

Synopsis

Some disasters can only be avoided if you know they're coming, and even then, sometimes the cure is worse than the disease.

On Karell, you are either blessed by the gods, granted a unique power and the ability to gain experience and levels, or you are forgotten. Micah Silver was a boy picked for greatness. Chosen by the gods to bear a mythic power, he longed to take his place amongst the heroes and legends he grew up reading about.

Unfortunately his primary blessing only allows him to travel into the past by sacrificing his class, wealth, and levels. Even if he's unwilling, fate has a way of forcing you to take up your destiny, even if it costs you everything. Over and over again.

Prologue - A Blessed World

The Church of Luxos has long maintained that the blessings were proof that the gods love us. Without them we would face a world filled with monsters, terror and fell magic unarmed and naked. Cynics point out that without Ankros, there would be no need for the blessings. Humanity could easily survive without the magic, status sheets, and special abilities conferred by the Sixteen if the God of Night and Struggle didn't decide in his infinite wisdom to fill Karell with monsters and his warlike children, the Durgh.

This author on the other hand, humbly disagrees with those cynics. We might be able to survive without the blessings and the monsters, but we would never thrive. Although the Durgh and monsters represent an external threat, kingdoms war with distressing frequency. Without blessings, we might not have the magic and martial arts to make such wars into the grand affairs they are today, but we also wouldn't have the magic to grow crops at a moment's notice or heal the wounded.

Plus, without attunements what would we do for money? Some rural or poverty stricken zones allow bartering, but not everyone possesses something that a merchant wants. If a man wants a loaf of bread and all he has to offer is jewelry, what is he to do if the baker has no need for jewelry?

Some of my contemporaries have discussed the concept of creating markers out of rare metals, disks and triangles issued by the various Kings with a set value. This idea seems

manifestly unwise. Gold is rare and pretty, but what use does it offer to a merchant, warrior or prince? Ultimately it is but a few chips of a fancy rock that we've decided has an arbitrary value.

Attunement cannot be robbed from you and it is awarded by the gods themselves. What could be a fairer system? Although attunement can be transferred freely between individuals, an enterprising person can simply go and earn more by accomplishing the various tasks set out by the Major Gods. Each has their own goals for mortal life and growth that are reflected in how they reward us. Fighting Monsters will earn you night attunement from Ankros, God of Night and Struggle. Research, study and learning new spells will earn you moon attunement from Mursa, Goddess of Moon and Magic. Serving as a harmonious and productive member of society will earn you sun attunement from Luxos, God of Sun and Growth.

Better yet, attunement is useful. Although classes help determine the amount of mana someone earns each level, attunement provides an important baseline for both mana capacity and regeneration. After all, each mortal has three mana pools, one associated with each attunement. Each pool is more useful for spells and martial arts closely related to the deity with whom the mana is attuned. Technically, you could try to use moon mana to power an elemental fire spell, but even the most inexperienced scholars could tell you that sun or night mana would be significantly more efficient.

Of course, some of my contemporaries say this system is unfair. Not everyone receives a blessing. The forgotten don't have access to their status, making them unable to level or use magic entirely. Although they can still earn attunement, without their status they don't even know how much they have, often leading to dishonest merchants swindling them. These disabilities, combined with a healthy amount of discrimination often lead to the forgotten occupying the bottom rungs of society, mired in poverty and barely able to eke out a meager existence.

"Micah!" A voice called, causing a young boy to snap his head up from the dusty book he was reading. "The Sun is starting to go down. You might want to finish your chores so that you can go home. You wouldn't want to miss your birthday tonight, would you?"

The boy slapped the book shut and slipped it onto the trolley he used to sort and file the library's books. Keeper Ansom was right. Today wasn't the day to be late.

Chapter 1 - A Good Night's Sleep

Micah Silver ran home from the library the minute the Sun dipped below the horizon. Keeper Ansom startled from his slumber rocked back in his chair at the library's front desk, just in time to take in Micah's rapidly receding. The Keeper squinted his rheumy eyes against the brilliant orange and gold hues of the outside world before turning his head back to the magelight

of his musty library. The old man chuckled fondly and stood up, his bones creaking in protest against their years of disuse, as he made his rounds of the library before closing up for the day.

As for Micah, he barely even noticed Ansom as he raced home. Today was the day of his sixteenth birthday. Tomorrow he would awaken blessed, imbued with a unique power from one of Karell's sixteen deities. He would have access to his status screen and the ability to gain a class, levels and experience. More importantly, he would be an adult. Finally allowed to become an adventurer or learn a trade.

He didn't let himself think of the possibility that he could end up as one of the forgotten. Theoretically, it was an even chance, almost half of those born on Karell simply didn't awaken to a blessing. But it couldn't be him. Ever since apprenticing under Keeper Ansom at the age of thirteen, Micah kept himself busy trying to develop the skills that might hopefully bring him to the attention of a capricious God.

From reading the Keeper's books while helping at the library, he learned the common belief that the forgotten were ignored by the gods due to their laziness wasn't entirely correct. It was true that the gods tended to choose those with skills and temperament suited to them, but it wasn't a sure thing. Many youths did everything they could to obtain a blessing only to fall into the ranks of the forgotten. On the contrary, it wasn't unheard of for a lazy student to receive a blessing without earning a single skill before their awakening.

Regardless of the rumor's statistical accuracy it drove Micah to work harder. Every weekday he studied the tomes in the library, hoping to be rewarded with skill levels in spellcasting once he awakened. On the weekends, he practiced with the spear handed down from his older brother Trevor. Repeatedly attempting to hit the sack of straw swinging back and forth from the plum tree in the family garden or practicing the basic forms that Trevor taught him.

Thinking about Trevor brought a smile to Micah's face. He was the first person in Micah's family to receive an Uncommon blessing, the ability to throw a spear and have it return to his hand. Beyond his combat ability, Trevor was blessed with the innate knowledge of a previously unknown spearstyle. As soon as he received the blessing, Trevor joined a mid-sized adventuring guild, the Lancers. After training for a year, he began operating with a small party cleaning up the feral boars and small monsters that plagued the countryside around Basil's Cove.

Trevor wasn't high enough level to challenge a dungeon yet, but his team let Micah join them on some of their simpler missions. By the age of fifteen Micah was able to kill a boar all on his own, a feat that earned him constant praise from his older brother. It might not be much compared to the rest of their teams' martial arts, but it was an impressive enough achievement for an un-blessed youth.

Trevor was a vanguard, a whirlwind of stabbing and prodding spears that harassed and kept monsters at bay while Glenn and Meredith, the axeman and pyromancer of their squad, finished them off. Rounding things out was Renee, the team's archer that provided non-magical ranged support for the rest of the fighters.

Micah would grudgingly accept being a warrior or vanguard like Trevor, he was good at it after all, but that wasn't where his heart was. No, Micah wanted to be a wizard. He'd settle for becoming an elementalist like Meredith, specializing in one affinity of magic to the exclusion of all others, but his blood *sang* for proper spellcraft.

Ansom was a weaker wizard, only having low affinities in Earth and Wood magic. Still, even the old man's low level rituals, twisting the two affinities together to make golems of stone and iron absolutely set Micah's mind alight. From the first time he saw the creations helping Ansom move books around the Library, Micah *knew* that spellcraft was his future. Nevermind that most blessings came with limited to no magical affinity, forcing the adventurer to learn a martial art to channel their mana. Every fiber in Micah's being longed to make it happen.

On his way home, Micah stopped in the market to pick up some last minute supplies before the benefits of his age faded. Luxos, the God of Sunlight and Patron of Humanity commanded that all of his followers provide aid and succor to youths. All reasonable purchases and education were free until he became an adult, at which point the God would cut him off, forcing him to earn his own way in the world.

Well, not exactly free. Luxos provided Sun Attunement to the merchants, usually slightly above the market rate for whatever was purchased, to ensure that their 'charity' didn't harm them in the long run. Tomorrow, if he wished to purchase something, Micah would have to trade slivers of his own attunement, the font of all mana production on Karell. Of course, once he was blessed he'd be able to go out and earn attunement on his own by engaging in acts smiled upon by the gods.

Saying goodbye to old lady Jacobson, Micah loaded the sack onto his shoulder and headed back to his home. Trevor was out on a mission, wrapped up in important business and unable to come back for Micah's birthday, but that didn't mean that the rest of his family would let him celebrate alone.

Excitedly, he opened the door to his home, a mid sized wooden building attached to his Father's tailor shop. Immediately the scent of freshly baked cake hit his nose, and Micah smiled. In the main room of the house, his Father, Jon, stood next to his Mother, Veronica, a hand affectionately draped over her shoulder while Esther, his younger sister bounced from foot to foot in excitement, her eyes fixed on the dinner table.

“Gods look at you,” Jon, a beanpole of a man just beginning to show grey in his beard and hair, said with a wistful smile on his face. “It seems like yesterday you were begging to apprentice at the library and now you’re of age.”

“I keep forgetting how big you are,” he continued, stepping around Esther to wrap Micah up in a hug. “Remember, no matter what happens tonight you’ll always have a home here. Not everyone needs to have some sort of grand magical destiny, and I could always use another set of hands around the shop.”

“Hush dear,” Veronica brushed his Father aside before putting her hands on either side of Micah’s face. “I know that you’re special Micah. All of my babies are. Trevor has his spear, you have your books, and Esther will find her own way. Don’t let your father put the seed of doubt in your heart. You were born for greatness and I know it. Just call it a Mother’s intuition.”

He smiled back uncomfortably. On his sixteenth birthday, Micah’s Father received a Common blessing from Saborell, the God of merchants and craftsmen that allowed him to measure and fit clothing with absolute accuracy. His Mother was forgotten.

Officially the forgotten weren’t discriminated against, but many people whispered that the gods passed them over with their favors for a reason. Veronica tried to hide it, but every day Micah could see how the sidelong pitying glances weighed upon her. Instead, she put every hope in her children. When Trevor was blessed with an Uncommon ability, Micah could have sworn that she was more excited than anyone else in the house, including Trevor.

As a forgotten, she faced daily struggles and would have had next to nothing on her own. Veronica was shunned in the marketplace and generally looked down upon by their neighbors. Unofficially, the forgotten weren’t even allowed to rent or purchase homes in their family’s comfortable upper middle class district.

Veronica was an exception and a sore point for their neighbors. Micah’s Father met her as a young man when she was selling flowers by the side of the road just outside the slums and took a liking to her.

Jon was a good man who could look past something as small as the minor magical blessings that most citizens didn’t even use daily, but the same couldn’t be said about the other craftspeople of Basil’s Cove. Even on the day of their wedding, it was impossible to quell all of the gossip about how she was marrying above her station. That the only reason a pretty girl like Veronica would marry a gangling man like Jon was his attunement and blessing.

To this day, Micah knew better than to bring their wedding and neighbors up around his Mother. Mentioning her Sister in Law’s toast in particular was a great way to get stuck weeding the family garden only to eat bland steamed vegetables for a week.

“Get a good blessing,” Esther ordered him, pressing her shoulder in between their Mother and Micah so that she could wrap her arms around his lower torso. “Sandy says that you’re only going to get a Common ability and that you’ll never be as cool as Trevor. You need to get a good one so I can shut her up.”

“With that motive,” Micah laughed and tousled her hair, “how would I dare get something less than an Uncommon blessing?”

“Good,” Esther nodded curtly, a gleam in her eye as she adopted a serious air. “Now that you know, let’s eat. Mom hasn’t even let me touch that cake for almost an hour while we waited for you to come home.”

After dinner, Micah laid down in his bed, mind racing. Sleep eluded him. It was paradoxical, really. As soon as he drifted off, he would learn his fate. He wanted nothing more than to sleep, but no matter what he tried: counting, meditation, reciting pages from Ansom’s histories, nothing worked. Instead, Micah’s nervous energy kept him unsettled, tossing and turning deep into the night.

Finally he stood up and put on a set of nightclothes. Maybe some fresh air would help. It certainly beat stewing in nervous energy and worrying with his eyes closed.

He stepped out into the small garden that his mother maintained behind their house and made his way to a wooden bench fixed to his home’s wall. Sitting down he glanced up into the night sky. Even in the city, night was peaceful. Far away, Micah heard the bustle of the taverns and brothels, but in his neighborhood there was nothing but the steady thud of the local constable’s spear on cobblestone as he paced down the street.

Thud. Micah never really looked at the stars. *Thud.* Every morning he was up with the dawn, working with Keeper Ansom until sundown. *Thud.* Then it was back home to eat a quick dinner before going to bed and repeating the process. *Thud.* Other boys his age spent time on boys and girls. *Thud.* Chasing after each other all day in order to play giggling breathless games under the stars. *Thud.* They probably didn’t stop for long to enjoy the night’s beauty either. *Thud.*

Micah opened his eyes. He was someplace else. A dimly lit fog surrounded him, and the only object he recognized was the wooden bench that he had fallen asleep on. He stood up hesitantly, glancing into the murky abyss.

“Human,” a genderless voice echoed through the emptiness of the space. “Rejoice for you have been blessed by the sixteen.”

Micah's heart started pounding in his chest. This wasn't how it happened for Trevor. His Brother simply had a dream about how to use his ability and woke up able to see his status sheet with the name of the ability printed upon it.

"As more than one God wishes to select you," the voice continued, "the choice of which blessing to select shall be yours. You will only be told the name of the deity and the rarity of the gift offered to you. Choose wisely as such an opportunity will never come again."

"Jiana, Goddess of Scribes wishes to offer you an Uncommon blessing," the voice intoned evenly. "Mursa, Goddess of Magic and Moonlight wishes to offer you a Mythic blessing, and Ankros, God of Darkness and Struggle wishes to offer you a Rare blessing."

Micah opened his mouth to respond. Clearly he was going to take the Mythic blessing. Mursa and Ankros were both major Gods, their power orders of magnitude higher than the lesser deities that usually blessed humans. Even an Uncommon blessing from one of them could outstrip a Rare or Mythic blessing from a lesser God. Literally, the only blessing more powerful than a Mythic from a Greater God would be to be made a chosen, but each deity could only support one or two of those at a time.

"I apologize," the voice interjected, slightly amused. "It is unusual but there has been a change. Ankros has heard the offer from Mursa and amended his own. Ankros is now also offering a Mythic blessing."

The empty glowing fog sat in silence for a handful of seconds before the voice continued. "Please state the name of the God or Goddess whose blessing you accept and you will be expelled from this place to awaken with the power of their blessing in full force."

Micah's mouth flopped open, his initial answer caught in his throat. His pick of Mythic powers from Greater Gods. That was something out of a story, reserved for the rich sons of nobles born under auspicious stars. He marshalled his thoughts as he tried to make sense of the impossible situation. Having finally come to a decision, he opened his mouth to give his answer

Chapter 2 - Mythic?

Micah woke up on the bench, the Sun beating down into his eyes and his heart racing. Quickly, he sat up trying to process the events of last night. He only knew one person with a Rare blessing, and that was from an intermediate God. Stanley had been immediately recruited as an apprentice by Basil's Cove's Arch Wizard.

He shivered in the chill morning air as he imagined what sort of favorable treatment he'd receive with a Mythic Blessing from a Major deity. There's no question that the guilds in Basil's Cove would start a bidding war over his services. They might even send him to the Capital to train with the high nobility. Images of dreamy princesses, heaps of magical items, looted dungeons and slain monsters flashed through Micah's vision as he sat still, grinning like an idiot.

"Status," he said, unable to resist any longer. His vision blurred and the status screen came up, a light blue roll of papyrus covered in tight and efficient lettering just as Trevor described.

Micah Silver

Age 16
Class/Level -
XP
HP 10/10

Attributes

Body 5, Agility 5, Mind 9, Spirit 8

Attunement

Moon 5 Sun 2 Night 4

Mana

Moon 10/10 Sun 4/4 Night 8/8

Affinities

Time 10
Wood 6
Air 5

Blessings

Mythic Blessing of Mursa - Blessed Return, Ageless Folio

Skills

Fishing 1
Librarian 3
Spear 2
Spellcasting 2

Micah nodded to himself. More or less average physical attributes combined with a strong mind and spirit. About what he had expected. The only real abnormality was his affinities. Unlike other attributes and skills, affinities were more or less considered static.

Although an affinity could be changed through powerful rites of magic, the difficulty and expense of such rituals meant that they were rarely performed.

Instead, a spellcaster was more or less defined by their starting affinities. That wasn't to say that a caster couldn't make do with weaker affinities, but affinities determined the mana efficiency of a caster's magic as well as the speed that they learned new spells. Theoretically, a scrappy spellcaster could make do with weak affinities and perseverance, but in practice affinities served as a sort of soft ceiling on a caster's abilities. His affinities in Wood and Air weren't bad, slightly above average as dedicated spellcasters usually had affinities in the 4-5 range. The Wood affinity in particular marked him as a potentially above average healer. Useful, but not nearly enough to justify a Mythic blessing.

The 10 affinity in Time was something else. According to Ansom's books, Time and Order/Chaos were the two primal fields of magic, much rarer and more powerful than their elemental counterparts, but poorly understood due to their rarity. Order/Chaos wasn't an unheard of affinity, albeit usually only welded at exceedingly low affinities by archwizards.

The only problem was that all of their spells were incredibly powerful and hard to utilize. Even with a 10 affinity, there was almost no way that Micah would be able to learn Time magic without years of experience and the levels that went with it. Worse, given the magic's rarity, the chances that Micah would find anyone able to tutor him in Time magic were just about nil. Although the strength and rarity of his affinity marked Micah as a potential prodigy, it existed just past his grasp, taunting him.

His attunements were much more standard. Awarded by the three Major Gods for acts done in their service, each attunement was associated with its own mana pool, the size and regeneration of which depended on a combination of Micah's level and attunement. Night, Sun, and Moon mana all had slightly different properties when applied to spellcasting. Micah's Moon mana worked well for all three affinities while the Night mana was only really useful for Air spells. As for the Sun mana? It was better than nothing and he could use it as currency in a pinch.

Currency. Micah sighed. If he couldn't catch the eye of some noble with his Mythic blessing, he'd need to find a way to earn attunement sooner or later. All exchanges required either a barter of goods or an exchange of attunement. Daily goods usually only cost slivers of an attunement, a tenth of a point or less, but expensive objects such as enchanted weapons easily ran into the dozens of points. Even if he could barely use Sun mana, Sun attunement was the primary currency in human kingdoms. At least there it could be some use to him.

Finally, Micah called up the descriptions of his blessing. His face fell, as his elation over his abilities left him like the water from a shattered pot.

Blessed Return

Casting time: 1 minute

The user casts their cognition through time back into their own body, five years in the past. Their level, affinities, and attunement are all set to the level they were at five years ago. Skills are not reset allowing the user to travel back in time with their skills at their current level. This ability is only usable once every five years (subjective time). 1/1 uses available.

Ageless Folio

Bound Item

The Ageless Folio takes the form of a tattoo on the user's wrist. The user may freely withdraw the Folio, which takes the form of a thin book, at will. While holding the Folio the user learns skills 20% faster and all of their thoughts are recorded automatically in their own hand. The Folio has an infinite number of pages and the user instinctively knows on which page any information rests. Notes taken in the Folio will remain in the Folio even if the user utilizes *Blessed Return* allowing the user to retain notes from a previous life. The Folio is blank when bestowed upon the user.

How in the hells was this Mythic? Clearly the ability was powerful, anything that allowed someone to wind and coil time like a rope was insanely potent. Useful? That was a different question.

Theoretically he could go back five years and train his skills, but Micah didn't even know how that would work. Humans only gained access to their status screen at the age of sixteen. If he were to travel to when he was eleven he wouldn't even have any way of tracking his progress. Of course, he'd have to give up everything. His body, his attunements, any levels he earned. They would all be thrown away for the uncertain chance that the next iteration of his life would somehow yield a better result.

It was powerful in theory, but the idea of having to live his childhood once again, drew a shudder from Micah. He needed adventure, to defeat monsters and conquer dungeons until his aura was fat and heavy with attunement. Returning to his eleventh birthday only to be scolded by his mother for every perceived misdeed was the exact opposite of what he craved.

He groaned, wondering what Ankros' blessing would have been. The God of Darkness and Struggle wasn't a popular subject in human kingdoms. The fact that he openly antagonized humans, sending monsters and barbaric Durgh after them so that humanity could 'hone itself in combat' against his children didn't earn the God many friends.

Even that life of isolation and distrust would be acceptable if he had a proper Mythic blessing. For every blessed individual, their blessing was the core of their identity. A unique

ability or skill that set them apart from others and gave them an advantage in combat. In every story of legend, the hero's blessing was their signature move.

Rasdar the Bold had the Mythic ability to create a great dragon from flame that he could control with his mind. Nissia the Usurper could control the flow of all liquids, including the blood inside her opponent's bodies. Even an Uncommon ability would let someone ignore poison, summon a powerful bound weapon or strike someone with their minds.

Micah? He had a book that helped him learn faster and an ability that he couldn't use without sacrificing everything. Admittedly, the book was useful as a utility skill, but its power was far from Mythic.

At least he had two skill ranks in spears and spellcasting. With a little bit of wood and air magic he could become a neophyte battlemage and offer his services to an adventuring guild. Most of them were looking for people capable of casting healing spells and Micah could already hold his own against low level beasts even without any magic.

"Micah!" Esther screamed, running out into the garden and jumping onto him, careful to avoid the tomatoes for fear of raising their Mother's ire. "You weren't in bed! Did you get a blessing? Tell me what you have!"

He rocked back from her onslaught blankly before smiling wanly. It's true that his ability wasn't properly Mythic, but the book alone wasn't that bad. It was certainly better than the frequently mundane Common abilities.

"I guess Mursa spotted me studying magic all day so she gave me a book," Micah did his best to crack a smile, summoning the Ageless Folio for Esther to see. It didn't look all that impressive. The book had cracked and battered covers, inlaid with basic geometric designs and wrapped around a handful of yellowing sheets of paper.

"Does it have spells or some sort of lost secret knowledge," Esther looked skeptically from the book to Micah. "You promised that you'd at least get an Uncommon ability. I bet Sandy chores for a week. If I lose, you're going to be the one doing those chores"

"It is Uncommon," Micah's face strained under the weight of his forced cheer. "It gives me a 20% increase to learning skills and it has infinite space for taking notes. With this I'll be able to save years worth of research in becoming a wizard."

"You have affinities then?" Esther's eyes were sparkling once again as she snuggled up against Micah.

"Wood 6 and Air 5," Micah nodded at her. Desperately he wanted to tell her everything, pour out his grievances over his decent but underwhelming skillset, but he knew better.

Anything he told Esther, her best friend Sandy would know within hours. The rest of the street would be in on the secret twenty four hours after that. It had certainly happened before.

If Micah wanted to avoid everyone mocking him over his more or less useless ability, that was the only choice. Already he could hear it. "Mythic Micah." Gods, it even alliterated. He'd never be able to live a name like that down.

"Super cool Micah!" Esther jumped up from his lap, narrowly avoiding the tomatoes. "I'll tell Mom and Dad right away! They'll be so excited. Two Uncommons. Wait until Sandy hears that!"

He watched her scamper away, all energy and excitement. There was something about her enthusiasm that wore away at Micah. For one brief second he'd had the world laid out in front of him only to have it jerked away. He sighed.

No. It was time to stop dreaming about being a hero. The Mythic title was little more than a cruel prank, but the Goddess did provide him with the power and affinities he would need to carve a comfortable life for himself. He took a breath, reorienting his expectations. He would never be a champion of freedom and justice rubbing shoulders with the nobility, but it was well within his power to help the local guilds clear the nearby dungeons and retire to research like Keeper Ansom.

He smiled weakly to himself as he got up from the bench, smothering the dreams he hadn't dared to articulate even two days ago. From inside the house his mother called out to alert everyone that breakfast was ready. His blessing might not be what he longed for, but they were certainly better than what a lot of people made do with.

He smiled weakly to the empty garden. Maybe if he kept repeating that to himself he'd even start to believe it.

Micah glanced toward the door inside and thought of his Mother. As disappointed as he was, at least he received a blessing. Sighing, he walked into the house, trying to make plans for his future.

Chapter 3 - A New Life

Trevor walked into the house, larger than life with his spear over one shoulder, covered in grime and streaming sweat. Micah was sitting next to Esther at the breakfast table as their Mother brought over a plate of pancakes. Jon was absent, likely having eaten already and gone into the shop early.

“Micah!” Trevor shouted at him, dropping the spear by the door and punching him in the shoulder. “We just cleared out a scar wolf den, but I hurried over as soon as I could to congratulate you.”

“Hey Trevor,” Micah smiled, rubbing at the bruise on his shoulder. Trevor was around level nine by now and given his vanguard class, his body attribute was well over ten making him roughly twice as strong as the average forgotten adult. “What would you do if I didn’t receive a blessing? That entrance really would’ve been in bad taste”

“I’ve seen how hard you work Micah,” Trevor snorted as he grabbed an apple from the table. “You sure as hell put more time and effort into your training than I did during my apprenticeship. If anyone was gonna get a blessing, I knew it was gonna be you.”

“So,” Trevor continued, flopping down into a seat next to Micah. “How’s my little brother doing now that he’s a man? Did you get anything good?”

“Uncommon and Mursa,” Micah summoned the Ageless Folio. “It helps with my skill growth and lets me perfectly organize my notes. That plus Wood and Air affinities seems to peg me as a caster of some sort.”

“How good are your affinities?” Trevor asked, trying to take the Folio from Micah only for his hand to pass through the ramshackle book. “I might be able to get you into the Lancers if you’re above four on one of them. We’re always short on casters and wizards are even rarer even if you’re only a dual affinity.”

“Six Wood and Five Air,” Micah answered around a forkful of pancake, trying to ignore Trevor as his Brother kept trying to poke the Folio while smiling like a madman as his finger slipped through the magical book. “I don’t think I’m going to be a high wizard anytime soon, but it should be enough for me to hold my own in a city the size of Basil’s Cove.”

Trevor gave a low whistle before slapping Micah on the back again. “Hold your own?” He laughed. “With numbers like that and a little luck figuring out a ritual to raise your affinities you could end up as a high wizard pretty easily. Affinities make things simpler but with a high enough skill level you can overcome a lot.”

“Look,” Trevor’s face grew a little more serious. “You let your blessing be known and some of the bigger guilds in town will try to recruit you. Now the Lancers aren’t a tiny guild, but we’re hardly the Golden Drakes. I’d love for you to join my guild but I’m not gonna push you. Anywhere you go it’s gonna be years of hard work, and a bigger guild could probably support your research better than the Lancers. Of course, if you join up with us, you’ll get to hang out with me and that’s GOT to be worth something.”

"If I had a Rare gift I'd probably try to go to the Capital or something," Micah chuckled as Trevor batted his eyelashes at him. "If I'm staying in Basil's Cove, I might as well join the Lancers. As you said, it's going to be a lot of work no matter where I go so I might as well sign on with some people I like."

"That's the spirit bro," Trevor laughed while Esther nodded earnestly. "You never stood a chance against my winsome personality and shameless begging."

"How do I sign up for the Golden Drakes again," Micah rolled his eyes and ate another forkful of pancakes. "I'm sure I wouldn't get razed as much over there."

"Nope!" Trevor shouted, standing up. "No takesies backsies. Look, I'm gonna take a bath. Why don't you finish breakfast and then we can head down to the guild hall. I can get you registered and get you a class. You're gonna have to start earning attunements soon, no real reason to waste time."

Trevor rumbled out of the room, just as much a force of nature as when he arrived. For a second there was only the clink of silverware on plates as Esther and Micah kept eating. Then his Mother sat at the table and smiled at him.

"Uncommon and from a Major Goddess," She was beaming. Micah felt sick to his stomach as her pride showered on him. He couldn't even think of how his Mother would react if she knew that his blessing was Mythic but largely unusable.

"I told you there was nothing to worry about Micah," She tousled his hair. "All of my babies are destined for something special. I just know it."

Micah smiled back uncomfortably, and finished his pancakes.

An hour later he was standing next to Trevor as his brother flirted with a cute attendant working the front desk at the Lancers guild hall. The building was a two story stone edifice, ugly squat, and long. The interior had some decorations but by and large it seemed to be a no nonsense affair. The guilds were collections of mercenaries with charters granted by the local government to take commissions and fight monsters. The Lancers main hall looked every inch the part. The furniture was crude but functional, the walls were covered with trophies from high tier monsters, and almost everyone seemed to have a weapon of some sort strapped to their bodies.

Finally the woman finished putting together Micah's introductory packet, a brief questionnaire regarding his abilities and goals. Quietly, he took a table and filled out the paperwork while Trevor kept chatting with her. After briefly writing down his abilities and signing a statement certifying that he hadn't overstated them, Micah returned the paperwork to the front desk where it was slipped through a slot in the wooden wall behind the attendant.

Then he waited for almost a half hour, sweating while Trevor tried over and over again to convince the attendant to go on a date with him. By the time a guild official walked into the hall to talk to Micah, the cheesiness of Trevor's pickup lines had reached the point that even some of the more hard bitten mercenaries sitting around the front desk were struggling to keep a straight face.

"Silver," the woman snapped at Trevor. "Leave Ashley alone. Other Silver." she pointed at Micah.

"Follow me," the statement was clipped and dismissive as the official had spun on a heel and walked down the hallway into the bowels of the guild.

Micah glanced at Trevor, confused. Trevor shrugged and made a shooping motion with one hand before turning away from the front desk and finally leaving Ashley in peace. Micah hurried to catch up to the official, almost reaching her by the time she turned into a side room.

Hesitantly he stepped in after her, only to see that the official was already seated with a hazy white ball made from glass or crystal sitting on a pedestal on the table in front of her. Micah walked forward and pulled out the chair at the table before sitting down.

She let him sit for a while. A couple of times he opened his mouth to say something, but stopped himself when he noticed her attention focusing on him. Finally she spoke.

"Micah Silver," she spoke the words as if she was reading them, but his paperwork was nowhere to be seen. "Brother of Trevor Silver, a guild member of good standing. You have low levels of skill in both spear and spellcasting. It's true that you have two affinities with decent scores, but it would take a fair investment of time and money on our part to train your existing skills to a level where you could be useful. Tell me why our guild should invest that time in you."

Micah stared at her blankly for a second, his mind racing. All he knew was that he was supposed to join a guild. It's what you *did* if you had a blessing used in combat. Almost on its own his mouth opened, desperate to fill the growing silence.

"Because I've secretly been adventuring with Trevor off and on for the last year?" Micah asked, hating himself for the slight stammer he heard in his voice. He knew that The Lancers should be thrilled to recruit him, wizards and healers didn't grow on trees after all, but the official's brusque nature kept him off balance and already he was showing weakness.

"I mean," Micah firmed his voice up slightly and straightened his back. "I've been studying basic spellcasting at my internship since I turned thirteen. If you ask Keeper Ansom he'll tell you that I'm a diligent worker."

Micah paused for a breath. This wasn't right. He wasn't here to beg and plead for a job, he was here to show the Lancers that he belonged amongst them. They weren't going to give him attunement to be timid and hide himself away. He was here to learn how to fight, and he needed them to know it.

"More than anything I've always wanted to be a wizard," his voice was steady, even. "If the Lancers turn me down, I'll find another guild. I know I'm going to have to work myself ragged if I want to be any good at this, but that's going to happen no matter where I go. I just figured that here there would be a couple more friendly faces while I put in that work."

For a couple long seconds there was no reply. Finally, a smile broke out on the official's face as she jotted down a couple notes on a piece of paper before her.

"Good," she replied. "I'm Zoe Daniels and I'm a deputy master here. Trevor might have told you about me because I'm the one in charge of his little band of misfits. He most *certainly* didn't tell me about letting his kid brother tag along on combat missions. I'll have to speak with him about that later."

"Oh," Micah replied sheepishly, scratching at the back of his head.

"I'm glad you followed up on your original response," Zoe continued. "There are plenty of people with talent on Karell, but over the years our guild has found something out about talent. Do you know what that is Micah?"

"Skills are more important?" Micah asked, grasping at straws while trying his hardest to sound confident.

"Close," Zoe chuckled before tapping her chest. "This is what matters. Determination. A talented individual who doesn't try isn't fit to hold the sword of a mediocre individual who works from sunup to sun down. Of course, talent still helps, but the Lancers aren't in the habit of recruiting the fancy noble types that will sit around talking about all the monsters they're going to slay but never leave the tap rooms."

"Now Micah," she continued, pushing the ball on the pedestal toward him. "If you put your hands on this class crystal, you'll be able to get a class, but you'll be locked into the Lancers for a decade. If you want to back out, now is the time to do it. You don't even have to give a reason. I don't even need you to elaborate. It can be as simple as 'the work sounds too hard', 'you want to join another guild', or even 'that you want to chase girls around town for a couple months before settling down.'"

Without saying anything, Micah exhaled, trying to calm his nerves before putting his hands on the sphere. An electric shock ran through his fingers, and his hands could no longer

move. Quickly, the sphere heated up, burning his trapped hands as Micah fought the urge to try and rip his hands away. All while Zoe watched on, disinterested.

“Analyzing skills and affinities,” the same genderless voice from his dream spoke in Micah’s head.

“Available classes are Wizard, Chronomancer, Aeromancer, Healer, Librarian, Spearman, Warrior,” the voice rattled off the list without any emotion. “Please select an option to gain more information about it.”

A specialist class for every affinity, a non-combat class, and two close combat classes. Not a bad set of choices, but it wasn’t that hard for him to narrow down. Micah knew better than to pick any of the specialist classes. Each provided a small bonus to his magic in that field at the cost of ever being able to cast spells of another affinity ever again. For example, if he became a Chronomancer he’d get a 10% boost to his time magic, minimal increases per level to his HP, much greater increases to his per level Mana, and periodic attribute points added to his Spirit and Mind attributes.

Unfortunately, despite its power, chronomancy wasn’t a real option. There weren’t very many time spells out there, and most of them were higher tier. If he specialized in time magic, he’d have to work for years without any access to magic whatsoever until he leveled up enough to actually use a time spell. That was, of course, if he was lucky enough to every get his hands on the spell formula for one.

As for the combat classes, those would forever bar him from spellcasting in exchange for higher HP per level and periodic attribute points in Body and Agility. He could still learn a martial art and benefit from his affinity and mana in that way, but without access to a class that blended melee and magic, that selection would be tantamount to turning his back on spellcasting forever. No, there was only one choice that let him use all three of his affinities as well as his spear.

“I would like to be a Wizard,” Micah replied, his teeth slightly gritted against the pain while Zoe nodded approvingly.

“Wizard- an advanced spellcasting class that allows the user to utilize and combine more than one affinity. Wizards gain mind and spirit attributes in alternating levels and have a high rate of mana growth. To unlock this class the user must have at least one level in the spellcasting skill and more than one affinity.” The voice paused briefly after reading the description. “Would you like to confirm your selection?”

“By the Sixteen,” Micah writhed as the heat increased on his hands. “Yes!”

The pain stopped and soothing white mist flowed over him. Micah could feel his body changing on a fundamental level as the energy washed through him, cleansing him and easing his pain. After a couple of seconds, it was all over and the hazy light in the sphere was gone. Micah glanced at it sheepishly.

“Don’t worry about that,” Zoe grunted, standing up and extending a hand to him. “It’ll recharge in a couple of days and be ready for a new recruit then. For now, welcome aboard Micah Silver. I hope you’re ready to sweat because we’re going to work you hard.”

Chapter 4 - Newbie

“Put some effort into it Silver!” Cornell Dover, the leader of Lancer combat team ‘D,’ screamed at Micah. “I need this man up, in action, and drawing the monsters’ attention in thirty seconds or the front line is going to collapse and we’re going to be neck deep in Charnel Horrors!”

Micah’s hands were covered in blood, his heart racing, as he literally shoved his left hand into the wound, grasping a handful of torn muscle fiber and mouthing the words to *augmented mending* from the Ageless Folio that he held in his right hand. The muscles writhed and twisted like a cluster of snakes as they sought each other out and began reconnecting.

Then Micah ran out of Moon mana. Frantically he switched to Night mana but it felt like he was knee deep in mud. Everything was slow, barely functional as the mismatches between the mana and the spell impeded him at every turn. The muscles wove together, making tenuous connections under his hand and growing stronger.

An arrow whistled past Micah’s face but he ignored it, knowing that he didn’t have enough mana to complete the spells if he let himself be distracted. Distantly he heard the arrow clatter against a wall behind him.

He pulled his hand out of the wound, propping the Folio into his armpit Micah frantically began stitching the skin back together with the copper needle and thread he kept in a pouch at his waist. As soon as the hasty sewing job was done, Micah cast *augmented mending* once again, switching to Sun mana to avoid depleting his almost exhausted reserves of Night mana.

The spell took and the wound closed, leaving nothing behind but an angry reddish purple line. Micah pursed his lips. With more skill in *augmented mending*, he’d be able to perform an operation like this without having to manually manipulate the injured tissue or field suture a wounded comrade. One day he’d be able to cast the spell without leaving a scar at all.

The pig he was clutching onto squealed and ran away. Exhausted from stress and mana use, Micah stood up, still covered in its blood, as Cornell walked over to him nodding his head slowly.

“Not bad Silver, I won’t even have to deduct the cost of the pig out of your pay,” the team leader threw him a wet towel. “*Augmented mending* is a second tier spell and you were able to cast it on a seriously injured target twice within 30 seconds. I’d still like you to get the casting time down on it, but you’ll do for an emergency healer for now. Hamstring wounds like that can get really nasty if someone doesn’t patch them up right away.”

“Was the arrow really necessary?” Micah replied, wiping the blood from his hands and tunic. “The exercise was bad enough without you trying to scare the life out of me.”

“That’s why you need to get the casting time down son,” Cornell chuckled, walking over to a weapon rack on the nearby wall of the training room. “The exam says that I’m supposed to miss you with an arrow at twenty seconds. In combat nothing is going to just sit there while you get a warrior back in the fight. They’re going to target you.”

“I passed though, right?” Micah asked, trying to keep the weariness from his voice. Cornell had made him do healing drills five days out of every ten, but they were by far his least favorite. *Mending* could cure bruises and abrasions, but to train *augmented mending* there was no other option but to... procure injured animals for Micah to heal. Usually that meant Cornell surprising him in the middle of another activity, such as spear practice, with an animal that he would promptly injure in front of Micah, forcing him to stop what he was doing and heal it on the spot.

It was good practice, Micah was sure of that. In three months his spellcasting skill had risen to five and his skill in *mending* and *augmented mending* had followed suit. Still, Micah longed for the day when Cornell certified him ready to join a combat team and he could leave the constant and grinding training schedule behind him.

“Yes you did,” Cornell replied with a smile, throwing him a spear. “You already know *gale*, *air knife*, and *wind shield*. Gustav has certified you as an aeromancer, and with that test you’re certified as a healer. Now we just need to get you up to snuff with the spear and you’ll be cleared for field work.”

“Are you sure?” Micah caught the spear, glancing down at it dubiously. “I’m awfully worn out after all that spellcasting. I’m not sure I’ll be all that useful right now.”

“You know the rules,” Cornell shot him a wink. “Make it five minutes without letting me hit you or hit me once and you win.”

“You’re level sixteen Cornell,” Micah tested the pliability of the spear before taking up a guard stance. “There’s no way I’ll be able to even score one hit on you in a fair fight.”

“Simple advice then,” Cornell twirled his spear. “Don’t fight fair.”

The rest of the afternoon was a bruising blur of constant fighting and Micah using the wood spell *refresh* to restore both of their stamina. Finally, for the first time in the hundred plus spars, spread out over the preceding three months, Micah managed to tag Cornell on the forearm with the side of his spear. Micah wasn’t sure if the strike was luck, skill, or just Cornell deciding it was time for him to graduate. Cheerfully, the huge black man proclaimed his training over and told Micah to hit the sack early because he’d be teamed with a ‘newbie squad’ the following day.

Laying down, Micah opened his status screen to take in the previous three months worth of work.

Micah Silver

Age 16
Class/Level Wizard 1
XP 0/50
HP 10/10

Attributes

Body 5, Agility 5, Mind 9, Spirit 8

Attunement

Moon 8 Sun 3 Night 5

Mana

Moon 5/16 Sun 4/6 Night 1/8

Affinities

Time 10

Wood 6

Tier I - *Refresh* 3, *Mending* 3

Tier II - *Augmented Mending* 2

Air 5

Tier I - *Gale* 2, *Air Knife* 3

Tier II - *Wind Shield* 1

Blessings

Mythic Blessing of Mursa - Blessed Return, Ageless Folio

Skills

Anatomy	2
Fishing	1
Herbalism	1
Librarian	3
Spear	3
Spellcasting	5

His attunement gains were modest, but that wasn't surprising, the Lancers didn't let him leave their guild hall to actually earn anything. Really, only the three points of Moon attunement were by his own hand.

It shouldn't have surprised him that Mursa would award his magical achievements with attunement. One for learning his first spell and one for each second tier spell. According to Gustav, his magic instructor, that attunement would be limited to the first higher tier spell per tier per affinity. Unfortunately, he wouldn't just be able to earn attunement by learning multiple higher tier spells in the same field.

As for the point of Night and Sun attunement? Those were gifts from the guild. Loans he was told. As a caster they wanted to make sure he had enough mana to train with, but a full point of attunement was incredibly valuable. He'd need to pay those back as soon as possible or their interest would likely bankrupt him.

His spells were simple but useful. As for the wood spells, *Refresh* cost very little mana but allowed him to restore stamina to a tired warrior, allowing them to retain their focus and continue fighting at peak efficiency. *Mending* healed bruises, sprains and abrasions for a minor mana cost. *Augmented mending* however was the spell he was proudest of. It was still at a low level, but for a hefty price in mana he could close up even fatal wounds in a matter of seconds. Even without the other abilities, that spell on its own would make him a valuable addition to almost any adventuring party.

The air spells weren't quite as impressive, but they still made Micah a useful addition to a combat team. *Gale* simply launched a gust of high speed wind that could knock a target off balance, trigger a trap or otherwise push something at a distance. *Air Knife* was a much more useful spell, allowing him to fire a small blade of compressed air to slash at a foe. It didn't do much to heavily armored foes, but a healer should be avoiding them anyway. *Wind shield* was a useful but unimpressive spell. Micah could create a sphere of air that would deflect incoming arrows and gaseous attacks. According to Gustav it was incredibly useful as a shield against archers, poisoners, and all manner of wispy or ethereal foes, but it just didn't seem essential to Micah.

Other than his increases in magic, Micah had already grown to appreciate the power of the Folio. Despite frequent bruising practice his skill level in spears had only grown by a point. In that same time, he'd learned anatomy and herbalism as part of his studies as a healer and gained three points in spellcasting. Despite his earlier doubts about the blessing, Gustav was lavish in his praise over the speed with which Micah learned abilities when he had access to the Folio.

Internally, he wondered if his reaction on the day of his blessing had been too harsh. He hadn't told anyone that his blessing was actually Mythic, still ashamed of its fairly modest nature. That said, having perfect notes of his instructors' teachings to study each night combined with the 20% skill bonus served as a much greater boon than he'd given it credit for.

He blew out his candle and laid down. Cornell was right. If they were convening a newbie team, he'd have a big day tomorrow. He'd want to put his best foot forward when he met the people that in all likelihood would be his companions for the foreseeable future.

Chapter 5 - The First Quest

Butterflies filled Micah's stomach as he walked into the training room to meet the rest of his team for the first time. As a spellcaster he'd mostly been trained on his own by Gustav, but occasionally, when he sweated under Cornell's kind gaze, he'd see some of the Lancer's other candidates working in the training hall. Cornell never gave him a moment to talk to them, but Micah couldn't help but wonder which of them would be members of his new party.

As he walked into the room, Micah saw Cornell talking with another black man. Where Cornell was thin but well muscled, focusing on agility and balance over brawn, the new man was a giant. He towered over Cornell, his bare torso covered in well defined and bulging muscles accented by various tattoos. Complimenting his mass was a gigantic single bladed cleaver, almost as long as a short man's body, that the newcomer held over his shoulder with practiced nonchalance.

Micah wasn't sure, but he could vaguely make out some Durghish features in the stranger. In addition to his size and skin tone, he had slightly wideset eyes and less prominent ears than the average human. Of course, this was all speculation. You didn't just ask someone if they had Durghish blood in them. Gods help you if they were. Everyone knew the Durgh were prone to violent outbursts and inquiring about their ancestry sounded like the perfect way to discover the truth behind the rumors firsthand.

Nearby, two women whispered together. They were pretty Micah supposed, in the same way that most young and physically fit women were. He was more interested in their equipment. Both wore robes inlaid with runes, obviously at least slightly magical. One had two

shortswords strapped to her hips, as well as a bandoleer of thin, needlelike daggers crossing her chest. The other held a bow, currently unstrung, with a matching quiver on her back and a shortsword at her hip.

Both moved with a grace and fluidity while talking that stirred envy in Micah's gut. He was hardly clumsy, it was hard to be a proper adventurer with bad reflexes after all, but both of them made him look like a newborn colt, all stumbling and knees.

Seeing him enter, Cornell stopped talking and waved him over.

"Silver, this is Drekt," Cornell introduced the towering bald man. "He's blessed by Ankros and pretty serious about it. I know that you aren't some sort of champion of Luxos, but I wanted to make sure there wouldn't be any sort of problem. He has seniority and I was about to make him your team leader. You can always turn down your team assignment, but that would just mean that you would return to training until another team becomes available."

"Nice to meet you Drekt," Micah extended his hand. "I'm actually blessed by Mursa, but when I acquired my blessing I also received an offer from Ankros. As long as you know your business, I'm not going to hold your patron against you."

"Good!" Drekt boomed, slapping his hand into Micah's with bruising force. "Ankros is woefully misunderstood in human lands. Most can't see beyond the stifling order that Luxos demands. They just see the dungeons and monsters created by Ankros and assume that those challenges make him evil. No one bothers to think that the mediocrity enforced by rigid laws is the real evil. Luxos prunes humanity like a hedge, growing us into a specific shape to match his desires. He never bothers to actually ask what form would be best for humanity as a race, instead just substituting his will for the natural order."

"You know the rules Drekt," Cornell shook his head in exasperation. "No politics. Just because I was able to pull together a team without any ardent Luxos followers doesn't mean that they aren't out there. There are still plenty in the Guild's hierarchy just waiting for you to fail so they can jump all over you."

Drekt opened his mouth to respond, a hangdog expression on his face, when the door to the training room burst open. A portly teen ran inside, huffing from exertion as he hastily tried to adjust a poorly fitted suit of chainmail hanging loosely from his bulging torso. In his hands he awkwardly held a large shield and a small warhammer. Micah winced as the newcomer jerkily shifted the hammer to his armpit, narrowly avoiding a gash on his forearm from the spike on the hammer's reverse end, before the stranger doubled over and began panting for breath.

"Now that all of us have finally arrived," Cornell shot a withering glance at the struggling new arrival, "we can finally begin introductions."

“Some of you,” Cornell indicated Drekt and the two women with his free hand, “have served together in the past, but we do have a pair of new arrivals so I think I should re-explain how this works. My name is Cornell Dover and I am in charge of D company for the Lancers which consists of three combat teams and a reserve team. Present in this room is our reserve team.”

“As you are probably aware,” he continued, his voice taking on a lecturing tone, “a combat team consists of between three and six individuals. Right now the three combat teams in my company are full, but injuries and promotions happen often enough that all of you will get your chance once you get a few levels under your belt. Hells, if you do well enough together you might all be promoted to combat status as a unit. Until then, you’ll be dispatched on mostly low profit missions in the hopes that you can hone yourselves enough to earn a spot on a combat team.”

“Although I am your boss,” the tone of Cornell’s voice put the last word in quotation marks. “Your day to day operations and orders will come from Drekt here.”

Cornell slapped the larger man on the back. Despite his comparatively slight stature, their difference in levels gave the blow enough force that the hulking man stumbled forward a step.

“Now that I’ve said my piece, why don’t you go around the room and introduce yourselves, your class, and your blessing.” Cornell smiled, his teeth a brilliant white in the training room’s dim light.

For a second no one spoke. Then Drekt rolled his mountainous shoulders and shuffled forward.

“I am Drekt Garrul,” the large man said proudly, his voice a deep clear bass. “I’m a Ravager, a class devoted to all out attacks with heavy bladed weapons and some limited spellcasting ability, mostly related to enhancing myself. My blessing is from Ankros, and it allows me to ignore pain in combat and absorb a small amount of the skill levels of enemies that I kill without aid. From time to time I may ask you to leave an opponent to me alone. I do not do so out of hubris, but instead out of a desire to grow stronger.”

“Josephine Redflower,” one of the two women stepped forward slightly. “Call me Jo, only my parents call me Josephine. I’m a scout. Most of the time I’m finding our targets for us but when I fight, I use stealth and agility more than brute strength. Well, that and I have a little water affinity. My blessing is from Nysatress, Goddess of Water and Travel. It’s nothing super impressive, but lets me walk silently.”

“Useful for sneaking up on people but not much else,” she shrugged. “Not that I need it given how much the rest of you tromp around and raise a ruckus.”

“Sarah Redflower,” the other woman said quietly but without a hint of nervousness. “I’m Jo’s sister and the team’s archer. My gift is from Tennema, God Wood and Life. When I fire my bow, living things shy away from my arrows. Cover behind a tree or bush is more or less meaningless against me. I can also ‘target’ someone within sight and I won’t lose track of their location as long as they stay within a certain range of me. A useful ability when Jo keeps trying to get the jump on me.”

Jo smirked, a lively grin flashing across her face. “If you didn’t throw a fit every time I dyed your hair in your hair in your sleep, I’d probably stop doing it.”

“One of these days I’m going to actually follow through on my threats and actually shoot you,” Sarah responded, unamused.

“Your words wound me more than any arrow,” Jo clasped both hands to her chest. “To think that you’d respond to my sisterly love and mild pranks with threats of violence.”

Cornell cleared his throat, silencing the two women with glare. Once he was sure that they were done with their digression he motioned for Micah to continue.

“Micah Silver,” Micah spoke up, trying to keep the catch from his voice as the entire room trained their focus on him. He’d never been all that great with crowds, that’d always been more of Trevor’s thing. “Wizard and healer. I have affinities in wood and wind, and I’m told that I’m acceptable with a spear in a pinch. I’m blessed by Mursa with a book that lets me learn skills faster and take notes.”

“Uh,” the overweight young man stuttered slightly. “My name is William Grantly but everyone calls me Will.”

Everyone in the room stood, still looking at Will. The silence dragged on until Sarah clicked her tongue.

“What is your class and blessing Will,” she spoke curtly, a cutting tone barely concealed by her melodic voice.

“Oh, OH, sorry,” Will blushed. “I’m a vanguard so I guess I uh stop people? My blessing is from Dunn, Goddess of Earth and Artifice and I uh. I get hard?”

“That sounds useful at parties,” Jo snickered, punching her sister in the shoulder while Sarah just shook her head.

“What Will MEANT to say,” Cornell interjected before things could get out of hand, “is that he has a RARE blessing from Dunn. He turns his skin into stone making him resistant to

most damage and his strength almost doubles. He just received his blessing a little under a month ago, but there's pressure from the top to get him into the field as soon as possible. With a blessing like that there's no use letting him languish away in a training hall. After all, with that ability even if he screws up, it's not like he's going to get hurt."

With that introduction, Jo's snickering stopped and Sarah looked at Will appraisingly. Micah smothered a pang of jealousy. With a proper Mythic ability, that would've been him. He knew that he'd be better in the long run without the fawning and preferential treatment, but that didn't mean that some part of him didn't long for it. After all, what child didn't grow up dreaming of being special, a hero that could keep his community safe while being showered in attunement and praise?

"But what about us?" Drecht asked, a frown on his massive face. "His skin is made of stone, but what happens if he screws up and we get hurt?"

"Micah's a healer," Cornell waved vaguely in his direction, drawing a series of unwanted and curious gazes to him. "That's a lot more than most parties get, reserve *or* combat."

"Now," Cornell continued, pointedly ignoring the women's antics, "it's time to talk about your first mission. Our Guild has a standing contract with Basil's Cove to keep the road to Westmarch clear. There's a nightwasp hive in the area that we periodically send combat teams into for royal honey so we don't want to wipe it out if at all possible. Instead, we regularly send reserve teams to sweep the area and keep their numbers in check."

"It's a bit of a hike," Cornell began handing out crude vellum maps of the area, "so you should probably set out fairly soon. We want you to stay in the field for three days clearing the area. You'll be rewarded with attunement for each stinger you retrieve, but remember. Don't go to the hive. Even though individual nightwasps aren't terribly dangerous, they will swarm you and you will die. The guild has spent enough time and energy training you lot that we'd prefer it not all come to nothing."

Micah nodded as he looked over the map. Already he could feel the vague itching sensation in his wrist that signified that the Ageless Folio was automatically making a perfect copy of the drawing. Nightwasps were about a foot long, and although their poison wasn't fatal, it was incredibly painful. The perfect enemy for a new team of adventurers.

Plus, he'd heard from his Father how the great swarms could drive away merchant caravans, interrupting trade. Even if the mission was a simple quest for beginners, it would tangibly help out Basil's Cove. Micah might not be a hero yet, but finally, after months of training he was ready to begin doing his part.

Chapter 6 - Adventure

The blade of condensed air from Micah's *air knife* sliced through the nightwasp's wing, bringing it to the ground before it could close within fifteen feet of Will. He grimaced as he took in the overweight boy, swinging his hammer wildly at the wasps swarming him. He hadn't hit one yet, but it hardly mattered. His stone armor deflected all attacks, including Sarah's arrows, allowing her to shoot the nightwasps off of him with impunity.

Glancing at Drekt, Micah swore. At least three nightwasps lay bisected at the man's feet, but in return two huge lumps pulsed an uncomfortable red on his back where a pair of wasps had stung him. The huge man was in the middle of a frenzy, likely unable to feel the effects, but Micah knew from his anatomy lessons that the venom would attack his nervous system with the potential to paralyze Drekt's lungs and heart.

Ducking under a nightwasp that buzzed toward him, Micah ran over to the ravager. Quickly he put his hands on the man's back and cast *mending* and *refresh* in quick succession. Neither spell had quite enough power to cure the stings on their own, but *mending* would cleanse most of the venom and *refresh* would restore the towering man's stamina. At least at this stage, Micah didn't have enough mana to freely use his second tier spells such as *augmented mending*. It wasn't a life or death situation, so slapdash first aid would have to do.

Drekt stepped back, knocking Micah to the ground as the big man almost accidentally rammed into him while swinging the cleaver at a frantically dodging nightwasp. It slipped past the cleaver with almost depressing ease and dove toward Micah. From his back, he swung his spear awkwardly, barely managing to smack the cat sized insect with its haft.

The creature buzzed angrily, circling around toward Micah once again as he did his best to roll away from Drekt. Heedless of Micah beneath his legs, the big man stomped his feet into the ground, swinging the cleaver at another wasp. Desperately, Micah began summoning mana as he tried to cast another *air knife* to ward off the nightwasp.

A shortsword sheared through diving wasp as Jo danced by, twirling with a fluid motion as her blades flicked through the air warding off one of its companions. Micah pulled himself to his feet. Already he could see the angry lumps on Drekt's back beginning to fade as the healing magic continued to work on the man.

Checking his mana reserves, Micah switched to his spear. He had enough for a couple more *air knives* or a single *augmented mending*, but as far as he was concerned, the job of a healer was to be prepared for a potential emergency. If someone on his team needed immediate care, he'd be ready. Micah wasn't as good with the spear as he was with air magic, but it would have to do until his reserves regenerated.

He thrust with the spear, forcing a nightwasp that was weaving toward Drekt to dodge. Unfortunately, Micah just didn't have the agility or training to hit the tiny target. Luckily, Jo stepped in again, beheading the wasp as it tried to escape from Micah. He nodded to her in appreciation and then whipped around as he heard Will scream in pain.

There was only one nightwasp near him, the rest writhed on the ground with arrows lodged in them, but Will had run out of mana. He collapsed to his knees, hammer and shield forgotten, clutching his bicep and wailing as an angry red lump grew rapidly on his arm. Micah swore to himself once again, swinging his spear through the air and slamming it into the wasp. This time, the force of the blow cracked its exoskeleton, crippling the insect.

He ran over to Will and put his hands on the young man's arm.

"Make it stop!" Will bawled, tears streaming down his face as he begged Micah. "It hurts so bad. Don't just make it kind of better, fix it entirely!"

"But-" Micah began only for Will to cut him off.

"It doesn't matter," he whimpered, rocking back and forth. "It feels like there are nettles everywhere under my skin. I don't care what you have to do Micah, but make it stop."

A quick glance around the clearing revealed that Jo and Drekt were working together to bring down the last two nightwasps, rendering the encounter more or less over. Micah gave in to Will's petulant demands, shifting his spell from *mending* to *augmented mending* and almost wiping out his reserves to do so. Under his hand, the wound spat out a stream of black venom as Will's body expelled it. Before his eyes, the swelling and puncture wound faded away, leaving nothing but a slightly red lump on Will's pudgy arm.

Micah rocked back onto his heels, still crouching next to Will's huddled form, and sighed. This was their second battle against the nightwasps and both of them followed roughly the same pattern. Drekt struggled against the agile foes, but did his best, often at the cost of trading a painful sting for a clean blow on a wasp. The Redflower sisters more than held their own, killing the majority of the insects with their precise, controlled attacks. Micah did what he could, killing a nightwasp here and there in between keeping the rest of the team on their feet.

Will was useless as anything but a target. Obviously a warhammer wasn't the ideal weapon for attacking agile and airborne insects, but the way the young man swung it, Micah suspected that he didn't even have the most basic of training. Wild and uncontrolled, Will whipped his warhammer back and forth without restraint, making it dangerous for Micah to even approach close enough to heal the young man.

“Clear!” Drekt shouted from his end, wincing slightly as he leaned against the oversized cleaver.

“Clear,” Sarah responded calmly.

“Clear,” Micah chimed in as he used the butt of his spear to finish off the nightwasp he’d battered away to get to Will.

“I think that’s enough patrolling for the day,” Drekt glanced at Will’s unmoving form with some concern. “Let’s set up camp here for the night. Now might be a good time to check your status and reflect on what went wrong and right in those battles so we can make plans to improve.”

Micah nodded, walking over to his backpack to unload his and Will’s tent. He tried to ignore the Vanguard’s unmoving body, but Micah couldn’t help but frown a little. He knew that the pain from the sting was mostly gone. *Augmented mending* used up almost half of his mana, but it was a powerful spell. If anything, the young man was just suffering from the emotional aftershock from getting stung.

It hurt, Micah knew that from their first encounter when he’d gotten careless and let a nightwasp get close to him. He’d been able to fight and cast through the sting, but he didn’t have any desire to do so again. That said, he’d been stung because Will hadn’t been able to draw the wasps attention and the sting hadn’t left any sort of psychological scars on him.

Pulling out the heavily folded tent, Micah called up his status.

Micah Silver

Age 16
Class/Level Wizard 2
XP 57/200
HP 15/15

Attributes

Body 5, Agility 5, Mind 9, Spirit 9

Attunement

Moon 8 Sun 3 Night 5

Mana

Moon 2/27 Sun 9/15 Night 1/19

Affinities

Time 10

Wood 6

Tier I - *Refresh* 3, *Mending* 3

Tier II - *Augmented Mending* 2

Air 5

Tier I - *Gale* 2, *Air Knife* 3

Tier II - *Wind Shield* 1

Blessings

Mythic Blessing of Mursa - Blessed Return, Ageless Folio

Skills

Anatomy 2

Fishing 1

Herbalism 1

Librarian 3

Spear 3

Spellcasting 5

A level then. Micah could certainly use the extra mana. As far as he could tell, he'd gain points equal to his spirit each time he gained a level in Wizard, and the point in spirit from level up would help as well. Unfortunately, his mana regeneration was still defined by his attunements, and they remained static. Still, the extra pool would let him operate for much longer in combat as something more than a borderline competent spearman.

"I gained a level!" Will shouted excitedly, animated now that Micah had taken the lead in setting up their tent, freeing the portly vanguard up to dawdle. "Guys, I'm level two already!"

"Good!" Drekt smiled, a giant toothy affair. Micah was pretty sure he spotted elongated canines amidst the slightly yellow snaggle of teeth that graced their leader's mouth. Yet another silent signal of his Durgh heritage. "A couple more points in body and you'll be able to hold your own. For now, I think a celebration is in order."

The big man rummaged around in his backpack and came out with a skin full of some liquid. Drekt took a deep pull, shuddering for a second before throwing the skin to Sarah.

"Seniority," he said with a laugh, winking apologetically at Micah.

She drank briefly, grimacing and coughing as she passed the container on to Jo.

"Where in the hells do you find this stuff Drekt?" Her voice was scathing as she smacked her lips in an attempt to clear its flavor from her mouth. "Are you fermenting abandoned monster parts behind the guild hall or are you just trying to level up your poison skill and using us as test dummies?"

“It isn’t that bad Sarah,” Jo tossed the skin to Micah.

It landed in his open hands with a pleasant slosh, surprisingly heavy for its size. Micah looked at the skin hesitantly. Even from here he could smell the strong biting odor of cheap alcohol.

“It’ll put some hair on your chest Silver,” Drekt laughed, a slight flush evident on his cheeks. “Think of it as a team building exercise. Plus, you’ll never get yourself a woman if you don’t know how to cut loose a little.”

Micah shrugged, lifting the cold metal of the skin’s spigot to his lips. It felt like fire in his throat. He’d snuck some of his parents wine before, but it tasted nothing like this. He felt himself starting to gag as the rotgut savaged his esophagus.

He coughed, doing his best to ignore his stomach performing backflips while Drekt laughed at his suffering. Already he could feel warmth rising to his cheeks. Micah was afraid to ask what proof the liquor was, suspecting that he’d actually just drank their team’s guild supplied firestarter.

With feigned casualness, he threw the container on to Will. The young man looked at it dubiously.

“I don’t think I’m allowed to-” Will began, a slight whining twang to his voice. Micah rolled his watering eyes.

“We’re in the field so what I say goes,” Drekt boomed, interrupting the younger man. “And I say drink up. After this we’ll start a bonfire. It’ll ward away most of the unpleasant things that wander the forest at night and we can tell some stories. Really get to know each other. Think of the drink as an icebreaker.”

“He has a point,” Jo drawled. “Anything that flammable has to be the natural enemy of ice.”

Reluctantly, Will drank the vile liquid. Seconds later, Micah found himself casting *refresh* as the overweight adventurer threw up the entire content of his stomach on the forest floor, much to Sarah’s disgust and Drekt’s delight.

“That settles it,” Drekt cackled as he began stacking dry branches from the nearby forest for their upcoming fire. “Team rules, Will has to take the first watch tonight.”

Micah smiled. He might be new, but he could sense the casual camaraderie from the team. It wasn’t quite the welcome he expected, but already they felt like a congenial if

dysfunctional family. He might as well get comfy with them. By all expectations he'd be paired with them for a number of years.

Chapter 7 - Dungeoneering

"Are you sure it's supposed to look like this?" Will huffed, his pudgy head swiveling about as he blinked at the stone walls of the dungeon. "It's awfully dark in here. How are we supposed to see the monsters?"

Jo stared at him as she pulled a torch from her backpack and wordlessly lit it. Turning to Micah, she thrust it into his free hand. He squinted at her in confusion.

"Support caster carries the torch," she stated cheerfully before walking past him toward the tunnel. Micah turned to Drekt, a silent question in his eyes.

"Casters usually have a hand free to hold the torch," the large man supplied as he walked past the large stone arch that marked the mouth of the dungeon. "I suppose that's not really the case with you given your spear, but most of the time you guys only need one hand to cast spells so the other can be used for a light source. Most dungeons glow slightly on their own so it's never completely dark, but for pureblood humans it's still not a great environment to fight in."

"What about Jo?" Micah cocked his head, looking down the tunnel where their scout had disappeared into the gloom. "There's no way this torch is giving her any light."

"She can see just fine," Sarah cut in curtly as she walked past Micah, her bow strung and an arrow resting on the taut string. "Just worry about yourself Silver. I don't want anyone dying because you're too busy gawking at your first dungeon to heal them in time."

Drekt patted him on a shoulder awkwardly, his massive cleaver held in one hand. Each blow from the man's massive paw staggered Micah slightly, causing shadows to skitter across the dungeon's walls as he stumbled forward.

"Don't worry Micah," Drekt rumbled sheepishly. "She'll warm up to you eventually. Sarah can just be a little prickly to newcomers. I'm sure she's happy to have a fully trained healer on the team. Most squads our level have to rely on potions and those are both uncommon and expensive."

"Doesn't the Guild just pay for potions?" Will's brow furrowed in confusion. "I don't understand why we would have to pay for them. The Guild has bought everything else I'm using."

“Well,” Drekt chuckled, taking his hand off of Micah’s shoulder and switching to a double handed grip on his cleaver, “not all of us have a Rare blessing. They fronted the attunement for me to buy my blade but I have to pay them back in installments. Luckily Ankros smiles upon dungeoneering and hands out night attunement liberally for slaying new and powerful monsters. We have a lucrative profession my friends, a good thing given how blasted expensive all of our equipment is.”

“What about Micah,” Will’s tiny little eyes swiveled toward him. “He’s the group’s healer, doesn’t the Guild give him something? Everyone keeps saying that we don’t have many full wizards and healers, shouldn’t the Guild help him too?”

“Just an Uncommon blessing,” Micah lied glibly, subduing his vague desire to confide in his team. “My Dad’s a tailor so I have a fairly stylish set of traveling clothes and the spear is a hand me down from my Brother. He has a spear combat class and trained me. When he leveled up enough to get his own weapon I got his old one.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Will mumbled, mostly to himself as he struggled to pull the giant hammer off of his back. After months of training he could lift and use the weapon when not transformed, but without any grace or fluidity.

“How’s Trevor doing anyway?” Drekt asked, ignoring Will’s discontented muttering.

“I didn’t know that you and Trevor were friends,” Micah cocked his head at his commander. “He would always talk about friends from the Lancers but he never mentioned any names around the house.”

Before Drekt could respond, Jo burst into the hallway, sprinting silently toward them, her face split in a manic grin.

“Good news guys!” She shouted, borderline cackling with mirth. “I found the first encounter! Bad news, apparently Cave Adders can see in the dark and slinking through the shadows to avoid them is pointless.”

For a brief second, no one but Jo moved as the hiss of scales on stone filled the tunnel. Two dark grey snakes, each slightly longer than Drekt was tall, darted after Jo, pink tongues flicking out from their triangular heads as they tasted the air around them.

“Will,” Drekt shouted as one of Sarah’s arrows zipped past him, puncturing through the hard scales of a snake to bury itself in the soft pink flesh beneath. “Transform and get into fucking position! Micah might be a healer, but I don’t want to test the effectiveness of his antivenom. Cave Adders are bad news!”

With a shove from Drekt, the portly man stumbled toward the injured snake, his eyes wide and the hammer trembling in his meaty fists. The snake pulled back its head to strike and Micah began chanting the incantation to *air knife*, focusing his mana and will on the coiled reptile.

He ran out of time as the animal lunged forward, snapping its jaws closed around Will's forearm as the man shrieked. The *air knife* slashed into the creature's side, drawing a line of blood and causing it to withdraw and hiss in pain.

Will grabbed the creature, his stone hands barely able to wrap around its girth, and squeezed. Frantically, it tried to bite him again, its teeth unable to find purchase in his heavy rock skin. Sarah stepped forward, a frown on her delicate face as she held a knocked arrow half drawn, waiting for an opening to shoot the snake grappling her party member.

Micah turned to the other snake just in time to see Jo pirouette out of the way, her body dancing past the lunging snake as a blade cut a line through its scales. For a moment he couldn't help but marvel at her fluid grace and the ease with which she narrowly dodged the attack without a single wasted movement. Behind her, Drekt brought his cleaver down on the overextended reptile, cutting it in twain with an angry bellow.

Instantly he felt the warm buzz that indicated an earned point of attunement. Returning his attention to the first snake, Micah's eyes widened as he watched Will scream and clench his fists, stone fingers tearing through scales and pulping the monster.

Will dropped the snake, panting and grabbed his forearm. His skin faded from grey to pink as he whimpered and fell on his rear.

Micah ran over, prying Will's free hand from the bite and blanched. Each fang wound was gigantic, almost as big as a walnut and deeper than a finger. Already the flesh around them was turning a sickly grey, highlighting the angry red blood vessels that pulsed away from the injuries.

"Fix it Silver," Will's eyes were wide as his breaths came in short quick bursts. "Oh Gods, it feels like I stuck my entire arm in Granny's oven."

Micah cast *refresh*. At an almost glacial pace a drop yellow ichor began to form over each puncture wound as Will's flesh rejected the venom. Frantically he began mouthing the words again, holding Will still as the heavy man began to thrash under him. As the second spell sunk in, Micah didn't slow down, casting it a third time.

At some point, Will passed out from the pain, Sarah propping his head to the side with a grimace to prevent him from choking on the froth caking his mouth. Finally, after the fifth

refresh, venom stopped seeping on out of the injuries and Micah took a second to wipe the sweat from his brow

He glanced up to see the rest of the party surrounding him, frowning at Will's quietly twitching form. Micah cast *augmented mending*, running his mana reserves dangerously low as he closed up the snake's deep fang wounds.

"Will should be fine," Micah said as he stood up, his muscles tight from stress. "I got to him in time to prevent the poison from getting to this heart, but that was a lot closer than I'd like."

"What kind of healer needs to wait until combat is over to fix a wound," Sarah snapped at him, her hands clasping and unclasping each other nervously as she kept her worried eyes on Will's unconscious form.

"The kind that is on his first dungeon run with a newbie party Sarah," Jo shook her head. "If it wasn't for Micah, Will would've already died."

"Just because you I-" Sarah began before slamming her mouth shut. For a second there was silence before she rounded on Drekt. "What about *you* oh fearless leader. You just shoved a *boy* at a high threat level monster. How in the hells are you supposed to lead this team if you start sacrificing its members."

"He should have transformed," Drekt shrugged. "Ankros says that the only way we improve is through struggle. He'll be fine in an hour or so and maybe a little bit of pain will be good for him. Next time, when a monster attacks, he'll know to use his blessing right away. Don't underestimate the usefulness of negative reinforcement."

"Why in the names of the Sixteen are we here anyway?" Micah asked Drekt, trying to stave off another explosion from Sarah. Somewhere to the side, Jo chuckled at his transparent deflection. "I know the Lancers told us to come here, but why did they need us to raid this dungeon?"

"It's all part of Ankros' great plan," Drekt said, a smile on his face. "Without conflict, mortals become complacent and weak. We need constant struggle to become our most perfect selves. The dungeons are him providing that struggle. They provide danger to hone our reflexes and experience, attunement and loot to increase our power."

"Loot?" Micah asked, cocking his head slightly.

"Yes," Drekt replied. "Just as the monsters in a dungeon respond endlessly, the Sixteen provide appropriate rewards for those that can fight their way to a dungeon's boss room and defeat its champion. Sometimes it's as simple as a valuable bar of metal, but truly lucky

adventurers can get their hands on enchanted items or even skill books detailing lost spells or martial arts.”

“So we’re just here risking our lives to make a profit for the Guild?” Micah frowned slightly.

“Drekt likes to leave out the other side of Ankros’ great plan,” Jo said with a snort. “Each day a dungeon goes unraided, more monsters spawn. They fight each other and gain experience. Eventually, they start evolving. If you leave them alone for too long, they evolve behind the ability of the dungeon to control and you have a break. Mutated and super powered beasts roaming across the land, destroying villages, burning churches and raping livestock.”

“... livestock?” Micah asked quietly, trying to gauge Jo’s poker face.

“Ankros is the master of both the carrot and the stick,” Drekt spoke over Micah’s mumbled thoughts proudly. “He understands that we are motivated by both greed and fear, so he gives us both. Truly he’s the most insightful of the Sixteen.”

“What now?” Micah shook his head, unable to pierce Jo’s sardonic grin as she winked at him. “I mean, we just fought a couple of monsters, what comes next?”

“Well,” Drekt nodded at Will’s barely stirring form. “We wait for Mr. Grantly to recover from his unfortunate run in with the Cave Adders, and then we prepare ourselves. Dungeons are meant to test adventurers and they aren’t meant to be taken lightly. I’m sure Will is in a lot of pain right now, but with any luck it will serve as a reminder to take all combat seriously. We’ve been fighting relatively sedate battles against weaker foes up until now in order to gain levels. This dungeon will be our first real challenge and proof that we are worthy of being promoted from a reserve to an active duty adventuring team.”

“Glory, honor, etcetera,” Jo rolled her eyes. “I’m mostly just in this to see what we’re goin to get from the boss. My gear is starting to get a little beaten up and I’d like an upgrade sooner rather than later.

Chapter 8 - Accomplishment

“Well,” Trevor wrapped his arm around Micah’s shoulders, his cheeks flushed and the faint smell of brandy on his breath. “How does it feel to be a real adventurer?”

“I thought I already was an adventurer?” Micah mumbled back, his voice muffled by Trevor’s bicep. “I’ve been hunting animals in the forest around town for at least six months now.”

“But this is your first dungeon,” Trevor’s head moved up and down an over exaggerated nod. “You popped your dungeon cherry and that makes you, officially, an active duty member of the Lancers. THAT means we’ve gotta celebrate.”

“I’m not even old enough to drink Trevor,” Micah protested, trying to squirm out from under his Brother’s arm. “Do you have any idea what Mom would say?”

“That hasn’t stopped you in the field,” Drekt interjected with a chuckle. “Remember that time we fought the bog horrors? Micah got so drunk he ended up singing a duet with Jo.”

Micah blushed, trying to wrench himself from Trevor’s grasp as his Brother laughed at his discomfort. Even drunk, Trevor’s body based class was more than enough to casually overpower Micah’s efforts.

“See?” Trevor staggered slightly into Micah. “Listen to tall, dark, and muscle bound over there. If you’re old enough to drink after killing a couple of bog horrors, you’re old enough to drink in the Lancers’ tavern.”

“Plus,” Trevor winked at Drekt before leaning closer to Micah. “First time after you clear a dungeon, your drinks are twenty percent off. Mom raised us to be thrifty. It’d be a positive shame to pass a bargain like that by.”

“Of course we want to hear another rendition of that lovely duet,” Sarah snickered, elbowing her Sister. “I think we recovered more than enough in monster parts and attunement from the dungeon to ensure that we can get Micah drunk enough for an encore. Possibly with some dancing on tables.”

“I’ll leave the dancing to Micah,” Jo rolled her eyes at Sarah. “The last time I tried that I got fined for damaging guild property.”

“It is more or less an act of rookie initiation,” Trevor nodded sagely, the faux seriousness of his voice betrayed by the flush of his cheeks.

“Then it’s settled,” Drekt slapped a brooding Will on the back hard enough that the portly man stumbled. “We get the two newbies drunk enough to dance on the table. I’m sure I can justify it in our ledgers as a team building activity or something of the sort.”

“Let’s build our team then!” Trevor released Micah and veered toward the guild hall leaving the rest of the party bemused outside of the entrance.

For a couple seconds they stood in silence, all sharing glances. Finally, Will spoke up, a hint of frustration in his reedy voice.

“But he isn’t even on our team?” He asked, his face scrunched in confusion. “I get that he’s Micah’s Brother, but why is he hanging out with us?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Drekt chuckled as he pushed open the door. “Trevor isn’t a big hitter with the Lancers but everyone likes him, mostly because he’s one of the most sociable people in the guild. Even if he wasn’t Micah’s brother he’d probably find a way to sneak into our celebration. Just think of it as networking.”

“Networking,” Will puffed his cheeks unhappily. “Why should I have to talk to a bunch of people? They should already know that I have a strong blessing. They should be getting to know me, not the other way around.”

“Whenever you add a third person to a pair,” Sarah replied over her shoulder dryly as she walked into the building, “things get political. Being high level and powerful will let you ignore some of those concerns, but at the end of the day people are going to have preferences. You don’t have to bow and scrape, but it makes sense to be friends with as many important individuals as possible. You never know who the team will be paired with next month or which group might have news about a big score that they’re keeping hush hush.”

“You should talk, Sarah,” Jo brushed past Micah on her way into the guild hall. “You spend half of these events drinking expensive wine by yourself, a quarter complaining to whatever pretty boy you manage to corner, and the final quarter drunkenly sobbing. If it wasn’t for me no one would talk to either of us”

Seeing Will puff himself up to respond again, Micah shook his head. Will’s opinion of himself was as inflated as his waist-line. He was an adequate fighter, mostly relying on the strength of his gift to make up for his lack of skill and instincts, but Micah had only talked with him a handful of times where Will hadn’t made the entire conversation about himself. Sarah humored him, but he suspected that everyone on the team mostly just tolerated the arrogant fop.

“I’m heading in to make sure Trevor doesn’t get into any trouble,” Micah waved off Sarah and Will before one of them could say something that would annoy him. Sarah wasn’t quite as bad as Will, but she certainly had a tendency to be hyper critical toward everyone that wasn’t her Jo or Will. “Mom would kill me if he came home with a black eye for hitting on Zoe while drunk again.”

Behind him, Micah heard Will sputtering something to Sarah but he did his best to ignore it. The world was hard and unfair enough without having to listen to Will invent more reasons why his relatively charmed life was the result of outside forces oppressing him.

Inside the guild hall, Micah nodded at the receptionist as he walked past the front desk toward the wing that held the tavern. It wasn't terribly large, a bar with one worker servicing a couple kegs of ale and several bottles filled with spirits of dubious vintage, but it was one of the most popular places in the hall. There was something about risking death fighting against Ankros' creations on a daily basis that inspired the Lancers to revel in comforts of the flesh.

Most adventurers saved a fair amount of attunement, but it was hard to convince them to actually put enough aside to retire. Not knowing whether or not you'd return to the city after your most recent raid tended to put a damper on any incentive to invest in the future.

As Micah entered the tavern itself, a wall of noise hit him. There was only one other party there, B company squad two, Trevor's team.

"There's one of the men of the hour!" Trevor slurred from the bar where he stood next to Drekt and Jo. "Come on Micah, let's get you good and sauced."

Micah waded through a crowd of back pats and formulaic congratulations from the other party to stand next to Trevor at the bar. Immediately, Micah's Brother draped an arm over his shoulder, eliciting a snicker from Jo, and leaned toward the bartender, a grizzled older woman with a deep scar puckering the right side of her face.

"Marlene!" He practically shouted at her, likely unsure of his own volume. "This is my kid brother Micah! He just finished his first dungeon run so we're trying to celebrate in style. Get him a mug of brandy please."

"I heard you the first couple of times Trevor," Marlene didn't move from her spot at the bar, leaning back against a keg with her arms crossed. "What'll ya have Micah."

"It's a celebration," Micah wobbled to the side as Trevor swayed into him while talking to Marlene. "He needs brandy! It's not a celebration without the good stuff."

"Can I have an ale please?" Micah asked, his ears turning red as Jo practically doubled over laughing at him. "A red if you have it."

"Come on Micah," he had to reach out and stabilize Trevor as he lost his balance turning around while trying to speak to him. "This is a special occasion. If you don't like the brandy, at least try the juushk."

Micah blanched. Drekt tricked him into drinking juushk once, the impossible to live down 'singing incident.' Juushk was little more than millet, reduced to a mash and fermented. Spellcasters or alchemists were used in the process to ensure that the product wouldn't poison the drinker, but that's about all that could be said for it. Juushk tasted vile and left a hangover that lasted a full day.

“We’ll save the juushk for Will,” Jo intervened, snaking her arm through Micah’s and pulling him away from Trevor. “I’m pretty sure he’s taken a liking to the stuff.”

Micah snorted, trying to contain his laughter as he let Jo lead him away. As bad as the incident drinking juushk had been for him, Will spent most of the evening in a bush throwing up while Drecht watched on, laughing uproariously. Even the morning after, when Micah lay curled in the fetal position beneath a tree barely able to drink water and wishing that healing magic worked on hangovers, by the sounds of things Will had it worse. The man moaned and whimpered for hours in a puddle of his own fluids. Laundry the next day had been particularly vile.

As they left Jo snagged two mugs of ale, both filled with a frothy red brew. He’d never had it before, instead relying on whatever the rest of the team brought out to the field due to his being underage, but most of the older adventurer’s recommended it heavily.

Jo practically pushed him into a seat in the corner before taking her own next to him. At the door Will and Sarah walked through to another round of congratulations as Trevor talked animatedly but inaudibly with Drecht. Micah raised the chipped ceramic mug to his lips before taking a sip of the ale. It was sweet with a somewhat woody and bitter finish, but most importantly after a long day of fighting monsters, it was cold.

He leaned back into his chair and sighed, enjoying the taste of the drink on his tongue and the wood on his back. Across from him, Jo chuckled.

“It’s all a bit much sometimes, isn’t it?” She finished her statement with a pull of ale, her grey eyes staring past him at the chaos near the bar. Micah squinted at her slightly. He’d never really noticed that she had grey eyes.

“I don’t have something on my face do I?” Jo cocked her head, brushing a stray strand of hair aside.

“No,” Micah stammered, hastily taking a drink from his beer as he averted his gaze.

“Well then,” she set down her drink and placed her chin in her hands. “What were you looking at Silver?”

He turned beet red floundering for words as he wilted under Jo’s gaze. She let him suffer for a couple of seconds before her laughter cut through the fog surrounding him.

“Gods you’re so cute when you get flustered like this,” her voice washed over him like cool water in a desert. “I’ve literally had your hands inside my torso as you healed a punctured

lung while Drekt and Will fought off willow creepers an arms length from your head and you didn't even blink, yet every time I try to flirt with you, you turn into a puddle."

"Wait," Micah's face twisted in his confusion, "you were flirting with me?"

"It's a good thing I don't mind them a little oblivious," Jo's laughter wrapped around Micah, filling him with a strange warmth. "All of the jokes in the field? Every time I found an excuse to touch your arm while talking over a scouting report? None of that ever registered with you?"

Micah shook his head helplessly.

"Well that explains why the godawful drinking game didn't work," she said almost to herself.

Micah cocked his head in an unspoken question, prompting her to continue speaking.

"That time Drekt gave us the juushk," a brief sour expression flitted across her face. "I figured that you were just shy and I hoped that a little liquid courage would push you to make a move. Unfortunately we just ended up singing barroom ditties and earning skull rending hangovers."

"Gods," Micah took a drink before setting his mug down and running a hand through his hair. "If I'd known I would have said something. I just always thought you saw me as a friend with all of the dirty jokes and teasing me."

"Well," she leaned toward Micah, her lips filling his vision. Almost absently he noticed his Adam's Apple bobbing as her face approached his. "I'm not leaving things up to chance and interpretation this time."

Chapter 9 - Ambush

"Come on Micah, think of it as an adventure," Trevor quipped, spear over his shoulder as he walked next to Micah. "Unless there's a raid, the Guild never sends out multiple teams after the same objective. This will probably be our only chance to work together unless there's a dungeon break."

"Can you at least show some concern Trevor," Sarah took a brief break from scanning the nearby forest to scowl at him. "Westmarch reported Durgish scouts sniffing around and then went silent. For all we know, the entire contingent deployed there is already dead or twisted into war beasts."

“Lighten up,” Trevor laughed, winking at Sarah. “Westmarch is a citadel. There might only be five hundred soldiers there but they’re all over level seven and well trained. Plus, I’ve seen those walls. They were raised by a team of high level earth wizards almost a hundred years ago. Granite, five times a man’s height tall and about one fifth as thick. Even if the Durgh have a veritable army they aren’t getting in there anytime soon.”

Sarah scowled at the both of them, drawing an aggrieved flicker of expression from Micah. Trevor was always like this, brimming with chatter and opinions regardless of how appropriate they were. Most people learned fairly quickly that he was immune to shame. Any attempt to scold him would be answered with a laughing wink.

Instead, they took it out on Micah, as if it was his business to keep Trevor in line. He sighed. Of course it could be that Sarah had it in for him. She’d never been his biggest fan, quick with a dirty look or a biting remark, but ever since Jo-

“Say Micah,” Trevor interrupted his thoughts by purposely bumping into his shoulder. “Your ex-girlfriend’s sister is kinda cute, do you think she likes me?”

Micah turned to Trevor, his mouth open to say something but the words just didn’t come out. Jo dumped him almost three months ago. Honestly, it was for the best. When Jo knew what she wanted, she just reached out and took it. Where he would spend days debating merits and consequences of his actions, Jo would act.

Before long their relationship turned into her doing things while Micah followed along. Once the initial novelty wore off, their reckless behavior began to nag at him. He tried to suppress his fretting and indecision in order to go with the moment, but Jo noticed.

She’d been nice about it, pointing out that he wasn’t happy and that he was forcing himself. She even left the door open to dating him again if he could get past his passive nature.

That was almost the worst part. The breakup would have been much easier if she’d been insensitive or cheated on him. Instead, he couldn’t help but agree with her. Even if he had trouble admitting it to himself, dating her had worn on him near the end. It only would’ve been a matter of time before one of them snapped at each other and said something they couldn’t take back.

He still cared for Jo, but they were better as friends. As much as he liked spending time with her, whenever they were together he felt like he was being overshadowed. They spent all of their time on spontaneous ‘adventures,’ breaking minor laws and incurring unnecessary risks for the thrill of it. Micah didn’t care for the adrenaline rushes that Jo obviously craved, he’d much rather spend his time reading grimoires or stories of past heroes.

“Micah,” Trevor interrupted him, concern on his face. “I’m just messing with you. It’s been a couple months since you and Jo broke up. You’ve spent this entire time moping. I was just hoping for some kind of reaction out of you.”

“Look,” Micah smiled weakly at his Brother. “I’m fine. This is all for the best. We need to be able to work together as professionals. She saw that things were turning toxic and she ended it. We’re still friends. I just have to shake off a bit of a funk and I’ll be good to go.”

“You know what’s great for shaking off a funk,” Trevor asked conspiratorially. “Now that you’re eighteen I can take you to the Rose Petal House and buy you some liquor and a girl to take your mind off of your ex. Trust me, it does wonders.”

“By Mursa’s quill we are NOT having this conversation,” Micah groaned, blushing furiously. “It’s not about sex. I just miss her but at the same time I know I’m better off with how things are.”

“If it’s not about the sex,” Trevor winked at Micah, “there’s no reason not to go to the Rose Petal House. We’re going to make a fortune off of this raid, we might as well use it on something entertaining.”

Micah paused, trying to think of a way to change the subject. His eyes flitted over the rest of their column. Combat teams from three different guilds, all fitted with the eclectic but well maintained gear that differentiated them from royal or noble soldiers, trotted down the packed dirt road toward Westmarch. Nine teams, three each from the Lancers, Mystic Hammers, and Steel Shrikes. Forty experienced men and women, each of whom had fought and bled in the dungeons around Basil’s Cove making names for themselves.

He didn’t know all of them personally, but everyone in the convoy knew of each other. Basil’s Cove was a city, but it wasn’t a large one. There were only so many active combat teams. Between bards’ tales, bragging over drinks, and a series of good natured rivalries fostered by the guilds, word spread fairly quickly about each and every adventurer capable of contributing in a proper dungeon run.

“Why do you think we’re getting paid so well,” Micah asked Trevor in an attempt to distract his Brother from loudly talking about Basil’s Cove’s most infamous brothel. “This is just supposed to be a scouting mission. They’d only send this many adventurers if they were expecting things to get rough.”

Before Trevor could respond, a woman began yelling. “Contact!” Micah whirled toward where she was shouting, panic in her voice. “The Durgh are in the ground-”

The rest of her sentence was cut off as a pyromancer triggered an explosion, blowing up a good chunk of the nearby forest and raining streams of fire down on the convoy. Quickly,

Micah cast *wind shield*, protecting those around him from the falling embers as the condensed air diverted the flames aside. Up and down the trail, magical defenses and blessings launched into the air to protect other adventurers.

Wordlessly, Trevor turned and ran over to his squad, his jovial nature melting away the second the situation demanded concentration. Drecht and Will positioned themselves between the rest of the party and the area of the explosion, each activating their gift as they prepared themselves for combat.

The rest of the raid party did the same, breaking down into its nine composite teams. A fireworks display of magic and gifts lit up the trail. Every melee class in one party began glowing gold as a protective field from their caster settled in. Another party was surrounded by a waist high spiked bulwark of steel.

A hail of javelins flew out of the forest. One blurred straight through the still active *wind shield* and struck Will in the throat. Micah flinched back as the allegedly impenetrable stone armor exploded into a shower of gravel. He blinked. That wasn't possible.

Will fell to the ground bonelessly, his rocky body cracking the beaten earth of the path. The spear, fashioned from the lacquered spine of some monster, quivered in Will's still form. Micah stared blankly for a second before the road erupted into chaos as various adventurers returned fire. Sarah fired an arrow at a shape darting out of the forest as Micah mouthed the words to *augmented healing* and placed his hand on Will's collarbone.

Nothing.

He was gone.

A bellow from Drecht pulled Micah back into the world. The huge man swung a cleaver at something that had once been a hound before it was subjected to the Durgh's twisted alchemy. The blade practically bisected the creature, but there were more behind it. Many more.

Micah cast *root spears*, a second tier wood spell. His breath came out in short panicked bursts as stakes of wood grew out of the ground, stabbing into some of the charging horrors and forcing the others to evade. A chorus of panicked screams erupted from the other adventurers, barely drowning out the sound of jaws tearing flesh and snapping bones as they tried and largely failed to defend themselves after the decimation of the javelin attack.

Then the Durgh themselves strolled out of the forest. Each of them was half again as tall as the humans they fought, thick with heavily corded muscles. Their black skin was littered with tattoos, each glowing with a fell pale green light. Two of them walked toward their party, moving casually as adventures fought and died in front of them.

“Sarah, support me!” Drecht shouted as his cleaver finished off the last of the hounds in his vicinity. “Jo and Micah, deal with the other one!”

Micah glanced at Jo. She gave him a quick smile that set his heart aflutter before throwing a stiletto at the advancing Durgh. It waved a hand indifferently, catching the tiny blade on the heavy metal of its thick bladed gauntlets.

She sighed theatrically at Micah and drew her short swords, sprinting toward the giant. Micah launched a pair of *air knives* over her shoulder. The Durgh didn’t even try to block, just letting the spell trace shallow lines of blood across its muscled abdomen as it focused on Jo.

Micah ground his teeth in frustration. The only spell he had that would even injure a Durgh was *sonic bolt*, a second tier air spell, but there was no way he’d be able to get it off without hitting Jo. He gripped his spear with both hands and cautiously approached the two.

Jo moved with the grace of a dancer, slipping just under punches from the Durgh’s gauntleted fists only to slash upward, drawing deep, bleeding wounds on the creature. It didn’t seem to care. Despite the blood flowing freely from its forearms, it acted like the cuts were merely superficial.

Then it stomped the ground, activating a blessing that knocked both Micah and Jo from their feet as the ground bucked beneath them. Micah scrambled back to his feet just in time to watch in horror as the Durgh punched Jo. All of her evasiveness meant nothing in that moment of imbalance and she flew backward, grunting as the blow connected solidly.

His vision went red.

Without thinking, he unleashed a *sonic bolt*, draining almost all of his remaining mana. For the first time, the Durgh looked alarmed as the attack bypassed its leathery flesh and attacked soft tissue directly, shaving off a good chunk of its HP. It stumbled and fell to one knee, blood dribbling from its ears.

Micah charged, thrusting his spear into its back just below the shoulder. It might not have been the most logical plan, but after Will and Jo fell, he wasn’t thinking. The Durgh stood back up and took a faltering step toward him, its balance clearly off due to its ruptured eardrums. Micah stabbed it again, sinking the spear into its gut all the way to the crossbar.

It backhanded him. There was a flash of pain, and then Micah was insensible. His right arm shattered as the blades from the gauntlet bit deep into his flesh. Almost in slow motion, Micah hit the ground and bounced.

He blinked at the afternoon sky, his vision narrowed to a tunnel. Distantly he knew that he should get up and do something, but he couldn't really understand the urgency. He didn't even know what it was he was supposed to do. Far above him a bird flitted between clouds.

A Durgh's face, eyes wild with hatred as it gnashed its tusks, appeared above him. Micah knew he should fight or resist as it reached for him, its gauntleted hand already stained with his blood, but he could barely lift his arms.

Its head jerked back as a stiletto sprouted from its cheek. The Durgh turned from Micah just in time for Jo to jump off of his spear, still lodged in its gut, and plant another pair of stilettos in its eyes.

Micah blinked again. She looked like hell. Her robes were torn and stained with blood, and the entire left side of her face was bruised beyond belief, but at that moment she was the most beautiful thing Micah had ever seen.

Then, the blinded Durgh grabbed her. Even through the haze of his head injury, he heard the pop of bones shattering as it squeezed and she went limp. It took hesitant a step toward Micah, before dropping Jo's body right next to him. It wobbled and fell to its knees, finally running out of hit points as the blood loss took its toll.

Micah turned his head to look at Jo. She was still breathing shallowly, blood gurgling past her lips. Hazily, his anatomy skill identified a punctured lung. The only treatment was an immediate and invasive application of three castings of *augmented mending*. Even if he was at full mana, he didn't have the strength to cut her chest open and cast the spell on her wrecked organs.

"Hey, Micah?" she coughed as she spoke, blood staining her teeth.

"Jo," He replied. Everything was dark and distant.

"I'm sorry but I don't think I'll have the opportunity to give you a second chance," the coughs transformed into a ragged jag as she began choking on her own blood, unable to clear the fluid from her throat and lungs.

A hand grabbed Micah by his collar. In a brief tumult of motion, he felt himself slung over a man's shoulder. Looking down, he made out Trevor.

"I've got Micah!" Trevor was screaming at someone, but it sounded like he was in a windstorm. The words were muffled and hard to make out. "Josephine's gone. We need to move before the Durgh come back for us!"

He winced as his Brother's shoulder jolted up into his injured torso. He was running. Drekt led the way with Sarah flanking them, stopping occasionally to fire an arrow backward. From far away, he heard the baying of hounds.

Micah didn't know how long they ran. Then Trevor jerked and pitched forward, spilling Micah to the forest floor. A huge black fist grabbed Micah, slinging him over Drekt's shoulder. Trevor lay unmoving, a black lacquered harpoon made from a monster spine quivered in his back.

Then they were moving again. Mercifully, Micah blacked out, unconsciousness protecting him from the grief and pain.

Chapter 10 - Reset

The walls were going to fall. Micah cast *root spears*, doing what he could to slow the Durgh host's advance. He felt his XP ticking up as the swarm of warbeasts simply overran the area of his spell, ignoring the damage inflicted by the knee high pungee sticks the spell grew from the ground in their frenzy to reach Basil's Cove.

This wave would be the small ones. Mutated wolves, pack animals and men, twisted by the dark alchemy and rituals that made the Durgh pariahs in civilized lands. The next wave would be the real monsters, the gargantuan beasts that roamed the tunnels of the Durgh's underground kingdoms, ritualistically melded into engines of destruction.

Next to him, Sarah fired arrow after arrow, barely bothering to aim as the density of the attackers guaranteed her hits. It hardly mattered. Her eyes were dead, and Micah didn't blame her.

Drekt stood by grimly, his cleaver planted in the battlements while he did his best to ignore the hostile stares from the other defenders. The rest of the soldiers manning the wall didn't trust him, suspecting that he was at least partially Durgh. They weren't wrong, after months of goading Micah had gotten the huge man drunk enough to admit that his grandfather was a full-blooded Durgh.

Whatever his birth, he was manning the wall next to them. Ready to bleed and inevitably die at the hands of his estranged relatives. It was more than most of the nobles could say. They'd fled Basil's Cover almost a week ago, just after Westmarch fell to the Durgh incursion. Ostensibly, they were retreating further into the Kingdom to try and raise support for a counter offensive, but everyone from the guilds knew the score.

Even if help was coming, it wouldn't come in time. Westmarch had been slaughtered, only a handful of sorry broken refugees managing to trickle back to the alleged safety of Basil's Cove shortly after their expedition returned.

It had been an absolute massacre. Only a handful of adventurers survived the frenzied retreat. Of the initial survivors, many were hunted down by hounds and harpoon wielding Durgh as they ran for almost an entire day and night through the forest.

Micah ran a hand through his greasy and unkempt hair as he glanced to the side, at the spots on the wall where Jo and Will should have stood. The entire operation had been a trap. The Durgh knew that humanity wouldn't let Westmarch fall unavenged, and they'd lured the guilds away from the City's walls and defenses to decimate the defenders.

Even now, as he hurled spells at the attackers, Trevor, Jo and Will flashed before his eyes. Trevor and Will both still had the Durgh spears sticking out of them, but Jo stood slightly distant, blood trickling down her chin as her body was wracked with a wet, repetitive cough. None of them said anything. They just watched his futile struggle on the walls of Basil's Cove, as if waiting for him to fall and join them.

Micah chuckled, it wasn't like he'd have to wait too much longer from that. He turned his gaze from the oncoming hoard, barely slowed by the defenders' magic and ballistas. Glancing down, he winced at the crude arm carved from living wood that grew from the mangled stump of his right shoulder. He could move the prosthetic, but without any of agility or grace he was accustomed to. Despite constant healing spells, deep down Micah knew he would never be able to use a spear again.

A thud drew his attention to the main gate. A war beast, grown from one of the great subterranean worms, twenty feet tall and covered in spikes and scales slammed its clublike tail into the thick wood once again. Spells sparkled around it, as the defenders struggled futilely to even hurt the massive creature, but the blessed capable of fighting something of that power had already fled Basil's Cove. It wouldn't be long now.

He closed his eyes to hide their burning dampness. Soon he'd be able to join Jo and Trevor. Below him, the small war beasts reached the wall. Half heartedly, he threw an *air blade* at a twisted cat monster as it dug its claws directly into the fortification and began pulling itself up toward him.

With a hiss, Drekt and a soldier upended a cauldron full of pitch on a cluster of war beasts, scalding and killing them. A half hearted cheer sounded from their section of the wall, only to be immediately extinguished when another swarm of war beasts immediately took their place, scrabbling over the bubbling corpses of their comrades.

The front gate thudded again, a dull booming sound that almost drowned out the scabble of claws on the wall in front of them. The worm was aflame, a high level pyromancer running herself almost out of mana to sustain a barrage of spells on the creature. It simply ignored the fire. He didn't know whether the fire wasn't damaging the monster or if the Durgh had just made it immune to pain.

It hardly mattered. Even if the fire was harming it, the gate would fall before the flames brought the monster low.

Micah created a squall of wind, exhausting a good twenty percent of his mana reserves to throw the war beasts off of his section of the wall. They landed on their backs, misshapen messes of limbs that squirmed back to their feet. He'd bought the archers a little more time to thin the swarm, but even as feathers sprouted from the monsters' soft undersides, he knew it wouldn't be enough.

He could already see the Durgh warriors silently walking out of the nearby forest in formation, standing just behind the final wave of advanced war beasts. Their front row carried heavy tower shields to protect them from arrows, but it was hardly needed. The defenders didn't have the time and energy to spare on the real threat.

With a signal from a Durgh clad in shiny silver armor, the final wave of war beasts rumbled forth from the forest toward the wall, the Durgh themselves following shortly thereafter. Already he spotted at least three of the mutated worms.

Maybe if the strongest among them remained there would be some purpose to this fight, but the Golden Drakes fled along with the nobility and the elite of the militia to 'seek help.' It was a cowardly retreat, made all the more damning by the council's final edict commanding that the remainder of the guilds and the militia hold the city to the last. They wouldn't even let the civilians evacuate with them.

Micah, his friends and his family were nothing more than a sacrifice. They were only meant to delay the Durgh long enough for those who truly mattered to make it to safety.

Hells, the Durgh probably wouldn't even occupy the city. As strong as they were, they knew better than to challenge the Royal Knights. No, in all likelihood this raid was for nothing more than slaves and plunder.

True, the bards would likely sing songs of 'the butchers of Westmarch' and 'the heroes of Basil's Cove,' fighting nobly to the last man, but it would be propaganda. Nothing but a recruiting tool tailored to lure more starry eyed young blessed into serving the very nobles that abandoned Micah. He snorted, the nobles would probably even commission the song.

Tears stung Micah's eyes as he watched the Durgh fall into formation with deadly precision. Despite his childhood dreams of being a hero, he just hadn't been strong enough. He'd tried and he'd bled, but Jo and Trevor were gone. Worse, from what he'd heard about the Durgh his parents and Esther would be lucky to die in the sack of the city.

The fate of Durgh slaves wasn't pretty. Some toiled hard to produce food for the host, some became food for the host, and perhaps the most unlucky were twisted by their foul rituals into the very war beasts that clawed at the walls below him. He'd warned his Father and given him a knife. Micah could only hope that he'd have the courage to use it.

Micah stood on the wall, the weight of his regrets rooting him in place as he watched his world come crashing down around him. If only he'd worked a little harder. If only they'd found out about the Durgh incursion early enough to call the Royal Knights to Basil's Cove. If only his damn gift had been enough.

No. Micah gritted his teeth. His gift WAS enough. He'd just been too scared to use it. He'd let childish fears about losing the levels and attunement he'd gained stop him from traveling back and learning the skills he needed to hold his own. If he'd treated being an adventurer seriously from the beginning, rather than as some sort of silly game, none of this would be happening.

It's funny. He'd fought for a little over a year and a half to become a level eleven wizard, and now that he was here, his path was clear. He'd throw it all away in a second for Trevor and Jo to come back. Mursa must have known what was coming, and she'd given him a second chance, both to improve himself and fix the mistakes and laziness that brought him here.

He laughed to himself, tears streaming down his face. Beside him, Sarah glanced at him and simply clicked her tongue before she resumed firing arrows into the enemy. Drekt paused as he hefted another cauldron full of pitch, giving him a look drenched in pity.

Saying a quick prayer of thanks to his rarely acknowledged Goddess, Micah stepped Micah from the battlement and took a quick breath.

"*Blessed Reset*" when he spoke the words to activate his gift, they took on a voice other than his. They were poetry. Melodic, a song almost. Then mana began to swirl around him, building toward a crescendo. Across the field from Basil's Cove, the Durgh howled, obviously sensing the huge vortex of mana condensing around Micah, but unable to reach him in time to interrupt the spell.

The mana swelled and reality fractured. It was as simple as that, for a fraction of a second everything froze, and then it shattered into a million glittering shards revealing the exact same scene as before.

Micah felt himself being pulled backward, step by step retracing his actions in reverse. At first the pace was faltering but inexorable, but the speed of his observations increased with each second until everything was a blur, a riot of color and mana. Then, he slammed into something soft, his back bouncing off of his childhood bed with the force of a catapult.

He jolted out of bed, his body small and frail. Looking down he noticed that his arms were pale, unmarked by the scars and muscles he'd earned as a Lancer. Outside his bedroom, he heard Esther's childish voice as she called for their mother to fetch a toy for her. Micah began laughing, a shrill tinny sound from his young throat. It worked. He was thirteen once again.