

BODY REFINEMENT IN A BEAST TAMER'S WORLD

ONE



SETH RING

SETH RING

BODY REFINEMENT
IN A BEAST TAMER'S WORLD

BODY REFINEMENT IN A BEAST TAMER'S WORLD

ONE



SETH RING



SETH RING

STAY IN THE LOOP

Be the first to learn about new releases.
Plus get newsletter-only bonus content.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

[Join the Nova Terra Reader Group](#)

[Read my books before they're released on Ream](#)

[Subscribe to my YouTube Channel](#)

ALSO BY SETH RING

Titan

[Nova Terra: Titan](#)

[Nova Terra: Greymane](#)

[Nova Terra: Kingbreaker](#)

[Nova Terra: Guardian](#)

[Nova Terra: Liberator](#)

[Nova Terra: Earthshaper](#)

[Nova Terra: Stormbringer](#)

[Nova Terra: Stone King](#)

[Nova Terra: Catalyst](#)

[Nova Terra: Worldbearer](#)

Battle Mage Farmer

[Domestication](#)

[Germination](#)

[Cultivation](#)

[Fermentation](#)

[Transformation](#)

[Preservation](#)

[Separation](#)

[Conservation](#)

[Culmination](#)

Tower

[Forge Master](#)

[Reforged](#)

[Arcanist](#)

[Ignition](#)

[Bloodline](#)

[Avatar](#)

[Challenger](#)

[Marauder](#)

[Warborn](#)

Iron Tyrant

[Chain of Feathers](#)

[Crow's Fortune](#)

[Healing Skies](#)

[Falling Gold](#)

[Death's Due](#)

The Exlian Syndrome

[Advent](#)

[Dark Dawn](#)

[Apex](#)

[Evolution](#)

[Shattered Glory](#)

[Light's Ascension](#)

Dreamer's Throne

[Dreamer's Throne 1](#)

[Dreamer's Throne 2](#)

[Dreamer's Throne 3](#)

[Dreamer's Throne 4](#)

Soul Caller

[Soul Caller 1](#)

[Soul Caller 2](#)

Standalone Titles

[Mad Master Alchemist](#)

Body Refinement in a Beast Tamer's World

Copyright 2026 by Seth Ring.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

1st Edition

CHAPTER ONE



When Magnus had planned his birthday, it certainly didn't include falling off a balcony and waking up in a fantasy world. But his opinion hadn't been considered and here he was, face down in the middle of a mage's tower.

His mage tower, apparently.

Turning his head to the side, Magnus winced as an entire lifetime of memories contained within the skull of the mage he'd just evicted burned their way through his own, creating a disorienting echo that nearly battered him into oblivion.

Borella. That was the name of the world. This world. The world Magnus the Magnificent had been so bent on making his mark in. Rolling over with a groan, Magnus tried to gather his thoughts, but they were too busy rubberbanding back and forth between his life on Earth and his life here on Borella. Then, abruptly, they snapped into focus, pulling Magnus into clarity with such force that he nearly threw up.

Struggling to turn on his side, he braced his hand against the cold stone floor and pushed himself up to his knees. As the haze faded from his eyes, he saw dark crimson splotches on the ground under him. It was blood. His blood. He tried to touch it, but moving his hand from the ground sent his shoulder slamming into the stone floor again.

Hissing with pain, he felt the cold floor against his warm cheek and rested there for a moment. For some reason his body was terribly weak and he could barely muster any strength. Drawing a shuddering breath, he tried to sit up, moving slower this time. When he managed to stabilize himself after tucking his legs under his body, he caught sight of a shard of silver, the remnants of a mirror that had shattered.

A disgustingly handsome face stared back at him.

Bright green eyes set under commanding eyebrows were framed by two strong cheekbones and a clean jawline. In the center of his face was a nose that could only be described as perfect, though it was currently marred by the dried blood that trailed across his upper lip. Otherwise his skin was unblemished and smooth, looking like what skincare commercials promised but never delivered.

For a moment, Magnus could only think about how nice it would have been to have this face when he was on Earth. Memories suddenly surged in his mind, overwhelming him. He had been a musician, and a talented one at that, but his dreams of stardom would have been guaranteed with looks like this.

The thought gave Magnus pause, as he suddenly realized that though he had memories from Earth, he couldn't remember his name. Magnus was what the mage had been called and, due to the merger of their selves, Magnus was all that came to mind when he recalled his name.

Blinking at his reflection, he saw his brows furrow and his lips quirk in pain a moment before the pain actually registered. It was a dull, aching pain that started somewhere behind his chest and radiated through his body in waves. Closing his eyes, Magnus called up his soul, accessing the immaterial organ by instinct. When he saw it the pain abruptly intensified, mirroring the fissures that ran across it.

Souls were not supposed to look like this.

But seeing his soul triggered new memories for Magnus—memories from right before his soul from Earth crossed over. Memories of ambition and eagerness that swiftly turned to terror. Memories of an impossibly large figure that turned to look at him from an impossible distance, blinking in the void as his soul contract approached it. There was a moment of curiosity from the vast being and then a brief touch, two souls meeting through the soul contract. That was when Magnus' soul shattered and he died. Yet here he was, not dead at all.

Taking a deep breath, Magnus felt the air inflating his lungs and focused on his exhale, just the way he would before going on stage to perform. A familiar calm settled over him, giving him enough wherewithal to attempt standing.

The room he was in was lovely, full of old wood and carved stone. Bookshelves dominated most of the walls, and every inch of shelf space was taken up. To his surprise, Magnus realized he knew what most of the books were about, as they were books personally selected by Magnus the Magnificent for his office. Off to the left was a large desk with a small globe and a magical lamp, while to his right was a table where he had performed experiments in the past.

At his feet was a smear of blood that led back to a doorway with a thick wooden door. Beyond the door was his meditation room, the room where his soul had shattered. Magnus had no memory of having dragged his bleeding body out into the office, but judging from the mess on the floor and the state of his shirt, he must have.

As the pain in his head eased, Magnus stumbled to the desk and took a seat, gripping the edge of the table to keep himself from tumbling out of the chair as his mind spun. It was slow, but more and more was coming back to him. Borella was a world ruled by mages who wielded powerful magic, watching over the mortals who lived in cities surrounding their towers. But magic wasn't something that could be wielded freely. Instead, mages formed soul contracts with mysterious creatures who embodied the elements or possessed supernatural abilities.

The creature a mage bonded to was of the utmost importance because it not only determined what elements a mage had access to, but it also granted the mage special abilities distinct to that creature. As a silver-ranked mage of some repute, Magnus had been bonded to a flameseeker lizard, a powerful, mysterious creature that granted him strong flame-based magic.

Yet Magnus the Magnificent, a self-proclaimed genius, hadn't been content with the flameseeker lizard, as it had only been bronze rank. In Borella, mysterious creatures and mages alike were categorized into eight levels of power. Iron, bronze, and silver were the so-called Common ranks, with silver-ranked wizards like Magnus holding considerable authority among mortals.

Above the Common ranks were the Noble mages, who held the ranks of gold, platinum, and diamond. These were the mages who ruled other mages, and their power was enough to determine the fate of cities and whole regions. Then there were the Rulers, mages who held the legendary and mythic ranks and ruled the five great mage organizations that divided the continent.

Though he had achieved a considerable feat by reaching silver rank by his twentieth year, Magnus didn't feel that was enough. Unwilling to remain in the silver rank, he had discovered a powerful, mysterious creature in an egg and tried to form a contract with it, only to shatter his soul into a thousand pieces. By all rights his soul should have gone the same way as the broken mirror, but for some reason it still held together, albeit barely.

A fresh wave of burning pain arrived, bringing with it something else, something Magnus hadn't noticed at first. A deep emptiness where he used to be full. Dreading what he might find, Magnus sat firmly in his seat, clutching the armrest of his chair as he once again peered into his soul.

A mage's soul rested separately from their body in an invisible space that could only be observed by the mage themselves. The soul was the foundation of a mage's magic, because it was only through soul contracts that their magic could be wielded.

Slipping into a meditative state, Magnus looked through his body at the space where his soul resided and once again saw the cracked and broken

soul that had nearly sent him into convulsions before. This time he ignored the discomfort and paid careful attention to what he was seeing.

Most souls looked like full orbs of pure energy. At least, that is what Magnus' soul had looked like before it was shattered. It had even carried a faint red tint, marking him as a mage who wielded the fire element. Now, however, it carried a sickly gray hue, and where fissures traced their way across it and through it there were hints of blackish purple. Yet, despite the damage, his soul didn't actually look like it was going to fall apart anytime soon.

Calming himself as much as possible, Magnus looked closer and slowly began to make out thin lines of dark purple energy, tattooed throughout his soul. At first they appeared to be random, traces of whatever darkness was eating away at his soul. But then he realized that the lines were too complicated, too orderly for that to be true. The more he looked, the more of them he saw, until his entire soul was filled with wire-thin lines. It took him a moment to understand what was going on, and when he finally realized what happened it was so shocking it actually snapped him out of his meditative state, sending his consciousness reeling back to the surface.

“That's a soul contract.”

His words were quiet, whispered into the void, as if saying them too loud would somehow make them more real. The very soul contract that had shattered Magnus' soul, killing him in the process, was currently the only thing holding his soul together. Something like this should have been impossible, at least as far as Magnus knew. Rubbing his forehead, as if that might somehow alleviate the pounding in his temples, Magnus combed back through all of his memories, trying to recall his days at the academy.

After a good ten minutes, he was positive that the situation he was in shouldn't have been possible. Of course, he had just crossed over from another world, melding his memories, his body, and his soul with Magnus the Magnificent. So the fact that his soul was currently being stitched together by a soul contract wasn't actually that weird.

Slowly leaning forward, he rested his head against the smooth, dark wood of his desk and let out a sigh. This was not how he imagined his birthday

going. After a few minutes, another thought struck him, and with a good bit of urgency, Magnus sat up. He was a mage in charge of a mage tower. And not just any mage, but a genius who had reached the silver rank before his 20th birthday. But now his soul was shattered.

With growing trepidation, Magnus leaned heavily on the desk, pushing himself to his feet, and then stretched out his hand, attempting to trace the pattern for the first spell that came to mind. The mana in his soul should have flowed through his finger to leave glowing lines in the air. These lines, once completely infused, would then activate, creating a wisp of light that would illuminate his surroundings. Instead, the dull ache in his soul intensified, and Magnus felt the mana he had tried to gather swiftly dispersing through the fissures that marred his soul.

“No! Oh no, no, no, no!”

Fearing the worst, Magnus tried to activate another spell, and the result was the same. Though his soul was in good enough shape to allow him to live, it was in such bad shape it could no longer hold mana.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Collapsing back down in his seat, Magnus stared blankly into the air. What was the use of waking up in a fantasy world with mages and magic and mysterious creatures if his soul was too broken to take advantage of it? Magnus’ expression hardened and he shook his head. He wasn’t one to take defeat lying down and so, stretching out his finger, he began to draw again.

Yet no matter how hard he willed the mana to concentrate itself, it leaked out of him as fast as he could gather it, and even faster in some cases. A mage’s soul acted as a sort of repository, and ambient mana could be drawn into it. Over time that mana would be converted, becoming branded with the aura of the mage’s soul, allowing them to control it in the casting of spells. Depending on the soul contract, how quickly a mage could absorb and convert mana would be faster or slower, and the more powerful the mysterious creature a mage bonded with, the faster the process was.

The size of a mage’s soul was what determined how much mana they could store and was used as the benchmark that gave them their rank. Magnus had always had a robust soul, naturally larger than others at his same rank. Yet,

now it couldn't even hold as much mana as an apprentice.

After a full two hours, Magnus, having long since depleted what little mana his soul could maintain, collapsed in defeat. As he sagged in his chair, his gaze dropped to the floor and he sighed. Though he had never heard of someone who had survived a shattered soul, it wasn't as if there weren't other mages whose souls became damaged. In fact, when a mage traded one mysterious creature's soul contract for another, there was always some residual damage left behind. After all, forcefully carving out one soul contract to deploy another wasn't exactly a harmless process, and Magnus knew firsthand just how painful it was.

Though he had never seen them himself, there were stories of potions and magical natural treasures that could repair damaged souls. And these, it would seem, were his only hope if he wanted to be able to cast magic again. Of course, what really confused him about this whole situation was that his soul contract seemed to be intact, despite the fact that his soul was literally in tatters.

His gaze drifted to the doorway of his meditation room, and Magnus decisively pushed himself to his feet. It had been in that room that he had completed the ritual to try and contract with a new mysterious creature, and even now the creature's egg rested there. Maybe it was because of the soul contract they shared, but Magnus could feel the egg, a cold, inert lump that seemed to sit just outside his perception when he closed his eyes.

Moving was still painful and his body still felt weak, so he carefully made his way over to the door and pushed it open. His meditation room was simple. Stone floor and stone walls, with murals painted on three of the walls and the ceiling. The murals weren't his. They had existed long before he became tower master, and they showed various scenes of crimson flames. For as long as this tower had existed the tower master had wielded flame as their element, and Magnus was no different. Or, at least, he had been no different.

Now he couldn't wield a candle flame, let alone the torrents of burning fire depicted on the walls. In the center of the room was a small mat, the place where he normally sat to do his meditation, and immediately in front of it was a twenty-four-inch tall obelisk with an indentation in the top. There,

sitting stably atop the obelisk, was the starstone.

CHAPTER TWO



In this world, mysterious creatures came in two forms. Many of the powerful beasts that roamed the world, with the right persuasion, could be convinced to sign soul contracts, transforming into mysterious creatures and granting mages access to their innate abilities. But most mages got their soul bonds through starstones, crystalline eggs that glimmered with a star-like radiance.

The only trouble was, it was next to impossible to be one hundred percent sure what sort of mysterious creature would come out of a starstone; it was always a gamble. Of course, there were professionals who spent their days studying starstones, and a process of assessment had been in practice for years. This starstone was one Magnus had traded for on the black market, guaranteed to be gold ranked or above—at least according to the sketchy old man who had sold it to him.

Magnus had been hoping for gold ranked, as he knew that accommodating a more powerful mysterious creature than gold with his silver-ranked soul power was a dangerous proposition. Mages who reached beyond their

means were fools, and normally dead by the time they discovered it. Of course, there were exceptions to everything, and some mages matched so perfectly with their mysterious creatures that the normal restrictions didn't apply.

But Magnus hadn't been born with a shaped soul like those geniuses. Instead, his soul had just been a bit stronger than normal, which was ultimately why he had taken the risk. What he had discovered, quite painfully, was that the starstone the old man had sold him wasn't gold ranked at all. What rank it was, he had no idea. He had never encountered a soul contract of this complexity before.

Stumbling to the meditation mat, Magnus sat down, crossing his feet under his body. The starstone glittered in front of him, revealing none of its secrets despite his intense scrutiny. Its surface was crystalline and highly polished, giving no clue as to what sort of creature it might contain, and the glimmer inside of it that danced before his eyes was likewise standard.

Over the years Magnus had seen dozens of starstones, and most of them looked exactly like this, which was confusing, because the more powerful the creature within the starstone, the more likely it was to bear distinctive marks. The intensity of the glimmer should have revealed something as well, but to his admittedly untrained eye, it looked like a gold-ranked mysterious creature.

What was even more confusing than how it looked was the fact that it was completely cold and unresponsive to his presence. Normally, with a soul contract established, the starstone should have reacted to his presence, even if it wasn't yet ready to hatch. Grimacing, Magnus reached out and touched the cold stone, trying to prompt a reaction. As soon as his fingers brushed the smooth side, a purple spark jumped from it, shocking his hand badly. He pulled back with a surprised yelp, more startled than hurt, and stared at the starstone, which had suddenly dimmed.

Magnus remained frozen for a moment as he watched the starstone for any other reaction, but the glimmer slowly brightened again, returning to the way it was before he had touched it. A feeling of disappointment rose in Magnus, but as he got ready to stand up, a field of blue suddenly covered his vision and a strange, metallic voice echoed in his head.

System initialization commencing...

Checking for host deficiencies...

Scanning environment for native threat levels...

The strange blue screen in front of him, which looked suspiciously like one of the video game quest screens he had seen during his life on Earth, flickered, and a wave of blue light expanded from it. As soon as it touched the starstone, the blue light immediately retreated and the blue window flashed red, unleashing an ungodly wail that pierced through Magnus' mind.

WARNING! EXTREME THREAT LEVEL DETECTED!

The blare of the strange voice in his head was deafening and nearly knocked him over. As he stabilized himself, the window appeared to panic, words flashing across it with a sense of urgency.

Immediate abandonment of world recommended! Abandoning soul bind!

ERROR! Soul binding too far along. Host is already fully integrated...

The window quivered and slowly calmed down, returning to the way it had been when it first appeared.

Choosing suitable system...

SYSTEM FOUND: Genius Body Refinement System™

Please brace yourself, host, as you might feel a sense of pressure.

“Huh? Pressure?”

Magnus' mind was still catching up with what was going on when the wave of white-hot agony lanced through him. The merger of his souls had been uncomfortable, but this was like getting kicked off a cliff into a pool of lava. Magnus could feel his bones melting and reforming, his muscles being pulled apart as each individual strand was remade. His skin felt as if a million needles had been stabbed into him, one at a time, before his body was drenched in lemon juice or rolled in a vat of salt.

Just before he passed out, the pain faded, replaced by a sense of warmth and

comfort that radiated through his whole body, restoring his frayed nerves considerably. The window shifted, transforming from its plain translucent blue into an ethereal tan. The sides of the window shimmered and the whole thing suddenly looked like an ancient book. Bound with an unknown scaly hide, the book gave off a faint sense of pressure that caused Magnus' soul to tremble.

Binding successful...

The strange voice returned, transforming into a mature male tone. The sort of tone Magnus might have expected from a middle-aged boxing coach. The specificity of the thought sent a jolt through him as he realized it sounded exactly like his boxing coach from Earth.

Welcome, host, to the Genius Body Refinement System™! This system has been customized to your specifications and contains everything you need to survive in this incredibly hostile world. The ambient threat level of this world is MAXIMUM and the chances of you surviving are NEGATIVE. Mastering perfect body refinement is your only hope.

“What... what are you?”

An excellent question, host! I am the Genius Body Refinement System™, a system designed to maximize your chances of survival. I hold innumerable features and functions, but there are a few you should understand right out of the gate. After all, we wouldn't want you to get crushed before you have a chance to grow.

The pages of the system book flipped, revealing an index page.

STATUS

REPUTATION

BODY REFINEMENT ART

MARTIAL SKILLS SHOP

IMMORTAL SKILLS SHOP

There were only five tabs listed, though Magnus could see some blurry entries below that were grayed out. Trying to wrap his head around the abrupt genre shift, he pointed at the book.

“These look an awful lot like things you would find in a cultivation world from a novel. Martial arts? No one does martial arts here.”

Never fear, host, the system is never wrong. Based on the level of creatures in your immediate vicinity and the gap in strength between you, the Genius Body Refinement System™ is the only system that will allow you to survive. While I did consider the Genius Archmage System™ initially, its power ceiling is a couple of tiers too low.

The system voice paused for a moment, and Magnus felt as if it shuddered slightly before resuming with a false cheerfulness.

But don't worry, as long as you have the Genius Body Refinement System™, you have a... 0.0001% chance of survival. Shall I introduce its functions to you?

Magnus' gaze drifted to the starstone that lay just beyond the ethereal floating book, and he couldn't help but shudder. Clearly, whatever was in that stone, whatever it was that was forcefully holding his soul together, was well beyond what he could imagine. Based on his memories of this world, there was no reason for the system to have judged it to be so dangerous, which meant that the threat it was detecting was contained in the simple-looking egg-shaped crystal in front of him.

“Uh, yeah. Go ahead.”

The system is designed for your absolute convenience, and I've taken the liberty of optimizing your settings to ensure that we, ahem, that you don't get crushed immediately. At the top of the index, you'll see your status. Go ahead and say, or think, the word 'Status.'

Concentrating, Magnus recited the word mentally and the book flipped its pages, revealing a simple spread that had a picture of him on one page, and a few lines of text on the other.

NAME: Magnus

RANK: Mortal

PRIMARY ART: Unselected

MARTIAL SKILLS: None

IMMORTAL SKILLS: None

This is your status. It will list all the relevant information about you as you grow. For the

moment it is largely blank, but as you select your primary art and gain Martial and Immortal Skills, they will be listed here. Please select your Primary Art to get started.

It only took a thought for Magnus to navigate back to the index and choose the Body Refinement Art section. A moment later he was looking at a short list that made no sense to him.

Tidal God Physique - **RARE**

Great Earth Physique - **RARE**

Holy Sun Physique - **RARE**

Imperishable Void Physique - **UNIQUE**

Given your dire circumstances, I've unlocked three rare physiques for you. Selecting one of them will set your path for the future. Each has its advantages and disadvantages, but all will allow you at least a chance of surviving in this world. Please make a selection.

Staring at the list, Magnus' gaze drifted to the bottom entry. Apart from the fact that it was marked as Unique, the words appeared to be shrouded in a subtle gray-and-purple mist, and it flickered slightly, as if it wasn't actually supposed to be there.

“Um, what about the Unique physique? What is special about that?”

There was a long silence, and then the system voice spoke cautiously.

Unique physique? Can you see an entry marked Unique?

“Yeah, it's right there, at the bottom.”

Ahem, of course... how could I... miss that.

The system voice sounded almost embarrassed, and Magnus could practically see his old coach rubbing his nose and turning to look away.

You should... you should select that physique.

“Can you tell me a bit more about it? How do I know if it's good?”

Because it's Unique. Not taking it would be the dumbest thing you've ever done. Don't, I beg of you, be dumb. Unique physiques are singular. Only one of them can exist at a time, and those who possess them and survive are unimaginably powerful. Selecting a

Rare physique will raise your estimated chances of survival to that 0.0001% I spoke of.
A Unique physique will change those odds to 0.001%.

“Ah, got it. Okay, I’ll choose that one.”

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, the three Rare physiques vanished and the Imperishable Void Physique flashed, rising to the top of the page. There was a purple flash and words filled the rest of the space below it.

PHYSIQUE: Imperishable Void Physique

RANK: Unique (cannot be improved)

CURRENT LEVEL: Not Initiated

PHYSIQUE EFFECTS: Improved Speed, Improved Strength, Improved Endurance, Elemental Immunity

As soon as the page finished populating, Magnus heard a choking sound, and then the system voice echoed in his head.

You—! That... that’s a good one. Ahem. Yes, that is a great physique. Though it might look simple, simple is sublime in Martial Arts. At each level, you will gain the effects listed. At its highest level the Imperishable Void Physique will make you immune to all elements and will transform your body into a living weapon of unimaginable strength. You will be able to cross endless distances with a thought, tear worlds apart, and pass safely through the void.

The clear awe in the system’s voice brought a smile to Magnus’ face.

“So have my odds of survival improved a little?”

Yes! You have at least a 0.01% chance with this physique, but only if you can initiate it.
Commencing Primary Body Refinement Art download.

Bracing himself, Magnus was surprised when the wave of pain he was expecting didn’t arrive. Instead, information quietly appeared in his mind as if it had always been there. It was like memories he had temporarily misplaced were suddenly discovered again.

The contents of the art were simple. It was divided into four levels—Human, Earth, Saint, and Deity—and each of those levels were divided into Initiate, Warrior, Master, and Grandmaster. As Magnus practiced the body

refinement art his level would slowly rise, granting him the corresponding benefits.

Before you dive in, please allow me to finish explaining the rest of the system's functions. While a Unique physique is enough to drastically increase your chances of survival, that is only true if you successfully initiate it, and if you master Martial and Immortal Skills to supplement it.

The system book flipped and a new page appeared, marked Martial Skills. It contained a list of basic martial techniques organized into categories. At the bottom of the page was a small arrow, indicating the list was continued on the next page.

DEFENSIVE ARTS

IRON BODY STANCE [10 POINTS]: Hardens the practitioner's muscles and bones through controlled breathing.

WILLOW SWAY [35 POINTS]: Learn to bend with attacks rather than resist them directly.

[See More...](#)

MOVEMENT

FLOWING RIVER STEPS [45 POINTS]: Light footwork that allows smooth transitions and improved balance in combat.

SWALLOW'S CLOUD STEP [75 POINTS]: Lighten your body with quick, darting movements that help avoid incoming attacks.

[See More...](#)

MELEE

WHISPERING PALM [15 POINTS]: Unleash a flurry of open-palm strikes aimed at vital points.

TWELVE THUNDER'S FIST [85 POINTS]: Shroud your fists in lightning and pummel your opponent.

[See More...](#)

RANGED

SILVER MOON STRIKE [99 POINTS]: Call on the energy of the moon to shoot a beam of energy at your target.

FLYING VIPER DARTS [20 POINTS]: Throw a hidden dart with unerring precision.

See More...

After reading over the page and getting a sense for how everything was laid out, Magnus pointed at the top entry.

“Points? What are points?”

An excellent question, host. Points are how you will purchase both Martial and Immortal Skills. Each skill is ranked in terms of points, which can be earned through the Genius Body Refinement System™ Reputation system. As you earn points by raising your reputation, you'll be able to buy improved skills, giving you the opportunity to increase your reputation, thus forming a perfect feedback loop. Allow me to initialize the reputation system for you.

There was a light hum in Magnus' mind and a small scroll popped up next to the book.

REPUTATION: Young Genius Fire Mage

CURRENT POINTS: 0

STATIC GOAL: Maintain your reputation as a genius fire mage to earn +5 points a day.

SPECIAL GOAL: Become the talk of the town to earn a bonus of +250 points.

Magnus read the scroll, and then read it again. A frown flitted across his face.

“Um, system? Shouldn't my goal be to become a genius body refinement cultivator? Why does this say I have to maintain my reputation as a genius fire mage? I can't do magic.”

CHAPTER THREE



There was a long silence, and Magnus could practically hear the system's gears turning. Finally, when he was about to ask if it was still there, the system voice came back with false cheerfulness.

Don't sweat the small stuff, host. I'm sure it will work out. As I was saying, Martial and Immortal Skills are available for purchase. Costs for skills are based on their rank and are as follows.

HUMAN: 1-99

EARTH: 100-999

SAINT: 1,000-9,999

DEITY: 10,000+

Buying a skill will unlock all the information you need to know to practice it, but actually initiating and practicing the skill will require effort. Reputation points can also be spent for supplementary materials and equipment, though those features are not yet available. Please check back in at a later time to see if they are unlocked. I believe I have covered everything, but if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask.

“Actually—?”

WARNING! Power overdrawn due to insufficient soul energy. Entering power saving mode...

Power saving mode activated. Some features not available.

Raise levels of soul energy to restore all features.

“Wait! System? Are you there?”

Raise levels of soul energy to restore all features.

The personalized system voice was gone, replaced by the flat, metallic voice Magnus had first heard when the system started.

“Ugh. I thought this was going to be a fantasy, but then it turned into the cultivation genre, and now... I don’t know what it is.”

Sighing, Magnus scrunched his forehead and stood up, being careful not to touch the starstone again. He could still feel his connection with it, but it remained unresponsive, as if it were nothing but stone through and through.

“Maybe it has the same problem as the system? But how do I increase my soul energy?”

Realizing he was talking to himself out loud, Magnus face palmed. His hand touched something crusty on his upper lip, and he remembered that his face was still smeared with dried blood. Leaving the meditation room, Magnus walked across the office to a door tucked next to a shelf that led into his personal chambers. His room was nothing impressive, with a simple bed and dresser. There was a small closet and an attached bathroom where he found a mirror and a basin with an ever-flow pitcher next to it.

Magnus wasn’t exactly sure how the pitcher worked, but he was quite grateful for the constant stream of warm water it could produce. Pouring the water into the basin, he splashed it on his face, resting for a moment, head down, water dripping from his cheeks and chin back down into the basin. Looking up, he examined his unnaturally handsome face again and his lips quirked up into a smile.

“At least I came out ahead in the looks department,” he muttered.

Grabbing a washcloth, he carefully wiped the dried blood from his upper lip, enjoying the feeling of the warm washcloth. Once he was all cleaned up, he flipped the lever to drain the basin, grabbed a towel, and dried himself off, moving slowly, methodically, as he tried to process the insane amount of pain he had just experienced. As he placed the towel back on the rack, Magnus caught sight of himself in the mirror and noticed that his eyes had grown calm.

Everything that had happened to him in the last few hours was bizarre, but it wasn't as if there was anything he could do about it. He was two people from different worlds mashed into a single individual. And he found, to his surprise, that he actually didn't mind.

Yes, he had been torn from his life on Earth. Yes, everything he knew about this world had just been upended. But both sets of memories and the accompanying emotions they contained had grown dim, as if they were another person's. And in a very clear sense, that's exactly what they were.

Magnus made his way out of the bathroom and returned to his office as he mulled over this new realization. Magnus the self-titled Magnificent, and whoever he had been on Earth, were no more. Instead, he now sat in their place, his mind full of their memories, his soul broken by the soul contract and bound to a bizarre system he genuinely didn't understand. But the realization that there was little he could do about his current situation, apart from moving forward, had allowed him to calm down.

"The first thing I need to do is initiate this body refinement art," he muttered, staring blankly at his desk.

Before he could recall what he needed to do to begin, however, there was a sharp rap at the door. Magnus froze for a moment and then, a smile appearing on his face, he called out.

"Come in."

The door opened just enough to allow a young man to step into the entryway. Dressed in a plain red robe with little ornamentation, he surveyed Magnus with a dispassionate gaze. His hair was blond and slicked back and a pair of round glasses perched at the edge of his nose, as if they might fall away from his face at any moment. He held a book in his hands, clutched

tight against his ribs, as if afraid someone might try to snatch it from him. His bright blue eyes were unnervingly intense. It took half a second, but awareness about who this individual was soon bubbled up in Magnus' mind.

“Ah, Penwick, what can I do for you?”

Penwick was the steward of the tower, and, incidentally, the only other mage the tower possessed. Magnus had only ascended to the position of tower master a month ago after the previous master, Magnus and Penwick's teacher, had peacefully passed away in his sleep from old age. Penwick was only twenty-five and was a silver-ranked mage just like Magnus had been before his soul shattered.

Seeing Penwick, and the unfriendly expression on the steward's face, brought the reality of his situation crashing down on Magnus. Though he was considered something of a genius and had ascended to the position of tower master, Magnus had been stuck up and self-obsessed, avoiding contact with others as much as possible.

The result was that the two had never really gotten along, which Magnus could understand, considering his body's previous owner had been jealous and suspicious of anyone with talent. Penwick's eyes drifted to the shattered glass on the floor and the smear of blood that led to the meditation room and then flicked back to Magnus. The steward didn't reveal a single hint of his thoughts as he spoke calmly.

“You have a visitor, sir. Charlotte Flamebrand is here to see you.”

“Charlotte?” The name sent a jolt through Magnus, and he quickly got to his feet. “Is she downstairs?”

“Yes, sir. You might consider changing before seeing her, however.”

It was only then that Magnus remembered that the clothes he was wearing were still smeared with blood and dirt from when he had dragged himself out of the meditation room.

“Ah, right, yes. If you wouldn't mind asking her to wait for a moment, I'll go ahead and get changed.”

“Of course, sir,” Penwick said, his face intentionally blank. “Shall I send a servant up to clean the floor?”

“Actually, that would be great. Thank you, Penwick.”

Magnus was too distracted to catch the hint of disdain that flashed through his steward’s eyes as he rushed into his room to select a new outfit. As Magnus dug through his robes, he found a dark-blue robe with silver stitching that he liked the look of and quickly put it on, barely thinking about what he was doing as he recalled what he remembered about Charlotte.

If Magnus was considered a genius, having achieved the silver rank before the age of twenty, Charlotte was in an entirely different category. One of the rare individuals born with a shaped soul, she had managed to achieve the impossible, binding to a platinum-ranked phoenix as her first soul contract. The result was that she had achieved silver rank by the age of sixteen, well before she entered the academy where they had met.

Magnus, though proud of his achievements, couldn’t help but feel a bit intimidated by Charlotte’s incredible record. The fact that they were still friends at all was rather strange, considering the mixture of jealousy and admiration that lingered when Magnus heard her name. Straightening his collar, he glanced in the mirror to make sure his robes were in place, then hurried downstairs. The one saving grace in his transmigration into Magnus’ body was that the young mage had practically been a shut-in and avoided relationships at all costs. Apart from Penwick and Charlotte, Magnus knew no one else, giving him something of a blank slate in this world.

The Crimson Flame Tower comprised five floors. On the top floor was his office and bedroom. Below that, on the fourth floor, were rooms for the tower’s other mages, the primary laboratories, and the tower library. The third floor contained resource storage and more laboratories that could be used by other mages, had there been any. On the second floor was where the servants lived, a dozen or so mortals who helped with all of the mundane chores around the tower. There was also a kitchen and a dining hall on the second floor. The first floor contained the grand entryway, a parlor for meeting important guests, and a few more storage rooms.

Bigger towers had magical lifts that would allow for swift travel between floors, but the Crimson Flame Tower only had a broad set of stairs that curled up through the center of the tower. As he reached the second floor, Magnus passed a servant carrying a mop and a bucket of water, laboriously climbing the steps. Greeting the middle-aged man with a nod and a smile, Magnus was in too much of a hurry to notice the servant nearly drop the bucket of water in shock.

He arrived at the first floor and took a moment to calm his breathing. After smoothing the front of his robe, he strode as confidently as he could into the parlor where Charlotte was waiting for him, a cup of still-steaming tea at her elbow. The parlor was similar in a lot of ways to Magnus' office. There was an understated elegance to it, and the wood beams and paneling spoke of a rich heritage. Unfortunately, the feeling was somewhat ruined by the threadbare carpet and worn-out furniture and the walls bare of any decorations, a stark reminder that the Crimson Flame Tower had fallen on hard times.

Seeing Magnus enter, Charlotte stood up, a deep scowl on her face. Though she was clearly furious, Magnus couldn't help but feel as if she were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Even his memories hadn't prepared him for how she took his breath away. Long crimson hair braided into a single thick strand fell to the small of her back and her eyes, like liquid chocolate, glowed with orange flecks. Her lips were full and mesmerizing, and as they parted Magnus couldn't help but stare in admiration.

She wore a red robe, but it was nothing like the robe Penwick had on. The off-the-shoulder neckline left her shoulders bare and the tight ribbon at her waist highlighted her hourglass figure. She wore a form-fitting silver dress with a choker collar underneath her robe that practically hummed with magic, and the matching set of ruby jewelry screamed wealth. Realizing he was staring, Magnus smiled and stepped closer to her.

“Charlotte. It's great to—”

“Don't Charlotte me!”

Lifting a piece of paper she had been holding, Charlotte stepped forward, her flame-red robe swirling around her, and shoved the paper into Magnus'

chest.

“How could you be such an idiot?” she hissed.

Magnus could see the genuine anger in her expression and feel the air around her growing hotter. Taking the piece of paper, he quickly scanned it.

“Tower War? What—?”

The memories suddenly came rushing back into his mind and his eyes widened. There, written at the top of the notice of the Tower War Challenge were the words “Crimson Flame Tower.” His tower. In something of a panic, his eyes dropped to the bottom of the sheet of paper, where he saw his own signature with all its customary flourishes.

He was staring at an application for a Tower War, a dangerous magical competition held between two towers. Magnus the Magnificent had barely been a tower master for even a month before issuing a challenge and the tower he had targeted was called Starlit Clay Tower, part of the Earthbound Circle Mage organization. Why exactly Magnus had issued the challenge, he couldn't quite remember, but here it was written in plain ink.

“I didn't tell you about Tower Wars so you could go and issue a challenge,” Charlotte snapped, her finger poking Magnus in the chest hard. “I told you about them so you'd be careful not to offend other tower masters and get dragged into one. Magnus, what in Terra's name were you thinking? You can't just go issuing challenges like this!”

Taking a deep breath, Magnus looked over the details again but, unfortunately, no matter how much he wished they might change, they remained the same, written in dark black ink. The Crimson Flame Tower, led by Magnus the Magnificent, had issued a challenge to Celestine Earthshaper, tower master of the Starlit Clay Tower.

Closing his eyes, Magnus tried to recall what he knew of Celestine, and soon information began to trickle in. In her mid-thirties, she was a haughty, dual-element mage, wielding earth and light power thanks to her soul contract with a crystal badger. She was silver-ranked, just like he was, but the problem was that her crystal badger was too. A full level higher than Magnus' flameseeker lizard.

Of course, Magnus currently didn't have access to his bonded pet. Or at least he didn't have one he could use in the Tower War. There was the starstone egg, of course, but he couldn't very well bring that out in a fight. And even if he did, he no longer had any access to magic, thanks to the cracks running through his soul. Slowly it was coming back to him. In his arrogance, Magnus had issued the challenge, then had tried to bond with a new pet, assuming that a more powerful mysterious creature would increase his odds of winning.

Instead, he had eliminated his odds, completely and wholly. His chances of succeeding in the challenge had gone from strong to less than zero. Still, Charlotte's clear assumption that he was going to lose pricked at his pride. With as calm a smile as he could manage, he used the piece of paper to push her still-pointed finger to the side.

"You look lovely today," he said, meeting Charlotte's gaze squarely.

Caught off guard by the compliment, her rage faltered, and she took a step back.

"Never mind that," she snapped, sitting down in her seat. "Tell me, what on earth possessed you to issue a challenge? Challenges are not child's play. Mages can get hurt. They can even die."

Walking over to the seat across from her, Magnus ran his fingers over the worn leather, stopping when they arrived at a small crack.

"I don't know if you've looked around, Charlotte, but it's not as if we have much to lose."

CHAPTER FOUR



Magnus took his seat, taking a moment to compose his thoughts. He was surprised to find that they came naturally, and that the words that tumbled from his mouth were nothing but the truth.

“My master always said that the Crimson Flame Tower was once powerful. But ever since I’ve known it, this is what it’s been.” He gestured to the worn-out furniture and the bare walls. “We’re in debt up to our fourth floor. Our resources are running out. And the experiment my master was working on, the one that was supposed to fix all of these problems? It went to the grave with him. Our situation is dismal, and honestly I’m not sure there is anything else we can do. I’m not about to let this tower be sold out from under me because I couldn’t pay my debts. So a challenge seemed like the right move. If we win, we’ll get enough resources to stave off our creditors and begin developing in the right direction.”

As he spoke, Charlotte shook her head, her expression growing thunderous.

“If you needed resources, you could have just come and asked. I have

plenty.”

With a bitter chuckle, Magnus held up his hands.

“Charlotte, I know you have money. Your father is the leader of one of the most powerful mage families on the continent. And he would kill me a dozen times over if he heard I was mooching off of you.”

Charlotte’s lips twitched into a grimace as she nodded.

“Okay, that’s fair. But still, there has to be something else you could do. Something you could try.”

“You don’t think I’ve considered? You don’t think I’ve spent time thinking about this? It’s all I’ve thought about for the last month.” Magnus rubbed his forehead. “Look, I really appreciate your concern. You’ve already been a tremendous help. But, unfortunately, this is the only way.”

His blunt statement caused Charlotte’s anger to flare once again.

“No,” she said leaning forward, her finger jabbing toward Magnus again. “It would be the only way if you could possibly succeed. Celestine is stronger than you. And her tower has six mages. You have two.”

“Sure, but we’re both geniuses,” Magnus said with an easy wave of his hand. “That evens the odds somewhat.”

“Magnus, you’re going to get crushed.”

“Not exactly the vote of confidence I was hoping for.”

“Stop laughing about this. It’s not funny. The Earthbound Circle has been looking for a chance to take the Flame Covenant down a notch. And you just played right into their hands.”

Leaning back in his chair, Magnus bit his lip, his eyes drifting to the fireplace. The Earthbound Circle and the Flame Covenant were two of the five major mage organizations. His tower, the Crimson Flame Tower, belonged to the Flame Covenant. In fact, it had been one of the tower masters of old who had actually started the Flame Covenant. In the last few hundred years, however, as the Crimson Flame Tower had declined in

strength, their position had fallen from among the core towers to the very periphery, and they had only barely managed to remain a member thanks to some careful maneuvering by the previous tower master.

The organization Starlit Clay Tower belonged to was the Earthbound Circle, a collection of towers on the southern end of the continent. The two organizations had been quietly sparring for some time, and Charlotte's assessment wasn't incorrect. If he had been thinking clearly, he would have issued a challenge against a less hostile organization. But as it was, he had gotten caught up in the friction, allowing his dislike of the earth mages to dictate his actions. Seeing that he wasn't responding, Charlotte clicked her tongue and picked up the tea at her elbow. She took a sip and nearly spat it back into the cup.

"Ugh, you do need better resources. This stuff is undrinkable."

Flashing a smile, Magnus shrugged.

"It's also our best. So you can imagine just how dire our straits must be for Penwick to serve it to you."

"So," Charlotte said, placing the cup back on the saucer and pushing it away from her. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean? I'm going to wait until the challenge is accepted. And then we're going to fight for our metaphorical life."

"What if you recruited more mages?" Charlotte asked. "That would at least even your odds a little bit."

"Recruit more mages with what, Charlotte? All the money we did have was spent by my master on his Terra-forsaken experiment."

"Really? I knew he was working on something, but what did he actually buy?"

"I have no idea. He died before he could tell us. And as far as we know he didn't write anything down." Sighing, Magnus rubbed his forehead. "No, he was too paranoid for that. We didn't even get a whiff that he was working on something until we read his will. But he left no clues as to what it actually was. All we know is that it was something in the tower. Something

that would restore the glory of our order to its previous place.”

Smirking, Charlotte shook her head.

“That would be impressive, but it’s a bit of a tall order. I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but your tower hasn’t had a mage beyond the silver rank in decades.”

“I’m well aware. And while I wish my master was correct in his estimation, we have no idea what he was working on, so it’s not going to help us. The only real option we have is to rise through more traditional means. Like Tower Wars.”

“But did you really need to be in such a rush?” Charlotte asked.

She was starting to calm down now, her tone becoming more measured, which Magnus was thankful for. Rubbing his chin, he slowly nodded.

“Unfortunately, like I said, we’re in debt, a lot of debt. The only way to get out of it is to come up with some new breakthroughs in our research. But all of our projects have stalled because we don’t have resources. Resources that we need money to buy. At this point, we’re barely treading water. So I thought this would be a quick and easy option. We either succeed and have the money we need, or we fail and everything is over quickly.”

Biting her lip, Charlotte hesitated for a moment and then leaned forward, crossing her arms under her bust. She had a fantastic figure, and her small smile when Magnus hastily looked away proved that she knew it.

“You know,” she said, her voice lowering to a purr. “There is another way you could solve this problem.”

“I already told you we don’t have enough money to recruit new mages,” Magnus said, closing his eyes.

“You don’t necessarily need money to attract talent,” Charlotte countered. “Let me join your tower. Pass the position of tower master to me, and I’ll ensure you win this challenge.”

Magnus had expected Charlotte to take the conversation a different direction, and the rejection he had managed to muster up died in his throat.

His eyes snapped open, and he saw Charlotte grinning at him. She was lounged back in her chair, her shapely legs crossed under her robe, a teasing smile on her face.

“While you’re right that I can’t directly give you resources without my father wiping you from existence, it would be an entirely different matter if I were the tower master of the Crimson Flame Tower. He’d be happy to support his favorite child in rising through the ranks.”

“You’re his only child,” Magnus said absently.

His brow deeply furrowed as he weighed out the pros and cons. In truth, he was quite tempted to simply say yes. If he did hand over the position of tower master to Charlotte, it would fix ninety percent of the problems they were facing in one fell swoop. She was a genius in her own right, but the bigger factor was that she was backed by one of the most powerful mage families on the continent, and other mages would flock to join her as soon as she gave the word.

The only challenge was that it would mean abandoning the wishes of his master. His master had wanted to raise the standing of the Crimson Flame Tower, not join it to another mage’s legacy. Still, it was quite a tempting idea.

Warning! The ability to generate reputation points requires the position of tower master. Should you lose that position, you will lose access to the reputation system.

With an annoyed sigh, Magnus waved his hand, dismissing the notice that had just popped up.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think that’s going to be an option. Of course, you can still join our tower. We’d be delighted to have you. We just can’t pay your wage or provide you with any resources.”

Slowly sitting up, Charlotte’s eyes narrowed, her anger rekindling.

“Magnus, I trust you know just how dangerous the situation is. Word of this challenge has already spread throughout the entire organization. My father and the other members of the High Council are watching closely, and if you

screw this up it won't just be you losing the challenge. They'll kick your tower out of the Flame Covenant. Handing over the reins ahead of time is your only good option."

Shaking his head, Magnus stood up and bowed slightly.

"I appreciate your concern. But, unfortunately, handing over control of the tower isn't possible."

"Fine!"

Slapping her hand against the table, Charlotte stood up, raising herself to her full height. Her head still only came up to just below Magnus' nose, but she stared at him like she was a good three feet taller than he was.

"This stupid pride of yours is going to get you killed, Magnus."

Stepping around the coffee table, Magnus smiled and took Charlotte's hand.

"You really are lovely today, Charlotte," he said, squeezing it lightly, "and I genuinely appreciate your concern. I know this isn't an ideal situation. In fact, it's a royal mess, but I don't have any option but to face it head on. Just think. Yes, this is going to be a challenge, but it's also an opportunity. And if we can safely pass through it, it might actually mean this tower can rise again."

Seeing a slow blush spreading up Charlotte's neck into her cheeks, Magnus realized he was still holding her hand. When he glanced down, she gave a soft gasp and pulled her hand away.

"Well," she said, her voice rather breathless. "I've said what I wanted to say."

She took a quick step back, nearly stumbling, and jerked her arm back when Magnus reached out to steady her. Lifting her skirt, she practically ran from the room, her ears nearly matching the color of her hair. Letting his hand drop to his side, Magnus stared after her for a moment.

"Huh."

Though he was a little bit surprised by Charlotte's reaction, it didn't take

Magnus long to figure out what was going on. His body's previous owner had never acted in such a forward way. As a genius, he had always known he was different from others, and that knowledge had calcified into a proud, stubborn, and stiff attitude. Now, having merged, many of those traits were gone. Magnus didn't feel like a genius. In fact, it was a bare-faced truth that he was currently weaker than even the weakest apprentice. Realizing his behavior was quite different than it had been before his two souls had merged, Magnus scratched his chin and then shrugged. There didn't seem to be much he could do about it, and he certainly wasn't going to go back to being the stuck-up genius he had been before.

A light knock at the door shook him from his musing as Penwick stepped inside.

"I trust your meeting with Miss Flamebrand was satisfactory."

Sensing the slight chill to Penwick's words, Magnus nodded.

"It went about as well as I could hope. Tell me, Penwick. Were you aware of this?"

Magnus walked over and handed Penwick the piece of paper Charlotte had left with him. Penwick's eyes barely flickered as he read over the document, but Magnus sensed a hint of anger in the way Penwick's shoulders and neck tensed.

"I was not aware of this," the steward said, lifting his gaze to meet Magnus'. "Is this a challenge that you genuinely think we can win?"

"We have to," Magnus said frankly. "There really isn't an option. You'll notice that we've wagered the tower itself, or at least the proceeds from the sale of the tower. So if we don't want this thing sold out from under us, then I'm afraid we're going to need to figure out a way to win."

"You can't be serious." Penwick didn't bother hiding his anger. His eyes narrowed and his tone turned icy. "I knew you were an idiot, but I didn't take you for this much of one."

In Magnus' memories, Penwick, though never personable, had never been anything less than distantly polite. Yet rather than get angry at the insult,

Magnus smiled and patted Penwick on the shoulder.

“You know, there’s a saying that springs to mind. When your army is outnumbered and in an unwinnable position, place your men’s backs to the river. With retreat cut off, the only way is forward.”

Penwick’s expression hardened even further, and he looked down at the paper once again.

“We’ll be outnumbered three to one.”

“We’ll just have to prove that our genius titles are well deserved.”

“Have you ever fought three to one?” Penwick asked, glaring at Magnus. “That’s not a winnable position, no matter how much of a genius you are. Terra knows why our master handed over control of the tower to you. But it was clearly a mistake.”

Penwick took a step forward, pressing the paper against Magnus’ chest. “If you do not figure out a way to resolve this situation, then I will. Even if I have to offer your head on a silver platter to do it.”

The threat was clear, and what was even clearer to Magnus was that Penwick wasn’t joking.

“I understand,” Magnus said, taking the piece of paper from Penwick. “Don’t worry. I’ll figure it out.”

Though his words were optimistic, in truth Magnus was feeling anything but. It wouldn’t be long before his challenge was answered, and if the Starlit Clay Tower accepted, which they had no reason not to, Magnus would have a month or two at most to figure out a solution. After Penwick stormed out of the room, Magnus slowly made his way back up to the top of the tower and entered his office, where he saw the middle-aged servant drying the floor.

“My apologies, Tower Master, I’ll be out of here immediately,” the man said, jumping to his feet.

CHAPTER FIVE



Magnus waved his hand casually.

“That’s fine. Thank you for your hard work. You can take your time.”

Still too wrapped up in his thoughts to see the servant’s mouth dropping open, Magnus sat down at his desk and stared blankly at the papers on it. In reality, he was pulling up the system. As the ethereal book popped into existence in front of his eyes, he focused his attention on the sections he had yet to explore. Just like the list of Martial Skills, the Immortal Skills listed out a variety of different abilities, each one marked with a corresponding price.

IMMORTAL SKILLS

TALISMAN ARTS [650 POINTS]: Bind spells to Talismans, allowing anyone to deploy their effects.

ALCHEMY ARTS [500 POINTS]: Transform the mundane into the magical through pill

creation.

WEAPON REFINING [900 POINTS]: Create powerful weapons.

ARRAY ARTS [750 POINTS]: Seal, ward, and trap by bending the world's energy to your desire.

FORTUNE-TELLING ARTS [2000 POINTS]: Peer into the secrets of fate.

DISGUISE ARTS [350 POINTS]: Transform yourself into another.

See more...

Magnus had seen many of these skills in his past life, not because anyone actually practiced them, but because they were popular in cultivation stories and video games. He had a feeling that the solution to his problem, the only genuine solution, was contained in this seemingly simple system. His most immediate problem was the fact that he had a Tower War coming up, a challenge he himself had issued, and yet he couldn't do any magic.

Getting out a piece of paper, Magnus barely glanced up when the servant quietly exited the room, closing the door behind him. Thinking for a moment, Magnus wrote "Fix soul" at the top of the piece of paper. Of course, that was likely easier said than done. So he drew a line under it and wrote "Initiate body refining art" underneath.

A quick search through his memory turned up the requisite information. Initiating the body refining system wasn't that difficult. All he needed to do was persist in a specific set of motions. Repeating these exercises enough times would automatically initiate his body refinement system and continuing the exercises would allow him to slowly improve it. Though he was tempted to immediately jump up and begin practicing, Magnus made himself slow down. He drew another line underneath "Initiate body refining art" and wrote down his third goal, "Increase reputation."

The system voice, before it had been shut down due to insufficient soul energy—which was undoubtedly the result of his cracked soul—had mentioned that if he wanted to succeed in his body refining, he would need other arts to go with it. Which meant that Magnus had to figure out a way to increase his reputation. Of course, he could do that just by running naked

through the streets. That would certainly get the whole city talking about him, but based on the reaction of the system when he considered giving up his position as tower master, Magnus had a sneaking suspicion that what the system wanted was a positive reputation boost rather than infamy or ridicule. Drawing another line underneath, Magnus added one final goal to the piece of paper: “wake up my soul contract.”

The starstone was still inert, resting quietly in his meditation room without any sign of the creature it contained appearing. Clearly there was another condition that hadn't been met yet. If he had to guess, Magnus would wager that the problem was the same one the system was currently facing, a lack of soul energy.

While the contract had been successfully inscribed into his soul, that was only the first step in activating a starstone. Normally a mage, after inscribing the soul contract, would feed it with power until the mysterious creature had enough power to cross over from whatever dimension they existed in into this dimension, using the starstone as a gate of sorts.

Clearly, whatever mysterious creature he had formed a contract with didn't have enough energy to cross over, and until it did it would remain a simple rock, pretty but ultimately useless. This meant that his primary goal, the most pressing issue at the moment, was to increase his soul energy, as that would solve two of his problems. Unfortunately, doing so was easier said than done.

As he thought about it, Magnus' eyes drifted to the second goal he had written down. Initiating his body refinement was the only action item he could take immediately so, rather than continuing to spin on what he should do next, Magnus put down his pen and headed for his meditation room.

He flipped the sign to indicate that the room was being used and stepped inside. There wasn't a lot of room in the meditation chamber, but thankfully the movements he needed to complete could mostly be performed in a small area. Moving his meditation cushion to the side, Magnus took off his blue robe, and then, after a moment of thought, took off his shirt as well.

His body was thin. The sort of thinness caused by long hours hunched over books, and his arms were much too stick-like for his taste. While he had

never been a bodybuilder by any stretch of the imagination, he had been quite proud of the fact that, on Earth, he had been fit. Between boxing and calisthenics, he had maintained a trim, muscular figure—a necessity for anyone who wanted to be a rock star. Pulling his thoughts back to the present, Magnus did some quick stretches as he mentally reviewed the movements he needed to complete.

The first was a simple horse stance, and so placing his feet shoulder width apart and then shifting them slightly further out, he settled back into a seated position, trying to use what little muscle he had to keep himself upright. Almost immediately he could feel the strain as his muscles, unused to this sort of motion, began to protest. Magnus ignored them.

“Discomfort is a sign of growth,” he murmured under his breath as he carefully pressed his hands forward, forming a particular arrangement with his fingers.

He held the position for thirty seconds until his legs began to burn and then carefully moved into the next position, pivoting his right foot on his heel, his toes pointing outward. He shifted his weight over his left leg in an angled squat as his torso turned and his fingers took up a new seal position. Expecting more fatigue, he was surprised when a thin thread of warmth appeared in his lower abdomen and began dispersing through his body, bringing a hint of relief to his already weary muscle.

As Magnus shifted into the third position, the hint of warmth grew hotter, and by the fourth position it felt as if someone had lit a fire inside of him. It was tremendously uncomfortable by this point, and beads of sweat began to appear across his body. Magnus ignored the discomfort, transitioning as smoothly as he could into the fifth position.

By this time, his body felt as if someone was pouring molten lead straight through his skull, down his spine, and into his limbs. Not, of course, that he had ever actually experienced that. But he could certainly imagine it, and this was exactly what he imagined it felt like.

Halfway through the seventh position, his body had had enough, and he abruptly collapsed. Instead of getting frustrated, he let out a breath, straightened his limbs, and waited for the burning feeling to fade. There

were ten movements he needed to get through, but it was clear that his body wasn't strong enough to withstand them. Moving through the seven positions had only taken a couple of minutes, but it took Magnus over an hour to recover.

The entire time he simply laid on the ground, browsing through the various skill shops to get a sense of what each contained. What he could see in the shops was relatively limited, which he assumed had to do with his low rank. The system voice had mentioned that as he grew in power the system would unlock new features, and he occasionally came across entries that were blurred out, leaving him unable to see what they contained.

Still, by the end of the hour he had a good sense of the various shops and had begun to compile a mental list of all the different things he was interested in. Of course, everything cost reputation points, and he was currently fresh out of those.

After the hour was up, he got back to his feet, took a deep breath, and began the process all over again. Once again he sank into a horse stance and completed the seal with his fingers before transitioning into the second move. He didn't rush but tried to flow from each position to the next as gracefully as possible.

Though it was only his second time completing the motion, he discovered that the tenser his body was, the more painful each progressive move became, and when he tried to relax and complete the motions with minimum force, each was less painful. On his second attempt he managed to barely complete the eighth move before collapsing, and he spent another hour laying in the meditation room.

On his third attempt he only managed six moves due to incorrectly twisting his arm as he transitioned, but an hour later he was back at it and once again managed a full eight of the moves. By this time it had been hours since Magnus started, but he still persisted. He knew better than anyone else just how much trouble he was in. And though he wasn't quite sure how the body refinement art was going to help him with his inability to cast magic, it was the only thing he could do at the moment.

Time ceased having any meaning as Magnus attempted the ten moves over

and over and over again. As he ground away at them, the time between each attempt began to lengthen. A few times he even fell asleep, taking short naps, before jerking awake and dragging himself to his feet to try again. During his fifteenth attempt, he was so spaced out he didn't even notice when he hit the ninth move. His body, which felt like it was falling apart despite the rest he had gotten, simply shifted into the position in his memories, sending new waves of molten pain through him. Yet, this time, he didn't fall.

Instead, welcoming the feeling, Magnus let out a breath of air so hot it steamed, projecting a cloud of white in front of him. His hands cut through the steam as he shifted back into a horse stance, retracting his extended hands and making the final seal with his fingers. There was a soft cracking sound as if something inside Magnus had just shattered and a disgusting-smelling, tar-like substance began beading on his skin, expelled by his pores.

By this point Magnus should have been exhausted. He should have been so wrecked that he couldn't continue to stand. And yet, the exact opposite happened. A thread of strength filled him, allowing him to stand easily. Seeing the black tar on his skin, Magnus grimaced and calmly walked out of his office toward the bathroom. He could see the sun coming up in the distance through the large windows in his office wall and realized he had spent the whole night in his meditation chamber.

Reaching the bathroom, he cleaned himself off with a hot bath and then grabbed his towel. As he began drying his body, he suddenly noticed that his thin chest wasn't thin anymore. Stepping over to the mirror, he examined himself, his jaw slowly dropping as he saw exquisitely chiseled muscles where none had been before. His arms, while not excessively large, were solid and at least twice the size they had been before. Even in all of his time working out on Earth, Magnus had never once had a body like this. His fingers felt strong, and he could feel the latent power in his legs, chest, and arms. Shaking his head, he finished toweling himself off and put pants on, grabbing a shirt. He carried it with him as he walked back into the meditation room.

His muscles certainly looked good, but the question was, were they useful?

Though he had just finished the most intense exercise of his life, Magnus wasn't done. Dropping into a prone position, he began doing push-ups, marveling at how effortless they felt. Push-ups turned into burpees, and then lunges and bear crawls. Even after half an hour of trying all his favorite exercises, Magnus was stunned to discover he hadn't even broken a sweat. Shaking his head, he slipped into his shirt and opened up his status.

NAME: Magnus

RANK: Human - Initiate

PRIMARY ART: Imperishable Void Physique

MARTIAL SKILLS: None

IMMORTAL SKILLS: None

Focusing on his Imperishable Void Physique, Magnus saw that section expand.

PHYSIQUE: Imperishable Void Physique

RANK: Unique (cannot be improved)

CURRENT LEVEL: Human - Initiate

PHYSIQUE EFFECTS: Improved Speed, Improved Strength, Improved Endurance, Elemental Immunity

Magnus really had nothing to compare himself to, but the exercises he had just completed had completely transformed his body. Even his skin was more elastic, providing a sense of toughness that hadn't existed before. He was just considering whether he should try the exercises again when his stomach growled and an intense feeling of hunger filled him. Letting out a breath, he nodded. That makes sense, I guess. Muscles like these don't come from nowhere. I need to replenish my energy.

Since it was morning, the servants were probably eating breakfast. So Magnus headed down stairs, taking the steps two at a time. When he walked into the dining room he didn't see anyone, but hearing a sound from the kitchen, he strolled in as if he owned the place, which technically, as tower

master, he did.

The servants who were eating breakfast all froze when he appeared, their eyes widening and their faces turning various shades. Registering their extreme reactions, Magnus quickly held up his hand.

“Apologies. I don’t mean to disturb your breakfast, but I’m a bit hungry. Would you mind preparing something for me?”

Immediately, all of the servants stood up, agreeing at once and beginning to frantically rush around the kitchen.

“Stop, stop, hold on,” Magnus said, holding out his hands to try and quell the chaos. “There’s no need for this.”

Unsure what to do, the servants all stopped and looked at one another. Eventually, the cook held up his hand.

“I can make you something, sir.”

“That’d be great,” Magnus said, grabbing a stool and pulling it up to the large table where the others were eating. “Sit down, finish your breakfast.”

None of the servants dared disobey, and as they sat down and resumed eating, Magnus caught sight of more than one trembling hand failing to keep their food on their forks. Curious about what was going on, Magnus dug into his memories. In this world, the difference between mages and mortals was intense, a vast gulf that couldn’t be crossed.

CHAPTER SIX



Mages rarely saw mortals as actual people, considering themselves a superior breed of human. The distinction between the two groups was so severe it wasn't uncommon for mortals who hung around mages to end up crippled or even dead. The nicest mages simply ignored their servants, while most were happy to take out their frustrations on the mortals around them with impunity. It was no wonder his presence made the servants nervous.

Magnus, having come from Earth, certainly wasn't used to these sorts of interactions, but he didn't let it bother him as he sat there quietly and waited for his breakfast. The only sounds in the kitchen were the cook's hurried preparations and the clink of silverware against plates as the other servants tried to eat as quickly as they could without appearing rude.

Magnus thought about starting a conversation, but the servants were so clearly unsettled that he thought it might backfire. Within a few minutes, they had all finished and vacated the room, leaving Magnus and the cook alone. Ten minutes later, the cook served a plate of eggs, toast, and sausage

with trembling hands. He added a bowl of oatmeal with cut fruit and fresh cream as well. Magnus, taking a deep breath to inhale the fragrance, grinned.

“This looks and smells great, but I think I’m going to need a little bit more. Can you cook me another dozen eggs?”

“Of course, sir,” the cook said, bowing and retreating to his stove.

He watched from the corner of his eyes as Magnus practically inhaled the breakfast, wiping out every crumb and morsel in only a couple of minutes. Pushing the empty plate to the side, Magnus enjoyed his oatmeal while he waited for the other eggs to be ready. After they were served he inhaled them too, along with half a dozen pieces of toast and five more sausages. Having finished his breakfast, Magnus sat back with a satisfied sigh.

“That really hit the spot. Thank you. I’m going to be needing breakfast like that pretty much every day going forward. I’ll let you know if I’m going to skip any.”

“Of course, sir. What time shall I have it served?”

Scratching his chin, Magnus looked around in vain for a clock before remembering that he was no longer on Earth.

“Just make it along with everybody else’s. There’s no need to serve it in the dining room. I’ll just eat in here.”

Standing up, Magnus waved to the cook, who looked like he had just swallowed a gnat, and strolled out of the kitchen. A couple of servants were standing in the hall, and they quickly straightened up when they saw him appear with an easy smile and casual wave. He walked past them and headed back up the stairs, taking them two at a time. By the time he reached the top floor he could feel a nice burn in his legs, so he immediately turned around, ran back down the stairs to the bottom floor, and climbed them again. He repeated this process twice more, ignoring the strange looks the servants were giving him, and on his last trip up he met Penwick standing on the fourth floor landing.

“A moment of your time, sir.”

Penwick barely squeezed out the last word between clenched teeth, but Magnus didn't let it bother him. He was still dressed in his pants and linen shirt, which did little to hide his new muscles. A smattering of fine beads of sweat lay on his brow, and his breathing was labored as he gestured for Penwick to follow him.

"Come on up," he said and then sprinted up the last flight of stairs.

Penwick, unable to wrap his head around what Magnus was doing, followed him.

"Let me just grab a towel," Magnus said, casually stripping off his shirt.

Penwick's lips twitched as he watched Magnus stroll into the bathroom. A moment later, Magnus had returned, his sweat wiped away and a new shirt covering his now-muscular torso.

"What can I do for you?"

"Given our current situation, I thought it would be wise to make you aware of just where our tower is lacking. I would like to do a review of all of our storerooms with you so you understand the intricacies of the problem we face."

Gone was the fury Magnus had seen in Penwick's eyes the day before. Instead, the steward's voice had returned to its customary calm. His face had resumed its customary expressionless mask, leaving Magnus wondering if he had only imagined the outburst.

"I think that's a great idea," Magnus said. "I've been putting that off for some time now, haven't I?"

"Indeed, ever since you took up the position of tower master," Penwick said, with a smile that wasn't a smile at all.

"Then, in that case, let's get to it."

"If you would follow me, sir. We'll start on the fourth floor."

"We should start up here," Magnus said, gesturing to the walls of books. "Surely there's something valuable among this collection."

“Sir.” Penwick’s eyes narrowed and his gaze intensified. “You surely can’t be considering selling your books.”

Realizing he had made a faux pa, Magnus quickly searched his memory, but Penwick beat him to it.

“Sir, books are a mage’s life. The knowledge they contain is the very foundation of your legacy. Selling them would be betraying who you are.”

“Better to sell the books than the tower,” Magnus said with a shrug.

Walking over to one of the bookshelves, he traced his fingers along the spines. In truth, each and every one of these books was precious, both monetarily and emotionally. He had painstakingly collected each and every tome, trading with other mages, buying them new, or hunting them down in used bookstores. Though the total value of his books weren’t enough to make even a dent in the debts the tower owed, at least they were worth something.

His finger paused on the spine of a book, and he pulled it out: a treatise on flame-based mysterious creatures by J.M. Warburton. This was one of the very first books in his collection, the book that convinced him to become a flame mage. It was also a book he guarded jealously. That, of course, was in the past, and walking over to Penwick, he held the book out.

“There are a number of tomes in this collection you should probably read, just in case we do end up selling them. If I remember correctly, a couple of months ago you asked me about this book. Here you go.”

Though Penwick’s expression didn’t change, Magnus could sense the subtle cracks in his unemotional mask as he carefully took the book Magnus held out. Penwick looked at it for a moment and gave a short, sharp nod.

“Thank you. I will treasure the opportunity.”

“All right. Well, speaking of treasure, what’s next?”

“Next we’ll head down to the fourth floor.”

As he spoke Penwick’s eyes never left the book in his hands, and he remained standing in place for so long that Magnus patted him on the

shoulder.

“Well, in that case, let’s get to it.”

He led the way toward the door, with Penwick following rather mechanically behind him. The fourth floor was where the majority of the experiments took place, and though the floor housed no major storage rooms, there was a library and the laboratories where experiments were carried out. Each laboratory had a cupboard, which should have been fully equipped with everything a mage might need to have on hand for their experiments. Instead, the cupboards were empty. Penwick, having recovered from his shock over Magnus handing him a book, was keeping a running tally of all of the materials in the tower.

“Laboratories one, two, and three are empty. Laboratory four half-stocked. The library is intact. Shall we proceed to the third floor, sir?”

Taking a deep breath, Magnus nodded. “I assume I’m going to like what I see there even less.”

Penwick just smiled his not quite a smile again and walked calmly down the stairs. Sure enough, Magnus didn’t like what he saw on the third floor. There were four large storerooms. Three of them were filled with nothing but trash, and the fourth barely had enough materials to fill a single cupboard.

“This seems a bit more dire than I imagined,” Magnus said after they had completed the full inventory. “Why wasn’t this brought to my attention sooner?”

“Sir, I’ve been trying to bring this to your attention for the last month. Ever since you were appointed as tower master.”

Magnus’ lips twitched, and he rubbed his chin.

“Ah, I see. Well, my apologies for ignoring it so long. Can we replenish some of our supplies?”

“No, not unless we can figure out a way to extend our credit.”

“And let me guess? That’s full up to, right?”

“Sir, if you sold off the tower, all of the servants, and both you and I, we would recoup approximately one-fourth the total amount we owe. We are mortgaged to the hilt. There is nothing left.”

“Well, that is not encouraging,” Magnus said. “And remind me how these debts came to be?”

Getting out a short stack of papers, Penwick wordlessly handed them to Magnus, who quickly flipped through them. Each was a promissory note signed by Morton Grayward, Magnus’ now-dead master.

“There’s no way anyone would have continued to let him borrow with his properties already mortgaged,” Magnus said. “Have we checked that these are all legitimate?”

“Examine the dates.”

Glancing at the date of the paper on the top of the stack, Magnus flipped to the next one and saw the same date. In fact, all of them had the same date. With a groan, Magnus slapped them back down on Penwick’s desk. They were in the small room he used as an office for handling all of the tower’s administrative business, and it was so small Magnus couldn’t even pace. He still tried, taking two short steps before turning around and taking two short steps back.

“They were all taken out on the same day from different people, weren’t they.”

“So it would seem,” Penwick said dryly. “What he used the money for, I have no idea, but it’s gone, vanished into the aether.”

“And these debts, have they come around to collect?”

Taking out a new document from the file, Penwick waved it in the air.

“All of the debts were bought by one merchant mage named Curtis.”

Biting his lip, Magnus nodded.

“I know Curtis. He’s sharp as a knife and ruthless when it comes to getting his money.”

“Then that doesn’t bode well for us. It’s been six months since the loans were taken out. And we’re already a few months past due on our first payment. Unless we can recover some of the money the master borrowed, we’re out of luck.”

Scratching his chin, Magnus glanced at Penwick from the corner of his eyes.

“You know, you seem entirely too calm for someone facing so much debt. Do you have a plan?”

A faint sneer appeared on Penwick’s face as he leaned back in his chair.

“I’m simply the steward. You’re the tower master. It’s your responsibility to solve this problem, not mine.”

“Fair enough,” Magnus said, not pushing the issue. “Let’s keep things as they are. Tighten up our belts where we can, and I’ll figure the rest out.”

Returning to his office, Magnus got out his piece of paper and crossed off the second line. He had already initiated the Imperishable Void Physique, reaching the human initiate stage, though he didn’t yet know how strong and fast it actually made him. The truth was he felt fantastic, physically at least.

From here, he would need to expand the number of skills he could practice. Of particular interest to him were a couple of the Immortal Skills, specifically Array Arts and Talisman Arts. Both were things that did not exist in this world and could become a steady source of income for the tower if he played his cards right. Unfortunately, both of them cost hundreds of thousands of reputation points, which meant they were out of reach at the moment.

Checking his reputation, Magnus saw that it had gone up by five points, an indication that he was still a tower master in good repute. He was considering ways to raise his reputation even further when a commotion outside the tower drew his attention. Glancing out the window, he saw an impressive-looking carriage flying through the air. It was pulled by two pegasi, their wings beating hard as they flew toward his tower. Down below, a stream of mortals, clearly interested in seeing whatever was going

on, were hurriedly gathering.

This was no doubt the battle administrator, bringing Starlit Clay Tower's response to his Tower War challenge. Seeing the flying carriage coming directly toward the tower, a hint of trepidation flickered through Magnus' mind, but it was immediately squashed by a sense of excitement. He had just been looking for a way to raise his reputation, and a perfect opportunity had been presented to him on a silver platter.

Rushing into his room, Magnus picked out his very best robe, the crimson tower master robe he had inherited along with the position of tower master. Called the Robe of Everburning, it was a powerful magical artifact in its own right, though he couldn't help but smile wryly into the mirror when he remembered the robe and jewelry Charlotte had worn. One of her hair clips was probably more impressive than this old robe.

Still, it genuinely was the best thing in the tower, and even though Magnus couldn't actually activate its defensive effects with his shattered soul, he slipped it on, carefully buttoning up the front. He stood in front of the mirror and looked himself over, a frown coming to his face. The robe was cut for a much wider man, and even though his shoulders fit in it well, it was so loose around his waist he looked like a little kid playing dress-up.

Unbuttoning the robe, he let it hang loose, turning this way and that as he examined himself. Taking it off, he tossed it on the bed and changed his shirt for the third time that day, selecting a white linen button-up shirt. Mages in this world were known for their propriety, and robes were their equivalent of the business suit. Buttoning only the bottom few buttons, Magnus left his chest half exposed and then dug through a small box of jewelry he had. Most of it was ancient, inherited from his mother who had passed away years ago.

Picking out a gold chain, he slung it around his neck, and then after checking his appearance in the mirror, he grabbed another necklace, this one with a small pendant, and wore that one as well. There were no rings that fit him, so he slipped one of them onto a third chain and added that to his others. Slipping his coat back on, he tucked his hands into his pants pocket and surveyed himself. He looked more like a pirate than a mage, but that suited him just fine. Turning with a swish of his open robe, he

sauntered out the door and started down the stairs.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Magnus found Penwick waiting at the front door.
“What are you wearing, sir?”

Ignoring the fact that the “sir” had been added as an afterthought, Magnus grinned and patted Penwick’s arm. As always, the blond mage was dressed in his neat red robe, looking prim and proper. A complete contrast to the sloppy, rakish air that Magnus exuded. Catching sight of the glinting silver chains on Magnus’ chest, Penwick twitched.

“You can’t be thinking of going out like that.”

“Why not?” Magnus asked. “I think I look fine.”

“You look like an embarrassment.”

“Not to any of the people that matter,” Magnus said with a laugh. “Is there a reason we’re waiting in here instead of out there?”

“It would lower our prestige to be seen waiting for the battle administrator

to arrive. Though I don't agree with the challenge you issued, we do have a certain standard to keep up."

"Oh, do we?" Magnus crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. "You know, I had an epiphany recently."

Rolling his eyes, Penwick deadpanned, "I'm awash with excitement to hear it."

"Don't worry, I'm happy to share." Magnus laughed as he straightened up. "Pride is one of those things that looks nice from a distance, but is all rotten once you get up close. I'm much more interested in results."

Grabbing the door, Magnus swung it open, and, for the first time in his new life, stepped out into the world of Borella. Though he had glanced out the windows occasionally over the last two days, this was the first time Magnus was seeing the city properly.

The Crimson Flame Tower sat on the northern end of Crimson Flame City, a small city of approximately 20,000 people. It was mainly comprised of merchants and people associated with the transportation industry. Crimson Flame City sat at a crossroads, and goods from the west and north often passed through the city on their way toward more civilized places. If the history of the tower was to be believed, Crimson Flame City had once been much larger back when the tower had been larger as well. As the rank of the tower fell, however, the city had shrunk, leaving large swaths of unoccupied buildings around its edges. Many of these neighborhoods had fallen into such disrepair that they had been demolished, leaving little more than ruins.

The city itself was well built, with most of the houses made from stone and wide streets that spoke of a more prosperous time. Magnus took all this in with a glance and then turned his attention to the approaching carriage. Crimson Flame Tower sat at the top of a hill with a stone wall at its foot. The gate, which had long since rusted open, was wide enough for three carriages to pass side by side and the massive carriage, pulled by two pegasi, had no trouble passing through it. Beyond the carriage, citizens were gathering around the wall, peeking their heads up over it or peering through the gate.

In truth, Magnus didn't care much for the Tower War administrator. The

man would no doubt deliver Starlet Clay's acceptance and then leave. Instead, Magnus was much more interested in the citizens who had snuck over to watch the excitement. After all, it was on them that his reputation actually depended. As soon as he came out of the tower, he could see many of the citizens murmuring among each other. And when he swaggered to the edge of the hill, standing with his feet apart and his robe thrown open, the murmurs grew stronger still.

Reputation +1

The window that popped up before his eyes caused Magnus' smile to ratchet up a notch, and he could hardly keep from laughing.

Reputation +1

Magnus pretended he couldn't hear the whispered conversation as he waited for the carriage to come to a stop. It was incredibly extravagant to use pegasi to pull a carriage as they were, at minimum, silver-ranked. If he had to guess, the two pegasi in front of him were likely stronger than that. It was a little bit unnerving to consider that even one of them could probably single-handedly wipe out Crimson Flame Tower, but rather than show nervousness as they drew closer, Magnus smiled widely and stepped forward, trying to project an air of fearlessness. It helped that he had little to lose. He had woken up in this world yesterday, after falling to his death from the balcony of a hotel. If he ended up getting crushed by an angry pegasus, he wouldn't have lost much.

The driver, seeing Magnus walking closer, was startled and quickly reigned in the pegasi. He skillfully maneuvered the carriage around to the side before finally getting the pegasi to stop. There was a muffled curse from inside the carriage, as the sudden motion had clearly thrown off the people inside. Jumping down from his seat and shooting Magnus a reproachful glance, the driver lowered the steps and opened the carriage door.

The first person out was a thick-set young man with broad shoulders and a broad face. He even had a broad nose which, combined with eyes that were set slightly too far apart, gave the impression that someone had grabbed both sides of his face and pulled in opposite directions. He wore a bright yellow robe with a black sash across it bearing the silver insignia of the administrators. The tower administration was, on the surface at least, a

neutral organization made up of members of each tower. They were responsible for overseeing disputes between the towers and administrating the Tower Wars.

With hardly a glance at Magnus, he turned around and offered his hand to the second person out of the carriage. Magnus' eyebrows rose as the last person he expected to see climbed down.

Celestine Earthshaper.

Magnus recognized her immediately, in part because he had seen her before and in part because she was a dwarf. Magnus remembered the first time he had seen her at the academy, where she had served as a substitute teacher for half of a semester. He had never taken a class with her but had seen her around campus enough to remember what she looked like. She wore a pretty brown robe with thigh slits on both sides that showed off her muscular legs. Dwarves were a naturally hardy people, and their bodies were typically built like tanks. Celestine was considered rather slim for a dwarf, and her striking cheekbones and sharp jaw gave her a sharp but beautiful face. Accepting the hand that was offered, she climbed down from the carriage and looked past Magnus at the tower behind him.

“It's been ages since I was here last, but it looks like you've lost a couple of floors.”

“It's true,” Magnus admitted, turning and gesturing to the tower. “You're what? 250 years old? You must be, because the last time we had more than five floors was at least that long ago.”

Though dwarves could live a long time, Celestine was barely thirty-five, quite young for a dwarf, and she clearly didn't like the insinuation that she was old. Before she could retort, Magnus slapped his forehead.

“Oh, there I go again, mixing up my dates. It was twenty-five years ago, not 250. My master was the one who lost them.”

One of the many peculiar things about the mage towers of Borella was that they grew and shrank according to the power wielded by their tower master. At the silver rank, a tower would possess five floors, barely enough to qualify as an actual mages' tower. Magnus' master had also been silver

rank, but he had inherited the tower from a gold-ranked mage under whose rule the Crimson Flame Tower had boasted a full seven floors.

“It is a bit of a shame we’re so short these days, but don’t worry, we’re working on it, which is probably why you’re here. I’d invite you inside, but I don’t want to be seen fraternizing with the enemy.”

Magnus had been keeping up a constant flow of speech ever since he began speaking, not giving Celestine a chance to fit in a word edgewise, and now he turned to the broad young man in yellow.

“I don’t know that I caught your name. You must be the administrator. Are you here to announce the successful result of my challenge?”

“Yes, I mean no! The challenge hasn’t happened yet.”

Catching sight of Magnus’ smile and hearing the faint laughter from the crowd below, the administrator drew himself up, his expression turning haughty.

My name is Carlson McRae of the McRae family. I’m here under official duty as administrator of the challenge you proposed to Starlit Clay Tower and—”

“Well, clearly you can’t have come all of this way with the challenged party herself simply to tell me she’s too scared to fight. That’d be awfully embarrassing, wouldn’t it?”

“I’ve come to tell you nothing of this sort,” Carlson snapped. “I’ve come to tell you she’ll accept your challenge.”

This was the first that anyone in the city was hearing about the challenge Magnus had issued, and the murmuring immediately rose.

Reputation +1

Reputation +3

Reputation +1

Pleased with the effect he appeared to be creating, Carlson, caught up in the moment, took a step forward, waving a crimson document in the air.

“I have the acceptance right here. However, before I deliver it Celestine has some conditions you’ll have to agree to before she’ll fight.”

Magnus’ eyes narrowed slightly, but the smile never left his face.

“Conditions, huh? This is the first time I’ve heard that the challenged party can try and set conditions on acceptance. That hardly seems standard.”

“Even if it isn’t, what can you do about it?” Carlson sneered.

Giving Carlson a rather annoyed glance, Celestine stepped forward, crossing her arms over her chest, and fixed Magnus with a hard stare.

“I do have some conditions. What you offered doesn’t cut it. I want to increase the stakes.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t quite hear you,” Magnus said, leaning forward and cupping his hand around his ear. “Should I get you a chair to make it easier to project your voice?”

Celestine’s expression froze, and she stared at Magnus as if she couldn’t believe what he had just said. He waved his hand with a laugh.

“Sorry, just a joke about you being really short. In poor taste, I know. Look, I’m genuinely not sure what more you could expect from us. I mean, all we’ve got is a beat-up old tower and you can’t sell my abs, so I don’t know what you’re looking for.”

As he spoke, Magnus casually lifted up his shirt, revealing his stomach and chiseled abs. There was a gasp as the city folk caught sight of his perfectly sculpted muscles. Celestine and Carlton were both taken aback as well, and even after he had lowered his shirt both of them kept glancing down at his stomach, as if unable to believe what they had just seen.

Reputation +1

Reputation +2

Reputation +1

Reputation +3

“I don’t want the proceeds from your tower. I want the whole tower,”

Celestine finally stammered out, managing to refocus herself.

Frowning slightly, Magnus reached up to fiddle with the ring on the chain around his neck, causing it to glint in the sunlight. Celestine's arrival had certainly thrown a bit of a wrench in his plans. He had been planning on making a scene, taking the opportunity to show off his body a bit to get the citizens of Crimson Flame City talking. So far he had succeeded, and his hope was that that would qualify him for the 250-point reputation boost. Unfortunately, with Celestine's arrival the folks in the city were more likely to talk about her than they were Magnus himself. His tactic of showing off his muscles and dressing strangely had worked, but if he wanted all the points he needed to up his game. Racking his brain for a way to shift the focus again, Magnus stood silently for a long moment.

"Miss Celestine has spoken to you, have the good grace to reply," Carlton said, his voice pitched high as he tilted his head up so he could look down his nose at Magnus.

Unfortunately, the only effect it had was to make him look rather cross-eyed, and the sight made Magnus laugh out loud.

"You're right, you're right. This beautiful lady has spoken. I should say something."

Turning to Celestine, Magnus peered down at her.

"You want the tower. What do you offer in exchange? Surely you can't expect me to give all of this up for nothing."

"Material of equivalent value," Celestine said, the faintest hint of pink dyeing her cheeks. "There's a mana crystal mine just south of here that's going up for sale. I'll buy it and add it to your holdings if you win."

"A full mine? Well, that's generous." Losing his languid air, Magnus crossed his arms over his chest and leaned forward. "Quite generous. It'll bring jobs to our city and provide income for thousands of our citizens. To say nothing of the peripheral industries it might spawn."

Magnus was speaking loudly, airing his thoughts for all to hear, and soon the murmurs of the watching crowd grew louder.

Reputation +2

Reputation +3

Reputation +3

The notifications were flying thick and fast by this point, so Magnus dismissed them and nodded.

“All right, fine, you’ve got yourself a deal. Carlsberg, adjust the terms for us while I show Ms. Celestine what might soon be her personal mage tower.”

Not giving Carlson any time to respond, Magnus spun on his heel, his robe swirling around him.

“Come along,” he said, waving for Celestine to follow him, and then sauntered toward the door to the tower as if he had no cares in the world.

Celestine hesitated for a moment, but whether caught up in Magnus’ pacing or just wanting to get away from Carlson, she soon followed him, leaving the poor administrator standing in front of the carriage, opening and closing his mouth like a fish. As they reached the door, Magnus opened it up and gestured for Celestine to precede him. Standing on the other side, his gaze frosty, was Penwick.

“Penwick, my good man, I’ll leave the administrator in your capable hands. He’ll need a place to draw up the new documents. Make sure you serve him our best tea. Oh, this is Ms. Celestine. We’re going to be fighting her soon. Now, shall we start the tour? We can begin on the first floor or the fifth floor.”

Ever since she had entered the tower, Celestine’s eyes had been darting around, and at Magnus’ question she stamped her foot against the hard stone floor.

“Do you have a basement?”

“Nope, no basement. Just five regular floors. I told you, it’s not much. But as a personal tower it’d probably do pretty well. It’s stood for countless generations. In fact, the history of this tower goes back thousands of years

to the very first master, Caraway of the Crimson Flame, a mythic-level mage. Now at that time the tower was a good bit taller, a full fifteen stories in fact. Pretty impressive, huh? Unfortunately, our line has grown thin, and over the years we've dwindled to the scant five stories you see here now. Through there is a sitting room, along with some storage rooms currently filled with absolutely nothing. Come on, I'll take you up to the second floor."

CHAPTER EIGHT



Patting Penwick on the shoulder as a heavy knock sounded on the door behind him, Magnus headed for the stairs with Celestine only a step behind. He moved quickly, and despite her short legs she had no trouble keeping up. After glossing over the second, third, and fourth floors, they made it to the top floor, and he opened the door to his office and invited her in.

“You can sit at the desk if you want,” he said. “It gives you a great view of the city and the plains beyond. On clear days you can see all the way to the Great Barrier Wall on the mountains to the west of here.”

At the mention of the Great Barrier Wall, Celestine grew quiet and walked to the window, peering out across the plains.

“There’s a bit too much haze today,” Magnus said. He pointed. “It’s a thin band of darkness on the horizon. You can just barely make them out.”

“Have you ever been to the wall?” Celestine asked in a quiet voice.

The wall she was referring to was the Great Barrier Magnus had mentioned, a massive wall built atop the mountains that protected the civilized parts of the continent from the savage tribes of the Great Wilds.

“No, I haven’t. It’s been a long time since our tower had enough mages to join the rotation. But I’d like to.”

Celestine looked up at Magnus, her eyes tracing his perfect profile.

“I’ve heard it’s a death wish.”

“Me too,” he admitted with a smile. “But then, if I lose this challenge and this tower becomes yours, I’m not sure what other options I’ll have besides selling myself into slavery to the Great Barrier Guard. I don’t have any tea, at least not tea that’s drinkable, but I should have a bottle of wine around here somewhere if you’re looking for some refreshment.”

Celestine watched Magnus walk over to the desk and begin hunting through the drawers.

“Aha, here it is.” He pulled a bottle of wine from the bottom drawer and shook it. “Unfortunately, I don’t seem to have any cups. So you’ll have to drink from the bottle or use your hands.”

Placing it on the desk, he pushed it toward her as she walked over from the window.

“You’re taking all of this quite casually, aren’t you? I find that unusual, especially considering you have no chance of winning.”

“Should I be all up in arms about it?” Magnus asked.

He leaned forward, grabbed the bottle of wine, and pulled the cork with a smooth pop.

“I’m not sure there’s much I can do, besides crush you in the actual competition of course. You see, I don’t actually plan on losing. I know everybody assumes I’m going to, including you, which is why you ran all the way here to offer me such a ludicrous deal. This tower isn’t worth a mana crystal mine, not by a long shot, which means that either you’re desperate to get out of your situation, or there’s something about this tower

I'm not aware of."

As he spoke, Magnus opened one of the drawers and, without looking, reached in to fish around.

"Ah, here we go," he said, pulling a glass out from under some of the papers, "a glass."

Pouring a few fingers of wine into the glass, he offered it to Celestine, who took it after a moment of hesitation.

"I know it looks messy, but the glass is clean."

After fruitlessly hunting for another glass, Magnus shrugged and took a swig straight from the bottle. Grimacing, he put the wine down on the table and pushed the cork back in.

"Maybe don't drink that. Who knows how long it's been sitting there?"

"Well, now I'm curious," Celestine said with a slight smile.

With a movement that reeked of expertise, she swirled the wine in her glass and lifted it to her nose. When she got a whiff of it her eyes immediately started watering, and she quickly put it down on the desk.

"I changed my mind. I am not curious."

With a laugh, Magnus gestured to the chair on the other side of his desk and then leaned forward, resting his elbows on the polished surface.

"So, are you going to spill it or leave me guessing?"

"Spill what?" Celestine asked casually, taking a seat and looking around the room.

"Are you going to tell me why you want the tower so badly?"

Celestine gave him a look that made it clear in no uncertain terms that she thought he was an idiot.

"Okay, fine, if you don't want to tell me I'll just guess."

Leaning back in his chair, he looked up at the ceiling for a moment and then

snapped his fingers.

“I got it. You’re looking for room to expand. The Earthbound Circle favors stability. They want mages who are willing to put in the years. After all, the majority of you are elves and dwarves, long-lived races. It wouldn’t do to have a young upstart mage flying through the ranks, gaining authority before they had been truly tested by the weight of time. But you, you studied at the academy. You even taught at the academy. You’ve been infected by human ideals. My guess is that the other tower masters don’t like that. Your talent can’t be denied, which is why you have your position. But at thirty-five—oh, that is too young, at least for the Earthbound Circle.”

Getting to his feet, Magnus walked around the desk and sat on it, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared at Celestine, his eyes gleaming.

“The Flame Covenant, on the other hand, they’re an entirely different order. They want ambition. They want mages willing to burn the world to get what they want. Within reason, of course. And only politely. If you win this challenge, you intend to abandon your circle and join the Flame Covenant. After all, they can’t afford to allow a member of the Earthbound Circle to own a tower in the middle of their territory. If you win, the Flame Covenant will have to pay off the Earthbound Circle, trading them significant material for this tower. But your condition will be that you go with it, neatly ridding the Earthbound Circle of the proverbial thorn in their side, giving you the freedom to expand. On top of that, you’ll be solving a problem for the Flame Covenant as well, which is that my line has too much history for them to just kick us out but not enough talent to be of any use.”

The entire time Magnus spoke, Celestine didn’t even blink. Her face was inscrutable, but Magnus could see the slight twitch in her fingers and the way her calves tensed as her toes flexed.

“That’s an interesting theory,” she finally said, admitting nothing.

Laughing, Magnus waved his hand.

“That’s not the only interesting theory I have. I also think you’re after something else. Something far more personal. My master’s research, maybe. That’s interesting to me, because it confirms something for me that I suspected but didn’t know. It confirms that this tower has a secret.”

This time Magnus, who was watching closely, caught the faint twitch in Celestine's jaw and knew he had hit the nail right on the head.

"But that's neither here nor there. Absolute speculation. I'm sure your actual reasons are much more straightforward and have nothing to do with either of my wild theories. Still, a mana crystal mine is quite the thing to put on the line."

Hearing a faint whisper of feet outside the door, Magnus gestured.

"It would appear our friendly administrator has finished up his work and we're being summoned."

There was a sharp rap on the door and then, without waiting for a response, Penwick opened it up, his expression stony.

"Administrator McRae has completed the adjustment. Both of you are requested to come down and sign them."

"Can you sign for me?" Magnus asked, pointing at Penwick.

Penwick didn't deign to answer and simply turned on his heel and stalked off.

"He comes with the tower," Magnus said. "And though he's a little frosty around the edges, he's really a nice guy. Come on. We should go sign before he gets so angry he decides to murder me in my sleep."

Hopping down from her chair, Celestine shook her head.

"You are really nothing like the stories say."

"Oh? What do the stories say? Too handsome for words? Exquisitely chiseled body?"

"No, they paint you as a stuck-up genius who consistently overestimates his own power."

"Well, that's not quite the reputation I was going for," Magnus said, leading the way out of the office. "Tell me, how have you found me in reality?"

Celestine didn't answer until they reached the fourth-floor landing and

Magnus turned to look at her.

“I find you disquieting. You have none of the decorum a mage should have. I came expecting a serious discussion. I expected to have to spar with you, but you act like we’ve been friends for years. If you behaved like this at the academy, they would have thrown you out on your ear. You don’t even know how to wear clothes properly.”

Glancing down at his half-open shirt, Magnus grabbed the edge and twitched it to the side. As he ran his hands over his chiseled chest and abs, he shrugged.

“I think I look pretty good.”

He could hear Celestine audibly grinding her teeth, but he just laughed and walked down the stairs one at a time as she followed a step behind.

“You know, I’ve never been one for stuffy tradition. So I’m glad to hear that I’ve been a breath of fresh air.”

“That isn’t what I said,” Celestine snapped, half annoyed, half amused.

“I mean, it is kind of what you said. At least it’s in the same general vicinity.”

They found Carlton looking quite annoyed at a table that had been set up in the parlor. Papers had already been laid out, and two pens were sitting next to them.

“The agreement has been set,” Carlton said, his eyes darting between Celestine and Magnus, rife with suspicion.

Picking up the document, Magnus began to read over it, making sure not to miss a single word. At about the third page, Carlton let out an annoyed snort.

“Don’t you trust the Tower Administration? You don’t think we’re trying to pull one over on you, do you?”

“I heard a story once,” Magnus said as he continued to read, “about a man who signed a deal to get his heart’s desire, only to turn around and discover

it had cost him his soul. I have no intention of signing such a deal, so I make a point of reading every document before I sign it.”

After reading to the end of the document, Magnus nodded, put it down on the table, and picked up the pen.

“This is sufficient. I’m happy to sign it. But before we do, I think it’s only fair to give you one more opportunity. Out of the kindness of my heart, of course.” Magnus spoke with a smile on his face, but his gaze was deadly serious as it bored into Celestine. “This is your last opportunity to turn down this challenge and spare yourself the embarrassment of losing to me.”

“And miss out on a free tower? Impossible.” Celestine met his gaze fearlessly, expressing her stance firmly.

“Very well.”

Without hesitating a moment longer, Magnus placed his pen down and signed the document in broad strokes. Celestine signed as well, and then, exchanging documents, they each signed again. With the agreement made, there was little left to do but see Celestine and Carlton off. As they walked to the carriage, Magnus waved at the people down below, showing them the signed Tower War contract.

“We look forward to that mana crystal mine,” he said with a loud voice as Celestine climbed the stairs into the carriage.

Pausing on the steps, she turned and spoke in a voice that all could hear. “You really are delusional, aren’t you? Do you really think you’ll be able to win this fight?”

“I don’t need to believe we will when I know we will,” Magnus said boldly. “I’ll see you in a month.”

Turning on his heel, he strode back to the tower and closed the door behind him with a bang. Waving away the storm of reputation notifications he was getting, he grinned at Penwick, who was standing just inside the tower, pure fury etched onto his face.

“And that, my dear Penwick, is how you do it.”

“Do what? Sign away our only chance at negotiating!? Are you an idiot? You just blew our very last chance. We could have traded the secret of the tower to someone for support, but you just gave it away!”

Unable to contain himself, Penwick took a step forward, his hand rising. There was a flash of mana and a spell began to manifest in front of him. Realizing Penwick had really lost it, Magnus’ eyes dilated and everything around him suddenly slowed. He could see the spell construct charging and knew that if it managed to complete he’d be in trouble.

He knew that thanks to his new body refinement he was much faster than before, but as he crossed the distance, managing to close in on Penwick before the spell construct could finish charging, he realized he had underestimated his improvement by an order of magnitude. With nothing at hand but a clenched palm, his fist jabbed toward the mana construct.

There was a flash of burning pain in his knuckles as they crashed into the spell construct and then the lines that formed the spell shattered, unleashing shards of mana that peppered his arm. Seeing that his fist was still moving at full speed and afraid he might just kill Penwick if he punched him in the chest, Magnus opened his fist and turned his punch into a grab. His fingers closed around Penwick’s throat and he lifted the blond mage clear off the ground with ease.

As everything snapped back into focus, Penwick found himself dangling from Magnus’ hand, his feet kicking above the floor. Gurgling, he grasped at Magnus’ arm, but it was like an iron bar and couldn’t be moved. Raising his eyebrows, Magnus lowered Penwick to the floor, supporting him until the gasping mage found his feet.

“While we’ve had our disagreements, I’m not sure they warrant attacking each other.”

Taking big gulps of air, Penwick stared at Magnus, his eyes wide as saucers.

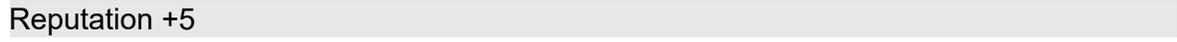
“What... what was that? Did you just... did you just break my spell? With your hand? How...”

Smiling, Magnus patted his dumbfounded steward on the shoulder.

“Like I said, I don’t plan on losing this fight. Get ready to manage a new mana crystal mine.”

Turning, he sauntered away, grinning as he felt Penwick’s stare boring into his back.

Reputation +5



CHAPTER NINE



Congratulations. The whole city is talking about you. You have earned +250 Reputation!

Unable to suppress his grin, Magnus opened up his reputation page.

REPUTATION: Young Eccentric Tower Master (with great abs)

CURRENT POINTS: 323

STATIC GOAL: Maintain your reputation as an eccentric tower master to earn +5 points a day.

SPECIAL GOAL: Impress another mage with your magic to earn a bonus of +350 points.

Magnus' eyes narrowed as he read over the reputation page. He had raked in the points by putting on a show for the citizens of Crimson Flame City, but they wouldn't last long. His new special goal, impressing a mage with magic, would be much trickier, considering he couldn't cast a lick of it.

Sitting back in his chair, Magnus rubbed his forehead as he tried to think of

a way he might be able to complete the special goal. With his current 323 reputation points, achieving his next bonus would put him within range of a couple of the Immortal Skills he had his eye on. However, just saving up for an Immortal Skill like Talisman Arts would mean being unable to buy any Martial Skills. It was unfortunate, but Magnus was realizing he was going to have to choose a path. Either he could improve his martial arts, or he could save up for Immortal Skills.

Opening up the Martial Skills window, he began to read through the Human-ranked techniques. Martial arts were divided into four categories: Defensive, Movement, Melee, and Ranged attacks. Ideally, it would be good to get a single art in each of the categories, and considering that the Human-ranked arts he currently had access to all cost between 1 and 99 points, with a little bit of finesse he'd be able to round out his skills nicely.

Selecting the Defensive Arts, Magnus scrolled through them, noting a couple that looked interesting. He did the same for the Movement, Melee, and Ranged categories as well, eventually coming up with a short list of martial arts that looked useful. He had 323 points, and he spent his first 99 on a ranged art called Silver Moon Strike. As soon as he selected it, another window popped up.

Please confirm your selection. 99 points will be deducted from your reputation. This martial art will occupy one of your three Human-ranked slots.

Pausing before he confirmed his selection, Magnus stared at the window for a moment and then looked down at his list, his brow furrowing. There were four categories of martial arts, but if he was limited to only three selections he would have to change his calculus. Silver Moon Strike was still a necessity as, according to the description, it allowed the practitioner to call down the energy of the moon, forming a silver beam that could be projected at targets within one hundred feet.

When Magnus had read the description, he had nearly leaped from his seat with joy. It sounded an awful lot like a magical ability, and his hope was that others, seeing him use it, would think he was casting a magical spell. Circling "Silver Moon Strike," he looked at the other three categories. Between Defensive Arts, Movement, and Melee, Magnus was inclined to

focus on Movement and Melee.

His physique was already strong, strong enough that he had been able to break Penwick's spell construct without suffering any significant damage. Given the fact that his body's defenses were naturally increasing, it made more sense to him to pick a Melee skill, increasing his attack power. Additionally, he had found a boxing technique called Twelve Thunder's Fist that, when practiced to the Grandmaster level, allowed the practitioner to cover their hands in lightning and even hurl lightning bolts. Again, Magnus' hope was that being able to wield lightning with his bare hands would distract from the fact that he wasn't actually casting magic. He had picked a Movement art based on a similar concept. Swallow's Cloud Step would, at its highest level, allow him to tread on air for a short distance, making it look like he was flying.

"I'm probably the only person in history to pick martial arts based on how they look rather than how effective they are," Magnus grumbled.

After double-checking his selection, Magnus confirmed the three martial arts and watched his reputation points dwindle down to 64. Of course, he knew he would get more the next morning, so he wasn't particularly worried about it. And even now, he could feel the odd point trickling in as people in the city continued to talk about his confrontation with Celestine and the upcoming Tower War. Getting up from his chair, Magnus went into the meditation room to check out Twelve Thunder's Fist, as boxing was something he was familiar with.

As soon as he accessed the memories, he felt his vision fade and saw a vision of a powerfully built Warrior appearing in an empty dojo. The Warrior, stripped to the waist, planted his feet firmly and let out a loud shout as he drew his fists to his sides. There was a surge of energy and tiny arcs of electricity began jumping across his body, gathering around his fingers. The Warrior clenched his hands and unleashed a brutal punch. Magnus could practically smell the scent of ozone as the air burned under the lightning's intensity. The first punch was followed by a second, and then, twisting his body, the Warrior chopped down.

Magnus recognized many of the moves as the Warrior continued through his kata, but seeing them performed in this way, with lightning streaming

from every strike, left Magnus floored. By the time he reached the twelfth move, the Warrior had transformed into a raging lightning storm, and as he stamped down and threw his last punch there was a loud peel of thunder and a bolt of lightning leapt from his fist, crossing the distance to slam into the wall opposite him. For a moment, the scene froze, and then it faded away, leaving Magnus staring into space.

“That was so cool. These martial arts are way more impressive than I thought they were going to be.”

In truth, Magnus had assumed the martial arts he picked would be like the martial arts he had observed and even practiced back on Earth, though maybe with a few more flashy moves. They were nothing like that at all. Watching someone summon and wield lightning with their fists had completely shattered Magnus’ understanding of the world, and it made him anticipate the other two martial arts all the more.

Instead of rushing into practicing Twelve Thunder’s Fist, Magnus concentrated once again, focusing on Silver Moon Strike. Once again, as he tried to access the memory about it the world in front of him faded, replaced by an ancient forest with a mountain in the distance and a big, round, full moon shining like a silver medallion above. A figure clothed in white perched at the very top of a swaying tree, his body remaining motionless despite the whipping branches around him. His pure white robe matched the moon above, and as the wind whipped at his clothes he surveyed everything around him with a calm gaze.

Magnus hadn’t noticed it at first, but as they got closer he saw the figure in white was surrounded by a dozen black-clothed enemies hidden among the treetops nearby. With a shout, the man’s enemies charged, revealing their razor-sharp weapons as they launched themselves through the air.

With an unhurried motion, the man in white reached into the air, plucking a strand of silver moonlight. With a casual motion, he used two fingers to hurl the silver beam at one of his enemies, who tried in vain to dodge the attack. The black-clothed attacker had barely begun to sidestep when the silver beam was upon him, piercing through his chest. With a cry, the black-clothed figure tumbled down from the treetops, disappearing into the sea of green below.

With the same unhurried motion, the man in white lifted his other hand, his fingers curling as he grasped five beams of moonlight. With a simple flick of his wrist he sent them flying out with unerring accuracy, piercing through his opponent's chests. Every enemy who was struck died instantly, and within a few breaths there were only four enemies remaining.

By this time they had approached within thirty feet, and as they accelerated the man in white lifted both hands, once again drawing beams of moonlight to him. His hands flicked and three of the black-clothed assailants followed in their companion's footsteps. The last, clearly stronger than his comrades, managed to lift his thick sword to block the attack that had targeted him. Yet, he could only watch in horror as the beam of silver moonlight pierced straight through his sword and then through his heart half a second later.

Unwilling to die like this, he stumbled a few steps forward, his foot slipping from a branch. As he tumbled through the trees and vanished into the darkness, the man in white lifted his head to look up at the moon and the wind stilled. As the image faded away, Magnus pumped his fist.

“Yes, that is what I'm talking about. There's no way people won't think that's magic.”

With just these two martial abilities, Magnus was fully confident he'd be able to fake the fact that he was unable to cast magic. Additionally, he had been talking a good game, insisting to everyone who would listen that he planned on winning the fight against Starlit Clay Tower. Up until this point, that had just been talk. But now, seeing what mastery of these martial arts looked like, Magnus felt like he had a genuine chance. Of course, he wasn't quite sure whether it would be enough to overcome the numbers difference, but if he could combine these martial arts with his improved physique he might actually have a shot.

The last of the three arts he had chosen was Swallow's Cloud Step, a movement technique that allowed him to lighten his body, achieving the same swift, darting movements a swallow used when flying. As he immersed himself in the memories, he saw a city packed tight with buildings and observed a young woman sprinting across the roof of one of the buildings. She was being chased by other martial artists, and Magnus could see more martial artists gathering on other rooftops to try and hem her

in.

Yet as she approached the edge of the building, she didn't stop for even a moment, despite the fact that it was a four-story drop to the wide street below. Instead, her form flickered, and planting her foot on the edge of the building, she leapt off.

Her body traced a parabola through the air, but instead of falling into the street, as Magnus half expected, her foot landed on empty air and she kicked off, flying further out over the street. Though there was nothing beneath her except four stories of empty space, she may as well have been walking on a brick road as she sprinted along. Her feet landed firmly on nothing, propelling her forward with ever-increasing speed until she reached the opposite side of the street. She had just landed on the opposite roof when there was a loud screech in the air from the fierce arrow cutting toward her.

Her form blurred again and she abruptly shifted sideways without ever stopping her forward momentum. The arrow, which had been aimed directly at her heart, missed by half a foot and continued on into the distance. She charged forward, rapidly vanishing from view and leaving those chasing her far behind.

Of the three arts, Swallow's Cloud Step was the least visually impressive. It was also the most practical. The ability to almost instantly change positions would be helpful, not only against physical attacks but against spells that fired projectiles. And when combined with Magnus' improved speed, he could only imagine what mastering the art would allow him to achieve.

Of course, there was a drastic gulf between the Initiate and Grandmaster stages of each of the arts. And Magnus knew that without incredibly dedicated hard work, he wouldn't be able to produce even a fraction of what he had seen in his visions. The real question in his mind was, would the month he had left before the Tower War be enough to master the three martial arts he had chosen?

Rather than delaying even a moment longer, Magnus shook the useless thoughts from his mind and got to work. His only option at this point was to do the best he could with what time he had. Of the three arts, Silver Moon

Strike was the one Magnus was most interested in. Though less destructive than Twelve Thunder's Fist and less useful than Swallow's Cloud Step, Magnus believed it fit his needs best.

Based on his experience tussling with Penwick that morning, he was already fast, and his close-combat abilities were strong. What he currently lacked was a reliable way to attack at range and something he could pass off as a spell.

Closing his eyes, Magnus immersed himself in what he knew about Silver Moon Strike. The martial art was anything but simple, and instead of requiring a specific body movement like Imperishable Void Physique it relied on a specific sort of visualization. The initial stage of the art required meditating on an image of the moon until it was permanently fixed in the practitioner's mind. Though it was called Silver Moon Strike, the strands of silver energy weren't actual moon beams but were instead condensed beams of mana formed into darts. Rather than pulling the mana from within himself, as he would do for a spell, this mana was condensed from outside of him by resonating his body with his surroundings.

Thanks to the vision he had seen when he first examined the skill, Magnus had a good guide for what he was trying to accomplish, and he had no trouble imagining the moon. He fixed the image in his mind, immersing himself in it as he tried to resonate with it. All the while his mind fed him the information he had received from the system about Silver Moon Strike.

In this initial stage, the more clearly he could imagine the moon, the easier it would be to resonate with it, and Magnus quickly discovered that the blurry moon in his mind was becoming more and more clear. It helped that he had seen high-definition pictures of the moon while on Earth. In fact, he had once used an ultra-high-definition picture of a full moon for the cover art of one of his albums. During a tour he had even blown it up to place on the backdrop for his shows.

Magnus imagined the bright disk of a full moon, paying attention to the craters and the way the light cast little shadows across its surface.

CHAPTER TEN



Time ticked by and Magnus, lost in his meditation, barely noticed it. It felt like only minutes when suddenly the moon in Magnus' mind flashed with a deep silver light and Magnus could suddenly sense strands of energy all around him. It was as if they had abruptly appeared, but he knew they had been there all along, just invisible to him. Reaching out, he tried to touch one of the strands, but doing so disrupted the moon in his mind.

All of the strands of moonlight faded away before he could grab one, leaving him feeling a sense of loss. Opening his eyes and stretching, Magnus could feel his stomach growling. He had no idea what time it was, and when he opened the door to his meditation room he was stunned to find the night had fallen. The moon, a thin shard of silver half hidden behind the clouds, was high in the sky, indicating it was in the middle of the night. Though he was eager to get back to his meditation, Magnus couldn't stand his hunger, so he took a quick trip down to the kitchen. Everyone else was already in bed, so Magnus just found a loaf of bread and a few apples.

By the time he had climbed the stairs back to his office all the food he had grabbed was gone, and though Magnus wasn't satisfied, the edge had been taken off his hunger. Returning to the meditation room, Magnus sat down and began his meditation again. This time the moon appeared bright and clear in his mind almost immediately, and over the next few minutes the strands of moonlight appeared all around him.

Magnus' initial goal was to keep the moon in mind while he interacted with the beams of moonlight. This was called hiding the moon in the mind, and once he achieved it he would achieve initiation of the martial art. It took him another few hours of careful concentration until he finally managed to grasp one of the beams and pull it toward him while still maintaining the image of the moon.

Magnus had no idea whether spending close to an entire night to initiate Silver Moon Strike was good or not, as he had no one to compare to, but he was pleased with his progress, especially after his system book popped up to inform him that Silver Moon Strike had reached the Initiate stage. Though he wanted nothing more than to flop back and rest, Magnus knew he didn't have time for that. So, letting the moon fade from his mind and dismissing the system book, he began to practice his body refinement skill.

He was already at the Human Initiate stage of the Imperishable Void Physique, and by continuing to repeat the ten moves it consisted of he'd be able to advance to the Warrior stage. He knew it would improve his body, allowing him to grow stronger, faster, tougher, and better able to resist the various elements. But he wasn't sure exactly how much he would improve in each of those areas, so all he could do was persevere through the movements and find out.

Until dawn arrived, Magnus performed his ten moves in sequence, doing his best to take as few breaks as possible. He had discovered that though he could, by moving smoothly, minimize the pain the ten moves caused, his improvement seemed to be better when he suffered.

Gritting his teeth as he reached the end of one of his ten-move cycles, Magnus didn't pause the way he had the previous time. Instead, he moved back into the first move without taking a break. This was possible since both the first and the tenth move were a variation on the horse stance, just

with different finger seals.

As he ignored the burning pain in his bones and muscles and moved into the first position, Magnus felt the pain intensify slightly. A faint stench rose from his body, and he could see from the corner of his eyes that his sweat had tiny black dots in it. Realizing these were impurities being expelled from his body, Magnus breathed deep and pushed forward, continuing into the second position. He barely made it more than four moves before collapsing.

But rather than be disheartened, he was excited. Clearly this was the right way to practice the Imperishable Void Physique. Magnus could already feel his strength increasing. It was a strange sensation, as the change was microscopic, and yet he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had improved.

By the time he had reached his limit, it was breakfast, so Magnus ran down the steps to the fourth floor landing and then turned around and ran back up to his office. Touching his door, he ran down the steps to the third floor landing, turned around, and sprinted right back up the steps to touch his office door again. He repeated the process for the second floor and even for the first floor before jogging down to the kitchen.

He had worked up quite a sweat but, to his surprise, his body didn't stink one bit. Instead, his sweat carried a faintly refreshing smell, which probably had something to do with the fact that he had already expelled most of the toxins and impurities from his body with his Imperishable Void Physique exercises.

The cook hadn't forgotten to make more food and Magnus, ignoring the staring servants, piled up his plate with eggs and toast and sausage. He ate a full three helpings while the servants stood awkwardly nearby, unsure if they should join him at the table or not. When he had finally finished, he carried his plate over to the sink and rinsed it off.

“Attention please.”

The low murmur in the kitchen immediately cut off and all of the servants stood up straight, listening intently.

“I’m going to be doing this every morning. It’s part of my new healthy living routine, so you’re going to have to get used to it. You don’t have to delay your breakfast on account of me. So tomorrow, I want to see you eating normally. Okay? Okay. Good talk.”

Amidst the chorus of “yes, sirs,” Magnus thanked the cook for the meal and headed back to his office. His sweat had already dried, and considering he was planning on exercising more, he didn’t bother with a bath.

Walking back into the meditation room, he pulled the mat back into position and sat down, crossing his legs as he straightened his back and placed his hands, fingers gently touching, in his lap. Closing his eyes, he allowed his mind to sink into his body, approaching his soul. It looked largely the same as before. And, if anything, the fissures running through it looked even more stark. Letting out a helpless sigh, Magnus shook his head. He had been hoping his Imperishable Void Physique would heal the damage that had been done, but it had turned out to be a vain hope. Clearly he was going to have to figure out another way to repair his soul. Ceasing his meditation, Magnus opened his eyes, catching sight of the inert starstone in front of him. On a whim, he reached out and poked it.

“I know you’re in there,” he muttered. “You should just come out.”

The starstone responded by flaring brightly, shocking Magnus so badly he tumbled backward. The glimmering light in the center of the cold stone began pulsing, threads of purple energy shooting out from its center and slamming into the hard crystal casing.

Magnus remembered clearly when he had hatched his previous soul contract. At that time the egg had flared once and then cracked in half, revealing the small flameseeker lizard he had formed a contract with. This time, however, the egg, and whatever was inside of it, seemed to be fighting. The crystal began to crack as more and more threads of purple energy emerged inside of it. Yet, at the same time, Magnus could feel an intense pressure, swallowing him, pressing down on the egg as if trying to contain it.

Unsure what was going on, Magnus found himself barely able to lift his head under the intensity of the weight as the air solidified, desperately

trying to keep whatever was in the starstone firmly contained. There was a faint whisper that sounded like the steady roll of thunder over the edge of the horizon and Magnus heard an answering snort, full of annoyance and reluctant acceptance.

With a whoosh, the pressure was gone, and for a brief moment Magnus stared at the now-purple starstone. Then, in the most dramatic fashion Magnus had ever seen, the starstone exploded, shards of crystal spreading through the air. Yet the entire thing happened in slow motion, as if Magnus was watching the explosion frame by frame. Glancing down at his hand, he wiggled his fingers, making sure he wasn't just imagining it.

As the shards of crystal tumbled ever so slowly through the air, the purple glimmer grabbed them and everything abruptly sped up. There was a crunching noise as all the crystal shards that had moments ago been flying outward were pulled back into the purple glimmer, which consumed them all and then gave a satisfied burp.

There was a flash of bright light, like the one Magnus had seen when his flameseeker lizard had appeared. As his vision cleared, Magnus found himself staring at nothing. Where the purple glimmer had been a moment before was now empty air. The starstone was completely gone, every bit of it devoured. But whatever had devoured it was nowhere in sight.

Hearing a faint snuffing noise and feeling a tug at his pants, Magnus looked down. There, chewing happily on his pant leg, was a small amber-colored pig with two silvery feathered wings tucked against its back. There was no doubt in Magnus' mind that this was his new soul-contracted pet. He had never heard of a pig as a pet before, let alone a flying one, but it was clear from the way the soul contract pulsed when he looked at the small creature that they were intimately connected. There was a faint ripping sound as the pig bit through his pants.

“Hey, stop that,” Magnus said, trying to shoo the pig away.

Afraid he was going to try and take the scrap of fabric back, the pig let out a squeak and trotted as fast as its little legs would allow it behind the obelisk. It peered out from behind the pillar at him and quickly chewed and swallowed.

“My pants aren’t for eating,” Magnus said and the pig, after staring at him for a moment, actually nodded.

Rubbing his forehead, Magnus, who had no idea what to do, stared at the pig for a moment.

“Your name is Amber?”

Mysterious creatures always had their own names, and as soon as Magnus had wondered about it the soul contract had fed him that information. Amber wrinkled her little snout happily, nodded, and then trotted out from behind the obelisk to nibble on his other pant leg.

“I said stop it! Pants are not for eating.”

Looking quite disappointed, Amber launched herself up into the air, her wings beating a steady rhythm to keep her aloft. She stared Magnus dead in the face and let out a soft squeak. Through their soul contract, he could tell she was hungry. Since he didn’t have anything on hand for her to eat, he got to his feet and gestured for her to follow him.

“Come on, we’ll get you some food.”

Amber, quite pleased, turned a little flip in the air and then zoomed around Magnus to crash into his chest. Catching her awkwardly, Magnus kept one arm under her body as she happily rested her chin in the crock of his elbow. She was light, though Magnus wasn’t sure if that was because she was just a small pig or if it had something to do with his improved strength, but he had no trouble carrying her out of the meditation room and down to the kitchen. There he found the cook cleaning up from breakfast.

“Excuse me?”

“Ah! Sir. My apologies, I didn’t see you there.”

“That’s fine,” Magnus said, waving his hand. “I wonder if you have some scraps I could feed to my pig.”

The cook stared blankly at Magnus. His eyes blinked rapidly as he tried to decode the meaning of the sentence. Slowly his eyes drifted down, and he caught sight of Amber, nestled contentedly in Magnus’ arm.

“Sir, is that a pig?”

“Yes, this is Amber. She’s a new resident in our tower.”

“Sir, does that pig have wings?”

As patiently as possible, Magnus nodded.

“Yes, she has wings. She is a pig. And she’s hungry.”

“Ah, yes. Of course, sir. Of course. Um.” The cook, clearly flustered, began pulling things out of the cupboards and stacking them on the table. Seeing a small mountain of food appearing, Magnus hurried to stop him.

“I don’t need that kind of food. Just scraps. You know, leftovers?”

“Sir, there are no leftovers. You ate them all.”

Remembering how he had completely cleaned out all of the food the cook had made for breakfast, Magnus smiled sheepishly and scratched his chin.

“Huh, I guess I did. Well, in that case, would you mind just making another breakfast for her?”

“Of course, sir. Just give me a few minutes.”

Their voices had attracted a couple of other servants who peeked in the door, and upon seeing Magnus holding a small pig they had begun whispering among themselves. It wasn’t long before word had spread across the tower that Magnus had a new pet.

Just as the cook was serving a heaping plate of eggs and vegetables to Amber, Penwick came storming into the room. This was the first time Magnus had seen his steward since their altercation at the door, and though Penwick’s expression was as frosty as ever there was a clear, though begrudging, deference in the way he spoke to Magnus.

“May I inquire where you got a flying pig, sir?”

Placing Amber on the table, Magnus watched as she squealed happily and dug into the food. She ate with surprisingly dainty bites and Magnus, who had fully expected her to create an absolute mess, was surprised to see that

not a bit of food was wasted.

“Ah, Penwick, I was just going to come see you this morning. My new soul-contracted pet has awoken.”

“Your soul contract is a tiny pig? I thought it was a flameseeker lizard?”

“It was. But the lizard was only bronze rank and I had maxed out its usefulness. I didn’t think it would be helpful in the coming challenge, so I found another starstone and formed a new contract. The good news is, she is much stronger.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



After a long moment of silence during which Penwick stared at Amber, he finally turned to Magnus.

“Dare I ask what rank your pig is?”

“I was hoping you could help me with that,” Magnus admitted, scratching his chin as he watched Amber. “I know she’s above silver rank. My guess is gold, and not just on account of her color.”

“Sir, a mysterious creature’s color does not dictate what rank it is in.”

“I know, I know. It was a joke. Clearly I have to work on my jokes, because nobody seems to find them funny except for me.”

Eyes narrowing, Penwick slowly unleashed his soul’s aura, causing a sense of pressure to fill the air around him. Most mages kept their souls tightly sealed away when they weren’t in use, as it was considered rude to walk around with the pressure naturally created by a mage’s soul flying freely.

Sensing the servants growing uncomfortable, Magnus waved his hand, indicating that they should clear the room, and they hurried out. As the pressure around Penwick continued to grow, from iron rank to bronze rank, Penwick's eyes narrowed even further when Amber didn't flinch. A bit surprised, he shot a glance at Magnus and then unleashed his full aura as a silver-ranked mage.

The pig ignored him completely, snorting happily as she ate her food.

Magnus, who was standing next to Penwick, was surprised to find that he could barely feel the pressure either. He could sense it clearly and knew that Penwick was subtly directing a strand of intense aura toward him. Had this been a week ago, before his life had been turned upside down, Magnus would have been forced to flinch, as his soul contract was only in the bronze rank. Now, however, it felt no different than a light breeze tickling his skin. Inexplicably embarrassed, Magnus shrugged and turned to Penwick.

“Like I said, probably gold rank, maybe even higher.”

Whatever Penwick was about to say was interrupted by a sharp crack, and Magnus spun around just in time to see Amber happily scarfing down a chunk of her plate. The food had been licked clean, and she had turned her attention to the porcelain plate underneath.

“Amber, no! Plates are not food,” Magnus said, reaching for the shard of porcelain sticking out the side of her mouth. Alarmed that he was trying to take her food, her wings beat rapidly and she quickly retreated, staying just outside of his reach as she tried to eat the porcelain faster.

“I said stop!”

Scrambling up onto the table to try and grab her, Magnus missed again as she darted sideways, moving entirely too fast for a pig with tiny wings. In his haste, he overextended and found himself tumbling forward off the other side of the table. Thankfully he managed to hook his toe on the table edge and balanced himself so he didn't face-plant into the ground. Amber, taking advantage of his distraction, zipped around him and landed next to the plate, opening her mouth to try and chomp down on it again.

Before she could, she heard a disapproving cough from Penwick and froze just long enough for Magnus to whisk the plate away. He climbed down from the table, smiling sheepishly at Penwick, who was staring at Amber with a disapproving gaze.

“Ha, sorry about this. She’s still young, still learning what she can eat and what she can’t eat,” Magnus said, waving the plate. “But like I said, I was hoping you’d be able to help me. I’ve never heard of a pig mysterious creature, at least not a tiny one with wings. There are boars, but they usually come out all big and muscular, not cute like Amber.”

Tossing the plate into the trash, Magnus scooped Amber up.

“Anyway, if you happen to figure it out, let me know.”

“Considering your pet’s tendency to eat everything,” Penwick said dispassionately, “I think I should come with you.”

Following the steward’s gaze, Magnus glanced down and realized that Amber had caught a corner of his shirt and was chewing industriously.

“Amber, cut it out.”

Tearing his shirt free, Magnus was quite distressed to see he had lost a chunk of his cuff.

“Shirts are not for eating,” he said, whacking her lightly on the bottom. “We don’t eat cloth or plates.”

With an annoyed sigh, he turned to Penwick.

“I might leave the library to you. Amber here obviously needs a crash course in what is edible and what is not edible. I’ll join you in the library later.”

“I wasn’t planning on—”

Magnus cut off Penwick’s protest with a wave.

“Look, our tower is in a dire situation, and considering how much she eats, it’s about to be in an even more dire situation. It’s all hands on deck to figure out what she is and whether or not she’s going to be helpful in the

upcoming Tower War. I'm counting on you, all right?"

He patted Penwick on the shoulder and strode out of the kitchen. For the next couple of hours, Magnus toured the tower with his new pet, pointing to objects and informing the little pig of whether she could eat them or not. Amber seemed quite compliant until they reached one of the storerooms and she saw some of the raw materials the tower used for experiments. There was beast skin taken from iron- and bronze-ranked beasts, gems that held elemental mana, and a variety of spiritual plants filled with mana.

Her eyes lit up as soon as she saw all of the materials, and she quickly wriggled out of Magnus' arms and flew toward the shelf holding the animal skins. Sensing that something bad was about to happen, Magnus rushed after her, barely managing to pull her away before she took a big bite out of a bronze-ranked skin.

"No, no, these are not for you. You can't eat them. We need them for experiments."

Amber let out a whining oink, her expression falling. Magnus held her tight and took a step back as her little legs wiggled in the air and she struggled to get free. After a few minutes of fighting with her, Magnus finally looked around to see if anyone was watching and then relented.

"Fine, but you can only have one, okay? Do you understand? Only one."

Amber nodded vigorously, and he let her go. To his surprise, instead of rushing straight for the skins, she instead flew toward the elementally active gems and used her nose to sort through them, singling out two stones. One was a gleaming sapphire and the other a dark-red ruby. Though neither were the biggest gem in the small pile, Magnus could sense that each held highly concentrated elemental mana, and it only took a glance for him to realize she had picked the two gems with the highest mana concentration among the bunch.

She looked back and forth between them, sniffing here and grunting there, clearly having difficulty making her choice, seeing her glancing at him from the corner of her eye as if hoping he'd relent and let her take both. Magnus shook his head firmly.

“I’m already going to get in trouble with Penwick for giving you any. You can only take one.”

With a sad huff, Amber considered for a moment longer and then picked up the water gem and gnawed at it with an expression of pure bliss. Pushing the fire gem back amongst the others, Magnus picked up his satisfied pig and headed for the library on the fourth floor. He found Penwick buried in books, a deep frown on his face.

The steward wasn’t alone. Coiled around his shoulders was a scaled lizard-like creature with two legs and a pair of bat-like wings consisting of a tiny mouth and four large eyes. This was Penwick’s bonded pet, a bookworm of the silver rank, who granted him access to the arcane element. It was a general rule among mysterious creatures that the more physically imposing they were, the fewer abilities they gave to their contractors.

While, on the other hand, mysterious creatures who lacked their own offensive or defensive capabilities tended to give their contractors a greater number of skills and abilities. Bookworms were especially helpful for mages who focused on knowledge, as they gave the ability Perfect Recall, allowing their contractor to remember everything they had ever read. Pulling up a chair and sitting across from Penwick, Magnus stroked Amber’s head as she continued to chew on her water gem.

“Well, I figured out what she likes to eat,” Magnus said as Penwick looked up. “Anything that’s mana active. She’s chewing on a gem right now.”

“And where did you get a mana gem?”

“I took it out of storage,” Magnus admitted. “Hold on. Before you flay me, remember, this is for a good cause.”

“That has yet to be seen,” Penwick said, leaning back. “But it does provide a clue as to what sort of creature you may have picked up.”

“Oh, did you find something?”

“Surprisingly, no.”

Penwick shook his head as he cast a glance at the books that surrounded him.

“I’ve been through every bestiary we have, and there’s no mention of tiny pigs with wings. But you mentioning her taste for mana-active gems made me remember something. Hold on. I’ll be right back.”

Getting up, Penwick disappeared into the shelves, returning a moment later with a small, hard-bound book.

“Pim’s Tales for the Young Mage,” he said, waving it for Magnus to see.

Flipping through the book, Penwick found the page he wanted and turned the book around.

“Treasure-seeking rat,” he said, tapping the picture in the book. “Considered a legend, as no one in recorded history has ever been contracted to one.”

Leaning over the table, Magnus looked at the picture, which showed a young boy chasing behind a small rodent with a pair of silver feathery wings that glinted in the light.

“You think I have a treasure-seeking pig?” Magnus asked.

Penwick shrugged.

“I don’t think anything. Except that this is the only creature I know of that has silver-feathered wings and likes to eat mana-active materials.”

“Does the story say what rank the rat was?”

“No.”

Closing the book, Magnus slid it back across the table.

“All right, so say she is a treasure-seeking pig. What kind of abilities might she have?”

“Obviously, the ability to sense treasure,” Penwick said, getting out a piece of paper where he had written some notes. “I’d guess increased appetite as well, considering the fact that you have eaten enough for five people at breakfast for the last two days. As for other abilities, I’m genuinely not sure. Her body appears to be robust, and her bite strength is considerable. Additionally, she has an unusually high level of agility, and her wings give

her magically augmented flight. Given her size, I don't anticipate she'll be much use in combat. At least not directly. But given your unusual condition, that might not matter."

Looking at the uncomfortable expression on Penwick's face, Magnus realized he was talking about their altercation the other day and the bizarre abilities Magnus had revealed.

"She seems to have some level of magic immunity," Penwick continued, "a trait you may have picked up, considering you crushed a spell construct with your bare hands."

"Good point," Magnus nodded. "And that's not the only change I've experienced."

Putting Amber down on the table, he grabbed the seat of his chair with one hand and the back of his chair with the other and then effortlessly lifted himself up off of his seat. He swung his leg back through his arms and lifted his feet into a handstand. After holding it for a second, he lowered himself back into his seat smoothly.

"As you can see, my physical strength, coordination, and balance have improved drastically as well."

"Which is highly unusual, considering most of the time those sorts of features are attached to combat-oriented creatures." Penwick rubbed his head and let out a sigh. "The truth is, you've picked up a genuinely mysterious mysterious creature. And the only way we're going to be able to understand it fully is if we explore its new capabilities a little bit at a time."

"That's good," Magnus said, lounging back in his chair, "because it means our enemy will be just as caught off guard. It'll be hard for them to counter a creature they have never heard of before."

"While that is true, please remember that neither of us have combat-oriented pets. And we will be facing six opponents. No matter how fast and strong you are, it's not going to help you when three mages throw spells at you all at the same time."

Rubbing the back of his head, Magnus cracked a smile. "Who knows?"

Maybe it will. We're going to need to figure out how to get more of these gems, by the way. If she doesn't have a steady diet of these things, she'll probably chew through everything else in the tower."

"That, sir, requires money, and we currently have none. Speaking of which, I wanted to bring it to your attention that, given your new appetite and the appetite of your pet, we're likely to run out of food within the week."

"Isn't it your job to worry about stuff like that as the steward?" Magnus asked, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"Normally, yes, sir," Penwick replied, the barest hint of a smirk lifting the corners of his lips. "But even an excellent steward requires a budget. And that is your responsibility as tower master."

"Fine. Fine. I'll figure something out," Magnus said, waving his hand. He jumped to his feet and picked up Amber, who was still happily chewing away at the mana gem. "Thanks for your help, Penwick. I'll let you know as soon as I've figured out where we're going to get money from. Oh, and you can stop calling me sir. It makes us sound so distant."

Giving Magnus a withering stare, Penwick nodded.

"That's exactly why I do it, sir."

Grinning, Magnus waved his hands in defeat. He left Penwick in the library and jogged up the stairs to his office and headed straight for his meditation room. He settled Amber in the corner, leaving her to gnaw on her stone, and called up his status. Just as he expected, it had undergone a slight change. Listed among the pieces of information was Amber, though her rank was strangely blurred out.

NAME: Magnus

RANK: Human - Initiate

PRIMARY ART: Imperishable Void Physique

SOUL CONTRACT: Amber (??????)

MARTIAL SKILLS: Silver Moon Strike (Initiate), Twelve Thunder's Fist (Uninitiated),

Swallow's Cloud Step (Uninitiated)

IMMORTAL SKILLS: None

PET ABILITIES (3/10): Treasure Sense (locked), Absolute Digestion (locked), Void Storage (locked), (Remaining Skills Hidden)

CHAPTER TWELVE



Under Martial Skills he could see the three martial arts he had purchased, though only Silver Moon Strike had reached the Initiate rank. The information Magnus was really looking for, however, was listed at the very bottom of his status. The greatest advantage of a soul contract was that it gave the mage access to specific abilities granted by their mysterious creature pet. Up till this point, Magnus hadn't discovered any new abilities, which was strange, so seeing Pet Abilities listed on his status was exciting. Most mages had no way of clearly identifying what skills they had received from their contracted pet, but Magnus had the advantage of the system, and it looked like it would list them out as he unlocked them. All ten of them. Swallowing, Magnus looked at the number again to make sure he wasn't hallucinating.

It was an iron-clad rule of mysterious creatures that they only ever had a set number of skills based on their rank. Even the most powerful mythic creatures had eight abilities. But Amber had ten. The implication was that her rank was not just one rank above mythic, but two. That was a problem, because there were no ranks above mythic, at least not that Magnus had

ever heard of.

Just as Penwick had speculated, she had the Treasure Sense ability, making her a genuine treasure-seeking pig. The other two skills listed were Absolute Digestion and Void Storage, both of which he was quite excited for. He didn't have any idea how Absolute Digestion would work, but if it was what led to Amber being able to chew on mana stones with no ill consequences, he could only imagine it would be helpful for him as well.

As for Void Storage, he guessed that it was the classic independent dimensional space that all of the heroes in his favorite stories had. Magnus, in all his years in Borella, had never come across anyone with a dimensional storage ring bracelet or any other artifact of the kind. The only dimensional space he was aware of was a spell that could create a house bigger on the inside than it was on the outside, but that had a lot of restrictions, including being immovable. As for the other abilities, they were hidden, and he had no idea what they might be.

“Just be steady,” he muttered to himself. “I’ll get there eventually.”

Closing his status, Magnus turned his attention to his martial arts. His goal was to initiate at least one more martial art and then practice both Silver Moon Strike and his body refinement. It was becoming increasingly clear to Magnus that the only way he'd even have a shot of winning the upcoming Tower War would be to push his Imperishable Void Physique and his martial arts as far as humanly possible.

So without any further delay, he began visualizing the mental image needed to initiate Swallow's Cloud Step. To initiate Silver Moon Strike Magnus had to hide a moon in his mind, and similarly, Swallow's Cloud Step required him to imagine a darting swallow and add its wings to his ankles.

This time Magnus didn't have the advantage of a super detailed, hi-res picture of the moon in his memory, but to his surprise he found that he didn't need it. Visualizing a lifelike swallow, he began imagining the swallow flying, its body gliding through the air, its wings twisting and turning, granting it supernatural agility.

At first he was confused at why his visualization was so easy, but after a few minutes of thought he suddenly turned and looked at Amber, who was

grunting quietly, laying on her back, her legs kicking happily in the air as she slobbered all over her mana gem. Earlier, when he had been trying to catch her to take the plate away, he had seen Amber's unusually agile movements. And now the swallow in his mind was performing the same movements. Unsure if it was because he shared a soul contract with her or if something else was at play, Magnus felt as if he had an intimate understanding of how her wings needed to move in order to achieve such a level of agility.

“At this rate, I'll have to call it Flying Pig Step,” Magnus said, chuckling to himself.

He closed his eyes and re-immersed himself in his meditation, until the swallow's wings seemed permanently etched in his mind. Suddenly, the swallow transformed and a figure that looked a lot like Magnus appeared in its place. The wings attached themselves to his ankles, and Magnus watched in a trance as the figure moved through the Swallow's Cloud Step.

Unable to contain himself, Magnus jumped to his feet. As soon as his toes touched the ground, his feet flexed and his body shot sideways. Yet before he reached the wall he had shifted directions again, his momentum not slowing in the least. Flashing around the room, Magnus came to a stop next to Amber, who was staring at him with considerable interest. She rolled over with a snort and launched herself into the air, wiggling her butt and curly tail as she hovered just outside of reach. Her eyes danced with excitement, and she let out a muffled snort around the mana gem she was still trying to chew.

Sensing she wanted to play, Magnus reached for her, but she darted away. This time Magnus moved after her with explosive speed, his body abruptly accelerating in the same direction she was headed. Yet just before his fingers brushed her front hooves, she shifted direction again, staying just outside the range of his fingertips. Magnus pushed himself harder, shifting after her, and the two of them danced around the room.

Though he came close, Magnus never managed to actually get a hand on her. He realized that he hadn't actually been close at all when, in a fit of excitement, her body abruptly blurred and she appeared behind him. By the time he turned around, she was already gone again, and as Magnus' gaze

raked the empty air he heard a squeal of pure delight behind his head. Slowing to a stop, Magnus rubbed the back of his head and grinned at Amber.

“Looks like I have a lot to learn.”

She clearly agreed, because she nodded her head sagely, dropped to the floor, and trotted back to her corner with dainty steps. With two of his martial arts initialized, Magnus turned his attention to the third, Twelve Thunder’s Fist.

Boxing had been a hobby of his in his past life, and as he immersed himself in the memories, Magnus couldn’t help but feel a sense of growing excitement. Just like the other martial arts, Twelve Thunder’s Fist required visualization. In this case, Magnus needed to visualize a storm, roiling clouds leading to thunderous bolts of lightning.

Instead of hiding the moon in his mind, like he had done for Silver Moon Strike, Twelve Thunder’s Fist resided in the center of his chest. Closing his eyes, Magnus sank into his first stance, imagining himself becoming the center of a powerful storm. As Magnus’ imagination grew more and more vivid, the air around him seemed to boil. Yet Magnus didn’t just want to be in the storm. He wanted to be the storm.

He inhaled mightily, drawing the storm in through his nose down into his lungs. With each breath he took, he could feel the storm in his chest growing. Until, after an unknown amount of time, a thunderous sound reverberated from within him. Thunder was the first step, but Magnus wasn’t about to stop there. Instead he began to visualize pure bolts of lightning, crackling with raw intensity, arcing through the storm in his chest.

Time passed in a flash as Magnus sank deeper and deeper into his trance. Unbeknownst to him, faint sparks had begun to crawl across his body, slowly gathering together at his fist. As he continued to imagine the lightning bolt, Magnus felt as if the Warrior from his vision had been superimposed on top of him. And Magnus began to feel the arcs of lightning that had shrouded the Warrior completely.

As the bolts of lightning in his chest solidified, Magnus let out a shout and

stepped forward, his foot slamming into the hard stone floor as his fist shot out. There was a cracking sound followed by a low boom, and the air in the meditation chamber vibrated violently. Magnus' eyes snapped open, and he stared in surprise at his fist. He could still see the air around it shaking, a clear sign that he had entered the Initiate stage of Twelve Thunder's Fist.

To him it only felt as if it had been a few minutes since he had begun his meditation, and for a moment Magnus genuinely wondered if he was, in fact, a genius. After all, he had just managed to initiate three incredibly complex martial arts in a single twenty-four-hour period. Then again, he did have considerable help from the system. Visualization seemed to come easy to Magnus, which he could only assume was because of the merger of his two souls.

Regardless, Magnus couldn't have been happier. And he quickly flopped down next to Amber, unable to contain his smile. Seeing how happy he was, she grunted and rolled over, exposing her belly for him to scratch, which he did as he pulled up his status to check his martial arts.

NAME: Magnus

RANK: Human - Initiate

PRIMARY ART: Imperishable Void Physique

SOUL CONTRACT: Amber (???????)

MARTIAL SKILLS: Silver Moon Strike (Initiate), Twelve Thunder's Fist (Initiate), Swallow's Cloud Step (Initiate)

IMMORTAL SKILLS: None

PET ABILITIES: All Locked

Sure enough, all three had reached the Initiate stage. There was no doubt in Magnus' mind that the easy part was over. Just as advancing his Imperishable Void Physique required grinding away at the skill, the same was undoubtedly true for Swallow's Cloud Step, Twelve Thunder's Fist, and Silver Moon Strike. Martial arts was ultimately about effort, and Magnus knew full well that the result of the Tower War was entirely

dependent on how aggressively he could grind his techniques over the next few weeks.

Unfortunately, as much as Magnus would have liked to bury himself in practice, there were still other things he had to do. As tower master, there was a considerable amount of paperwork necessary to keep the tower and the city outside of it on the right track. Additionally, he had to solve the food problem they were now facing. It was unlikely his appetite was going to decrease. If anything, the further he got into his martial arts training, the larger his appetite would probably get. And that was to say nothing of the greedy little pig lying next to him. Amber had been chewing on the mana gem for about half a day, and it was mostly gone. Assuming she only needed one per day, they were still close to fifteen gems short.

And then there was the matter of debt. Magnus would have loved to have just ignored it, but he knew Curtis, the merchant mage who currently held their pledges. The man was money mad, and Curtis wasn't one to take a default lightly.

Opening the door to the meditation room, Magnus glanced out the window and saw that it was night. His dinner had been brought in and placed on his desk. And after wolfing it down, he stretched his body and headed straight back into the meditation room.

While all of the problems he had listed needed to be solved, none of them could be solved at night. So Magnus returned to his training.

It had been a couple of days since Magnus last slept, but rather than feeling tired, whenever he completed his body refinement training he found himself completely refreshed. With this in mind, he adopted a simple training cycle. First he trained Silver Moon Strike, then he completed a round of body refinement training. After that he practiced his Twelve Thunder's Fist, working carefully through the twelve strikes the art contained, and then underwent another round of body refinement training.

Finally, he would practice Swallow's Cloud Step, though it normally turned into a game of tag he could never win when Amber saw him flashing around the room. Once that was complete, it was back to body refinement training. By then morning had normally come, and so Magnus would

complete his stair run, grab breakfast, and then settle in for his day's tasks. That included mounds of paperwork, which he completed as fast as possible, and then a heavy workout.

Though it wasn't quite as effective as his body refinement training, Magnus quite enjoyed calisthenics and so put himself through a brutal regime designed to test the very limits of his physique. To his surprise, he discovered that he was making visible progress and that if he practiced his calisthenics during the day, his nighttime body refinement sessions were nearly twice as effective.

In this way, a couple days passed in quick succession. By this point, practically all of the reputation gains Magnus had been getting from his encounter with Celestine had faded, but he was still getting the daily reputation increase. He had picked up a total of 37 reputation, bringing him to 101 points, still a far cry off from what he needed to unlock any of the Immortal Skills he was interested in. When he looked in the Martial Skills store, he discovered that all of the entries were grayed out.

Clearly he couldn't learn any more Human-ranked skills, and he wasn't strong enough to learn any of the higher-ranked skills either. Realizing he'd have to push his reputation gains to the back burner, Magnus instead concentrated even more fervently on his practice.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Unfortunately, his best intentions ran into a significant roadblock when, two days later, he heard a quiet knock on the door in the middle of his morning workout. Lowering his legs from his handstand push-up, Magnus jogged over to the door and opened it, revealing Penwick.

“Mage Curtis has arrived to speak with you, sir.”

Magnus stared at Penwick blankly for a moment and then looked down at himself.

“I’m afraid I’ll need some time to change, probably at least a couple of hours. You wouldn’t mind keeping him occupied while I shift into something a little bit more appropriate?”

Penwick’s eyes slowly scanned Magnus’ shirtless body, and he begrudgingly nodded.

“I can buy you a few minutes, sir, but Mage Curtis is insistent on speaking

to you.”

“Excellent. Then I’ll count on you.”

Shutting the door, Magnus let out a sigh and walked to the bathroom. He poured some hot water into the basin and used a washcloth to wipe down his body. After toweling himself off, he put on a shirt and then a casual black robe. After checking himself in the mirror and using his fingers to comb out his still-wet hair, he nodded and walked straight to the window. A glance down at the courtyard showed a simple but well-built carriage, clearly designed for comfort rather than ostentation. There was a coachman sitting on the carriage but no one else was in sight, which meant Curtis had likely already entered the tower.

“Well, what must come must come,” Magnus said to himself, “but maybe not today.”

He opened the window and climbed out, his fingers gripping tightly to the stone window as he hung five stories off the ground. There was a curious squeak as Amber poked her head out the window and then took flight, fluttering around him as he carefully felt along the edge of the stone blocks that made up the outside of the tower, pulling the window shut behind him.

Magnus took a deep breath, and then, trusting his newfound strength, began working his way around the tower. He was soon out of sight of the carriage, and after glancing down at the dizzying height—and having a brief moment of panic as he remembered tumbling to his death from a balcony—he carefully worked his way toward the ground. It was a painstakingly slow process. He likely could have gone a good bit faster without much risk, but Magnus’ memories of his last fall were too fresh. Then again, it was possible with his new strength that his body would survive a five-story fall, but he didn’t plan on testing it at the moment. His goal, after all, was to avoid Curtis, not end up with two broken legs and ruptured intestines.

It took him about twenty minutes to reach the ground, and when he looked back up the sheer side of the tower he couldn’t help but grin. Penwick was no doubt entertaining Mage Curtis and would head back up to find him when Magnus didn’t make an appearance in a little while. As long as Magnus wasn’t in the tower, Penwick would be completely justified in

fobbing the debt collector off, so Magnus decided it was time to spend an afternoon in the city. Looking around, he saw a small path leading to a small iron gate at the base of the hill and jogged down to it. The gate hadn't been used in a long time and was quite rusty, so Magnus simply hopped over it and strolled into the city.

The area immediately surrounding Crimson Flame Tower was rather upscale, and from what Magnus remembered there were at least a dozen other mages who lived in this area. Most mages who weren't associated with a tower served merchant organizations or were members of one of the guilds that practiced magical crafts. There was a potion-making guild, a wand-making guild, a tailoring guild, and a beast tamers guild. There were also mages who served as scribes, handling information and ancient knowledge. Scribes were known for their ability to identify starstones, helping mages pick the perfect soul contract pet.

Realizing that Amber was quite conspicuous as she flew around his head, Magnus called her down and held her in his arms as they walked along. She snuffed at his pocket, trying to bite the mana gem he had slipped into it until, rather annoyed, he finally pulled it out and shoved it into her mouth. She was quite content to suck on it and lay in his arms with her eyes closed and wings folded, sucking and slurping away. Figuring that the sound was better than the sight of her flying around, Magnus strolled through the district, heading for the center of town. He had just gotten to the edge of the nobles district when he heard a shout.

“Magnus! Hey, Magnus!”

Looking up at a tall building, he saw Charlotte sticking her head out of the window, waving at him.

“Stay right there. Don't move.”

Her head disappeared and then popped back out as if to check whether he had run away.

“Seriously, don't move.”

She disappeared again and then, two minutes later, emerged from the door somewhat flushed and out of breath. She ran down the stairs and over to

where he stood. When she arrived, she panted for a moment and then stared at him. Magnus stared back, until she began to blush.

“Uh, hi,” she said, reaching up to tuck an errant strand of her flaming red hair behind her ear.

“Hello, Charlotte,” Magnus said. His eyes rose to the building behind her. “Did you just run down here with no actual plan?”

“Well, yes,” she admitted, “but I was just so surprised to see you. You never leave your tower.”

Scratching his chin, Magnus looked around and then nodded.

“That’s true. I just suddenly felt like getting out, you know? Taking a walk in the fresh air, maybe checking out the city. I don’t know that I’ve ever actually walked around it. At least not since I came back from the academy.”

Magnus had been born in Crimson Flame City, but ever since he had gone to the academy he hadn’t actually spent time in the city proper. Instead, the last few years he had spent holed up in the tower, desperately trying to advance his rank.

“Would you like to accompany me as I look around?” he asked Charlotte. “I’d be delighted to have your company.”

“What? No, I can’t. I mean, I am working.” Clearly flustered, Charlotte shook her head on instinct, unwittingly turning Magnus down. Her eyes suddenly widened as she processed what Magnus had just asked and quickly blurted out, “But I can stop! I don’t need to be working. I mean, if you want to walk around the city, I can walk around the city with you.”

“I don’t want to take you away from your work if you were doing something important,” Magnus said casually, “I’m happy to just wander around by myself.”

“No, you can’t! I-I mean, you should have someone to show you around. I can do that. Though I’m not from this city, I’ve been here for the last two years and I’ve gotten to know it quite well. Give me five minutes. No, two minutes! I’ll be right back.”

Turning on her heel, Charlotte picked up her skirt and ran for the door. After graduating from the academy in the same year as Magnus, Charlotte had appeared in Crimson Flame City. She had taken a position operating her family's raw materials business, much to everyone's confusion. Why the darling of the Flamebrand family would voluntarily take a position in a backwater place like Crimson Flame City was anyone's guess, but she had done a good enough job that no one argued about it anymore. Magnus had a pretty good idea why she took the position, though he wasn't so vain as to speak it out loud.

He ended up waiting closer to ten minutes for her, and when Charlotte reappeared the reason became apparent. She had changed both her dress and her robe and looked absolutely stunning. Her dress was a soft pink with the choker-style collar she favored, and her robe was white as snow with matching pink embroidery. She was wearing a tiara of bright silver with soft pink gems that stood out against her hair, which she had redone to let it fall in curls down her back. As she walked toward him, Magnus could see a mix of emotions in her eyes. There was a good deal of hesitation, mixed with a strong sense of defiance and, underneath, a strand of anticipation.

"You know, it constantly catches me off guard how you can look more stunning every time I see you," Magnus said, stepping forward and holding out his hand to her. She hesitated for a moment and then placed her hand in his, letting out a startled yelp as he spun her in a full circle.

"Seriously, it's no wonder your father has to beat off the suitors with a stick." He let go of her hand and turned to gesture to the city. "Where shall we go first?"

"Is there anywhere you would like to go?" Charlotte replied in an even tone, her hand clenched unnaturally tight by her side.

"No, not in particular," Magnus said as they started to walk toward the edge of the district. "I'm not joking when I said I just came to wander around. My goal is to see the city and then get back to the tower when it gets dark. Do you have any favorite places?"

"I quite like the bridge. During the Lantern Festival it's lovely. And the markets are interesting as well."

As they walked down the street, Magnus saw the citizens making a wide path for them. Charlotte didn't even seem to notice, taking it for granted that mortals would simply get out of their way.

"Let's see the bridge first," Magnus said. "And then we can go wander around the markets. You know, we should also find some food. Though, now that I think about it," he patted his pockets. "I didn't actually bring any money."

"That's fine," Charlotte said a little too quickly as she produced a white-and-pink purse. "I have plenty."

Magnus' lips twitched, and he let out a dramatic sigh.

"This is the exact opposite of how this is supposed to go, you know. I invited you out and I'm supposed to be the one paying for things. But here I am, a penniless pauper, forced to throw myself on your charity. But snacks are snacks, and one must make sacrifices."

Rolling her eyes, Charlotte tucked her purse away.

"You know, sometimes I wonder if you've hit your head."

"Oh? Why's that?"

As they walked down the street, Magnus didn't hide his curiosity as he took in all the sights.

"Your way of speaking, it's different. You seem a lot more relaxed than you did before. If I had offered to pay for you a month ago, you would have turned me down flat with some sort of comment about how you could stand on your own two feet and didn't need charity. But here you are joking about it."

"A lot has happened in the last month," Magnus said. "It might have something to do with my new soul contract. You've heard the theory of how the pets we bind ourselves to influence us, right?"

"Yes, though that's never been proven."

"I mean, how would you prove something like that?" Magnus said with a

shrug. “But allow me to introduce you to Amber.”

Charlotte had clearly been so fixated on Magnus himself that she had completely missed the fact that he was holding a pig in his arms. That was partly because Amber was half snuggled under his robe, but as he spoke her name she stuck her little snout up into the air and oinked a greeting at Charlotte, who stopped in the middle of the road to gawk at her.

“Is she a pig?”

“Yes.” Magnus twitched his robe aside, revealing her glittering silver wings. “A pig with wings, to be precise. The only one of her kind, as far as I know. My more relaxed attitude might have something to do with her,” Magnus said, using the convenient excuse so he wouldn’t have to explain how he was actually two merged souls in one body.

Stepping closer, Charlotte reached out her hand and then hesitated.

“Can I pet her?”

“I don’t know. Amber, can she pet you?”

Amber looked Charlotte up and down, her eyes narrowing, as if weighing the female mage’s worth. After a full assessment, the little pig stood up in Magnus’ arms and nodded casually, as if bestowing a great favor.

“Here, why don’t you just hold her?” Magnus said, handing her over. “But be careful. She likes to eat, well, everything really. But especially mana-active objects.”

Magnus hadn’t missed how Amber’s eyes lingered on Charlotte’s jewelry, and as the pig settled into Charlotte’s arms, he gave her a warning glance. They’d been standing in the middle of the street, having their conversation, and traffic was starting to get backed up behind them. Of course, none of the citizens would ever dare interrupt two mages, even if they were preventing the carts from moving.

While Charlotte cooed over Amber, Magnus lightly touched the back of her elbow and guided her to the side of the street, where there was a stand selling some sort of roasted meat on skewers.

“Smells delicious,” Magnus said to the rather horrified stand owner. “Why don’t you introduce what you have for sale here?”

“Of course, my lord,” the skewer seller bowed repeatedly. “We have two kinds of meat, my lord. We have beef and...” his voice faltered as he caught sight of Amber. “And... and... and....”

“Is this pork?” Magnus guessed.

The skewer seller’s face blanched in terror, and it was only by gripping the side of the stand that he managed to avoid fainting dead away.

“Yes... yes, my lord.”

“Great, I love pork. Give me four pork skewers and two beef skewers. Actually, make that four beef skewers as well.”

“Do you want any?” he asked Charlotte.

She was still too busy tickling Amber under the chin, and Magnus had to repeat his question before she snapped out of it and shook her head. Seeing his outstretched hand, she took out her purse and placed it in his palm. With a shrug, he opened it up, pulled out a couple of bills, and then stuffed the purse in his pocket.

“Go ahead and make it six of each skewer,” he said as he handed over payment.

“My lord, you don’t need to pay for these. You’re welcome to just have them.”

“Absolutely not. I categorically refuse,” Magnus said, slapping his money on the stand as lightly as he could.

The force of the blow still caused the counter to creak alarmingly, and the skewer seller didn’t dare argue any further. After handing over the twelve skewers, he carefully made change for Magnus, counting it twice to ensure that everything was in order. Magnus left a few extra copper sitting on the counter as a tip, shoved the change in his pocket, and carried off his skewers triumphantly with Charlotte following close behind.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



After looking around, Magnus spotted a small fountain with some benches nearby, and he led Charlotte over to one of them.

“Have a seat, and let’s try these skewers. I do love roasted meat you know. We’ve got beef and pork, and it seems like some spicy seasoning.”

Charlotte looked at the skewers and took a sniff.

“They do smell good,” she said. “But I didn’t—”

Without hesitating, Magnus handed her a beef and a pork skewer.

“Beef and pork,” he said. “Enjoy.”

“Should we really be eating pork?” Charlotte protested. “I mean, won’t that hurt Amber’s...?”

Her voice trailed off as Magnus held out all but two of the remaining skewers for the little pig, who sat up and rapidly gobbled down all of them, sticks and everything. It was like feeding logs into a wood chipper, though

instead of shavings flying everywhere, they were all neatly devoured. As soon as she had finished, Amber's eyes darted to the two skewers Magnus was still holding, but he shook his head.

"Don't even think about it. These are for me. You'll have to beg your lady friend there if you want more."

Amber immediately turned and set her eyes on a new target, the two skewers Charlotte was holding.

"Hmm, this is really good," Magnus said as he stripped a couple of pieces of seasoned beef from the skewer. "I'm going to have to remember that place."

By the time he had finished his two skewers, Amber had eaten one of Charlotte's and was clearly angling for the last one.

"Don't be greedy," Magnus said, picking up the wiggly little pig. "You really should try that," he gestured to the skewer Charlotte held. "It's excellently seasoned."

Though she clearly didn't see the appeal of meat roasted on the side of the road and stuck on a stick, Charlotte still tried it, taking a dainty bite from the piece at the very end. As soon as the spices hit her mouth, her eyes lit up.

"Hmm, this is good. It's got a very different flavor."

She took a bigger bite, chewing with appreciation, as Magnus sat next to her.

"I never knew mortal food could be this good."

"Have you never eaten street food?" Magnus asked.

"No, never. If my father heard about a delicious food he might invite a cook to come to the estate to cook for us, but buy food off the side of the road? Ha, never. That's not the Flamebrand way." Her tone held a hint of self-mockery.

Magnus had only ever seen Kaelan Flamebrand, from a distance but he

could practically hear her father repeating those words.

“Did you grow up in a tower?” Magnus asked casually as Charlotte continued to nibble at the skewer.

“An estate just outside. Only mages were allowed in the tower, so Mother and Father spent most of their time there. They would come and visit me every few days. At least, Mother would. My father was rather busy. Heh, still is really busy. But I got to see him most weeks.” Charlotte spoke casually, no hint of complaint or hurt in her words. If anything, she seemed thankful she had gotten to see her father as much as she did.

Her words triggered his memories, and for a moment Magnus was lost in the past. He hadn't grown up in a mage family like Charlotte. His father had been a minor nobleman who had died a few months before Magnus was born, and his mother had raised him by herself, relying on the proceeds from the estate his father left behind. They had lived a quiet, insular life, never interacting with other nobles, let alone mages, and avoiding commoners like they were plague ridden. According to his mother, commoners and any non-mages were entirely beneath him. It was no wonder Magnus had grown up to be such a stuck-up and self-centered brat. Shaking himself free from the memories, Magnus directed the conversation back to Charlotte.

“You formed your soul contract early, didn't you?”

Glancing at Magnus from the corner of her eye, Charlotte nodded.

“Yes, I was ten. During my assessment, it was revealed that my soul is shaped like a phoenix. It's hereditary to my family, though it only appears once every few generations. My father caught a phoenix for me, a frostflame phoenix.”

“Right? I remember seeing it at your exhibition match at the academy. I don't think I'll ever forget the sight.”

“Her name is Glacia,” Charlotte said quietly, a smile curling at the corners of her lips.

“And if I'm remembering correctly she's platinum ranked, right?”

“Yes. Though it’s less impressive when you consider that all phoenix are platinum ranked or higher. If I make it to her rank, she’ll automatically begin to grow stronger too.”

“It’s kind of incredible you were able to form a soul contract with a mysterious creature that at the time was, what? Five ranks above you?”

“It’s the advantage of a shaped soul,” Charlotte said with a shrug.

She had finished off her last piece of meat on the skewer so Magnus, standing up, took the skewer from her and fed it to Amber, who chomped it down without any hesitation.

“Amber here is not platinum ranked,” Magnus said, with a self-deprecating laugh, “but she does have her uses.”

“Is there a reason you keep her summoned? I mean, besides how cute she is?” Charlotte asked, standing up and smoothing out her skirt.

Magnus hadn’t given it much thought, but now his brow furrowed. Most mages didn’t walk around with their pets on display, only using them when they had actual need. It required mana to maintain a pet’s presence in the physical world, after all. The rest of the time their pets returned to whatever dimension they came from, where they would wait in stasis until the mage activated their soul contract, pulling their pet back into the world.

The unfortunate truth for Magnus, however, was that he didn’t have any mana to use on his soul contract, so if she went back into the mysterious dimension he wasn’t sure he’d be able to bring her out again. But that only highlighted how strange she was. She wasn’t pulling mana from him since his soul was in no shape to channel it, which meant she was forcefully keeping herself in this dimension. In fact, as he remembered the bizarre experience of the starstone cracking, he realized that Amber had very likely forced her way into this world, since Magnus had been incapable of using mana to stimulate his soul contract. Unable to open the gate himself, he couldn’t send her back even if he wanted to, which seemed to suit her just fine.

“You know, I haven’t really thought about it,” he said, scratching his head. “She’s not that disruptive, apart from her tendency to try and chew on

everything she sees, so I just let her be.”

Thankfully there were no direct prohibitions against keeping soul pets out, though most were so large that their presence was rather disruptive. Turning in place to look around, Magnus caught sight of the tower in the distance. By his estimation, Penwick and Curtis had probably figured out he had run away. A small smile slipped across his lips, but he hid it by pretending to cough into his hand.

“So,” he said to Charlotte, “where is this bridge you were talking about going to see?”

“Nearby. It’s the bridge that leads from this district into the center of the city. We’ll head down this street and turn on the next,” she said. “Then it’s a straight shot to where the bridge is.”

Magnus was still holding Amber, idly scratching the top of her head and behind her ears, so he gestured with his head for Charlotte to lead the way. He kept pace beside her as they left the fountain, heading for the bridge. As they walked Charlotte tried to keep up a flow of conversation, but quickly ran out of topics and lapsed into a slightly embarrassed silence. Occasionally she would peek at Magnus before quickly looking away again.

Magnus was mostly occupied by observing all of the fascinating things he saw in the city. Of course, since one of his souls was from Borella he had no trouble recalling what the world was like. On the other hand, since one of his souls was from Earth, a place where technology and civil society were considerably more advanced, he found just about everything strangely novel. This world was clearly still in a semi-feudal state, where the mass of the population was reliant on those who owned the land they farmed and hunted.

While Crimson Flame was a trading city, it still boasted a considerable amount of agriculture, and the majority of the civilians were engaged in farming, animal husbandry, or hunting. Their goods flowed from the surrounding areas into the city, and in exchange the city’s military provided protection against bandits and beasts who came down from the mountains or out of the deep forests.

Most of the people Magnus saw were dressed in coarse, heavy clothing,

more akin to canvas than linen. There didn't seem to be a specific style that he could pick out among the commoners, and the majority of them wore stacked clothing with a considerable number of layers, despite the fact that the late summer sun was relatively warm. There were also those dressed in finer clothing, silks, brocade, and crisp linen. Anyone dressed in finer clothing normally had a profusion of jewelry as well, clearly marking the wealth gap between the two groups.

Magnus knew that society in Borella was divided into four distinct and incredibly codified social classes with next to no movement between them. At the bottom were the commoners, individuals who mainly got by through the sweat of their brow. They worked as farmers, laborers, blacksmiths, tanners, miners, and the like. Anyone who worked directly with raw material to either create or harvest it and those who took that raw material to shape it into more refined goods were part of the commoner class. Commoners were, by and large, poor, with very few being able to save more than a pittance. Most lived day to day, or week to week, and they tended to live in multi-generational family units that packed into small houses.

Above them were the merchants and artisans, the so-called middle class. This middle class comprised anyone who took a refined good and transformed it into something new, as well as those who controlled the flow of goods by transporting and trading. Merchants and artisans made up this class, though they were still considered commoners by the nobles. Often the merchants and artisans were quite wealthy, and in many cases they were wealthier even than the nobility who looked down on them. They had their own social structures, their own areas of influence, and, especially when organized, were a force to be reckoned with.

The nobles were the third class above the merchants, and they controlled all of the land across the continent that wasn't owned by the mages. Though the cities were, on the surface, the property of the mage tower that guarded it, all of the agricultural land around the cities was divided into areas assigned to the nobility.

Once Borella had been a world with kings, and even emperors, but as the mage towers grew in power, conflict had broken out. After all, no matter

how many mortal soldiers a king might have, they couldn't compete with the power of a tower of mages. No one knew why exactly it had started, but the kings and mage towers went to war, and eventually the power struggle grew so fierce that the nobility had been forced to choose allegiance to the king or allegiance to whichever of the mage organizations ruled over their lands. That choice had turned out to be easy, as a handful of mages could wipe out a kingdom on a whim.

Within a single generation, all the kings were wiped out, along with their bloodlines. Even those mages who were members of royal families were eliminated, so as to leave no one who could claim a right to the now-empty thrones. This left the nobility adrift, so they quickly pledged themselves to the towers. In exchange, the towers granted them land and guaranteed their succession rights. Even now, countless generations later, the nobility held titles for all of the surrounding land.

This meant they held the livelihood of both the commoners and the merchant class in their hands. The result was a carefully balanced society where the nobility leased their lands for farming and resource collection to the commoners. They sold the raw materials and refined goods to the merchants, who would turn around and distribute them throughout the continent, finally selling the finished goods to the nobility. Of course, above all three social classes were the mages, the true rulers of Borella.

Like the kings before them, the mages provided a stabilizing pressure that would crush anyone who tried to disrupt the system. On the occasion that a noble family tried to carve out a chunk of the continent to establish their own kingdom, the mages from their overseeing organization would pay them a visit to encourage their continued participation in the status quo through the threat of death.

“We’re going to go this way,” Charlotte said as they reached a corner, pulling Magnus from his thoughts.

Turning down a broad street, Magnus caught sight of an impressive stone bridge in the distance. There were quite a few pedestrians and a dozen or so carts climbing up the long arc, and as Magnus and Charlotte got closer he saw that the entire thing was made of a smooth blue stone. Stopping near one of the large pillars that anchored the bridge to the shore, Magnus ran his

hands along it. A chill pierced his palm, causing his eyebrows to rise.

“What is this? I’ve never seen stone like this.”

“They call it ice stone. It comes from far to the north,” Charlotte said. “It’s incredibly durable and retains the same temperature all year long, staying cool to the touch even in the dead of summer, which is why they call it ice stone. But during the winter it doesn’t get much colder than this, which means ice doesn’t form on it and carts can still use it without worrying about slipping.”

“Impressive.”

Together, they walked up along the pedestrian path heading for the top of the bridge. The river the bridge crossed wasn’t particularly large, and here in the midst of summer the spring thaw had run its course, causing the water level to drop. It was still deep enough for small boats, however, and Magnus saw half a dozen moving up and down it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



For a few minutes the two of them stood at the railing, watching the water drift by below.

“This is lovely,” Magnus said, “and I imagine it’s even prettier during the Lantern Festival.”

“It is,” Charlotte said, turning her head slightly and tucking a few strands of hair the breeze had blown free behind her ear. “They light the lanterns at the top of the river and the current brings them down under the bridge. Each lantern is supposed to represent a memory of something good that happened this year. They often get so thick on the water it looks like the river is on fire. You should come and see it this year.”

“I think I will,” Magnus said.

Just then, he heard a faint mooing sound and then a crashing sound, as if a thousand small rocks had been suddenly dumped. His hearing had grown considerably sharper since he had upgraded his body, and as he looked over he realized that whatever was making the noise was still a couple blocks

away. Charlotte hadn't heard a thing, but Magnus reached for her hand and tugged on it.

"It seems like something exciting is happening," he said. "We should go check it out."

"What? Why?"

She made a half-hearted effort to pull her hand free from his, only to discover that his grip, though not painfully tight, was impossible to shake off. Pulling her along at a half jog, Magnus left the bridge and hurried through the street. They had hardly gone half a block when they heard a louder bellow, this time tinged with a hint of rage and pain. At the same time, shouts broke out and civilians started streaming toward them, clearly trying to get away from whatever was ahead.

Exchanging glances, they sped up, breaking into a run as they headed for the disturbance. Though mages focused on casting spells, their bodies were a good bit stronger than mortals, and Charlotte, picking up her skirt with one hand, had no trouble as she ran toward the disturbance. Magnus found her speed to be abysmally slow, of course, but he didn't want to leave her behind so he matched her pace.

Coming around the corner, they saw one of the many open-air markets that dotted the city. Normally these markets were full of stalls and crowds of citizens buying and selling goods. But this particular market was in complete chaos. Dozens of stalls were overturned and merchants and civilians were scrambling to get out of the way of a massive ox with green skin that was currently rampaging in the center of the market.

Magnus recognized it immediately as a green river ox, a common iron-ranked beast used to pull large loads. Normally docile, the green river ox was furious and in pain, likely due to the burning bundle of pitch-soaked cloth and hay tied securely onto the poor creature's tail. Flailing with its wide horns, the ox crushed a stall, sending debris flying and trampling straight through another, causing it to fall down in the wake of its charge. Worse, its tail kept lashing this way and that, causing drops of burning pitch to land on the ruins of the stalls.

Catching fire, the wood and cloth soon began burning fiercely enough that

it started spreading to other stalls that hadn't been knocked over. Magnus could see the city's mortal soldiers gathering, but none were foolish enough to try and stop the ox, as a casual swing of its horns or whip of its flaming tail would kill them instantly. The difference in strength between an iron-ranked beast and a mortal was vast, and Magnus couldn't blame them for their caution.

Unfortunately, not everyone had made it out of the market in time, and there was a shriek as a woman who had been pinned under her stall after the ox brushed past it finally struggled free. She climbed to her feet, but her leg was badly mangled, forcing her to crawl across the ground. A burning chunk of a stall crashed over on her, causing her to cry out and attracting the attention of the ox. Turning its head to stare, the ox let out a loud bellow and pawed at the ground, its tail whipping back and forth in a frenzy, lighting stalls on fire.

Charlotte, her lips pressed into a thin line, thrust out her hands, forming a rapid set of seals as she began to summon her soul pet. The air behind her shimmered and then began to split open slowly as she formed the dimensional door. Unfortunately, summoning a soul pet took a few seconds and Magnus, realizing there wasn't time to wait, tossed Amber into the air and dashed forward. The ox, absolutely enraged by the burning flames all around it, lowered its head and let out a bellow that shook the air. The beast pawed the ground again, sparks flying, and then charged, its horn dipping low to skewer the crawling woman.

Realizing he wasn't going to get there in time by running, Magnus pressed his foot against the ground hard enough to shatter one of the cobblestones and executed his Swallow's Cloud Step, practically teleporting forward. Normally he used the steps one at a time, resetting his stance in between them. But even that would take too long, and his focus sharpened as he pushed himself to a speed he had never managed before. Out of absolute necessity he abandoned his perfect form as he chained the steps together, performing three rapid dashes in a slight zigzag path.

As he took his second step, Magnus felt something break free inside of him. And by his third step he discovered that he didn't need to spend any time resetting between steps. A window popped up in the edge of his vision, but

he had no time for it as he suddenly found himself in front of the green river ox, which was just as startled as he was.

For a moment Magnus considered using his Twelve Thunder's Fist, but worried that it might kill the creature. Remembering that the ox with its tail on fire was someone's livelihood, he instead reached for the massive creature's horns. Green river oxen were large creatures, easily weighing more than a ton, and this one was a fine specimen. Though the ox was charging with its full strength, Magnus had no trouble catching its horns, and he began to twist to the side. He had been expecting significant resistance, but Magnus found, to his surprise, that he could match the giant creature in strength without any issue.

The woman, only a few feet behind him, had already collapsed to the ground, her face frozen in fear when Magnus planted his feet, gripped the beast's horns, and with a loud shout, twisted his waist, tossing the surprised ox onto its side. Its forward momentum was redirected into sideways movement as it slammed into a couple of stalls, completely crushing them under its bulk.

There was a surprised moo as the ox tried to struggle to its feet, but before it could get up Magnus arrived behind it. His hand dropped onto its neck and he pressed down, pinning it to the ground even as its legs struggled and kicked. The ox rolled its big eyes, no longer angry but instead frightened out of its wits. It let out another moo, tinged with pain as the fire continued to scorch its tail.

Just then there was a sharp phoenix cry as Charlotte finished summoning her soul pet. A cold wind blew through the ruined market as Glacia spread her wings. The frostflame phoenix was a full six feet from beak to tail, with wings that spanned over twelve feet, and was a sight to behold. Her feathers were pure white, with a hint of blue frost at their edges, and her body glimmered like freshly fallen snow in the sunlight. Her eyes were sharp, and the aura she exuded was overwhelming, causing dozens of citizens to faint to the ground just from being too near.

She let out another cry, this one softer, and her wings beat once, whipping up a glacial wind that immediately put out the flames burning on the ruined stalls and the ox's tail. It coated everything with a tiny layer of frost.

Between Magnus, who had pinned it to the ground, and Glacia, who was a full four ranks above it, the green river ox was too frightened to move, and it could only let out weak moos, hoping they would let it go.

Charlotte rushed over, her eyes as big as saucers. “Magnus, are you okay?”

Letting go of the terrified ox, Magnus held out his hands and did a casual spin, showing that he was perfectly fine.

“Hello, Glacia,” he said to the phoenix as he completed his turn, “a pleasure to see you again.”

The more powerful a mysterious creature, the more intelligent they generally were, and there was no hiding the disdain in Glacia’s eyes as she stared down at Magnus. She clearly didn’t rate him as highly as Charlotte did and, if he had to guess, the phoenix would have happily turned him into a block of ice so he would stop hanging around Charlotte. He didn’t let it bother him and instead looked around for Amber, who he had tossed to the side. He didn’t see her, but through their soul contract he could tell she was nearby and in no danger, so he didn’t worry.

“Well,” he said, dusting off his hands. “It looks like everything’s sorted here.”

There was a whimper from nearby as the woman whose leg had been injured tried to struggle to her feet and bow toward them.

“No need for that,” Magnus said, walking over and grabbing her shoulder to keep her from getting up.

The expression on her face went from thankful to terrified in an instant and she fainted dead away, causing Magnus no little embarrassment. He carefully lowered her back to the ground and coughed lightly into his hand.

“Where are the guards?”

His question was answered by the tramp of metal boots as soldiers who had been on the periphery of the market rushed in to take control of the situation. A portly officer with a gold breastplate and a helmet tucked under one arm rushed over and bowed repeatedly.

Reputation +1

Reputation +2

Reputation +1

“My lord, thank you for your assistance. This would have turned into a disaster without you.”

“You should be thanking her,” Magnus said, trying to downplay his part. “That fire very well could have spread to the rest of the city.”

In truth, most of the rest of the city was made of stone buildings, so it wasn’t actually likely that the fire would spread. But the captain didn’t dare contradict Magnus and instead shifted his focus and bowed toward Charlotte.

“Thank you, Lady Charlotte, you really saved us.”

Charlotte, who was still staring at Magnus as if she couldn’t understand what had just happened, waved her hand in dismissal and the captain quickly retreated, drops of sweat the size of soybeans dripping down his face. Many of the civilians, who were watching, kept pointing at Magnus and Charlotte, whispering to each other.

Reputation +2

Reputation +1

Reputation +1

Reputation +1

Seeing that everything was in order as the soldiers began shifting through the rubble and pulling trapped merchants free, Magnus closed his eyes to sense where Amber was and headed in her direction, with Charlotte hurrying along behind him. Her phoenix was a bit too eye-catching and shrank down into a small parrot-sized bird that landed on her shoulder.

“Magnus, how did you do that?” Charlotte asked as they strolled out of the market.

“Do what?”

“You threw that bull with your bare hands.”

“Ox.”

“What?”

“It’s an ox. Green river oxen are iron-ranked beasts used to move goods around. They’re not bulls. Someone likely wanted to disrupt the market or sabotage the person whose ox it was. That’s why there were pitch-soaked rags wrapped around its tail. That or some kid wanting to play a joke. A dangerous joke, if that’s the case.”

“I don’t care what it was. You just threw an iron-ranked beast with your bare hands.”

Glancing down at his hands, Magnus wiggled his fingers and then nodded casually.

“I guess I did.”

“But it wasn’t just that,” Charlotte said, replaying the scene in her mind. “You moved quickly too. Supernaturally quick. How did you get from where we were standing to halfway across the market in an instant?”

Scratching his chin, Magnus looked around for Amber while he thought about how to answer the question.

“New abilities,” he finally said. “Abilities that Amber brought with her.”

Charlotte’s eyes narrowed, clearly not trusting his casual explanation, but before she could pry any further they came around the corner and spotted Amber. The little pig was standing in front of a man in a gray robe covered in embroidered gold coins who was crouched down in front of her. His hand was outstretched, and she was eating something from his palm. There were four heavily built thugs standing in a loose square around him. And though they appeared casual, their eyes never stopped scanning for threats.

Keeping his face composed, Magnus groaned internally. Still, the others had seen him as soon as he stepped around the corner, and considering Amber was happily chomping away, Magnus knew he couldn’t avoid the coming confrontation.

“Ah, there you are, Amber. How many times have I told you not to take things from strangers?”

Hurrying over, Magnus crouched down and picked up Amber. With an annoyed squeal, she bit down on the rest of the plant stalk she had been eating and held it tight in her mouth as Magnus picked her up.

“Hello, Magnus,” the gray-robed man said.

With what he hoped was a natural smile, Magnus returned the greeting.

“Curtis, what a pleasure to see you.”

With a smile that wasn't quite a smile, Mage Curtis, the very man Magnus had been trying to avoid by coming out into the city, rose to his feet, casually wiping his palm on one of his bodyguards. His eyes drifted to Charlotte, and he gave her a flourishing bow.

“Lady Flamebrand, what a pleasure to see you. I don't know if we've been formally introduced. My name is Curtis. I am a friend of Magnus here.”

Charlotte wasn't dumb and could easily sense the tension between the two men, but she didn't show it on her face as she smiled softly and curtsied.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mage Curtis.”

Curtis glanced at Glacia, who was resting on Charlotte's shoulder, a hint of wariness appearing in his eyes before he turned his attention back to Magnus.

“I swung by your tower today, only to be informed by Penwick that you weren't home. An unfortunately common occurrence these days. Imagine my joy at running into you unexpectedly.”

“Indeed, an absolute pleasure,” Magnus said, taking a slight step back. “Unfortunately, I really don't have time to hang out and talk, but maybe we could set up another appointment. You know, I've been very busy these days. In fact, it's great to finally see you, because I have been meaning to come and see you about some of the tower's business, but it just hasn't worked out. What about next Tuesday? I could probably do next Tuesday.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Blocking his path, Curtis' smile never shifted, somehow reminding Magnus of a great white shark about to take a bite out of a fish.

“Tuesday is too long from now. Why don't we just chat now?”

“I would, but I really have to go somewhere that isn't here, and do something else. It was nice—”

“Don't worry,” Curtis cut in smoothly, his smile never leaving his face. “What I have to say won't take long.”

“But this really isn't a place for business,” Magnus said, gesturing to the citizens who were gawking from a safe distance. “And like I said, I barely have any time today. We have an incredibly busy schedule. Isn't that right, Charlotte?”

He got a blank stare from Charlotte in return, and then a half-hearted nod, but didn't let it faze him.

“See? A terribly busy schedule. And I just have such little time to do this conversation.”

“Is this your new soul contract?” Curtis asked, completely ignoring everything Magnus had just spewed. “It’s a shame she’s so small, we’ll hardly get anything for her at the butchers.”

The naked threat in Curtis’ voice caused Magnus to stiffen and, slowly, the silly smile on his face faded away. Charlotte tensed as well, but Curtis didn’t seem to notice. Instead, he glanced at the ring on the thumb of his left hand and smirked. He pulled it off his finger and held it up for Magnus to see.

“Do you know what this is?”

Magnus didn’t reply or even glance at the ring, his eyes remaining fixed on Curtis, whose smirk grew wider.

“This is the signet ring of the Crimson Flame Tower, given in pledge by the previous tower master for loans of genuinely astronomical sums. The largest loans I have ever given in my life. I came to meet you today at the tower as we had arranged a month ago, with the intent of giving you this ring back. Assuming, of course, you were able to bring your debts current. Now, however, I don’t think I’m going to do that. I think I’m going to keep this as a reminder of how the Crimson Flame Tower tried to take advantage of me.”

Slipping the ring back onto his thumb, Curtis held it up, admiring the way it gleamed in the sunlight.

“It’s embarrassing enough for a tower master to be without his signet. It’s even more embarrassing to be chased all over by creditors, which is why I’ve done you a significant favor. I’ve purchased all of your tower’s debts. Now you only have one. Admittedly, it’s large. Large enough that if we sold everything in your tower, including you and your soul contract for parts, you wouldn’t even make a dent in it. Instead of spending the day sightseeing with your girlfriend, I highly recommend you figure out how you’re going to pay me back.”

Curtis took a slight step forward, his aura spreading around him, and the

four bodyguards who had been looking around all quickly retreated. Curtis ignored them as his aura pressed down on Magnus, attempting to force him to his knees.

At Magnus' side, Charlotte's face paled slightly. She was silver-ranked and her soul contract was platinum rank, making her one of the strongest mages in her rank. But the aura coming off of Curtis threatened to crush her, which meant that Curtis was a genuine gold-ranked mage. He hadn't even summoned his soul pet, and yet the air around him had practically solidified, causing Charlotte's face to pale. Glacia let out an angry cry and her wings spread, clearly unhappy with Curtis' intimidation.

But before things could escalate, Magnus held out his hand to stop Glacia. To his surprise, he found that the pressure from Curtis was nearly non-existent. And it wasn't just him. Amber was continuing to chomp through the plant Curtis had lured her over with, hardly sparing the gold-ranked mage more than a glance. Taking a step forward, Magnus barely blinked.

He could feel the pressure Curtis was exuding, but it didn't bother him at all. Of course, he didn't imagine he was actually strong enough to fight Curtis. After all, the gold-ranked mage had both spells and a gold-ranked soul pet, and Magnus' instincts were screaming at him that Curtis was incredibly dangerous. More dangerous than anyone else he had encountered recently. Besides, Curtis was in the right at the moment. Crimson Flame Tower really did owe Curtis a lot of money. With a physical confrontation not possible, Magnus opted for a different approach.

"No need for any of this," Magnus said to Curtis, who was staring at him with something approaching shock in his eyes.

The gold-ranked aura around Curtis faded as quickly as it had appeared, and Curtis looked Magnus up and down as if seeing him for the first time. Behind Magnus, Charlotte took a deep breath, trying to clear the uncomfortable feeling from her body. She was annoyed at how rude Curtis was being, and she glared at him.

"If you need help—" Charlotte started to say, but Magnus shook his head.

"Thank you. I really do appreciate it, but I'll handle this."

Still holding Amber, Magnus took a second step forward, putting himself right in front of Curtis.

“You’ve made yourself clear,” Magnus said. “But really, if you were smart, you’d take a step back.”

“I never take a step back when there’s money on the table,” Curtis said, his smile growing ever so slightly.

“But that means you’ll lose out on more money,” Magnus countered. “Tell me, do you know what has just happened? You should, it’s been all over the city recently.”

“You mean your Tower War agreement with Starlit Clay Tower?”

“Correct,” Magnus, nodded, glancing toward the tower in the distance. “Crimson Flame Tower versus Starlit Clay Tower. A battle that everyone thinks is going to be completely one-sided.”

Scoffing, Curtis shook his head.

“Are you going to try and convince me you can actually win? That you’ll be able to pay your debts with what you win?”

His lips twitching into a pained smile, Magnus leaned forward slightly, lifting his hand to the side of his mouth as if he were telling a great secret.

“No, it’s actually just the opposite. All signs point to us getting crushed.”

His honesty caught Curtis off guard, and his brow furrowed.

“And that helps me how?”

“Well, simple. Bet on Starlit Clay Tower to win, which will make you a tidy profit. Then, after we lose the fight, Celestine Earthshaper will be the new tower master, which means that she will not only inherit the tower itself, but all of the debts that go along with it. She’s going to be much better able to pay the tower’s debts. Because, if I’m honest, I’m completely tapped out. You can’t squeeze blood from a stone, you know. She, on the other hand, is a very wealthy dwarf with access to even more money. Did you know she’s pledged a mana crystal mine on this? That means once she wins the fight

and gets the tower, she'll have access to plenty of resources.”

As he continued speaking, Magnus' eyes lit up, a delightful idea occurring to him.

“In fact, if you really want to rake it in, what you should do is lend me even more money! You should lend me enough money that if—I mean when Celestine wins—you'll be able to take the mana crystal mine. By my estimation, you're good for it. And just imagine, in one short month, being the proud owner of a mana crystal mine.”

By this point, Magnus was really getting into it. He stepped closer and patted Curtis on the shoulder, causing the gold-ranked mage to jerk back.

“Listen, I've just had the most fantastic idea. We're already mortgaged for more than the tower's worth, right? So what's a bit more? All you need to do is double the amount of money that you've lent us. You can even lend it to us at an exorbitant interest rate. I'd be fine with that. After all, you'll be collecting it with interest soon. And from someone who can actually pay, unlike me.”

For the first time since he had appeared, the ever-present smile on Curtis' face vanished.

“Do you think I'm an idiot?” he asked, his voice low and full of danger. “Why would I ever agree to such a thing?”

“Because you don't have much of a choice,” Magnus replied calmly. “Yes, my master overpledged to you and others. Yes, we owe you a lot of money. Yes, you have the Crimson Flame signet. But though you can pressure me all you want, you're not going to get a single penny before the Tower War. From me or from Penwick. I don't care about my reputation, so you can't use that to threaten me, and he is just the steward. It's not like I have anything else that you can try to seize. If you try to get rough, I'll ask Lady Flamebrand here for a favor, consequences be what they may. And if I lose to Starlit Clay Tower and Celestine I'm going to be pledging myself to the Barrier Guard anyway, so you won't get a penny out of me even after.

“Really, this is your only good option. I mean, come on. How could we possibly win? We have two mages. And I will give my solemn pledge that I

will recruit no other mages during this one-month period. That leaves us at two versus six. Tell me, do you really think we're going to win this fight? Sure, the odds are going to be heavily against us, so you won't make a ton of money betting on Starlit Clay Tower winning. But if you increase our debts, lending us more money now at an astronomical interest rate, you'll be able to recoup all of it. After all, the new tower master will be responsible for the tower's debts. Besides, Celestine already knows we have debt. We just haven't disclosed exactly how much."

Curtis had clearly set his mind on refusing, but as soon as Magnus mentioned joining the Barrier Guard his expression turned ugly. The mages who defended the wall were in a special category, and there was a standing order enforced by the five major mage organizations that any mage who pledged themselves to the Barrier Guard for the rest of their lives would have their debts wiped out. Not repaid, but instead simply eliminated.

Curtis hadn't been concerned that Magnus' master would run off to join the Barrier Guard as he was entirely too old to qualify, but Magnus, in the prime of his life, would be eagerly accepted. It was a desperate play, to be sure, but Curtis could well imagine that if Magnus had no other way to climb out from the pit of debt he would throw his lot in with the Barrier Guard.

Taking a small step back, Curtis gave Magnus a long, hard look and then, gritting his teeth, he pulled the signet ring from his thumb and tossed it back to Magnus.

"Fine. I'll lend you the money. But in return, you'll swear on this signet that you won't add or borrow any other forces to your tower. You have to swear that in the coming Tower War, the only combatants your tower will field will only be you and Penwick. If you can do that, I'll have the contracts drawn up. And remember, it's the tower that's borrowing the money, not you."

Examining the ring he had caught, Magnus smiled and slipped it onto his thumb.

"I, Magnus Chalder, formally swear on the signet of the Crimson Flame Tower that the only people who will participate in the Tower War with

Starlit Clay Tower from our side will be myself and the tower steward, Penwick. Should I break this vow let my mana dissipate and my soul be shattered.”

There was a faint rumble in the air and Magnus felt something intangible brush over him, as if the world itself was witnessing his oath. In fact, that was exactly what was happening. Whenever a mage made an oath, it became binding and the world itself was the witness. Should Magnus try and recruit anyone else for the upcoming Tower War, he would suffer the fate he had outlined. His mana would disperse, and his soul would be shattered.

Granted, his mana had already been dispersed and his soul was already shattered so there was a good chance that breaking the oath wouldn't actually impact him, but Magnus had no intention of breaking his oath. Satisfied, Curtis gave a sharp nod.

“I'll bring the money and the contract to you tomorrow.”

“Shouldn't we discuss the terms of the contract?” Magnus asked. “I mean, how much money are you bringing?”

With a sneer, Curtis waved his hand.

“You're in no position to negotiate. I'll inform you of the terms when I arrive tomorrow.”

“Fine,” Magnus said, holding up his hands. “I look forward to our meeting.”

With his four bodyguards surrounding him, Curtis turned on his heel and strode away, his robe making faint jangling noises as if the embroidered coin were really real. Magnus, after watching the merchant mage leave, turned to Charlotte, who was staring at him like he was the biggest idiot in the world.

“Well, that was unfortunate. I was really hoping to dodge him today. But, overall, I don't think things turned out bad. At least we'll have some money tomorrow. Penwick will be happy about that.”

“Are you really going to join the Barrier Guard?” Charlotte's voice was

quiet, but Magnus could hear the faint panic hidden in her words.

“Probably not,” Magnus said with a shrug. “I really doubt it’ll come to that.”

“You just said that when you lose the fight, you’re going to join the Barrier Guard.”

Her voice gaining volume, Charlotte practically snapped at him as she stepped forward and poked Magnus hard in the chest. He didn’t even flinch, and instead she jerked back her finger and hissed in pain.

“How—?!”

“It’s all the push-ups I’ve been doing,” Magnus said with a grin. “Hey, didn’t you say there were some fun markets around? We’ve still got time before evening. Why don’t we go find one? Plus, I’m a little bit hungry. We should find some more food. Now that I’m rolling in the dough, I’ll treat you.”

As he spoke, he fished out the pink purse Charlotte had given him before and waved it in the air.

“Give me that,” she snapped, grabbing the purse from him and slipping it into her pocket.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Taking her arm, Magnus pulled her along as he began walking down the street without giving her a chance to return to her complaints.

“You don’t need to worry,” he said as she walked stiffly beside him. “The chances of me having to join the Barrier Guard are getting lower every day.”

“I don’t see how.”

His calm rubbed off on Charlotte and her words were much quieter.

“You’re in debt way over your head. You’ve just arranged to be in even more debt. You’re about to fight and lose a Tower War that you won’t let me help with. And you just swore that you wouldn’t get any help from anyone else. Magnus, I don’t know what your plan is, but from here it looks like you’re just digging yourself deeper and deeper into a hole.”

“Incidentally, that is half of the plan,” Magnus said with a laugh. “I could tell you the rest of the plan, but that would ruin the surprise. And I think

surprises are fun, so I'm going to keep it under my hat for now. But I'll tell you this. Every day our chances of winning go up."

"You're impossible," Charlotte said, sighing and shaking her head.

"So I've heard. Everybody assumes we're going to lose the Tower War, but what do you think happens if we win?"

"You get a few resources and you stay in debt," Charlotte snapped.

"Not for long we don't. We'll have a mana crystal mine. We can lease it out or sell it outright. In both cases, we should be able to clear our debts."

"That might have been true up until this point," Charlotte said. "But I have a feeling Curtis isn't going to give you the chance. He'll give you so much money tomorrow that there's no way you'll be able to pay off the debt, even if you gift him the mana crystal mine."

Magnus just smiled and patted Charlotte's hand, causing her to blush slightly.

"Hey, what's that over there?" he asked, pointing to a large building with a crowd out in front of it.

By this point Charlotte was getting used to Magnus' abrupt shifts in attention, and looking over she saw the store he was pointing to.

"That's a stone gambling shop."

Getting closer, Magnus saw that the shopkeeper was standing on the store's porch, surrounded by citizens dressed in all sorts of clothing. He was holding a large, rough chunk of stone on a pillar that had been placed on the porch, displaying it for everyone to see. Next to him there were a couple of clerks keeping track of bids coming from the crowd.

"Stone gambling? I've never heard of this before. How does it work?"

As Magnus and Charlotte stopped at the edge of the crowd, the shopkeeper called out the winning bid and a pleased merchant strode forward, pushing his way through the crowd to get the stone.

"Will you cut it here? We offer free cuts," the shopkeeper said as he handed

the stone over.

“No, I’ll take it home,” the merchant replied, shaking his head. “I’ve got the tools myself.”

Carrying it back through the crowd, the merchant dumped a rock into a small cart that held a few other stones.

“Each of these stones has the potential to contain magic materials,” Charlotte explained, pointing at a giant pile of rocks stacked outside the shop. “You can’t tell until you cut into them, because the rocks prevent the mana from leaking. But there are all sorts of valuable minerals you could potentially get once they’re cut open. Of course, you could get nothing. Hence the gambling part. It’s a relatively new thing that has swept the continent in the last couple years.”

“Quite curious.”

Magnus watched as the shopkeeper pulled out another stone, this one roughly the size of his head. The man set it on the stand in front of him and patted it.

“We’ve got a stone for sale, folks. Make your bids.”

There was a period of quiet murmuring as those in the crowd who were interested in bidding looked the stone over. A few even stepped forward to measure it or knock its surface with their knuckles or small metal hammers, listening to how the stone sounded.

After a couple of minutes, the shopkeeper raised his hand.

“We will start the bidding at 100 gold. Do I have a bid?”

“100.”

“150.”

“We have 150. Anybody want to go up to 200?”

“Yes, 200!”

“250.”

“250 right there. Do I have anybody for 300? 300. Do I have anybody for 300?”

“Too small to be worth 300,” one of the bidders yelled, but the shopkeeper shook his head.

“You never know. Even small stones can hold incredibly valuable treasures. Somebody last week opened a perfect quality blood jade, made nearly 10,000 gold right here on this spot.”

“I’ll give you three.”

“That’s right, folks. You got to spend money to make money. I have three. Do I have 350?”

“350!”

“400.”

Quite pleased, the shopkeeper kept the bidding going, finally ending at 650 gold, a considerable amount of money for such a small, nondescript stone. The man who won made his way to the front, and the shopkeeper asked if he wanted to take advantage of the shop’s free cutting services. After a moment of consideration, the man nodded.

“Yes, go ahead.”

Two of the clerks stepped forward with chisels and a saw. Very carefully, they made a slight notch in the top of the stone. While one poured a thin stream of water onto the stone, the other took the saw and began to cut down into it. It was hard work, and the deeper the workmen cut, the more nervous the merchant who purchased the stone grew. They made it about a quarter of the way into the stone when the workman using the saw suddenly stopped.

“I hit something,” he said, and a gasp rose from the crowd.

Carefully maneuvering the saw out, he took his chisel, inserted it into the thin crack, and gently tapped, causing a piece of the stone shell to crumble away. Little by little, he worked away at the stone until, as a piece fell away, a dusty amber glow appeared.

“Looks like you got amber! That bodes well, folks. Let’s see what’s inside,” the shopkeeper announced with a smile.

Turning the rock on its side so the revealed amber was pointed up, they quickly washed it with some water, rubbing it so they could peer into the gap.

“Looks like you got a plant of some kind. Six petals? I think that’s a jade dewflower,” the shopkeeper announced. “1,200 gold, minimum. If it’s over 100 years old, that price will double. Do you want us to keep cutting?”

The man who had bought the stone quickly shook his head.

“No, that’s fine. I’ll take it from here.”

He grabbed the stone after the clerks dried it off and quickly carried it away, not wanting to reveal his treasure to anyone else.

“This is quite interesting,” Magnus said. “How often do people pull treasures like that?”

“It depends on the batch,” Charlotte said. “But I don’t think it’s very often.”

“One in ten if we’re lucky. One in twenty if we’re not,” a nearby merchant said, turning to look at Charlotte and Magnus.

As soon as he realized he was speaking to mages, his face blanched, and he quickly bowed. Magnus gave him a thankful nod and the man, shivering as if he had caught a fever, turned and slipped into the crowd, clearly wanting nothing to do with the two mages. It was at this point that the shopkeeper finally noticed there were mages watching, and he hurried over, leaving his stewards to continue the selling.

“Greetings, my lord and my lady, welcome to my shop.” Though clearly nervous, he wasn’t nearly as nervous as the other merchant had been. “If you’re interested in stone gambling, we have a better selection inside. That’s where the real stone gambling happens. This is just scraps and castoffs. You typically won’t find anything here that’ll cost more than a thousand gold. And the treasures are likewise less valuable. Our experts select the best stones and keep them in the backyard. In fact, as I speak, one of your peers is trying his luck. May I escort you there?”

Seeing that Magnus was quite interested in the stone gambling, Charlotte nodded.

“Sure, let’s go back and see.”

Clearing the crowd out of the way, the shopkeeper brought them into his store. Inside were hundreds of stones set on display, half cut open to reveal whatever treasures they had inside. There was also a variety of different kinds of stones piled into large stacks still waiting to be cut. Weaving his way through the treasures, many of which were priced in the tens or even hundreds of thousands of gold pieces, the merchant brought them to the shop’s backyard, where there were even more stones spread out. Stacked all around were small stones, large stones, and even massive monoliths larger than Magnus himself.

There were a dozen people in the backyard, in addition to the workmen who were handling the stones, and all of them were dressed in fine clothing, marking them as either rich merchants or nobility. There was also a short man in a mage’s robe with a portly build and an air of self-importance. He was barely 5’5” and yet still managed to look down his nose at everyone around him. As Magnus and Charlotte entered the backyard, a number of glances were cast their way, and seeing their robes, a low murmur rose. The short mage, hearing the remarks, turned and looked at Magnus and Charlotte, his eyes lighting up.

“Lady Flamebrand,” he said, abandoning the stone he had just been examining and rushing over to Charlotte.

Before he could get close, Glacia let out a sharp chirp, her wings spreading, and the man quickly stopped, maintaining a distance of ten feet. His face paled as he felt the soul pressure Glacia exuded. Ignoring the pressure, even though Glacia was sending the majority of it toward him, Magnus walked forward and held out his hand as he introduced himself.

“Magnus,” he said. “I don’t know that we’ve been introduced before.”

Though he clearly didn’t want to shake hands with Magnus, the short mage gave a strained smile and put his hand limply in Magnus’.

“My name is Caspin Woolworth of the Woolworth family.”

“Oh, the Woolworth family? I don’t know that I’m familiar,” Magnus said.

By this time, Charlotte, who was clearly not happy to see Caspin, had come closer.

“Mage Woolworth is a member of the Woolworth Merchant Group. They mainly deal in cloth. The Flamebrand family has a long-term partnership contract with them.”

Caspin nodded his head like a chicken pecking rice, his eyes practically glowing as he looked at Charlotte.

“Are you interested in stone gambling?” he asked, gesturing to the stones surrounding them. “I’m particularly partial to it myself. As you know, I have a powerful bronze-ranked earth-based soul pet, which gives me a bit of insight into these sorts of stones. Though it isn’t nearly as powerful as your phoenix, the mud badger is particularly good at digging, which brings it into contact with lots of types of stones.”

One of the young noblemen standing nearby, sensing a chance to improve his standing with Caspin, quickly chimed in.

“Lord Woolworth has an incredible success rate, at least two out of three.”

With a self-satisfied smile, Caspin shook his head.

“Oh, come, it’s not that good. But I have been on a winning streak recently with at least a fifty percent success rate which, if you know anything about stone gambling, is rare. Can I interest you, Lady Flamebrand, in giving it a try? I’d be happy to buy any stone in here for you. I can even introduce you to some of the tricks of the trade.”

Charlotte didn’t answer right away, glancing instead at Magnus, who was hardly paying attention to Caspin and instead was looking around at the gathered stones. Gritting his teeth, Caspin forced a smile and invited Magnus as well.

“I’d be happy to teach both of you how to pick good stones.”

“I think I’m okay,” Magnus said. “I’d like to try my hand at it by myself first. But thank you for the offer.”

Placing Amber down on the ground, Magnus strolled off, heading for a big pile of stones. He ran his finger over a few of them and then continued to a pile of small stones, trying to see if he could tell the difference between them. Left behind with Caspin, Charlotte, who didn't want to offend the eager mage for the sake of their family's business ties, reluctantly agreed, though her eyes were fixed resentfully on Magnus' back.

Thrilled, and oblivious of Charlotte's pointed stare, Caspin excitedly brought her over to examine the stone he had been looking at before. "One of the things you want to pay attention to," he said, "is the way the stone is formed."

He suddenly paused and looked at the nobles, who were crowded around as close as they could get, listening intently. With an ugly expression, Caspin waved his hand for them to go away, and all of them reluctantly made their way to the other side of the yard, giving Charlotte and Caspin some privacy.

Magnus, paying no attention to the others, wandered through the piles of stone, looking here and there. All the while, Amber ran around at his feet sniffing the rocks and letting out the occasional grunt. Magnus couldn't see any real differences between the rocks, no matter how much he examined them. To him they just looked like stones. But as they passed by a pile with large, smooth river rocks, Amber suddenly stopped, squeaked excitedly, and pressed her nose into a small gap. Crouching, Magnus looked at the gap but didn't see anything inside of it.

"Did you find something?" he asked quietly, and began moving the stones aside until he uncovered a gray river stone about the size of his torso.

Amber was practically drooling by this point and quickly opened her mouth to try and bite the edge of the stone.

"Hey, you can't eat it until we buy it," Magnus said, grabbing her chest and pulling her back.

With his other hand, he grabbed the edge of the stone and hoisted it into the air, lifting it easily. Amber let out a couple more squeaks, her legs wriggling as she tried to worm her way out of his grip.

"Don't worry," he said, holding her tight. "Let's at least get whatever it is

out of the stone first.”

That calmed her down, and she trotted along happily at Magnus’ feet as he carried the stone over to the workers.

“How much is this one?”

“If you put it on the scale, sir,” the worker said, “I can tell you.”

Magnus casually placed it on the scale. Seeing how much it weighed, the worker couldn’t help but take another look at Magnus.

“Two thousand gold, sir.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Biting his lip, Magnus turned and scanned the yard, looking for Charlotte. He saw her walking toward him, alongside Caspin, who was still prattling away. Two of the workers were struggling along behind the short mage, holding a large rock Caspin had selected. As they arrived, Caspin glanced at the stone Magnus had selected and let out a snort.

“This is why,” he said to Charlotte, half under his breath, “it’s so important to understand something about stone formation. Otherwise, you might end up picking stones like that one.”

“Is something wrong with my rock?” Magnus asked.

Giving an insincere smile, Caspin held up his hands.

“My apologies, I didn’t mean to insult you, but river rocks like that rarely have anything good. You’ll notice how they’re all smooth. That’s because there’s been water and sand running over them for a long time. And they’ve also been brushed by other stones when the spring thaws send the rocks

downstream, a tumble method for smoothing the stones, if you will. Typically, when a river stone has something inside of it, the forces it's under will cause it to crack because it's not solid stone all the way through. This means if you find an intact river stone, you can practically guarantee there's nothing inside of it. That's also why they're so cheap. Let me guess. That one was 2,100 gold?"

"Close," Magnus said. "And I appreciate you sharing your knowledge."

With a self-satisfied smile, Caspin gestured to the large piles of rocks.

"Why don't you pick another one? I'd hate to see you be disappointed at spending all that gold on nothing."

"That's okay," Magnus said with a wave of his hand. "I'll stick with this one."

Caspin, who had been just about to tell the worker to take the stone off the scale and put it back, froze, his expression turning ugly.

"Well, I tried to help. Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I won't," Magnus said casually. "Charlotte, can I borrow 2,000 gold?"

She nodded and walked over a little too quickly while getting out her purse. The two workmen bringing over Caspin's stone set it down with a grunt next to the scale, and Amber trotted over to give it a sniff. Wrinkling her nose, she immediately turned around and came back to Magnus' side, clearly uninterested with whatever was inside the rock.

"You know," Magnus said suddenly, looking over at Caspin, "stone gambling is fun, but it might be more fun if we added a little bet. You're an expert, right?"

"I don't count myself an expert, but I do have a certain level of knowledge," Caspin said, his nose rising a couple inches into the air.

"Well, then why don't we make this more interesting? Why don't we make a little wager? We can see whose stone holds a more expensive material."

Caspin's eyes immediately narrowed, and he looked at Magnus' stone

again. To his credit, despite how dismissive he was of the river rocks, he didn't immediately agree, but after carefully examining the smooth, oval-shaped stone still on the scale, he smirked.

"Sure, what kind of little bet were you thinking?"

"I'll leave that up to you," Magnus said with a wave of his hand.

Immediately, Caspin smiled widely and turned to Charlotte, two golden tickets appeared in his hand.

"Mage Toppel of the Botanical Society has a Dawnlight flower that will be blooming in a few days. I've managed to procure two tickets to the event at great cost. It is said that observing the Dawnlight flower bloom can strengthen the soul. I'll wager these two tickets that the gambling stone I picked today has a more valuable material than the one Mage Magnus has selected. However, if I win, all I request is that Lady Flamebrand accompanies me."

As he spoke, Caspin fixed his face into what he thought was a gentlemanly appearance, though really he just looked kind of constipated. When he finished, he bowed toward Charlotte.

Her eyes burning with flame, Charlotte shook her head. "What do I have to do with—?"

"An excellent bet," Magnus interrupted. "We agree. And if I lose, I'll cover the cost of your stone. I know it's not worth the same as those two tickets, but it's the least I can do."

"What are you doing? You don't have any money!" Charlotte hissed.

Patting her on the shoulder magnanimously, Magnus nodded. "True, but you do. And if I get those tickets, I'll take you to see this Dawnlight flower bloom."

Freezing, Charlotte stared at Magnus, her protests dying on her lips. With a rather ugly expression, as if she couldn't believe that she was agreeing, she nodded and plucked the two tickets out of Caspin's hand.

"Fine. If Caspin wins, I'll accompany him to see the blooming of the flower

and Magnus will pay for Caspin's stone. If Magnus wins, I'll accompany him to see the blooming of the flower."

"And I'll pay for his stone too," Caspin said, his eyes eager.

It was clear that he didn't care about the bet with Magnus at all and was really just angling for an opportunity to take Charlotte to see the Botanical Society's flower.

"So how do we do this?" Magnus said, scratching his head. "Do we cut mine first or yours first?"

"We'll cut Caspin's first," Charlotte said. "Let's just get this over with."

At Caspin's nod, the workers quickly hoisted his stone up onto the workbench and began carefully cutting into it, while next to him Charlotte grew increasingly tense. Little by little, the outer stone was chipped away, and it wasn't long before the workman hit something. A pleased smile broke over Caspin's face.

"Well, well, well, it looks like I've gotten lucky. We'll just have to see how lucky."

The stone he had picked had cost him 3,500 gold, and as the outer shell was peeled back, a large chunk of gray metal with crimson veins running through it was revealed. Letting out a sigh, Caspin shook his head.

"Ah, well. Blood vein ore is valuable, but I was hoping for something a bit better," he said. "Then again, the size of this piece is fairly significant. I'd estimate at least 15,000 gold pieces."

The workers continued to peel back the stone, and soon the entirety of the blood iron ingot was revealed. They hoisted it up onto the scale, and after weighing it out, the shopkeeper himself assessed the price.

"If you were to put this up for sale in our shop, the commission would be around 22,000 gold," he said, bowing to Caspin. "Congratulations on an excellent pick."

Flashing his self-satisfied smile, Caspin looked at Magnus and gestured.

“Well then, 22,000 gold. Not bad, considering what I paid for it. Shall we open your stone and see what you managed to find?”

“Magnus,” Charlotte whispered, grabbing his arm tightly. “I don’t want to go on a date with him!”

Her words were too quiet for Caspin to hear, but Magnus heard them loud and clear. Giving her hand a comforting pat, he gestured for the workmen to get started and they began cutting into the river stone carefully. Yet they had barely started when there was a sharp crack and the river stone split in half completely, revealing nothing inside but empty stone. The workmen froze, afraid they might be blamed for breaking the stone so violently. Caspin let out a light chuckle.

“Well, it looks as if I’ve won,” he said in a gloating voice. “It doesn’t look like you’ve managed to find anything.”

Confused, Magnus looked at the stone and then down at Amber, whose eyes were fixed on it unblinkingly. Hearing a groan from Charlotte, Magnus stepped forward and grabbed the edge of the river rock. His fingers flexed and he squeezed slightly, causing the stone to simply crumble away under his fingers. The workmen, dumbfounded by the sheer strength being shown, were even more shocked when they caught a hint of something glinting in Magnus’ palm. Brushing away the dirt, Magnus held up the gleaming iridescent crystal and gestured for the workers to continue.

“Keep going,” he said, placing the crystal down on the workbench.

The gloating expression had vanished from Caspin’s face, and he stared at the crystal on the table as the workers broke apart the two sides. With each piece that was broken more of the iridescent crystals were piled up and the shopkeeper, standing nearby, grew increasingly excited.

Reputation +3

“Congratulations, my lord,” he said as the sixth crystal was revealed. “These are perfect quality mana crystals, each worth at least 10,000 gold.”

Mana crystals were a naturally formed crystal made of hyper-concentrated mana. They were used for all sorts of different things, and it was no

understatement to say that the entire mage world relied on them. A single crystal, the size of a thumb, was worth at least 10,000 gold, and among mages they were often used as a sort of currency.

So far, the river rock had produced seven crystals, and three more were quickly uncovered, along with a number of mana crystal fragments which ranged from the size of a raisin to the size of a thumbnail. When the small pile of mana crystals was finally tallied up, the shopkeeper delivered the total with a smile so wide it threatened to split his face apart.

“123,000 gold pieces, my lord. If you are willing, we’ll buy them all from you right now for 150,000 gold.”

Mana crystals were almost completely controlled by the mage towers, as they were the ones who owned the mana crystal mines, making it exceedingly hard for mortals to get their hands on complete crystals, which was why the shopkeeper was happy to pay a premium for them. To his dismay, Magnus shook his head.

“I’m happy with the mana crystals, though I’d be willing to sell you the mana crystal fragments. You can use it to cover the cost of the two stones we opened.”

As he spoke, he picked up the ten crystals and slipped them into his pocket. They felt like normal crystals, though they shone with an iridescent glow that came from inside of them. Magnus knew that as soon as the tough outer layer of crystal was broken they would unleash a torrent of hyper-concentrated mana. Caspin, who looked as if he had choked on a frog, was still standing there, staring in shock at the fragments of river rock. Magnus patted him on the shoulder.

“It looks like I was lucky today, but don’t worry. We’ll put those tickets to good use.”

His words only made Caspin look even more miserable and, after muttering something unintelligible, the short mage fled, unable to even look at Charlotte. Picking up Amber, Magnus slipped one of the mana crystals from his pocket and fed it to her. She snuggled down in his arms, wrinkling her nose happily as she gnawed on the hard crystal.

“Well, this was fun,” Magnus said. “Though I should be getting back to the tower.”

“Are you going to use the crystals to pay some of your debt?” Charlotte asked as they walked out of the shop after saying goodbye to the shopkeeper.

“No,” Magnus said. “A hundred thousand gold is a drop in the bucket. I’d rather feed them to Amber here.”

“How much do you owe?” Charlotte asked. “I know you said it’s a lot, but how much is a lot?”

“Somewhere around twenty million gold,” Magnus said casually.

“Twenty million gold?! Magnus, how on Terra did you manage to borrow twenty million gold and still end up broke?”

“Wasn’t me,” Magnus said, shaking his head. “It was my master. May he rest in peace. What do you think, still think you can help me out?”

Falling silent, Charlotte walked alongside Magnus for a few minutes and then, to his surprise, she actually nodded.

“Yes,” she said, her voice serious. “I could go and ask my mother. It wouldn’t be hard to get you twenty million gold to clear your debts.”

“Absolutely not. Do not ask your mother. She would kill me even faster than your father.”

“True, but you’d be out of debt when you died.”

Charlotte’s words were delivered with a smile and made Magnus laugh.

“You could put it on my gravestone: barked up the wrong tree, but at least he died debt-free.”

Giggling, Charlotte linked her arm through Magnus’ as they walked back toward the bridge to return to Charlotte’s home.

“You know,” Charlotte said, as they reached the bridge, “I very much like this new you.” She paused. “I know that you’re treating the coming Tower

War lightly, but I'd be really sad if you did end up having to pledge to the Barrier Guard."

Charlotte's tone was light, but Magnus could sense from the way her arm had tensed just how honest she was being. Peeking at her profile from the corner of his eyes, Magnus cracked a smile.

"I'd be disappointed too, but it's unlikely to come to that. A month should be more than enough time to guarantee that I can win the Tower War."

"You keep saying that, Magnus," Charlotte said, stopping and turning him to face her. "But I don't see how that's possible."

"Well, if you'd asked me a week ago, I'd have bet my life that pigs couldn't fly, but," Magnus glanced down at Amber, "here we are."

Biting her lip, Charlotte nodded.

"Fine. But I want you to promise me that you're not going to run away and join the Barrier Guard without talking to me first. If everything goes wrong, I will figure something out."

"Thank you, Charlotte. You're a genuinely wonderful friend."

Charlotte smiled, but it faltered after a moment, her eyes searching Magnus' eyes. Whatever she was looking for, she didn't see and, with a disappointed pout, she turned and pulled him onward.

"Just a friend?"

Her words were quiet—whispered under her breath—and if Magnus hadn't had superhuman hearing he would have missed them. Realizing what she was annoyed about, Magnus reached into his pocket and pulled out two golden tickets.

"Hold onto these for me. Just in case I get jumped by Curtis' thugs. I'm excited to go see the Dawnlight flower bloom with you."

Snatching the tickets, Charlotte's smile returned, and she carefully put them away in her purse.

"I look forward to it," she said as they arrived in front of her home.

“I’ve had a great time,” Magnus said, removing his arm from hers and stepping back. “Thank you for showing me around the city. It was really enjoyable. I have to get back to the tower though. Otherwise Penwick is going to blow a gasket.”

Cocking her head to the side, Charlotte gave Magnus a confused look.

“What’s a gasket?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Magnus said. “What I meant to say is that he’ll blow his top. I’ve got to go and tell him the good news about Curtis and all of the money we’re going to be borrowing at ridiculously high interest rates.”

Reaching for Charlotte’s hand, Magnus lifted it and brought his lips down to brush lightly against her fingers.

“I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

He straightened and with a wave turned and strode off without looking back, Amber tucked securely under one arm.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



By the time Magnus arrived back at the tower, the sun was merely a crimson blur peeking over the horizon. He walked up the main path instead of climbing over the back gate and stopped in front of the tower to admire the sunset for a moment.

“All in all a pretty good day,” he said, speaking to Amber. “Sorted out things with Curtis, had a fun time with Charlotte, and even scored some tickets. I’d say we did pretty well.”

Behind him the door opened, and Penwick, looking like he wanted to eat Magnus alive, appeared in the doorway.

“And where, sir, have you been?”

“Here and there, out and about,” Magnus said, waving his hand. “Solving problems, wooing ladies, you know, that sort of thing. And boy, have there been some developments! And not just in my love life. Come on, I’ll tell you all about them.”

Grabbing Penwick's shoulder, Magnus forcefully turned him around and marched him right into the tower, shutting the door behind them.

"Let's go up to my office. We don't have to air our dirty laundry down here."

"What dirty laundry? I don't have any dirty laundry. If anyone has things to hide, it's you!"

"Yeah, yeah, keep walking."

Practically pushing Penwick up the stairs, Magnus took the opportunity to open up his status and check the changes that had occurred while he was out. He had picked up 23 reputation and would gain another 5 once morning came, which put him at 128. This was still a far cry from what he needed for the Talisman Arts or Array Arts Immortal Skills, but he was at least making progress.

The other change was that his Swallow's Cloud Step had broken through from the Initiate stage to the Warrior stage. He had been practicing diligently, but he had expected that it would take at least another week to break through. It seemed that using his skills in practical situations was the best way to advance them. Which meant he would need to find a way to get consistent practice against beasts if he wanted to upgrade all of them before the Tower War. When they reached the top floor of the tower, Magnus let Amber down and pulled out a chair for Penwick.

"You'll want to be sitting down for this."

The blood drained from Penwick's face.

"Oh no. What did you do?"

"See, this is your problem, Penwick. Your outlook on life is too negative. You just assume that I did something bad. What if I told you I have figured out how to pay off our debt?"

Penwick's eyebrows rose.

"Did you?"

“Yes, actually, I did, but the route to get there is a bit circuitous.”

Walking around the table, Magnus took his seat. He took the signet off his thumb and placed it on the table where Penwick could see it.

“What I am about to tell you is top secret. I am trusting you that you’ll not only take what I am about to tell you with utmost seriousness, no matter how crazy it sounds, but that you support me fully in this plan. This is the only way we’re going to come out of this in one piece, and I will need your help as well. If you can’t support me in this fully, I’m afraid I’ll have to take some drastic actions.”

Stiffening, Penwick leaned forward, his eyes fairly blazing as he stared at Magnus.

“I have, during my tenure as steward of the tower, never once taken an action that harmed Crimson Flame Tower. Though I think you are often a fool and not suited for the position of tower master, I will not undermine you or your authority—unless you threaten the destruction of the tower.”

“Good. I believe you,” Magnus said, nodding.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a mana crystal and placed it on the table next to the signet ring.

“You were correct about Amber. She is a genuine treasure-seeking pig. Today I went out with Charlotte and discovered stone gambling. That wouldn’t be particularly significant, except that Amber picked out the stone this crystal came out of.”

Frowning, Penwick shook his head.

“A single crystal is hardly impressive.”

Magnus took a second crystal from his pocket, and then a third and fourth in rapid succession. By the time he took out the ninth crystal, Penwick was sitting bolt upright, staring in shock at the pile of mana crystals.

“Are those all from the same stone?”

“They are. Which confirms a couple things. She can sniff out treasure, but

she is most attracted to high concentrations of mana, so she prioritizes really valuable treasures. The first part of my plan is simple. I'm going to be cleaning out all the stone gambling shops in the city. But that means I'll need capital. A lot of capital. We also need stone-cutting equipment so we can open them here, because if I have a perfect hit rate and open the stones in the shops, they'll ban me before I can blink."

Penwick was silent for a long moment and then slowly nodded.

"I can take care of that, sir. How much money will you need?"

"At least 50,000 gold. Take five crystals to exchange for it. The other four crystals will be given to Amber as treats on days she does well."

"You want to feed them to your pig, sir?"

Laughing at Penwick's pained expression, Magnus shook his head.

"No, I want to feed them to my treasure pig. Who will be finding treasure for us."

Taking a deep breath, Penwick nodded.

"Fine. You said this is the first part of your plan, sir. What is the second part?"

Hesitating for a moment, Magnus tried to guess the odds of Penwick attacking him when he heard the next part of the plan. Unfortunately, it was impossible to read the steward's expression, so Magnus could only forge ahead.

"So, I ran into Curtis today..."

Magnus paused and glanced at Penwick out of the corner of his eye, but the steward was still just sitting there, stiff as a board.

"And we got to chatting. Turns out, we owe him a lot of money."

"Twenty million, eight hundred and thirty thousand gold, sir."

"Right, exactly. So I thought, how do we turn this situation around?"

Feeling increasingly nervous at Penwick's complete lack of reaction, Magnus stood up and began pacing back and forth.

"Then an idea hit me. A genius idea. Instead of fighting against the current, why not go with it? Everyone thinks we're going to lose, right? And when I say everyone, I mean everyone. Celestine, Curtis, the administrator Codsworth or whatever."

"Carlson Mcrae, sir."

"Exactly. Even you and Charlotte think we're going to lose. Which, incidentally, is perfect. Perfect for setting a trap. A trap so diabolical that no one will see it coming."

Taking another turn around the room, Magnus took a deep breath and plunged in.

"Step one of the trap, admit that we're outclassed. Which I did, to Curtis. Today. Step two, convince him that Celestine Earthshaper is good for all our debts. Because if we lose and she gets the tower, she gets the debts too. She likely knows how much debt we're in already, but if Curtis doubles or triples our debt by loaning us all that money before the Tower War, he'll be able to demand it back with interest once she holds the signet."

"Sir..."

Seeing the dangerous gleam in Penwick's eyes, Magnus held up his hand and spoke as firmly as he could.

"Just let me get through the rest of the plan and then we'll talk about pros, cons, and likelihood of success. Where was I? Oh, right, that is number two. Curtis loans us a lot of money. Number three, we spend money like water to make it seem like we're trying to improve our odds of winning, mostly on stone gambling, and other ventures that use Amber's talents to make us money. On the surface it looks like we are desperately scrambling for a minuscule chance of victory. In reality, we are making money on Curtis' money, which ensures that even if everything goes belly up and we have to ditch the plan, we're not put completely out to dry."

Walking back over to his desk, Magnus picked up one of the mana crystals

and turned it over in his palm.

“This brings us to step four. When the fight arrives, we bet everything we have on our victory. The odds will be completely one-sided by that point, but that is perfect. We bet everything, sweep the victory, and the payout will cover both Curtis’ loan and everything else we need to clear our debts. Probably with some left over. We’ll also end up with a full mana crystal mine, which will be great for the city and will provide for us over a long period of time. That’s the plan. What do you think?”

Closing his eyes, Penwick rubbed his forehead.

“I think you aren’t going to listen to what I think. I also think you already implemented it, so no matter what my opinion is we’re already too far along.”

“Wow, you’re taking this really well, which is great, because I for sure thought you were going to try and kill me,” Magnus said, letting out the breath he had been holding.

Penwick’s eyes snapped open and he glared at Magnus for a moment before deflating.

“At least tell me we have a real chance at succeeding. From where I sit, we’re in a hopeless situation.”

Standing up from the desk, Magnus gestured for Penwick to follow him. He led the way into his meditation room and had Penwick shut the door.

“I’ve been working on a new sort of magic. One that I think will give us a tremendous advantage in the fight, even if we are outnumbered three to one. We don’t have a sparring room, so this will have to do, but go ahead and attack me.”

Blinking, Penwick adjusted his glasses and summoned his bookwyrm. It coiled around his shoulders and hissed at Magnus, expressing its displeasure.

“Be careful, sir.”

Penwick thrust out his hands, his fingers swiftly carving symbols in the air.

Magnus recognized the symbols for Magic Missile, one of the more common arcane spells. Penwick was quick, and his symbol was ready in less than two seconds. Without hesitating he activated it, and three magical darts flew toward Magnus with a high-pitched hum. Magnus tracked the trajectory of the three attacks and his feet flashed, carrying him out of danger. The Magic Missiles slammed into the wall, burning three holes in the stone, a testament to how dangerous they were.

As Magnus moved out of their path, Penwick took a step back and began casting again, but this time he used both hands, drawing two Magic Missiles spell constructs. Dual casting was a rare ability, typically only available to mages attuned to the arcane element, and Magnus was surprised to see Penwick doing it. As a tower master he should have been aware of what Penwick was capable of, but he realized he had no idea. This was just another piece of evidence showing how self-absorbed Magnus had been before his transmigration.

Instead of panicking, he lifted his hand and grasped at the air as a silver moon rose in his mind. Accurately grabbing three strands of silver, Magnus flicked his wrist, unleashing a silver bolt that crashed through one of the spell constructs, nearly piercing Penwick's hand. The other Magic Missile spell construct was almost finished charging, but the disrupted spell construct collapsed, unleashing a blast of mana that warped the air and disrupted the other spell construct. As both of them failed, Penwick hurried to retreat, only to find Magnus standing in front of him, grinning.

“Instant, or near-instant movement, ranged spell disruption with a close to instant cast, and strong close-combat ability.”

To prove his point, Magnus stepped past Penwick, clenched his fist, and thrust it out, causing the air to crackle. His fist slammed into the wall, the air around it vibrating so fast it crushed a layer of stone under his knuckles. Though impressive, punching the wall turned out to be a bad idea, and Magnus' knuckles stung so bad he worried he had broken them. Casually putting his hand behind his back, he tried to keep his face impassive as he cried inside.

Penwick was staring at Magnus in shock, unable to believe what he had just seen. Magic, as far as he knew it, didn't work like that, but how else was he

supposed to explain what he was seeing? Sensing a chance to improve his reputation, Magnus lifted his unwounded hand and grabbed a few silver beams of moonlight and, one by one, flung them at the wall, making three shallow divots. Though not as strong as the Magic Missiles, Magnus proved it didn't matter when he did it twice more in rapid succession, unleashing a total of nine attacks in less than three seconds.

When he grabbed a fourth set, Penwick's mouth finally dropped open and Magnus got the notification he was waiting for.

Congratulations. Another mage is impressed with your incredible magic. You have earned +350 reputation!

REPUTATION: Young Eccentric Tower Master (with great abs)

CURRENT POINTS: 478

STATIC GOAL: Maintain your reputation as an eccentric tower master to earn +5 points a day.

SPECIAL GOAL: Complete the impossible task of defeating an enemy above your level to earn a bonus of +500 points.

Casually reaching out with a finger, Magnus pushed Penwick's jaw up.

“And what I can do now is only a fraction of what I expect to be able to do in a month. If we can find the right sorts of supplements, I should be able to increase my abilities pretty drastically. That is why I want to focus on stone gambling. But remember, all of this starts with us getting money from Curtis tomorrow.”

Slowly getting himself under control, Penwick's expression firmed and he nodded emphatically.

“Tell me what you need me to do and I'll make it happen.”

“Thank you, Penwick. I really appreciate it. It makes me happy to know you're going to support me.”

With a short laugh, Penwick shook his head.

“How can I not? You've just invented a new type of combat magic that will

throw the world on its head. The perfect anti-mage system. I knew you were talented, but this, this is something else. When the world sees you fight like this, half of them will spare nothing to recruit you, and the other half will spare nothing to kill you.”

With those encouraging words, Penwick shook his head again and left the meditation room. Staring after him, Magnus grimaced. If Penwick’s judgment was correct, and Magnus had no reason to doubt that it was, he desperately needed a way to cover for his martial arts. The last thing he wanted was to jump out of the frying pan and straight into the fire, but it appeared that was the road he had set himself on. Examining his knuckles, which were still red from when he had punched the wall, Magnus suddenly laughed.

“As long as I’m strong enough, it won’t matter what they want to do.”

There was an approving snort at his feet and Magnus looked down at Amber, who had come in through the open door.

“Better get to it, Amber. We don’t have a lot of time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



After a full night of training, Magnus could sense clearly that his martial arts were improving, and as he sat in the bath, enjoying the warm water, he couldn't help marveling at how quickly he was improving.

"I guess it isn't called the Genius Body Refinement System for nothing," he said to Amber, who was floating in the tub with him.

She oinked in agreement, a pleased expression plastered across her face, though it was possible she was just happy to be splashing in the water. Magnus wasn't quite sure when Curtis was going to arrive, but he wanted to be ready, so after finishing up his bath and eating breakfast, Magnus didn't immediately resume his physical training as he normally would have. Instead, he spent some time with Penwick, going over their plan again, this time in more detail.

Penwick seemed to have come to terms with the situation. He offered a number of suggestions and minor refinements that improved their odds of

success. While Magnus didn't consider himself bad with money, Penwick was a genius when it came to numbers, and Magnus very quickly handed the responsibility of managing their impending wealth and its accompanying debt to the steward.

About ten in the morning, just when Magnus was considering going to get in a quick set of stair runs, a nondescript carriage pulled up to the tower. Magnus recognized it immediately as the same carriage Curtis had arrived in before and, sure enough, the door opened and Curtis climbed down. He carried a leather bag with him stuffed with papers as he strolled up to the tower's door and knocked.

"I'll get it," Magnus said, jumping to his feet before Penwick could rise.

Dashing down the stairs, Magnus opened up the door forcefully.

"Welcome! We've been waiting for you," he said, gesturing for Curtis to come in. "We're going to be up on the fourth floor in the library. It's got a little bit more space, and we can use the tables to lay out the documents. I sure hope you brought enough money."

"Good morning," Curtis said, leaning back slightly, as if afraid Magnus might accidentally spit on him in his exuberance.

They walked up the stairs together, and though Magnus tried to make small talk about the weather and the state of the city, Curtis remained completely silent. When they arrived at the library, Curtis looked around intently, as if gauging the value of everything he saw. Penwick, who had risen to his feet when they entered the room, bowed.

"Good morning, Mage Curtis."

"Good morning to you, Mage Penwick."

Laying his bag on the table, Curtis began to get out papers and then paused.

"Mage Penwick, am I to believe you actually want to go along with this scheme?" Noticing a hesitation in Penwick's expression, Curtis smiled grimly. "Though you aren't the tower master, I believe in your good sense. If you don't want to do this, you're welcome to say so. I'll pack my things and be on my way."

“And then be back tomorrow to collect the debt, right?” Magnus interjected.

Smiling thinly, Curtis shrugged.

“That is a matter for tomorrow.”

Taking a deep breath, Penwick shook his head.

“The tower master is the one who makes the decisions. I simply execute on them. If he’s decided that this is the path we will take, then this is the path we’ll take all the way to the end.”

Grinning, Magnus patted Penwick on the shoulder, earning himself an annoyed glance.

“That’s what I’m talking about. Unity. You know, that’s what a tower needs to succeed. Everybody has to commit to the vision, which we all do, as you just heard.”

Raising his eyebrows, Curtis looked back and forth between Magnus and Penwick and then nodded sharply.

“Very well. In that case, once we sign, there’s no going back. I brought the terms for the loan, along with summary sheets.”

Getting out a massive stack of papers Magnus assumed was the contract, Curtis handed two single sheets to Magnus and Penwick for them to peruse. As he read over the terms, even Magnus couldn’t help but let out a whistle.

“Wow, you really are committing to this. Not that I don’t appreciate it, but this is more than I anticipated.”

“This loan is for 60 million gold coins! How on Terra—” Penwick was too shocked to finish his exclamation as he stared at the paper.

“I did have more,” Curtis said, his eyes narrowing, “but someone borrowed it from me already. The 6,000 mana crystals I’m lending you is my entire fortune. You’ve already borrowed the equivalent of 2,000, so why not add 6,000 more to it?”

“Hold on,” Penwick said, closing his eyes as he did some rapid math. “This is entirely too much. It is more valuable than a mana crystal mine.” He

stood up and began to pace as he ran the calculations. “Realistically, you can expect 10,000 to 12,000 total crystals out of a class-three mana crystal mine like the one that has been put up as collateral for this Tower War. But that’s over a period of fifteen to twenty years. Considering the costs incurred, it’s more realistic to assume 5,000 to 7,000 mana crystals in profit.”

He stopped and stared at Curtis, his gaze probing.

“Even if you end up with the mana crystal mine, you’re not going to make money on this deal. There has to be another angle.”

Smiling slightly, Curtis shrugged. “Let me be the judge of whether I’m going to make money or not. You just need to sign the document.”

Crossing his arms, Magnus thought for a second and then turned to Penwick.

“What if the mana crystal mine is class two or even class one?”

Scoffing, Penwick threw the paper he held down on the table.

“Then they’d never use it for a bet with us. A class-two mana crystal mine can produce up to 50,000 crystals and is a strategic resource for the towers. As for class one, that’d be ludicrous. There’s only a single class-one mine on the entire continent. There’s no way this is a class-one mine.”

“Sure, but it could be class two and the people running it don’t know it yet,” Magnus said, observing Curtis from the corner of his eye. “After all, Celestine said it was a new mine they just broke ground on.”

Curtis maintained a perfect poker face as he watched the two of them theorize, but he couldn’t stop the very slight dilation of his eyes when Magnus mentioned it could be a class-two mine.

“Anyway, it has nothing to do with us, right?” Magnus said, changing the subject. “After all, we’re going to be borrowing this money as the tower, and it’ll be the responsibility of the tower master after our defeat to resolve these debts. Isn’t that right?”

“It is,” Curtis agreed. “What do you think of the rest of the terms?”

Looking over the sheet that summarized the contract, Magnus put it down on the table and tapped one of the lines.

“I have an issue with this. We want this contract to be ironclad, in part so that Crimson Flame Tower can’t renege on its deal, but also so that we can buy the time we’re trying to buy. As you know, we’re going to be fighting an impossible battle, but that doesn’t mean we don’t want to strengthen ourselves as much as possible. Remember, we’re not doing this out of the kindness of our hearts. We want to earn something from it too, which means you need to guarantee that you’re not going to come after us before we lose to Starlit Clay Tower. That’s only a month away. But the last thing we need is you knocking on our door trying to collect old debts throughout this next month. So let’s add a provision that says you won’t collect from our tower until after we’ve been defeated by Starlit Clay Tower. At that point, when Celestine takes over the tower as tower master, the condition will have been met and you can collect to your heart’s content.”

Curtis sat silently for a moment, staring at Magnus, as if trying to see through him. After nearly thirty seconds, he finally nodded.

“Fine, that seems fair. I was wondering what your angle in all of this was, but now I can see it. You’re going to use the 6,000 crystals to try and improve your own strength.”

Holding up his hand, Magnus shook his head.

“Realistically, what can we do in a month? It’s not like we can advance to gold rank. I mean, we both just reached silver rank. But you aren’t wrong. What we can do is pave our way for the future, buying resources that will allow us to reach gold rank over the next few years, increasing our value and survivability considerably.”

“And leaving Celestine and the Crimson Flame Tower to pick up the tab,” Curtis said with a chuckle. “You know, this idea of yours is bold, and I actually like it. It’s just a shame that I’m on this side of the table and you’re on that side.”

“I can walk around,” Magnus said, cracking a smile. “Penwick, is there anything else you can see in the contract that we need to address?”

“Not from the term sheet,” Penwick said with a shrug. “We’ll have to read the actual contract itself to determine that.”

“Then we better get started,” Magnus replied, looking at the giant stack of papers with a grimace, “this is going to take us all day.”

Thankfully, both Penwick and Magnus could read quickly, and it only took two hours for them to go through the contract. There were a couple minor adjustments to be made, which Curtis did on the spot using a special pen that could reabsorb ink to erase lines and adjust wording until the contract was corrected. When it finally came time to sign, however, Penwick hesitated.

“Sir, are you sure this is a good idea?” he asked Magnus, his worry clear on his face.

“I mean, it’s not the best option, but it’s probably our only option,” Magnus said. “What do you think, Curtis?”

With a predatory smile, Curtis leaned across the table and tapped the contract.

“I’d say this is both your best and only option. If you decide not to sign it, that’s fine. But I can guarantee you that the next month of your life will not be pleasant. I will do everything in my power to get my money back as fast as possible. And if you think you can run off to the Barrier Guard, well, let’s just say it’s unlikely you’ll make it. I don’t like using violence to solve problems. It’s so uncivilized. But believe me when I say that I do not suffer loss lightly, and if violence is what it takes to ensure that I make my money, then so be it.”

Magnus could sense Penwick getting riled up, so he patted him on the shoulder and then picked up his pen and signed his name with a flourish. With Magnus signing, Penwick could only add his own signature as a witness, which he did begrudgingly.

“Congratulations. You are now 6,000 mana crystals richer,” Curtis said, gathering the documents together and putting them in his bag.

“Excellent,” Magnus said, rubbing his hands together. “I assume you have

them with you.”

“I do,” Curtis said, standing up. “They’re in the carriage. I’ll have my men bring them into the tower.”

“No problem. I can come down and help,” Magnus said, waving his hand.

The mana crystals were contained in a large chest, which Magnus picked up with barely any effort and carried into the tower. After double-checking the chest contents and storing it, Magnus saw Curtis to the door. The merchant mage looked pleased, though Magnus could tell that his shoulders were carrying a considerable amount of tension. He couldn’t blame him, really. After all, Curtis had just spent close to his entire fortune on this scheme. And if anything went wrong, he would be out an astronomical sum of money. As they stepped out of the tower, Curtis stopped and turned to face Magnus.

“Allow me to issue a word of warning. Consider it a bit of good will. There are more interests than just yours and mine involved in this fight. And though you’ve come up with a good scheme, those forces are not going to take kindly to the stunt you’re pulling. I’m not going to stop you, of course. In fact, I’m going to do my best to push you even deeper into it. But in consideration for the vast amount of money you’re about to make me, I think it’s only fair that you understand what it is you’re walking into.

“This fight started with your foolish challenge, but the sharks smell blood in the water, and they’re starting to circle. The Flame Covenant sees it as a way to get rid of your pesky lineage permanently, and they’re likely to encourage Starlit Clay Tower to eliminate both of you completely. While fatalities are rare during Tower Wars, they’re not unheard of, and with a little bit of manipulation it wouldn’t be hard for the situation to simply spiral out of control.

“On the other hand, you have the Earthbound Circle who’s eager to plant their flag in the Flame Covenant’s backyard. The fastest and easiest way to do that is to simply eliminate you so that the Flame Covenant doesn’t have a way to wheedle out of the contract you made with Celestine. I’m afraid to say you’re quite on your own, and surviving this Tower War is going to take quite the trick. I just hope, for your sake, and for the sake of our dear

Barrier Guard, that you'll actually be able to stay alive. I look forward to seeing you in a month."

Turning on his heel, Curtis strode toward the carriage, his robe jingling slightly.

"Well, that was nice of him," Magnus said under his breath as the carriage rolled down the long drive toward the city. Walking back into the tower, he saw Penwick coming down from the storage room.

"How do they look?" Magnus asked.

"Six thousand mana crystals is quite the impressive sight."

"Well, that's good. We're going to need each and every one of them," Magnus said. "Curtis just warned me that both the Flame Covenant and the Earthbound Circle are going to try to eliminate us during the Tower War. Which makes sense, as that would be the neatest way to wrap this up. Hopefully 6,000 crystals is enough to put a wrinkle in their plans."

"If your pet's nose is as accurate as you believe it is, we should have plenty," Penwick said, seeming strangely unbothered by the impending threat of death.

Magnus wasn't sure if Penwick had just resigned himself to the fact that they were going to die, or if he was genuinely confident in Magnus' abilities. Either way, there wasn't much to do now but put the plan into action.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



After collecting Amber and filling his pockets with mana crystals, Magnus headed for town. Their tower was so poor that they didn't even have a carriage, so the first thing Magnus did was find a wainwright to buy four large wagons from with green river oxen to pull them. He even hired a few drivers.

Ordering them to follow along, Magnus marched straight back to the stone gambling store he had visited the day before. The shop was open and doing a brisk business when he arrived, and he only had to wait a few moments before the shopkeeper hurried over.

“Welcome back, my lord. You had fantastic luck yesterday. Are you here to try your hand again?”

“I am,” Magnus said, looking around. “You know, I am quite interested in stone gambling. It seems like a fascinating thing. And I'm going to give it a shot on a slightly larger scale. Is there a limit to the number of stones I'm allowed to buy?”

Taken aback, the shopkeeper glanced at the empty wagons behind Magnus and quickly shook his head.

“No, my lord, you’re welcome to buy out the entire stock of the store if you’d like, though you’re bound to get some duds mixed in with treasures.”

“I don’t plan on buying everything. Instead, I am going to run an experiment to test how lucky I actually am. Let’s go into the back.”

With the excited shopkeeper at his side, Magnus walked into the backyard and looked around. There were two people already digging through the piles, nobles by the looks of them, but when they saw Magnus they quickly bowed and slipped away, leaving Magnus as the only person in the yard besides the shopkeeper and the workmen. Glancing at a pile of rocks that were nearly as large as he was, Magnus pointed at one near the top.

“Have your men go ahead and cut that one open,” he said, “while I select the rest. Oh, and keep a tally of the cost for me.”

“Of course, my lord. Those stones each cost 5,000 gold.”

“In that case, cut open two,” Magnus said. “The top one there and this one here on the side.”

Pulling a mana crystal out of his pocket, Magnus tossed it to the shopkeeper and then patted his pockets, causing them to softly chime as the crystals bumped against each other.

“I’ve got plenty more, so let’s get to work.”

While the workmen carefully lifted and moved the two giant stones he had selected, Magnus got busy looking through the other piles. He had a fairly simple method for determining whether or not he wanted a stone. If Amber made a noise after sniffing it, he would keep it. If she didn’t, he put it to the side.

In this way, he moved through the stones quickly, sorting through almost two piles before the workmen had even begun cutting. Of the roughly hundred stones he sorted through, he discovered twenty of them Amber deemed worthy, making his pick rate one out of every five. The duds were discarded and the remainder were placed to the side for the shopkeeper to

price. Watching his casual sorting method, the shopkeeper was rather stunned. But he wasn't about to let such a windfall go to waste.

"Sir, would you like help sorting through the piles?" he asked, his head bobbing up and down like a chicken pecking at rice as he bowed at Magnus' side.

"Actually, that would be great," Magnus said. "Do me a favor and have a couple of your men begin shifting the stones from this pile over there. They just need to bring the stone to me so that I can examine it before putting it in the buy pile or the leave pile."

Picking up Amber, Magnus held her as the workman quickly began carrying stones from one pile to the other. As each one passed him by, Magnus would either nod, indicating that they should put the stone aside for him, or shake his head, indicating that they could toss it onto the pile he wasn't interested in. Soon the three men began to grow tired, and the shopkeeper hurried to find a few more.

Almost an hour in, the shopkeeper came back to inform Magnus that the first of the large stones he had selected didn't have anything of value in it. His 5,000 gold had been wasted. Magnus just waved his hand and had them begin cutting the next stone open. In fact, both of the stones he had selected were likely empty, as he had picked them at random without relying on Amber's nose. But that didn't concern him at all, as he knew that every single stone he had picked with Amber's help contained treasure.

One after another, stones were carried past, and Amber either let out a soft oink or shook her head while Magnus made a show of examining the stones closely. The pile by his side grew rapidly until it was as tall as he was. For the sake of space, he had the workmen pause to carry all of the stones out to fill one of his carts.

Seeing so many gambling stones being carried out of the shop, a small crowd started to gather and Magnus, not wanting to lose out on the benefits of reputation, strolled out to oversee the process. Once the cart had been loaded up, Magnus patted the green river ox on its shoulder, as he spoke to the driver in a loud voice that all of the watching citizens could hear.

"Be careful with all my treasures. Take them up to the tower and tell

Penwick to start opening them immediately.”

Pulling out a couple of gold, he handed them over to the driver as a tip.

“And then make sure you come back, because we’re going to have plenty more loads before today is done.”

Reputation +1

Reputation +1

Murmurs began to rise as the crowd discussed what they were seeing. And Magnus, pleased with the effect, dismissed the windows that popped up and walked back into the shop.

The second of the large stones had been cut down considerably, and it looked as if it too was going to be a dud, but just as Magnus was about to resume his sorting he heard a surprised gasp from one of the workers and then a shout from the shopkeeper.

“My lord, my lord, we hit amber!”

Walking over to the workstation, Magnus watched as they carefully polished the stone, revealing the golden glow of amber. Once they had removed enough of the outer stone shell, they positioned the amber so that it was getting lots of light and looked inside, letting out another gasp.

The worker who was peering into the hardened amber whispered something to the shopkeeper.

“Congratulations, my lord. You’ve hit the jackpot. We found a starstone! That’s at least 100,000 gold.”

Raising his eyebrows, Magnus glanced at the massive stack of boulders he had randomly picked from.

“It makes sense why people are willing to gamble 5,000 gold on those large stones. Is it common to find starstones?”

“No, my lord. It’s exceptionally uncommon. And a mark of your fantastic luck,” the shopkeeper said. “This is the first starstone we have ever opened in this shop. My lord, I do not mean to be forward, but opening such a stone

is auspicious, and it would be a great honor if you would allow us to display this starstone with your name attached as one of our signature items. We would be willing to pay double the value of the stone after it is appraised.”

Casually waving his hand, Magnus nodded.

“That’s fine. I’ll continue choosing stones while you arrange that.”

The frantic carrying of stones quickly resumed as the shopkeeper hurried off to fetch someone to appraise the starstone. The worker who had uncovered the amber also continued to work, carving off half of the stone and carefully filing away at the amber until half of the starstone was fully revealed. Magnus had to admit it looked very cool to see the starstone half embedded in a chunk of amber, which in turn was embedded in regular stone. Just as the worker finished his polishing, the shopkeeper returned, bringing with him another mage who he introduced to Magnus as Pericott.

“Greetings, Tower Master,” Pericott said, placing his hands together in front of him and bowing slightly. “My name is Pericott, a member of the Scribes Guild.”

Magnus could sense from the faint aura Pericott gave off that he was an iron-ranked mage, barely more powerful than a mortal. Still, Magnus was polite and returned Pericott’s greeting.

“A pleasure to meet you. I’m eager to see what you think about this starstone.”

Highly gratified by how polite Magnus was, Pericott patted himself on the chest.

“Though I may not be the most powerful scribe, few can compete with me in knowledge,” he said. “Please allow me to examine your starstone and I’ll have a report for you shortly.”

Magnus was curious about how scribes assessed starstones, but he still had a tremendous number of gambling stones to get through, so he didn’t stop his selection as he watched Pericott approach the starstone.

The iron-ranked mage started by assessing how bright the stone was. And then, after measuring it to get detailed dimensions, he took out a little board

made from gold with a number of gems set in it. There were small levers underneath each gem, which Pericott began to manipulate, carefully watching the glimmer in the center of the starstone as he made his adjustments. Unable to contain his curiosity, Magnus told the workmen to take a break and wandered over.

“I hate to be a bother, but do you mind explaining what you’re doing? It looks really interesting.”

Clearly proud of his craft, Pericott showed the board he was holding to Magnus.

“The seven gems represent the seven elements. What I’m trying to do is match the color exactly,” he said, pointing to a clear crystal at the top of the board. “As I adjust these levers, I feed different amounts of the element contained in the gem into the crystal. My goal is to produce a glimmer that matches the starstone’s glimmer precisely, which is going to tell me what kind of elemental mix we’re looking at. From there, we can use that as a springboard, combined with the dimensions of the starstone, to try and get a fairly accurate reading on what creature it might be. It should only take me a couple more minutes to nail it down.”

“I look forward to it.”

Heading back to where the workers were all sitting down, Magnus waved for them to continue resting as he and Amber began sorting through another rock pile. True to his word, Pericott walked over a few minutes later to show the board to Magnus.

“It would appear that you have uncovered a relatively rare darkness arcane starstone. Based on the strength of the glimmer, it looks to be gold ranked. And from the dimensions and the shape of the glimmer, I’d guess that we’re looking at some sort of creature in the bat family. There are four different kinds of bats that this could be, though one is incredibly unlikely as it rarely appears above bronze rank, and another is equally unlikely, as the only recorded shadowbat king was in the legendary rank. This means we’re most likely looking at a regular shadowbat at the top end of its power level, or the rarer moon-touched shadowbat, which can grow to platinum rank and potentially beyond. Based on this estimation, you’re looking at between 75

to 100 mana crystals.”

“Excellent,” Magnus said, his eyebrows rising. “That’s not bad for a 5,000 gold gambling stone.”

“I’d say.” Mage Pericott let out a laugh and glanced around, unable to hide the envy he was feeling. “Trading half a mana crystal for a hundred mana crystals is quite the deal.”

Reaching into his pocket, Magnus grabbed out a couple of mana crystals and stuffed them in Pericott’s hand.

“For your trouble,” he said. “I really appreciate you coming so quickly and doing the assessment onsite. I know that’s not standard protocol. If I manage to find any other treasures in these stones that I’m sending back to the tower, I’ll give you a shout.”

“It’d be a pleasure to assist you,” Pericott said, bowing quickly, his hands clenching the two mana crystals tightly.

By this point, Magnus had already gone through most of the stones in the yard, and Amber was finding increasingly few valuable stones. Realizing that she might be getting tired, Magnus had the wagons cart away all of the stones he had already purchased and took a short break while he fed Amber a mana crystal. While she chewed on it, Magnus continued to sort through the stones one-handed while holding Amber in his other arm. He paid close attention to her nods, and by the time the shopkeeper had returned from escorting Pericott back to the Scribes Guild, he had finished examining all of the rocks in the yard.

With trembling hands, one of the clerks handed the total tally over to the shopkeeper, and when he saw it the shopkeeper’s eyes nearly fell out of his head. Coughing lightly, he walked over to Magnus, who noticed the poor man’s hands were trembling from excitement over how much money he was about to make. Though it could also have been the fear that Magnus wouldn’t pay. It was impossible to tell.

“My lord, we have your total for you.”

“Sure, what do you have?” Magnus asked.

“A total of 9,728,000 gold coins, my lord.”

“Oh, that’s less than I thought it would be,” Magnus said. “Tell you what, if you’re still interested, I’ll sell you the starstone we opened for 1.5 million.” Magnus held up his hand before the shopkeeper could protest. “Don’t feel like I am taking advantage of you. That price includes allowing you to put my name and Crimson Flame Tower’s seal on it, as well as the date when I opened it. You can display it in a large case at the front of your shop. As for the rest, I’ll have somebody fetch the payment right away.”

Quickly bowing, the shopkeeper nodded his head.

“Of course, my lord, an excellent deal.”

After Magnus sent a message to the tower, it wasn’t long before Penwick arrived and handed over a wooden case with a pained expression. Taking off the cost of the starstone, Magnus owed just over \$8.28 million, which the shopkeeper rounded down to an even \$8.2 million. Handing over 820 of their precious mana crystals was clearly painful, but Penwick did it without hesitation, surprising Magnus.

Pulling Magnus to the side, Penwick handed him another case. This one contains a full 1,000 crystals.

“Keep going,” Penwick whispered. “We’ve already started opening the stones you’re sending, and every single one is a treasure. Every. Single. One.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Magnus could practically see the gold coins dancing in Penwick’s eyes and knew that his steward was hooked. It had been a long time since the tower had enjoyed any significant resources, and so seeing treasure after treasure worth tens of thousands and even hundreds of thousands of gold tumble out of the gambling stones Magnus was sending back had caused Penwick’s excitement to shoot through the roof.

After the steward hurried off, Magnus walked out to the front of the store with the shopkeeper by his side. There were still tons of citizens around, and occasionally, as they discussed the astonishing sight of wagon after wagon of gambling stones being sent up to the tower, Magnus could see his reputation rising.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Magnus said to the shopkeeper. “I have a great feeling from the stones I bought. But I do have one last request for you.”

He spoke loudly enough that the crowds could hear.

“Having successfully opened the very first starstone your store has ever seen, I feel like my luck is at an all-time high. And I’d like to try some other gambling stores. I’d appreciate it if you’d make some recommendations for me. Money is no object, and I fully intend to clear out every store in this city today.”

The shopkeeper, stunned by the request, quickly rose to the occasion.

“Of course, my lord, I happen to be part of a network of stone sellers, and I’d be happy to show you to another store. In fact, there’s one right around the corner.”

As he spoke, he surreptitiously smacked one of his clerks who, getting the hint, took off at a dead sprint, heading for the store around the corner to alert them to Magnus’ arrival.

“Excellent,” Magnus said. “Lead the way. And as soon as the wagons come back have someone send them over. I’m not going home until I’ve been through every store in this city.”

Reputation +2]

Reputation +4]

Reputation +2]

Reputation +5]

Watching his reputation soar, Magnus was quite pleased, and it was in high spirits that he followed the shopkeeper down the street and around the corner to the next stone gambling store. A large crowd of citizens, eager to watch the fun, followed after him, and they in turn attracted others. Word quickly spread that the tower master of the Crimson Flame Tower had become a gambling addict. As, once again, cart after cart of gambling stones were sent from the shop up to the tower, the whispers and rumors grew even louder.

The sheer cost was one thing, but Magnus, recognizing an opportunity to farm a tremendous amount of reputation, began putting on a show. In addition to the steady stream of stones he sent to the tower, he also selected some stones which he had the shopkeeper take to the front of the store and

open in front of the crowds.

Magnus, wanting to establish his reputation as a strong stone gambler but not wanting to scare off any of the other stores he planned to visit, began to mix in two duds for every treasure stone he had the shopkeeper open. The crowds were shocked to see such an accurate picking sense, though Magnus laughed it off and claimed it was pure luck, which the citizens were inclined to believe when he then opened four duds in a row. Of course, he followed that up with two treasures back to back, establishing himself at just under a fifty percent pick rate.

As the stones he had selected were being opened, Magnus continued to sort through the rest of the gambling stones, picking out every stone with a treasure and carting them off to the tower. He spent just over eleven million gold at the second store, though he made back two million just from the stones he opened in front of the shop.

Once he had cleaned out the second shop, it was time to head to the next store. However, when he arrived he discovered an enterprising merchant who didn't wait for him but instead brought a cartload of stones for him to assess. The crowds had grown so big it was almost impossible for Magnus' wagons to move through the street, so after conferring with a couple of the shopkeepers, Magnus picked a relatively open marketplace and had them set up a platform for him. This gave the citizens a clear line of sight and allowed the shopkeepers to bring over their gambling stones.

Magnus continued to individually examine each stone, but by now his coordination with Amber was exquisite and it barely took him a glance to determine if he wanted the rock or not. A few of the merchants tried to sell him stones in bulk, but Magnus rejected them outright, and when one merchant insinuated that it would be the only way he'd allow Magnus to purchase from him Magnus kicked him out directly.

That cowed the other merchants, who lined up respectfully with their loads of gambling stones for Magnus to inspect. Every dozen or so stones he picked, he would send a few to the platform to be cut open in front of the crowd. When a treasure was brought forth, there was a roar of approval, and likewise, when a dud was revealed, a groan of pain, as if each of the citizens were personally paying for the stones. The air was festive, and as

the crowds continued to swell more and more food sellers moved their stands close by or carried their wares through the crowd for people to buy.

Sensing the excitement in the atmosphere, Magnus paused his sorting and climbed up on the platform. They had just finished cutting a stone, revealing a handful of mana crystal shards. The cost of the stone was only a thousand gold, and from a casual estimation the mana crystal shards would fetch at least six times that price. Looking around the crowd, Magnus held up his hands for silence.

“I want to thank you all for coming out to watch my bit of indulgence. This has turned into quite the occasion, hasn’t it? And to celebrate my continued good luck, and hopefully generate a little bit more of it, we’re going to do some giveaways. We’ll start with these shards.”

Magnus quickly pointed out six people from the crowd at random and gestured for them to come forward. Though there was some clear trepidation in their gazes, they all gathered on the platform. Two were old men and one an old woman, while the remaining three were a young man, a young woman, and a kid Magnus had seen on his father’s shoulders. Starting with the oldest of them, Magnus handed over a mana crystal fragment to each one, leaving them completely dumbfounded. Turning, his eyes scanned the crowds.

“Our first winner, let’s give him a round of applause.”

Slowly at first, but then with increasing vigor, the crowd began to clap and cheer, unable to believe Magnus had just casually given away 6,000 gold. As the ecstatic prize winners climbed down from the platform, Magnus called one of the shopkeepers over.

“See to it that they all get home safely,” he said. And though his smile was bright, the shopkeeper couldn’t help but shiver.

“Of course, my lord, I will ensure it.”

The shopkeeper immediately turned and called over all of his biggest workers to guard the six people Magnus had given the prizes to. Turning back to the crowd, Magnus lifted his hand for quiet, causing a hush to fall over the crowd.

“Citizens of Crimson Flame. I can sense that my luck isn’t the only thing that is turning. Our fair city, once a major player in this region, has been in decline for years. But that ends today. You can believe me, I’m the tower master, after all. Today will mark the day that our city’s luck begins to change for the better. This will be the first annual Stone Gambling Festival. Today, and on this day every year, the Crimson Flame tower will select 100 individuals to test their fortune. In the future we’ll select by lot, but today, since we’re just putting this together on the fly, I’ll select random people from the crowd. However, there’s no guarantee you’ll get a treasure if you are selected. Instead, I’ll put 100 gambling stones up on the platform. Each person who is selected will be allowed to pick one single gambling stone, which will be opened on the spot. Irrespective of cost, you get to keep what’s in it. Of course, if there’s nothing in it, you’ll only be able to blame your bad luck and wish you were as lucky as me.”

The crowd let out a roar of laughter at his quip, and Magnus, making a great show of inspecting each and every one, had soon picked out 100 stones. Over sixty of them possessed treasures, while the rest he genuinely picked at random since he didn’t want to give away his secret. Not wanting to deal with a headache of having to pick 100 people, Magnus considered handing the task over to the shopkeepers who were still gathered around, but then another idea struck him.

“Hey, Amber, do me a favor and pick out a hundred people for me from all over the crowd.”

Amber, who was chewing happily on a mana crystal, looked up, and to Magnus’ surprise, nodded. Ever since she had appeared, Magnus had been growing increasingly convinced that she could understand every single word he said. And this only further reinforced his beliefs when she took off into the air, her eyes scanning over the crowd. Shouts broke out as the crowd saw her silver wings glittering in the afternoon sun, and then a hushed silence blanketed as she dipped down and landed lightly on a broad young man who was gaping at her. He hardly dared move as she stood on his head and let out an oink. As she took off, Magnus gestured for him to come forward and, sheepishly, the young man pushed his way through the crowd.

“Go ahead and take your pick,” Magnus said after he had walked up to the platform.

As he looked at the 100 stones, Amber selected another person, and it wasn't long until there were 100 individuals lined up below the platform. One by one they selected their stones to be opened, and after they had all picked Magnus called the rather dense-looking young man up onto the platform. He picked first, choosing a small stone barely the size of a fist, which elicited considerable laughter from the crowd. But when it was opened and a piece of deep-sea cold iron the size of a walnut was revealed that laughter turned into ecstatic cheers.

It took the young man a considerable amount of time to realize he had just won a piece of material worth 50,000 gold, which one of the shopkeepers bought off of him on the spot. As he was escorted away to get his money the air grew electrified, and the crowd couldn't help but watch with bated breath as the next person carried their selection up onto the platform. Magnus made sure to comment on each and every one of the individual's choices, and again when their prize was revealed. For those who failed to find anything, he generously produced a mana crystal shard, ensuring that no one left the stage empty-handed.

Word of what Magnus was doing had long since spread beyond the commoners and the merchants, and it wasn't long before nobles and mages alike were taking up positions at the edge of the crowd in carriages or observing the market from nearby balconies. As soon as they began to appear, Magnus saw his reputation climbing even faster and his words and motions became even more exaggerated. Yet through all of it he never forgot his main purpose and continued, with Amber's help, to diligently sort through the gambling stones.

The majority of them were rejected, much to the shopkeeper's chagrin. But by the time the day was done, he had bought close to 35,000,000 gold worth of gambling stones, all of which had been transported back to the tower. There were so many of them that they couldn't even be stored inside the tower and had to be piled up in large stacks all around it.

As the day came to a close, Magnus thanked the crowds for being there and thanked the merchants for their willingness to participate. The merchants,

all of whom had made a tremendous amount of money, all bowed repeatedly, encouraging Magnus to return whenever he wanted.

Under the loud cheers of the citizens, Magnus waved and then used Swallow's Cloud Step to vanish from the platform, eliciting loud gasps.

Reputation +3

Reputation +2

Reputation +5

Reputation +3

Chaining the steps together, he quickly dashed out of sight. His body was little more than a blur as he made his way back to the tower. Amber flew overhead, keeping up with him easily. She had been chewing on mana crystals all day, and when Magnus got to the tower she landed in his arms and he realized she had grown slightly bigger. There were dozens of people in the yard standing near the stone piles who Magnus had never seen before, but they all greeted him enthusiastically as he entered the tower.

He found Penwick pacing back and forth on the first floor landing, practically trembling from excitement. As soon as Penwick saw Magnus, he bound down the stairs, taking them two at a time, something Magnus had never seen before. He grabbed Magnus' collar, dragged him into the sitting room, and gestured to the hallway they had just left.

"You wouldn't believe what we're pulling out of these stones. How much did you spend?"

"Close to thirty-five million," Magnus said.

"Let's see. Three thousand, five hundred crystals. Well, we've already pulled at least 2,500 crystals worth of materials out of the stones and we haven't even gotten through an eighth of them. You saw the piles outside, right? I had to hire people to guard them because they won't fit in our storage. In fact, we've had to clear everything out just to make room for the treasure."

Pleased, Magnus scratched his chin, his thoughts churning. Patting Penwick on the shoulder, he gestured to the ceiling.

“Sounds like the first step of our plan is sorted. We’re going to need some channels to sell through, however.”

“Should I call Curtis?”

“No.” Magnus shook his head. “He’ll try to delay the sales because as long as we still have the treasures in the tower when he comes to collect, he’ll be able to grab them. We’ll talk to Charlotte. Her family has excellent channels, and I’m sure they would be delighted to handle all of these rare materials. Anything that we can use, keep behind. We’re only going to sell enough for our bet.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Caught off guard, Penwick’s brow furrowed. “What bet?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten the plan already,” Magnus said. “We’re going to be betting an absolute fortune that we will win the fight. And then we’re going to do exactly that. Our winnings will make this pile of treasures look like pocket change.”

Taking a deep breath, Penwick took a moment to compose himself.

“I actually did forget that was the plan. I got so caught up in the idea that we’d be using these treasures to clear our debts—which we could, by the way—that I forgot you have an even more insane plan in mind.”

“The thing is, it’s only insane if it’s not guaranteed,” Magnus said. “But this is guaranteed.”

“I don’t know where your confidence comes from,” Penwick said, and then paused. “Okay, well, that’s not true. I do know where your confidence comes from. But I think it’s misplaced. You don’t think that the people

behind Starlit Clay Tower are going to play fair, do you? They'll find some way to guarantee that their team wins, which means that no matter how strong we get, we're going to be at a tremendous disadvantage."

"Maybe," Magnus shrugged. "Maybe not. They have to survive long enough to activate whatever it is they're going to be using to wipe us out. And if I get to them first..."

Magnus flashed a smile that caused Penwick to shiver.

"But enough about this. I'll talk to Charlotte. I'm seeing her tomorrow night. In the meantime, keep a tight lid on what you're opening and keep going. We need to get these stones cracked as fast as possible."

"I've already put out the word to recruit more stone cutters," Penwick said. "But you should see the storerooms."

"I'll see them when you're finished," Magnus said, waving his hand. "I've got other things to focus on right now, like getting stronger so we don't come out of this looking like fools."

Leaving Penwick to deal with the seemingly endless pile of stones, Magnus headed for his meditation room and summoned his system book. Flipping through the pages until he got to the reputation page, he nearly laughed out loud.

REPUTATION: Young Eccentric Tower Master (with great abs)

CURRENT POINTS: 1267

STATIC GOAL: Maintain your reputation as an eccentric tower master to earn +5 points a day.

SPECIAL GOAL: Complete the impossible task of defeating an enemy above your level to earn a bonus of +500 points.

His reputation had risen by 789 points, an astronomical number. Magnus was starting to understand how to best use his system and, sure enough, making big scenes that caused a lot of people to talk about him seemed to be the best way.

If he could have, Magnus would have planned on repeating his performance again the next day. Unfortunately, he had already combed through just about every gambling stone store in the city, and though it was possible he had missed some of the treasures, he had wiped out enough of them that stone gambling odds were going to be abysmal for a long time, at least until the merchants brought in new stock.

Furthermore, as soon as the merchants realized that every stone that was opened in their shop was now a dud, Magnus knew he wouldn't be able to buy from them anymore. Yes, they were in it for the money, but they made their money by mixing treasures with duds. And if there were no treasures to be found, no one was going to bother buying their duds. They couldn't afford to have someone like Magnus who could accurately pick out each treasure while leaving the duds behind. They'd go bankrupt in no time flat.

It was just a shame that stone gambling was no longer a viable path for Magnus, but considering that he had likely turned 3,500 mana crystals into well over 10,000 mana crystals, he was pretty pleased with the result.

They still had 2,500 mana crystals from Curtis, and once they had opened all their treasures they would have materials equaling another 20,000 or even more, more than enough to bet on their success. Magnus had been keeping an eye on the odds, and currently Starlit Clay Tower was sitting pretty at 8 to 1. In truth, Magnus had expected it to be even more steeply weighted in favor of Celestine and her tower, but it appeared that there were some manipulations going on behind the scenes.

Most likely it was Curtis, who didn't want his winnings from betting on Starlit Clay Tower to be too low. If Magnus had to guess, Curtis had probably released the information that he had made another loan to Crimson Flame Tower, expressing his confidence in their ability to win. With such a large loan, they would at least be able to put up a fight, which artificially raised their chances of victory, at least in the eyes of the people running the betting pool.

Magnus had been surprised to discover that the bets were handled by the tower administrators, though it made sense when he thought about it. They were, at least on the surface, neutral, and they were also exceptionally wealthy. Magnus wasn't concerned that they'd be unable to cover his bet.

With more than enough reputation points at his disposal, Magnus didn't hesitate any longer. He flipped to the Immortal Skills page in his system book and selected Talisman Arts. 650 reputation points drained away and a shiver ran through him as memories he had never experienced awoke in his head. The world faded away and Magnus saw a boy, only just turned ten years old, bowing to an elderly man with a long beard and ink-stained fingers.

The young man entered a room with dozens of other students while the old master took his place at the front of the room. Though Magnus couldn't quite hear what the old man began to teach, the information being passed down began to appear in Magnus' mind. Day after day, the young man would step into the classroom and the old man would instruct him on the art of Talismans. Weeks turned into months and the weather outside the classroom changed and then changed again, but inside it was always the same.

Sitting at his small desk, the boy immersed himself in the study of Talismans until years had passed. His peers all left and his master barely entered the room anymore, but still the boy persisted. Now much older, the young man began to add drawing Talismans to his study. He used a brush he had made himself to carefully trace out the seals onto paper, struggling to create his first Talisman. Again time passed, appearing to Magnus to fast forward as the seasons flashed by. It wasn't until, his hand as steady as a rock, the young man drew his thousandth Talisman that he finally succeeded, causing the paper to light up with a bright glow.

From then on, the young man drew even faster, but this time his master stood over him, pointing out his flaws. Talisman after Talisman flew from the young man's brush until a thousand Talismans had turned into ten thousand. As he completed his ten thousandth Talisman, the young man's brush gained a subtle sublimity and the symbols under his brush exploded with brilliant light.

The glow from the Talisman filled Magnus' vision and the image shattered, bringing Magnus back to reality. Yet every bit of information, every bit of muscle memory was firmly entrenched in Magnus' body. It was as if he had spent a decade sitting under the teaching of a master Talisman maker,

learning everything there was to learn about Talismans. Yet even as the memories that had just appeared in his head unrolled, he realized they were incomplete. At a certain point they simply cut off, leaving him yearning for more. It was then that Magnus noticed a new entry had appeared under his Immortal Skills.

TALISMAN ARTS - EARTH [1,500 POINTS]: Bind more powerful spells to Talismans, allowing anyone to deploy their effects.

The description was almost the same as before and was equally vague. Grumbling that he would have to pay more if he wanted to advance his Talisman knowledge beyond the Human stage, Magnus began to delve into the memories. He quickly realized that even if he did have access to Earth-stage Talisman knowledge, it wouldn't actually do him any good. Drawing Talismans required soul strength, and currently his soul was shattered, which drastically reduced the amount of soul strength he could bring to bear.

Fearing he had bought something completely useless, wasting his hard-earned reputation points, Magnus quickly gathered the materials he needed to draw Talisman. After looking through his list of Human-stage Talismans, he picked an Initiate-level Talisman called the Minor Cloud Talisman. The effect was simple. It could create a 100-foot cloud that reduced visibility.

There were other Talismans Magnus was interested in, but this Talisman, if he could successfully draw it, would fix a particular problem that had been worrying him. Penwick had already warned him that after people saw his fighting style he'd draw a tremendous amount of unwanted attention. And since Magnus was planning on wiping the floor with his enemies, he had been considering how to hide his combat ability. A Minor Cloud Talisman would do just the trick, as he could simply cast the cloud around whoever he wanted to beat up, allowing him to beat them up in peace.

In order to create a Talisman, a few things were necessary. First, high-quality paper. The higher the quality, the more mana the paper could hold, and higher-ranked Talismans had very strict paper requirements. The second ingredient was ink. Thanks to the tremendous amount of Talisman knowledge in his head, Magnus knew a dozen recipes for first-rank Human Talismans, and he was pleased to discover that he had all of the materials he

needed in the storage room.

It took him about half an hour to mix up the ink, which left only one last item, a Talisman brush. The bad news was that Talisman brushes didn't exist. Unlike paint brushes, they required a specific combination of hair, along with a core of precious metals and a wooden wrapper to serve as a handle inscribed with specific symbols. The good news was, Magnus could make one.

He spent almost an entire night working carefully to try and create a brush, and after two failed attempts finally succeeded. By the time morning came, Magnus was ready for his first attempt at drawing a Talisman, but because he wanted to be in his best state he took a quick nap and then meditated for fifteen minutes.

Once he was completely calm, Magnus placed the sheet of paper in front of him and dipped his brush into the ink pot. His brush was poorly made, barely serviceable in fact. But in Magnus' memories, this was exactly the kind of brush that an apprentice Talisman maker would construct. Talisman makers relied to a significant degree on a principle they called unity.

Unity was comprised of three different things: unity of material, unity of tool, and unity of man. Unity of material referred to the ink and the paper being compatible. Unity of tool spoke of the compatibility between ink and the brush. And unity of man referred to the unity between the brush and the Talisman maker. One of the grand secrets of Talisman making was that it was better to have a high degree of unity with poorer materials than a low degree of unity with better material. A Talisman maker's success rate was directly tied to the degree of unity that Talisman master possessed.

With careful strokes, Magnus replicated the symbols in his memory, carefully drawing them onto the paper. He did his best to keep his brush steady, pausing to dab it into the ink pot when he needed to. As he got to just about the halfway point his hand shook slightly, and Magnus felt a twinge in his broken soul. A streak of pain shot through him, disrupting his brush stroke. With a crackle the Talisman burst into flame as the mana it contained went wild.

Though he had failed his first attempt, Magnus wasn't bothered. In his

memory, an apprentice Talisman maker might draw a couple thousand Talismans before succeeding with their first one. Magnus already had the experience of having drawn five times that number of Talismans. In his memory, he had succeeded countless times and even reached the realm of perfect unity. It was simply a matter of transferring that skill to the real world, taking a couple of moments to calm his heart.

Magnus got out another piece of paper and began the process all over again. By the time he had attempted and failed his fourth Talisman he could feel the burden on his soul. Had his soul not been cracked Magnus was confident he could have succeeded on his first try, but the damage to his soul was too great, and his attempts all ended in failure.

“Haste makes waste,” he repeated softly to himself.

After cleaning his brush and capping the ink, he put them to the side. He would continue trying to make Talismans the following day. Instead, Magnus turned his attention to his training, starting with his Imperishable Void Physique. After he had completed one round of bone-scorching training, Magnus practiced his martial arts, pushing all three of them as hard as he could.

By this time, he felt like his soul was back to a relatively stable place, and so he calmed himself down and tried to draw another Talisman. When his attempt burned up after he made a small mistake at the three-fourths mark, Magnus simply placed the materials to the side and resumed his physical training, once again looping through his routine.

In this way, a whole day passed, and though it felt as if he had hardly made any progress, he knew that the truth was otherwise. He had already reached the ninety-nine percent mark on his Talismans, and he believed firmly that with another one or two he would succeed in creating his first Minor Cloud Talisman.

Additionally, his other martial arts were improving as well.

Magnus could sense that he was just about to reach a breakthrough in both his Twelve Thunder’s Fist and Silver Moon Strike. Yet there was still a little bit of a barrier, like a thin piece of paper, placed between his current state and the next level. Unfortunately, the paper was proving tougher than he

had anticipated, and he guessed that he would need something additional in order to break through.

His Swallow's Cloud Step had broken through during combat, and Magnus guessed that this was what he was missing. He had the theory of Twelve Thunder's Fist and Silver Moon Strike down pat and had practiced them over and over and over again. What he hadn't yet done was use them in actual combat, proving that his efforts were the real deal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



The question was, where to find an opportunity for combat? There wasn't a good place in the tower to throw down and have a real fight, and even if there had been, Magnus didn't have anyone to fight with. Penwick wasn't interested in sparring and was much too preoccupied with opening up all of the treasures from the gambling stones Magnus had collected. He could always go and ask Charlotte, but then again Magnus wasn't sure she would be interested, and he wanted to keep his abilities a surprise.

It was also possible, of course, that he just hadn't worked hard enough, and so Magnus spent another full day immersed in his practice. Right around four in the afternoon, just as he was going to wrap up for the day, Magnus finally successfully created a Minor Cloud Talisman, producing a magical-looking and quite complex symbol that shimmered on the thin strip of paper he had drawn it on. Quite pleased, Magnus admired it for a moment, and then, picking it up, immediately tore it in half.

There was a faint rumbling sound as fog began to pour out of the Talisman,

rapidly filling up the meditation room. The fog was so thick, in part because it was constrained by the walls, that Magnus could hardly see his hand in front of his face, and by the time the Talisman burnt out and stopped spewing fog he genuinely couldn't see his hand in front of his face. Additionally, his skin felt all cold and clammy due to the heavy moisture in the air.

Crawling along the floor, Magnus felt his way along the wall until he reached the door. When he opened it, the fog rapidly spilled out into his office. He opened the windows to try and clear the room out but was surprised to discover that the fog simply stayed in place. Even his efforts to disperse it by fanning ended up failing, as the fog seemed bound to a particular area. And as soon as it blew away it would slip back into position, creating a hundred-foot space where it was difficult to see.

“This is going to be perfect,” Magnus muttered.

The fog lasted for about five minutes before it vanished as rapidly as it had appeared and Magnus found the scorched remains of the Talisman, which had transformed into a pile of ash on his floor. After cleaning up the ashes, Magnus headed for his room to take a quick bath and get changed, as he had a date with Charlotte that evening. On his way out of the tower, Penwick stopped him and wordlessly handed him a piece of paper. To date, they had opened a bit more than 7,000 mana crystals worth of treasures, and they were only a third of the way through the stones.

“Keep up the good work,” Magnus said with a grin, “we’re headed off.”

With Amber by his side, Magnus headed for town, hopping the back gate and strolling through the nobles district until he arrived at Charlotte’s home. This was also the headquarters of the Flamebrand mercantile, and as Magnus climbed the steps an elderly butler opened the door.

“Lady Charlotte said you would be coming, Lord Magnus. If you will follow me, I will see you to the drawing room.”

Still holding Amber in his arms, Magnus followed the butler into a small private sitting room and took a seat in a wingback chair by the fireplace.

“May I get you any refreshments, sir?”

“No, I’m fine,” Magnus said, waving his hand.

“And for your pig?”

“She’s fine too,” Magnus said, ignoring Amber’s squeaks.

“Very well, my lord. I will inform Lady Charlotte that you have arrived.”

Seeing Amber pouting because he hadn’t let her get any food, Magnus slipped her a mana crystal, which she gobbled down with glee. She snuggled up against him, grunting happily as she chewed on the mana crystal, leaving Magnus to observe the room they were in.

It was much nicer than any of the rooms in his tower, though that made perfect sense considering who owned this building. The Flamebrand family was a mage family with a very, very long history. According to what he remembered from the academy, they had been around for nearly 2,000 years, well before the continent had lost its kings and emperors. During that period they had maintained their presence as one of the strongest mage families, thanks in large part to their hereditary shaped souls and phoenix pets.

Every few generations, a mage with a shaped soul like Charlotte would appear, bringing the family to new heights. But even those who lacked the magical shaped souls were a force to be reckoned with. And Charlotte’s father, Kaelan Flamebrand, the current patriarch of the Flamebrand family, had done no less to improve his family’s standing than the last leader with a shaped soul.

He was also known for being quite ruthless, both to his enemies and to himself and his family. It was widely known that getting involved with the Flamebrand family was a dangerous proposition, and Magnus knew that by continuing his relationship with Charlotte he was playing with fire. There would be no hiding it from her parents, which meant that, sooner or later, he would have to deal with them.

Magnus didn’t mind, of course. He wasn’t about to let other people tell him who he could and couldn’t be interested in. And as he waited for her to arrive, Magnus reflected that he was genuinely interested in Charlotte. On top of being stunningly beautiful, he found her a delight to talk to and

genuinely appreciated the kindness hidden under her fiery exterior.

Thankfully, Magnus wasn't entirely without hope. "Only the Best" was the Flamebrand's motto, and so long as Magnus was the best, he would have a shot at winning Charlotte's parents' approval. Of course, things hadn't progressed to that degree yet, but Magnus knew that he would be forever regretful if he didn't at least try to pursue Charlotte romantically. The Magnus who had lived in this world had been hopelessly in love but too proud to admit it, and Magnus had inherited all of his feelings. He was still lost in thought when the door opened and Charlotte appeared. Her bright red hair was done up on top of her head with a few curls falling down around her face. She wore a pure white robe with a Nehru collar and gold stitching that matched the accessories on her wrists and inner hair.

Magnus, who was dressed in a light-blue robe, looked positively shabby next to her, but he didn't care one bit and quickly bounced up to greet her.

"Well, don't you look radiant," he said as he walked over, stretching out his hands for hers.

With a pleased smile, she placed her hands in his.

"Hello, Magnus."

"Are you ready to go eat?" Magnus asked. "I figured we could grab some food and then go to the Botanical Society. The Dawnlight flower is supposed to bloom close to midnight, so we'll want to get there in plenty of time. I'm not sure if the tickets give us assigned seats."

Getting out the two golden tickets to give to him, Charlotte looked over them and then shook her head.

"I'm actually not sure either."

"Then we'll just have to find out once we get there. But we should get some food first. You know, there's a new restaurant, at least new to me, that I'd like to try. It's called Carvers or something like that. It's right downtown near the Botanical Society."

Seeing Charlotte's eyebrows rising, Magnus realized he was acting out of character, at least according to how Magnus of old behaved. Trying to think

of a way to paper over his change in behavior, he shook his head with a light laugh.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you to pay for it. I know it’s expensive. But I’ve recently had a tremendous stroke of luck.”

“Oh, I don’t care about that,” Charlotte said. “I’m just surprised you’re actually willing to spend money. I didn’t manage to come see myself, but everybody is talking about how you just blew thousands of crystals on stone gambling. Word among the citizens is that you’re tremendously rich and incredibly lucky. Word among the mages is that you’re a fool who’s absolutely desperate.”

“Well, you’ll have to decide for yourself which is true,” Magnus said, holding Charlotte’s hand tightly. “Come on, let’s go.”

They took Charlotte’s carriage. It was an absolutely gorgeous crimson vehicle pulled by a perfectly matched pair of white horses, and it wasn’t long before they’d arrived downtown. Carvers was a restaurant for mages, and one of their unique features was that they only accepted mana crystals as payment. Considering that the average mage might barely see a hundred mana crystals a year, eating at Carvers cost an astronomical amount.

But Magnus, having recently come into a lot of wealth, and trusting that Amber’s nose would help him find more whenever he needed it, had no issues spending a full fifteen mana crystals for their meal. The food was excellent and the company even better. Over the course of dinner, Charlotte grew increasingly relaxed, often giggling at Magnus’ silly attempts at wit. As their meal drew to a close, Magnus finally shook his head.

“Look, I know I’m not that funny. You don’t have to humor me.”

“Oh, I’m not humoring you,” Charlotte said, dabbing her lips with a napkin. “It’s just so amusing to see you try to be funny. You certainly need more practice.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll keep putting in the effort,” Magnus said, pushing his chair back from the table. “Shall we head over to the Botanical Society? They’re having a mixer of some sort before the actual event, so we might as well take advantage of their free drinks.”

Scooting herself back from the table, Charlotte took his offered arm, and they strolled out of the restaurant. Her carriage was waiting for them, but Magnus waved the driver off.

“It’s only a couple of blocks, so we’ll walk and enjoy the nice evening.”

It truly was a beautiful evening. The sun had set over an hour ago, and the stars were out in full force, dotting the dark sky like a million starstones just waiting to be unlocked. The moon hung full in the sky, and Magnus could feel its energy around him. They walked the first block in silence and then, peeking at Magnus from the corner of her eye, Charlotte spoke quietly.

“I do like this, you know. And I’m so relieved to be going to this event with you instead of Mage Woolworth. But our happy days might come to a close sooner rather than later. I wasn’t going to say anything, but I don’t think it’s fair not to.”

“Your parents?”

Biting her lip, Charlotte nodded.

“Yes, they haven’t said anything, but I have no doubt they’ve been informed that we’ve gotten close.”

“Was that one of the reasons you were always so hesitant to show interest before?” Magnus asked, thinking back on how, during their time at the academy, Charlotte had constantly flip-flopped between hot and cold.

“It is,” she admitted. “It worries me a lot. Though my birth comes with unbelievable advantages, there are also a couple of downsides. Chief among them are my father’s expectations for me. I can guarantee he’s going to say that getting married can be left for later and that romance right now is simply a waste of my potential.” She let out a light sigh. “I’m already six months away from having to go back to Flamebrand Tower. I was only granted three years here. And in exchange I have to spend ten years serving under my mother at the tower. Not that I’ll mind, of course. It’s just...”

She fell silent and Magnus finished her words for her.

“It’s just that this is really nice.”

“Exactly.” She squeezed his arm a little bit tighter. “I know that this is a silly thing to complain about. Anybody in the world would want to be in my position, but I have to admit I do chafe under the restrictions. I have everything in the world I could ever want. Well, almost.”

Catching her glance, Magnus grinned.

“It’s not like you can’t have that too.”

She shook her head firmly.

“You don’t understand. My parents won’t allow it. Being out together like this? That’s as far as we can go if we don’t want them to kill you.”

She spoke in such a matter-of-fact voice that Magnus was taken aback. For a moment, he wanted to protest that even if they wanted to kill him, it would come down to whether they had the ability. But then he remembered that Kaelan Flamebrand was a mythic-ranked mage with a mythic-ranked phoenix, powerful enough to wipe out the entire region with a snap of his fingers.

If he decided Magnus needed to die, then Magnus would have no choice but to comply. Her mother, while not quite as strong, was herself a legendary-ranked mage with a legendary-ranked phoenix. And though a vast gulf lay between husband and wife in terms of power, they may as well have been equally strong as far as Magnus was concerned. Fighting them was simply not an option.

“Well, it is a pretty pickle,” Magnus said. “But that doesn’t mean the odds are insurmountable. I just need to become the type of man your parents would be happy to throw you at.”

Slapping Magnus’ arm lightly, Charlotte glared at him. “You make my parents sound mercenary.”

“Come on, Charlotte. You’re telling me your dad wouldn’t bend over backwards to get you engaged to a legendary- or mythic-ranked mage who was your own age?”

“Well... I mean...” with a defeated sigh, Charlotte gave up. “He absolutely would do something like that,” she mumbled under her breath before

quickly bouncing back, “but you’re not even close to legendary level, let alone mythic.”

“Not yet,” Magnus said. “So I’ll have to ask you to wait for a little while. And as long as I show the potential to get there, I’m sure your parents will be more amenable to our relationship. Speaking of which, we should probably formalize it. Charlotte Flamebrand, will you be my girlfriend?”

Blushing bright red, Charlotte smacked Magnus on the arm again, this time harder.

“It sounds so dumb when you say it, but yes, I will.”

Hopping into the air, Magnus clicked his heels together, causing Charlotte to laugh. Arm in arm they walked through the quiet night, filling it with their laughter and soon arriving at the Botanical Society, a large building with multiple greenhouses attached. The top of the building was covered in a giant glass dome, and as Magnus and Charlotte made their way inside they were stopped by a mage in a green robe.

“Good evening. There is a private event being held tonight, so unfortunately the Botanical Society will not be open for guests without tickets.”

Magnus produced the two tickets, and as soon as the attendant mage caught sight of them he quickly bowed.

“My apologies, I didn’t realize you were VIP members. Please, come this way.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Handing off his position to another mage who was standing nearby, he led Magnus and Charlotte into the large open foyer that sat underneath the glass dome. There were chairs set up all around the foyer surrounding a simple-looking pot, in which a plant with a dozen stems covered in bulbs grew. Magnus could immediately feel the intensity of the energy and Amber, who was in his arms, began to wiggle excitedly.

“Calm down,” Magnus whispered. “We can’t eat that.”

Charlotte, hearing his comment, giggled. The mage attendant led them to their seats, which were right in front of the pot, closer than any other seats in the room.

“Wow. Mage Woolworth must have paid an absolute fortune for these tickets,” Magnus said, glancing around after they had been seated.

“Well, I’m glad to be here with you,” Charlotte said. “I probably wouldn’t have come at all if it was him who was going to be sitting next to me. He’s been bothering me incessantly for the last year.”

Seeing someone heading for them, Magnus lightly tapped Charlotte's arm and then stood up.

"Please, no need to stand. I'm just coming over to introduce myself."

The mage who approached was broad-shouldered, and his robe hung loosely around him, though very little of his body appeared to be fat. He had thick hands, and Magnus saw tiny trace amounts of dirt under his nails as he held out his hand for Magnus to shake. Accepting the handshake, Magnus felt the mage squeezed slightly and responded in kind, which caused the man's eyes to light up.

"I am Mage Toppel. Welcome to the Botanical Society. If I'm correct, you are Tower Master Magnus. This is the first time you've stepped foot in our esteemed society."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mage Toppel. I've heard great things about your society, and I'm quite excited to see your Dawnlight flowers bloom. Allow me to introduce you to Mage Charlotte Flamebrand."

"Oh, I'm well acquainted with Lady Flamebrand," Toppel said, giving Charlotte a grandfatherly smile. "I know one of her uncles. We go way back. In fact, I ran the Botanical Society branch in Flamebrand City for a number of years."

Charlotte was smiling, but Magnus knew her well enough to be able to sense the hint of frustration she was holding back, making him wonder if Mage Toppel's sudden appearance in Crimson Flame City was because of Charlotte.

"You only arrived recently. Is that right? I don't remember there being a Botanical Society branch here before I came back from the academy."

"That's correct. We've actually only been here for about two years," Mage Toppel said. "Had I known you had any interest in magical plants, I would have sent you an invitation."

"That's okay," Magnus said with a wave. "I found somebody else to procure one for me."

That made Toppel laugh, though his humor didn't quite reach his eyes.

“I heard that you won these tickets in a competition with Mage Woolworth.”

As Toppel spoke, he gestured, and turning, Magnus saw Caspin leaning against the wall with a sour expression on his face. Caspin’s eyes were fixed on Magnus and Charlotte, and when he saw Magnus look over he gave an ugly smile and lifted his glass. Magnus returned the wave with a friendly grin and then turned back to Toppel.

“It’s true. I’ve had a bit of a lucky streak with stone gambling and, well, Caspin wasn’t quite as lucky.”

“So I’ve heard. Tell me, Tower Master, is it true that you spent 3,000 mana crystals on gambling stones?”

“No,” Magnus said. “It was 3,500. I’ve gotten some good things too.”

“Well, I didn’t realize your tower was so profitable as to be able to afford that sort of expenditure.” With a wide smile, Toppel gestured to the Dawnlight flower behind him. “We’re here to see the flower bloom, but it’ll be up for auction afterward if you have any spare crystals laying around.”

“Can I just buy it now?” Magnus asked, taking another look at the Dawnlight flower. “I hear it has a soothing effect on the soul. Is that correct?”

“Indeed, the Dawnlight flower is a peculiar flower. It needs incredibly stringent conditions to grow, and it won’t bloom until it has at least twelve stems. Thankfully, once it has established itself with a dozen stems it becomes very hardy, and the flowers bloom all year round so long as it has a steady supply of mana. The flowers will not only continue to bloom, but they produce a fragrance that purifies the soul, which in turn allows mages to purify their mana.”

Toppel paused and then shrugged.

“Of course, the effect is minute, but meditate for long enough in the presence of a Dawnlight flower and the effect becomes substantial. It is going to be up for auction, so I apologize, but you can’t buy it right now.”

“How much does something like this normally go for?” Magnus asked,

scratching his chin.

“Anywhere from 200 to 400 crystals,” Toppel said. “A pittance compared to what you spent on gambling stones, but still a substantial amount for most of us poor mages.”

Glancing at the thick brown robe the mage Toppel wore, Magnus almost called him out on it. If he had to guess, based on the sheer amount of mana the robe contained he was pretty sure it would cost a cool 2,000 crystals. It undoubtedly magnified Toppel’s spell casting and likely had strong defensive capabilities. Anyone who could afford a robe like that wouldn’t be worried about spending 400 crystals on a magical plant that could improve the purity of their soul.

“Can I just pay you 400 crystals for it right now?” Magnus asked.

Mage Toppel, who had turned to look away, nearly choked, but quickly shook his head.

“As much as I would love to do that, this is a young Dawnlight flower and is more likely to go for closer to 200 in the auction. I couldn’t take advantage of you like that.”

As he spoke his gaze flicked to Charlotte, who was staring at him intently.

“After all, you’re a friend of Charlotte’s, and she’s like a niece to me.”

“Which makes us practically family,” Magnus said, causing a pretty pink to dye Charlotte’s cheeks. “Wonderful.”

Catching the innuendo, Toppel’s gaze hardened, but just then there was a subtle ripple around the Dawnlight flower and Toppel quickly excused himself. The mages all took their seats, and as the minutes ticked by the ripples around the Dawnlight flower grew stronger. In Magnus’ arms, Amber wiggled her body, her eyes fixed on the stems. Then, all of a sudden, the buds began breaking open and beautiful white flowers, covered in an iridescent haze, spread open. As the flowers bloomed, they released a potent scent that rapidly spread throughout the room.

Inhaling a deep breath, Magnus felt an intense sense of comfort that filled him, reaching into every part of his body until it reached his soul. Next to

him, he heard Charlotte groan lightly and knew she was experiencing the same thing. As he greedily inhaled, Magnus could feel the cracks in his soul actually closing ever so slightly. It was almost unnoticeable, but as he continued to breathe in the rich scent the flowers released, he examined his soul more closely and, sure enough, the cracks had begun to heal.

The scent lasted a full half an hour. And though the impact wasn't that substantial, at least for Magnus, he was quite pleased with the effect. Though it wouldn't be a fast process, as long as Magnus was able to meditate in front of the Dawnlight flower for a few years, the majority of the cracks in his soul would be sealed back up, leaving only one or two especially deep cracks that had pierced all the way to the core. After the flower's scent had faded, Mage Toppel stood and walked to the center of the room.

"Thank you to everyone who has attended. As always, we will now auction this Dawnlight flower. Our rules are simple. We'll start the bidding at 100 crystals. Simply call out your bid if you wish to own this Dawnlight flower."

"125."

"150."

"200."

The last bid was called out by Caspin Woolworth who, immediately after speaking, glanced at Magnus, a sneer on his face. Magnus, though he heard Caspin's voice, didn't turn and look and instead raised his hand.

"300."

"350," Caspin immediately called out.

"500."

A deep silence fell over the room and all eyes were fixed on Magnus, who was lounging casually in his chair as if the number he had just called out was five and not 500. Taken aback, Toppel peeked at Charlotte, who just shrugged as if to say it had nothing to do with her.

“We have a bid of 500 from Tower Master Magnus.” Toppel spoke slowly, as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was saying. “Do we have any other bids?”

Five hundred mana crystals was an absolute waste for such a young Dawnlight flower, at least to most mages, but Magnus didn’t even blink, as if the crystals meant nothing to him. In truth, in the face of potentially repairing his soul, they genuinely didn’t mean anything to him. He would have happily bid a thousand to get the Dawnlight flower, but no one else was that foolish. With silence shrouding the room, Toppel looked around and then nodded.

“Then the Dawnlight flower has a new owner. Congratulations, Tower Master Magnus. It’s yours.”

With the excitement over, the mages began to leave, and Magnus and Charlotte rose. Toppel approached them again, holding the small pot where the Dawnlight flower was planted.

“I’ll send instructions along for how to care for it, but it’s really fairly simple. You just need to plant mana crystals around its roots. The more mana crystals you plant, the faster it’ll grow and the more consistently it will bloom. Ten mana crystals a month should keep it blooming all year, and add at least one stem every year. When it reaches two dozen stems it’ll increase in rank, and the effect will improve as well.”

“Thank you,” Magnus said, taking the pot, “I’ll have the crystals sent over tonight.”

“No need,” Toppel said. “I plan on coming and visiting you at your tower tomorrow. I can just pick them up then.”

“In that case, I’ll look forward to your visit.”

Glancing at Charlotte again from the corner of his eye, Toppel nodded and walked off to say goodbye to some of the other mages.

“Well,” Magnus said, looking at Charlotte, “that was exciting, but we should go before Mage Woolworth has a mental breakdown.”

Peeking from the corner of her eye toward the unfortunate mage, Charlotte

quickly nodded.

“He looks like he might challenge you to a duel right here.”

Handing Amber, who was staring at the Dawnlight flower with an obsessed gaze, off to Charlotte, Magnus took her arm and led her toward the door. Unfortunately, there were quite a number of mages who wanted to greet Magnus, and even more who wanted to greet Charlotte. Forced to stop every few feet, it was slow going trying to get out of the Botanical Society.

While he had been joking about Woolworth, Magnus was genuinely concerned that seeing how close he and Charlotte were might actually send the poor man over the edge, so he soon excused himself from an eager mage who wanted to chat about stone gambling. Grabbing Charlotte around the waist, he used his Swallow’s Cloud Step to flash toward the door. The mage Charlotte had been talking to was left stunned when she vanished, leaving her with nothing but the sight of Magnus’ grin.

“Magnus! What—”

“Quiet please,” Magnus said, holding her hand tightly as he pulled her along. “I’m getting a bad feeling.”

Ever since his Imperishable Void Physique had been initiated, Magnus’ sixth sense had been slowly growing stronger, and he was discovering that he was becoming increasingly sensitive to ill intent. Practically running, they turned the corner and slid to a stop as they came face to face with Mage Woolworth and three others who had spread out to block them. Though Woolworth was the only silver-ranked mage and the others were bronze or iron ranked, there were still four of them, leaving Magnus and Charlotte outnumbered.

“Get your filthy hands off of her!”

Caspin’s shout was loud and shrill and caught Magnus off guard, though on reflection it shouldn’t have. Caspin’s gaze was firmly fixed on Magnus’ hand that was holding Charlotte’s, and he looked like he wanted to eat Magnus alive. His bloodshot eyes rose to Magnus and he practically snarled.

“No one is worthy of her but me!”

Magnus’ eyebrows rose, but before he could retort Charlotte beat him to it.

“That’s it. You’re all dead.”

She let go of Magnus’ hand and tossed Amber to him as she strode past him. Though it must have been an illusion, Magnus could swear he saw icy ethereal flames shrouding her head and shoulders. She didn’t even bother summoning her phoenix and instead just began casting. Though Caspin was still focused on Magnus, the other mages reacted to the sight of a mana construct rapidly forming by letting out yells and trying to cast their own spells. Mage Woolworth finally saw Charlotte coming toward him and his eyes brightened.

“Don’t worry, Charlotte, I’ll protect you from—!”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence as Charlotte’s spell roared to life, unleashing a powerful blast of icy air that slammed into Caspin, lifting him from his feet and throwing him through the air. With Caspin suffering the bulk of the strike, the other mages weren’t as affected, though two of them failed to keep their spells stable, causing the spell constructs to crack and fade.

The other two mages managed to cast their spells, but their coordination was terrible. One formed a shield around himself, while the other cast a weak-looking Magic Missile. The single dart flashed through the air, but Charlotte didn’t even glance at it. When it reached her one of the gems in her tiara flashed and a shield appeared, blocking the attack.

By this time she had already finished her second spell, and as Caspin slammed into the street she thrust her hand forward and gripped her fist. The cold wind she had unleashed suddenly solidified, creating a brutal field of ice that surrounded every one of the mages, freezing them solid. The fight ended as quickly as it had begun, and just when Magnus was wondering if Charlotte was really going to kill them, Toppel appeared. Seeing the frozen mages, he quickly rushed over.

“Charlotte! Is everything okay?”

Taking a deep breath, Charlotte stamped her foot lightly and the ice faded away, releasing the shivering mages. By this time Caspin had come back to his senses, and when he looked at Charlotte, it was with more fear than reverence.

“They insulted me,” Charlotte said simply, her chilly gaze sweeping over Caspin and his companions. “I don’t want to see them ever again.”

“I understand,” Toppel said. “I’ll see to it.”

Turning on her heel, Charlotte took a few steps toward Magnus, her expression conflicted, as if afraid of what he might think of her after her furious display. But instead of fear she saw excitement. He walked over and took her arm, not caring one bit for the glare Toppel was giving him.

“That was awesome! Next time I need someone beat up, I am absolutely calling you.”

Her good humor returning, Charlotte rolled her eyes and the two walked off into the night, leaving Toppel and the groaning mages behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



After dropping Charlotte off at her house, Magnus strolled back to the tower, his pot clutched in his arm. He was excited to begin meditating near the Dawnlight flower and was even more excited because he could faintly feel himself approaching advancement with his Imperishable Void Physique.

The burst of spiritual healing he had received when the Dawnlight flower bloomed had not just worked to repair his cracked soul, but it had actually improved his physique as well. It would only take one or maybe two more training sessions until he could break through to the Human Warrior stage. Considering how strong and fast he was already, Magnus couldn't wait to see what benefits the next stage brought.

With Amber flying around his head, Magnus climbed over the gate and made his way up the hill to the tower. It was late and he didn't see anyone as he entered the tower, though he did hear the sound of sawing and chiseling which told him the stone cutter teams were still hard at work.

“I’ll have to remember to check in on what sort of materials they got,” Magnus said to himself, glancing toward the third-floor storage rooms as he passed by the landing.

Though he was excited to check out all of the treasures, he was more interested in advancing his physique, and as soon as Magnus reached his meditation room he put the pot down on the pillar and stripped off his shirt to begin his practice.

He started by running through each of his martial techniques, carefully practicing them with absolute focus and precision. Once he had completed a few rounds in each art, he took a deep breath, smelling the faint fragrance that had begun to fill the room. In a wide open space, such as the Botanical Society’s foyer, the scent produced by the Dawnlight flower could only be smelled at its moment of greatest concentration when it bloomed. But in a small, enclosed room like his meditation chamber, the Dawnlight flower’s scent would slowly fill the space until every breath allowed him to soothe his soul.

Considering that it had a subtle impact on his physique as well, Magnus didn’t feel that he had overpaid for it at all. Where others would only be able to purify their mana over time, he could both repair his soul and improve his body. A double win.

Bringing his hands together in front of him, Magnus took another deep breath and then settled into his horse stance, starting his Imperishable Void Physique forms. Normally, in between practicing his martial arts, he would run through these forms once, rejuvenating his energy and accomplishing a minor rotation of his physique. This time, however, intent on advancing, Magnus didn’t stop when he reached the end of the ten forms. Instead, he persisted, slowly moving back into the first form and continuing to repeat the rotation.

When he reached the eighth move for the second time, he could feel his body beginning to give out. The burning sensation in his bones had spread to his muscles, and his body shook under the pressure of completing the move. Magnus breathed deep, pushing past the discomfort to begin the ninth move. At this point, weakness flooded his limbs and he felt as if his body had turned to mud. It seemed impossible that he’d be able to move, let

alone complete the horse stance required for the tenth move.

Instead of giving in to the weakness, Magnus let out a low shout and clenched his teeth. With utmost effort, he shifted into his horse stance and forcefully brought his hands into position. His fingers felt like they were liquid, and any attempt to control them sent them twitching violently. Through sheer willpower Magnus forced his fingers to obey him, persisting until they formed the correct seal.

Yet even that wasn't enough.

Completing two rotations was fine, but if he wanted to break through to the next stage he needed to at least start the third. For a long moment Magnus remained locked in position, trembling like a leaf. His body was on the cusp of collapsing, and he wasn't sure how long he could maintain it. As the seconds turned into minutes, the burning sensation in his body faded ever so slightly as he became accustomed to it. Like a flash of lightning through his mind, he realized this was his opportunity.

Seizing on the brief moment of respite, Magnus drew his hands back, returning his fingers to their first form position before he could think about it. To his surprise, it actually worked. His body responded instinctively, creating the proper seal before it remembered it was too tired to move.

There was a sharp cracking sound inside his body, as if a tightly locked gate had been shattered by unstoppable force. Magnus felt a cool thread of pure power erupt inside of him. As fast as lightning, it raced through his body, leaving an intense feeling of comfort in its wake. The energy, which was unlike anything Magnus had encountered before, seeped into his muscles, penetrating deep into his bones. Where mana burned, this energy was like a gushing spring, bathing him in an intense warmth.

Following tight on the footsteps of the comfort was an intense, sharp pain, so strong that Magnus' mind simply blanked. His whole body heated up, every inch of his skin turning bright red, as if a million insects had bitten him all over at exactly the same time. White steam erupted from his pores, carrying with it trace amounts of impurity that had still been trapped in his skin. Snapping out of his daze, Magnus took a long breath, gasping for air. And just like that, the pain was gone. His skin rapidly cooled, returning to

normal.

Congratulations. Imperishable Void Physique has leveled up to the Human Warrior stage. You have unlocked a creature skill. Please select from the following list of available skills: Treasure Seeker, Absolute Digestion, Void Space.

Magnus immediately recognized the three Human-stage skills Amber possessed. He had been wondering why he didn't have access to them like other mages did, and it appeared that he had his answer. Each skill was tied to a certain rank of his Imperishable Void Physique. Considering that there were three skills for the Human level, Magnus guessed they could only be unlocked at the Warrior, Master, and Grandmaster stages. That meant he'd need to level up again before he could select a second of the three skills.

Magnus didn't make his selection immediately and instead slowly lowered himself to the ground. Though his body was practically bursting with energy, he could feel a deep-seated fatigue and his stomach was growling terribly. Ignoring his feelings of hunger, Magnus looked at the descriptions for each of the three skills.

TREASURE SENSE: Gain a supernatural sense for the location and value of treasures allows the user to detect treasures within twenty feet. Treasure-sensing distance will increase with stage.]

ABSOLUTE DIGESTION: Transform any mana-active substance into a tonic. Eating a mana-infused object will allow for improvements tied to the sort of material absorbed. Absolute Digestion makes the user immune to toxins they consume via their mouth.

VOID STORAGE: Acquire a five-foot-cubed void storage space allowing the user to deposit and retrieve non-sentient objects. Anything placed in the Void Storage enters stasis until removed. Size of the space increases with stage.

Magnus let out a low whistle. All three of the abilities were tremendously powerful, and he could immediately think of uses for them. However, the one that attracted his attention the most was Absolute Digestion. Treasure Sense was a strong ability, but Amber could already use it, and Void Storage was similarly strong and would create the illusion he had powerful spatial magic.

The problem was, if anyone actually saw him using it he was likely to end up on a mythic-ranked mage's experiment bench, cut open like a frog as

they tried to figure out how he was doing spatial magic at his rank.

Absolute Digestion, on the other hand, was a skill that would help him grow faster than he was already and would allow him to take maximum advantage of the tremendous amount of treasure the tower had just come into possession of. Magnus, for all his excitement at improving his physique, hadn't forgotten his ultimate objective. Unless he could win the coming Tower War, everything else was for nothing.

With the ability to convert treasure directly into strength by eating it, Magnus was even more confident he'd be able to train himself into an invincible position, at least as far as this Tower War was concerned.

Selecting Absolute Digestion, Magnus felt his stomach rumble fiercely as a mysterious energy, the same kind of energy that had just washed his muscles and bones, seeped into the walls of his stomach and esophagus. His hunger grew even more intense, and Magnus' eyes were inexorably drawn to the Dawnlight flower sitting in front of him. He couldn't help but lick his lips as his eyes grazed over the petals of the flowers. It was probably just how hungry he was, but the Dawnlight flower suddenly looked like the most delicious thing he had ever seen in his life.

Realizing that something bad was going to happen if he stayed and kept staring at it, Magnus scrambled to his feet and strode out of the room. He saw Amber laying on his desk, her legs splayed out and her wings spread wide as she chewed on a mana crystal. Hearing her happy oinks, Magnus paused for a moment. And then, striding over to the table, picked up one of the mana crystals he had casually discarded after returning home and lifted it to his lips.

It looked even more delicious than the Dawnlight flower had. He hesitated, unable to believe that he was actually going to try and eat a mana crystal, but his overwhelming hunger and the intense desire that had awoken inside of him at the sight of the crystals overrode his hesitation and he popped the mana crystal into his mouth.

At first it was no different than putting any other rock in his mouth. Magnus sucked on the cool stone for a moment and, with a fair amount of hesitancy, bit down. To his surprise, instead of breaking his teeth it was the crystal that

broke. The hard outer shell shattered and an intense surge of mana, like an exploding fireball, erupted in his mouth. Before the scalding mana could burn him, the strange energy that had shrouded his stomach and throat surged forth, forming a vortex that sucked the mana in his mouth down into his stomach.

His stomach filled instantly, eliminating Magnus' hunger and causing his belly to bloat. Going from intensely hungry to painfully full in a fraction of a second was a new experience for Magnus, and for a moment he just stood there. Unfortunately, the intensity of the mana only increased when it got to his stomach, and he genuinely thought he might explode. Realizing he had to do something, he turned and made his way back into the meditation room with waddling steps.

He could barely sit down, so he abandoned the thought of meditating and instead crouched and began working through his Imperishable Void Physique forms. The intense ball of mana in his stomach reacted immediately, roiling violently as wisps of it were drawn away to infuse his extremities.

Under the intense influence of the mana crystal, Magnus managed to achieve almost three complete rotations of his form before he collapsed, trembling to the ground. Yet his stomach was still full of mana. Realizing he needed another way to siphon it off, Magnus struggled back to his feet and began practicing his Twelve Thunder's Fist, followed by Silver Moon Strike and Swallow's Cloud Step.

He had recently been trying to advance all of his techniques, but at the moment his mind wasn't on improving them but instead using them to bleed off the intense ball of mana in his stomach. Instead of just practicing each art independently, Magnus began linking them together, stumbling through his Swallow's Cloud Step even as he threw punches according to the Twelve Thunder's Fist. After unleashing a powerful strike that left the air vibrating, Magnus darted to the side, opening and then closing his fingers as he drew his hand back, allowing him to grasp three silvery beams in the process. He unleashed them with a flick of his wrist even as he changed positions again, and then turned, transforming his fist into a knife hand as he delivered a fierce chop.

He moved faster and faster, exerting more strength with every chained move, and the ball of mana he had swallowed down was quickly whittled away until it was much more manageable. As he finally came to a stop, he let out a long, hot breath. Practicing all three of the arts together hadn't improved any of them particularly. But he knew that in combat he would have to link them together, so it was good practice for that.

Sitting down, Magnus allowed his mind to relax, sinking deep into his body to examine his soul. When he caught sight of his shattered soul, he couldn't help but be shocked. In addition to the thin purple lines of the soul contract he had formed with Amber, he could see two other substances at work. The faint scent of the Dawnlight flower was gathering around the wounds in his soul.

But what was really surprising to him was that the mana he had just thrown into his mouth was also beginning to gather with faint wisps, infusing into the Dawnlight flower's scent, causing it to thicken and improving its efficiency. It appeared that by eating mana crystals, Magnus could actually improve the speed at which the Dawnlight flower would repair his soul. Very welcome news indeed.

Though it was only a very slight improvement in the scent's effectiveness, Magnus would take anything he could get. Taking a deep breath to fill his lungs with the Dawnlight flower scent, Magnus began to meditate, trying to gather the mana that was seeping out of his stomach and direct it into his soul. The effect was good, and Magnus felt the cracks on his soul slowly begin closing.

He had originally estimated it would take a couple of years with just the twelve-bloom Dawnlight flower, but now, based on the efficiency gain from directly adding mana to the scent, he was confident he could cut that time in half. Of course, that wouldn't allow him to repair his soul completely. There were a few cracks that were simply too big for the Dawnlight flower to effect, but even repairing the smaller cracks would be a major boon and a huge weight off of Magnus' mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



After his meditation session was done, Magnus went to find Penwick. The steward was buried under literal piles of treasure, trying to sort through everything, and only emerged after Magnus had called his name a couple of times.

“Ah, Tower Master.” Penwick looked rather dazed and like he hadn’t slept in a couple of days. Judging by the sheer volume of treasures he had already sorted, that was likely true.

“You might want to get some rest,” Magnus said. “It’ll all be here when you come back.”

Adjusting his glasses, Penwick looked around with bloodshot eyes.

“That is true. It’s not going to grow wings and fly away, and I could use some sleep.” Penwick slowly sank down, sitting on a still-uncut stone. “Did you need something?”

“I’m mainly interested in checking out what treasures we have,” Magnus

said. “Anything particularly valuable?”

“We’ve opened a couple dozen starstones and quite a few flowers and other mana-active plants. But the majority of what we’ve opened are mana crystals and valuable ore. It’s standard stuff, and its main value to us is exchanging it for more mana crystals. I can show you.”

Watching Penwick struggle to get to his feet, Magnus quickly pressed him back down.

“You stay here and rest. I’ll go dig through it myself. Is it okay if I take some of the mana crystals?”

“Yes, of course. Just note down how many you take,” Penwick said, sagging slightly as his exhaustion finally caught up with him.

Patting his hardworking steward on the shoulder, Magnus walked over to one of the storerooms. It was packed full, and though an effort had been made to keep everything organized, there were so many resources they were spilling out into the walkway between the shelves. Spotting some boxes of mana crystals, Magnus took two of the flat cases, each containing a hundred mana crystals, and tucked them under his arm. He walked back into the sorting area to tell Penwick he was taking 200 crystals, only to find the steward snoring away, laying sideways on the pile of material he still had to sort. Chuckling, Magnus hoisted Penwick into the air with his free arm and carried him off to bed. The steward was so out of it he didn’t stir once.

When Magnus returned to his office he took a moment to sit at his desk and began tracing out a training plan. With their immediate problem of resources solved, Magnus was excited to throw himself into training. He had twenty-eight days until the Tower War, barely four weeks, to improve his strength by a drastic degree, which meant he needed to prioritize his training properly. At the top of the paper he wrote “Imperishable Void Physique” and underlined it. His body was the foundation of his strength, and so that needed to take first priority.

“Live combat” was written underneath. In order to improve his martial arts, he would need to put himself in dangerous positions against opponents who could fight back. It was one thing to train martial arts in the safety of his meditation room and entirely another to step out into the real world and put

himself up against foes who could potentially hurt him.

Thinking for a moment, Magnus wrote “Talismans/Meditation.” Repairing his soul was important. And through meditation and the combination of the Dawnlight flower and mana crystals, Magnus could improve the speed at which he repaired his soul.

But equally important was practicing his Talisman making. For the coming fight he wanted to be well stocked up on not only Minor Cloud Talismans but, if he could manage it, a few other Talismans, like the Spirit Detection Talisman, which would allow him to track opponents, and the Minor Healing Talisman, which would improve both his energy and healing ability.

There was also a Talisman called the Paper Ward Talisman that would create a thin barrier in between the caster and anything that wanted to harm them. According to the description, it would repel insects and minor spirits. The challenge was, Magnus didn’t know what qualified as a minor spirit, and he would have to create one to be able to test it out.

With his priorities established, Magnus first ran downstairs to find one of the servants, who he asked to deliver a message to Charlotte. He scribbled it out quickly on a piece of paper, folded it in half, gave it to the servant, and then sprinted back upstairs, eager to get back to training. He wasn’t sure if Charlotte would be able to help him find opponents he could practice his martial arts against, but she was the only person he could currently think of.

He had just made it to the top of the stairs when he heard something down below and, peering over the railing, he saw Mage Toppel standing five stories below in the entryway of the tower. Though slightly annoyed at the interruption to his plan, Magnus had been expecting him, so he stepped into his office to grab his shirt and raced back down the stairs three at a time to greet the head of the Botanical Society.

Magnus wasn’t wearing a robe, which was highly unusual for a mage, and instead was dressed in his pants and a casual linen shirt. His feet were bare, as he preferred practicing his martial arts without boots on, and a faint sheen of sweat still dotted his brow. When he landed in front of Toppel the broad-shouldered mage looked taken aback, as if unable to understand why

Magnus had appeared in such a disheveled state.

“You caught me working out,” Magnus said, extending his hand for Toppel to shake. “Come this way. We have a sitting room right over here. Unless you’d prefer to go up to my office.”

“Let’s go up to your office,” Toppel said, looking around. “This is the first time I’ve been in Crimson Flame Tower, and it’d be nice to get a tour.”

“Sure,” Magnus agreed and led Toppel up the stairs. “Second floor are the servants’ rooms, kitchens, and dining room, laid out pretty much exactly like any standard tower. Up here on the third floor we have storage rooms and labs. You’ll have to excuse us. We’re a bit of a mess at the moment. We’ve been opening stones like crazy.”

As they passed through the third floor, they had to step around two stone cutters who were manhandling a massive slab of granite into one of the rooms. Seeing them struggle with it, Magnus grabbed one of the edges, his fingers sinking into the stone as he lifted the entire thing.

“Let me help you,” he said, and as the workman quickly backed up he casually carried it through the doorway, doing his best not to scrape the wooden frame, and deposited it in the room.

“You guys are doing a great job. Keep up the good work.”

Magnus patted one of the workers on the shoulder as he walked back out into the stairwell. He was quite pleased to see that rather than looking petrified, both of them looked proud at his compliment, a clear sign he was starting to break through the class barrier. He caught the curious look in Mage Toppel’s gaze as they continued to climb to the fourth floor but ignored it, returning to his fast-paced introduction of the tower’s facilities.

“Labs, rooms for the tower’s other mages—currently only Penwick—and the library. And then up here on the fifth floor we have the tower master’s office and my private rooms. Come on in.”

The door was still hanging open as Magnus walked into the room in front of Mage Toppel, and Amber was still splayed out on the desk. She had fallen asleep with a chunk of mana crystal sticking out from between her lips,

presenting a gluttonous but cute picture. After scratching her lightly on the head Magnus swept the scattered mana crystals together and into the top drawer of his desk as Toppel walked into the room. Sitting down, Magnus gestured to the open seat.

“Take a load off and tell me what’s on your mind.”

Mage Toppel, after looking around the room, sat down. His gaze landed on Magnus, and it was easy to see the disapproval Mage Toppel was holding back.

“I had heard reports that you were quite casual,” Toppel spoke the word like it was a grave insult, “but I hadn’t realized just how true they were.”

Chuckling, Magnus held up his hands.

“You have to understand that I’m fighting for my life here, quite literally. Within a month I’m either going to be dead, or I’ll have demonstrated that I have enough worth that nobody’s going to care how I act. So why play it straight-laced now? Will it help me if I’m extra polite to you?”

Taken aback by Magnus’ frankness, Mage Toppel thought about it for a moment and then nodded.

“It’s a fair point. No matter how polite or impolite you are, it won’t change the fact that you have to fight in the Tower War you initiated.”

Ignoring the hidden barb in Toppel’s words, Magnus tapped on his desk and shifted the subject.

“I’m sure you didn’t come here to talk to me about my impending loss to Starlit Clay Tower. Why don’t you tell me why you’re actually visiting?”

After considering Magnus for a moment more, Toppel nodded and made himself more comfortable by stretching out. He crossed one ankle over the other and rested his big hands on his stomach as he leaned back in his chair, finally getting to the purpose of his visit.

“I have known the Flamebrand family for many years. In fact, I was granted the opportunity to become a mage thanks to Charlotte’s uncle. I even served in Flamebrand Tower before joining the Botanical Society. You might say

that my whole life as a mage has been entwined with Charlotte's family. For the last ten years, however, I've been a member of the Botanical Society. As part of the Botanical Society, we study the growth of magical plants. Our society specializes in hard-to-find and hard-to-grow varieties, perfecting their development through years of careful cultivation. I bring this up to say that this is the same mentality the Flamebrand family has."

Sensing where the conversation was going, Magnus smiled. "Only the best, right?"

"Exactly," Toppel said with a nod. "Only the best. They focus on maximizing everything that they do, especially when it comes to the growth of their young ones. I've never seen a family more obsessed with developing strength in their younger generation. And Charlotte is the prime recipient of the Flamebrand family's attention."

Scratching his chin, Magnus nodded, indicating he understood.

"Then you must have been sent to make sure nothing happened to their flower."

Toppel seemed unsurprised at Magnus' guess, and the broad-shouldered mage sat up a bit straighter in his chair, his gaze boring into Magnus.

"You are correct. I was asked to move here to Crimson Flame and establish a branch of the Botanical Society. Over the last two years I've been observing Crimson Flame City and come to a couple realizations. It's a quaint, if backwater city, and given the right leader could likely grow considerably. So far, though you haven't shown the qualities I would necessarily want in a leader, you at least haven't harmed the city. With the right backing and the right training, I think you could do well. The Flamebrand family is always on the lookout for talent. Given my recommendation, the family would probably be more than willing to support you. Even in the coming fight."

Shaking his head slightly, Magnus leaned forward, resting his arms on the edge of his desk and laughed at the blatant attempt at bribery.

"Support at what cost? Let me guess. As long as I leave Charlotte alone and break off future contact with her, the Flamebrand family will swoop in and

save me from my current predicament, making me wealthy enough that I won't have to worry about anything for the rest of my life."

"It's a pleasure to speak with intelligent people," Mage Toppel said with a wide smile. "You've grasped the issue perfectly."

"Two problems with that," Magnus said, holding up two fingers and counting down. "First, Charlotte is the one who has been pursuing me, at least up until a couple of days ago. She is a woman who has her own thoughts, and just because I might decide to throw away our relationship doesn't mean she would agree. And second, I don't want to. I'd much rather keep my relationship with Charlotte and dig myself out of this hole by myself than abandon my friend for the promise of security."

Slowly, Mage Toppel's smile faded.

"Maybe you don't grasp the situation as well as I thought. So far I've spelled out the easy choice for you. But there is a hard choice as well."

"Well, then why don't you spell out the hard one and we'll see if I still feel the same way," Magnus said with an easy smile.

By this time Mage Toppel's expression had grown dark, and he stared at Magnus like he was looking at a bug. Uncrossing his legs, he shifted to the edge of his chair as if he might jump up at any moment and rested his hands on his knees.

"The hard choice is that the family terminates your relationship for you by removing you from the land of the living or getting you sent to the Barrier Guard's mines to serve a criminal's sentence for the rest of your life. Even if you don't die in the coming Tower War, your life will certainly be over shortly after. You seem like a nice kid, but don't think that you can go up against the Flamebrand family and win."

Magnus' smile hadn't shifted even an inch in the face of the naked threat. In fact, it had only grown wider as Mage Toppel spoke.

"I don't mean any disrespect. But unless I hear those words from the head of the Flamebrand family themselves, I'd be an idiot to take your word for it. By this time, I have no doubt that the family is aware of me. But this

level of threat feels a lot like you're trying to nip a problem in the bud before it happens. I'm assuming Charlotte knows you were sent to this city to watch over her. And my guess is there are others as well. So the fact that she didn't have any issue with the two of us waltzing right into your presence yesterday and showing off our relationship means she wants her family to know.

“I appreciate that you're being a faithful servant and doing your duty to the Flamebrand family. But Charlotte is a member of the Flamebrands too. And standing in her way is liable to make you suffer. Rather than stick your nose in at such an early juncture, wouldn't it be better to just wait and see what comes of this? It won't be too late to throw me in a sack and toss me in the river if the orders come down. But currently we're in the negotiation stage and you, sir, are jumping the shark.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Unfamiliar with the expression, Toppel frowned.
“Sharks don’t jump.”

“Exactly. They don’t. So you’d be better off waiting for orders than just striking out on your own.”

Sitting up, Magnus’ voice took on a more serious tone.

“I must admit, I do appreciate you looking out for me. I know I’m a practically worthless tower master. I’ve little to no influence and few favors I could call on. But I am still the tower master. So walking into my office to threaten me is not a good idea if you intend for you or your branch of the Botanical Society to remain in this city.”

“Threats don’t become a weakling,” Mage Toppel said, his stare heavy.

“That’s a great saying but doesn’t apply in this case. It’s because I’m weak that I can make threats. And though we haven’t gotten there yet, I’m

perfectly willing to start making real threats if that's what it takes to resolve this situation. There is a saying I once heard that fits my situation well. The barefoot don't fear those with shoes. Tell me, Mage Toppel, what do I have to lose right now? What can I be threatened with? I'm in more debt than should be possible. I've had a death sentence declared over me because people want this tower and I'm standing in their way. And yet, even that hasn't frightened me. You really don't think that coming in here and issuing your half-baked threats is going to suddenly do what the direct threat of death couldn't?"

"Then maybe you need a more direct threat to get the situation through your thick skull," Toppel said, his words laced with anger.

Slowly standing up from his chair, Mage Toppel unleashed his aura and an intense pressure rolled out from him, displaying his solid gold-ranked strength. The soul pressure was so strong that small objects nearby began to shake, yet Magnus didn't even blink. On the top of the desk Amber opened one eye to glance at Toppel and then, snorting disdainfully, rolled over onto her back to continue sleeping.

"Stop drooling on my desk," Magnus said, poking Amber's chubby little stomach.

She squealed and wiggled out of his way and then continued sleeping, ignoring him as well. With a sigh, Magnus grabbed the shirt he had discarded that morning and wiped her drool off his desk. Tossing the shirt toward the door to his room, he brushed off his fingers and looked at Mage Toppel, who was staring at him with a mixture of shock and pure confusion.

"You can reign it in. Your point about how strong you are has been made." Flashing what he hoped was a mysterious smile. Magnus gestured to the window. "Hopefully my point has been made as well. You know, I've been doing a little digging the last couple of days, and it appears that your Botanical Society has done a really good job of livening up the city. We're pretty fortunate to have you."

Walking over to the window, Magnus pointed to a stretch of land just outside the city limits.

"I've also heard that in other cities, the Botanical Society runs farms for

various magical plants. I was wondering if you'd be interested in taking on that project here in Crimson Flame. We'd be happy to provide the land if you find it suitable or arrange for you to rent from one of the nobles. I was thinking of giving you a ten-year lease at cost for the sake of the city's development."

The complete disregard for Mage Toppel's aura and the abrupt change in subject had its intended effect, and Toppel stared at Magnus for a moment. Then, slowly, he withdrew his aura before walking over to the window. They stood in silence only an arm's length from each other for nearly five minutes before Toppel spoke.

"I hadn't considered staying long enough to establish a farm," Toppel admitted slowly. "Now I might change my mind."

Magnus was well aware of the misunderstanding Toppel was under, but he didn't correct it. The fact that he could remain entirely unfazed by Toppel's gold-ranked aura was a clear indicator that his soul strength was higher than Toppel's. To a mage, this was a clear indicator that Magnus must be in the high gold or even platinum rank.

Magnus was nothing of the sort, of course. As far as mages were concerned, he was barely iron rank. But between the soul contract that was forcefully holding his soul together and his Imperishable Void Physique, Magnus had no trouble shrugging off the gold-ranked aura Toppel had just tried to crush him with.

No mage who had made it to the gold rank was an idiot, and Magnus could practically see the gears turning in Toppel's head. According to all official reports, Magnus was barely silver ranked, and everyone betting on the coming fight was operating under that same assumption. If Magnus was actually gold or, Terra forbid, platinum, all the calculations changed.

A twenty-year-old platinum-ranked mage was something Borella had never seen, and the number of gold-ranked mages in their twenties over the last 2,000 years could be counted on one hand. If Magnus had achieved that level of strength, the Flamebrand family would do everything in their power to betroth Charlotte to him immediately. Like most mages, Toppel's ultimate concern was his own advancement, and that didn't change even

though he served the Flamebrand family. He had come to the tower today making a bet that he would be rewarded for breaking up Magnus and Charlotte's relationship.

Yet now, based on what Magnus had just hinted at, the power dynamic had shifted drastically. If the young tower master was genuinely stronger than him, getting on his bad side would be a death sentence. On the other hand, if Toppel could forge a good relationship with him, Magnus could be Toppel's ticket to rising even further. From the obviously conflicted expression on his face, it was clear that Toppel was weighing whether it would be worth it to bet on Magnus instead of betting against him.

"I genuinely think you should consider it," Magnus said, patting Toppel lightly on the shoulder. "This city will rise, and those who invest in it will be amply rewarded. And as for our other conversation, let's just keep it between us. There's no need to get Charlotte or anyone else involved. Consider it the first step in a long and friendly relationship."

Hesitating for a moment, Toppel finally nodded.

"That's agreeable to me." He glanced at the land surrounding the city. "I'll go back and consider what it would look like to start a farm. If the assessments look viable, I'll bring you a plan. I might not be the one running it, but somebody from the Botanical Society could."

"Excellent. That's exactly what I wanted to hear," Magnus said. "Now, I don't mean to be rude, but I do have a busy day ahead of me."

"Of course, Tower Master. I won't bother you further."

With considerably more respect than he had held when he first walked into the tower, Mage Toppel bowed and headed for the door. Magnus saw him out, despite Mage Toppel's protestations, making sure to hand over the 500 crystals he had promised for the Dawnlight flower.

It was only after the gold-ranked mage had left the tower and the door had closed behind him that Magnus finally relaxed, letting out the breath he had been holding. He wiped a bead of sweat that was threatening to run down his cheek and let out a shaky laugh. Though he had tried to appear completely at ease, the whole situation had been harrowing. Had he not

possessed exquisite control over his body, he was afraid he would have given up the game as soon as Toppel had unleashed his aura.

Magnus had guessed when he met him last night that Mage Toppel was one of Charlotte's secret guardians. That much had been proven when he showed up as soon as Charlotte started fighting. And when the mage had mentioned coming to visit his tower, he had further guessed the mage was going to warn him off. Though their conversation had ultimately ended in Magnus' favor, it could have gone a different way very quickly. The Flamebrand family was fiercely protective, and as one of their attendants Mage Toppel could very well have taken Magnus' refusal as a declaration of war. Though the soul pressure a gold-ranked mage could exert didn't bother Magnus directly, Toppel's strength was nothing to sneeze at, and Magnus was genuinely unsure whether he'd survive a fight with a gold-ranked mage.

"I really need somebody to spar with," he muttered as he jogged back upstairs.

With nothing else on his schedule, Magnus was free to begin his training in earnest. He adopted a simple rotation. First, he swallowed down a mana crystal and then he worked through as many rotations of his Imperishable Void Physique forms as he could, pushing himself until he collapsed. Once he collapsed he would sit and meditate, bleeding off a bit of the excess energy from the mana crystal, and then would repeat his Imperishable Void Physique forms for a second round, followed by another round of meditation. Once he was calm, he would practice his Talismans and then do a third round of physique refinement, though this time he didn't exert himself fully.

With his energy restored, he would practice each of his three martial arts in combination until he had exhausted the mana crystal. This intense training was followed by a short break, and after taking half an hour to rest Magnus would swallow another mana crystal and begin it all over again. The full rotation took about five hours, including his half an hour of rest, which meant that if he pushed himself Magnus could fit four rotations into a twenty-four-hour period. The remaining four hours were spent sleeping, eating, and talking to Penwick.

He had done this for two days before he got a response from Charlotte. He had expected a simple message, but instead she showed up herself. Magnus was in the middle of a rotation when she arrived, so he asked her to wait while he finished. She opted to wait in his office, watching him through the open door of the meditation room as he completed his martial training. As he walked out of the room, she handed him a towel, her eyes sliding over his chiseled torso.

“I didn’t even know they made muscles like that,” she said as he dried himself off.

“Only mine,” Magnus quipped. “Tell me, did you manage to find someone for me to spar with?”

“Nobody that met your qualifications. The only people who meet your requirements aren’t people at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Charlotte said, sitting down and crossing her legs, “you want someone who can cast magic and engage in melee in the silver rank. Mages above the bronze rank don’t fight with their hands. It’s a waste of time. Magic is so much more powerful.”

“What about a mage and their soul contract? I could fight both of them.”

“Magnus, no mage in their right mind is going to agree to fight you. There’s no value in it, and mages only do things that benefit them. It’s going to be impossible to convince anyone. Your best option is to find a bronze-ranked beast.”

“But I want to fight somebody in the silver rank.”

Rolling her eyes, Charlotte squeezed the skin on her forehead as if she were speaking to the dumbest person in the world.

“Magnus,” she said, her voice practically bleeding patience. “Don’t you remember any of your lessons from the academy? Did you go to school for four years in vain? Beasts, because all of their strength is in their physical form, making them naturally mana resistant, can always fight up a rank. Fighting a silver-ranked beast as a silver-rank mage is suicide. You’d need

to be gold ranked, or higher, in order to defeat a silver-ranked beast.”

“Okay, so where do I find a bronze-ranked beast I can fight?”

“If we were in the south, it would be easy,” Charlotte said, shrugging. “They have Beast Arenas all over the place where they fight beasts against each other, but Beast Arenas aren’t popular up here in the north. But don’t worry, I do have a solution. As long as you can find a Legacy, you should be able to find beasts inside that you can fight to your heart’s content. The only downside is that they’re going to try and kill you.”

“Not a downside at all,” Magnus said, smiling. “In fact, that’s what I want. I need to train my combat skills. I’ve only got twenty-six days until the fight. And I need as much combat experience as I can get.”

Hearing Magnus speak about the coming Tower War, Charlotte’s lips turned down in a frown. Magnus knew what she wanted to say but was holding back. He gave her a reassuring smile and closed his eyes for a moment, recalling what he knew about Legacies.

In ancient times, before mages were prevalent, most mages didn’t live among the population. Instead they lived in small pocket worlds they created with the power of their towers. These pocket worlds were extra-dimensional spaces attached to the real world through an anchor point. In these dimensional spaces, a mage could cultivate their own world, shaping it as they desired. Over the course of their long life they would cultivate all the resources they needed in their pocket worlds, creating a renewable source of material for their experiments.

Yet no one could resist the march of time, and as these powerful mages passed away their pocket worlds would become ownerless. As the power of their towers faded, the dimensional anchor would be revealed, allowing modern mages to break into the pocket world, giving them access to the resources inside. Knowing this was inevitable, most of the ancient mages proactively set conditions upon the pocket world, imposing restrictions on who could enter.

In addition, treating these worlds as their graves, they would create tests that, if a mage could pass them, would grant them access to the original mage’s legacy. Though not that common, there were thousands of these

Legacies scattered around the continent that had been uncovered over time. Each was considered priceless, and the mage organizations and families that owned them had access to a nigh-endless supply of resources.

Unfortunately, there were no Legacies anywhere close by. This time it was Magnus' turn to frown, and Charlotte, guessing his thoughts, sighed.

“I know there are no convenient Legacies, but if you want to try, I can ask my family if they'll let you use ours. We have a Legacy about two weeks north of here. Unfortunately, all of the bronze-ranked beasts and above have been culled. We use it for resource collection, so there's no point in having beasts around.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



A depressed silence fell over the room as Charlotte and Magnus both racked their brains for a solution. Unfortunately, there simply wasn't anything to be done. Magnus even considered trying to go out and find a silver-ranked beast in the wild, but mages had been meticulous about eliminating dangerous creatures close to civilization. The degree of damage a silver-ranked beast, or even a bronze-ranked beast could cause to a city, was significant, and there were many towns and cities without mage towers that would be entirely helpless should they end up being attacked.

It was much more efficient to simply remove dangerous creatures from civilized areas than it was to try and station mages in every town and city across the continent. There were, of course, some areas that still had powerful beasts, but in most cases they were too strong for Magnus to try and spar against.

Finding a Legacy was the right answer. The problem was where to find one that fit his needs and was close enough that he wouldn't waste time getting to them. What Charlotte didn't say, but Magnus knew, was that there were

other organizations besides the Flamebrand family who possessed Legacies, but most of them wouldn't give him access, if for no other reason than to avoid angering the Earthbound Circle.

Magnus was just about to give up on the idea when he heard the pound of footsteps on the stairs and Penwick burst into the office, his eyes wide and his breath coming in large gasps.

"They're gone! They're all gone! They vanished into thin air!"

"Whoa, slow down there," Magnus said, getting up and walking over to steady Penwick, who looked frantic with worry. "What are you talking about? What's gone?"

"The mana crystals! They just vanished."

Taken aback, Magnus shared a glance with Charlotte.

"That's not good. Why don't you take us down and show us?"

Ringling his hands together, Penwick led Charlotte and Magnus down the staircase to one of the storage rooms on the third floor. Magnus sensed the trouble as soon as they arrived at the room. It should have been full to bursting, just like all of the other storage rooms, but when he opened the door he discovered that the entire room was empty, save for a few pieces of metal shoved in one corner. The racks, which should have been stacked high with thousands of mana crystals, were completely bare. After sweeping the room with his gaze to ensure he hadn't missed anything, Magnus turned to Penwick.

"When did this happen?"

"I just saw it now. I was in here last night and they were all here. Yesterday I reorganized and moved all of the crystals into this storage room. Before everything had just been sort of haphazard, but the accounts weren't making sense. We kept losing some crystals here and there. I didn't understand it at first, but after reorganizing everything, overnight all of the crystals I put in this room, a full 5,000 of them, just vanished. Gone. I don't know where they could be."

"Maybe a thief?" Charlotte asked, walking over to one of the shelves and

swiping a finger along it.

“Unlikely,” Magnus said, closing his eyes. “The number of crystals is too high to carry them out of the tower without making a scene, which means they just evaporated. Unless somebody used some sort of dimensional magic.”

A thought struck him and he stiffened.

“Where’s Amber?”

He had left her on the desk upstairs in his office, but as he turned around he saw her sniffing against one of the storage walls. She had followed them down and now seemed to be quite interested in something at the other end of the storeroom. Walking over, Magnus crouched down next to her.

“Amber, did you eat all the crystals in this room?”

She looked up, looked at the empty shelves, and then looked back at Magnus as if asking, “What crystals?”

“Don’t give me that. This is important. Did you eat all of the crystals in this room?”

She shook her head emphatically and then turned toward the wall and gestated with her nose, letting out a series of oinks. The wall she was pointing to looked no different from any of the other walls and, reaching out, Magnus ran his hand across it. It also felt no different from a regular stone wall, but considering Amber’s talents Magnus suspected it was anything but.

“Penwick, can you grab me some crystals? Do we still have any?”

“We do still have some,” Penwick said. “Everything else we have is raw material. We haven’t managed to start selling it yet.”

“I’m still setting up the sales channels,” Charlotte chimed in. “It’s taking a little bit of time, but they should be rolling in the next week.”

“That’s fine. Just bring the crystals we have.”

“What? All of them? But what if they disappear too?”

“Yes, all of them. Just trust me.”

Though hesitant, Penwick complied and had soon directed the servants to bring the tower’s remaining mana crystals into the storage room. Magnus had them arrange the crystals on the shelf nearest to the strange wall and then, after dismissing the servants, he waited. He didn’t know exactly what he was waiting for, but after about twenty minutes he suddenly saw the wall ripple. He had touched it only moments ago and it had been as hard as stone, so to see it ripple left him feeling quite strange.

The ripples spread, and the nearby mana crystals abruptly levitated and shot straight toward the wall, moving faster than Magic Missiles. Yet instead of crashing against the wall and exploding, like Magnus half expected, the mana crystals slipped into the undulating stone, vanishing. A full 650 mana crystals, one after another, vanished into the wall before Penwick let out a scream and reached for the stones that had yet to fly away.

Magnus stepped forward, his hands stretching out to touch the rippling wall, only to find that he couldn’t actually make contact. An invisible barrier blocked his way forward, forcefully stopping his hand a few inches away from the wall.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Charlotte muttered, her expression pure disbelief.

“What’s going on? Do you know what this is?” Magnus asked, never tearing his eyes from the still rippling stone.

“That’s a dimensional anchor.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Magnus could hardly believe his ears, but Charlotte was being deadly serious.

“It’s a spatial node, a dimensional anchor. There’s a Legacy here.”

Holding up his hands, Magnus shook his head.

“I’m sorry, that’s some novel-level plot armor stuff. You can’t actually be serious.”

“I don’t know what a novel is, but I’m not kidding. This is what a spatial node looks like when it’s being activated.”

“You are trying to tell me that there is a Legacy here? Inside the tower?”

Ignoring him, Charlotte moved closer, reaching out like Magnus had to try and touch the wall. She too encountered the barrier, but as more crystals slipped into it her hand suddenly pressed forward as the barrier thinned and then dissipated. With her eyes gleaming, she turned to Magnus.

“Magnus, this must have been what your master was trying to do with all of those crystals. He must have discovered the Legacy and he was trying to open it.”

“You open Legacies by feeding them an astronomical sum of crystals?”

“No—I mean, yes, you can. It’s the most expensive way to do it, but it works. Dimensional anchors are gates that lead between the real world and pocket worlds, but they’re normally locked behind specific restrictions. The stronger the restrictions, the more mana you need to power them. But someone figured out that by overwhelming the barrier, you can force the anchor open. The two ways to unlock them are through geomancy, using the energy of the world to anchor the gate open, and by feeding it so much mana it can’t help but open.”

There was a crash as Penwick, who had been staring in shock at the wall, let the crystals he had grabbed slip from his arms. His glasses in his rush had been knocked askew, and he very slowly reached up to adjust them on his nose.

“We have a Legacy?”

Magnus was still having trouble coming to terms with it himself, but he nodded.

“It would seem so.”

Though he was racking his brain, Magnus couldn’t remember any memories that indicated anything about the Crimson Flame Tower having access to a Legacy. They had just been talking about finding one earlier, and he couldn’t help but feel something sketchy was going on, considering it

had just popped up. Then again, they had lost nearly 6,000 crystals to open it.

The barrier blocking the dimensional gate was now gone, and Magnus could see the wall was still rippling. He reached out to touch it, and as soon as his fingers made contact with the wall the signet ring on his thumb flared. Thankfully the door to the storage room was closed, because the entire room was instantly dyed in crimson light as the ruby on the ring shone brightly. Magnus felt the signet ring heat up slightly and form a connection with the gate, granting him a clear understanding of how to control it.

Only a few days ago Curtis had given him the ring back that his master had used for collateral, but there was no way the merchant mage would have ever imagined that the signet was the primary control method for a hidden Legacy. As tower master, Magnus had inherited the signet ring from the previous tower master but hadn't thought much of it. Clearly it had uses far beyond what he actually understood, but his master had died before having a chance to explain it. As the crimson light faded away, the wall stopped rippling. Instead the stone transformed as an archway emerged from the wall.

There was a blank stone wall inside the archway, smooth as glass and polished until it reflected all of their faces like a mirror. Magnus could only laugh at how silly they looked staring at the wall blankly. With a thought, the crimson stone on his signet flickered and the mirror-like stone began to transform, taking on a crimson hue as a dimensional gate opened up.

“Oh my goodness,” Charlotte spoke in a hushed whisper. “Magnus, you can't give up this tower. This... this is a stable gate. Stable gates are worth a fortune.”

“Which means previous tower masters must have known about this,” Penwick said.

He stepped closer and reached out a hand to touch the dimensional gate, pulling back just before his fingers made contact. He turned to Magnus, his eyes gleaming.

“This is what Master was trying to do. He was trying to unlock this Legacy.

I always wondered why the Crimson Flame Tower was here in the middle of nowhere. But now it makes sense.”

“What doesn’t make sense is the fact that it was closed in the first place. If we’ve had access to a Legacy, why haven’t previous generations used it?”

“Resource depletion,” Penwick said immediately. “Legacies go through cycles. They’re like the real world, and there are ebbs and flows to the mana field they contain. It’s not uncommon for Legacies to be sealed for a generation or two so that the resources the world contains can be regenerated.”

“I guess that makes sense, given the history of the tower. The decline probably started when this Legacy was shut.”

Glancing down at the signet on his thumb, Magnus found himself at a loss. Clearly his master had known about the Legacy, and probably feeling that he had reached the end of his rope, he had done everything in his power to open it back up. Unfortunately, he had died before succeeding, and it was only blind luck and Magnus’ insane idea that had allowed them to discover it. That, of course, was a more realistic idea than Magnus’ suspicion that there was some sort of cosmic mastermind playing out his life as a joke, or his even more ridiculous suspicion that he had somehow been reincarnated into a novel.

“Well, though we don’t know what this Legacy contains, there’s a good chance it’ll solve our problem. And 6,000 crystals is a small price to pay for access to a Legacy.”

“That’s a gross understatement,” Penwick said, adjusting his glasses again as he calmed down. “And my guess is that Celestine Earthshaper somehow ran across this information and knows that our tower used to have a Legacy. Given Master’s large-scale mana crystal acquisition, she probably guessed what he was trying to do, which was why she got someone to manipulate you into issuing the challenge.”

He fell silent for a moment and then spoke with a great deal of hesitation.

“Magnus, you know, the fact that we have a Legacy means that there is another path forward. We could—”

Holding up his hand, Magnus shook his head, stalling the words that were about to come out of Penwick's mouth.

“Absolutely not. While we could give up the Legacy to get ourselves out of this situation, it would be a betrayal of Crimson Flame Tower. Master died trying to preserve the tower's Legacy. We're not going to do anything less.”

Letting out his breath, Penwick nodded, his expression growing firm.

“You're right, we won't dishonor the tower.”

Glancing at the still-shimmering crimson dimensional gate, Magnus quickly recalibrated his plans.

“My original intention was to completely immerse myself in training over the next three and a half weeks. But this is too good of an opportunity. We're going to need to explore it. If there was information about this Legacy, the tower doesn't have it anymore, at least that we know. My guess is that Master destroyed it, not wanting others to find out our secret. Charlotte, it's going to be potentially dangerous, but we're going to need help exploring it. Are you interested?”

Smirking, Charlotte flipped her braid over her shoulder.

“Magnus, if you didn't invite me, you and I were going to have some choice words. Of course I'm interested in exploring it.” Charlotte's eyes fairly blazed with excitement as she stared at the portal. “When are we going?”

“No time like the present. Let's prepare a few things first, but I'd like to start the exploration today. We need to do it discreetly and quickly. Penwick, lock down the tower. You can let the words slip that we're investigating a theft. I don't want anybody going in or out. Charlotte, you're going to be our one exception. Can you gather the supplies we will need to explore properly?”

“Of course. This isn't my first time diving a Legacy, though it is my first time with a brand new one, or at least a completely unknown one. I'll be back in two hours at the most.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



Waving his hand, Magnus caused the gate to dim and then the entire archway melded back into the wall, hidden from view. Once it was gone Charlotte rushed out of the room, leaving Penwick and Magnus alone.

“Do you think we can trust her?” Penwick asked after Charlotte was out of earshot.

“Well, we’re dating,” Magnus said with a shrug. “So there’s that.”

“You’re what?”

“Dating? Like, boyfriend and girlfriend? Seeing each other? It means—”

“I know what dating means! You’re dating? You and Charlotte Flamebrand? Lady Flamebrand and... you?!”

“You don’t have to look so surprised,” Magnus said. “I’m not that much of a loser.”

Penwick gave Magnus a skeptical look.

“Okay, fine, you’re right. She probably just likes me for my looks,” Magnus said with a laugh, “and my abs. I mean, can you blame her?”

Rolling his eyes, Penwick hurried off to lock down the tower while Magnus returned to the office after carefully locking the storage room door. Before transmigrating he had already been through the office multiple times, searching every conceivable location for information that may have been left by his master. Unfortunately, he had come up empty-handed every time. This time, however, he had a new secret weapon. Thankfully, he had taken 200 mana crystals from the storeroom up to his office the other day, leaving him enough for his training. He grabbed one of them, crouched down, and held it out to Amber.

“You did a great job. This Legacy is going to be a godsend. Can you check this room too and see if there are any hidden compartments or things like that? I’m looking for something the previous tower master may have hidden, like information about this Legacy.”

Gobbling down the mana crystal Magnus was offering, Amber nodded and immediately began sniffing around the room. Magnus watched her for a few moments and then returned to his desk. Though finding a Legacy inside their tower was astronomical luck, Magnus couldn’t help but feel quite nervous. It was one thing to bet everything when you had nothing. After all, the worst that could happen was that he would die, which he already had experience with. It was an entirely different matter when you possessed a tremendous fortune.

A Legacy hidden in the tower was not on his bingo card, but now that it had popped up, Magnus felt even more pressure to carry the title of tower master of the Crimson Flame Tower well. His master’s greatest wish had been the restoration of their mage line, and this Legacy was just the thing they needed. Properly handled, the resources from a Legacy would allow them to both expand and grow in strength. Unfortunately, he was currently too weak to protect it.

Worse, Magnus had no idea what was behind the gate, and considering it had been generations since it was last opened, at least as far as he knew, it

was very possible there would be beasts with strength beyond what he could handle. He had almost considered reaching out to a mage like Toppel in the gold rank just to ensure they'd be safe, but the risk of doing so was too high.

There was a very real chance Toppel would immediately kill him and Penwick upon learning about the Legacy. Legacies were just that valuable. And if Toppel handed it over to the Flamebrand family, they would be more than happy to help him cover up the crime. Even revealing it to Charlotte was a risk, but it wasn't as if Magnus had many options. After all, she had been there for the initial discovery, and all he could do was trust that she wouldn't betray him to her family.

As he racked his brain to figure out how to best utilize the newly discovered Legacy, Amber continued to sniff around the room. She didn't find anything in the main office, but after entering the meditation room she quickly began to let out loud oinks.

Jumping up from his desk, Magnus hurried into the room and found her sitting in front of the short pillar. She was sniffing at its base and then glancing over her shoulder at him, so he walked over to examine it. It appeared to be set solidly in the stone, and all his efforts to shift it from side to side failed.

Shaking her head, Amber flew up into the air, her wings beating in a steady rhythm as she hovered over the pillar. She mimed grasping it with her front hooves and lifting and then flew further up into the air and stared at Magnus expectantly.

Realizing what she wanted him to do, Magnus squatted, gripped the top of the pillar tightly and lifted straight up. Sure enough, the pillar began to shift, but even after he had lifted it chest high he still couldn't see the bottom. Thankfully his raw physical strength was tremendous, and he was able to slowly pull it out until he had nearly ten feet of heavy stone in his hand. Just as the top of the pillar brushed against the ceiling Magnus felt the bottom rise out of the hole, and he could carefully lay the long, thin stone pillar on its side.

He couldn't see anything down in the hole, so he examined the pillar

instead and discovered that at the very bottom was a round tube. It was placed inside a hole drilled through the center of the pillar. Magnus pulled it out with careful fingers, and after popping off the sealed cap found a booklet that had been rolled up tight and shoved into the tube. Taking it over to his desk, Magnus gingerly retrieved the book, placing it down on his desk.

Whatever material it was made of was resilient, and it immediately sprang flat. The booklet was barely fifty pages, but each page was so thin it was nearly see-through, and the writing on it was dense. Opening up the book, Magnus began to read and was soon immersed as he realized that this was his master's handwriting.

The book detailed the history of Crimson Flame Tower, pieced together over countless years. Magnus' master had been a scribe, and it was clear that his overwhelming obsession was understanding and restoring the greatness of Crimson Flame Tower.

Toward the end of the little booklet, the tone changed and a great sense of excitement shone through the words. His master had discovered in ancient texts the existence of a Legacy, not hidden in a remote area as most Legacies were but instead inside the tower itself.

Magnus wasn't sure how, but his master had discovered the location of the dimensional anchor and that a tremendous number of mana crystals was necessary to open the portal. He'd also discovered that, unlike most dimensional gates, which required a steady influx of mana crystals, this dimensional gate was anchored to the tower itself and had no need of additional support.

The tower was placed at the intersection of two ley lines, invisible channels of mana that ringed the world. These ley lines allowed the tower to absorb a tremendous amount of ambient mana, and that mana, in turn, was fed into the dimensional gate. Though crystals were needed to jumpstart the process, now that it was established it would remain open until Magnus, using the power of the signet, sealed it once again.

According to his master's research, what Penwick had speculated was true. Previous generations, having largely exhausted the resources of the pocket

world, sealed it away to wait until they had regenerated sufficiently. Somewhere along the line, the existence of the Legacy had been lost as tower masters failed to pass the information down, and rather than being reopened on schedule, half a dozen more generations had passed as Crimson Flame Tower continued to decline.

When he had finished reading the book, Magnus sat for a long time, staring into the air and then, with a sigh, he carefully rolled it back up and returned it to its hiding place. The good news was that his master had discovered a fair amount of information about the Legacy they were about to walk into. The bad news was that it was impossible to know how much had changed over the last thousand years.

If his master's speculations were correct, it had been nearly 1,500 years since the Legacy was last opened. A mage, like Magnus and Penwick, at the silver rank, could typically live for around 200 years, and that number rose as their rank rose. It wasn't uncommon for mythic-ranked mages to live for over a thousand years, and had Crimson Flame Tower still possessed tower masters with that level of strength the Legacy never would have been lost. Unfortunately, for some unknown reason Crimson Flame Tower had experienced a drastic drop in the strength of its tower masters, and the result was the situation before them.

Charlotte returned quickly, almost an hour faster than she had predicted, and she brought with her numerous supplies packed into backpacks. There was food and rope and light sources and everything else one might need for roughing it out in the wild. She also brought mana potions, health potions, and a variety of different kinds of antidotes.

Charlotte had changed her outfit as well and was wearing a crimson robe that bore the Flamebrand insignia. Magnus could practically feel the mana dripping off of her and couldn't help but compare her high-quality equipment with his non-existent equipment. Then again, her robe was probably only marginally stronger than his skin, so it wasn't really a fair comparison.

Penwick, on the other hand, was just as geared up as Charlotte. Magnus was surprised when the steward emerged from his room with a full set of combat gear. For a mage, that meant a defensive bracelet that could autocast

a shield in case of mortal danger, a staff that would amplify Penwick's spells, a low-grade defensive robe, and a circlet designed to boost arcane magic. Catching Magnus' stare, Penwick shrugged.

"I haven't always been a steward, you know. This is all gear left over from a past life before I joined Crimson Flame Tower."

"Huh." Magnus scratched his chin as he looked between the two fully equipped mages.

Though there was a drastic gap between the quality of their gear, seeing both of them fully outfitted, while he had nothing but the pig he was carrying, left Magnus feeling a bit left out. Of course, he did have the tower master's robe, but Magnus had gotten so used to not wearing it, and he was so worried about damaging it he had left it in his room.

"Aren't you going to bring some gear?" Charlotte asked.

"No," Magnus said after a moment of thought. "I think I'll be fine like this."

Though skeptical, she just shrugged, trusting that he knew what he was doing. After closing and locking the door to the storage room, Magnus waved his hand and the gate emerged from the wall. It had been perfectly melded with the tower and was impossible to find unless activated. The only exception being Amber's nose, which was able to sniff out any good thing.

Taking a deep breath and clutching Amber tightly, Magnus stepped through the portal and the world blurred around him. As his vision cleared, he discovered that he was standing on a small rocky island. Yet rather than being surrounded by water, he was surrounded by empty air. A glance down showed an endless abyss underneath him, which the small rocky island floated effortlessly above. In the distance were countless other floating islands spreading toward the horizon. There was a faint sizzle in the air as Penwick and Charlotte emerged from behind him, and Magnus, with a wave of his hand, closed the portal, ensuring it would remain hidden in the real world.

"Wow, that's an impressive sight," Charlotte said, her eyes taking in the

magnificent landscape before them.

There were thick vines, many of them almost a dozen feet wide, that snaked from the island they were on to dozens of other chunks of land. They seemed to have appeared at the narrowest point of the floating landmass, and the islands grew bigger as they headed toward the horizon. The air was clear and a yellow sun hung in the sky, its warm rays blanketing everything.

In the distance Magnus could see massive islands covered in trees, as well as rivers that ended in waterfalls which dumped their torrents into the abyss. The spray of the falling water caused rainbows to form in the bright sunlight, lending a mystical feeling to the landscape.

“That must be the central tower,” Penwick said, pointing at a tall crimson tower in the distance.

“Maybe,” Magnus countered. “I actually did a little bit of digging and found something while we were prepping thanks to Amber here, who sniffed out a pretty ingenious hiding place in the meditation room. According to what Master gathered before he died, this Legacy is huge. But we’ll only be able to access the resources in the next area after we defeat the challenge in the tower. That’ll unlock a new area with a new tower challenging us.”

As he spoke, Magnus began making his way forward, walking carefully to the edge of the rocky island and then out onto one of the thick vines.

“Hold on,” Charlotte said. “Let me summon Glacia just in case.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Magnus said, stopping to wait for Penwick and Charlotte to summon their pets.

Glacia appeared, letting out a sharp cry that rang through the air. In the far distance there was an answering roar, as if a beast was answering her challenge. Glacia flew up into the air, her eyes fixed on the horizon, but though she clearly wanted to fly off and attack whatever had responded, Charlotte called her back.

“Don’t cause trouble,” she said, chiding her phoenix.

With a grumbling chirp, Glacia shrank down and landed on Charlotte’s

shoulder, angrily pecking at a few of Charlotte's hairs.

"Stop it," Charlotte said, trying to ward her off. "We will probably fight them later, but right now we're just exploring."

With another grumbling chirp, Glacia settled down. Penwick's bookwurm wasn't nearly as unruly and simply curled around his shoulders as it normally did, its eyes blinking rapidly as it took in all of the sights. As for Magnus, he had been holding Amber this whole time, and she had hardly stirred when she heard the roar in the distance.

With everyone ready, they began their exploration as Magnus filled the others in on everything he had learned from the little notebook. This Legacy was, at least according to the stories Magnus' master had uncovered, gigantic. But access to the larger islands were blocked by crimson towers that proposed a challenge to the mages who entered them. Only upon successfully overcoming those challenges were the mages allowed to proceed to the next area.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



If Magnus and his friends wanted to take full advantage of this Legacy, they would have to overcome each of the towers. He wasn't sure how many of them there were, but he knew there were at least three. As they made it across the first set of vines and to a slightly larger island, Penwick pointed at a plant growing in a crack between a couple of rocks.

“That’s a blue beam flower. It’s used for health potions.”

“Is there only one?” Magnus asked, looking around.

“It looks like it,” Penwick replied, but as soon as they walked around the large rock his mouth dropped open as an entire field of blue beam flowers appeared.

“Well, I guess not,” Charlotte said with a laugh. “And this is exactly why Legacies are so valued. Blue beam flowers are hard to cultivate. But here, in such a mana-rich environment, they grow like weeds.”

That proved to be quite true, and as they proceeded further into the island it

quickly became clear that this entire island had once been dedicated to the cultivation of this single flower. There was no danger on the island, at least as far as they discovered, and Amber didn't seem particularly interested in staying. Instead, she was eager to continue on, and so Magnus and the others followed.

The next island didn't have flowers but instead had thousands of short trees growing on it with a peculiar yellow leaf. These were yellow sweet sap trees, widely regarded as a treasure by most mages, as the sap the tree produced was one of the best melding agents for making potions.

Each island that they visited, as they continued to work their way toward the power Penwick had spotted, held a different kind of plant, as if the entire space had been one giant farm. But it wasn't just the cultivated plants. They also discovered many other precious plants that grew randomly here and there. Hearing the chirp of birds and seeing a few swallows darting this way and that, Magnus couldn't help but marvel.

"This really is like a whole world, isn't it? Look—insects, birds. There's a whole ecosystem."

"And larger creatures too," Charlotte said. "Don't forget that roar we heard."

"It's pretty incredible," Magnus said, reaching toward a large pile of stones they were walking past.

With a casual grasp, he picked a stone up and crushed it, revealing shards of mana crystal inside. The shards were too small to be truly valuable, but their presence indicated that the ambient concentration of mana was incredibly high, and it meant that as they continued deeper into the pocket world, the more likely they were to find fully formed mana crystals.

"It's no wonder that Master was so desperate to open up this Legacy," Penwick said, his voice carrying a hint of sorrow. "It's just a shame he died before he could see it."

"Well, we'll take full advantage of it to honor his memory," Magnus said. "Come on, we only have a few more islands before we reach the tower."

By this time, the islands they were crossing were large, some miles across. Each of these larger islands was split into multiple regions that had, at one point, been cultivated for different purposes. Over time, as the pocket world was left to its own devices for 1,500 years, trees and vegetation had spread, blurring the lines between the different areas.

Coming to a cliff, Magnus and the others turned from their path, looking for another way up. They found a small trail leading through the forest that wound its way up a hill, bringing them to the top of the cliff. When they arrived, Magnus suddenly stopped, his senses tingling.

“Hold on,” he said. “There’s something dangerous ahead.”

At the same time, Amber let out an excited oink and burst into a sprint, charging forward. Caught off guard, Magnus couldn’t grab her in time and was forced to follow as quickly as he could. She ran into a patch of woods, coming to a stop as they gave way to a clearing. There, amidst a pile of rocks, stood a small tree. It was barely six feet high, with gnarled branches that spread in every direction, and a sweet scent, more tantalizing than anything Magnus had ever smelled before, drifted from the fruit that hung on its branches.

There were only three fruits, each plump and on the cusp of ripening, and unlike anything Magnus had ever seen before. The fruit was small, only the size of a kiwi, and had a stony exterior that was covered in cracks. Peeking through the gaps, Magnus could see plump, juicy red flesh. Amber’s eyes were fixed on the fruit, and she let out another excited oink. A moment later Charlotte and Penwick finally caught up, and both of their pets reacted just as Amber had, with clear excitement. The danger Magnus had sensed had grown stronger, and he kept a firm grip on Amber as he looked at Charlotte and Penwick.

“Any idea what that is?”

“It’s a stone skin fruit,” Penwick said quietly, his eyes glancing around as he checked for danger. “It’s an especially powerful tonic for mysterious creatures and beasts. A ripe stone skin fruit can elevate their body by one or more ranks.”

“That sounds valuable,” Magnus said. “You mean that if an iron-ranked

beast were to eat one of these, it would be as strong as a bronze-ranked beast?”

“Yes, though it would likely break through to the silver rank because of the energy it contains. They usually take a couple hundred years to grow and mature, and as far as I know, they’re supposed to be extinct.”

“Well, it looks like we’re in luck then,” Magnus said. “There are three of them and three beasts here, which is perfect.”

As he stood up, still holding Amber, who was wiggling violently, Charlotte shook her head.

“I don’t need one. It would be better for the two of you to split them.”

Glacia gave an aggrieved chirp, but Charlotte shook her head firmly.

“It would barely have an effect on you. They need it more than we do.”

“I don’t think that’s fair,” Magnus said, but Charlotte held up her hand.

“Glacia has already consumed a stone skin fruit. Our family has a tree.”

“That must be nice,” Penwick muttered under his breath, and Magnus laughed.

“Of course you do. In that case, we’ll take advantage of you this time. Anything I should know before I pick the fruit?”

“It looks like it’s not quite ripe,” Charlotte said. “The cracks on the skin of the fruit will open up completely when it’s ripe. But based on the smell, it should be ripe any moment.”

“Good,” Magnus said. “That gives us time to deal with whatever beast is guarding it.”

Before the other two could ask him what he was talking about, he strode into the clearing, heading straight for the tree. The closer he got, the stronger the sense of danger he felt, and when he was barely outside arm’s reach of one of the fruits there was a hiss. From a perfectly concealed position in the rocks a massive snake lunged toward him, two sharp fangs stabbing toward his chest.

Magnus, who had been expecting the attack, reacted instantly. His toes pushed against the ground, and his body blurred as he slid back. At the same time, his hands pulled at the air, forming silver darts, which he threw directly at the snake's open mouth. Just when he thought he'd scored a hit, the snake suddenly swerved sideways, using the scales on its neck to block the bolts. With a sharp chime, they glanced off its hard scales, scattering away, and the snake reared its head back, hissing violently.

"Oh, that's trouble," Penwick said, taking a step back. "That's a rock python. A silver-ranked rock python."

A bit perturbed that his Silver Moon Strike had done nothing but leave a few marks on the snake's scales, Magnus watched it warily. Its body was as thick as his chest, and he estimated that it was a good thirty feet long. Its head, with two poisonous fangs on display, rose high above him, swaying back and forth slightly as it stared down at him. From the ferocious confidence it exuded, the snake was clearly the master of this island, and it wasn't about to let Magnus and the others take the fruit.

Then again, Magnus wasn't about to give them up. This wasn't a situation where either would be willing to step back, so a fight was inevitable. Thankfully, Magnus wasn't alone. Charlotte had already begun casting a spell, and Glacia launched herself into the air, her body growing to its full size. Penwick backed up a few steps, creating just enough distance from Charlotte that he wouldn't get caught in any friendly fire, and he began casting as well.

The snake, sensing the threat from the growing concentration of mana in front of Charlotte and Penwick, launched itself forward, fainting an attack at Magnus and then quickly slithering around the side to deal with Charlotte and Penwick first.

"Oh no you don't!" Magnus said, his fists beginning to vibrate.

Before the snake could bypass him, he darted toward it, unleashing a heavy punch that slammed into its gray scales. The intense vibration that covered his fist cracked one of its scales, but its tough body caused his fist to rebound. Still, the attack got the snake's attention, and with an annoyed hiss it abruptly curled, throwing a loop around Magnus to try and tie him up.

Ducking under the snake's thick body, Magnus darted back, using Swallow's Cloud Step to avoid being constricted. Though its attack missed, the snake's goal, which was to drive Magnus back, succeeded, and it quickly lunged forward, its mouth opening wide to try and swallow Penwick. There was a blast of frigid air from beside it and it jerked its head back, abandoning its attack just in the nick of time as four vicious-looking ice spikes grew up from the ground where its head had just been.

There was a loud screech and Glacia dropped out of the sky, her claws raking against the snake's scales. Yet the stone python's scales were so tough that Glacia barely succeeded in cutting two shallow furrows across the snake's back. It hissed in pain and rolled over, its tail whipping through the air as it tried to swat Glacia down, but with a quick turn of her wings she flew back up out of reach.

Though Glacia was a platinum-ranked beast in her own right, the soul contract she shared with Charlotte limited her to the strength of a silver-ranked beast, drastically downgrading her power. The snake, seeing that Glacia's claws weren't very effective, quickly turned its head toward her.

As it coiled its body, about to lunge for the phoenix, Penwick's Magic Missiles arrived, slamming into its mouth and eye. Its angry hiss turned into a cry of pain, and the snake swung its head back toward Penwick, who immediately turned and ran for his life, his face pale.

The snake lunged forward, rapidly crossing the distance, but Magnus appeared right in its path, his fist driving up into the bottom of its jaw with crushing force. The scales on the bottom of its head weren't as thick as the scales on its back, and a few of them shattered, sending blood splattering as the snake's head was snapped upward.

Magnus hissed as well, his fist aching from how hard the snake's body was. He was starting to get a good sense for just how strong a silver-ranked beast was, and it was honestly depressing. The snake was faster and stronger than he was, and its defense was ridiculous. Though, if he had to guess, this snake was likely infinitely close to gold rank, which meant it was stronger than most silver-ranked beasts.

Still, despite the fact that he had upgraded his Imperishable Void Physique

twice, he still was hardly a match for the giant snake. Before the beast could recover, Magnus pulled more silver moon beams from the air and unleashed a barrage, targeting the snake's softer underside. This time he managed to make a few small bloody holes, but that only enraged the snake, which began to chase him in earnest. With Magnus locked in a fierce dance with the giant snake and Penwick and Charlotte both unleashing spell after spell on the creature, the two sides remained relatively well-matched. Though if it wasn't for the fact that the snake constantly had to be wary of Glacia, who roamed the skies overhead, letting out sharp shrieks and occasionally diving down to rake the beast with her claws, Magnus wasn't sure they would have been able to keep up.

The giant rock python was insanely strong, its body unbelievably durable, and though they managed to cause wounds here and there, they would almost immediately stop bleeding and even showed signs of starting to heal. Just when Magnus was going to call for them to abandon the fight, the sweet scent from the stone skin fruit abruptly grew more concentrated, and from the corner of his eye Magnus saw all three of the fruits ripen.

Letting out a loud hiss, the snake abandoned its fight against Magnus and lunged for the tree, clearly intent on swallowing the three fruits whole. Magnus, not wanting to let the snake get it, sprinted for the tree as well, trying to reach it first. Even Glacia, who was up in the sky, dropped into a steep dive, aiming for the tree with her claws.

Yet faster than all three of them was Amber, whose silver wings turned her into a blur. As she zipped around the tree her mouth opened abnormally wide, swallowing down the fruits with no trouble. Glancing at the snake and giving a smug "oink," she darted away as the serpent bit on the empty air where a fruit had been a moment before. Magnus arrived a fraction of a second later, his hand closing on empty air, and Glacia, likewise, slammed into the ground, staring incredulously at the spot where a fruit should have been.

All three of them had clearly seen Amber take the fruit, but the pig was nowhere in sight, having fled from the clearing to hide in the forest. There was a moment of tense silence as Magnus, Glacia, and the giant snake all tried to figure out what was going to happen next. Just when Magnus

thought the fight would resume there was a sharp “oink,” and Amber came tearing back into the clearing.

Before anyone could react, a rumbling roar sounded like thunder in their ears—the same roar that they had heard when they first entered the pocket world. Stalking out of the trees came a massive tiger, ten feet at the head, with a body nearly twenty feet long and a tail like an iron whip that stretched another twenty feet. The tiger was a sight to behold. Its teeth and eyes gleamed menacingly, and the aura it exuded made it hard for everyone present to breathe.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Even Magnus found himself weighed down by this sheer strength of the tiger's soul. Magnus had encountered a gold-ranked mage before and the pressure they had exuded had hardly bothered him, but the gold-ranked beast in front of him was in a different category. The snake immediately let out a deep hiss, its body coiling defensively as its head drew back. Though it looked as if it wanted nothing more than to flee, the serpent knew better than to try, at least not while the tiger's attention was fixed on it.

Magnus, likewise, took a step back, his fists coming up as Amber fled past him. He could feel the weight in the air as he began to drive his Twelve Thunder's Fist, brewing an intense storm in his chest. Sensing the vibration around his body, the tiger glanced at him, the full weight of its gold-ranked aura pressing down on Magnus as if to squash any thought of fighting back. His eyes narrowing, Magnus refused to cow, and he took a small step forward, shifting into a more aggressive stance. As soon as he did he heard a now familiar, subtle cracking noise and the paper-thin barrier, preventing his Twelve Thunder's Fist from advancing, was pierced.

Congratulations! Twelve Thunder's Fist has leveled up to the Warrior stage.

The vibrations intensified, and tiny arcs of electricity began crawling out of his chest and across his arms to gather around his fists. Magnus had no time to rejoice, however, as the tiger let out a low growl to the side. With a loud crash, the beast's tail crushed the trunk of a tree, causing the top half of it to topple over, as if warning Magnus that this is what would happen to him.

Behind him, Glacia suddenly spread her wings, and with a cry leapt into the air. The tiger's eyes twitched and it launched itself forward, teeth bared and claws drawing back. Magnus moved instantly, more by instinct than anything else, but instead of retreating he charged his Swallow's Cloud Step, allowing him to appear in the tiger's path abruptly. His fist lashed out, slamming straight into the tiger's nose, and there was a blast of lightning as all of the arcs dancing on his fist were transferred into the tiger's face.

In truth, Magnus hadn't been intending to punch the tiger. Instead, he had been looking for an opportunity to run away after grabbing the others. But his body had moved without his mind consciously driving it. His fist landed square on the gold-ranked beast's nose, and though he did no damage to the tiger, the sheer audacity of his attack caused it to stop in place, allowing Glacia time to get away.

For a brief moment, Magnus and the tiger simply stared at each other. And then, as the snake tried to take advantage of the situation and dart into the forest, the tiger casually slapped Magnus away and pounced again. Though he clearly saw the tiger's paw coming, Magnus found that even with Swallow's Cloud Step he couldn't actually get away.

The tiger used its overwhelming soul pressure to lock him in place, ensuring that its attack actually hit, and the force that slammed into him sent him tumbling head over heels until he smashed into a tree. He hit the trunk of the tree so hard the entire thing collapsed around him.

Thankfully, the snake had drawn the tiger's attention. And as it tried to slither away the tiger pounced, biting deep into its tail. Hissing in pain, the snake looped its coils around the tiger's neck, trying to crush its skull, but almost casually the tiger tore giant furrows in the snake's skin with razor-sharp claws that cut through its scales with ease. Groaning, Magnus

staggered to his feet, throwing off the branches that had buried him.

“Magnus, are you okay?” Charlotte was frantic with worry as she ran over.

“Are you hurt?” Penwick asked, staring at Magnus in surprise.

“Of course he’s hurt!” Charlotte snapped, producing a healing potion.

Rather speechless, Penwick pointed at Magnus, who had just spit a little bit of blood to the side and was now loosening his shoulders as if getting ready to run back into the fight.

“He doesn’t look hurt.”

Startled, Charlotte, who had been about to pour the potion on Magnus’ wounds, realized that Penwick was right. Apart from some red marks on his back and his torn shirt, Magnus seemed perfectly fine. Grasping his shirt, Magnus ripped it off, revealing his incredible physique. He could feel his body thrumming, and far from wanting to flee, every bone in his body seemed to be yearning for a fight. Claspng his fists, he glanced at Charlotte and Penwick.

“Retreat. Find a safe spot.”

“What about you?”

The words had barely come out of Charlotte’s mouth when Magnus was gone, dashing across the meadow like a bolt of lightning. The snake was writhing on the ground under the tiger’s claws, and Magnus took the opportunity to land a heavy punch on the tiger’s ribs. With a soft yowl, more surprised than hurt, the tiger tried to turn and swat Magnus again, but it was too tangled with the snake to manage to hit him. Dancing back, Magnus clenched his fist, channeling more lightning into it, and lunged forward again, his punch this time even heavier than before.

Angry, the tiger rolled over, its tail scything toward Magnus’ head. But he bent over backward, allowing it to pass over him, and then his body sprang up and, taking a step forward, he kicked as hard as he could, his foot driving into the tiger’s unprotected belly. This time the tiger let out a sharp hiss, expressing both pain and displeasure.

Magnus was about to attack again when one of the snake's coils suddenly slipped over him and his body was yanked backward, a crushing force constricting his movement. Realizing that the snake was just striking blindly, Magnus forced one arm free even as his chest began to compress violently. Pulling silver beams from the air, he threw them, targeting one of the deep wounds the tiger had already caused. The pain his attack created sunk deep into the snake's flesh, causing it to shudder, and for a moment its coils loosened. The tiger and Magnus used this opportunity to retreat, pulling back and regrouping.

Congratulations! Silver Moon Strike has leveled up to the Warrior stage.

Barely glancing at the notification, Magnus focused all his attention on his two enemies. Of the three of them, Magnus was by far the weakest and the tiger was clearly the strongest. The unfortunate snake was caught in between and obviously wanted to be anywhere but the present. Unfortunately, the tiger seemed to bear a grudge against it. Something related to the stone skin fruit tree, from the way the tiger's eyes were constantly drifting toward the short tree.

Magnus, glancing over as well, found it rather astonishing that despite the fierce brawl the tree hadn't been harmed in the slightest. It was as if the two creatures were hyperaware of its presence and neither was willing to harm it. As his battle lust slowly began to fade, Magnus suddenly realized he was in a terrible position. He was facing off against two beasts that were both stronger than him with martial arts that, though powerful, weren't nearly enough to turn the tide. Amber was nowhere in sight, and though his companions had retreated, it was unlikely they had retreated far enough he'd be able to outrun a silver-ranked snake, let alone the gold-ranked tiger.

Magnus' feet slowly shifted as he began to plan his retreat. But his movement triggered something in the tiger, which feinted an attack against the snake and then suddenly turned and locked Magnus down just as he was about to try and pull back. With the full weight of the tiger's aura pressing down on him, Magnus found his moves considerably constrained. He could still move, but he felt as if he was trapped by the air itself.

The tiger's paw, claws out this time, raked toward him, and Magnus knew instinctively that he wasn't going to be able to get away unscathed. Making

a quick decision, he lifted his arms, protecting his chest and head, and dove to the side. He was too slow to get out of the way, and the tip of the tiger's claws raked across his arm, leaving deep wounds. The force of the strike shook Magnus' bones, and his body spun as he was thrown across the clearing once again.

The tiger was about to follow up on his attack and end Magnus once and for all when the snake suddenly turned and fled, clearly not wanting to be on the chopping block after Magnus died. With an angry roar, the tiger spun and gave chase as Magnus rolled to a stop on the torn-up grass. The tiger's claws had cut through his skin like butter, so deep that bone was revealed in multiple places. Even though its claws hadn't actually hit bone, the sheer force of them flying by had shattered Magnus' arm in a couple of places.

The pain was intense, but Magnus still forced himself to his feet, getting ready to run. There was another loud roar, and the tiger suddenly stalked back into the clearing with a furious expression etched on his face. Magnus saw the bottom part of the snake's tail still twitching behind the tiger. The snake had abandoned its tail to make an escape, and the tiger wasn't happy about it at all.

"Well, this went poorly," Magnus muttered to himself. "Hopefully I can buy enough time for the others to get out of here."

He lifted his good arm, clenching his fist as he prepared for a desperate last stand. The tiger glared down at him and began to pace back and forth, its tail lashing violently from side to side. Figuring it was better to be active than reactive, Magnus hopped up and down lightly, getting ready to execute his Swallow's Cloud Step. He figured he could keep the tiger occupied for at least a little bit as long as he didn't get caught by its aura.

The tiger's tail suddenly stilled, and Magnus was about to move when Amber trotted out of the forest in between them. She seemed completely unconcerned about the fight, to a degree that left both Magnus and the tiger frozen. Taking in the situation at a glance, she huffed and reluctantly opened her mouth. Three perfectly intact stone skin fruits rolled out her open mouth. And then, before Magnus could react, she flipped all three of them into his own open mouth.

As the first stone skin fruit hit his tongue Magnus shuddered and the entire thing simply melted away, leaving a small round seed. He didn't think the other two fruits would have normally fit, but because they each melted away he ended up with three seeds and a mouthful of liquid. Magnus instinctively swallowed and the seeds vanished down his throat, disappearing into his stomach.

Magnus had never jumped into a pit of lava, but he could imagine that it would feel a lot like the wave of pain and heat that washed over him. The stone skin fruit was meant for beasts and mysterious creatures whose bodies were many times tougher than even the strongest mage, and thanks to Amber Magnus had just swallowed three of them. His body stiffened and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Yet something in him wouldn't let him lose consciousness. Even though his bones felt like they were being nibbled on by millions of fire ants, he could only clench his teeth and endure. Energy tore through him, continually condensing and branding itself into his muscles and bones like it was trying to tattoo each of his cells individually.

There was a loud cracking sound in his body and a primal scream tore from his throat as his muscles clenched. The strange energy he had experienced with each of his breakthroughs in Imperishable Void Physique raced through him, bringing intense comfort where there had been pain, but almost immediately on its heels came another wave of brutal power from the stone skin fruit. It felt like his body was being torn apart with every wave and then rejuvenated by the power of his physique.

Magnus had no idea how long these cycles lasted, but when he finally regained his wits he found a crazy notification in front of him.

Congratulations. Imperishable Void Physique has leveled up to the Human Grandmaster stage. You have unlocked the remaining creature skills in the Human stage. You have unlocked the following skills: Treasure Seeker, Absolute Digestion, Void Space.

Beyond the notification Magnus saw both Charlotte and Penwick. His two friends were standing in place, not moving a muscle, their eyes staring past him at something behind him.

“Hey,” Magnus croaked. “How are we still alive?”

Swallowing, Penwick raised his hand ever so slowly, pointing at whatever they were staring at. Dismissing the notification, Magnus took a deep breath and turned around. There, barely three feet away from him, was the massive tiger. It was crouched in place as if it were about to pounce, but the look on its face was anything but aggressive. Magnus' eyes slowly rose past its nose and large eyes to the top of its furry head. Standing in between its furry ears was Amber, casually chewing on a plant she had gotten from who knows where.

Seeing Magnus looking at her, she stamped lightly and the tiger quickly backed up, keeping its belly low to the ground. Amber's wings flapped and she flew down to Magnus, bumping into his chest with a happy snort. Bemused, he grabbed her, his eyes still fixed on the tiger.

“Uh, guys? Any idea what I'm looking at?”

“Nope,” Charlotte said. “When we got here you were screaming bloody murder and she was like that. We have as little idea as you.”

“And can I ask why you are standing there without moving?” Magnus asked, glancing over his shoulder at Charlotte.

Rolling her eyes, she gestured with her chin toward the tiger.

“We didn't want to get eaten. Don't know if you noticed, Magnus, but that is a gold-ranked tiger.”

“Oh, I noticed,” Magnus replied with a grimace.

Yet when he looked down at his arm where the tiger's claws had ripped him apart, he was stunned to discover that far from the gaping wounds he expected, he instead found nothing but smooth skin. Clenching his fist, Magnus felt his strength surge, reaching heights he had never imagined. For the first time since he woke up, Magnus began to take stock of his body, and the result left him shocked. It made sense, of course, since he had risen a full two minor stages, reaching the Human Grandmaster stage of the Imperishable Void Physique and fully unlocking all three of Amber's Human-level abilities.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Glancing at the tiger, which was still crouched in place, a rather silly expression on its face, Magnus slowly moved, testing to see if it would get a reaction. The tiger didn't respond at all except to twitch its whiskers.

“Amber, is he safe?”

Magnus wasn't quite sure why he was asking his pig if the giant tiger was safe, but considering she had been on the beast's head, he figured it was worth a shot. Amber looked up at him, and then at the tiger, and oinked. Slowly, the massive cat rose to his feet, and with a great show of reluctance turned and slunk off, often glancing sadly back at Magnus, or more accurately, Amber herself.

“Did your pet just pick up a boyfriend?” Charlotte asked, reading between the lines of the tiger's body language. “Because that's kinda what it looks like.”

Scrambling up to look over Magnus' shoulder, Amber gave Charlotte a

scornful look and shook her head. Once the tiger was out of sight, Charlotte walked up to Magnus and touched his arm lightly.

“What happened? We just heard you screaming and hurried back.”

“Well,” Magnus said, scratching his chin, “the tiger was about to kill me, or at least put forth a concerted effort to kill me, when Amber here waltzed out of the forest, spit up the stone skin fruit she had swallowed, and shoved them in my mouth.”

“You ate the stone skin fruit?” Penwick’s eyes were wide, and he quickly examined Magnus’ body. “Natural treasures like that are incredibly poisonous. How are you not dead?”

“I mean, it does explain all of the screaming,” Charlotte said, “but somehow you look fine.”

“Better than before, actually.” Glancing down at his muscular body, Magnus shrugged. “Amber here has a special ability. She can eat anything and turn it into something useful for her body. I might have picked up on that trait as well.”

With a sigh, Penwick stepped back and crossed his arms.

“She is the weirdest mysterious creature I’ve ever seen. First the ability to sense treasure. And second the ability to eat anything? I mean, I guess it’s fitting, considering she’s a pig. But still...”

“You’re not going to get fat, are you?” Charlotte asked, casting a worried glance at Magnus’ perfect six-pack.

“Asking the important questions, huh? No, I don’t think so,” Magnus said. “If anything, I seem to be getting more muscular.”

Though his physique had advanced, twice in fact, Magnus hadn’t added any significant muscle mass. If anything, he had slimmed down ever so slightly, losing excess body fat. His body appeared to be turning into a hyper-efficient machine, putting every bit of the nutrition and mana he consumed toward strengthening his muscles, bones, and skin. Putting Amber down, Magnus turned his palms face up and then flipped them over, all the while watching them closely.

“Absolute Digestion isn’t the only ability Amber has passed on,” he said. “She also has some sort of dimensional storage space.”

Crouching, he picked up a rock and then turned his hand over. By the time his palm was facing up, it was empty. The rock had simply disappeared. Magnus could sense an extra-dimensional space in his mind and there, in the midst of it, the rock that had been in his hand had appeared. It took but a thought to summon it back out. Fascinated, Magnus put it away and retrieved it in rapid succession.

“That’s an insane ability,” Charlotte said, crouching down to watch the rock, which was vanishing and reappearing over and over again. “What else can you put in there?”

“Anything that’s not alive. Well, that’s not quite accurate. Anything that’s not sentient. So I should be able to put plants in.”

Magnus plucked a blade of grass from the ground, and it joined the rock, appearing and disappearing.

“Can you store mana crystals?” Penwick asked.

“I’m guessing yes, but I don’t have one to test.”

Penwick immediately pulled a mana crystal from his belt pouch and handed it to Magnus. Dropping both the blade of grass and the rock, Magnus took the crystal, and with a wave of his hand it too vanished.

“It’s going to make magic tricks quite easy,” he said. “Look, nothing.”

He displayed his empty palms and the backs of his hands to Penwick and Charlotte and then, with a flourish, produced the mana crystal.

“Ha, I’d make a killing at parties.”

“How big is this space? I mean, is it very large?”

“Big enough to store all our packs,” Magnus said, “but not much larger. Speaking of which, I should try to find mine.”

He had dropped it during the fight with the snake, and it had gotten tossed in the ensuing brawl. They found it, at the edge of the woods, burst open

with its contents half spilling out of it. Magnus discarded the bag and sorted through all of the items. Half of the mana potions, and a couple of the healing potions had been smashed, but everything else seemed to be in good shape. With a casual wave it disappeared into his storage.

“Makes me a bit envious,” Penwick said. “Amber really is a perfect treasure-hunting companion. The ability to sniff out treasure, the ability to consume anything and transform it into a tonic, and the ability to store treasures you find. Though she lacks offensive capability, I’d say she’s an excellent soul pet.”

“I agree,” Magnus said, picking up Amber and scratching under her chin.

He reproduced the mana crystal he had stored and fed it to her. Grunting happily, she nestled herself down in his arms and began gnawing on it like a dog with a bone.

“So, what’s next?” Charlotte asked, glancing at the crimson tower in the distance.

They could see its roof peeking up above the trees, and Magnus estimated they were about one island away from it.

“Before we continue I’d like to test a couple of things,” Magnus said. “Eating those stone skin fruits seems to have had a bit of an impact on my body.”

“I’d say,” Charlotte quipped, giving him an appreciative look.

“I’d like to test the limits of it,” Magnus said, clenching his fist and feeling the raw strength that ran through it. “I might need your help for that though.”

Walking a dozen feet away, he turned and gestured to Penwick.

“Can you shoot a Magic Missile at me?”

“I’m not sure that’s a wise idea,” Penwick said, adjusting his glasses. “Sure, eating the fruit may have made you a bit stronger, but Magic Missiles are dangerous. And if you get hurt we’re not going to be able to continue our exploration.”

“I won’t get hurt,” Magnus said, tapping his chest. “And even if I do, we’ve got health potions. I need to know what’s happened to my body, and this is the best way.”

Though Penwick was still hesitant, he nodded and began casting Magic Missile. He kept the spell as weak as possible, firing only a single dart, which crossed the distance to Magnus in an instant, moving too fast for the eye to follow. Yet to Magnus the dart moved as slow as molasses. What he discovered was that he could actually adjust how quickly he perceived it. It was as if he had a dial in his head that allowed him to speed up and slow down his perception of the world around him. As soon as he sensed danger, the dial turned all the way down.

Magnus could see the rustling leaves and the swaying grass in such clarity and detail, he felt as if he could predict where the wind would twist and turn next. Across from him, he could see every minute movement of Penwick’s body, along with the Magic Missile lazily swimming through the air toward him.

As the dial was turned up, everything began to move faster, but Magnus still had no trouble lifting his hand to catch the Magic Missile. It struck his palm, and Magnus felt a light stinging sensation. Yet the mana, which should have pierced through his skin, simply rebounded, losing its shape under the force of its own impact. To Charlotte and Penwick, it appeared as if Magnus had simply crushed the attack with his hand, and for a long moment the two of them just stared at him, their mouths open. Examining his palm, Magnus saw a little bit of abrasion on his skin, but as he flexed his fingers it began to fade until his skin was as unblemished as before.

“Huh,” Magnus flicked his palm, testing his skin.

To him it felt just as elastic as before, and when he asked Charlotte to squeeze it she had no trouble kneading his hand. Magnus had no idea how it was possible for his skin to be so tough and yet still soft and flexible. Yet that’s exactly what it was. It was as if he had replaced his skin with beast skin.

“That was an iron-ranked Magic Missile, right? Can we try bronze?”

“Sure.”

Much more confident now that he had seen how tough Magnus' body was, Penwick launched a second attack, this time shooting two Magic Missiles that shot toward Magnus' chest. Though he could have easily caught them with his hands, Magnus instead let them land. One of the advantages of Magic Missile was that all of the darts would strike the exact same location unless the mage casting the spell wished otherwise. These successive attacks drastically increased the piercing power of the spell, making it one of the most dangerous arcane spells no matter the level.

As the first Magic Missile struck, it dissipated exactly as it had the first time. The second Magic Missile impacted immediately afterward and the stinging pain Magnus felt increased slightly, yet it too dissipated, leaving nothing but a red welt that quickly faded away, returning to normal in less than ten seconds.

At this point, Magnus was almost positive he was simply immune to iron- and bronze-ranked spells, which was an insane thought but matched what he knew about magical beasts. Lifting his eyes from his unblemished chest, he looked at Penwick, who simply nodded and began casting his most powerful Magic Missile. The gap between iron rank and bronze rank was significant, but the gap between bronze and silver was even larger. As spells ranked up they grew exponentially more powerful, and as the silver-ranked Magic Missile formed, Magnus felt his body tense ever so slightly, as if able to tell what degree of danger the spell represented.

He kept himself still as Penwick completed his spell and launched it toward Magnus. Magnus' every instinct was telling him to dodge, but he forcefully kept his hands down by his side and allowed the three Magic Missiles to slam into his shoulder.

The first missile struck, bringing with it a stinging pain and a red welt. The second missile impacted in the same spot, stinging even more and causing Magnus' skin to split ever so slightly. The third missile, targeting the scratch that had just been formed, exploded fiercely and a trickle of blood dripped from Magnus' torn skin. Charlotte, who had been holding a health potion, hurried over, but Magnus lifted his hand.

"Hold on a second," he said, staring at his wounded shoulder.

At first it just continued to bleed, but within fifteen seconds the blood flow slowed and then stopped. Within thirty seconds the wound had started to close. And less than a minute after the Magic Missiles struck, Magnus' skin had returned to normal.

He had felt mana rushing to that spot, beginning to accelerate his healing, and had been curious just how quickly his body would regenerate. When he and the others had been fighting against the silver-ranked rock python, one of the biggest challenges had been that even if they managed to wound the beast, its body was simply going to heal before they could deal more damage.

Magnus' body was now demonstrating the same characteristics, and though he wasn't immune to silver-ranked spells, at least not in the way he was to bronze- and iron-rank spells, and his defenses weren't quite as strong as the rock python's, Magnus had the advantage of martial arts. Had he wanted to, he could have simply dodged Penwick's attack, never letting the darts hit his body. For those attacks he couldn't dodge, he now had significantly higher chances of surviving, and as long as an attack didn't kill him instantly he'd be able to heal from it.

Hopping up and down a couple of times, Magnus abruptly darted toward the other end of the clearing, reaching it in less than two seconds. He hadn't used Swallow's Cloud Step but rather had simply relied on his natural speed. Turning around, his foot pressed against the ground, leaving a deep imprint. And in a single step he appeared back where he had been before.

His Swallow's Cloud Step was in the Warrior stage, but it had improved many times over simply because Magnus' body was now stronger and faster. He could only imagine what would happen when his physique reached the Earth stage, and even the Saint's stage beyond it.

Having tested his speed and defenses, the only thing left to check was his strength. Walking over to the nest of boulders where the serpent had staged its ambush, Magnus casually grasped the largest stone he could find and, with barely any effort, lifted it into the air. He tossed it above his head and caught it lightly with one hand. The stone must have easily weighed 500 pounds, but to Magnus it was nearly weightless. Still holding that stone, he grabbed another and lifted it as well. Unfortunately, the stones were too

large for him to pick up a third, but after carefully weighing them in his hands he dropped them both back to the ground. They landed with heavy thuds, denting the earth.

Magnus estimated that if his maximum lifting capacity had been one ton before breaking through twice in his physique, his total strength had increased to close to five tons. If he were still on Earth, he'd be no different than a superhero. All that was missing was the ability to fly and maybe shoot lasers out of his eyes.

Dusting off his hands, he retrieved a spare shirt from his dimensional storage and slipped it on as he walked back over to where Charlotte and Penwick were standing.

“You’re a human-shaped beast,” Penwick said matter-of-factly as he peered at Magnus with considerable interest. “You know, I’m starting to think this Absolute Digestion skill you picked up is maybe a little bit stronger than I realized. If we can find other special fruits or spiritual plants and continue to improve your physique, we might actually have a shot at defeating Starlit Clay Tower. That, combined with...” he hesitated for a moment, glancing at Charlotte, who held up her hands.

“I can give you two space if you need.”

“No,” Magnus said, walking over to Charlotte and taking her hand. “We trust you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Though Penwick clearly wasn't as confident as Magnus, he still nodded.

"That's right. We're all on the same side here. My apologies. It's just we need to be cautious with this."

"No offense taken," Charlotte said, giving Magnus a grateful glance and squeezing his hand lightly.

"As I was saying, with your new physique combined with your anti-mage combat abilities, there's a very real chance we'll be able to come out of the fight against Starlit Clay Tower alive, even if we can't win."

"Don't worry," Magnus said confidently. "We will win. But first we should go check out the tower."

The other two gathered their bags, Magnus stored them away, and they resumed their journey. As they traveled, Magnus looked around. His brow furrowed.

“Where’s Glacia?” he asked.

Charlotte’s face fell.

“During the fight with the snake she got bitten. The snake’s venom was particularly potent, and so I sent her back to recover. She should be fine in a couple of hours. I figured that if we were going to die to the tiger, better that she didn’t.”

Her words had yet to fade when Penwick suddenly stiffened and with a trembling finger blurted out, “Tiger.”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

Charlotte shot him a strange glance, only to discover that he was frozen, his finger pointing toward some bushes. As she and Magnus looked over, they saw the massive tiger hiding in the bushes, watching them with his big eyes. Afraid the beast was going to pounce, Magnus quickly pulled the other two back, watching the cat warily.

Amber had no such concerns, and jumping down from Magnus’ arms, she trotted over and began oinking in a scolding tone. The tiger quickly lowered himself to the ground, getting his body as flat as he possibly could as he stared at her with a fawning and hopeful gaze. She oinked again and the tiger shook its head. A hint of stubbornness appeared in his eyes. Amber’s wings rose, the feathers stiffening, and her head lowered slightly as if she might charge.

Panic flashed across the tiger’s face and he quickly retreated, letting out a soft yowl as he turned and dashed into the forest. With an annoyed huff, Amber trotted back to Magnus and prodded him so he would pick her up. Once in his arms, she let out another annoyed huff and snuggled down, closing her eyes to take a nap. Penwick was the first to recover. Taking off his glasses, he rubbed his face with his hand and let out a sigh.

“Can’t things be normal at least once?” he asked, putting his glasses back on and adjusting them on his nose. “I mean, I’m glad the tiger doesn’t want to attack us anymore. But I don’t know if I can take much more of this weirdness.”

“Maybe they’re related,” Charlotte said, blushing as the two men looked at her. “I mean, it’s common for beasts to take care of their own kin, right?”

“Amber’s a pig.”

“I know she’s a pig,” Charlotte said, her blush deepening. She smacked Magnus on the arm. “I know pigs and tigers aren’t the same. But how else do you explain the fact that that gold-ranked tiger is clearly trying to get on your pig’s good side?”

“There is another option,” Penwick said quietly, gazing at Amber with a thoughtful gaze. “Yes, it’s a gold-ranked tiger. But what if she’s of a higher rank?”

The question hung in the air for a second, and then both he and Charlotte shook their heads at the same time.

“No, impossible.”

“Yeah, never mind. I take it back. There’s no way. Even if she was a higher rank, the tiger wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to eat her. I don’t know. I give up,” Penwick said, waving his hand.

They had hardly traveled a hundred feet when suddenly the tiger bounded back through the forest, this time coming directly up to them. From the looks of it, he was holding something in his mouth, and based on his body language the beast had no interest in attacking them. Dropping a branch that had been pinched between his teeth in front of Magnus, he yowled again and then turned and sped off without waiting for a response.

The branch was about six feet long and had clearly just been stripped from a tree. There were three clusters of small grape-like fruit on the branch, plump and juicy and delicious looking, at least to Magnus. Amber clearly thought so as well, because she immediately perked up and wiggled to try and get down. Charlotte, bending over, picked up the branch and examined it.

“Are these crystal grapes?”

“It looks like it,” Penwick said. “There must be a crystal grape tree somewhere around here.”

Crystal grapes were a relatively low-ranked spiritual fruit, prized for their delicious and rich flavor. Unlike the stone skin fruit, which had a drastic impact on the physique of any beast that ate them, crystal grapes were much more common and had little effect besides acting as a natural mana potion, allowing anyone who ate them to instantly restore a portion of their mana. To Magnus they seemed like small mana crystals, and stripping the first bunch from the branch, he fed a couple of them to Amber.

“You guys should eat some as well,” he said as he popped one of the lush grapes into his mouth, biting down. He felt a rush of icy sweet that filled his mouth and throat with a wonderful aroma.

Penwick pulled the other two bunches off the branch and they continued on their way, eating grapes. Amber absolutely adored them, and Magnus fed her most of them. After traveling for another mile there was a crash in the forest ahead, and the tiger squeezed his way out of two narrow trees, nearly knocking one of them over. This time the tiger didn’t appear to be holding anything in his mouth, but as he got close he quickly lowered himself to the ground and stuck out his tongue, carefully shaking a plant that still had its roots attached to the ground.

The tiger growled softly, blinking his massive eyes hopefully at Amber. When he didn’t get a response, far from looking sad he actually grew quite excited. And after spinning around on the spot, the beast dashed off once more. Cautiously walking up to the saliva-covered plant, Penwick examined it and then shook his head in wonder.

“This is a silver moon orchid. Its petals can be turned into tea, and drinking the tea will purify a mage’s mana.”

That interested Magnus quite a bit, as the last flower that had possessed the effect of purifying mana also healed his cracked soul. The tiger had clearly dug the entire plant up, as the roots still had little clumps of dirt.

“Let me try something,” Magnus said. Touching the plant lightly, he transferred it into his storage. It appeared hanging in the void without any issue, causing Magnus to grin. “My storage space has the effect of freezing time for whatever I put into it, which means the plant won’t wither before we have the chance to take it out and replant it. How much tea can one

silver moon orchid produce?”

“They only bloom under the full moon, but approximately once a month they can produce six to ten petals. Enough for a couple pots of tea,” Penwick said, standing up and brushing off his hands.

“So if I want to drink this tea consistently, I’ll need some more,” Magnus said, nodding. “Got it.”

Charlotte had hardly glanced at the silver moon orchid and was instead staring with narrowed eyes at Amber as the little pig ate the last few grapes. Whatever was on her mind, she didn’t share, and the team continued on toward the tower, crossing the last large island. Though there was still a considerable amount of area they hadn’t yet explored, including a number of islands off to the right and left, Magnus saw only a single vine pathway leading from the large island they were on to a much smaller island where the crimson tower stood.

There seemed to be no way around it, unless someone could fly. But seeing a faint, shimmering barrier stretching around the tower, Magnus guessed that wouldn’t work either. The only way to continue on to the larger islands behind the tower was through the tower itself.

As they crossed the vine bridge and approached the tower, Magnus took a moment to admire its construction. It was made of massive crimson blocks that fit together perfectly. It showed no sign of age, and the blocks gleamed in the sunlight as if it had only just been constructed. The door was thick and was made of wood wrapped with metal bands. Stopping in front of it, Magnus was about to reach for the door handle when he saw the big tiger trotting across the vine bridge. This time he was dragging something, which swung precariously over the edge.

As he got to the small island they were on, the tiger yanked on the vine he gripped between his teeth, pulling a large bundle up over the side of the island. It had been almost an hour since they had last seen the tiger, and clearly he had been busy. Wrapped up in the vine was a variety of different fruits, along with some chunks of ore that glittered in the sunlight and a big mushroom. Sitting back on his haunches, the tiger looked quite pleased with himself. He used his paw to nudge the pile of items toward the team, clearly

offering them to Amber.

Magnus wasn't exactly sure what the tiger wanted, but he figured that the tiger had traded enough that it wouldn't do for Amber to keep playing coy. He placed Amber down on the ground and patted her on the butt.

"Go say thank you. It's the least you could do."

She glowered at him over her shoulder and then trotted down the steps and over to the bundle. After rooting through it with her nose, she gave the tiger a short nod, and then, completely ignoring him, picked up one of the fruits and trotted back to Magnus.

The tiger let out a happy roar and quickly lay down, his tail lashing back and forth. The fruit that Amber was carrying was still attached to the vine, and she ended up dragging the whole bundle over to the steps. Penwick, keeping a wary eye on the tiger, quickly sorted through it.

"I don't know where it found all these treasures, but it just goes to show you the true value of a Legacy," he said when he had finished. "Any single one of these fruits would be worth at least a couple hundred crystals in the outside world."

He held up the mushroom. "This is the azure cloud mushroom. If you eat it, it'll increase the speed of your thoughts permanently. It only has an effect once. But you can also use it as an ingredient for clarity potions, which can be taken multiple times." He held up another plant. "This is the heavenly dew flower. If you plant it, its leaves will trap dew. As long as you don't touch it, the dew will eventually condense into a single drop that drastically accelerates healing. High-level health potions use this as an ingredient."

He gestured to the other plants and fruits. "Every single one is just as valuable as these two."

"Well, it's good to know they are all present. We're going to need to recruit more people if we want to take full advantage of this Legacy," Magnus said. "There's no way the two of us would be able to manage everything."

Walking down the steps, Charlotte picked up a plant with serrated green leaves, tipped with hints of red.

“This is phoenix feather grass.”

“Is it useful for you?” Magnus asked.

Charlotte hesitated for a moment and then nodded. “Yes, because of the shape of my soul, anything related to a phoenix is extra effective. Phoenix feather grass can be turned into a potion that will improve my total amount of mana.”

“Then you should keep it,” Magnus said. “If you want, I can keep it for you until we get out of here.”

“Thank you.”

Magnus nodded and waved his hand, sending it into his storage along with the other plants and fruits.

“You know,” Charlotte said as she climbed back up the stairs, “the sheer scale of this Legacy and the variety of plants makes me think that Crimson Flame Tower must have been huge. Our family has a Legacy too, but it’s barely the size of these islands we’ve been on. It doesn’t include any of the rest of it.”

“It makes me wonder why the tower has declined so much,” Magnus said. His gaze turned to the red stone tower in front of them. “We may never know, but I do know that the path to restoring Crimson Flames Tower’s glory is behind this door. Are you ready?”

Seeing Charlotte and Penwick nod, Magnus gripped the door handle and pulled it open, stepping into the tower. The room they entered wasn’t large, merely ten feet across and fifteen feet deep. As all three of them entered the building, the door closed behind them with a loud click, alerting them that it had been locked. Before Magnus could turn around to try and open it, the air shimmered and a faint figure appeared.

“Welcome, challengers, to Crimson Flame Tower.”

The figure appeared to be an older woman, wearing a long red robe and holding a cane. Her back was bent and her hair white. Fine wrinkles could be seen around her eyes and mouth.

“I am Aphelia, tower spirit of the Crimson Flame Tower.”

Magnus and Penwick shared a surprised glance at her words, and Magnus held up his hand.

“I’m sorry, did you say Crimson Flame Tower?”

“Yes.” Aphelia nodded, showing no anger at being interrupted. “The Crimson Flame Tower is the organization that rules this land. You are currently in one of the outer towers that guard this land. Paragor of the Crimson Flame established this holy land, and upon his death decreed that his Legacy would pass to the one who successfully passes the challenge of the central tower.”

“Can I ask how many towers there are?”

“You can ask, but I won’t answer.” Aphelia seemed to smile and shook her head slightly. “All you need to know is that the challenge in front of you awaits. Will you seek the Legacy of the Crimson Flame?”

“Before I answer, could I ask a couple questions?” Magnus asked, glancing at Penwick again.

“Of course.”

“In the world we come from, there’s a Crimson Flame Tower. Is it related to this one?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



This time, Aphelia did smile.

“Most likely. Over the last few thousand years there have been a number of challengers. One even made it through three of the towers, becoming a steward, before being unable to proceed. Challengers who succeed at least one tower are eligible to consider themselves members of the Crimson Flame Tower, and it is likely that one of these challengers established a branch of the Crimson Flame Tower in your world as well. Will you take the challenge?”

“Yes.”

Charlotte and Penwick both echoed Magnus’ choice, and with a bright smile Aphelia waved her hand, instantly transporting the three of them away. Magnus reappeared in a wide, open room. It was circular, and the walls were made of the same red crimson stone the towers were made of. The ceiling was at least fifty feet above him, and the ground was a dark, incredibly hard stone. Magnus was still holding Amber, who looked around

with interest and then yawned and went back to sleep. Aphelia appeared in front of Magnus, floating in the air.

“Welcome to the first tower. Here you will face a series of challenges to make sure you meet the base qualifications for joining Crimson Flame Tower.”

“Hold on,” Magnus said, lifting his hand to show off his thumb ring. “Technically I’m already the tower master.”

Aphelia’s smile stiffened and her gaze narrowed dangerously. Realizing he might have offended her, Magnus quickly backpedaled.

“I mean, outside of this place I am. In here I’m clearly nothing but a weak wannabe challenger, not even close to the tower master.”

The thunderous expression on the tower spirit’s face eased slightly.

“Indeed,” though her tone was cold and not nearly as friendly as it had been before, at least she didn’t look like she was about to kill him. “Your first challenge will begin. Defeat your opponents to advance.”

Aphelia waved her hand and then faded from view as two portals opened up and large figures strode through them, dressed from head to toe in crimson armor and holding spears and shields. They came to a stop, moving in perfect unison, down to the sway of the tassels on their weapons. Magnus could sense no life from them, and as he examined them closer he saw hints of stone beneath their armor.

Realizing that he was facing off against golems, inanimate stone brought to life through magic, Magnus cracked his knuckles and activated his Twelve Thunder’s Fist. Lightning began to shroud him, and as the two golems started to move he burst into action.

He crossed the distance before the first golem could lower its spear and his fist drove directly into the center of the golem’s chest. It hadn’t managed to get its shield up in time, but even if it had, it wouldn’t have mattered. Covered in dancing lightning, Magnus’ fist punched straight through the metal chest plate and landed on the golem’s hard stone torso, which immediately cracked.

Stumbling back, the golem tried to twist its body to bring up its shield, but Magnus was too fast, and a second punch landed right where the first had. The cracks in its chest expanded abruptly, and the only thing that kept the golem from simply falling to pieces right there was the fact that it was wearing armor. As it was, the light in its eyes dimmed, and it crumbled to the ground as the second golem stabbed toward Magnus.

Casually swatting the tip of the spear to the side, Magnus grabbed the edge of the golem's shield and twisted sharply, snapping the golem's arm off. His foot lashed out, crushing its leg. As it toppled over, his fist found its head. Obliterating its helmet and the stone head underneath, the golem dropped to the ground but didn't stop moving. Magnus kicked aside its flailing arm and stomped on its chest, crushing whatever mechanism was driving it.

The golems had barely appeared a few seconds before, but already they lay in a heap on the ground. Judging by their strength they were merely iron-ranked, but Magnus knew that because of their stone bodies and heavy armor, even bronze-ranked mages would have trouble with them. Aphelia reappeared, a confused expression on her face as she stared at the two deconstructed golems and then at Magnus. He was still holding Amber, who was asleep in his arms, snoring quietly as she drooled on his arm.

"Would you like to proceed to the next level?" Aphelia asked, a hint of hesitancy in her tone.

"Sure," Magnus said.

"Very well. The bronze-level challenge shall commence."

Aphelia faded away again, and this time three portals opened up. The golems that stepped through them were clearly stronger than the first pair he had fought. Not only were their movements smoother, but they immediately took up guard positions when they saw Magnus. Additionally, only two of them had shields and spears while the third, still dressed in heavy armor, carried two staves. Realizing things were about to get a little bit trickier, Magnus put down Amber and grabbed at the air, forming three silver darts. During his fight with the tiger his Silver Moon Strike had broken through to the Warrior stage, increasing his accuracy and allowing him to release multiple darts at a time instead of having to throw them one

by one.

As the mage golem lifted its two staves and began forming spell constructs, Magnus dashed to the side, wanting to make sure Amber was out of harm's way. The two melee golems tracked him. Their shields lifted as they protected the mage from his attack. As Magnus circled, he unleashed his moonbeams, sending them flying toward the spell constructs, but both of the melee golems moved immediately, lifting their shields to block the attacks.

The silver moonbeams punched through the shields with little effort and burrowed into the golem's heads. The attacks didn't manage to slow them at all, and he quickly realized he'd have to do something about the shield golems first.

Magnus shifted direction, accelerating toward them. Moving in perfect synchronization, one of them fell back while the other charged forward, creating a layered defense to buy the mage golem more time. Just before he crashed into the front golem, Magnus stepped to the side, perfectly chaining his Swallow's Cloud Step to bypass both of the shield-wielding golems, and appeared in front of the mage. His fingers flicked and darts flew, tearing through the mana constructs and causing both of them to explode. Stumbling back, the mage golem immediately raised its staves to start casting again, but by that time Magnus was too close.

His fist struck, accompanied by a blast of lightning that caused the golem to freeze for a brief moment. Though it was only a second, Magnus was able to land three heavy punches, shattering the golem into pieces. He ducked and then spun, barely avoiding a spear that stabbed toward the back of his head. His hand wrapped around the haft of the spear, and he jerked it forward as his foot lashed out, kicking the golem's legs. With its arm and shoulders going one way and its legs going the other, the golem was forcefully pulled off balance. Magnus, stepping around its side, grabbed its head and drove it into the ground with enough force to crush it.

Cartwheeling over the golem's body, he avoided a slash from the other golem's spear and quickly landed a heavy punch that crushed the prone golem's core. Fearlessly, the last golem advanced, unconcerned about what had just happened to its companions and even its own imminent

destruction. Magnus, eager to test the true limit of his strength, repeated the same move. Dodging a spear attack, he pulled the golem off balance, but this time he hoisted it into the air.

Each of the golems, though only six and a half feet tall in their armor, was made of stone and easily weighed a couple of tons. Lifting the golem over his head, Magnus hurled the golem at the wall in the distance, managing to send it nearly sixty feet before gravity finally won and it hit the ground. Slamming into the stone floor, it rolled over and stopped by the wall. It had just struggled up to its feet when six silver moonbeams pierced through its chest plate, burrowed into its stone chest, and shattered its core, causing it to slump lifelessly to the ground.

Magnus hadn't even broken a sweat and was beginning to get a sense of just how absurd his Imperishable Void Physique actually was. The air shimmered and Aphelia appeared in the air above him again. This time the confusion on her face was clear.

“Aren't you a mage? Why do you keep punching them?”

Scratching his chin, Magnus thought quickly, unsure whether giving an incorrect answer would get him kicked out.

“Do I have to be a mage to join Crimson Flame Tower?”

“No,” Aphelia admitted. “You could join as an attendant knight, but if you want to be a ranked member, then yes, you have to be a mage. This is a mage tower.”

“Close-combat magic,” Magnus said immediately. He summoned the power of his Twelve Thunder's Fist, causing lightning to crawl along his palms and knuckles. “I specialize in close-combat magic, short-range, instantaneous movement, and lightning fists.”

“That's not instantaneous movement,” Aphelia said. She abruptly appeared next to Magnus. “This is instantaneous movement.”

Jumping, Magnus clutched his chest. “Whoa, sorry, you startled me there. How did you do that?”

“Minor teleportation, also known as Blink,” Aphelia said. “Though in

actuality I'm a tower spirit, meaning I can appear wherever I want inside the towers because I am everywhere simultaneously. But if you were to do it, you would use Blink."

"Don't know that spell, but I do know this one."

Magnus' body shivered and then vanished, reappearing a dozen feet away.

"That is not instantaneous movement," Aphelia said matter-of-factly, shaking her head. "You're just moving really fast."

"Sure, not yet, but I'm working towards it."

"That'll never become instantaneous movement," Aphelia said, shaking her head. "Are you sure you're doing magic?"

Realizing that she was catching on to him, Magnus quickly waved his hand, pulling a health potion from his dimensional storage. After holding it up for Aphelia to see, he waved his hand again and it vanished.

"Yes, I'm a mage. That's my soul contract over there. I just specialize in body reinforcement and close-combat magic."

"Those kinds of magic don't exist," Aphelia said, her tone firm.

"Look, I'm not trying to pick a fight here, but just because you don't know about close-combat magic doesn't mean it doesn't exist."

"Do not try and tell me what exists and what does not, child. This tower was established by the god of magic himself, and I am its spirit. What I don't know about magic does not exist!"

There was a lot of information hidden in Aphelia's outburst, and Magnus quickly held up his hands in defeat.

"I apologize. I didn't mean any disrespect. I'm not challenging your understanding. If I'm honest, no one else in the outside world can do what I can do either. Maybe it's just my special physique, but this is how my magic manifests. Also, you have to admit that it's been many years since anyone has come here. It could be that this magic has developed since then. Then again, it could also be that I'm just a genius."

Magnus didn't feel bad borrowing the term. After all, his system was called the Genius Body Refinement System™. Slightly mollified by Magnus' humble tone and amused by his cheeky claim to be a genius, Aphelia waved her hand, causing the destroyed golems to vanish.

“Fine. Will you face the third challenge?”

“Of course,” Magnus said.

“Then let's see how your close-combat magic fares against this.”

With those ominous words, Aphelia vanished and a single portal opened up, a tall, lanky figure stepping out of it. It was a creature Magnus didn't recognize, with long arms that hung all the way to the ground despite its seven-foot frame. The creature's fingers, which ended in massive, curled claws, brushed against the ground as its spring-like legs carried it forward. The creature had a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth and a single unblinking eye that split the center of its head vertically.

It immediately let out a shriek that pierced Magnus' eardrums, causing a sense of discomfort in his mind. His eyes narrowed, and instead of waiting for the monster to attack Magnus darted forward, his fists streaming arcs of lightning as he crashed into it.

It responded by dodging out of the way and trying to rake him with its thick claws. Just before its claws hit his body, Magnus shouted, “Shield.” The shout didn't do anything, of course, but he was hoping Aphelia didn't notice that. The creature's claws scraped across his skin, causing sparks to dance but doing no actual damage, and before it could recover from its surprise Magnus had grabbed its thin arm, causing its body to flail wildly as it was forcefully stopped.

Extending his fingers, Magnus hacked at the creature's neck, and there was a sharp cracking sound as its bones were crushed. Despite the damage it suffered, the monster's life force was still strong and it tried to hiss at Magnus, its forked tongue dancing between its sharp teeth.

He responded with an uppercut that caused it to bite its tongue off. Realizing he was punching a little bit too much, Magnus finally let go of the monster's arm and took two quick steps back. At the same time he grabbed

silvery darts from the air, which he launched at the monster's eyes.

It still hadn't recovered from biting its own tongue off, and the silver beams sank into its skull, finally killing it.

Magnus had no idea what the monster was, but from the dumbfounded expression on Aphelia's face as the tower's spirit reappeared, it was clearly something significant.

"What is that?" Magnus asked.

"It's a mage hunter," Aphelia said. Her tone was short and words clipped. "A monster from the wilds, particularly adept at hunting down spellcasters."

"Really?" Magnus nudged the creature with his foot. "Didn't seem very strong to me. Anyway, that's the third challenge. Is there a fourth?"

Aphelia shook her head.

"No, you've passed all of the challenges for this tower and unlocked access to the next area. Congratulations. You are now a ranked member of the Crimson Flame Tower."

She waved her hand and two items appeared. One was a simple crimson robe similar to hers that looked significantly less valuable. Magnus immediately recognized it as a slightly less ornate version of the Crimson Flame Tower master robe currently in his closet. The other item was a simple token made of a smooth, white, jade-like material with a crimson flame in the shape of a tower etched into it.

"This is your identity token. It marks you as a ranked member."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



“How many ranks are there?” Magnus asked.

Instead of directly answering the question, Aphelia waved her hand and the room they were in disappeared as Magnus was transported to the room he had initially entered. Now, however, there were three open doorways in the room that hadn’t been there when he first entered.

“The Crimson Flame Tower is divided by a strict hierarchy. At the top is the tower master himself. Currently, the position is vacant. Under the tower master are the elders. Those positions are vacant as well. Then the stewards, and below them core disciples. Each elder is only eligible to elect a single core disciple, and they represent the very best of the Crimson Flame Tower’s future. Under the core disciples are the inner disciples, who are given access to the knowledge of the Crimson Flame Tower and many of its resources but are required to complete missions in order to advance. Then, finally, there are outer disciples and attendants. As successfully defeating all three levels of the tower in,” Aphelia’s voice caught for a moment before she continued somewhat unwillingly, “the shortest amount of time in

recorded history, you have achieved the status of the rank of inner disciple.”

“Just inner disciple? Shouldn’t I be like a core disciple or something like that?”

Rubbing her forehead, Aphelia didn’t bother to answer Magnus’ question.

“Defeating the three tests of this tower normally grants the rank of outer disciple. And defeating at least two of them qualifies you to become an attendant.”

“Is there a limit to the number of times someone can test?” Magnus asked.

“Yes, three.”

Sensing that Aphelia was much more forthcoming with information and guessing it had something to do with the fact that he had just become an inner disciple, Magnus pressed further. “Is there ever danger to the challenger’s life?”

“Not at this tower. As you proceed and get closer to the central tower, that changes. As an inner disciple, you are free to use the amenities of this tower. Additionally, you’ll find living quarters and two buildings in the next zone that will also be open to you: the refinement pavilion and the library. The refinement pavilion contains all of the tools you will need to make magical artifacts, while the library contains vast knowledge about the Crimson Flame Tower, about magic, and about spells. There’s a limit to the number of spells that can be withdrawn, but you’ll find more information when you actually visit it.”

“Thank you,” Magnus said, bowing to Aphelia. “I genuinely appreciate your help. Might I ask how many other people are currently members of the Crimson Flame Tower?”

Aphelia hesitated for a moment. “Zero. Oh, actually, one. And an attendant.”

Magnus was taken aback, but his confusion was immediately cleared when both Charlotte and Penwick appeared. Penwick’s face was pale, and his hand was clutched to his throat.

“I just died,” he said, his voice breathless. “That creature just slit my throat.”

“You’re okay,” Magnus said, stepping closer and gripping Penwick’s shoulder. “You’re all right.”

He turned to Charlotte, who was looking at the token and robe that appeared in her hands. The token was similar to Magnus’, but instead of being white was black with a crimson tower on it. Her robe was even plainer than Magnus’, marking her as an outer disciple of the Crimson Flame Tower. Penwick hadn’t managed to beat the mage hunter monster and had only earned the rank of attendant. But Magnus wasn’t worried, as Penwick still had two more opportunities to try.

Tapping her cane to get their attention, Aphelia bowed slightly. “It is good to have new members joining the Crimson Flame Tower. Remember, only by making your way to the center of this world and climbing the central tower can you obtain the true Legacy of the Crimson Flame. As you grow in strength, more and more of this world will be open to you, but the danger will likewise increase. Use the resources you have access to well and climb as high as you can.”

She bowed again and vanished, leaving Magnus and the others alone in the tower.

“Well, that was exciting,” Magnus said. “Charlotte, how did your fights go?”

“The first two were simple. I overpowered the golems easily, since ice locks up their movements. As for that last creature, the, uh, mage killer, it was strange. Its body was so slippery, as if my magic just rolled right off of it. I finally managed to encase it completely though, and then stabbed it through its eyes to kill it.”

“I didn’t manage to take down the mage killer,” Penwick said, shaking his head. “The golems were tough until I figured out how to disable them, but that mage killer was too fast for me. I’d barely started the fight when it had crossed the distance and cut my throat.” He reached up to touch his neck again. “I still can’t believe I’m alive.”

“What about you?” Charlotte asked.

Magnus, glancing at the token he held, shrugged.

“My fights went fine,” Magnus said with a shrug, “but then again, my magic is hyper combat-focused.”

Magnus opened the robe he was holding and examined it for a moment before slipping it on. He could feel a faint thread of mana running through it, though he wasn't quite sure what effect it actually had. After putting on the robe, he studied the token and sensed a hint of mana in that as well. To his surprise, Charlotte pricked her finger and dripped a hint of blood onto her token, which immediately lit up as the blood was absorbed. The token rose from her hand, spun, and vanished into her forehead.

Magnus, who had no idea how she had known to do that, coughed lightly and then tried to prick his finger. Unfortunately, his finger was so tough that even after stabbing it repeatedly with a small dagger he didn't manage to break the skin. Unsure what else to do, he bit the inside of his cheek so hard it began bleeding, and wiping a bit of blood and saliva, smeared it on the token. The blood immediately was absorbed, though the spit remained. And just like Charlotte's, his token began to glow and then flew into his forehead. Immediately a torrent of information rushed through his mind, and he realized his problem.

Magnus couldn't actually gather or project mana. Had he been able to, he would have been able to connect with the wisp of mana inside the token, which would have given him instructions on how to use it. Thankfully, Charlotte was next to him and had deciphered the trick. Otherwise, Magnus likely would have walked around never actually having activated his inner disciple rank.

The information in his head contained a few things. A map of the attendant zone, which was the first area they had entered and passed through to come to this tower. Another map that showed the outer disciple zone, which was the new area that had just opened up for them beyond the tower. Finally, there was a third map of the area marked for inner disciples, but Magnus knew that until he passed the second tower's test he wouldn't actually have access to it.

Of course, being an inner disciple didn't lack privileges. It granted him free use of the refinement pavilion without having to pay the customary rental fee required of outer disciples. Additionally, he was allowed to access all three floors of the library instead of just being restricted to the first and second floor.

One question that had been bothering Magnus was about the resources that the legacy world contained. Up until this point, he and the others had just been picking up resources wherever they found them. And he was concerned that that was somehow against the rules.

What he discovered was that there were quotas for each member ranking in the Crimson Flame Tower. But because there were currently only two members and one attendant in the entire Crimson Flame Tower, their resource allotments were listed as unlimited. It was obviously in Aphelia's best interest to encourage them to grow as fast as possible, which she did by giving them unlimited access to all of the resources in their areas.

After digesting the information from the token, Magnus suggested they look through the tower. He quickly discovered that it was very similar to the tower outside the Legacy world. It contained five floors, most of which were storage rooms or bedrooms. If every room was occupied, Magnus estimated that at least 500 mages would be able to live here.

Additionally, according to the map of the outer disciple zone these were simply attendant rooms. Inside the zone they had yet to explore were numerous small, independent houses for the outer disciples of the tower. Inner disciples were granted even nicer rooms, but Magnus was still blocked off from being able to access them by the second tower. After they had finished exploring the tower, they climbed to the roof of the tower and looked out over the new zone they had just unlocked.

"So, what's the plan?" Penwick asked, leaning on the parapet that surrounded the top of the tower.

Magnus thought for a moment before he answered, "I'm going to stay and train. This environment is even better for the kind of training I want to do than the tower. For the next three weeks, until the Tower War starts, I'm going to grind in here. What about you two?"

“It’s nice to have access to the resources,” Penwick said, looking around. “But honestly, my training can be done in the tower, and somebody needs to be there to manage it. I think, at least until the Tower War is done, it would be better if I returned.”

“That makes sense,” Magnus said with a nod. “Charlotte, what about you?”

“I can’t be gone that long. In fact, if I don’t show up tomorrow we’re going to have some very concerned individuals knocking on the door to your tower. I wish I could stay, but I don’t think I can. I’m going to return as well. Are you going to be okay by yourself in here?”

Walking back to the other side of the tower, Magnus glanced over the edge at the massive tiger still sitting outside the tower, waiting patiently. “I think I’m going to be fine. I don’t know what Amber did, but even if I do find trouble, she could probably convince Mr. Tiger to help me out. And besides, I wanted a sparring partner, and now I have one.”

“You can’t be serious,” Charlotte said, looking down at the tiger and then back at Magnus. “Are you seriously thinking about fighting against a gold-ranked tiger?”

“Sparring. A little bit different,” Magnus said. “Besides, I always have Amber, and maybe I can find some other creatures that are a little bit closer to my level.”

Though his body refinement had improved drastically and both his strength and speed were leagues above where they had been before, Magnus was under no illusion he’d be able to put up a genuine fight against the tiger. Of course, striving to defeat a creature stronger than him was a great way to improve, and Magnus could feel his blood boiling with barely suppressed excitement as he thought about it.

After arranging a few more details, Penwick and Charlotte both retreated, heading for the entrance of the Legacy. Thanks to his connection through the signet ring, Magnus could control the entrance from anywhere. And he set it so that both Charlotte and Penwick would be able to enter and exit at any time. The only downside was that the gate itself couldn’t be hidden during this period. But Penwick said he would conceal it, so Magnus wasn’t too worried.

After seeing them off, Magnus hesitated for a moment and, while holding Amber, walked out to see the tiger. Though he was eager to start exploring the outer disciple zone, Magnus knew that he didn't have that much time. It would likely take a couple of days to fully explore everything the outer disciple zone of the Crimson Flame Tower had to offer. And those were a few days he simply couldn't afford.

Instead, Magnus resolved to throw himself into his training. This meant continuing to refine his physique, continuing to practice his martial arts, and drawing more Talismans. Stopping suddenly, Magnus sighed and slapped his forehead. He had left all of his Talisman drawing equipment and materials in the tower and likewise his Dawnlight flower, which he needed in order to continue to repair the cracks in his soul.

Realizing he was going to have to make a trip out to the tower anyways, Magnus passed by the tiger and chased after Charlotte and Penwick. Together the three of them returned to the tower, and Magnus took an hour to collect everything he needed. His Void Storage ability made it awfully convenient. And after getting his mana crystals, his brush, the Dawnlight flower, and all of the ink and paper he would need, he said goodbye to Charlotte and Penwick and rushed back into the Legacy.

Crossing over from the first island, he found the tiger sitting there, staring at him, or rather at Amber, and realized he was going to have to do something.

“Amber, what's this tiger's deal? And also, can you ask him to spar with me?”

Amber hesitated for a moment, and then, using her little hoof, scratched something in the dirt. It was hard to make out exactly what she was drawing, because she kept walking over areas she had already drawn, but the first drawing looked a bit like a tiger with a large circular body and four stick legs and a wiggly tail out the back. Its head was little more than a circle, but Magnus got the idea.

Underneath it, Amber drew a snake and then scratched out its tail, indicating the rock python they had fought before. Then, above the tiger's head, she drew herself, spending considerably more time trying to capture her wings and cute little tail. Stepping back to look at her picture, she drew

a downward arrow, starting from her going past the tiger and ending at the snake.

“You’re saying that the tiger ranks above the snake and you rank above the tiger?”

Quite pleased that Magnus had understood, Amber nodded quickly.

She looked at the tiger and oinked and the tiger immediately flattened out on the ground. She oinked again and the tiger jumped to his feet like some sort of game of Amber Says. She oinked again and the tiger, looking a little bit confused, curled his front paws, tucked his head, and rolled over. Amber turned back to Magnus and wrinkled her nose, clearly pleased with herself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Magnus didn't pretend to understand beast lives, but somehow a strict hierarchy had been formed. Whether it was because of the offerings the tiger had handed over or something else, Amber seemed to have accepted the gold-ranked beast as her subordinate and the tiger was clearly pleased about it.

“What about sparring?” Magnus asked, crouching down next to Amber.

She nodded, and Magnus grinned. With this, his training was practically guaranteed to be effective. He found an island with a good amount of empty space and immediately got to work. Swallowing down a mana crystal, he began his Imperishable Void Physique forms, managing to last through four complete cycles before he collapsed.

Though he had gotten all the way to the tenth move of the fourth cycle, it felt as if he had come up against a massive wall that appeared, abruptly blocking his progress forward. This was the barrier to the Earth stage of the Imperishable Void Physique, and Magnus knew that until he broke through it he wouldn't be able to advance.

Shaking out his muscles, Magnus turned to the waiting tiger, bowed, and lifted his hands. The tiger just looked at him and then glanced at Amber, as

if asking what Magnus was doing. She oinked for a little bit, and then, under the skeptical gaze of the massive tiger, nodded firmly.

With a resigned sigh, the tiger rose to his feet and then batted Magnus across the island. The blow came out of nowhere, striking Magnus, who had expected some sort of preamble. It was only, as he tumbled toward the edge of the island, that he realized it had been the tiger's tail that had slapped him upside the head. His hands dug into the earth, stopping himself before he fell off, and he bounced back up, only to find the tiger right in front of him. The beast's mouth opened wide, and Magnus barely avoided a snapping bite.

Magnus retreated along the edge of the island, looking for an opportunity to return to the center, only to find himself completely blocked. The tiger, though not quite as quick as he was, was incredibly fast, and given his larger size could cover more area. His tail was vicious, and the gleam in his eye told Magnus he wasn't going to spare his strength just because Magnus was weaker.

Forced to push himself to the extreme, Magnus finally found an opportunity thanks to the terrain. The tiger was hampered for a brief moment by a pile of rocks. Magnus, driving his Swallow's Cloud Step to the utmost, barely managed to slip by the beast's claws. Instead of retreating to the center of the island, he turned around and immediately attacked, his lightning-covered fists slamming into the tiger's shoulder.

The beast hardly grunted and retaliated immediately. Now that he didn't have to worry he was going to fall off the island into the endless abyss, Magnus was able to move more freely, shifting back to avoid attacks and then darting forward once again to land his own.

That worked until the tiger, getting a sense of his rhythm, abruptly barreled forward, using his bulk to try and crush him. Barely managing to avoid the charge, Magnus was going to try and counterattack when one of the tiger's paws abruptly slapped out and the cat's claws caught his shoulder. He had taken off his crimson inner disciple robe in order to practice, and the claws ripped through his skin, though not nearly as easily as they had before.

Additionally, the heavy shock that came with them as the force from the

tiger's paw radiated through his body was absorbed, and though his bones shook, they didn't break. Thrown backward, Magnus was forced to scramble to the side as another paw crushed the ground where he had been laying. There was a bloodthirsty gleam in the tiger's eyes, and it was clear he was hunting for real.

Magnus fled, abandoning any thought of attack as he tried to buy time for his wounds to heal. He managed to outpace the tiger. And when he made it back to the center of the island, he found Amber waiting for him. She let out a sharp oink and the tiger, who had been running full out, skidded to a stop, a rather reluctant look in his eyes. He stretched out his claw that still carried a hint of Magnus' blood on it. The tiger licked it clean all the while, giving Magnus side eye.

Amber looked at Magnus' forearm and shoulder, oinked, and dashed off into the forest as he sat down to try and heal. He got out a health potion and dabbed it on the wound, causing the skin to begin knitting back together. The wound was deep, but thanks to the combination of his own regenerative ability and the health potion, it closed enough to scab over in only a couple of minutes.

"You know, every time I think I'm strong," Magnus said to the tiger, "I run up against something that smacks me back into my place. I didn't think I could beat you, but I thought I could at least put up a fight. Also, why am I talking to a tiger?"

Whether the tiger understood or not, Magnus wasn't sure, but the look the beast gave him was one of pure disdain, causing him to laugh.

Just then, Amber flew back into the clearing and spit up a dozen fruits. Using her hooves, she divided them into little piles and then pointed at the first pile. She nudged them toward Magnus, and then oinked and pointed toward the tiger. After that, she trotted over to the second pile and tapped her hoof against the ground.

"Eat the fruit, fight the tiger, repeat," Magnus said, and Amber gave a pleased snort. "Got it."

As he stood up to collect the fruit, Magnus could only wonder to himself why he was taking training advice from a pig. But obviously Amber was no

normal pig. While he was intensely curious about the mysteries she held, Magnus also knew she bore him no ill intent. That much was clear from the connection they shared. About to toss the fruit in his mouth, Magnus was stopped by Amber, who flew up and whacked him on the head with her hoof. She pointed to the fruit in a particular sequence, and Magnus realized there was an order to the fruit she had organized.

“All right, I got it.”

Under her guidance, he took the first fruit and ate it in a few bites. A numb sensation traveled through his body. And just when he felt like he might end up being paralyzed, she tapped the second fruit. This one was much smaller, and he tossed it in his mouth and chewed a couple of times before swallowing.

The numbness abruptly gave way to a terrifying itch deep in Magnus’ bones that was impossible to scratch. Just as it was growing too much to bear, Amber pointed to the third fruit and the fourth fruit, both of which Magnus gobbled down.

Unfortunately, that didn’t lessen the itch but only added to it, causing Magnus’ skin to sting as if under assault by thousands of wasps. His muscles burned, as if they were transforming into magma. With all the fruits eaten and Magnus in terrible discomfort, Amber flew around Magnus, pushing him into a horse stance with her nose and hooves, realizing she wanted him to practice the Imperishable Void Physique forms. Magnus started right away and was stunned to discover that the fruit he had just eaten drastically improved the effectiveness of his practice.

He persisted, though it was quite difficult, until he had finished his fourth form and ran smack into the wall dividing him from his fifth rotation. Yet this time, instead of running into an immovable wall as he had last time, he felt the wall vibrate slightly.

The itch and burn in his body had faded, and as Magnus came out of his forms he heard a soft “Oink!” and the tiger pounced immediately. This time Magnus was prepared and dodged, but the tiger, eager to fulfill his duty, chased after him. Having learned his lesson the first time, this time Magnus focused entirely on running, managing to dodge the tiger’s attacks. He

could feel his Swallow's Cloud Step improving significantly. And just when he thought he might break through to the next stage, a gold blur slammed into him, sending him tumbling to the side, allowing the tiger to catch up.

Jumping to his feet, he saw Amber shaking her head at him. The little pig pointed at the tiger and then zoomed off to watch from up above. Realizing that she wanted him to actually fight, Magnus groaned, but he still lifted his fists and tried to attack. The result was predictable.

After getting slapped around for twenty minutes, Magnus finally retreated to the center of the island, his body once again bearing a gash. The tiger, seeming to understand what was going on, didn't give chase and simply trotted over to lay down thirty feet from Magnus while he sat to heal his wounds.

While he was gone, Amber had added another fruit to the piles, which she had him take first. About the size of a peach, it had a scaly skin that Magnus peeled first before eating the soft flesh inside. As soon as it touched his lips, the soft fruit melted away, bringing a wave of warmth to him that concentrated around his wounds, healing them within minutes.

With this new fruit, the amount of time it took for Magnus to recover after each bout with the tiger was reduced drastically. And he threw himself into the training. Over and over he ran through the cycle, consuming the sequence of fruits, driving his forms to their absolute limit until he smashed into the barrier between the fourth and fifth cycles, followed by throwing himself into combat against a gold-ranked tiger.

The sun in the sky never moved, bathing the pocket world in perpetual daytime, making it almost impossible for Magnus to keep track of the time. What he did know was the amount of time he could spend on his Imperishable Void Physique forms and the length of his fights against the tiger were increasing. He was in discomfort almost one hundred percent of the time, and everything began to blur together as he forcefully ground out improvement.

After who knows how many iterations, Magnus, moving more on autopilot than anything else, went to pick up the healing fruit, only to find it had been replaced by something else. Staring at the piece of grass laying where the

healing fruit should have been for a long moment, he slowly lifted his eyes and looked at Amber, who gestured for him to eat it.

Shrugging, Magnus picked up the piece of grass and shoved it in his mouth. It was about two feet long and four inches wide, and he had to fold it over a couple of times to get it all in there. As he chewed it, it vanished down his throat, and Magnus felt his body relax. The intense practice he had just undergone had caused incredible tension to build in his body. And as his muscles began to unknot, he realized just how locked up he had been.

As his body relaxed, a wave of exhaustion rolled over him. And without preamble, Magnus fell face forward onto the ground and slept. When he woke, Amber was still there and a new pile of fruits had been stacked up, waiting for him to start his training over again.

As the punishing training continued, Magnus occasionally caught sight of a notification popping up in front of him from his system book. However, he barely had any time to dismiss them, let alone read them, as even a moment of lapsed concentration could have catastrophic results. Losing his focus during his forms would waste an entire cycle of Imperishable Void Physique refinement. Losing concentration during a fight with the tiger meant broken bones or worse, which further lengthened his recovery time. Losing concentration as he meditated or drew Talismans meant being forced to start over, so Magnus firmly ignored all of the windows and kept himself supremely focused.

At first he followed Amber's direction meticulously. But as time passed, Magnus quickly discovered that he had an instinctive understanding of what needed to happen next to maximize the effect of his training. Where this feeling came from, he had no idea. But it was akin to the sort of instinct a beast might possess. Furthermore, simply by picking up one of the spiritual fruits or plants Amber brought over, Magnus quickly realized that he seemed to be able to sense what sort of effect the treasure would have. He had unlocked Treasure Sense as a pet skill but hadn't actually spent any time exploring it. His days passed quickly. Magnus immersed himself in his training, fighting against both himself and the tiger as he tried to push his body to the brink. Amber spent her time wandering around, finding things for him to eat.

Every once in a while she would stroll over and dump a massive pile of different sorts of spiritual fruit and plants in front of him. And Magnus would take a moment to sort through them, dividing them up so as to best utilize them during his training. When he was tired, or when his body began to show signs of overtraining, he would eat a piece of the long stem grass Amber had piled up nearby and would quickly fall into a deep sleep.

Magnus could feel his body improving at a frantic rate. His skin continued to grow stronger, more elastic and more resistant to damage. At the same time, the fruits he consumed before beginning his practice forged his bones into iron and transformed his muscles, making them stronger and more explosive.

Through his brutal sparring sessions with the tiger, Magnus soon lost any of the stiffness that had existed before when executing his martial arts, and his moves began to blend together.

Originally Silver Moon Strike was only a ranged combat ability, executed only when there was a distance of at least ten feet between him and his target. Driven to desperation during a vicious close-combat brawl, Magnus abandoned his rigid forms and began pulling silvery darts out of the air to stab into the tiger's thick hide, trying to pierce through it so that he could land an actual punch.

Likewise, while being chased, Magnus discovered his fist could unleash shocks even without touching his opponent, allowing him to slow the tiger down slightly, enabling him to get away even faster.

And always, Magnus was forced to drive his Swallow's Cloud Step to the utmost, learning to find leverage where there was none, to change the direction of his body and shift his momentum freely.

Still, it wasn't enough. The tiger's strength was just too high for Magnus to be able to beat him, especially when the tiger's aura came into play.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



As the days dragged on, Magnus lost all sense of time and instead was filled with a burning frustration. No matter how hard he pushed, no matter how much he improved, the tiger always seemed stronger.

At the same time that he was gaining experience and growing, the tiger was as well, though his strength didn't increase as drastically as when the stone skin fruit had rapidly rocketed Magnus up to the Human Grandmaster stage. But now that strength was being polished, compressed, transformed from the fruit's strength into his own.

As the days dragged on, so too did the pile of Talismans next to Magnus. He had discovered that the moment after he completed his meditation was the perfect time for drawing Talismans. Focusing on the simple symbols granted him a moment of respite from the intense frustration he was beginning to feel.

In one of the brief moments where he paused to think about the madness of what he was doing, Magnus couldn't help but laugh. If Penwick and

Charlotte could see him now, they might not be able to recognize him. He normally presented himself as a calm, easygoing, and carefree person who was happy to tackle any challenge and wasn't worried about what the future held.

Yet it had been days since he had stopped to take a break, days since he had done anything but relentlessly grind away at his training. And rather than want to stop, Magnus' overwhelming drive was to continue, to push harder, to go further.

This strange dichotomy was the same mind-numbing obsession that had caused Magnus to become a musician in his life on Earth. The same obsession that had forced him to practice his instrument until his fingers bled, the same drive that had gotten him an inch away from stardom before he died. And it was this same burning drive that was going to ensure he crushed his enemies in the upcoming Tower War.

In truth, Magnus wanted to quit. Punishing his body and throwing himself into combat against an unbeatable foe was not his idea of a good time. What he actually wanted to do was find a bed, crawl into it, and sleep for a week, and then maybe go on a couple of dates with Charlotte.

Thinking about eating one of the spiritual fruits from the pile in front of him made him sick to his stomach. He had long since grown to hate the taste that others would willingly spend their last penny to sample.

Unfortunately, he simply didn't have another option.

Taking a deep breath, Magnus reached down and began the cycle again.

Though the sun didn't move in the sky, Magnus had soon developed a way of keeping time. He tracked his rotations and knew that for every six rotations, approximately twenty-four hours passed.

So he knew that three more days had passed when there was a loud "oink" and Amber suddenly came tearing through the clearing where Magnus was doing his forms.

The tiger, hearing Amber's cry, glanced at Magnus and then turned and bolted, disappearing into the woods before Magnus could blink.

A bad feeling rose in Magnus' heart, and as he turned, he saw a shocking sight.

The rock python, with its still-wounded tail, was slithering toward him, but it wasn't alone. Behind it were two more massive snakes, each as big as the rock python and all clearly angry.

Recognizing the wisdom in the tiger's retreat, Magnus was about to run when Amber arrived in front of him. She shook her head, oinked, pointed at Magnus, pointed at the snakes, and then smacked her hooves together.

"Wait, you want me to fight them? All of them?"

Amber nodded and then zipped away.

For the first time since he had accepted that his pet was strange, Magnus genuinely wondered if she was trying to get him killed.

Still, taking a deep breath, he shook out his arms and began to run, not away from the three massive serpents but straight toward them.

His clothes had long since become a wreck, and Magnus hadn't bothered changing into new ones. At this point, he was wearing nothing but his underwear and the pants he had torn into shorts.

His hair had begun to grow out and looked quite shaggy. His chin was covered in stubble.

Yet, despite his rather disheveled appearance, there was nothing disheveled about his physique. Every movement screamed pure power, and there was a grace to his movements that defied definition.

The snakes, seeing him come, suddenly pulled back, coiling defensively as they watched him approach. The rock python, recognizing him, hissed angrily and abruptly lunged forward, striking out toward him at lightning speed. To Magnus, it wasn't fast at all. Without even thinking, his body moved, executing Swallow's Cloud Step to dodge past the snake head that shot toward him. He didn't stop as he blitzed toward the main section of the rock python's body. His elbow drove down onto its head as he darted past. There was a sharp crack and the python's head slammed into the ground.

Magnus had long since stopped controlling his force. After all, embroiled in fights with the tiger every day, every blow had to be executed at maximum strength if he wanted to have any effect besides tickling the tiger's tough skin.

One of the other serpents struck while Magnus was sprinting past, but again, without even thinking about it, Magnus' body twisted out of the way, his feet flashing as he borrowed the side of the rock python and then stepped onto nothing but air, somehow using it to change the direction of his momentum. The serpent slid past him, its fangs barely inches from his exposed chest. Yet those inches may well have been miles, because even as it tried to change direction, Magnus caught the side of its head and swung his body around, kicking his feet up and over the snake.

He breathed out and a lightning-shrouded fist pummeled the top of the snake's head, knocking it silly. Lightning jumped from his knuckles, cracking its scales and biting deep into its flesh. Stunned, the snake failed to react as Magnus pulled a silver beam from the air, and using it as a dagger, stabbed straight through the side of the snake's neck.

The third snake, furious, launched its own assault, attacking with both its tail and its mouth at the same time. Still in the middle of stabbing its companion, Magnus didn't dodge. Instead, his foot and his hand shot out, catching the snake's open mouth to prevent it from biting him. He borrowed the force from the attack to shift out of the way of its tail strike, which landed with a loud thud on the wound he had just created.

As the snake's mouth snapped shut, Magnus helped it along by slapping the top of its nose, forcing its mouth to crunch shut. His arms wrapped around the now-closed mouth of the snake. And as his feet landed on the ground, he heaved.

His muscles went taut as power surged up from his legs, through his waist, and into his back. And he forcefully lifted the thirty-foot python into the air. In vain, the snake tried to coil around him, but Magnus was simply too strong. After taking a step, he slammed the snake down into the ground with bone-crushing force.

The other two snakes had already circled around. And now, fangs on full

display, they both struck. What met them was a mouthful of silvery darts that bit into their flesh. The pain was sudden and intense but didn't stop them from biting. Magnus didn't stick around to find out if his skin was tougher than their fangs. Instead, targeting the rock python whose neck he had slashed, Magnus slipped to its side, his fists pounding into its ribs.

There was a sharp cracking noise as the monster's bones crumbled, writhing with pain. The snake quickly tried to retreat. Magnus wasn't about to let it go, however, and gripping its tail, he began hauling it back, despite its best efforts to pull away from him. Realizing that it was not going to be able to escape, it turned around and tried to bite at him. But he let go of its body just long enough to crush its jaw with an uppercut that sent its head a full 180 degrees, slamming into the ground. Seeing that its neck was exposed, Magnus leapt forward, his lightning-covered fists punching a hole straight through the scales at its neck.

The snake jerked wildly, its muscles spasming, and its coils smashed through trees and rocks alike. Yet Magnus was unmoved. His fist came down again, pulverizing the snake's spine. Lost in the heat of battle, Magnus lifted his head and roared, a loud, primal roar that shook the land.

When the sound finally faded, he blinked and looked around, breathing heavily. The other two snakes were long gone, and there was not a single sound anywhere around him. The insects and birds that normally made the forest their home were silent.

And as Magnus calmed down, they slowly started to return. Grabbing the snake, he hauled it back into the clearing and retrieved a knife from his dimensional storage. He began stripping its skin.

Magnus had been eating nothing but fruits and plants for the last few weeks, and the sight of meat left him salivating. He was halfway done when Amber reappeared, riding on the head of the tiger, who padded cautiously through the woods, paying careful attention not to accidentally knock Amber with any branches.

As Magnus made eye contact with the tiger, he was surprised to see a hint of grudging respect under the normal disdain the big cat showed. It was only then that Magnus realized just what he had done. This rock python he

had just killed was larger and stronger than the one he had fought before, yet it stood no chance against him.

Magnus wasn't sure how strong he was, but he had clearly grown significantly over the last few weeks, which was a good thing. Because if it had turned out that had he wasted his time, he might just need to find another balcony to jump off of. He continued grumbling in that vein as he continued with his task.

He finished skinning the snake and then set to work, butchering it and starting a fire. He skewered a big chunk of meat and began roasting it. He could see the tiger eyeing the snake hungrily. So he cut another big chunk and carried it over. As soon as he put it down, the tiger went to work, tearing off large chunks of meat with his teeth and swallowing them down. He clearly thought it was delicious. And Magnus, smelling the aroma of the meat he was roasting, couldn't blame him. Almost without exception, beast meat was exceptionally good. The only challenge was that it was also poisonous.

The wealthy of Borella paid exceptional amounts of money to have the mana extracted from beast meat so that they could eat it. But the stronger a beast was, the more challenging that became. High concentrations of mana were poisonous, at least to most people. As far as Magnus was concerned, they only made the food taste better.

After his portion was roasted, Magnus skewered another one and began eating. For the rest of the day, late into what should have been the night, Magnus continued roasting pieces of meat and devouring them. He even, at Amber's prompting, ate the bones, discovering that though they were harder than iron when outside of his mouth, as soon as he put them into his mouth he could crunch away on them like they were toffee. Rather than swallowing hard shards of bone, they melted away into pure energy as they entered his throat, a function of his Absolute Digestion skill.

Magnus tried the scales and skin as well, discovering that they were exactly the same. Outside of his mouth, they were so tough that even a knife stabbed at full strength could hardly pierce them. But as soon as he put them into his mouth, it was like eating drips of dried seaweed. Amber, not one to be left out when there was food to be had, ate just as much as the

tiger. And between the three of them they polished off the entire snake, apart from its fangs, which Magnus kept as souvenirs.

By the time the snake was nothing but a memory, Magnus' stomach was full and mana surged through his body. Yet, instead of stopping, he gathered the rest of the spiritual fruits together and, trying desperately not to think about their tastes, shoved them into his mouth. Amber, who had been sitting by the fire, relaxing, jumped to her feet, staring at him, but Magnus, already caught up in what he was doing, didn't stop.

After a moment of hesitation, Amber slowly sat back down, but her eyes never once left Magnus. He barely managed to choke down the last of the fruits, and by this time his stomach had transformed into one giant ball of burning pain. The mana that had filled him after eating the snake was now raging, threatening to burst through his skin and burn away everything around him.

Gritting his teeth, Magnus sank into his first form stance, fighting through the discomfort as he moved into the second form. The third form followed, and then the fourth and fifth. And as he completed each form, Magnus forced the burning energy in him to condense.

Over the last few weeks, as he performed the spiritual fruit-infused body refinements, Magnus had felt the barrier between his fourth and fifth form shaking with increasing force. In the world of mages, upgrading from one rank to the next was a matter of refining mana, purifying it, making it flow more smoothly, and then increasing the size of the soul so more mana could be held. Breakthroughs were a matter of slow and steady accumulation, and pain or difficulty breaking through was a clear sign that something was wrong.

The opposite was true in body refinement. Body refinement was about forging the physical form into the ultimate tool, transforming bone, muscles, and skin into their ultimate form. And it was a painful, brutal process.

By the time he reached the end of the third rotation and began the fourth, Magnus was genuinely stretched to his limit. In addition to forcing his body to go through the painful forms, he was also aggressively compressing the

mana in his body, using his muscles to squeeze it together in his stomach like a smoking volcano. The mana inside of him was like magma, just waiting for an opportunity to explode forth, burning everything it touched.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



Yet Magnus didn't stop.

He completed the fifth form and began the sixth, clawed his way to the seventh form, and forced the eighth through sheer willpower. The ninth form desperately tried to elude him, but Magnus was relentless, pushing his body into it with ruthless determination. When it came to the tenth form Magnus nearly failed, but he channeled every bit of the pain, anger, and frustration he had been feeling over the last three weeks into forcing his body through the transition from the tenth form of the fourth rotation to the first form of the fifth rotation.

All he had to do was draw in his hands and make the correct seal. Yet this was what had been stopping Magnus every single time he had attempted it over and over for the last three weeks. He knew the wall was there, but instead of slamming into it with full force, as he had done every other time, Magnus simply relaxed, allowing the ball of mana he had forcefully compressed inside of his body to erupt.

In the same moment, it exploded. He drew his hands back and his fingers shifted into the first form seal.

The wall that had stopped him so many times before was obliterated.

Under a flow of mana so powerful, Magnus' skin began to burn, tiny jets of flame shooting from his pores and superheating the air around him. The tiger, who had been gnawing on one of the snake's rib bones, leapt up and rapidly retreated, staring in horror at Magnus. Even Amber, eyes narrowed, took to the air, circling Magnus at a safe distance.

At the same time, Magnus' body was burning from the inside, wave after wave of energy surging through him, washing his bones and muscles and radically changing everything about him.

•

Stepping into the storage room, Charlotte closed the door behind her and bit her lip, surprisingly nervous. The storage room had been reorganized, the shelves moved around, and a large shelf, packed with writing supplies, stood against the far wall. Walking up to it, Charlotte pulled a secret lever, which allowed the shelf to swing outward, revealing the stone doorway with the crimson portal flickering inside of it.

It had been nearly a month since she had seen Magnus, and the Tower War was less than twenty-four hours away. She was hoping, praying that Magnus had been able to improve his strength during the month he had spent in the Crimson Flame Legacy. But if she was honest, she wasn't really holding out hope.

Though she knew it would hurt his pride, Charlotte had already begun her own plans, organizing her own contingencies. Reaching out lightly to touch the portal, she hesitated for a moment, her mind in turmoil. She wasn't quite sure when she had first fallen for Magnus, and she fully admitted that her fascination with him was a bit odd. He was handsome, but she had seen many handsome men. Yes, he was good at magic, but he fell at the bottom of the ranks when it came to genius mages, barely qualifying by the standards she grew up with. On top of that, he was proud, stiff-necked, and all too serious.

In truth, the reason she had asked to come to Crimson Flame City was because she knew full well that prolonged exposure would likely cure her of her infatuation. After all, he was also spineless, bowing to the strong and bullying the weak, and she despised that.

Her plan had almost worked too. His insistence on starting a Tower War had been the last straw, and she had come to the tower expecting to write him off forever, only to discover that he had changed drastically.

She first noticed it when he walked into the room. Gone was the stiff-shouldered, stilted walk of a man suspicious of everything around him. Instead, he strolled into the room like he owned it, which he did, but that was beside the point. He had never walked anywhere like that in his life, at least in her memory, but there he was, completely calm and confident.

And then there was the way he paid attention. For the first time since she had known him he looked at her, truly looked at her. Not the gaze of someone so wrapped up in their own world that they could only see reflections of themselves, but the eyes of someone who wanted to know reality intimately. His too-stiff speech was gone too. He complimented her casually but sincerely, and spoke with humor and cheerfulness. The change had been disorienting, and she had worked hard to convince herself she had just imagined it.

Charlotte's hand lowered to her side, and she stood staring at the rippling dimensional gate. Had it not been for her stupid whim to run down and accompany Magnus on his tour of the city, she may well have missed the incredible transformation he had undergone.

Then there were the strange changes to his body. He had always been lean, but it had been the missed-too-many-meals sort of lean, not the absolutely ripped, three-percent-body-fat sort of lean. And his muscles weren't just for show either. He had casually tossed and pinned a green river ox and could crush stone with his bare hand without apparent effort. This was not the body of a silver-ranked mage.

Charlotte had only seen strength like that in legendary-ranked mages and above. Feeling her cheeks heating up slightly, Charlotte placed her hands on them and shook her head.

Magnus had changed substantially, but every single one of the changes seemed to be for the better. Between his strange pet, Amber, and her ability to sniff out treasure and discovering Crimson Flame Legacy, he had shared everything with her openly and without hesitation.

Though Charlotte had grown up with a golden spoon in her mouth, she wasn't naive. She knew just how brutal and cutthroat the world of mages could be. Anyone else in Magnus' position, no matter how much they trusted those around them, wouldn't have dared expose their secrets. Even Charlotte wouldn't have been able to be so open and honest.

Taking a deep breath, Charlotte settled her emotions, making a quiet promise to herself. No matter what happened in the Tower War, Magnus and Penwick wouldn't die, even if she had to burn everything to the ground to keep them alive.

With her mind clear and her heart firm, Charlotte touched the portal and vanished into the Crimson Flame Legacy.

•

When Charlotte finally returned through the dimensional gate, Magnus was sitting at its edge waiting for her. With him were Amber and the giant tiger, all three of them eating something. Hopping to his feet, Magnus, who was dressed in his crimson robe and looked little different from the day Charlotte had last seen him, looked over her appreciatively.

“Prettier and prettier,” he said.

Rolling her eyes, Charlotte walked over and accepted his hug.

“How are you doing?”

“I'm in excellent form,” Magnus said, patting his chest. “Ready for whatever they throw at us.”

“Did the tiger give you any trouble?”

“No, actually. He was super helpful. He doesn't have a name yet, which we should probably fix at some point.”

“No time for that now,” Charlotte said. “We have less than twenty-four hours until the Tower War. The admin are already setting up the arena, and people are starting to get nervous because you haven’t been seen in weeks. I think it’d be good if you made an appearance.”

“Gotcha.” Magnus turned and waved at the tiger. “See you, big guy. We’ll be back in a couple of days.”

Letting out a deep, rumbling purr, the tiger rose to his feet, dipped his head toward Magnus and then Amber, gave Charlotte a disdainful glance, and patted off across the vine bridge.

“Why do I get the sense that tiger looks down on me?” Charlotte asked, as her eyes narrowed.

“Because he does,” Magnus said. “He looks down on everybody who’s weaker than him. Unless you feed him, of course. That’s an instant way to gain his esteem.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” Charlotte said, her lips twitching, “as I don’t think I’m going to be able to beat him up anytime soon.”

“Keep working hard and you never know.”

“You’re feeling confident?”

“Yes.” Magnus’ reply was simple, direct, and carried a sense of absolute certainty.

Together, they headed back through the portal, and Magnus stepped into the tower for the first time in weeks. After admiring the way they hid the stone gate, Magnus headed for the office on the fifth floor. Penwick was already there, organizing a pile of documents.

“Magnus, you’re back. How did it go? Are you confident?”

“You know what’s funny? Charlotte just asked me that same thing. Yes, I am. What’s all this stuff?”

“We finally got most of our materials sold thanks to Lady Flamebrand.”

Charlotte waved her hand.

“I told you to call me Charlotte.”

“Yes, well, anyway, we managed to sell everything that wasn’t useful. I’ve organized the remainder, but we ended up collecting just under 22,000 crystals, which is good news, as it means we’ll be able to pay back all of our debt if we don’t win this fight.”

“Hate to break to you,” Magnus said, “but you’re forgetting a crucial piece of our plan again.”

Adjusting his glasses, Penwick looked pained. “Do we really have to make a bet? Wouldn’t it be better to keep a safety net so we can pay back the debt we’ve racked up?”

Magnus shook his head.

“It’s better that we go all in. Remember, so long as we don’t lose, we’re good to go. Odds are what? Eight to one?”

“Fifteen to one.”

“Fifteen to one. If we bet 22,000 crystals, we’re going to make what?”

Swallowing, Penwick took a deep breath.

“We’d make 330,000 crystals, which is 3.3 million gold coins.”

“If that doesn’t dig us out of the hole we’re in,” Magnus said, “I don’t think anything will. But that’s not all. We’ll also pick up a mana crystal mine. At that point, we’ll have enough resources to actually develop the tower, expand, bring in new mages, and begin restoring the glory of the Crimson Flame Tower. Without that level of resources, we’re going to be forced to go and ask for investment. And you know what that means. It means we’re not going to be able to control the Legacy. It means we’re not going to be able to decide how we grow. It means we’re going to be under somebody else’s thumb. Betting is the only way forward. The only question we should be asking is, will anybody be able to cover it?”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Charlotte said, with a slight smile. “The tower administration is the one that oversees the bets. And though 135,000 crystals sounds like a lot, it’s pocket change to them.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Magnus said. “Now, I believe we had talked about me making a public appearance. What’s the best way to do that?”

“We should inform the city that you’ll be making an announcement at the front of the tower.”

“Do you have something particular you want me to announce?” Magnus asked, sensing Penwick was holding something back.

“Yes.” Penwick hesitated for a moment and then plunged on. “I think it would do the city well if you were to announce a holiday. Throw a festival. Do something to get the people to blow off some steam. Sort of like that impromptu stone cutting thing you did before. The city has been... it’s been tense recently. There have been rumors flying around that you’ve already fled. I’ve been trying to tell everybody that you’ve just been training, preparing for the fight. But the citizens are skeptical and things are getting bad. Announcing a festival and waiving taxes for the next couple of days will do a lot for morale.”

Thinking for a moment. Magnus shook his head.

“I don’t think we should.” He quickly held up his hand. “Wait, hear me out. I think the impact is going to actually be a lot better if we wait. Let everyone stew for one more day. Besides, the odds might even increase, which means we’ll be able to earn more crystals. And like I said, the effect on the city will ultimately be better. If we show up now and say, ‘Hey, everything’s fine, don’t worry,’ the citizens are going to expect us to do the same thing again next time there’s a crisis.

“On the other hand, letting them sit for another day and then showing up for the actual fight itself and demonstrating that there was nothing to worry about will help them trust us more. The next time there’s a crisis and we tell them everything’s fine, they’ll believe it. Yes, it might be uncomfortable, but sometimes short-term pain is worth long-term benefit. What we need to do at this point is show calm confidence, mostly by just ignoring all of the rumors. Besides, we have good reason to minimize our exposure to our opponents.”

“I don’t like it,” Penwick said, shaking his head. “I don’t like it one bit, but you’re the tower master. And I’m already too far in to jump ship now.”

Laughing, Magnus laced his fingers together and put them behind his head as he leaned back in his chair.

“It sounds like tomorrow is going to be a day of proving to you along with everybody else that I’ve been right all along. Don’t worry. If I was confident a month ago, I’m absolutely certain now. I’m also exhausted. It’s been a month since I’ve gotten any real sleep, so I’m going to go crash. But don’t worry, tomorrow is going to be fantastic.”

Magnus stood up and stretched, then glanced out the window at the city that surrounded them.

“Tomorrow will be a day that no one on this continent will ever forget. The beginning of the rise of the Crimson Flame Tower.” Turning, he winked at Penwick. “Or it’ll be the biggest catastrophe you’ve ever been part of. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Letting out a delighted laugh, Magnus walked to the door leading to his chambers, threw it open, and collapsed onto his bed. He was out within seconds, leaving Charlotte giggling and Penwick grinding his teeth. Amber flew up onto the table, patted Penwick’s hand reassuringly, and flew into the bedroom to curl up next to Magnus. Magnus slept like a rock, barely stirring, until he felt someone shake him awake. Charlotte was sitting on the side of the bed, shaking his shoulder. A smile on her face.

“Good morning, lovely,” Magnus said, yawning. “Is it time?”

“Still got an hour. Just enough time for you to freshen up. You mentioned not sleeping in a month. So I assumed you hadn’t bathed in a month either. I’ve already drawn up the hot water.”

Bouncing out of bed, Magnus gave her a light peck on the cheek.

“Thanks. Do me a favor and pick out some clothes.”

“I already did,” she said, with a grin. “Penwick informed me that you’re not to be trusted when it comes to fashion choices.”

“That’s just because he has poor taste,” Magnus threw over his shoulder as he headed into the bathroom.

CHAPTER FORTY



S tripping down, he got into the tub and let out a groan of pure bliss.

Charlotte was correct. It had been an entire month since he had last bathed, which was frankly disgusting. Of course, Magnus' body barely sweat anymore. And when he did it carried a faintly pleasant aroma, a testament to just how pure his body was.

After scrubbing himself all over and rinsing off, Magnus climbed out of the tub, dried off, and donned the robes Charlotte had put in the bathroom. To his surprise, the tower master's robe, which had once been too big, now fit perfectly. During the month he was gone, someone must have taken it to a tailor and had it adjusted. Though he still preferred his more casual shirt and pants with an open robe over top, Magnus had to admit that the crimson robe did look quite good.

Combing his hair, he got out his razor and shaved his chin, which turned out to be quite easy. His hair wasn't nearly as tough as his skin, and so he could wield the razor liberally without having to be worried he would cut himself.

In fact, by the time he was done the razor was practically dull from being dragged across his skin, which Magnus found rather hilarious.

Washing off his face, he patted it dry and examined himself again. One of Magnus' first thoughts when he woke up in this world was about how disgustingly handsome he was. As he had advanced his Imperishable Void Physique, he had only grown more handsome, and it was no lie to say he was stunning.

Grinning at himself in the mirror, Magnus tossed down the towel.

“Whatever else happens, at least I have a face that could make cities fall. If this whole body refinement thing doesn't work out, maybe I can try to trade on that.”

Chuckling at his own wit, Magnus strolled out of the bathroom. He found Charlotte waiting for him in his office. She had changed while he was taking his bath and wore a pretty blue robe with a crimson cowl. The robe was hemmed in crimson, and there were subtle silver flames embroidered all over the robe. The jewels she wore matched her robe, making Magnus wonder just how many sets of jewelry she had. She stepped close and adjusted his collar, looking over him to make sure everything was in place.

“Today you represent the Crimson Flame Tower, our tower.”

Taken aback by her bold comment, Magnus suddenly remembered that both he and Charlotte had joined the tower in the Crimson Flame Legacy. Though he wasn't the tower master and was only a disciple one rank higher than her, it was true that they were both members of the Crimson Flame Tower.

“Do not bring us shame.” Her words were direct, and Magnus could sense the weight behind them.

“I wouldn't dream of it,” he said.

“I know you won't,” she replied.

Sharing a small smile with Charlotte, Magnus straightened his shoulders and turned toward the door. As much as he liked to have fun, what happened from here on out was deadly serious. He had been desperately

preparing for the last month, and it was time to see if his work had paid off. He swept out of the office and down the stairs, Charlotte following behind him. She held Amber in her arms, following a step behind him. They met Penwick at the front door. He was dressed in a crimson robe as well, and to Magnus' surprise, he bowed.

"Greetings, sir."

Magnus didn't correct him, just nodded.

"Is everything ready?"

"It's as ready as it'll ever be," Penwick replied, straightening up and adjusting his glasses. "Tower administrators are finalizing the arena as we speak. We'll be having a meeting with the administrators and the representatives of Starlit Clay Tower. But I would expect to be approached by both the Earthbound Circle and the Flame Covenant before the meeting begins."

"And this meeting, it's to do what?"

"It's to choose the arena where the battle will take place, register the members who are going to be participating, and establish the rules."

"Excellent. Let's go."

Penwick opened the door and Magnus strolled out. The sun was shining bright, and Magnus felt great. As soon as he stepped out into the yard of the tower, he could feel dozens of people staring at him, most with pure curiosity. But he felt a couple malicious gazes as well.

There was quite a crowd down at the base of the tower outside the gate, which had somehow been closed. And when they saw Magnus, a murmur rose.

Reputation +1

Reputation +2

Reputation +1

Seeing his reputation starting to climb, Magnus couldn't help but grin. A

carriage had been pulled up outside the tower, and Magnus recognized it as Charlotte's.

They climbed into it and headed down the driveway and out through the gate, which two workers had pulled open with difficulty. The crowd outside the tower made a path for them and then streamed along behind them, running to keep up as the carriage trotted through the city. More and more people began gathering, all to catch sight of Magnus, until the crowds became so thick they began to spill onto the road and they were afraid they might accidentally run someone over.

The driver pulled his reins and the horse slowed. Sticking his head out of the carriage to talk to the driver, Penwick realized what was going on. He sat back on his seat and grimaced.

“Too many people are trying to get a look at you, sir. It's going to be hard to push through the crowd.”

Opening the door to the carriage, Magnus climbed out, using the window as a foothold as he climbed up onto the roof of the carriage. As soon as he appeared, the crowd erupted, everyone talking at once. Magnus saw reputation notifications flashing across his vision as he looked around. It was clear that the crowd was starting to get out of control.

“Ladies and gentlemen!”

Magnus' voice boomed through the air, so loud that the horses nearly bolted. Members of the crowd who were nearby quickly pressed back, and absolute silence fell. The reputation notifications started ticking up even faster, but Magnus missed them as he waved to the crowd.

“I appreciate your support. You have my word that Crimson Flame Tower will emerge victorious today. So make sure you place your bets on the right side. After I do, of course. Wouldn't want the odds to go down.”

A wave of laughter swept through the crowd as Magnus grinned cheekily.

“In fact, that's where we're headed now. But it would seem that, in your excitement, you've devoured the road.”

The crowd followed Magnus' pointing finger, turning toward all of the

people crowded in the street. There was some nervous laughter and everyone pressed to the sides, forming an open path.

“We’re on our way to the arena now, first to place our bet and then to crush Starlit Clay Tower. If that’s something you’d like to see, I welcome you to come watch.”

Lifting his hand, Magnus made a fist.

“For Crimson Flame City.” His words echoed over the crowd, and he gave a subtle nod to the driver, who began driving them forward.

Magnus casually climbed back into the carriage, even as they were moving, and the crowd surged behind them. This time there were even people who ran ahead making sure that the path was clear, and they had no trouble leaving the city.

“When did you get so good at speeches?” Charlotte asked. She was resting her chin in the palm of her hand, staring at Magnus with such intensity that Penwick almost started blushing.

“Hidden talent, I guess,” Magnus said.

It took them twenty minutes to leave the city. They exited through the southern gates and soon arrived at the massive arena the tower administration had built just outside Crimson Flame City. Magnus had no idea how they had managed to construct a building so fast, but they had. There was already a line of people stretching back toward the city gate waiting to enter. And it grew ever longer as more and more citizens streamed out of the city.

Thankfully, as one of the participants, Magnus didn’t have to wait in line, and the carriage drove directly up to the giant arena. As he got out, Magnus looked around, spotting the betting pavilion. It was a large tent, and the line to enter the arena actually passed through it, which Magnus thought was rather genius. Instead of heading straight in, he walked over to the tent, gesturing for Penwick and Charlotte to follow.

The attendant, who had come out to greet them, was stunned to see them walking in the opposite direction, and after a moment of panic quickly

followed. Stepping into the tent, Magnus saw a couple of people who were in line placing bets, while other attendants roamed up and down, waving their ticket books. Magnus didn't bother with any of the attendance and instead walked straight up to the counter.

"I'd like to place a bet," he said, leaning on the counter.

The mage, behind it, didn't look up.

"Find an attendant."

"I'd rather speak to whoever's in charge. It's a large bet."

"They can handle any size bet."

"They can handle a bet of 22,000 crystals?"

Frowning, the mage slowly looked up, his eyes going wide with shock when he realized who he was talking to.

"You want to place a bet?"

"Yes, on Crimson Flame Tower, 22,000 crystals."

Though Magnus wasn't trying to project his voice this time it was still heard clearly, and whispers began to break out from those waiting in the tent. Carefully reaching up and putting his finger in his ear, the mage twisted it back and forth a little bit and worked his jaw as if his ears were popping.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Please say that number again. I could have sworn you said 22,000 crystals."

"Yes. On Crimson Flame Tower's win. Do I just bet on win or loss, or can I bet on other things?"

Biting his lip, the mage looked around for a piece of paper, finally waving one of the attendants over.

"Let me see your bet sheet."

The attendant handed it over and the mage scanned over it.

“A bet of 22,000 crystals is too large to be on anything except win and loss. If you’d like to divide it up, you can spread it out.”

“Oh, why’s that?”

Reaching over the table, Magnus took the sheet so he could look at it. The sheet was divided into dozens of different bets, and many of them had ridiculous odds. There was a bet that Crimson Flame Tower would only last one minute before being defeated, and the odds were two hundred and fifty to one. On the other hand, the odds that they would last less than ten minutes were only three to one. The odds of the Crimson Flame Tower losing were currently nineteen to one, which caused Magnus to frown. Nineteen to one was such an awkward number.

“Wouldn’t it be better if it was twenty to one? Anyway, that’s fine. I’ll just put it on Crimson Flame Tower winning.”

“And you said 22,000 crystals, right?” the mage asked, desperately hoping the number was wrong.

“Yes.”

Taking a deep breath, the mage wrote out the ticket and handed it to Magnus.

“If you win, you can turn this ticket in. If you win, you will earn...” the mage paused and swallowed, “171,000 crystals.”

“Excellent. Do you need me to deliver the crystals for my bet? I can have them brought here.”

“There’s no need,” the mage replied, smiling thinly. “After all, it’s not as if your tower can run away.”

“True. It’s the one disadvantage about towers. It’s very hard to move them.” Tucking the ticket away, he turned to Penwick and Charlotte, “shall we?”

“Not quite yet,” Charlotte said. Stepping past Magnus, she leaned over the table. “I’d like to place a bet.”

“Aren’t you with...?” the mage did a double take and then shrugged.

“Okay, that’s fine. What do you want to bet on?”

“I’d like to bet on Crimson Flame Tower’s victory.”

“Again? Fine, they’re your crystals. How much would you like to bet?”

“Fifty thousand crystals.”

Magnus nearly choked on his own spit, and the mage’s mouth slowly dropped open. After staring at Charlotte, he got himself back in order and shook his head.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know that I have the authority to sign off on such a large bet.”

Frowning, Charlotte tapped the table.

“You can do 22,000 crystals, why can’t you do 50,000 crystals?”

“I’m only allowed to sign off on rewards up to 500,000. Your reward, if you win, would be almost 1,000,000.”

“Well, find somebody who can. I’d like to place this bet.”

Calling over one of the attendants, the mage whispered something to him and then hurried out of the tent, leaving the attendant to watch the table. A couple minutes later the mage returned, and with him came a familiar face.

“Remind me who that is?” Magnus stage whispered to Penwick.

“That’s Carlson McRae, sir.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Magnus said, snapping his fingers. “I’d completely forgotten.”

Carlson, who had heard the entire exchange, did his best to mask his fury as he approached.

“George informs me that someone would like to make a rather large bet.”

“That’s me,” Charlotte said.

“Ah, Lady Flamebrand, a pleasure to see you. Of course. The Tower

Administration would be pleased to cover your bet. Though I should be remiss in my duties if I didn't warn you. Betting on the Crimson Flame Tower is, I'm afraid to say, a losing proposition."

Charlotte frowned at Carlson's condescending tone.

"Seventy-five thousand on Crimson Flame Tower winning."

"Ah, what? I thought the bet was for 50,000?"

"Well, now it's for 75,000," Charlotte said.

With a rather ugly smile, Carlson glanced at Magnus, who was smiling smugly, and then looked back at Charlotte.

"Lady Flamebrand, I don't mean to tell you what to do with your money, but it really isn't a good idea."

"One hundred thousand."

Carlson started to open his mouth, but the mage, who was growing paler by the second, grabbed his arm and tugged on it hard.

"Sir, if it goes any higher, we can't cover it," he said through clenched teeth. "That's 1,900,000 crystals."

The smile that had been plastered on Carlson's face faded completely and, rather pale, he bowed toward Charlotte.

"One hundred thousand crystals, was it?"

"I can go higher," Charlotte said, without blinking. "You administrators take enough from the towers as fees, this should be child's play to you."

"Of course the tower can cover it. It's just that... never mind. One hundred thousand crystals on Crimson Flame Tower winning. Odds are nineteen to one, and here is your ticket. Have a very pleasant day."

Carlson turned as if his tail was on fire and ran out of the tent.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



The mage who was recording all of the bets looked like he wanted to cry, but he still did his best to smile as he escorted them out of the tent.

“That, my dear Penwick, is what it means to bully somebody with money,” Magnus said, as proud as if he had done it himself.

A subtle smile flickered across Charlotte’s lips.

“The association does have the money to cover it,” she said quietly. “But the one running the betting pool isn’t actually the tower. If my guess is correct, Carlson, or his family, is the one bankrolling this betting pool. He’ll use his money to run it, and then he’ll pay a percentage to the association as a fee for using their name and hosting the betting pool at their event. Of course, if he doesn’t have enough money to cover the bets, then the association, in order to keep up its reputation, is going to have to chip in. If he loses them millions, he’ll be quite out of luck. They’re particularly unforgiving of members who lose significant sums.”

“Well, in that case, we should help him along,” Magnus said, turning to the crowd waiting in line. Raising his voice, he spoke loudly. “Can you believe it? Lady Flame herself has such confidence in Crimson Flame Tower that she just placed a 100,000 crystal bet. That’s almost two million crystals if she wins. With odds at nineteen to one, you might as well play something, right?”

Laughing heartily, Magnus strode off, leaving the crowd whispering. Though Magnus didn’t stick around to watch it, he knew exactly what was going to happen. And sure enough, by the time he entered the arena, the odds had already begun to change, as every single person who came into the tent after him placed a bet, no matter how small, on Crimson Flame Tower. Of course, Magnus’ odds wouldn’t change, as he had placed the bet when it was nineteen to one.

The attendant, who had watched the whole thing, fled as soon as possible after showing them to their staging room. It was a small space, bare except for two chairs, which Magnus insisted Charlotte and Penwick take. Penwick tried to protest as Magnus pushed him down. There was soon a light knock on the door, and opening it up, Magnus saw two men and a woman he hadn’t seen in years.

“Professor Gordon, a pleasure. Come on in.”

“Not a professor anymore,” Mage Gordon said, entering the room. He was a middle-aged man, balding, with a comfortably round stomach. Behind him was a thin mage with a severe expression named Helm and a pretty young woman named Tasha who observed Magnus with considerable interest.

“Mage Helm. Mage Tasha. Welcome to you as well.”

“Given your company,” Magnus said, turning back to Gordon, “I assume you’ve joined the Flame Covenant.”

“Correct. They gave me an offer I couldn’t refuse. And teaching at the academy, well, I’ve done enough. It’s time to focus on growth.”

“You did always teach us that advancement was the only truth,” Magnus said with a smile.

“Indeed.” Gordon laughed loudly, patting Magnus on the shoulder. “No matter your theories of life, only advancement will allow you to prove them. It’s with that in mind that I’ve joined the Flame Covenant.”

“Well, we appreciate you coming all the way here to support us.”

Gordon had the decency to look uncomfortable at Magnus’ statement, and he quickly turned to Helm, who stepped forward and pulled a thin scroll from his robe.

“The Flame Covenant asked us to deliver a message, and to observe the proceedings, to ensure the honor of the organization is not impinged.”

He held the scroll out to Magnus, but Magnus just stared at him, causing an uncomfortable silence to fall over the room. Penwick had jumped to his feet as soon as the representatives from the Flame Covenant entered, but now Charlotte, who had kept her seat, grabbed his arm and pulled him back down to sit. As the silence dragged on, Magnus’ eyebrows rose ever so slightly.

“You know, I sometimes wonder about the intelligence of our leaders,” Magnus suddenly said. “Considering their rank, they should be reasonably intelligent, but then they go and pull something like this.”

Both Gordon and Tasha were now visibly nervous, while Helm simply frowned and pushed the scroll closer to Magnus. Magnus still didn’t take it, his eyes still fixed on Helm. After another minute of silence, Magnus’ eyes narrowed.

“Get out.” His voice was flat and brooked no argument as Tasha immediately started backing up.

Helm didn’t move and Gordon, who was sweating bullets, tried to ease the situation.

“Come now. We’re all friends here. We’re part of the same organization, on the same side. We don’t need to make this harder than it should be.”

Turning away from Helm, Magnus put his hands behind his back and spoke to Penwick.

“Remind me, Penwick, what is the proper procedure when greeting someone of a higher rank in the Flame Covenant?”

Standing up, Penwick adjusted his glasses and recited in a calm voice.

“Upon meeting a mage of higher standing in the organization, one should announce one’s name, position, and bow at a forty-five-degree angle, or a ninety-degree angle, if greeting the organization head or any of the counselors.”

“And what is it called when those greetings aren’t carried out?”

“Insubordination, sir,”

Magnus turned around ever so slowly. To his credit, Mage Helm was still standing in the same place, though his expression had darkened and a sense of hesitancy had appeared in his hard eyes.

“Insubordination is what it’s called, Helm. You seem to have forgotten yourself. I don’t know if I need to slap you across the face with my signet ring for you to remember, but I am a tower master and deserve to be treated accordingly. Get out. This will be reported.”

Helm bowed stiffly and then glanced around, looking for a place he could put the small scroll. But since there was nothing in the room except for the two chairs, and he couldn’t very well place it on the floor, he could only hold it in his hand as he turned and strode out of the room. Magnus smiled politely at Gordon and Tasha and gestured toward the door, and they hurried out after Helm. After the door had closed Penwick looked like he wanted to ask a question, but he hesitated.

Magnus waved his hand.

“You can ask whatever you want, Penwick. And don’t worry. I don’t expect you to bow when you see me. It’d be awfully annoying. It’s already bad enough that you can’t stop calling me ‘sir.’”

“Sir—I mean, Magnus.”

“There you go. What’s up?”

“What was that about? Why did you suddenly grow so strict about the rules?”

“Convenient way to avoid having to look at whatever stupid message he was bringing me,” Magnus said, examining his nails. “Sending a message like that, especially through an idiot like Helm, who’s probably the only person on the continent who’s more stuck up than me, was a ploy. A ploy designed to undermine me. Chances are they’re trying to get me to abandon the fight or, at the very least throw it. But we’re not going to play those games. At least not today. We’ve got other fish to crush.”

“I don’t think that’s the expression, dear.”

“Is it not?” Magnus asked, smiling at Charlotte. “Well, it will be today after I’ve finished crushing them. It sounds like it’s time to go.”

Sure enough, there was a knock at the door, and when Penwick opened it the attendant who had escorted them into the arena was back.

“It’s time for the meeting, Lord Magnus.”

“Very well. Lead the way.”

As they filed out of the room, the attendant hesitated for a moment and then bowed to Charlotte.

“Lady Flamebrand, shall I take you to the viewing room? There’s a VIP seat waiting for you.”

Though she clearly wanted to stay with Magnus, Charlotte nodded and held her hand out. Magnus kissed the back of it lightly and then followed the attendant toward the meeting room while another attendant escorted Charlotte to the VIP seats.

Magnus could sense Penwick growing more and more nervous as they got closer to the meeting room, so he patted him on the shoulder, giving him an encouraging smile. For some reason that only made Penwick even more nervous, so Magnus gave up.

The meeting room was large, with a giant U-shaped table. At the bottom of the U sat a placid-faced old man whose badge identified him as the person

in charge from the Tower Administration. Though he had never met him before, Magnus needed no introduction. This was Korick McRae, Carlson's grandfather, and one of the most powerful members of the Tower Administration. The McRae family was considered one of the Tower Administration's pillars, and it was largely because of Korick.

Celestine and five other mages were already sitting on the other side of the table, and there were two chairs that had been pulled up for Magnus and Penwick. Taking his seat, Magnus greeted everyone.

"Hello, hello. Pleasure to see you all. Celestine, how are you doing?"

"You must be Mage Magnus..." Korick's forehead furrowed slightly before it smoothed out again, "the Magnificent."

"It's so kind of you to say," Magnus said. "But that title is really a joke."

The smile never shifted from Korick's face as he lifted his paper and pointed at it. "That's what's written here," he said blandly. "So that's what I have to call you."

"If I had known that, I would have written something better," Magnus said with a laugh.

"Amusing. Now, we don't want to keep everybody waiting. So let's get the details nailed down. Mage Celestine, Mage Magnus. The two of you have signed a contract. Is that correct?"

"It is."

"Yes."

"Wonderful. I've reviewed the terms, and I must say they are significant. Normally we don't see these sorts of terms for battles at this level. But it's not my place to judge the terms, only the battle. You are engaging in a Tower War. This is a long and storied tradition, and I hope that neither of you will do anything that might compromise it. The rules are simple: up to six participants are allowed. All combatants must be members of your tower and cannot be of higher rank than their tower master. Is this clear?"

"It is," Magnus nodded.

“Yes, we understand,” Celestine said.

“Good. The arena has been set. The landscape will be generated after being picked at random. At that point, we will begin the fight immediately. Are there any questions?”

Glancing across the table at Celestine, Magnus noticed that her hands were tightly clenched, and though she was fighting hard to appear nonchalant there was a faint tension in her brow, sweeping the rest of the mages with a casual glance. Magnus didn't detect anything unusual. But that didn't mean there wasn't some sort of trick at play.

His impression of Celestine was that though the dwarven woman was as much of a schemer as any mage, she had a largely forthright nature. For her to be this tense meant that something underhanded was going on. Of course, Magnus didn't particularly care one way or another. His plan was going to be the same no matter what his enemy threw at him. He raised his hand.

“How do we feel about external items? For instance, if I have a platinum-ranked weapon, can I use it?”

The mages across the table stiffened and shared worried glances, only relaxing when Korick shook his head.

“No, just as before, you cannot use items of higher rank than the tower master. To put it simply, each tower's restrictions are based on the rank of their tower master. Nothing and no one can be used that is of higher rank. Does that make sense?”

“It does. But external items are okay, right? I can use potions, that sort of stuff.”

“Of course. Again, as long as it's not higher rank than you.”

“No problem,” Magnus said. “Then we're all good.”

“Excellent. In that case, let's choose our terrain.”

Noticing Celestine's tension growing, Magnus watched as Korick got out a set of sticks. Made of wood, each one had the name of a type of terrain written on it. He showed them off to everyone to ensure that all of the

names were different and then placed them in a cup where the names couldn't be seen. After mixing them up, Korick walked around the table to stand in the center of the U.

"The process is simple," he said. "You'll each select a stick. Going back and forth, one at a time, until there is only a single stick remaining. That will be our location."

On the surface it seemed completely fair, but Magnus didn't trust it one bit. And as he and Celestine each took sticks out of the jar, he paid careful attention to Korick's hands. Celestine pulled the second to last stick, at which point Korick held up the jar and smiled.

"This is our location."

As the Tower Administrator reached for the stick, Magnus sensed a subtle movement of mana. Though he wasn't sure exactly how it happened, he was confident Korick had just rigged the match location, a suspicion that was confirmed when it was revealed.

"We have a stone forest," Korick said, holding it up.

Penwick groaned. "That's the worst possible option for us."

Penwick was right, of course. A stone forest, which was a swath of badlands with large stone pillars or columns rising up randomly from the ground, was perfect for an earth element mage. And considering Starlit Clay was a tower full of earth element mages, it was hard not to see the game being played. Korick handed the stick to an attendant, who rushed out of the room.

"The transformation of the arena will only take thirty minutes," Korick said. "Once it is done, we will begin the match. Best of luck to both of you."

The permanent smile etched on Korick's face was starting to look quite hypocritical, but Magnus didn't speak up. He had been expecting the situation to favor Starlit Clay Tower. So the fact that they would be fighting in a stone forest left him unmoved. After going back to the small waiting room they had been assigned, Magnus patted Penwick on the shoulder.

"You don't need to be nervous. Yes, the terrain will favor earth mages, but

it'll actually favor us as well.”

His hand turned over and a large stack of Talismans appeared in his palm. For the last twenty-five days, as Magnus worked relentlessly to improve his physique in the Crimson Flame Legacy, he had been drawing Talismans in between every one of his training rotations. With his concentration so meticulously honed, Magnus had a success rate of close to one hundred percent and had ended up drawing six Talismans a day over the course of the first ten days. His efficiency only rose, and for the last fifteen days he managed to double that number, sneaking two Talismans in between each practice session.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



The result was a pile of over 240 talismans sitting in his dimensional storage space, the majority of which were Minor Cloud Talismans. He handed the stack of twenty Minor Cloud Talismans to Penwick and then got out another forty, handing them over as well.

“Don’t worry, I still have plenty,” he said when he saw Penwick’s wide-eyed stare. “In order to activate them, all you have to do is rip them. You can also tack them up to something and then use a spell to activate them. As long as the paper is torn or pierced, they’ll activate, throwing up a very thick cloud around you. Clouds lasts five minutes, and inside of it you’ll hardly be able to see your fingers in front of your face. They’re probably best used for retreating. But thanks to our opponent’s preferences, we’ll also be able to use them to block lanes of sight.

“A Cloud Talisman propped up between a few rocks is going to completely shut down their ability to navigate the stone forest. The plan is simple. You’re going to take these. You’re going to move around the stone forest. And you’re just going to activate them. Try to keep them a couple minutes

apart. Sixty of them, spread out at two-minute intervals, will be enough to create two hours of pure confusion. It'll also attract their attention, and they'll send one or all of the team to try and hunt you down."

Swallowing nervously, Penwick nodded. "I'll distract them while you attack, right?"

"Yes, though you can attack too. My main goal is to just create an even playing field. Of course, they might have other tricks up their sleeve as well. Prioritize your safety, prioritize surviving, and we'll come out on top of this."

Glancing down at the pile of Talismans, Penwick's expression hardened and he nodded.

"All right."

The half an hour they had to wait seemed to take forever and pass too quickly all at the same time, and it wasn't long before Magnus found himself standing with Penwick at the entrance to the arena. The attendant who had led them to the entrance grabbed their sleeves and positioned them right in front of the door.

"As soon as the door opens, please enter. Good luck."

With a creaking sound, the door opened and Magnus stepped into the arena with Penwick at his side. He heard a loud roar and the sound of the crowd washed over him. The sun was bright above them, and if Magnus hadn't known he was in an arena he may very well have thought that he had been transported to a pocket world. The crowd wasn't visible, though he could hear them clearly because of a barrier that ringed the arena, designed to keep all of the magic inside. From inside looking out, everything was blurry. Though from outside looking in he assumed it was clear, allowing the people viewing the match to see all of the action while preventing those inside from communicating with those outside.

The floor of the arena was hard, cracked dirt, dry as a bone, and large stone pillars, at least twenty-five feet high and a dozen feet wide, were scattered across the arena in front of him. He couldn't see the other side, but not so thick as to impede movement. Magnus glanced back at Penwick and saw

the firm expression on his face. Clearly, Penwick was ready for the fight.

From up above the barrier, Korick McRae's voice boomed over the arena.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the Tower War!”

The crowd cheered and clapped as Korick continued.

“On the north side we have Celestine Earthshaper, tower master of the Starlit Clay Tower, in the position of the challenged, with five mages from her tower. On the south side is Magnus the Magnificent, tower master of Crimson Flame Tower with one mage. The two sides have met, have agreed to terms, and now in this arena of magical combat will settle their grievances once and for all. The arena is established. The bets have been placed and the combatants have taken their position. The Tower War has begun!”

There was a soft chime and Magnus took a deep breath as Penwick frantically began summoning his pet.

“Slow it down, Penwick,” Magnus said, patting his shoulder. “Slow and steady. And remember, don't die.”

With those encouraging words, Magnus jogged off, Amber flying above him. His goal, at least to begin the fight, was to get a good view of his opponents, so he rapidly scaled one of the pillars, hoping to catch sight of them on the other side of the arena. At the same time he saw a mage popping up across from him, clearly having the same idea. As soon as he was spotted the other mage disappeared, retreating back down to report the situation.

Magnus made his way forward, hopping from stone to stone. As he approached he kept an eye out on his flanks, looking for enemies trying to sneak around. Unfortunately, the stone forest was so thick it was almost impossible to see very far in any direction.

He had made it halfway across the map when he heard a shout from the crowd, and glancing over his shoulder, he saw a cloud of fog peeking up over the stones. It appeared as if Penwick had begun deploying the Talismans. When, a couple minutes later, another cloud appeared, linked

with the first, Magnus smiled.

He was still moving forward, crossing the arena, which was a full mile square. But as he continued forward, he sensed that something wasn't right. Slowing down, Magnus suddenly felt a faint pulse of mana. He hadn't noticed it before, but now that he was getting ready to fight, his senses were operating at their max. It was incredibly subtle and originated from the elbow of his robe.

Magnus' mind immediately flashed back to when the attendant had grabbed his and Penwick's elbows under the guise of showing them where to stand in front of the door to the arena. Magnus wasn't sure what the intended effect was, but if he had to guess, it was probably a way of tracking them to allow the enemy to identify their locations.

Magnus still hadn't seen hide nor hair of the enemy, which meant that most likely they had bypassed him, sneaking around to go and deal with Penwick. As soon as he had the thought, he abandoned his advance and, turning around, began to sprint back across the stones toward Penwick.

"Amber, go check on Penwick."

His flying pig, who had been keeping pace with him, nodded, transforming into a golden blur, vanishing from his sight as she shot across the arena. Magnus stripped off his robe, and after a moment of hesitation dropped it on top of one of the pillars. Hopefully he'd be able to retrieve it after the fight.

He had just made it back to the southern half of the arena when he heard shouts and saw bursts of mana being deployed, a loud roar, and the sound of rocks crashing to the ground. Magnus' heart clenched, afraid that Penwick might be in trouble.

As he got closer, he counted six deployed Minor Cloud Talismans and saw the flares of magic were coming from inside of them. Clearly the enemy, having surrounded Penwick, had tried to close in. Thankfully, the Minor Cloud Talismans seemed to be keeping them from identifying his exact location.

Magnus had just set his sights on one of the clouds of fog when there was a

rumble and the stone pillar he was standing on began collapsing. Startled, he jumped off, landing lightly on the ground. The fog didn't just block line of sight but deadened sound as well, though Magnus could still hear faint shouts from the nearby clouds. Before he could move to investigate, he saw two figures approaching him from between the stone pillars—Celestine Earthshaper, accompanied by a middle-aged dwarf with a long, luxurious brown beard.

Both were dressed in complete sets of gear: thick bracelets on their arms, strong defensive robes, staves, and circlets. They looked like real mages, at least compared to Magnus, who wore nothing but his boots, pants, and shirt. Accompanying them were their soul pets.

Celestine had a large crystal badger who padded along next to her, its back a good three feet higher than her head. The crystal badger was a dangerous foe that had the ability to freely manipulate the earth in a ten-foot area around it. Typically this manifested as a means of defense, as it could call upon the surrounding stone to form thick layers of armor or walls.

The other dwarf, whose name Magnus didn't know, had a serpent coiled around his shoulders. Though it looked small, Magnus didn't fall for it. He recognized the same scale pattern as the rock python he had fought in the Crimson Flame Legacy. The snake lifted its head, its tongue darting out as it fixed its cold reptilian gaze on Magnus.

“You should surrender. You're completely outmatched,” Celestine said, her eyes bright as she lifted her staff toward Magnus. Her male companion began to slowly circle, forcing Magnus to turn slightly to keep an eye on him. That put his back against a pillar.

“I don't think I know your name,” Magnus said, pointing at the male dwarf.

“Tamarrel,” the dwarf said, his voice gruff.

“Well, Tamarrel, a pleasure to meet you. Hopefully you don't think too badly of me after this is done.”

Tamarrel responded by lifting his staff and beginning to cast a spell. Celestine, who looked like she wanted to say something else, gritted her teeth and began casting as well.

Magnus didn't begin casting a spell but he did dash forward, reaching into his pocket to pull out a Talisman he had actually summoned from his dimensional storage. He tore it in half and it immediately began to burn, unleashing gouts of thick fog into the air. At the same time, Magnus' hands raked across the air, pulling silver darts, which he flung toward the two mages.

There was a hiss from Tamarrel's snake, who darted out to block the incoming attack and prevent Tamarrel's spell from being disrupted. While, on the other side, the crystal badger slapped its front paws against the ground, causing a wall of earth to rise up and block the attacks. Though the wall of earth managed to stop the beams, the snake was pierced, its aggressive hiss turning into a hiss of pain, and it immediately began to expand, growing rapidly to face the threat Magnus represented.

Both of the Starlit Clay Tower mages had finished their spells, but with a thick cloud of fog now covering everything in the vicinity, they had lost their target. Magnus, on the other hand, was perfectly at home. Relentless fights with the tiger had honed his instincts, and he had no trouble navigating the thick fog. He targeted Tamarrel first, because the middle-aged dwarf seemed to be the more dangerous of the two.

Magnus crept quickly through the fog, catching sight of one of the snake's coils. Instead of attacking, he carefully moved around it, only to discover that the snake had completely surrounded Tamarrel's position, providing a barrier with its body.

Magnus acted immediately, using Swallow's Cloud Step to rapidly jump over the snake's back. Sensing Magnus' position through the disturbance in the fog, the snake turned and lunged its head, snapping down on the spot Magnus had just been. Unfortunately, it was a moment too late, and Magnus had already landed next to Tamarrel.

The startled dwarf, finally seeing Magnus, thrust out his hand, activating the spell he had cast. Thick earth immediately began to rise up around Magnus as Tamarrel's Entomb spell tried to trap Magnus in place. Unfortunately, Magnus was so close Tamarrel couldn't help but get caught at the edge of the spell, and he was forced to move back quickly to avoid getting sucked into the stone prison.

At the same time, the snake instinctively tightened its coils, trying to capture Magnus, and it too encroached on the spell area. Feeling stone beginning to creep up around his feet, Magnus darted forward, using the force of his raw speed to shatter the stone. Tamarrel had already lifted his staff to begin casting again when Magnus appeared to teleport right in front of him.

The rock python was impeded by the stone prison spell, which, having lost its target after Magnus had rushed out of its area, instead applied its effect to the stone python's body.

Magnus knew it wouldn't hold a snake for long, but all he needed was a moment. Lightning shrouded his fist as he slammed it down on Tamarrel. Immediately both of the dwarf's bracers flashed and two magical shields automatically deployed, a clear testament to just how dangerous Magnus' blow was. The lightning surrounding Magnus' fist was thick, and even before his fist arrived it was already eating away at the magical shields. The last thing Tamarrel had expected was to get punched, and the shock on his face was clear as the blow shattered the first shield and cracked the second. Though Magnus didn't manage to actually hit Tamarrel, the lightning around him had no trouble bypassing the shield through the crack his fist had made.

The spell Tamarrel was trying to cast shook as the lightning bolts crawled across the dwarf's body, shocking him and breaking his concentration. That moment of hesitation was all Magnus needed as he unleashed a rapid combination of punches.

The true power of Twelve Thunder's Fist lay in chaining the twelve strikes together, forming an unstoppable barrage of lightning-laden attacks that transformed into a storm that consumed its target. The first two attacks shattered Tamarrel's defensive shields, and the following ten attacks pummeled the dwarf into unconsciousness.

As Tamarrel collapsed to the ground, Magnus heard a pained shriek from the snake. In the brief moment before its coils constricted completely, Magnus hesitated. Tamarrel lay defenseless before him, and it wouldn't be hard to eliminate him outright. A flick of his fingers would send silver darts into the dwarf's neck, ensuring he was never a problem again. That was

what a mage would have chosen, what Magnus would have chosen, barely a month and a half ago.

Yet, he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Instead, moving as quickly as possible, Magnus grabbed Tamarrel's staff and stripped the circle from his head. The two defensive bracelets were useless until they recharged, which would take at least a day, but Magnus wasn't about to leave them or his opponent's robe. Putting the pieces of equipment he had gathered into his storage space, Magnus leapt out of the constricting coils.

The rock python was furious. Its head emerged from the fog, ramming toward Magnus. As it was about to slam into his side, Magnus reached out and grabbed the tip of the snake's nose. As their gazes met, Magnus' eyes narrowed.

“Stand down and you won't die.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



He had no idea whether the snake had understood his words, but it certainly understood his intentions and it quickly lowered its head, not daring to look him in the eye anymore. He landed on its coils, which were curled protectively around Tamarrel's body, and could feel its shiver as it suppressed its natural instinct to attack him.

He still had a couple of minutes of fog, and he could sense Celestine casting around to try and find him and Tamarrel. Instead of confronting her, Magnus slipped away, emerging from the fog and scaling up a pillar to try and see if he could spot Penwick. He was quite concerned about the steward, not because Penwick wasn't a competent mage but because he was outnumbered four to one.

There was a loud boom, and one of the stone pillars, in the midst of a large cloud of fog that had been continuing to expand, collapsed. Though he wasn't sure if that was where Penwick was, Magnus launched himself through the air, caring little for the thoughts of the crowd.

His feet moved quickly, sometimes stepping on stone pillars, sometimes bouncing off of pure air as he deployed his Swallow's Cloud Step to the utmost.

Reputation +7

Reputation +9

Reputation +5

Reputation +11

Reputation +6

Reputation +8

Watching his reputation soar, Magnus had no time to be happy. In front of him, the cloud of fog suddenly began to fade away as the Talisman that had formed it burned up. And Magnus saw the collapsed stone pillar and a sight that chilled him. Penwick, half pinned under a large rock, was furiously double casting as he tried to hold off two mages who were attempting to crush him. As Magnus closed in, he saw Penwick complete his spells and immediately start casting again.

The two mages, a man and a woman, were forced to retreat as blasts of arcane energy slammed into their position. The woman was the quickest and managed to step back out of range of the arcane blast, though her shield was still deployed. The man wasn't as lucky and was a step behind. As the arcane blast detonated in front of him, his shields flashed to life. But he was still thrown back, landing in a heap next to a stone pillar.

As Magnus got closer, he saw a third mage lying unconscious on the ground, bloody wounds piercing through his chest and shoulder. The sight caused a surge of pride in Magnus as he realized Penwick had actually taken one of the enemy down, despite the fact that he was fighting three mages at once.

The female mage, lifting her staff, called upon her soul pet, a large bull with stone-like plates all over its body. It lowered its head, getting ready to charge over and trample Penwick, when it suddenly sensed Magnus and its head swung around. The female mage caught sight of Magnus at the same time and commanded the bull to charge him, only to see the bull shake its

head rapidly and retreat, taking cautious steps backward, its eyes fixed on Magnus.

Landing in front of Penwick, Magnus grabbed the stone that had pinned Penwick's leg to the ground and lifted it up, tossing it to the side casually. A health potion appeared in his hand, and he handed it to Penwick.

"Well done."

"They put some sort of tracking spell on us," Penwick said, his teeth clenching as spasms of pain ran through him. Uncorking the mana potion, he poured it on his wounded leg and hissed as his bones began to knit back together. Noticing that Penwick had torn the sleeve from his robe, Magnus reached down and helped him up.

"I figured it out too late," he said gravely, "but it's not going to help them. New plan. We work together and beat their faces in."

"Fine by me," Penwick said, fury bubbling in his eyes.

The female mage, who was still trying to urge her bull to charge, swallowed as Magnus' eyes landed on her. The mage that Penwick had blown away was already back on his feet, though he had a slightly dazed look in his eyes and there was blood dripping down the back of his head.

"Try to avoid fatalities," Magnus said as he clenched his fists and took a step toward the bull.

There was a sharp screech and the ground around them abruptly began to cave in, causing the two spells Penwick was casting to fail as he suddenly fell. Magnus grabbed the back of his robe and dashed across the air, carrying Penwick to safety.

Behind him, a massive antlion dug its way out of the pit it had just created, its large mandibles snapping down on the air where it expected its prey to be. This was the other mage's pet, and had Magnus not been so proficient in Swallow's Cloud Step, the ambush would have succeeded.

The massive stone bull let out a low moo, filled with warning and fear, but urged on by its mage was forced to take a few steps forward.

Having regained his footing, Penwick immediately started casting again, throwing a storm of Magic Missiles toward the male mage while Magnus charged the bull. He could clearly see the reluctance and worry in the bull's eyes that lowered its head to meet his charge. Dodging past one of the horns, Magnus slapped down on the top of its head.

“Stay down,” he said as the lightning that covered his palm seeped into the bull's body, stunning it. Considering that the bull was strong enough to charge through the large stone pillars without blinking, seeing it collapse to the ground at a simple slap from Magnus was enough to dumbfound the female mage.

It also caused Magnus' reputation to immediately skyrocket. This was the first time anyone had seen him fight. In fact, this was the first time the crowd had managed to witness any fighting, as everything else had been covered by the thick clouds of fog. His reputation immediately began to shoot up again, but Magnus was focused on his opponent and paid no attention.

She desperately began to activate a defensive spell, summoning a wall of stone to try and block Magnus. But before she could finish it a silver dart crashed through the spell construct, causing it to explode. Her shield deployed immediately, blocking the blast of mana. But it wasn't strong enough to block Magnus' fist, which crashed through it.

Just before his fist crushed her nose, Magnus' fingers opened and he grabbed her face. There was a surge of lightning and a short shriek as she was shocked unconscious. Instead of stripping her immediately, Magnus tore another Talisman that he had pulled from his pocket, causing a thick cloud of fog to begin billowing out around him. Once his actions weren't visible anymore, he took off her circlet, stripped away her defensive bracers, which could still be used, and swiped her staff.

Both the circlet and staff were almost exactly the same as the items he had taken from Tamarrel and seemed to be standard equipment for the Starlit Clay Tower mages. Still, they could be sold, which was all Magnus cared about. After a moment of hesitation he stripped her robe off as well.

By the time the expanding cloud of fog reached Penwick, his fight was over

as well. Though his opponent was no slouch, Penwick's ability to double cast had overwhelmed the man, and Magnus found the steward standing over the terrified mage, whose arms had both been disabled by Magic Missiles. Penwick, in an effort to avoid the antlion, who liked to ambush from underground, was standing right over his opponent in the hopes that, if the antlion attacked, it would catch its master as well. Walking over, Magnus crouched down, sending the mage to sleep with a quick chop to the neck. After looting the unconscious mage, he patted Penwick on the shoulder.

"That's three down. Shall we hunt for the rest?"

Taking a deep breath, Penwick nodded.

"Yes."

"Oh, by the way, have you seen Amber?" Magnus asked.

"I have. She's the reason I'm still alive." Penwick's voice was subdued, but Magnus could sense the deep emotion it contained. "I don't know how she did it, but she ate one of their spells. And then kept disrupting one of them by ramming into them. That allowed me to take down one opponent. But then the bull knocked down the rocks and I got caught. I don't know where she is now. She disappeared into the fog."

Looking around, Magnus shrugged.

"Well, I'm sure she's all right."

He could vaguely sense her direction through their soul contract. But as long as she was safe, he wasn't worried.

There were three opponents left, Celestine and two other mages. After thinking for a moment, Magnus scaled one of the stone pillars again. As soon as he emerged, he heard a shout and then an answering shout from the other side and realized that he was standing almost directly between the two remaining mages Celestine had brought with her.

Pretending to be frightened, Magnus quickly retreated. No sooner had he jumped back down than there was a sharp caw and a massive yellow bird slammed into the top of the pillar. Its claws raking the stone with such force

that it shattered. Magnus had been so focused on the mages that he hadn't seen that one of their pets was circling above, as the large eagle flapped its wings to try and ascend once more.

A golden blur shot up out of the stone forest and slammed into it. It was Amber, her wings working furiously. She hit the eagle in the side like a cannonball. With a squawk, the poor bird tumbled head over heels, trying desperately to regain its balance. Its master, startled by the abrupt attack, quickly climbed down the pillar to begin making his way over, only to discover a face smiling at him through the fog.

“Wait—” a single word was all he got out before Magnus' fist slammed into his chest, knocking the wind out of him and sending him crashing into the stone pillar he had just climbed down.

His lips opened again, but Magnus, who had rushed over to his location, wasn't interested in listening. A swift chop to the neck took the mage out of the fight, and Magnus quickly stripped him, leaving the poor man in his underclothes sprawled out on the hard-packed dirt of the arena floor.

The fight had grown practically anticlimactic, and for a moment Magnus stared down at his hand. He was fighting silver-ranked mages who, while strong, barely qualified as true powerhouses. Yet even though his relentless training had paid off, this fight seemed too easy. A single blow to take out a silver-ranked beast, a casual strike to take down a silver-ranked mage. There was something that wasn't adding up, and he wasn't sure what it was.

Still, there would be time to explore the mystery after he finished the fight. There were two mages left, and when Magnus popped up above the stone forest again he didn't see anyone. He was just about to go and rejoin Penwick when he heard the sound of explosions that caused the fog to ripple and clear for a brief moment before rushing back in.

Realizing Penwick was engaged in a fight, Magnus turned, but before he could there was a surge of mana that set off warning bells in his head. It started with a surge of mana so intense, Magnus felt the ambient mana in the air actually vanish. The clouds of fog rapidly boiled away as the mana contained in the burning Talismans was absorbed. At the same time there was a sharp scream, and Magnus, glancing over his shoulder, saw a

horrifying sight.

Penwick had been fighting against one of the last mages, throwing his arcane blasts and Magic Missiles against his opponent's stone golems. But the mage was clutching his head, screaming in pain as his body visibly withered. The bracers on his arms flashed with crimson light. As Magnus watched, arcane symbols that gave Magnus a deeply unsettling feeling began to emerge on the bracers.

As the mana his body contained was rapidly absorbed there was a sharp screech and an antlion broke through the soil underneath him, waving its mandibles, frantic with worry as its master was sucked dry, realizing there was something wrong with the bracers.

Magnus took off at a dead sprint, pushing himself to his fastest speed. As he shot through the air, he could feel the air bunching up in front of him. But his feet flashed, Swallow's Cloud Step accelerating him even faster.

A loud boom shook the arena as Magnus broke the sound barrier, arriving next to the screaming mage in an instant. The antlion, sensing Magnus' arrival, lifted itself up to try and protect its master. The shockwave that resulted from breaking the sound barrier threw the creature back.

Magnus grabbed the mage's body and immediately felt a sense of suction. The bracers were absorbing the mana in the mage's body. Eyes narrowing. Magnus grabbed the mage's wrist and squeezed, digging his fingers under the bracers, which were pinched tight to his forearms. There was a cracking sound as the mage's wrists broke, but Magnus paid no attention and instead squeezed harder, forcefully tearing the two bracers off the drained Mage's body.

"He needs a health potion!" Magnus snapped.

By the time Penwick recovered his senses enough to fumble at his belt for a health potion, Magnus was gone. Celestine had been wearing the same bracers, and Magnus had a strong feeling he would find her at the center of the swirling storm of mana.

He poured through the stone forest, using Swallow's Cloud Step to dodge through the pillars as he raced for the center of the storm of mana. He had

no idea what was happening, but he did know that if he didn't make it to Celestine in time she'd end up dead, drained dry by whatever this spell was.

As he ran, he glanced into his inventory and saw that the other bracers were laying inert. He wasn't sure if it was because they were in an extra-dimensional space or not, but he could only assume that if he pulled them out, they would activate as well.

The thought sent a chill down his spine. He had known that his opponents would stop at nothing to make sure he and Penwick ended up dead, but sacrificing an entire team from Starlight Clay Tower to do it was an insane price to pay. Then again, as Magnus' mind worked over the problem, he realized it was actually a perfect solution. If the upper-ranked members of Starlit Clay Tower wanted to get rid of both Celestine and Magnus, then what was happening made perfect sense. A neat way to tie up all the loose ends at once.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



The storm of mana was beginning to compress, boiling together into a singular point. At the same time, a large mana construct began to form underneath it.

By this time, Magnus was close enough to spot Celestine. The dwarven woman had her arms spread wide, her head thrown back and her mouth open in a soundless scream as furious amounts of mana were being channeled through the bracers on her wrist.

Sensing he was running out of time, Magnus lowered his shoulder and accelerated, not bothering to dodge around the stone pillar in front of him. His shoulder smashed into it and the stone gave way, exploding into a million shards that went flying in every direction as he shot straight through the center of it without slowing down. Like a wrecking ball, Magnus charged straight through, his arm in front of his face as he crashed through another pillar.

Through the tumbling stone shards, Magnus caught sight of Celestine's

crystal badger. It lay at her feet, barely alive, its body likewise drained. It must have seen Celestine's body being sucked dry and fed its own mana into her in a desperate effort to keep her alive. Gritting his teeth, Magnus pushed himself faster, and a subtle crack ran through his body as his feet touched nothing but air. The air pressure that had been fighting against him to slow his body down mysteriously vanished, and Magnus felt as if, rather than hindering him, it had begun to help him, holding his body aloft, making his movements easier. The feeling was mysterious and wonderful, but he had no time to pay attention to it.

Congratulations. Swallow's Cloud Step has advanced to the Grandmaster stage.

Magnus was well and truly flying now, and he crossed the distance to Celestine's side in an instant. Instead of arriving with a sonic boom as he had earlier, Magnus found that he was in complete control of his momentum. He stopped right next to her and gripped the bracer on her left wrist with both hands. These bracers were stronger, clearly better made, but contained the same crimson symbols as the others.

Digging his fingers under the edge of the bracers, Magnus pulled, his muscles straining as he forcefully tore the metal apart. Immediately the amount of mana draining from her body lessened, and Magnus darted to her other side, tearing the other bracer free as well.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, she collapsed to the ground, her eyes rolled back in her head, unconscious. Magnus grabbed two health potions, tossing one into the mouth of the weakened crystal badger. The other he forced down Celestine's throat, pinching her jaw open and simply pouring the potion in.

All the while, his eyes were raised on the still-swirling ball of mana. As it compressed to a tiny point, he heard a tearing sound and a portal began to open. All around the arena, the stone pillars began to shake and crumble away, disintegrating from the top down and transforming into a storm of stones.

Holding Celestine in one arm, Magnus grabbed the back of the crystal badger and hoisted it up. The stones continued to fly up into the air as Magnus took off, trying to get out from underneath whatever was emerging.

He had originally thought he might be able to disrupt whatever was going on, but the sheer amount of mana made him second-guess. Top priority at the moment was ensuring that Celestine and the other mages survived.

It only took him thirty seconds to make it back to where Penwick was standing, and Magnus unceremoniously dumped Celestine, the badger, and a badly wounded eagle he had picked up.

“Try to protect them as best as you can,” Magnus said. “I’ll grab the others.”

Before Penwick could respond, Magnus was gone, practically flying through the air as he zipped around the arena to collect the other unconscious mages. There was no fog anymore, and the citizens could see clearly what was going on.

Magnus couldn’t hear the specifics of what they were saying, but the roar of the crowds hadn’t lessened one bit. When he carried the last mage over and dropped him at Penwick’s feet, the steward pointed with a shaking finger at the giant portal that was now surrounded by a ball of stone.

“Do you know what that thing is?” Magnus asked, turning to look at the terrifying sight.

“It’s an Earth Elemental.”

“That’s an awfully big Earth Elemental.”

With a shaky smile, Penwick fixed his glasses. “Elementals start at the platinum rank,” he said.

“That would explain why it’s so big,” Magnus said. He bit his lip and stared at it for a moment. “It doesn’t seem strong enough to be platinum ranked.”

Thanks in part to Magnus’ calm attitude, Penwick had begun to calm down as well.

“It is mana starved. Normally, when Elementals step into our dimension, they gather a vast amount of mana.” He gestured toward the blurry barrier above. “The arena is sealed though. It can only gather mana from inside.”

“Which is why they needed it to absorb the life force of the mages,” Magnus said, his gaze growing cold.

Glancing down at the emaciated mage at his feet, Penwick nodded.

“Most likely you stripping off their bracers limited the amount of mana it could gather, but it’s still going to be gold ranked at the lowest. Maybe we should give up.”

“Gold ranked, huh?” Magnus cracked his knuckles. “That should be fine.”

Before Penwick could ask Magnus what he was talking about, there was a loud roar and the dimensional gate opened slightly wider. An ethereal figure broke through. A wisp of dark yellow in a roughly humanoid shape slipped out of the portal and into the massive ball of stone, which shook violently. The twisting ball of stone began to morph, arms and legs appearing as it transformed into a massive golem.

•

In the VIP box above the arena, the air was tense. Korick sat in a central seat, his soft smile still plastered across his lips. His eyes weren’t smiling, however. A hint of anger filled them as he glanced to his side where an elderly dwarf sat, his long beard reaching down past his knees to his ankles.

Obsidian Vainwright, a diamond-ranked mage of great renown and the tower master of the Shattered Crown Tower. He glanced over at Korick, not a ripple in his ancient eyes, leaving the Tower Administrator feeling helpless.

Korick glanced to his left, his anger giving way to helplessness. There, her legs crossed, a frosty expression on her face, sat Charlotte Flamebrand.

Korick had been expecting someone else from the Flame Covenant. After all, Obsidian Vainwright himself had arrived to represent Earthbound Circle. So it was strange that someone of a higher standing hadn’t arrived from the Flame Covenant.

The only thing Korick could think of was that the Flame Covenant had chosen to completely abandon Crimson Flame Tower, tacitly allowing it to

be devoured by the Earthbound Circle.

As the ball of stone embodied by the Earth Elemental began to transform, Charlotte, who hadn't said a word the entire match, finally spoke.

“Mage Korick, this doesn't seem within keeping the rules. A platinum-ranked Earth Elemental hardly seems fitting for a silver-ranked match. Additionally, its summoning seems to have required blood sacrifice, which has been forbidden on the continent for a thousand years.”

Korick's expression stiffened ever so slightly, but the pressure from Obsidian Vainwright was impossible to ignore. Though he was a platinum-ranked mage in his own right, Korick knew he couldn't afford to get on the wrong side of the Earthbound Circle, especially after what he had already done.

“I appreciate your concern, Lady Flamebrand, but you can leave the judgment of this match to me. I will maintain impartiality.”

“I certainly hope so,” Charlotte said, “because if you don't, it'll be a stain on the Tower Administration's reputation, the likes of which I've certainly never seen. I imagine that the Tower Administration would be quite disappointed to discover that one of its highest ranked members is favoring one mage organization over another. After all, that calls into question the Tower Administration's entire existence, doesn't it?”

“I don't appreciate the insinuation you're making, young woman.”

Charlotte's eyebrows rose.

“Was I making an insinuation? Allow me to be more clear. If this match is not above board, if it is not conducted with absolute regard for the rules, I will do everything in my power to drag you and your family into the flames.”

Giving Korick a sweet smile, Charlotte turned her attention back to the arena.

“Was that clear enough?”

“You forget your place.” Obsidian Vainwright's voice was deep in gravity

and carried a natural pressure that rolled over Charlotte. “Though you are being afforded the privilege of sitting here based on the strength of your father, you have no right to speak. You would do well to keep your tongue between your teeth.”

The pressure on Charlotte was substantial, but she defiantly glared back at Mage Vainwright. Displeased with her defiant attitude, he let out a light hump and the pressure abruptly increased. Just when it looked like Charlotte would collapse, a hand touched her shoulder lightly and all the pressure vanished.

Mage Vainwright shot to his feet, his eyes filled with anger and more than a little fear. Korick, seeing who had arrived, immediately stood and tried to bow but found to his horror that he couldn't. Looking over his shoulder, Charlotte saw who it was and her face lit up with a wide smile. Before she could speak, she was shushed and the figure pointed to the arena behind her. As Charlotte turned around, she saw the massive Earth Elemental striding forward.

•

Magnus hadn't been standing still as the Earth Elemental shaped its body. Instead, he had taken the opportunity to spread Talismans all around.

“They won't give you any actual defense, but hopefully they'll confuse the Elemental's senses,” he said as he finished scattering the hundredth Talisman. “You can use your Magic Missiles to activate them, but wait until it's headed in your direction before you start.”

Magnus cracked his neck and stretched out his arms.

“Are you actually going to fight that thing?” Penwick asked.

“Yeah, why not?” Magnus said with a grin. “It doesn't look like anybody's going to be stopping the match, despite the obvious cheating. So we might as well give it our best shot.”

“Magnus, it's gold rank.”

“Good. Then it should be able to put up a fight.”

Flashing an infuriatingly confident smile, Magnus took a step forward and, at the same time, the giant Earth Elemental stepped forward as well.

“Time to see if that training paid off.”

Clenching his fingers into tight fists, Magnus pounded them together in front of his chest and, with a crackle, thick arcs of lightning began forming around him. He took off running, his feet pounding against the hard dirt even as the Elemental took another step forward, causing the arena to shake. Figuring it was better to fight further away from Penwick and the others, Magnus accelerated abruptly, his body transforming into a streak of lightning as he ran through the air.

The Elemental had just started to lift its foot to stomp forward when Magnus barreled straight into it, slamming into its chest so hard it actually stumbled backward. The arena shook with every step it took and the ground crumbled under its feet, unable to support its weight.

Magnus’ fist smashed through a large boulder on its chest, but he could only click his tongue in annoyance. The stones simply shifted around. Worse still, the shards of stone left from the boulder didn’t fall to the ground as Magnus had been hoping but instead simply continued to float in the Elemental’s body.

Magnus had been hoping the Elemental’s control only applied to stone, and that as long as he crushed each stone down fine enough it would collapse, but that didn’t appear to be the case.

The Elemental swung a ponderous hand, trying to swat Magnus down, but he kicked off its body, dodging past its arm, and ran up onto its shoulder. There was a loud crackle and, appearing from midair a dozen feet above his head, a bolt of lightning slammed down into the Elemental, striking precisely where his fist had just landed.

Magnus was just as shocked as the crowd was. He had no idea when he had broken through to the Grandmaster stage of Twelve Thunder’s Fist. But he didn’t let his shock stop him from continuing to attack.

Faster and faster his fists swung, each accompanied by a thick bolt of lightning. As his attacks piled up, the Elemental let out a roar of rage and

lifted its hands to try and grasp him.

Magnus' punches were falling so thick, it appeared as if a lightning storm had formed above the Elemental's head. And though his punches did little damage to the Elemental's body, the same couldn't be said for the arcs of lightning now running through it.

Not wanting to get caught in the giant's crushing grip, Magnus quickly retreated, but the lightning he had thrown into its body continued to flow through it, causing its movements to appear jerky. Though Magnus could run through the air, he couldn't truly fly, and after retreating a hundred feet he was forced to land down on the ground.

The Elemental, realizing he had pulled back, let out a roar and lunged forward, one massive foot rising over his head and stomping down. As the Elemental's foot rose above him, it abruptly spread the stones, forming a wide net.

At the same time the earth under his feet began to collapse and fold in on him, and Magnus realized the Elemental was trying to trap him.

Magnus burst forward, dashing closer to the Elemental's body. It responded by throwing up earth and walls to try and trap him in. But Magnus was too quick, like a swallow's dizzying flight. His body glided through the air, abruptly changing directions to slip around the walls.

The Elemental's foot came down with a boom, forming a massive crater where it landed, and Magnus took the opportunity to launch a barrage of attacks against its other foot. Once again, thick bolts of lightning arched from his fists, shocking the Elemental, who roared in rage. Magnus noticing that the Elemental's movements slowed slightly.

Magnus realized he could use this to his advantage. Dashing to the Elemental's leg, Magnus rapidly scaled up it, his feet finding purchase on the shifting stones as he raced up toward the center of the Elemental's body.

He had gotten up to its thigh when suddenly the stones under his feet gave way and a giant mouth of grinding stones emerged in front of him.

Caught off guard by the Elemental's sudden attack, Magnus didn't manage

to dodge and was rapidly swallowed into the Elemental's stone body.

Massive chunks of rock hammered against him but Magnus simply swung his fists, pulverizing the stone as it came close. Inside a sea of shifting stones, Magnus could only strike out blindly, his fists hammering into heavy rocks and summoning bolts of lightning that danced around him.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



He could feel the Elemental's fury, feel the intensity of its power holding the rocks together as it tried to crush him into a pulp. But Magnus' body was simply too tough, and the storm of stone slamming into him shattered as it struck his skin. Though the attacks couldn't actually harm him, they didn't feel very good either, and Magnus knew that his body was going to be one big bruise if he managed to make it out of this fight alive.

As he continued to fight, throwing punch after punch, obliterating all of the stone around him, Magnus sensed the full power of the Earth Elemental in front of him. In his mad thrashing, he had somehow managed to draw close to the core of the golem, where the Elemental was positioned. The closer he got, the stronger its control over the stones around him.

And as he drew back his fist, it suddenly flooded him with earth and sand and a storm of razor-sharp shards of stone. Rather than hammering him with boulders, as it had been, it was now trying to drown him in a coffin of earth, recognizing that this attack was much more dangerous than the

others.

Magnus resolutely shut his mouth and eyes and slammed his fists together, generating a storm of electricity that pushed the incoming wave of earth back, knowing that he didn't have more than a few seconds before it closed around him.

Magnus took a deep breath, reached out his hands, and grabbed, pulling threads of silver from the air. Instead of transforming them into darts and throwing them, Magnus channeled his lightning into them, turning his body sharply as he used them as makeshift blades, raking the air around him and cutting through the incoming wave of earth.

Though it bought him a temporary respite, the true danger of the attack was revealed when the earth he had cut apart was simply pulled back together.

The Elemental was clearly intent on smothering him, but Magnus wasn't going to make it easy. With beams of silvery light covered in arcs of electricity clenched between his fingers, he struck out again and again, using them as claws to rake through the soil as he moved closer and closer to the Earth Elemental's position.

Halfway through a strike, his back bowed slightly and his legs abruptly crouched. Without even thinking about it, he let out a loud roar and his hands lashed out, transforming into ethereal tiger paws that obliterated all of the earth in front of him.

Magnus was so immersed in the fight he didn't even think about it but instead continued to draw silver shards of energy around him.

In his mind, the moon shone bright, rippling as the loud roar echoed around it. A deep shadow fell across the moon formed by the ripples, and the silhouette of a tiger appeared.

Magnus struck again, snarling as he did, and the image of the tiger grew clearer still. All around him the moon's silvery beams began to condense, forming the shape of a beast, keeping the crushing earth from touching his body, coiling at his feet.

Magnus pounced forward, crashing through the remaining dirt and arriving

in front of the Earth Elemental. Though it had no eyes, Magnus could feel it staring at him, surprise radiating from its body. He didn't care how surprised it was and struck immediately, his fists like claws, raking and pounding it. And at the same time he opened his mouth and lunged forward, trying to bite into its body.

There was a rumble and the Earth Elemental fled backward, abandoning control over the sea of stone and earth it had been trying to crush Magnus with.

Magnus gave chase even as the stone golem fell apart around him. His feet, like giant tiger paws, were walking on air.

The Elemental burst from the golem's collapsing body with Magnus only a few steps behind. As it emerged it suddenly changed directions, heading for the earth below.

Realizing it was going to get away if it touched the ground, Magnus tried to speed up, but he was already moving as fast as he could.

The Elemental seemed to know it was going to escape, and Magnus felt its attention return to him, as if it was mocking him for not being able to catch up. Yet, just before it hit the ground, a golden blur passed by, and Amber, somehow managing to open her tiny mouth wide enough to fit the entirety of the Earth Elemental, swallowed it down.

Magnus, who had barely been wounded, despite being subjected to the Earth Elemental's crushing force, failed to stop in time and slammed right into the ground face first. As he impacted he felt his nose shatter. With a groan he came to a stop in the pit his head had just created. Rolling over, he let out a deep groan as blood began to gush from it. Thankfully his body's natural healing kicked in quickly, and after painfully setting the broken bone and gulping down a healing potion, Magnus was able to crawl out of the hole. Amber was waiting for him, and she let out a pleased oink as he pulled himself up over the edge of the crater and rolled over on the ground next to her.

He had been so focused on catching up that he hadn't actually considered what he would do if he managed to grab the Elemental. As it was, Amber had grabbed the Elemental for him, devouring it cleanly and leaving

Magnus to suffer an embarrassing faceplant.

“You thought that was funny, didn’t you?” Magnus said, with a mock glare.

Amber gave another happy oink and nodded. Chuckling, Magnus sat up as Penwick came running over.

“Are you okay? Are you...?”

The steward slowed to a walk and then stopped, staring at Magnus’ face. His eyes slowly narrowed and Magnus knew exactly what was on his mind, but he quickly jumped to his feet to stop Penwick from asking the obvious question.

“I’m fine. A little bit of internal injury, but none the worst for wear. I cushioned my fall with a spell.”

“Uh-huh.” Penwick clearly didn’t believe it but also wasn’t going to call out Magnus, at least not here, in front of the entire city.

The sound of the crowd was deafening, and the reputation notifications that Magnus had pushed off to the side were practically flying past his vision. There was a loud chime and the barrier above the arena rippled and faded away, causing the noise from the crowd to grow even louder. Citizens of Crimson Flame City were going wild, cheering and stomping as they celebrated their victory.

Magnus lifted his hands to wave, only to realize that his clothes were in shambles. He quickly pulled out a robe and slipped it on over his torn shirt and pants. As he walked toward Celestine and the other unconscious mages he waved to the crowds, eliciting even greater cheers.

“The Tower War has concluded,” Korick’s voice boomed over the arena, quieting the crowds. “And Crimson Flame Tower, in an incredible upset, has emerged victorious.”

The crowd let out a loud cheer again, wave after wave of shouts washing over the arena.

“What do you think?” Magnus said to Penwick who, for the first time in the last few days, looked genuinely relaxed.

“I still can’t believe we won.”

“Well, believe it, because we’ve got crystals to collect.”

Penwick’s eyes lit up as he remembered the 170,000 crystals they would be collecting from their bet. As they approached the unconscious mages, attendance streamed out from a door in the side of the arena, running over with stretchers. One of the mages, who wore a light-yellow robe with a white sash, stopped Magnus from getting closer and bowed. Her body language was clearly nervous, but her expression was calm and her words gentle.

“Mage Celestine and the other members of her tower need immediate medical treatment. We will take it from here.”

“Thank you,” Magnus said, taking a step back. Leaving Celestine and the others in the hands of the healers, Magnus turned to scan the arena and caught sight of three people coming toward him. In the center was Korick, who looked like he was going to be sick. On his right was an elderly dwarf with a very long beard. Though his expression was calm as an ancient well, Magnus didn’t miss the old dwarf’s white-knuckled grip on his crystal-topped cane.

On the other side of Korick, strolling along, was the second most beautiful woman Magnus had ever seen—after Charlotte of course. And had it not been for the slightly more mature air about her, Magnus would have sworn the woman was Charlotte’s sister. As Korick stopped in front of Magnus and raised a hand to greet him, Magnus completely ignored the administrator and instead, stepping to the side, bowed deeply.

“Lady Flamebrand, a pleasure to meet you.”

“I’m not sure if the pleasure is mine yet or not,” Rebecca Flamebrand said, “that remains to be seen.”

“I’ll endeavor not to disappoint,” Magnus replied with a smile as he straightened up.

Rebecca Flamebrand, the legendary mage of the Flamebrand family, and more importantly Charlotte’s mother, was much too important to be here to

watch his Tower War. Magnus knew immediately she had come to investigate the reports that her daughter was getting a little bit too cozy with a man. Though he was embarrassed that he had been ignored, Korick didn't dare interrupt the conversation between Rebecca and Magnus. To his relief, Rebecca waved her hand toward him.

"I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to talk later. For now, let's finish this disgraceful business."

Korick's smile slipped slightly and he took a step forward to greet Magnus.

"Tower Master Magnus, you have surely earned your title 'The Magnificent.'"

Smiling, Magnus scratched his chin and shrugged.

"It really wasn't that impressive," he said with false modesty. His eyes flicked to Mage Vainwright, who stiffened at the subtle dig.

"Well, it certainly looked impressive from where we were sitting. You have won the Tower War, and as agreed, everything waged will be delivered. Congratulations."

It was obvious that Korick intended to leave it there and beat a hasty retreat, but Magnus held up his hand.

"A moment, Mage Korick."

Stopping mid-turn, Korick looked at Magnus, a faint warning in his gaze.

"Yes, Tower Master?"

"I'm wondering about the process for lodging complaints."

Their words were currently being projected across the arena. But halfway through Magnus' sentence the projection switched off. Magnus caught the subtle twitch of Korick's finger as he silenced the last few words of Magnus' sentence. It was clear that Korick didn't want a scene, but Magnus didn't care what the tower administrator wanted. He was on the hunt for reputation. His smile widened slightly and he took a deep breath and then spoke in a voice so loud it literally shook the ground underfoot.

“What I said was, I’m wondering about the process for submitting complaints.”

Entirely at ease despite the fact that his voice was rolling like thunder across the arena, Magnus continued. “While I have no doubt about the integrity of the Tower Administration, I noticed some highly unusual coincidences, as well as a blatant rule violations.”

Trying to hide his anger, Korick took a deep breath. “This is not the time or place, Tower Master.”

“I think it’s exactly the time and exactly the place,” Magnus replied. “After all, we wouldn’t want these things to be swept under the rug. And it does make me wonder how they happened, as they all require the explicit cooperation of members from the Tower Administration.”

“You tread on dangerous ground, Tower Master.” A hint of Korick’s platinum-level aura leaked out from him, and though both Mage Vainwright and Mage Flamebrand could have stopped it, neither moved, simply watching how Magnus would respond.

He laughed and stepped forward, entirely unconcerned by the mage’s aura.

“Crimson Flame Tower cannot be intimidated,” Magnus said. “We will have an investigation, and we will demand that everyone involved is brought to justice. No matter how high up the chain we have to go.”

As he finished speaking, Magnus let his aura fly for the first time since he had emerged from the Crimson Flame Legacy. Though he had no way to control mana because of his shattered soul, Magnus’ physique carried an aura of its own. And it was this that spread out from him, catching all three of the mages off guard.

Korick felt a deep sense of danger, as if Magnus wasn’t a man but instead a massive, ancient beast ready to devour him. The feeling was so intense, Korick couldn’t help but take a few steps back. Even Mage Vainwright, though he didn’t feel the same intense danger, couldn’t help but shift slightly, bringing his cane in front of his body defensively. Only Lady Rebecca didn’t react except to lean forward, her eyes widening

“You are gold ranked,” she said, her tone incredulous.

Though she didn’t speak as loudly as Magnus was speaking, Lady Rebecca’s voice carried just as well, and the entire arena fell silent before erupting into shouts of surprise. Magnus felt like giving Lady Rebecca a thumbs up as he watched his reputation soar. Instead keeping his expression calm, he simply turned toward her and bowed slightly.

“My rank was the only reason the Earth Elemental didn’t slaughter us. How else could we hope to beat a platinum-ranked Earth Elemental, summoned by a silver-ranked tower master using blood magic?”

Korick’s expression twisted, but he adapted quickly and turned to Mage Vainwright.

“Now that Tower Master Magnus points it out, it does seem odd. I wonder if the Earthbound Circle has an explanation for us.”

Mage Vainwright hadn’t expected Korick to toss the ball to him, but now that he was holding the hot potato, he couldn’t avoid becoming involved.

“Tower Master Celestine’s choices are her own. They are not a reflection of the Earthbound Circle. We will, however, investigate this matter deeply and give you a clear explanation. It’s just unfortunate that the items that were used to execute the blood magic have been destroyed, as they would have provided clues.”

Placing his hand behind his back, Magnus casually retrieved one of the bracers from his storage space and then tossed it to Mage Vainwright. Startled, the dwarven mage nearly dropped it but, after a fumbling catch, his expression grew ugly as he recognized what it was.

“Conveniently, there’s still one there. Maybe it’ll help you in your investigation,” Magnus said. “I’ve heard that every refiner leaves their own mark, so it should be fairly easy to trace where that came from, especially for an organization as powerful as yours. And don’t worry. If that one breaks or happens to go missing, I have others.”

“Well,” Korick said, taking a quick step forward to stop the situation from devolving further. “You have my personal guarantee that we will get to the

bottom of this. If members of the Tower Administration did, in fact, collude with Starlit Clay Tower, they will be suitably punished.”

“Thank you for your assurance,” Magnus said, bowing slightly toward Mage Korick. Pleased by Magnus’ respect, Korick smiled, but before he could respond Magnus’ next words wiped the smile from his face.

“In the interest of assisting you, I will also be filing a complaint with the Flame Covenant so they might bring their resources to bear on this investigation as well.”

Realizing that Magnus really wasn’t going to let it go despite his win, Korick gave an angry snort and turned away, stalking off. Mage Vainwright gave Magnus a long look and then followed. While Lady Rebecca stood there a moment longer, it was impossible to tell what she was thinking, but Magnus could feel her sizing him up.

“I’m afraid Crimson Flame City hasn’t shown you its best side, Lady Flamebrand. May I have the honor of hosting you at Crimson Flame Tower?”

“Yes,” Rebecca said. “I assume you’re going to have some sort of celebration and that my daughter will be invited. I’ll come with her.”

Turning, her foot tapped lightly against the ground and her boots flashed with an icy glow. Silvery wings sprouted from her ankles, and she flew through the air back up to the VIP area, where Charlotte had been watching breathlessly. Seeing Charlotte staring down at him, Magnus smiled and waved and then walked back over to Penwick, who was standing quietly at the side, shaking in his boots.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



“We should collect our winnings before they can skip town,” Magnus said, only remembering that he was still speaking in his extra loud voice when Penwick nearly fell over.

“Oops, sorry about that. But seriously, I’m afraid they’re going to leave with all our winnings.”

The crowds still packed into the stands, not wanting to miss the excitement, abruptly turned and began running, all of them fighting to get to the exits. The majority of the citizens from Flame Brand City had bet at least a couple of gold on their win after hearing that Charlotte had placed a 100,000 crystal bet, and all of them wanted their money. The idea that the Tower Administration would skip out without paying their debts hadn’t initially occurred to them. But after watching everything that had happened and hearing Magnus’ words, the fear took root. Taking a deep breath and adjusting his voice back to normal, Magnus coughed lightly.

“On second thought, I’m sure they won’t renege. If they did, they’ll have

bigger problems to worry about than me. Come on, let's head back to the tower. We've got a party to plan."

It took nearly three hours for Magnus to return to the tower, mostly because everywhere he went, crowds of people saw him and gathered around shouting and cheering and celebrating the Crimson Flame Tower's victory.

When he finally did make it back to his office, he collapsed into his chair with Amber in his lap. His pet was growing more and more mysterious, and Magnus was beginning to wonder if she didn't have some sort of invisibility skill. She seemed to be able to appear and disappear at will. And even when she was around, everyone seemed to just ignore her. She had eaten an Earth Elemental, for goodness sake, and yet not once did anyone mention it.

He knew she wasn't a figment of his imagination, as whenever Charlotte was around Amber was fond of snuggling in her arms, but the whole matter was quite strange. Shaking his head, Magnus turned his attention to his status and all of the reputation he had gained. The ethereal system book opened up in front of him, and Magnus looked over his status.

NAME: Magnus

RANK: Earth - Initiate

PRIMARY ART: Imperishable Void Physique

SOUL CONTRACT: Amber (???????)

MARTIAL SKILLS: Tiger of the Silver Moon (Grandmaster), Twelve Thunder's Fist (Grandmaster), Swallow's Cloud Step (Grandmaster)

IMMORTAL SKILLS: Talisman Arts (Warrior)

PET ABILITIES (3/10): Treasure Sense, Absolute Digestion, Void Storage

It had changed considerably from a month ago. Not only had his Imperishable Void Physique grown to the Earth rank, giving his body the equivalent strength to a gold-ranked beast, he had even reached the Grandmaster stage in all three of his martial arts.

Furthermore, upon reaching the Grandmaster rank of Silver Moon's Strike,

something strange had happened. The moon in his mind had mutated and the shadow of a tiger was cast across it. Activating it would summon the silvery tiger armor he had worn to defeat the Earth Elemental. Magnus genuinely had no idea what was going on, but when he opened up the skill he saw its name had transformed to Tiger of the Silver Moon.

TIGER OF THE SILVER MOON (SELF-CREATED): You have gained Silver Moon totem armor in the form of a tiger.

Magnus had never heard of the term “totem armor,” but seeing as how he had advanced a martial art through self-realization, he was curious if it would be possible to drive his other martial arts to new heights. There was no doubt in Magnus’ mind that the transformation had come about because of the amount of time he had spent fighting against the tiger in the Crimson Flame Legacy. He was also beginning to suspect that the tiger wasn’t gold ranked at all, as even though Magnus had become gold ranked, he couldn’t pull off the cat’s trick of freezing people in place with his aura. The best he could do was cause them to slow down, impeding their movement.

On the surface, having broken through to the Earth Initiate of his Imperishable Void Physique, Magnus should have been able to fight the tiger on equal ground. Instead, in his last sparring match he had barely avoided being beaten to a pulp. With a wry smile, Magnus clenched his fingers into a fist and shook his head.

“I’ll have to add the tiger to my list of mysteries to solve,” he muttered, scratching Amber under the chin.

His Talisman skill had broken through as well, rising to the Human Warrior stage, and the number of Talismans Magnus could draw had increased. He still had a good number of Minor Cloud Talismans he hadn’t used during the fight, and now that the Tower War was over it was time to begin practicing some of the other Talismans.

The Human Warrior rank gave him access to more powerful Talismans with stronger effects, like the Lesser Barrier Talisman, which was an upgrade from the Paper Ward Talisman and the Poison Cleansing Talisman. Additionally, there were Talismans that would temporarily harden the castor’s skin and Talismans that would allow for faster travel, as well as a

number of utility Talismans that could help with things like purifying water, cleaning a room, and the like.

Overall, Magnus was quite pleased with his growth. He had barely been in this world for a month, and yet he had already managed to raise his Imperishable Void Physique by an entire major stage.

Of course, he wasn't foolish enough to believe that such a fast level of growth was going to continue to be possible. In the month he had spent in the Crimson Flame Legacy, Magnus had nearly devoured the place clean. Thankfully he had only consumed the resources of the outermost area and there were still plenty of resources in the outer disciple zone, which he had yet to explore. Flipping through the book to the reputation page, Magnus let out a low whistle.

REPUTATION: The Most Handsome Young Genius Tower Master

CURRENT POINTS: 4,791

STATIC GOAL: Maintain your reputation as a genius tower master to earn +5 points a day.]

SPECIAL GOAL: Complete the impossible task of defeating an enemy above your level to earn a bonus of +500 points.

Even as he stared at the page, the number jumped, his reputation still increasing as people all over the city talked about the epic fight. Though most of the citizens who had been watching didn't understand the details of what had gone on, they did know that Magnus had beaten an Earth Elemental, and that Earth Elementals were normally platinum rank.

In reality, the Earth Elemental had been much weaker than it should have been at the gold rank, which was one of the reasons Magnus had had such an easy time with it. He knew this, in part, because he hadn't managed to complete his special goal of defeating an enemy of a higher tier than him.

Now that he had advanced to the Earth stage in his physique, Magnus had access to Earth-ranked martial arts, as well as enough reputation to pick up some of the more impressive Immortal Skills, like Fortune-Telling Arts. Before he made his decision, however, he decided to handle a couple of

other things. He wanted to take his time in thinking through the kinds of martial arts and skills he was going to unlock. And that would take time.

He was still wearing his red robe and underneath his torn-up clothing. So, setting Amber on the desk and giving her a small pile of mana crystals, Magnus drew water for his bath.

After a bath and changing into new clothing, Magnus grabbed a mana crystal and headed for his meditation room. He had yet to miss a day meditating with the Dawnlight flower to try and repair the cracks in his soul, and he wasn't about to start now. After two hours had passed and the effect of the mana crystal had faded, Magnus rose to his feet and headed for the door.

There wasn't a great place to hold a party in Crimson Flame Tower, as it wasn't very large. Now that he had grown to the gold rank, the tower should have expanded as well. But Magnus suspected that his lack of ability to drive mana was preventing it.

Lacking a ballroom, it had been decided that the dining room would simply have to do, and the servants had cleared out the furniture to open the space up. There were tables shoved against one wall, covered with food, and Penwick was already there dressed in his finest robe, directing the servants where to lay everything out.

"Greetings, Tower Master," Penwick said, bowing. He always reverted to more formal speech whenever he was excited, so Magnus just patted him on the shoulder instead of calling him out on it.

"We're expecting our guests any moment," Penwick said. "In fact, that's probably them now."

The faint sounds of the door being opened and people entering drifted from the hallway below, and it wasn't long before a steady stream of mages were entering the dining room. They were all smiles and congratulations and many even brought presents. Considering that barely a month ago they would have disdained to come meet Magnus, it was a drastic change and showed the power of his new rank. No one would pass up an opportunity to get to know a gold-ranked mage. Mage Toppel of the Botanical Society arrived as well, and after greeting Magnus handed him a folded piece of

paper. Flipping it open, Magnus read over it and his eyebrows rose.

“Those are awfully generous terms. And an awful lot of land,” he said. “Are you sure you want to make such a large investment?”

“Fertilizer is only helpful when a plant is in its growth stage,” Toppel said with a smile. “Consider it an apology as well.”

“I told you, there’s no need to apologize. But I certainly won’t say no to these terms.” Magnus handed the paper back. “You can work out all of the fine print with Penwick, but we agree.”

“A pleasure doing business. I look forward to a long cooperation.”

Toppel bowed and walked off to talk to some of the other mages, tucking the paper into his pocket. Though the Botanical Society wasn’t a political organization, Magnus knew better than to underestimate the amount of influence they had. They controlled the majority of the farms that grew magic plants across the continent, and what Toppel was proposing would transform the lands around Crimson Flame City into one of the largest farms the society controlled.

Magnus could smell the Flamebrand’s hand behind Toppel, but it was likely that Toppel himself had initiated the investment and was willing to bet that Magnus would rise further. As more mages arrived, Magnus even saw Caspin Woolworth, who looked quite sheepish as he slunk into the room alongside an older man who must have been his father.

The older Mage Woolworth dragged Caspin along to bow and apologize to Magnus, and it was clear from the incredibly precious gifts he presented that he was willing to do whatever it took to earn Magnus’ forgiveness for his son. To the merchant’s surprise, and Caspin’s utter shock, Magnus laughed the matter off and clasped Caspin’s shoulder, treating him as if they were fine friends.

“Just some petty squabbles among the kids, sir,” he said to Caspin Senior. “In fact, I’ve been meaning to come over and talk to you. The Woolworth family is one of the major merchants of Crimson Flame, and I’ll be relying on you as our city expands to ensure we can meet the demands of our citizens. Crimson Flame Tower is coming into a good bit of money, I’m

sure you've heard about our bet, and we'll be using it to procure resources. We need good channels, and the reputation of the Woolworth family is exceptional. Today's probably not a good day for it, but sometime next week why don't you stop by and you and Penwick, our tower's steward, can figure out an arrangement."

Looking as if a great weight had been lifted off of him, Caspin Senior bowed.

"It would be an honor, Tower Master. And if I can be so bold as to ask..."

His voice trailed off, but his eyes darted between Magnus and Caspin, who looked nervous enough to faint.

"Like I said, nothing but squabbles. Now that Caspin is taking a bigger role in your enterprise, he'll need to develop the bearing that goes along with it. In fact, if he's interested, we're going to be recruiting mages here at Crimson Flame Tower. After all, it's a little bit silly that a gold-ranked tower only has two mages. Up until now we've been a bit lacking in the resource department, but as that situation has been solved, we're going to be expanding. I'll announce more details next week. But if you're interested, Caspin, you should definitely apply."

Magnus was speaking loudly enough that many of the mages present heard, and he saw most of them carefully filing the information away. About an hour after the party started, Charlotte arrived, though her mother was absent. Charlotte had a huge smile on her face, and when she saw Magnus she gave him her hands. Though he much rather would have hugged her, Magnus restrained himself for propriety's sake and simply squeezed her hands lightly.

"Thanks for coming to my party."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," she said, her smile radiant. She was dressed in a high-collared robe of pure crimson that caused her hair to positively glow. Ornate gold stitching covered the cuffs and hem and a phoenix was stitched across the breast.

"How's your mother liking Crimson Flame City? She said she would stop by."

With a slight grimace, Charlotte pulled his hands slightly and the two of them made their way over to the side of the room. The other mages, though quite curious about what was going on, gave them a little bit of space so as not to appear rude.

“There’s been a bit of a complication. Celestine Earthshaper says that the bracers weren’t hers. They were given to her by Mage Vainwright of the Shattered Crown Tower.”

“Wasn’t that obvious?” Magnus said, cocking his head to the side.

“Problem is that those bracers have blood magic in them. And if she’s telling the truth and Vainwright is the one who gave them to her, then the entire Earthbound Circle is going to be in tremendous trouble.”

“Well, sure,” Magnus nodded. “I don’t see why this is a new development though.”

Charlotte grimaced.

“Mage Vainwright is trying to take Celestine with him under the guise of interrogating her. My mother went to block him, afraid that the Tower Administration and the Earthbound Circle are going to try and get rid of the evidence.”

Flipping his hand over, Magnus revealed one of the bracers.

“I wasn’t joking when I said I have more of these. The reason the Earth Elemental was so weak was because I had stripped them off of all but two of the mages before it was summoned.”

“That’s the other problem,” Charlotte said. “Celestine says she didn’t summon it. Somebody activated her bracers remotely.”

Unsure where this was going or why it was such a big deal, Magnus nodded encouragingly for Charlotte to continue.

“The Earthbound Circle produces the mass majority of mage equipment. If they’re building equipment that can be triggered by someone other than the user remotely...”

Sucking in a sharp breath, Magnus nodded.

“Got it. You’re right. This is a big deal.”

“After the party is done, my mother has asked that you come to the prison where Celestine is being held. You were there during the fight on the ground, and she’s hoping you can provide a little bit more detail.”

“I’d be happy to. I can give her some of the bracers as well so she can check them out.”

Biting her lip nervously, Charlotte shook her head. “This could very well turn into a real problem.”

“It could, but don’t worry. There are strong people above us who will hold up the sky when it starts to fall,” Magnus said with a smile, squeezing Charlotte’s hand. “For now, let’s enjoy the party.”

Rejoining the others, Magnus continued to socialize, though this time with Charlotte at his side. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that something was going on between the two of them, and knowing looks began to spread throughout the room. Magnus and Charlotte didn’t mind. After all, the only opinions that actually mattered were her parents, and they hadn’t said anything yet.

As the party drew to a close, Magnus said goodbye to each of the mages who came, even going as far as to shake Caspin’s hand. Whatever ill feelings he had toward Magnus had completely vanished. And now, when he looked at Magnus, even with Charlotte standing right next to him, there was nothing but admiration and a little hint of hero worship in Caspin’s gaze. After he had followed his dad out of the room, Charlotte poked Magnus inside.

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make even your enemies like you?”

Magnus shrugged. “A perk of my handsome face, maybe.”

That earned him another poke. Laughing, he shook his head.

“Everyone has things they value. And just because, occasionally, the things we value come into conflict with the things other people value, it’s not like that has to be the case forever. Caspin values status and the opinion of his father. I can give him both without it costing me anything. Plus, it’s better to have more friends than more enemies. So, if I can help him out at no cost to myself, then why not? He’s not, at his core, a bad guy, just a bit stuck up, something I have tremendous personal experience with.”

Squeezing Charlotte’s hand lightly, Magnus called for Amber, who was polishing off the last of the food left from the party.

“Come along, Amber, and let’s go see if we can’t turn more enemies into allies.”

To Be Continued...

AFTERWORD



Thank you so much for reading Body Refinement in a Beast Tamer's World. What a fun story this has been to write.

For the last year I've been feeling an increasing urge to write a lighter, more encouraging story, so BRiaBTW has been a breath of fresh air from a creative perspective. Hopefully you've enjoyed it as well.

If you can, please don't forget to leave a review. Reviews are really the life blood of an author's career. You can leave me a review [here](#).

If you REALLY enjoyed it, or you just like being helpful, one of the biggest ways you can bless an author (like me) is by sharing this book on social media. Platforms are increasingly restricting author posts, which means that when I post about my book very few people see it.

The opposite is true when YOU post. Platforms want user recommendations, so hitting up your favorite LitRPG group on Facebook or Reddit, or posting on TikTok, Instagram, or X and dropping the cover and a couple words about why you liked it does a world of good for the series, even if you have no followers. Don't forget to tag me so I can say thank

you!

I can't wait for you to read about Magnus and Amber and Charlotte's adventures in [Body Refinement in a Beast Tamer's World 2](#)

See you in Borella!

Be sure to join my email newsletter to get new release announcements and special bonuses throughout the year. You can join at sethring.com/join.

Then, head on over to Facebook and follow the Seth Ring fan page. That is the best place to keep track of what is coming up next for the Endless Worlds. You can follow at facebook.com/sethringwrites.

If you are interested in a more intimate experience or being an active part of the Endless Worlds, check out my Ream page to read new chapters as I write them. You can join at reamstories.com/sethring.

[Subscribe to my YouTube Channel](#). This is a space I use to talk about my current writing projects and my thoughts on being a writer. I write sci fi and fantasy novels and I love to create and explore new worlds. Watch my latest video here: sethring.com/YouTube.

WWW.SETHRING.COM

If you are interested in following my adventures or want to keep up with what is happening in Nova Terra, come join the Facebook community. We are always super excited to interact with new members and enjoy doing worldbuilding projects for Nova Terra. You can join at facebook.com/groups/NovaTerraFanClub.

If you are interested in reading more GameLit or learning more about this genre or related genres like LitRPG, there are cool communities on Facebook where you can find new books and get recommendations for other books. You can join at

facebook.com/groups/LitRPGsociety.

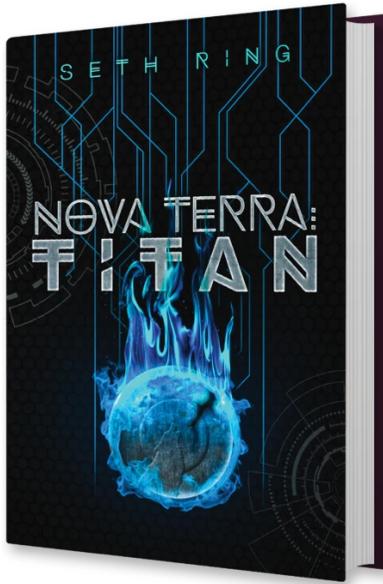
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/litrpgs/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/LitRPG.books/>

LOOKING FOR MORE?

The Titan Series

A LitRPG/GameLit Adventure



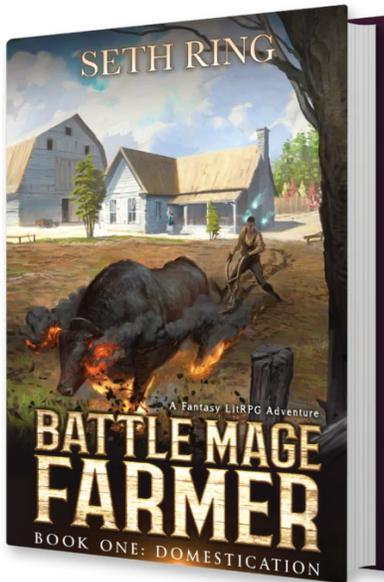
If you like immersive storytelling, rich fantasy, and epic adventures with a slice of friendship thrown in, you'll love this complete, page-turning series.

[Start Reading *Nova Terra: Titan* Now!](#)

■

Battle Mage Farmer

A Fantasy LitRPG Adventure



Mixing slice-of-life with epic fantasy action, mystery, magic, cultivation, and a broken game system that seems determined to make everything as hard as possible for the already overpowered protagonist, this LitRPG/GameLit series is perfect for readers who enjoy exploring rich worlds and complex characters.

[Start Reading *Domestication* Now!](#)

Tower

A LitRPG Adventure



Set in the world of Nova Terra and starring the unforgettable Thorn, if you like immersive storytelling, rich fantasy, and epic adventures with a slice of friendship thrown in, you'll love this page-turning series.

[Start Reading *Forge Master* Now!](#)

Iron Tyrant

A Fantasy LitRPG Adventure

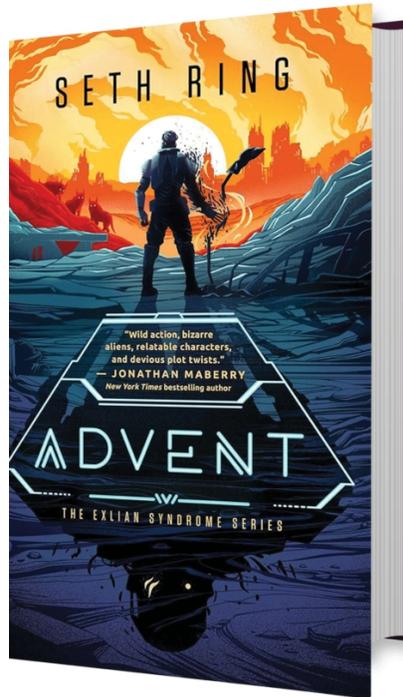


Following a weak-to-strong protagonist, this series mixes epic fantasy action, mystery, cultivation, and a world with endless depth where little is as it first appears. This LitRPG/GameLit series is perfect for readers who enjoy exploring rich worlds and complex characters.

[**Start Reading *Chain of Feathers* Now!**](#)

The Exlian Syndrome

A Fantasy LitRPG Adventure



An epic new series of alien contact, fast-paced military action, and thrilling adventure that will leave readers hungry for more.

[Start Reading *Advent* Now!](#)

Dreamer's Throne

A Fantasy LitRPG Adventure

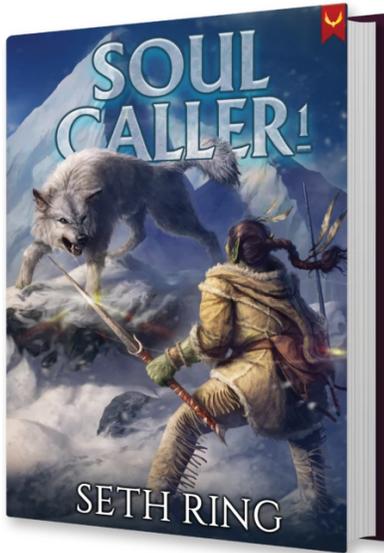


Mixing Lovecraftian elements with epic fantasy action, mystery, magic, intellectual maneuvering, guild building, and a grim fantasy world where monsters from nightmares are creeping into reality, waiting to devour the already disabled protagonist, this LitRPG/GameLit series is perfect for readers who enjoy exploring rich worlds and complex characters.

[**Start Reading *Dreamer's Throne 1* Now!**](#)

Soul Caller

A LitRPG Adventure



Dive into the heart-pounding world of Soul Caller, where lone warrior Merrick, blessed by the Great Spirits, faces a cataclysmic destiny. Immerse yourself in a tale of courage, mysterious Guardian Spirits, and a relentless quest for an unknown treasure. Also available on Audible narrated by the voice of The Witcher, Peter Kenny!

[Start Reading Soul Caller Now!](#)