

## A Single Stone...

If you have ever known what it was like to spend a long time swimming in a stagnant pool of water, finally to find that there is now a flow pulling you along in another direction, then you know what comes next. Your curiosity gets the better of you and you follow that new path, consequences be damned.

Will felt it tug at him in a sense that can really only be equated to that. In his world of grey monotony, the stone drew him away in his arcane senses. It pulled sharply like the way a cool fall breeze asks you to walk out into it and just go...

And for once, Will felt as though he could go. A thought opened in his mind about leaving all this dull grey behind. Something that had been long overgrown by the lessons of repetition and requisite.

Maybe there was a way to crack the hold on his mind. He breathed deeply - so much that it hurt. Then exhaled and inhaled again, feeling the world around him as he tried to think... "Out there, where do I feel the voice strongest... where do you call me..."

He was tempted to clutch the stone tightly, but the pulsing forces made him relax his grip.

However, even as he held grasp over the stone, in the back of his mind he knew that keeping something like this a secret would be difficult. Where nearly every classmate was also a potential rival, anything secret was quickly confiscated or stolen. It was this overhanging thought that gave him pause more than anything. How long could he conceal this before someone found out? And when they found out, what would the headmaster say? Even with his talents and high marks in the classes, the fact that he wasn't a pure-blooded magi meant that trouble was guaranteed.

In fact, these days, even pure-blooded magi were becoming less and less common. Families that had been magi for generations were producing fewer and fewer 'heirs' with even a fraction of their ancestors talents. It made people like Will even more disliked. Nothing hurt their egos more than non-elites who had talent greater than their own offspring. The great families were growing weaker by the day.

At this point in Myrhh's history, nearly all people who used arcane arts needed canes, staves, or wands to cast spells and incantations. It was impossible for them to even use spells without calling forth the sacred words to invoke their arts.

It was a slightly unwieldy system since any one could hear what you were going to do before you did it. Will always thought it made things a little redundant at times.

Even as long as a century ago, some magi were able to cast spells without staves or even so much as speaking. This was the last great generation before people started to lose their powers.

Will had been severely punished when he had last tried to use magic without his staff. It was only a lightning spell, but the proctor of the test had sent him to solitary study in the basement detention. The system was a broken system at best that produced individuals with similar skill sets, but at the same time cut off any real growth of the arts.

As Will started back to his room, he knew he'd have to act quickly. Even getting past the gate sensors would be tricky. Then he'd need to pick up his staff. His pace quickened as he saw the school in the distance coming into view. His heart was really starting to pound with fear and excitement as he could

see the front gate.

One of the mentors had also gone out for a breather and looked at Will as he came back to the gate. "Out for a breath of fresh air, boy? Well, looks like it's time for afternoon sessions." He was one of the combat teachers who usually took charge of the trouble makers.

"Nice just to have some space to walk around," Will replied.

"Did you take time to practice your scatter shot spell? Last time your execution was good, but your aim was a bit off."

"Yeah, I'm still trying to get used to landing vectors. We just started that in my last year. First time I've used a spell that isn't horizontally aligned."

As Will walked through the gate, he started to tense up. His first steps were slightly hesitant as he watched the scanning lights switch colors from blue to red. With a mentor behind him, he would have nowhere to go.

He stopped as the lights changed back to blue and then to red, then the lights started flashing red angrily.

"What's wrong now?" the mentor asked as he stepped up to the gate.

The mentor stepped through and the lights went back to normal. Then Will walked through again. Normally the gate scanner simply picked up outside objects. Originally they had been designed to prevent students from carrying in illegal substances, particularly those for recreational use. It had been a problem among the older students, but sometimes the scanners had been known to pick up dust from the grimy cities and their debris.

The mentor turned and looked Will up and down. Seeing nothing out of place, he asked, "Did you go outside the walls?"

"I'm sorry, but... the food here just hasn't agreed with my stomach these days." Will was in a cold sweat hoping his quick lie would get him through.

"What's your name, rank, and class?" The mentor asked.

"I'm Will, third rank, class 939." Will responded to the question with rote memory. Every student memorized their rank and class at the academy. Ranks were assigned based on birth status. In Will's case, being the son of two non-magi, he had the lowest rank. Your class was the year in which you had been "introduced" to the school.

They called it an "introduction", but that was just a light way of saying Will had been kidnapped. Most of the third ranks, and a few second ranks, were kidnapped. Sterility was high in the first ranks (an unfortunate side effect from lifetimes of magic use). With so few born from 'pure' first rank stock, the last several decades had seen a push to keep the number of magi up. Too few and the non-magi populations might catch on to how loose their hold really was. Only about a third of the world's population had any ability. Some could be taught, but a lot was still dependent on how randomly 'gifted' one was by the genetic mutations in their body.

A global enchantment had been in place for awhile that could detect a magi anywhere in the arcane world, however it had some limitations in the non-arcane world. With some places nearly inaccessible due to the environment. Using a complex network of enchantments, the heads of the central ministry kept watch over vast portions of the population to find potential 'recruits'. However, there were still some who were just out of reach of the ministry's grasp. Those who weren't under constant surveillance were either criminal magi - usually on the run from authorities for unsanctioned use of magic, or at times revolutionaries who were rebelling against the heavily entrenched system.

From time to time, stories cropped up about distant accidents precipitated by rouge magi. What really made tracking impossible, besides the reach and limits of the arcane arts, was that those regions not being watched were notoriously dangerous by their own right. High cliffs, rough mountains trails, sparse dry deserts, or deserted islands far off into the Eastern Sea.

If finding outlaws was difficult, simply trying to bring them in alive was nearly impossible.

Yet, Will was certain that he had to do something. His panic stricken mind refused to settle down as he reached the door to his room. Thankfully, his roommates weren't present. He wasn't a bad guy, but they just didn't have much in common. He was also a third rank like Will, however he was more than willing to accept that he would one day take a job as one of the nameless magi who ran the global generators or maybe swing a faun or two and get a job as one of the many ministry bureaucrats who deliberated over appropriations, lobbying, and deciding whether or not to initiate harsh border restrictions.

Looking around for anything that might be of help, Will instinctively grabbed for his staff. His first had broken long ago during the first few years of his studies. He had been flogged twenty times for that, but almost everyone who was 3rd rank had used or inferior equipment.

This staff had taken him several tries to get right, but when he finished, he was more than satisfied with it's quality. He carried it in his left hand as he grabbed a bag and packed what few clothes he could spare. His shirt, pants, a pair of socks, his old boots, his cape, and finally his met-set.

He paused and took a deep breath to calm his nerves.

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