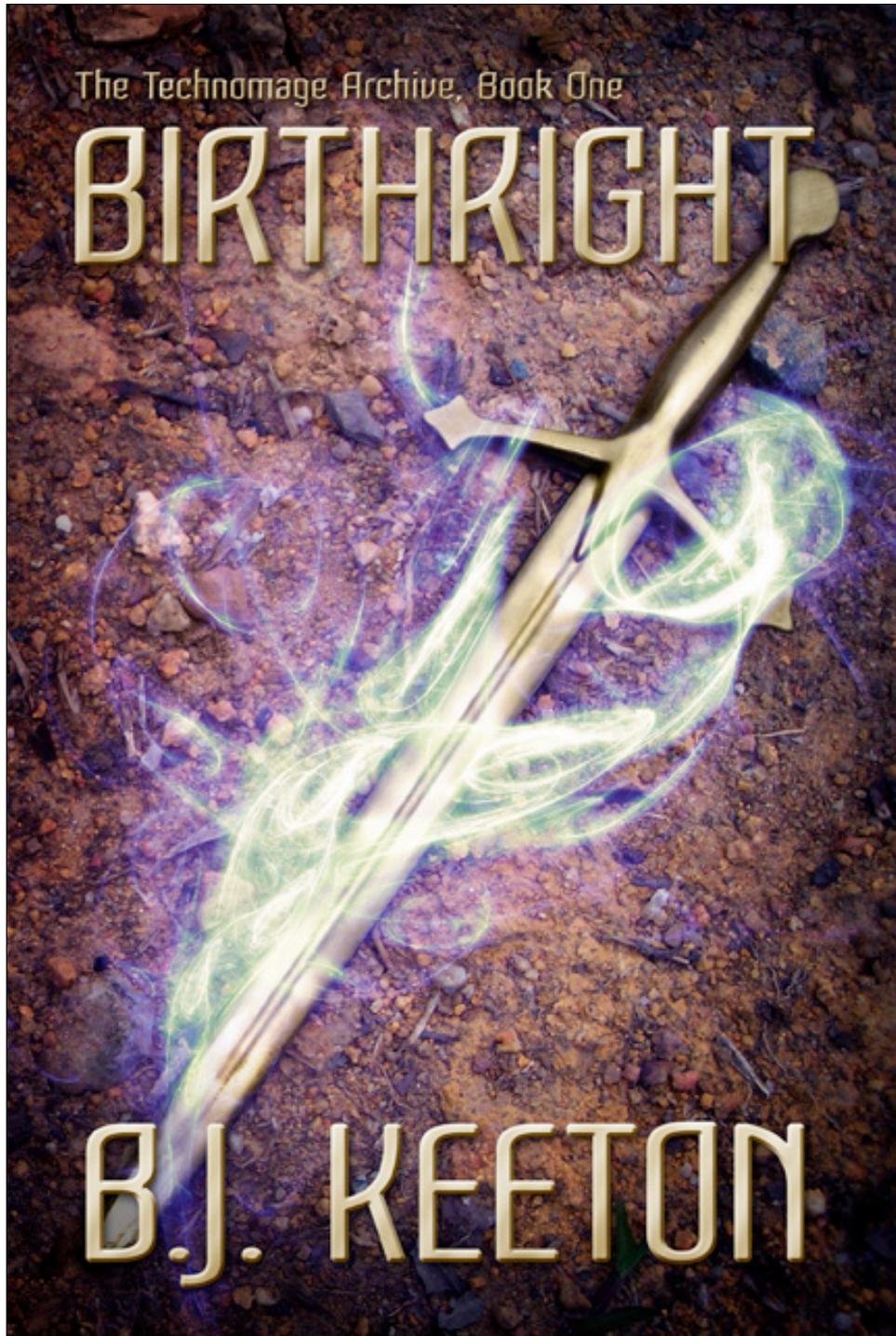


***Birthright* (The Technomage Archive, Book One)**

Kickstarter Sample

<http://kck.st/LQNnwd>



Chapter 1

“You are not ready.”

That was it. “You are not ready,” then silence. Ceril Bain looked around as the other returning students milled about quietly. They were all apparently still listening to the subsonic speakers in the lobby, which meant none of their welcome messages were so short. So why was his? And what wasn’t he ready for?

Ceril had never met Ennd’s Academy’s new headmaster, so how could he say that Ceril wasn’t ready? And more than that, Ceril wondered just what it was that he wasn’t ready for.

Maybe he would find out soon. Probably tomorrow at Presentation.

Ceril figured there wasn’t much use just sticking around the lobby, so he weaved through the crowd of still-listening students toward his new Phase II dormitory.

The P.A. system bothered him, anyway. Ennd’s faculty had never explained how the announcements worked, actually. The faculty tended to skirt around conversations about the technomages or their artifacts. If he weren’t a historian’s grandson, he might not have even heard of Vennar.

Well, maybe it wasn’t that extreme. Everyone knew about Vennar. He was *Vennar*. Who *didn’t* know about him?

Ceril stepped into the elevator at the end of the curved hallway.

“Hello, student. Welcome back to Ennd’s Academy. Where are you traveling today?” The automated attendant’s voice was soft and chipper. Ceril liked talking to the elevators. It made him feel like one of the technomages.

“Phase II, please.”

After a moment’s pause, the elevator said, “Of course, student.” Ceril hadn’t even realized they had been traveling when the doors reopened onto a different view than Ceril had expected. He stepped out of the elevator, ignoring whatever it was that the automated attendant was saying.

For the past five years, Ceril had grown used to Ennd’s Academy. He had learned the hallways and the decor, and he liked to think he knew his way around pretty well. But as he stepped into the new Phase II area, he felt like a tourist.

Which, Ceril supposed, he kind of was.

He was standing in the middle of the hall when a hand touched his shoulder. He whirled around to see Swarley Dann's smiling face. Ceril returned the smile, and the two boys embraced.

Swarley had grown over the summer—enough so that Ceril couldn't call him his "little buddy" anymore. Swarley now stood a good hand taller than Ceril and had bulked up quite a bit. He looked more like a man than he had before, which made Ceril feel like a child in comparison. He kept his embarrassment to himself and asked, "So you're lost, too, huh?"

"Not lost," Swarley said, smiling, "just a little misguided. I saw you just standing here, staring at the Library, so I thought it was the least I could do to say hello. And since we're going to the same place..." His eyes glinted mischievously.

"You're lost, too, huh?" Ceril repeated.

"As a crow in a fishbowl."

* * *

"This place looks so funny, Swarley," Ceril said. The boys had been wandering around the halls for what had to be hours, looking for their dormitory. "I'm not even sure if we're in the same school anymore."

Swarley said, "I know, right? I don't like it. It's just so...I dunno what. I mean, Phase I felt so cozy. I felt safe there, you know?" He slapped the sandstone wall and slid his hand across the border that divided it from the brushed-steel paneling beneath it. "But this? It's just so cold."

"It's sterile," Ceril said, hoping he had used the word correctly.

Swarley nodded. "Yeah, that's it exactly. Like a—like a hospital."

"Weirdest hospital I've ever been in," Ceril muttered.

The boys walked a little further down the hall, and Swarley pointed into an alcove. Every hall in Phase II seemed to be decorated the same way: statues in alcoves. The statues in this one stood twice the size of Swarley. "Who are these guys?"

"You don't know?" Ceril asked.

"And like you do?" Swarley replied.

"Well, no. How could I?" Ceril stood beside Swarley and stared into the alcove.

"Whatever," Swarley said, "but I bet they're old."

"You think? I bet they're technomage artifacts."

“That do what? They’re statues of people with animal heads cut out of big pieces of rock, Ceril.”

“They *could* be artifacts.”

“And you *might* be the prettiest person in the hall right now, but that doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“I’m just saying,” Ceril said. “They might be. We don’t know.”

“No, we don’t,” Swarley said. “Come on, let’s go. I want to eventually find out where we live. My feet are starting to hurt.”

“Yeah, and I think we go left up here when the hall ends. There should be an elevator to the dormitory level.”

“How do you know that?” Swarley said. “You’ve been as lost as I am.”

“We’ve passed the sign for it a couple of times already. You’ve been walking us in circles.”

“I have done no such a thing.”

Ceril just nodded and started walking toward where he thought the elevator was.

“It all looks the same to me,” Swarley said. “Lead on, man.” He followed Ceril down the hall and toward their dormitory.

* * *

Ceril opened the door to the room he and Swarley had been assigned. The first thing he noticed was the gigantic, curved window that filled an entire wall from floor to ceiling. They were being housed in one of the higher towers on campus, which gave them a pretty spectacular—and unobstructed—view of the night sky. The moon shined brightly into the room and cast a surreal light across the unfamiliar space.

“We must have been wandering around for quite a while,” Ceril said, peeking out the window.

“Musta been,” Swarley agreed. He fell backwards on the nearest bed and sighed. “This’ll do. I think I can handle this.”

Ceril did likewise and found that the bed was much softer than the one he had slept on for five years of Phase I. “Yeah, I think it will.” He rolled over and something jabbed into his side. In the moonlight, he could just make out the corner of the

suitcase that was jabbing into him. “Lights,” he said and rubbed his ribs. “I think this is yours.”

He tossed the suitcase onto Swarley’s side of the room, and his friend responded with an “oof” and a “thanks for that” before throwing Ceril’s bag over to him. Until this year, Ennd’s staff had transferred students’ luggage to their rooms and unpacked it. This time, however, they were not unpacked, which meant the boys could finally choose which bed was theirs. It was a small luxury, but until that very moment, the boys’ had never been given a choice about anything regarding their time at Ennd’s Academy—no say regarding class schedule, roommate, or even when they wanted to bathe. Their two hours of daily recreation were even determined by the staff.

Phase II was supposed to be different, and so far it was. Not only did they get to choose who they lived with, they got to choose their own beds, and at Presentation tomorrow morning, they would choose their primary area of study.

Now that the lights were on, Ceril could see that the room was lightly furnished with maroon linens on both beds. The beds sat on opposite sides of the room, and there was a large, two-sided desk dividing the room in half. The walls, floor, and ceiling shared the motif of the rest of the Phase II campus: tan stone and brushed-steel.

“I’m not sure I like this room,” Swarley said. “It still feels just as sterile in here as it did out there.”

“Get used to it,” Ceril said. “This is home for four more years. At least. Maybe longer depending on your Rites.”

After a few minutes of lying still, Ceril couldn’t take it anymore. He popped upright and braced himself against the mattress. “Oh, Swarley!” he almost shouted. “I forgot to tell you what I found last week!”

“A sense of humor? A lick of common sense? What? I’m dyin here, Ceril.”

“A Charon’s sword.”

“Shut up.”

“No, really. I did. I found a technomage sword in the garden—“

“Shut up,” Swarley repeated.

“No!” Ceril said excitedly. He stood up and leaned against the desk so he could see Swarley better. “After that, Gramps spent the rest of the week telling me about

Vennar and the other Charons. That's what they called themselves. *Charons*. Cool, huh?"

"Not even a little," Swarley said, sitting up and frowning.

"What's the matter with you, Swarles?" Ceril asked. "I thought you'd be excited for me. I mean, I found a Flameblade! An artifact!"

"Are you an idiot, Ceril?"

"I think we both know the answer to that," Ceril said, trying to joke around with his friend. Swarley wasn't having any of it. What was his deal?

"My gods, Ceril, you should know better than to just blurt something out like that right now."

"I seriously have no idea what you're talking about, Swarley."

"You found a...Flameblade? A technomage sword?" Swarley's voice lowered to a whisper as he said the word *technomage*."

"A Charon's sword, yeah. That's what Gramps said it was, anyway," Ceril said. His voice was getting higher and higher as he spoke faster and faster. "I was working in the garden when I hit something hard in the dirt. I thought it was a rock, you know, so I reached in to dig around it so I could pull it out of the ground, and I cut myself. Gramps came over and saw that it wasn't a rock like I thought. He said it was a Flameblade, a Charon's sword. After that, he told me a lot about them—the Charons. Did you know what's what they were called?"

Ignoring the question, Swarley asked deadpan, "A Charon's sword? In Ternia? In *your* garden?"

"Uh-huh!" Ceril nodded vigorously. "Gramps called it a Flameblade. He said a technomage could make it catch on fire, but that the fire wouldn't burn anyone the technomage didn't want it to. And that the color of the fire—"

Swarley interrupted him again. "Did it ever catch on fire with you?"

"No," Ceril said. "But I'm not a technomage."

"What about Gramps?"

"He's not, either, Swarley."

"Then how do you know it's a Charon's sword? Did you look it up on the 'Nets?"

"Well, no," Ceril said. "Gramps doesn't have anything but basic CommNet, but he said that he only knew of a couple of these swords ever being found across all of

Erlon. He told me that that all the rest of them might have been lost. He said that ours might be the only one left. How cool is that?”

“Really? The only one?”

Ceril nodded.

“Ceril, do you know how ridiculous this all sounds?”

Ceril hesitated. It hadn’t sounded ridiculous at all when Gramps had said it. Of course, nothing sounded ridiculous if Gramps said it. “It’s true, Swarley.”

“I don’t doubt you found a sword, Ceril, but it’s not a technomage...Flameblade? Is that what you called it?”

“Yeah.”

“And it never caught on fire for you? Not once?”

“Well, no,” Ceril admitted.

“I don’t want to be the one to say it, bud, but I think your Gramps is pulling your leg.”

“Why would he do that?”

“To have some fun with his gullible grandson? It doesn’t matter why, anyway,” Swarley said with a small grin. He leaned up on his mattress and looked Ceril dead in the eyes. “And, umm, make sure that you don’t mention it around school, all right? Especially not to the teachers.”

“Why not?”

“Ceril, really?”

“What?” Ceril demanded. “I mean, Gramps told me not to tell you, and I did. And it’s fine. The world didn’t end or anything. So why are you telling me not to tell anyone else? What’s going on?”

Swarley’s shoulders dropped. “You don’t have the ‘Nets when you’re at your Gramps’ house.”

Ceril furrowed his brow. “You’re being a jerk because I don’t have the ‘Nets over the summer? Swarley—“

“No,” Swarley said. “I don’t mean...” He sighed. “You haven’t heard, then.”

“Heard what? What are you talking about?”

Swarley got off his bed and sat down at his side of the desk. “Hold on,” he said, “let me find it.” He manipulated the terminal for a few minutes, and when he was satisfied with whatever it was he had found, he leaned back and let Ceril watch the first newsreel he had seen since before the summer began.

Above the desk, a hologram of a woman began to discuss what she called “the first in what is sure to be a series of unprovoked attacks” from a terrorist organization calling themselves the Untouchables. Ceril sat down on Swarley’s bed and leaned forward as the image of the woman faded away. It was replaced by a video of a playground scene. “Please be advised,” the woman’s voice continued, “the images you are about to see are incredibly graphic. Viewer discretion is advised.”

Kids were screaming and running around, probably toward their parents. Parents were yelling for their children, but only a few actually found them. The camerawork was bad; it was obviously a quick video someone had taken with their tablet or PDA.

But that didn’t matter. The quality of the video wasn’t important. What it captured was.

The video zoomed in, and Ceril covered his mouth with his hands as he watched. A group of men and women were wearing long, purple robes and holding golden swords. Swords which looked an awful lot like the one he found in Gramps’ garden.

If there had been only one weapon, he would have assumed someone had stolen the sword from Gramps. After all, Gramps had said theirs was probably the only one. Ceril watched as the cameraman whipped the camera around the scene, catching parents and children being gutted, stabbed, dismembered, and eviscerated.

Ceril swallowed audibly.

There were maybe half a dozen of the robed figures, and they were all bald, even the women. The men had identical, chest-length beards that were dyed a garish blue. And they were all using their swords to kill the running children.

“Swarley, what the hell?”

“Just watch, Ceril.”

Ceril did. The swords that the robed killers held were glowing now. One of the women cut through a man’s arm, and her blade flared yellow. She turned around and immediately sliced a running mother down the length of her back, while the glow around the sword pulsed blue. As the mother fell, she covered her son with her body in an attempt to protect him.

Her body shook as she lay there, and Ceril realized she was weeping. The video tried to zoom in further, but it just distorted the image. Ceril thought he could

see the woman with the yellow-blue sword rush toward her and plunge the sword downward.

Even in the low-quality video, it was easy to see the sword penetrate through her body and into her son. The sword's aura erupted in a flare of color as the bald killer shrieked. She laughed girlishly as she pulled the blade from the corpses she created.

The cameraman, who had been silent until this point, let out a whimper, which caught the attention of the largest man. He whipped his head toward the camera and wiped his sword against his leg, but the red-purple fire around its blade didn't seem to singe his robe at all.

That was exactly the way Gramps described the sword he had found. Ceril swallowed again, but didn't dare to blink.

The large man with the Flameblade screamed something unintelligible at the man behind the camera, who then turned and ran. The next few seconds of video were hectic and unfocused. Then there was a crash, and the camera fell to the ground, focusing sideways on a tree. A booted foot stepped into frame, and the bald man's face appeared soon after—sideways, too—as he crouched to peer into the lens.

He said, "Your generation has tried to hide the past for too long, and the time has come to make things right. We are the Untouchables, and we will no longer allow you feed the world the scraps of your technology." He held up the glowing sword. "You technomages will either remove yourselves from the shadows and put Erlon back on the path toward its destiny, or we will pull you out and put it there ourselves."

The face moved out of frame, followed by the boot. There were a few seconds of silence and then a *whuffing* sound off screen that ended with a *pop*. The video ended, and the hologram returned to the woman who had introduced the horrifying clip. Swarley paused the holo-vid before the woman could begin her commentary.

"Hey!" Ceril said. "What was she saying?"

"About how horrible it all was, and that no one knows what's going on. It doesn't matter," said Swarley.

"Then what does?" Ceril yelled. "Why did you show me that?"

"Because it's all that anyone has talked about for the last month, Ceril. I knew it was going to be tough at Ennd's this year because of the technomage rumors these

Untouchables stirred up—did you know my parents almost wouldn't let me come back?"

"No," said Ceril. "How could I? I'm glad they let you."

"Me, too. I just never expected you to come in claiming to be a technomage after...*this!*" He waved his hand at the area of the room where the hologram of the woman still floated.

"I never claimed to be a technomage!"

"But you said you had one of their swords, which might as well be the same thing. What did you call it again? A Flameblade?"

"Yeah," Ceril said.

"It sounds a little too close to what those people killed all those kids with, man."

Ceril was silent. He leaned against the wall and banged his head lightly against it over and over. "Yeah," he finally said. "It sure does."

"Did yours glow like that?"

"No," said Ceril.

"What about the rest of it? The color of the metal, the sword itself?"

Ceril thought back to the garden. He could see the gold blade glinting in the sunlight as though it were in front of him. "It looked just like the ones in the vid," he said.

"So. This sword, this Flameblade of yours. Where is it?" Swarley asked. His voice was even, without inflection. Ceril thought Swarley sounded a little more menacing than he had ever heard him.

"Gramps kept it. Said he might contact a museum about displaying it," Ceril said.

"Right," Swarley said. "And you said he didn't know about this attack at all?"

Ceril shook his head. "How could he? You know how he feels about the 'Nets."

"Okay. Well, at least you didn't bring it here. The sword, I mean."

"He wouldn't let me."

"Smart man," Swarley said. He just stared at Ceril with his lips pursed.

"What?"

"I dunno. I'm just saying all of this kind of weirds me out."

"Yeah. It does me, too," Ceril said and closed his eyes. "I'm not a terrorist, though. I'm not a killer."

After a small pause that Ceril might have imagined, Swarley said, “I know.”

“Neither is Gramps.”

“I know that, too, Ceril. Of course I know that. But no one else here does. And after that—” he gestured again to the hologram floating above the desk, “you really shouldn’t mention the Charons, the technomages, or that sword to anyone. I wouldn’t even make a reference to the technomages or artifacts or anything. It’s just...just a bad idea, you know?”

“Yeah,” Ceril said. That’s all he could say. “Yeah.”

“Now I have to get some sleep,” Swarley said. “Presentation is tomorrow morning. Get off my bed.”

“Yeah, it is, isn’t it?” Ceril said. He had barely even thought about Presentation since he had been back at Ennd’s. Ceril went to his side of the desk and set the alarm so that he wouldn’t oversleep and miss Presentation. Or worse: be late. Satisfied, Ceril settled into bed and tried to get comfortable, but every time he closed his eyes, he kept seeing the mother and her child being impaled by the Flameblade.

“Oh, and Swarley?” he said.

“Yeah?”

“I appreciate the heads up. I really had no idea.”

“Sure thing, bud. It’s what I do,” Swarley said.

The two boys lay there in silence for a while. Ceril tossed from one side to the other, unable to sleep. He said, “And thanks for not thinking I’m crazy.”

“Oh, I think you’re crazy, Ceril. I just don’t think you’re a terrorist.”

“Still, thanks.”

“Mmm hmm,” Swarley said. The next sound Ceril heard was his roommate snoring. He hoped that he would be soon, too. He lay his head on his pillow and lulled himself to sleep by replaying the events of the previous week in his mind.

Chapter 2

The next thing Ceril knew, sunlight gleamed through the wall-sized window at the head of his bed. Only one of Erlon's twin suns had risen so far, which meant it was early. He sat up and grunted; his neck ached, and so did his shoulders. He grimaced as he tried to work the stiffness out.

Ceril was bent double over the side of his bed, stretching his back when Swarley came back into the room, already fully dressed. He opened the closet door, stood in front of the mirror, and attempted to get the slightly snug dress uniform to fit correctly over his summer growth.

His dress uniform. Oh, no.

Ceril threw himself out of bed, ignoring his aching muscles, and rushed to his bags and began digging through them for his own uniform. Swarley was already dressed, and that had to mean there was less than ten minutes before they had to be in the Library for Presentation. Ceril had known Swarley for long enough to know that he was notoriously last-minute; punctuality meant nothing to him. If he was already up and about, then there was no way Ceril would have time to shower and groom himself for Presentation.

"Why didn't you get me up?" he asked Swarley, as he found the last piece of his uniform and headed for the door.

"Eh, you were sleeping," Swarley said. "Finally. I knew you'd get up when you heard me come back in." Swarley tugged at his collar. "Relax. We still have over half an hour before we have to be in the Library for Presentation," Swarley said.

"What?" Ceril said, stopping and turning back toward his friend. "You're never early for anything."

"Phase II means more responsibility, Ceril. My dad said that if he hears about me losing any marks for tardiness this year, he'll pull me out of Ennd's and make me go to that military school my uncle teaches at. I'm a lot of things, Ceril, but a soldier I ain't."

"Me, either," Ceril agreed. Nothing in the world sounded worse to him than being a soldier.

Ceril's alarm began to scream and brought an end to their conversation. The noise validated Swarley's claim that they still had plenty of time.

“See?” Swarley said. “Not going to be late for Presentation. Now, does this collar look okay?”

Ceril grunted as he pushed past his roommate to head to the showers. How was it that Swarley had become the responsible one? That had always been Ceril. He’d woken Swarley up every day for years. He had even thought at one point that the boy couldn’t understand how alarm clocks worked. His friend’s newfound initiative unnerved him a little, but he didn’t know why.

Ceril was thankfully able to find the showers quickly. Every student at Ennd’s had to be immaculate for Presentation. Hair, teeth, breath, nails, clothes—everything about them had to be perfect. Or at least that’s the way it was during Phase I. Ceril assumed nothing had changed for Phase II.

* * *

He had assumed wrong. Everything had changed.

Stepping into the Phase II Library sent Ceril reeling. He followed the crowd of other returning students through the doorway to Presentation and felt a soft wafting of air as he crossed the threshold. It made his skin tingle and his ears pop. His eyes even began to water from the harsh light beaming from the center of the room.

Ceril found himself standing on a narrow metal platform overlooking a gigantic, upright cylinder of a room. The cylinder continued up and down as far as Ceril could see—miles above and below ground. The center of the room was a pulsing beam of light that shifted color almost imperceptibly. One moment it was green, but then while Ceril watched, it became orange and blue and yellow without him ever actually seeing it shift.

The metal platform Ceril was standing on connected to a ramp, which spiraled the outside walls of the cylinder like the threading on a screw. Bookshelves lined the walls, too, and paralleled the ramp up and down. As the students filed into the Library, some of Ceril’s classmates paused for a second to acknowledge that they were in a new place, and then kept on moving either up or down, taking a spot in line and waiting for Presentation to start.

Ceril, though...he couldn’t just write this off. This wasn’t just some new place, some new Library. There was something completely different about this room than

anything he had experienced during Phase I—maybe his entire life. He just couldn't quite place what it was.

Stepping out of line so he didn't cause a fifteen-student pile-up at the doorway, Ceril leaned over the guardrail in front of him to see if he could spot the top or the bottom of the room.

Not even close.

Now, the Library at Ennd's Academy—for all phases, I through III—was part of the central spire, a tower easily ten-times as large as the one his and Swarley's dormitory was in. But even it wasn't large enough to hold this.

Which meant there was only one explanation for how this room could even exist: Instancing.

There had always been talk among the students at Ennd's that most of the school was Instanced, that different wings and sections of the campus were actually in the same space, overlapping and right on top of one another. They just couldn't see, feel, touch, sense, or interact with anything not in their own Instance.

It sounded crazy, but it was a story that had to do with the technomages, so Ceril had to hope there was at least a little truth in it. Now, seeing the vastness and physical impossibility of the room he found himself in, crazy didn't seem so...well, crazy.

Ceril knew that two entirely separate buildings like the Phase I and II Libraries could not very well be in the same place at the same time any more than Swarley could put his feet right where Ceril's were without pushing him out of the way. It was impossible.

Except for how Ceril was standing in a monstrous well of proof that it wasn't. His heart began to beat faster as he accepted what was going on. That for the first time, he was undoubtedly in contact with a technomage artifact. If it had not been Presentation, he would have squeed in delight.

He couldn't wait to tell Gramps that his stories were actually true. There were technomages! There were Charons!

That thought led to another, and eventually Ceril forgot entirely that he was in the Library for Presentation. His mind raced. There was the sword he had found in the garden, the video Swarley had shown him the night before, and, if this Library were any indication, all the wonderful artifacts and technology he would discover during Phase II.

He was jarred out of his daydreaming by a hand grabbing him by the collar and pulling him upright. He whipped around to face a rather portly teacher with square glasses, shoulder-length hair, and an immaculately pressed faculty robe. Ceril recognized Professor Nephil at once.

The teacher frowned at Ceril, then pointed to an empty spot in the line of students. Each of them already faced the center of the room and stood at attention. Ceril's awe at his discovery of Instancing must have made him stand out. With a nod, Ceril joined his classmates in line.

"It certainly is breathtaking isn't it, Ceril?" asked the professor.

Ceril knew better than to respond. He stood at attention and waited like he had been trained to do during Phase I.

"But," Nephil continued, "that is no reason for being out of line and not at attention. Stand here and wait on Presentation to begin." He glanced down at the tablet in his hand and tapped the screen twice. "Where is Swarley Dann?"

Ceril blinked. He didn't know. They hadn't even come in together this morning, what with Swarley being ready ahead of time and all. Ceril looked around and found his roommate in line a short distance down the cylinder's ramp. Ceril pointed in his general direction for Professor Nephil.

"Thank you, Mr. Bain," said the teacher and walked toward Swarley.

The beam of light in the center of the cylinder came to life and seemed to solidify. Inside it, a man floated in midair directly in front of Ceril. He flickered once before stabilizing. If he had not, Ceril would have had no idea he was a hologram. It was by far the most advanced hologram Ceril had ever seen; it was far higher-definition than any of the 'Nets.

Ceril didn't think he would be able to handle the gruesome video Swarley had shown him if it had been this true-to-life.

All the other students were staring straight ahead, as though someone were directly in front of them, too. Some of them were talking. The floating man, Ceril assumed, operated on the same technology that the P.A. system did.

"Hello, Ceril," the hologram said.

"Hello," Ceril replied. He made eye contact and kept his arms at his side. He had never been anything less than perfect at Presentation during Phase I, and he was certainly not going to change that now. Especially after Professor Nephil hadn't punished him for being out of rank.

"I'm Gilbert Squalt," the man continued. "I'm the new headmaster at Ennd's."

Each student had their own private meeting with the headmaster this Phase? After the unsettling welcome message he had been given yesterday, speaking to this man in private was low on Ceril's list of priorities.

"I hope the morning has found you well," said Headmaster Squalt.

"Yes, sir. Well enough," Ceril said. He was trying to keep his voice from cracking as the hologram's eyes inspected his uniform. He knew he had put it on properly, but with the headmaster's attention on it, he knew he was going to get reprimanded.

"Good. I'm very glad to hear that, young man. So tell me, what do you expect out of Phase II?"

The question took him aback. Ceril wanted to say, "To know what I'm not ready for," but he didn't. Outside of that, he had no idea what to expect from Phase II. He knew what everyone else knew: it was the time when students at Ennd's specialized in an area and began training for their future. Gramps had gone to Ennd's once upon a time, he had said, and even he wouldn't tell Ceril anything about the nature of Phase II beyond that.

"I suppose, sir," he said, "that I expect to learn." His voice rose at the end of the sentence, as though it were a question.

The hologram grinned. "How very generic, Ceril. Though, I would certainly hope so. This is a school after all. Could you be more specific?"

"Y-yes, sir. I expect to learn about agriculture," said Ceril. "I'm from Ternia, sir, and I want to learn what I can do to return to my grandfather and help him with his land. Maybe help him expand it to a full farm. We have already started by doubling the size of his garden this summer."

"So you expect to specialize in agriculture, then?"

"Yes, sir. I think so."

"Interesting," the headmaster said. "A good choice."

Ceril beamed.

"But I'm afraid that choice is not up to you."

"Excuse me, sir?"

The headmaster folded his hands in front of him and said, "We choose for you, Ceril, based on last year's End of Phase aptitude examinations and a cumulative interpretation of your five formative years at Ennd's."

Ceril folded his own hands behind his back momentarily, but moved them back to his side as the rule entered his mind unbidden: *During Presentation, you should stand at attention, with your hands at your sides at all times.* His ears and cheeks felt warm, and he couldn't help but feel a little sick at his stomach.

"We choose for you," the headmaster continued. "That way, you can be sure that you are well suited for whatever field you pursue. If we were to allow you to choose your specialization, then there would be some very poor professionals out there doing their jobs primarily for the love of it. And I don't think I have to tell you, but that is simply not an efficient use of resources."

Ceril was speechless. He had his future planned out, or at least he assumed he had. He wanted to spend his life working with his hands, feeding people, helping people, and being with the little family he had. He just wanted a simple life. However, the headmaster's declaration stopped his plans in their tracks.

You are not ready. The headmaster's P.A. address came back to mind. Ceril began to understand it a little better. He took a couple of deep breaths, to make sure his voice didn't break or sound rude, and said, "What would you have me study, sir?"

The headmaster laughed, and as he did so, the hologram bounced slightly up and down. Ceril would have been amazed if he weren't so disgusted. "I would have you study nothing, my boy. It is not my place to interpret a student's future. The committee would have you study—" The hologram froze. The headmaster's eyes darted to the left, and he stared at something that was obviously not in the same Instance as Ceril, then the hologram disappeared.

Ceril blinked and looked around, but did not relax. The other students were still chattering away with their own personal headmasters.

After a few seconds, Headmaster Squalt reappeared. He looked toward Ceril, but not at his face. At his feet. The headmaster spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. "What...is that, Ceril?"

Ceril looked down and his jaw dropped at what he saw: the golden metal of a Flameblade.

Which was impossible. Gramps had made him leave it at home. It had to be another hologram, and this was just a test for Phase II. "I'm sorry, Headmaster. What is what?"

"At your feet. What is that?"

Ceril looked down again. He blinked three or four times. The sword was still there. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, sir,” Ceril said. As he stared at it, the sword seemed to gain a slight glow, a hazy green aura.

Headmaster Squalt’s brow furrowed and his lips pursed. He stared at Ceril and said, “I think you do. Do not lie to me, Ceril.”

Ceril looked down again. “Umm, i-it looks like a sword, sir.”

“Yes, Ceril. Yes, it does,” the hologram said. The headmaster became distracted again and quickly turned to look at something behind him. He said, “Would you mind telling me why there is a sword lying at your feet at Presentation? A sword that—unless I am terribly mistaken—was not there a few moments ago?”

“I wouldn't mind at all, sir. I just don't know,” Ceril said.

The headmaster’s voice came back stern. “Have you ever seen this sword before, Ceril?” The headmaster looked behind him again. *Why is he doing that?* Ceril wondered. Was he nervous or angry? Why was he so twitchy?

“I’m not sure, sir,” Ceril said. It was not technically a lie. The sword *looked* like the one he found with Gramps, but he had left that one in Ternia with Gramps. It couldn’t be the same sword. On top of that, it looked like the ones in Swarley’s video, too, and Ceril sure wasn’t going to mention that to the headmaster.

“You’re not sure?” Squalt said. Ceril thought the man’s tone mocked him.

“No, sir,” Ceril said. “I’m not sure. I have seen a sword kind of like this one, but there’s no way I can say it’s the same one.” Ceril swallowed and said a silent prayer that honesty would indeed be the best policy here.

“And where have you seen such a similar sword?” asked the headmaster as his attention once again moved from the sword at Ceril’s feet to whatever was behind him.

Ceril said, “At my Gramps' house, sir.”

The headmaster visibly tensed. He asked very deliberately, “Was it this sword, Ceril?”

“I’m not sure, sir.”

“Did you bring that sword with you to school?”

“No, sir,” Ceril said. His response was immediate. He hadn’t. That was the truth. Maybe he was going to get out of this by telling the truth after all. Maybe he wouldn’t have the new headmaster think he was a murderer and a terrorist on the first day of school after all.

“Are you sure?” the headmaster inquired. “Are you sure you did not bring it with you?”

“Yes, sir,” Ceril said. “Absolutely.”

“So this is not the same weapon that set detection sensors off in your dormitory last night?”

Ceril flinched. What detection sensors? He hadn’t heard any alarm. “I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

“Of course you don’t,” the headmaster said. He turned around again. With his back turned to Ceril, he said, “Ceril, can I ask you to please reach down and pick up the weapon?”

“I’m sorry, sir?”

Headmaster Squalt did not turn around. “I asked you if you could reach down and pick up the weapon.”

Sweat began to bead on his forehead. His heart beat harder and faster, and he could feel every beat in his ears and cheeks. His stomach churned, and he thought for a moment he was going to vomit. Through gritted teeth, Ceril asked, “Why?”

“Just do it, Ceril,” the headmaster demanded.

Ceril took a deep breath and leaned down to grab the hilt of the sword. The moment his hand wrapped around the hilt, the light green aura flared. The green was much brighter now, and a hint of purple was mixed with it. The effect was unlike anything Ceril had ever seen before.

No, that wasn’t quite true; he had seen it once before: the video of the Untouchables. Their swords glowed like this as they killed those people. As they killed those kids.

The headmaster looked at Ceril in fascination. He stared at the sword, but his attention was soon drawn away from Presentation again. This time, the headmaster stood up and reached for something behind him. When he returned, Squalt held a sword that was very much like the one Ceril was holding, only the headmaster’s sword glowed a much-less-intense orange and brown.

“Ceril, I am going to need to speak to you in person immediately, if you wouldn’t mind. Do you know the way to my office?”

Ceril shook his head. “No, sir.”

“I will get Professor Nephil to escort you, then. And please, be discreet with your weapon. If you would like, you may return it to your dormitory on your way here.”

“Yes, sir,” Ceril said. He had no plans on returning it to his room.

“I’ll see you soon, then,” the headmaster said. The hologram flickered and disappeared.

End of *Birthright* Sample

First of all, thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed this introduction to the world of Erlon and the technomages. This is just the beginning of Ceril’s journey, and if you liked it, then you’re in for a treat with the rest of the novel, if I do say so myself. Help make this project a reality by pledging your support to the Birthright Kickstarter campaign at <http://kck.st/LQNnwd>

Pledge anything you can, and I will love you forever for doing so. Even if you can't pledge, then you can still help, and I'll still love you! You can share this project with your friends and family on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and across any other corners of the Internet you want to. Heck, even share it with the strangers around there, too!

Thank you all so very much.

--B.J. Keeton