

A Single Stone...

Will's magical senses had always felt like a stagnant pool of water, but touching this stone gave him the suddenly, overwhelming sense of a flow - like there was suddenly more to explore - something to touch and discover. He had studied and worked to improve his prowess over these years, but he'd never felt a real *pull* in his arcane senses. In this world of grey monotony, the stone drew him away. It pulled in the way a cool fall breeze asks you to walk out into it and just... let... go...

And for once, Will felt as if 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 Myra'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.

There wasn't much on his mind besides getting out. He could feel the innate power in the aura of the stone, but that was the whole trouble: it was highly valuable. It was rare for an object to have this much arcane pull, especially in an outward direction. Will felt like it was pulling him away from the academy as well. Or maybe that was a projection. Maybe he had simply had enough of this place: the academy, the Grey World, the magi... All it's rules, it's rigidity, it's endless drum beat of rank and status...

The histories he had read always talked about the superiority of magi over non-magi, as if he had been fortunate to know the truth. The obvious truth was that the magi ran the world economies and governments. That he would be able to have a life that was free from the drudgery of a non-magi existence of daily physical toils. Yet that lifestyle was truly reserved only for the 1st rank elites: the ones who'd been born from generations of magi-related stock. The injustice of it all was enough to make escape seem like something that would be worth pursuing.

Remembering that his best chances lay in getting outside all the enchantments, Will knew this meant getting to the non-magi world outside the city. It was those thoughts running endlessly through his head as he walked quickly down the stair well, across the courtyard, through the back gates, and out to the main streets.

Surprisingly, at least from the magi perspective, was the sheer proximity they all lived to non-magi. Aside

from the illusions created by minor walling or barrier spells, the academy was situated only five blocks from the city main streets.

He was walking down the streets at a steady pace. There were several decent sized buildings, or at least tall enough to perhaps bring him to the range of the planetary barrier. It was this final barrier that kept the really large space debris from causing them any harm.

Sadly, it was also this "protection" that created a conflict with the ozone layer that would otherwise absorb harmful biological by-products. Ever since it's placement, the world had steadily grown grey as the skies were no longer free to move as nature had intended. It was odd how this control had brought the feeling as close to any casual observer.

The largest building was a local apartment complex that rose over twenty stories. If he could manage it, maybe the building's height would bring him close enough to the barrier that he could slip through it.

Finally he reached the top of the building. In the back of his mind, he thought about what would happen if this failed. The instructors would be livid at this perceived escape attempt. He would be viewed as little more than a criminal, a traitor, or both.

"It's a crazy idea," he thought to himself. Perhaps, but was death really any worse than a life in slow agony? Nights passed when he wondered about his parents... who they were... were they even alive? It had been so long though that they had probably moved on; just as Will had been forced to do.

The stone was in his pocket. Will took it out. For an instant, he thought about throwing it away, let someone else deal with it. But the thought never amounted to anything. No! He'd crossed the point of no return. There was no turning back. There was nothing to turn back to now. For the first time, Will was in charge of his own fate. Not some hereditary authority or an appointed instructor.

Will took a deep breath and pulled in all the air his lungs could bear to hold. His insides felt the waves of magical energy wash over as a surge began to overtake him. His body felt good: a warm feeling like after having a glass of wine. The old fetters of the academy were starting to loosen as his mind expanded out through the power of the stone. The vortex of beyond was calling, drawing him like the draining of a sink. He held tightly to his staff and the stone. Will thought he heard a soft whistling song; a song he'd never known had existed. A gentle touch, a free place where magic wasn't just rigid rules but living wild like the beasts of old.

Will raised his staff and thought of the words to the lightning spell. A rush of power came to first his right then left arms. It lifted him slightly. He put his hands together, clasping to both his staff and the stone.

The sky looked clear for once. Then the ground shuddered, shook, and fell away. Will could finally feel beyond the barrier. The fresh cool breeze of the autumn sky. It was a welcome chill. A light was growing from his right hand where the stone was. Soon it was blinding and Will had to close his eyes. He was reaching out blindly now.

Yet the light continued to grow stronger. Will couldn't feel anything beneath him anymore. But it was okay. The stone took control now. The powers of the stone overwhelmed Will's mind as he was finally pulled free of Myrah. He blacked out and fell into a peaceful rest.

For the first time in a very long time, Will dreamed. They were dreams without fear. He was cut free of the "Grey" past, the harsh overwatchers, the constant expectations. It was good. Will smiled and knew, even though what lie ahead would be difficult, he somehow knew that things were becoming much more interesting now.

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