

Every single rule, every single decree or dogma inevitably has its shades of gray and its loopholes, and from this stems discord and disarray. Our world is no different. The young crafter was aware of this. His masters were not. -Journal of an unknown scholar (entry 55-13)"

Isha Arcelus furiously scribbled along the rough paper. Ignoring the pitch black ink smeared along her maroon robes, the imperial scholar wiped the sweat off her eyebrows. *By the Decrees, this is getting nowhere.* Daggers seemed to stab her brain, and the orange, waning glow of the candle before her only made her nausea worse. She sighed, her gaze wandering towards the crumpled letter she received so many moons ago, stuck on the corner of her desk. Picking it up, she gently spread it out, careful not to stain it.

-I have yet to find any more information on the "Young Crafter." Some say he was a demigod. Others say it was not a single person, but a group of blessed crafters. Some go as far as to claim he was the reincarnation of Magic itself. But what baffles me, Isha, is the Holy Order's silence in this matter. In the course of history, this one person is the only Spellcrafter that has no personal records on the holy archives. 'Tis quite intriguing, no? For now, I believe-

Isha stopped reading. It had been six moons since Scholar Rudin vanished, leaving her with this fragment of a letter. Most of it was useless information, the majority rambling about Rudin's wandering thoughts on the matter - meaningless shapes littering cream-colored paper. *Damn it, Rudin. I'd rather you left nothing than these... these useless, good for nothing texts.* Isha crumpled the letter once again and threw it down the desk.

Five years. Five long years she'd delved into the mystery of the Young Crafter. Just as she was about to give up, teetering on the edge of surrender, Rudin had joined her endeavor. *Much good that did us.* Isha rubbed her eyes. He had managed to penetrate the Vactus archives but emerged empty-handed. Two days after penning this letter, news of his death reached her. It reeked of foul play. Imperial scholars never indulged in drink, yet Rudin's body was found drowned in the city river, reportedly drunk. Who but a Vactus inquisitor could fabricate such a tale? The real question was not who, but why.

Shaking off these grim thoughts, Arcelus focused on the tome before her. It wasn't anything fancy, like an ancient prophecy or a lost relic of the 5th desert. Rather, it was merely a collection of fairy tales for children, written in the dialect of the western coastlines. Interpreting it was tedious, but it was the closest thing to a lead she'd found in years. One tale whispered of a being who could manipulate time itself. Her work had yet to yield any personal description, but she wouldn't surrender now.

The spike in anomalies, the whispers of the Ascendant, this was unheard of since the Closing of the loop. If she could figure out how the Young Crafter ended it, the holy sacrifice, she could possibly solve this. If only, if only she knew what transpired during the final sacrifice of the crafters, then maybe, just maybe she could...

Chapter 1: A Warm Welcome

Wizardry, Sorcery, The Arcane, they are no mere tricks nor glorified elemental projectiles. No, the Element of Magic is the venerable decree of nature, the rules this world acts by, akin to the inexorable force of gravity. To read its flows, decipher it, to sense its pulse, comprehend its essence, and ultimately, to wield its influence, such is the noble pursuit of those attuned to sense the mystic element of the Great Decrees.

<On the essence of the element of Magic> foreword- 5th Headmaster Carovnic of the Institution of spellcasting.

Raynyar despised cockatrices. To be fair, he never really cared for the other creatures of the draconic family, such as drakes or wyverns. They were quite rude and annoying. But cockatrices, those semi-sentient, treasure hoarding monstrosities, held even less appeal for Raynyar. The fact that he was fighting one certainly didn't help much to improve his opinion.

"Dare ye daydream before me, worm?" The cockatrice's booming roar jolted Raynyar back to his senses, just in time for him to dive from its claws. The gigantic, curved blades slammed into the ground, rending the earth asunder, tremors reverberated through the soil as Raynyar struggled to get up from the rough ground, pebbles digging into his palm as he pushed himself up.

When in the great decrees did everything go wrong? he wondered. Thirty minutes ago, probably.

Frigid wind whipped past Raynyar's ears as he plummeted through the sky. Below him, the world blurred past in a kaleidoscope of greens and browns, the ground rushing ever closer. *Well, at least this is much better than teleporting inside some wall,* Raynyar mused as he plummeted toward the ground.

Ignoring the wind furiously tugging at his satchel, Raynyar glanced down at the little orange kitten clinging desperately to his robes. "You okay, Mercedes?"

"We're falling to our deaths, you idiot!! Why aren't you doing anything?" The kitten screamed, her frantic meows lost in the air.

"The Decrees aren't stable yet!" Raynyar yelled back as he studied the approaching surface. Gray matter crackled around him as the decrees struggled to mend the anomalies spawned from his teleportation. "I'm fairly confident they'll recover shortly!" At least, that's what he hoped.

"Shortly??? We're about to be squashed pancakes!" Mercedes shrieked, digging her claws deeper into his shoulder.

Raynyar chuckled, though it came out more as a wheeze – those claws hurt. "Surely you could cast something yourself."

Mercedes huffed, her fur bristling indignantly. "Hurling through the air isn't exactly helping me!!"

Cats. Squinting towards the ground, Raynyar quickly made some calculations. At this speed, summoning something to cushion his fall would most likely splinter every bone in his body, so that was out of the question. Reversing gravity? That might work, though timing it correctly would be tricky.

Ignoring the screeching meows from his feline companion, Raynyar felt something click as the edge of his vision cleared away the gray sparks. The fundamentals around him had finally stabilized. Immediately, the dizziness that had accompanied him since the start of the teleportation cleared up, and he could sense the Laws as clear as day.

"It seems the Decrees have calmed down."

"Aw, what great timing," Mercedes mewled in panic, "we're like, seconds away from bursting like an overripe melon!"

"Just have some faith, eh?" Ignoring her not-so-appropriate meows, Raynyar reached out with his mind. Sifting through the numerous Fundamentals, he found what he sought - gravity. The force every object inherently possesses. An unceasing pull. But what if it were reversed? To push, rather than pull? Raynyar flicked his fingers, and with a snap, the codex rearranged.

Raynyar's heart lurched as the unrelenting force that had been pulling them to their death now pushed them away. They were still falling, but according to his calculations, they would stop before hitting the ground. Raynyar breathed a sigh of relief as he slowly glided to a stop. His face halted inches away from the greens.

As he felt his body rise, Raynyar clapped his hands together. At his gesture, the Decrees revolted back to whence they were held, and he dropped face first into the ground with a *poof* as gravity took hold in the right direction. *Oof. That hurts*, Raynyar thought as he slowly pushed himself up. Note to self, turn around before falling. Raynyar spat out the grass in his mouth.

"Are we in heaven?" Raynyar turned to see Mercedes still latched onto his shoulder, curled in a ball, eyes squeezed shut.

"No," Raynyar stated dryly, the taste of dirt stubbornly clinging to his tongue.

Mercedes slowly blinked her eyes open, rubbing them with her paws before hopping down. "I guess if this were heaven, you wouldn't even be here with me anyway."

Ignoring her jab, Raynyar frowned. The teleportation was more unstable than usual - worrisome. He scanned his surroundings. Sprawling grasslands, gentle, rolling hills, occasionally misplaced trees, it looked like where he was headed. But these were standard issues for most habitable worlds. Taking a deep breath, Raynyar focused his mind's eye once more.

Let us read.

Immediately, every object before him became littered with the Decrees. Every blade of grass, every rock, every molecule of air together formed a page of the great book the world acted upon as they shimmered with the definitions. Threads of decrees connected them all, forming the fundamentals in a way no normal man could comprehend or express. They felt alien, yet familiar - like a dusty old tome found in the old archives. Like a childhood memory. This was the place.

Raynyar closed his mind, the world before him becoming unreadable and obscure as before. Taking in a deep breath, he let the wind swirl past him. They danced and weaved between his fingertips, gently brushing past him. How long has it been?

"After all these years. Walking on Eliren once more." Raynyar sighed. "Just to find that little tome. Silly, isn't it?" Hearing no reply, Raynyar glanced towards his friend. "Merc?"

Raynyar stared at the ground where Mercedes lay, gently snoring. *Hub*. He knelt beside her, quietly scooping her up. It seemed the fall was too exciting for her little brain to handle. Or the Great Mother was summoning her brethren. It didn't really matter.

Raynyar opened his satchel and plopped Mercedes inside. It was by no means a standard way of carrying a friend, but it worked—and that was reason enough. Raynyar swiftly got up and dusted off his robes. *Hopefully we could find a town before the sun sets.* He thought. At the end of the day, even after the closing of the loop, the darkness of the night in Eliren was no welcoming host.

Honestly, this was not what I was expecting when I saw that sign for Town Spira. How he believed himself lucky when it stated it was only a few minute's walk! But now, as he reached the top of the hill, he knew in his veins that his dreams were just that: dreams. It was a simple town—houses, stores, some landmarks, it was

one of the most generical towns he had ever seen—or it would have been. Buildings lay in ruins, consumed by flames that sent thick plumes of smoke billowing skyward—it was no ordinary fire, they had been attacked. The Decrees were agitated, their screeches echoing through the air. Raynyar quickly shuttered his mind. Squinting through the smoke, he tried to identify the source of destruction, to no avail. *Another warm welcome...* Raynyar ran towards the turmoil.

He could barely see anything through the smoke up close. His eyes threatened to water but the immense heat dried it away. Raynyar took a deep breath, then rushed in. Running past the fallen buildings, Raynyar could see traces of the town's former self. Crumbling buildings, burning carriages, scorched cobblestone roads, it wasn't hard to imagine a life here before the destruction.

Up ahead through the haze, he spotted a collapsed belltower - one of the few standing structures amid the rubble. Raynar increased his pace towards the precariously leaning tower. It was hard to ignore the screams, but finding the source of this would be of more help.

As he drew nearer, his pulse quickened at the unmistakable sounds of battle. Grunts and the clashing of steel cut through the cacophony of crackling flames. Raynar slowed, reaching out with his mind's eye to try and ascertain the threat.

The area's Decrees were strained, the letters muddled and unclear. Gray sparks flickered around the destruction, swirling eddies of ashen gray sparks that seemed to hang suspended, refracting the sun's light in unsettling ways. Anomalies were appearing-but where was the cause? What was happening was indecipherable amidst the destruction save for a few brief flashes - armored figures desperately fighting...something. A bestial roar pierced the air, shaking Raynyar's bones. Raynyar briefly considered just running away. He had no ties to this particular village, nor was he entitled to slay every monster he came across. In addition, he just might be able to form a barrier before sunset, if he started soon. Just then, one of the gray sparks floated up to his ear. Raynyar flinched away as it touched him, the stark coldness twisting, pulsating as it reached towards his mind—as if welcoming an old friend. *I guess that's my reason.* Raynyar thought as he moved away, nausea threatening to erupt. If he didn't remove the source of the anomaly, *they* might send someone to investigate, and before long, they would be aware of his presence. He couldn't have that happen. Steeling his resolve, Raynyar plunged into the chaos.

Coughing as he emerged from the wall of smoke, Raynyar finally glanced at the sight of the monster. Of all the creatures... Raynyar grimaced as he fully stepped into the town center. Amidst the rubble and the fallen was a Cockatrice. The ancient deformed relative of the dragon, Its wings spanned the width of a building, its head rivaled the size of a carriage. Its serpentine body weaved through the smoke with unearthly grace, its serrated tail sliced through what remained of the structures with effortless swipes, leaving destruction in its wake. The stench of blood and burnt flesh attacked Raynyar's senses, and the smoke scratched his throat. A few soldiers in armor bravely hacked away at its legs, but the blades harmlessly bounced off its black scales.

Those fools. Wielding steel against a draconic beast. Disgust dawned on Raynyar's face as it snatched up a soldier with its claws, the cracking of ribs and the screams of the soldier, along with that of the Decrees, pierced even through the roaring flames. It was playing with them.

Truly, they were revolting creatures.

Raynyar flicked his fingers. The disarray of the decrees was making him nauseous, the world tilting and swaying as reality bent around him, but he wasn't letting that creature cause anymore damage. In a split second, he focused on light. Its warmth as it shone down on a spring morning, its brilliance as it bounced off fresh leaves...and its blazing glory as the sun rose in the morning. Raynyar shot his hands forward, and a bolt of white-hot light blasted through the air, and hit the cockatrice directly in its face. Stars shined before his eyes, but Raynyar could vaguely see the cockatrice drop the soldier as it gripped its eyes, the guttural roar echoing through the town.

Raynyar glanced at the fallen soldier before immediately looking away—there was no way a mortal could be alive like that. It was futile to even attempt to save him, so instead, he glared at the soldiers. “Get out of here!” He yelled, but the dazed soldiers sluggishly moved toward the cockatrice. Perhaps the smoke and anomalies addled their brains. No matter the reason, he couldn't have them stand in the way of the cockatrice, which was trying to get up. “Ye dare steal mine treasure, and now dare assault me? You shall pay!” It screeched, flailing around. One claw narrowly missed a soldier, another stumbling backward from the wind. *Gab.* This wasn't going to end well. Raynyar clapped his hands together, reaching for the decrees once more. It was chaos. As his mind flew between objects, sensing for the soldiers, he could feel the towering shadow of the cockatrice. The decrees depicted it as a blinding mass of sparks, gray energy crackling with its every move. Everytime the anomalies landed on an object, the decrees around it warped and twisted, shortly before it repaired itself. *. At least the Decrees are still holding together.* Ducking a stray spark, Raynyar found the mind of the soldiers—addled, disorganized, shallow. Raynyar looked at his options. The anomalies around them were stronger than normal, anything more than a precrafted spell would empower them. So precrafted spells it was. Raynyar made a shape with his hands as he yelled the keyword. “Klara”. Raynyar could feel the Decrees shift as the keyword took effect, the ancient commandment influencing the fundamentals.