

Mage of Souls

# ELITE MAGE

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Michael William Goodman

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## DEDICATION

To my new readers, may your imaginations run wild with your own stories. I look forward to sharing my worlds with you now and in the future.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank everyone who has stuck with me, especially my father, who has been a huge supporter of my love of fantasy and books in general, as well as going through the pain of becoming my editor and helping me publish. I also want to thank my wife for always pushing me to follow my dreams.



## Chapter

# 1

The shrill sound of squeaking brakes forced me from the deep nap I was enjoying. My body rocked back and forth as the creaky train I had been on for the past 32 hours began to slow. The grogginess of a deep sleep took a couple of tries to blink away. I stretched my arms above my head, letting out a loud yawn. A few vertebrae popped satisfyingly as I twisted my stiff body to the side, looking out the window. We were pulling into a large train station that looked as dark and dead as the city outside. A thick covering of clouds made the night even darker. As we entered the station, the city was replaced with concrete walls and empty benches. With one final jerk, the train came to a stop. A large clock hanging on the station wall read 2:34 AM.

"Now arriving at Eledor. Now arriving at Eledor." The robotic voice of the static-filled train conductor rang out over the broken loudspeaker. The sound of restless passengers filled the hall outside my door.

I leaned forward, pulling a pair of black leather boots on my feet and lacing them up. They ended halfway up my shin and were polished so clean that I could see my reflection in the toes. I stood up and flattened the wrinkles in my black pants, ensuring my maroon button-up shirt was tucked in. Lifting my arms high for one last good stretch, I grabbed the jacket off the hanging hook and slid it over my shoulders. It was a sleek black jacket that came down to just above my knees with seven large silver buttons running down the middle.

I took a second to tidy myself up, paying extra attention to the black and silver badge on my chest. After I was content, I squatted a little in front of the small mirror on the wall. I was almost six feet tall, which was no giant, but this mirror had to have been made for someone much shorter.

My reflection looked a little haggard, but that was to be expected after a long journey. I had deep shadows under my eyes that looked about as colorful as a puddle of mud that deepened my brown eyes. Two days of uncomfortable travel would do that to you. I rubbed the stubbly skin on my chin, listening to the scratchy sound of my less than impressive 5 o'clock shadow I was sporting, even after two days of not shaving. I had once hoped to be able to grow a beard like my father, but at the rate I was going, it would take a full year to come in. I ran my thumb over a small scar on my chin that was slightly hidden by the hair; it was a trophy of my first right hook at the academy. I did my best to flatten the wild sandy beach color of unkempt hair into something resembling professionalism. Once it was somewhat acceptable, I stood up and gave myself one last once over. Everything looked good, but the sleeves on my button-up were a little tight. Not only had I gone through more than one growth spurt over the past few years, but I had continued to put pounds of muscle on, giving my clothes a hard time keeping up with me.

I was happy with the state of my uniform and pulled the backpack I was traveling with over my shoulder, taking one last look around and ensuring I didn't leave anything behind. The small private room I had been traveling in had a nice setup with a small table, bench, and bed. It was the only thing that made the travel a little more bearable.

After triple-checking the room and finding nothing, I pulled the thin metal sliding door that was doing a poor job of dimming the loud hallway packed with passengers. People shuffled through like lost penguins, dragging luggage of every size as they attempted to exit the train. I waited patiently as the line slowly moved forward, doing my best to ignore the uneasy glances of the passengers around me. I saw their eyes shoot from the badge on my chest to my face and then away, avoiding further eye contact. One lady even went so far as to pull her child in front of her, dragging them over her suitcase like a doll. I pretended not to notice, focusing on a point in the distance.

It took a few minutes to exit, and I was thankful to finally



step off the train. Anything was better than the tight hallway that seemed to get hotter and stuffier with each passing second. I took a deep breath, filled my lungs with the semi-fresh cool air of the train station, and exhaled out of my mouth, watching the steam drift up into the air. The crowd around me all headed in the same direction, pulling me towards the station exit. Even in the early morning hours, there was the chatter of families reconnecting with loved ones and grandparents meeting their grandchildren. I glanced around the families and saw a line of taxis off to my right, waiting for the off-going passengers. I headed over to the first one and got in.

"Where are we heading?" The taxi driver asked, turning around to face me with a charming customer service smile plastered on his face. His bright green eyes and jet-black hair made my muddy brown eyes look basic. He looked me up and down, landing on the badge; his smile faded immediately.

"Take me to 'The Gate,' please," I replied, returning the smile.

He turned around quickly, muttering a reply, and pulled into the street. A painfully awkward silence engulfed the taxi as we headed down the empty road. I tried to make small talk, asking about the city and the weather. After I got nothing but a one-word answer for each question, I tried entertaining myself by looking out the window but quickly grew bored. The city was all but dead in this early hour. There were no lights or signs on in the dark buildings we passed, and besides the occasional bundle of rags where a homeless person was hiding from the cold, the streets were otherwise empty.

I looked forward at the driver; he glanced up in the mirror and locked eyes with me. Panic shot through his eyes, and he looked forward, his posture becoming as stiff as a board. I noticed for the first time that he had sharp, pointed ears, not long enough to be an Elf but more pointed than any Human. Looking closer, I could see a thin line of what looked like blue scales around his hairline, shimmering off the occasional streetlight. It was a unique trait that I hadn't seen before. I thought back to the mound of literature I had been forced to

learn. Out of everything I had read, the closest description was that of a half-djinn. Djinnns were a quiet race of powerful magic users who spent most of their time alone and in seclusion, but there were cases where they made their way into larger cities and fell in love. The result of this love was driving my taxi, a half-blood djinn.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, reaching inside me and looking for the small core of power as I had a hundred times before. I could feel the power located in my head. It felt like a balloon filled to its bursting point with energy, just waiting to flood out. I grabbed ahold of my mana core and pulled the thinnest thread out like a stream trickling from a massive lake. A buzz of energy filled my body as I let the stream of mana flow over my eyes.

I slowly opened my eyes as the mana passed over them, coating them with magic. The world seemed to grow sharper and more focused. I was able to count the individual hairs on the back of the driver's head and each stitch in the seat fabric. A soft grey light radiated from the driver, floating off him like a fine powder dissipating as it left his body. He was part djinn alright; the grey light surrounding him was the magical aura that creatures of magic produced just by breathing. It is what makes certain races innately powerful; they are one with the magic of the world. Of course, not everyone who possessed mana could use it, but for races like the djinn, it was part of them. Because of that, they tended to be faster and stronger than your average person. From the low levels of energy that he was giving off, I doubted that he used magic very often, if ever.

Being able to see the flow of mana in the air was something that was unique to me. It was a product of the special location of my mana core. Most people had their core in their lower abdomen or near their heart, but mine was in my head. This allowed me to coat my eyes with little or no effort. If someone else tried to do this, they would need to use a lot more force to maintain the flow of mana. If they made even the slightest mistake, it could easily lead to permanent blindness. Of course, for me, there was still a risk of injury if I overused it, but I had

trained it and been careful to keep it in check.

As my eyes began to burn from the constant flow of mana, I released the flow and let it slide back into my core. I blinked back tears as my eyes adjusted to normal again and looked out the window. Beads of sweat began forming on the back of the driver's neck. I think my intense staring at the back of his head made him nervous.

He was extremely quiet during the rest of the journey and made sure to minimize any unnecessary movements, acting more like a robot than a person. After a few miles, I noticed that he was driving under the speed limit as if he were afraid that I would attack him if he caused me any discomfort. The slow progress was more irritating than the silence, but I held my tongue and stared out at the empty streets.

Thanks to the cab drivers overly cautious driving skills, what should have been a 15-minute drive took over 20. I let out an audible sigh of relief when we came to a stop and threw the door open. I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out some small bills, placing them in the money slot between the front and back seats. The driver flinched when I did, making me wonder just how bad an impression he had of me.

"Oh, no, sir. The ride is free for you." The half-djinn stammered with a panicked tone, refusing to look at me.

"It's fine. Keep the tip." I said warmly, closing the door as I stepped out of the cab, not giving him time to say anything back. I heard him mutter something that sounded like thanks before he sped away. He drove off and turned the street corner, disappearing from view faster than he had driven the entire time I was in the cab. Shaking my head, I turned and faced the concrete building where I had been dropped off.

It was a large concrete building painted bright white in an attempt to give it a friendly atmosphere. It was a tough sell with the barred-up windows and constant patrol of armed guards walking outside the building in pairs. There were no signs on the building itself but a large metal sign at the base of the stairs leading up to the front doors with bronze lettering, 'The Gate. 1752 Frontier Drive.' It was a government-owned and operated building that acted as a massive travel hub.

I headed toward the stairs and stopped when I stepped on something crunchy. Under my foot was the tattered remains of a protest sign that had been left by someone. It had a pair of wings and a faceless head with pointed ears inside a large red circle with a slash through it. Above the image, written in bright red letters, was, 'wings and pointed ears have no place on EARTH.' Pro-human protestors were often seen outside buildings like this. Even though it had been a few hundred years, there were still Humans who didn't like people of other races. Of course, it did go both ways sometimes. I scoffed and kicked the sign to the side, stepping past it.

I made my way up the 20 or so stairs, looking around. At least eight pairs of guards stood outside the building, each attentive and keeping a watchful eye on the surroundings. A pair of them passed me on patrol halfway up the stairs. I could see their eyes shift to my chest and then back to my face as they stiffened and quickened their pace a little. I shook it off and headed inside the building.

The inside was the exact opposite of the shell of the building. It was incredibly colorful and bright enough to catch me off guard compared to the city's darkness outside. I blinked against the bright white lights as I entered a large lobby. Once I got past the shock, the room had a warm, welcoming feel to it. To one side of the lobby, soft-looking sofas lined the wall with coffee tables in front of each one. A few comfortable-looking chairs were scattered around the area, and plants were tucked into the corner of the room, giving off a very home-like vibe. To my left were four vending machines, and to my right, the far wall had information boards on it.

I scanned the room and took it all in; five people were scattered around, waiting quietly. The room's far end had a counter with one employee sitting behind it with their head down. I could barely see the man's head as I approached the desk and questioned if he was sleeping. The sound of a turning page let me know he was awake. I stepped up and got my first look at the gentlemen behind it. He was a short man with shaggy brown hair that covered his eyes. He wore a bright blue polo with the words "The Gate at Eledor" embroidered on

the left pocket. His head was lazily resting on the palm of his hand as he flipped through a magazine.

"How many travelers?" He asked with a bored tone, not looking up.

"Just one, please," I said, slowly getting irritated by his poor customer service skills.

"45 dollars, please. Gate leaves in," He glanced at the small clock on the counter, making as little movement as possible. "52 minutes."

I pulled the badge off my chest and set it on the money tray. He reached up lazily, groaning as if my presence alone was the bane of this night. The badge slid off the metal tray with a scraping sound; he looked it over. There was a brief moment of confusion as he glanced from the badge and up to my face. I gave him a warm smile and waited patiently for him to go through the phases of recognition. It took three looks between me and the badge as his brain slowly began turning. Finally, he snapped his back straight in a very professional manner.

"M-my apologies, officer. I didn't notice you were there. Let me print out your ticket." He stammered and began scrambling around the desk. After a few minutes of clicking on a keyboard, a thin ticket printed out and was handed to me. I took it and looked down at him, waiting.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, officer?" He asked, clearly worried.

"I could use my badge back, please," I said pleasantly, holding back my overwhelming irritation.

"Oh, my gods, yes, of course. Here you go." He said, scooping up the badge and handing it back to me. I nodded in thanks and took the badge back. One perk of this job was that it gave me free travel on all government-run transportation; trains, airships, taxi cabs, and the gate were just a few of them.

I bobbed the badge in my hand, running my fingers over the smooth edge while taking a lap around the lobby. The right side was decorated entirely floor to ceiling with a giant storyboard labeled "The Great Merge." I pocketed the badge and stopped in front of the first board, which was titled "The

Brief History:

'IN THE YEAR 2032 OF THE OLD CALENDAR, THE EARTH EXPERIENCED CATAclysmic CHANGES THAT SHOOK THE PLANET TO ITS VERY CORE. THE GREAT MERGE BEGAN CHANGING THE COURSE OF HISTORY AND EVERYTHING THAT WE KNEW. THE FOUR WORLDS, ETHERRA (EARTH), RELEXIT, CAVALON, AND THE VOID, COLLIDED TOGETHER, LINKING ONE ANOTHER THROUGH GATES. THESE PORTALS OPENED THE WORLDS TO ALL THE POSSIBILITIES OF EACH OTHER FORMING FRIENDSHIPS AND ADVANCEMENTS.'

There was a symbol under the paragraph of the four spheres connected with a thick tube of moving black glitter to symbolize the gates that linked all of the worlds. There was a golden sphere symbolizing Cavalon. The paragraph next to that world read:

'CAVALON IS HOME TO THE CENTINALS, SPIRITS, AND THE FAMOUS FLOATING CITIES. CAVALON IS KNOWN FOR ITS BIOLUMINESCENT OCEANS, MILE-TALL FORESTS, AND WINDSURFING ALONG THE FLYING MOUNTAINS.'

Next to the planet was a picture of two Centinals, a man and a woman wearing white and gold clothes. Both were beautiful and angelic in appearance; they had skin as dark as night with four massive snow-white wings that extended from their backs. Because of their beauty and wings, they were mistaken for angels in the early days. It is said that you would never be able to find a Centinal that wasn't beautiful beyond words. Both of them were suspended in the air, caught mid-flight for the picture. What the picture didn't do justice to was the size of Centinals. On average, they were roughly eight feet tall, towering over most humans and elves.

I moved on to the next orb, which was light green. Relexit.

'RELEXIT IS HOME TO ELVES, OGRES, AND BEAST PEOPLE. MOST OF THE WORLD IS COVERED WITH MASSIVE

DENSE FORESTS. THIS EXTENSIVE WILDERNESS OF RELEXIT PROVIDED NEW PLANTS AND HERBS THAT LED THE WORLDS INTO A NEW ERA OF MEDICINE. '

The picture next to this planet was of two elven dignitaries who had come over to Earth during one of the first official peaceful meetings. Relexit was called the land of fantasies. The Elves were the most populous and were named the leading race, but they were not the only inhabitants. Dwarves, ogres, imps, goblins, beast peoples, and many other races lived there.

I looked closer at the picture. Both of the Elves in the photo were wearing green suit jackets and had golden blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, keeping it off their long-pointed ears. Both of the female Elves were incredibly beautiful and made the Human ambassadors next to them look like goblins.

I moved to the third orb, which was a deep black. The Void:

'THE VOID IS HOME TO SPIRITUAL BEINGS, GHOSTS, AND OTHER BODILESS FORMS THAT WANDER THE ENDLESS EXPANSE OF THEIR WORLD. LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THE VOID BEYOND THE FACT THAT THOSE WHO HAVE RETURNED FROM IT EITHER LOST THEIR MINDS OR WERE TOO SCARED TO REPORT THEIR FINDINGS.'

There was no picture next to the planet since it was difficult to get a good picture of mostly translucent or downright invisible ghost-like creatures that lived in the Void. The final orb was a more detailed image of Etherra. There was no paragraph next to the little Etherra or pictures, so I moved along the wall, reading the rest. The following section had pictures of natural disasters, buried cities, and panicked citizens.

'THE GREAT MERGE CAUSED A MASSIVE CHANGE IN THE EARTH'S CLIMATE SYSTEM, LEADING TO THE MOST SEVERE WEATHER PHENOMENA THE HUMAN RACE HAD EVER SEEN. MASSIVE HURRICANES ENGULFED ENTIRE COUNTRIES,

TORNADOES AND EARTHQUAKES SHOOK THE LAND, AND INFRASTRUCTURE WAS DESTROYED ALL OVER THE WORLD. THE INCREASE IN SEISMIC ACTIVITIES CAUSED AN UNPRECEDENTED NUMBER OF EARTHQUAKES AND VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS. THE DEATH TOLL OVER THE NEXT YEAR REACHED OVER 1 BILLION PEOPLE, LEAVING MORE THAN 85% OF THE WORLD'S REMAINING POPULATION WITHOUT A HOME.'

It was a brief synopsis of what had happened. Before the first publicly recorded gate appearance, the Earth was plagued with storms and natural disasters that had never been seen on the planet in the last few million years. On top of what they said, there were massive floods that swept away homes, and windstorms destroyed crops, leading to an increase in world hunger. The winters were longer and colder, and the summers were without rain. It was indeed a terrible time on Earth. Below the explanation were pictures of destroyed homes and cities; there was a second section with a picture of a skyline that was splattered with deep purples, reds, blues, and grey colors as if a child went crazy with a paint set. The paragraph underneath the picture read:

After more than a year of horrific natural disasters, the first gates began to emerge, connecting to each of the other three worlds. The opened gates flooded the Earth with mana. Each world possesses a different type of atmospheric mana, and the clash of them mixing created a new phenomenon not seen in any of the worlds known as mana storms. These beautifully colored storm clouds created storms that completely wiped out all electricity worldwide, plummeting Humans into darkness.

During all of this, as humanity attempted to survive the destruction of the world, gates started to appear in various locations around the globe. The first recorded gate appeared in the old city of Hong Kong, China, and later reports of gates in San Francisco, California; Sydney, Australia; Paris, France;



and London, United Kingdom. These were just the first to appear; over the next few decades, more and more gates were reported in various locations worldwide.

The next section of the wall was a large picture that looked closer to a hieroglyphic of an Elf and a Centinal stepping out of gates on either side of Humans. I lazily scanned over the paragraphs. They described that once the storms began to calm down, there was the first contact with the Elven and Centinal races out of their perspective gates. We later found out that the appearance of the gates had caused similar destruction on each of the other worlds. However, in the beginning, communication between the races was almost impossible, and the belief that each other had caused the devastation that came with the appearance of the gates led to an unprecedented war. Records were hazy on which world started the war, but the fighting that ensued lasted for 200 years, with all sides taking massive damage. This time in history was rightfully labeled as the two-hundred-year war.

Eventually, a peace treaty was drafted and agreed on between the worlds, excluding the void, which had no one race to represent it. That led to an unsteady peace between the worlds that has lasted over the past 200 years. It was only after the war that Earth was renamed Etherra, which was closer to Terra, which the other planets were calling Earth at the time.

I grew bored with the history lesson and left the wall for an empty couch, which I sunk into. I set my backpack down between my legs and unzipped it, rummaging around, looking for a large envelope. The pages inside were the culmination of the past four years of training I had done. I pulled out the certification of completion as an Elite Mage.

The history on the wall was missing many things, like the fact that at the beginning of the war, the so-called modern weapons the humans had were practically useless against the magic that both the Elves and Centinals used. Anyone with even a tiny amount of mana could block a bullet. Missiles and explosives were hard to control with no guidance systems, leaving the human race at a massive disadvantage. It didn't take

long of getting our asses handed to us, that humans began to learn how to use magic and finally started to level the playing field.

Once everything calmed down and the treaty between the worlds was formed, a new form of government was needed that was inclusive across all of the worlds. Delegations and committees were set up, containing members of all the world's major races, to try to maintain diplomatic relations with everyone. It was a very long and challenging task where each world wanted to retain its ways while allowing travel and trade between the gates. After many years and many close calls, we arrived at the working situation that we have today.

The creation of the Mage Association, tasked with controlling, monitoring, and regulating the use of magic, helped maintain this new peace and deal with any new problems that may arise. The new issues that came with the blending of the worlds needed to be met with an even stronger force. A group was created to act as a special forces unit to deal with any misuse of magic; they were called Elite Mages.

Elite Mages were tasked with upholding all magical laws, investigating any magic-related incidents, and dealing with a new form of magical terrorism that had started to appear. This included magical beasts, dark magic, curses, illegal potions, illegal trade and sale of magical goods and tools, magical fight clubs, and a plethora of other issues that appeared over the years. As a newly graduated Elite Mage, this responsibility was now on my shoulders.

I pulled out the badge from my pocket, rolling it over in my hand. It was a circular badge about 3 inches in diameter with a silver Octagram in the center. Each long point of the star touched the edges of the circle. In the spaces between each point was a small icon of either a planet or a type of magic, alternating between the two. It represented the four worlds linked between the portals and the four main types of magic. The planets were represented with colored gems that matched the information board. In between each world were the symbols of a skull for Necromancy, a rune for Rune Magic, a small drop of blood for Curses, and a fireball for casting magic.

In the center of the Octagram were three large blood-red slash marks that symbolized me being an Elite Mage.

I leaned back on the couch, holding the badge up to the light. The silver glimmered as I moved it side to side. It had been an exhausting few years to get to this point, so much so that it almost didn't feel real that I graduated. I was okay with it now, but in the beginning, I struggled with the fact that I was not given an option and was forced into this line of work. Elite Mages were supposed to be able to fight any strong and powerful opponent or group that popped up. This meant that we needed to have a trump card of our own that allowed us to be a step above the rest. It was that trait that led me down the road I was currently on.

Magic had become such a large part of society that being able to use and control magic could set you up for a bright and lucrative future. Not everyone was able to use magic; humans were one of the worst races when it came to magic use, having about 8% of the population able to use it. Elves and Centinals were at the higher end with around 40%. However, regardless of race, everyone is given a magical evaluation around the age of 12.

I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in seventh grade when they called us all to gather in the gym for the evaluation. The aptitude test was simple; all we had to do was place our hands on a magic stone and see if there was a reaction. If a child had an aptitude for magic, the stone would begin to glow. Different colors indicated the type of magic that someone had an affinity for; red was fire, blue was water, and so on. My class had over 500 students of various races, and there were very few who had caused the stone to react. I remember losing hope as I moved slowly in line when child after child entered a room with thoughts of grandeur and left filled with sadness as they failed to activate the stone. More than one of them came out with tears streaming down their faces; I can't blame them even now; what 12-year-old wouldn't be crushed after having their hopes squashed?

I remember being so nervous when it became my turn that my palms were clammy, and I was actively sweating. My

teacher led me into the room; it was a small room with only one other person and a stone in the center. The stone was large, about the size of my torso, and completely clear, like a block of glass or ice. An older man with a beard of ashen hair stood next to the stone with a clipboard and a friendly smile. He was kind and told me to simply place my hand on the stone.

The stone felt so cold under my hand, but a mild vibration was coming from under it. I held my breath for what felt like an hour as I prayed for any reaction. Right before I lost hope, a dark cloud began to form inside the stone. It grew and grew until it filled the entire stone up and seemed to crackle with red energy that bounced around the inside. My teacher was shocked at the reaction and asked what it meant. The older man said nothing, and instead, I was pulled aside and led into a separate room. My parents, who had come to watch the ceremony, were brought in with me a few moments later.

We were left in the room alone for a while before the older man returned and told us what my reading had meant. Black smoke inside the stone meant that I had the ability to use every type of magic freely. Most people who could use magic only had the power to use one type; I was different. I was not bound by any single type of magic. He explained to us that while it was amazing, it drastically limited my options for the future. His words echoed in my mind all these years later.

"It's not so much that your future is limited, but there is instead only one path that you can take," he said with a sad look on his face. I didn't see the issue, but my parents' faces were also cast with a shadow of sadness. At the time, I didn't understand why everyone seemed so upset by this news; all I knew was that I could use magic. Only after I got home did my father explain my reality to me.

The thing that made me unique was also what made Elite Mages so incredible. The single requirement to become one was the ability to use all types of magic. Of course, that in itself was special and could be considered the trump card that set them apart from the rest; there was one more gift that we had that no others possessed. Being able to use all types of magic

unlocked a dormant carnal form of magic that could drastically increase our magical output for a time. It was what gave us the less attractive but more accurate name of Berserker Mages. We were able to tap into a type of magic that amplified our powers, strengthened our bodies, and sharpened our minds, turning us into what had been described as a monster mage.

I ran my thumb over the red slash marks in the center of the badge, symbolizing a berserker. It was this trump card that allowed Elite Mages to take on large numbers of attackers or stop terrorist attacks on a large scale all by themselves. Of course, nothing so grand and powerful comes without a cost. While it gave us the ability to vastly increase our power, it also removed some of our control over it. It was a double-edged sword; while we were able to save many from dying, more often than not, there were a few casualties and massive property damage. Due to this, Elite Mages were often viewed as murderers or walking disasters. Needless to say, the general public had a negative opinion of us, hence the uneasy looks I had been receiving. I was no better; as a child, I was warned that if I did anything bad, the Elite Mages would come arrest me. It was honestly a horrifying thing to say to a small child.

After the aptitude test and the large bombshell that was dropped on my family, I was left alone for a while. The old man told me to keep the fact I was going to be an Elite Mage a secret; it wasn't a hard task since I was certain I was going to become a murderer. Other than that, I was allowed to continue attending public school for another two years before being pulled out and sent to the Elite Mage Academy, where I spent the remaining four years of my childhood undergoing painstaking training. We learned magic of every type, hand-to-hand combat, weapons proficiency, monster and race anatomy, laws and regulations, the five most common languages used today, and much more. Of course, we also learned how to activate and best control berserker magic. It wasn't a perfect system, but it was better than being a loose cannon. I gripped the badge in my hand and sat up. Thinking back on everything I went through sent a shiver down my spine. It had been exhausting and brutal, but I had gotten

stronger and smarter than most people my age.

I pushed the memories aside with a visible shudder, pocketing the badge, and put my bag between my legs, unzipping it. I pulled out a large yellow envelope and flipped the top open, pulling out the first page. It was nothing fancy, a white sheet of paper with gold lettering that read "Certification of Completion as an Elite Mage of the Federal World League." A name was neatly written under it in black ink. I still have not gotten used to the name since it wasn't my real one. It was the name assigned to me by the Mage Association. This rule was implemented after the families of Elite Mages were targeted by groups for ransom, revenge, or leverage. To fix that, our names were erased from records and changed to the one they picked; in my case, that was Mikah Ridel.

The thought was still a little unpleasant to me. However, the risk to my family made it necessary. I hadn't seen my parents or younger sister in the last four years, and at this point, I had no idea when I would see them. Not only did I not have time to see them during training, but I was also ordered to go to my first station immediately after graduation.

That unhappy thought led me to the next set of papers in the envelope: my official orders. I looked it over, scanning the useless jargon that made up most of the document. The meat of the orders was to travel to the Elven city of Cerulean on the world of Relexit for my official apprenticeship with the acting Elite Mage who worked there.

Four years of training seems like a lot, but with all of the information we had to cover, there was a lot that they couldn't teach us or explain in the depth we needed. Anytime we prompted or asked questions above the level of teaching, the instructors would say that we would learn that during our 'on-the-job apprenticeship.' After graduation, all of us were sent out to shadow an Elite Mage and learn the ropes from them. Since there were so few of us due to the harsh requirements, there was only one mage in a city at a time, and more often than not, mages were in charge of multiple areas. The apprenticeship was the only real opportunity we had to learn

how things operated in the real world and not just from books. There was a little picture of the mage I was going to work with over the name Lieutenant Aaron Cameron.

The small professional headshot of the lieutenant came into view, and I pulled it out, looking at it closely. Lieutenant Cameron looked as happy as anyone forced to take a military photo. He had bright blue eyes and an emotionless face that seemed fitting for his square jaw. His hair was cut in a short, professional military style cut, making him look as stuck up as a cop on a bad day. Overall, he was average-looking and not someone who would stand out too much in a crowd. The thing that stuck out to me the most was his rank. It wasn't easy to rank up in such a small elite group, and Lieutenant was two ranks ahead of me. For Elite Mages, we started as cadets in training, then moved on to officer after graduation, then corporal, lieutenant, captain, commander, regional commander, general, grand general, and master. If he was a lieutenant, he most likely had experienced many things in his time. I was excited to meet him and learn everything that I could.

"Excuse me." The voice of the man behind the desk echoed over the loudspeaker, pulling me from the documents. "The gate will be switching in 5 minutes. Please gather your things and make your way to the front desk in a single file line."

The few of us in the room started to gather our belongings and file one by one, past the front desk, and hand him our tickets. I tucked the orders into my jacket pocket, pinned the badge back on my chest, and followed the others to the desk. The desk man refused to look at me as I handed him the ticket and walked past without a word. We moved through a glass door leading to the back of the building and were ushered into a large white room over 40 feet high and just as large around. Seemingly floating a few inches off the ground in the center of the room was a 20-foot tall and 10-foot-wide oval black mass.

The vortex swirled and twisted with hints of dark purple in the mix, making it look like water swirling in midair. It seemed

to pull my eyes into it, simultaneously creating a strange illusion of being nothing and endless. I shook my head and looked away from it as my eyes started to strain.

"Alright, everyone, please stay in a single file line behind the yellow line on the floor. The gate will change in less than a minute." The man said over the intercom. I had never been through a gate before, but from what I knew, the gates were like a one-way door that would switch sides on a regular schedule. You were only able to pass through the gate during the times when the gate was open on your side; if you tried to go through when it was closed, you would run into a solid object. I looked at the vortex and watched as it started to slow down before coming to a complete stop. A slight buzzing in the room made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, sending a chill down my spine. The uneasy feeling lasted a few seconds as the vortex slowly began spinning again, this time counterclockwise. It spun faster as the buzzing faded.

"Thank you for your patience. It is currently 11 a.m. on Relexit. Once again, we would like to thank you for coming to The Gate at Eledor and hope you have a wonderful time in Cerulean. Before entering the gate, please make sure you have all of your belongings. You may now begin to enter the gate." The voice over the intercom was professional and robotic; it was clearly a script read every time the gate changed.

The line began moving forward after getting a wave from the security guards, ushering us on like livestock. I was 4th in line and watched as the people in front of me walked up to the gate and passed through with no hesitation. Since this was my first time, it was a little nerve-racking.

The gentleman in front of me dressed in a very nice, fitted suit passed through the gate, leaving me up next. It seemed much larger now that I was standing directly before it. The gate towered over me, taking up everything in front of me with its endless darkness. Lifting my hand, I touched the vortex, letting my fingers pass through the suspended liquid. It felt like nothing, like I was moving my hand through the air. I took one final deep breath and stepped into the vortex.

As my face passed through the surface of the gate, the



world went dark. No, dark was an understatement; it was darker than dark. It was like everything in the world had vanished, leaving only emptiness in its wake. Before I could wrap my head around the emptiness, my body felt like it was doing a few summersaults. As my stomach churned, I could no longer tell what was up and what was down. I could hear no sound nor feel any air on my skin. It felt like an eternity in darkness as my mind tried to wrap itself around this feeling. The loud thump of a single beat of my heart filled my head as I lowered my foot. I expected nothing to be there. I expected the feeling of missing a step and dropping into the endless pit that surrounded me, but I was pleasantly surprised to feel the solid surface of a floor.

One heartbeat, and it was all over. I stepped out of the gate in a single stride and left the white artificial lights of the Eledor gate room to the floodlight of natural sun that beamed through the high windows on Cerulean. My body was still in a little bit of shock as the people in front of me filed forward, ushered out of the room by more guards. I forced myself to move and followed behind them as I overcame the incredibly uneasy feeling of passing through the gate.

One of the guards saw me grab my stomach and take a few breaths of air; he couldn't hide the smile on his face at my misfortune. The warm glow of embarrassment tickled my ears, and I looked away. The guard next to him smacked him on the shoulder, and he turned away, trying to get his composure again. I noticed that the guard who was still facing us had a badge on his chest that was in the shape of the gate with a blue wave imprinted in the center. It was like mine in the fact that it said what magic he used; in his case, he was a water mage.

We were shuttled out of the gate room into a similar-looking lobby that we had just left, except it was bright and sunny instead of the dark night sky outside. I ignored the few worried glances and hushed whispers from those who passed me by as I headed toward the door. I couldn't help but want to get outside and see what the other world was like. For the last four years, I had only seen and read descriptions of Relexit in books; this was my first time getting to experience it.

Stepping out of the gate building was like stepping into a new world, and that's precisely what happened. Cerulean was one of the continent's largest and most prosperous Elven cities. Located near a gorgeous coastline, it was the second-largest port city in Relexit and a major trading hub for the entire continent. While it was officially called an elven city, it was home to many races thanks to its size and location and had been even before the gates appeared. Now, the city was also home to many Humans, Centinals, Demons, and Pixies from other worlds like myself.

I took a deep breath of the salty air and looked around. It was summertime here, but I could feel the cool breeze flowing in from the water, giving me a break from the hot sun that was blazing down. The gate was at the top of the city and was built on a slope that twisted and weaved to the sea below. From up here, I could see the maze of cobblestone-style streets and alleys that made up the city. At the bottom was a large bay with two skinny peninsulas wrapping around the sides where the land was hugging the bay. Even from here, I could see plenty of large, masted boats that were slowly sailing in and out of the bay, most likely carrying cargo from different areas all over the world.

The city from up here was beautiful; it looked like a painting with the ocean in the distance. After taking in the surroundings for a few minutes, I pulled myself back to reality and took another glance at the orders tucked in my jacket pocket. According to this, Lieutenant Cameron had a main office near the city's center. I skimmed the paper again until I reached the part with the address.

'PROCEED TO 2318 CARVER STREET, ROOM 4C, BY NO LATER THAN THE 5TH DAY OF DISCHARGE AND MEET WITH LIEUTENANT CAMERON FOR TRAINING AND GUIDANCE.'

The instructions were basic enough to leave no room for interpretation; they might as well have said, 'Go here now' in big, bold letters.

Since the gates switched on a schedule, there were plenty

of taxis in front of the building waiting for oncoming arrivals, such as myself. However, they were not like the taxi cabs from Earth. Relexit had never made automobiles and also never wanted anything like it in their world; instead, ground transportation consisted of large carriages pulled by a variety of magical beasts. The cab that I chose had a dark wooden carriage body driven by a small elven boy and pulled by a ground drake.

"2318 Carver Street, please," I told the driver, walking up to the open door and climbing inside.

"Yes sir!" The boy said enthusiastically and ushered the drake to move. He was young, looking no more than 12 years old, and either didn't know or didn't care about the badge on my chest. The drake let out a low rattle from deep within its throat as it was told to move. Drakes were distant relatives of dragons and covered with a thick, scaly body. Sadly, they didn't have wings, nor were they able to breathe fire like their massive ancestors. They looked closer to a velociraptor I had seen in books than a dragon.

The drake pulling the carriage was called a ground drake. There were a few types of drakes, such as water drakes and forest drakes. Their names were based on their habitat and physical appearance. Ground drakes were a dark brown color similar to mud, with massive muscular legs that pulled the carriage with ease as we made our way down the streets, bumping and clattering against the uneven cobblestone.

I looked out of the window as we made our way into the city. The buildings were all well-constructed and made mostly of stone. Unlike Etherra, Relexit had put their planet first, sticking to mason work over any large factories or products like plastic and cement. It all seemed more beautiful to me than the cement buildings I had been used to. I also noticed that there was a lot greener than the cities I had left. Because most of the Etherra had been destroyed in the war, the few remaining cities were jam-packed, meaning there was little to no green in the city, even if most of the planet was covered in it now. Relexit, on the other hand, made sure that large areas of grass and trees were woven around the city; even the vines

that climbed up some buildings looked beautiful and intentional.

The entire trip took less than 20 minutes. When we arrived, I left the boy a sizable tip and got out of the carriage, looking at the plain grey stone building in front of me. It was clearly an office building that was home to a variety of shops and businesses, all of which were posted on a board near the door. I looked over the array of business names which ranged from 'Durks Dwarves Lawyers' to 'Vickie's Exotic Pet Doctor'. It looked like there were three different insurance agencies in the building as well. I scanned the office numbers next to the business names, looking for 4C, with no luck. I didn't expect to see it, as there was no reason to advertise where he was set up. While Elite Mages often worked closely with the police officers of their city, it was common for them to get a private office to work out of. It made it easier to have meetings, make magical objects, and occasionally do some less-than-legal things that we were known for. Not to mention that we tended to make people a little uncomfortable and were counterproductive to a healthy workplace environment.

Since there was no reason to wait, I entered the building, headed up the stairs to my right, and made my way up to the fourth floor. My boots clacked on the tiled floor as I made my way down the hall, glancing at the brown wooden doors, looking for 4C. Most of the doors had a brass number next to them with a nameplate stating the business and title of the inhabitants. Since it was the middle of the day, everyone in the offices was hard at work, and no one paid any attention to me, which I preferred since the uneasy glances were getting old. I stopped at the door marked with 4C; it had no nameplate or title on it. I knocked on the door and waited for an answer. Once none came, I knocked again and waited, but still no reply.

"Maybe he is out for the day," I said to myself and tried the doorknob, which, to no shock, turned out to be locked. I set my bag on the ground next to the door and leaned against the wall. "I guess I'll have to wait for him here."

Twenty minutes passed with no sign of Lieutenant

Cameron. I was starting to grow impatient and tried the doorknob again as if it was going to be magically unlocked, which, of course, wasn't true.

"Magically unlocked?" I said with a little smirk. "Not a bad idea."

I leaned down and opened my bag, rummaging around and looking for my tool kit. The tool kit was a little bit of an understatement; it was a magically enchanted bag known as a "Deep Pocket." It was the first project that we had to complete at the academy when studying enchantments. We were tasked with building a bag that was capable of holding about five times more than it should. The bag was made with wyvern leather and had enchantment runes stitched on the inside with fiber made from a unicorn's mane. Both materials radiated with residual mana from the creatures they came from and used that to power the enchantments for the deep pocket. Eventually, that mana would fade away, and the deep pocket would become shallower until it was just a normal pouch, but that was a few years out at least.

I flipped open the clasp at the top of the bag and reached down into it, looking for a magical tool that I also made at the academy. I was looking for a thin piece of wood with runes carved into the side of it. Over the course of our four years at the academy, we learned a lot; one of the courses we took was on making magical tools. Magic tools were objects made using special ingredients and ancient magical runes or enchantments to do a specific task. We had been taught how to craft a handful of magic tools like hoverboards, fire torches, water cannons, and other things we might need or want in the future. After we learned all of the technical parts of making magical tools, we were given free time to either practice with the ones we had learned or to make some of our own. After weeks and weeks of failed attempts and a lot of planning, my Elven partner Addler and I managed to come up with two useful magic tools, one of which was a lock pick.

"Got it!" I said, finding the tool after reaching in a few inches past my elbow, and removed the contents of the bag, which were two sticks and four marbles. The sticks were about

4 inches long and shaped like chopsticks, with one end carved into a flat blade shape. They were made from a hardwood known as Marblewood that grew extensively on Cevalon and was known for its ability to channel mana evenly and easily. Because of this, it made the wood both rare and expensive. We had etched runes into the wood that would allow it to magically pick almost any lock. The marbles were something special, too; they were a type of defensive tool that we had spent weeks making. I pocketed the marbles, put the bag back into my backpack, and stood up, grasping the doorknob. After making sure it was still locked, which it was, I inserted the flat end of the stick into the keyhole. The key to activating a magical tool was to infuse it with mana.

Mana was all around us; it was the atmosphere of the very life of nature itself. And some people had the ability to absorb and control that mana. To use magic, you had to focus on your mana core and direct the mana through your body to the desired location. Think of it like directing the flow of water from one point to another. It took concentration and focus, but once you were able to do it, you could accomplish unimaginable feats.

I closed my eyes and focused on the stick in my right hand while reaching for the mana core in my head. I gently pulled on the mana and began to guide the flow down my neck and then down my arm. There was a pleasant, warm, tingling sensation in my arm as the magic flowed into the stick.

The stick reacted to my mana and absorbed it like a sponge. Runes etched into the side of the stick began to glow a dim blue, activating the magical tool. I felt a slight gust of wind from inside the keyhole, followed by a quiet slurp. I turned the stick and felt the bolt slide over as the door unlocked. I gave a small smile and pulled the stick out, looking at my handiwork. Where the end of the stick used to be was now the perfect replica of the inside of the lock. The stick formed the key from hardened raw mana. I looked the key over happily before it disintegrated completely, leaving nothing but a fine ash in my hand.

One of the best and worst things about magical tools was

the fact that they were one-use objects. The combination of mana and magical runes made them unstable for longer than a few minutes at most. Some could last longer, but they needed expensive, rare ingredients and a constant flow of mana to keep them from breaking down.

I wiped the ash off my hands and turned the handle, pushing open the door. I stepped in. A sickening metallic smell hit me in the face as the door swung open. I froze in place, standing in the doorway, my heart lodging in my throat and sinking to the floor simultaneously.

The room was trashed. Books and papers were strewn all over the place, making it look like a natural disaster had swept through. Dark red blood was splattered across the walls and ceiling. My eyes scanned over the room in horror before landing on the most gruesome part. In the center was a mutilated pile of blood, bones, and torn clothes of what I assumed used to be a person.

I felt my knees give out as I looked at the bloody mess, my body slumping against the doorframe. Every meal in the past 24 hours threatened to come up, forcing me to look away. I choked down the vomit, taking deep breaths and inhaling the metallic bloody air, which just made me gag again. This time, I was unable to keep my food down and turned, vomiting right inside the door. I stumbled back out of the room and slammed the door closed, blocking the smell. I heaved a few more times, succeeding in swallowing the bile that threatened to come up again. I slid to the floor, shaking. Luckily, the door seemed to have formed a good enough seal to keep the smell from leaking into the hall.

I closed my eyes, steadying my breathing and trying to get my mind straight. I needed to clasp my hands together to keep them from shaking. It took a few minutes until my breathing became steady again, and I could think a little clearer. I had never seen anything like that before. At the academy, we were told that we were preparing for 'real world' experiences, but nothing could have prepared me for that.

"Okay, think about your training," I told myself, trying to get my mind straight. "Fuck, we never learned anything about

this."

Over the past four years, we had pretty much only studied magic and laws. I mean, you could study for your entire life and still not learn everything about magic; how were we supposed to learn all of that and more within just four years? We did have one section on crime scenes, but most of our questions were answered with 'The police will be there to help' or 'Your mentor will help you out.' A lot of good that was right now.

I stopped for a second as the thought of my mentor came to mind. What if that bloody thing was my mentor? Or worse, what if he was the one that did that to someone? The thoughts of both of those scenarios made me go into another panic spiral, and I put my face in my hands, trying to get ahold of myself.

I wanted to just leave, to go run to someone else and have them fix this problem for me. The problem was that the person for the job was an Elite Mage. This was part of my job now, and I couldn't run from it after all the blood, sweat, and tears that I had put in up until this point. I took a few more deep, steady breaths and pulled myself to my feet as I hardened my resolve.

"You got this," I said to myself, placing my hand on the doorknob.



## Chapter 2

I may have talked a big game to myself just a moment ago, but with my hand on the door handle, I couldn't force myself to turn the knob. I closed my eyes and cursed under my breath, filled with frustration. What was I so scared of? It was just a body, a bloody, messy, torn-up body, but a body. I felt myself get nauseous as bloody images flashed across my mind. Stop! It couldn't hurt me, so there was no reason to be afraid. That thought seemed to calm me down a little.

"Alright, first, I'm going to go inside the room and see if I can identify the body without touching anything. Second, I'm going to lock the door, go to the police station, report the incident, and get someone down here to collect evidence. Third, probably cry and throw up again." I said in a confident tone with my hand still on the doorknob. "Piece of cake. You got this."

Again, I spoke with confidence, but my body was not responding to my words. I let go of the handle and took a step back, cursing. Why was I being so useless right now? A little voice in the back of my mind told me that was not true, and this was probably a normal reaction, but I pushed it away. I needed a little distraction and pulled out the orders again, looking at the headshot of Lieutenant Cameron. I looked at the picture hard for a minute, burning the image into my head. His light brown hair and squared jaw with a hint of freckles across his nose and upper cheeks. I stared at it long and hard until I could see his face even when I closed my eyes. I needed to be able to identify if the corpse in there was him or not.

Before I had time to doubt myself, I took a step forward and threw the door open. The scene didn't make me throw up this time, but it was certainly close. I wasn't sure how long that would last, and I quickly made my way across the room. I kept

my head down and did my best not to step on the vast amount of blood that was scattered around the room. I tip-toed my way to the center of the room where the body was. The problem was that I was currently looking at the tops of my boots, refusing to see the bloody mess in front of me.

"Come on. You can do this Mikah. You are an Officer of the law," I knew how cringy that sounded, but I was trying to pump myself up again. I needed to be able to do this; I needed to have the resolve to look at something like this. I held my breath as if that was going to make everything better, and I looked at the body. I did my best to take in every detail that I could. The corpse was mutilated; its entire abdomen had been blown out, causing a few of the lower ribs to protrude at odd angles out of the body. I leaned down, getting closer to the corpse. I could clearly see the face of a man, his expression twisted, a grimace frozen in agony. His cheeks were scratched like he had clawed at his face before dying. It was indeed Lieutenant Cameron; from his square jaw to his blue eyes, he looked just like the little picture. A slight panic shot through me as to what that meant for me, but I quickly pushed that down; there were other things to worry about first. I let out my breath, looking away from the body.

There was considerably less blood on the walls and ceiling than I first imagined, but splatters and dots of blood were evident on almost every flat surface. From what I could tell, he had been facing the window when whatever had happened had happened, since there was a large pile of shredded organs and blood that caked the window and floor. I looked away from that, feeling another wave of sickness threaten my stomach. I spun in a small circle, trying to see if there was anything out of the ordinary or anything that I needed to take note of. It was hard to look past the blood and guts in the room.

A large bookshelf on the far wall had most of its contents strewn over the floor before being covered with blood. A bloody glob was on top of an open book next to the body. *So, the books were tossed around before he died.* At the very back of the room was a large wooden desk; the chair was flipped over, and

some of the papers were lying on the floor, but most of the desk remained unchanged. There was a large stack of blue folders still sitting neatly on the corner of the desk, untouched beside the splattering of blood.

There was too much blood between me and the desk to get over there without ruining the crime scene. I got on my tip toes, straining my neck to get a better look at the desk. It looked like nothing else was out of place. I let out a sigh and dropped back on my heels. A loud thunk from the door behind me interrupted my investigation. I let out a high-pitched squeal of a terrified schoolgirl and spun around, looking at the door.

An imp floated three feet off the floor, flapping his wings frantically to keep him airborne. He stared at me with his jaw half open. A briefcase on the floor under him must have caused the thump. He must have dropped it after seeing the state of the room.

*Shit, did I forget to close the door behind me?* I met the large electric blue eyes of the small, winged imp; he was two feet tall at most, with a set of small black horns curling from the top of his head that matched the dark color of his wings. They were a sharp contrast to the snow-white fur that covered his entire body. He was dressed in a professionally fitted grey pin-striped suit, vest, and tie, giving off the appearance of a well-dressed businessman; even his black hooves looked as if they had been freshly shined. I saw his eyes shift from me to the bloody mess on the floor and back. The shock and fear that was plastered on his face flipped to anger as he locked onto me.

"This is not what it looks like," I said quickly, lifting my hands defensively. All in all, it was a pretty poor defense, but I wasn't in any position to say much else.

I felt the pressure in the room change, making the hairs on my arm stand up. I subconsciously reached for my mana core focusing my mana into my eyes. The world sharpened as my eyesight enhanced with the added mana, and the bright colors of the ambient mana began to flicker around the room.

With my enhanced vision, I could see the individual hairs

on his body bristling with anger. Like water flowing through a drain, the mana in the room began to converge on the imp, turning into a sharp blue and gold color. I had found out with some practice at the academy that when someone uses mana, it will give off a certain color to match the properties of the magic being used: fire is red, water is blue, ground is brown, and so on, similar to the colors of the mana test. This look was new to me.

The focal point of the gathering mana was the imp's hand. He flicked a finger, and a glowing light went flying toward my face with a short hiss from the imp. I released the mana and dove to the side as a bolt of electricity sliced through the air where my head had previously been.

"Wait, wait, this is all a misunderstanding!" I yelled as I rolled across the floor, doing my best to ignore the fact that I just ruined a crime scene and was now covered in blood. It seemed like the angry imp didn't hear me or simply didn't care. He hissed again and shot another bolt at me. I rolled to the side again, dodging it and coming to my feet. It looked like this was not going to end with just words. "That's it. Don't blame me if you won't listen."

I needed to stop this guy before he fried me or the room. It was hard to be mad at him since it was probably a reasonable reaction given the situation. I could fight him head-on, but it seemed a little premature to go berserker mode on a misunderstanding. Instead, I reached into my pocket, pulling out the marbles I had taken from my deep pocket earlier, gripping them tightly in my hand, and injecting mana into them. They started vibrating in my hand, growing hotter with each second as the runes carved into the surface glowed a bright white. I dove to the side again, dodging another bolt of electricity from the imp coming up to my feet and tossing the now trembling marbles. The marbles clacked together, creating a spark as the runes grew brighter.

The marbles were too slow and incredibly easy for the imp to dodge, and he preemptively drifted to the side while preparing another blast of electricity. I needed to bounce between the imp and marbles, waiting for the right time to act.

My timing was flawless. The marbles were less than a foot from the imp when a bright white crack split down the smooth surface. I slapped my hands to my ears and squeezed my eyes shut, opening my mouth.

Even if the imp saw what I was doing, he was not fast enough to protect himself. The magic marbles that I created exploded with an ear-splitting bang along with a blinding flash of light. Even though I was prepared for it, the attack was still painful. I kept my eyes tightly shut until the light in the room faded. I blinked a few times, trying to get the little colorful spots out of my vision, and popped my ears.

"Damn, that was a lot louder than I imagined," I said, shaking my head and getting to my feet. When Addler and I made these, we never got a chance to actually use them. This was as much a test run as it was an attack on the imp. I dug my pinky into my ear as if I could pull out the shrill ringing that was filling my head. "Works great though."

I was somewhat fine, but the imp had taken the attack full force. He was currently on his back, grabbing his ears with both hands, rocking back and forth on the ground like a fish out of water. He had fallen back and was slightly out of the room, trying to drag himself away from me. I grabbed his ankle and pulled him into the room, tossing him to the side. I tried to be nice, but I may have tossed him a little hard; he bounced off the wall and landed in a puddle of blood; so much for the crime scene.

Voices in the hall were growing louder as people poked their heads out of the offices to see what the commotion was about. I cursed under my breath and pulled my badge off my chest, tossing the bloody jacket to the ground. People began crowding around, and I heard someone say something about the smell. I quickly shut the door, sealing off the bloody mess inside the office, and turned to face the onlookers. It was impressive just how good that door was; once closed, I could neither smell nor hear anything that was going on inside.

"I'm so sorry for the noise," I said, holding up my badge so the growing number of people in the hall could see it. "There was an accident with a piece of equipment."

"What the fuck do you mean accident?" An older dwarf said gruffly, pushing his way through the crowd. He was 4 feet tall with a large black beard and small semi-pointed ears that were closer to a human than an Elf's.

"Fitt, shut up," one of the onlookers said to the dwarf in a hushed tone. I had no idea why he was trying to be quiet about it; everyone was able to hear him. "Look at the badge."

The dwarf squinted at my badge a few times, opening and closing his mouth like a ventriloquist doll before finally deciding that it wasn't worth it and turning away. It took a few minutes for everyone to filter back into their offices, grumbling something about causing disturbances with threats of bringing this up to the city council. The badge had a few good perks, like dispersing a crowd when something crazy happens. I thanked them again and apologized for the disturbance. Once the majority of the people had left the hall, I slipped back into the office, digging my finger into my still-ringing ear.

As I shut the door, the imp was just starting to come around. He was shaking his head, pulling himself to his feet, blinking his eyes, and squinting around the room. I tossed the badge to him, which he managed to catch even while squinting. He glared down at the badge and looked up at me and back to the badge. He did this a few times before it dawned on him that I may not be the bad guy.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?" he said slowly, standing up. He straightened his wrinkled clothes, looking utterly disgusted at the blood stain on his pants.

"Officer Mikah Ridel. I was sent here to assist Lieutenant Cameron. Who are you?" I may be new at this and completely terrified, but my words came out crisp and strong.

"Ard Bocket, Cameron's assistant." He looked at the bloody mess on the floor behind him. "Is that Cameron?" His voice was shaky and it was clear that he was also sickened by the scene.

"Yes," I said rather bluntly; he was a little suspicious no matter how I looked at it.

I made sure to watch his face carefully as I spoke. Genuine

shock flashed over his face as he looked back at the body before quickly turning away and placing a hand over his stomach and mouth. His reaction seemed natural enough; I mean, it was almost identical to mine. This imp, who claimed to be Lieutenant Cameron's assistant, meant there had to be some proof in the room. While there were no pictures around, there was a smaller desk close to the entrance that I ignored due to the state of the room. I stepped closer to it and glanced at the metal nameplate that sat on the desk. It was a bronze nameplate with 'Ard Brocket' in big blocky black letters. It wasn't uncommon for mages to hire an assistant to help out with paperwork; the trick was keeping them around with all the insane things that we dealt with. I had nothing to go on but the nameplate, and as far as I could tell, he was speaking the truth.

"What happened to him?" Ard asked after a moment of collecting himself. His voice was a little shaky, but he had adopted a clear business tone that better matched his suit.

"I don't know. I got here about an hour ago, and the door was locked. When I got in here, I found this, then ended up vomiting over there," I said, pointing at the corner where I had thrown up. He raised his eyebrow at that, which I simply ignored. "Hold the judgment; this is my first dead body. Anyway, as I said, I was over there, then came closer to try and get an identity when you came in. What about you? When did you see him last?"

"It's been a while. I have been on vacation for about a month and just got back to the city. I was stopping by to see if Cameron needed anything," he said with the same emotionless voice, even though his hands were shaking a little. He closed his hands into fists and shoved them in his pant pockets.

"I need to go report this to the police and get some people down here to help investigate," I said after a brief silence. Ard nodded while blankly looking at the wall. It was clear he wasn't in the best mindset, which was understandable since he knew Lieutenant Cameron.

It was obvious that I wasn't going to get an answer from

Ard, so I began to move on my own. I scooped up my bloodied jacket gingerly with two fingers. I had rolled through at least three blood pools on the ground, and I could see dark patches on the cloth. For better or worse, elite mages had blood on their uniform often enough that we had an enchantment stitched into the fabric just for moments like this. I found the rune just below the tag at the back. It was about an inch wide and looked like two circles connected with a few lines that resembled a cursive 'r'.

The main difference between enchantments and magic tools was the power involved and the degree of energy it takes. The ancient runes that are often used in magic toolmaking are much older and much more powerful. They were the base for all the runes used in enchantments, and because of that, enchantments were weaker and didn't cause the tool to disintegrate.

I placed my thumb on the enchantment and pushed a little mana into it. The rune glowed lightly with a little drain on my magic, much less than the magical tools. A small puff of air ruffled the jacket. All the dust, grime, and blood were pushed from the fabric, leaving the jacket nice and clean. It was an enchantment placed on every uniform that we received and was very useful. I slid the jacket on and inspected the rest of me for blood; there was a small spot on my pants, but not visible enough to set off any red flags in public. Once I was confident in my appearance, I headed toward the door, snatching up my bag and placing it on my back.

"Hey kid," I turned at Ard's words and caught the badge that he tossed to me. I nodded in thanks as I left the office and pinned the badge to my chest. I made sure to close and lock the door so the smell didn't attract any attention.

I managed to snag a passing ground drake carriage and got a ride to the police station. There was a large courtyard outside the building that had a well-manicured yard with some pretty colorful flowers that ran along the outside. The front of the building was painted blue with a giant golden badge above the door along with 'Cerulean Police Station' stamped in black letters. To the right of the building was a large stable filled with



all types of drakes and other rideable creatures. If it wasn't for the uniformed officers and the giant badge, I might have mistaken it for a barn.

Two Elves came riding up to the stable on blue and green drakes. They looked similar to the ground drakes. However, according to what I knew, the blue one was a water drake with webs between its fingers and toes, making it a formidable swimmer. The green drake was a tree drake with hands and feet that resembled a padded lizard's foot suitable for climbing trees. The idea of a velociraptor that could climb trees was a little terrifying to be honest. I shook the idea off; I had bigger things to worry about.

I made my way up the stairs as the Elves dismounted their drakes and pulled off the black saddles with a police badge stitched into both sides. A few officers were moving in and out of the station, minding their own business. Most of them didn't bother to even look my way as I passed. The ones who did notice me gave me unhappy glances after looking at my badge, which I ignored. The glass doors pushed open easily as I entered the police station. It was a small front lobby with solid grey stone floors and a few benches leaning against the wall. One semi-rounded desk sat in the center of the far wall, and a uniformed officer sat looking around intently.

"I need to meet with the police captain," I said to the stiff-looking dwarf sitting at the desk.

"Do you have an appointment?" he asked gruffly, looking me up and down. I also looked him once over. His wrinkled uniform was untucked and had what looked like a mustard stain on his chest. The slightly off-center name tag on his chest read Frutlorn. The police badge on his chest had a picture of a rock in the center. He was also a mage and one who could use ground magic.

His appearance, while slightly unprofessional, did not bother me. What did bother me was the annoyed tone of voice he had and the single eyebrow he lifted while looking at me. It wasn't that he didn't care about the badge on my chest, but more like it actively made him not like me.

"No, but it's urgent," I said, trying my best to keep a kind

expression on my face.

"Always is," he said, shuffling papers with a 'you interrupted my lunch' tone of voice, or it could have been the 'get the hell out of my face' tone. "Look, kid, the cap is a very busy person, and if you didn't call ahead, you can't see her."

"Officer, I know this is inconvenient to you and the captain, but when I say that this is very important, I mean it," I said through slightly gritted teeth. I was doing my best to stay calm, but the events of the day were making that just a little tricky.

"Sorry, don't know what to say, man." He looked past my shoulder as if I was in the way of others needing help. My hands balled into fists.

The short temper I had spent too long trying to extend was nearing my breaking point. The only thing stopping me from losing it was the idea that causing a scene now would make any future work with the police more difficult. I stopped and took a few deep breaths and tried to come up with something to say to this man besides 'Hey, there is a dead body' since the murder of one of us shouldn't be shouted in a busy lobby area.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot," I said calmly. "I am Officer Ridel, and I just arrived in Cerulean. Something important happened and I need to speak with the captain. Can you please tell me the way? I will take the blame if they get mad."

He smirked at the sight of me struggling, and I felt the thin string holding back my temper snap. Mana started to leak from my core and flood out into my body. The main way to activate the berserk mode was to get mad. I wasn't there yet, but it was getting dangerously close. An idea popped into my head that Addler had given me a year or so ago.

It happened when I was trying to train my mana eyes; if I ever pushed a larger amount of magic in them, my eyes would start to glow with a faint blue tinge to them. If I kept it up, they would turn a bright, eerie blue. I had been told on more than one occasion that it was 'freaky as hell' to see in person. I put a little effort into my mana eyes and looked him dead in the face.

I dropped my hand on the counter a little harder than normal, making sure to get the ignorant dwarf's attention. The extra mana that was flooding my body made the hit stronger than intended. The desk gave a groan and something under cracked. The dwarf jumped and looked up at me with an irritable expression which disappeared immediately as he met my glowing eyes.

"I'm going to ask once more. Get me the police captain, Officer Frutlorn. Or I will make them come to me," my voice was low and a little harsh as I did my best not to shout. The air around me began to vibrate as the excess mana in the room started to react to my power. He nodded, fumbled off his chair, and ran down the hall.

I reeled in the mana from my eyes and closed them tightly, holding back a few tears. They were burning from the excess use of magic. It made sense; I was forcing my eyes to enhance with mana. We could put mana into our arms and legs to make them stronger, but even that could be dangerous if we pushed too hard. Eyes were much more delicate than the rest of the body, making it even more risky. I was warned at the academy that if I didn't control the flow or held it too long, there was a chance I could damage my eyes and, at worst, go blind, but that never stopped me from pulling a prank from time to time.

"Please follow me." Officer Frutlorn said, coming back down the hall a few minutes later. He was breathing hard, and there were beads of sweat on his forehead. I tried not to smile at that, served him right for being a dick.

I followed the unkept dwarf as he led me up to the third floor. He directed me toward a plain wooden door with a metal plaque on it reading 'Capital Eleanor Highbeck'. The sound of shuffling papers and a scribbling pen could be heard from the other side. I knocked as the dwarf stomped away, heading back to the lobby and muttering something under his breath.

"Enter," a female voice came from inside the room. I followed the command and opened the door, stepping in.

The police captain's office was large and very well

organized. At the far end was a desk with neatly stacked piles of paper; it sat in front of a big window that allowed natural light and fresh air into the office. Behind the desk sat a High Elf filing paperwork. If I hadn't just seen a mutilated body, I might have been transfixed by her beauty. Every movement she made was smooth and even. I had no idea that someone could make paperwork look sexy, but somehow, she did. The sun behind her lit up her blond hair, which was pulled back in a tight, professional ponytail. She was wearing a white uniform top tucked into navy blue pants.

There were a few types of Elves, the same as people. High Elves, like the captain here, were tall with pale white skin and long pointed ears. In contrast, the Plains Elves were shorter, generally with light brown hair, very long pointed ears, and olive skin. There were also Dark Elves who had short ears and dark brown skin and were generally as tall as the High Elves. Other than the physical differences high Elves were generally proficient in wind and light magic, plains Elves in water and ground magic, and dark Elves in dark and fire magic. Historically, there was some tension between the Elves, but most of that was in the past.

She didn't look up as I entered and moved across the room in front of her desk. It wasn't until I stood directly in front of the desk that she pulled her eyes from the paperwork she was working on. I saw her eyes move directly to the badge on my chest. I noticed the badge on hers; it was in the shape of a shield that was bordered with the words 'Cerulean Police Department.' In the center of the badge was a green swirl, signaling that she was proficient in wind magic.

She adopted a plain expression as she spoke, "So, officer, what can I do for you?" I was getting tired of everyone's 'stop bothering me' attitude.

"Lieutenant Cameron was brutally murdered in his office," I said in a flat tone. The only sound that followed was the pen that dropped out of the Elf's hand, and her jaw opened slightly in shock. "Yeah, it was a shock to me too. Just thought you should know."

I turned and began to walk out. At this point, I either

wanted to make the captain feel like an ass for assuming I was here to cause trouble, or I wasn't going to get any help at all and was better off doing things on my own. Either way, I was pissed off and no longer cared about being here.

"Stop!" She snapped at me, which was not the response to get me to stop at this point, so I just kept walking. "Please." Her tone was much gentler now, even if it sounded a little forced.

"What is it you need Captain Highbeck?" I said in my best customer service voice, turning around with a forced smile, which made her physically twitch. That turned my fake smile into a real one.

"I apologize for my prior attitude. Please have a seat and tell me what happened." I could almost hear the grinding of her jaw as she spoke.

"I arrived in Cerulean today and was supposed to meet Lieutenant Cameron at his office. When I got there, I found his body with his insides as outsides," I didn't bother to sit down as I spoke. My words got a reaction out of her and not one screaming surprise but instead that of recognition. The snide little voice in my head stopped, and I walked a little closer. "You recognize this type of murder?"

"Yes! We are a little too familiar with this MO. Over the past four months, we have had a string of murders that all died the same way. I reported it to Lieutenant Cameron after the second body was discovered and have been relaying all the information since then to him. We have been trying to figure out how the victims are picked and exactly how they were murdered, but we kept coming up empty." She explained, sitting up a little straighter.

"Okay. I'll need to ask Ard about that and get the information," I said, aiming for the door.

"Ard is back already? I thought he wasn't going to come back for another week," Her voice had an air of recognition again although not in the most friendly way. I take it that they knew each other in some aspect and it wasn't the best of relationships.

"Well, he is back. He found me over the body in the office

and tried to electrocute me to death." Her long-pointed ears twitched at my words.

"He tried to electrocute you?" Her voice was filled with confusion now.

"Yeah, he used lightning magic and shot a few bolts at me. It was just a misunderstanding. He caught me standing over the dead body of Lieutenant Cameron," It felt a little stupid to explain.

"Ard can't use lightning magic. He is an Ice Imp."

That took me a little by surprise. Besides elite mages and a handful of lucky individuals and races, using more than one type of magic was all but impossible. I sat there dumbfounded for a few seconds as that information bounced around in my head. An uneasy feeling started to grow in my stomach as the gears in my head turned.

"Son of a bitch. He wasn't the real Ard then," I said in both a statement and questioning way.

I was a mix of confused and offended. However, looking back on the situation, I realize that simply trusting a random Imp at a crime scene wasn't the best idea. There was a chance that the mystery Imp either killed Lieutenant Cameron or knew something about it, and I just left him in the room by himself. I cursed as Capitan Highbeck rested her face in her hands. *Talk about a rookie move.* Not only that, but now I looked like a complete idiot in front of the police captain and the entire police station.

It was probably already too late to do anything about it, but I needed to try. I spun on my heels and pushed past the door, kicking myself for being so naive. My boots thudded down the hallway as I stormed toward the stairs. I can't believe that I was fooled by a little acting.

"Where are you going?" Captain Highbeck asked, poking her head out of the office.

"He is probably already gone, but I need to at least try to catch him," I shouted over my shoulder. The captain followed me down the hall, keeping up with my speed. "Please send someone to collect evidence and the body."

"Of course. You can take one of our drakes," she said,

stopping as we reached the stairs. I was fuming at this point.

"I'll be faster without one," I said, now running down the three stories, taking the stairs five at a time. I shot through the lobby, getting an annoyed warning from Frutlorn about not running in the station, which I ignored.

As I ran down the few stairs outside of the police station, I pulled my bag off and yanked out a hunk of wood with a leather loop strapped across one of the long, flat sides. The board was covered in runes that had been painstakingly etched into it, each one filled with a different metal to strengthen the effects. I dropped the board onto the grass and slid one foot into the leather strap. Once my foot was secure, I pulled a thread of mana down my spine and into my foot, letting the wood absorb it.

The board vibrated as it came to life, each of the runes lighting up a different color. An invisible force lifted the board into the air. I shifted my weight onto the board and hovered a few inches off the ground. I maintained a constant flow of mana to my right foot and funneled more into my left hand. The double flow of mana down my spine affected my eyes, and I could see the mana in the air start to glow green as I condensed the magic into my hand, imagining a gust of wind to lift me up.

"Wind gust," I commanded the condensed magic. A large gust of wind flowed from my hand, pushing me off the ground at incredible speed. I soared 50 feet into the air, coming to a stop and using the hoverboard to keep me suspended. The office building was to my right, and I angled my hand, changing the direction of the wind, and launched forward. I skimmed the roofs of the buildings as I sped in a direct line to the office. The constant use of magic to keep me going was draining my mana core.

The original trip to the police station took about 15 minutes by taxi; with the help of magic, I was able to reduce that number to less than 2. I landed on the ground in a little jog, kicking the board off my foot. Instantly, the hoverboard crumbled into dust in a puff of smoke. I felt a surge of fatigue from the massive amount of magic that I used, which caused

me to stumble against the building.

My vision went fuzzy, forcing me to stop and take a minute to breathe. I allowed myself a few deep breaths before pushing past the tired feeling and ran into the building, sprinting up to the fourth floor and slamming into 4C. I looked around frantically. There was no sign of the imp imposter, and the bloody mess in the center of the room looked untouched. I poked my head out the door and looked down the hall, just praying that he was still there. I know I would have seen him on my way up, but I wanted to be sure.

I let out a little curse and walked back into the office, closing the door behind me. I made a pass around the room, slowly looking it over. The only thing that seemed to be missing was the large stack of folders that were originally on the desk. I cursed again, throwing my hands into the air. My little tantrum made my head spin, and I had to stop and lean against the wall, gritting my teeth. I was so angry and embarrassed, but mostly, I was ashamed.

I stepped back into the hall and shut the door behind me, locking the smell and gruesome scene in the office. I ended up sitting on the floor waiting for a little over half an hour before a few men in scrubs that Captain Highbeck had promised me came down the hallway. They were led by a uniformed officer. He approached me as I unlocked the office door, letting the ones in scrubs in.

"I heard what happened. I'm sorry for your loss," he said, offering me a hand. I took it, a little moved by his lack of hostility. He was a man about my height of 6 feet with shaggy brown hair and brown eyes; he was thin and pale and looked rather ordinary. According to his name tag, he was Officer Smith. I nodded at his words. It's not like I was upset about Lieutenant Cameron; I didn't know him. What I was upset about was how everything had gone to shit in less than 3 hours of being in Cerulean. "Captain Highbeck told me that you came here ahead of us to look for a suspect. Were you able to find anything?"

"He wasn't here," I said dryly. I could tell from his voice that there was some judgment from what had happened;



honestly, I didn't blame him. I really screwed up this time.

"In that case, Captain Highbeck said to head back to the station if you are done here. We can take care of the rest." He had adopted a lighter tone as he thumbed into the room. I could tell that he had some sympathy for me. I looked in the room; they were already scrubbing through the crime scene. With nothing left to do here, I thanked him and headed out.

I stopped outside and looked up at the sky blinking against the sun; it was already sinking lower. Even though it was a form of time travel when hopping gates, the entire day had been one mess after another. I was utterly exhausted and wanted nothing more than to bury myself in a soft bed, but I still had things to do. Hell, even if I didn't, it's not like I had a place to stay in the city yet.

With my hoverboard gone, I caught a carriage and returned to the police station. It took me longer to get there this time since the streets were busier as people got off work. I tipped the driver and slowly walked up the stairs to the precinct, past Officer Frutlorn, who was still at the lobby's front desk.

"Heard you made a mess of things." Officer Frutlorn said with a little smirk. I had nothing to say to that, but I still had enough pride to give him the finger as I walked by. I felt a little better as his smirk turned into a scowl. I stopped with my hand raised to knock on the captain's door. I didn't want to do this, but I had no choice. I was told to enter after regretfully knocking on the door.

The next four hours were somehow even more exhausting. I had to recite everything I had seen and done since walking through the gate this morning. Then, I needed to write down everything I said for the official report. If that was not horrible in itself, I had to do it not once but twice since the Mage Association and Police Department had different paperwork. Next, I did my best to describe the imp that pretended to be Ard; however, with no distinctive marks, it was impossible to identify him besides a well-dressed lightning imp with light blue eyes and white fur. If today had been any less horrible, I might have made an IMPoster joke, but I couldn't even bring myself to smile at the thought.

About halfway through the process, the collection team returned with the remains of Lieutenant Cameron, pictures of the crime scene, and other various samples taken from the office. Everything was then boxed up along with my detailed report and sealed. It was protocol to send all evidence of an Elite Mage's death to headquarters for further investigation. I also added a note from myself asking about my situation since I was now an apprentice without a mentor in a city with a serial killer.

According to Officer Smith, the only thing obviously missing from the room was the stack of folders. After I described them to Captain Highbeck, we concluded that they were the police files on the other murders. So not only had I let a suspect escape, but he also managed to steal files of the murders that were exactly like this one.

"Okay, I think that is everything that we need from you. We will have the evidence sent to the Mage Association tonight. We already have an officer preparing to leave," Captain Highbeck said after many hours of work.

"Thank you," I said sincerely and stood up, rubbing my eyes. After her initial dislike of me passed, she was very helpful when walking me through the paperwork. I yawned and looked out the window in her office. The sun was already down, and I was beyond tired now. "Hey, earlier, it seemed like you knew Ard well." I had been meaning to ask her.

"Not incredibly well, but I know his wife through a family friend. Why?" She said while also packing up her stuff to head out.

"Is there a way we can let him know what happened while he was away?" I wanted to get word to him so he wouldn't have to come back to this mess.

"I'm sure I can arrange it," she said, picking up her briefcase. I thanked her again and headed out. In addition to helping me with the paperwork, she had also offered to make copies of the crime scene reports from all of the murders. It was the most I could ask for at this point. I left the lobby, too tired to even look at Officer Frutlorn, and headed back to the office.

## Chapter

# 3

“What the hell happened?” I said to the air. I had started my slow walk back to the office and found an empty bench next to a small, equally empty park. A light salty breeze crept its way up through the streets, and a swing creaked in response. I looked blankly at the night sky, trying to wrap my head around the day’s events. It all felt so overwhelming that it was hard to even tell if it was real. But there was no denying what had happened and what that meant for me.

I could feel my heart start to pound painfully in my chest as reality came crashing down on me. I was alone in this city; the man I was supposed to work with was murdered, and for all I knew, I was next. Panic shot through me, and I looked around fanatically as if the murderer was going to be right behind me. No one was there; I was alone on a seemingly deserted road.

“That’s enough of you,” I said to myself, slapping my hands on my cheeks. The pain and crisp sound brought me back to now. There was no proof that I was a target, and even if I was, it was not the way I wanted to go. The pounding of my heart slowed; there was no reason to be scared right now. Today sucked, but that didn’t mean that I needed to let it control me. “Let’s go.”

I got to my feet and continued my way down the road, heading for the office with a new determination in my step. If someone wanted to come at me, let them try. I wasn’t afraid of a fight.

My impressive determination faltered as I stood in front of the office door, hesitating with my hand on the handle. I may have strengthened my resolve, but the images of the bloody mess from earlier today were stopping me dead. I gave the doorknob an experimental twist; it was unlocked. Part of me

was really hoping that it would have been locked again, but there was no reason to have my luck start now. I closed my eyes and pushed the door open.

I waited in apprehension for the metallic smell of blood to come flooding out, and when none came, I slowly peeled my eyes open. I knew they had cleaned up the body, but I still expected to see a gruesome crime scene in the room. I stepped into the office, looking around in awe. Not only was there no smell, but there wasn't even a speck of dust or blood anywhere. I walked back into the hallway and double-checked the room number. The label still read 4C, meaning that I was in the correct room.

"Wow, the cleaning crew went above and beyond. They deserve a raise," I said as I let out a whistle. I stepped into the office, closing the door behind me. It was so clean that I was able to almost forget that a horrible murder had happened here. Almost. The scene was going to be burnt into my mind for a while.

Now that I had stopped for a while, I started to realize just how tired I was. My eyes were so heavy that I was barely standing up at this point. I sleepily locked the door, turned off the light, and walked to the center of the room, tossing my bag onto the ground. While I wasn't thrilled about sleeping on the floor, it wasn't the worst place I had ever slept. I also had no other option at this point.

I pulled off my jacket bundling it up into a pillow, curling up on the carpet. My eyes snapped shut, giving them a break from the endless paperwork. This day was so much that it wasn't going to take long to drift off.

The sight of the bloody, mutilated corpse in the office made me open my eyes again. I became acutely aware of my placement in the room. Something about sleeping at the exact point where someone was brutally murdered just a little while ago just seemed a bit off. I didn't believe in ghosts apart from the ones that came from the void, but I wasn't going to risk a possible haunting. I scooted over a few feet, moving out of the center of the room. Somehow, that was better because as soon as I closed my eyes, I drifted off into a deep sleep.

An intense burning sensation in my left hand drove me from my sleep. I let out a scream and rolled on the ground. I scuttled along the floor like an injured spider, flailing until I found the wall and pulled myself to my feet.

"Who's there?" I said into the darkness, sliding along the wall and looking for the light switch. My heart was in my throat as I fumbled for the switch. Was this the killer who murdered Lieutenant Cameron? Were they here for me? How did he or they know that I had arrived in the city?

My fingers found the switch, and I flipped it up, preparing for an attack. Light temporarily blinded me, and I squinted, scanning the room for an intruder. The room seemed empty. I glanced around, trying to calm my nerves down; there was nothing obvious in the room. My hand was still burning, and I quickly glanced down. The back of my hand was red and blistering. I had no idea what had caused it, but it looked like a chemical burn.

My eyes got used to the light after I blinked a few times, and I pulled myself off the wall, slowly looking around for the source of the burning. I found the culprit sitting on my jacket pillow. A light blue translucent slime slid across my jacket, moving toward me. It wasn't fast or threatening in any way as it plopped off the coat and rolled forward. It took a few seconds before the slime seemed to get its bearing again and slid closer to me. It was round and squishy looking, about a foot in diameter, and left a trail of wet behind it as it slid slowly across the floor. I stepped over the slime as it got close and walked to the other side of the room, scooping up my jacket. The slime juice it left behind itself had already evaporated.

The slime turned and started following me, moving at a snail's pace. I checked my hand, which was still tingling in pain. The blisters were pretty bad, and it was definitely an acid burn.

"But how the hell did you get in here?" I asked, looking around the room. This was my first time getting a good look at the office since it had been cleaned. It was a large office with two desks. One was closer to the door; it was a plain wooden desk that belonged to the real Ard. The other was a large, well-

designed dark wood desk with impressive carvings around the edge; it sat at the back of the room in front of a large glass window. The buildings on either side of this one were shorter, and I was pretty sure that we were facing the water. Once the sun rose, I would have to see how good the view was. The rest of the office was simple; on the right wall, there were two bookshelves and a filing cabinet. Behind the desk was a small door that looked like it was a closet.

“How the hell did you get in here, little man?” I asked the slime, looking around. The door was shut, and the window was closed, so it wasn't likely that the slime came in that way. I took a slow lap around the room. I noticed a note on the large desk that I had neglected to see for the first time. I picked it up, keeping an eye on the slime, which wasn't even halfway across the room yet, and read the note.

Officer Mikah, after securing the evidence from the crime scene, we released a slime into the office to clean up the blood residue. After the room is cleaned to your satisfaction, please return the slime to the sewer systems.

The note was signed by Officer Smith; he had shockingly nice handwriting.

I looked back at the little slime that had now officially reached the halfway mark. We learned about slimes at the academy. They had absolutely no attack power; however, it came with a perfect defense. With the acidic fluid that filled their insides, slimes were on every predator's no-bite list. They were capable of dissolving almost anything; however, they preferred organic material. That fact made them perfect for cleaning up the sewer system, and they were often employed in most cities and towns to take care of waste and trash. That was one reason that Relexit had practically no pollution. There have been many efforts to bring slimes into the other worlds to take care of trash there, but something about the slime's physiology made it so that they could only survive in the natural mana that was in Relexit. As far as I know, no one has yet to make a way for slimes to live on other planets

successfully.

I tossed the note onto the desk and walked over to the slime that had made it another foot toward me. I pulled mana down my spine into my right hand. As the mana passed over my eyes, I could see the slime in greater detail; it wasn't just a simple acid ball. Looking through the mana, I could see the slime had one large eye that was looking directly at me. I moved around it and watched as the eye followed me. The eye passed over some translucent organ-shaped blobs like they were nothing as it tracked me around the room. It was interesting to see, but not enough for me to keep wasting mana on it. I stood over the slime and put my hand a few inches above it, imagining the freezing cold of an icy river.

"Freeze," I said, speaking the simple command. The mana in my arm flowed out with an icy chill, creating a little puff of fog. Ice crystals started to form over the slime as I continued to pour ice magic onto it. The slime twitched in panic and tried to move away, but it was no use. After a few seconds, I let go of the mana and flicked the slime to ensure it was frozen solid. The thunking sound my finger made let me know it was now safe to move.

Slimes were incredibly resilient. Freezing them solid didn't hurt them and made it possible to pick them up and move them around without hurting us or the slime. I vaguely remembered a manhole in the alley to the side of the building that was a perfect place to return the slime to the sewers.

I picked up the block of ice. It was shockingly light for a basketball filled with acid. Carrying it down four flights of stairs was a little awkward, but I successfully got it to the back alley. I pried open the manhole, glancing down into the darkness. It looked spotless. I dropped the slime down into the clean underground, hearing it thud on the ground. It would thaw out eventually and spend the rest of its time happily cleaning the sewers.

I closed the manhole and headed back to the office. It was still late, and I needed more sleep. My body was still tired and it felt great to lay down again, but after half an hour of tossing and turning, I sat up looking around the dark office. I was

exhausted but for some reason, I couldn't manage to get any sleep. Maybe it was the throbbing in your left hand, or maybe it had been so traumatic that you can't sleep. My internal thoughts were always this optimistic.

Sighing, I stood up and turned the light back on. If I wasn't going to sleep, I might as well try and do something productive. With everything that had happened today, I hadn't had time to look through the office. I figured I could waste the hours away looking through someone else's possessions.

The first place I wanted to start was the closet in the back of the room. Luckily, it was unlocked, so I pulled the door open. The first thing I saw was a cot and a blanket folded neatly on the floor.

"Well damn. I wish I knew this was here earlier." I said, annoyed, speaking to the empty room.

Not that it was impossible to sleep on the floor, but it sure wasn't comfortable; the cot was going to feel great. It also meant that I didn't need to get a place to stay right away. I moved it aside and looked through the rest of the contents of the closet. Besides the bedding, there were some basic shower supplies and toiletries, an empty suitcase and backpack, and a perfectly ironed and hung Elite Mage uniform. It was fairly ordinary and a little boring. After I was sure there was nothing of interest in the closet, I shut the door and turned away heading toward my next mission, the big desk.

I sat down in the oversized brown leather spinning chair, sinking into the comfortable cushion and reclining back a little. The chair was incredibly comfortable. I would have instead tried to sleep here than on the floor. I spun around a few times, enjoying the feeling, before stopping and facing the desk.

With the files gone, the top of the desk was relatively empty. Only a few pens and a clean coffee cup were strewn across it. It looked like the slime had knocked everything all over as it was cleaning. I was not going to complain if it meant that all the blood was gone.

I organized the desktop before I started to open the drawers. The first drawer I tried was the long, thin, wide drawer over the gap for your legs; it was locked. I suddenly



remembered the keychain that was part of the contents of the evidence box that was currently on its way to the association. I mentally kicked myself for not grabbing them and moved on to the right side of the desk. There were two drawers on the right. The top drawer was filled with paperwork that I shuffled through. Most were copies of reports that he had made; some were reimbursement receipts, finance reports, a folded map of the city, and a few other pieces of paper that were of no help to me. After I was convinced there was nothing of interest in the drawer, I shut it and moved to the one below it.

"Jackpot," I said excitedly. This drawer was a lot more interesting. It was packed full of various materials that were often used in different magical tools, enchantments, potion-making, and other magic-type goods. Even though the drawer was almost overflowing, it was incredibly organized. I picked up a few sealed glass bottles; each one was neatly labeled. Slime juice, troll blood, demon ash, and elemental clay were just a few of the contents of the bottles. Besides bottles, there were a few bags of feathers, bones, rocks, and minerals, all well-labeled and organized. Some were rather expensive and rare, while others were very common or cheap. Either way, it was nice to have a supply of things that I could use right away.

I was excited as I dug into the other two drawers on the left side. I leaned back, a little disappointed after shuffling through some more paperwork, a few manuals, and a how-to guide for police reports. It was useful but not as exciting as the material drawer. The only thing left now was the middle and locked drawer. I made sure to be on the watch for a spare key in the other drawers to no avail, leaving me with only one other choice. I pulled my bag over and grabbed the deep pocket reaching in and pulling out the last lock pick tool. I was a little sad to use my last one, but with the contents of the desk, I should be able to make more. A little flux of magic later, the desk drawer opened with a click.

"No fucking way," I said in shock, pulling out a chunk of wood. This piece of wood was 3 inches thick, 10 inches wide, and 12 inches long. It was dark brown with a bright gold color in the grains of the wood, which gave it its name, golden elm.

The crazy thing was that golden elm was very rare and extremely expensive. It was known for its ability to distribute mana smoothly, making it one of the best types of wood used in magic tool making.

When it comes to making magic tools, the higher the quality of the material used, the better the result you will get. Golden elm was considered the jackpot of woods. It was a type of wood that grew exclusively in a small part of Cavalon. The thing that made this type of wood so rare was the fact that it didn't mature until it was at least 1000 years old. So, these trees are protected, and there aren't many of them, making it hard to get a piece. It had to have cost at least a few hundred thousand if not a little more. It was probably worth more money than I would make in the next five years. I gently set the piece of wood back into the drawer as if it was going to explode if I was too rough with it.

The next thing I found was almost as shocking. Sitting to the left of the wood block was an old .45 magnum semi-automatic pistol. Guns were incredibly rare nowadays since they were practically useless against anything that could use magic. However, since they could still kill, they had been heavily regulated, and the general public was in possession of less than 1% of guns left on Etherra. Most of the guns had been collected over 100 years ago and were melted down to scraps. Even the police departments didn't carry guns anymore. We didn't even learn about them in the academy, and when I asked about them, they said there were 'more practical things' that we needed to cover. The only reason I knew about them was that my dad just happened to be part of the 1% of civilians who had managed to keep their guns hidden and passed down through the generations. He had taught my younger sister and me how to shoot once on a camping trip.

I picked it up and tested the weight in my hand; it was a lot heavier than I expected. I released the magazine and pulled back the slide, checking to make sure the chamber was empty, which it was. There were 15 bullets in the magazine. After counting them all, I slipped the magazine back, set the gun in

the drawer, and looked through the rest of the desk.

I figured that the excitement was done now that I found a gun and a block of extremely rare and expensive wood. However, there was one more surprise in the desk. Tucked into the back of the drawer, almost out of sight, was a large stack of cash. After a quick count, it was about 10 thousand. I felt a little excited holding this amount of money in my hand at one time. I chose to convince myself that it was just a pile of emergency funds and not anything shady. I slid the stack of cash back into the drawer.

"He doesn't need it anyways," I said, shrugging it off. The last thing in the drawer was a simple key. I tried it on the desk drawer with no luck. I also ran over to the front door and tried it. When that didn't work, I tossed the key back into the desk and shut it.

Now that the desk was thoroughly investigated, it was time to move on to the bookshelf. There were some monster manuals, monster and race anatomy, destination travel books, mage manuals, potion books, and basics to enchantments, but nothing terribly interesting. The filing cabinet was next, which was just full of reports that had been filed while he was here. It looked like the reports went back seven years. I flipped through the paperwork, scanning a few documents with nothing jumping out. Closing the drawer, I sighed and walked to the window looking out at the dark sky beginning to grow lighter as the sun started to awaken on a new day.

"Let's hope today is a little more productive than yesterday," I said, pressing my forehead against the glass. I felt so tired, but at the same time, I knew that even if I tried to sleep, I wouldn't be able to. Thinking about what my next actions needed to be, I tried my best to order them from most important to least. I needed to wait for a reply from the Mage Association and see if they were going to send someone to help me or even send me somewhere else to work with a different mentor. However, until I got official orders, it was my job to clean up my mess and see if there was anything that I could do as the only Elite Mage in Cerulean. That meant that there was a chance I was going to be on my own for a while.

I made a mental list that started with getting a place to stay, getting a copy of the documents from the police station, and preparing more magical enchantments and tools to resupply and prepare for whatever was to come. The bottom half of my list had things like buying some new clothes, changing the lock on the door, and taking a shower. My stomach let out a loud, long grumble, letting me know just how long it had been since I'd eaten. I think I was going on 24 hours, maybe more.

"It looks like breakfast got put at the top of the list," I said out loud, turning back into the room.

I stepped outside the office building into the crisp summer morning air and stretched, releasing a little bit of the tension that had built up in my back from the hard floor. I rubbed my hands together, warming them up a little. I had changed into the only other pair of clothes that I had brought with me: shorts and a plain black T-shirt, which offered much less protection from the cold than the uniform.

"Now, to find something to eat," I said, looking around the street. I knew nothing about the area, so the only thing I could do was look. There was nothing but apartments and other offices in the immediate vicinity, so I set off on a mini adventure to find food.

A block and a half later, I lifted my nose as a delicious aroma drifted along the summer breeze. I moved a little faster as my stomach protested again. After rounding three corners, backtracking twice, and hitting a dead end, I finally managed to find the source of the smell. A little coffee shop that was smashed between two larger office buildings. 'Anne's Coffee & Tea' was plastered in bright red letters over the door. I wasn't much of a coffee drinker or hot drinks as a whole, but the glass window filled with various baked goods and my stomach made it impossible to resist. The smell of freshly baked bread, coffee, and bacon hit me in the face like a truck when I opened the door to the little shop. A bell above the door chimed, announcing my presence as I entered.

"Hello, welcome to Anne's Coffee and Tea; how can I help you today." The hostess said behind the register. She was a young Plains Elf who, at most, was about 3 feet tall. She was

standing on a stool to make up for her petite stature. She had long brown hair put up in almost childlike pigtails. Her voice was warm and welcoming and filled with the energy of someone who enjoyed their job.

"Good morning. Is that bacon I smell?" I said, practically drooling, as my stomach started to ache with hunger.

"Yes, sir. Our special today is steak and eggs with a hefty side of bacon," she said happily.

"Yeah, I'll take that." It sounded terrific even if I looked past my hunger, although at this point, I could eat pretty much anything. I paid her, took a metal stick with the number one stuck to the top, walked toward the back of the cozy coffee shop, and found a seat. The chairs were comfortable and seemed to settle perfectly around me as I sunk into one. The warm atmosphere of the coffee shop made the entire place feel like home. Looking around for the first time, I noticed that I was the first one in today; it was relatively early, so that was to be expected.

The food was brought out to me after only a few minutes by a large muscular man with a scar over his right eye and a thick handlebar mustache. He looked tough, like a retired adventurer who had been in more than a few fights. Although his appearance did not match the cute shop, his attitude was nothing but professional as he smiled and set the food down before politely leaving. I thanked him and hurriedly dug into the food. I could feel myself drooling as I cut a piece of the thin steak, watching as the meat juice leaked onto the plate. I grabbed a large chunk of eggs along with the steak and shoved it into my mouth. My taste buds exploded upon contact with the perfectly seasoned eggs and steak. It was almost worth crying if I wasn't so distracted with shoveling more food into my mouth.

Three eggs, a large steak, and 17 slices of bacon later, I leaned back more than satisfied. I had been so distracted with the food that I didn't even notice the little shop was now filled with customers. Very few looked to be sitting down to eat; most just grabbed coffee and a pastry on their way to work. I made sure to place a hefty tip on the table before I thanked

the staff again and headed out into the street.

The sun was up now, casting light over the city as it came alive. People pushed past me on their way to work, and drake-drawn carts ran through the streets. I watched the bustle of the city for a little while before turning and heading to the police station. My head was on straight now that the crazy events of yesterday were in the past. There were a few things I needed to ask Capitan Highbeck about since I no longer had a mentor in the city.

The police station was fairly empty; only a few drakes were in the stables to the side. I assumed they were all out doing their daily rounds of the city. I entered the police station and waved at the person at the desk; it wasn't Officer Frutlorn but a thin, pale, pale-looking human. I showed him the badge I had pocketed before leaving the office and headed up the stairs. The captain's office door was ajar, and I politely knocked before entering.

"Good morning, Capitan." I said with a smile.

"Good morning, Officer Ridel." She returned the greeting. I wouldn't say that she was smiling at me, but she was being polite even after my royal screw-up from yesterday. "I'm glad that you came; I have the documents that I promised you. I was going to have them delivered, but since you are here."

"Perfect timing then," I said, keeping the warmth up as I walked to the side of her desk to the large delivery bag she was gesturing to. Inside the bag were blue and white folders filled with reports, there seemed to be a lot more than I initially expected. I closed the bag and lifted it onto my shoulder. "Thank you."

"No problem. Is there anything else I can help you with?" She said, putting her pen down.

"There was one thing that I wanted to ask you. Do you know where I can go to buy supplies for magical gear?" If I was going to be on my own with a murderer who was willing to go after an Elite Mage, I wanted to be prepared.

Making magical equipment was an important part of an Elite Mage's skills. The biggest issue was that it was rather difficult to get the materials needed to make most magical

tools since they were generally rare. Some cities had magic shops, but they were rare and heavily regulated by the government. Other than magical shops, we were told to request material from the Mage Association. The biggest problem with this was that you needed to have a reason written out and justified. According to our instructors, most requests were denied, especially those that were on the pricy side. When we probed further, we were given a bit of advice from one instructor in particular. Elite Mages would go to the black market to get most of the material that we needed or wanted.

"So, we don't have any stores in Cerulean, but there is a black market that operates in the slums and underground that has been known to carry such goods, for a price of course." She said with a stern voice. I could tell that she wasn't particularly happy to give the information. The simple fact that she was giving me the info also meant that Lieutenant Cameron had some ties with them.

The black market was a shady organization that dealt with the sale of illegal, rare, and even sometimes unethical goods and materials. Obviously, they were an illegal organization, but most times, it was too difficult or dangerous to try and fight them head-on. The police had every right to stop individual acts, traders, cargo, or mercenaries in any illegal act. However, they could not fight the black market head-on without putting both their officers and the general public at risk. Most major cities had some form of a black market, and they all talked and traded, so if you attacked one, you attacked all.

"Any hints on where I can find them?" I asked politely. Capitan Highbeck sighed, pulled a sticky note and pen closer to her, and wrote something down on it. I could tell that this was irritating to ask and that she would probably rather tell me to go to hell. But she is a professional and understood why I was asking.

"Because of the size of the city, the black market has multiple bosses and groups. The big-timers ended up taking control of certain goods or areas within the city. They do their best to move around a lot to keep themselves from being

discovered, and because of that, most of their exact locations are not known. While we don't know where the bosses are, there are a few legit businesses that members of the black market are known to frequent." She handed the paper to me; there was a single address on it. "This is a bar on the edge of the slums called The Spiders Nest and is known to frequent guests of the black market. For obvious reasons, I never gave this to you."

"Of course," I said, pocketing the note gratefully. "Oh, one last question: do you know where Officer Cameron lived? Like, did he have an apartment somewhere?"

"No, I'm sorry. We never spoke outside of work, so I never knew where he lived. We were never close. Honestly, I thought he might have just lived in his office." Her voice had some bitterness to it. With the way that she had treated me when I first got here, I had the feeling that the two didn't get along well, but this kind of confirmed it.

"Alright, I'll have to ask Ard when he comes back. Thank you anyway." I said with a polite smile, got up from the chair, and left the office with a polite goodbye.

I left the police station and made my way back to the office. It was a beautiful day outside, so I decided to walk back to the office instead of taking a cab. Yesterday had been so busy that I hadn't had the opportunity to look around, and I wanted to actually see the city I was going to be living in for an unknown amount of time.

I had no real bearing on the city, so it was nice to go on this adventure. It was a few miles between the police station and the office since I chose to take a long way back. Most of the buildings were offices or homes, with the occasional restaurant that I passed. I took note of a few places that looked good for a later date as I strolled the streets. Heavy activity to my left got me sidetracked, and I made my way down a side ally of shops. It turned out to be a busy market filled with all types of stores. I pushed through the busy bustle of shoppers and businesses selling an assortment of things. The shops sold everything from clothing, fine antiques, food, and spices. There were a few butcher shops open with ice-filled trays of



various meats and fish.

One of the butcher shops, in particular, caught my eye. The thing that caught my eye most of all was a specialty meat. They had orc meat. From what I heard, it was supposed to be extremely tasty and sometimes called a delicacy. Only one small cut of meat on the orc that was edible was located in their neck. Because it was hard to come by in bulk, the meat was expensive. The orc meat was clearly their best seller sitting up front, but they also had various reptiles from the surrounding forests and other cuts of meat on ice. I heard the shop owner telling a dwarf that the best way to cook the black coffer, a very long and fat black snake, was to fillet the body and grill it and it's best served with potatoes and carrots.

I watched as the butcher talked the dwarf into buying the black coffer and a few more choice meats. He rang the man up with a large smile on his face. A rugged-looking group decked out in armor carrying swords came up to the shop pulling a wagon behind them, catching the butcher's attention. The contents of the wagon were covered with a cloth, so I couldn't see what it was, but from the look of the people in the group, I assumed it was a group of mercenaries or adventurers who had just gotten back from a hunting trip into the surrounding forests.

The inhabitants of Relexit did not believe in farming of any kind. At best, they had a few small personal gardens but nothing to the scale that we had on Etherra. So, to get a constant flow of fresh meat and vegetables to sell, shop owners had two options. The first was to purchase things from the ships that came into the port. The second option was to look to the Adventurer's Guild to take care of it.

The Adventurer's Guild was simple enough. If they needed something, they would place an order at the guild with the proper payment, and anyone who was looking to get some extra money would be able to take the job and go out into the forest, ocean, or further to hunt and gather for the asked product and bring it back. Adventurers got paid when they completed the task, the merchants got to sell their goods, and the people of the city got to eat. It was a win, win, win situation

that worked wonderfully here.

From what we had learned during the academy, Relexit was about four times the size of Etherra, and most of it was uninhabited wild land. So, there was never a short supply of places to hunt, fish, and forage. Of course, with that came a lot of danger, so the tasks were mostly taken care of by professionals or large parties like the ones selling their goods here today. However, anyone could register as an adventurer and take on any job that they wanted. The death rate for adventurers wasn't super high since most people were smart enough to know their limits, but there were always some that decided to bite off more than they could chew and ended up dead.

Because of this, there was a stigma around adventuring, making most believe that it was only for the dumb brutes or adrenaline junkies who couldn't make it far in the world. And while that might hold true for a lot of the people that take on this lifestyle, it didn't take an adrenaline junky to gather mushrooms in the forest for extra cash. There was a time as a kid when I dreamt about becoming an adventurer. Of course, that ship sailed along with any other plans I had. I left the butcher shop after seeing the owner look over the cart's contents and pass the money to the adventurers.

I kept on moving my way through the main street occasionally stopping to see someone's goods. While looking at a fish stall, I was informed by a nice old Elf pushing 200 years old that the best place to buy fish would be at the open fish market down by the pier. While I wasn't asking for the information, I still thanked her and dropped a few bucks in the jar she was carrying. I hadn't intended to buy anything since this was a spur-of-the-moment trip, and I was about to leave when a long wooden stick about 3 feet long caught my eye. I stopped at a small store and picked up the stick, feeling the weight and texture of the wood.

"That there is a branch from a Goose Tree." The old man behind the counter said gruffly, confirming my assessment. I assumed he was the owner of the shop. He was a 4-foot-tall gnome leaning back in a small rocking chair. Gnomes were

close to dwarves in height with one key difference. Unlike dwarves, gnomes had two pairs of ears that ended in a pointed fork.

I rolled the branch in my hands. It was no bigger around than my thumb. The wood itself had a smooth texture, almost like a piece of rubber, and along with that feeling, had a good amount of flex in the branch. It was also very heavy and weighed at least four times more than it should for its size. The goose tree was a very dense tree that grew at high altitudes with great amounts of wind. Their flexion allowed them to bend with the wind without taking any damage, and the weight kept them rooted in place.

"I can tell. How much?" I asked, testing the flexion by bending the ends toward each other. There was no creaking, groaning, or cracking of the wood as I made the ends touch, making a perfect circle with the branch. I released the tension, and it returned to its original shape without a hint of bend.

"You knew just by touching it? You got a good eye kid. How about 700." He said with a hint of a grin. I laughed at that and shook my head.

"Come on, old man. Are you trying to rob me? The best I can go is 400," I said back stubbornly.

"Ha, talk about theft. It's at least worth 650." He said, crossing his arms over his chest. I hesitated for a minute, thinking it over.

"How about 600?" I couldn't help but smile at the old man. The old man rubbed his beard and leaned back in his chair. He let out a long sigh.

"Fine, fine. I can do 600," he said, reaching out a hand. I took it and shook on the deal before reaching into my pocket and passing him the money. I thanked him before continuing my journey, twirling the branch as I walked.