggests. “Or they feel like it’s lost forever. I mean, it’s been months since I was nearly taken. They probably only search once a month now or the forest covered it in leaves or something else.” Looking desperately at his ghostly guardian, Macyn asks everything he needs to in one word. “Sen?”

“I... don’t like it, Macyn,” she tells him just as gravely.

“I know,” Macyn acknowledges, mirroring her concern.

“I’ll be with him the entire time,” Solo assures her.

“You can’t, though,” Sen tells Solo before she knowingly asks Macyn, “can he?”

Nodding, Macyn tells Solo, “if we want to trick this person, they’re going to have to feel safe enough to approach me. Which can’t really happen with the godly level of talent that is honored heir Solomon Roth nearby,” Macyn playfully mocks.

“That’s funny because it’s true,” Solo claims proudly. Macyn snorts as Solo continues. “Well, then, how’s about I stick around during classes, like normal, and after class, I shadow him wearing an invisibility coverall?”

“It would have to be the best,” Macyn thinks, recalling from Ryce’s class how difficult it is to completely erase all the aspects of a person’s presence.

“Uh, you forget who you’re talking to, mate,” Solo casually asks as if insulted.

“...Fine,” Sen tells them, adding, “however, I would like to ask for Miss Hew’s assistance. She is capable, caring, and the additional backup would make me feel more at ease.”

Tilting his coal-haired head down to the animagraph fashioned into his house emblem on his lapel, Solo’s mana covered hand touches the polished material before he asks, “hey, Marny, can you come to the library? ...Busy means nothing to Solomon Roth... Yeah, I don’t care about that... I still don’t care... And can you wear something tight? You know how Macyn likes that...” With wide and surprised eyes, Macyn emphatically spreads his vexed palms, as if to ask, ‘*why!*’ Highly amused by Macyn’s reaction, Solo replies to Marnamei’s

response with a smile, “you’re such a violent girl,” and Macyn can easily imagine her beautiful smile as well. “Marnamei... it’s important. Thanks,” Solo finishes before turning to the other two and adding, “she’s on her way.”

“Let’s get to drawing then,” Macyn vocalizes as he brings out a blank piece of parchment. Tracing the movement of Sen’s ethereal index finger, Macyn nearly finishes the paper-fan behind a cloud emblem when there’s a knock on the door. At Solo’s, “why the bloody hell is he here,” Macyn looks up to see Marnamei enter the room followed by Everette.

“You said her full name,” Everette responds. “You didn’t think I’d be curious to know.”

“Not prophecy important, you glory hound,” Solo throws back.

Ignoring her childhood friends, Marnamei waves to Macyn as she greets, “hey.” Interested in the design in front of him, she leans over the desk as she observes, “I didn’t know you can draw.”

Trying to ignore the beautiful Marnamei leaning over, Macyn clears his throat before mumbling, “yeah, this is, uh, actually why we called you here-”

“Whoa, hey, are you sure,” Solo asks Macyn, very clearly pointed to the honored heir Masters. “With uninvited ears present and all.”

“Shut up,” Everette tells Solo, squaring his rounder shoulders as he faces him.

“Make me,” Solo confidently challenges.

“Hey,” Marnamei calls stepping between them. “Enough! Or I swear I’ll ignore you both for the rest of the year!” Still glaring at each other, they take a few steps away.

“This is about the kidnapper,” Macyn reveals, and Marnamei and Everette sharply turn their attention on a seated Macyn with his inhabitant floating beside him. To Solo, Macyn nods his consent to Everette’s presence and Roth walks over to Macyn’s other side, crossing his arms.

Masters then declares, “I’m getting Jay.”

“You can’t,” Solo calls, stopping Everette at the door.

“Are you incapable of considering anyone but yourself,” Everette yells, quickly asking, “what if it was your sister?”

“I’d hope she didn’t murder the kidnapper too horrifically and expect to see her later at dinner because she’s a damn furie, and not an eight-year-old,” Solo reasons loudly.

“He *needs* this,” Everette retorts eyeing Solo gravely.

“And the last thing we need is a fekking bully who’s overly emotional,” Solo counters.

“I agree with Mr. Roth,” Sen states. “Unstable emotions can lead to irrational decisions and there are children’s lives at risk.”

“I’ll keep him in line,” Everette promises the room. “But he needs this. Please,” Everette asks, and with Solo’s exhale before his hesitant nod, Everette exits the room, returning several minutes later with a silent and fuming Jaylen. He instantly glares at Macyn who handedly returns the middle finger.

Certain Jaylen was ready to listen, Marnamei turns to Macyn and firmly asks, “please explain.”

Eying Jaylen, Macyn explains, “first, you guys have to understand that this could be nothing... but we think we discovered a lead to the kidnapper’s identity.” Macyn, Solo, and Sen then explain from the beginning to the drawing in front of Macyn, to wearing the

necklace around the school to draw out the kidnapper's partner.

"And you're certain you can make this pendant," Marnamei asks.

"It's not any harder than making a menuki," Macyn states, though, clearly they don't understand what the metal ornaments embedded between the rough skin and threading wrap of a katana's handle is. Having practiced with a dozen before making six perfect ornaments for the three handles, Macyn simply reasserts, "yeah, I'm sure."

"I'm wearing it," Everette declares, and Macyn doesn't dispute it, fully accepting he'll no longer have to be the one to endanger his life like that. The large caramel-skinned heir is the first in the room to claim the pendant for the operation, however, he wasn't the only one. Solo, Jaylen, and Marnamei wish to wear it as well and the debate escalates from there. To protect Marnamei, Everette doesn't want her to wear it and Solo heatedly argues with Masters on whether she has any more or less right to wear it than any of them. Though Jaylen is overly passionate, he demands the right to wear the necklace, yelling to all, "she's my sister! It has to be me!"

"You're too emotional, Jay," Everette insists. "Lives are riding on this to risk one wrong decision. Look, I can more than take care of myself and the accomplice wouldn't be suicidal enough to take a Masters, or the whole of Menhir would be after him. I'm the safest choice."

Jaylen counter argues with intensity, "if we *actually* want to draw him out, you should be the *last* one to have it!" Eying both Solo and Marnamei, he practically yells, "and the same can be said about a Roth... definitely a Hew. He needs to feel like he can truly win. It only makes sense that I be the one to draw this piece of filth out."

"By that logic, it makes the most sense if Mace wears it," Solo evenly responds.

Having already given up on wearing the necklace, Macyn sharply turns his attention on Solo, quickly voicing, "wait, what?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," Marnamei suggests, turning to Macyn to sympathetically add, "no offense."

"I agree," Everette claims. "He's lower order and he still has his inhabitant. There's such a thing as too weak."

"He may not have been trained like us but that just makes him an even better choice," Solo argues. "Weak as everyone thinks he is, the accomplice would definitely make a move."

"Ow," Macyn sounds, grabbing his chest over his heart and furrowing his brows in pain at his best friend's blunt honesty before Solo pulls him to the side for a private word.

With his right arm wrapped affably around Macyn's neck, Solo whispers, "look, I know this is dangerous but we'll be nearby the whole time." Sen moves in close to listen as Solo adds, "we won't let anything happens, and more importantly, if you impress either Hew or Masters, it's a pretty safe bet they can endorse your Mum for her appeal. They have all the political pull you need."

Sen doesn't say anything, looking at him as if it's his decision. Macyn had initially expected to wear the necklace, and so with a shrug and a stiff nod, he returns to the others, declaring to them, "I should wear it."

"No, you're not," Everette commands with finality, adding, "however, you have a point. Jay does make the most sense."

"No, actually, he doesn't," Solo argues with his prophecy brother. "Why would

Hawkins even have the pendant, to begin with? Anyone who knows him will realize he doesn't go out that far. None of you do. Macyn is the only one with reason and opportunity, and since he was the one attacked, it makes all the sense in the world that he'd be the one to find and wear it."

"He still can't fight worth a damn," Jaylen harshly returns. "It's pointless to be bait if he's too weak to even defend himself."

"He can hold his own," Solo assures the room. "I've been sparing with him and he's already sent me to the infirmary once."

With wide eyes, a stunned Marnamei asks, "that was you?"

With a sheepish smile, Macyn weakly answers, "I just took him by surprise."

"No," Jaylen heatedly maintains, drawing all the attention in the room. Glaring at Macyn, he declares, "I won't accept it! I'm not losing my baby sister because some piss-poor broken pathos's trying to prove something."

Standing between Jaylen and Macyn, Sol hotly contests, "you conveniently keep forgetting why *we* will be invisible, but if you need proof, that's fine. What if he beats you in a duel?"

"Fine," Jaylen calls happily. More than eager to let off some steam and secure the opportunity to save his sister, he steps closer to the door, yelling, "let's go, right now. If he beats me, I'll allow it. If not, I'm wearing it."

"Deal, but we're waiting until Mace makes the pendant first," Solo agrees in a shocked Macyn's place.

"It's settled then," Everette confirms. "The day after he finishes, in the dueling room, after classes. In the meant time we all get our coveralls," he adds before the large heir, Jay, and Marnamei leave.

Growing more nervous by the second, Macyn sadly mentions, "if you didn't want to be friends anymore, you didn't have to schedule me for a violent beating. You could've just said so."

"You'll be fine," Solo shrugs. "It's not like you're terrible."

"Jaylen's sixth-best in wardcrafting," Macyn points out. "Oh, yeah, and he's already beaten me up before."

"Really?" Solo asks in surprise. Exhaling, he tells his best friend, "I didn't know, but even if he had, you've gotten better since then. You're managuard lasts the longest and endurance is a big deal. All you really need is a strategy. My sister, Marny, all the furies, aren't necessarily stronger, but they're efficient and strategize effectively. This is why I say you have to think outside of expectations. Marny, Everette, and Jaylen think you're weak, but of the three, Jaylen is the only one who'll underestimate you."

Macyn turns to Sen who nods her agreement before he does as well. With her expert guidance, Macyn finishes the pendant to her satisfaction in two days. He works hard using his chisels and small hammer to create the fan over the clouds emblem, however, rather than a necklace, they felt a pin over the breast of their uniform would showcase it more believably.

There are several dueling rooms throughout campus; each of the school houses has its own dueling squares and the Barracks has several connected to the largest dueling square in school. Once done with the emblem pin, Solo, Sen, and Macyn walk to the dueling room Everette scheduled. After two days of strategy sessions with Solo, Macyn's not so nervous he

wants to vomit as he walks toward the Barracks, however, upon entering the private room, they discover a small crowd of popular students waiting around Marnamei, Everette, and Jaylen.

The moment Solo sees the crowd, he demands to know, “what the bloody hell are these smarmy vultures doing here?”

“Finally,” Rosston shouts from the other end of the dueling square, gathering the room’s attention. “The sacrifice has arrived!”

Quickly agitated by the unexpected Ventus and Aqua gathering, Solo aggressively responds, “if you want to avoid being a sacrifice yourself, Rosston, best keep your hole shut.”

Marnamei quickly walks over to them, and with a word from Everette, the other Ventus and Aqua onlookers stay on their end of the mat.

“I’m sorry-” Marnamei starts before she’s interrupted.

“What the hell, Marny,” Solo asks, though Everette is the one who answers, “Jay let it slip, but it’s fine. None of them know what the duel is for.”

“He’s going to wish he hadn’t let it slip when Mace kicks his ass,” Solo fiercely contends.

“Solo,” Marnamei starts but is interrupted by Everette cheerily asking Solo, “you do know that you’re not the one fighting, right?”

“That’s enough,” Marnamei calls looking between the heirs. She turns to Macyn and offers, “we can reschedule if you want.”

“So he can look like a gutless chicken,” Solo asks her. “When you thought to warn us—because I know you thought to warn us—did you decide not to because you wanted him to lose?” For the first time ever, Macyn witnesses Marnamei look ashamed, however, Solo turns to Everette and finishes, “or did she just follow your lead? Cause this sneaky bullocks has Everette Masters written all over it.”

Everette and Solo glare hostilely at each other and given their past and destiny, it’s easy for Macyn to see why they’re so contentious with one another. One is destined to be the hero while the other is the sacrifice.

“It makes no difference,” they all hear Sen say as she exits her wand.

Macyn nods, before telling them, “let’s just get this over with.”

“I’ll hold on to the-” Everette starts to say when Solo rudely interjects, “you can’t be trusted, Dread Head. Marny’ll hold the pin.”

“Don’t ever question my honor, Solomon,” Everette snarls back, intimidating Macyn for a moment.

“And don’t forget, I know you,” Solo hurls back.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Marnamei says from between them.

Macyn hands Marnamei the pendant and grabs Solo’s shoulder to drag him away. Macyn ignores all the mocking calls from Rosston and his cohorts, however, he pauses when he sees Onawa staring at him. She’s not mocking him like the others but she seems conflicted. From beside Jaylen, she’s quiet and introspective.

As Macyn dresses in his wardcraft gear, Solo motivates him, stating, “they don’t expect anything from you. And that would piss me off, but not you. You keep your cool. You stay calm. You’re a trickster and you use their expectations against them.” Macyn nods before Solo adds, “you got this. I’ll be back.”

Macyn curiously watches Solo walk toward the opposite end of the dueling

square as Sen voices her positive faith. “The only thing you can expect from yourself is your best. It’s not a matter of ‘*can I*,’ but, who wants it more.”

Jaylen and Macyn are on the dueling stage. Though they’re both wearing their wardcrafting gear, Jaylen’s combat uniform is complete and more tactical than Macyn’s. Their respective supporters on opposite ends of the square. Solo holds Macyn’s clay wand while the few Aqua and Ventus mages cheer for Jaylen. The square’s clear protective barrier glows momentarily as it arises, safeguarding the audience from harm.

Standing ten paces away from each other, both Macyn and Jaylen hear Marnamei call, “ready? Begin!”

Jaylen smirks ferociously before he extends his finger-cropped sleeved hand. Solo had expressed concern that Jaylen would try to end it from a distance, and as Macyn’s widening eyes detect the Aqua Jet rune stitched on the palm of the sleeve, Macyn’s heart sinks. At the sight of the explosive mist of moisture around the jet of water, Macyn just manages to erect his managuard. The jet of water didn’t break through, however, the concussive force is strong enough to rattle his teeth and skull before he’s hurled effortlessly off his feet. Rolling backward with the momentum, the painful jet of water sneaks a bruising line of blunt trauma across his unprotected back—ripping a painful grunt from his throat—before Macyn can reassert his mana defense.

Smiling, Jaylen halts his attack, confidently staring down at his wincing and wet opponent while his friends cheer him on from the sidelines. Macyn feels like a hot line of bruising is swelling from his back, however, eager for more water, Macyn smiles at Jaylen, asking, “that all you got?”

From his knelt position, Macyn raises his managuard just as Jaylen shoots another jet of water. It vibrates his skull violently, and so Macyn tries to finesse his guard’s impact cushion so it doesn’t hurt him as much while Jaylen shoots jet after jet of cutting water.

Unlike the gale rune on his smelter, Macyn didn’t need to maintain the intensity of his guard against the quick shots of Jaylen’s Aqua Jet rune until the final stream. Growing keen on ending the duel, Jaylen closes the distance between himself and Macyn as he’s shooting a continuous blade of cutting liquid. The vibration painfully shakes the bones in Macyn’s outstretched arms, bruising the muscle and sending his brain an urgent message to stop.

Still, Macyn holds his mana preserving arms despite the flaming pain and relies solely on his plan. Macyn takes deep calming breaths, focusing his mana as he does when manning his smelter for hours on end. Feeling the water puddle and build to a small floor contained within the mana barrier of the dueling square, Macyn yells over the tearing sizzle of the laser water, “is that all you got!”

Jaylen intensifies the pressure as he steps only four feet away, doubling the painful vibrations. Tightening his jaw through the unnerving pain, Macyn holds out for minutes until Jaylen finally pauses to take a breath, momentarily ending the rune attack for the break Macyn needs to surround himself with mana. Eliminating any contact with the inches of water on the floor, Macyn triggers the Shirane coin in his grasp and the light flood erupts in a blinding light of water conductive electricity.

For a split second, Jaylen didn’t understand what Macyn did until his entire body seizes, stunted to stillness. The sizzling of water and the shocking tightness of his muscles involuntarily kept him in place for a few moments. As Solo and Macyn had discussed, Jaylen’s ward-gear nullified the majority of the electric shock, however, as Macyn had explained to Solo,



it was more than enough of a distraction to rush and jump a dazed and blinded Jaylen.

Macyn had shown Solo a few of the grapples his step-sister had practiced at length on him, so pain and muscle memory are enough for Macyn to plant his right foot on Jaylen's right thigh to hoist himself up, grab his outstretched right hand and wrap his entire left leg over Hawkins' shoulder and his long neck, snatching his opponents arm to drop on the wet floor with Jaylen in a tight armbar.

Macyn automatically applies limb-breaking force on Jaylen's captured elbow as Macyn yells, "tap out!" Gathering some of his senses, Jaylen tries to expand the surface area of his mana to push Macyn off, however, Macyn utilizes his mana to counter it. Jaylen strains his mana to push Macyn off, but Macyn holds firm as the two clashing forces of calcified spirit energy push desperately for dominance. It stays like this for a minute until, with every breath, Jaylen loses more and more leverage. Abruptly, Macyn firmly bends Jaylen's arm in a horrible direction until the boy frantically pats his leg, yelling, "okay, okay! I concede! I concede! Let-"

Macyn lets him go, rolling away and into a kneeling position as he hears Marnamei Hew call out, "victor, Macyn Blende."

## The Bite

“Someone get M'Curre!” Onawa shouts.

The water soaks into the ring as she, Marnamei, and Everette rush to Jaylen's side who's rolling on the mat from the agony of his hyper-extended elbow. Macyn's certain he hadn't broken Jaylen's joint, however, judging by the way he's wincing as he's clutching his arm, it seems he's never experienced an armbar submission before. Macyn himself felt soggy, feverish, tired, and the worst of his injuries is the swelling line burning and throbbing across his back. Recalling the hurt June could lay on him, this is much worse and he wants relief right away. Judging by the shocked or glaring faces rushing over, he expects to be delayed.

Solo and Sen rush to Macyn's side as Everette yells, “were you trying to break his arm!?”

“That wasn't even dueling, you fekking peon,” Rosston yells absent any humor.

Outraged, Onawa asks Macyn, “how could you do that?” Kneeling beside Marnamei as the Hew heiress inspects his elbow, she irately adds, “after everything he and his family are going through.”

“Shut the hell up, the lot of you,” Solo orates emphatically, silencing the room. “How could he do what? Win?! Did you all forget this was a duel and the only thing that matters is the win.” Everette huffs but it's clear he understands. Helping Jaylen to his feet, Marnamei was introspective the entire time, and Macyn's simply happy she isn't yelling at him like the others.

Standing beside Jaylen with her hand comforting his shoulder, Onawa hotly returns, “he didn't need to nearly kill him.”

Though on his feet, Macyn was hunched over, cognizant of every flare of pain with the slightest of movement, and from beside him, Solo aggressively responds, “wow, exaggerate much? The only one who was getting ‘killed’ in there was Mace. Aqua-Jet can easily cut through muscle and bone, but you all seem perfectly fine with Jaylen using something that dangerous on him.” The silent chagrin didn't seem to be from realizing their hypocrisy or humiliation but from how ardently Solomon Roth, heir and child of destiny was arguing on Macyn's behalf, adding, “why's that, I wonder? Was it because none of you expected dragon dung out of him, or could it be none of you expected Jaylen to get hurt in a duel?”

“Let's just take them to M'Curre,” Marnamei suggests.

“I want to know why,” Everette demands, taking a step toward Macyn. Solo steps forward as well as Everette elaborates, “why go through all this?”

“Everette,” Marnamei insists, eyeing him sternly.

However, he only asks her, “aren't you curious as to why some stolid would go so far-”

Cutting him off, Marnamei answers, “yes,” insisting, “but it can wait until after we get them medical attention.” Though aggravated, Everette stands down.

Half an hour later, the group is in the infirmary. M'Curre is tending to Jaylen's arm with Onawa standing nearby while Everette and Marnamei stand opposite Macyn, Solo, and Sen a few beds away. With his back tended to, Macyn occasionally stretches and twists to test for mobility and discomfort. While they wait for the all-clear from M'Curre, Marnamei

hands Solo the pin as Everette eyes Macyn and sternly voices, “well?”

Solo defiantly argues, “there’s that self-righteous tone I hate so much. The duel was fair. Macyn won. Get over it.”

“I think he means to ask, why go so far,” Marnamei clarifies. Her tone seems light and her beautiful eyes are inquisitive as she comments, “dueling like that... I mean no one uses lower-order techniques like that since it’s usually easy to mana-push them-”

“I think you’re focusing on the wrong details,” Everette points out. Marnamei nods sheepishly as Everette asks Macyn, “why would you go so far for someone you don’t even know? If he took it a lot more seriously, he could’ve hurt you, so, why?”

As they expect an appropriate response, a wide-eyed Macyn grows nervous, however, with a supportive nod from Sen, Macyn slowly starts. “...I need your help.” He clears his throat before he adds, “I thought if I helped the missing kids, you or your families might help me.”

“Of course,” Everette scoffs, looking at Marnamei knowingly as if it’s only to be expected. “I’d expect no less from a bottom feeder. Trying to gain favor on the kidnapping of a little girl... Mages like you make me sick.”

“Everette,” Marnamei tries to say but she wonders as much as well.

Everette continues, angry to know, “so? What is it? Mynt? Fame? Some form of alliance between our families?”

Macyn’s mother’s appeal depends on this moment and two of Menhir’s most influential heirs are completely misunderstanding him; even Marnamei is looking at him with doubt. Representing his mother’s behalf is his job, and yet, he’s faltering, making his hands clam up and pits heat up in nervousness. Clearing his dry throat, Macyn answers, “I only wanted to help.” Trying to make them see he would help even if he didn’t receive their assistance in return, he continues, “I’m not- I don’t mean like a trade-”

“No, no, no,” Everette states, his animated hands flicking for Macyn to explain himself. “This is what you nearly kill my friend for, so speak. You’re going to be the one wearing the pendant. At least tell us what selfish favor your greedy little head is angling for.”

Hearing Solo’s knuckles crack, Macyn instantly realizes how much his friend is holding back. Macyn knows Solo never has a problem speaking his mind and he appreciates it. So, despite the way his dry throat feels like it’s closing up, Macyn draws on the support from his best friend, his caring inhabitant, his father, and the need of his incarcerated and banished mother. With Sen and Solo beside him, Macyn explains, “I... I want to lift my mom’s banishment... so she can come back to Menhir.”

As Everette tilts his dreaded head, his caramel face converting into a wonderment of curiosity, Marnamei asks, “why was she banished? What did she do?”

“Nothing,” Macyn quickly answers her. “She was married to my dad when he was banished. He kept her in the dark so she didn’t know she lied under oath, and they banished her with him.”

“It’s true,” Solo confirms for the heirs. “I read the official record.”

A curious Marnamei continues to ask, “and now you want her to be allowed to return?”

“Yes,” he easily answers.

Everette waits for more, and after a few moments of silence, asks, “...and?”

“And, that’s it,” Macyn assures Masters, shrugging his shoulder.

“What about your other family,” Marnamei inquires, to which Macyn bashfully admits, “I don’t have any other family.”

Everette looks put out and Marnamei seems sympathetic when M'Curre returns to check Macyn one last time. After the all-clear from the beautiful nurse, they leave, formulating the initial stages of the trap along the way to the last half of dinner. Pinning the emblem clearly on his jacket, Macyn jests, “there’s no time like the present,” and walks to a table.

As discussed by the group, Macyn eats by himself, he walks to school by himself, he studies alone and all contact from Solo is to be kept to a minimum. Though he knows Marnamei, Solo, and Everette are keeping an eye on him at all times, either in class or outside under an invisibility coverall, the time spent in solitude is not fun. Even watching Solo laugh with Marnamei during lunch annoys him.

As planned, Everette and Solo soon make a scene during dinner to sell more attention to the emblem on Macyn’s chest. Everette pretends to spot the emblem and demands to buy it from him for Marnamei. Solo would counter bid and they would get into a heated argument for the right to buy the pendant. Macyn would then rush out of the Banquet hall to get away from the drama and commotion, and Marnamei would follow in her invisibility coverall. Unfortunately, their trap bore no fruit that night, and many mages asked to buy the pendant for many days afterward.

The following week, another trap was set, however, Macyn, Solo, nor Marnamei had any knowledge of it. Macyn had felt the stares early in the morning. He didn’t like it and he soon realized why when he saw a current image of his likeness in the Menhir Tribune as well as the Rock Rag paper. A watery image of his bust was floating in the air, with the pendant visibly on his chest, and the headline read, ‘*MACYN BLENDE, THE TENTH TAKEN?*’ After he managed to attain a copy, the rest read how he, a stolid who can craft mana, was nearly abducted and the subsequent cover-up of his identity, however, nothing of Sen and her possessing him was in the article.

In the privacy of the reserved study rooms of the library, Solo immediately blames Everette for the leak, however, no one is angrier than Sen, who brazenly asks Everette, “do you think this was smart? Do you realize what you’ve done?”

“First, I didn’t leak it,” Everette tells the group. When Marnamei eyes the tall caramel heir eerily, he raises his hands, open palms, and assures her, “I didn’t! Marny, I’d admit it if I had-”

“It was Jaylen, wasn’t it,” Solo interjects. “He’s the only other mage stupid enough to piss all over this.”

“He’s going through some stuff, Solo,” Everette yells. “As hard as emotions might be for you, understand it’s not something normal mages can shake off. And whether you agree with him or not, I *do* think this is a solid plan.”

“And you’d be wrong,” Sen contends, raising higher than the brown-skinned heir. “You would know that if you had consulted us, if we *all* talked about this, as we’ve been doing. Now, rather than drawing out the accomplice, you may have brought the kidnapper upon my ward! A kidnapper who can enter the campus undetected, who—thanks to you and Mr. Hawkins—now knows the name and face of the boy who possibly found the very thing that can reveal his identity. If this kidnapper is not immediately running from Menhir, he’ll be looking to silence Macyn!”

Even if the silence in the library private room stretch to a few moments, it felt like minutes until Marnamei slowly adds, "I agree."

"Marny," Everette calls, stepping tender-footed to her. His almond-shaped hazel eyes gazing pleadingly into hers, adding passion to his voice when he reminds her, "this is Sora... You've played with her at her birthday parties. You've known her since she was a baby. She wants to be just like you!"

"I know, Everette," Marnamei states, Macyn isn't the only one in the room that can see the conflict in her sky-blue eyes. Marnamei scans the room and her engaging eyes hold on him long enough to make his heart hammer harder. She returns her attention on Everette before she informs him, "I... just can't condone risking someone else's life for another-"

"And Sora's just another life to you," Everette demands to know.

Regardless of his height over her, or the width of his shoulders, Marnamei takes a challenging step forward, fiercely eying him as she declares, "don't you dare question my love for that girl, but I took grandsire seriously when he told us both that all lives matter. The ends don't justify the means if it means Macyn gets hurt or Odin forbids, dies."

"He's already risking his life," Everette points out. "We all are. What's a little more?"

"More than I'm willing to accept," Sen interjects. "I'll be demanding round-the-clock security from the marshal-"

"No," Everette calls just as Marnamei calls, "Lady Sen," and Solo states, "you can't." Sen looks the most disappointed by Solo's opposition, and so he adds, "I don't want him in any more danger either, but he has us. If either accomplice or kidnapper comes out, you know I'll protect Mace while Everette and Marny take down the threat. It's already worked out."

"It's okay, Sen," Macyn tells a very concerned Sen. To ease her distress, if even a little, Macyn makes sure she knows, "they have me covered, and I have you too. I never worry with you looking after me." Furrowing her brow and squinting her eyes, Sen can easily see his play. Though it didn't stop her from smiling ever so briefly. For she is instantly upset again when Macyn tells everyone in the library's private room, "I'll be heading into the forest this Sunday for about ten hours, so, pack accordingly."

Though Sen argued against it and he would've preferred if his name and face weren't in the papers, Macyn had already planned to go in the forest in hopes of drawing out the accomplice, and if that didn't work, he felt, at the very least, he can smelt more ore for a new sword. Come Sunday, he has an early breakfast, alone, before walking back to his dorm. He changes into his orecrafting gear, gathers his sledgehammer and supplies in his traveler's bag. Confident three of the strongest mages in his class are trailing him from a safe distance, he walks into the forest.

The grand forest has never felt as majestic after he was nearly abducted. Macyn is always cognizant of the long monstrous arms hiding in the dark shadows now. Still, drawing confidence from his capable bodyguards, Macyn breathes easy. He makes it to the shallow cave he still has a smelter in, and soon begins preparing it for use. After smashing lemon rock and manaforming the honeycomb charcoal, he's ready to smelt more ore.

Near noon, Macyn takes a break before he mans the tuyères again so Sen can find Root and alert her to the hidden bodyguards. Drinking from the bamboo water bottle, Macyn wonders if Root can sense Solo, Marnamei, or Everette with her nymph abilities when a snap of a twig stuns his attention. Sitting up, Macyn scans the tall trees for any shadow lurking

nearby. The birds still make their calls as the fireflies still burn their bulbs, which forces Macyn to wonder about an animal when he hears a thump opposite the broken twig.

The moment Macyn surveys that direction, he hears hard steps on stone and dirt ground behind him. Turning around, he just manages to raise his managuard when there's an explosion on the stone floor in front of him. Hot rock and dirt, blinding dust, and grass hit him head-on with concussive force and he's blown on his back onto loose rocks and hard ground. Ignoring the ringing in his ears and the sting from the hot sand all over his skin, Macyn strains to get up to ascertain the threat.

A non-adult-sized figure, cloaked in all black military uniform is nearly on him, attacking with another blast of fire and needle-like impact. Macyn instinctively managuards with more mass and density, cutting off his oxygen as he's blown back like a body in a barrel. His vision blurs and focuses on a rune design he's never seen before aimed at him.

Macyn wants to desperately yell out, 'wait,' but his hasty managuard has cut off his oxygen when he's struck with another super-heated concussive blast that made his brain drown in disorientation and his skin burn with dulled heat. Macyn is flipped onto a rock and despite the fear, his guard evaporates on impact.

He inhales both hot and cold air as his vision is spinning and he calls out, "wait! Wait!"

He's manapushed off the rock's surface to the stone and sand floor below. Macyn looks to the forest as he gathers his shaky legs under him to run away, wondering for his backup, his bodyguards, his heroes, his friend, and yet, out of his peripheral vision, he sees no one; no rescue, no aid, no defense. Unguarded and distracted, Macyn is struck just under his right arm and he can hear his ribs crack over his agonized scream.

Despite his long piercing cry, the attacker takes hold of Macyn's tense arm with what feels like cold spirit hoists it away, pulling at his taut shoulder while the attacker checks his body.

"Please, please, don't- Help! HELP," is all Macyn can yell before the assailant squeezes his right hand with inhuman strength, cracking bone and compressing cartilage. Unable to think past the moment, Macyn has never been so afraid under such familiar agony in his life.

The attacker finally yanks the pendant from Macyn's chest before he lifts the whole body in the air by his gripped right arm and tosses Macyn against the wall of the stone cliff. Despite the thin managuard he manages to erect, there's very little protection between his head and hard stone, and upon impact, his vision immediately spins and sparkles as the fracture of pain spreads down his neck and spine. Twisting his ankle upon landing on the ground, he falls on his side, hurt, broken, and wheezing.

Macyn is conscious enough to see the attacker look down on him, and at that moment, Macyn felt he was going to die. The attacker was going to finish him after drawing out as much of Macyn's suffering as possible. It was only a moment, but to Macyn, it may as well have been an hour of heightened and continuous terror beating his heart to an early grave.

Mercifully, his attacker soon rushes away, leaving a broken Macyn to his pain. More undetermined moments pass before an invisible mask is uncovered to reveal a very frantic Solo. Macyn can tell the Roth heir is yelling something, but he can't hear what, and slowly, it doesn't matter as his vision fades to black.

## A Curious Thing

“Keep him awake,” a horribly muffled voice barely says in the graying darkness.

“Mace!” another voice desperately calls, though Macyn’s slow mind barely registers that it’s his name being called. “You have to stay awake, mate! Come on, mate, open your eyes for me!” More vibrating black gives way to gray and then blurry white. “There you are,” Macyn hears a blurry face yelp. “You have to stay with me now!”

“We’ll meet you...” a voice from a distance yells.

For a brief moment, Macyn is free to wonder why half of his hazy vision is red, why he’s looking up at fast-moving clouds just under the thin blue of the Menhir sky, why is Sen so agitated as she flies right beside him, why is he flying, and why is he throbbing? He’s free for a single moment to ask these questions, however, his only reply is unmitigated pain; hot, stabbing, poisonous pain he couldn’t help but wheeze through. It hurt to breathe and his ribs felt like they were razors held together by molten glue.

Then it all came back to him. He was the victim of a violent assault, again. Aside from the burning pain causing his body to sweat profusely, Macyn couldn’t help but mentally scream how this wasn’t supposed to happen. This wasn’t the plan they had discussed multiple times at length, so, why was he in rancid pain, flying through the air with Sen by his side?

Tilting his head, he slowly wheezes, “Sen...”

“Macyn,” she immediately calls. “Conserve your strength. Just stay awake and focus on your breathing.”

From Macyn’s other side, Solo yells, “how is he?”

Macyn slowly turns his head to the right as Sen yells, “please go faster.”

“We’ll be there soon,” Solo yells, and Macyn slowly notes Solomon Roth, on his flying carpet, holding him as with his mana, as they fly through the air. He can tell they’re still over the forest surrounding Erudite, however, they are traveling much faster than if they were sprinting on foot. Solo shouts, “go warn M’Curre we’re fifteen minutes out!”

Sen’s regal face takes up his whole view as she patiently informs him, “Macyn, I’ll be right back. Just stay awake,” she finishes before speeding away.

With her gone, Macyn sees his friend again. His friend... who promised to watch his back... who promised to rush-in the moment the accomplice reveals himself. As if compounding his physical pain, Solo’s deception hurt in an overwhelmingly earnest way. As if, on top of the physical agony and difficulty breathing, he was also stupid. Stupid for believing. So stupid it hurt.

“Put... me... down,” Macyn tries to say but his lungs hurt so badly, his garbled voice is unheard over the rushing wind. It isn’t until they reach the infirmary that Solo finally sets Macyn down on his feet, sending a ripple of pain from his twisted ankle and through the sensitive flesh of his leg. Solo tries to steady him as M’Curre reaches them, however, with every ounce of strength that remained in his feeble body, Macyn roughly shoves Solo well away. Glaring into the honored heir’s dark and confused eyes, Macyn struggles to speak clearly, “stay... away!”

Though Solomon looks hurt, he fades to black and Macyn passes out. For nearly two hours, M'Curre tends to the worst of his list of injuries until he snaps awake. He's breathing heavily and thrashing in bed despite his bandaged injuries.

"Shh, it's okay Mr. Blende," M'Curre calmly states. Looking into her eyes, Macyn is suddenly awash with a serene feeling of safety and comfort, and he quickly calms down. "Do you know who I am?"

Macyn looks at the beautiful nurse and croaks, "healer... M'Curre."

M'Curre smiles as she nods, following with another question. "And do you know where you are?"

Looking around the familiar room, Macyn answers, "infirmary." When she asks him if he knows why, the memories bulldoze their way into the forefront of his mind. Though the distressing images aren't as intensive as before, it's sharp enough to cause his breathing to increase and heart rate elevates as he answers, "yeah."

"You're more than safe now," M'Curre assures him and he immediately believes her and her enchanting voice.

"How is he," Solomon asks from beyond the curtain before Sen calls out, "please leave, Mr. Roth."

"I'm not going anywhere until you let me explain why this is all Everette's fault," Solo declares from the other side of the privacy curtain. "I'm going to murder him the second I leave here, so, Mace should at least know why I'm going to Hellbury."

"Mr. Roth, I haven't forcibly ejected you from my infirmary because I understand your concern but I cannot have you agitating my patient," M'Curre shares, though Macyn is wondering why Solomon wants to murder Everette. M'Curre adds, "if you do not settle down, I will make certain you leave by any means necessary."

"...It's okay," Macyn's scratchy voice says. Looking at Sen hovering protectively beside his bed he asks her, "do you know what happened?"

"I've been too upset to hear any excuses," Sen answers. "For the moment, all I need to know is they failed to protect you," she says before raising her voice for Solo to hear, "as they promised they would!"

"...Mace," Solomon calls over the closed screen. "Please, just let me explain. You know I don't ask for anything, but I'm asking you for this, mate."

Macyn turns to M'Curre and nods. She stands and opens the screen as she informs him, "you have five minutes, Mr. Roth." M'Curre walks to her office and laboratory for more medicine and Solo has a clear view of an irate Sen and a bandaged, disappointed, and sad Macyn.

Before Solo can speak, the infirmary doors open to a rushing Marnamei. Undeniably concerned, she runs to Macyn's bed and her bluish-green eyes immediately focus on his bandaged ankle, his hand, his head, and his torso. "Oh, Macyn..."

She raises her hand to her mouth when the doors open again, this time to a gleeful Everette, and at the sight of his big, toothy smile, Solo launches himself at the honored heir. Macyn can't see the altercation but he hears a heavy thud, like bodies hitting the floor, wrestling and punching one another.

Sen doesn't bother stopping them, and to Macyn's surprise, neither does Marnamei. His inhabitant asks, "Miss Hew, can you please explain why you, someone I took to be decent, honest, and honorable, broke your word to ensure Macyn's safety?"



Surprised, Marnamei asks them both, “didn’t Solo tell you?”

“I’ve been out until a couple of minutes ago,” Macyn answers. “But more than that, I’m pretty pissed... because I can’t think of a single reason why you guys let that happen to me.”

Despite, the sound of glass breaking, fist smacking flesh, grunts and huffs, and M'Curre's heels running atop of wood floor toward the fighting heirs, Marnamei hangs her golden blond head low before answering him, “Everette... felt that following the accomplice back to a possible location where the kidnapper and the missing children might be was a better strategy.”

“For that to happen,” Sen irately begins to point out. “The accomplice would have to be successful in *forcibly* taking the pendant from Macyn, which I never would’ve agreed to.”

Marnamei assures Sen, “Solo and I wouldn’t have either. Everette knew that, so, the moment we saw the accomplice approach you, he petrified us. We couldn’t break it without risking discovery, and I’m so sorry, Macyn. Truly. I’m so sorry. I can’t even begin to tell you how sorry I am.”

Like tracks shifting, Macyn felt the anger inside him shift to a single target. Calling over the girls, loud enough for the entire room to hear him, Macyn yells, “Solo?”

After a grunt, Solo answers, “y-yeah?”

“Kick his ass,” Macyn angrily responds.

M'Curre finally maintains order between the heirs when a huffing Solo calls back, “you know?”

“Yeah, Marny told me,” Macyn yells back.

As Solo laughs, Marny hesitantly comments, “actually, Everette and Solo are the only ones who call me...”

Waving his bandaged right hand, Macyn asks, “remind me again how you can’t begin to tell me how sorry you are-”

“Macyn, that’s underhanded,” Sen reprimands.

“Fine,” Macyn agrees with a roll of his eyes as Everette leaps into view, even with his attention constantly on Solo.

Marnamei is indifferent to Masters’ huffing, his bleeding nose, and his busted lip, as Everette tells Macyn, “yeah, look, I’m not beyond acknowledging that it was a hard call to make, but it was the right one. Right now, at this exact moment, the IPW and Furie Corp are raiding the Himura home, searching for those missing kids. So, while I wish you didn’t have to suffer to get this win, I’m more than fine with the result. And once all the children are back with their families, so will you.”

“I bet you’re fine,” Solo sarcastically retorts. “It wasn’t your skin on the line, was it you flea-riddled glory hound.”

“For Odin’s sake, he’s fine,” Everette argues, waving a hand at Macyn. “That kid has been searching for the pendant for months. I just knew he would take it to the kidnapper. This was the only play.”

“No, Everette,” Marnamei challenges, adding, “it wasn’t.”

Everette turns to the beautiful heiress, looking at her cautiously before slowly stating, “you can’t be naïve about this Marny; not with Sora and the others on the line. It’s been over a year since the first kidnapping. They need us!”

Staring up into his hazel eyes just as intently, Marnamei asks, “so you would’ve let it happen even if I was the one being attacked, fighting for my life, screaming for help?”

Everette automatically shakes his head, turning away and searching for words before he finally reasons, “that would never happen. You’re not the same-”

“As me?” Macyn interjected. “Is that just about how much stronger she is, or is it fine because it wasn’t someone you cared about?” His silence makes Macy want to hit, instead, he proclaims, “I get the trick, Everette. You’re not fooling anyone. Only now I don’t trust you.”

Responding thickly with sarcasm, Everette dryly jests, “whaaaa? A friend of Solo doesn’t trust me?” Returning to his normal voice, he dismisses Macyn, adding, “yeah, I don’t care. Don’t need your trust,” Everette easily answers.

“But how am I supposed to,” Marnamei genuinely asks Everette. “We gave him our word. We said we would be there...” However, before a stunned Masters can think of a response, the double doors of the infirmary open for Marshal Hew, flanked by Dean Von Brandt and Mrs. Makykli.

Marshal Hew takes the lead, surveying the student mages a moment before focusing on Macyn and commenting, “Mr. Blende you kick up more fuss than any one student should. Perhaps a loll from trouble would be cordial of you.”

Marnamei steps closer to her great grandfather and asks to know, “what’s happened, Grandsire?”

“I’ve left the sight of the search in order to begin ascertaining your involvement up to this point,” the marshal begins telling his students. “In the coming days, we will be speaking to you individually and possibly reprimanding you for not bringing this information to our attention sooner.”

Quirking his head back in surprise, Solo asks without fear, “for what? Our plan was wishful thinking at best. There’s no way we could’ve known this would happen.”

“And yet it did, injuring my student in the process,” marshal Hew retorts. “Regardless of the outcome, I’m quite disappointed in each and every one of your judgment.”

“Can you please tell us what they’ve learned, at least, marshal,” Everette respectfully asks. “I understand we’ve disappointed you but don’t we also deserve to know the results of our effort?”

Marshal Hew deflates a bit before nodding to Von Brandt, who then explains to the students, “it would appear Himura Taishi is the culprit abducting the children, or at the very least, the one who attack Mr. Blende. Not only does there appear to be sufficient evidence of his involvement, but, he also attempted to escape. The furies did not let him get far. Unfortunately, we have yet to find the missing children or even evidence of their presence on the Himura estate. He may have them hidden somewhere else on Menhir or heavens forbid, Gaiorem.”

“Luckily you can drug him for the truth,” Solo comments.

“Normally we would, Mr. Roth,” Von Brandt claims. “However, it appears he’s ingested a peculiar potion that has rendered him deeply comatose. As he is, we can’t even navigate the recesses of his mind for the truth.”

“What of Yasuo,” Marnamei asks.

Macyn snaps his head to her, repeating, “Yasuo? Wait, you don’t mean Yasuo from Ignus is related to the guy who tried to kidnap me?”

“Yasuo was the accomplice,” Marnamei sympathetically answers as Everette

sternly adds, “we saw him unmask before we followed him to his uncle.”

“What’s going to happen to Yasuo,” Marnamei asks her great grandfather. “He attacked Macyn.”

“Curious you should be so curious of things you ought not be curious of,” marshal Hew easily responds.

Tilting her head in disbelief, she asks, “really greatpap? If you don’t want to tell me just say so. I’ll learn of it later.”

“I’d be delighted with later,” he quickly responds before turning to Macyn. “Until the authorities uncover more please remain on the grounds, Mr. Blende. No more trips into the forest. And should I find that you have, I’ll hold Miss Hew personally responsible. Do you understand?”

Daring a slight glimpse toward Marnamei, Macyn quickly answers, “yes, marshal.”

“Very good,” he states. Turning to his great-granddaughter, he requests, “come along, Marny. Your parents are waiting in my office.”

As the marshal begins to leave with Marnamei beside him and Everette trailing, Mrs. Makynli walks up to Macyn’s bedside and asks, “will the following Sunday be acceptable to schedule your appointment with the marshal?”

“Uh,” Macyn voices, eyes growing with uncertainty as he slowly confirms, “yes?”

“Perfect,” Mrs. Makynli smiles before noting on parchment as she urges, “if you can please bring the transcript of your mother’s trial as well. That will aid us in exploring patronage for her appeal.”

“My- are you serious,” Macyn hollers, quickly sitting up and almost immediately regretting it. He grips his pain-riddled torso as he grunts, “the marshal’s going to help my mom?”

“The house of Hew is run by marshal Hew’s son, Absolon,” Mrs. Makynli informs him. “He’ll be the one to make the final decision,” she says, pausing a moment to smile as she adds, “however, marshal Hew’s recommendation carries a lot of weight.”

Macyn is stunned as Mrs. Makynli and Dean Von Brandt exit the infirmary, and he barely hears Sen tell him, “congratulations, Macyn.”

“Congrats, mate,” Solo says, giving Macyn a good smack on the shoulder, accidentally sending another tsunami of rippling pain through his body. Through the pain and Solo’s many apologies, Macyn simply smiles happily, for he can’t imagine a better opportunity to help his family. It almost scares him to vividly picture living in a home on Menhir with his mother annoying him about dinner and chores. It’s odd to want something so normal this much, but Macyn can’t think of a better improvement to his life than something so fundamental. Living with a caring parent is how it should be.

In the coming days, every mage in or out of Erudite knows that Marnamei Hew, Everette Masters, and Solomon Roth helped lead authorities in the capture of the kidnapper, Himura Taishi. Their popularity couldn’t reach a higher peak and even Solo’s indifference to it all was seen as endearing. Anywhere Solo, Marny, and Macyn went, the heirs would be thanked in some way, shape, or form for their brave actions. Macyn’s ‘*thank you*,’ comes only after the truth is revealed and they ask in surprise, ‘*Really? You helped?*’

Since Sunday, Marnamei has been chumming with Solo and Macyn regularly;

in class, during meal periods, and even after school, and at the heirs' insistence, only the few that follow them know that Macyn even helped at all. While they congratulate Macyn, they seem to only believe it to impress the heirs. It's the first time Macyn's been surrounded by so many mages, however, he doesn't talk to them as they have no interest in him or Sen. This greatly annoys Solo and he does a fantastic job dissuading most of Marny's fans from following them.

In the grand scheme of things, lifting his mother's banishment is a reward for helping to rescue kidnapped children as well as Dog Stolid. Unsurprisingly, Macyn was the only one who wondered if the sad adult was fine. He patiently waited for any word from Marny or Solo about the children or Dog, yet after a week, nothing new is reported. Still, his meeting with the marshal went by expectantly quickly. Marshal Hew simply asked for the transcript, a quick summary of its content, and if he's hired an advocate yet, before asking him to recount his version of the events that led to Taishi's capture.

Like many other mages talking around Macyn now, he had questions for the marshal. It's been several days since the news on the raid on Himura's home broke along with the connection to the taken children, yet nothing new has been discovered. Macyn asked about the children and Dog, but it became apparent the marshal wasn't going to answer any of his questions.

Later that afternoon, Marny shares her belief that the authorities have no ideas and the members of house Himura are not cooperating. Despite the IPW's best efforts for many days, they've yet to locate the missing children, and the public grows more and more frustrated with every unfavorable headline. Frustrated with the lack of news, Marnamei hands Macyn the paper as they finally released a photo of the alleged kidnapper, and Macyn was shocked to his core.

He recognized the face. He couldn't forget such a traumatic incident. On the final festival of the winter solstice, when Macyn was being chased by Coral the dragon, Himura Taishi looks exactly like the same man with professor Hawkins. The paper was asking anyone who might have information to come forward but Macyn wasn't sure if that tidbit of knowledge meant anything. The puzzlement mystified him all day, and it wasn't until the three were in the field behind Anthony, sparring that Macyn simply decided to ask. After being manapushed hard enough to land flat on his back, Solo calls it.

"Where the bloody hell's your head, mate," Solo yells as he walks up to the downed Macyn. Macyn is wincing as he stretches his aching back. Looking over at Marnamei, Solo admits, "you're really embarrassing me here."

Macyn didn't jump on the humor train as he slowly asks Solo, "did that article mention anyone coming forward?"

Tilting his head to the side, Solo simply shrugs and answers, "nothing credible. Why?"

As Marnamei walks over ready to enter the bout, Macyn asks her, "would you happen to know if professor Hawkins said anything to the IPW about Taishi?"

Quirking her lovely brow inquisitively, Marnamei asks, "why would Merula have anything to say to them?"

"I saw them together during the winter solstice," Macyn answers, and even Sen flies out of her wand to listen. "After I was hit by the scent bomb and you told me to run indoors. Professor Hawkins and Taishi were together on the second floor of the sophomore wing."

Solo and Marnamei share an introspective and mildly concerned look before Solo asks, “you sure it was him?”

“Most definitely,” Macyn tells his friend, prompting Marnamei to asks, “how close were you?”

“I got *real* close,” Macyn scoffs, irately recalling the nightmare of that night. “I was super pissed he just left when I was obviously in need of help. I could’ve been humped to death by that idiot lizard and this guy just leaves? Dick.”

Sighing impatiently, Marnamei states in disbelief, “I still can’t believe you can be so disrespectful to Menhir’s only dragon. Do you know how amazing it is that we even have one?”

“A fact I’ve shared with him repeatedly,” Sen tells the heiress.

Tapping his chest repeatedly, Macyn can’t help but kindly yell, “it still looks at me funny!”

Solo wants to laugh, but holds his mirth to a wide grin as Marnamei reminds Macyn, “it’s an ancient and divine symbol of power and reverence.”

“It’s a big green pervert with a taste for boys,” Macyn corrects her with grossed out eyes.

Before a frustrated Marnamei can say anything more, Solo interrupts, “Okay, okay. How about we just talk with Merula.”

Spinning toward Solo, Marnamei wryly inquires, “and ask her what? If she knows where the kidnapped children are?”

“I mean, we probably shouldn’t lead with that,” Solo suggests with a smirk. “If Mace is right, and I think he is, that means she knew the kidnapper, which, yes, I’ll admit isn’t damning by itself-”

“But she has or hasn’t spoken with the IPW,” Macyn finishes to which Solo nods in agreement. “Wouldn’t you or Everette have heard if one of the professors went in to speak about their connection to Taishi.”

“Especially a Hawkins,” Solo adds.

“This is crazy,” Marnamei mouths. “She’s likely just embarrassed she didn’t see Taishi for what he is. I’m sure she isn’t the only one he interacted with and she likely doesn’t want anyone to know.”

Solo maintains, “we should still talk to her. At least to ask her if she spoke with the IPW or the marshal.”

“Sen,” Marny calls before asking, “what do you think?”

Solo and Macyn turn to her as she easily answers, “it’s highly unlikely professor Hawkins would condone the kidnapping of her own kin, however, it’s possible she hasn’t come forward out of fear. I think encouraging her is a good idea, though I’d appreciate it if you didn’t involve Macyn.”

To which a slighted Macyn immediately interjects, “what?” as Marnamei confirms, “agreed.”

Macyn turns to her wounded, and Marnamei smirks as she expresses, “Macyn, you can’t expect to be the one to ask her something so personal. This may be a delicate and possibly humiliating conversation for her and she doesn’t know you like she knows me and my family.” She then turns to Solo before slowly telling him, “maybe we should ask Everette to come with us.”

Eying her with an amicably evil eye, Solo asks, “why? So he can sacrifice someone else for his greater good nonsense.”

“First, there’s not going to be any sacrificing of any kind,” she assures the coal-haired heir. “Second, it’s not nonsense. Whether it’s a great honor or a great burden, it matters, and I still take it seriously.”

Solo looks at her like seeing in the past and tells her, “Gods, Marny... it’s been years. Forget about that. All I needed was a friend, not a promise, and you gave me that.”

“I can’t,” she declares. “I won’t.”

By the way Solo and Marnamei were staring at each other, her bold sky-blue eyes peering into his aloof crystal blue eyes, Macyn felt as if he was intruding on something very personal. Hanging with the pair for a little over a week, Macyn learned right away that they have an easy rapport and a long history, and it’s always isolating when it comes up.

“I’m telling you for your own good, but if you want to be an idiot, fine,” Solo exhaustively mutters. “We’re still talking to Merula.”

“With Everette,” Marnamei adds.

“The same Everette Masters you haven’t been talking to lately,” Solo tries to point out.

Marnamei hot contests, “yes, yes, because I’m pissed at him! I get it, but, that doesn’t mean I don’t believe he won’t help those children,” Marnamei argues with Solo. “Look, he knows the Hawkins family better than I do. If he’s there, I think it’ll go better.” She maintains adorable eyes, slanting the gesture of her lovely frame pleadingly before delivering the killer blow. “For the kids...”

It didn’t take Solo more than ten seconds before he begrudgingly caves, citing, “fine, but if he even thinks of doing anything his way again-”

Lunging forward to give Solo a big hug, Marnamei assures him, “he won’t! He won’t!”

Though Macyn wishes he received a hug too, he quickly exhales his envy before asking Marnamei, “will Everette even believe me?”

“Of course,” Marny answers, picking up her blunted sword.

“He didn’t before,” Macyn counters, moving away from her.

The three mages step back before dropping into their stance. Ready to spar again, Marnamei confidently replies, “I believe you. That should be enough for him.”

“I don’t believe it,” Everette tells them.

It’s the following day and four students and one inhabitant are meeting in the Roth private room of the Coliseum. After explaining to Everette what Macyn saw the night he was attacked by Coral, the tall brown boy isn’t sure what to believe. Macyn is seated in a comfortable chair sipping his sweetened and creamed tea as he watches the heirs argue.

Everette continues asking Marnamei, “why would Merula know Taishi-”

Cutting him off, Solo argues, “the fact that you aren’t one hundred percent sure about her is enough of a reason to at least talk to her!” Macyn’s loud tea-sipping is grating on Everette’s patience, eating away a lot of Solo’s ire.

“Solo...” Marnamei reminds Solo of the agreement to play nice.

“No,” Solo adamantly tells her. “I said I wouldn’t duel him, but I’m still pissed!”

“Marny,” Everette calls, pausing only to turn to Macyn’s loud tea-sipping.

Macyn does nothing to ease Everette's annoyance, however, he begrudgingly continues asking Marny, "how could you possibly think a Hawkins would have anything to do with this? For Odin's sake, Sora's her own niece."

"Maybe she has bad taste in men," Marnamei weakly suggests. "Well, I mean... it's happened. It's not like I think she's involved but Macyn saw them together."

Looking at the coffee-haired Ignus sitting in his comfy chair sipping his tea, Everette challenges, "and you believe *him*?"

"Yes, I do," Marnamei immediately answers. "But more importantly, it's been well over a week and they still haven't found them. Like you said, it's her own niece and she still hasn't come forward. She might know something, if even just a little hint."

Turning to Macyn and Solo discussing how delicious the tea is and back to Marnamei, Everette slowly asserts, "I'll only agree... if you and I ask her alone."

"What," Solo yells, standing to face Everette. "How stupid could you be? She probably isn't involved but on the off chance she is-"

"She isn't," Everette yells.

"But if she is," Solo yells back. "It'd obviously make sense to have backup!"

"On the off chance she is, it would be better to tell the authorities," Sen says. "And let them handle it... for once."

Turning to Sen, Everette irately retorts, "and have her reputation tarnished by treating her like a suspect when she isn't?" Turning to Marnamei, he maintains, "no, it's me and Marny or it's nothing."

"Everette," Marny pleads. "It wouldn't hurt to have numbers on our side."

"You and me," Everette reaffirms. "You and me are more than enough... or I don't go at all."

"Fine," Marnamei answers him. "We'll go on our own."

Surprised, Everette immediately reacts with a question. "What? Come on- Marny, I know you're still pissed at me but be serious. It's not like I don't think we should help her see reason, but we certainly don't need them."

Before Macyn and Solo can say anything, Marnamei angrily retorts, "you can't even be sure of what we need! But instead of planning for the worst, you're thinking with your macho agenda and planning with your pride." Looking at him pleadingly, she admits with finality, "if you won't start making sense, then I can't rely on you."

With a slight jaw-drop, Solo sweetly expresses with raised eyebrows, "Gods, I hope that stung."

"Shut it," she warns Solo with a stern finger.

Flickering a judgmental eye at Solomon, Everette sorely asks, "so you want to be with him now? Him? Instead of embracing his fate, he mocks, cowers, and runs from it." Immediately, the temperature in the room heats up and Marnamei had to get between Everette and Solo before Macyn drags his coal-haired friend away.

Marnamei confesses to Everette, "I think it's incredibly brave how you've embraced your destiny, but I wholeheartedly believe you are the only person who knows exactly what he's going through, but instead of helping him, you insult and deny him. If I mean anything to you, this isn't the way."

Marnamei walks to the door, Solo, Sen, and Macyn exiting at her gesture when Everette alleges, "you don't understand... I can't hold his hand through it."

Before she closes the door behind her, Marnamei asks, “is it so hard to be a little understanding?”



## The One Thing

Though they should be studying for the final exams taking place in a matter of weeks, after classes let out, Marnamei and a contentious Everette lead Solo and Macyn to the Sanctuary. In the enclosure that's home to many of the animals studied, they spot professor Hawkins feeding the tall and hefty aurochs in the field behind the schoolroom. Macyn wonders why they're called aurochs when it's obvious they're just feral, more agile cows with longer legs, longer horns, and a mane like a lion.

As Marnamei and Everette already explained, Merula Hawkins is not a very social mage and prefers the company of animals than people. Upon reaching her, Macyn initially felt sympathy at the sight of her. With dark droopy eyes, oily shoulder-length black hair, pale skin, a strong aroma of cattle about her, and a bulky physique, she looked like she could use a friend. Still, Everette and Marnamei greet her amicably while she's feeding the oblong cows, to which she frigidly responds over her shoulder, "grab a pale if you're considering Animalia next term."

"Actually," Everette starts, drawing her attention. "We wanted to talk to you about something else."

"Spit it out—" Merula begins to retort and upon turning, notices Macyn behind Marnamei and Everette. "You're that stolid boy Coral's hungry for." Shocked to hear a dragon is hungry for him like a menu item on a drive-through, Macyn barely hears Merula ask, "what's the matter? Is Sun's masking potion not working anymore?"

"We wanted to talk about Himura Taishi," Marnamei clearly states and Merula ignores Macyn to stare at Marnamei.

The muscular professor analyzes each of the four student mages in silence. Macyn can't see past her resting sad face to wonder what she's thinking before she flings the rest of the dark pellets on the ground for the agile brown cows and walks toward the schoolroom. She asks them to follow her and soon the four end up in her messy office. There's all manner of animal feed around the furnished room, adding to the strong animal aroma, and different thicknesses of rope in the corner. With vials of colorful liquids, books, and parchment on all her desks, it's evident the brownies don't touch her office. Portraits of her with her favorite creatures line the wall, and with only one window, the muggy room is not well lit.

Merula walks to the corner and prepares herself a cup of tea, and at the sight of them, as if recalling her manners, she prepares four more cups for each of them. Once they're all seated, she bluntly asks, "what do you know?"

"Macyn saw you with Taishi during the Winter Solstice," Solo starts to which Everette adds, "not that we're accusing you of anything," glaring at Solo. Everette returns his attention to Merula and says, "we were just curious to know if you've spoken to the IPW, or marshal Hew."

"As you know, the IPW haven't located the children," Marnamei adds. "And we felt, even if it led nowhere, every perspective might help narrow down the location of those kids as well as your nephew."

Growing pensive for several moments, as if considering her words, the blunt Merula grunts for them to, "drink," as she swallows a mouth full of her tea. As they take a polite

sip, Merula roughly asserts, “nature is meant to be understood, not feared, and yet we seek to dominate it. Now isn’t the time to fear for the great spirit of this world only seeks to fill the void we know not how easily we create.”

“...uh, Professor,” Everette curiously calls.

“We’re all just animals,” Merula tells Everette, adding, “some are simple and beautiful, others are chaotic and destructive, but animals nevertheless. Taishi understood that,” Merula adds and the four mages instantly sit up at the admission.

“So you *do* know Taishi,” Solo accuses.

“Have you spoken...” Marnamei allows a yawn despite the urgency of the conversation to pause her question before finishing, “excuse me. Have you spoken with the marshal? They may be able... might be able-”

“Have you all had your tea,” Merula asks, examining the four student mages slowly succumbing to slumber. “No matter, the air is laced with a sleeping agent only my tea has the antidote for.”

Kicking the chair back as she hops to her large feet, Marnamei immediately tries to fight the sleeping agent in the air with mana shrouding her entire body, however, the gas has long since invaded her lungs and she stumbles to the ground. Everette and Solo couldn’t kick off from their seats and slowly slide down to unconsciousness. With the last few seconds of cognitive function, Macyn unhooks his clay wand and leaves it in the crevice of the chair while whispering to Sen, “don’t... come out...”

“Misters Roth, Masters,” Merula starts walking around the mages to the corner. “It’s fortunate you both are chosen by the mother spirit herself. I will not obstruct her order. Grabbing the rope she surmises, “however, try to remember that by the time you regain consciousness and alert the authorities, I will have already slipped away to the grand maze that is Gaiorem. You will never find me, you will never find those children, and you will never find your classmates.”

The four mages succumb to the dark subjugation of forced unconsciousness for an untold amount of time. At some point, Macyn feels a tremendous pressure prodding his lazy senses, but it isn’t until he hears muffled voices that he begins thinking again. His mind is slow and it’s hard to remember, much less make out what is being said, but he’s cold, and it feels like he’s on the floor.

“...periment was a success. We needed more subjects anyway.”

Gradually, the pitch darkness of Macyn’s vision gives way to a sliver of muted firelight. His hazy vision can see he’s on the floor, however, he can’t feel his body. He’s in a small hall made of dark and shiny stone the firelight highlight and shade repeatedly. Though very groggy and the voices sound far away, Macyn can hear a response say, “if you felt you needed to abort your cover, I won’t disagree, however, you should have brought Roth as well.”

“But he’s prophesied,” the voice returns, giving Macyn’s fuzzy mind something more to focus on.

Macyn faintly hears scoffing before the flat ringing voice rises to declare, “allow me to educate you on why silly superstitions are shackles. When a hen laid eggs with messages written on the shell, a whole town believed the end of days was nigh. Murder, rape, pillaging, plundering quickly ensued and many died. Of course, it was nothing more than a hoax. Planetary alignment, shooting stars, red moons, odd births, drunk taradiddles of the town buffoon. People see the worst in anything and everything that justifies the thing they crave the

most; attention.”

“But the Monk of Sinai isn’t some random con spouting conditional nonsense,” Merula argues. “Their prophecies come true, and the great evil is coming... I couldn’t impede nature’s will.”

“No,” the voice Macyn wonders is female slowly says. “Prophecy is a promise that life won’t be without misfortune. Society seems content to forget that from the moment you suck your first breath, life is a never-ending series of obstacles. These herds of cowards are all too happy to allow boys to solve a problem of their own making. It’s so sickening I’d kill Roth or Masters simply to witness society’s fragile mind shatter.”

“Then you would doom yourself, Medusa,” Merula claims. “Everyone knows you should not meddle with destiny lest your own be forfeit along with it.”

“How can you not see, Merula? Nothing and no one can save any of them from the reckoning of their own making.”

“Nothing... will save you from yours,” Marnamei slowly ordains. Macyn tries to push through the fog and focus on her nearby, yet, weak voice. Macyn’s muscles don’t respond to his will, however, along with the cold temperature of the cold stone floor, he slowly senses his hands and feet are tied.

“My dearest lady Hew,” Medusa states. Through the rustling of clothing and crisp heel steps, Macyn can tell the mystery voice is moving toward Marnamei. With his hand-tied in front of him, his heart begins to race when it’s impossible to deny that he and Marnamei loose ends that can be killed at any moment.

Medusa continues. “Such noble and brave words. If only you weren’t entirely too immature to fully fathom how little they matter.” Macyn can hear Medusa turn to Merula and ask, “do you know why she’s awake?”

“I...” Merula starts pausing a moment to think before responding, “I... can’t say. I mean, I dosed all four at the same time. Maybe-”

With a sigh, Medusa chides with an odd mix of concern and frustration, “Merula, you have to be more careful. Do you not know who her great grandmother is?”

“I...”

“She was a nymph,” Medusa quickly answers for her. “It’s extremely rare a human-nymph union produce a child but as we all know, Theophilus is no ordinary man, thus her grandfather Absolon was born. Making him and all subsequent children hybrids who are highly resistant to invasive potions.”

“It wore off-”

“It wore off,” Medusa frustratingly repeats. “Think Merula.” There’s a long pause between them before Medusa continues, “they’re secure for the moment. Take them to the lab and lock them in the last cage. I’ll meet you there after I lock the entrance and report this unexpected development.”

Despite his weak attempts to escape his bonds, Macyn feels Merula lift them with her mana and leads them through a series of dark avenues for several minutes until they end up in a large room. Macyn still can’t see Marnamei when Merula sets them down for a few moments to catch her breath. She may be a professor, but apparently, her endurance isn’t strong. Subtly observing the large room, Macyn ponders the wicked purpose of this ritual room. There are nine, empty water tanks large enough to fit several adults. The low lit room also has many geometric shapes and runic characters arranged on the stone floor and walls of the entire room.

And worse yet, is the cages at the far end of the large room with children inside.

Some of the children are awake and gripping the metal bars but none call for help. From the floor, Macyn can't see them clearly on the other side of the room, but they seem so still, so accustomed to their predicament, he can barely see them as children. They remind him of ghosts, all glazed over silence. Weak and frail, Macyn's sees no way of avoiding the same fate and his heart pumps faster in his ears. He was so close to reversing his mother's exile, to living on Menhir with his best friend, to getting to know more about Marnamei in hopes of eventually asking her out on a date... to a life he could be happy with. Instead, he's going to be locked in a cell and the unattainable girl he likes is to be locked in the cage next to him.

If Solo had been taken, Macyn knows he wouldn't allow Marny to be enslaved and experimented on. Solomon Roth wouldn't let her down like that, frustrating Macyn, because even if he wanted to fight, his mana feels sickly and unresponsive. He imagines it's the same for Marnamei or she would do something; having sparred with her and seen her spar with Solo, he knows her mind is geared for combat. This is her time, but with dark, cold cages, what can they do tied at the wrist, ankles, and without mana?

His heart is beating so hard it hurts and his eyes sparkle with color as Marnamei asks a resting Merula, "what is this place? It feels like Menhir but I'm sure you said we were going to Gaiorem. I even felt it."

"We did," Merula huffs. "Momentarily. It's just to throw them, of course."

"You know my family will look for me, even in Gaiorem," Marnamei evenly states. Macyn realizes the same train of thought when Marnamei finishes, "but in actuality, we'll still be on Menhir."

Smiling, Merula adds, "at the bottom of the Kuolema lake, right under Kane Haven's floating market." Merula picks them up again and they traverse the remainder of the large rune-etched laboratory to the small cages. Macyn has a clear view of the hollow-eyed children now and he couldn't imagine the horrors they've must've lived through.

As Merula sets them down, Marnamei tries to reason, "if you let me go and help us-"

However, Merula cuts her off, interjecting, "all will be forgiven?" Snorting, she adds, "so stupid. Such a stupid stupid girl." As Merula uses her mana to lift Marnamei and walk to Marnamei's confining pen, she viciously communicates, "do you truly believe I care about the empty promises of society's game? Look at all these children, lady Hew. Will you be appealing to my humanity when I can see my niece in her cage?"

Marnamei extends her hand to reach to one of the cage doors with her mana, however, a white gas that moves like flame-flicker sputters until nothing more extends from her hand. As Macyn tries to get his feet under him, Merula explains, "don't bother. Medusa is a warlock and a world-class runemaster."

The bulky Hawkins opens the door of the cage when Marnamei fights against the restrictive mana holding her. On his weak feet, Macyn can't feel his mana, but he can feel the needle-tingling numbness of his leg muscles, and witnessing Marnamei struggle against her captor, Macyn takes a weak hop forward. His equilibrium is off and his muscle twitch oddly, however, with his forward momentum, he takes another hop. Macyn manages another hop and he would've been close enough to help, but trips.

Merula watches him the entire time, unalarmed by a weakened, tied up mage who just hit the floor in front of her. Shaking her head, Merula quickly shoves Marnamei into

the steel pen, however, before she can close the cage door, Macyn kicks out her left knee and she falls back as if the floor was snatched from under her, yelping in surprise. Macyn shuffles forward in time to catch her upper frame and wrap his wrist-tied arms around her neck in a chokehold.

Immediately, he feels an insufficient amount of leverage nor the arm strength to hold her long enough for her to pass out and Merula quickly shuffles to free herself. She uses her mana to try and push Macyn away when Marnamei hops on top of them. The heiress manages a single punch to Merula's face before the professor's mana roughly hurls her off, however, Macyn gains more leverage and he pulls back as hard as his feeble arms can.

Merula thrashes, attempting with arms and mana to extricate herself from him. Macyn struggles desperately to hold on but he can sense it isn't enough, until, yet again, Marnamei strikes at Merula's mana covered body with a steel pipe. It's not enough but Marnamei doesn't stop striking their abductor and Macyn engages more effort than he feels he has in his screaming arms. When Merula allows her mana a respite, Macyn relies on the technique his step-sister taught him to finally force their abductor to pass out.

Rolling away from the unconscious woman, Macyn gasps for much-needed air, finally relaxing his strained muscles. Though her hands and legs are still bound, Marnamei hops over and begins undoing the knot of his ropes speaking in the process.

"We don't have much time," Marnamei huffs, beginning to unbind his feet. "Medusa won't be long."

With a little more energy in his voice, Macyn asks, "what do you want to do?"

"Lock Merula in the cage," Marnamei starts. "Release the kids and get out of here," she finishes as she just manages to untie his feet.

As she moves to his hands, Macyn surveys the room and the kids before telling her, "I don't see any locks on those cages. Chances are Merula can unlock them from the inside... and Marny, those kids are looking at us weird."

Once Marnamei unties his hands, Macyn returns the favor starting with her feet as she closely examines not only the young mages in their cages but the laboratory as well. The children are pale, their hair is shiny and clumped together, and their eyes are unfocused, wide, and sunken, as if aged and lifeless. The nine children are all like statues without reaction and Marnamei wonders aloud, "maybe they're drugged," when Macyn unties her hands. She tells him to look around for anything that can help them as she works on the rope at her feet.

Leaning forward as she is, Macyn notices the strip of white paper taped to her back. The moment he reads the complex runes, he feels the strip of white tape on his neck, and straightaway, reasons why they can't use their mana. Merula said as much and reaching behind his neck, he digs his skin for a corner before yanking the tape off in one go, shocking Marnamei after the fact. He moans happily as he feels the toxic fumes exit his body like the cold leaving a warm house.

"Are you fekking crazy?" Marnamei calls with wide eyes drawn on the rune scribed paper. "How could you just take something you don't understand off your body? It could've killed you or knocked you out."

Macyn's mind suddenly catches up to his near mistake, recalling all the runes he's copied over the year for Root and Ryce and the imprinted knowledge of how dangerous it is to tamper with rune arrays one has no comprehension of.

"...Yeah," Macyn tells her, slowly inspecting the strip when the runes begin to

disappear. “That was dumb... but, now that I’m thinking about it, I imagine they weren’t expecting us. Here, let me look at yours.” Marnamei turns around and pulls her elegant blond hair to the side. Aside from wondering about his fascination with her neck, Macyn notes they’re the same hand-written, torn strips of white parchment. Without her endorsement, he yanks her strip off as well, drawing out a deep guttural groan of pain from her.

“Didn’t you just hear what I said-”

“They’re exactly the same configuration,” Macyn tells her, tossing her strip to the floor as it disintegrates. “If my mana is back, so is yours.” She takes a moment to herself, reverberating her mana before absentmindedly nodding to him.

They take a closer stock of the room’s exits and wears for anything that can help them. The laboratory is certainly large with a rune configuration etched in the middle of the lab so complicated, Macyn can only be sure it’s organic-related. Ten large tubes tall enough to hold an adult man are aligned comfortably with relation to the large runic scheme. The ceiling had a wide opening, seemingly to fill the tanks with water from the lake above. Outside the rune design, there are large chalkboards, tables with books, parchments, empty vials, dozens of jars with animal parts in them, and beakers rotating on their own.

The cages were against the wall and seemed to open with mana rather than a key. Upon closer inspection of the children, they are all wrapped with rune-covered bindings more intricate than the ones Marny and Macyn ripped off themselves. Of the three doors attached to the room, two doors led into hot and cold storerooms and the third was the entrance they came through.

There were no other exits and with no observable way of opening the cage doors, Macyn hesitates to voice the painfully obvious. “I don’t think we can get them out of here.”

“You don’t know that,” Marnamei heatedly argues.

“We checked the room,” Macyn reminds her. “There’s nothing we even know how to use that can help. We can’t open the cage doors and that Medusa chick is going to be back any minute.” Marnamei has no words and Macyn can tell she’s trying desperately to think of some solution. “Marny...”

“My great grandfather wouldn’t leave them!” She yells at him, looking every bit as ashamed as he feels. They’re effectively talking about leaving abducted children to save their own lives. “If we leave them now, Medusa will take those kids to Gaiorem and we’ll never see them again. How am I suppose to save Solo if I can’t even save children right in front of me?”

“I don’t know,” Macyn easily tells her, worried that any second, Medusa is going to walk through the door and they may not have a chance against her. “This sucks, I know. I wish we could do something-”

“Then think!” she yells, slamming the butt of the metal pole against the stone floor, and echoing the sound around the room. “Because I’m not going anywhere! I’ll fight her if I have to!”

Exasperated, Macyn roughly rubs his face because he automatically knows he’s not leaving without her either. Looking up at the dark water through the glass panels of the ceiling, Macyn wonders how they might surprise Medusa, however, despite Marnamei’s impressive combat skill she’s still a freshman, and Medusa is likely far more trained than Merula. It’s the enemy’s territory after all, and the runes outlining most of the room are as

dangerous as the warlock likely on her way.

“Look at this place,” Macyn returns, extending his hand around the very large and intricately design rune scheme etched into the room. “Does this look like an amateur? If she’s a warlock, she can kill us both!”

“I never expected Solo to make friends with a coward,” Marnamei retorts.

“And I always thought Everette was the suicidal glory hound!” Macyn heatedly counters. “You think I *want* to leave them! Or disappoint you, or Solo, or my mom! But look around you! There’s nowhere to go but-” a queasy Macyn pauses for several moments as his brain offers a radical solution in a desperate effort to keep the peace. “Oh, balls, I think I know where to go.” When Marnamei asks him where, he simply looks up at the circular opening accessing the lake.

Following his eye-line, Marnamei comments, “no, we can’t. Kuolema is too deep. We’ll drown before we reach the top and their cages won’t fit-”

“One of us goes, the other stays behind and guards the kids,” Macyn tells her as he takes the pole from her hand. “And I won’t have to swim,” he adds as he moves to the desk with the metal staff. Macyn flips through books and papers in search of tools.

Wondering what he’s looking for, Marnamei asks in disbelief, “you?”

“Don’t give me that look,” he tells her as he’s tossing items off the table. “I’m not trying to save myself here. Of the two of us, you have a better chance of keeping them safe. And it’s literally the only thing I can think of to deal with your stubbornness- Yes!” Macyn lays out a chisel set and begins marking the end of the metal pole.

“What are you doing,” Marnamei asks as he begins carving into the metal with the chisel and little hammer.

“Making a propeller,” he answers. “Start barricading the door with everything you can to buy me as much time as possible. It probably won’t stop her but if I can get help in time, it won’t matter. When Medusa starts breaking through, hide. If we’re lucky, she’ll think we both went through the lake.”

“I don’t like this plan,” Marnamei hesitates to share. “You know there are creatures that can swallow you whole in the lake, never mind the insane amount of water pressure that’s going to push you down.”

“Fill the tank,” Macyn tells her, nodding to the tall glass water tanks. “I’ll push myself through the water by extending the pole up to the surface.” Marnamei pauses to consider other alternatives, however, Macyn affirms, “Marny, you’re not leaving them and we need help... what other choices are there?”

Conceding with a nod, Marnamei moves a tall tank underneath the wide valve on the ceiling. With her resolve and mana, she then props any and every heavy object against the only entrance of the room while Macyn finishes the rune array on the metal. Marnamei just manages to manaform the door’s frame to warp in such a way to make it exceedingly difficult to open when a bang against the door alerts both students.

“Merula,” Medusa calls through the hefty barrier. After a fast glance at one another, Macyn and Marnamei rush to the glass tank underneath the water valve. Macyn presses his mana-covered palm against the glass to raise the height while Marnamei grabs the ladder against the wall and sets it up as Medusa yells, “Merula!”

Marnamei speeds up the rungs to the top and presses her mana-coated palm against the rune scribed tube. It does nothing and the pair try to locate the access port for the

array. With a loud bang against the door, the pressure mounts as Macyn rushes up on the opposite rungs and asserts, "here, try here! Between the Ha characters."

Pressing her mana covered palm against the tube, the water immediately rushes into the tank underneath it, filling it quite fast. As the banging gets louder, Marnamei hastens to remove the necklace around her neck, before presenting it to Macyn.

With force neither of them were expecting, Medusa slams her powerful mana against the barricaded door, jostling all the restrictions against it, vibrating the wall, and even releasing bits of dirt streaming from the stone ceiling. Both mages now acutely realize Medusa was much more powerful than either of them.

"Take this," Marnamei tells him at the same time Macyn tells her, "you need to hide!"

"Macyn, take it," Marnamei repeats over the loud rushing of water beside them. With the tank nearly filled and another powerful impact shoves back several of the heavy objects, Marnamei ties the necklace on herself, shouting, "it's so they can find you quicker! It's probably being blocked down her but up there-"

Another stone vibrating bang hastens Macyn's resolve and he shortens the length of the mental pole before extending the bottom into the tank as he yells, "fine, I get it! Now, will you please go and hide!"

"Merula!"

"Good luck," Marnamei tells him before she slides down the ladder as the tank begins to overflow. Macyn couldn't even respond before he holds tight and jumps into the space between the valve and overflowing tank instantly submerging in forceful water. With a deep breath, Macyn adds his mana to the rune etched on the metal pole and with the butt of the pole pressed against the bottom of the container, the force propels Macyn up as fast as he continues to extend it.

With the edge of the overflowing water tank so close to the large valve, the water pressure eases enough for Macyn to escape the tubing into the oddly dark blue bottom of the lake. Macyn had a hard time seeing the waterfleas, copepods, mayfly nymphs, the acidic fens, shrub-like plants, or carnivorous bell-flowers, all around him. The depth was too dark and the murky pressure pushed on his eyes but he kept adding mana to the rune on the metal pole. Fortunately, Macyn only felt the heavy wetness of the deep lake and not bitter cold.

Propelling himself up under such weight, Macyn's chief concern was whether he could hold his breath long enough to reach the surface, however, he began feeling his wet dragging body strain the muscle arms and that made him wonder if he should slow down so he doesn't slide. Suddenly, Macyn hits a solid object and panics. Looking up in the murky and hazy blue, the rocky black seems to have caught the top of the pole. Macyn is still too far down and his lungs are starting to burn, urging his legs to kick off the rock-like wall as hard as he can. He kicks at the hard sediment and pushes with his mana when the rock wall finally shifts away, rising and confusing Macyn until the dark scaly rock opens up to an immense bio-luminescent pupil, slitted like a snake and larger than his entire body.

Macyn's mind flat-lined when he slowly realized he was staring at a large yellow eye that just focused on him. Though he felt like urinating, his body became so rigid and his mana so manic, he rocketed up twice as fast as before. Panic forced him to look down and as more light shone through the lake water, Macyn wanted to scream at the sheer size of the monstrous snake uncoiling its grand body as it raises his head effortlessly through the water's



heavy pressure.

His lungs burn and scream for air when the pole is shoved and angled away from the straight shot to the surface, but his desperate hands and mana wouldn't let go. Despite the stars beginning to form in his vision in his sideways velocity, Macyn finally breaks through the surface of the riveting lake. He takes a deep, life-sustaining breath as his body continues to rise into the air with the extending pole.

However, bursting through the surface did not escape the monster on his heel. The sizable snake monster chasing him explodes out of the water to swallow him whole. Macyn only pushes his mana-powered pole to go higher as the large, terrifying, white and lake-weed covered head moves close enough to rear its head back, coiling its body before the strike, however, the creatures scaly frame pushes the pole and Macyn is launched to the side, flinging his body like a small flag on a long pole.

The metal pole easily bent and snapped under the slithering weight of the enormous snake. From the height he was falling, Macyn was certain he'd hit the beach and if he didn't outright die, then most of the bones in his body would surely shatter. In spite of the physics of his death, this is exactly what Malenkomas prepared his mages for; the common sort of fatal impacts a human body wasn't made to withstand. Focused on avoiding death, Macyn's mana expands around his body, concentrating on the cushion Malenkomas repeatedly beat into their brains. The rocky lake-shore rushes toward him and his mana-covered body hits the ground hard enough to break stone and knock the wind out of him as he bounces and rolls to a stop.

Macyn is surprised he's still conscious and breathing. Rolling over to his knees, he'd laugh in astonishment for surviving if not for the very large snake eyeing him with its fierce eyes. The impossibly large snake causes large waves as its long body under the water coils and moves. Its gigantic head raises high and Macyn knows well enough that he can't outrun it even with the forest behind him.

Quickly, Macyn wonders how long the necklace needs to call for help prays someone can reach him in time to save him. It almost makes him laugh as he knows that's not his mother or Solo's way. Facing this giant serpent in a frozen bubble of time, Macyn finally realizes how they live and how they want him to live; they want him to rely on himself. Somehow, he knows they would do all they could to survive and he can't do any less. Macyn grips over his thigh where his wand usually is wondering if Sen can sense him when he instead feels his shirane coin in his pocket.

Digging it out, Macyn runs toward the snake, and more specifically, toward the metal pole still immersed in the water so near the snake. The monstrous creature rears its head back before springing forward to attack with extended fangs. It moved far faster than Macyn was expecting and he only just managed to raise his managuard around his entire body, pushing himself to the side as its head strikes the stone shore. The loudness of the impact rattled his bones and exacerbated his headache, yet Macyn stands.

Ignoring the pain in his head and lungs, Macyn sprints for the metal pole. The giant serpent reared back insanely fast and strikes even faster when Macyn just reaches the pole. Fangs as long as he is tall sink into the sand on either side of his mana-covered form, giving him a personal view of the inside of its maw. Its breath was noxious before it pulls away violently, seizing uncontrollably as it shrieks in terrible sizzling pain. Confused, Macyn suddenly feels dangerously rising heat and only then understands the full strength of the Shirane coin was activated on the inanimate metal in his hands, sending millions of volts of electricity into the

metal pole, water, and snake.

The metal was quickly heating to its melting point and Macyn lets go as the lakes surface sizzles and steams. The giant snake is rattled and stunned, but not fleeing, however, Macyn doesn't stay to let it recover and runs from the shorefront. Sprinting with water-logged clothes, Macyn makes it to the tree-line and it's then he remembers Medusa when she teleports directly in front of him. His mind quickly wonders and worries for Marnamei and the children but realizing he needs to reach help, he attempts to manashove her,

She effortlessly swats away his attempt before shoving him nearly as hard as Malenkomas does. Grunting in pain, Macyn flies back before hitting the floor and instinctively sliding into a roll. He attempts running in another direction when she appears in front of him yet again, only this time Macyn throws rocks to distract her as he runs around her toward the forest. Her obvious strength doesn't let him make it past the first tree. She grabs him with her mana and shoves him against the rough bark of the tall tree.

Walking toward him, Medusa sighs before asking, "where is she?" Macyn cares only about the massive amount of pressure he can hardly prevent from crushing him, and she asks again, "where is Marnamei Hew?"

His head is pounding, he can't breathe, his shirane coin is useless against living beings, and his mana is nothing compared to hers, but looking up, the tree he's being crushed against is very familiar. In the most immediate effort to preserve his life, Macyn mumbles desperately despite her mana doing nothing to inhibit his speech, however, he knows she wants answers.

Fortunately, he feels her ease her grip on him as she asks, "where did she go?"

Macyn laughs at her, happy to confuse her with his amusement as he scratches the Anchineel tree he's pressed against, and a second later, the oil-like mist of the poisonous tree's defense mechanism sprays them both. Macyn and Medusa guard themselves with their full-body mana, however, the poison eats away at the hardened spirit energy. Macyn takes the precious opportunity to run.

With his mana losing its substance as he runs, Macyn tries to get a good distance away from his most lethal threat. Though the poison seeping closer and closer to his skin acts within seconds to paralyze him, all he needs is to roll himself in the hard dirt to remove the worst of it. If Medusa catches him, it'll be far worse than the paralysis.

"Macyn!" he suddenly hears, stopping to quickly scan the area. He swears it sounded like Sen when his left arm suddenly blooms in agony and flops to his side. He glimpses the dot of poison touching the skin of his hand when he immediately throws himself to the floor, dragging and rolling so the dirt clots the poison and comes off. However, his left arm begins to deaden as the melting hot agony shreds his arm and seconds late, it's nothing more than a painfully tumorous sack of meat hanging off him.

His heart pumps madly in his ears, hurting his already throbbing head and his mana fluctuates as he loses focus when unexpectedly, waves of dirt swash all over him before forcibly streaming off. He can feel mana manipulating the dirt but he can't be sure how, though expecting Medusa, he tries to get up and run.

He's pushed down as Root shouts, "stay down! I'm almost done."

"Root..." he weakly mumbles, holding in the ever-growing cries of pain.

Concentrating on removing all the oily poison, Root asks, "was that you waking the infant Jormungandr?"

Shocked in wide-eyed surprise, his raised voice asks in disbelief, “that was an infant?!”

With the snapping of a twig, Root looks around the forest and tells him, “someone’s coming.”

“Root, you need to get out of here,” he quickly relays. “Go to the Haven. Tell ‘em we found the missing children at the bottom of the lake. Quick-”

“I’m not leaving you again,” Root cuts in, finally removing the poison from his dirty and sweaty body.

She grabs his arm and forces him up to his weak legs as he argues, “there isn’t time.” Ignoring the burning agony as best he can, he hops along with her support as he commands, “just get out of here, please! She won’t hesitate to kill us.”

“How right you are,” Medusa coldly spits. Though not as dirt-covered or hopping on one leg like Macyn is, she looks less put together and quite angry. Despite the distance between them, she fiercely shoves them both painfully hard with her strong mana. They hit the ground, hurting more from the brick wall of mana hitting them than the soft grass as she closes in on them.

Medusa vocalizes with utter disdain, “you’re worst than a pest.”

No doubt within range of the strong warlock’s attack, Macyn expected the killing blow or Root to exercise some awesome nature-styled mana attack he’d never seen before, however, neither happen, as none of them expected marshal Theophilus Osgar Hew to suddenly appear in front of them and voice, “and yet you have to admire their perseverance.”

## A Duty

One of the strongest living men in history simply appears in front of them, and Medusa glares cautiously at him. In addition to the throbbing tsunami of radiating pain, Macyn feels relief enough to smile weakly at the sight of the dapper marshal. Macyn can feel taught tension keeping his body primed dissipate in the safe presence of Theophilus when Medusa's mana morphs into a scythe and drops low and strikes Macyn from the side. He grunts when he tracks the point of the mana weapon about to pierce his chest when the marshal's mana formed an impenetrable barrier around him and Root.

With his hands clasped behind his back, the marshal walks toward the downed teens as he calmly notes, "Orsula-"

"It's Medusa now," she corrects as she slowly moves to the side, keeping the teens in her view.

"Fitting," is all he says, watching her cautiously move. "I've never known you to be so ill-prepared... and to return to Menhir when you were so well hidden... What could be worth it, I wonder."

"Why nothing at all, Theo," Medusa affirms unconvincingly. "Why I would ever think to correct the wrongs done against me. It's in the past."

"You live in the past," the marshal notes with the fatigue of repetition.

"Only because I won't accept the future your justice so callously imposed upon me," she throws back.

"Accept what you cannot change, Orsula, or your mortal ethos will wither and waste to nothingness," Theophilus counsels, though Macyn can't detect a hint of sensitivity in his deep tone.

"The sun of your fates has long since set and the most eternal darkness will consume this asinine world until you all consume yourselves like the monsters you are," Medusa viciously promises, immediately followed by an attack so fast, Macyn's blurry and spotted vision couldn't see it. The marshal blocked it with his mana as he erects a multitude of spike out of the dirt and Medusa ignites the air with an explosion of fire. Under the marshal's protective guard, Macyn and Root only faintly feel a small rumble, and when the smoke dissipates, they see the last stage of the air around Medusa warp before she teleports to parts unknown.

The marshal turns to Macyn and quickly asserts, "I'm going to bring you both to the infirmary, however, I need to know where my great-granddaughter is."

"She's..." Macyn starts, pausing to allow a pang of pain flaring in his body to subside. "She's in a room—a lab—at the very bottom of the lake. The missing kids are with her."

The marshal takes out a wood square with runes on it and Root immediately notes, "that's a mana tower, so you can teleport right back!"

Nothing more is said as everyone within the marshal's mana is teleported directly into the infirmary. M'Curre rushes from her office to take custody of the injured patients, and after the marshal quickly relays everything he knows of Macyn's injury, he teleports away; not that Macyn is aware of much more than the tremendous pain coursing through his body. To his grand relief, M'Curre takes his pain away by medically disposing of his

consciousness.

The following day, Macyn wakes up in the infirmary, and despite recalling Root being there before he passed out, Sen is the only one with him when he regains consciousness. Happy to note his headache is gone, his body still feels feverish and heavy, as if waterlogged. Still, he slowly sits up as Sen hovers lower to his eye level. Though Sen asks how he's feeling, Macyn shrugs lethargically and only cares to know, "what happened?"

With a bit of a huff, Sen starts, "the children were rescued by the marshal. They've been taken to the Hippo... that's the Hippokratius Center of Medicine and Education."

"Are they going to be okay," Macyn asks. "They looked pretty out of it."

"Unfortunately, that remains to be seen," Sen sympathetically explains. "From what I've gathered, the children were used in a black ritual, however, the healers and authorities are unaware of the particular type. The fear is it is unprecedented work, which means they have very little reference by which to help the victims."

"What about all the runes in the room," Macyn asks. "Can't they figure it out that way?"

Shaking her head, Sen replies, "this Medusa covered her escape fairly well. The marshal was barely able to save everyone before the room was destroyed. They'll need your memory in order to see the runes."

Tilting his head curiously, Macyn asks, "didn't they ask Marny? We both looked over that entire room." Sen remains silent for longer than Macyn is comfortable with. The mournful expression on her face forces panic to grip Macyn's weakened frame. He sits up to face her as he asks, "Sen?"

"...Marnamei sustained severe injuries," Sen softly speaks. "It seems Medusa was trying to kill her before the marshal could reach her secret base. Marnamei fought hard, however, she was struck in the neck and lost a lot of blood. She's currently in the critical care unit of the Hippo."

Macyn needed many minutes to allow that to sink in, and Sen silently gave him that. Finally, he asks, "is she going to be okay?"

"I don't know," Sen pitifully admits. "But I like to think so. She's one of the strongest mages I know. If anyone can pull through, it's her."

"I want to see her," Macyn declares.

"Macyn-" Sen tries, however, Macyn stubbornly shakes his head, spouting, "no, Sen. I need to see her." Touching the necklace still around his neck, Macyn adds, "we were there, together. That was... I don't even know how to describe it. I just need to see her."

With an unbecoming sigh, Sen replies, "I'll ask." Before she leaves, however, she gestures to the table and informs him, "you have a letter from your mother."

"Thanks," Macyn replies as she leaves, dreading what he'll write in his return letter.

It isn't more than a few hours before he's visited by two professors and the lead investigators of the missing children. Before Macyn can see Marnamei, he's made to write out everything he recalls, and along with the Dean of Students and his Head of House, he's questioned by Meegeren and Bushkey. Again, of the partners, the larger, bushy-beard Bushkey is the only Macyn cares for. Still, along with Sen's statement, Macyn explains everything that led himself and Marnamei Hew in the underground laboratory. They capture a copy of his

memory, and Bushkey thanks him with a strong handshake.

Immediately after they leave, Macyn asks Dean Von Brandt, “can I see Marny now?” Adding, “please,” after a prolonged silence.

“She is not allowed visitors at the moment,” Von Brandt relays. “However, they are confident the worst has passed.”

A fair amount of time passes before he hears any word about Marnamei; days of uncertainty. He’s in his dorm room, staring at the three samurai weapons he fully created from dirt, wood, heat, sweat, and work, wondering about Solo and Marny. He hasn’t heard from Solo, however, he’s fairly sure his best friend is by Marnamei’s side, or at least outside the room, waiting to see her just like he wants to.

When a paramail written by Mrs. Makynli finally reaches him and explains Marnamei has been released into M’Curre’s care, Macyn grabs a vial of his medicine and puts away his forged swords in an old guitar case he found in the basement before he walks from Anthony to the infirmary. Walking the campus, it appears to Macyn as if classes have been put on hold for the moment as much of the student body is outside with a crowd gathered around the infirmary.

Macyn has to push his way through the student mages to the two IPW’s standing guard and keeping the students from entering. Not at all expecting the guards at the door, Macyn felt relief when he pulled the paramail from his pocket and they let him enter. With Sen by his side, Macyn makes his way to the very familiar infirmary. Many of the beds were moved outside the main treatment area, and upon entering the room, Macyn immediately spots two familiar faces.

Stepping into the nearly empty infirmary, there is a long curtain splitting the room in half. Macyn can’t see the other side, however, sitting and pacing are Solo and Everette, respectively. The moment they are aware of him, Everette tenses his shoulders, angrily so, and with clenched fists stomps toward Macyn. Solo grips the large mage by the arm, and though Macyn wants to thank him, Solo’s face appears just as angry to see him as Everette, which both mage and ghost are surprised to see.

“Hey, Solo-” Macyn starts but is interrupted by Solo when tells him, “shut up and take a seat.” Unexpectedly, Solo throws a seat toward with his mana.

The noise draws out Mrs. Makynli from behind the curtain, asking, “what was that?”

Though Everette only cares to ask, “why’s the stolid here?”

Walking over to Macyn, Mrs. Makynli asks Everette, “have you forgotten your manners, Mr. Masters?” Without waiting for a response, she turns to Macyn with a smile and speaks as she lifts the chair. “I’m so happy you came, Mr. Blende, lady Sen. It won’t be too much longer.”

“Thank you for telling us,” Macyn sheepishly asserts, glimpsing the stone-faced Solo and Everette.

“Mr. Blende, that goes without saying,” Makynli responds as if it’s obvious.

“Um, do you know, or, uh, can you tell me why they’re mad at me,” Macyn asks Makynli.

Turning to the prophesied heirs, Makynli slowly voices, “you know, I don’t truly know myself, but, I’m fairly sure they’re quite upset Marnamei was so injured. The three of them grew up together and they’re very close. Don’t worry too much about it,” she finishes as

she leaves him.

When Makynli leaves the three, Macyn hesitates to approach Solo, but he was hoping to see his best friend again, and so he walks to them.

Everette has no issues telling Macyn, "I hope they expel you," before walking to the other end of the room and leaning on the wall.

Macyn isn't sure what to make of that or how to respond. Realizing Everette's never been his biggest fan, Macyn greets Solo, "hey... uh, what's going on?"

Solo glares at Macyn as if trying to decide to respond with words or fists when the curtain dividing the room is pulled back. Bushkey bows to the heirs before leaving, nodding to Macyn on his way out, and Meegeren happily gives nurse M'Curre a card before slyly exiting the room. Macyn spots nurse M'Curre turning the card to dust before checking on Marnamei.

Everette and Solo immediately rush to her side as marshal Hew, dean Von Brandt, and a few of Marnamei's family step to the side. Apart from the marshal, there are three he recalls from the Solstice galas; Marnamei's grandfather, Absolon, and her parents, Christian and Arielle. As before, that entire family is some of the most beautiful people Macyn has ever seen.

So it truly was a surprise to see a half-moon shaped scar intersecting the middle of her left eyebrow and a long scar on the right side of her neck, as if a sharp weapon cut into her vital body with the express purpose of murder. The scar was red and under tape made out of clear liquid. Light even moved and warped like on the surface of water. She was busy calming both Solo and Everette down, though in different ways. Everette preferred to ignore the injury and overflow with joy simply to see her whereas Solo simply saw it and remained quiet.

She held their hands as chairs and a table are brought in. The table was placed against the wall and immediately filled up with finger-style food. Not many grabbed food, and Macyn wasn't hungry but he felt so out of place, he decided to fill a plate simply to have something to do. The chairs were spread around Marnamei's bed, however, no one sat down right away. The adults were talking and Marnamei was chatting with Everette while Solo remained quiet.

Macyn decided to eat and wait by a chair some paces away from the bed, and only then did Marnamei see him. When their eyes met, it was like Macyn was instantly transported to that time and place. He remembered their brief captivity, their fear of the unknown, the suffocating anxiety of their doomed fate, the weight of not only their lives, but the lives of the children on their shoulders. He recalled wanting to get help and her stubbornness to stay and fight. Their adversity in an unexpected situation with someone many times over stronger than they were and they survived. He didn't nod or wave or smile, but the tilt of his head, the slant of his shoulder, and the deep exhale mirrored her own. Only then did knowing the fact that they survived, *feel* like they survived.

"Can I have a plate," she asks Macyn with a smile. "I'm starving."

Macyn returns her smile, however, when he gets up to grab her a plate, Everette shoulder-checks Macyn back in his seat as he tells Marnamei he'll get it.

Solo still looks murderous and Marnamei regards both Everette and Solo, who don't care to hide their feeling towards Macyn. Quickly Marnamei asks Everette, "what was that?"

Solo and Everette look at each other nod, then Solo finally speaks, glaring daggers at Macyn as he says, "he *left* you."

“More like ran,” Everette retorts. “Leaving you to fight by yourself.”

Macyn quickly blurts out too fast for speech, “whay, whet, wait, what?”

“He ran while you were protecting kids,” Everette quickly calls, drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

“And you could’ve been killed,” Solo strains to voice out loud. Everette only partially adds, “and for this yellow-bellied pissant to have the gall-”

“That’s enough!” Marnamei yells, interrupting him. Nurse M’Curre moves to her side as Marnamei continues, “don’t call him that!”

“Why not?” Solo asks.

Macyn didn’t even notice Sen levitate higher, looking quite angry, as she tells the heirs, “because he’s not.”

“Then why weren’t you-” Solo starts.

However, Marnamei cuts him off as well, removing her hand from his as she yells, “because we split up! It was impossible to take Sora and the others with us, but staying with them meant fighting Medusa and Merula by *ourselves* with no back-up coming! So, I stayed with the children, *hidden* mind you, while Macyn went for help. I only even fought Medusa because she came back to take the children to Gaiorem.”

Solo and Everette give each other lost looks when Solo recalls aloud, “but, we were told that the marshal couldn’t make it to you in time because he was too busy rescuing Macyn.”

Marnamei sighs loudly before directing her ire-laced words at Solo. “No one knew where we were so I gave my locator to Macyn because it was obviously being blocked inside the lab. And you’re calling him a coward when he and I both knew escaping through the lake would draw Medusa to him?!”

Everette drops his head as the news was painfully humiliating, and weakly responds, “we didn’t know.”

“It’s not surprising you wouldn’t know,” Sen responds. “His name wasn’t in any of the many articles written since then, let alone any of his contributions. And yet he cared for none of that. He was only worried about you three, especially when I informed him of Lady Hew’s injury.”

In the ensuing silence, the marshal sets his cup of tea down to address the young mages. “Hmm, the reason I needed to speak to each of you will wait until the others join us, however, I would like to add some clarity to the confusion. I, personally, witnessed Mr. Blende’s final moments in fierce and determined battle with Medusa, a highly capable warlock in her own right. This was of course after his battle and victory over the Jormungandr that resides at the bottom of the lake.”

All three whipped their heads at him, eyes bulging in surprise as they yell in perfect unity, “a Jormungandr!?”

Marnamei irately declares, “I told you!” Staring at Macyn with sheer frustration, she adds, “I told it was insane! That you could get swallowed whole.”

“Like that’s any better than fighting Medusa by yourself,” Macyn defends. “Also, it was *only* an infant, and double also, it worked!”

“Do not be so bashful, Mr. Blende. Even an infant Jormungandr is over twenty-eight meters in length.” Turning to Solo and Everette, the marshal informs them, “a member of Kane Haven witnessed his battle if you doubt my words. And despite Mr. Blende’s serious



injuries, when I arrived his only words to me were of the safety of Marnamei, the missing children, and their location.”

The marshal picks up his cup of tea once again as awkward silence grips Everette and Solo. Both the heirs look mortified, apologetic and Marnamei wasn't very happy with their behavior. With much shame, Solo rushes to Macyn and punches him in the shoulder, yelling, “why didn't you tell me I was being stupid?!”

“Wha- Well, I didn't even know what the problem was,” Macyn yells back. “Next time don't hold it in so I can tell you to stop being stupid!”

“Fine,” Solo calls.

“I thought you didn't want to be friends anymore,” Macyn adds, with an odd mix of mischief.

“I know, mate,” Solo hotly answers. “What can I say? I was being a right git.”

“...Your silent treatment hurts,” Macyn evenly says, trying to hold in his smirk.

“Alright,” Solo calls, shoulder bumping his friend. “I get it! Now will you quit making me feel things?”

With thoughts of the ready swords, a smirking Macyn nods, informing him, “your sword's ready, by the way,” before adding in a quirky tone, “the price has doubled.” Solo snickers with amusement and shrugs as if that means nothing to him.

The final arrivals enter and Macyn is shocked to see Root arrive with two adults who have similar features. Fingering them as her parents, they're dressed in loose summer style clothes; her mother in a white flowy dress and her father wore a thin short-sleeved button-up with baggy fisherman style shorts. Rather than the black dress Root always wears when he's seen her, she also has on a khaki and white summer dress that hides her curves, a white choker, and yellow rimmed glasses.

As they walk toward the marshal, Macyn immediately wants to rush to Root and make sure she's fine, however, from behind her parents, she spots him and quickly shakes her head, *'no.'* Macyn notes that he doesn't feel their allure, however, it's obvious to a blind man how inhumanly attractive they are. The nymphs momentarily speak in private before Marshal Hew asks everyone to take a seat. Oddly enough, he asks all the student mages to sit together.

From beside Marnamei's bed, Theophilus begins to explain to the young mages, “I wanted everyone to know that you are not to speak to the press about anything you encountered without your head of house, the dean of students, myself or your parents present.” Though Macyn easily recalls how callous and unyielding the marshal can be, looking at him now, he feels nothing but comfort in the elder's presence now.

The marshal continues, “I also want you to heavily edit what you say to friends and peers. The reason for this is due to the fact that Medusa remains at large, so we must all remain vigilant. Marnamei, Mr. Blende, I especially want you both to take extra care for it's well within the realm of possibility she may enact a contingency plane or carry a vendetta against you.”

“I won't let Marny out of my sight, marshal,” Everette proudly states. Solo still looks down but doesn't seem to appreciate Everette's comment.

Marnamei just shrugs, “what else is new?”

“No one knows where she is but Gaiorem is the most likely destination,” he informs. “The authorities would like to keep this detail private for now, so I cannot stress upon you the importance of regulating your responses to anyone, friend or not, accordingly. If you're

unaware of what to say, state nothing, or ask the appropriate elder. Do we understand each other?"

Root, Macyn, Marnamei, Solo, and Everette nod.

"Good, now if you'll excuse me," the marshal tells them before he begins walking toward the door. "Mr. Blende, if you'd be so kind as to accompany me a moment." He raises his eyebrows at Sen and Solo, who shrugs as Sen enters the wand, then he follows the elder warrior.

In the hallway, Theophilus curtly begins, "you will have questions, but I'll be brief, so please allow me to finish before you ask any. First, I cannot allow you to return home for the summer."

Wide-eyed and shocked, "but," is already out of Macyn's lips before the marshal interrupts him.

"Mr. Blende," he calls with an open and sympathetic palm. "Please trust I understand you'll have questions. Allow me the courtesy to finish. Dean Von Brandt will accompany you to explain to your parents with sufficient details on why this is necessary."

"And why... why," Macyn quickly asks.

"You would be an easier target in the Lower Order, and if your safety is their chief concern, I don't foresee why they would disagree. Second, you will not be allowed to stay in your dorm for the summer, as all but the faculty are discharged from the University. After, discussing the situation with the school council, we've come to the conclusion that you will board with Simorgh Institute through their exchange program. Their scholastic program runs all year with week-long breaks sprinkled throughout, but they've agreed to add you for the summer. I'm sure someone there will explain the finer details of your day-to-day."

"But you can't do that," Macyn asserts, recalling hateful feelings for the marshal again.

"As I've said," the marshal calmly relays. "We will be speaking with your parents, and while I may not be your guardian, I'm still considered your representative of sorts."

"Sir, please! This is crazy," Macyn adamantly argues.

"I understand that this is a rather sudden robbery of your summer plans," Theophilus verbalizes. "But equally as unexpected, is how unfortunately necessary this is for your safety."

Disgruntled and silently irate, Macyn sullenly asks, "...for how long?"

"Uncertain," the tall man answers.

Pointing to the room they just left, Macyn asks, "what about everyone in there? Are you making them stay too?"

"The others didn't play a pivotal role in unraveling Medusa's nefarious operation, however, those leaving Menhir for the summer will be keeping their alarms as a precautionary measure."

"This isn't fair, marshal," Macyn weakly admits. The thought of having to wait another year simply to see his mother and father again seemed so demoralizing. He feels robbed and has no problems telling the marshal, "it's like I'm being punished."

However, he simply responds, "'no good deed,' as they say."

"So I *am* being punished," Macyn grumbles.

"I'd hardly call additional education punishment, Mr. Blende," Theophilus asserts, patting his heavy hand on Macyn's round shoulder. "Further to the point, we would not

be duteous in our task as guardians if we allowed you to fend for yourself simply because the school year has ended. You showed true grit against formidable odds, and yet, you are still a teenager; a freshman, at that.”

“Please,” Macyn tries, clapping both his hands together in prayer. “I’m asking-begging you to reconsider.”

“Rest assured you will be allowed and even encouraged to continue orecrafting, and as for visiting your family, simply schedule it with the administration. You have a month before you start. Please represent the best of Erudite during your time there. Now if you’ll excuse me,” the muscular old man finishes before returning to the infirmary, Macyn simply stands there until Sen floats out of the wand.

“Macyn,” Sen calls tentatively.

Responding solemnly, he murmurs, “...yeah?”

“I’ll stay with you,” Sen warmly tells him. “If you’ll have me.”

With a deep exhale, Macyn admits, “thanks, Sen. Of course. I couldn’t do this without you.”

“Write to your parents...” Sen hesitantly offers, though she cannot help but add, “however, I do believe your parent will agree with the marshal. It would just be too irresponsible to assume you’re not in danger. Medusa knows your name and face...”

“...Yeah.”

## Heart To Mind

With Theophilus Osgar Hew as Erudite's marshal, it isn't long, at all, until the school returns to normal. With finals right around the corner, only the truly confident in their scholastic acuity spend any time greeting, thanking, and gifting Marny. As she was the only one credited to saving the missing children, all of Menhir is overwhelmed with appreciation.

She was swarmed almost everywhere she went, and as Solo would prefer to avoid the crowd, the duo barely saw her by herself. It wasn't until after a week of grueling finals did Macyn finally see Marnamei. He was returning from class, lamenting the pending results of his exams when he walked through Anthony House's front door to find Solo, Everette, and Marny inside.

"Oh Lord of lords," Macyn yells in jests at the sight of Marny. "Is that the one and only Savior of the Nine, Menhir's angel?"

"Shut it," Marny calls. "I've had more than enough of that, thank you."

"As my queen commands," Macyn quickly chirps, before walking into his room.

"Actually, it's just Marny," Marnamei grins when she tells him.

Abruptly halting, Macyn turns around with raised eyebrows on his shocked face, easily mirroring the male heirs as well. For clarity, Macyn asks, "really?"

She simply nods walking around him and waiting by his door. They enter his room as Macyn asks about their exams. While he puts his meager things away, Macyn listens to their shared stress and political worries as only the one percent can. By the end of their unrelatable problems, Macyn shamelessly tells them, "I'll be happy if I pass."

"Well, all that nonsense is over now," Solo tells the room as Macyn grabs the old ratty guitar case.

Marny asks Macyn, "any plans for summer?" However, he finally has a clear look at the long scar on the right side of her neck and the half-moon scar cutting into her left eyebrow. Marny notes, "believe it or not, I actually like them. Every day in every reflection, they remind me of my weaknesses and my goals." Rather than undercut her earnestness with a joke, Macyn simply nods before Marny continues, "there are a few mage-only communities in Italy, China, and France that my family and the Masters are considering."

"That's... nice," Macyn hesitates to say, aggrieved and sensitive about his summer. "I'm on lockdown, actually."

Marnamei creases her brow, really highlighting the red of her scar before asking, "what do you mean lockdown?"

"Ask the marshal," Macyn answers with a sad sigh.

Everette turns to Marnamei who dourly responds, "contrary to popular beliefs, he doesn't tell me everything."

"I'd rather not talk about it," Macyn tells them. As he's about to give Solo the guitar case, Marnamei sternly stares at Everette.

The taller, broad-shouldered, heir steps forward, and hesitates to say, "Macyn, I realize I never actually apologized about what I said to you... you know, calling you a coward. So, I'm sorry. I could understand anyone running to save their own necks, so I just assumed

that's what you did."

Sen appears and is looking very angry at them but says nothing. Somehow, that makes Macyn lighten up a little and explains, "I understand you guys didn't know. It was a mix-up. I'd say give me the benefit of the doubt next time, but, I'm never doing anything that stupid again."

Macyn extends the faded black case to Solo, who smiles as he takes it. Opening the case, Solomon slowly brings out a scarlet red scabbard with a black and scarlet wrapped handle. Solo unsheathed the sword and the sound of reverberating sharpness paired with a finely polished edge before the beautiful hamon-line of the arched katana blade... awed Solo and the heirs. Every single time Macyn sees the completed sword, it amazes him that he made it with his own hands.

"Looks pretty damn good," Solo says, testing the length and balance of the katana. He takes a sheet of square parchment and lightly makes contact with the edge. When it cuts the paper effortlessly, Solo tells Macyn, "write up the receipt, mate."

As Sen dictates the receipt while Macyn writes, Everette professes, "I can't believe your parents actually said okay to that amount."

"Especially since your family already has orewicks," Marnamei states as she looks over the receipt with wide eyes.

Solo walks over and impassively slams his house ring into the receipt as he tells them, "you don't think I know how to work a deal? I just told them the truth, I needed a special gift for an heiress of Menhir and it can't be cheap." They didn't understand until Solo takes the katana and extends it to Marnamei. "Lady Hew, I present to you a very unique gift. Please take it with the gratitude of house Roth, or such nonsense," he finishes with a smile.

Marnamei smiles at him before looking at Macyn, who adds, "it's the best sword I've ever made."

"Macyn," Sen sternly states, and he can tell she doesn't appreciate making light of this. It's all he needs to realize he made more money in a single day than his father has made in years and that was chilling and he recalls what Sen often spoke of when they were forging together.

"Heart to Mind," Macyn repeats. "We all know everything has a spirit, but Sen taught me that everything that has a spirit, also has a heart. The job of the orewick is to recognize the heart of the material and work with it to create a singular existence. If I am the spirit, then this sword is my heart, and I'd be honored if you would have it."

"That was very sweet of you, Macyn," Marnamei earnestly conveys. "It would be my honor."

"Look at you," Solo joshes Macyn while slinging his arm around his shoulders. "Giving out your heart so recklessly, you rebel."

Unsheathing the katana, Marnamei tells Macyn, "I've spoken to grandfather Absolon, who is our family's legislator. He wasn't sure we could give our support even after everything you've done, since politically, it might upset both Noble Houses Roth and Masters, but when Great Grandfather entered the discussion, he didn't even hesitate and ordered father and grandfather give our sponsorship. So, your mother has House Hew's support."

Macyn warmed all over at the good news he'll be able to share with his family. Unable to trust his voice won't crack, he smiles and nods hating himself for sniffing. Marnamei puts her hand on his shoulder and he reacts on instinct, hugging her. By his ear, she tells him,

“thank you for everything you did.”

“Thank you, Miss Hew,” Sen happily expresses. “We will make sure to send a formal letter of appreciation.”

Macyn lets Marnamei go before the heiress asks, “now will you tell me what this lockdown is?”

“I don't even care about that anymore,” he shrugs in elation.

“So tell us,” Marny adds.

With a shrug, he answers, “it seems like Medusa can nab me easy enough in Vegas so, without even asking me, the marshal and school board canceled my summer plans to go back home and are sending me to extra schooling in Sim- Sigmoid-”

“Simorgh,” Solo corrects.

“Simorgh Institute,” Everette exclaims curiously.

“Yeah, that's the thing,” Macyn sarcastically whoops. “Supposedly, it's for my safety, which, yeah, I guess, but still, it's *more* school.”

Marnamei is thrilled and speaks, “you're going to be studying with the Elves!”

“I mean, yeah, I guess,” Macyn shrugs unenthusiastically. “But all I heard was, *‘you have no control over your life. Here's more school. Take it and like it.’*”

“Oh, stop exaggerating,” Marny tells him, smacking his shoulder. “It's a tremendous honor.”

Macyn asks her, “a better honor than China, Italy, or France?” Marny doesn't answer.

“Got you there,” Solo points out with a smirk.

“So, what are you up to for the summer?” Macyn asks Solo. “You weren't sure where you were landing.”

“I invited him to come summer with us,” Marnamei's upbeat voice shares. “We haven't summered together in so long.” Turning to Solo, she asks, “you're coming, right?”

Solo looks at Marnamei then Macyn, then back to Marnamei before answering, “why not. Even Everette's better company than my nitwit of a family.”

“Well, I guess this is it,” Everette calls. He extends his hand to Macyn, adding, “have a great summer.” Macyn shakes his hand before he leaves.

Macyn turns to Marnamei and tells her, “stay safe.”

“You too,” Marnamei returns, giving him a strong hug. “I hope I get to welcome your mother to Menhir soon.”

Macyn smiles and then she exits.

Solo walks up to Macyn. “Mate, I'm painfully sorry I didn't trust you, but I reckon I have the perfect way to make up for it.”

As Solo digs in his bag, Macyn asks, “how's that?”

Solo takes out a small object in a cloth covering as he explains, “my original thought was to suffer Simorgh with you, but mate, that's a lot of extra schooling. I heard so many horror stories of how evil those elves are; educational slavers.”

Macyn's dejected and resentful face conveys, “you're not exactly making me feel better about this.”

“Sorry. Anyway, here you go,” he responds, extending to Macyn an old compass.

Curiously examining the compass, he comments, “um, it's a compass.”

Rolling his eyes, Solo replies, “technically, it’s a compass from the 18th century, mate. Get it right. But in actuality, it’s an Effigy.”

“Oh,” Sen happily says.

“Yeah,” Solo tacks on smugly.

“Oh and yeah, what?” Macyn asked before he recalls, “oh! That’s the thing- the thing that Sen can inhabit without-”

“Causing flux to your mana,” Solo interjects. “Yup. I figured, with the hell you’re going to be going through, you’ll need all the advantage you can get.”

“Again, not instilling a lot of comfort here.”

Solo smiles his apology, before telling him, “good luck, mate.”

He hugs his best friend as he says, “shut up.”

After leaving Sen and his wand atop his Gud Arm, Macyn meets the Dean outside Anthony House. With his traveler’s bag over his shoulder, she teleports them instantly from Menhir to Vegas. It felt oddly numbing, then cold, then weightless and soon his bent knees felt weight again before the searing sun above bombards them with cooking heat. They land in front of everyone outside his apartment complex and by the time his brand new clothes—that he purchased with the stellar quantity mynt in his account—adjusts to compensate for the excessive heat, all of his formally astonished neighbors have forgotten about the impossible teleportation they had just witnessed.

Macyn happily knocks on his old ratty door and even with prior warning, Annetta is still the first to open it. Macyn felt himself in limbo for the briefest of moments before he greets her with a light hug. He may have missed her, he admits to himself, however, they are still off. She pats his back before separating and then greets the elder oddly dressed lady German.

June rushes him and Macyn happily hugs her, spouting, “what’s up, Bug.”

“Don’t make me choke you out,” June happily tells him while Colin waits behind her.

“Mr. Blend,” Von Brandt calls as Macyn’s hugs his father.

“Ah, yeah,” he states separating from his father. “This is the Dean of Students, Reinhilda Von Brandt. She needs to talk to dad.”

Seated at the kitchen table with tea and coffee out, the Dean and his father speak while Macyn remains silent in the middle. Dean Von Brandt explains everything Macyn only lightly touched upon in his letters.

By the end, Colin was very upset, repeating, “a Jormungandr? Warlocks and Jormungandrs?” It was clear to Macyn he wasn’t happy, however, his father was worried more than anything else, which meant he wouldn’t fight the decision to send Macyn to Simorgh.

“This is why we propose he stay on Menhir throughout the summer before he starts his sophomore year,” Von Brandt finishes and Colin didn’t hesitate to agree with his old professor.

However, Macyn has to try, and asks his father, “don’t you think mom would like it if I stayed in-”

“You really need to ask?” Colin hotly interjects.

Rolling his eyes, he simply asks, “then can I, at least, see her before I start another round of school?”

“If Dean Von Brandt is willing,” Colin starts looking at the dean for consent. “We can go right now.”  
Sitting up, Macyn remarks, “but it’s not visiting hours.”  
With the deans, nod, Colin stands and grabs his keys as he says, “come along.”  
Macyn calls out hopefully, “dad? Is mom out?”  
“No, no,” Colin stubbornly insists. “Consider my silence as punishment for omitting how serious your year actually was.”

Though it feels weird to be in a car with his dean, they drive for forty minutes before reaching the poverty-stricken part of town worse than where Colin lives. The row of apartment towers look identical as drive through the neighborhood. At the sight of an old homeless man, Macyn’s mind wonders about Dog Stolid. They rescued the children, but Dog was nowhere to be seen. The IPW assured him they’d continue investigating, but Macyn has little hope any of them care about an old clay-hand with mismatching eyes who can’t craft mana.

The group traverse to the third floor of an old brick apartment complex and Colin knocks on the metal door. Within the infinity of those few seconds Macyn struggles to wait, he pays attention to the scratched and tagged paint on the rusted door, the flickering yellow lights down the hall, the crying baby off in the distance, the laundry hung over balconies to dry and the muggy warmth of the evening. Macyn is jittery and breathing very hard by the time Jahmela opens the door. It takes both mother and son many seconds to realize this is no illusion, and they’re hugging the very next second after.

He can feel his mother shake with her crying. His brown eyes water and leak, and his nose reddens hotly in his long-awaited embrace. Very little needed to be said that couldn’t wait. He didn’t need the details of her appeals process or wonder about the money he would help pay. He didn’t need to assure her about the patronage he secured from the Honored House of Hew. Macyn simply wanted to feel the strength of this new reality... until Colin mentions, “wait until our son tells how his year went.”

And in an instant, Macyn became fearful. Uncomfortably, he separates from his mother, who quickly picks up on the underlying tone. Jahmela bows her head to her old professor then tilts her head to Macyn, asking without words to explain himself.

“Okay, so, j-just remember,” Macyn starts, clearing his suddenly dry throat. “I got the pardon.”

## Chapter 1

Thank you to my Patreons for your support. It keeps me fueled to write every single day. Thank you, Thank you, Thank you.

I am an artist and regardless of supposed limitations, my job and joy is to create. There's a story in me begging to be told and it's simply waiting for me to listen carefully so that I may properly commit it to paper. This is my first novel but it will not



be my last, so thank you for reading what's in me to write.

Male, 30's, Hispanic, getting it done.

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