

# PROLOGUE

Deklin sat on a jut of carved stone that was once his home, watching his lifeblood drain and trickle down his fingers to pool around the crimson-stained moss below.

Sacred swords encircled him like a shattered throne, thrust into the smoldering remains of his ruined hermit cottage. Each priceless weapon, forged by master craftsmen from across the Ages, broken and consumed by the battle.

*Not much longer now.* His thoughts spun idly as he tried to will his heavy limbs to action. *She sure is taking her sweet time. Should have been dead by now. I certainly wouldn't have given myself time to think.*

Most people when seriously injured simply shut down. It's too much to bear, and it takes all their faculties just to hang on to the unraveling thread of their life.

Deklin's Magi training kicked in and he pushed through the fog of impending death to take stock.

*It wasn't good. Channels shot, core leaking Spirit like a sieve, Sapphireframe busted up, and I'm surrounded by at least a dozen Silversouls.*

*Break me, this isn't good.* Despite himself, Deklin found a bubbling laugh frothing the blood on his lips.

*You're done and dusted,* said an inner voice.

He couldn't disagree.

The clouds huddling above for warmth finally broke, swirling outward to form a perfect circle of wintry blue sky. Chunks of rock, carried on strands of Air and Spirit, lifted from the scarred

battlefield. A warrior descended, for all intents and purposes, from the heavens themselves.

Deklin gave the entrance an eight out of ten.

With darklight scythe in hand, she took each step as nonchalantly as if walking on floating stones a hundred feet in the air was an everyday affair.

*For her, it probably is,* he found himself thinking.

Stella took her time. Dark and violent storm clouds of mana streamed along her limbs like a second Pathform armor.

There was a very real chance that, despite cycling Life to stem the flow of blood from his countless wounds, that Deklin would bleed out before she ever reached him.

*Would serve her right,* he thought. *She always had a flair for the dramatic.*

A lopsided grin tugged at the side of his bloodied lips as an unbidden thought bubbled to the surface, *game recognizes game.*

At the very edges of his dimming vision, Deklin was aware of her Sect's goons closing in. Many of their bodies littered the razed hilltop that had once been a peaceful series of small gardens.

Deklin frowned at the mangled Golden Pomegranate trees. Some hulking brute with three pairs of arms had crushed them in its death throes. *I really liked those poms. Took me eight years to get them to grow all the way up here too....*

Slumping forward, Deklin barely managed to stop from toppling headfirst into his own pool of blood. He stopped cycling Life, letting more of his blood pump free.

A few extra minutes was all it would buy him, anyway. He had more important uses for the ragged remnants of his Spirit.

Gathering up every last dreg he could, Deklin shaped the flow of his Spirit into a Technique. At the same time, he used Spirit he could scarcely spare to mask what he was doing. It would fail under closer inspection, but Stella always believed what her eyes told her.

*So cold*, he thought as he struggled to lift his head to meet Stella's odd eyes.

*Just like mine*, he thought ruefully.

Her right eye was storm-gray, but her left as always, drew his attention. Black as night with an iris of virulent acid-green, she would be distinguishable on nearly any Worldshard.

Those eyes marked her as surely as they marked him. No matter what body they inhabited, those eyes would remain.

Deklin's gaze met hers, they were a mirror image. Left storm-gray, right black relieved with a ring of green. He opened his mouth to ask what she planned to do now, but another question leapt out instead. "Where'd you learn that Technique?"

Call it professional curiosity, but Deklin couldn't help himself.

The stately woman, all tight clothing, black slashed with silver—and bearing more than a few gashes from his blades—ground the butt of her scythe into the ground beside him.

Judging by the frown on her dark face and the quirk of her manicured eyebrow, she had not expected that question either.

Deklin could not resist a slight smirk as she answered purely out of habit, "The Sect of the Stormblade taught me." Her voice still held the musical quality that had stolen his heart back at Brookmoors.

"Remind me, was that before or after you killed their leader?" Deklin asked, flashing bloodied teeth. *Come on*, he thought, *you know you want to gloat*.

His Burning Heart Technique was nearly ready, but he had to keep her talking. He felt like a blind man scrambling for every last scrap of Spirit he could find to funnel it into his Technique.

“Before, obviously. Tai-gon could not very well bestow upon me the Stonecloud Technique with his head detached from his body.” She reached down and gripped his jaw in her iron grip. “Don’t worry that pretty head of yours, Deklin. I would not mar your beauty by beheading you.”

“How very kind of you,” Deklin struggled to say around her grip. “If I didn’t know you any better, I would say you’re going soft.”

“Violence for the sake of violence is for children and idiots,” she said, thrusting his head away. She examined the blood he left on her hand. “I have... grown beyond such pettiness.”

“Would that our classmates bore witness to your magnanimity.”

A ringing blow blinded Deklin to the world around him. He only managed to keep hold of the Burning Heart Technique by his fingernails.

Hands hauled him upright before the world stopped spinning. He hadn’t realized he fell.

“You always were an insolent, myopic little man,” she spat. “Too busy drinking yourself into oblivion to face what you were party to.” Stella shook her head, her glossy black hair caught the cold sunlight as it swung around behind her. “Tell me something.”

“Anything for you, sugar lips,” Deklin said around a mouthful of blood. He spat to the side.

Stella’s gaze thinned but she refrained from hitting him again. But only just. Deklin could see through the thin film over his rapidly shrinking vision that she was at the end of her tether.

*Good.*

Her lips parted slightly as she studied him. For a moment Deklin was sure she could feel his Spirit building to a crescendo. *Not yet. Rime and ash, not yet!*

With a sigh, Stella straightened herself and looked down her nose at him. She had gotten very good at that. “Why do you persist in this little game of yours?”

Stella wiped her bloodied palm on her hip. “You know I will best you every time. You don’t even bother to bring any other Magi with you. Why? Do you really think you can take me on your own? Fix all your mistakes on your own like a big boy?”

“Perhaps you’ve heard? I’ve got a bit of an ego,” Deklin said, plastering on the biggest grin he could manage.

Stella, was inoculated to a lot of Deklin’s antics, but few people could resist the sheer blunt-forced *smugness* that Deklin could radiate at will.

The storm artist lifted him up with one hand, her face a rictus of rage. Stella’s lacquered fingernails dug into his neck, drawing beads of blood. *Not like I have much more blood to spill.*

This was it.

Like a maddened engineer aboard a steam engine, Deklin shoveled every bit of Spirit he could into his Burning Heart Technique. He was draining his very life force—what was left of it, anyway—to bring the Technique to bear.

Stella realized her mistake too late. She tried to release him, to sever the connection between them, but Deklin’s left hand clamped around her wrist with the bizarre strength of the dying.

There were precious few methods of dealing with an adversary not just a full Rank above you, but an entire Echelon. *And here I thought I had done well to reach the Rank of Ruby.*

The Fourth Threshold always stopped him from Advancing. He never could figure out the trick to surpassing it.

But his Burning Heart Technique used the catalyst of his very core, consuming every last shred of his Spirit and then some.

When the deck was stacked against you from the outset, your only option was to cheat in kind.

Thrusting his right palm forward, Deklin slammed his Spirit into Stella's middle. His core shattered from the strain. It felt like his very soul had been broken apart.

He gritted bloodstained teeth and soldiered on.

The Burning Heart Technique rushed forward, dragging the shards of his core along for the ride. Spirit sprayed and flared out of wounds that ripped open along his forearm as his channels were torn asunder from the torrential flow.

Every last bit of Deklin's Ruby Ranked core flooded through his ruined channels. A great deal of it flashed out in Spiritflares, a violent aurora borealis of rich greens, purples, and blues.

Stella staggered back just as her companions rushed forward, sensing the surge of Spirit too late to do anything other than watch the aftermath. She tossed him onto a patch of soft freshly tilled dirt, as if distance would remedy her situation.

Spoiler alert: it wouldn't.

Deklin tumbled to the ground as his heart pounded its last feeble beats. His only regret was that he could not watch the inevitable and horrifically painful end that was in store for her.

There was no elixir on this Worldshard—or any, that he knew of—that would spare her. Not with his core shattered and used as shrapnel.

It was a last-ditch attack. Desperate and, some would say, stupid.

Those same people would have ended their life with an empty gesture, afraid to fully commit. Deklin, however, knew his death would—eventually—bring about Stella's.

It had to be enough. He wasn't going to get anything more.

Not in *this* life.

Deklin was no stranger to death. As it turned out, you could get used to anything, including dying. That isn't to say it was in any way *pleasant*.

The coldness came first as his heart gave out and pumped the last crimson stains onto what used to be his herb garden. *Had some good basil growing here*, he thought as the shroud of death crept over him.

Next was the hollow floating sensation that presaged the transdimensional travel known as Realmwalking. As a Magi, death on any Worldshard aside from their home was a temporary thing.

To those still living on that Shard, they were dead and likely never coming back. But to the Magi, they were chucked back to their home Shard like the aftermath of a bouncer that had just caught them sneaking into the club.

Deklin instinctively held his breath—not that he had any at the moment—as the hollow sensation flooded his body in the moments between existence and nihilism.

It was an old superstition, one that many Magi still held. Breathing while passing that threshold of existence could do

strange things when you were bounced back to your body on your home Shard.

Any force created during that brief moment was multiplied exponentially.

Deklin had heard stories of people flailing and screaming during their revival only to flatten their bed, their room, their whole house and the nearby block when they returned to their body.

And considering Deklin was bunked up in his cottage dorm at Brookmoors, quite a few rare vintages would be destroyed if he flattened the half-century-old cottage.

There were a few Fourth-Year students that he might miss as well. The Kindred knew how few of *them* there were now.

Opening his eyes, Deklin took a moment to reorient himself to his old and familiar body. The experiences of his past life on Thale rained down upon him, strengthening his core.

It was a long process, and one of the primary methods a Magi gained new Ranks of power. But with the experiences came the memories of his failures.

His defeats.

The hollow looks of a beaten people he could not save and now, never would.

Most of all, he remembered Stella's terrible beauty. His stomach churned sickeningly at what he had done to her. It was necessary, but he did not have to feel good about it.

*Now leaving [Worldshard: Thale]...*

*Realmwalking Journey (4<sup>th</sup> Year Magi) complete!*

*Welcome back to [Worldshard: Earth (Brookmoors Academy)].*



*“Wander the stars, live a hundred lives, seek your soul’s ambition, and delve into every sort of supernatural mayhem possible. For it may just fuming save us all.” — Professor Ruencrad.*

As more dark memories sleeted into his consciousness, he groaned in the darkness of his dorm and flung out a hand groping for the lamp on his bedside table.

“I need a drink,” he said to the empty room.