

Chapter 11 - Once Again

Micah swung his feet out of the bed, marveling at the way they barely touched the ground. He'd been scrawny at thirteen, going through a late growth spurt just before his fifteenth birthday to fill out his gangly frame.

He stood up, hissing slightly as his bare feet touched the cold wood of the floor. He wobbled slightly as he tried to take the first step with his awkward new body. The limbs were too long, all elbows and knees, throwing off Micah's balance.

He stopped, his hand on the simple wooden door leading to his bedroom. Hesitantly, he tried to call up his status.

Micah Silver

Age 13 [ERROR] / 18

Class/Level -

XP

HP 8/8

Attributes

Body 4, Agility 3, Mind 9, Spirit 8

Attunement

Moon 4 Sun 1 Night 2

Mana

Moon 8/8 Sun 2/2 Night 4/4

Affinities

Time 10

Wood 6

Air 5

Blessings

Mythic Blessing of Mursa - Blessed Return, Ageless Folio

Skills

Anatomy 6

Fishing 1

Herbalism 4

Librarian 3

| | |
|--------------|----|
| Ritual Magic | 2 |
| Spear | 5 |
| Spellcasting | 10 |

A wide smile blossomed on Micah's face. Whatever magic powered his status and blessings clearly didn't know what to make of his return, but despite its confusion it still worked. His class was gone and his attributes and attunements were trash, but years of training with the Folio gave him the skills of an experienced adventurer.

It wouldn't be easy to avoid the coming storm, but with those skills and the time to hone them further, this was doable. For the first time in weeks, hope began to bloom in Micah's chest.

"Miiiiicaaaaaah!" Esther screamed, slamming open the door and almost running into him. "Momma said to wake you up. Breakfast is ready and she didn't want you to be late for your apprenticeship with Keeper Ansom again."

"Well I'm certainly up," Micah chuckled, rustling her hair as he walked out of his bedroom. A wave of nostalgia washed over him as he smelled the ham sizzling away in the kitchen. Constant fieldwork kept him from his mother's cooking for most of the last year, and only now did he realize how much he missed her home cooking.

After a 'brief' but hearty breakfast, Micah began the walk to Keeper Ansom's library. Around him, the comfortable morning sounds of Basil's Cove tried to lull him into a sense of normalcy. The bell from the docks, announcing to the stevedores that a new ship was pulling into harbor for unloading complimented the babble of the petty merchants as they sold all manner of knick knacks and food from small stalls lining the city streets.

It was all so mundane, in sharp relief to the terror and adrenaline of the Durgh invasion. Micah couldn't help but smile as he quickened his pace, trying to arrive at the library just as it opened.

He was almost on time, drawing a mirth-filled admonishment from Ansom as Micah gasped for breath in the darkened building's vestibule. Silently he vowed to take up jogging. His younger body lacked both muscle definition and endurance. If he really planned to make a difference in five years, that would need to change.

"Keeper Ansom," he asked between deep breaths, sucking down the morning's humid air. "I was talking with some of my friends about blessed and none of us could figure out how they get their classes. James said that they just get them along with their blessings but that doesn't sound right to me."

"That's why you're working for me and James is apprenticing as a butcher," Ansom replied with a chuckle, buying Micah's lie. "Classes are bestowed by something called a class

crystal. Really it's not much more than a chunk of quartz enchanted and imbued with a point of attunement. They aren't terribly hard to make, it's just that spending a point of attunement on them is fairly expensive. Most of the adventuring and crafting guilds have a couple on hand that they let their proteges use in exchange for an exclusive contract. It's the same story with the military and civil government. Heck, I'm a decent enchanter myself. I could probably make one if I wanted to."

"How does the crystal select your class then?" Micah questioned, doing his best to sound like an inquisitive youth.

"They analyze your skills, affinities and blessings," Ansom replied, moving over to a pile of books by the side of his desk. "Most people end up with fairly simple classes because it's hard to amass the necessary abilities to earn an uncommon or rare class before they turn sixteen. Technically you don't need to select a class right away, but it's difficult to earn attunement without so most people don't bother with waiting. Still, some scholars have studied the process."

"Here," Ansom passed a musty tome to Micah titled *On Classes and their Assignment*. "About a century ago the royal house of Kerrakan commissioned this work. As far as I understand the purpose of it was to help them design rigorous training regimens to ensure that their children would earn more rarefied classes than those available to you or I. Once you finish your work you can take it to the reading room."

Micah nodded, taking the book from Ansom before scampering off to an eventful day of sorting and reshelving books. Every once in a while, the Keeper would need him to engage in the tedious drudgery of copying by hand a damaged passage in an older grimoire, but usually Ansom gave him half of almost every day to read through whatever might take his fancy.

In his previous life, that had included an embarrassing number of books about heroes and knights rescuing fair damsels in addition to the more practical works on spell theory. This time, Micah passed by the histories and propaganda entirely. As soon as he finished his work for the day he began pouring over *On Classes*.

It was fascinating. No one in the Lancers really talked about the theory behind the classes. You just touched a crystal and got your options, but in the book they were laid out by category and rarity. Apparently Wizard was an uncommon class because it required multiple affinities as well as a skill. When Micah compared it with the more common elemental spellcasters, he noticed the difference immediately. Only elementalists specializing in the primal elements, time and order/chaos, earned an attribute per level. Even the per level growth in mana/HP were noticeably different.

Semi angrily he paged toward the end of the book, looking for more advanced spellcasting classes. Some such as sorcerer which required affinities in both primal elements

were a matter of luck, but many were simply more advanced versions of wizard. High wizard required a spellcasting skill level of ten, doable but well beyond the abilities of most commoners. Magi needed two affinities and a spellcasting skill of five along with a skill level in ritual casting. Adept also demanded two affinities, a spellcasting skill of five, and a skill level in enchanting.

Each of those classes granted a point in both spirit and mind per level, doubling a wizard's attribute growth. What truly caught Micah's eye however was the thaumaturge class. Only one royal son had ever managed to earn it, and he was quickly killed during a dynastic dispute lest he turn into an unstoppable despot. The details on its acquisition were spotty, but it was rumored to require three or more affinities, and ten skill levels in spellcasting, ritual casting, and enchanting. In addition to increased mana growth, the class gave a point in spirit, mind, and an attribute of its user's choice each level. The book had an afterward, speculating about even more exalted classes that would put their users on par with the saints themselves, but Micah simply ignored the baseless speculation.

Micah closed the book, a gleam in his eyes. That was true power. He'd always known that nobles were more powerful than a guild blessed. The insufferable pricks never shut up about it after all. He'd always just chalked it up to the absurd amount of attunement they inherited, letting excess mana subsume any difference in skill the two might have. This changed things.

The next day, after finishing his normal work Micah cracked open a book on enchanting. He wouldn't have the time to become a thaumaturge, after all it took him almost three constant years of spellcasting to earn his way to ten ranks in that skill, but with it shouldn't be impossible for him to learn enchanting well enough to make a class crystal. Once he selected a class, most likely magi, he'd be able to use his spells again. Then, it was just a matter of sneaking out at night to practice spells and gain levels. Hopefully if he became powerful enough one of the larger guilds would take notice of him and listen to his warnings about the Durgh.

Mentally setting the Folio to take notes, Micah took into the book on enchanting. It was like crossing calculus with calligraphy. Each rune etched onto an item created an effect and altered the item on a fundamental level. Every rune needed to be custom tailored to the object that it was being inscribed on, with slight changes to the composition or even metaphorical significance of the object being enough to cause an enchantment to fizzle. Worse, each subsequent rune required the enchanter to account for the changes made to the magical fabric of the object by previous runes.

He ended the day with a headache, a skill level in enchanting, and a point of moon attunement as a reward for his diligence. For almost a month he did little but study enchanting at the Library and follow up on his studies from the notes inscribed in the Folio at home. Fairly quickly he made it to the second skill rank in enchanting before his growth tapered off, likely due to his reluctance to actually practice the skill. After all, every attempt at enchanting, no matter whether or not it was successful, cost attunement.

Finally, a couple days after Trevor's sixteenth birthday and blessing and just before Micah's fourteenth birthday, he reached the third level in the skill. Reluctantly, Micah went to the market and acquired a decent sized chunk of quartz from a curio shop. The milky crystal had some use in enchanting, but it was a common enough mineral that no one second guessed a boy claiming he wanted it to 'make jewelry' for his mother.

That night he snuck out into the garden with the necessary reagents to enchant the quartz, a small amount of silver dust, a chisel, a kitchen knife, and a live chicken he'd fed a sleeping draught. Once he was sure the rest of his family was sound asleep from the draught he'd slipped into their dinner he began the process.

Sprinkling a pinch of the dust over the quartz he recited a ritual spell of consecration to prepare it before quickly slitting the chicken's throat and letting its blood soak the stone. Theoretically a chicken wasn't needed, but any ritual or enchantment needed energy. If lifeblood or some other easily accessible source wasn't provided, it would simply take it from the caster. A simple two rune enchantment like this wouldn't kill him. Probably. It certainly would sap his vitality, making him frail and more prone to injury or disease.

As the blood soaked into the stone, it grew warm in Micah's hand. Quickly he began inscribing the runes into the quartz, careful to follow the detailed instructions and mathematical proofs laid out in the Ageless Folio. After what seemed like hours, Micah leaned back breathing heavily, his body drenched in cold sweat. The rune was done. There was only one final step.

He cut his hand with the knife and let his blood mingle with that of the chicken on the stone. A primal force slithered into his mind and asked him a wordless question. Three clusters of light appeared, one as white as the sun at noon, another a pale grey, and the final one a single point of starlight in a field of darkness. Micah focused his attention on the sun and indicated his acceptance.

With a crackle of energy and the smell of burning flesh a tremendous amount of energy transferred from his body into the crystal. His entire body felt weaker, like he'd run for hours without rest or water, and he knew instinctively that he was now one sun attunement poorer.

The dried blood flaked off the sides of the crystal. Where once the quartz had been a rhombus, now Micah held a perfect sphere, slightly smaller than his tiny fist. Before his eyes it began to grow with an inner light.

New life and energy flowed through his body as he was awarded a point of moon attunement for his achievement. Micah chuckled and held the sphere up to the starlight. Now he only needed to let the crystal charge and he'd be ready to resume his work once more.

Chapter 12 - Reclassed

While waiting for the class crystal to charge, Micah spent all of his free time at the library studying ritual magic. Really, the apprenticeship was a lucky break on his part. The Library was technically owned by a collection of Basil Cove's richest families and curated by Keeper Ansom. No one family could easily afford all of the books in the library, and usually each noble house only wanted one or two at a time. The more Micah thought about it, the angrier he got at himself for how he misused his time in his first iteration. With most of Basil's Cove's theoretical knowledge just sitting around him, instead he read children's stories. Admittedly he was a child, but still.

Ritual magic had always fascinated Micah. Like enchanting, it didn't require an affinity but by the same token it wasn't terribly useful in combat. Rituals could be used to see great distances, summon fell creatures, enhance someone's body, change the weather, or any number of things. Unlike spells, they didn't require mana. Casting a ritual was more a matter of scholarship and skill. Every factor needed to be accounted for from the phase of the moon, to the position of the stars and more importantly the processing of the reagents.

Technically, even a first level ritual caster could use the most powerful rituals devised. In practice, the complexity of even simpler rituals tended to overwhelm any caster without a double digit mind attribute and years of research spent on developing the skill.

The results of a failed ritual were much more serious than a fizzled spell. With mana, either the spell worked or it didn't, but often rituals would work but in ways unforeseen by their casters. The guidebook warned of teleportation rituals that lodged the user in a solid wall, or summoning spells that released eldritch horrors upon the world. Micah wasn't sure if the book was overstating the threat as a warning, but he wasn't inclined to risk it.

Finally, the crystal was charged. Once again Micah waited for his family to go to sleep before sneaking out to the garden and placing his hands on the sphere. The heat built as the voice entered his mind.

"Error," the genderless voice stated without any inflection. "Prospective user is under the age of majority. No class can be assigned at this time."

"Override," another feminine voice interjected. "Designate prospective user as temporal anomaly and reanalyze."

That was new. Micah frowned, trying to ignore the way the crystal continued to heat up under his hands. None of the books mentioned anything like this.

“Prospective user is eighteen solar years,” the original voice responded. “Adjusting internal records and analyzing skills and affinities.”

“Available classes are Magi, Adept, High Wizard, Wizard, Chronomancer, Aeromancer, Healer, Doctor, Herbalist, Surgeon, Librarian, High Spearman, Spearman, Warrior,” the voice recited the list emotionlessly. “Please select an option to gain more information about it.”

“Magi,” Micah choked out through gritted teeth. The interlude while the voices argued had let the heat in the crystal build to an almost unbearable level.”

“Magi,” the voice responded. “An advanced class that allows the user to utilize and combine more than one affinity. A focus on ritual casting gives the user bonuses to learning and successfully casting rituals. Magi gain one point in the mind and spirit attributes each level and have a high rate of mana growth. To unlock this class the user must have at least five levels in the spellcasting skill, one level in the ritual casting skill and more than one affinity.” The voice paused, casting Micah into a pit of agony as the crystal burned into his palms. “Would you like to confirm your selection?”

“Yes,” he hissed out. Magic flowed into his body, but with the sound of a windowpane breaking, the crystal shattered, rapidly breaking down into a fine white dust. Micah didn’t know or care why it happened, instead clutching his still smoking and blackened hands.

Through a haze of pain, he cast *augmented mending* from memory, not even thinking that his status sheet currently didn’t show him knowing the spell. It still worked, consuming all of his mana but ending the pain in his hands. Blacked skin chipped and began falling off of his palms, revealing pristine pinkwhite flesh underneath.

Micah looked at his hands in wonder. That shouldn’t have worked. Spells took weeks of practice to perfect, even if you knew their words and formulas you couldn’t just cast them. Even then, he didn’t have enough mana yet to cast *augmented mending* at level one. Like skills, spells gained levels that altered both their mana cost and effectiveness. At level one, *augmented mending* should have been ruinously expensive and barely enough to heal a serious cut.

He checked his status, face breaking into an immediate grin. He’d gained a point of moon attunement from ‘learning’ his first second tier wood affinity spell, and *augmented mending* was already at level seven. Exactly where it’d been when he threw himself into the past. Apparently *blessed return* treated spell levels as skill levels.

Even if his mana levels were pitiful due to his low class level, Micah’s high skill level in spellcasting and basic combat magic would be enough for him to start venturing outside the city walls to gain levels. Really it was only a matter of finding low level enemies such as feral boars and kobolds until he gained the mana to use the entirety of his magical arsenal. Once he

leveled up a couple times, even if his body was nowhere near as rugged as it used to be, the extra mind and spirit points from his enhanced class would be enough for him to quickly surpass his previous life.

Quietly Micah swept up the dust from the crystal and went to bed. He still needed to get up early enough to go to the Library and continue his study of ritual magic. His skill level wasn't high enough yet, but he'd already made note of a teleportation ritual and one that would half the amount of sleep he needed in a week.

Part of Micah was concerned that his master plan involved fiddling with the very fabric of the cosmos in order to sneak out at night, but at the same time he couldn't come up with another solution. He could create an energy draught with his herbalism skill, but it wouldn't be anywhere near as effective as the ritual and the guards would certainly notice if he went to and from the city frequently without a proper explanation. The last thing he needed was to be labeled a spy.

The next two weeks went quickly. During the day Micah studied ritual magic and astronomy, incrementally improving his knowledge toward the two selected rituals. At night, he cast his spells one by one, unlocking them as he prepared for his eventual sojourn outside the city walls.

Finally, Micah considered himself ready. He'd learned enough enchanting and ritual magic to create a beacon, a target for the teleportation ritual to lock onto. If he was going to train at night, he needed to create a beacon outside the walls, someplace secluded where monsters and travelers wouldn't come upon him.

Greeting the guards, Micah left Basil's Cove early Saturday morning. They didn't inspect him that closely, after all youth were exempt from the city's tolls per Luxos' edict. They'd probably care a little more when he came back, just to ensure that he wasn't carrying contraband, but even then most of the guards in his past life didn't take their jobs all that seriously. Really, they were there to scare off monsters and bandits, not to regulate the flow of dream leaf into the city. After all, Basil's Cove was a fairly prominent port. Dream Leaf, Divine Tears, Drake Resin, all of them were smuggled off of visiting ships and into the houses of ill repute in the slums.

Technically the drugs were illegal, but the city didn't put a large amount of effort into policing them. So long as users stuck to their houses of ill repute in the forgotten districts, the council didn't even bother to send the militia to arrest them. They kept the forgotten high and complacent regarding their social stature. Frankly, Micah had always wondered if some of the noble houses that made up the council were actively part of the trade.

Micah looked up at the cloudless sky, enjoying the crisp air of the sunny morning. The hardened dirt of the road crunched under his boots as he walked for almost a half hour before

summoning the Ageless Folio and checking local landmarks. Spotting the lightning struck pine tree towering above the local forest, he smiled and veered from the path, humming fast paced ditty.

Using his spear as a walking stick, Micah made his way through the forest, occasionally checking the Folio for references to landmarks. Once he got turned around, a tree that was felled during his original journey still stood, but before too long he came upon his target, a mound of boulders and rocks, almost twenty feet high. When he first discovered it, four years in the future in his previous iteration, Micah and Drekt speculated that it was the result of a high level earth spell. After all, how else would a pile of boulders appear in the middle of an otherwise flat but densely forested plain?

Walking closer, he spotted his goal, a small circular cave, just shy of six feet tall and wide. As an adult Micah might struggle getting in and out, but for his current slight stature, it would be perfect.

Kneeling down, he smiled once again. He traced his finger around the large pawprint embedded in the moist forest soil. When he and Drekt came upon this place in the future, it'd been the home of an adult dire stoat. It looked like the stoat, currently a juvenile, had already moved in. A perfect source of experience for a young magi out and on his own for the first time.

Chapter 13 - The Plan

Micah walked to the edge of the cave, pausing to listen for the stoat. For a moment, he heard nothing but the twitter of nearby birds, then he made out the quiet sound of fur brushing against stone. Perfect.

He positioned himself with his back to a nearby tree. Dire stoats weren't incredibly dangerous if you could see them coming, but they were fast and liked to attack from the flanks. The last thing he needed after all of his work was to be killed by an overgrown weasel because he got careless. He summoned the folio and tucked it under his arm as he planted the butt of his spear against the tree.

"Wake the fuck up you overgrown hamster!" Micah screamed, wincing as his voice cracked. Puberty a second time was going to be fun. "By Ankros' night get your tail out here so I can send you back to whatever hell he dragged you from!"

It was an established fact that the beasts Ankros created were more intelligent than their more mundane brethren. Some even understood common. Micah didn't know if the Dire Stoat understood him, but if it could, getting it extra pissed off wouldn't hurt.

The stoat stormed out of the cave, waist high on Micah's current body, but just over knee height on a proper adult. It wrinkled its nose at him, its white muzzle prominent against its reddish brown hide. The oversized weasel cocked its head at Micah trying to make sense of him.

He cast *root spears* feeling the exhaustion wash over him as the second tier wood spell sank into the forest floor. A second later, a series of two foot long sharpened wooden spikes exploded from the ground in a large area around the dire stoat. The lengths of wood stabbed in all directions, creating a sharpened tangle of undergrowth with the monster at the center.

It squealed as two stakes punched into its side, penetrating fur and flesh to draw blood. The creature squirmed and tried to escape by pulling its form off of the spikes, only widening the injuries. Micah cast *air knife*, exhausting his mana and opening a gash on the monster's shoulder.

After a minute or so, its struggles began to abate as it lost blood. Once it managed to pull itself from the two staves impaling it, it slipped while trying to climb the bloodslick wood, falling onto another spike. Micah didn't move from the tree, slowly watching as his mana recovered. He probably had enough for another *air knife*, but he wanted to save it in case the stoat made a move once *root spears* ended or the creature escaped.

Finally it stopped moving altogether. Shortly thereafter, the five minute duration on *root spears* ran out and the wood grew brittle, cracking and falling apart. Micah released a breath, the tension leaving his shoulders.

As weak as a dire stoat was, he was level one and just shy of fourteen. He needed to temper his usual confidence as an experienced adventurer. If it hadn't been seriously injured by the *root spears*, Micah would have struggled to fend it off, let alone come out on top. Still, the spoils of battle were his. One damp, poop filled cave and enough stoat blood to enchant a beacon.

Micah grabbed the dead monster by its short tail and dragged it into the cave, struggling to move its surprisingly heavy form. Once he made it to the cave, he reached into his backpack, and pulled out a large garnet and a smooth stone bowl. Quickly he filled the bowl with the stoats blood and dropped the pre-prepared garnet in it.

Wrinkling his nose, Micah brushed away the filth that clogged the cave's entrance before using a small hammer and chisel from his backpack to carve a circle into the floor of the cavern. Dragging the stoat over, he cut it again and used the weight of his body to wring enough blood from the dead animal to fill the circle.

Reciting the precise words of the ritual, Micah removed the garnet from the bowl of blood. It was warm to the touch and as soon as he removed it, the blood burned with green

flames. Standing in the center of the circle of blood he recited another incantation and placed the gemstone in the exact center of the circle. The circle roared to life with green flames as well, trapping Micah inside as he continued reciting the nonsense words and atonal yelps of the ritual.

Sweat began to pour down his back from the heat given off by the flames as he continued the casting. One wrong word. Hells, even the right word but facing the wrong direction, and everything would be wasted or worse. Still, he'd practiced the words recorded in his Folio countless times. Micah was confident that he could complete a ritual this simple even if he were drunk or drugged.

Ten minutes later it was over, the only evidence that something untoward had happened, the barely visible silver circle etched in the floor of the cave and the charred corpse of the stoat. It was for the best that no one knew about the casting. Although ritual casting wasn't officially illegal, the Church of Luxos tended to frown upon it and watch those capable of using it. After all, an incorrect casting could rip a hole between dimensions and unleash a swarm of monsters or a virulent plague.

Packing up his hammer and chisel, Micah took note of the shattered bowl and sighed. Apparently the heat from the flames was too much for the simple implement. He'd just have to make up a story about breaking the bowl when he got home and accept punishment from his Mother. She'd probably ground him again.

Not that 'sending him to bed' would be all that effective any more. He fished a second garnet out from the backpack and smiled at the faint red glow deep in the stone. It was the sister of the gem used in the ritual, split from the original rock with the very hammer and chisel he used to etch the circle.

The teleportation ritual itself was nowhere near as hard as creating the beacon. So long as he had the garnet, it was really just a half hour of casting and the sacrifice of a potted plant.

Of course there was still the matter of getting back inside the city walls. He'd need to capture a creature large enough to power another ritual but small enough that he could smuggle it back into Basil's Cove. Only then could he create another circle in his bedroom to allow himself to teleport back home once his activities for the night were done.

Walking out of the outcropping, Micah propped his back up against it and pulled out the sandwich he'd packed for himself that morning. Biting into it, he called up his status menu once again.

Micah Silver

Age 13 [ERROR] / 18

Class/Level Magi 2

XP 51/200
HP 12/12

Attributes

Body 4, Agility 3, Mind 10, Spirit 9

Attunement

Moon 11 Sun 0 Night 2

Mana

Moon 30/30 Sun 0/0 Night 13/13

Affinities

Time 10

Wood 6

Tier I - *Refresh* 10, *Mending* 9, *Plant Weave* 7

Tier II - *Augmented Mending* 7, *Root Spears* 4

Tier III - *Heal* 2

Air 5

Tier I - *Gale* 7, *Air Knife* 10, *Air Supply* 4

Tier II - *Wind Shield* 5, *Sonic Bolt* 4

Tier III - *Updraft* 1

Blessings

Mythic Blessing of Mursa - Blessed Return, Ageless Folio

Skills

Anatomy 6

Enchanting 3

Fishing 1

Herbalism 4

Librarian 3

Ritual Magic 3

Spear 5

Spellcasting 10

His mana growth remained the same from his previous life. Twice his attunement plus one for every point of spirit per level after the first. Slightly worriedly, Micah noted that his zero Sun attunement from creating the class crystal prevented him from gaining any Sun mana on level up. Still, all of the bonus Moon attunement he'd gained from relearning second and third tier spells, creating his first enchantment, and casting his first ritual more than dwarfed that loss.

It was unfortunate that he couldn't cast *sonic bolt* without drawing attention. As its name implied, the spell generated a lot of noise. Since he'd learned it about a year ago the spell had quickly become one of Micah's favorites, launching a ripple of air vibrations at a high enough frequency that eardrums ruptured and soft tissue hemorrhaged. It wasn't the most powerful second tier spell available, there were plenty of earth and fire spells competing for that title, but it was by far Micah's most powerful single target spell.

Even though the Lancer's taught him a pair of third level spells when he made it to his tenth level, neither really helped him right now. *Updraft* produced an upward gust of wind that would cushion a fall or help Micah jump higher. Theoretically, at higher levels it would let him fly after a fashion, but the spell was a mana hog and tricky to use. In short he hadn't found the opportunity to properly level it yet.

Heal was more useful in general, but not to a solo operator like Micah. In a team, it allowed him to heal his companions with a potency comparable to *augmented mending* but at range. He certainly appreciated being able to fulfill his role in a party without risking himself overly much, but for self healing, *augmented mending* was just as good, a cheaper mana expenditure, and higher level.

Finishing his sandwich, Micah stood up and stretched the kinks out of his back before grabbing his spear. Now to begin the next phase of the plan. Basil's Cove's city council didn't listen to the midsized guilds like the Lancers. They might respect them in the same way they did a collection of skilled artisans or craftsmen, but the way the city fell in the first timeline made it obvious that the smaller guilds weren't respected.

The only people with political power in Basil's Cove were the noble families that sat on the council and the Golden Drakes. The Kingdom was more than powerful enough to beat back the Durgh, the only reason for the disaster in the last timeline was a lack of warning. Properly alerted the nobles could scout out the Durgh and appeal to the King to send in a contingent of Royal Knights, high level blessed loyal to the crown.

Micah's only question was how to convince the local nobles and the Capital to take the threat seriously. All he could think to do was reveal himself and some of his abilities. This time, if he showed up at the door of the Golden Drakes and revealed his affinity for Time magic as well as an unnaturally high level and skill set, hopefully they'd believe him when he said he had a message from the future.

With a high enough level he would even feel comfortable revealing that his blessing was Mythic. If nothing else, a Mythic blessing associated with the primal element of Time would get their attention. Maybe then they'd believe that his gift included a 'message from the future.'

There was plenty of room to go wrong, but it's not like Micah had another choice. Even with only sleeping half of the night and constantly fighting monsters outside of Basil's Cove, he'd

be lucky to reach level twenty by the time the Durgh arrived. The leaders of the midsized guilds that led the defense were all in their mid forties and at least one of them died without fanfare in the first clash with the Durgh. Micah had no way of knowing how powerful the leaders of the incursion were, but he wouldn't be able to fight them on his own.

Uncertain as going to the Golden Drakes, a generally arrogant guild in his previous life, was, it seemed like Micah's only option. He just needed to make himself look like a valuable enough asset that they would drop their veneer of haughtiness to invest in him. After all, Micah thought darkly, the Golden Drakes were well acquainted with looking the other way for some of their more unsavory candidates so long as they showed enough potential to justify such discretion.

Slinging his backpack over his shoulder he started off into the forest once more. He would need blood sacrifices to create the second teleportation beacon, and he had limited time before the Sun set.

Chapter 14 - Prodigy

Micah walked back from the Library. Once again, it was his sixteenth birthday, but this time there wasn't any tension. Briefly he relived the moment from his previous timeline. It seemed so pivotal then, his very future hung on events outside of his control. For some reason he wanted to hurry them rather than take a couple minutes to enjoy his last day as a youth.

He chuckled slightly to himself as he took in the setting sun. He already had his blessing as well as enough skill levels to impress any recruitment officer. The past couple years gave him time to hone his skills and gain enough levels that he couldn't be ignored. He'd filled out, his solo escapades giving his body the tone and definition that he'd lacked on his last birthday. Already his body and agility attributes were at six each. Idley, he wondered if he could get them even higher with a more regimented training plan.

Home was just as he remembered. Trevor wasn't there, occupied on some sort of mission beyond the city walls. His family threw a small party. It was just as he remembered, Esther was excited for cake and his Mother pushed him too hard while his Father hinted that he'd accept Micah no matter what. It was a touchingly nostalgic moment. Even though he'd relived this timeline for the last three years, it never seemed as real as the first.

Micah didn't know when he started thinking of his 'new' family as placeholders for his 'real' family but it'd happened. Maybe it was the constant training. He just didn't have the same free time to spend with his family as he'd had in his previous life. Micah knew that his beliefs were irrational and unfair to them, but that didn't mean he could slack on his training. He

vowed, probably for the tenth time, to make it up to them once this timeline was fixed and the Durgh attack was averted.

He went through the motions, eating dinner while pretending to be excited and nervous about his blessing. His family bought it. They spent the entirety of the dinner reassuring him rather than noticing that Micah's actions were slightly off.

Really, he just wanted to get it over with. He never loved being the center of attention, and his Mother's investment with his blessing bordered on desperate. Finally, Micah escaped and went to bed. He fell asleep almost as soon as his eyes closed.

"Micaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" he woke up the next morning to the sound of Esther screaming at him and jumping on his bed. Somehow she'd gotten his door open without waking him and now he had a squirming younger sister whipping the pillow out from under his head and beating him soundly with it.

"WakeupwakeupwakeupWAKEUP!" She shrieked him in elation as he tried to roll over to avoid her blows. "Tell me what your blessing is. Luxos says you have to tell me, I'm still a youth."

"Hold on," Micah croaked out, shielding his head with his right arm as he tried to rub the sleep from his eye with his left hand. "Just give me a second here, I'm still basically asleep."

Esther scurried back on his bed, giving Micah some room to get his bearings, but still holding onto his pillow. He suspected that any efforts to fall back asleep would be swiftly thwarted. Out of options, he shook the last of the sleep out of his system and smiled at her.

"My blessing?" He asked, feigning confusion. "I do recall having some sort of dream about that, but I can't put my finger on it..."

He dodged the pillow thrown at his head and leaned forward to rustle Esther's hair. She wriggled out of his grasp with snake-like agility and jumped out of his head, pouting and stomping a foot on his bedroom floor.

"Micah," she put her hands on her hips, mimicking their Mother's favorite scolding pose. "You promised."

"I'm not sure I did," he chuckled, pulling the blankets off of himself and letting his feet dangle onto the cold floor. "But I'll let you know anyway. Mythic blessing of Mursa. She granted me limited power of prophecy, some decent affinities and a book that has notes and the story of a possible future. Better yet, I got a class and ten levels. I'm already higher leveled than Trevor."

“What,” Esther’s eyes grew into dinner plates. “Wait until I tell Sandy!” She sprinted out of his room, not even closing the door behind her.

Micah chuckled to himself and walked into the kitchen. His mother was mixing the ingredients for their morning pancakes, but for once Micah was up early enough to see his Father chewing away thoughtfully at his morning eggs and toast.

“You’re up early,” Jon chuckled, brushing some crumbs from the toast from his bushy mustache. “I take it from your sister’s reaction that she had something to do with that?”

“She didn’t want to wait to hear my blessing,” Micah pulled out a chair and sat down across from his Father. Strange that she’s more excited about it than I am.

“Well,” his Mother called from where she was preparing the pancakes. “Don’t leave us in suspense either. Tell us what the Sixteen saw fit to give you.”

“It’s a Mythic blessing from Mursa,” Micah winced at the sound of his mother dropping her cast iron pan on the floor. “Limited prophecy in the form of a book that details possible futures along with a class, ten levels, and some pretty good affinities.”

“Mythic,” Micah’s Mother lurched forward toward the wash basin, her knees giving out under her as she clutched at the counter to avoid following the pan to the ground. “My boy has a Mythic blessing. This changes everything. There’s so much to do. I, I have to tell someone.”

“Are you certain Micah?” Jon set down his toast, focusing entirely on Micah. “You don’t seem all that excited about your ability. Please tell me you didn’t just make something up to get your Mother excited. You know she’s sensitive on this topic.”

“The Goddess was quite clear,” Micah shrugged, glancing guiltily at his mother as her babbling segued into sobbing with joy. “I just know that a Mythic ability from a major deity is going to come with its own problems. There’s no way I’ll be able to join the Lancers with Trevor, and there’s a good chance that I’m going to be sent to the Capital for training. I’m not exactly excited to leave everything I know behind.”

“Trevor was excited to try and rope you into the Lancers,” his Father replied with a chuckle. “He was trying to be cagey, not pressure you into it but it sounds like you’ve picked up on his plans anyway.”

“You’ve got the right of it though,” Micah’s Dad continued. “Everyone looks at the greater blessings as a gift, but they come with their own share of responsibility. You’ll likely end up with your fair share of wealth and fame, but the King is almost certainly going to want to make you a Royal Knight. I don’t think I’ve heard of a common born with a Mythic gift that hasn’t been snapped up by a noble house or the royal family.”

“I know,” Micah replied. “I don’t think I have a choice but to get wrapped up in court politics and I barely know what’s going on. It’s like being forced to play a game, but nobody has bothered to explain the rules.”

“Another apt description,” his Dad chuckled. “It’s hard to go wrong with the royal family. They have most of the power around here and a pretty decent system for developing new talents. You might be able to get better benefits for yourself by joining a noble house, but it’s too easy to piss off the kind of people you can’t afford to annoy if you go that way. I certainly don’t know enough to advise you.”

“Don’t worry too much about your brother,” Jon edged a slice of egg onto his toast before bringing it to his mouth. “He’ll understand. As heartbroken as he’ll be that you have to leave, he’ll be twice as proud for you. I’d say you join the Golden Drakes. They’re a high tier adventuring guild headquartered in Basil’s Cove, but they have ties to the royal family. They’ll get you the training you need without ruffling some noble’s feathers.”

“Thanks,” Micah replied sincerely, slightly surprised at the depth of his Father’s knowledge and analysis. He’d never really thought about it, but Jon made some of the finest tailored suits in Basil’s Cove. He likely rubbed shoulders with the same elite that Micah would be dealing with shortly on almost a monthly basis.

“What about Mom?” He asked, eyes flickering back to his Mother, still mumbling to herself on the floor. “She’s taking this a little... differently than I expected.”

“Don’t worry about her either,” his Dad chuckled. “You should probably grab some fruit or something for breakfast before you head over to the Golden Drake guildhall, I don’t see your pancakes being done anytime soon. Other than that she’ll be fine and bragging about your gift to the neighbors in a couple hours.”

Smiling and whistling a tune, Micah grabbed two slices of fresh bread and an apple before setting out. The Sun was barely up and the regular morning noises of Basil’s Cove were rather muted. He took advantage of the lack of foot traffic to take cut through the usually busy market district. The Golden Drake guildhall stood right at the border of the noble quarter. You didn’t need a letter of recommendation to get past the nobles’ guards, but they certainly watched Micah like a hawk as he walked up to the door.

Registering with the Golden Drakes was a very different experience. Micah was given roughly the same questionnaire as the Lancers, but after turning it in he was left to cool his heels for almost four hours. Finally a plump man, sweat beading on his face and wearing a cloak embroidered with gold thread entered Micah’s waiting room.

“Mr. Silver,” the stranger pulled out a handkerchief and blotted his damp forehead. “I’ve been assigned to talk to you about your application. You’ve indicated that you have a Mythic gift for prophecy and 10 time affinity. Obviously these abilities are incredibly powerful. It isn’t uncommon for people to fake having a powerful ability in order to gain wealth and acclaim.”

The man sat down in a chair across from Micah with some relief. During his entire rippling descent, Micah couldn’t help but notice how very *pink* this man was. Whoever he was, he certainly wasn’t accustomed to missing a meal or traveling outdoors.”

“At this time,” the man continued, “you can withdraw or modify your application without penalty. Be aware that I am a certified Truth Seer. If you refuse to withdraw your application and you are found to be lying, I will be quite cross and the penalties will be very strict.”

“I understand,” Micah nodded. “Just tell me what I have to do.”

“Simply put both hands on the table,” the man replied, slightly breathlessly. Apparently he struggled for oxygen after the simple act of pouring himself into the chair. “I will need to hold both of your wrists while you recite your abilities and I will be able to tell if you’re telling the truth or not. Very simple.”

Micah extended his hands. The stranger took them in his own and muttered something. Micah felt his arms goosebump as a static charge went up them. He shuddered briefly from the sensation before making eye contact with the stranger who nodded at him.

“My name is Micah Silver,” he chose his words carefully. “I have a Mythic blessing from Mursa, Goddess of the Moon and Magic. Part of that blessing includes a ten affinity in time magic and limited knowledge of future events, specifically in the next two years. I am a level ten Magi. I also have a book that aids me in learning new spells and abilities. This book contained details about the spells I have learned.”

“Truth,” The man replied, his mood lightening considerably. “Please state your other affinities for the record and I’ll send in the next inspector.”

“Before I state my affinities,” Micah continued, steeling himself. “I feel obliged to let you know that there will be a Durgh incursion in about two years. I believe they are massing now, but when they come their numbers will be sufficient to overwhelm both Westmarch and Basil’s cove. As for my affinities, Wood is six and Wind is five.”

“Truth and truth,” the man frowned. “Unless your actual gift is one related to deception or hiding your abilities, you believe in all of the statements you’ve made today. Obviously I am not in a position to make a decision on your prophecy, but I will escalate your claim. You can be sure that a committee will investigate its veracity as soon as possible.”

Chapter 15 - With Great Purpose

Micah thrust his spear into the shade ogre's chest, sinking the head deep through the tightly coiled muscles until its heart. The creature bucked against the daemons holding it steady once or twice and died, slumping in their grip. One of them leaned forward, sniffing the ogre with its head that resembled a wolf's before releasing it.

"Very good Micah," Brenden complimented, the slight hint of an accent clipping his voice as he nodded his head approvingly.. "You slightly overextended on *gale thrust* but that was a superb exercise in mana control."

Micah planted the butt of the spear in the ground and held it vertically, leaning against it as he panted, sweat streaming down his face. The other daemon prodded the dead shade ogre, whining softly. Both of them were only Onkert, the weakest of the five known daemon breeds. Resembling gorillas with the head of wolves, they were by far the most summoned daemon due to their low energy costs.

He shuddered remembering that cost. Four pigs. A half hour per daemon per life, cut and bled in accordance with the ritual and cast into the flames. The Church of Luxos disapproved of daemon summoning, but they'd never gotten around to banning it entirely. The summoned daemons were too useful to the ruling class, both as shock troops and magically enhanced laborers.

"Now Mr. Silver," Brenden continued down the dungeon's hallway motioning for Micah to follow him. "For the next target I want you to disable it using *paralytic sting*, we need to make sure that your wood magic doesn't fall behind. We both know that the actual goal is for you to earn enough mana to cast fifth tier spells so you can start learning time magic, but there's no reason for us to neglect your spellcasting skill and weaker affinities."

"Sure Mr. Thrakos," Micah agreed, trotting to keep up. "I still think it'd be quicker to let me fight the monsters."

"You," Brenden Thrakos snorted at Micah. "You're an investment Micah. You're level twelve but we're in a level fifteen dungeon. I'm not ever sure if you'd be able to solo any of the monsters in here let alone beat them in a timely fashion. No, we need you to gain levels so you have the mana for time magic. You'll land the killing blow on each monster as we've been doing up until now."

"But what about my skill levels?" Micah frowned. "If I'm only delivering killing blows I'm only going to gain levels. I won't be able to use any of my lower tiered abilities."

“Micah,” Brenden whirled on him, a flash of annoyance in his eyes that he quickly buried under a cake sweet smile. “This is how all of the nobles do it. You learn skills until you earn a good enough class. Then you gain experience until you level up enough to have the mana to train your martial arts and spells. It might not be how the stories talk about it, but trust me. This is how everyone serious does it.”

Ahead of them the Onkert tackled another shadow ogre, the hulking creature’s ability to hide their presence entirely useless before the daemon’s acute noses. One of the Onkert wrestled the crude greatsword from the ogre’s hands while the other twisted its arms behind its back. By the time Brenden and Micah came into the room, one of the Daemon’s had kicked its knees from behind, bringing the almost ten foot tall monster to its knees. The other drew its head back, exposing its throat to Micah.

“Now,” Brenden continued with the air of someone explaining advanced mana theory to a goat. “Use *paralytic sting* to disable it and then finish it off with a *sonic bolt*.”

Micah cast *paralytic sting*, coating his right hand in a glowing green sheen of mana. He stiffened his fingers and jabbed the hand into the side of the struggling ogre’s neck. The spell discharged into the monster, causing its eyes to cloud and its motions to quiet. The spell didn’t do any damage, but even at a fairly low skill level it could utterly paralyze a monster below level 25 for almost a minute.

It had better, Micah thought as he gritted his teeth. *Paralytic sting* was a third tier spell and used a good portion of his manna to cast. Seconds later, after a nod from Brenden, Micah unleashed a *sonic bolt* at close range into the ogre’s skull. Blood began to flow from its nose and ears, but it continued breathing.

“Again,” Brenden said impassively, motioning with his hand. The Onkert holding onto the ogre’s head gripped it by the hair and lifted it up, closer to Micah.

“This doesn’t feel right Mr. Thrakos,” Micah looked down at the paralyzed helpless ogre, bleeding and immobile before him.

“I believe my hearing must have been scrambled by your use of a sonic spell in an enclosed space,” Brenden replied, his voice dangerously calm. “I told you to use the spell again, and I thought I heard you questioning me.”

Gritting his teeth, he cast the spell again, killing the creature and emptying himself of Moon mana. Checking his reserves grimly, Micah noted that he still had a little bit of Night mana left. Whatever he’d thought the Golden Drakes were, his training had been something else. As soon as his abilities were verified, they gave him a lavish suite and luxuries he’d only dreamed of while working for the Lancers. A couple days later, they brought in Brenden Thrakos, a talented wizard and martial artist with affinities in wood and air.

Training under Brenden was completely different than his time with the Lancers. He wasn't assigned to a team or sent on any missions where he might ever be in danger. Instead, the guild 'power leveled' him. Brenden taught him a couple additional spells and a martial art, the Wind Spear, but after that it was just sending him through the same level fifteen dungeon over and over again.

It had done wonders for Micah's experience and levels, but it was a remarkably hollow endeavor. He didn't really have any friends at the Golden Drake guild, instead spending almost all of his time with Brenden. There wasn't any camaraderie or risk, just the day to day chore of landing the finishing blow on a monster he would ordinarily struggle with. Honestly, if it wasn't for the knowledge of his previous life, Micah suspected that he wouldn't even know how to fight right now.

Even Wind Spear was a bottom tier martial art that he practically had to beg out of the Drakes. It was evident from their dismissive response to his requests that they just didn't see much value in him learning combat abilities. Even the handful of skills and spells they taught him seemed more like an attempt to placate and humor him than actually make Micah a more powerful spellcaster. As long as he kept gaining skill levels in spellcasting and levels in Magi, they didn't seem to particularly care what he did.

The entire system was cold and impersonal, but as he'd been informed at least a half dozen times in the last six months, the Golden Drakes were a big business. They only treated him well because he had the potential to be a high level magi in a rare affinity. Beyond Micah's time magic, decent wind and wood mages were a dime a dozen to a guild like the Drakes. They still likely would have hired him, but he would have spent the first five years of his training protecting miners seeking ore in the Great Depths, a thankless and dangerous task.

Only then would they have bothered to put him in a combat team and sent him to the dungeons to earn money and gain proper levels. The higher echelons of the guild could compete with the Royal Knights, but pretty much everyone else was a footsoldier or support staff, and that hierarchy was made clear to Micah from day one.

"Good," Brenden nodded at the dead ogre. "We have two more before the boss fight and I want to make sure you've recovered what mana you can just in case we need you for an emergency heal. Take a five minute break, we'll be working on your spear form from here on out."

Micah grunted back at his instructor, more than anything wishing to return to his days on the Lancers when it was just Drekt, Jo, Sarah, Will and him. They'd never managed anything worthy of a bard's song, but he still had plenty of fond memories. Sometimes they were victorious, sharing a toast as they looted the junk filled packs of a clan of kobolds. Others, they ended up running for their lives, puffing for breath as they fled a cave or ruin they'd been

exploring while being chased by monsters well over their level that sought to punish them for their intrusion.

All of their adventures hadn't mattered all that much in the long run, but they certainly made Micah feel alive. Like he was part of something greater and that is daily efforts mattered in some small way.

Still, as dissatisfied as he was, at least the Golden Drakes listened to his prophecy. Almost immediately they'd dispatched scouts to the Great Depths outside Westmarch to verify his prediction. If it would save his friends and family, Micah was more than willing to put up with the Drakes leeching all excitement and joy out of being an adventurer.

"Your five minutes are up Mr. Silver," Brenden began walking ahead. "Try to avoid overextending yourself this time."

Clenching his jaw, Micah stood up and followed the man to the next room. If he was lucky they would finish early and he'd have some time at the guildhall before his afternoon exercises.

That night, a knock on Micah's door dislodged him from his study of ritual magic. Brenden insisted that the rituals would eventually become a key part of his time magic repertoire once he leveled up enough to use fifth tier spells. Micah didn't complain. The topic was interesting, certainly more fun than spearing restrained monsters, and it made him think of happier days working with Keeper Ansom.

"Come in," he called, slipping a felt bookmark into the grimoire before closing it and turning in his seat to face the door.

Brenden stepped in, stiff and formal. He glanced over Micah's room, taking in its neat state and the stack of books by his reading desk. The gaze dissected every imperfection, looking for a reason to scold him. Finally, after finding none, Brenden grudgingly nodded his approval.

"I've come to check up on your studies Mr. Silver," he stated, his tone clipped and formal under the weight of his accent. "I see that you're reading *Taraken's Intermediate Mutations*. How are you progressing on your transference rituals?"

"Fairly well," Micah nodded, summoning the Folio from his wrist. "I've been more interested in the summoning and translocation rituals. I keep running into references of using an inert metal like lead to offset the energy spikes caused by a recent meteor shower, but I haven't been able to figure out how the lead would interact with Akh, Tel and Bo runes."

“Immaterial,” Brenden shook his head, annoyance flashing through his eyes. “You were told to focus on transference rituals, specifically energy transference as it is a key component of time magic. Tel and Bo runes aren’t used in transference rituals so learning them is a waste of your time.”

“But I’ve hit a bit of a wall on transference,” Micah answered, trying to hide the hint of a whine from his voice. “Both translocation and summoning both use transference to fuel their rituals. I figured a practical application of transference might help it all make sense to me.”

“Mr. Silver,” Brenden crossed his arms, clicking his tongue at the younger man. “I’ve had people with the deceit skill try much better excuses than that on me. It’s not going to work. Get back to studying what I’ve told you to study. It’ll be for the best in the long run.”

“Sure,” Micah replied with a sigh, flipping the pages in the Folio until he was looking at his notes on transference. “It’s not that hard, just exacting and time consuming. I really think that I’d be better motivated if I had a more practical discipline to apply the transference too.”

“You will soon,” Brenden replied, his face a mask of boredom and vague annoyance. “The guild leadership has verified the prophecy you revealed when you joined the guild. The Durgh are massing. Already the call has gone out for the Royal Knights. Together the Knights and the Golden Drakes are going to crush the nearby Durgh outposts to put them on the defensive and head off any attack.”

“You mean I’ll finally get to battle with the rest of the guild?” Micah jumped up from his chair, barely noticing the pile of expensive tomes tumbling off the table from the force of his movement.

“No,” Brenden replied, the faintest hint of a sneer curling his lip. “You will be going to the Capital for further training now that the extent of your gift has been revealed. A seer is *far* too valuable to risk in the front line.”

Chapter 16 - Goodbyes

The market bustled around Micah as he followed Brenden. The older man strode imperiously through the crowds, forcing them to part around him. A few people shot disgruntled glares in his direction only to look away upon noticing the sigil of the Golden Drakes on his lapel.

The insignia might protect the two of them from any overt reactions to Brenden’s imperious behavior, but it did nothing to silence the angry muttering. No one said anything definite, but for every face that turned away after realizing the forces Micah and Brenden represented, there was another voice grumbling indeterminately just behind their backs.

Finally, Brenden stopped in front of an upscale boutique specializing in high end adventuring gear. Looking the well decorated mid sized building up and down, Brenden clicked his tongue and sighed.

“Quit dawdling Mr. Silver,” Brenden called over his shoulder, annoyance on his face. “This store is barely adequate, but it’ll have to do. There’s hardly anything better in this hamlet.”

“Basil’s Cove is a city,” Micah corrected halfheartedly. He knew that Brenden didn’t actually care, but it still rankled him that the older man would try to denigrate his home in such a petty way. “There are over thirty thousand people living here and we handle almost all of the trade up and down the Horn Coast.”

“Thirty thousand?” Brenden sneered back at him, stopping in the doorway to turn around and face Micah. “The Capital has over a million. The Kingdom itself has almost ten million citizens. Maybe thirty thousand is more than a hamlet, but I don’t know why it even matters. It’s little more than a rounding error. The difference between Basil’s Cove and a real City is infinitely larger than the distance separating this provincial ‘city’ from a hamlet.”

“Why are we shopping anyway?” Micah asked, trying to change the subject and deflect Brenden’s temper. “I never get to leave the compound and then suddenly out of nowhere you tell me we’re going to the market.”

“Simple,” Brenden turned back to the shop and walked in, finally letting the pair of people that had been waiting to leave while he ranted at Micah slip out. “The Sixteen have heard my prayers and in their mercy decided to deliver me from this rural hellscape. You are being transferred to the Golden Drake home office in the Capital which means that I am free to return to a city with actual restaurants, bards that know how to tune their lutes, and theaters that will run performances with more sophistication than constant pratfalls and fart jokes.”

“No one said anything about this,” Micah’s forehead furrowed as he followed his irritable mentor into the store.

“I just said it now,” Brenden didn’t even bother to look back as he swept through the store before stopping in front of a display of robes and travel packs. “Consider yourself both in the loop and informed. Now get over here so we can get you fitted for your travel apparel. I don’t want anyone to accuse me of breaching my contract with the Golden Drakes because you showed up to the Capital without appropriate equipment.”

Brenden snapped his fingers above his head, drawing a series of frowns from other shoppers, but summoning an attendant that hurried over. She was young, pretty, athletic, and wearing a skirt that was cut mere inches from immodesty. Obviously, her employer had hoped

that adventurers would spend more time looking at her than the prices of the wares they were purchasing.

Loneliness washed over Micah as his memory flashed back to his previous life with Jo. She'd been a little too wild for him, prone to dragging him away at midnight to sneak into a temple for a tryst or an active dungeon for a date. Jo was a consummate adrenaline junky, but in that timeline, only near the end did he grow out of being a shy librarian's assistant.

Things never would have worked between them. She wanted more excitement and adventure than the Micah of that timeline could provide, but when things were good, they'd been almost perfect. There was just something pure about fighting monsters all day before returning to camp and giggling at dumb inside jokes while the moon filled the sky.

Even after Jo suggested that they break up, he held those memories close. She was right, once the infatuation of the early relationship wore off it became harder and harder to keep up with her. Micah liked spending time with Jo, but the idea of climbing a cliff at midnight just to dangle their feet off the edge started to seem less 'romantic' and more like a dangerous chore that would leave him exhausted the next day.

After the breakup they remained friends, at first Micah had been hurt and remained fairly quiet to avoid starting drama in the party, but eventually he realized that it was for the best. Although there was an unmistakable chemistry between Jo and him, they'd just met at the wrong time. He didn't have either the energy or the maturity to keep up with the woman, and neither did the slew of men she dated after him.

By the time he'd reset the timeline, they'd settled back into being friends once again. Their relationship never became physical after the breakup, but Jo became a confidante. They shared their fears, concerns and plans under the starlight and things between them were almost like before. There'd been no one on the team that he trusted more than Jo. He knew that if need be, they'd die for each other.

Micah sighed, forcing his hands to unclench. She had. A lot of people had.

Brenden sniffed at the attendant dismissively, drawing Micah's attention back to reality. She blushed before speaking hesitantly.

"Welcome to Haarvash's Emporium kind sirs," her voice trembled slightly as her gaze fixed itself on the Golden Drake badge on Brenden's collar. "My name is Miranda. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to be of assistance."

"My ward," Brenden nodded toward Micah, not even bothering to look at him, "needs travel clothing. I don't know the first thing about fashion or attire in this area, but he can't be an

embarrassment to me. Outfit him with travel apparel and a pack full of clothing and bring him back to me.”

“You do know that my Father is a tailor Mr. Thrakos?” Micah asked, not really expecting Brenden to acknowledge him. “If all we needed was to get me fitted for clothing, we could have just visited him.”

“Enough Mr. Silver,” Brenden cut him off. “It’s unacceptable for my ward to be clad in provincial hand me downs. If we’re forced to acquire your attire here, I’ll be damned if you’re clothed in anything less than the best that Basil’s Cove has to offer.”

“Silver?” Miranda’s eyes brightened as she looked at Micah once again. “As in Jon Silver? We carry his work here. His embroidery is to DIE for.”

“Whatever,” Brenden rolled his eyes and turned away from the both of them. “So long as he doesn’t end up looking like a farmer in an ill-fitting suit. I know I’m not giving you that much to work with, but do your best.”

The door chimed, causing Micah to look up. His breath seized in his throat as he saw Sarah and Jo Redflower walk into the shop. She was just as beautiful as he remembered, laughing at some joke from her sister as she brushed some hair from her face.

“Cute aren’t they?” Miranda chuckled as she approached Micah with a tape measure. “Both of them come in here shopping at least once a week. I can introduce you if you’d like.”

“I just feel like I know them,” Micah smiled weakly. “But it can’t be real. Like they’re from a dream or something.”

“Miranda!” Jo shouted, waving to flag the attendant down as she power walked over. “Did you get any of the new scabbards in? I need something that will accent that armor I bought last month.”

Brenden stepped in front of her, frowning with his arms crossed. Jo stopped short, barely avoiding plowing into his chest.

“Your friend is occupied young lady,” Brenden scowled down at her. “She’s currently helping outfit my ward. You can gossip with her once she’s finished with her work. Until then, amuse yourself elsewhere.”

Jo opened her mouth to say something only for Miranda to shake her head. Micah did his best to avoid eye contact. Even without Brenden’s arrogance, he didn’t feel ready to see Jo again. Too much time had passed.

His emotions swirled as she glared at the both of them. Her gaze focused on the insignia on Brenden's shoulder, transforming her mouth into a thin line. Her eyes flashed as she shifted her attention to Micah and Miranda.

"Fine," Jo replied, turning back to Sarah. "If they give you any trouble Miranda, just let me know. Not everyone is afraid to stand up to the Drakes."

"Your friend is safe," Brenden snorted. "Don't overvalue yourself. I'd take her if I wanted and there's nothing you could do about it. It just isn't worth sullyng my reputation on a dalliance with a provincial trollop."

Jo turned red, her mouth opening to issue an ill advised response. Sarah grabbed her sister's wrist, interrupting her and shaking her head. Brenden smirked and walked away, clearly dismissing the two of them

"Sorry about that Miranda," Micah smiled weakly at her. "It's probably for the best if we get to shopping. The sooner we buy what we need and get out of here, the lower the chance that someone aggravates Brenden enough to make him lash out."

The actual shopping was fairly quick, Miranda efficiently took his measurements, periodically slipping him sympathetic looks. Afterward she brought a selection of outfits for him to peruse. Micah was hardly a talent on his Father's level, but he knew a fair amount about the proper cuts and stitching of fabric. Between Miranda and him they were able to put together a full ensemble of clothing and travel garb that would hopefully stand up to the Capital's scrutiny.

Brenden barely looked at it before escorting Miranda to the front desk to make the purchase. Micah stood awkwardly, his hands stuffed in his pocket, waiting for the entire transaction to be completed. A woman cleared her throat behind him, prompting him to turn and see Sarah standing next to Jo.

"Excuse me," Sarah asked, an uncharacteristic smile on her face. Jo scowled at him.

"Uh, yes?" Micah responded.

"I couldn't help but notice that you appear to be a member of the Golden Drakes," Sarah extended her hand, a far cry from her usually judgemental and sarcastic self. "My name is Sarah Redflower and this is my sister, Josephine Redflower."

"Micah Silver," he took her hand, Sarah's callouses from constant combat contrasting with his own soft digits. "It's a pleasure to meet both of you."

"Why were you harassing Miranda?" Jo jumped in suspiciously. "Even if you are rich, you can't just bother a girl like that. It's not like she's a piece of property that you can go out and purchase. She's her own person with rights."

“Silver!” Brenden shouted impatiently as he walked toward the door. “Quit flirting with your girlfriends, we need to get moving if you’re going to catch your carriage.”

He smiled weakly at both of them. Melancholy swept over him as he realized that in this timeline, he’d probably never see either of them again. As much as he wasn’t ready to see them again, he wasn’t nearly ready to let them go. There was so much he hadn’t processed, so much he hadn’t said, but there was nothing for it. The hands of fate were pulling them apart with a force that couldn’t be denied.

“Goodbye,” he said sadly, smiling slightly. “It was nice to meet you. I feel in a different life we could have been friends.”

Chapter 17 - The Capital

Bitollan, City of Lights and Spires, was as majestic as its name sounded. Even at night, mage lights of a dozen colors illuminated the soaring buttresses of the City’s towers. Micah tried to enjoy their splendor as he rode the carriage in, but his excitement was tempered by the knowledge that he was missing the battle for Basil’s Cove at that very moment.

Deep down Micah knew that it was all worth it. As much as he wanted to be on the front lines, elbow deep in combat and risking his life side by side with his former friends, he didn’t have any real basis for that desire. Still, he couldn’t help but compare himself to the nobles and Golden Drake members that fled Basil’s Cove in his previous timeline. The fact that he had sacrificed everything to keep his family safe didn’t make him feel like any less of a coward.

He jolted slightly as the carriage rolled over a rut in the road. Micah sighed and closed the window. He’d have plenty of time to gawk at Bitollan later. For now he just needed to focus on the advanced ritual book Brenden had given him when they parted. He’d been reading it for most of the weeklong journey, and by this point Micah was convinced that the book was on the Church of Luxos ‘burn on site’ list.

Where most of the books on rituals he’d been introduced to up until now walked a fine line of acceptability, this one focused entirely on the transfer of anima. True, every ritual or enchantment needed anima, the life force behind a living being, to power it. Up until now, the portions of the rituals related to anima were fairly perfunctory. The caster sacrificed an animal, presumably and hopefully livestock or a monster, and its life force was added to the ritual.

This book, *On Life and Energy* by Karin Dakkora was decidedly more in depth. Micah's inner bookworm found the ruminations on the nature of the soul fascinating, but the appendices to the book were concerning. Where normally a book on theory would simply opine and try to make sense of observations, *On Life* contained descriptions of detailed experiments. Ones that involved captives being used as batteries until everything vital was drained from them, leaving the victims as little more than empty drooling husks.

The fundamental point of the book was that ritual and primal magic could feed upon anima to empower them. More than half the book was devoted to finding ways to improve on the drawing and transference of anima as part of ritual casting. The author was disdainful of most recorded spells and rituals, decrying them as the safe dabbling of the mediocre. Micah did agree that rituals spelled out in the last third of the book by Karin were much more exciting, but in the 'these might rip a hole in reality' sense rather than anything he was eager to try.

Frowning, he pulled out the Ageless Folio and searched for Karin Dakkora's name. Thanks to the magic of the Folio he found her almost immediately. One of the records of Keeper Ansom's that he'd read detailed a noble party of heroes defeating a dark archwizard that swore loyalty to no God.

Apparently her collection of daemons raided nearby cities indiscriminately and all of the Sixteen joined together to request that their greatest champions rid Karell of her plague. The record went on for pages about how her fell powers spat in the face of the natural order and threatened the entirety of Karell with some sort of unknown incursion from 'the outside.' It didn't detail what 'the outside was, but Micah got the distinct impression that it wasn't a friendly or happy place.

He closed the book with a sigh and dismissed the Folio. *On Life* was almost certainly a banned book. He wasn't entirely sure why Brenden insisted that he study it, but his time with the Golden Drakes taught him that asking was frowned upon. Hopefully someone in the capital would be more willing to shed light on the situation.

Micah closed his eyes, trying to will himself to sleep. Bitollan was still miles away. There'd be plenty of time to gawk at its sights and get answers tomorrow. At first, sleep eluded him, the occasional ruts jolting him to wakefulness, but before long he slipped off into a dreamless slumber.

He awoke to a calloused hand shaking his shoulder. Micah sat up, blinking against the harsh white mage lights that illuminated the coach driver in the carriage's open door.

"Come now milord," the man spoke with a thick country drawl. "Let's get you inside and into a comfier bed so I can unhitch the horses."

“Milord?” Micah cocked his head at the man. “My Father was a tailor. Last I checked I was fairly far from being nobility.”

“Whatever you say milord,” the driver responded with a chuckle, climbing out of the coach to give Micah access to the doorway. “I’m a forgotten, so even having a trade smells a bit like nobility to me. Plus, if this is the place I’m dropping you off, I’m definitely calling you milord on account that I don’t wanna get beaten by a palace guard for disrespect.” The man jerked his head, indicating the twisting marble towers behind him that glowed in the magelight.

Micah stepped out of the carriage, craning his neck to take in the massive building. Absently he noted that his jaw was slack, but he couldn’t help himself. Mammoth walls of smooth stone surrounded the building, gem inlaid runes practically humming with energy. The building itself looked like an artist’s rendition of a castle, only stretched to twice its normal height.

Internally, Micah’s mind balked. No building of stone could be that thin and that high. Even though he *knew* that magic was being used to lighten and strengthen the stones, part of him recoiled, expecting the towers to collapse under their own weight at any moment.

“That was my reaction the first time I saw it too milord,” the driver removed Micah’s luggage from the rear storage shelf on the carriage. “Course, I grew up on a farm. Most magic we saw was the local lord’s elementalists, cleanin out the kobolds before they could run off with that year’s harvest. Here in the Capital, there’s magic on every street corner. Hells, the buildings themselves are artwork.”

“Where,” Micah tried to recollect his thoughts. “What is this? I was just supposed to be transferred from the Basil’s Cove Golden Drake branch office to headquarters in Bitollan.”

“This here’s the Royal Knight’s headquarters,” the coach driver set down Micah’s luggage next to him with a dull thud, before holding his hand out slightly expectantly. “Far as I can tell its mostly administration, training and research here. Field soldiers are housed about a mile away.”

“As for the Golden Drakes?” He shrugged indifferently, “they have connections to the Royal Family, everyone knows that. I don’t know why I was directed to bring you here, but I know you’re expected. They’d have impounded my carriage the minute I drove it into the Royal District if you weren’t.”

“Milord,” the driver coughed slightly, glancing down at his empty hand. “The Golden Drakes settled up your bill, but it’s been a hard couple of winters. The tab itself barely pays for what I owe on the carriage. If you’d be so kind as to spare some attunement, I’ve got three little ones and a fourth on the way.”

“Oh,” Micah shook his head, trying to clear the fog of drowsiness and wonder. “Of course. What kind of attunement would you prefer.”

“Sun would be great milord,” the coachman beamed at Micah, displaying a pair of missing teeth. “Name’s Gheblan milord, but my friends call me Gheb. You look like you’re in a bit over your head so I thought I’d throw a little advice your way. Folks like me? We try and stay away from the rich and powerful sort. Sometimes things work out like in the fairy tales for the little ones, but more often than not we step on toes we shouldn’t step on and hurt feelings that can’t be hurt.”

“Not to say you’re clumsy mind you,” Gheb frantically waved his hand. “No, the rich just have their own way of doing things. It’s too easy to say the wrong thing to the wrong person and pfff.”

“You’re gone,” Gheb waggled his fingers, a serious note in his eyes. “Happened to my Cousin, Reggie. He saved a Count’s prized horse from having to be put down after it threw a shoe. Count brought him out to his estate. Had a feast in his honor and everything. Then Reggie had a couple too many drinks and complimented the wrong young lady. Count’s son killed him in front of everyone to win her honor. At his own feast.”

“You stay alert and you stay careful,” Gheb crossed his arms, shaking his head. “You didn’t know where you were going until you arrived? Well, that’s a surprise and surprises aren’t accidents in Bitollan. You’re playing a dangerous game, and it sounds to me like someone else is already a couple moves ahead of you.”

“What should I do?” Micah asked him worriedly, touching Gheb’s bicep to transfer the Sun attunement to him. “I could not drink. Try to avoid saying something I shouldn’t to the wrong person.”

“Wish I could help you more,” Gheb shrugged. “Not drinking might show a lack of trust or hospitality. Could be an even worse insult than talking about someone’s grammum.”

“You there!” A voice shouted from the gatehouse as a tall, well-built man wearing sparkling silver chain armor and carrying a halberd began walking toward them. “Move the carriage or we’ll have it impounded for loitering.”

“That’s my cue,” Gheb chuckled, hopping back up onto the carriage with an agility that belied his husky frame. “If you’re ever in a spot of trouble, head on down to the Charcoal Ox in Soap Town and ask for Gheb. Doesn’t smell the best down there on account of the rendering plant, but that just means we don’t have to deal with as many guards. I can’t promise much, but if I were you I wouldn’t be trusting any promises right now.”

With a whistle and a flick of the reins, the horses started trotting away, their hooves clacking against the cobblestones. Micah turned as he heard the sound of the guard's footfalls approaching him. The man looked him up and down impassively. Micah shifted self-consciously as he compared his battered travel linens to the guards gleaming armor and helm.

"Are you Micah Silver?" The man asked, leaning forward slightly to squint at Micah's face. "I was told you'd have a spear."

"Oh," Micah coughed nervously, motioning toward the spear, its head wrapped in an oilskin, that leaned against his suitcase. "Yes, I'm Micah Silver."

"Good, we've been expecting you," the guard nodded, satisfied with Micah's response. "Let's get you inside and settled in." He turned around and began walking back toward the gatehouse.

"Wait," the guard stopped abruptly, forcing Micah to twist his body to avoid running into the man. "That coach driver didn't bother you for a tip did he?"

Micah nodded, uncertainly.

"By the Sixteen," the guard shook his head angrily. "Pests, the lot of them. He was paid in full at the outset of your journey. He probably took you for an easy mark and ran a grift on you."

Chapter 18 - Academy

The next morning, Micah was woken by a sharp and officious knock on his bedroom door. Struggling to clear the sleep from his eyes, he yawned and dragged himself out of bed. He padded in silence across the bedroom's plush carpet, his feet sinking almost to his ankles in its soft embrace.

A second before Micah reached the door, it opened on its own revealing a tall, rail thin man wearing an immaculately pressed formal suit. He ran a stern glare over Micah's rumpled bedclothes and clicked his tongue.

"Of course you don't have proper attire," he sniffed irritably. "I don't suppose you've even seen a doublet before."

"I know what a doublet is," Micah cocked his head, trying to make sense of the mostly bald stranger critiquing his wardrobe at the crack of dawn. "My Father is a tailor after all. I just

wasn't told that I would need formal clothing. I was just told to grab my adventuring gear and report to the carriage post for a trip to the Capital."

"Good," the man threw up his hands. "His father is a tailor. I'm sure that will impress the third princess and the Duke of Essenbrox's second son. You can inform them that your crinkled and out of style drapings are actually a fashion statement of some sort. They'll be quite impressed"

"Well what am I supposed to do about it," Micah snapped back at him, annoyed at the older man's one person community theater routine. "I came in after midnight, haven't had a full night's sleep, and no one bothered to tell me formal wear was apparently an essential component of my wardrobe."

"Who in the name of the Sixteen are you anyway?" Micah asked incredulously before continuing in a calmer tone. "I have a couple dress shirts, but nothing more formal than that. Unless you can scare up something else for me, we'll need to make due with what I have."

"My name is Martin Osswain," Martin squinted down his nose at Micah. "The Royal Academy has assigned me to be your batman. It reflects on me when you show up to morning classes unprepared and looking like a particularly disheveled turnip salesman."

"Aren't batmen supposed to show more deference?" Micah let some of his annoyance bleed into his voice. "I literally don't know why or what I'm doing here and already I'm catching guff from you."

"Hmfmf," Martin stepped past Micah into the bedroom before looking around and crossing his arms. "The batmen for the children of full nobles or knights might show respect in honor of your parents, but you as a person aren't anything special yet. At the moment you're nothing but potential, hormones, and trouble. If you get knighted, I will be the first to insert a deferential 'ser' before your name. Until then, you're just another talented cadet that I have the unfortunate duty of trying to keep out of trouble. Do you know how many of those the academy sees?"

"I'm assuming that you're about to tell me a very high number," Micah responded dryly, walking over to his luggage and laying out a dress shirt and pair of trousers."

"Well," Martin paused slightly nonplussed. "Yes. The academy accepts over twenty scholarship students with a Rare blessing from a Major Deity, Mythic blessing from an intermediate deity, or one of the rare Chosen from a lesser deity each year. In addition, there are approximately five high class scholarship candidates like you that are either the Chosen of an intermediate deity or the recipient of a Mythic blessing from a Major deity. Of those twenty-five, about eight to nine make it to graduation. The rest fail their exams or become too crippled to continue."

“What about the nobles?” Micah asked, donning his shirt and fiddling with the ivory buttons. “Surely they aren’t crippled and killed at the same rate. I would presume that their families would have something to say about that.”

“Of course not,” Martin snorted, eyeing Micah’s clothing dubiously. “They’re from established brands. Most of them aren’t seeking full knighthoods anyway, simply a well rounded education from the best tutors available. For you? Knighthood is the only way for a scholarship student to graduate. I would advise you to take your studies seriously.”

“Wait,” Martin interrupted Micah just as he opened his mouth to speak. “Is that *boar* tusk you’re using for buttons?” He snatched Micah’s hand away from the shirt, bending down to peer more closely at the shirt, disappointment and disgust warring with each other in his eyes.

“Yes,” Micah snapped back. “I know that it isn’t in fashion, but once again I wasn’t told that formal clothing was required and even if I was, I simply don’t have the money to invest in more valuable ivory and cloth. Unless the Academy is going to pay or clothe me, these shirts are simply going to have to do.”

“Fine,” Martin released his hand pacing back and forth through the room’s thick carpet. “You’ll make a laughingstock of me, but apparently selfishness is all your kind knows. I’m sure you’ll enjoy treading upon thirty years of my honor like it’s a cheap rug thrown on the floor of your family’s hovel.”

Micah frowned at Martin and opened his mouth to respond only for the older man to keep speaking, ignoring Micah’s unhappiness altogether.

“Your first class is introductory enchanting,” Martin didn’t even look at him while reciting the itinerary. “Enchanting will last about four hours on Mondays and Wednesdays. On Tuesday and Thursday mornings you will study intermediate ritual magic. Every afternoon, you will continue to work on your spellcasting. Fridays and Saturdays will be devoted to level growth in the Academy’s captive dungeon. You will have Sundays to yourself to *socialize*.” Martin practically spat out the last word.

“Socialize?” Micah asked, frowning in Martin’s general direction. “What is there to do around here?”

“You’ll hardly have the time boy,” Martin sniffed at him. “Your betters might be able to find a moment to visit the botanical gardens, restaurants, museums, and zoos attached to the campus. As for you? If you want to make Knight you’d better put aside any childish dreams about having a fun and rewarding school life. You’re here as an investment, not to play foolish games.”

Unwilling to argue with the ornery older man, Micah finished dressing himself under Martin's disdainful gaze. Given that he was still unsure of his surroundings and the social order he'd been thrust into, a wait and see approach seemed best. After all, he wasn't an expert on noble etiquette but as far as he could tell, servants weren't supposed to chew out and mock their masters. Whatever was happening, it wouldn't be too late to stand up for himself after he learned whether he could safely do so.

Class went about as well as Martin predicted. Honestly, Micah wondered if some of the nobles had blessings related to sight because one of them simply looked at him when he stepped into the classroom and stated "boar tusk" despite being over forty paces away. After that, none of the noble cadets even looked at him, and Micah ended up seated with the other scholarship students in the back of the lecture hall.

Their section of the classroom was silent, following the professor's words as best they could yet largely unable to ask questions. Whether it was how far back they were or another example of class stratification, both of the times Micah raised his hand to follow up on something the professor said, he was simply ignored. Quickly, he learned his lesson.

In the front of the room, it was a very different story. The professor would promptly answer any questions asked of him, likely afraid of the powers behind the students. As for the cadets, some of the nobles paid attention, but most of them simply chatted quietly with each other.

Micah had no idea how much if anything they were actually picking up from the lessons. On the other hand, he also didn't know how much it mattered to them. As far as he could tell they were simply at the Academy so that they could later brag about their graduation as an achievement. Learning was a distant second to networking.

Despite his chilly reception, to Micah, the class was a dream come true. The professor went in depth over many of the more troublesome equations related to basic strength enchantments, including some that still troubled Micah. Although he took notes of his own to help cement the lesson in his memory, he was thankful for the Ageless Folio. The itch on his wrist was distracting, but he knew that it was taking down all of the lesson word for word.

Lunch was more of the same. Micah didn't even bother trying to sit with the nobles. Their section of the cafeteria was a minefield. From one glance, Micah could tell that their seating arrangements betrayed a complex web of social and political alliances and rivalries.

In short, the cafeteria was the gameboard for a complicated and deadly social game. Even if he was welcome at one of the tables, he probably wouldn't have taken the offer. It presented too great of a risk of annoying someone else important.

Instead, he sat in the corner with the rest of the scholarship students. They ate in silence. Even when Micah tried to ask them questions about their affinities and classes, most of

them just grunted in response. Only one even bothered to talk to him, a rather lonely boy named Bart. Eventually, Micah just gave up on speaking to anyone else. He wasn't at the academy to make friends, and Bart's rambling stories about how much he missed his dog and fishing would have to do.

That afternoon, each student was assigned their own mentor for their mana related classes. Some of the cadets that focused more on physical combat practiced their martial arts rather than spellcasting, but the model was the same for all of them. The instructor would force them to wear items enchanted to stimulate their mana regeneration. Then they kept casting spells at a series of dummies and targets until they ran out mana entirely. As soon as he was unable to cast any further spells, his instructor tossed Micah a practice spear and forced him to repeat basic spear forms until his muscles screamed.

It was hardly an interesting way of training, but it allowed the students to safely and efficiently raise skill levels in their respective spells and martial arts. With everything else going on, it was strangely therapeutic. He didn't need to think about his future or what was happening around Basil's Cove. All Micah needed to do was try and shorten the chant to *air knife* as he cast it over and over again.

The next morning was a repeat performance. Micah attended his intermediate ritual magic class only to be snubbed by a different and more advanced set of nobles. Again, his wardrobe gave enough clues about his social status to strangle any socialization before it could begin. With a slight smile on his face, Micah went to the back of the room once more in order to find an open seat near the scholarship students. The middle class cadets kept to themselves while the professor gave a very in depth lecture on the role of lunar phases in ritual casting.

Friday and Saturday involved Micah going into a dungeon while Martin supervised him. Surprisingly, the fussy old man was a level forty four aquamancer, more than capable of defeating any of the monsters in the dungeon. It's possible that Martin's advanced level had something to do with his dismissive attitude, but Micah suspected that the old man was just an asshole.

Unlike Brenden, Martin actually let Micah fight the monsters, occasionally giving his spear form or spellcasting a half-hearted compliment. Really, Martin looked bored more than anything. The one or two times Micah got himself into trouble against monsters above his level, Martin stepped in, but the rest of the time his 'servant' seemed more focused on reading the small paperback book he brought into the dungeon with him.

Micah's head hit the overly stuffed pillow. One week of school at the Royal Academy was in the books and it certainly could be worse. True, the training regimen assigned to him was grueling and there were more than vague hints that he could easily be crippled or killed at the Academy if he didn't live up to his potential, but other than a cold shoulder from the nobles,

no one had mistreated him. He wasn't a target for scorn, simply a non-entity until he proved himself.

He suspected that things would have gone worse if he tried to force the issue and sit with some of the nobles, but as dense as he was regarding the aristocracy, even Micah knew enough not to piss them off for no reason. The lack of friends was a bit concerning. Micah worried that years of training with no one to talk to but Martin would crack his psyche like an egg.

He closed his eyes. He'd have to get in touch with Bart and spend some time relaxing. If he'd learned anything about the difference between the Golden Drakes and the Lancers, it was that the Lancers knew the importance of downtime. He'd have to think of something to do. Bart was earnest, but he certainly wasn't imaginative.

Chapter 19 - School Life

After two weeks, Micah truly started enjoying his time at the Academy. As upsetting as his time with the Golden Drakes was, especially when Brenden would simply tell him to drop a course of study because it wouldn't benefit his 'build,' the Academy felt like it was going to make it all worthwhile. The nobles might be snobs, and the scholarship students might be too terrified to bother with, but finally he was actually learning something.

Of course, that didn't mean that Micah wasn't trying to make some friends despite his handicaps. However ill advised that might be.

"Micah look!" Bart shouted, his eyes wide as he pointed at the bored and vaguely malnourished looking tiger. Micah felt for the creature. It was just trying to get some sleep while Bart and a handful of entitled noble children shrieked at it from just outside the enclosure.

"I see the tiger Bart," Micah tried to smile, hoping that his overly enthusiastic friend wouldn't notice how forced the expression was. "Tigers certainly are majestic creatures, but there's no real need to get overly excited. We are at a zoo after all, there are plenty of animals on display."

"You don't understand Micah," Bart turned back to him, joy written across his face. "You grew up in the country and actually had a chance to adventure before you were sent to the Royal Academy. I'm from the city and my Dad's a stonemason. Other than horses, I've never gotten a chance to see anything larger than a dog."

“What about leveling?” Micah frowned slightly as he asked the question. “Don’t you have to delve into your dungeon with your batman too? I’d expect you to encounter all kinds of fantastic creatures down there.”

“That doesn’t count,” Bart’s happiness disappeared like a snuffed torch. “Reginald scares the hell out of me and keeps threatening to kill me if I don’t meet his benchmarks. He won’t even tell me what the ‘benchmarks’ are. Plus, everything down there is trying to kill me. It just isn’t the same.”

“How about we go to the HJ Thiel aquatic exhibit next?” Micah asked, trying to rekindle Bart’s earlier excitement. “Basil’s Cove is by the ocean, we don’t have access to many freshwater biomes. From what I’ve read in the pamphlets there should be a bunch of species that neither of us have seen there.”

“That sounds splendid Micah!” Bart’s smile lit up his face before he led the way toward the indoor aquatic exhibit. Apparently the water needed careful temperature regulation provided by enchantments meaning smaller, enclosed and indoor exhibits.

Quickly he caught up to Bart, a slight smile on his face despite himself. Micah wasn’t entirely sure how Bart had picked up a Mythic blessing from an intermediate deity, the man was slightly dumber than the average pile of bricks. Still, the larger man was earnest, friendly and sported an infectious laugh.

Under ordinary circumstances he probably wouldn’t have even befriended Bart. A simpleton was far from his speed. That said, he was glad he’d taken the time. There was something straightforward and earnest about Bart. Like a large friendly dog.

Whenever they spent time together, Micah didn’t have to watch his every word. Mostly because Bart was too stupid to actually blackmail him, but also because Bart was loyal to a fault. As far as Bart was concerned, they were friends and that was the end of it. Through thick and thin, they’d have each others’ backs.

Micah suspected that the world wouldn’t let them off that easily. The Royal Academy was the sort of place that ate naive and trusting souls like Bart alive, but at least for now, he was a friend and a refuge from the constant stress of their training.

“Look at him go,” Bart whistled in awe as Micah walked up behind him. For some reason Bart had made a beeline past the merfolk, kelpie, and diamondfish exhibits, instead standing enraptured before the tank devoted to a family of river otters.

One of the sleek mammals darted past, catching one of the silvery fish loaded into their tank by the keepers. Quickly the creature surfaced, rolling over onto its back to eat its treat while making eye contact with Bart and Micah.

“They’re beautiful animals aren’t they,” Micah nodded in the otter’s direction, barely able to draw Bart’s attention as the other man pressed his face against the glass of the cage.

“Just look at their little paws Micah,” Bart looked back at him, a slight wistful smile on his face. “Do you think that the Royal Knights will let me get a pet otter when I make full Knight? I know that’s a long way off, but all the Knights are rich, powerful, and respected. I don’t really know what I’d do with all that attunement, maybe buy my family a better house, but I want something for myself. I just didn’t know what it was until today.”

“Sure,” Micah tried to keep the emotion from his voice. It was hardly a sure thing that either of them would survive to graduation let alone be in a position to demand exotic pets. “Once you become a full Royal Knight, a pet otter probably won’t be a problem at all.”

The rest of the visit to the zoo progressed smoothly, ending with both of them paying more attunement than they should for some sort of well seasoned grilled meat on a stick. He enjoyed the meal, but Micah couldn’t help but worry about the future. Half of the reason he spent time with Bart was to avoid thinking about the topic.

As for his actual combat capability, Micah made steady progress. Slowly, but still at a rate that raised Martin’s bushy white eyebrows, Martin’s skills ticked up month by month. He grew in level at a slower rate now that he wasn’t simply killing monsters immobilized by Brenden, but the levels did come and along with them more mana in each of his pools allowing Micah to cast more spells and with greater force.

Finally, when he reached level nineteen, deep in the Academy’s captive dungeon, Martin motioned for him to stop. Micah leaned against the wall, sweat pouring down his body due to his exertion and the dungeon’s elemental fire theme. He’d heard that the nobles had access to dungeons whose themes didn’t make the actual act of delving in them physically uncomfortable and sweaty, but Micah did have to admit that the shorter line for the fire dungeon was a boon when he wanted to do as many runs as possible in his limited time.

“Micah,” despite being on the third floor of a dungeon, Martin’s voice was as stuffy as ever. “Now that you’re level nineteen we need to talk about your first class speciality. You’ve been surprisingly thoughtful to date for an individual of your experience, but this is a decision that impacts your entire future.”

“I’ve heard other students mention specialties,” Micah huffed in between taking a drag from his waterskin, “but no one really talks about them in any real detail. All I know is that they’re a big deal and they happen at level twenty.”

“That makes sense,” Martin nodded thoughtfully. “Most noble families treat their research into class specialties about as seriously as they do initial classes. As far as I know,

you get one every twenty levels with the power of the specialty raising significantly each time. Depending upon your class and skills, different options will be available. It's fairly common to get an upgrade to a martial art or field of magic, but there are rumors that some of the noble houses have figured out how to unlock esoteric specialties that grant bonus attributes at each level."

"Not all of the specialties are fully explored," Martin continued, his dry voice washing over Micah. "We have some ideas about the more basic specialties, but my goal isn't to grant you a bonus 2 HP per level or the ability to speed the research your own spells. If you're going to earn a knighthood, you'll need time magic."

"You've learned well over these months," Martin grudgingly acknowledged. "Your spellcasting skill is at the level that you could earn a class specialty in chronomancy, allowing you to use those spells much more freely."

"Unfortunately for you," Martin smirked, quickly flashing his teeth at Micah, "the rules for getting an elemental specialty are well known. All you need is to know one time spell when you level up."

"Of course," Martin's unpleasant smile spread across his entire face. "The lowest tier time spell that I'm aware of is in the fifth tier. Although you can cast some fourth tier spells, the limit between four and five is a fairly serious one. Actually casting a fifth tier spell is a daunting task for anyone under level thirty."

"But how do I learn one," Micah frowned. "I've been trying to make it to fifth tier magic for almost a full year and I still have a ways to go. I suppose I can keep practicing fourth tier spells until my spellcasting skill levels up enough but that seems awfully slow."

"One year to cast fifth tier magic and he's complaining," Martin snorted. "Boy, I can only cast sixth tier spells. The Fifth tier took me a decade. Being a prodigy gives you some shortcuts, it doesn't let you circumvent the entire race."

"How am I supposed to learn time magic then?" Micah cocked his head to the side. "Everyone keeps telling me that there aren't any known spells below the fifth tier, but there has to be some way to earn the class specialty."

"That's true," Martin agreed. Glancing around he cast a quick spell, creating a bubble of water around the two of them that blocked out all ambient sound. "Has anyone told you the tale of Karin Dakkora?"

"No," Micah replied slowly, his memory flashing back to the almost certainly illegal book 'gifted' to him by Brenden. It was still in the bottom of his travel luggage, Micah hadn't dared to

bring the book out since his arrival at the Academy. After all, what was the need when the Folio retained a perfect copy of any book he read?

“It’s not a tale that the Church would tell,” the usual boredom and arrogance in Martin’s voice were replaced by reverence. “Karin was the greatest ritual caster that this planet has ever seen. Her research was absolutely revolutionary. She posited that the magic given to us by the gods was little more than a weak and feeble thing. A toy or bauble that you’d use to distract a child to stop them from accidentally putting their hand on a hot stove. She created rituals of a magnitude and elegance that they could’ve changed the world and ushered in a new golden age.”

“But,” Martin spat on the ground. When he looked up his eyes burned with a dangerous zeal. “The Sixteen grew jealous of her, fearing that her power had begun to rival their own, and sent their champions to lay her low. Despite a simple Rare blessing and fighting alone, she struggled with the divine champions for a decade while she sought the ritual that would finally allow her to defeat them once and for all. Unfortunately, despite holding out for all that time, she was finally defeated.”

“But,” Martin practically hissed the word as he stepped closer to Micah. “Some of her works survived. Collected by her followers and those interested in *true* power.”

“She created a ritual,” Martin’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “One that lets a caster draw power from the life of another in lieu of mana. Right now, all that stands between you and the fifth tier is mana, right boy?”

Micah nodded uncomfortably. The sweat pouring down his back had little to do with the heat.

“Good,” Martin’s eyes flashed with a predatory gleam. “I know that you’ve been focusing on ritual magic. I’m going to teach you that ritual and you’re going to use it to cast a fifth tier time spell the next time we venture into this dungeon. And if you don’t?”

Martin snapped his fingers, causing the sphere of water to pop like a soap bubble around them. “You’ll have confirmed my suspicions about you, that you’ve been wasting my time for these past six months. By the Sixteen, boy, if you can’t make this work I’ll kill you myself.”

Chapter 20 - The Ritual

Micah shook his head as he read over the spell formula for *Foresight*. It was more than just mana, the diagram for a fifth tier spell was exponentially more complex than a fourth tier. Even then he struggled with casting *healing wave*, the only fourth tier spell he’d managed to

learn to date. The worst of it is that there wouldn't be any extra chance to cast the spell. He'd have one chance to use the excess mana from the spell to bridge the gap and cast it. If it fizzled, they might have the materials for a second try but that'd be it.

Spells weren't something you cast on your first time through. Each of them involved a complex set of nonsense words combined with precise body positioning and hand motions. Maybe a caster could succeed with a first tier spell on their first try, but each tier became significantly more difficult. His third tier spells all took two to five attempts before Micah mastered them well enough to cast them consistently. *Healing wave* took a week of daily exercises where he failed to cast it and then waited for his mana to slowly recharge.

Theoretically, *Foresight* was the simplest known time spell. It would let Micah see shadowy outlines of what would happen over the course of the next second. The spell used an insane amount of mana and only lasted for five seconds, but during those five seconds the caster was next to invulnerable. A reasonably fit person could dodge almost any blow simply by knowing exactly where it would land.

He closed the book he was studying from and glanced at the door to his bedroom. Ever since he and Martin returned from the dungeon, his batman had informed the Academy faculty that Micah was 'feeling ill.' He'd spent almost the entire week locked in his bedroom with Martin patrolling outside, preventing any outside contact.

Micah withdrew the Folio from his wrist and went over the conditions of the ritual once again. At least that was one spot where he was fairly confident of success. He'd taken advantage of his week of forced solitude to closely study the materials provided by Martin and Brenden. The ritual itself wasn't terribly advanced, it just involved the removal of certain limiters designed to prevent it from running out of control. The book contained some hastily scrawled notes with words such as 'explosive' and 'spontaneous combustion' describing what happened to casters who didn't use one hundred percent of the mana provided by the ritual.

He could see why the Church warned people against using the ritual. It provided extra mana, but it took almost twenty minutes to prepare for each casting. The caster couldn't hold onto any of the mana past the immediate casting of a spell, and the chances to magically cripple yourself were astronomical.

Still, it wasn't like he had any options. Martin wasn't joking when he threatened him and his next scheduled foray into the dungeon was tomorrow. For better or worse, in about twenty four hours he would be using a dangerous ritual to fuel casting a spell far beyond his capacity, all while a murderous assistant watched his every movement.

Maybe if he hadn't gone through Cornell Dover's training in his first life the task would appear even more daunting. Luckily, Micah had his fair share of experience casting spells beyond his capability under high stress situations.

For what felt like that twentieth time in the last six months he reflected upon the different training philosophies of the Lancers and the Golden Drakes/Royal Knights. Really, the Lancers cared the most about his willingness to push himself to the limit while training more than anything else. After that, they put him in dangerous situations that they considered within his capabilities in order to teach him how to operate under fire and in high stress situations. Their guild might not recruit the same quality of adventurer as the higher tier guilds, but each and every one of them, no matter how base their gift, were given a fighting shot to actually make something of themselves.

The higher tier training regimen on the other hand seemed strangely inefficient. His entire time with the Golden Drakes, Micah had been coddled beyond belief. He learned spells from books and slew bound monsters. Only when he reached a decent level was he sent to the Royal Academy where he actually got to fight, but even then he only learned a limited number of spells and martial arts, all in sterile classroom environments.

Now, he was given a do or die test. He'd always wondered about the numbers of crippled and dead candidates that Martin quoted at him. It didn't seem to make sense that scholarship cadets were dying en masse given how sterile and safe the training was.

With the new 'test,' everything locked into place. His fellow scholarship candidates' silence and haunted eyes. The prodigious casualty rate. The casual dismissal by the noble and knight heirs. They might be in the same school, but the methods used on the scholarship students were much rougher. Martin, with the Academy's tacit endorsement, sought to push him beyond his limits. If Micah succeeded, he'd have access to time magic at an incredibly low level, hugely increasing his power. If he failed, in all likelihood he'd be a burned out husk, discarded and incapable of serving the kingdom any further.

He returned the Folio to his wrist and started preparing for bed. Maybe he should have panicked, wasted the last week trying futilely to escape from the Academy only to end up hyperventilating in the corner when he failed. It just all seemed so useless to him. At this point, worrying about factors outside of his control wouldn't help him. He had enough skills in ritual magic and spellcasting to give him a credible shot at success. At this point there just wasn't much more he could do. A good night's sleep and maintaining a positive attitude tomorrow would do more to ensure this success than any more last minute studying.

Closing his eyes, he focused on measuring his breathing. Counting his breaths in and out as he worked on stilling his racing heart. As his body calmed and his thoughts slowed, Micah smiled slightly, his eyes still closed. He couldn't help but reflect on how this all began, insomnia keeping him from sleep at his parents' house. Once again, his future was out of his hands and all that was left was to wait for sleep to take him.

The next morning, he ate a full breakfast and performed some basic calisthenics in the privacy of his shag carpeted bedroom. He briefly reviewed the textbooks and star charts,

making a handful of last minute notes and adjustments to the ritual's formula. Finally Martin knocked on his door, opening it a second later.

"It's time Silver," the older man tossed Micah his spear before shifting the bag containing the ritual's components over his shoulder. "This time I'll clear all of the monsters until we get to the boss room. He'll be the sacrifice to power the ritual. I don't want you wasting any of your mana. You'll need to be in peak condition if this is to have any chance of success."

Micah nodded, not bothering with a verbal reply. He had any number of witty and biting responses, but ultimately, what would they do for him? Martin had twice his levels and could cast sixth tier combat spells. Escape was an impossibility. His only chance at survival was success, and antagonizing his bodyguard cum executioner didn't seem like a wise course of action

They walked in silence through the halls of the Academy toward the dungeon's entrance in the basement, Micah's eyes burning a hole into Martin's back the entire time. Finally, they stood before the double iron doors that marked the beginning of the dungeon and Martin turned back to Micah.

"I know you hate me Silver," his tone didn't contain any sympathy, just a dry recitation of facts. "I hated my batman when he put me through my tests. This is just how things are done. A candidate can't grow properly without stress, without a threat forcing them beyond their limits. Don't expect any mercy from me, if you fail, you die. I just want you to understand that you are walking a path that I walked long ago, and it is a large part of what made me into the Knight I am today."

"I don't have anything like confidence that you'll succeed," Martin shrugged indolently. "I actually expect you to fail to be frank, but you will be given your chance. Each of the tests are a necessary gateway, separating those that have a powerful blessing from actual warriors."

"Each of the tests?" Micah asked incredulously, frustration dripping from his voice. "How many more times will you have to threaten my life?"

"I don't know," Martin opened the gate to the dungeon, motioning for Micah to follow. "Did you think that I was the one that planned all of this? No, the Academy isn't anywhere near that haphazard. Each scholarship student's tests are personally handed down by the Master of Curriculum. If you make it past this, I'm sure she'll tell me what the next step is. If."

The journey through the dungeon was almost unbearable. Floor after floor, the tension just kept building. Micah didn't even have a meaningful battle to release the stress knotting up his shoulders and back. Martin simply batted aside the monsters he'd struggled with last week with giant pillars of water, crushing them into dust against the dungeon's walls. They didn't

even slow their advance until finally, Martin and Micah stood before the large stone archway that signified the door to the boss' lair.

Martin only paused for a second, ensuring that Micah was still behind him, before the old man walked into the chamber. The boss, an eight foot long salamander that clung to the ceiling and spit streams of fire that could melt a metal shield to slag with a single attack, didn't stand a chance.

Martin raised both of his hands above his head, shouting an eldritch incantation. Eight tentacles of water reached out from Martin, pulling the surprised creature from the ceiling with an audible pop before binding its legs, tail, and snout. Martin strolled indolently into the lair to admire his handiwork before dumping the sack full of materials into the center of the room and tossing a wickedly curved knife to Micah.

"The moment of truth is upon us Silver," Martin stepped back, finding a pillar to lean against as he observed the entire chamber. "Use the ritual to cast the spell. It's too late to run and you know the price of failure. There's only one path for you boy, and that's forward."

Micah bit his lower lip, jogging into the room. Quickly he began scratching the runes into the Dungeon's stone floor, periodically checking his notes to ensure that the inflections were correct. Next came the reagents, dusts made from gemstones and the ground up bones of powerful monsters. Each rune flared briefly as the correct mixture filled it. Finally, he placed the symbolic catalysts at their positions, embedded in the runic circle that would channel the spell.

Almost twenty minutes to set up the circle, slower than expected. Micah's heart began pounding in his chest as he looked at the dagger in his hand. He began reciting the words of the ritual, enunciating each word as he motioned with the dagger, trying his hardest to maintain his sweat-soaked grip while he engaged in the frenetic hand motions required by the ritual.

The power built slowly, taking the form of a sense of dread in growing like a tumor in the back of his mind. Finally, Micah stepped forward, the knife flashing briefly, opening a cut on the salamander's throat. Blood poured into his cupped hands.

He brought them to his mouth, struggling to avoid gagging at the heavy, salty taste. After drinking the required mouthful, he cupped his hands once more beneath its neck, collecting another handful.

Quickly, Micah scrambled back into the center of the circle, letting the blood dribble from his hands onto the circle's runes. One by one they began glowing with a green light, clearly visible in the dim chamber.

The salamander struggled against its bonds, croaking in distress. Its eyes snapped open, revealing the same green glow as the circle. Visibly it shrank, aging before Micah's eyes as power poured into him in great unrelenting waves.

Frantically, he pulled out the Folio reciting the words to *Foresight* as the mana caused his reservoirs to swell like balloons. On an instinctive level, Micah knew that if he didn't act soon, those reservoirs would overextend and pop. He didn't know exactly what would happen, but from the warnings in the ritual's description, he'd be the luckiest if he was simply erased from creation.

The spell formula grew in his mind, each nonsense word and arcane motion adding definition to its misty shape. Mana began to pour from him into the spell, relieving the bloating that threatened his very existence.

With each second, he enunciated the words with more force, and Micah's hand motions became more defined. Vague rainbow shadows began to extend from everything around him, showing him hints as to where they might be in the next moment.

Then he misspoke. The syllable *Harr* came out *Hark*. The magic shuddered around him. Micah stumbled slightly, his left hand barely out of position as he tried to recover from his mistake.

The soap film images of the future faded into nothing as the spell fizzled into nothingness. Micah fell to his knees, gasping. It didn't even have the dignity to explode or spray a shower of sparks when failing. It just worked one second, and then the next it was gone.

He looked up at Martin in fear. For the first time since changing timelines, Micah realized that it wasn't going to work out. That small part of him that 'knew' he was going to be a great hero had lied to him once again. He'd gambled everything, but now it was all over.

He closed his eyes. It wasn't a complete loss. Images popped up unbidden of Trevor, Ether, his parents, Direkt, and Jo. Even if he were to die here and now, he'd done something good in saving Basil's Cove. A tear hissed as it splattered against the dungeon's overheated floor.

"As expected," Martin clicked his tongue in disappointment. "Luckily, there's a contingency. Don't ever say that I've done nothing for you boy."

Micah looked up from the rough rocks of the Dungeon's floor, confusion on his face. Brenden strode into the room, a cocky smile on his face and a wriggling sack over his shoulder. Micah's old mentor nodded at Martin before walking up to him and dumping the sack next to the ritual circle.

“Good to see you again Thrakos,” Martin smiled slightly. “Now, Silver. Mr. Thrakos has so graciously provided you with a second chance to complete the ritual and cast *Foresight*. You won’t get a third.”

“But it won’t be enough,” Micah spoke questioningly, barely daring to hope. “The ritual requires an incredible amount of energy to operate. Nothing that size will have enough power to actually fuel the spell.”

“That’s certainly true for non-sapient,” Martin agreed, grinning at Micah. “You haven’t inspected the gift that Mr. Thrakos brought you. Don’t be so quick to dismiss it out of hand.”

Horror burning in Micah’s chest he reached down and pulled the burlap sack off of the wriggling form. Staring up at him in terror was Bart. The man silently screamed at him, muffled by the gag wrapped around his face.

“Your friend there already failed his test,” Martin motioned mockingly at Bart. “But here at the Royal Academy, we don’t believe in waste. His failure is your second and final chance.”

Chapter 21 - Graduation?

“Do you mean?” Micah glanced up at Brenden and Martin and motioned at the sacrificial knife. Bart shook, trying to free himself from his bonds as his eyes fixed on the knife.

“You could always just sit there pissing yourself like a scared puppy,” Brenden sneered back. “Being an adult means making tough choices. Even if you hadn’t failed today, it was just a matter of time. Eventually you’d be where you are today. No one gets Knighted without getting their hands dirty. The Royal Knights aren’t an organization for idealists, that sort of emotional weakness will get people killed on the battlefield.”

“But I thought you were with the Golden Drakes?” Micah’s eyes widened. “Why were you my mentor there if you’re a Knight?”

“He’s not a Knight yet boy,” Martin interjected. “Brenden is a squire. Once the Drakes sold you to us, I sent him over to handle your early education. He let me know when it was time to accelerate your training and sent you to the Capital. Now, are you going to sit there mewling about how the world has wronged you, or are you going to actually try to make something of yourself.”

“The Drakes sold me?” Micah cocked his head to the side, blinking rapidly as the room spun around him.

“As soon as you revealed you had the power of prophecy,” Martin chuckled. “That’s the sort of blessing that’s very useful to a ruler but relatively useless to a guild. The Golden Drakes have some connections to the Second Prince and they know better than to hold onto recruits that might be strategic assets. We paid a Baron’s ransom in attunement for you boy. I still think it was a waste, but who knows. You might prove me wrong yet.”

“Now,” Martin pointed at the knife in Micah’s hand. “No more dawdling. Get on with the ritual. Either you’ll succeed or you won’t. Either way I want a resolution so I can get out of this armpit and take a shower.”

Micah looked down at Bart shivering against the bonds. They’d never been close, but Bart was currently what passed for Micah’s best friend at the Academy. He stared up at Micah, pleading with his eyes.

Micah gritted his teeth, trying to will his weakness away. Martin wasn’t lying. He could see the glee in the older man’s eyes when he talked about murdering Micah. If this didn’t work, Martin would use a water tendril to smash him against the wall with enough force to break every bone in his body.

He closed his eyes, the dagger weighing heavily in his palm. It all wouldn’t matter soon. This timeline wasn’t nearly as bad as his first, but there was no way Micah was going to live out his life under the Knights thumbs. If they were going to make him kill another student just to ‘show his loyalty,’ it was only a matter of time before they escalated the atrocities expected of him.

Really, when you thought about it, Bart was barely even a person. This entire timeline was doomed to fade away the minute he reverted. Micah wouldn’t feel *good* killing him, but at this point his choice was stark and clear.

Micah began reciting the words to the ritual. Brenden and Martin’s visible approval damned him almost as much as Bart’s frantic struggling. Once again, the incantation went off without a hitch. The only moment of doubt came when Micah struggled to choke down the ritual mouthful of Bart’s blood. The salt and iron burned his throat, and Micah felt the bile begin to rise in the back of his throat.

With an act of will, Micah ground the nails of his right hand into his palm, using the pain to distract himself from his barbaric actions. He scattered the second handful of blood into the circle, activating the runes once more.

Mana surged into him, more than he ever thought possible. Bart’s life gave him easily two to three times as much as the dungeon boss, quickly swelling his reserves to the breaking point. Quickly, he began casting *foresight*.

This time, the spell was almost perversely easy. Maybe it was the advantage of having attempted it once before, or maybe it had something to do with Bart's sacrifice, but each word and motion came like he'd rehearsed them a hundred times. Almost in a trance, Micah finished the final incantation and the rainbow smears projecting the potential future actions of the objects around him snapped into place.

With perfect clarity, he watched Brenden slouch over to Bart's desiccated body to dump him in a flaming brazier almost a second before it happened. Some aspect of the spell allowed his focus to split perfectly, tracking every discrete moment between the present and a second in the future simultaneously. The rainbow blur of motion should have distracted Micah, but instead he was oddly fascinated by it.

"Well," Martin spoke a second in the future, "that was a pleasant surprise."

"It surprised me too," Micah replied, too enthralled with the multicolored smear of future possibilities laid out before him to notice that Martin had just opened his mouth.

"Maybe we should wait to continue this conversation," Martin smiled slightly. "You seem a bit overwhelmed by your cosmic significance at the moment."

Micah nodded absently, staring around the room. All too soon the spell came to an end, the probability arcs shortening until they disappeared entirely. Suddenly, Micah was fully grounded in the present once more. Brenden looked vaguely nonplussed over not being allowed to murder Micah, but Martin was strangely happy.

"Good," Martin smiled, his eyes roaming over Micah like he was a prime cut of meat. "You've proven yourself worth the investment the Royal Knights have made in you. Now we just need to get you leveled up to twenty so you can claim a class specialty. Then we can begin on your advanced studies and transform you from a confused young man into a proper warrior."

With a hiss, Bart's body began to burn in the brazier. Micah's gaze snapped back to it, watching the acrid black smoke begin to fill the room. Almost immediately, everything began to smell of charred meat. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. Even if this timeline was a dead end, he wouldn't forget what he'd been forced to do today. Next time, he'd know better than to trust the Royal Family and their knights.

"Oh stop moping," Brenden said, wiping Bart's blood from his hands onto the dungeon boss's corpse. "He was dead anyway. He needed to make a breakthrough as an enchanter and he was given three chances. Even if you took some sort of moral stand and refused to perform the ritual, he'd have joined you in the fire anyway. The Knights will make you wealthy, powerful and famous so long as you're useful. If you aren't useful? Well. No use wasting resources."

Micah hurried to catch up to Brenden and Martin as they left the dungeon. The following week, he was excused from every class. Instead the three of them went into the dungeon as

often as it reset. Micah killed monsters held still by Martin's water tendrils or Brenden's daemons over and over again.

Finally, he hit level twenty. Withdrawing his spear from the imp's chest, Micah heard a chime that rose steadily in pitch until it became an omnipresent droning whistle. His vision blurred and the floor rocked under him. He sank to a knee, shaking his head to try and clear his senses.

The noise faded away, prompting Micah to open his eyes. Around him was nothing but dimly lit mist. The floor felt the same as before, but it was the only touchstone of normalcy. He couldn't see Martin anywhere. He might still be in the dungeon, but at this point his location was more of a guess than anything.

"Congratulations blessed," the familiar voice from his class selection spoke from the mist. "You've reached your first milestone and are eligible for a class speciality. A series of options will be presented to you based upon your affinities and skill levels."

"For your achievements in learning the martial art, Wind Spear, you may upgrade the martial art to Uncommon rarity, increasing the effectiveness of all abilities associated with that martial art." The voice continued, its even tone and measured cadence unperturbed by Micah's bewilderment. "Due to your increased physical fitness, you may specialize as an athlete and gain additional hit points upon each level up. For following the path of the spear, you may specialize as a spear adept, making you more effective in many small ways with a spear. For your achievements in wind magic, you may specialize as an aeromancer, decreasing the mana cost and increasing the effectiveness of your wind magic. For your achievements in wood magic you may specialize as a healer, decreasing the mana cost and increasing the effectiveness of your wood magic. For your achievements in time magic you may specialize as a chronomancer, decreasing the mana cost and increasing the effectiveness of your time magic. For your knowledge and achievements in ritual magic, you may specialize as an occultist. For your knowledge and achievements in enchanting, you may specialize as an enchanter."

The voice paused as Micah blinked rapidly, inundated with information.

"Be aware that you may only select one speciality or improvement of a specialty every twenty levels." The voice spoke, tone unchanged. "Please select one of the previously listed abilities or request that they be repeated for you."

"Chronomancer," Micah tried to prevent his voice from cracking. Martin had been clear. Any other specialty would not result in his survival

"Granted," the voice replied, the mist fading away to reveal the chamber of the dungeon he'd been standing in before. Martin stood nearby, attempting to rub some monster blood from the hem of his outfit.

“Congratulations on your level Micah,” Martin’s voice didn’t carry any warmth. “Now that you’re done staring vacantly into space and staring it’s time to move on to the next step of your training.”

“Moment of truth once again Mr. Silver,” a water tentacle snaked out from behind Martin’s back. “You should be close to full mana right now. If you selected chronomancer like we agreed, you’ll be able to cast *foresight*. Otherwise,” he shrugged.

“The Royal Knights are fairly keen on following orders.” Martin continued, the water tentacle snaking near Micah. “We aren’t very keen on accepting rogue elements into our ranks.”

Micah glanced toward the tentacle and bit back a sarcastic response. As much as he didn’t enjoy the constant threats, he knew they were genuine. Now wasn’t the time to goad the malevolent killer that held his life in his hands.

He cast the spell, only stumbling once but quickly catching himself. It consumed over half of his mana, but by his projections from before he gained the specialty, it should have consumed over 130% of his available mana. The world faded into the rainbow blur of probabilities around him.

Micah’s eyes widened. He ducked a full half second before the water tentacle, its tip flattened into an axe head, swung at his neck, traveling at barely visible speeds. He rolled to the side, a disc of water drilling through the dungeon floor at hypersonic speeds.

He pulled himself up into a crouch and raised his spear. Just as he was about to charge, he paused, literally seeing his future self get pulled apart by a lattice of water blades that sprouted from nothingness around Martin.

“Good, good!” Martin clapped his hands together, grinning maniacally at Micah. “A Magi managed to dodge two high speed attacks and avoid rushing into a defensive trap. I’d say that’s proof positive that you had *foresight* active.”

“That,” Micah’s teeth chattered as cold sweat ran down his back. “That was all just a test? You could have killed me!”

“*Would* have boy,” Martin clicked his tongue at him in disappointment. “Sometimes I wonder about your Mind attribute. No matter how much we tell you that the Royal Knights aren’t a place for the weak, either physically or emotionally, you never seem to properly take it in.”

“You’re more or less one of us now,” Martin began walking out of the dungeon, motioning for Martin to follow him. “If you can cast a fifth tier spell before your eighteenth

birthday, no matter how you got there, you're qualified to be a junior squire. If you've learned anything from me during these past eight months, I want to be clear on the most important lesson. You're going to have to toughen up. It takes a lot to survive in our organization, and right now you've only gotten your foot a couple inches inside the door."

Chapter 22 - Squire

"And this will be your room Squire Silver," the servant opened the door to a mid-sized room about twelve stories up in one of the towers. "You've been assigned to Ser Osswain for your apprenticeship. Squire Thrakos will be by soon with your first assignment."

"Do you know when Squire Thrakos plans to visit?" Micah asked, taking in the snug but well appointed apartment. "Do I have time to draw a bath?"

"I would not presume to know what a squire does with their time," the servant still refused to make eye contact with Micah, instead staring at his immaculately polished shoes. "I do know that it is best not to make a knight wait. The punishment for doing so is quite harsh."

"Understood," Micah replied glumly, walking into the room.

The door closed behind him with a click as the lock engaged. He sighed. They'd inducted him into the Royal Knights. Micah Silver, Squire Third Class. According to Martin, he should be proud. Usually the Master of Curriculum required test after test, constant proof of skill and loyalty, before a blessed would be made into a squire. As it stood, Micah was brought into the Royal Knights at one of the youngest ages in recent memory.

It didn't come without a cost. The locked door confirmed that he wasn't trusted, and even five minutes of conversation with Martin confirmed that the older man didn't respect him. He might be part of the Knights, but there wasn't any sense of belonging. They considered him useful, an asset. Martin had so much as told him that any escape attempts would be punished with either death or dismemberment.

Micah walked over to the reading desk built into the wall of his apartment. The arrangement was quite cozy, a bookshelf stocked with tomes on magical theory and ritual magic sat just to the left while a mage light hung from a gossamer thread above the desk. He only needed to tap it to turn the light on, illuminating the room without any need for the dangers of an open flame candle.

On the desk lay a book. Its cover weathered and yellow to the point that he could barely make out the title: *Time and its Uses*. He opened the book gently, careful not to pull or tear at

its ancient binding. The book was a treatise on magical theory, specializing in time magic with a handful of spells scattered throughout its length.

He lost himself in the grimoire. It divided the study of time into two major fields, transferring one's thoughts and perception forward or backward in time and the actual energy related to the passage of time itself. Perception was the easiest field to learn, with *foresight* and *time echo* being the two most discussed introductory spells.

Time echo was intriguing. Although a fifth tier spell, it was a much easier spell to learn and use than *foresight*, instead focusing on past events that occurred at a specific location. The user could cast their sight and hearing into the past, rewinding events at up to ten times their normal speed, only limited by the hefty per second mana cost of the spell. At his current level, Micah could only rewind events by a couple hours, but he could almost immediately see how the spell would aid either a diplomat or a spy.

The sections on temporal energy were even more interesting, albeit borderline useless. Temporal energy was just too powerful. There were ways to recreate it with mana, but they were simply too mana intensive to do anything. The book contained a powerful spell, *temporal transfer* that allowed a caster to create 'age' with mana or to draw 'age' from a target into the caster. It was just that it took a full mana pool to create even a month of age, and drawing age into oneself predictably aged the caster.

With a single knock on the door, Brenden strode into the room. He glanced around briefly before smiling at Micah. The smile was an ugly thing, his lips were pulled back tight, displaying a mouth full of teeth without a single ounce of mirth.

"Squire Silver," Brenden walked over to Micah as he placed a cloth bookmark in the grimoire and set it down. "It's good to see you so studious now that we're both squires to the same Knight and all. Ser Osswain sent me to get you. He has a task for you, but first he wants to show you a surprise to commemorate your induction into the order."

Micah followed Brenden, thoughts flitting through his mind as he speculated as to the nature of the surprise. Neither Brenden nor Martin were sentimental sorts. Anything they gave him would come with a price tag, usually one far above and beyond what the gift was worth.

Brenden opened the door with a mocking flourish. Inside was a well appointed dining hall with five sumptuous meals set out on a beautiful table carved from a single old growth tree. Micah's breath caught in his throat.

"No," he whispered as Esther bounded around the table toward him, flinging herself into the air to wrap him in a hug.

“Martin thought you’d like to catch up with your family,” Brenden said with a laugh and a wink. “Once you’re done with lunch, we’ll have them escorted to their new living arrangements and you can begin your project.”

“You mean-” Micah’s eyes went wide with horror.

“Squire Thrakos invited us to live on the estate of the Royal Knights,” his mother interjected excitedly. “Apparently people have tried to use the families of Royal Knights as hostages against them in the past. Now it’s standard practice to pay their family a generous stipend to relocate so that we can’t be used against you. Of course, we couldn’t turn down such a generous offer, especially if it had the potential to put your work at risk.”

“Hostages,” Micah turned back to Brenden, his eyes wild.

“Tragic really,” Brenden’s eyes danced while he tried to adopt a dour tone. “Families killed and tortured. These days we try to do everything we can to prevent such a sad recurrence.”

Brenden left the room, Micah’s eyes still trained on him. A slap on his back returned his attention to the room. Trevor’s hand was on his shoulder as the big man leaned in for a hug, engulfing Micah almost entirely.

“By the Sixteen you’re huge now,” emotion choked his brother’s voice. “You’re only Seventeen and you’ve probably already passed my level entirely.”

Trevor grasped Micah’s shoulders, pushing him back a step so he could look him up and down. Micah noticed the shine of unshed tears in the other man’s eyes.

“You don’t know what the past year has been like Micah,” Trevor’s smile only wavered slightly. “You didn’t get to come home from the Golden Drakes so we never really got a chance to catch up, but I’ve been so proud of you. Plus, the minute they announced you were being transferred to the Royal Academy.”

“Well,” Trevor smiled sheepishly, wiping away the moisture pooling around his eyes. “I just couldn’t shut up about how proud I was of you. I think I told everyone at the Lancers about ‘my younger brother, the Royal Knight candidate’ at least twenty times.”

“It’s good to see you too,” Micah smiled back, trying his hardest to make the most of the moment with his family. “They’ve been working me so hard that I haven’t had a chance to come home and visit. It’ll be nice to have you all close at hand.”

Trevor shooed Esther away before leaning in close. “What about your boss, that Brenden guy?” Trevor whispered to him conspiratorially. “He’s pretty cute in an overly authoritative sort of way.”

“What?” Micah sputtered, “by the Sixteen no. Never. Gods above, I thought you liked girls.”

“I do like girls,” Trevor winked at him, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t like boys too. I never really spoke about it back in Basil’s Cove. It’s a smaller city and they frown on alternative lifestyles there. You saw how the housewives treated Mom. Can you think of what they’d do if either of us did anything other than settle down with a nice girl? Hells, I wasn’t about to date an elf, boy or girl. There’d just be too many rumors.”

“Here,” Trevor smiled, slapping him on the shoulder once again. “Things are different in the Capital. I don’t know if I’m going to let Mom and Dad know, I know they’re pretty keen on grandkids, but if the right guy comes along.” Trevor shrugged.

“Squire Thrakos is NOT the right guy,” Micah shook his head empathetically. “Please. Anyone associated with the Knights should be considered off limits. There’s a lot going on behind the scenes that I can’t talk about, but just don’t.”

“Spoilsport,” Trevor replied at a normal volume, pulling away from Micah with a laugh. “Come on, lunch is getting cold and it sounds like you still have an assignment this afternoon.”

After the meal, Brenden led the way to Martin, constantly trying to draw his attention. Micah knew better than to engage. Brenden just wanted to bait and taunt him about his family. The older man couldn’t help but target Micah’s every weakness. He couldn’t really make out whether Brenden didn’t like him or if he was just an asshole. Either way, he wasn’t keen to start an argument he couldn’t win.

Together they walked into a laboratory, books and reagents meticulously stored up against its vaulted stone walls. Martin absently waved them in as he put the finishing touches on a ritual circle. At its center, a swarthy man wearing only ragged undergarments struggled against metal bonds holding him to a steel slab. Micah squinted at the man, his face vaguely triggering a thread of memory.

“Micah!” The man shouted at him as soon as his eyes fell upon Micah. “You gotta tell these guys that it’s all a mistake. Whatever they says I’ve done, I didn’t do it!”

“Who?” Micah cocked his head to the side, trying to ignore Brenden’s damning smile at his side.

“It’s me!” The man rattled his wrists against his bonds. “Gheb! The carriage driver? I brought you from Basil’s Cover to Bitollan.”

“This man is a criminal Micah,” Martin replied indolently, motioning to Brenden who quickly gagged the struggling man. “He’s a senior agent in the Resistance. Under interrogation with a Truth Seer he admitted to gathering information and passing it on to dissident forces. He’s already been found guilty of treason.”

“The Resistance?” Micah asked, frowning slightly. “What are they resisting?”

“What indeed,” Martin smiled, walking over to a chair within arms reach of Gheb and seating himself. “Everything really. They’re a group of forgotten. Their stated purpose is to acquire ‘equal rights’ for the forgotten, but really they’re nothing more than a bunch of rabble rousers, trying to create chaos and benefit from the suffering of others.”

“What is he doing here then?” Micah asked slowly, his eyes flicking from Gheb to Martin and back.

“The same thing you are,” Martin smiled. “Serving your purpose in the greater scheme of things.”

“You see Micah,” Martin continued. “Brenden told me you’ve begun reading up on the spell *temporal transfer*. What the written grimoires don’t speak of is the theoretical breakthrough made by Karrin Dakkora. Unfortunately, she didn’t have any time affinity so she couldn’t act on the theory, but she created a ritual to amplify *temporal transfer*. One that would allow a caster to transfer years from one target to another.”

“Every nation has an organization like the Royal Knights,” at a nod from Martin, Brenden handed Micah a sheaf of paper containing the formula for a ritual. “The problem is that it takes years to get soldiers to higher levels. I’ve spent most of my life working my way to level forty four. Enough to make me a full Knight, but I know my limits. I don’t have enough time to make it far past level sixty in this lifetime.”

“Battles between kingdoms are decided by powers above level eighty,” Brenden grabbed a censer full of incense and placed it at Micah’s feet as Martin kept speaking. “The problem is that anyone of that level is too old. Often pneumonia is more likely to claim their life than an enemy’s arrow.”

“But,” a mad smile occupied Martin’s face. “What if Dakkora’s ritual works? What if we can transfer years from an old man like me and give them to refuse? Then we can put our malcontents and prisoner’s to work while giving the elite of the Kingdom a second life.”

“I know my place,” Martin bowed from his chair with a self-deprecating flourish. “I’m an old man that’s getting close to his limit. I’m useful to the Kingdom, but if I die it won’t be

crippling. I am our test case. Your job is to get that formula to work. Once you succeed with me, you'll return the truly powerful to the full glory of their youth."

"Then," Martin's eyes shone with an unhealthy fervor, "the Kingdom will stand tall. We'll have blessed above level one hundred. Once their classes evolve, they'll practically become demigods. None of our neighbors will be able to stand before us. We'll unite the continent in a generation."

Micah looked down at the formula before glancing at Brenden. The older man was standing in front of the door. His only escape would be when the cooldown on his blessing ran down.

Chapter 23 - Third Time's the Charm

The spell worked. It took four tries for Micah to get the feel of the ritual and how it interacted with *temporal transfer*, but it worked. The one time Micah actively wanted a new spell to not live up to expectations, it performed flawlessly.

Gheb screamed and begged Micah through his gag the entire time, but there wasn't anything he could do. Brenden stood just outside of the circle, a summoned daemon at his back just waiting for Micah to hesitate. There was no question in his mind that any failure on his part would spell the death of his entire family. Micah's only option was to grit his teeth and count down the days until he could use his blessing again as Gheb deflated before his eyes, the time magic wilting him like a week old bouquet.

The spell 'only' stole a year of Gheb's life for Martin, but that was enough for it to be declared an unqualified success. Performing the ritual and *temporal transfer* in the laboratory became Micah's new world. Each day, Brenden would escort him to the room where a new prisoner would be waiting. Some truly deserved to have years ripped from their lives, murderers, kidnappers and rapists. Many were political prisoners. Members of the Resistance or even just outspoken individuals that annoyed the wrong noble.

The first month was mostly devoted to 'treating' Martin, performing the spell over and over again until Martin shed his age like a used overcoat. The difficulty of the casting steadily pushed up his spellcasting and ritual magic skills until Micah was able to transfer two to three years at a time. Finally, once Martin looked to be in his early twenties he announced the project a success.

The next day, Micah vaguely hoped for a period of rest, but once again Brenden retrieved him from his apartment. When they walked into the laboratory it was practically

humming with tension. Martin stood in the center of a cluster of older, well-armed men, showing off his new body.

“Squire Silver,” he called out as soon as Brenden brought him into the room. “The man of the hour is here.”

Micah’s breath left his body as all six of the other men turned to look at him. Every one of them carried a palpable aura of power, a weight of energy and gravitas that demanded respect. They stared at him with vague disinterest, cataloguing and immediately dismissing him as beneath their notice. Micah would bet his last point of attunement that all of the newcomers were at least above level sixty. He was a rabbit, shivering and alone in the midst of a pack of wolves.

“As I was discussing gentlemen,” Martin said with a hint of nervousness as he draped an arm over Micah’s shoulders. “This here is Squire Silver, the Time Magi that performed the treatments on me and restored my youth. It should just be a matter of time and effort and he should be able to do the same for you.”

Their gazes intensified, but no one responded. A cane clacked on the stone floor, and the men parted, making way for a wizened old woman who slowly approached Micah. She was almost a foot shorter than him, her hair a stringy tangle of white and grey, but her rheumy blue eyes didn’t miss a thing. Micah couldn’t look away. She glowed like the Sun. A corona of power leaked off of her, her very aura creating heat mirages in her wake.

“You’ve kept him at level twenty?” She asked Martin, her voice the crackle of paper crumpling.

“Yes M’lady Ikanthar,” Martin hastily bowed at the waist.

“He’s compliant then?” Ikanthar continued, peering at Micah’s shaking form. “I don’t want a spy or saboteur working on me.”

“Yes M’lady,” Martin responded unctuously. “He was discovered by the Golden Drakes, a high tier adventuring guild where he demonstrated the power of prophecy. They sold him to us and we’ve been training him ever since. Squire Silver has a perfect ten affinity in time so we’ve been able to train him to use time magic and the ritual at a much lower level than would otherwise be expected. He’s already gotten his hands dirty on my orders several times and his family is being held against his good behavior.”

Micah twitched slightly as Martin laid out his entire life story, describing him as an auctioneer would a prize head of cattle.

“Good,” Ikanthar hobbled to the seat next to the restrained prisoner. “If this works, your research into the black rituals will be forgiven Knight Osswain and you will be rewarded. If this doesn’t work, you knew the risks when you began your research into Dakkora’s rituals. They are forbidden for a reason, but as you know, success forgives all sins.”

“Success forgives all sins,” all of the Knights repeated the phrase in unison, reverently as if it were some sort of talisman or prayer.

“Now,” she waived a wrinkled and veiny hand in Micah’s direction. “Boy. Work your dark magic on me but be aware, if you fail or try to harm me you and everything you love will learn the true depths of human misery in exquisite detail.”

“Archmagus Ikanthar isn’t prone to idle threats Silver,” Martin turned to him, his face deadly serious. “I’d suggest trying your hardest.”

Micah coughed nervously, very aware of how dry his throat was. He approached, smiling weakly and not even looking at the political prisoner he’d be draining today. Micah found that it helped. Their screams still haunted him, but at least he didn’t have to deal with their eyes. He still saw Gheb staring at him every time he tried to sleep.

He traced the circle, placing the rituals reagents and components, his hands shaking slightly under the gaze of the powerful Knights. Now that he’d had a moment to calm down, he recognized almost half of them from the bards’ tales. Noble men, renowned for their valorous deeds and service to the kingdom. Men he’d grown up respecting and wanting to emulate. All waiting to kill him if he didn’t perform an unnatural act of magic on a defenseless prisoner.

Micah enacted the ritual. Once again using his body as a conduit to transfer the monstrous amount of power built up in Archmagus Ikanthar’s aged and twisted body. As the temporal energy passed through him toward the prisoner, for the first time he began to truly feel the weight and majesty it represented.

With Martin, it’d simply been a chore, channeling a massive amount of energy from one spot to another. The ritual and spell were little more than an equation in which he was a variable. He played his part, but there was a lack of vital understanding. He knew that the temporal energy existed and that it was powerful, but he couldn’t harness or control it.

It wasn’t mana. Temporal energy was something more than that, much closer to the life force used in ritual magic. A primal energy that moved outside the safe boundaries of regular magic, only restricted by the natural phenomena of the universe itself.

His mind went back to the ritual he used to graduate. As the energy passed through him, he could see how the spellforms and reagents would interact with it, transforming it into something that he could begin to use. It wasn’t a complete thought, just the beginning of a

concept. There wouldn't be a way to use it as mana, the energy was too wild for that. It would overwhelm the limits of magic almost immediately and backlash on Micah, consuming him in a moment. He squinted his eyes, trying to see the shape the ritual would take.

Then the spell was over. Absently Micah realized that he'd fallen to both knees, gasping as sweat poured down his back. The prisoner had aged visibly, wrinkles appearing around the corner of his eyes and grey gathering at his temples.

Archmagus Ikanthar stood up from the chair, stretching her back briefly. The room's silence became electric. The various Knights grasped the hilts of their weapons, each training their eyes on Micah, waiting for any signal from Ikanthar of his betrayal. She waved her hand, a ball of fire forming in her palm without her chanting a single word to the spell. Quickly it turned into a writhing snake and wound in between her fingers.

She snapped her thumb and index finger together, dissipating the tendril of flames. She turned to the crowd of Knights and nodded, smiling quickly.

"You've done our Kingdom a great service Knight Osswain," she inclined her head ever so slightly at Martin. "No one else thought to harness the black rituals in this way, molding an untrained talent into the vehicle of our Kingdom's rebirth. For this, you will be removed from your duties at the Royal Academy and rewarded greatly. From this day forward, Squire Silver will be remanded to my care."

Micah started blankly at Martin as the older man opened his mouth to respond, before closing it bitterly. His entire fate was decided before his eyes without even a second glance. Like he was a bolt of cloth or a loaf of bread to be sold at the market.

"Yes Archmagus," Martin replied, the reluctance audible in his voice. "It shall be as you command."

The hour or so after meeting was a blur. Micah was ushered away by the Archmagus' servants. Soon he found himself in a new, slightly more luxurious apartment with the notable addition of bars on the windows. Any slight chance he'd had of crawling out the window and using *updraft* to cushion his fall was long gone. Even if he chose to abandon his family, he was truly and completely trapped.

Micah pulled out the Folio and began sketching his thoughts on the new ritual. He'd need more experience transferring temporal energy to perfect it, but if he had to guess, temporal transfers looked like the entirety of his near future. He just hoped that Archmagus Ikanthar wasn't the type to destroy her tools once she was done with them so that no one else could use them. He only had about four months left before the cooldown on *blessed return* finished off. It would be a painful kind of irony if she simply killed him right before he was able to use the blessing to escape this bleak timeline.

Luckily, those four months passed quickly and productively. Ikanthar literally never spoke to him in that time. Servants would fetch him and ensure that Micah was dressed appropriately before ushering him off to a much larger laboratory where he would perform the same ritual time and time again. At some point, when Ikanthar was a beautiful and vibrant young woman, she stopped appearing and one by one Micah found himself casting the spell on a series of geriatric Knights.

Transferring energy for the nights wasn't nearly as beneficial to his research as the times he performed the ritual on Ikanthar, but it hardly mattered. By that point Micah had most of the theoretical framework of a ritual to harness the temporal energy put together. He wouldn't be able to cast the ritual before reversion, too many eyes were on him at all times, but the Knights provided the research material he needed to polish off his final draft of the ritual.

He didn't know for sure what the difference between Ikanthar and the Knights was. Maybe it was her total level eclipsing theirs or her status as a Chosen of Katton, God of Fire and Forge, but for some reason the energy flowing from her was just on another level. He hoped that when the time came, it wouldn't matter, but really there would only be one way to find out. In his next life, he would need to do everything he could to avoid falling into her grasp once again.