

## Chapter 9: Road to ...

Both stood slowly from their grassy seats.

"We'll cover the basic-8 and foot work today. If you feel its too much don't be afraid to disengage or bow-out. At least you can live to fight another day." While Miila explained the basics of blocking and attacking she stretched out and got them ready.

"Now watch and repeat. 1!" Both Julia and Will repeated Miila's overhead blocking position.

"2!" Lower block position. Until they had covered a clock work of blocking positions, "Again!" Miila was enjoying the warm-up as Julia and Will tried to keep pace.

For a good few years Miila had been the team's personal trainer in combatives. With her sharpened feline reflexes it was easy work. Vulgurutt may have been the team's muscle, but Miila was a true fighter, and on more than one occasion she had been the one to get them out of some fairly tricky situations.

After lunch, Miila sat Julia and Will down for some advice. "Will, good positioning with your staff. Don't be afraid to put more force behind your blocks, enemies won't hold back, neither should you."

"Julia, lean-in more. This may be practice, but a weak stance shows fear. Some creatures out there can read that," Miila explained.

Finally after they felt a little rested Miila took them to a different part of the woods. There the trees were growing tall and straight, almost like a bamboo grove.

"This is to help put things to perspective," Miila talked as they stopped at a partially clear area with several large rocks sticking out.

"We'll be taking turns. I'm going to press an attack and you will use your blocking skills to evade. Feel free to use the grounds to your advantage, if you can." Miila then asked who wanted to go first. Julia hesitated a bit, but Will was feeling fairly confident. Before beginning his journey Will had had some basic training.

"Choose your position." Miila let Will pick his ground from which to defend from. Will looked around carefully; he'd need to find a way to reduce Miila's reach and slow down her movements. He settled on a large smooth rock to his left and several loose trees to his right.

"Good choice, Will. Shall we begin?" Will's staff was at the ready as she advanced. Miila began with a few quick probing strikes before switching to heavier blows. Will held his ground okay, but she was still just toying with him.

Finally Will switched to an offensive counter-strike, but she was ready. Miila blocked high and stepped-in to striking reach. "Gotcha!" He stopped as Miila was now just inches from striking. "Good first round, Will."

Julia's turn. She was feeling a tad nervous as her new friend stood opposite, in her battle stance, waiting for the first blow. She didn't care for violence at all, but didn't want to be a hinderance so decided to start

with an over head strike.

Miila read the move quickly and side-stepped. "Press the attack, Julia. One strike isn't enough." Julia decided to go for all or nothing and slashed to the side, hoping to catch Miila, but it was blocked again. But, Julia didn't stop this time. She threw herself at Miila trying every strike she could remember.

It was a new and exhilarating experience for Julia, who had spent most of her life surrounded by academia. She'd only ever read of fights and battles for her history courses, never been engaged in any contest like this. All the wasted years! There was the oddly refreshing feeling of directing 100% of your energy at something or someone that made all the worries of a regular life melt away...

Both Will and Julia were very sore at the end of their 2nd day of preparations.

After a few more rounds with Miila they had packed up and went back to the inn. The active day's practice had made them a bit more light-hearted about that morning's events and 'monsters.' The dinner looked and smelled so good to everyone who had been training. The stew broth simmered a salty and spicy tone of red, while the freshly cut fruits and greens tasted so good with the roasted meats. It was easy for them to see why wanderers preferred meat and stew dishes, the amount of energy they expended required a large heavy meal to recharge quickly.

"Ah, Will, my my, just who I was looking for!" Kadde rushed in with Jack and a package. "Have a look at your new clothes. Wanted you ready for tomorrow's leg of the journey." Kadde was insistant that Will try it on as soon as possible, so he was quickly sent up to their room to change.

Will thought the clothes a bit heavy at first, but after some final adjustments from Jack, it really started to settle down. Arm bands, shoulder rings, leather under-jerkin under a sable over tunic/robe, brown pants and dark brown boots. Finally, a cape, to denote his 'mystic' status. Actually the cape was more of an elongated robe, but much less fluttery. It was also sable-blue, but with silver and bronze colored edging.

"Wow. Very nice. I feel almost like a full Magus," Will said looking in a mirror.

"After what Kadde tells me about your mystical prowess, you may indeed be a Magus. Real fire-power eh?" Jack slapped Will on the shoulder. Will looked much more like part of a traveller now.

Walking down the stairs Will was a bit nervous, but mostly because he knew people would be looking and thinking about his new outfit.

"Hmmm, yes, yes. Indeed. A good fit. Quite dashing, Will." Kadde was very pleased. It had cost him more than he usually made on one trip for Will's outfit. Expensive, to say the least, but in his gut, Kadde knew now that Will was marked for a great journey, and simple clothes wouldn't do, he need an outfit to see him through the trials ahead.

"Dashing? Really Kadde, I'd say more heroic is the word. He looks almost like a combat mage." Miila could see why Julia probably had a little bit of a soft spot for Will. He wasn't ugly, in fact Will was fairly nice to look at; he was maybe a bit lean, but a quick study, and fairly talented magics user.

Julia could see something else though, a blurry ideal. Will looked like he had a purpose, the outfit was meant for someone motivated by a dream, a goal. Will looked like he belonged in that type of outfit.

They all enjoyed a hearty meal that night as they knew that the next day things would be a bit different

for them; no more comfy beds or hot meals. Lots of long paths, perhaps no paths at all.

The night's sleep was good. No strange feelings for either Will or Julia. Just the feeling of anticipation. Tomorrow the road awaited them. Kadde had mentioned leaving early, as early as final packing allowed. "The roads were best taken at the sun rises or earlier," Jack had said. "Cooler on the feet, and less to worry about. Most things don't wake or start trouble until dusk or night. Need to make as much progress as possible."

It was a slightly cool night, but every one slept well. Will and Jack, Miila and Julia, Kadde and Vulgurutt. The inn became quiet as the night passed and the sun began to rise again in the distance.

Vulgurutt was yawning his great toothy maw as they loaded his pack with all the essentials and extras for the road ahead. It was at least a week to the ruins, maybe more. Vulgurutt was feeling good, the meal still in his gut digesting, but now he was feeling well satisfied enough to hit the road.

"Wow, when you said early, you weren't kidding," Will said hefting his staff and a small pack. In the distance the sun had barely reached the edge of the horizon in an orange-yellow hue.

Miila took a stretching yawn as she pulled her arms left then right in a quick loosening stretch. She liked this time of day, the clearest, or at least it felt the clearest to her. Easier to spot threats or other things on the move. "Mmm, best time of the day, Will."

Julia definitely would have disagreed. It was hard getting up super-early, especially without coffee. "How do these people live with out latte?" she thought as she packed the last few things into a bag. She had had a good night's sleep... until Miila started waking her up. Miila tried the trick method of pushing Julia out of bed, but when that had failed Miila simply whipped the sheets off and jumped on the bed.

Must have been a good mattress because Julia bounced at least a foot or more and awoke mid-spring. It had been a mad-rush from there on out. Miila had a twisted sense of 'best'!

Finally Jack and Kadde walked out onto the entry viranda of the Inn. Jack had dressed as usually but Kadde had a funny mix of robes and instruments. His wings naturally stuck out the back of his clothes, as did his tail-feathers.

However, his legs were strapped with something that looked like spats or stirrups. His legs were wrapped in protective leather bindings to his ankles, which were then covered in hardened leather greaves. Well dressed for a professor.

"This is it. The final leg of the expedition. Several days and we'll be where we need to be. Will, Julia, I hope you will be able to learn something more of Ged before you are 'called' away again."

They all started walking East along part of the same road they had taken yesterday. The sun was starting to breach the skies and Julia felt the sun on the back of her neck.

A cool breeze picked up from the West, and they were on the road. It was fairly quiet for the first while or so before the chatter along the road began. Kadde and Jack discussed some of the landmarks to look for along the way; large piles of rock, road forks, copse of trees, abandoned towns, over grown road sections.

Julia and Will hadn't talked much for the past few days, it was a little annoying actually, Will thought. He

wanted to make sure Julia was ok. Will had been to 4 separate worlds now, he was starting to get an idea how to open his mind to different things.

“Hey, buddy. How are you doing?” It was Julia who sidled up to Will.

“Not bad. A little excited actually. We don't have any ruins on Myrah. The Ministry made it a point to demolish anything of cultural opposition some centuries ago. Can't have history contradicting absolute rule.”

“Oh. I wish I could have taken you to some Earth ruins. We have many still intact, even after a few thousand years.”

The road went on. Breakfast was – fast, lunch, the same. Yet, even the short meals didn't take away from the beauty and allure of the good weather and new surroundings. The hills and roads that seemed to dominate this part of Ged was, as Kadde explained, fairly normal.

“If we kept going South, or even East beyond the ruins, we'd reach the edge of Ulthusseë, this continent. If we really got lost we could just follow the straits. They run almost completely East / West.”

It was a little hard to believe Kadde, since all they'd really seen was trees, hills, rocks, roads, and some streams.

“It's the world. Not so small is it?” Kadde remarked. It made sense to Julia. Ged had no advanced technology; no buses, cars, or planes. By foot was the main way to travel. She was kind of glad to have that chance to see the world in a new perspective.

The first day's light was starting to dwindle as Kadde consulted several maps and charts. Will watched as Kadde cast what looked like a compass spell. A small glowing ball of blue with various points illuminated over a sheet with strange marks and calculations. “Hmm, need to make a course correction tomorrow, off by 2 degrees to the Northeast.” Kadde let the spell dissipate and he sent out Miila and Jack to scout ahead.

The rest of the team stayed put and double checked their packs as they waited. Kadde took out a few nuts to eat quickly as Vulgurutt simply stretched and looked around their road clearing.

“Not bad, quite good. We could camp here. Easy to defend or move,” He said. It had been a while since Julia had heard Vulgurutt speak, it caught her in a bit of a surprise. His voice had a heavy rolling sound to it, very unhuman.

“Perhaps, but let's hear from Miila and Jack. Never know if there are hidden nests of creepy crawlies.” Kadde didn't like to bed down until things were completely okay.

It was getting close to dark as Jack and Miila returned. “Nothing dangerous. Maybe a bear or a wolf, but nothing that would come to attack,” Jack said.

“Why?” Will was still just a little unsure of spending the night 'roughing it'.

“Most dangerous creatures tend to stay within a defined territory. Why go looking for trouble, especially along a road?” Jack explained. “Oddly, the most dangerous things out in the wide-world are usually very big or very magical in nature. Kadde would sense them or Vulgurutt would smell them.”

They unloaded their bedding along the road in a decent sized clearing. The sky was mostly clear except for some errant clouds drifting through the night sky. Julia vaguely recalled camping with her father years ago. It had been cold and wet, a lot of baggage and then the possibility of bugs.

Her thoughts halted about the past and a look at the vast sky above was a definite eye-opener for her. The stars seemed brighter on Ged, without its pollution and big cities like Earth, it was very different. The glowing dots of the great endlessness of space, some looked red, others orange or yellow. 'The constellations were so different on Ged!' Julia thought.

For Will this was very much as it had been on Mist, a vast open sea of stars spanning forever. 'Was this how Myrah used to look? Before the grey clouds?' Will thought as he let sleep over come him.

Julia had been right, cold again. The sun was getting above the horizon as she woke up. She noticed just how hungry she was as she saw Miila already packed and ready to go. "Light sleeper?" Julia asked. "Always, part of my nature," Miila replied.

"Hey Miila, could we get in a quick practice? Just need to think," Julia didn't know why, but she felt like practicing with Miila. A gut feeling. If she was now with Will for the long haul, maybe it'd be best to sharpen her other skills. Miila grinned and unstrapped a pair of practice swords. "Certainly. Remember, stay loose Julia."

It was a moment before both were standing opposite each other. Miila was going easy on Julia, she could tell. If Miila wanted to she'd move faster.

The blows were quick but light as Miila struck both right, then lower left. Julia tried hard to keep a fair length of space between her and Miila's reach, but it wasn't easy.

Soon the clacking of practice swords had woken the others up. Breakfast was a brief affair of bread, nuts, and cold meats and fruit. They had to keep moving in order to get to the ruins before the seasons changed. It was a race against time.

However, Will noticed something else, as the days went by. He liked hiking the lands of Ged, he was rather enjoying himself, being out in the 'wild' as some called it. Ged was so fascinating on so many levels. It was a diverse and complex world with so much natural beauty.

Myrah was not without 'wild' lands, but with so many different layers of security and detection, 'freedom' was not something most people of Ged knew.

Mist had been a gigantic forest with streams and hills, but he'd never taken the time to explore it much. It was vast greens and blues.

Earth, now there was someplace that could begin to compare. Earth had been a large diverse world with so much culture to absorb. In his time he'd read so much about its lands and seen so many pictures of great far away places.

Finally though, on Ged, Will could see the open lands far from civilization. As they crossed grassy fields of unsettled veldt, up into the foot hills that divided the lands. Each day brought them a dozen or more miles along ill-defined old roads, some over grown with mosses, others still in use by local villages.

As they neared the final obstical of their journey Will could see the steep rise of Mountains. Mountains...

The thought was exciting even just to be close to them. He'd read so much about mountains for so years but now he could see their cloudy and snow capped peaks in the distance.

'Majestic' was the word that first came to Will's mind. The craggy uneven faces of the peaks as they stood, great stone sentinels. It was at that thought the small stone, now in a chest pouch resonated, just a touch. 'Perhaps it had once been part of a mountain? Maybe this feeling of closeness to its kindred stirred a memory. A stone with a memory?' It did make Will think for a moment as they all continued to walk along the beaten road path.

That night they made camp in a stoney lean-to. They'd moved several large rocks by physical and mystical means to form a crude shelter. "We have one good & long trek through the mountain's pass about 5 miles from here as the crow flies." Jack said, checking maps with Kadde. "Yes, but we know it's not a straight path. It'll take at least the morning just to reach the pass entrance, then another day of careful navigating the rocky path between Nai'Guherda ("North guard") and Et'Miseis ('East Wind rocker')."

It was an uneasy sleep that night, as a cold wind beat down from the mountains, even the rocks couldn't keep out the howling sound of the night's chilly rasping. "The mountains are restless. They feel something stirring." Vulgurutt said. In the pit of his stomach Will wondered if his stone or his run-in with a master had created this omen.

The morning was unusually cold, Julia thought as she stirred from under her travel blanket. There was still a shifting breeze coming in from some unseen crack in the lean-to. Try as she might it was still chilling her so she woke up and took a look out side.

The first shock was the shallow crust of newly fallen snow. Snow from high over the mountains. The second shock was seeing something very large moving amidst the mountain peaks. It was large, larger than one of the peaks possibly, slowly and soundlessly shuffling through rocky faces with hardly a sound.

Julia quickly roused Miila, and then the rest of the troupe to take a quick look. Even from dozens of miles away they could see the craggy form shift between the pinnacles of the mountains, moving in some unseen valleys.

"The rumors are true. Looks like a Behemoth is on the move. Probably feeling restless after a few centuries," Kadde said as he took out a small note book and quickly sketched a picture of the creature.

"An omen, can't tell which," Vulgurutt thought out loud.

"That's a Behemoth? A monster?" Will wasn't quite sure.

"Certainly. They tend to inhabit mountain ranges, though most people rarely have a chance to be this close. Often they shift at night, less trouble." Kadde said calmly.

"And this is considered a sacred monster on Ged?"

"Oh Indeed."

"How do they sustain themselves? Why can't we sense them through Arcana?" Will was very curious how something so big could create such little stirring both physically and magically.

"Good questions, Will." Kadde set into lecture mode.

"There is one theory that states; since monsters are living arcana of this world they can mute themselves from most sources, as easily as I mute my voice. Like an arcane vacuum, they create a suction that stifles any reactions nearby. Amazing really. And here I am to see it." Kadde finished his quick notes.

"Still, daylight is wasting boys. Let's get going," Miila said as the rest snapped out of their stupor.

They packed up and took to the now mostly dirt and rock road ahead.

The five miles to the pass didn't feel like five, but rather fifteen in Will's mind. The road was horribly rough and uneven, there were numerous holes all around and it was hard not to trip in one.

The pass was cut between two large hillsides that created a zig-zag of dirt and rocks. They all sat for a quick bite from their packs.

"The last stretch. Finally." Jack was getting tired of the long road almost as much as Will. His specialty was spy-work and information, not slogging over long paths. He knew it had its downsides; adventuring. But so far, the rewards had been consistent. And even if the ruins lacked any major prizes, any thing useful would get a nice pay-out. They were looking more for confirmation and data - not shiny artifacts. Artifacts could be stolen or broken, but information was easier by far...

They prepared for the pass, but this time everyone was told to double check their weapons. "Eye out for nasties," Miila said as she re-adjusted her leather armor and asked Julia to do the same. "Easy spot for an ambush. Narrow, downwind, and structurally unstable." She pulled out her staff, which now sported reinforced tips at each end, and they looked like business.

If the first five miles of the day had been rough, the road along the pass was even more so. The road was strewn with large rocks and boulders. Carrying their packs now was getting hard since the road was now heading up over a large ridge.

"Obviously we can't take it head on, too steep. Need to take it at an angle," Vulgurutt mentioned.

Will was starting to see how a mountain could quickly lose its charm. Seeing from a distance was nice, but going over it felt like his legs were being beaten by sticks. Despite his magus training on Myrah, this really was much harsher, realer experience, than he had thought. The path simply continued to climb.

That was when it hit. Several large rocks began tumbling down the upper reaches of the mountain side and Will could see it. "Cover!" Vulgurutt roared out as everyone scrambled for a safer place behind rocks or under cover.

Kadde jumped off the highest point of the ridge and glided to a safer part of the cliff side. The jump shocked Will and Julia until they saw him drifting effortlessly on an updraft, remembering, and feeling very silly, that Kadde had wings.

Jack faded into the back ground of the cliff to avoid detection, leaving only Miila, Will, Vulgurutt, and Julia to deal with the creature that had caused the rock-slide. It quickly slithered its way down the many rocky spires of the cliff-way. Julia wasn't sure how to identify it. She'd never seen any thing like it. Its body was certainly serpentine in shape and dimensions, but the long legs that allowed it to descend the rocky face of the mountain looked almost insectile.

"What is it?" Julia asked, hoping for some idea of its nature.

"Don't know, don't care!" Miila was in no mood to play baby sitter. This was a bad road, and everyone hopefully knew that. Not the place to face off with a nasty creature that was hungry.

The creature stopped on the path behind them, pushing them ahead. It let out a loud, high pitch screech hoping to make one of them flinch, but Vulgurutt, Miila, Will, and Julia held firm. Julia remembered from all her text books, never panic in a dangerous situation. Especially as a care-giver. If a medical personnell panicked, it may be the difference between life and death.

Will quickly went through a list in his head, 'Which spell would give us the best chance?' He didn't want to give the monstrosity a chance to think. Remembering the practices with Kadde he had an idea. Quickly summoning his energies he materialized a sparking-light orb, just one this time.

The sound of crackling energy distracted everyone for a moment, even the creature hesitated a bit. "Miila, duck!" Will let his carefully aimed shot fly. The creature took the orb clean in the head and let out a scream of pain. One of its four eyes was now burned shut from the impact.

Sensing an opportunity Vulgurutt charged with his sword but one of the creatures fore limbs blocked the blow as one of its other limbs slashed back at Vulgurutt.

He took the hit in full force, but in stead of backing out, pushed back harder.

The creature tried to make a bite at Vulgurutt, but Miila could see the positioning and struck with all her feline strength. She let out a roar of rage and smashed down on the creature's head with her battle staff. There was a sharp snap as the staff cracked, or the creature's skull cracked? Will couldn't be sure. Either way Will knew Vulgurutt was making the sacrifice play by holding the beast in place.

To make it plain, Vulgurutt locked his large reptilian jaws on the creature's fore-leg, making sure it wouldn't be distracted.

Will knew he had a clear shot at the creature's body, but he'd need precision, something he'd been working on for a while now. Breathing deeply he summoned almost a dozen crackling orbs of sparking energy.

The creature tried to swipe Vulgurutt free from its fore-legs, but Miila was lunging at its head keeping it from gnashing down on her friend. "Can't fight the croc if your face is busy, eh?" She was almost enjoying herself. Something about danger got her blood boiling in a way most things could not.

The orbs were rotating in a circle as Will focused on directing each to a different part of the creature. 'Make it impossible to handle 12 at once!' The orbs flew out into the air - then re-directed at different spots all along the creature; a few along the tail and body, the legs and arms, the back, and at least one in the under belly. That was it!

Flailing and fighting back from the group, it let out one last scream of frustration and pain as it slithered and scurried away. It partially rolled off part of the road as Vulgurutt fought free from his death-lock grip.

A few seconds of scurried, hurried running and the creature had removed itself from range of Miila's smell and hearing. Everyone was frozen, waiting for anything else to pop-up, yet nothing else came. Miila let out an exhausted laugh as Vulgurutt dusted himself off.

"Ha, ha. Will! That was impressive!" Miila said tiredly. "Well done." Vulgurutt said stretching out, checking himself over for injuries.

Vulgurutt had taken the brunt of the creatures anger in the encounter. His arms and upper-body were cut-up fairly bad as well as what sounded like cracked ribs from the way he was breathing in raspy breaths. He sat down for a moment to rest. Julia quickly came forward to see if she could do anything. It was odd, Vulgurutt up-close had an almost crocodilian anatomy; stocky bone structure, heavy muscular build, and a very slow pulse rate even after the fracas they had been in. She was amazed to see his wounds slowly scaling themselves over. His scales were strong, and even from the osteoderms on his back he must have been over 100 years old.

They heard a swooping sound behind them, and Kadde landed back on the mountain side road. "Excuse me, Julia. This is where I do my thing." Kadde quickly pulled out a strange stick and beads and began chanting in a low tone. A soft bluish-green light emerged and Vulgurutt's injuries started to seal themselves back-up. "How are you doing, old friend?" "Tolerable. Could've been worse without Will. I've seen offensive arcana before, but this was impressive."

It had been nearly a half-hour since the attack had disrupted their trek and Vulgurutt was about ready to start the final push. Jack reappeared with good news as well. "We're about half a mile from the summit. After that it gets easier." "Where did you slink-off to?" Miila pointedly asked. She knew it was his job to gather information, but his timing had been bad today.

"Miila, this is not the time or place. We need to make cover. First things first." Vulgurutt said as he stood up. It was then that he noticed his back pack was missing. "Shoot. Must've fallen over." Vulgurutt's pack had housed most of the food and excavation equipment.

"Hmm, we'll just have to tighten our belts. Improvise and hope for a little luck." Kadde knew they were close to the ruin and they had been in situations like this before.

They began hiking up the mountain path again, this time at a slightly faster pace. The sun was starting to crest over the mountain tops and within an hour or so it would start to get dark.

It was after they crossed the ridge summit that Vulgurutt began humming a strange tune.

"Friends of far do not fear, For we've been through roads worsen here. The rock, she's old and bitter cold Long she's seen these trails mold. Can't help but feel she is right you see Older than the bones that run through me. Away, Away we cannot stay, the rock'll fall and block our way!"

It was a strange song he sang, but it helped them stay focused on walking farther along and ahead. They could look back and see the mountain trail growing smaller and farther away. "Till the sun sets today friends. Need to get as far from that rock as we can. Some creepy crawlies can be a bit persistent."

Kadde hadn't taken a part in the fray, but no one would have thought he wasn't still the boss. He had the maps and was the only accomplished arcane healer present. Like today's incident had proved, in valuable.

Finally they could see that they were a good few miles away from their mountain road crossing point and decided to set up camp. "I'm sorry every one, no fires tonight. Can't risk it. Bundle-up." Will was fairly cold from the drain the attacks had put on him, so he simply wrapped as tight as he could.

Inside their shelter they took stock of their supplies. There was enough for a few more days, but they would need to hunt for a fresh meal at least once, or hope for ideal fishing. No one slept a particularly sound night, but at least they could sleep in relative cover and safety.

When morning did come, Will woke earlier than usual. The sun was still an hour or so from rising when Julia quietly crept out of the shelter. They both took a seat on a large rock over looking the open lands before them.

“Hey.” “Hey.” They both said. “It's been quite the journey hasn't it?” Julia said. “Indeed it has. 4 worlds and still I'm not sure about things yet.” Will was feeling a bit lost still. He'd started his journey to escape the dull grey of his world, but there was something else now, but he couldn't quite put it together.

“How are you holding up, Julia?” She'd been thinking a lot about what was probably going on back on Earth, yet she felt that this journey was teaching her so much more than any of her classes could. “I miss my home a little, but I feel like this is my journey, just like its yours,” She said. “I just wish I knew more about where its all going. There's still some thing I don't understand.” Will still felt a little anxious from the previous days events, and Julia could tell he was suffering from some form of traumatic-stress.

“Will, it'll be okay. You're alive today. We're all alive because of you. They all feel grateful for your help, don't forget that. We got to see another day because of your courage to stand your ground.”

“But I'm not sure where I want to go from here...” Will sounded still stressed. He just couldn't figure out what he wanted to do with the stone. “We have today. Let's just do that okay? One day at a time, Will. All we ever have is now.” Julia wanted to make him calm down a bit.

Will felt Julia hug him. It was calming. Warm. He felt better. He took a deep calming breath, remembering what Hiram had taught him all those months ago. The sun come up over the line of trees in the horizon. They were past the worst.

Down in the valley below the shine of the sunlight hit something polished and it shone in the morning light. Finally, the ruins of the clock-makers.

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*Author's notes:* 1. The Resonance of the Stone (Foreshadowing) When the group is approaching the mountains and Will feels his stone resonate, you can use this to introduce the physical toll of arcana.

The Idea: Instead of just a fleeting thought, make the stone's resonance physically jarring. The “memory” of the mountain hits Will like a static shock or a sudden migraine—a raw “arcana touch” from Ged's natural magic.

The Integration: Will might stagger slightly or grip his chest pouch in pain. Julia notices, and without thinking, places a hand on his arm or shoulder to steady him. The moment she makes physical contact, the sharp, overwhelming frequency of the stone dampens into a manageable, warm hum. It gives Will a subtle clue that her presence acts as a buffer for his magical senses.

2. The Toll of the 12 Orbs (The Breaking Point) During the Behemoth fight, Will channels a massive amount of energy to summon and control twelve separate orbs. This is the perfect place to show the danger of the arcana touches.

The Idea: Channeling that much raw, foreign magic overloads Will's nervous system. As the orbs form, you could describe the arcana burning his veins or threatening to fragment his focus. He's on the edge of losing control of the spell, which could be disastrous.

The Integration: Amidst the chaos, Julia's voice cuts through the arcane static. Because she stays so calm—relying on her caregiver instincts—her steady voice gives Will the anchor he needs. He visualizes her calm demeanor, which allows him to parse the chaotic arcana and direct the strike with perfect precision.

3. The Morning After (The Payoff) The final scene where Will wakes up anxious is perfectly set up for this lore. Right now, he is dealing with traumatic stress, but you can blend that psychological stress with the physiological hangover of using so much magic.

The Idea: Will isn't just feeling lost; he is suffering from “arcana sickness.” The lingering magic from the fight is still sparking under his skin, leaving him feeling frayed, overstimulated, and disconnected from reality. It's the peak of his arcana touches.

The Integration: When Julia hugs him, make the grounding effect literal. As she wraps her arms around him, the erratic, buzzing magic in his system finally finds an outlet. Earth is a world largely devoid of this kind of magic, making Julia the perfect grounding wire. Her non-magical nature (and their emotional bond) draws the excess arcana out, allowing Will's mind and body to finally integrate the experience safely. He realizes in that moment that he isn't just comforted by her—he genuinely needs her to survive the toll this journey is taking on his body.

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