

THE WHETSTONE FIST

EPISODE 1



BRIAN K DECLAN



The Whetstone Fist: Episode 1 by Brian K. Declan

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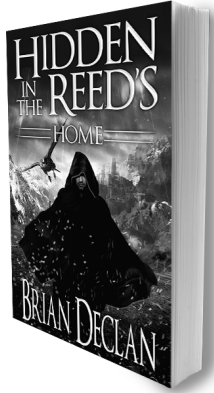
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FREE NOVEL



Thanks for checking out my latest series The Whetstone Fist. If you enjoy please check out some more of my work starting with my free debut novel: Hidden in the Reed's. Or see what else I'm up to on my website: www.briankdeclan.com. You can also find the rest of the Whetstone Fist series: [here](#).

*Enjoy the Story,
-Brian Declan-*

CHAPTER 1



The walk to Lord Stanwick's estate always felt like marching to the gallows. It's strange, Stanwick must think those gleaming white walls make the place look safe and inviting. To Lock it looked more like a big fancy prison. His men in their gleaming armor were more like prison guards than defenders. City guardsmen, like his dad, killed all the nearby monsters.

"Why the sour face?" asked Flint.

Lock forced a smile, "Nothing, just lost in thought."

"Well, snap out of it, we're almost there."

"Yeah, I see the walls," said Lock.

"Hold up," said Flint as he caught Lock's shoulder, and forced him to face him.

"What?" asked Lock.

With a sudden burst of speed, his dad jabbed him in the chest with his finger.

It didn't hurt, but still Lock took a step back. "What?"

"I know you don't want to be here, but buck up. An Initiation is no joke. Screw it up and you'll end up busting your ass in the guard for the rest of your life. Neither of us wants that, so focus."

Yeah, I have heard that every darn day for fifteen years.

For his dad's sake Lock took a deep breath and let it out slowly, "I'm focused."

That was one of the nice things about his dad. It was easy to keep him happy. Flint gave Lock a quick smack on the shoulder, then continued walking toward the estate. "Good, then let's go."

Thankfully, his dad walked the last hundred yards to the gates of Stanwick's estate in silence. The last thing he needed was another pointless reminder about how important today was. Lock stayed a half step behind his dad as they passed through the gates. He was expecting the estate guards to stop and interrogate them. But they simply gave his father a firm nod and waved them into the courtyard.

Across the courtyard, there was a staircase. A ridiculous staircase with no purpose other than to wow visitors. It was all just for show. A subtle but not-so-subtle reminder that Lord Stanwick was a step above his servants. Mid way up the staircase, a pair of the Stanwick's retainers stopped lounging against the manse's walls and moved over to block the top of the stairs.

"Useless fucking guards," mumbled one retainer, then he raised his voice. "Lord Stanwick has enough guardsmen. Come back next month."

Lock's father hopped up a step to put himself in front of Lock and turned his body sideways, "My son is here for an Initiation."

His hand shifted to the hilt of his sword, but stopped when the two retainers burst out laughing. "Funny. Now piss off."

Prick should watch his mouth before he ends up eating dirt.

"No joke, I'm afraid. Magister Tempo can vouch for us. Flint Sharp, and my son Matlock," said Flint.

The retainers stopped laughing and shared a look. Whether that was because they recognized his father's name or because they were afraid of Magister Tempo, Lock was not sure. Regardless, they moved aside.

“Whatever,” said the other retainer, “Let them deal with it inside.”

Without another word, they climbed the rest of the stairs and walked up to Stanwick’s manse. The doublewide doors opened on their own when they were a few paces away.

Okay, he had to give Lord Stanwick credit for that. It was cool. The rest of Stanwick’s overindulgent estate was silly, but the doors were neat.

The last time Lock entered Stanwick’s manse was almost five years ago. Inside of the manse, it looked the same as he remembered. From the pristine marble staircases that flanked the entryway to the aroma of fresh-cut flowers and baked bread, it was the same. Even the immaculate floor. Not a spec of dust anywhere to be seen.

Lock hated it. The real world was not that clean. Not the world he grew up in.

“Come on,” said Lock’s dad as he walked between the staircases and down a straight hallway. Doors flanked the hallway. His dad led them to a room at the end of the hall. He stopped in front of a pair of double doors and knocked twice. At the slightest touch, both doors creaked open.

Inside, there were three men at least ten years older than his dad. They were lounging around a stout coffee table. Each was sipping at what smelled like freshly brewed coffee. Strong coffee.

One of them jumped to his feet with a wide smile as they entered. “Flint, you showed up,” said the man as he rushed over to shake Flint’s hand. As they shook hands, he turned to Lock, “And the young Matlock, you’ve grown so much.”

“He has,” said Flint as he motioned Lock into the room.

“Excellent, excellent. I hope you remember me. Its been so long,” said the man.

“Of course, Magister Tempo,” said Lock, accepting Tempo’s hand.

The old man eagerly started pumping his hand with a

surprising amount of strength. "Come, come sit. Would you like some coffee while we wait for the other candidates?"

"Sadly, I can't," said Flint with a frown. "I've got patrol at noon."

Tempo stopped pumping Lock's arm and looked at Flint like he just said he had a date with a demon horde. The two other men were surprised. One of them froze. The other choked on a sip of his coffee.

"No thanks, coffee makes me jittery," said Lock, to break the awkward silence.

Tempo snapped out of his daze, "Ah can't have that today. You may have a seat. I need to have a word with your father. I'll walk you out. Magister Cadence and Magister Vercon can answer questions until I return."

Without another word, Magister Tempo and led Flint out of the room. Lock sat down across from the Magisters.

"So how do you know Magister Tempo?" asked Lock.

The man on his right stopped choking on his coffee cleared his throat, "Magister Vercon and I are teachers at Waystar."

"Oh, right," said Lock.

"Not that Head-Magister Tempo does much teaching these days," said Vercon.

"Ah," said Lock, then he sucked in a slow breath. He was trying to think of another question when the doors opened. In walked a pair of young men.

Magister Cadence finished his coffee with a single gulp and stood up to greet the two candidates. They both were around Lock's age, but he had never seen them before. Not surprising considering their fine silk cloths and the galvanized metal spell-rods hanging from their waist. They were not from East Stanwick. That much was clear.

Lock moved to the far side of the couch as Magister Cadence finished his greeting and motioned to the couch. The other two Initiates were thin. But Lock was still too big. With his broad

shoulders, the couch felt like it was made for children. To make matters worse, a few seconds later, another candidate entered the room, followed by Magister Tempo. This time, it was a young girl.

She had a stern look on her face and her golden blonde hair was in a tight ponytail. She was cute, despite the no-nonsense vibe. Probably because she was tiny. Little things always looked cuter.

As Lock checked her gear, he felt a twinge of self-consciousness about his own kit. He was the only one wearing leather armor instead of fine braided silk and his only weapon was a short sword, whereas the other three had spellrods.

“Great! With Miss Everbright, we are only waiting for one more,” said Tempo with his usual excitement.

“Sorry Magister, Shela moved to a later time. She said something about her brother having a later start time and wanted to go with him,” said the young girl, Miss Everbright.

“Ah, understandable but a shame none the less,” said Tempo, then he clapped his hands together, “Shall we?”

Tempo walked to the back of the room and stopped in front of a large mural of the continent.

Lock twisted in his seat to follow where he went. The move blocked his side of the couch. The two guys shared a look as they walked around the opposite end of the couch. Lock rolled his eyes and spun around the side of the couch. Instead of making a scene, he waited for everyone else to line up in front of the mural. Besides, he was the tallest person in the room.

The mural was some sort of map. A map with dozens of thin streaks of purple, blue, and green. As he focused on Stanwick’s manse, he noticed that two of the streaks crossed. Tempo tapped the intersection, then walked to the side of the mural.

Tempo raised his palm with his fingers curled forward and plunged it toward the picture frame. A few inches before his

hand hit the wall, a glowing circle of interlaced sigils appeared around his fingers.

Tempo twisted his hand clockwise, then counterclockwise, and the entire wall burst into a cloud of blinding blue smoke. Lock blinked the stars from his vision and realized the wall had disappeared. It had become a portal to what looked like an underground cavern. Judging by the moldy smell and lack of light, it must have been deep underground. Maybe the bowels of a nearby mountain.

The three Magisters formed a line in front of the mural. “A few points before we begin,” he said, turning his left palm up.

Magister Cadence took his cue from Tempo. “Your goal is to find a very special well inside the dungeon. If you succeed, you will be returned to us here in Lord Stanwick’s study.”

Magister Vercon picked up as soon as Magister Cadence stopped speaking, “The caverns form a network of twisting tunnels much like a maze, but remember your goal is at the bottom most chamber. Keep moving down and you will find it. However, the twisting maze of tunnels is not your only concern. Keep your eyes and ears alert at all times.”

“If you run into too much trouble,” said Tempo as he pulled six small blue crystals from his pants pocket, “these are despawn crystals. They will despawn all monsters in the area and effectively end the Initiation. You will fail. Only use them if you must.”

Tempo motioned for Miss Everbright’s wrist, “Besides the crystal, we’ll be giving you each an auraband. It’s nothing much. It will help you see in the caverns and monitor your health, stamina, and mana levels. You will also be able to track experience gains, but you must return them at the end of your initiation.”

In one smooth motion, Tempo slapped Miss Everbright’s wrist with a thick strip of copper colored metal. The moment the metal touched her skin, Tempo let go and the strip of metal

wrapped around her wrist. The back of her hand glowed. A series of numbers appeared on the auraband.

LVL. 1 Human Female: Clarisse Everbright,

Exp. 0/1000

72/72 Health.

95/95 Mana.

40/40 Stamina.

“A RESPECTABLE AMOUNT OF MANA. Quite impressive, but you’ll need to work on your stamina,” said Tempo as he flicked his fingers for the other candidates to give him their hands.

Tempo slapped another strip of metal on the next candidate’s wrist.

LVL. 1 Human Male: Jasper Stanford,

Exp. 0/1000

85/85 Health.

82/82 Mana.

53/53 Stamina.

“ALL GOOD, NUMBERS,” said Tempo, then he reached for the next candidate.

LVL. 1 Human Male: Drew Stanford,

Exp. 0/1000

80/80 Health.

83/83 Mana.

48/48 Stamina.

. . .

AFTER READING DREW'S STATS, Lock nudged his way to the front and offered Tempo his hand. As soon as he slapped the auraband on Lock's wrist and the entire room exploded into bright colors. The sudden onslaught of light caused him to stumble back, "Whoa."

It took several seconds for his vision to adjust to the currents of magic he was seeing. He glanced down at his stats.

LVL. 1 Human Male: Matlock Sharp

Exp. 0/1000

113/113 Health.

41/41 Mana.

98/98 Stamina.

HE LOOKED up to see Tempo staring at his wrist, "Abysmal mana, you'll need to take extra care to improve."

Yeah, thanks for pointing out the obvious.

"How long will the auraband work?" asked Lock.

"Excellent question. At your mana levels, it would only last about an hour. However, the natural Ether flow in the caverns will maintain it for about twelve hours. The monsters also respawn every twelve hours. That is one of the reasons this dungeon is special," said Tempo. "Any more questions?"

"Yeah, how are we supposed to keep our experience?" asked Jasper.

"Don't worry, the Blessing you earn from completing all five floors will take care of that. If you fail; however, you'll need to find other means to earn a Blessing," said Magister Vercon.

Tempo stepped to the side. "Please make your way through the portal. Mr. Sharp, if you will."

Great, he was standing in the back. The biggest guy in the room. And they wanted him to go first. Whatever. Lock pushed his way between the two Stanford brothers, stepped through the portal...

And face planted into a pile of moldy cave dirt.

Dammit, his dad was right. He had to focus.

He pushed himself up and watched the other candidates push past him. He was about to follow them when he heard a strange sucking sound behind him. The sound set off some nervous instinct, and he drew his sword without thinking, "Freaking teleporting."

Lock brushed off what dirt he could and rushed to catch up.

Within seconds, the tunnel opened up, and he found the group. All three of them had stopped a few steps inside a large chamber. The room was at least thirty feet in height and fifty feet wide. Around the perimeter, there were seven tunnels. All of them were sloped downward.

Before exploring, Lock dug a quick arrow in the dirt.

One of his biggest concerns was getting lost in the caves and running around in circles. A little forethought might save time later.

"I say we each take a cavern. If you run into trouble, head back. We'll meet here in, say, an hour," suggested Clare.

Lock nodded to Clare, "Sounds good to me."

Drew and Jasper just ignored her and shared a whispered word. Then, without looking back, they walked away. Clare watched them enter the far right tunnel.

"Assholes," said Clare, as the two brothers disappeared. From the look on Clare's face, she knew them. "Just the two of us, then. My name's Clare."

"Aa, yeah, I read your stats. Matlock, but you can call me Lock," Lock said, then offered his hand.

Clare glanced at his dirty hand, then looked him in the eye. "No offense, but are you sure you're ready for this?"

“Don’t worry about me,” said Lock.

Clare pursed her lips, then shrugged, “If you say so. Our best bet is to work together. There are too many tunnels to explore. According to my brother, we need to go down five levels. Each level has a large chamber similar to this. Our biggest challenge is navigating the maze of tunnels.”

After a few moments, it became clear she would not shake his hand, so he brushed it off on his pants, “So we split up. I’ll take the far-left. You take the one next to it. I suggest marking your path to keep track of the tunnels that loop back on each other.”

“Not a bad idea,” said Clare. “Um, be careful. These tunnels could be full of monsters.”

Yeah, that’s the one thing I am ready for.

CHAPTER 2



Clare was right; the tunnels were literally crawling with monsters. Spiders as big as house cats, bats bigger than eagles and slimes. The darn slimes were a pain because his sword did nothing against them. They were slow. Easy to avoid. His tunnel forked twice, but within half an hour of scouting, he slaughtered most of the monsters and found a path to the next large chamber. He marked the dirt with a quick arrow, then went back up to wait for Clare.

While waiting, he sat down to clean the spider guts off his sword. A couple of minutes later, Clare came running out of the fourth tunnel.

She slid to a stop panting, “You’re back.”

“What do you mean?” said Lock, “I was waiting for you.”

Clare ignored his question and bent over to steady her breathing. “Any luck?”

“Yeah, I marked a path to the next chamber,” said Lock.

“Oh good. I explored the rest of the tunnels. They’re all blocked by monsters,” said Clare as she huffed out a breath and stood up straight. “What are you waiting for?”

“I was just,” began Lock but Clare had already disappeared down the far-left tunnel, “Waiting on you, ya stuck-up jerk.”

After a cooling breath, he wiped the last bit of guts off his sword and followed Clare down the marked path. Less than thirty feet in, he found Clare prancing around a pair of spiders. He hung back to let her have the experience from killing them.

“What are you doing? Help me out here,” said Clare as she back peddled away from one spider.

Without another word, Lock jumped in and thrust his sword right between the cluster of eyes on the spider’s bulbous head. A few seconds later Clare dispatched the other spider with a burst of mana from her spellrod then spun on him, “What the hell? I thought we were going to work together.”

“Uh yeah, I found the path and came back to get you. What’s the problem?” said Lock, but he took a step back to keep Clare’s spellrod in his peripheral vision.

“You stood there and watched me almost get gorged by that spider. That’s the problem,” said Clare as she jabbed her spellrod at Lock.

On instinct Lock shifted into a low guard, “Take it easy.”

The runes on Clare’s rod flashed a pale blue light. “What’s the deal? Are you going to watch my back, or do I need to worry about you screwing me over?”

“I figured you would want the experience. It’s not much, but it adds up,” said Lock.

A few tense moments passed as they stood there staring at each other, but eventually Clare lowered her spellrod, “How many of these things did you kill already?”

“I don’t know, maybe sixty,” said Lock.

“No way, let me see your auraband,” exclaimed Clare. Lock raised his hand so she could check his stats.

Exp. 623/1000
113/113 Health.
41/41 Mana.
92/98 Stamina.

“I TAKE IT BACK, you’re more prepared than I thought,” said Clare as she dropped Lock’s hand.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m sure my face plant back there didn’t make the best impression,” said Lock.

Clare shrugged and continued down the tunnel, “And your mana level is like a child’s.”

“You’re one to talk. Your stamina is no better,” said Lock, loud enough to draw the attention of a trio of bats.

“Keep your voice down,” blurted Clare as she fired off a mana blast at one bat. The attack connected, but the bat shook it off with ease.

To avoid another staring contest with Clare, Lock rushed forward and sliced through one bat, then slammed another to the ground with his off hand. While it squirmed on the ground, he finished it with a quick stomp. By then Clare killed the third bat with a flurry of mana blasts.

“You good,” asked Lock as Clare fired another blast at the dead bat.

Clare took a breath then nodded, “Yeah sorry I snapped at you, I’m not used to fighting monsters.”

“Not for calling me a child,” said Lock in an attempt at humor.

“I didn’t... Ah whatever. Let’s keep moving,” said Clare as she took a few steps down the tunnel then stopped, “You should go first.”

Lock took the lead without complaint, and they made their way down to the second chamber in relative silence. Each time they encountered more monsters, they fell into a delicate pattern. Lock hit them head on while Clare stayed back and fired her

spellrod from a distance. The strategy worked without flaw, and before he knew it, they made it back to the second chamber.

Lock was about to enter the chamber when Clare caught his wrist, "Hold on, there should be a monster guarding each of the chambers."

"Looks clear to me," said Lock.

"The Stanfords could have cleared it already, but just in case, wait a second for my mana to regenerate," said Clare.

"Alright, if there is trouble, I say we stick to what we've been doing. You cover me from behind," said Lock.

"I was thinking the same and if there's trouble, we fall back to this tunnel," suggested Clare.

Lock nodded his agreement, "Ready?"

Clare took a deep breath and bobbed her head. Together, they stalked into the chamber, trying to make as little noise as possible. They were only two steps into the chamber when a ten-foot slime dropped from the center of the ceiling.

Clare didn't hesitate to blast it with her rod, but Lock froze. His sword was useless against the damn slimes. If he attacked, all it would do was get stuck.

The slime giggled and bounced closer. Clare fired off another blast. "What are you doing? Attack it."

"My sword's useless against that thing," complained Lock.

"Yeah, it's a magical creature. Channel mana into it, you dope," said Clare as she fired another mana blast.

Lock took a second to focus on his mana, but nothing happened. The slime giggled bounced toward them a second time. There was no time; they needed another plan, so Lock rushed forward, "Keep blasting it, I'll get it to chase me."

"You what?! Wait just... Ah fuck it," said Clare as she powered up another blast and took aim.

Despite the Slime being massive, it was painfully slow. All Lock did was throw some stones and it would giggle-bounce after him again. Clare continued to pepper it with mana bolt

after mana bolt. The first one got its attention, but it was too dumb to know what shot at it and continued to chase Lock.

The plan was simple, but it worked. Lock threw rocks and led it in circles while Clare wore it down with mana blast.

Occasionally, one of Clare's attacks would catch its attention, but again Lock threw rocks, and they fell back into their attack pattern. It went that way for the next ten minutes. Lock kept it bouncing in circles while Clare chipped away at its health. Twice she had to retreat to the tunnel and regenerate her mana, but in the end, they cleared the second chamber without a scratch.

The moment the Slime died; Lock felt a surge of power run through his body, followed by what seemed to be a swirling ring of yellow light. When the surge of power faded, he noticed Clare bent over, rubbing her forehead.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She sat down and huffed out a breath. "Yeah, it's only a headache. Looks like you leveled up."

Lock glanced down at his hand.

LVL. 2 Human: Matlock Sharp

Exp. 305/1250

124/124 Health.

45/45 Mana.

108/108 Stamina.

"YEAH, I did. That thing must have given like 500 XP. My mana still sucks, though," said Lock.

Clare continued to rub her head. "That's because you never use it. If we're going to make it any farther, we need to change that."

"I've dealt with monsters easy enough," said Lock.

"Then what happened with the slime, huh? You would have

been helpless if I wasn't here, and, I don't want to burn through my mana like that again," said Clare.

Lock cracked his neck. "I'd say it was a joint effort, but fine. How am I supposed to channel mana into the sword?"

Clare's eyes widened, then she blinked a few times and her headache seemed to go away, "Here, try it with my spellrod first," she said as she tossed him her spellrod.

Lock caught the spellrod, then pointed it across the chamber. "Alright what now?"

Clare snorted out a breath, "For starters, flip it around before you blast yourself in the chest," then she stood up to adjust Lock's grip. When she finished, she took a step back. "Okay, good. Now do you feel that swirling in your chest?"

Lock bobbed his head as he took aim again. "Yeah, I know that much."

"That's the source of your mana. Once you get that, try to feel how it flows around your body. It should go from your heart to your head and down your arm. Through your legs, hands, and fingers," explained Clare.

"Okay, I've got it. What next?" asked Lock.

Clare took a step behind Lock. "Now you need to control that flow. Extend it into the spellrod and Hooah!"

In an instant the spellrod fired a tiny mana blast across the room, "Holy crap, it worked."

"Congrats, now for the hard part. Before you extend the mana flow into the rod, try to build it up in your fist. The more mana you build up, the stronger the blast will be," said Clare.

"Ah, that's why my blast was so crappy," said Lock as he took aim again.

He turned his focus back to his mana, then the spellrod slowly glowed. Without warning, a blinding mana blast flew across the room and shattering a large chunk of stone off the far wall. The sound echoed around the chamber and sent a searing pain

through Lock's head. The pain was so bad that he stumbled back and lost his grip on the spellrod.

"Whoa, you don't put everything into one shot, you idiot," said Clare as she rushed to catch Lock.

Lock squinted open his eyes, "A little warning would have been nice."

"Screw you. It's not my fault you know nothing. I was trying to help," said Clare as her concern turned to anger. She shoved Lock, collected her spellrod, and walked off to explore the next set of tunnels.

"Nice, piss off you're only ally," said Lock to himself, "Brilliant plan."

CHAPTER 3



Lock rubbed his face, hoping to clear the lingering mana headache and tried to think of his next move. Clare ran down the second tunnel from the left. He could follow her and try to apologize. Then again, finding a safe path to the third chamber would be a solid way to make it up to her.

Words are meaningless in the face of inaction.

With that thought, Lock drew his sword and went down the far left tunnel. Ten feet in a spider the size of a large dog dropped out of nowhere. As the spider fell, its front two legs slashed a pair of thin cuts down his leather chest plate. Lock bounced back but the moment the spider hit the ground it bunched its legs and sprang at him.

He threw out his free hand to knock it back. But missed, and the spider's fangs sink into his forearm. Its razor-sharp front legs clawed at him. A sudden jolt of pain shot up his arm as the spider's fangs punched through his armor. Once the spider found the soft meat of his forearm, it went into a frenzy and clawed at him with a whirlwind of slashing limbs.

The spider's frantic assault caught him off guard, and he fell on his back. Thankfully, pain had a way of forcing him to focus.

Lock dropped his sword, bunched his fist, and smashed it into the spider's side. The first punch rocked the spider back, but its flailing limbs absorbed the blow. The second and third punch knocked it on its back, but it still clung to his arm.

Feeling its prey get away, the spider clamped down even harder on his forearm. The pain sent Lock into an even deeper rage. Now that he was on top, he realized he had the advantage not only in position but also in weight. Huge spider or not, it still only weighed seventy some pounds. Lock grabbed onto the base of one of its front legs, lifted it slightly off the ground, then bashed its head into the ground.

The effect was immediate; it released his left hand. But instead of letting go of the spider, Lock grabbed its other front leg and continued bashing the spider's face into the ground until it went limp. Or at least until its legs stopped flailing.

Whether he bashed it ten times or twenty, he wasn't sure. He was filled with so much rage that he lost track of how many times he pummeled its lifeless body. Regardless, it was dead.

He stood up panting, "That'll teach you to sneak attack someone twice your size."

Lock huffed out a breath to clear his lungs and bent down to collect his sword. As his fingers tightened around the sword's handle, a throb of pain jolted his whole body. He dropped the blade.

A second throb of pain pulsed through his body, and he immediately knew what happen. His hand darted to the small herb pouch he kept strapped to his belt. Nothing. There was no pouch. It must have come loose during his scuffle with the spider. Lock spun around in a panic and scanned the ground for his lost pouch. Nothing.

Maybe he lost it in the fight with the Slime. He was about to rush back to the second chamber when his body throbbed with pain again. His body seized up for a second, then he missed a step and crash to the ground. He ignored the pain in his body. With

sheer will picked himself up. He put one foot in front of the other. Each step was agony. It felt like he was wearing lead boots. His arms seized up, but it was not the pain or the difficulty that made him stop cold. It was the sudden realization that his herb pouch was not in the second chamber either.

He collapsed to the ground. His only hope of fighting the poison was gone. He clawed at the dirt one last time before his body froze. But while the poison trapped his body, his mind was clear. Too bad that was like torture. His own body had become a cage.

Careless! Unfocused!

He could hear his father's words. If he saw how easily that spider snuck up on him, he would have been right. Lock should never have let that happen. He had been too busy thinking of his blunder with Clare, not focused. Not living in the present.

One mistake is all it takes to end your life.

Guardsman died all the time from stupid mistakes just like this. Even seasoned veterans lost track of time or got overconfident and died to low-level monsters. The monsters of the wild were unforgiving like that. The same applied to this moldy old cave. He might not be dead yet, but he was easy prey. Another monster could wander by any second and finish him. Or.

"Why are you laying in the dirt?" asked Clare.

Yes!

"Come on, stop screwing around. The monsters are getting stronger. We should explore together from now on," said Clare.

Yeah, no crap.

"You're hurt," blurted Clare as she ran over to Lock, "What is it? What happen?"

I screwed up.

"Your arm's bleeding!" squealed Clare. "Oh god, it's yellow. You're bleeding yellow! So gross."

Poison, now hurry and find my herbs.

"I can do this," said Clare as she took a deep breath. "Yellow means poison. What did my brother give me for poison?"

Goldleaf, crushed Goldleaf.

"Its gotta be here somewhere," said Clare as she riffled through her pack. A few moments later, she pulled out a tiny yellow vial and pressed it to Lock's lips. She dumped the dull yellow liquid and instantly he felt the stiffness in his muscles relax.

By the time the vial was empty, the paralysis in his body had completely worn off. He sat up and before he realized what he was doing; he pulled Clare into a hug. A moment later, his mind caught up to his body, and he pulled back in an awkward jerk.

"Sorry," blurted Lock, "I mean, thanks."

Clare acted like he had done nothing. All business, "What happened?"

"Spider bit me, but I lost my herbs. I came up here trying to find them and collapsed. It must have some poison."

Clare blinked then put her hands up, "Hold on, a spider bit you then let you crawl away."

"Not exactly. I killed it, then stumbled up here," said Lock.

For a few moments Clare stared blankly at him, then she shook her head, "It doesn't matter. You need to be more careful. Where's your knife?"

"It's a sword, and I must have dropped it. Left tunnel, but first I need to find my herbs," said Lock.

Clare stood up and offered her hand to help Lock up, "They're just herbs, forget about it."

"They're not just herbs. We might need them," said Lock.

Clare folded her arms in front of her chest, "We don't have time. The monsters are getting stronger, causing us to move slower. If we don't keep moving, we are going to run out of time."

She had a point. They had to get moving and the monsters would get stronger the lower they went. But the herbs were the only way he had to heal and counteract the spider's poison. It was

only a matter of time before another spider poisoned one of them, so they needed the herbs.

“There’s no point in rushing if we get killed by poison,” said Lock.

Clare pulled another yellow potion out of her pack and drank it. “Satisfied?”

This time it was time for Lock to give a blank stare. “What?”

Clare huffed out a breath. “The potion has a thirty-six-hour effect. Neither of us need to worry about poison.”

Thirty-six hours! Holy crow. Those potions were worth a fortune. Any potion that lasted more than a few minutes cost more than. Well, it cost more than he could imagine, and she gave him one without a second thought.

“How many of those do you have?” asked Lock, his voice lower than he intended.

Clare zipped her bag shut, tossed it over her shoulder, and gave the strap a sharp tug, “Enough.”

Lock put his hands up, “I was just surprised you brought such a powerful potion, let alone two of them.”

“Well, I’m surprised the Magisters let you come here,” said Clare. Still a jerk.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” demanded Lock.

Clare snatched her spellrod off her belt and started walking away, “Nothing, we need to move.”

“Not nothing. You’ve got more to say, so have at it,” said Lock.

Clare stopped abruptly and spun around, “You’re not ready for any of this, and that puts my future in jeopardy.”

“I might not have as nice a gear as you, but I’ve prepared for this my entire life. In case you forgot, I killed most of the monsters. And, you might not want to admit it, but we took out that huge slime together,” said Lock as calm as he could manage. Still, by the end, he was practically shouting.

Clare seemed startled by Lock’s rise in volume but instead of

backing down stood her ground, “No, you ran around in circles while I drained my mana killing it. And why was that again? Oh, right, because not only do you not have a proper weapon or supplies, but you don’t have a freaking clue how to use your mana. Guess what genius, a Blessing uses mana.”

“If I’m so useless, then why bother to save me? Do you like to waste money?” Lock snapped his fingers, “That’s right, where you come from gold just falls from the sky and multiplies.”

Clare snorted out a breath. “You’re one to talk. Your parents had the money to pay for an Initiation. They should have spent some of that money on better gear and training,” then she snapped her fingers to mock him, “That’s right, they’re just as inept as you.”

Before Lock knew it, he was in Clare’s face. She raised her spellrod, but her reaction was comically slow. He slapped the spellrod out of her hand and clamped his hand around her neck. “Insult my father again, and I’ll end you. I’ll fucking end you. Understood me?”

He waited for her to answer, but after a few moments of silence, he realized she couldn’t breathe. That simple realization was enough to snap him back to his senses. He let her go.

Clare dropped to the floor coughing, “I...” she muttered, then broke out coughing again.

Lock watched her try to speak and debated offering an apology, but he did not want to apologize. Not to some stuck-up rich chick. Then again, she saved him from the spider’s poison, and he was the one who lost his temper.

“Sorry I snapped. Like it or not, I still think we should stick together. I’m going to get my sword. If you’re not here when I get back, I understand. Either way, good luck,” said Lock.

Before entering the tunnel, he took a deep breath and let go of the tension between his shoulders. If the past few minutes taught him anything, it was that he had to stay focused and in control.

No matter what happened next, he was not about to let another monster catch him off guard. Not again.

He continued forward with caution and stalked his way down the tunnel until he found the broken body of the spider he killed. The sword should have been right here, but he found nothing. Just like his herb pouch, the sword had disappeared. In frustration, he kicked the dead spiders curled up body. "Piece of crap."

Its bunched-up body rolled farther down the tunnel like a tumbleweed and stopped ten feet away. As soon as it stopped rolling, another spider dropped on top of it and sank its fangs into the dead carcass. Without thinking, Lock rushed forward and kicked it while it was attacking its dead brethren. He planted his off foot and connected with so much force that both spiders flew across the tunnel and slammed into the wall with bone-breaking force.

Both spiders curled up in their death throes. Still, Lock gave the second spider a good stomp, just in case. As he stopped the spider, he caught a glint of light from the other spider. His lost sword was sticking out of his back. That was what attracted the second spider. Good thing he caught it before it got too far away, or it would have disappeared with his only weapon.

The entire exchange was a convenient reminder, spiders struck anything shiny or moving fast. If he kept the sword sheathed and moved slowly, they might not notice him.

Anyway, he had his sword back, and learned his lesson. Time to go see if Clare stuck with him or not. When he turned around to head back up the tunnel, she was already there. She stood still, staring at him with that stern face. Cute stern face.

"What?" he asked.

Clare glanced at the dead spiders, "I was going to say we should stick together..."

"... but," prompted Lock.

"But I don't know if I can trust you," answered Clare.

Lock nodded. They had just met each other, "You can trust I want to earn a Blessing. Like you."

"That doesn't mean you will not stop me from getting mine," said Clare as she watched Lock's eyes.

"What do I care if you get one?" asked Lock.

Clare shrugged, "Don't know, you could have many reasons to sabotage someone else's success."

"Well, I'm not like that," said Lock. "Are we sticking together or not?"

"First let's get one thing clear. You ever touch me again, and I'll blast you in the back the first chance I get. You saw what your 50 points of mana did. I've got twice that, and I know how to use it," said Clare.

"Point taken," said Lock, "I'd rather not have to look over my shoulder the entire time we're here."

"Yeah, well, you've got your sword back. Now lead the way," said Clare as she tossed Lock's herb pouch at him.

CHAPTER 4



Level 2 spiders lurked the entire tunnel, the first two Lock killed were only the start. He killed three more within a minute of continuing their trek downward. Then they stopped as they came up to a group of five of spiders feasted on some sort of rotting carcass. Based on the size, it was probably a large bat or flying insect.

“Turn back?” asked Lock.

“No point. The other tunnels are full of just as many monsters. I think they want us to fight through them,” answered Clare.

“Alright, cover me,” said Lock.

Before Clare could respond, he leapt on the closest spider. His sword slashed down, severing the spider’s bulbous hind segment from the rest of its body. He followed that up with a quick thrust through another spider’s beady eyes. Clare fired off a blast from her spellrod, scattering the other three, but Lock rushed in and kicked one of them into the cavern wall.

The last two spiders tried to flee as their brethren died, but Clare fried one with a charged blast from her rod. Lock severed

the last one's leg, then with a burst of speed, he dashed in front of it and slammed his blade through its head.

The moment the last one was dead, Clare walked up to Lock and shoved him. Or at least she tried. She was easily seventy-five to a hundred pounds lighter than him and had no chance of moving him. "Don't be reckless."

Lock forced himself not to laugh at her failed attempt to push him and took an unnecessary step back, "It's called being decisive."

Clare snorted out a breath, "A little warning next time, alright?"

"Alright, but we did pretty good," said Lock.

"You're a brute," said Clare, then she flicked her fingertips at Lock, "Keep going."

She was right, so Lock didn't argue. It was not long before they found more spiders, most in packs of two or three, but they had little difficulty cutting or blasting through them. Of course, that was when another problem popped up. The tunnel split into three separate passages.

"You have a preference?" asked Lock.

"No, but give me a minute to regen my mana," said Clare.

"Oh right," said Lock as he pulled out a small square of cloth and cleaned his blade.

Clare took a seat along the side of the tunnel. "That sword special or something?"

"Huh?" said Lock, a little surprised Clare was starting a conversation. "Um, sort of. It was my pop's. I mean my grandfather's."

"It seems small for you," said Clare, then she put her hands up, "I didn't mean it... Just... sorry I know nothing about swords."

"No, you're right. My pop was short and used to duel wield a pair of these. It's small for me, but it's the best weapon my dad owns, aside from his own blade. But that's a two-handed saber. I prefer something with a bit more weight to it," answered Lock.

“Why don’t you channel mana into it when you attack?” asked Clare.

Lock paused, trying to read Clare’s face. She seemed genuine. “I’ve been trying, it doesn’t seem to work.”

Clare rubbed her earlobe for a few seconds. “Can I see it?”

Lock stopped cleaning the blade and flipped it around to hand to her. Clare took the sword with both hands, which should have been awkward since it was a single-handed weapon. Then again, small hands.

“Its heavy,” said Clare as she closed her eyes. A few moments later, a gentle blue aura formed around the sword. She stayed like that for a while before she opened her eyes and handed the sword back to Lock. “It’s not like the spellrod but it will accept mana. You’ll need to push harder.”

“I don’t understand. How d’you do that?” asked Lock as he took the sword back. The aura died immediately.

“Spellrods are created specifically because it is easy to channel mana through them. It almost pulls it from your hand. They made your sword to cut stuff. But it is possible to channel mana into almost anything. Just takes more effort,” said Clare.

“Alright,” said Lock as he closed his eyes and focused on channeling his mana into the sword.

He felt like something was about to happen when Clare broke his concentration, “Stop, you’re just pushing all your mana into your hand.”

“Yeah, my hand is touching the sword,” said Lock, like it was obvious.

Clare shook her head, “Don’t use so much of it. You’re trying to push what’s in your hand into the blade. Not moving everything in your body closer to the blade. It doesn’t work like that.”

A few more minutes went by while Lock practiced and failed at channeling his mana into the blade. Finally, he got frustrated and sheathed the sword. “This isn’t working. Let’s just keep moving.”

Clare stood up, "Alright but I've got something you can try."

"Oh?" asked Lock.

"Next time you're in close with one of those spiders, channel some mana into your fist and punch it. Should work the same as the sword, might even drop it in one hit," said Clare.

"Cool, I didn't know you could discharge mana from your hands," said Lock, only to have her stare at him with that non-nonsense face. "What?"

"You can't discharge mana from your hand, or the sword. You'll just hit it harder, a lot harder," said Clare.

"Oh, I was hoping it would be more explosive, like your spellrod," said Lock.

"No offense, but how do you not know any of this? Someone must have taught you?" asked Clare.

Lock raised his chin, "Magister Tempo showed me a few things when I was little."

"And since then?" pressed Clare.

"My dad trained me," said Lock as he continued down the nearest tunnel.

Clare took a couple quick steps and fell in behind him, "Then you must have learned how to use your mana. I mean, I can't tell if you're trying to deceive me."

Lock stopped. "I'm not deceiving you. My dad's a city guardsmen. Did the best he could. He doesn't know the first thing about firing a spellrod or using mana. We didn't have money for an Initiation, or better gear. Magister Tempo owed him a favor, plain and simple."

The moment Lock stopped, Clare snapped up her spellrod, and the runes flared to life. For a moment she just stood there pointing her rod down the tunnel, "I... that's not what I expected you to say. It's not like Magister Tempo to owe someone."

"Well, I hope you didn't expect me to say I was nobility. What's your story?" asked Lock.

"No, I didn't, but that's more likely than being the son of a city

guard,” said Clare fired off a charged blast from her rod, a moment later a spider dropped dead from the roof of the cavern, “My parents are merchants from Wilhelm, they wanted something better for me and my brother. They saved for years to bring us to East Stanwick and give us a chance at earning Blessings.”

Lock rushed forward to engage a pair of spiders. With a well-timed thrust, he impaled one, then charged his fist to punch the other, but before he could attack, Clare blasted it.

He released the charge and kept walking. “What sort of merchants?”

“They’re brewers,” said Clare, “They supply the two largest taverns in Oberlin.”

“That explains how you got those potions,” said Lock as he continued to search the shadows of the cavern.

Clare stumbled but recovered her balance with a couple of quick steps, “What makes you say that?”

Lock rolled his eyes. “I’m not a complete dope. Master brewers make the best potions, not alchemist. The real question is why your folks aren’t selling them in East Stanwick. They’d make a killing.”

“It’s complicated,” stated Clare.

“Does it have something to do with those other two guys? Seemed like you knew them?” asked Lock as he continued his decent.

“No, they have nothing to do with it,” said Clare.

“But you know them,” said Lock.

Clare glanced at Lock with her grumpy face, “Yes. They’re brothers, twins, in fact. Magister Slater has taught them for over a decade,” said Clare.

“Seem more like lovers the way they ran off together at the start. How d’you know them?” said Lock.

“Magister Slater’s my tutor. Was anyway,” said Clare. She practically spat the words, clarifying what Lock suspected. She did indeed have a poor history with the Stanford twins.

Lock stopped walking and glanced back at Clare. “We need to worry about them?”

“Worry about what’s right in front of you,” said Clare a little too fast.

Lock could not help but laugh, “You sound like my father.”

“Your father sounds smart,” said Clare.

“He likes to think so,” said Lock.

Clare laughed, “Parents, I’m pretty sure they’re all like that.”

They cut their laughter short as Lock raised his hand to signal that he heard something. It was a faint clicking sound. He took a moment to search the shadows and found a group of five spiders that had scurried up the walls of the cavern and now prepared to ambush any unsuspecting prey. Lock jabbed two fingers toward his face, pointed at the patch of shadows hiding the spiders, then held up his hand with all five fingers extended.

She nodded and took aim with her spellrod. As she charged up a mana blast, Lock readied himself in case they attacked. His preparation was unnecessary. Clare’s charged blast was enormous, shattering both rock and spider. In an instant, all five spiders were dead, and broken bits of rock and dust covered the tunnel.

“Fuck, how much mana did you hit them with?” asked Lock as he waved some of the lingering bits of dust away from his face.

Clare shrugged, “About twenty, twenty-five max.”

“Remind me not to pick a fight with you,” said Lock.

“Again,” said Clare.

“Huh,” said Lock.

“Not to pick a fight with me again,” said Clare.

“Oh right, yeah. Thanks for not blasting a hole in my back,” said Lock.

Clare dipped into a slight bow, extending her hand for Lock to keep moving, “You’re welcome but don’t expect such kindness next time.”

“There won’t be a next time,” said Lock as he moved through

most of the rubble, then stopped in front of a chunk of rock too large to walk around.

“Ya know men always say that,” said Clare as she bumped into his back, “Right before they run off with some other girl, or head back to the nearest tavern.”

“I’m not a big drinker, and last time I checked, you were not my girl,” said Lock as he jumped on top of the rubble and extended a hand to help her up.

Clare glanced at Lock’s hand but hesitated to take it. “And your temper. When was the last time you lost control of that?”

“The last time someone picked a fight,” said Lock as he waited for Clare to take his hand.

It took her a moment before she accepted his hand. “What’d they do, yell at your mother?”

“That would be pretty tough,” said Lock, as he hopped off the rubble. “She died when I was two.”

“Holy Shit!” blurted Clare.

Lock spun around at the sudden outburst. People usually acted strange at that news, but shouting was a bit much, especially given their situation. He glanced up at her to see if she was okay and found her staring at the roof of the cave. “You alright?”

“What?” said Clare as she snapped out of her daze and looked down at him, “Yeah sorry, I think I found our ticket to the bottom chamber.”

“What’s that?” asked Lock.

“It looks like a hidden chamber of some sort. I’ve heard rumors of Initiates finding them, but I always assumed it was just over embellishment,” said Clare as she moved closer to the wall and felt around.

“What’s in there?” asked Lock as he climbed back on top of the rubble. There was a faint purple light pouring through a hole maybe two and a half feet wide. With his vision enhanced by the auraband, the purple light blended almost perfectly with the

patches of shadow scattered throughout the caverns. But now that he looked straight at it, there was something up there.

“Don’t know. Give me a boost and we’ll find out,” answered Clare.

“You sure? There could be more monsters,” warned Lock.

Clare frowned, “I doubt it. They would have come out when I blasted it open. Either way, it’s worth the risk.”

“Alright,” said Lock as he bent down and knit his fingers together, “Still best if you keep your spellrod handy.”

Clare didn’t bother to answer as she stepped into Lock’s hands. He lifted her with relative ease. She grabbed the lip of the hole, then stepped on his shoulders and disappeared like a sneaky little cat. A good ten seconds later she poked her head out of the hole, “You’ve got to see this.”

“Back up, I should be able to jump and pull myself up,” said Lock. He took one step back, then with a quick shuffle forward, he leapt into the hole with his arms bunched in front of his chest. His shoulders scraped against the rocks, but he could cling to the lip of the hole. He half expected Clare to give him a little help, but she had already started exploring the hidden chamber.

He debated asking her to help, then decided against it. Instead, he swung his dangling legs forward and muscled his chest over the lip. From there, he could push himself the rest of the way. He rolled to his feet and gave a quick scan of the room.

The chamber was much larger than he expected. The walls were smooth and curved in the shape of a half dome. In the center of the ceiling there was a massive crystalline prism that emanated a gentle purple glow that lit the chamber. Around the prism, there was a twelve-pointed star etched into the ceiling. Each point of the star was a different color and each of those colors matched one of twelve short pillars that lined the outside of the chamber.

In the center of the room was a raised pedestal covered in concentric rings of sigils. That pedestal had attracted Clare’s

attention. Her face was inches away from the pedestal's surface as she reverently ran her hand over the sigils.

Lock leaned over the pedestal to catch her attention. "What is all this?"

Clare smiled from ear to ear as she stood up. "It's a fusion chamber. Or infusion chamber, there's a fair bit of debate over what it does."

"What's fusion or infusion?" asked Lock.

"It depends on several factors, such as the mana type you choose, or which items get fused. The effects might even change depending on which Ancient built the chamber. But the general purpose is to imbue an object with a specific type of mana and give it enhanced capabilities. For instance, if it's infused with fire mana, you can cast fire spells without performing a mana conversion. Even if you don't have a fire Blessing." said Clare.

"Sweet, how do we do it?" asked Lock.

Clare beamed, "Pay close attention," then she took her spellrod off her belt and stuck it into a six-inch wide pool of translucent liquid in the center of the pedestal. Once the spellrod was submerged in the liquid, she looped the strip of leather on its handle around a small nub on the pedestal, "There's pure Ether in the center. Make sure you don't touch it. Concentrated mana can be quite volatile."

Ether? Concentrated? Volatile? Lock didn't understand any of that, so he just leaned over to see how she secured the spellrod, "Gotcha."

Her spellrod was only a foot of straight steel and slipped all the way into the Ether. With the loop of leather attached to the handle, she could pull it out without touching the pool of Ether.

"Then all you need to do is select the mana type," Clare waved her hand toward the pillars lining the chamber, "And feed it mana."

"How do you know which mana type each pillar designates?" asked Lock.

“Just look at the top of the pillar. Each has a symbol for one of the twelve aspects. This one here is for light. Both of my parents and my brother earned light mana from their Blessing. I think I’ll choose that one just in case I don’t get a light Blessing. You should infuse your sword, so it will be easier to channel mana,” said Clare as she went over to the light pillar.

She placed her hand on the pillar and channeled her mana through her hand. As she fed it mana, pulses of yellow light ran up the pillar and collected inside the prism set in the ceiling. Each pulse made the light inside the prism intensify until it was a golden yellow, as pure as the sun.

Clare pulled her hand back from the pillar and winced like she had a headache. A moment later, a beam of blinding light shot from the prism to the pedestal and winked out. For a few seconds, the chamber lingered in near total darkness. Clare’s spellrod glowed and slowly fill the chamber with a pure golden light.

Despite her obvious headache, Clare walked up to the glowing pool of Ether with a smile on her face. As she unfastened the loop of leather and pulled the spellrod out of the pool of Ether, a golden orb of light flowed out of the pool, went through the spellrod, up Clare’s arm, and settled in her chest. When the light from her spellrod faded, the prism in the ceiling filled the room with dim light. The only difference was that now the light was gold instead of purple. Clare wrapped her fingers around her spellrod, and she forgot about her headache.

Lock glanced at her wrist to confirm what he suspected.

LVL. 3 Human Female: Clarisse Everbright,

Exp. 81/1563

87/87 Health.

115/115 Mana.

48/48 Stamina.

. . .

SHE'D NOT ONLY REGAINED her mana, but the infusion process gave her experience enough to reach level 3.

"Your turn," said Clare, "Just don't touch the Ether, it looks like it's still charged with light."

Lock drew his grandfather's sword and stepped up to the pedestal. The blade was only two feet long, with another six inches of guard and handle. The only part that stuck out of the Ether pool was the inch and a half end cap at the tip of the handle. For a moment Lock had a sense of panic that he would never get the sword out without touching the Ether but there was just enough to grab.

Now that the blade was in place, he circled the room, trying to think of which mana type would be best. His father never earned a Blessing, so he didn't have a mana type, and his mother was not around long enough for him to ask what mana type she had. He made a full circle before a thought came to him.

"Which aspect lit the chamber when we arrived?" asked Lock.

"I think you were seeing things, I did not set the chamber to a mana type yet," said Clare.

"Then why was it purple?" asked Lock.

"I don't think it was purple, but purple corresponds to Void," said Clare as she pointed to one pillar.

Without another word, Lock walked up to the Void pillar and put his hand on it. He expected to have trouble channeling his mana, but the pillar pulled it out of his body even worse than the spellrod. The strength of that pull was a little jarring, but he braced himself against the wall. A few seconds later, he removed his hand and a lance of pain shot through his temples. After watching Clare go through the process, he knew what to expect. Still, it took him a few deep breaths to make the headache to subside.

“Did it work?” asked Lock as he searched through the darkness.

“Not yet. You need to draw your mana through the sword to complete the fusion,” said Clare.

Lock felt his way back to the center of the chamber and carefully leaned over the pedestal. With his thumb and forefinger, he gently pinched the end of his grandfather’s sword and began lifting it out of the Ether pool. He only lifted it a few inches before the handle slipped out of his fingers and sank back into the Ether pool.

He rubbed his fingers, then tried it a second time. Only to fail again. Third time’s the charm. He tried pinching it with his left hand and failed again. After a third failed attempt, it was looking pointless, but he couldn’t give up yet. For the fourth try, he used both hands. As soon as he lifted the blade, he realized his fingers were too big for such delicate work.

The Ancients couldn’t have overlooked such a simple problem. There had to be an easier way to get it out without touching the Ether. Or maybe the Ether wasn’t as dangerous as Clare seemed to think.

She knew more than him, but by her own admission, fusion chambers were extremely rare. If there was debate over what and how the fusion chambers worked, how did anyone know that Ether was dangerous.

“Fuck it,” blurted Lock right before he plunged his hand into the Ether pool. The moment his skin touched the Ether, his vision exploded with color, then all light just winked out.

CHAPTER 5



Lock lurched awake and blinked the stars from his eyes. “My sword?”

“Really? That’s your first question?” said Clare as she stood up, “Not. What happened? Or is my hand okay? Or ya know, Am I freaking alive?” Clare threw Lock’s sword into his chest, “There’s your sword and in case it’s not obvious I’m tired of saving you.”

Lock blinked a few times to clear his head a bit. “Um, thanks, I think. What happened?” asked Lock. “All I remember is a bunch of lights.”

“You stuck your hand in a pool of pure Ether, and almost died,” said Clare.

Lock glanced down at his hands. “I feel fine. Great. A little confused but great.”

“Good, then get moving. You’ve been out for almost half an hour,” asked Clare.

Half an hour! It felt like only a handful of seconds. If she was right, they had three more floors to survive. If they never slept, they had roughly nine hours, figure two hours per floor. And another hour for each of the chamber bosses. That was cutting it

real close.

Not to mention that the floors were likely to get more difficult the deeper they went. Regardless of how he felt, they had to move, “Not like I have a choice, we’re running out of time.”

“Yeah, come over here. I need help to get down,” said Clare as she walked over to the section of floor, she blasted open.

Lock sheathed his sword and followed Clare. At the hole he offered both of his hands, “Hold on tight.”

“And what?” said Clare, as if he was stupid.

“Just give me your hands,” said Lock.

Clare rolled her eyes but placed her hands on hips. As soon as they touched, he lifted her clean off the ground, “Whoa!”

Lock took a couple of steps closer to the hole. Once she was over top of it, he lowered her down. Then, as she got low enough, he crouched down so he could lean into the hole and shimmied onto his chest to lower her further, “You good?”

“Yes,” said Clare, “You can let go.”

Once he lowered her safely to the floor, Lock secured his sword and rolled over to lower himself down feet first. Thankfully, slipping through the hole was much easier on the way down. In a couple of seconds, they were back in the tunnels. It looked the same as he remembered, a handful of crushed spiders and a pile of stones and rubble.

“I’ll take point,” said Lock, eager to try out his infused sword on the next group of spiders, but it turned out Clare was also hoping to test out her spellrod and she was better equipped to strike at a distance.

The blast from her spellrod had a golden hue, and it struck the spider center mass. The result was startling. Her blasts used to create a devastating explosion of raw mana. This time, the blast shot right into the spider’s body. A split second later it broke apart with a slight burst of light, “Oh yeah.”

Lock twisted mid stride, “Impressive.”

“Yeah, light mana is all about the flash,” said Clare with a smirk.

“What about void mana?” asked Lock with a twirl of his sword.

“Don’t ask me, you picked it,” answered Clare.

“Right, mind if I pick up the pace?” asked Lock.

After a nod from Clare, Lock started jogging down the tunnel. Despite his increased pace, he continued to scan the walls and ceiling for more spiders. Partly out of caution, but mostly because he wanted to test out his sword. It wasn’t long before he found a pair of unsuspecting victims.

This time he would not let Clare strike first, so he used his secret weapon. His family’s intrinsic ability, Flash Step. As soon as it triggered, everything around him seemed to slow down. He closed the distance between him and the spiders in a fraction of a second.

First, he struck the one on the right with an upward slash, then reversed his grip and stabbed down through the midsection of the one on the left. He pulled his sword free, glanced down at the bodies to make sure they were dead, then checked the blade. It looked brand new, as if it had just been polished.

“That’s strange,” said Lock as the world returned to normal.

Clare slowed her pace as she caught up. “That was insane. What did you just do?”

“Not that. I mean, my sword cut clean through them,” said Lock.

“That’s what swords do,” said Clare.

“I mean, it was like they weren’t even there. As if I was cutting through air and look, the blade’s not even dirty,” said Lock.

Clare glanced at the dead spiders, “Maybe that’s what void does.”

“Maybe,” said Lock as he started down the tunnel again.

Clare jogged after him, “Hey, hey, hold up. You better explain that whole becoming a blur thing?”

“It’s nothing. I just moved faster at an increased stamina cost,” said Lock.

“Okay,” said Clare, “That’s cryptic.”

“Eh,” said Lock as he increased his pace to take point again. Move moving meant lest talking.

From there, they slashed or blasted a clear path through the tunnels. To call their weapons effective seemed like a bit of an understatement. They slaughtered their way through the rest of the tunnel so fast that it made the time they lost in the fusion chamber irrelevant. Killing the monsters had turned into little more than swatting away annoying bugs.

Still, by the time they reached the third chamber, they needed a break. Or more accurately, Clare had to catch her breath. Lock played along to make her feel better, but he knew his stamina regen was high enough that he didn’t need a break much at all. He could, however, use the extra time to study the boss chamber. It looked much the same as the last one, but on the far side there were only two tunnels, both of which looked to be blocked by a sheet of white fiber.

“How much you want to bet it’s going to be a spider?” asked Lock.

Clare laughed but didn’t give him an answer.

“What’s so funny?” asked Lock.

“You have nothing to bet,” said Clare, “Besides, I agree it’s going to be a spider.”

“An enormous spider,” said Lock.

Clare frowned as if she was thinking about something, “With all these spiders, why aren’t there webs anywhere except here. I always thought spiders left cobwebs like all over the place.”

Lock snorted out a breath. “Finally, something I know. They’re cave spiders and cave spiders hunt by surprising or outrunning their prey rather than trapping them with webs. Trapper spiders use webs, hunter spiders use stealth and their sharp claws. They both use venom, though.”

Clare played with her bottom lip for a few seconds, “Oh... well, cobwebs are gross.”

“Agreed,” said Lock with a nod. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Same as before, I suppose. You need to get close to use your sword, plus you can use that blur thing,” said Clare as her eyes flicked to Lock, then she looked straight again.

Lock pretended like he didn’t notice, then shrugged, “It’s called Flash Step.”

Clare bounced to her feet and pointed a finger at him. “I knew it was something special. Where’d you learn that?”

“Not sure it’s teachable. I picked it from my dad when I was little,” answered Lock.

“It’s an intrinsic ability?” asked Clare, “Like specific to your family?”

“I guess so, yeah,” said Lock.

“I’ve heard of them before,” said Clare, “but never seen one like that.”

“Do you have one?” asked Lock.

“I don’t know, maybe. My dad’s auraband says he has a skill called Analyze. He uses it to determine the base elements of a potion or solution. I never picked it up though.”

“Makes sense, considering you are a family of brewers. A bit of advice, you won’t learn it until you try to use it,” said Lock.

Clare played with her bottom lip again, “Did you say your dad was a guardsman?”

“Yeah, what of it?” asked Lock.

“No offense, but your intrinsic ability seems like the kind of thing that makes you a famous duelist,” said Clare, “I mean, you ran like thirty feet, killed two spiders and cleaned your sword in the time it took me to blink.”

“My dad quit dueling before I was born,” said Lock. No need to tell her that his dad picked up matches whenever they needed the money. Hell, Lock wasn’t supposed to know either.

“Yeah, it’s pretty dangerous,” said Clare to break a silence that Lock didn’t realize they had fallen into.

Lock drew his sword and gave it a quick twirl to loosen his wrist. “You ready?”

Clare twirled her spellrod, “Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER 6



“*M*ove!” shouted Lock as the giant spider shifted its attention toward Clare. She fired off another blast of light mana to knock it back, then dropped to her knees, clutching her head.

Without thinking, he used Flash Step to sprint past the spider, caught Clare under her arm with his free hand. He triggered Flash Step again and sprinted for the wall of the chamber. Clare was at her limit. That was the third time she had drained all her mana, and each time it took her longer to recover. Lock wasn’t much better off; he’d used Flash Step countless times. Now his shirt was soaked through with sweat and clung to him worse than the random bits of cobwebs. Worse, his muscles burned from overuse. He could only use Flash Step one or two more left before he collapsed from exhaustion.

“Hurry! Kill it,” stuttered Clare as she fought through her headache.

“What do you think I’ve been trying to do,” panted Lock as he spun around and squared off against the spider. It fixed its beady eyes on him and reared up on its back legs, ready to strike. That was the same attack pattern it used every time he got close. It was

predictable, and easy to counter, but that didn't matter. Its hide was impenetrable. He needed some way to damage it.

Even his new void charged sword did nothing. Every time he struck the spider, it bounced off its hardened skin like a dull blade. It was then that his father's words came to him.

Don't keep chopping, try a fresh attack.

With that thought, he charged the spider. The spider took on the challenge and lunged forward, using its front two legs as spears. The spider aimed both legs at his chest. They would have connected, but at the last moment, Lock used Flash Step and leapt straight into the spider's face. Venom dripped from its fangs as its front two legs closed in around him. He was faster. He slammed the butt of his mana charged sword right between its eyes. The spider was dead before it even touched him.

The result was equal parts disgusting and glorious. Streaks of purple mana tore through its body. Everywhere the streaks spread, they disintegrated flesh and exoskeleton. The sight was gross, but the smell was far worse. It was like smoldering garbage mixed in with burnt stew.

Lock covered his nose as he picked one of the spider's fangs off of his, then he worked his way away through the spider's putrid corpse, and went to check on Clare, "How you are doing?"

"I'll live," said Clare as she propped herself up against the wall and took a swig of a dark blue potion.

"Spider's dead," said Lock as he flopped down next to her.

Clare reached into her bag and tossed him a pale green potion. "Couldn't have done that earlier?"

"Sorry, I try to avoid punching giant things that are trying to kill me," said Lock, "What's this?"

"Not much time to rest and your stamina needs a boost," said Clare.

Lock glanced down at his wrist to check his stamina.

. . .

BRIAN K DECLAN

LVL. 4 Human Male: Matlock Sharp,

Exp. 5/1963

78/158 Health.

45/62 Mana.

12/142 Stamina.

“THANKS, I didn’t realize I pushed myself that hard,” said Lock,
“Leveled up though.”

Clare checked her wrist.

LVL. 4 Human Female: Clarisse Everbright,

Exp. 120/1963

96/96 Health.

30/126 Mana.

39/53 Stamina.

“ME TOO, which is great, but we need to come up with a better strategy for next time. That was way too close. I can’t even figure why our weapons didn’t hurt that thing?” asked Clare.

“Not sure, but it could have had resistance to blades or certain types of mana,” said Lock. “It’s also the first monster that was a higher level than us.”

“Hmm,” said Clare, “No resistance to that explody slam thing.”

“I wouldn’t count on it next time though,” said Lock. “We need a Plan B.”

“We can’t change our weapons,” said Clare, “But if it had something to do with our comparative levels, we can work on it.”

“Huh,” said Lock as he tried to understand, “You saying, you want to level up?”

“Yeah dummy,” said Clare.

“Hey, be nice,” said Lock, “I just meant, we’ve been doing that the whole time.”

“I’m not saying we do anything different. My brother said the highest-level monster he encountered was level 5,” said Clare, “I figure if we clear all the tunnels and try to hit level 5 before taking on the next chamber guardian, it will go a lot smoother.”

“Two floors left, and it’s taking us what, two hours per floor. With only three hours left, I’m not sure if it’s worth it,” said Lock.

Clare bounced her head around then took a sip of her potion, “It’s a risk, but I don’t have a better idea.”

Lock pushed himself to his feet, “Me neither,” then offered his hand to Clare.

She grabbed his hand and let him lift her up. “You want to make a bet?”

“I thought I had nothing to bet?” asked Lock.

They wasted no time clearing out the tunnels. In their fight with the giant spider, they’d almost forgotten how much of an advantage they had against the weaker monsters. Still, clearing the tunnels became tedious. Thankfully, Clare turned it into a bit of a competition, and they started counting who had more kills.

“Fifty-seven!” shouted Clare.

“Sixty-one, sixty-two, and sixty-three!” shouted Lock from farther down the tunnel.

“Bullshit! You just hit fifty!” argued Clare as she rushed to catch up.

Lock stood there waiting, with his arms on his hips. “Count the bodies if you want, but bats travel in large numbers.”

Clare kicked one of the dead bats, “I’ll pass. Bats are gross and I’ll bet the next chamber guardian is going to be a giant bat.”

“You know, I have nothing to bet,” said Lock with a sly grin.

Clare shoved him to keep moving. “It’s a figure of speech. You know, one of those things grown-ups say. You should try it instead of grunting every time you swing that sword.”

“Don’t act like I’m the child here. I hear you making that ‘HoooAH’ sound whenever you charge your spellrod,” said Lock.

Clare waved off the comment and went straight back to business, “Whatever, looks like the fourth chamber is up ahead. We need to find another tunnel.”

Lock put his hand up to stop her. “Hold up, I’ve been marking them. This is the last one.”

“Shoot, I still need a few hundred XP to hit level five. What about you?” asked Clare.

“About the same for me. The Stanford’s must have killed off the rest,” said Lock.

Clare looked like she was about to argue but nodded her head, “Agreed. We’ll just have to risk it.”

“Before we go, do you have any more of those potions?” asked Lock.

Clare slipped one of her arms out of her pack and felt around inside, “Only one more stamina and two mana but I was hoping to save them for the last chamber.”

“Good idea it’s only going to get harder,” said Lock. “I’m ready whenever you are.”

“You first,” said Clare as she secured her pack.

Lock stalked into the fourth chamber, but he was barely five feet inside when he knew something was wrong. Maybe it was because the room was too quiet, or too still, or maybe it was just too unthreatening. Whatever it was, something screamed at him to escape, and fast.

He used Flash Step to spring backwards. As he flew backwards, he slashed his sword upward out of instinct. He didn’t know if he hit anything because of the void blade, but he felt his sudden movement shoved Clare back toward the tunnel.

Instead of retreating to safety, she collided with an inky black wall of shifting shadows and stumbled into his back. Clare opened her mouth to complain, then shut it and gulped down a mouthful of air.

Lock was about to check on Clare when he noticed an impossibly pale man in tattered robes standing in front of them. The man looked down at his chest, then pressed his fingers to his abdomen. When he pulled his hand away, a putrid black liquid coated his finger tips. "You're a quick one."

"You have seen nothing yet," said Lock.

The pale man flashed a pair of gleaming white canines as his lips peeled back into a smile, "Ah, the requisite boasting. It's been so long that I almost forgot about that part. Oh, and last time I tasted my blood," said the pale man, then he licked the blood from his fingertips, "You are going to provide some much-needed entertainment."

"Only if you find a sword through the heart entertaining," said Lock.

The pale man's face curled into a lopsided grin. "Threats can't mask the fear in your heart," then he flicked his bloody hand so fast that it was little more than a blur. In that instant, his hand became clean. Worse, his chest healed. But his cloths remained as tattered as before. In fact, now that he had time to look at the man, the only part of him that lacked perfection were his tattered robes.

His face, his teeth, even his hair, all looked perfect. Too perfect.

"Lock," said Clare. Her voice quivered, but despite that, her spellrod cast a gentle glow from behind him.

"Don't worry about him, he's an Ashwisp," said Lock with as much confidence as he could muster.

The man in tattered cloths chuckled, "Quite right, but you have something else to worry about," then he disappeared in a poof and reappeared on the other side of the room. He raised his pale hand and snapped his fingers. "Meet my new friends. I didn't have time to ask their names."

A moment later, two blobs of shadow drifted into the room from the cavern behind the Ashwisp.

As the Ashwisp spoke, the shadows dripped off the two figures like a falling curtain.

“Jasper and Drew,” said Clare.

“Hey,” snapped Lock, “Time to focus. Those two are not the problem. We take out the Ashwisp and we stop them too.”

The light from Clare’s spellrod flickered and dimmed. “He’s too fast, he’ll kill us. We need to leave before we end up like those two.”

Not turning your back to a predator was one of the first lessons, Lock. That said, you also never turned your back on a friend. He spun around and flicked Clare’s chin with his thumb, “It’s not speed. It is a trick that combines air and shadow mana. When he moves like that, he can’t hurt us, but as you saw, we can hurt him. He has more to fear than us.”

“But... Jasper and Drew... he enslaved them,” said Clare.

“It’s his mental attack, and he’s doing it to us already. Inducing fear taking control,” Lock flicked Clare’s chin again, “Hey, look at me. You need to push it to the back of your mind. You hear me?”

Clare finally pulled her eyes away from Jasper and Drew and looked him in the face. “Yeah...” she said a little shaky then the light from her rod brightened, “Yeah. I mean yes. I’m focused. Let’s kill this Ashwisp.”

CHAPTER 7



*K*illing a wisp is a challenging feat, like trying to catch the wind. Killing one while two novice magi peppered you with mana bolts was like chasing the wind in a thunderstorm and trying to avoid the rain. If it wasn't for their much-improved weapons and some slight practice at teamwork, they would have lost in seconds.

The only real reason they survived was because Clare knew who she was fighting. Not only that, but she had also far better aim and her blasts of light wasted less mana. If she wanted to, she could have taken them out with one charged blast. But they weren't the real enemy. Instead, they fell into a battle of attrition.

The goal was to buy time so Lock could get close to the wisp and kill him. He'd already proven that he had the speed and power to damage the wisp. The only problem was that Lock had too much ground to cover. Flash Step didn't last long enough to get close and still kill the wisp.

"I can't hold them off forever," said Clare.

"No, but please try," taunted the Ashwisp right before he disappeared across the chamber once again, "I'm rather enjoying this one chasing me."

“It’s no good. We need to try something else,” said Lock as he pulled up next to Clare.

“I’m open to ideas,” said Clare as she jumped to avoid a blast from Drew, then fired a blast to distract Jasper.

“You remember how we found the fusion chamber? Think you can do that again?” asked Lock.

Clare glanced at her wrist, “Yeah, but not with these two assholes attacking me.”

Lock didn’t waste time on words. Instead, he rushed past Clare and attacked Drew. If his memory was right, Jasper had higher stats, which likely made him the stronger or older brother. Whatever.

Enslaved or not, the protective brother instinct should still be there, and with one swift attack, Lock put Drew on the defensive and triggered Jasper to attack him instead of Clare.

That was when Drew did the unexpected. He stopped retreating and swung his spellrod at Lock’s midsection. Lock’s dueling instincts kicked in and he bounced back. The move took him clear of Drew’s attack, but a blast from Jasper caught Lock in the back.

As he lurched forward, Drew followed up with a backhand strike from his charged spellrod. Lock narrowly avoided the attack by dropping into a sideways roll. Despite the awkwardness, he could tuck his legs and pop out of the roll. As he popped out of the roll, Lock used his momentum to hop to the side and forced Jasper to stop attacking to avoid hitting his brother.

Lock was about to charge Drew when a massive section of the chamber wall exploded into a cloud of dust and shards of stone. The shock wave from the explosion knocked all three of them off their feet.

Lock blinked the dust from his eyes and tried to keep track of Drew. Before he the dust cleared, the Ashwisp’s voice echoed around the chamber, “Forget him you idiots. The girl, get the girl.”

Something in those words reminded Lock of the nonsense lectures his father always gave after sparing.

Fights aren't pretty. They're fast and ugly. Winning is even uglier and you can't do it by sitting on your ass.

There were seconds before the Ashwisp's command would take hold of Jasper and Drew. He had to act. Lock swatted the dust out of his face and lunged at the last place he saw Drew. Luckily, his shoulder caught him in the stomach.

It caught Lock off guard how easy it was to move him, and Lock put way too much muscle behind his lunge. He went down face first. Regardless, he shoved Drew at his brother hard. It was still too dusty to see perfectly, but he heard both brothers go down. More important, he caught a glint of light as one of their spellrods dropped on the ground.

Lock pushed himself up and did a sloppy version of a belly crawl toward the brothers. When he thought he was close, he flung out his hand to snag the spellrod. And found nothing but stale dirt. He was less than an inch away.

"An inch short and a second late," said the Ashwisp as he plucked the spellrod off the ground and pointed it at Lock.

On instinct, Lock curled into a ball. It did nothing to protect him from the barrage of mana blasts the Ashwisp fired into his back. The force of the blasts was nothing compared to what Clare could manage. Still, the rapid-fire attack cut through his simple leather armor and flattened him to the ground.

In seconds, it tore a hole in his armor and burned away tiny patches of his skin. Lock clawed at the ground, but the barrage of mana bolts never stopped coming. More and more of his skin burnt away. His vision drifted into a sheet of white-hot pain. The pain intensified and threatened to leave him unconscious. With a grunt of effort, he pushed the pain out of his mind and tried to roll away. His rolled turned into a couple inch belly flop. Then something slammed against the side of his body and sent him tumbling across the cavern floor.

The pain in his back subsided, but then his vision exploded with golden light and he blacked out.

“Come-on, come-on, please be alright,” said Clare as she cradled Lock’s head in her lap. Her spellrod dangled from her wrist and bumped into his shoulder. That gentle touch sent a lance of pain down his back and forced him awake. When he opened his eyes, the blinding light disappeared.

“Did we win?” asked Lock.

“Quiet,” said Clare as she pressed a tiny vial to his lips, “Drink this and stay still. We’re running out of time.”

Lock pushed the pain out of his mind and swallowed the potion. It burned like drinking pepper juice and left him in tears. He did all he could not to move or react, but that potion burned all the way down his throat.

It also worked, and the pain in his body subsided.

He laid there still and waited until his breathing evened out, “What happened?”

Clare’s top lip curled up at the edges and she bit off the words as she spoke. “There’s some good and some bad. The Ashwisp’s dead and Jasper and Drew are themselves again.”

“That’s the good part, right?” asked Lock.

“Sort of. We need to go after Jasper and Drew. Can you stand?” asked Clare.

Lock flexed his hands, then twisted his midsection. “Well, the pain’s gone, but I must have dropped my sword again.”

“Yeah, that’s the bad news. I’ll explain on the way,” said Clare as she offered her hand.

Lock accepted her hand, but Clare was too tiny to offer any real help. He pulled on her arm but had to stand up with his own power. “What happened?”

Clare took off at a steady jog. “They went down the second tunnel from the right. If we hurry, we should be able to catch up.”

Lock kept pace a few steps behind her, and a twinge of pain

shot up his back. The pain was annoying, but it was nothing compared to the intensity from a few seconds ago.

“Start talking,” said Lock between breaths.

Clare’s eyes flicked to Lock, then back to the tunnel in front of them, “I’m not sure if you were still conscious, but after you tackled the Stanford’s, I blew up the Ashwisp.”

“I figured as much after it exploded in my face,” said Lock.

“What was I supposed to do, it would have killed you?” snapped Clare.

Lock patted the air with his hands. “Take it easy, I’m not blaming you.”

Clare turned her head away from Lock and sped up a little. Lock increased his pace to keep up. “I was only trying to hit the Ashwisp, but it was on top of you, and I didn’t want it to escape.”

“So, you added some extra mana to make sure you got him. Good call,” said Lock.

“Maybe, or maybe it was overkill. The Stanford’s thought so,” said Clare.

“Clare, what happen to my sword,” said Lock.

“Well...” said Clare, “I may have blown up more than the Ashwisp.”

Lock’s eyes bulged. “My grandpa’s sword.”

“Not quite. I blew up Drew’s spellrod,” said Clare.

“Then what happen to my sword?” asked Lock but as soon he spoke, the answer came to him, “Wait, that ass took it, didn’t he.”

“I tried to stop them, but I emptied my mana into that last attack, and you didn’t look like you were going to make it,” said Clare.

Lock waved his hand at Clare, “Don’t worry about it, I know how to handle a couple of crooks.”

Clare caught Lock’s forearm and slowed her pace. “Hold on.”

Lock rolled his wrist and broke Clare’s hold on his forearm. “For what? They took my sword. I’ll get it back.”

“I’m not arguing that. Just be careful. That healing potion

might get you up and moving, but it won't put you at one-hundred percent," said Clare.

"I've been dealing with punks like them all my life. I can handle this," said Lock as he started jogging again.

"Okay, okay, I'm just saying, be ready. They both hit level 5 when the Ashwisp died," warned Clare.

"So did I," said Lock as he raised his hand into a fist.

LVL 5 HUMAN MALE: Matlock Sharp,

Exp. 120/2441

62/211 Health.

76/76 Mana.

115/183 Stamina.

"THAT'S GREAT, but don't underestimate them. Magister Slater has trained both of them, and if the rumors are true, he's never lost a duel," said Clare.

"Then he's never faced my dad," said Lock, offhand.

"Those two might be pricks, but they each have twice as much mana as you, and trust me, they know how to use it," said Clare.

Lock just laughed.

"I'm serious," said Clare.

"I know you are, and that's what's funny," said Lock.

Clare sped up and jumped in front of Lock. "Look, I know you're tough, but they aren't monsters. If you attack them, they won't be fighting like half-baked zombies."

"What is your point? That I should let them go?" asked Lock.

"I'm saying you are injured, unarmed, outnumbered and they are dangerous," said Clare, "Maybe it would be best to avoid a fight and get to the last challenge."

Finally Lock stopped brushing Clare aside and looked her

straight on. The concern on her face was enough to give him pause and reconsider his next move.

"I hear ya, and all that makes perfect sense. But sometimes the right thing to do makes little sense at all. Sometimes you must fight when the odds are against you. Besides, I'm not outnumbered, right?" asked Lock.

Clare pressed her eyes closed for a moment then bobbed her head, "I'm with you."

The conviction in Clare's voice brought an unexpected smile to Lock's face. Despite their differences and arguments, they had become friends. Or maybe it was those arguments that brought them closer. Regardless, they were no longer opportunistic allies. They were a team.

"I know," said Lock as he took off at a steady jog.

Clare followed a few paces back in what had become their 'go to' combat formation. In less than a minute, they caught up to the Stanford brothers. The brothers must have heard or been expecting them as both stood side by side, facing back up the tunnel with their weapons at the ready.

"You two have gone far enough. Either you pop those crystals and save yourselves any further embarrassment. Or we'll make you," said Jasper.

Before Lock could even react, Clare snapped, "Embarrassment?! You're the one that was trapped by the Ashwisp, you delusional prick."

Lock's eyes flicked to Clare, then back to Jasper, then settled on Drew, "Give back my sword and things don't need to get ugly."

Drew leveled the sword at Lock, "Give back my spellrod, you," but Jasper stopped him by raising his free hand.

"A reasonable request. The weapon no doubt has considerable value to you. My brother's spellrod had value to him," Jasper scratched his chin, "He shall return it to you once we have cleared the last chamber. You have my word."

“Only a fool accepts the word of a thief,” said Lock.

Jasper waved his hand at Drew, keeping him silent. “No need to throw insults. I take that as a refusal which leaves us at a bit of an impasse.”

“That sword is leaving in my hand,” said Lock as he shifted his gaze to Drew, “Your choice how it goes down.”

Drew’s face screwed up as if he smelled a pile of garbage. “Be honored I even considered using your filthy blade.”

Lock triggered Flash Step and was in Drew’s face before he finished speaking. To his credit, Drew’s instincts were quite fast. He at least tried to attack. With the speed of Flash Step, it didn’t matter. Lock caught his hand and elbowed him in the chest. It wasn’t enough to do any major harm, but it loosened his grip on the sword. Lock yanked the blade out of his hand and pointed it at Drew.

With his attention focused on Drew, Lock missed what happen between Jasper and Clare, but now Clare had her golden glowing spellrod pointed at Jasper. Jasper stood behind some sort of mana barrier and stared at Clare. The hatred that passed between them was almost palpable.

Whatever had put them at odds, it had time to dig deep. Hatred like that had nothing to do with Lock’s sword or being ungrateful.

Drew bumbled back to hide behind his brother. Lock walked over to stand at Clare’s side. “It’s done!” he said, then lowered his voice, “We still have a big fight ahead of us.”

It was a surprise when Jasper was the first to drop his shield. “This isn’t over.”

“But brother,” began Drew, but Jasper silenced him.

“If you couldn’t hold on to your weapons, then you don’t deserve them. Best learn that by the time father hears what happen,” said Jasper.

After chastising his brother, Jasper turned his back and

walked away. Drew gave Lock a hateful stare, then rushed after his brother.

“Where to from here?” asked Lock.

“I know we’re short on time, but there’s no way I’m going after those two,” said Clare.

“Can’t argue with that. Besides, I need a little more time to recover. Your potion is wearing off and my back is killing me,” said Lock.

CHAPTER 8



The other path down to the last chamber was an easy trek. Aside from a scant bat or two, it was uninhabited. There were no more of the never-ending twists, turns, and dead ends from the upper floors. Down here, even the ground changed.

Instead of the sloped uneven dirt floor from the caves above, there were level cut stone tiles. As they reached the end of the tunnel, even the walls smoothed out. It was like the tunnel itself was trying to invite them into the last chamber. It was almost too good to be true.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Clare, as the tunnel opened to the last chamber.

"Not much we can do about it, we've got less than an hour," said Lock in agreement, then he moved forward in silence to the end of the tunnel.

"See anything?" asked Clare as she pulled up beside him.

"The chamber is massive. In the center, it looks like a ring of pillars toward the center of the room and whatever's in the middle of the pillars is glowing," answered Lock.

"That must be the Well of Radiance. All we have to do is reach

it, and the Initiation is over,” said Clare, “But I’ve heard stories about many weird things happening here.”

To gage the distance, Lock tried to count the number of tiles between them and the pillars. He lost count around fifty and hadn’t counted more than a tenth of the distance. Each tile was about a yard long, which meant they had at least five hundred yards to cross with no cover. Worse, there was no light. If there was something hiding in those shadows, they’d be easy prey.

“There’s a lot of open space between us and the well,” said Lock.

“I don’t see any other options,” said Clare as she placed her hand on Lock’s shoulder and pointed across his body, “Looks like the Stanford’s came to the same conclusion.”

Lock cocked his head toward Clare with a sideways grin. “Want to watch them get mauled by whatever monster is lurking out there?”

Clare smiled but then she flicked Lock in the gut, “I want my Blessing more.”

“Back-to-back then,” said Lock.

Clare bobbed her head, “Let me give us a little light first,” then she gripped her spellrod. The runes on its surface lit up and illuminated a good twenty-foot ring around them.

“Glad we found that chamber,” said Lock as he crept out of the tunnel. Even with the light from Clare’s spellrod, he kept his head on a swivel. Every few seconds he would glance toward the pillars to make sure they were moving in the right direction, then back to check on Clare. She was doing much the same thing except that she was also checking on the Stanford brothers as well.

They were punks. Nothing to worry about. At least not now. They didn’t have time to waste focusing on those idiots, “Forget about them.”

“Sorry,” said Clare, “Habit.”

“It’s fine,” said Lock as he continued to cross the chamber. “Stay focused. There’s something hiding out here. I can feel it.”

Clare gulped down a breath and continued to backpedal at a slow steady pace, “Maybe a little more light,” then the tip of her spellrod flared even brighter.

It was so bright Lock had to raise his free hand to keep from being blinded, “Not too much.”

When they were around the midpoint, Lock realized that once again his sweat-soaked shirt was sticking to him. His heart hammered faster than it had the entire time in the tunnels. Something about the openness and limited sight brought up a deep instinctual fear. It was the same fear that drove Clare to intensify the light.

“Sorry,” said Clare, then she dimmed the light from her spellrod.

When her light returned to normal Lock, glanced back to check on her. A few loose strands of hair stuck to her face; her breath uneven. Other than that, she looked focused. She looked ready to fight.

Then something occurred to him; This challenge wasn’t about defeating a monster at all. It was all about fear.

But not to push through a passing moment of fear. They had done that many times in the previous challenges. This time was different. The fear was constant. There was no way to push it aside with the urgency of battle. The only way to deal with this type of fear was to accept its presence.

Lock took a deep breath and let his muscles relax.

Whatever happens, I’m ready.

A crack of thunder shook the room, almost like it was responding to his thoughts. The sudden noise caused Clare to jump, letting out a little yelp.

Lock caught her with his free hand. “It’s alright, no matter what that was. We’ve got it.”

Clare clung to his arm and slowly her breathing evened out,

“Thanks, you’re right,” then she let go of his arm and brushed the loose hair out of her face.

A wave of hot air washed over them. Then a series of crackling pops emanating from the Well of Radiance. Lock and Clare connected eyes for a moment before looking for the source of the sound. It didn’t more than a glance to see that something serious happen at the Well of Radiance. It was like a bonfire had exploded inside the ring of pillars. Patches of flame littered the area around the pillars.

Clare breathed out a slow breath, “What do you think the odds are that we have to fight a dragon?”

Lock froze mid-step, “The chamber is Dragon sized,” but then his rational mind considered that possibility, “But no. Everything would smell like ash and sulfur.”

“That’s reassuring,” said Clare.

“If it helps, I’m pretty sure whatever we have to fight is waiting for us at the well,” said Lock.

Right after Lock spoke, something exploded in the same direction that they last saw Jasper and Drew. Both Clare and Lock turned their attention toward the sounds. They were just in time to see Drew fall flat on his face and get dragged into the darkness. Jasper threw up one of his mana barriers, but it did nothing to stop his brother’s screams from echoing throughout the chamber.

To his credit, Jasper dropped his barrier and rushed after his brother as soon as he realized what happened. Regardless, he was too slow. He didn’t make it more than a few feet before his brother’s screams cut off. The chamber dropped into an eerie silence.

“Perhaps we should hurry,” said Clare.

“Agreed,” said Lock.

With renewed caution, the two of them made their way to the ring of pillars. Out of the corner of his eye, Lock kept track of Jasper. Not that it was difficult, as he maintained his mana barrier the entire time. It would have been a lie if he said he

watched him out of concern. But the main reason he watched Jasper was because he would be the first to encounter whatever waited for them at the Well of Radiance.

As Jasper passed through the ring of pillars, it sounded like he was speaking to someone. They were still too far away to make out any words, but Jasper didn't sound scared. He sounded more confused than anything.

A few moments later, a male voice answered. They were still too far away to understand the words, but the intent was clear. The man had dismissed Jasper like an annoying child.

Jasper responded in an even voice, but his usual cocky undertone was hard to miss. This time, a woman answered in a soothing, almost melodic voice.

When Jasper answered, they were finally close enough to hear what he said. "This is ridiculous. I made it here on time."

Clare caught Lock's eye and together they jogged the last twenty yards. As he thought, there was a man and a woman standing next to the Well of Radiance. Jasper stood just inside the ring of pillars with his spellrod charged and ready.

The man stood like a statue with his arms crossed in front of him. He wore a cream-colored cotton shirt over a pair of simple gray trousers. The man had no weapons and was frankly unremarkable. He even had one of those faces that was so normal that it could have been any of the thousand people Lock passed every day. There was only one feature that made the man stand out. His eyes. They emanated a gentle light-blue glow, as if his eyeballs were tiny orbs of mana.

Lock glanced at those eyes, and one thing became abundantly clear. This man was dangerous. Dangerous in a way that scared the living hell out of him. This man reminded him of his father. Flint Sharp. Broke-dick, part-time city guardsman. Flint Sharp. Undeclared duelist. The deadliest man in all of East Stanwick.

The woman to his right was the stark opposite. Her arms rested at her side. At the sight of them, her face turned into a

welcoming smile. She wore an elegant day dress that draped around her like blazing crimson flames. Around her neck hung a large heart-shaped ruby that flickered with deep red light. Unlike her companion, she had a short thin spellrod that looked almost like a sewing needle.

The woman shifted her hips and her needle like spellrod burst into a blade of pure flame, “Clarisse Everbright, you’ve done well,” said the woman as she raised the flaming spellrod above her head, “Now show me what you’ve learned.”

She slashed the air in front of her and created an arc of flames. The wave of flames flew straight at Clare. Without thinking, Lock jumped in front of her and sliced through the flames with his Void powered sword. The arc of flames broke apart and littered the ground all around them with tiny bits of flame.

Instantly, the woman’s smile shifted to a mask of rage. She bounced a few inches into the air and a pair of flaming wings burst from her back. She fixed her eyes on Lock and drifted toward him.

“Insolent child,” said the woman as she raised her flaming spellrod.

As soon as the woman swung her sword, the stone-faced man appeared in front of her with his hand clamped around her wrist. Just like that, one moment he was standing next to the well, the next he was standing in front of them. He’d traveled twenty feet in an instant.

Lock had seen his father pull off similar feats countless times, but there was one major difference. And that difference was terrifying. There was not a single sign of movement. No scuff on the stone floor. No ruffle in his clothing. The man’s hair had not even moved.

“Do you wish to pick a fight with the Temporal Guard?” asked the man.

“He is the one who interferes, not I,” said the woman.

“He did,” agreed the man with a curt nod, “And in doing so he

has proven himself worth my time. So, I ask again, Cassandra. Are you looking to cross the Temporal Guard?" asked the man.

The woman cast her eyes to the side, the flaming wings winked out, and she drifted back to the ground, "No, ensure he does not interrupt me again."

The man released the woman's wrist and dipped his head in acceptance. Then, just like that, he disappeared again. A heartbeat later, he appeared behind Clare. He clamped a hand around the back of her neck and shoved her toward Cassandra, "Remove yourself from my presence."

The woman bowed her head, "As you wish," then she flashed a playful smile at the man, "Little Leon."

Without another word, Cassandra swirled her spellrod above her head and created a spinning mass of flames. The flames wrapped around her and Clare like a blanket, then dissipated into a puff of hot air. Clare and Cassandra were both gone.

"Theatrics," said Leon as he turned to face Lock.

Lock still did not know what was going on. He didn't have a clue who this guy was or how he got here. He just prayed that he didn't have to fight him.

Everything they faced up to this point was difficult, but victory always seemed achievable. After the brief display of power, there was no way Clare stood a chance against Cassandra. The same for Lock against Leon. These two were in a league of their own. Then again, Lock was used to getting beat by his dad.

"The fuck is going on?" asked Lock, but then he remembered what Cassandra said. Show me what you learned. The point of it was not to win the fight; it was to show what you could do. The same thing he did with his dad.

"Matlock Sharp," said Leon as he turned to face him and wrapped his arms in front of his chest, "You have piqued the interest of the Temporal Warden. I am here to assess your potential. Are you ready?"

Lock took a steadying breath and settled into a low guard but

before he said anything Jasper had a brief outburst, "You would test this lowborn fool and not me?!"

Leon stood motionless, like a cat waiting to pounce. Then, without warning, his left forearm snapped up. The air around Leon rippled, then there was a thunderous crack. The next thing he knew, Jasper tumbled into the darkness as if a horse had kicked him in the chest. A cloud of blue sparks that lingered in the air. The same blue as Leon's eyes.

"Lower your weapon. This is not a test of martial ability," said Leon.

A sudden wave of relief ran through Lock as he lowered his sword and stood up straighter. As much as he excelled at fighting, he was injured. Even a sparring match would be painful. Especially against a guy like Leon.

"Then what am I supposed to do?" asked Lock.

"Show me how well you know yourself," answered Leon as he held up three fingers. After a moment, Leon curled two fingers under his thumb, leaving only his index finger. "First question. What was your first lesson?"

Lock's mind raced. Lesson what lesson. He had countless lessons with his father, but what was the first one. Footwork, running, balance. He'd been working on those things for longer than he could remember, but what did they translate into?

Leon folded his arms and looked to be running out of patience, so Lock blurted the first thing that came to mind, "Evasion."

Leon's eyes narrowed, "Explain."

On instinct, Lock repeated his father's words, "Most fights are about avoiding your opponent and waiting for an opening. It's a mistake to think you can win with a head on attack all the time."

"And how did the slime teach this to you?" asked Leon.

The question took Lock by surprise for a second time. Slime. He had not encountered a slime until his Initiation. That was what he meant; the first floor. What did it teach him?

"I realized I did not have an effective weapon when I attacked one of the smaller slimes. I did not want to make the same mistake again," answered Lock with confidence this time.

"Good. Know your limits. You have many, as do we all. To be a Temporal, you must understand this and strive to overcome your limits. Always. Improve. That is our first tenet," said Leon with a nod and what could have been a slight smile, "Understand?"

"Yes, training changes, but it never ends," said Lock, echoing his father's words once again.

"Indeed. The second lesson?" asked Leon.

Now that he understood the context of Leon's first question, the second made a lot more sense. Lock turned his thoughts to the fight with the giant spider. How did he win? He smashed it between the eyes with the butt of his sword. Why? Because nothing else worked. His void sword hardly scratched the spider's hide and Clare's mana blasts did next to nothing. But why? Because they were out of options, he had to win in that moment, or they would have been goners.

"To never give up," answered Lock.

Leon unfolded his arms and took a half step back. "No. Even an animal continues to fight when their life depends on it. If that is all you learned, you are not fit to be a Temporal."

No? How could it not be the lesson? Persistence got them through that fight. Hold on, he called himself a Temporal Guard. A guard's duty is to protect others and, in that fight, he protected Clare by killing the Spider.

"Wait, I learned that sometimes the only way to protect your friends, is to kill your enemy," said Lock.

Leon shook his head, "No," then folded his arms in front of his chest again, "But you acted decisive out of a desire to protect the girl. The ability to think clear and act decisive is a rare trait even for a guardian. To be a Temporal, it is essential. And for that I will reinforce your second lesson this one time."

Without warning, Leon attacked. Not with superhuman speed or any of his Temporal abilities. He attacked with the speed and finesse of a professional fighter. First with a straight jab followed by a low sweeping kick.

Lock's instincts kicked in and he swatted down Leon's jab and stepped over his kick.

Leon's next series of blows came even faster, a quick punching combination followed by a front kick. The punches distracted from the actual attack, the kick. It was a simple tactic that Lock had seen hundreds of times, but Leon's kick was lightning fast. It would have shattered Lock's hip, but with Flash Step, he could bounce away.

"Quick," said Leon, "I see why the Warden took notice of you."

Lock twirled his sword and let his muscles relax before their next exchange, "I thought this wasn't a test of martial ability."

"This isn't a test," said Leon, right before he disappeared. When he reappeared, his fist struck Lock in the face like a hammer. "It's a reminder."

The punch was strong, but Lock relaxed his body enough that he kept his balance. As he spun away from the punch, he lashed out with his sword to counterattack.

Leon already disappeared. "If this was an actual fight, do you think a sword would make any difference?"

"Only a fool enters a battle without a weapon," said Lock.

"The Temporal Guard does not need weapons," said Leon. "They are weapons," then again Leon disappeared. The next thing Lock knew, his hand went numb, and his sword clanged off one of the nearby pillars.

In a panic, Lock triggered Flash Step, jumped backwards, and spun around, hoping to catch Leon off guard with his speed. As he spun, Leon reappeared less than a foot in front of him. Enhanced speed or not, he walked right into Leon's hands. He dropped to his knees and jabbed Lock in the gut. Lock lurched

forward from the wind being knocked out of him. “You think speed changes anything?”

As Lock struggled to recover his breath, Leon released an onslaught of jabs and punches. The attacks bounced Lock around like a bustling crowd. His head spun until finally he felt a solid blow all along the side of his body. He blinked away the dizziness and realized that final blow wasn’t a blow at all. It was him hitting the ground.

Leon nudged Lock onto his back with the tip of his boot and stepped on his chest, “Weapon’s gone. Speed failed. So now what?”

Never give up.

That was the lesson for him. Not some cryptic bullshit that Leon thought he should have divined from the fight.

Never give up.

Those three words had been hammered into his head since the day that he was born. That simple phrase had gotten him through many fights, including the one with the giant spider. Who the hell was Leon to tell him otherwise?

Lock stared up at Leon and shoved his foot off of his chest, “I just realized something.”

Leon kept his balance but only by planting his foot right under Lock’s armpit. “Let’s hear it, but you better be sure. No more second chances.”

Lock couldn’t stop his mouth from curling into a smile right before he clamped his arm around Leon’s ankle. Before he could react, Lock used his other hand to grab Leon’s calf and formed a figure four-ankle lock.

Like most people who have their leg trapped, Leon’s initial reaction was to pull his leg free. It was the perfect way to give Lock all the leverage he would need to dislocate his foot.

“Yeah, your faster and you’ve got me outclassed, but...” said Lock as he tightened his hold, “I’m bigger,” then he tightened it

more, "I'm stronger," then Lock arched his back to break Leon's ankle, "and I Never Give Up!"

Right before Leon's ankle snapped, he let out a vicious scream in Lock's face, then the entire world spun. It was as if he had been tossed into the middle of a hurricane. The sensation only lasted for a moment, but it was enough for Leon to break free.

Leon stumbled a few steps and dropped onto his knees, "You're a stubborn one."

Lock's stomach twisted, and he felt himself gag, but before he threw up all over himself, Leon shoved him onto his side.

"Don't fight it. You'll feel better in a few minutes," said Leon, as he patted Lock's back in a gentle gesture. "I meant it when I said that was the wrong answer, but what you showed me just now was not simple determination. It was Adaptation. When one attack failed, you tried another. Not blindly but also not with conscious consideration."

For a few moments, Leon sat in silence while Lock puked his brains out. He didn't fight it, he just let his stomach empty itself and tried his best not to get any of it on his cloths. By the time the spinning was over, he felt better. Weak, but better.

Lock sat up and scooted a few feet away from his pile of puke. "Does that mean that I failed or that I passed?"

Leon tested his ankle, then pushed himself up and offered Lock a hand, "Neither, there's still one more question," before Lock could answer Leon raised his hand, "In that fight you showed the ability to adapt. When one attack did not work, you tried another. In the end, that's what made you succeed. Adaptation. But you did it more on instinct than by intention."

Lock took Leon's hand but stood up with his own strength. "Point taken. Always try to improve, as you said. You ready to hear the last one?"

Leon smirked, "Go for it."

"Sometimes victory is ugly," said Lock without hesitation.

Leon's smirk widened as he snorted out a laugh. "I was going for Sacrifice, but the sentiment is the same."

"Does that mean I passed?" asked Lock.

"It means that I have judged you worthy of carrying a Temporal Blessing. But it is still your choice," answered Leon as he walked over to the Well of Radiance.

Lock let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding and felt a wave of relief settle over him. All the injuries from the day were not for nothing. They weighed on him more than he had wanted to admit. Now that the challenge was over, a wave of exhaustion washed over him. Exhaustion so bad that he almost collapsed right there.

By sheer will, he pushed his body over to the well. "Now what?"

"Drink and the Well will take care of the rest," answered Leon.

CHAPTER 9



Whatever happen after drinking from the Well of Radiance, Lock did not know. Either someone messed with his memories, or he passed out. Regardless, a lot of time must have passed. The first thing he noticed was the pre-dawn sunlight. The next thing was that he was on a bed. A bed that was way too comfortable to be the bundle of blankets he normally slept on. That meant he must be in one of the spare bedrooms of Lord Stanwick's mansion.

Leon was right. Receiving his Blessing was easy, but he failed to mention that he was going to lose so much time. That or he did pass out. Leon also failed to tell him what sort of abilities he would get. Regardless, that was a problem he could figure out at another time. For now, he had something else to attend to, his aching stomach. Comfortable bed or not, he had to find some food.

He threw aside the blankets and realized he was butt ass naked. Once the shock of that wore off, he also noticed that he was clean, and his wounds had healed at an alarming rate. That or he'd been asleep for days, not hours.

A quick scan of the room and he found a fresh stack of cloths.

A pair of maroon trousers with a cream button-down shirt, the colors of house Stanwick. He would have preferred not to wear the colors of any house, but he couldn't walk around naked. Besides, there was a higher priority. Food.

All he had to do was follow his nose... and one of the Lord Stanwick's maids.

"Excuse me, what was your?" asked Lock.

"Rebecca milord," said Stanwick's maid with a quick curtsy.

"Thanks Rebecca, but I'm no lord. Just a lucky fool," said Lock.

Rebecca opened her mouth, then stopped. "Sorry, my mistake. I meant no disrespect..."

"No worries. I can't imagine Magister Tempo owes many favors to fools like me," said Lock. "Mind showing me to the kitchens?"

"There's a spread laid out in the dining area. This way," said Rebecca, then she let out a nervous bit of laughter.

Lock thanked her again and let her lead him to the dining hall. Instead of making her more uncomfortable, Lock kept his mouth shut and followed her through the halls. Before he knew it, Rebecca held open a pair of double doors. "Here we are."

"Thanks," said Lock as he dipped inside. Clare was already there, along with a handful of what looked like other Initiates. They were all dressed in Lord Stanwick's colors.

"Finally, woke up, I see," said Clare as she walked over with a plate full of some sort of little sandwiches.

"How long was I asleep?" asked Lock.

"I was just teasing you. Most of us couldn't sleep after getting our Blessing," said Clare.

"Most of who?" asked Lock.

"The other Initiates. The ones that passed, at least. Wait, you didn't get your head bashed in by that mean guy, did you?" asked Clare.

"No. Well, kind of, but I'm fine. Just hungry," said Lock.

Clare twisted and hid her plate behind her body, “Don’t even think about it.”

Lock flashed a smile then used Flash Step to snatch a pair of sandwiches off Clare’s plate and downed them two quick gulps, “Hank ou.”

Clare shoved him and pulled her plate away again. “The table’s full of food. Get your own.”

As if responding to her jest, Lock’s stomach rumbled, “Yeah, good idea.”

After hearing that, Clare lead him past the food table. She even offered to carry an extra plate of food for him. Once he had a pair of plates loaded up with some food, Clare led them to a couple of seats. They sat and exchange stories about their last encounter.

Clare had a similar but far less violent question session with Cassandra. In the end, she earned what they called a Searing Blessing. It gave her some ability to summon fire or use fire. He didn’t know enough about Blessings to understand.

“I thought you wanted a Light Blessing,” asked Lock, “Like the rest of your family?”

“Eh,” said Clare, “Fire’s close enough. Besides, my dad will be ecstatic. He’s always hiring fire magi to sanitize the fermenters.”

“Fire sounds pretty cool to me,” said Lock. “Better than Temporal, anyway. I don’t even know what it means.”

“Better than Temporal?!” blurted one Initiate. “Are you joking? Temporals can use Spirit mana and that is far superior to any other type.”

“Sod off Ruffus,” said another Initiate who seemed to think he was also part of the conversation. “Not all Spirit Blessings are as powerful as the Santi’s.”

Well, that was a good bit of information. It was well known that the Santi family did not earn their position by birthright or political maneuvering alone. They did it because they were

strong, or they possessed a strong and unique Blessing. Spirit mana might have something to do with it.

The two guys' argument stopped when the double doors to the dining area slammed open. Then a sudden snap brought silence to the room and pulled Lock from his thoughts. When he looked up, Magister Tempo was standing by the entrance to the room with the other two Magisters.

"That's much better," said Tempo into the silence. "Congratulations Initiates. Our gracious host, Lord Dmitri Stanwick, has a few words for all of you."

The two Magisters held open the doors and in walked Lord Stanwick. He was wearing an elaborate cloak and an almost identical set of clothing to what most of the Initiates now wore. Fitting, considering they were his house's colors.

Stanwick flicked his cloak off his shoulders; "Today, you have all earned great honor for yourselves and your families. You have my congratulations."

Stanwick looked around at the faces of the Initiates, "Earning a Blessing from one of the twelve major deities is no small feat. But it is only the first step in a long journey. Now you must be trained. For that I offer my support."

Stanwick motioned to one magister, "For those of you who pledge to be one of my retainers there are aurabands," then the Magister held up a handful of aurabands much like the one they wore during the Initiation.

Magister Tempo started to speak as soon as the other Stanwick stopped. "Enrollment forms for WayStar Academy are on the table. I have also arranged housing in Baker Hall at Lord Stanwick's request."

"I also offer a monthly stipend of up to 50 talents for those who qualify. Regardless of what you choose, you are welcome to eat your fill and stay as long as you like. My doors are open to you, and good luck," said Stanwick, then he spun on his heel, swished his cloak out like a fan and left the room.

As the doors slammed shut, Magister Tempo stepped up to address the room. “Lord Stanwick’s offer is generous, but I encourage all of you to take time to consider your options. One week from today, Lord Santi will hold his Tri-annual games. The games are an opportunity for the Blessed of all skill levels to showcase their abilities and attract a patron. I am sure some of you do not require any support, but the games are also a great way to gauge your own skill level.”

Tempo took a step back and to the side, giving the stage to one of the other Magisters, “For those of you I have not met, I am Magister Cadence. I am sure you are all eager to go test out your new abilities, so I will keep this short. Lord Santi’s games feature three challenges for the Blessed.”

Magister Cadence held up a finger. “One will focus on applying brute magical strength.”

He added a second finger, “Two will focus on finesse.”

Last, he flipped his hand over to add a third finger, “Third is a test of speed.”

Cadence dropped his hand and folded it neatly behind his back. “Keep this in mind as you explore your new abilities. Prepare as best you can and good luck.”

With those last words, the room broke into dozens of little bits of chatter. Lock’s brain was exploding with information. He had to find a patron, get training, and prepare for tests of some sort. On top of all that, he had some sort of paperwork to fill out. Maybe Magister Tempo or Clare would help him with it.

“Planning to take Stanwick’s offer?” asked Clare.

“Huh, ah no. But I was going to get some of that paperwork. What about you?” said Lock.

“Heck no, my parents would kill me if I became a retainer. It might be a good option for you though,” said Clare.

Twenty-four hours ago, he would have been offended. Now he was used to her straightforward nature. Besides, she was right;

he was poor as dirt, and she was not. Regardless, he was not about to decide without talking to his dad first.

“I’d like to see what happens at the games first,” said Lock.

“Good idea. If you do well with even one of those challenges, I’ll bet Stanwick will make a better offer,” said Clare.

Better! Stanwick already offered fifty talents a month. That was over five times what his dad made in a month, and she’s saying you could get more just from doing well on a few simple tests.

“Well, no shit,” said Lock. It was time to get back to training.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I know not everyone feels comfortable reviewing books, but I enjoy hearing from readers. I love even more to hear from fans. A simple comment or rating would be much appreciated.

If you didn't enjoy the story, I also encourage you to give your feedback because a high five might feel good, but criticism is what helps me to improve. And that is priceless.

*Thanks for Reading,
-Brian Declan-*

Once again, thanks for checking out my latest series The Whetstone Fist. If you enjoy please check out some more of my work starting with my free debut novel: Hidden in the Reed's. Or see what else I'm up to on my website: www.briankdeclan.com. You can also find the rest of the Whetstone Fist series: here or check out a sample of the next episode below.

*Thanks for reading,
-Brian Declan-*

A LOOK AHEAD



EPISODE 2 - CHAPTER 1

Lock laid on his back and stared up at the mid-day sun. Then a knot of rage and frustration formed in the pit of his stomach. He slammed his fist into the ground, “Dammit!”

His father Flint leaned down and offered him a hand up, “I say we try my idea.”

“I told you I’m dizzy enough afterwards. How am I supposed to keep my balance if I can’t see,” said Lock as he took his father’s hand.

“Don’t be such a baby,” said Flint as he dangled a small strip of cloth in front of Lock’s face like he was taunting a dog with a piece of meat.

Lock ignored his father’s wide grin and snatched the strip of cloth, “Fine but only so you shut up about the stupid blindfold.”

Flint clapped his son on the back, “That’s my boy. And since you’re already angry,” Flint paused for dramatic effect then poked Lock in the chest, “You’re welcome in advance.”

As he tied the blindfold over his eyes Lock took a few slow breaths so the knot in his stomach would relax. When he stopped feeling like he was going to puke, he reached for the power

swirling throughout his body. That was his mana. It had always been a challenge to manipulate but since he earned a Blessing, controlling it was as easy as walking.

Triggering his ability, Temporal Slide, was like taking a deep breath. Mana surged from the pit of his stomach, swirled all around his body, then in an instant he teleported. From the outside that fraction of a second it might seem easy but for Lock that fraction of a second was torture. Every fiber of his body flipped around and turned inside out. It was like being caught in a raging hurricane then dumped back on solid ground.

It had taken a full week of practice to not throw up every time.

He let out a slow breath to release the last bit of tension in his stomach then focused on his target, a flat patch of ground ten yards in front of him. Without his eyes to guide him he created an image in his mind then triggered Temporal Slide. The ground shifted under his feet, but he was quick to catch his balance.

Several seconds passed before he realized what happen. He slid and didn't feel like the world was spinning. As soon as he realized what happen so did his father, "Hoo Hoo, Who's the best? I said, Who's the best?"

Lock pulled off the blindfold only to find his father doing a little jig with an even wider smirk than earlier.

"Come on son. Help me out here. Hoo Hoo, Who's the best?" continued Flint.

"You're the best," answered Lock with a complete lack of emotion.

Flint stopped dancing but kept his smile, "You're no fun. So, what's next?"

"I have to Slide farther, and I have to do it without the blindfold," said Lock.

"Oh, come on, that's easy just close your eyes. And who cares how far you can go; you're not running away are you?" asked Flint.

“That’s... actually a good idea. But no, I’m not running away. The challenge is to hit a target that’s... I don’t know how far away. But I know it’s over ten yards,” said Lock.

With blinding speed and grace Flint scooped up a pebble and flicked it at Lock. The pebble hit him square in the chest, “So throw something.”

“That’s not what it’s about. It tests my spell amplification or something,” said Lock.

“So, throw some mana at it,” said Flint.

Lock stared at his father expressionless, “That’s not how it works. I don’t have a spellrod.”

“So, punch it?” asked Flint.

Lock nodded his head in agreement, “Yeah pretty much.”

“I still don’t understand why you don’t use Flash Step, always helps me punch what needs punching,” said Flint.

Lock huffed out a breath, “How many times do I need to explain. I have to use mana and according to Clare, Flash Step doesn’t use mana.”

“Oh yeah Clare. Tell me more about her,” said Flint with a sudden burst of enthusiasm.

Lock threw his hands up, “Really dad?! You’re supposed to be helping me train with this Temporal Slide.”

All sense of levity drained out of Flint’s face, “Think you can use that trick of yours to keep up for once?”

Lock cracked his neck and settled into a low guard, “Think you can you fight fair.”

“Fighting isn’t fair,” said Flint right before he took off with his version of Flash Step and kicked up a cloud of dust in his wake.

ANOTHER DAY, another loss, but his true failure did not come at the hands of his dad. That honor was all his own. He’d always known that his greatest weakness was his understand of mana.

Or lack of understanding and now that weakness was manifesting itself in an inability to use his Blessing.

His best chance to overcome that weakness was to get a proper education but that cost money. Lots of money. Money that he did not have. His best chance to get money was to prove he was worth investing in. But to do that he had to show he could use his Blessing.

It was a messed-up loop. Do well and you get money, but to do well you needed money. Money. Money! Money!

“Cheer up sourpuss, you didn’t lose that bad,” said Flint from the bottom bunk of their one-room shack on the outskirts of East Stanwick in a little neighborhood called Greenside. Greenside, not that there was a lick of green in sight. Mud, dirt, and grime, all of those were plentiful. But *Grimeside* made it sound too much like the crap hole it was.

“I know, and I’m not a sourpuss. I’m tired,” said Lock as he stopped staring at the ceiling and rolled onto his side.

“Still, you did pretty good. Used that Slide thing what ten times in a row, while in Flash Step I might add,” said Flint.

“Five, and then I threw up. Thanks for the reminder,” said Lock.

“Just saying, that’s more than I’ve seen. Jumpers burn out after two or three,” said Flint.

Lock sat up and bashed his head into the ceiling, “Ah dammit.”

“You alright up there?” asked Flint.

“Fine,” said Lock as he rubbed his head, “What do you mean more than you’ve seen before? And what’s a Jumper?”

Flint paused just a little too long before answering, “Nothing, just something I heard while on patrol. Forget about it.”

Lock rolled on his side and punched his pillow to fluff it up, “Yeah, patrolling Bruno’s arena.”

Before the word’s left Lock’s lips, his head bounced into the ceiling again, “Watch yourself boy. That was a long time ago.”

A long month maybe.

What could Lock say? Every time they docked the guard's wages, dueling was the way his dad could put food on the table.

Silence was Lock's only answer. He knew his father well enough to know the conversation was already over. Flint Sharp didn't answer questions from anyone, least of all his son. And he would never admit that, long ago was probably not long at all.

GLOSSARY

Adept—A mage with a Blessing that has successfully completed at least one year of formal education.

Archon—A mage that has never earned a Blessing.

Aspects—Light, Fire, Stasis, Life, Earth, Illusion, Void, Spirit, Water, Shadow, Air, or Mental.

Auraband—A tool in the shape of a tight bracelet that is specifically designed to monitor an individual's stats. It can also be used in combination with a spellrod to perform advanced targeting techniques.

Blessing—A Blessing is the reward for successful completion of an initiation. They can come in any of twelve different Aspects.

Over the generations, Blessings of each Aspect have been grouped into four different tiers. Although there is great debate over the establishment of these tiers, they are widely accepted. Tier one is the weakest and most common. Tier four is the rarest yet most potent.

To some extent, Blessings are influenced hereditarily, though not in all cases.

Besides the twelve aspects, Blessings also have up to three distinct subclasses.

Delve Team—A team of five magi that has come together with the specific purpose of venturing into a dungeon.

Dungeons—Dungeons are the most concentrated havens for wild monsters.

Ether—In short, Ether is mana in liquid form, but it is far more concentrated than the typical gaseous form of mana.

Exel—A mage with a Blessing that has completed at least three years of formal education.

Guardsman—The lowest level of city defenders, they rely on martial skill instead of magical gifts. Despite their inferior status, they keep pacified areas free of wild monsters and fight on the front lines.

Initiate—Any individual who has completed an initiation, earned a Blessing and has not yet completed any formal education.

Initiation—A formal test takes place in rare, guarded dungeons. Because of their rarity, most countries conceal the location of initiation dungeons and restrict access to only the most well prepared. The actual test comprises clearing five floors; the first is a starting area, the next three are the major challenges, and the last is an area reflection.

Leyline—Shifting currents of mana that flow deep beneath the surface of the earth.

Mage/Magi—Any individual who has developed their ability to control their own mana. Often, this is focused on enhancing their combat abilities or creating more potent magical items. Potions, spellrods, enchanted crystals, etc.

Magister—A title given to a Blessed mage that has completed five years of formal education and possesses master level proficiency in at least one form of magical expression.

Magnus—A mage who has completed five years of formal education, achieved expert level proficiency in dueling, cooperative battle magic, defensive spellwork and can perform at least one area effect spell or skill.

Mana—The purest form of magic. It can come in any of thirteen different forms; one for each of the twelve Aspects, as well as plain mana.

Mana Crystal—The most concentrated form of mana. Creation of synthetic mana crystals is an extensive, labor-intensive process. The easiest way to get them is by defeating wild

monsters before they have established themselves in a single location, like a dungeon.

Potions—Potions come in many forms but are in short are created by fermenting ether so it can be consumed without adverse effects. The fermentation process can be altered to produce potions with a wide range of beneficial effects.

Praxar—A mage who has successfully completed at least four years of formal education.

Relar—A mage who has successfully completed at least two years of formal education.

Spellrod—The most common tool used by magi. It is a multi-use tool that enhances a mage's ability to cast spells, fire mana bolts and create barriers.

Waygate—Stable portals that allow for instantaneous travel between two locations.

Wells of Radiance—A series of wells with a single purpose, to grant a Blessing. How they grant Blessings is one of the great mysteries that magi has researched for centuries.

