

HIDDEN IN THE REED'S



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Hidden in the Reed's: Home by Brian K. Declan

Published by Brian K. Declan

Woodlyn, PA

www.briankdeclan.com

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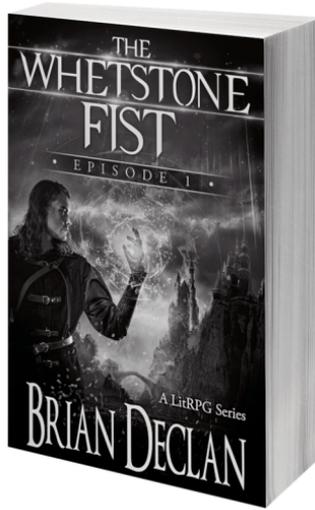
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Cover by Glendon Haddix at Streetlight Graphics. www.streetlightgraphics.com

ISBN-13: 978-0-9998012-0-8 (ebook)

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Enjoy the Story,
-Brian Declan-

PROLOGUE



Condor watched the sunrise from his balcony the same as every morning. Those first moments when the sun painted the sky with color were his favorite. The endless array of color reminded him of the possibilities hidden inside each day. Normally those moments filled him with excitement, but today there was no excitement. The only emotion Condor felt was an overwhelming sense of dread.

Condor pulled himself away from the sunrise to scan the city around him. Most mornings he watched as his people began their day, going to work in the fields or opening their shops and storefronts. But this morning was not most mornings; the only thing he watched was people climbing into one or another of the city's many fountains. They climbed into the fountains, slipped under water, and disappeared. One after another, people he had known his entire life. Men and women, young and old, sick and healthy, they all just disappeared. He watched the faces of everyone he had ever loved disappear. He would never see them again, not for a single passing second.

When the last person was gone he went to his own private fountain and sat next to it watching the ripples bounce around

the surface of the water. Today was just one of those ripples, one of the possibilities that was hidden inside a day that had long since passed. He had cast the stone that caused this ripple and revealed this possibility. And today he was casting another stone, creating another ripple, revealing a lifetime of possibilities.

“Is that everyone?” asked Condor.

“Yes, they are all gone. Are you ready?” asked Lily.

“Not yet, I want to see him one more time,” answered Condor.

“Look into the fountain,” said Lily.

Condor watched the ripples stop as if the water was suddenly turned to a sheet of ice. He watched his own reflection shift as Lily showed him his son. Every second spent looking at his son’s young face made it more difficult to pull away. But he needed this reminder to give him strength. He needed the strength to carry today’s burden for an eternity. That strength came from only one place. It came from *love*.

“I’m ready,” said Condor.

“Climb in the fountain and brace yourself,” said Lily.

Condor did as she instructed, the water was warm and inviting as always.

“I’m sorry, child. This will be painful,” warned Lily.

“I know,” said Condor.

“Close your eyes,” said Lily.

“Lily, please keep them safe,” whispered Condor as pain consumed his entire world.

A STONE'S THROW



“**F**UCK...I need you to check on Fort Reed,” he said. “Cocksucker! He said nothing about this chaos, nothing about helping people. Just take this fucking message and bring back a fucking response.”

“Wait, Master Rocious, where are you going? We need to help these people,” said Sergeant Chaplin.

“What am I supposed to do, Chaplin? I’m *attuned* to fire! You want me to burn the fucking river?! Besides, they don’t seem injured,” said Master Rocious.

“We... I... But we need to do something to help them!” said Chaplin. Rocious let out a frustrated breath. Chaplin was recently promoted to the rank of Sergeant and was supposed to be in charge. But it seemed whenever trouble popped up everyone turned to Rocious.

“Fine. Send your men downstream, there is a shallow spot where they can start pulling them out of the river. Tell whoever can walk to head east to Dominion.”

“Yes, sir,” said Chaplin.

“Where is that pompous twit Werval and his beautiful horse?” asked Rocious.

“It’s *Lord Werval*, and I’m right here.”

“Oh, well get your horse. Ride back to Dominion and tell Dominick to prepare for a lot of people. Have him send supplies to meet us on the road. These people are going to be starving in no time,” said Rocious.

“We left Dominion two days ago, now you expect me to ride back?” asked Lord Werval.

Ignoring Werval, Master Rocious continued, “I’m headed to the Fort to find Count Reed and figure out why thousands of his people are floating down the fucking river.”

“Yes, sir, but how do you know these people are from Fort Reed?” asked Chaplin.

Master Rocious continued ignoring his companions, “Oh, and start questioning people, see if anyone knows what happened.”

“Yes, sir, but what if we need you here, in case something happens?” asked Chaplin.

“In case something happens?! I know you are young but don’t be stupid! Something already fucking happened, and I mean to find out what. Now get your head out of your ass and start solving problems instead of asking questions,” said Rocious in exasperation.

Chaplin took a breath to order his thoughts, “Yes, sir, blond hair, warm clothes. They are likely from the mountains. The river here flows from... Fort Reed?”

Master Rocious swirled his hand encouraging Chaplin to spit out his answer, “Yes, it flows from Fort Reed. The real question is how thousands of people got this far down river, but that’s my worry. Focus on getting them out.”

With a salute Chaplin took off shouting orders to his men.

Master Rocious closed his eyes and began to focus his magical senses.

“You really expect me to ride—”

“FUCK, Werval. Yes, I expect you to stop wasting time and ride,” barked Master Rocious.

Rocious's vulgar nature often made it difficult to distinguish between simple irritation and true *rage*. But Werval had known the man for a long time and was well aware that he could turn his *rage* into a bloodbath if pushed too far. Hell, Werval had seen him incinerate countless men when King Dominick unified the Duchies. Werval simply bowed his head and took off riding down the road.

Rocious, satisfied with the Lord's obedience, turned his attention back to the road. Instead of controlling his *rage*, he opened himself to it. Letting the rage grow and grow, once it intensified enough it called to magic from all around. He could feel magic rush to experience his rage, intensifying it and fighting him for control. But with decades of experience he easily mastered his rage and claimed the reward: magic to do as he wished.

Master Rocious made his way west to the mountain city known as Fort Reed. Even after a life spent travelling the realm of Lora he had never been to Fort Reed, nor had he met Count Reed. That was why Werval was on this trip. Count Reed and Lord Werval were peers of a sort. Even though he did not know the Count well, he did know that his people loved him. Early in King Dominick's reign he had tried to replace the Count with someone more loyal to him, but the whole county rebelled in support of the Count. Few men possessed that kind of loyalty, Dominick included. So even though he never met the man, Rocious respected him.

Using the magic he gathered earlier Master Rocious created small explosions, just big enough to create a concussive force to push him forward. He could use the explosions in many ways but right now all he needed them for was to move as quickly as possible. He was able to make it to Fort Reed in a matter of hours instead of days. He stopped on a small hill beside the road and scanned Fort Reed. He searched for anything that might indicate what had happened. Smoke from fires could mean a dragon or a

raiding army. But these looked more like the normal fires from hearth and home.

“It’s almost peaceful,” said Rocious to himself.

As Master Rocious approached the city, he paused to focus on drawing more magic. This time he used the *serenity* he felt looking at such a beautiful place tucked between the mountains. Compared to *rage*, the feeling of *serenity* took much longer to control, as was typically the case with pleasant emotions. But the reward was far greater. Rocious lingered a few moments longer than he needed to, just enjoying what remained of the feeling. Slowly he opened his eyes and focused on the task in front of him. Find Count Reed and figure out what the hell happened.

As he approached he realized the gates were open and unguarded. Even if a raiding army took the city they would not leave the gates open. He decided to take a closer look. Keeping his senses focused, he proceeded inside the city. His senses, both magical and mundane, revealed nothing.

As Rocious took his first step through the gate he was stopped cold with sudden pain, blinding, intense pain. It was the pain felt when another of the *attuned* tore magic from their control. This did not feel like another *attuned* though.

The *attuned* could pit their will against each other if they called magic from the same source. But this was no contest of will. Rocious had been broken as if he were a drop of water trying to control the tides.

The pain left him panting and sweaty. Time passed as the pain faded and he slowly pulled himself together. One breath... another...

Fuck... have I forgotten how to breathe? he thought. Covered in sweat he took a second step inside the gate... nothing. Senses alert he took a third step – before his foot hit the ground he was struck in the chest by a wave of energy knocking him back up the hill.

“Fuck,” he breathed as he blacked out.

. . .

HOURS later Rocious woke to see the sun had moved across the sky indicating mid day. Testing his body, he was sore but relatively unharmed. Rocious walked the perimeter of Fort Reed, careful to not step inside. Now that he knew what to focus on, he found the barrier around every entrance to the city. Wanting to be thorough, Rocious went back to the hill he approached from and threw a few balls of flame above the wall of the city. They were simply extinguished when they hit the barrier. Seeing no reason to linger he set off back to where he left his companions earlier in the day.

Using his explosions he got back to Chaplin and his group as the sun hit the horizon. Rocious found Sergeant Chaplin setting up a camp by the river where he had left the younger man not even twelve hours ago. If nothing else, Chaplin was resourceful and organized. He had recruited some men from Reed and set them to guard the camp in pairs every twenty meters, tents in neat rows surrounding a large group of people.

"What can you tell me, Sergeant?" asked Rocious.

"Not much, we've spent most of the day just pulling people out of the river. There was a group of just over 2,000 people that left already. I decided to have the rest set camp when the sun started to go down. We'll send them to Dominion in the morning. I've ordered the men to be ready to march on Fort Reed at first light," said Chaplin.

"Cancel that last order, you'll escort them to Dominion," said Rocious.

"Yes, sir."

"Has anyone been able to tell you anything useful?" asked Rocious.

"It seems that nobody knows what happened. The most anyone has said is that they climbed into the water. The next thing they remembered was us pulling them out. We did confirm that they are from Reed," said Chaplin.

"Climbed into what water, the river?" asked Rocious.

“Fountains, lakes, heck, that old guy,” Chaplin nodded towards an unkempt man sitting nearby, “claims he climbed into a privy. Might be true by the smell of him.”

“The kids say the same?”

“I only asked a few, they said mostly the same but you know kids. Active imaginations.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Good work, Chaplin, you saved many lives today. And the Count?” asked Rocious.

“Yes, sir. 12,237,” said Chaplin.

Rocious wrinkled his forehead and looked at Chaplin, “12,237?” he said slowly.

“Roughly. Yes,” answered Chaplin.

Rocious pinched the bridge of his nose, “Count Reed?” he clarified.

“Oh, sorry. Yes, many claim to know him and assure me he isn’t here.”

“That’s odd, I’ll need to think on it,” said Rocious dismissing Chaplin.

Rocious approached the refugees. Looking in their eyes he felt the hopelessness of men and women who have lost something very dear to them. He could do little to ease their suffering. But he might add a little joy to a difficult day. With that small gift he hoped they would be more inclined to answer some questions.

Centering his thoughts on the joy he could bring these people, Rocious used his sense of *pride* as a Praetorian Master of the Path. Once he had more magic under his control he created two small balls of flame, and sent them dancing around the camp. Quickly igniting the camp’s curiosity, he split and multiplied the flames sending them farther into the camp until he reached everyone. As if creating a countdown, he shifted the flames’ color from red to orange then to blue and finally to an intense white. With a sliver of effort Rocious brought the flame back to his left hand, first one then another and another. With the dancing

flames came the camp's attention. With a little effort he had lit up every face in the camp. The stage was set.

Rocious dimmed the flames lighting the camp and raised his own ball of flame into the air. First the flames were just flames, then slowly they took the shape of a small rabbit. Rocious changed them into a puppy, then a doe. Entranced by the show, the camp watched as the flames took the shape of animals they knew well, and then took the shape of great beasts few men had seen outside of statues and books. And finally, the flames took the shape of a great bird. The bird flew around the camp, once, twice. On the third pass Master Rocious let the flames break apart into little flickers of light in the sky. Releasing his control the small sparks rose into the sky as if to join the stars peeking through the twilight sky.

As the show ended soldiers and refugees returned to their business, but a small group of children lingered. Now that he had their attention Rocious turned to the children.

"Did the fire scare you?" asked Rocious.

"No," a few of the children answered.

"Were you scared in the water?" asked Rocious.

"No," more of the children answered.

"How did you end up in the river?" asked Rocious.

"The Lady she—" answered one of the boys.

"Shut it, Fal! It doesn't matter," a larger boy cut in.

The group was silent in an instant. *This must be the leader or the bully of the group* thought Master Rocious.

"Fal, is it? Will you tell me what happened?" asked Rocious.

"Umm," Fal hesitated to answer.

"I will tell you, Master," an older girl answered for him.

It appeared the other children looked up to her. *She is the leader; the boy was just the bully* thought Rocious.

"Shut it!" the older boy cut in again, with a tinge of fear in his voice.

“He could help, Paul,” answered the girl.

“She won’t like it, Mary,” warned Paul. “Let’s go. Good night, Master. Thank you for the show,” Paul bowed and left, some of the children following close behind.

“I’m sorry Master, we should go,” said Mary before she left with the rest of the children. Only the young boy Fal lingered. He had the typical look of the people from Reed, golden: blond hair, slightly tan skin and the unmistakable blue eyes. His seemed to almost glow in the dim light, similar to the *attuned* when they were filled with magic.

“Don’t worry boy, I don’t want you to get in trouble. Can you tell me anything about what happened?” asked Rocious.

Fal looked up and slowly nodded yes.

“The Lady, is she your mother?” asked Rocious.

“No,” answered Fal definitively.

“Is she *attuned*?” asked Rocious.

The boy hesitated for a moment.

“No.”

“Did she help you get out of the city?”

“She saved everyone.”

The boy paused, “And my name is Falcon,” he added.

“How old are you, Falcon?”

“Eight,” Falcon answered showing his fingers.

Falcon shivered and looked toward the river.

“Is the Lady here?” asked Rocious.

Falcon looked at Rocious suspiciously, “No. She can’t leave the city.”

“We are at least fifty miles from Fort Reed. How could she help get you here if she can’t leave the city?” asked Rocious.

Falcon rolled his eyes and looked at Master Rocious. Falcon let out a frustrated breath and picked up a stone. He showed it to Rocious and threw it into the river. “Like that,” said Falcon, again shivering.

“Thousands of people were thrown into the river?” asked

Rocious.

Falcon blew out an impatient breath, "I don't know."

Falcon's patience was running out. He had been through a lot today and was probably scared. Rocious had more questions that needed answers but they would need to wait. There was just one more thing and he would not let it wait.

Rocious focused his magical senses, for him it was like listening. He could sense the magic of the woods nearby, not unlike the gentle creak of the trees in the wind. He could sense the magic in the river, like a low whistle. Rocious drew magic from the river and the moment before he had it under his control, he released it. When he opened his eyes Falcon was gone.

NOT MY STYLE



The next morning Master Rocious woke early, his body stiff and sore from the day before. Most would have thought it was signs of age, but he knew better. His close-cropped white hair was the only part of him that showed signs of his age, the magic kept his body far younger than it had any right to be. Even the vision in his red-tinged black eyes stayed crisp from his constant use of magic. The soreness came from the lingering affects that came from losing his magic at Fort Reed.

After taking care of the necessities Rocious buttoned up his double-breasted white shirt, wrapped himself in his red-lined grey cloak and walked to the River. There were a few people from Reed standing on the shore holding hands. Probably hoping or praying for friends and family that could have drowned or left for Dominion the day before. Maybe they never even made it here. A little farther upstream he spotted the boy, Falcon, sitting alone. The boy appeared to have stayed awake all night, crying.

“Good morning, Falcon,” said Rocious.

The boy’s eyes focused and he glanced up at Rocious.

“Today we are going to start travelling to the capital. Have

you ever been to Dominion, Falcon?" asked Rocious intentionally using the boy's name again.

Falcon looked away, "My dad was supposed to take me to there on my birthday."

Rocious followed Falcon's eyes back toward Reed, "Maybe he can meet us there."

Falcon shrugged.

"Ah, well that is where we are going. I will escort you, stay close to me on the road. Can you do that?" asked Rocious.

"Okay," Falcon said as he got up. "Can we leave now? I don't like this place."

"I just need to speak with the Sergeant, then we can leave," said Rocious.

Rocious found Sergeant Chaplin organizing the people from Reed for the day's travel. He told Falcon to wait as he approached.

"Chaplin. What's the status?" asked Rocious.

"Morning. Everyone is hungry," said Chaplin.

"I figured, we need to get them moving. Are they fit to travel?" replied Rocious.

"Some were injured in the river and there are quite a few elderly that will need help on the road. I've asked for volunteers so it shouldn't be a problem," reported Chaplin.

"Then get them moving as soon as possible," said Rocious.

"There's just one thing..." Chaplin began.

"What is it?" snapped Rocious. *The hunger must be getting to me too.*

"They seem to be forgetting things, it's rather odd," answered Chaplin

"Forgetting what things?" Rocious pressed.

"Nothing major, just the time they spent in the river," said Chaplin.

"That is rather odd. But it doesn't stop them from walking," said Rocious.

“Yes, sir. What’s with the kid?” inquired Chaplin.

“Just one of the kids your men pulled from the river. Apparently his father is still missing so I’m looking after him,” answered Rocious.

“Ha,” blurted Chaplin. Rocious raised an eyebrow. Chaplin quickly cleared his throat, “Think he’s back at Fort Reed?”

“No, maybe he left yesterday,” answered Rocious flatly.

“What parent would leave their kid behind like that?” questioned Chaplin.

“People do terrible things every day,” said Rocious, losing his appetite at the thoughts that accompanied his statement.

Not sure what else to say Chaplin returned to his business, “I’ll get them moving.”

Rocious gestured for the boy and left.

THE PAIR TRAVELLED in silence for close to an hour. Frustrated with the boy’s slow pace Rocious had enough and decided to carry him on his back.

“Fuck it, come here kid, I can shit faster than this.”

Falcon laughed as he hopped onto Rocious’s back.

“Do you even know what that means?”

“Poop, it means you poop fast.”

“No, it means you walk slow.”

“No I don’t. I can run twice as fast as the other boys.”

“Well, you walk fucking SLOW!” shouted Rocious startling himself. Then he too broke into laughter at the boy’s smirk.

After sharing a few moments of laughter the two fell into a steady rhythm for another hour before Falcon started to squirm. Rocious stopped to let him down.

“Yeah, we should take a little rest.”

Together they found shade nearby and settled down to rest for a few minutes.

Now that they were more familiar, Rocious thought to see

what else Falcon knew about what had happened. At the least he might be able to find out who was taking care of him. Either way, there was no one else to talk to.

"Falcon, that's an odd name. Is it normal to name someone after birds in Reed?" asked Rocious intentionally referencing his home county.

Falcon shrugged in reply; his face blank.

"You are from Reed, right?"

"Yeah," answered Falcon.

"In the five duchies we usually name people after their grandparents. Or if you're fool enough to want them to be famous, you can pull a name from the histories," said Rocious, expecting to get a laugh out of the boy.

Falcon looked at the ground and started picking at the grass.

"You named after someone?" Rocious continued.

"I'm named after the Falcon, guardian of the sky," answered Falcon with pride.

"Sounds like a joke to me. People can't fly," replied Rocious sadistically.

"I read that Castor Kard flew to the sunken isles for the Duke of Caledonia. He was *attuned* to wind," Falcon said with intensity.

"No, the *attuned* jump. It's unpredictable. Hardly considered flying," said Rocious laying back and closing his eyes.

"At least my name has meaning, Rocious is a joke. Like a baby's rambling," Falcon said defiantly.

"Yeah, it is a joke. Just not a funny one," said Rocious.

"Who gave you that name?" asked Rocious, breaking the tension.

Falcon looked up at the old man, his defiance shifted to defeat. *He's lost something*, realized Rocious.

"Was it your parents?" asked Rocious.

Falcon's face looked pained, sorrow being replaced with grief.

"Did your parents give you that name?" Rocious clarified.

Falcon's emotions shifted again and he looked away as if to

avoid answering the question. When he looked back at Rocious his face was covered in sweat and tears. *What the fuck is going on*, thought Rocious. Then he saw it; Falcon's emotions were attracting magic and he was fighting it for control.

"Everything is okay, you need to calm down now," said Rocious gently.

More magic collected around the boy, causing him to panic and in turn attract more magic. It was a vicious cycle that took practice and control to break free, something even Praetorian struggled with. Falcon never stood a chance.

"Falcon, listen. Take a slow breath and try to calm down," said Rocious in a firm but a gentle undertone.

Falcon jumped up and tried to run but Rocious blocked his way.

"Leave me alone!" the boy yelled.

"Screw it." Rocious grabbed a stone from the ground and beamed Falcon in the head.

Rocious picked up the boy, tossed him over his shoulder and continued down the road. "So much for resting."

ROCIOUS WALKED until midday with the boy in his arms, making surprisingly good time now that he did not have to deal with the kid's little legs. He had just caught up with the group of refugees that started their journey the day before when Falcon began to open his eyes. Rocious put the boy down and lead the way to see what caused the large group to stop moving. Working his way through the group Rocious caught sight of a group of about twenty mounted soldiers blocking the road with a few war carts.

Rocious scooped up Falcon and pushed his way through the group. Just before reaching the soldiers he put Falcon down.

"Stay here until I say otherwise."

Falcon nodded an affirmative then squinted and rubbed the

side of his head. Rocious looked away then turned to the problem at hand and walked toward the soldiers at a steady pace.

"Hold, old man," said the Decurion, as several mounted archers trained arrows on him.

Asshole thought Rocious. He was expecting to take charge of these men easily due to his station, but it seemed like this Decurion was one of the few officers that did not recognize him or was just a moron. With his mastery of fire he was virtually untouchable and could display his identity through flame and fear. But if the archers felt threatened someone might accidentally get hurt. To be safe he needed to get closer, and disarm them. He could try some subtle way of convincing them to let them pass or take charge. But he did not feel like waiting and subtlety was not really his style.

"Fuck it." Rocious traced a line in the air with his middle and index finger. A wall of flames formed between him and the blockade. Then he jumped through the flames and used two explosions to flip the carts. A flick of his fingers sent a series of sparks snapping the archer's bowstrings before they could cause any damage.

Rocious searched the group of soldiers locking eyes on the man that called him old. "Move the blockade."

The men jumped into action to obey. Rocious smiled, pleased and hopped back through the fire to retrieve Falcon. The boy was gone.

FALCON WATCHED as the grumpy old man casually approached the soldiers as if they were harmless. He knew it was a bad idea; standing up to a bully only got you beat. You had to distract them first. Then again, sometimes taking the beating was the distraction, like right now. Falcon quietly thanked the old man and darted away from the group.

Mostly unkempt fields surrounded this section of road. A few

sparse trees and shrubs were littered around the fields, not enough to hide a full-grown man. But perfect for Falcon to sneak past the diverted gaze of the soldiers.

Falcon worked his way from shrub to shrub careful not to move too fast or abruptly. He learned at an early age it was better to just move at a steady pace to avoid unwanted attention. Adults were always more focused on themselves and never had time to spare for games. No matter, Falcon did not want their attention, quite the opposite in fact. In his experience adults were mostly boring and always worrying about the weather. What was it about the weather that had them so interested? It's not like you can change it. He'd had enough of their rules. A few more shrubs and he would be free to do whatever he wanted.

The soldiers were so distracted that he practically walked right past them. As he made his way back towards the road on the other side of the blockade, he caught sight of more mounted men galloping down the road. *They look important, definitely not soldiers*, thought Falcon. Falcon rolled off the road and ducked under a bush right before the soldiers stampeded past him.

That was close, he thought.

Cautiously, he peeked out of the bush he used as shelter, then skipped his way to freedom.

Making his way down the road Falcon thought about what he would do next. He was not sure where he was going but a new life where nobody knew him seemed pretty nice. He could forget about everything that had happened and start with a clean slate. He could wake up when he wanted, eat whatever he wanted, maybe even learn swordsmanship. His dad never even let him touch swords. Maybe he could find a teacher in Dominion but then again someone would probably recognize him. On second thought, the swordsmen in Lucitania were the best and he had always wanted to see the ocean.

Again he heard galloping and his dream of a new life was crushed in an instant. One of the mounted men must have

spotted him and turned back. Falcon ran back into the field, desperate to be rid of his pursuer.

"Hey there lad, I'm not going to hurt you. No need to run," said the man pulling up behind Falcon.

Falcon stopped running. That stupid horse took his one shot at freedom.

"What is your name lad?" asked the man as he approached.

As he turned toward the soldier his head began hurting slightly.

"Nice to meet you," said Falcon returning the greeting with a respectful bow. Rising from his bow Falcon lost his balance and fell forward.

"Are you alright lad?" asked the man as he dismounted.

Falcon clutched his head.

"My head," he said as he blacked out.

FALCON WOKE in a warm bed in a simple stone room with cut stone walls and utilitarian furnishings. There were no lights except a steady fire to the left of the bed. His head did not hurt anymore but he was starving. He looked around the room to see if anyone had left him some food, but all he found was a pitcher of water. He scooped up the pitcher and drank, ignoring the cup that was obviously for him. The door opened while Falcon was still drinking. Startled, he spilled half the water on his lap, and breathed in what was still in his mouth, coughing.

"Damn kid, you trying to kill yourself?" said Rocious entering the room with a slim woman in servant's clothes carrying a tray of salted meats and bread. She placed the tray next to the bed and left.

"Were you?" Falcon replied after she left.

"Fair enough. Eat and get dressed. I need you to come with me to answer some questions," instructed Rocious.

“What questions?” inquired Falcon before tearing into the bread.

“Maybe none, but it’s not up to me,” said Rocious taking a seat next to the fireplace.

“Whose questions are they then?” murmured Falcon with his mouth full of bread and salted meat.

The door swung open again. This time the serving girl brought a second pitcher of water. She filled a glass, placed it next to Falcon, and then put the pitcher on a table across the room.

Rocious waited until the girl left to answer. “Swallow before you choke. Questions are from the king. Maybe some nobles, or cocksuck politicians. A piece of advice kid, answer the king. Ignore the rest.”

“Why would the king ask me questions?” asked Falcon.

“Because I was supposed to do something. Instead I brought you,” said Rocious getting up to leave.

“Wait, you’re coming with me right?” pleaded Falcon.

“Yes, I’m to escort you. This time, don’t run,” said Rocious flashing a smirk.

ROCIOUS AND FALCON were waiting in the antechamber to King Dominick Maximus’s throne room. They had been there for almost two hours and Rocious had lost his patience approximately two hours ago. Scratch that, he had lost his patience before they even got to the antechamber.

“Six times, six fucking times?!” complained Rocious.

“Why do you keep saying that?” inquired Falcon.

“It’s just not right,” said Rocious.

“Everybody does it,” said Falcon.

“Trust me kid, nobody does it this much unless something is wrong.”

They had been waiting for two hours and Rocious had

escorted Falcon to piss six times. Seven if you counted the stop on the way to the Antechamber. Rocious started to wonder if this was some sort of sick punishment King Dominick had thought up. The king had two sons: Fafnir, who was the same age as Falcon, and Drake who was a few years older.

The doors to the throne room opened and two armed soldiers entered the antechamber. "Praetorian Lockland, it's time," said one of them. Rocious nodded to the men and they returned to the throne room leaving the doors open.

"Showtime kid. You remember what I told you?" asked Rocious.

"Yeah, yeah," Falcon replied.

"Say it," commanded Rocious.

"The only one who matters is the king. Wait to be called. Be respectful," recited Falcon verbatim.

Rocious did not reply, he simply entered the throne room with confidence. He walked with the confidence of a man who knew what he was walking into and what he was walking away from. Every step he took displayed the confidence of someone who knew himself inside and out. The casual contempt written on his face was that of a man who owned the world and if he chose to burn the entire place to the fucking ground that is precisely what would happen.

His aura was so disconcerting that even the Herald forgot to announce him until Rocious cleared his throat.

"Praetorian Frederick Archibald Lockland, Curia to—" the herald boomed belatedly.

"Enough," King Dominick said calmly from his throne, cutting off the Herald.

"Frederick, my friend," Dominick said pausing to let the words settle. "You remember why I sent you to Reed?"

"I do," said Rocious directly to the king.

"Then tell us what happened to the message you were supposed to give Count Reed?" inquired the king.

“I have it here,” Rocious produced a sealed letter from his concealed breast pocket.

Dominick left his throne and approached Rocious, watching him critically. Rocious had served him well for years. It was not in his character to fail. Dominick took the message, read it and handed it back to Rocious. The note was in fact the one that Dominick had given Rocious to deliver; Rocious had simply added three words for the king to see. *Don't ask how.*

“Why are there twelve thousand people camped outside my city?” asked the king.

“I told them to come here,” answered Rocious remaining frighteningly still as King Dominick circled the room.

“What should I do with them?” asked the king aloud, bringing the rest of the curia and ambassadors into the conversation. Dominick returned to his throne to listen.

Curia, like Rocious, were the king's selected advisers and administrators. They advised on topics from magic to grain supplies. Occasionally they would serve as messengers like Rocious. More often they handled the day-to-day functioning of the realm and assisted with resolving disputes. They held no real political power aside from having King Dominick's ear and would keep their mouths shut unless addressed directly.

There were also four ambassadors in attendance, one from each of the three surrounding duchies and one from the northern County of Stormhelm. In addition to representing the capital, Dominick spoke for his family's duchy. Typically there would be a sixth ambassador from Reed, but the previous ambassador from Reed had recently died of old age. Hence the reason Rocious had left for Fort Reed in the first place. Rocious thought most of the ambassadors were cowards but here they held significant power and influence.

First to seize the moment, Lord Werval stepped forward.

“Your Majesty, Antioch has food to spare and I'm sure Duchess Camilla will welcome them.”

Lord Quintus Werval was of course Duchess Camilla Antioch's ambassador and one of the wealthiest men in all of Lora. He likely had a plan to use the people to some financial gain.

Lord Blundus Longfellow, Duke Cato Eikard's ambassador swooped in.

"Nonsense Quintus, she has too many people as it is. Your majesty, send them back to Reed where they belong. Or at least to somewhere close to Reed, like Keld."

Duke Eikard held the lands closes to Reed. He was probably more concerned that if men from Laza, the neighboring realm, invaded Fort Reed, he would be attacked first.

"I'm not sending unarmed men and women anywhere without knowing what happened," answered Dominick.

Duke Eikard not only had the best trained and supplied army, he also had openly opposed Dominick's claim on the throne. In fact, Eikard claimed there should be no king. Hence Dominick was always keeping Lord Blundus on a tight leash. *A muzzle would be better*, thought Rocius.

"King Dominick, we can assist with training," announced Alvi Grey, the ambassador from Stormhelm and the Count of Stormhelm's oldest daughter. Stormhelm was different from the rest of the realm. In their culture they taught everyone how to fight: men, women, children. As a result it seemed like the entire county was in a constant state of war. Half the time Stormhelm's various clans fought each other, the other half the time they fought invaders from Laza or pirates that crashed on their rocky coast.

"Thank you Alvi, that won't be necessary," replied Dominick with a smile. Dominick liked Alvi, straightforward and pretty. "Rufus?" continued the king.

"Yaa, yes, Your Majesty?" replied Lord Rufus Secundus, the second cousin of Nero Secundus and ambassador from the coastal duchy, Lucitania. Rufus was a halfwit and probably had already forgot the topic, if he was even listening to begin with.

“Do you have anything to add?” prompted the king, strategically offering him an easy out by wording the question to have as simple an answer as possible. Rocious smirked at Dominick. Rocious may suck at politics and conversation but Dominick knew the dance well.

“No,” sighed Rufus taking a seat and probably turning off his brain again.

Dominick raised his hand to signal that he had heard enough. He looked around the room reading, each face in turn, ending with Master Rocious. Keeping his eyes fixed on his friend he announced his decision.

“The people will stay in Dominion. Samuel, find them some place to sleep in the third ring. Send orders to the seventh legion to return and help with construction of the city’s expansion. Lord Werval, send word to Antioch. We’ll need whatever supplies Camilla can spare. As for Fort Reed,” Dominick paused “Praetorian Lockland, is there something more you have to add about Fort Reed?”

“The Fort is secure,” answered Rocious.

“You can’t know that!” accused Lord Blundus.

Rocious’s eyes flicked to Blundus then back.

“Blundus. Sit. Silence,” said Dominick.

“How is the Fort secure if there is nobody there to guard it?” asked Dominick.

“There is some spell or barrier that blocks entry to the city. It extends across the full length of Reed Valley and continues into the mountains,” answered Rocious.

“How?” inquired Dominick

“I can’t be certain,” said Rocious, disappointed. This was the moment Rocious was hoping to avoid. It would lead him and Dominick down a dangerous path. The king knew what Rocious wanted and was asking anyway. It meant Rocious had to dance to this court’s tune.

“How?” asked Dominick.

"I believe it was Count Reed," answered Rocious, disappointed that his friend was pushing him into a corner.

"Bullshit," said Alvi.

"Count Reed was not *attuned*," said Blundus.

The four ambassadors began to argue but were cut off as Dominick used his amulet to amplify his voice, "Silence."

"The Reeds are an old family, Praetorian Lockland, probably older than everyone in this room. Several of us here have even known the Count personally for years. In that time he has not once shown the slightest magical ability. And never in the Reed's history has an *attuned* been identified. So you must understand the skepticism we have in your claim?" asked the king.

"I do," answered Rocious.

"Then what in all the world has lead you to this belief?" Dominick asked.

Master Rocious took a step back turned ninety degrees and motioned toward the door, "Falcon Reed!" he announced.

FRIENDS



Earlier Rocious had entered with a stunning display of confidence playing off his reputation to remind everyone he looked upon that he could turn them to cinders if provoked. And Falcon put him to shame. If he had been nervous for the past two hours it was only to piss out every last drop of doubt and uncertainty. Where Rocious entered with determination, contempt and purpose, Falcon entered as if he was the purpose. No contempt, he did not give them enough attention for contempt to even matter. Rocious had an aura that said *don't fucking look at me*. Falcon had an aura that said *here I am. You're welcome*.

Rocious had shown confidence with fear and contempt but it was also a reminder that he did not want to be there. Falcon, entering with pure delight, said far more. The boy may be eight but he was raised in the limelight by a Count and was obviously comfortable in the king's court. He was also a mystery to everyone in the room, and he knew it.

Falcon took his place in the center of King Dominick's throne room, bowed his head to Master Rocious then, as was customary, bowed to the king.

"Welcome, Falcon Reed," said Dominick gesturing for Falcon to stand.

"Thank you for receiving me in your home and for helping my people, your majesty," said Falcon.

"Of course, I assume you have heard the conversation from the antechamber?" asked Dominick, careful not to look at Rocius.

"To be precise your majesty, I heard from just inside the throne room beside your two Praetorian," answered Falcon honestly.

"Ah, then you know what we need you to clarify?" asked Dominick glancing disapprovingly at his guards.

"Yes, I am the son of Count Reed," answered Falcon simply.

"So is Praetorian Lockland's claim correct?" asked Dominick.

"I don't understand," said Falcon.

"Was your father *attuned* boy?" blurted Blundus.

This time it was not the king who silenced him. It was Alvi, but she did it with a goblet to the head.

"Thank you, Alvi. Falcon, was your father able to use magic?" asked Dominick.

"Hmm, I don't know. I don't know any of the *attuned* except umm, Praetorian Lockland and he isn't anything like my dad," answered Falcon.

"Do you know who put this barrier around the city?" asked Dominick.

"Umm, I don't know what that is," answered Falcon.

"It's like the walls and gates that protect the city but with magic," said Rocius.

Falcon looked over at Rocius, not sure if he was supposed to follow the advice from earlier to only pay attention to the king. Falcon looked back to Dominick.

"My dad protects Fort Reed," said Falcon resolute.

"Hmm, I do not believe Count Reed was much of a soldier.

Werval, you knew the Count better than the rest of us,” said Dominick.

“I did, what are you asking Sire?” replied Werval.

“We all know he defended us from Laza, but how?” asked Dominick.

“Until now I would have said he had well trained soldiers, loyal and experienced. But maybe there was something more to it,” answered Werval.

“Did he fight with them?” asked Dominick.

“I never so much as saw him pick up a sword,” answered Werval.

“My dad did not practice swordsmanship,” said Falcon.

“Sire?” injected Alvi.

“What is it, Alvi?” asked Dominick.

“I saw him fight. Best hand to hand fighter I’ve ever seen,” said Alvi.

Dominick looked critically at Alvi, “Where was this fight?” he asked skeptically.

“Um, a tavern in Valencia,” answered Alvi.

“Hardly the best place to gauge a man’s ability,” said Werval.

“Hardly,” agreed Dominick.

Dominick looked back at Rocious and scratched his chin, “Loyalty, perhaps there was more to that... What do the soldiers call you Frederick?”

“Rocious,” answered Rocious, annoyed with the question.

“No, the other name?” asked Dominick.

Rocious flicked his fingers dropping sparks on the floor, “Is there a point to this?”

“Yes, you inspire loyalty because of the things you can do,” answered Dominick.

“The soldiers are loyal because I fight with them,” corrected Rocious.

“No. I have also fought with them countless times. It is not the same. I believe we underestimated Count Reed. His people were

loyal to him in the same way my legionaries are to you," said Dominick.

"I'm not even part of the army," said Rocious.

"I will send scouts to verify your claim about this barrier, unless we hear different the matter is settled," said Dominick.

Dominick got up to leave but was stopped mid step when Rocious cleared his throat.

"What is it Frederick?" said Dominick.

"If we all agree he is Count Reed's son, we need to have the boy tested and trained," said Rocious.

Rocious knew the only way to keep the boy out of the throne's politics and greedy motives was to get him in front of a more powerful group: the *attuned*.

"Why can't you train him?" asked Dominick.

"I've never helped another walk the path, the academies will need to give their approval," said Rocious.

"There is an academy in this city, is there not?" asked Dominick.

"He's a noble and I'm, well, me. We will need to involve all of them," said Rocious.

"Fine. I'll send messages for the schools to come test the boy. Until then, he's your ward," announced Dominick with finality.

"Wait, what?" said Rocious to deaf ears.

King Dominick ignored everyone as he left the room out behind the throne. The rest of the ambassadors and Curia left out the side entrance, leaving Rocious and Falcon alone aside from the unconscious Ambassador Blundus.

"Fuck," said Rocious.

"What am I supposed to do now?" asked Falcon.

"Come on," said Rocious as he left the throne room.

"Where are we going?" asked Falcon.

"To find someone to take care of you," answered Rocious.

. . .

ROCIOUS DID NOT HAVE many friends and those he did have were exclusively men. Most of them had also been through some fairly bloody battles leaving them like Rocious: a bit hateful and ill equipped to care for a child. What Rocious did have however was money and an idea to make sure Falcon got the loving care of a woman, several if he was lucky.

Falcon quickly jogged to catch up as Rocious purposefully marched thru the streets of Dominion. After Dominick's family began seizing power, roughly three generations back, they built this city from almost nothing. The center of the city was originally a fort built into a solitary mountain called Drake's Roost, named after King Dominick's great-grandfather Primus Pilus Drake Maximus. Since then it had expanded out in three concentric rings with streets connecting them like spokes on a wheel. Once the city reached a critical mass the city would expand again. First they would erect another solid stonewall outside the current border, and connect the roads. It was the secure way Dominick's ancestors had devised to keep everyone safely inside the city and still expand.

"Why did the king say you were to be my guardian?" asked Falcon, struggling to keep up with Rocious.

"What?! He didn't say anything like that. I'm just supposed to keep you safe for a few days. Besides, this will be safer for both of us," said Rocious as he marched down the streets with purpose.

"I'm your ward, that means you are my guardian. Not someone else," said Falcon with certainty.

"Ah, here we are. Wait... Never mind, you're coming with me," said Rocious remembering the last time he left the kid alone.

"The Pink Oasis?" said Falcon reading the sign as they walked up to the door.

"No kids," said a large man putting his hand on Rocious's chest to stop his entry.

"There a problem here, Vitus?" another man said stepping outside.

"Guy's got a kid with him," said Vitus. Rocious just stood looking Vitus in the eye and said nothing.

"We ain't babysitters. If you want a twirl come back without the kid," said the smaller man.

"I'm here to see Tatiana. Now move," said Rocious.

"Ha ha, funny old man," laughed Vitus.

Rocious did not wait any longer; that was enough response for him to know they were not going to make things easy and he did not have time for their shit. He simply used two tiny slivers of magic in each hand. The first to create an explosion a few inches from Vitus's chest whose concussive blast sent Vitus through the wooden food stand next to Tatiana's and halfway down the street. The second sliver of magic Rocious used to create a lingering fire at his finger tips, which he waved in front of the smaller man's face.

"Move," he said again. This time the man must have shit his pants trying to get out of the way.

"He poops fast too," laughed Falcon.

Rocious smiled and shook his head, "Come on kid."

"You should be saving that energy for later," said a young woman as they entered. She could not have been more than fifteen years old. The building did not look very large from the street, but inside you could tell it was actually connected to the buildings next door and the walls had been knocked down to make a large lounge area. There was a bar on one side and private curtained booths lined the rest of the room. Women and prospective clients were lounging on couches in the center of the greeting area.

"Master Lockland, you told me you'd be traveling, but I won't complain," said an older woman greeting Rocious with a bright smile.

"Hey Tatiana, ran into some trouble."

"I know we say to bring some friends but we do have age restrictions," said Tatiana.

Rocious raised an eyebrow and glanced at the girl that greeted them, "Can we talk alone in the back?"

"Always straight to business. Sabina, entertain our young friend," said Tatiana to the young girl.

"Of course, Tati," said Sabina taking Falcon by the hand.

Tatiana led Rocious behind the bar to an office in the back where they could speak in private.

"What can I do for you Frederick? I hope you aren't trying to find someone for the boy? He's a bit young for my girls," said Tatiana pouring drinks for them.

"I need someone to watch over the boy for the next two days. No sex, just keep an eye on him and feed him," said Rocious removing a pouch of gold from his pant's pocket and tossing it to Tatiana. She caught it but did not open it.

"What do you think we are here? Most of my girls have kids of their own. We'll take care of him but keep your fucking money. Now get out!" said Tatiana throwing the pouch back in his face.

He stood stunned. He thought it was going to be difficult to convince her to take care of Falcon so he brought more money than this brothel would make in a month. Maybe it was too much.

"Thank you," said Rocious. He placed the money on her desk then turned and went back to the greeting area. Sabina and Falcon were sitting on the bar stacking cards. Falcon had built what seemed like a mansion out of cards, and a few of the girls were cheering him on. Rocious went to join them when one of the cards slipped causing the whole mansion to collapse.

"Hey kid," said Rocious to get Falcon's attention.

"Yes. Are we staying here? This place is fun," asked Falcon.

"Umm..." stammered Rocious. He was not even sure why he stopped to say good-bye to Falcon. He should have left out the back. Must have been thrown off by Tatiana.

"I have to go, but you are going to stay here for a few days,"

said Rocious hoping Falcon would be happy with the answer.

"No, you can't leave. I'm your ward," complained Falcon, jumping off the bar.

"Trust me, it's for the best," answered Rocious catching Falcon and putting him on the floor.

"Best for you. I thought you were going to teach me," said Falcon as his face filled with tears.

"Well, I'm not. I'll be back for you in a few days," said Rocious. He left before there was any more drama. Falcon did not watch him leave. He simply picked up the cards and began stacking again.

FALCON DID HAVE a fun time staying with Tatiana and her girls. A few of them had children close to his age and he made fast friends with two boys, Thomas and Lucius. Thomas's father was a soldier that died in some meaningless battle a few years ago and Lucius never knew his father. They did not believe him when he said he was Count Reed's son. It seemed that in Dominion there were huge class differences and nobles' children did not play with the rest of the kids. Nor could you play with kids from other neighborhoods. Falcon did not understand. They thought he was making up stories but that did not stop the three boys from having fun together.

In Reed, Falcon had not been treated differently because he was nobility. When Paul gave him a black eye, his dad invited Paul's family for dinner. Then Falcon and Paul spent the next three months cleaning floors and weeding the city's garden. *You'll learn to work together*, his father had said. Instead they spent most of the time scheming how to get out of working. Which only got them in more trouble, but they did become friends. The next time their parents had dinner, it was to discuss keeping them separated. He felt a similar closeness to Lucian and Thomas, perhaps because of their shared loss.

Rocious decided to use the back door this time, best to avoid any drama with the two bouncers at the front. Plus he was able to avoid Tatiana. He found Sabina and asked her to send Falcon out the back.

“What are you wearing?” asked Falcon as he emerged from the back door.

“An empath’s formal robes,” answered Rocious. Normally he wore grey knit pants with a white double-breasted knit shirt and a grey cloak lined with dark red. But today he was dressed completely in a one-piece grey robe hemmed and lined with dark red like his cloak.

“As you walk the path your robes will mark your achievements and your abilities. It is one of our oldest traditions and as an *attuned* you will respect it. For now you wear plain black,” said Rocious tossing Falcon a small black robe.

Falcon held it up to look at, “It’s too big,” he said.

“No, that’s how it’s supposed to be. Now come on,” said Rocious as he took off walking. Falcon slipped the robe over his head then struggled to catch up without tripping.

AGAIN THEY WERE WAITING in the antechamber to King Dominick’s throne room. This time Falcon did not need to piss nine million times, nor did they wait for several hours. After only fifteen minutes, the herald announced them correctly. Dominick and his extended council filled the edges of the throne room. In the center of the room waited six Masters of the Path in full white robes on the throne room floor. Two of them had robes with colored hem and lining similar to Rocious, one with dark blue hem and the other purple.

“Praetorian Lockland, I’m glad to see you are well,” said the master with purple-accented robe followed by a respectful bow of the head.

"Praetorian Connelly," said Rocious bowing his head respectfully in response.

"We hear that you have identified an *attuned*. I presume this boy is the one?" asked Connelly.

"Yes. This is Falcon Reed, son of Count Reed," answered Rocious.

"How long have you trained him?" asked Connelly.

"I have not," answered Rocious.

"But you're certain?" asked Connelly.

"Yes," answered Rocious.

Connelly knelt and motioned for Falcon to come closer.

"Falcon, do you know why we are here?" asked Connelly.

Falcon looked up at Rocious then moved closer to Connelly, "To see if I am *attuned*," answered Falcon.

"Yes, but how?" asked Connelly. Once Falcon reached Connelly, Rocious joined the other masters.

"I don't know," said Falcon.

"To start walking the path of the *attuned* you must be able to sense the very fabric of our world. Concentrations of raw emotion, or more simply put, magic. Some refer to us as empaths but here in the realm of Lora we use the term *attuned pathos* once you begin training, or one day the title Master. Myself and the other masters gathered here have dedicated our lives to identifying, training and testing all *attuned* who wish to become *pathos*. Would you like that Falcon?" asked Connelly.

"Yes," answered Falcon immediately.

"Good. What we need then is to test your ability to sense the presence of magic. Do you understand?" asked Connelly.

"You mean like seeing or hearing, but for magic," answered Falcon.

"Yes, Falcon, *precisely* like that. Each of the *attuned* has this ability manifest differently. For myself it is like the world radiates an endless array of color. For Praetorian Lockland, it is like the

world sings to him.” Connelly paused watching Falcon closely for a moment.

“Today, Falcon, we do not need to know how you do it, we need only know if you can,” said Connelly.

Falcon nodded his head, “Okay, what should I do?” he asked.

“Very simple, you find this,” said Connelly. He flicked his fingers and there was a small vial between his fingers.

“What is that?” asked Falcon.

“This is magic, more precisely it is a container for magic,” said Connelly twirling the vial between his fingers and handing it to Falcon.

“It’s warm,” said Falcon.

“Yes, it’s warm. Are you ready?” asked Connelly putting his hand out for the vial.

“I think so, just find that vial,” said Falcon.

“Yes, just find the vial filled with magic,” said Connelly.

Connelly twirled the vial between his fingers and then it disappeared. The other masters joined Connelly to form a circle around Falcon. Falcon looked around at the masters, waiting for a signal to begin. Half a minute passed before Falcon realized they were the ones waiting on him. Falcon rubbed the back of his head then pointed to Connelly.

“Very good,” said Connelly revealing the vial.

Connelly twirled the vial before it disappeared again. Connelly flicked his fingers and had two vials. He passed one to the masters on his left and another to his right.

“Find it again,” instructed Connelly.

This time Falcon did not wait, he pointed to Connelly. Connelly grinned before he revealed the vial again. The next time the masters passed the vials several times before hiding them. This time Connelly gestured for Falcon to find the vial again. Falcon turned around and honed in on three of the masters. He took a few seconds and looked back and forth between them.

“Is this a trick?” asked Falcon.

"No," answered Connelly.

"Okay," said Falcon. He then pointed to one of the masters.

"Are you sure?" asked Connelly.

"Yes," answered Falcon.

All three of them revealed vials and passed them back to Connelly. He twirled them in his fingers and one by one they disappeared.

"Why did you not choose one of the others?" asked Connelly.

"They don't have the vial you showed me," answered Falcon.

Connelly snapped his fingers, "Splendid," said Connelly.

Without a word the masters moved to the far side of the throne room to discuss. While Falcon waited he looked around the room for the first time realizing how many people were watching. As he looked at all the faces in the room he was struck with a simple fact. In a room filled with people making decisions about his life he did not know anyone; he was all alone in a room full of strangers.

Falcon closed his eyes. He missed his home and did not want these strangers to see him cry. He listened for any sign they had finished discussing how well he had done with the test. He heard the beating of his own heart and opened his eyes to realize they had finished and were now watching him.

Connelly walked over to him and knelt, "It is quite obvious that you have the potential to be something great— " Connelly stopped due to a few whispers.

The room became quiet again, "But greatness is not something that is achieved from birthright or chance— " Suddenly Connelly was gone. Falcon blinked but he had simply disappeared leaving nothing but a tiny bit of dust and smoke. Falcon looked around the room and Lord Blundus Longfellow was gone as well.

As quickly as he left, Connelly was back kneeling in front of Falcon as if nothing had happened, "Sorry for the interruption. Where was I?"

Falcon blinked a few times unsure what had happened, “Birthright or chance,” he said.

“Ah, yes, it will take hard work and careful guidance to walk the path. Hard work is your responsibility,” Connelly motioned toward the other masters, “guidance is ours,” finished Connelly as the other masters joined him in front of Falcon.

“Everyone here is qualified to teach you if you wish. With the exception of Praetorian Lockland, we have all dedicated much of our lives to helping others walk the path. We each run schools that can house and guide you. But you must know, once you start walking the path you must finish your training. A partially trained *attuned* can be dangerous and it is this council’s responsibility to eliminate that danger. It is your choice who will train you,” finished Connelly.

Falcon looked around the room full of strangers again. Rocious was the only person he knew in the slightest. “What about Praetorian Lockland?”

Rocious opened his mouth but Connelly spoke first, “Praetorian Lockland has yet to pass on his knowledge but he welcomes the opportunity.”

“Do I need to choose now?” asked Falcon.

Again Rocious opened his mouth but Connelly stopped him with a look, “Yes,” answered Connelly.

Falcon looked at each of the masters, they were pleasant enough and each looked to be powerful. But they were strangers. All except Rocious.

“Praetorian Lockland, will you be my guide?”

“Yes,” said Connelly. “He will, but fear not if you require another’s guidance, you need only ask. There is one last thing.”

Connelly turned and motioned toward one of the other masters then took his place next to them.

The first master stepped forward, placed his hand on the ground and closed his eyes. At first nothing happened, but then the doors to the throne room slammed open to allow a pack of

five enormous wolfhounds to rush to the master's side. He stood and led his wolfhounds out of the throne room.

The second master stepped forward, touched his forehead and a chair flew across the room, scooped him up and floated out of the room.

The third master stepped forward and bowed to Rocious. He waited for Rocious to bow his head before he stood up. He extended his arms with his palms facing upward. With a breath he summoned two balls of flame above his palms. He took another deep breath and the flames spread across his hands then to his arms. The flames cast filled the hall with a sudden warmth but his robes remained unburnt. He bounced his eyebrows at Falcon, let the flames engulf his entire body then walked out of the room wreathed in flame.

The fourth master bent to the ground and touched the solid stone floor as if it was made of sand. The master gathered a few handfuls of sand and worked them into a chalice made of glass. He handed the chalice to Falcon and walked out of the room.

The master with the blue-accented robes closed his eyes and waved his hand through the air. Behind his hand drops of water began forming and falling to the ground. He bent down and touched the liquid. When he lifted his hand a spear of ice formed. He twirled the spear masterfully then tossed it into the air. It broke apart in mid air creating a shower of snowflakes in the whole room. There was a wave of awed gasps from the king and his council. The master then smiled and left the throne room.

Connelly and Rocious were the only two left. Connelly rolled up his sleeves and showed his hands to Falcon. Connelly snapped his fingers and was holding a piece of candy that he then tossed to Falcon. The moment Falcon caught the candy Connelly disappeared. Falcon looked closely at the place Connelly had been standing and realized he was wrong earlier. It was not smoke or dust that he left behind, it was a fading cloud of shadows.

Rocious walked in front of Falcon and asked him. "Do you

understand?”

“Everyone’s path is different,” answered Falcon.

Rocious nodded, closing his eyes to listen for the magic around him. Like eavesdropping on a distant conversation he honed in on the sound. Instead of using *rage* or *anger* as he normally did to call magic in a fight, he used his *pride*. Pride in his mastery of the path. Pride in his knowledge that although he had never been a guide like the others he had surpassed them long ago. Rocious let that pride consume him and with it came the magic from the all over the castle complex.

Rocious opened his eyes, took a deep breath and the entire castle fell into complete darkness. He had extinguished every source of heat and flame in the castle complex. Using a small bit of magic he created two balls of flame to lead Falcon and himself out of the throne room door.

“WHAT THE HELL am I going to do with you two!?” shouted the king.

“I thought we would stay here,” said Rocious.

“After that stunt you pulled earlier, I can’t imagine what would happen if you were to stay here. I’d lose all of my servants,” shouted Dominick.

“The stunt I pulled?! I warned you about the kid before we even got in this mess, so don’t go putting this on me,” said Rocious.

“You call that cryptic note a warning? How was I supposed to know you had a generations-old secret sitting in the damn antechamber?” complained Dominick.

“I did what I could,” answered Rocious getting up to leave.

“Are you two finished? Perhaps you can continue this after the children retire?” asked Dominick’s wife Octavia. She was sitting between her two sons at a side table in their private dining area. The queen had grown accustomed to her husband and Rocious

arguing about something Rocious had done due to his constant need to remind everyone, including her husband, what he was capable of before they tried to order him around. Which left her to put out the fires, sometimes literally.

"Fine, I'll take the boy with me in the winter but you figure out what to do until then," said Rocious.

"He's your student, he can stay with you," said Dominick.

"Perhaps you two will argue after we eat?" said Queen Octavia ushering Falcon and her boys to sit at the table.

"A meal may calm our tempers," said Dominick.

"As long as we're past the little 'lights out' incident," agreed Rocious taking a seat across from the children.

AFTER DINNER they moved into a larger sitting room with a balcony that overlooked much of the city. *It is beautiful, but it's not Home*, thought Falcon. He took in the view for a few moments and then moved inside leaving Rocious and Dominick to their bickering. Falcon was used to Paul's parents arguing on occasion and their arguing seemed similar. It was just an argument on the surface, neither was truly angry, so he ignored them. Besides, he was more fascinated by all the weapons that decorated the walls of the sitting room. There were no weapons anywhere in his father's hall.

"Which do you prefer?" asked Fafnir, the younger of the king's two sons.

"I don't even know the difference. In Reed they use a flexible straight sword but my dad never let me learn," answered Falcon.

"How did he expect you to defend Reed?" asked Drake, the older of the king's sons, as he took a two-handed bastard sword from the mount on the wall. It was still too big for him but he handled it confidently enough.

"It's too big. I prefer these," said Fafnir taking a pair of identical gladius that were also too big for him.

“Do you know how to use them?” asked Falcon, fascinated that the two boys were allowed to play with the swords.

Fafnir twirled the swords and took a goofy stance, “Father has us practice every day,” said Fafnir drawing a laugh from his brother.

“Maybe I can learn too,” said Falcon.

“Praetorian Lockland will decide what you learn,” said Drake as he put back the sword using great care.

“He hasn’t taught me anything yet,” said Falcon glancing skeptically to the balcony. Rocious did not seem to want to teach him anything.

“Lessons are sometimes hidden in simple tasks,” said Drake.

“Falcon!” called Rocious with a scowl on his face as he entered the room.

Falcon looked down and walked over to Rocious, “Yes, sir?”

“Do not waste your energy with those toys,” said Rocious.

“It wouldn’t hurt the boy to learn to defend himself,” said Dominick, joining them.

“He doesn’t need to swing a club to do that,” said Rocious.

Tired of the arguing, Dominick did not take the bait for another meaningless feud.

“Falcon, we’ve decided that you will be staying here in the castle with us. Each morning Praetorian Lockland will meet you in the main courtyard after first meal,” said Dominick.

“Yes, Sire. Master Lockland will be teaching me empathy?” asked Falcon.

“Don’t worry, I have your lessons planned until winter,” answered Rocious revealing his perfect white teeth.

“After your lessons for the day, Praetorian Lockland will escort you back to the courtyard.” Dominick met Rocious’s eye, “Prior to evening meal. You will then join my family and I for dinner. My sons study histories and numbers three days a week. You will join them. The seventh day you are free to entertain yourself,” said Dominick.

"Yes, Sire," said Falcon.

"Octavia, would you mind?" said Dominick gesturing for her to leave with the three boys.

"Come on, it's time for bed," said Octavia gathering the boys and leading them out. At first Falcon did not realize that meant him too.

As soon as they were alone, Rocious took a half-filled bottle of brandy from a side table and went back to the balcony overlooking Dominion. Dominick gave him a few minutes to drink alone and then joined his friend on the balcony. They watched the beautiful lights of Dominion in silence until Rocious finally spoke.

"This is a mistake. His emotions are volatile, and I don't know how to teach anyone," said Rocious.

"It's a risk I am willing to take," said Dominick flatly.

"You risk too much," said Rocious, taking a long pull from his bottle and handing it to Dominick.

"Do you know how I was able to end the duke's war?" asked Dominick staring down at the brandy.

"You're smarter than everyone else," answered Rocious without hesitation.

"Because of my friends," said Dominick putting his hand on Rocious's shoulder.

FALCON HAD BEEN TRAINING with Rocious every day for three weeks, and he still had no idea what he was learning. Every day he read the same book about words he already knew, and every day Rocious told him to keep reading, as if he was going to find something new in the book. The book had twenty-two pages with one word on each page. Each word had a description and a symbol. After reading the book until midday, he would eat. When he finished eating Rocious had him write the symbols and the words until his hands hurt. If he messed up the symbol, or wrote

the wrong symbol, Rocious said nothing, he simply smacked him in the head. Training sucked.

History lessons were just as boring but at least they were different each day. Plus he was not alone in his suffering. Fafnir was a terrible student and constantly finding some irrelevant question to annoy their instructors. Drake was the opposite. He engaged the instructors with detailed questions and even studied after they were dismissed. Falcon was so used to the repetitive lessons with Rocious that he found history easy to pay attention to.

The last lessons of the day were numbers and, surprisingly, Falcon found that he liked those lessons. After Rocious's lessons they were easy for him to remember. Especially compared to the two other boys. Fafnir was always trying to look at his work. In a class of three it was quite obvious. Drake became frustrated easily when he made mistakes, which were frequent and often lead to more mistakes. Falcon rarely, if ever, made mistakes with the numbers. Learning them felt merely like a way to pass the time. Plus, he could do the sums in his head to torture Fafnir with nothing to cheat from.

Falcon was happy enough with the routine but still he spent every night plotting his escape. Everywhere he went he was with people he did not know, which was both good and bad. It was bad because he wanted to stop feeling alone, but it was good because he smiled and they believed he was happy. Nobody knew him well enough to question or wonder what he was planning. None of them had a clue he was planning to go back to Reed, back to his home. His only regret was that he would not see Thomas and Lucian again. Since coming here they were the only ones he felt understood him.

“ARE YOU COMING WITH US?” asked Fafnir.

Drake and Fafnir watched the weekly challenge matches the

legionaries held in the castle's main courtyard. Each legion had a ranking system and every week they could challenge up to two ranks above them within their cohort. If they won they switched ranks with the loser. There was only one simple rule: if you wanted to challenge another cohort you had to be the best in your own. Similarly, if you wanted to challenge the best of another legion, you had to be the best in your own legion.

"No, I am going to wait for some friends," answered Falcon. Last week he'd spotted Thomas and Lucian leaving the matches and was hoping to catch them before the match this week.

"Whatever, come on Drake. I don't want to miss Decimus," said Fafnir before running off.

"Are you sure about these friends?" asked Drake.

"Don't worry, they're harmless. I'll catch up if I don't find them," said Falcon.

"Okay, we'll save you a seat," said Drake before going after Fafnir.

Falcon waited for ten minutes before he figured he must have missed them. On his walk to catch up to Fafnir and Drake, Thomas tackled him from behind.

"I told you it was him," said Lucian glaring down at Falcon.

"Those are some fancy friends you've got," said Thomas with a smirk.

"We can't all be as uncivilized as you, Tom," replied Falcon pushing Thomas off of him.

"Let's go get some seats before it's completely full," said Lucian extending a hand to Falcon.

The rest of the afternoon they spent making meaningless bets on the matches and telling stories of how they would be great fighters one day. Thomas made some ridiculous claim that his father was undefeated in the challenge matches. After the matches were over Falcon had two hours before he had to be back for dinner. Lucian and Thomas led him through the city to a place they liked to hang out, near one of the stone walls

dividing the city. They had stacked crates and trash at various heights so with a little momentum they could climb up the wall and get a better view of the city. Falcon and Thomas were looking out over the city while Lucian lay on the battlements. Falcon was looking out of the city toward his people. Thomas was staring up at Drake's Roost Castle.

"Now that's the life," said Lucian.

"What?" asked Falcon.

"He means the birds," answered Thomas.

"Oh," said Falcon.

"Our friend Lucian wants to sprout wings and fly away from his terrible life," said Thomas.

"No, just away from you," answered Lucian, tossing a stone at Thomas who caught it without looking.

"It would be nice to fly. Free to go wherever you want," said Falcon.

"Free to befriend as much gutter trash as you want, Count Reed?" mocked Thomas.

"I still can't believe you really are a count," said Lucian.

"Believe it, or I'll have you thrown in the stocks!" threatened Falcon.

"Next we'll find out Thomas's dad really was some legendary swordsman," added Lucian as the boys perked up to watch the sun set.

Thomas shoved Falcon and grabbed Lucian's leg, threatening to flip him off the wall, "He was!"

"Falcon, you never told us what happened to your parents?" asked Lucian.

"My mom liked to venture into Laza. She was killed when I was a baby," said Falcon.

"Damn," said Lucian.

Thomas flicked Lucian's ear, "Nice job, Lucian."

Falcon shrugged, "Happened a long time ago, I don't remember her,"

"I guess that makes it easier. What about your dad?" asked Thomas.

"He sent me away and I wound up here," said Falcon.

"Screw him," said Lucian. Of all people, he could relate; his father left his mother before he was even born. He had been taking care of his mom since he could walk.

"Oh crap, what time is it? I need to be back for dinner," said Falcon making his way to the crates.

Before parting they agreed to meet next week at the gate. Falcon even offered to introduce them to Drake and Fafnir if they showed up early.

FALCON WAS late for dinner but apparently so was everyone. Aside from the gate guards he hardly saw anyone in the castle complex. When he entered the hallway leading to where they usually ate, Octavia and Fafnir stopped him.

Octavia grabbed his hand and pulled him alongside her son, "Oh thank the heavens child, I was worried something had happened to you."

"What's going on? Where is everyone?" asked Falcon.

"Don't worry child, you're safe here. We're headed upstairs until we hear from my husband," reassured Octavia.

Falcon obeyed but he did worry, though not for himself. He worried for Thomas and Lucian, and he worried for all of his people from Reed. He had not seen them since coming here and did not have a clue where they were. He even worried for Rocious who probably spent his day off getting drunk.

When they arrived upstairs Falcon ran to the balcony. What waited for him was not the awe-inspiring beauty he had witnessed last time he was here. This time it was beautiful death and awe-inspiring destruction staring back at him.

The entire outer ring of Dominion was burning, the ring that housed the people of Reed. His people.

FEAR



Rocious was pissed off. He was pissed because he had to figure out how to teach some rich kid empathy six days a week. He was pissed that he could not go to his favorite whore because he had pissed her off due to that rich kid. He was pissed that he could only get drunk one night a week because he had to teach said rich kid six days a week. He was even pissed that he had to wait so long for another ale. He felt like making something explode, maybe this crappy dive bar with terrible service.

“There’s nobody even in this damn place,” said Rocious out loud.

“Where’s my ALE?!” shouted Rocious.

He looked around to find the bar maid but there really was not anyone in this damn place. He reached over the bar, poured himself another ale, and got up to see where everyone went. There was nobody in the back so he went upstairs to check outside. He made it one step out of the bar and knew something was not right.

The acrid smell in the air, the distant clapping sound. It brought back a rush of memories that he was currently drinking

away. With those memories came a surge of magic. The memories caught him off guard causing him to drop his ale. He took a centering breathe to regain control and focused on what needed to be done.

The smell of smoke and ash could come from many things. But Rocious could only think of one thing that made that thumping sound: a fully-grown dragon challenging a rival for territory.

He took off running toward the outer ring of the city, using some of the magic he had accidentally called to create small explosions propelling him. Each explosion sent a challenge of it's own back at the dragon. As he approached the stone wall leading to the outer ring he used a bigger and louder explosion to scale the stone wall dividing the second and third ring. When he landed on top of the wall, he knew it was true. There was a dragon. Nothing else could cause so much destruction this fast.

"LET ME GO!" screamed Falcon.

Queen Octavia pulled Falcon close and wrapped her arm around him, "It isn't safe, we have to wait for word from Dominick," she said.

Falcon struggled out of Octavia's arms, "NO! They are dying!"

"It will be okay Falcon, my dad will make everything okay," pleaded Fafnir.

Falcon could feel that he was calling the nearby magic. As he continued to call magic he could feel people all over Dominion experiencing the same emotions. They were nervous and scared. He focused on the other people and without warning the weight of their emotion hit him. He felt himself being crushed under the weight of so many people. Then he remembered Rocious and the other master. Sure they had a lifetime of practice, but if they could control it so could he.

Falcon took a breath and called to the excitement of the

legionaries standing guard around the city and brought it under his control. He took a second breath and brought the anxiety of those preparing to defend the city under his control. A third breath and he used his own fear to resonate with the fear in almost every person in the city. Before he could bring that fear under control he heard someone scream then felt his body go limp. As he passed out he realized the scream came from his own lungs.

ROCIOUS FOUGHT A DRAGON ONCE BEFORE, soon after earning his grey robes. He thought, with his mastery of fire, he could make the dragon respect and fear him. It did not respect or fear him but it did teach him a valuable lesson. Fear was a powerful bitch.

Fear had the power to drive weak hearts to all manner of crimes or to cause kind hearts to look the other way in the face of those crimes. Fear could freeze even the bravest warriors, stealing their life in an instant. Or it could motivate the cruelest of men to rape, pillage and murder. Fear was a powerful force and it had swept over Dominion like wildfire. But Rocious remembered his lesson from long ago. He harnessed that power by using the fear in his own heart to resonate with the fear coursing through the city.

Rocious filled with magic as he took control of not only his own fear but the fear of everyone he resonated with. He controlled the fear of one after another until he came to Falcon. Falcon's fear of losing more of his loved ones made Rocious stop. He stopped not because it was difficult to control but because he would need to break Falcon's will to do it. His hesitation lasted for only a moment. Falcon's will was shattered and the city's collective magic was his.

Rocious took off running through the destruction to the outer wall of the city. His explosions launched thru the city and left a *crack, crack, crack*, in his wake. The entire time he scanned

the smoke filled skies for a sign, any sign. The dragon had every advantage in the air and could swoop in to kill him at anytime. If he were not careful, it would happen so fast the only sign of his death would be one last explosion. *Crack*, dead.

And with that thought he had an idea.

“Come on fucker, I’m right here,” taunted Rocious to himself.

He could see the southern gate on the city’s outer wall and increased his speed. As he got closer he heard the flapping behind him.

A hundred feet to go to the gate and his plan solidified in his mind. Got to make it to the gate. The sound of flapping grew louder. It was gaining some height before diving in for the kill. Rocious increased his speed again. *Crack, crack, crack*, the explosions propelled him, fifty feet to go. *Crack, crack, crack*, twenty feet. *Crack, crack, crack*, ten feet. Rocious stopped propelling himself, dropping them into a sudden moment of silence. Then he created three slivers of magic. He tossed one over his shoulder, the second he looped around the arch above the gate and the third he held tight, building it until the moment was right.

When the flapping stopped Rocious triggered the first sliver of magic, a series of small sparkling explosions that went off in the dragon’s face.

The second he triggered a heartbeat later. A rope of flame he used to wing him through the gate then up and around the stone wall. He held onto the flame rope until he looped back into the dragon. Letting go of the rope he triggered the last sliver of magic right before his feet connected with the dragon. The magic created an explosion big enough to destroy the gate, launch the dragon forty feet past the outer wall, and flip Rocious into the air.

Panting Rocious landed among the rubble of the destroyed gate and for the second time in his life he prepared to fight arguably the most violent creature in all of Lora. Taken straight from the nightmares that had plagued him for decades. The giant

beast was covered in thousands of scales that looked like nothing more than shiny black stone fragments. Each of them perfectly interlocked forming a near impenetrable armor but at the same time the creature moved effortlessly. The scales gave off a slight red shimmer and realigned as the dragon moved. Behind its eyes the dragon had twin horns that flicked back and forth like a curious kitten. The look in its feline eyes gave no doubt the dragon was not looking to play.

With barely a moment's pause the dragon rushed him, biting through pieces of rubble. Rocious barely escaped its jaws by triggering an explosion at his feet. But the dragon whipped its tail up. The tail caught him in the side and knocked him into a pile of ash and rubble. It must still have been partially blinded or it would have been a direct blow.

He rolled to his feet, and in a sudden fit of rage turned his breath into fire. The dragon responded with its own surge of flame. The dragon paced back and forth waiting for Rocious to make the next move.

"Come on!" shouted Rocious.

The dragon paced back and forth taunting him with another surge of flame and smashing some rubble with a flick of its spiked tail. Rocious grabbed a couple hand-sized stones and tried to throw one at the dragon. The stone landed in a puddle a few feet away. Rocious looked down at his arm, it was broken. Frustrated, he screamed at the dragon, drawing a horrifying screech from the beast.

As the stone sank deeper into the puddle, an idea came to him.

"Lady, I hope you're watching," said Rocious.

The dragon started circling him. It would only be moments before it came at him again and this time there would be no escape. He would be torn to pieces, if he did not kill himself first.

Rocious created one large sliver of magic. Last time he used an explosion on the dragon he tried to hit hard in one small area

like fast moving stone. This time he spread the explosion over an area wide enough to catch its whole body, more like a rolling boulder. When it circled he shifted the sliver of magic keeping it between them. When it went for the kill he triggered the explosion.

SMALL TOWN HERO



Falcon woke up some time after dawn from the sound of a strange voice. When he opened his eyes he saw a calm, young face slowly dripping tears. He was lying on a cot with a young girl kneeling next to him praying. Next to the girl was a middle-aged woman that he recognized also praying. She was Dominick's servant who had woken him every morning since coming to Dominion. The young girl looked to be her daughter.

"What are you saying?" asked Falcon, his throat was hoarse.

"Silence child, Floriana, get some water and let the king know," said the older woman.

Falcon tried to get up but his whole body hurt, it felt like he had been beaten. Floriana came back with his water and helped him drink.

"Gran, I told Lady Octavia," said Floriana.

"Thank you dear. Stay with him while I attend the others," said Gran.

After drinking some water Falcon sat up. He looked around in a bit of a daze, not sure where he was but not really caring either.

"Where am I?" asked Falcon of himself more than the girl.

"We're in a tent in the third ring taking care of those injured in the attack," answered Floriana.

"The. Third. Ring," said Falcon rubbing his neck.

"Yes, it was attacked," said Floriana.

So it was not a dream thought Falcon. When the realization hit him he vaulted out of the cot and bumped into Dominick.

"Easy son. No need to panic, we have everything under control," said Dominick holding Falcon firmly to his side.

He still felt panic gripping him but the king's steady hand helped him keep his composure.

"What happened?" asked Falcon.

Dominick sat on the cot and held Falcon in front of him, "I won't lie to you son, there are many injured people. Most of them from Reed, and I don't expect they will all survive," said the king gently.

"Show me," said Falcon meeting Dominick's eye.

"Before we go, there's one more thing," said Dominick, closing his eyes to collect himself. "Praetorian Lockland. He hasn't been found."

"He's probably passed out somewhere," answered Falcon flatly.

Dominick knew it was a good guess but not true in this case.

"Follow me, Falcon. Floriana, tell my wife we'll be in the hospice," ordered Dominick.

Falcon felt the haze falling over him as they left the tent. There were injured people all over the place. Some of them looked dead already, covered in burns or missing limbs. Others had worse injuries like crushed limbs that were purple and bloated. As he got closer he almost threw up as the smell hit him. It was like stagnant water and rotting food mixed oddly with metal and the lingering scent of burning. The worst part was that Falcon recognized every single person, as broken as they were.

By the time Dominick stopped Falcon's face was covered in grime and his tears were flowing freely. They were standing in

front of another tent similar to the one he woke up in. Falcon's friend Mary came out of the tent. She too was covered in grime and had been crying.

"Falcon! Come quickly. He's been asking for you," said Mary.

"What? Who?" asked Falcon as Mary pulled him inside, "Mary, I don't understand. Who? Tell me what happened."

"We've been staying in one of the school houses they set up in the third ring. When everything started catching fire we all hid in the basement, but then the explosions started and the buildings started to collapse. Most of us got out to the streets before the walls started crumbling, but Cleo was too scared," said Mary.

"What happened to them?" said Falcon.

"Paul and I were leading everyone out to the street, but when we realized someone was missing Paul went back inside. He's probably the only one strong enough. He carried her up the stairs, but the walls were collapsing so fast. On the way out, they got trapped. Paul took the worst of the collapse, then some of the people on the street helped pull them out," said Mary.

"Are they alright? Where is everyone?" asked Falcon in a panic.

"Everyone is fine, it's just Paul. He's over here," said Mary leading Falcon into the tent.

Falcon ran over to his friend and fell to his knees, "Paul! Paul! What happened to you?!"

The left side of his face was purple and yellow with bruises, his eye looked sunken as if it had been pushed in. His chest rose and fell in steady rhythm but his limbs were completely still, and worse of all his left leg was crushed and broken.

Paul opened his eyes and his lips curved slightly, "Hey, Fal."

"NO! What did you do?!" screamed Falcon, "Why'd you do it!?"

"I had to, I had to keep them safe," said Paul in his low voice.

"Why!?" screamed Falcon.

Paul closed his eyes and smiled contentedly, "Had to... to keep them safe," whispered Paul.

Falcon took his hand, weeping. He had lost too much. His home. His family. His people were suffering and dying all around him. Now his best friend was dying in front of him, because he could not control his own fear.

Falcon slumped to the floor, "Why?" said Falcon squeezing Paul's hand, his head bent. He did not need to open his eyes to know. Paul was dead.

WHEN ROCIOUS REGAINED his senses he realized he was still falling. The explosion had shredded the dragon's wings and it was straining to keep them airborne. Thankfully the dragon was focused on flying and not trying to kill him. He held on to a horn protruding from one of its many scales with his one good arm. There was little else he could do but hope he did not fall to his death or get crushed by the dragon accidentally.

Hope turned into reality as they landed in one of the few ponds near Dominion deep enough to save them from the fall. Safe from the fall there was another problem: the pond was full of some black mud that had them trapped. Being killed by a dragon would have been a worthy death. But dying in this stinky, disgusting shithole was not how Rocius wanted to be remembered. So he swam and clawed his way to the shore, cursing and bitching the whole time.

When he looked back over the pond he realized the dragon had the same determination, but it did not have the same ability to swim. It was barely able to keep its head above the water but still it thrashed and screeched. Rocius looked at the magnificent beast struggling for its life in this shithole. This terrible place was not worthy of killing him and it was not worthy of killing something so formidable. Perhaps it was that stubbornness, or the

kinship that drove him to seek out the dragons in his youth. Whatever it was, Rocious made up his mind to help.

“Don’t make me regret this,” shouted Rocious.

He created a flame rope and threw it around a horn on the dragon’s head. Then looped the rope around a few thick trees and hauled with his one good arm for nearly twenty minutes. Together he and the dragon fought the pond until they were both onshore. At some point while pulling the dragon out, the black mud caught fire, not surprising given the present company. Finally safe from their previous ordeals they stared at each other debating what to do next.

After their fight and the struggle to get out of the pond neither had much energy left. But then again the dragon did not need much to kill. If the beast came at him there was little he could do to stop it. It did not matter; he had no regrets. Rocious took a seat against one of the trees, “Your choice now.”

Rocious watched the dragon circle him. It was clear that it was a wild and dangerous creature but staring into its eyes there was no stupidity or vengeance. He closed his eyes to rest.

THE GRAND ECONOMY



Most of the soldiers knew the telltale sounds of Rocious in a fight, the explosions he used to move and attack had made him famous. When the explosions stopped legionaries started searching the wreckage. By morning they had cleared most of the wreckage and brought the survivors to tents set up in the unfinished section of the third ring. Still nobody had found Rocious or whatever he was fighting. Stories had spread that it was a demon or a raiding army from Laza.

While searching amongst the wreckage, Werval found a few broken pieces of dragon scales. Dragon scales normally looked like simple sheets of shale. But when the light hit them just right they would shimmer as if light had been trapped inside. Werval always had an eye for spotting wealth, and dragon scales were exactly that. The few broken pieces he had found were easily worth a fortune. A full, undamaged scale would be priceless.

While everyone else was searching for Rocious and survivors, Werval was on the lookout for dragon scale. After he was done in the city he searched outside the south gate. On his way a squad of legionaries joined him to help search. Using his position, Werval

quickly took command, giving each person a section to the east. He himself headed west.

At the break of dawn he had seen a hint of bluish smoke mixed with the morning fog. Werval knew of only one place nearby with the oil that produced that bluish smoke: Hatcher Pond. Hatcher Pond was originally a fish hatchery but roughly twenty years ago all the fish began dying due to oil leaking in from some vent in the bottom of the pond. These days it looked more like a swamp than a pond.

Once all of the legionaries were out of sight Werval took his war cart and rode to Hatcher Pond. As he got close to the pond he noticed scorch marks, presumably from Rocious or what he now knew to be a dragon. Aside from fire damage, the place was completely untouched. Even the wildlife had learned to avoid the oily death trap leaving the vegetation too overgrown for his war cart.

Werval pulled his cart safely aside and continued on foot using the scorch marks to guide him. As he got closer to the pond the vegetation grew thicker until he could barely see his own feet. Keeping his mind on the dragon scale he clawed through and finally saw light reflecting off the pond. A few more feet and he could see clear across the pond. Flames littered the opposite side of the pond making it immediately clear the dragon and Rocious crashed here.

Werval tore his way to the far side of the pond, staining and ripping his clothes. As he got closer the vegetation thinned out, likely due to the recent flames. He looked down at his clothes. They were completely ruined; his wife would be yelling at him for a week easily. Of course they had plenty of money for new clothes. But they did not earn that money without being frugal and it was a hard habit to break.

Forgetting about his clothes, Werval quickly picked up their trail next to the pond and followed it to a burnt cluster of trees. Littered around that cluster of trees he found six perfect dragon

scales and one lonely old man. He looked surprisingly young sitting there sleeping, and from what Werval could tell, he barely had a scratch on him.

Forgetting Rocious, Werval turned to the six perfectly heart-shaped dragon scales. The smallest scale as long as his forearm but the largest would cover a man's entire body if he positioned correctly. There were too many and they were too heavy to get all at once so Werval grabbed the largest, trudged back to his cart, and stowed it safely in the hidden compartment he built into the undercarriage. The second trip took even longer but he was able to safely stow two more. On his third trip down to the pond he heard the sound of riders. He knew it was only a matter of time before someone caught up to him. Three was more than enough, plus he had the huge one.

Werval turned toward the riders and acted like he just came from the pond, "Hey! Hey over here!"

There were three riders. Upon hearing his shout two broke off to intercept him. But the third went for his war cart.

"That you, Lord Werval?" asked one of the two riders approaching him.

"Yes, Sergeant Chaplin?" asked Werval.

"Yeah, I'm surprised you remembered. Damn man, what happened to you? And what's with all the shouting?" asked Chaplin.

"It's a death trap down there, best go on foot from here," said Werval.

"That your cart?" asked Chaplin.

"Yes. I always like to be prepared," said Werval keeping his answer simple.

Werval had learned that Chaplin was incessantly observant and was becoming suspicious of him. Chaplin could cause problems if he searched the cart.

"Did you find anything?" asked Chaplin.

"I only just arrived. I was trying to find a way to get the cart down when I heard your horses," said Werval.

Chaplin took a moment to piece everything together and make sure Werval's story checked out. Werval put on his best poker face and waited.

Chaplin rolled out of his saddle, "Clint! Hitch the horses and keep watch. Tom, you're with me," he ordered.

Clint rode over from the cart and took the other men's reins, "Aye Chap,"

Werval started following his trail to the pond, "This way."

On the way Chaplin kept searching the trail and looking up at Werval. Werval knew that close to the pond the chaos from the dragon and Rocious would cover his trail, but that would do nothing to cover his original trail. Best to come up with an explanation before Chaplin noticed it.

Too late, he thought as Chaplin veered off course toward Werval's original path but then Tom spoke up, "Hey look there. The trees are burnt from Rocious's Flame Whip thing,"

"Tom, go check it out. Lord Werval, lead the way down to the pond," instructed Chaplin.

"Aye, Chap," said Tom.

Werval dutifully led the way down to the pond and away from his original trail, "As you say."

On the way Werval pointed out the tracks from the dragon and Rocious.

"I've never seen tracks like that, they're huge." said Chaplin.

"He's here!" shouted Tom.

Chaplin immediately ran to inspect the body. The legionaries sudden burst of enthusiasm caused Werval to stumble. *Why so concerned for a man who treats you like shit?* They were distracted, no time to ponder. Werval tossed one of the scales into the taller vegetation and another behind the scorched trees. He stayed back just a little waiting for the right moment to dart over and hide the last scale.

"He's breathing. Looks fine but I'm no healer," said Chaplin.

"You think we should move him?" asked Tom.

"Yeah, no choice. Come give us a hand," said Chaplin.

Werval gave up on his plan to hide the last scale and jogged to help the two legionaries. Better to not draw any undue attention.

"What's that there?" said Tom twisting to grab the hilt of his sword.

"What? What'd you see?" asked Chaplin drawing his sword.

"I'm not sure, something flashed in the bushes," said Tom.

"Gentlemen," said Lord Werval drawing their attention back to Rocious.

"Yeah, whatever he fought might still be around. You got him," said Chaplin.

"Yeah, I got his feet. Get his arms," said Werval.

"Fucker's heavy," said Tom.

Werval helped the men carry Rocious back to the cart. Clint kept watch as they secured him in the cart.

"Clint, Tom. Escort Lord Werval back to the barracks," ordered Chaplin.

"You're not coming?" asked Werval.

"I'll catch up," answered Chaplin.

Werval did not inquire further, no reason to verify his suspicion. Besides, Chaplin did not even know what he was looking for. With a little luck Werval could return in the evening and collect the rest of his prize.

"Be safe, Sergeant," said Werval.

Werval mounted his cart and waited for the two legionaries to pull up beside him before he led his cart back to the road. Not once did he look back.

RUN



“*Y*ou need to talk to him,” said Dominick.
“I’m not good with kids. You go talk to him,”
replied Rocious.

“I have tried. You’ve spent weeks together, what’s the big deal?” asked Dominick.

Rocious stopped walking and perked up with an idea, “Send a woman, women are great with kids.”

Dominick squeezed the bridge of his nose, “Is that why you took him to a brothel? Wait, don’t tell me, I don’t want to know. Just go talk to him?”

“I don’t want to,” said Rocious.

Dominick turned on his heel and continued walking, “I don’t care, do it anyway,” he said over his shoulder.

“Fine, but if he runs away, don’t ask me to go after him,” threatened Rocious.

“He better not run away,” said Dominick right before he made it around the corner.

Rocious had been trying to get out of going to talk to Falcon for almost two days. A day and a half of that time because he was unconscious, the rest he spent hiding in the servants’ quarters.

That is, after almost killing the healer who took care of him. He had to break and re-heal himself almost completely.

After Dominick left, Rocious asked one of the servants to show him to Falcon's room. He was a thin young man dressed in simple clothes. Rocious normally did not talk to the Dominick's staff, mostly because he tended to scare them whenever he was around but also because he avoided the castle as much as possible. Since this young man was helping him, Rocious made a rare attempt at conversation.

"Thanks for showing me the way. What is your name?" he asked.

The young man kept his eyes down but when Rocious spoke he looked around quickly. When he did not see anyone else there he blurted, "Archibald, sir."

Rocious smacked the young man's shoulder making him jump, "Ha, That's my second name. Mind if I call you Archi?"

Archi rubbed his shoulder but kept his eyes down, "Yes sir. As you wish sir."

"I'm Frederick, most of the men here call me Rocious. I hate it but you can address me by either," said Rocious.

Archi looked up at Rocious and quickly looked down again, "Yes sir, I know who you are."

"Oh. Yeah, sorry about that 'putting out the lights' thing," said Rocious.

Archi hesitated to respond. "Not a problem, sir,"

"Mind if I ask you a question?" asked Rocious.

"Of course sir, however I can assist you," answered Archi.

"Do you know about Falcon?" asked Rocious.

"Yes sir," answered Archi.

"What should I say to cheer him up?" asked Rocious.

"Give him something to care about," said Archi.

Rocious flicked his fingers dropping sparks on the floor, "Something to care about? Like a puppy?" mused Rocious.

"I don't know, something kids like. He's lost so many loved

ones. He's simply stopped caring so give him something to care about," said Archi like the answer was obvious. Archi stopped walking indicating they arrived at the door to Falcon's room.

"You should do it," said Rocious.

Archi opened his mouth to reply but Rocious entered the room without waiting for a reply. Falcon was tucked under his blankets facing toward his balcony, "You awake?"

Falcon did not answer so Rocious walked around the bed to see if his eyes were closed. Before Rocious saw his face, Falcon rolled toward the door. Rocious took a seat by the fireplace and tried to figure out what to say. While he thought, he flicked sparks into the fireplace.

The fire flared up and it gave him an idea, "Did anyone tell you I fought a dragon?" Falcon gave no reply so he continued speaking, "Biggest dragon I have ever seen. I've only seen a dragon once before but this one was bigger and faster. It's amazing a creature so big can move that fast."

Falcon gave no indication he was listening, so Rocious considered leaving. He could tell Dominick he had tried and let someone else comfort him. Rocious stood up to leave. He stopped next to the bed to give Falcon a comforting pat on his way out. When he touched Falcon his blanket moved revealing his hair, only it was not Falcon's short golden hair, it was long black hair.

Rocious pulled the blanket back, "What the? Who the fuck are you!" asked Rocious.

"Umm, Flor. My name's Floriana," said Floriana as she cowered away from Rocious.

"And where is Falcon? This is his room right?" asked Rocious, not sure if this was the wrong room or a scheme.

"He left. This was his room but he left," answered Flor still cowering.

"Shit. Dominick isn't going to believe me," said Rocious.

. . .

FALCON HAD BEEN SNEAKING out of his dad's hall since he could walk and he knew the best way was to use a disguise. Wearing a dress was a new idea but it seemed perfect for getting through the halls undetected. Plus, Flor was more than willing to help.

The only close call was Rocious coming to his room as he slipped down the hallway, but Rocious had been busy talking with Archi. Falcon just needed to make it through the courtyard. The courtyard was filled with hundreds of watchful eyes that might spot anything out of place.

The servants in the castle were easily fooled but the legionaries would likely notice him. They would definitely stop him at the gate to take a closer look. Clearly Falcon needed another tactic to make his escape. Luckily this was not his first time sneaking out. Falcon stashed Flor's dress behind one of the plants on his way to the courtyard.

He cracked open the door and peeked into the courtyard before entering the courtyard casually. Instead of going straight to the eastern gate he moved toward a war cart sitting outside the stables. On his approach he moved at an angle to his right, trying to keep the war cart between himself and the group of soldiers that were congregated near the stables.

Once he reached the cart, he rolled underneath, hid behind one of the wheels, and listened. Every morning groups of legionaries would run loops around the courtyard, for what seemed like hours. He was listening for the signs of them passing, then his plan was to dash behind them for cover while he ran to the stables. While he was waiting for the legionaries to run past he heard voices approach behind him. The group of legionaries that normally clustered next to the stables moved over to lean on his cart. Falcon took a few breaths to calm his nerves and continued to listen for his cue.

"We missed you last night, Chap," said one of the men.

"Yeah, I had to run an errand," said Chaplin.

“Decimus said he saw you leaving the city. Where were you headed so late?” asked one of the other men.

“You got a girl you haven’t told us about?”

“Nothing like that. Clint’s the ladies’ man,” answered Chaplin shoving Clint.

“Eh, Chap’s more interested in that horse lord anyway,” teased Clint.

“Ha ha, you sly Chap?” laughed the other men.

“Ha ha, why don’t you ask your mom,” said Chaplin.

There. Falcon heard the sound of feet moving in unison; he tuned out the conversation and focused on the sound of stamping feet. Once he heard the sound right in front of the cart, he poked his head out ready to run. A split second before he took off he heard another sound. When he looked back there was a fat soldier struggling to keep up with the main group. Falcon waited a moment longer and then took off running as fast as he could. First running directly toward the perimeter then he cut left and paralleled the group running past. Finally he jumped to his right and rolled into the stables, throwing his hands up for dramatic flare. Success.

He took a quick peek behind him to make sure nobody had noticed then grabbed a pitchfork for the next part of his plan. The dress may have been a new idea for Falcon but posing as a stable hand was not. One of his punishments when he was younger was to muck the stables. After he finished he was dirty and stinky but he’d realized that if you were dirty and stinky people tended to avoid you. Perfect if you were trying to avoid detection. After he finished mucking out a few of the empty stalls his disguise was complete but he still had one thing left to do.

Falcon put the tools back where he found them and took the shovel. He put the head of the shovel in between two rails of the stall and kicked it until the head was deformed.

“Perfect,” said Falcon to himself.

He took the broken shovel and checked the courtyard again. There were two gates to the courtyard. Falcon normally left out the east gate for his lessons with Rocious so this time he went for the west gate.

Falcon kept his eyes down and walked as casually as he could to the west gate, dragging the broken shovel behind him. He tried to ignore the few glances his way, and keep focused on getting to the gate. About thirty feet to the gate Falcon was forced to stop for the soldiers to run past, and then walked right through the gate, trying not to smile. But then a few steps past the gate a guard walked in front of him.

"Ho there, where you headed?" asked the guard.

"Shovel broke. Takin' it ta da smidth," answered Falcon trying to drop his accent in case they realized he was from Reed.

"I don't think so," said the guard standing behind him.

Falcon swallowed, debating if he could outrun them. He was pretty fast but these were grown men who trained every day, usually running in armor. He needed another plan and fast. If he failed to escape this time, getting a second chance would be nearly impossible. Feeling his chances of freedom slipping away, Falcon dropped the shovel.

"Craftsmen are on the other side of the city," said the guard who originally stopped him. The other guard picked up the shovel and handed it to Falcon.

"Thank you, sir," said Falcon.

He propped the shovel on his shoulder and started walking down the street trying to keep his nerves in check. He was free! But then a twinge of remorse hit him and he looked back at the castle. He had only been there for three and a half weeks but he had gotten somewhat comfortable in those halls. Plus, it was beautiful; stone towers built into the face of the mountain. The natural features of the mountain blended seamlessly with the man-made towers and walls. It was almost like the mountain had

formed itself into a castle over time. Falcon took a second to find his own room but something else drew his attention.

One of the windows on the southern side of the castle exploded outward and sent out a shockwave shaking the ground. Falcon jumped back and tripped over his broken shovel. When he looked up again a clump of debris from the explosion was about to land directly on top of him.

CHOICES



Rocious watched that innocent looking stable boy look up at the castle, “Gotcha!”

He blew out the nearest wall and used another explosion to launch himself over the courtyard, then a final explosion to cushion his landing.

That last explosion usually had the added benefit of making sure there were no surprises waiting for him when he landed, but this time it made sure Falcon could not run while the dust settled.

Through the dust from his last explosion, Rocious looked down at Falcon, “Where’s your dress?”

Falcon waved some of the dust from his eye. “I left it for Flor to get later.”

“How thoughtful, you know what else would have been thoughtful?” Rocious kicked the broken shovel out of his way, “a good-bye, or a thanks for taking care of me. Or not fucking running away in the first damn place!” raged Rocious.

The guards ran over to investigate the scene.

“What’s going on here? Rocious? Do you need help?” asked the guards.

“Get back to your post, the castle can’t guard itself,” barked Rocious.

Rocious flicked sparks on the ground while he waited for a response. Falcon brushed some of the dust off his clothes and started walking away. Rocious grabbed his shoulder but Falcon pulled away from him. Rocious tried to stop him again but when he saw the look on Falcon’s face his anger faded away. Falcon did not regret running; even after being caught he was determined to leave. Rocious glanced back at the castle. He could drag Falcon back there easily enough and Dominick would probably be happy. Then he turned back to Falcon, still walking away determined to leave. Rocious was a stubborn son of a bitch too. He knew that dragging Falcon back would only make him try harder next time.

So Rocious caught up and walked next to him, “Where are we going?”

Falcon kept walking but his eyes flicked to the side, “What?”

“I presume you didn’t come up with this scheme without having a destination in mind. So where are we going?” asked Rocious.

“Home. I want to go home,” said Falcon.

Rocious took a deep breath and looked at the ground. His shoe was smoking. At some point he must have started flicking sparks again. He rubbed his hands together to keep them occupied.

“I’m sorry, we can’t go back there,” said Rocious.

“I don’t care. I want to see Fort Reed again,” said Falcon.

Rocious tried to make Falcon look at him.

“I can’t take you there, not until we figure out what happened.” Rocious reached for Falcon’s arm again, “Let’s go back to the castle.”

Falcon pulled away again, “No, just leave me alone. Everyone is always telling me what to do but all I want is to go home.”

"No. You said it the other day. You're my ward so I can't leave you right?" asked Rocious.

"You left me. Now you only want me to go back so you don't get in trouble," said Falcon.

He was right; maybe he should let him run.

"You're right, I left you. I'd say I'm sorry but I'm not. I am a nasty shit, I don't like being with people. I don't want to be here, you don't want me to be here. But do you see anyone else coming? No, because quite frankly there is nobody else," said Rocious.

Falcon started crying.

Rocious threw his hands up, "Shit! I told Dom I'd make it worse." *Fuck, he was supposed to give him something to care about but instead he told the kid he was completely alone.* Rocious almost gave up but then he grabbed Falcon around the waist and tossed him over his shoulder, causing him to start screaming to put him down.

"Shut up, I'm not taking you back to the castle," said Rocious.

Falcon started hitting Rocious in the back but he was only eight and Rocious ignored it. Falcon quickly realized his tantrum was futile and gave up. Once Falcon calmed down Rocious carried him through the city to the stone wall that divided the second ring from the third and jumped up to the same spot he stood on the night the dragon attacked. Finally Rocious put Falcon down.

Rocious leaned on the battlements and looked back toward the castle, "What do you see down there?"

Falcon felt a few tears run down his cheek and wiped them away, "My people," he said.

Rocious looked behind him to the section of the city that was destroyed a few days ago. It was still early but there were already people out working to repair the damage.

Rocious leaned on the wall to watch Falcon's people, "Yeah, mine too. Most of them I don't even like but a long time ago I

decided I was tired of losing the people I see every day. The war killed them, whether they were soldiers fighting with the legion or civilians. Doesn't matter, the point is they died and I missed them. I was pissed, but instead of running away I decided to do something. The fucked up part is that most of these people think I'm a hero. The thing they don't seem to understand is that I'm not doing it for them, I do it for me."

Falcon's tears flowed freely. He covered his face and turned away from his people, sliding down the battlements until he was sitting. Rocious sat next to him, pulled him a little closer and let him cry.

Falcon stopped crying for a moment and his chest heaved, "I killed Paul." He burst into more tears causing his whole body to shake. A few times he stopped shaking and mumbled the same thing. "I killed Paul." Rocious sat with him holding his shoulder.

"I know," said Rocious.

They stayed there for a few minutes, Falcon just crying and sneezing out his pain. Rocious sat with him, trying to be unaffected by the boy's pain but he not only knew it, he could feel it. Eventually Falcon calmed and sat up on his own. Rocious took his arm back and waited for Falcon to clean his face. The only blessing was that there was barely any latent magic in the area since Rocious had used it during the attack.

"I really did kill Paul," said Falcon, calmer this time.

"Yeah, I know," said Rocious.

"I don't know how. I didn't mean to," said Falcon.

"It's your emotions, Falcon. Normally they are barely intense enough to attract magic from a few feet away. Right now, you're pulling magic in for blocks, there's just not much around at the moment. If it's intense enough, you can pull it right out of someone. He was close to death so it was easier," said Rocious.

"It wasn't magic. I touched his hand and he died. I felt him die," said Falcon starting to cry again.

Rocious grabbed Falcon's hand and closed his eyes. Rocious pulled at Falcon's magic, forcing them into a battle of wills.

"You feel that? It's the same thing," said Rocious.

"It was you," breathed Falcon wide-eyed.

Falcon pulled back trying to hold onto what was his. Rocious let him go, allowing the link to break. Falcon sat panting rapidly trying to regain his composure.

"What happened with Paul was mercy. He was dying, you eased his passing," said Rocious matter of fact.

The two sat in silence, watching the sunrise. Falcon stood up and stretched, Rocious took a breath to enjoy the sun on his face.

"You still want to run away?" asked Rocious.

"I never wanted to run. I want to go home. I don't want to go back to the castle," answered Falcon.

"I don't have anywhere else for you to go. What's so bad about the castle anyway?" asked Rocious.

"It's not a good place. The servants are scared to talk, my friends can't visit me, and there are weird rules for everything," answered Falcon.

"I'll talk to Dominick, make it feel more like a home for you," said Rocious.

Falcon did not really want to go back to the castle but as he looked down at his people rebuilding he realized they were not running, they were standing tall in the midst of destruction. If they were fighting, he had to also.

"Okay, now what?" asked Falcon.

"You go back to studying," said Rocious.

Falcon considered jumping off the wall but then he nodded, "Okay, but can I have something else to read?"

"No. That's the only book I own."

THE NEXT FEW months went by without any real excitement aside from the constant flow of scouts in and out of the castle. Falcon

fell back into his study routine, and seeing Thomas and Lucian every seventh day. The only surprising thing was that Falcon was growing closer to Drake and Fafnir. At first they were reluctant to spend any real amount of time with Thomas and Lucian, but after a few weeks Fafnir began saving seats for Falcon and his two friends at the challenge matches.

Towards the end of the fall season Drake and Thomas spent the entire match talking about the fighters and debating who would win. Drake would describe the fighters' style or weapon choice, and point out why they would wait for a riposte. Thomas ate the information like a starving man, trying to dissect each fight. In the end, Thomas had become annoyingly proficient at betting on the fights. Even Drake was unwilling to bet against him.

The atmosphere in the castle had not changed, if anything it was worse. The entire place was on guard, as if there would be an invading army at the gates every morning. They still had not figured out why the dragon attacked or even where it came from. There were just rumors that it was sent by Duke Eikard or came from Laza. Falcon knew the rumors were wrong. Nobody could control a dragon.

FALCON AND ROCIOUS were traveling with a small group of soldiers led by Sergeant Chaplin. They had three war carts, two filled with various goods and supplies; the third one filled completely with broken weapons and raw ore. The destination was a place called Spring Forge. The soldiers talked about it as if it was a luxurious vacation but the impression Rocious gave Falcon was that they were going to a slave camp.

On the fourth evening of their weeklong journey the men made camp while Falcon studied his book under Rocious's supervision. After the camp was set a few of the men prepared dinner and they sat around a small fire sharing a meal. Falcon ate

slowly, trying to avoid having to read the book for the thousandth time.

"What are you reading?" asked Chaplin from across the fire.

"It's a dictionary," answered Falcon.

"Must be an interesting dictionary, you've had your nose buried in it since we left," said Chaplin.

Falcon glanced across the camp to where Rocious lounged against a tree, watching the sunset.

"I hate it. I was supposed to learn magic, instead I have this," said Falcon showing his tiny book.

"Just learn it quick and ask for something else," advised Chaplin.

"You done eating yet?" asked Rocious loudly.

Falcon took his book and started walking toward Rocious with his head down, "Yes, sir."

On his way he handed Chaplin his empty bowl, "I memorized it months ago, and there is nothing else."

Chaplin looked over at Rocious to see if there was some reason he made Falcon read the book so much, "Hey, why do you keep torturing the kid with that book? He says he memorized it already," asked Chaplin.

Rocius pulled himself away from his the sunset and joined the rest of the men around the fire.

"That true?" asked Rocious.

"Yeah," said Falcon.

"Okay, do you think you're ready for the next lesson?" asked Rocious.

"Yes," said Falcon perking up.

"Decimus, are you still carrying around Colville's old knife?" asked Rocious.

"Yeah. It's in my pack, but trust me, you want another blade if you wanna cut something. It's more of a memento than a functional blade," said Decimus getting up to fetch the knife from his pack.

“Dec, I don’t trust you to do anything except swing the sword, not even sharpen it,” injected Chaplin.

Decimus handed the knife to Rocious, ignoring Chaplin. Rocious took the knife, grabbed a branch from the pile of wood for the fire and then handed the knife and branch to Falcon.

“Look closely at the knife, recognize anything?” asked Rocious.

“The symbols from my book,” answered Falcon.

“Runes, but yes. Carve the same runes in the branch then hand it to me,” instructed Rocious.

Falcon took a few minutes to carve the runes into the branch, making sure to get them perfect before passing the knife and branch to Rocious. Rocious examined the branch for a moment, turning it over in his hands, then finally nodded satisfied with Falcon’s carving.

“Did Colville ever show you how to use the knife?” asked Rocious.

“It’s a knife, I know how to use it,” said Decimus.

Rocious just stared at Decimus.

“No, he just told me it was Arthur’s,” answered Decimus.

“Aye, Arthur made it to practice. Watch,” instructed Rocious.

Rocious held the knife for the group to see, then pushed a sliver of magic into the hilt of the knife. The runes began to glow a faint red along the blade. Rocious grabbed the hilt tight and forced more magic into the hilt causing the runes to glow brighter. A moment later flames burst from the hilt covering the blade and extending a foot and a half past the tip. The group stared at the knife, stunned into silence until Chaplin spoke.

“How long has that been in your pack?” asked Chaplin.

“Four years,” answered Decimus, greedily focused on the knife.

Rocious let the flames die and stabbed the blade into the dirt before turning his back to pick up the branch Falcon had just finished carving. Decimus went to snatch the knife but burnt his

hand on the hilt before he could pull it out of the ground. Rocious turned back and smacked Decimus full on across the face.

"Fool, let it cool down and pay attention to the rest of the lesson," said Rocious.

Rocious held the branch in his open palm the same as he did with the knife and again the runes began to glow a faint red. He grabbed the branch tight forcing more magic into the branch. Again the runes got brighter, and the branch caught fire. A moment later the entire branch was gone, burned into smoke and ashes.

"The runes are powerful but harnessing that power has a price," said Rocious.

"What is that price for the *attuned*?" asked Falcon.

Rocious pointed to the pile of firewood and the entire pile turned to ashes in a few moments. "Our price is suffering but we pay it up front. Then we are free to destroy the world," Rocious shoved Decimus's head and grabbed his wrist. In a few moments his burnt hand was healed, "or fix it."

LAPDOG



The sun was almost set when the group finally made it to Spring Forge. The first snow of the season began early in the day so they arrived late, wet and tired. All except Falcon, who grew up in the mountains and was excited to feel the snow again, and to see a place that looked like home. However, once they arrived at Spring Forge the snow disappeared. The area gained its name from a series of hot springs and a lava flow that was used to fuel the forge.

The only entrance to Spring Forge was through a narrow mountain pass, formed by two sharp cliff faces. A few centuries back the Duke of Valentia had built a fort into one of the cliff faces and built a stone wall from the fort to the other cliff. Currently only Thomas Colville and his apprentice lived at and defended the fort. A group of soldiers was normally stationed there but they had already left for the winter and it was Chaplin and his men's duty to take over the fort and allow Colville to work the forge for the season. The gate of the fort was left open as they arrived.

"Pull the carts into the storehouse and stable the horses. Clint, grab a cask on your way in," instructed Chaplin.

The men obeyed, leading the carts into the storehouse. Chaplin, Rocious and Falcon made their way into the barracks that would be their home for the winter.

"Where's Colville?" Chaplin asked the girl who worked in the forge with Colville, "he should join us for a meal or at least some ale." She was new; Colville must have scared off his last apprentice or worked them into the dirt.

"Passed out probably, he's been drinking since breakfast," answered the girl.

"No worries, I'll get him," said Rocious.

The girl stepped in front of Rocious to stop him from leaving to wake up Colville. Rocious looked down at the teenage girl genuinely surprised someone had the guts to stop him.

"I don't think you should wake him," said the girl.

"Who are you?" asked Rocious skeptically.

"My name's Flow, I am Master Colville's apprentice," answered Flow.

"I have known Colville longer than you have been alive, so move your ass or I'll do it for you," said Rocious.

As he spoke Rocious drew a small bit of magic from the cook fire and candles in the room causing the room to darken. The effect on Flow was immediate, and counter productive. She froze. Rocious did not wait however and knocked Flow over on his way to the stairwell.

Falcon went over to help her up, "Ignore him. He doesn't know how to talk to people. I'm Falcon, Master Lockland's student."

"Nice to meet you, Falcon," said Flow with a bright smile.

Decimus barged in the door followed by Clint and the cask of beer, "Wow, the kid's a charmer."

"That's Decimus, I am Sergeant Chaplin. If you have any trouble with the men, come to me and I'll sort things out," said Chaplin.

“Nice to meet you all. Um, there’s stew on if you’re hungry,” said Flow.

Before anyone could answer, the door to the sleeping quarters rattled as if something slammed it from the other side. A few moments later Rocious walked out holding his nose to stop it from bleeding. Falcon quickly grabbed a cloth and brought it to Rocious.

“He’ll be right down,” said Rocious as he covered his broken nose with the cloth.

By the time Colville came downstairs, Chaplin and his men had eaten and were taking a quick dip in one of the nearby hot springs. Rocious had healed his nose and cleaned the blood. Falcon was using the time to practice his new lesson. Since Rocious had given the demonstration with Decimus’s knife and the branch, Falcon’s next lesson was trying to activate the runes. He carved another branch so he could practice all day. So far he was only able to get them to glow a faint light blue; unless it was dark you probably would not even notice the runes were glowing at all. At first Falcon was ecstatic that they were glowing but now it only taunted him.

“Dinner ready?” grunted Colville as he took a seat next to Falcon.

“Hello, Master Colville, I’m Falcon. The stew is on the fire,” answered Falcon in greeting.

“Bah, don’t talk about it, get me some,” Colville shoved Falcon, “And some water.”

Before Falcon got up Flow came walking out the back with a bowl full of stew and piece of bread for Colville.

“Ignore him. He doesn’t know how to talk to people,” said Flow, flashing Falcon a grin.

Rocious came in from the back room carrying a couple mugs of ale and more stew. He sat across from Colville and gave Colville one of the mugs before drinking from his own. The two

old men sat in silence, drinking and eating while Falcon focused on his branch.

Decimus leaned back from the fireplace, "You still plugging away at that branch?" he asked Falcon.

"Trying to make it glow," answered Falcon.

"Good on you. Hard work always pays off," said Decimus.

"Leave the boy be, Decimus. Focus on yourself," said Colville pushing his bowl away to pay full attention to his ale.

"You can annoy him all you want. He needs to learn to focus in the midst of distraction," said Rocius staring at Colville.

"You trying to take my students?" asked Colville.

"No. But I see them more than you," answered Rocius.

"Then keep to your student, I'll keep to mine," threatened Colville.

"I brought him here for you to teach him," stated Rocius with finality.

"Teach him yourself," said Colville.

Flow brought two more mugs of ale from the back, and signaled Falcon to follow. Leaving the two grumps to their arguments, Falcon gladly left the distractions behind and followed Flow upstairs. She showed him to the room that would be his. Compared to the room back in Dominion it was more of a closet but, at least, it was a place to escape the bickering. Falcon jumped up on the bed with his branch and turned his focus back to the runes for a few moments before he realized Flow had sat on the bed with him. He looked up to see what she wanted.

"How long have you known Master Lockland?" asked Flow.

"I've only been his student for about five months, and I only met him a few days before that," answered Falcon.

"I guess your parents knew him then?" asked Flow.

"No, we just met on the road," answered Falcon, getting annoyed again that someone was distracting him from his practice.

“Met him on the road? You mean you’re from Reed,” said Flow.

“Yeah, so?” said Falcon offended.

“What is your name?” asked Flow leaning in closer.

“I told you, Falcon,” answered Falcon.

“Falcon who?” asked Flow.

“Falcon Reed,” answered Falcon.

Flow slipped off the bed and dropped to the floor bowing her head, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you were a Count. I didn’t mean any disrespect.”

Falcon was too surprised to move, he had never seen anyone freak out like that over nothing. “Um, it’s okay, really. Nobody makes a big deal about that kind of thing in Reed.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think any nobles would be coming here,” said Flow.

Falcon hopped over the bed, “You’re making me feel uncomfortable. Can you just forget it?”

Flow stood up but kept her eyes down, “I’ll try. It’s just that my family works in the Vale household and they are pretty strict with such things.”

“I know, I have been staying with the Maximus family and they have a ton of rules. I swear all it does is scare the crap out of the servants and make it really quiet everywhere. It doesn’t feel like a home,” said Falcon.

“Maximus? As in King Maximus?” asked Flow wide-eyed.

“Yeah, Master Lockland is friends with him but even he doesn’t like staying in the castle,” said Falcon.

Flow rubbed her hands together, “Master Colville never told me he knew the King,” said Flow.

“How long have you been his apprentice?” asked Falcon.

“Almost six years but, he only has me clean and cook. I was supposed to work in the forge engraving but he kicked me out in the first year,” said Flow.

“Master Lockland had me read the same book everyday for

months. I thought it was punishment but it turns out the real lesson was just hidden," said Falcon.

"I don't think Master Colville is that clever," said Flow.

"You should ask him why you're here," suggested Falcon.

Flow looked down at the floor again, "I'll think about, but you should be going to bed."

WHEN FALCON WOKE the next morning there was no one else awake in the fort, aside from Decimus and Clint who stayed awake keeping watch. After a quick stop to get some bread, Falcon grabbed the black cloak Rocious gave him and went out to explore Spring Forge. On the journey to the forge the soldiers frequently mentioned the natural hot springs as the best part about coming to the valley, but Falcon was interested in something else entirely. Rocious told him that there was a lava flow inside the forge that made it the best place in Lora to create armor and weapons.

In fact, Spring Forge was the only place that could work the best materials for making armor and weapons. According to Rocious, the only reason the runes destroyed objects was that they were not alive. So the best weapons were created from materials that were once alive, but living things tended to be fragile. The few that were not fragile could only be worked in that one place.

Due to all of the mystery surrounding the forge, Falcon wanted to see it for himself. Besides, lava sounded really cool. With branch in hand, Falcon set out for the forge but the moment he left the fort it was like he was transported to another world. The snow disappeared, the air was warm and the plants grew as if spring was coming instead of winter. He had been looking forward to the snowcapped mountains like Reed but this was nothing like that.

Close to the forge Falcon heard a steady *tink, tink, tink*. When

he entered he found himself inside what looked like a show room: there were weapons and armor of all types adorning the walls and on display tables. Everything was masterfully made and covered with intricate rune work. Falcon was drawn to one set of armor in particular, that seemed to be forged from stone. But that was not the reason Falcon was drawn to it; it was the runes engraved all over the armor. It was subtle but they were more masterfully done than everything else. Falcon pulled himself away from the armor and followed that *tink* sound farther into the forge.

He followed it to a long corridor. On the right side was a series of tables with tools and tubs of water, and on the left about twenty metal blocks and a string of chains and hooks above the flowing lava. Falcon was mesmerized by the sight and instantly knew he wanted to stay here. It was a place that had a deep connection to the earth, and he craved that connection like a child craves his mother's comforting embrace.

Shaking himself from the trance this place put him in he followed that *tink, tink, tink* to the end of the corridor. At the last workstation Master Colville was working on repairing a pile of broken equipment, presumably from the cart they brought here. Colville saw Falcon approaching and put his hand up signaling him to stay. Falcon patiently watched how he worked.

When Colville finished repairing the sword he hung it above the lava flow and turned to Falcon, "Are you lost boy?" asked Colville.

"I followed the sound," answered Falcon.

"I was about to take a break to cool down. Help me stow the tools and we can head upstairs," instructed Colville.

Colville led the way to a side chamber of the showroom. Colville poured two cups of water, gave one to Falcon and sat.

"What's that you're carrying around?" asked Colville indicating Falcon's pocket.

"Just a branch," answered Falcon showing him the branch.

Colville motioned him closer so he could get a better look at the branch, Falcon handed it to him. Colville inspected the runes with scrutiny, picking at the wood to expand any flaws in the carving.

"Did Rocious... did Lockland make this for you?" asked Colville handing it back to Falcon.

"No, I carved it. Master Lockland burnt the last one," answered Falcon.

"I want you to show me," said Colville.

Colville left the room and came back with polished piece of wood and a set of engraving tools. Falcon took the tools and sat on the floor to carve the wood, but Colville stopped him.

"Stop. You cannot use fire runes on wood. Just like Lockland to not explain how they work," said Colville.

"I memorized the whole book," said Falcon defensive.

"Yes, but you don't understand it. The runes basically manipulate magic the same as the *attuned*. So the fire rune converts the magic into some form of heat and what happens to wood when you heat it?" asked Colville.

"It burns," answered Falcon finally understanding.

"Yes," said Colville then he held up a finger and left the room. He came back with a slab of stone and a piece of chalk.

"See, if you use this one, the magic will be converted to the most basic form of energy," instructed Colville.

"What is energy?" asked Falcon.

"Like pushing, pulling or throwing. In general, energy will not damage the object but it is difficult to activate. Fire is easy to activate but it is destructive," said Colville.

"I think I understand but Master Lockland said the runes had a price to pay. And that price destroys them?" asked Falcon.

"It's somewhat true. See, they are only runes and they are imperfect. It's the imperfections that destroy, not anything else. Lockland thinks he is paying a price for using magic," said Colville.

“I think I understand but what about that armor you have? It looks really old. Shouldn’t it be destroyed by now?” asked Falcon.

“Forget you saw that armor. Now show me how you carved the runes but switch fire for light,” instructed Colville, making it clear not to ask again about the armor.

Falcon obeyed and began carving again, this time uninterrupted. Colville watched him work. As usual, Falcon took his time carving. He wanted to make sure not only that the runes were carved correctly, but he also wanted the runes to look pretty.

“I’m done,” said Falcon handing the finished wood to Colville.

Colville inspected the runes closely.

“Flow is going to be pissed. How would you like to engrave the armor I create?” asked Colville.

“You want me to carve runes? I have to ask Master Lockland, he said I was coming here to train,” answered Falcon.

“Actually, you’ll be engraving the runes, and this was the training Master Lockland wanted,” said Colville.

“Do I get to stay in the forge?” asked Falcon.

“Yes, of course,” answered Colville.

THE WINTER WENT by in a blissful haze of exhaustion; every morning Falcon woke early to practice moving magic enough to activate runes for a few hours, then he tried to help Flow cook breakfast but usually ended up just watching. Then they would engrave the various weapons that Colville repaired or created. Most days he was so tired after engraving he would eat dinner and fall asleep only to repeat the same routine again the next day.

On the rare occasion Colville decided to close the forge early, Falcon would watch the soldiers practice. Decimus was clearly the best swordsman of the group, but by far the best fighter turned out to be the old man, Colville. He always fought unarmed and still never lost. He was either psychic or insanely

fast. Colville also turned out to be a kind man, aside from the times he was hung-over. Falcon only wished his friends were there to watch the fights with him; Fafnir would have crapped his pants seeing an unarmed, old man cleaning the floor with his hero Decimus.

Even with missing his friends and being tired every day, Falcon was happy in this place. The warmth of the springs and forge filled the valley with life year round, and the soldiers were always cheerful and joking around. The atmosphere was the complete opposite of living in the castle in Dominion. The day the snow melted and the roads cleared, a messenger arrived from Dominion with a letter for Rocious. Rocious read the letter then burnt it to ashes a moment later.

"I'm leaving before dawn. The rest of you will go to Dominion without me," announced Rocious after their evening meal.

Most of the men had not finished eating but Rocious left the table without waiting for any reply. He went to his room to prepare for his journey in the morning. Rocious was filling his pack when he realized Falcon was standing in the doorway watching him.

"What do you need?" asked Rocious.

"You're going to Reed. I want to go with you," said Falcon.

"No. I need to go alone. You will go to Dominion with Chaplin," stated Rocious flatly. Falcon knew him well enough to not argue but stating his desire was all he really expected to do anyway.

That night Rocious did not sleep; he simply waited for the others to drift off and slipped out of the fort. The letter he received said Cato Eikard, the Duke of Caledonia, was behind the dragon. Rocious made his way south though the cold night, travelling along the mountains as high as he thought safe. On the way he focused on the sense of freedom he got from traveling alone through the wilderness.

He did not try to control that sense of freedom; he let it draw

in magic while he walked. By the time he saw the moon high in the sky he had attracted enough magic to speed up his pace. Using explosion and traveling directly he could make it there in a few days. But he would need to follow the Hadrian Mountain range south to Fort Reed then track the Severan Mountain range to Eikard's home in Keld. There were two problems with that plan: someone hearing his explosions and the mountains themselves. Explosions, he would simply need to be careful with; the other two were the tricky ones.

Both mountain ranges were said to be cursed. Rocius did not believe that, but he did believe that no one had ever come out alive. In the case of the Hadrian Mountains he understood why: there were thunderstorms trapped between the mountains. Momentarily they would calm or there would be gaps between them, but it never lasted long. Anyone out there for more than a few hours usually wound up struck dead by lightning. Not a problem for a master of fire, especially one who could move at his pace. But the Severan Mountain range was an entirely different beast.

The Severan Storm was an endless blizzard that caused men to lose their minds, as well as their sense of direction. Those who ventured into the endless blizzard seldom, if ever, came back out, and those who did never survived for very long. If they survived being infected with cold rot, they lost their minds. Fire might deal with cold rot but it did nothing to shield the mind. He may have been crazy already but he was not about to lose his mind intentionally.

When the sky changed purple and orange he stopped to eat and watch the sunrise. For he knew the first rays of sun did more than warm the skin. As he watched the horizon he heard movement in the trees below and glanced down. It was only some deer being startled as the nighttime fairies fled the coming light. He looked up just in time to see the sun wink over the horizon. Rocius winked back then closed his eyes to enjoy the warmth

on his skin. A few minutes later he opened his eyes having claimed more than he needed for the rest of his trip.

Using that magic, Rocious easily made it to Fort Reed by midday and spent the rest of the afternoon marking out the edge of the barrier. It had nothing to do with Eikard but Falcon was right in assuming he would go there. This was the perfect time to investigate how to take down the barrier. The only idea he had come up with all winter was to target what was powering it. A barrier that size would require an enormous source of magic. If Rocious could find that source and cut it off, he might be able to take back the fort single-handed. How to do that, he still did not know but the first step was locating the source.

So after marking out the border he spent the rest of the evening sitting next to the barrier following countless threads of magic to their source, or in this case, sources. He was ambitious in hoping to find a single source but he did find a commonality. Every thread led to one of the city's fountains but that was where he was stopped. When he tried to follow it farther the complex tapestry of magic being worked overwhelmed his senses. Using what he had recently learned, he thought he knew where the source was located.

Over the past year Falcon had told him countless stories about Fort Reed, and in one of his stories there was a tiny nugget of information that meant the world. His family had a private garden with its own fountain. That was where Rocious focused his senses. It took him a while to locate it, as the Keep was built on a raised mount much higher than he originally thought. When he honed in on the garden he found the fountain instantly. The magic emanating from it was literally screaming at him.

Rocious focused his magical sense of hearing on that fountain, searching for what was controlling this complex weaving. As he started to hone in on the source, the barrier throbbed, suddenly expanding. He was sitting next to the gate, but when he

stopped rolling he had been knocked so far down the road he could barely see any of the city over the rise in the road.

“Asshole,” mumbled Rocious to himself.

Well, that ruined his idea. The power of cutting off the source assumed there would not be someone there to turn it back on. At least now he knew the truth of it. That barrier was never coming down until Count Reed wanted it to or he died.

With nothing else to learn, Rocious made camp nearby and decided to continue on his mission in the morning.

HE ARRIVED at Keld by late morning and was scouting from a nearby peak for the best way to sneak into the castle when he spotted the duke inside the walls assembling a group of soldiers. He was easy to spot in his scale armor made completely out of stone. Rocious had never met the man outside of the throne room but he seemed like a fair ruler. Killing him was nothing personal, simply something that had to be done to protect the realm.

Since the dragon attacked Dominion, Dominick had been searching for who or what the cause was. Rocious presumed that Dominick had discovered Eikard was behind the attack and was sending him to ensure it would not happen again. Watching the duke assemble a group of soldiers, it seemed the duke would make things easy and leave the castle. All Rocious would need to do is follow them and he could take the duke down when they were far enough away from reinforcements.

If he was careful with his magic he could kill Eikard and toss his body into the Severan Storm. Nobody would be able to link the death back to him and Dominick.

The duke and his men left Keld and followed the road south. Rocious followed them staying on high on the mountains until the road disappeared into a patch of trees. He could see where the road continued on the other side of the trees. If he was fast he

might be able to catch Eikard before he made it through the patch of trees. At the least he would be able to wait for Eikard's return and ambush them.

Rocious quickly executed the plan and slipped into the trees for cover. He reached the road just as fast but Eikard was faster and had already left the trees. Rocious jogged down the road hoping to see which direction they went, but again Eikard was one step ahead. At the top of the next hill was a line of mounted soldiers staring down at the trees, and halfway up the hill Eikard waited on foot with his saber resting in front of him. Apparently they had spotted him and were waiting; the next move was his. Accept the challenge, or flee and fail his mission.

Never one to back down from a fight, Rocious took a few calming breaths to control his fear and anxiety, the reward of magic was a bonus as he had already drawn plenty preparing for this fight. Rocious tossed back his hood and calmly walked up the hill.

"I respect a man who fights his own battles!" shouted Rocious.

"Your respect means nothing to me, Lapdog," said Eikard, his voice easily carrying down the hill.

"You must have known this was coming!" stated Rocious.

"Aye, the moment I heard of the attack on Dominion, I expected he'd pin it on me," replied Eikard.

"Why then? To kill a couple hundred people?" asked Rocious.

"Did you come to talk or to fight?" prompted Eikard twirling his saber as he moved toward Rocious.

Rocious knew Eikard was a brilliant military tactician but had not heard anything of his exploits as a duelist. So he approached cautiously, trying to keep him talking in case it helped to distract.

"Just curious how you got the dragon to do what you wanted," said Rocious keeping his distance by circling the duke.

"It wasn't me," said Eikard.

Rocious was slightly surprised by Eikard's claim and in that moment Eikard threw a small blade. Rocious recovered in time

to avoid the blade but Eikard followed it up by rushing in. Rocious triggered an explosion to keep his distance but Eikard pressed the attack again, throwing a series of the blades almost like needles. Each time, Rocious triggered explosions to widen the gap between them.

“What are you running from Lockland?” taunted the soldiers watching the fight.

They had a point; he came to fight not to run.

“Fuck it!” breathed Rocious.

This time, instead of using the explosion to keep his distance, Rocious launched himself forward then triggered a second explosion to stop himself and blast Eikard off his feet. Only Eikard shook off the explosion like it was a warm breeze and followed up with a thrust toward Rocious’s chest. Rocious twisted to avoid being impaled and was kicked square in the chest. By sheer luck or instinct he triggered another explosion, launching himself down the hill. Shaking loose his senses in midair, he triggered another explosion that softened his landing and likely saved his life.

“All flash and no follow through!” taunted Eikard throwing another dagger.

Rocious dodged on instinct, “I’ll show you flash.”

“Time to end this!” said Eikard and then charged.

Rocious took a deep breath and blew out a gush of flame, then triggered an explosion launching him over Eikard. Eikard charged through the flame slashing, then used the momentum of his swing to turn. Eikard kept his guard up, searching through the lingering smoke for Rocious when a trail of flame lit up. Following the trail of flame Eikard pressed the attack again.

This time Rocious was ready, the trail of flame was actually one of Rocious’s flame ropes. Once Eikard ran over the flames Rocious pulled the duke off balance and immobilized him with more flame ropes. Eikard struggled with the flames and lost hold of his saber. Seeing an opportunity, Rocious pulled the duke

away from his saber. Eikard used that time to get in close to Rocious.

Eikard broke free of the flames, punched Rocious in the face and kicked him just above the knee. He went down hard, his head bouncing off the ground dazing him a little. In a last ditch effort Rocious rolled away from Eikard and triggered an explosion at Eikard's feet. Eikard's armor lit up and absorbed the explosion like it was nothing. Eikard waved away some of the dust and kicked Rocious in the stomach. Rocious bent to cover his stomach so Eikard took a step closer and kicked him in the face, shattering teeth. Rocious rolled onto his hands and puked blood. When he tried to get up Eikard stepped on his back, then bashed his head into the ground.

"You're a tough bastard but you are not the first *attuned* Dominick sent to kill me," said Eikard.

"-Ek ou!" garbled Rocious through his broken face.

"Yeah. Fuck you too," answered Eikard.

The duke stood up, pulled another one of his knives from his belt and grabbed Rocious's hair.

"It's a shame you sided with Dominick. We haven't had an ally *attuned* to fire since Praetorian Caldwell," said Eikard.

When Eikard tilted Rocious's head back, Rocious closed his eyes and triggered a series of blinding flashes. Eikard released Rocious to cover his face from the intense light. Rocious used the distraction to run for the tree line.

As he ran he let himself be filled with fear and elation until he was well within the patch of trees. He rushed through the trees and underbrush trying to get to the mountains. When he finally broke through the trees, he took control of his fear and sent the magic right into his explosions. He was so focused on fleeing Eikard that by the time he realized where he had launched himself it was too late. He was trapped inside the Severan Storm.

DOMINION



The same day that Rocius left Spring Forge, Chaplin and his group led their war carts back to Dominion. Since Rocius was not around, Chaplin let Falcon lead the cart containing the armor and weapons. Most of the weaponry had simple runes to make them sharper and stronger. Those Chaplin would deliver to the armory in Dominion. The last few swords were decorated with elaborate markings, or engraved with a complex series of runes by Colville, and were meant for craftsmen and nobles in Dominion. Those, Falcon begged Chaplin to let him deliver so he would have a chance to run around the city.

By the time they reached Dominion, Chaplin had conceded to bring the cart to the armory and let Falcon deliver the rest of the weaponry. He hopped out of the cart with the bag loaded with intricately engraved swords. Over the years, businesses had clumped together in the second ring, so when Falcon hit the business district he was able to make all of his deliveries except two. One sword was meant for a noble Lord Quintus Werval who lived in the inner ring, the other was for a craftsman with a closed storefront: Sir Arik Denali. Since he had nothing else

planned for the day, Falcon waited for the store to open. Twenty minutes later a young woman arrived and rushed to open the door.

"Come inside child, it's too cold to be standing out here," said the young woman, pushing Falcon inside.

"I don't mind the cold," shrugged Falcon.

"Feel free to look around while I get my father," said the woman as she darted into the back.

Falcon looked around at the room. The store was similar to Colville's display at the forge. Swords and armor lined the walls and there were three counters displaying a variety of jewelry and small blades. Towards the back of the store there was another counter filled with ornate daggers. Each dagger had a card above it with a rune labeling them with one of the eight expressions of magic: Light, Fire, Ice, Wind, Water, Earth, Shadow, and Energy.

"Beautiful aren't they?" asked the woman. "I'm Rika."

"Yes, they are beautiful," said Falcon.

"Don't let that fool you, they are powerful weapons. Everything in our store is masterfully engraved and imbued with magic. I promise you, you won't find better in all of Valentia," said Rika.

"Who made them?" asked Falcon.

"They are all crafted at Spring Forge and engraved by either my father, Sir Arik Denali, or by none other than Sir Thomas Colville," answered Rika.

A group of three teenagers a little older than Falcon entered the store stealing Rika's attention. They were dressed in black robes, marking them as students of the academy in Dominion.

"Feel free to look around, and let me know if something catches your eye," greeted Rika.

"Do you have anything with more than these basic runes?" asked one of the teenagers.

"The ones along the wall have simple engravings to keep them

sharp or stronger. But the ones in the cases are masterfully engraved with more complex runes,” said Rika.

The group explored the various counters and eventually joined Falcon at the back counter.

“Would you like to have a closer look at any of them?” asked Rika.

“Yes, that one,” said one of the boys indicating the dagger under the fire rune.

“Ah, be careful, that one could set the store on fire in the right hands,” warned Rika.

Rika gave the dagger to the *pathos*. They examined the runes closely and passed it around, unsuccessfully trying to activate the runes.

“Fire should be easy. Your engravings are off,” said one of the boys.

“Can I see it?” asked Falcon.

Falcon just examined the dagger for any flaws much like he had done over the past few months and handed it to Rika.

“What did you say this is supposed to do?” asked Falcon.

Rika checked the dagger again, “That one will create flames. If you can learn to activate the runes,” answered Rika. She took the dagger and closed her eyes to demonstrate. The group turned to watch also, but nothing happened.

“Can I see this one?” asked Falcon indicating the dagger under the Energy rune.

“Sure,” said Rika, thankful for the distraction.

“Ha, good luck. Energy is the toughest,” said one of the boys.

Falcon took the dagger, examined it for a moment and activated the runes. But the sword burst into flames.

“I think you mixed up your display,” said Falcon looking at Rika with a smile. As Falcon went to put the dagger back, one of the three boys moved closer and reached for it. Falcon moved the dagger out of reach. At the same time another one of the boys stepped behind him. Again the boy reached for the fire runed

dagger, but Falcon flicked it across the display and looked up at the boy's cold blue eyes. Those blue eyes were so similar to his own. Except where Falcon's eyes had an underlying sadness, this boy's eyes masked some deepseated anger. Only a moment had passed when an older gentleman entered from the store's back room grumbling about being woken up. Falcon kept his attention on those cold blue eyes until he turned away and nodded to his friends. He watched the three boys grumble about poor quality as they left the store grumbling then turned to the sleepy older gentleman.

"Sir Arik Denali?" asked Falcon.

"Aye, that's me," answered Denali.

"I have a delivery from Master Colville," said Falcon taking the short sword out of his bag and handing it to Denali.

Denali took the sword and examined it, running his fingers along the runes. Then grabbed the handle. The runes activated almost instantly, covering the blade in ice. Everyone watched Denali; he made it look so easy.

"Feels good to have her back again. I'll have to thank Colville," said Denali.

Falcon put the bag back on his shoulder. "You should write him, I'm sure he would like that."

Realizing his daughter was staring, Denali put the sword on the counter. "What's your name?" asked Denali.

Falcon snapped his fingers, and then patted his pockets. "I almost forgot, Master Colville sent a letter for you too. My name's Falcon," said Falcon.

"Thank you, Falcon," said Denali.

"You're welcome. I should go, I have another delivery," said Falcon.

"Of course, of course. Come back anytime, maybe I'll even have that letter for you," said Denali.

. . .

FALCON FOUND the recipient of his last delivery in a large, stone mansion in the inner ring. For such a large home Falcon was surprised that Lord Quintus Werval greeted him alongside his servants. Werval invited Falcon inside to share a meal and thank him for delivering the sword. Falcon did not really want to join Werval, but it would have been rude to turn down his hospitality.

“This is my wife, Gyda. Gyda, this is the young man I told you about: Falcon Reed,” said Werval, leading Falcon to a large but simply decorated sitting room.

“Nice to meet you, Falcon,” said Gyda.

“Nice to meet you, Madam,” said Falcon.

“Falcon has just returned from Spring Forge and is Master Lockland’s student,” said Werval.

“Oh wow, sounds like you have a taste for adventure. Certainly more than our simple lives,” said Gyda.

“Sometimes I wish my life was simple,” said Falcon.

“You’re welcome to come visit if you like simple,” said Gyda.

“I’m not sure King Dominick would like that, he warned me to stay away from the members of his court or I would be sucked into politics,” said Falcon.

“Nothing to worry about; I’ll have no politicking in my home. Well, let me get you gentlemen something to eat while you chat,” said Gyda excusing herself.

“What she said is true, I know how it can be in the castle,” said Werval.

Falcon was dreading returning to the castle so Werval’s offer was a tempting one, but he did not really know if it would be any better here. In an attempt to be polite, Falcon stayed quiet and nodded to Werval. Once Gyda returned with a tray of food they ate and talked about Falcon’s winter at Spring Forge and some of his studies. Falcon started to feel that he could stay there all day and they would happily accept him, but he had somewhere else he wanted to go before he was expected back at the castle.

"Thank you for your hospitality but I really should be going," said Falcon.

"You're welcome. Let me walk you out," said Werval.

After leaving Werval, Falcon went to see his friend Mary in the outer ring. As he walked the streets he noted they were almost completely empty. Everyone was so scared of the cold they stayed inside but Falcon knew the cold was no threat. In Reed, you learned to embrace the cold. Here the city was a greater danger than the weather.

The people from Reed were poor and nearly homeless with no friends. In Dominion that could be a death sentence, even for the people who lived here their whole lives. Life in Reed had not prepared them for the dangers of the natural world, not the harness of other people. In Reed everyone banded together to help each other during hard times. Whether it was opening their door for a stranger during a harsh blizzard or looking after each other's children and homes. In Dominion, everyone was a stranger and their children were just as likely to steal your home as they were.

As Falcon reached the neighborhood housing his people, it was like entering a different world. Half the buildings were torn down to rebuild others. It looked like it was recently abandoned instead of being recently occupied. When Falcon saw how hard his people worked hard to make it their home and here he was complaining about living in grandest place in the city. Falcon shook off the thought and he went straight to where his friend Mary lived. She was wrapped in a blanket with a worn book on her lap.

"Hey Mary," said Falcon from behind.

"Oh! Falcon! I'm glad you're alright," said Mary jumping up to give Falcon a hug.

"Why would I not be alright?" asked Falcon.

"No reason, but I haven't seen you all winter," said Mary.

"I was not in the city. But I'm back now. How are you?" asked

Falcon, noticing she'd become both taller and leaner over the winter.

"I'm alright. Life here is... different. Most are making it feel more like home but there's been a lot of arguing that we should go back to Fort Reed," answered Mary.

"How can I help?" asked Falcon.

"Don't worry about us. We have each other here. You're the one who's all alone," said Mary as she flicked her long braids over her shoulder.

"I'll be okay. I'll try to come back soon," said Falcon.

"I'd like that, I'm sure everyone would be happy to see you," said Mary.

They spent the rest of the afternoon talking and laughing about the differences between Dominion and Reed. It was so easy to talk to her that the time went by in a flash. As the sun started to set he realized he had to leave for dinner. So he bid his farewell and left for the castle. On his walk Falcon thought about how his people were working so hard to make Dominion their home. Yet there were some who would rather work toward getting their old home back.

He lost his train of thought when someone called out to him from farther down the street. "Hey, Fen. Looks like we found another one!"

"Your dad was right. The Reed disease is spreading. What do you think, Ruark?" said Fenir from Falcon's right.

"Looks lost and scared," said Ruark from Falcon's left.

They had him surrounded. Fear struck him and he almost did not realize they were talking about him. He took a few steps back trying to keep the three boys in front of him.

"Whoa, where are you headed?" asked Fenir, hopping next to Falcon and using his arm to block the way. Stupid, he just told Mary how dangerous this city could be.

"Don't you want to learn about your new home?" said Ruark grabbing Falcon's arm.

As the two boys dragged him into a narrow side street, he tried to kick free but they grabbed his legs.

"So feisty," said the boy holding his legs.

"How you like them, Hal," said Fenir.

"Heee—" Falcon's scream was cut off by Fenir shoving a piece of moldy trash in his mouth.

Hal flicked Falcon's nose, drawing even more fear, "If you want to live in our city you're going to need to learn the rules."

Ruark punched him in the stomach, "These are our shops and our streets. If you want to use them, you have to pay," said Ruark.

Fenir took a small wooden club from his robe and cracked Falcon in the chest, "If you and the rest of your flea-ridden people want to live in our houses and work our jobs, you have to pay."

Fenir tapped Falcon on the forehead with his club and sat on his thighs. Ruark and Hal held him down. Fenir beat him with his club. Falcon tried to scream and choked on the garbage, his eyes filled with tears.

"Last lesson, next time I see you talking to Rika back at the shop, your face is going to pay the price. I'll let my friend here peel the skin off your face and make you eat it," said Fenir.

Falcon kicked and tried to break free, but they were just too strong. After Fenir finished speaking, they stopped holding him so Ruark could use the club. Falcon tried to run, but they shoved him to the ground and continued the beating. Hal took the club for his turn and again Falcon tried to run.

"Guess he's a slow learner," said Fenir, tripping him again. Falcon landed on his stomach and Hal stepped on his back.

"Don't worry, I'm a good teacher. Hold him," said Hal.

Fenir and Ruark held him down. Hal took off his belt, and looped it around Falcon's neck.

"Stop squirm'n, we ain't gonna kill ya!" said Fenir.

Overcome by fear, Falcon struggled one of his arms free. Fenir grabbed his arm and twisted, breaking Falcon's arm and

keeping him down. Falcon's vision went black from pain. Hal tightened the belt, causing him to twist trying to get away.

"Keep him still," said Hal.

Hal leaned his weight on Falcon's back to keep him down.

"Pay attention, next time it'll be worse," said Hal.

Again Falcon struggled. Hal cracked his head. Falcon went limp and passed out.

WISE AND STUPID



When Falcon woke up, he was cold and alone. His whole body hurt, and he smelled like shit, piss, and garbage. When he tried to stand, his broken arm sent a jolt of pain. He collapsed and curled into a ball, shaking. What reason was there to get up and keep trying? The wind blew making him shiver. Using his good hand, he crawled closer to one of the buildings. The wind made him shiver again.

If only to get away from the cold wind, he looked around for anything to cover himself. He spotted the black cloak Rocious gave him bundled up next to the building. It must have come loose at some point. Falcon rolled over to his cloak and used the building to get to his feet. He wrapped himself in his cloak, but it was wet and he still felt cold. He looked around again for some place to keep warm. There was nobody on the street, but he saw a few shadowy faces in the surrounding windows. In Reed, he could have gone to any of them but here they had probably locked their door the moment they noticed him. Falcon tightened his cloak and started walking back to the castle.

When he got back to the main street he realized the sun was still up, he must not have been passed out very long. Maybe he

could clean himself up, and still make dinner. Falcon held his broken arm close and tried to ignore the pain as he walked. When he got to the castle's courtyard, the guards stopped him. But they let him through quickly when he said he was cold. As he reached the door to the castle, it opened from the inside causing him to stumble.

"Whoa there," said Decimus as he caught Falcon by the arm.

"Bahh!" said Falcon through clenched teeth as Decimus grabbed his broken arm.

"What the hell happened to you?" asked Decimus concerned.

Falcon pushed the pain away and slipped past Decimus, "Nothing."

Decimus let him by and walked down the hall next to him, "That don't look or smell like nothing," said Decimus.

A couple servants walked toward them down the hallway. Decimus pushed Falcon, forcing him to turn down a side hallway.

"Hey!" said Falcon.

Decimus pushed Falcon's head to the side and forced him farther down the hall, "Oh shut it. I don't know what happened, but you best get cleaned up before someone else sees... or smells you."

He led the way to a smaller closet near the kitchens and shoved Falcon inside, "Use the dish water to clean up, I'll grab you some cleaner clothes."

Decimus shut the door so Falcon took off his cloak and clothes carefully, then washed himself in the tub of cold water. He even tried to wash the taste of garbage out of his mouth. As he was drying off Decimus opened the door with some servant's clothes in his hand.

"Fuck, who did that?!" asked Decimus.

"Nobody, forget about it," said Falcon.

"Looks like you got trampled by a horse," said Decimus.

Falcon got dressed, favoring his broken arm. Decimus tried to help but Falcon shoved him off.

"Look, I ain't gonna ask anymore but, you've gotta do something about that arm. Come back to the barracks and I'll set it," offered Decimus.

"I can't, I'll be late for dinner," said Falcon.

"Then find me after or it'll stay fucked up," said Decimus.

"I have to go," said Falcon shoving his way past Decimus.

FALCON QUICKLY CHANGED his clothes to something more formal. He was luckily able to make it through dinner without setting off any major alarm or at least none that were voiced. Normally he would have history lessons, but they let him go to bed early after being on the road. Instead of going back to his room, he searched for Decimus.

He found Decimus in the barracks with the old dagger Rocious used to demonstrate the use of runes. He was trying to activate the runes, but had not made much progress.

"Hey, I forgot to thank you earlier," said Falcon.

Decimus did not look up, he just sat focusing on the dagger. Falcon sat next to him and waited...

"Fuck it. That's a lot harder than Rocious made it seem," said Decimus finally.

"That's because you can't sense the flow of magic. I can make you one that's easier to practice with," said Falcon.

"I'm not scared of a challenge. Let me see the arm," said Decimus.

Falcon offered his arm for Decimus to set and splint, "It will still be difficult to do, but easier to notice when it's working," said Falcon.

Aside from the setting part, Decimus had a surprisingly gentle hand for such a big guy. "Believe it or not, I've been there. I grew up in Dominion, tough city."

“Yeah,” said Falcon tersely.

Falcon wanted to go to bed, and forget about it. But Decimus clearly wanted to talk and Falcon did not want to be rude after Decimus had helped him.

“You know why I’m ranked number one in the ninth legion?” asked Decimus.

“You’re bigger and better than everyone else. Well, except Colville,” answered Falcon with a sly smirk.

“Bigger helps, but why do you think I’m better?” asked Decimus.

“I never really thought about it,” said Falcon.

“Everyone make excuses, like I have talent or I am naturally strong. But the truth is, I’m better because I work harder,” said Decimus.

“Except Colville,” said Falcon.

“He’s spent his whole life fighting, that’s a big head start. And not to make excuses, but it’s in his blood,” said Decimus.

“What happened to him? Master Lockland said, he gave up the sword,” asked Falcon.

Decimus was caught off guard by the question. It took him a little while before he answered.

“Colville’s son, Arthur, was killed four years ago. Colville hasn’t picked up a sword since,” said Decimus.

“Arthur? The name carved into the ninth’s challenge boards?” asked Falcon.

“Yeah, Arthur was number one. I was second,” answered Decimus.

“It’s tough to believe,” said Falcon.

“He wasn’t the best just because he was a better swordsman. Don’t get me wrong, he was, had more talent. He was even better than his dad. But what made him truly special was how he pushed everyone strive to be better,” said Decimus.

“That why you work so hard, to push everyone?” said Falcon.

“I’m just too stupid to do anything else. With Arthur it wasn’t

hard work. It was fun. Everyone worked harder, but it felt like a game," said Decimus.

"My dad told me *'you can be stupid and wise at the same time'*," said Falcon.

Decimus turned away for a second then looked down at his hands, "Sounds smart. Too smart for me," said Decimus.

"He was confusing," agreed Falcon looking down at his own hands.

Decimus nudged Falcon's shoulder, "Anyway, I grew up in Dominion. It's a tough place, gotta fight if you want to survive. If you want I can teach you. I wake before sunrise and train in the main courtyard until the rest of the barracks wakes up. You're welcome to join."

"My dad forbid me from learning swordsmanship and Master Lockland said it was a waste of time," said Falcon.

"What do you say?" asked Decimus.

"I want to learn but Master Lockland said *'Weapons just get in the way'*," said Falcon in a grumbly voice.

Decimus rumbled out a laugh at Falcon's impression, "That's a pretty good. I can teach you to spar but it's still gonna be tough fighting without a weapon," said Decimus.

"Okay. I hope Master Lockland doesn't get mad," said Falcon.

"He's always mad. Speaking of that old grump, shouldn't he be back by now?" asked Decimus.

ROCIOUS HATED THE COLD, but he learned there were things he hated far more. Trapped in an endless blizzard and the cold was the only part that he could fend off. As a master of fire he could walk through a frozen wasteland naked and come up unharmed. But he was powerless against the constant wind. It was so strong he had to lean into it simply to keep from falling over. But not too much or when it shifted he would fall flat on his face.

Rocious had fallen hundreds of times before he learned to read the shifts in the wind and keep his balance.

Keeping his balance did nothing to stop the sound of the endless wailing. That was what must have caused men to lose their minds in the midst of the storm. Sometimes it sounded so lovely, as if from a beautiful maiden singing just for him. And then it would shift as if that beautiful maiden transformed into a grotesque beast coming to tear his heart out. Those sounds instilled such a fear in him it was incomparable. The night of the dragon attack he tasted the fears of everyone in Dominion and controlled them. The fear induced by that sound had him shivering and crying so bad he wanted to lie down and die.

Then it got worse – the darkness of night set in. Even during the day visibility was minimal, but when the darkness came his fear became a primal force even he could not control. It took hold of him so strongly he attracted magic for miles. Like a grand joke, he was surrounded by an endless supply of magic but fear rendered him powerless to control it. For the first time in almost fifty years he was unable to master himself. The first night he survived on sheer stubbornness. The next two his body failed him. There was nothing to do except let the wind knock him around. The fourth night he wondered how many nights it would take to kill him. As that thought hit him, a flicker of hope appeared.

A flicker of hope in the form of a woman's voice. That voice that brought tears to his eyes and warmed his heart. Whether it was his mind playing tricks or not, he followed that voice through the cold dark night. Each time he stumbled that voice picked him up, but the whole time he wondered if he was dreaming or dead. Suddenly the voice stopped, shaking him from his morbid thoughts. The voice stopped but he did not need it anymore. It had led him to the last place he expected. Fort Reed.

He stumbled down the mountains to the same place he had spent the night before going to Keld. He found his pack and

gorged on the little food and water left. He went to take another look at the city, his salvation. Before he knew it, he was sobbing like a child.

He hung his head and wiped his tears, "Thank you," he whispered.

Rocious put together a quick fire and lay down to sleep. He still had a long journey to Dominion. Tomorrow he had to make it back there and let Dominick know what had happened. Word that Eikard was declaring war had probably already reached Dominion, but he would need to tell Dominick the details before Eikard mobilized his troops. At least he now had plenty of magic to get there quickly.

He closed his eyes to sleep, muttering to himself, "If that is you Reed, what are you doing? Your kid needs you. Fuck, I'm talking to myself. I've been alone too long."

Rocious paused and looked around then turned back to Fort Reed, "Whatever, if I'm crazy, I'm crazy. I'll look after Falcon. Shit, I'll try to be nice to him. No promises but I'll try. Unless he tells me I shit too fast," said Rocious to himself.

On his high-speed trip back to Dominion he was in an uncharacteristically good mood. Especially considering Eikard beat the living hell out of him, he had been lost in a frozen wasteland of insanity and had probably started a war that would kill thousands of people. But if you had lived as long as him, you knew some days you stepped in shit and other days you laughed because it was someone else who stepped in it.

Being in such a great mood Rocious sped through the city increasingly fast to screw with the people who saw him. By the time he stopped in the main courtyard, he was still laughing about the dazed looks. Looking around the courtyard, Rocious was surprised. The soldiers were sitting around casually. There was no heightened alert like he had expected. The ninth legion should have been organizing and preparing to defend the city. Riders should have gone out to call back the other legions, but it

looked like nothing had been done. He did see Falcon and Dominick's two boys exercising with Decimus, not surprising since Rocious was not there for Falcon's lessons.

Something was not right; he had to talk to Dominick before he spoke to anyone else. So he went straight to the throne room, pushing past the line of people waiting for an audience with the king.

The doors to the throne room were shut when he got there. He debated if he should give Dominick another reason to have a shit fit about his court etiquette or wait patiently. He had already skipped to the front of the line, so he waited. When the doors finally opened he entered the throne room calmer than usual, until the herald opened his dumb mouth.

"Sir Francis Birch!" boomed the herald.

Rocious stared at the herald trying to hold onto his good mood, "First, the fuck forgets to announce me, now he announces someone else. Do you want me to burn my name into your forehead so you can remember it?" asked Rocious losing his good mood.

"Francis Birch was next in line. Either you changed your name or Mr. Birch is still waiting outside," said Dominick.

"Francis Birch!" shouted Rocious.

A lean, tall middle-aged man poked his head around the door-frame. "He's waiting outside," said Rocious.

"Then welcome home Master Lockland, I will see you at dinner. Until then, Samuel has a package for you," said Dominick motioning for the side door. "Mr. Birch, my apologies. Please come in," said Dominick using his amulet to project.

Rocious was caught off guard. He was expecting Dominick to dismiss everyone else and start preparing for war, not to make dinner plans. When he left out the side entrance Samuel was waiting with a small box. Usually a blunt man himself, Samuel handed him the box and walked away. Rocious opened the box to find what looked like four small white stones on top of a folded

piece of paper. Looking closer he realized they were his broken teeth. His magic had already caused them to grow back but the message was clear even without reading the note: 'Good Luck Dom'.

AT DINNER all Rocious heard were the nonstop questions about Colville. Falcon must have told them how Colville beat Decimus, Fafnir's hero. And now the boys would not shut up about it. Rocious squeezed the bridge of his nose and had only one thought, *what happened to my good day?* After the meal he wasted no time grabbing a bottle of brandy and taking his spot on the balcony. The three boys stayed inside chattering about the winter.

"Rough trip?" asked Dominick coming to join him.

"Something like that," said Rocious.

Dominick shoved Rocious, forcing him to turn and look him in the eye. Rocious stuck his chin out and stared back at him. Dominick looked away and Rocious took another swig of brandy. Mid swig Dominick grabbed Rocious with both arms pulling him into a bear hug.

"I wasn't sure if you were coming back after getting the package from Eikard but I hoped," said Dominick.

"Wasn't sure if I'd make it," answered Rocious.

Dominick let him go, fixed his shirt and put his hand out for the bottle of brandy.

"I'm glad you did, I don't know what I would do without you," said Dominick.

"I failed," said Rocious.

"You made it back. Tell me what happened," said Dominick handing the brandy back.

"I'm not sure, he brushed off everything I threw at him like it was nothing and kicked my ass in the process. I was lucky to escape," said Rocious looking down.

Dominick waited for him to continue.

"I ran into the Severan Mountains, was lost for, I think, four days. May have lost my mind in the process," said Rocious pausing again to take a drink.

"Anything else?" asked Dominick.

"He said it wasn't him. I don't know the guy, but why would he lie to me right before killing me?" asked Rocious.

"For someone else to hear maybe? His soldiers probably think him righteous. What would his own people think if he was responsible for sending a dragon to kill Count Reed's people?" answered Dominick.

"I don't know, Eikard and Reed both deal with men from the Laza. I thought they were close," said Rocious.

"We've got another problem. He sent that message instead of sending an army," said Dominick.

"So what does that mean?" asked Rocious.

"I'm not sure. If he's going to keep your attempt on his life secret, I will keep his involvement with the dragon secret too. But I think he's going to make an attempt to kill me or to kill someone close to me. I need to keep them safe, including you," answered Dominick.

"What am I supposed to do?" asked Rocious.

"Move here, I don't care about the staff," answered Dominick.

"You have got to be fucking joking?" said Rocious.

"No," said Dominick resolute.

"I'm not a wilting flower, and I don't like hiding," said Rocious.

"Just for a little while. Until he makes his attempt," negotiated Dominick.

"Fine, but I'm still leaving in the winter. Don't like the cold," said Rocious.

"Fine, you're probably safer there than anywhere," said Dominick.

"Falcon isn't going to take this well. He already feels like a prisoner here," said Rocious.

"When you're not with him I'll have Decimus look after the boys," said Dominick.

"He's going to hate you for this," warned Rocious.

NO GOODBYE



When winter arrived and Falcon returned to Spring Forge he felt like he was escaping from prison. For the past nine months he had been constantly busy. Between fighting with Decimus, learning magic with Rocious, and studying math and history, he had no free time. The only time he really had to himself was the hour before falling asleep.

Not much had changed at the forge, but Falcon felt like he was exploring it for the first time. Last time he was here the innocence of youth still clung to him, but now he saw the world with a harsh clarity. Last year, Spring Forge was like a breath of fresh air. This year, it was more like taking a deep breath on a muggy day. Even so, it felt good to be working in the forge again. Once he learned what they could do, he had developed a passion for runes and the forge was the best place to explore that passion.

More than his purview on life had changed over the past nine months. He was getting stronger and faster every day; even his mind felt like it was sharpening. He could easily activate basic runes although they made him feel tired. Rocious told him the next lesson started when he was able to activate all of them, and even then he would continue to practice. Decimus was a dedi-

cated teacher and an excellent fighter, but like swordsmanship, his abilities came from his natural strength advantage and an unrivaled work ethic. Decimus was great at preparing recruits for a fight, but Falcon wanted more than that. He wanted to be like Colville: untouchable even when he was outnumbered and unarmed. Colville never seemed scared; he fought with a calm clarity that showed how sure he was in his own ability.

The day Falcon arrived at Spring Forge Colville agreed to teach him. But since then Colville had kept him working and cleaning so there was no time for anything else. He thought if all of his chores were finished early, Colville would be forced to teach him. He woke early and cleaned the fort before Flow started cooking, then he got a head start working the Forge. By midday he was exhausted, but there was nothing left for him to do. When he finished engraving the last piece of armor, he found Colville.

"I'm finished with everything," said Falcon.

"Good, we need to clean out the carts and start loading them," said Colville.

"I did it this morning," said Falcon.

"Then dust the displays in the showroom," said Colville.

"I finished everything. I was hoping you would close the forge to teach me," said Falcon.

"You still have a lot to learn from Decimus. Why look for another teacher?" asked Colville.

"When Master Lockland taught me runes, you said there was a difference between learning and understanding. I learn a lot from Decimus, but I feel like there's more," answered Falcon.

Colville put down his tools and looked at Falcon for a long minute, "Alright, let's see what Decimus taught you."

Colville led Falcon to the flat area they used for exercise and practice. Colville took a seat and watched Falcon run through the series of strikes and movements Decimus taught him over the past year. It took Falcon almost an hour to show everything he

had learned. He was covered in sweat and his voice was hoarse from shouting by the end.

When Falcon finished Colville motioned him over to one of the springs for some water, "You've got an excellent memory, but there's more to the martial arts than remembering."

"Thank you, sir," said Falcon taking the water.

"Why did Decimus start teaching you?" asked Colville.

"I asked him to," said Falcon.

Colville knocked the water out of his hand, "Don't lie to me boy, not unless you want this to be the last lesson."

Falcon looked down, "I was attacked by some older boys. Decimus helped set my arm and started teaching me."

"You didn't attack them or provoke them?" asked Colville.

"They said I was a freeloader, because I'm from Reed. They said I had to pay to use the street," said Falcon.

"So now you want revenge?" asked Colville.

"I don't want to be afraid of them," answered Falcon.

"Eh. Decimus has you shout when you strike or block. Did he explain why?" asked Colville.

"To focus intent," answered Falcon.

"It's more than that but close enough. When you fight, what is your intent?" asked Colville.

Falcon took a few seconds to think about the question before he answered. Colville made it clear not to lie, but Falcon was not sure if a guess would seem like a lie.

"I'm not sure, it isn't always the same," said Falcon.

"Good, explain," said Colville.

"Umm, I don't know," said Falcon.

"Show me again what Decimus taught you. But this time I want you to think about the intention behind every movement," instructed Colville.

Falcon had another drink of water before he began again. He closed his eyes, forming an image in his mind. When he began the first form, he imagined Hal, Fenir and Ruark were attacking

him. By the end he was tired, but he was so full of rage and adrenaline that he felt like he could smash Hal's imaginary face all night.

"Why do you want to fight?" asked Colville.

"So I won't be afraid—" Colville smacked Falcon spinning his head and knocking him to the ground.

"I told you not to lie to me. Again," said Colville calmly.

Falcon got up and ran through the forms again using Hal's face as fuel.

"Why do you want to fight?" asked Colville.

This time Falcon did not answer right away and Colville smacked him again.

"Again," said Colville loudly this time.

Falcon ran through the forms a third time as Colville watched. By the time he finished the sun was setting and his arms felt like jelly. His legs felt like they might buckle any minute.

"Why do you want to fight?" asked Colville.

Falcon did not answer right away but Colville waited for him to catch his breath.

"I want to kill Hal. No, I want to do worse than kill him. I want to shove garbage in his fucking mouth and beat him until he's a cripple. I want to set him on fire and watch him beg for me to piss out the flames," said Falcon.

"Sit. Drink," said Colville.

Colville watched Falcon as he drank and caught his breath. Falcon was not sure if Colville was angry with him and wondered if he would refuse to teach him. From what he knew about Colville he seemed to be a very compassionate man. He was far from the type of person who would teach him to kill Hal.

"It's not right what those boys did to you," said Colville.

"I hate them," said Falcon.

"Last year you were a kind boy with a simple and admirable motivation. You wanted to learn empathy and find a way to take your people home," said Colville.

“I still want that. I practice empathy every day,” said Falcon.

“But in the past year, how much time and energy have you put into fighting that you could have used learning magic?” asked Colville.

Falcon did not answer, he looked into the dirt because he knew Colville was right. He did the math quickly in his head: two hours a day for about ten months. He had spent a full month’s worth of time learning to fight.

“This hate is distracting you from what matters. I will teach you to fight, but not for revenge. I will teach you so you can get your home back, and trust me, if you want it you will have to fight,” said Colville.

“Thank you,” said Falcon.

Colville touched Falcon’s chin to look at him, “If you want to be the best, remember what you’re fighting for,” said Colville.

Falcon nodded and thought of something, “Yes, sir. Can I ask you something?” asked Falcon.

“Sure. But be quick, we’re late for dinner,” said Colville.

“Decimus said you gave up the sword. Why?” asked Falcon.

“I imagine it was the same reason your father never let you learn swordsmanship,” said Colville.

“He said when men fight with their fists they can become friends, but when they draw blades they are enemies. He told me I should make friends, not take lives,” said Falcon.

“I suppose I was just tired of making enemies,” said Colville.

COLVILLE TRAINED Falcon for the rest of the winter, mostly refining what Decimus had taught him. Colville made him move painfully slow while he explained the importance of each movement and every breath. But the biggest difference was that Colville had him remain completely silent. He said it would help him focus on breathing and keep calm in a fight. When spring-

time arrived he willingly continued the practice without Colville's supervision.

The only problem was time. There was simply not enough time for the highly physical training with Decimus, practicing empathy with Rocious, continuing Colville's training and going to his lessons with Fafnir and Drake. The compromise he settled on was to exercise with Decimus three days. The rest of the time he practiced alone. Even with the compromise he was constantly late and having trouble staying awake during his lessons.

"You get it yet?" asked Rocious.

Falcon startled awake, "Huh, What?"

He must have fallen asleep again instead of controlling the flow of magic. He was supposed to be activating a series of energy runes but he had fallen asleep before attempting it. It was the last series of runes before his next lesson. Rocious was uncharacteristically tolerant when he fell asleep. In fact, since Falcon was attacked Rocious had become increasingly supportive.

"You had your nap, now it's time to focus," said Rocious.

"Yes, sir," said Falcon.

Falcon rubbed his eyes and tapped into his sense of touch to feel the flow of magic around him, then picked up his engraved dagger. Instantly a jet of bluish energy shot from the dagger, knocking Falcon over the top of his chair. Falcon lay on the floor a moment and looked at Rocious surprised.

"What happened?" asked Falcon.

"You activated the runes," answered Rocious stating the obvious.

"But I barely did anything," said Falcon.

"Yup. Everyone is tuned to one of the eight types of magic, even if they are not *attuned*. We call this an *affinity*. Mine is fire, yours is clearly energy," said Rocious.

"So now I can stop practicing with the runes," said Falcon.

“No, but you won’t need them for your next lesson. All we need is this,” said Rocious showing Falcon a plain dagger.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” asked Falcon.

“You won’t do anything with it, I will. Watch carefully, I won’t repeat this,” said Rocious. He rolled up his sleeves then laid a towel on the table in front of Falcon. Rocious placed his left hand on top of the towel and stabbed the dagger through his hand sticking the blade into the wood table. Then pulled his hand free of the dagger splitting it completely down the middle. Falcon was disgusted when Rocious showed him his mangled hand. As he watched, the bones slowly moved back into place, the tendons and muscles knit back together and the skin sealed again. In about twenty seconds Rocious’s hand looked like nothing had happened.

“Before you can use external magic, you need to learn internal magic. That means healing. Most *attuned* will spend years healing the sick and injured. I have found that method wastes time and teaches very little. Lucky for you, I came up with a more effective way,” said Rocious.

Falcon scratched the back of his neck, “Okay?”

“You will need to call more magic, take a few moments and do as I taught you,” said Rocious.

Falcon closed his eyes and thought back to Paul’s death, as the memory solidified in his mind he felt magic fill him from farther and farther away. With a few breaths he had it under control.

“Very good, you will need to do that every day before our lessons,” said Rocious.

Rocious put his hand out to help Falcon stand, “Stand over here.”

Rocious put his hand on Falcon’s shoulder and moved him a little then he stabbed the dagger into his stomach. Falcon swatted at Rocious arm and fell to the floor clutching his stomach to stop the blood gushing out of his wound.

“My stoma—,” cried Falcon looking down at his stomach in

shock. "My..." Falcon's mouth filled with blood and he started shaking. "Mmm. Mm. My stomach."

Rocious knelt next to him and watched him panic. He placed his hand on Falcon's chest and looked him in the eye. "Calm down, the magic in your body is already healing it. I want you to try and stop the wound from healing," said Rocious.

Falcon's mouth continued to fill with blood, "You, help."

The wound in his stomach started to close just like Rocious said. He was still scared but starting to regain control as the initial shock wore off. He tried to move the magic away from his wound but he was just too scared to do it. He coughed out the blood in his mouth and felt the rest of his wound healing. Rocious helped him sit up.

"See, as long as you do not die immediately you can heal the wound," said Rocious.

"Then why should I stop it?" asked Falcon looking down at his hands resting in a pool of blood. His hands were still shaking, and his clothes were covered in blood.

"If you don't stop it there are two problems, first and most important is because you will be deformed. Bones that are misaligned or muscles that are not in the right place. The other problem is healing uses a large amount of magic. You can't change that, but you can make it more efficient," answered Rocious.

By the time Rocious finished speaking Falcon's hands had stopped shaking and his breathing evened out. But he was still sweating from the blood loss.

"What if I don't heal correctly?" asked Falcon.

Rocious showed his teeth in a wolfish grin, "You have me."

Falcon swallowed and stood, his legs shaking slightly.

"You can fix me?" he asked.

Rocious placed his hand on Falcon's shoulder gently and plunged the dagger in his stomach again. "In a way," he answered.

Looking directly in Falcon's scared eyes, "I know you're scared. But you need to stop healing."

WHEN HE FINALLY HAD A DAY WITH no training, Falcon met Thomas early in the morning. They were planning to meet Lucian and spend the day playing ball outside the city with a group of Lucian's friends.

"Where are we going?" asked Falcon.

"I told you: to get Lucian," answered Thomas.

"Are you sure he's here?" asked Falcon. He had been following Thomas for twenty minutes through an old rundown section of the city and was completely lost. In the year he had lived in Dominion he had never seen areas of the city like this. He learned to stick to the main streets where it was clean, organized, and relatively safe, but Thomas had no such restrictions. He knew every nuance of the city and led Falcon down the dirty side-streets revealing a whole world hidden beneath the surface.

"Yeah, he works here," answered Thomas.

"It doesn't seem safe," said Falcon.

"Trust me, it's fine, but you might want to take your cloak off," said Thomas.

"Alright," said Falcon pushing away his anxiety and trusting in his friend. He removed his cloak and tucked it under his arm while following Thomas through the winding alleyways. Eventually they came to an intersection with a much wider street and Thomas stopped to peek around the corner. Falcon leaned over to look around the corner, but Thomas put an arm out stopping him.

"Just a second," said Thomas continuing to watch down the street. "Alright, come on."

Falcon followed him around the corner onto a wide street almost like the rest of the city's main streets. This one was more run down and there were no shops anywhere, at the far end he

saw the shape of the stone wall separating the second ring from the third. It looked like a mansion was built into the wall with several balconies and a staircase leading up to double doors. On the balconies there were several armed men and a pair of guards at the double doors.

"Heyo, Lucian around?" shouted Thomas to one of the men by the doors.

"Na, ain't see him dis morn'n. Dat anoth'a dem Reed folk?" asked the guard through a mouth of broken and missing teeth.

"Na, just a friend. What about Marcus?" asked Thomas.

"Try Tati's new place on Callen," said a man from the balcony.

"Oh, hey Marius. Callen next to the old furrier's place?" asked Thomas.

"Yeah," answered Marius.

"Thanks, I'll check there," said Thomas waving hello and farewell.

Falcon followed Thomas down one of the side streets. After winding through a few alleys they reached another major street and Tatiana's new place. A couple of armed men were standing in front of it. Thomas waved to them and went straight for the door.

"Marius said his brother was here?" asked Thomas.

"Aye, he's in the back," said the man.

Thomas went inside with Falcon a step behind. The place was obviously another brothel but still being renovated. Similar to Tatiana's other brothels, the walls were being knocked down to make a large lounge area with a bar on the first floor. Also like the other places, behind the bar was Tatiana's office. Thomas stopped outside the door and waited. Falcon peeked inside to see Lucian writing in a notebook while presumably Marcus and Tatiana spoke with a group of rough-looking men.

A few minutes later the group of men left and Falcon took a seat with Thomas inside the office.

Tatiana put her hand out toward Lucian, "Let me see."

Lucian glanced up at Marcus. Marcus nodded and Lucian handed her the notebook to examine. Marcus took a seat next to Thomas and looked over at Falcon.

“Who’s your friend?” asked Marcus.

Tatiana spoke almost immediately cutting off Thomas, “Falcon Reed, he’s Lockland’s student.”

Marcus turned to Tatiana squinting, “How’d you know Lucian?”

“I introduced them last year,” said Tatiana continuing to scan the notebook.

Marcus tapped Thomas’s shoulder, “Kid don’t have a tongue?” Thomas shrugged.

Tatiana closed the notebook and looked up. “Everything checks out, you three can go.” Marcus raised his hand slightly palm down. Lucian and Thomas stayed sitting, but Falcon got up and walked to the door. Noticing that his friends were not following he turned back. “See ya tonight,” said Marcus dropping his hand.

Lucian and Thomas hopped up and followed Falcon outside. The moment they reached one of the main streets Falcon asked, “Who was that guy?”

“Marcus, I work for him and his brother,” said Lucian.

Falcon stopped walking, “You mean you work for a gang.”

Lucian stopped walking and faced Falcon, “You don’t know anything about them, you’ve lived here, what? A year?”

Falcon stepped forward, “I know enough to see Marcus is trouble.”

Lucian stepped closer staring down at Falcon, “And what? Master Lockland isn’t trouble?”

“He helps the people of this city, he’s risked his life countless—”

Lucian shoved Falcon, “He didn’t help last time our landlord beat the shit out of my mom. He didn’t give us food after half the

block burned down. Marcus did. Fuck you if he runs a gang, he looks out for us," said Lucian.

Thomas stepped between them, they both looked down deflated.

"I didn't know about all that, but is it safe to be working for him?" said Falcon.

"Chill Lucian, he's only concerned," said Thomas.

Falcon turned to Thomas, "Do you work for him too?"

"I just know them," said Thomas putting his hands up.

Lucian shoved Thomas aside and confronted Falcon again, "So what if he does? Are you gonna bitch at him too? Go back to your castle."

In the blink of an eye Thomas smacked Falcon and Lucian in the stomach, then caught them around the neck, "Chill the fuck out. We're friends." Thomas let them go. Falcon put his hand up to show he was calm.

Lucian took a breath, trying to calm down, "Sure, Marcus can be dangerous but he looks out for me and my mom. I read and do sums for him, that's all it takes to have food and a safe place to sleep."

Thomas prodded Falcon and Lucian to start walking, "I'm sorry I got mad. I know it's not easy for you guys. How is that everyone knows you, Thomas?" asked Falcon.

Lucian bumped Thomas into Falcon, "I'm sorry I got mad too. Thomas here's a legend, tell him the story," said Lucian.

Thomas let out a breath, "A few weeks after my dad died, one of Marcus's guys took a liking to my mom. She wasn't interested, he smacked her around a little so I stopped him."

"Stopped him? He tied him up and delivered him to Marcus like a present. How old were you? Seven?" asked Lucian.

"Six," corrected Thomas.

"Marcus thought it was hilarious. Word spread and most of the gangs try to recruit him now," said Lucian.

Falcon laughed, "How'd you tie him up?"

Thomas told the rest of his story and the three of them laughed together as they walked down the street. Instead of going to play ball like the original plan, they went to their spot on the wall between segments of the city. Falcon told them about Rocious and what it was like living with Dominick's family. In some ways they agreed it was worse than living on the street. As usual, the time he spent with Thomas and Lucian passed quickly, and before they knew it they had to go home. Thomas left to return to his neighborhood while Lucian escorted Falcon back to the inner ring.

Lucian shoved Falcon, "Come on, I know a shortcut."

"Alright," said Falcon jogging to catch up as Lucian darted through a line of shrubbery, "What is this place?"

"It's a garden grown by the academy, sorta off limits for the gangs. Full of people during the day, but check this out." Lucian said grabbing a stone off the ground and throwing it at a tree. The base of the tree started glowing a dim yellow, and then the light shot through the tree illuminating a network of veins inside the tree. When the light reached the leaves they flashed bright as if sending out a warning then went out.

Falcon let out a low whistle, "Killer." He picked up a few stones to light up trees on the walk.

Lucian spun and paced backwards, "There's a pond over there with these blue flowers but you've gotta see it in winter," said Lucian pointing.

Falcon's eyes lit up, "They sink underwater and glow," he said.

Lucian paused, "You've seen them?" he asked.

"Yeah, we have them in Reed," said Falcon with a smile.

Lucian tapped his shoulder, "I guess you have a piece of home, here in Dominion."

Falcon threw another absentminded stone, "Doesn't feel like home here."

"Ha, I've lived in Dominion my whole life and it still doesn't feel like home. I hate it here," said Lucian.

Falcon shrugged and walked in silence for a while. "Not for Thomas though, you can see it. He loves this city," said Falcon.

"You know he's not lying about his dad," said Lucian.

Falcon wrinkled his forehead, "Really? The legionnaires never mentioned anyone. I figured Decimus would know him, being ranked first in the ninth legion."

"Just ask him about—"

Lucian stopped mid sentence and watched the trees ahead.

Falcon looked over at Lucian and asked "Just ask him about what?"

Lucian raised his hand, "Quiet."

Falcon heard a footstep behind them and jerked his head around.

"Look who it is," said Hal with those hate filled eyes that looked so smiliar to his own.

Ruark walked from behind a tree to the right, "The king's little charity case."

Falcon shifted his weight onto his back foot, "What do you want?" he asked.

"He doesn't sound too happy to see you Hal," said Fenir stepping out from behind Ruark.

Falcon glanced behind; there was a clear path out of the garden. Then his eyes twitched to Lucian, his friend was not prepared to run nor was he nearly as fast as Falcon.

Lucian squared off in front of Hal, "You sure you want to do this?" he asked Hal.

Hal faced Lucian and smiled, "Sure?" he asked dropping his smile. Hal's blue eyes flared, "Yeah, we're sure."

Falcon's hands tightened into fists, his eyes widened and he turned toward Ruark and Fenir. Out of his peripheral vision he saw Hal move for him. Falcon pushed backwards into Lucian, "RUN!" he shouted raising his hands palms out. Hal spun swinging at Falcon, he swatted down the punches on instinct. Lucian stumbled but ran into the garden. Falcon hopped back

and ran after his friend with Hal, Ruark and Fenir close behind.

“Fucker. You’re only making it worse,” shouted Ruark.

Falcon kept his mouth shut and focused on the ground in front. He heard their footsteps fade behind him, but he was quickly catching Lucian. Falcon caught up to Lucian and saw him struggling. he was never going to get away. He looked over to Falcon, he was already panting and his face was a little red but then Lucian smiled.

“I hope you can swim,” said Lucian between breaths.

Falcon looked straight ahead and saw the gentle glow from the water lilies on the garden’s pond. He never learned to swim, but he was about to do it anyway. Lucian never slowed. He sprinted straight into a dive and glided across the pond with ease. Falcon was nowhere near as graceful, but he jumped into the pond at full speed and started thrashing his way after Lucian.

“Shit, I can’t swim,” said Ruark turning to run around pond.

Fenir followed Ruark but Hal jumped right on top of Falcon and they both sank into a mess of clawing limbs and muddy water. Falcon pushed Hal off him and tried to swim away. Hal caught his shirt and pulled him underwater. He struggled but Hal was bigger and held him underwater. Falcon felt his neck tighten and he took an involuntary breath of water. The next thing he knew someone pulled him onto the bank of the pond.

Falcon leaned to the side to puke out mud and water but Fenir kicked him in the face. Falcon rolled to the other side only to get a second kick in the face. As Fenir beat him unconscious he saw Lucian pull Hal out of the water only to have Ruark slam his face into the dirt. A moment later he blacked out.

FALCON WOKE up and spit blood and dirt out of his mouth. Coughing, he opened his eyes and looked for Lucian. He was unconscious in the dirt a few feet away. Falcon rubbed his face then looked at his hand, it was covered in more blood and dirt.

He tried to remember his lessons but he failed. The magic already started healing him so he crawled over to Lucian to wake him up.

“Come on buddy. Wake up,” said Falcon.

Falcon touched his chest, he was breathing. Then Falcon sat up and pulled Lucian’s head into his lap. He focused, trying to heal him but again he failed. Blood and tears fell on Lucian’s face and ran down his cheek, “Please, wake up.”

He closed his eyes, trying to stop the tears but could not hold it back. His chest heaved, his nose ran and his eyes blurred. “No one else, please.” He hugged Lucian’s limp body closer. “Please, not him.” sobs shook him again, “Please. Please.” Falcon pulled him closer. “I need him. Please. I need him.”

Lucian’s body lay limp, his chest slowed. Falcon felt the last of his life drift away.

TWO MORE



*D*ink, Dink, Clang! — Dink, Dink, Clang! — Dink, Dink, Clang! Falcon easily fell into the rhythm of the forge. In the ten years since he first started engraving runes for Master Colville he had learned to love and to hate the forge. He loved the simple song they made working the metals and the mesmerizing effect of flowing lava. But he hated the endless routine of engraving the same runes over and over, and the near constant pain and fatigue in his muscles after weeks of working.

Love or hate, over the years the forge became the only place Falcon felt truly at peace. The nights he spent in the castle were a pain he endured to keep to his studies and training. The nights he spent on the road had a nice freedom but it was a temporary freedom; there was always a destination that took it away. Here at the forge he could forget about all the bustle and clutter of his life and focus on a simple task: creation.

“You finished yet?” asked Colville.

“Yes sir, it’s over here,” answered Falcon.

Falcon walked over to another workstation where he had some of his finished pieces hanging. All of them had highly detailed runes, probably because of his critical and repetitive

lessons with Rocious. To avoid reproach Falcon had become annoyingly organized.

He stopped at the workstation took a sword off the rack, and handed it to Colville for inspection.

"What have you done with the bond?" asked Colville.

"I used what you taught me," teased Falcon, challenging Colville to figure it out in the same way he challenged Falcon.

"Looks like you flipped part of the rune," pondered Colville out loud.

"I combined it," corrected Falcon.

"Ah, you combined an open bond with a closed bond. It won't work," said Colville definitively. He handed the sword back to Falcon.

"It works on your armor," said Falcon.

"That secret was lost a long time ago, but if you want to waste your time, fine by me," said Colville.

Falcon knew Colville was probably right, but there was something that drove him to search for the missing rune. The book of runes Rocious gave him over ten years ago had one rune per page adding up to twenty-two runes but there were two blank pages at the end of the book. Twenty-two runes in a twenty-four-page book; it picked at his brain constantly.

As he learned more about the runes he was able to classify them into one of four categories. The first category was called *brand*, and those runes gave an object purpose or purposes. The four runes classified as *brand* were: absorb, contain, dispel and restrict. Colville argued with him wholeheartedly that they did not give purpose. He said they gave function – purpose was only for living beings.

The second category was called *construct* and these eight runes did exactly as the category implied: they were used to build a construct out of raw magic. These were the frame on which the rest of the runes were built.

The third category was the obvious one called *expression* and

they converted raw magic into one of the eight expressions of magic: light, fire, ice, wind, water, earth, shadow and energy. The tricky part about them was that they functioned like a modifier to the other runes and could be very finicky.

The last category was where the true power of the runes came from, and if you asked Rocious, it was where true empathy got its power also. The *bond*. The book contained only two runes that could establish a bond, an open bond or a closed bond. As Colville called it, an open bond was transferable: anyone who picked up the object could use it. The opposite was true for a closed bond: only one person could ever use it. But Falcon believed there were two more bonds, and he hoped to discover them.

“You’re never going to figure out the secret behind the armor without trying,” replied Falcon.

“I don’t want to figure it out, world’s better off not knowing. Where do you plan to find two people who can test it?” asked Colville.

“I was thinking the Pathos Academy in Dominion. I heard a rumor about a pair of brothers at the academy,” answered Falcon.

“Be careful going there,” warned Colville.

“Why is that?” asked Falcon.

“All the academies have a bit of a rivalry with each other, sometimes it gets pretty violent,” answered Colville.

“I’m not from a rival academy,” said Falcon.

“Lockland trains you, not Connelly. That’s all that matters,” answered Colville.

“It could be nice to meet *pathos* other than Master Lockland though,” said Falcon.

“What is so special about these brothers anyway? Have Denali and his daughter test it,” said Colville.

“The rumor is they are both attempting the Praetorian Trials next year,” said Falcon.

"Ah, the real reason: you want to see if you can attempt the trials," said Colville.

"Master Lockland would never let me attempt them. Besides, a *pathos* can help me transfer the bond... that is if it works," said Falcon.

"There's more than a year before the trials, he could change his mind," said Colville.

"Trust me, forty years won't change his mind," said Falcon.

"Regardless, be careful, in my experience *pathos* are a jealous breed," said Colville.

"I'm hurt," mocked Falcon.

"I'm serious, you'd be better off avoiding them," said Colville shoving him.

"Don't worry, I'll be careful," said Falcon pushing him back.

"Good, then load the cart, you need to leave tomorrow if you're going to catch up to Centurion Chaplin," said Colville.

"Eh, alright," groaned Falcon.

"Oh wait. I almost forgot, I made you something," said Colville.

Colville reached into his pocket, pulled out a medallion and handed it to Falcon. Falcon ran his hand over the medallion trying to make out the runes Colville had engraved. "What does it do?"

"It glows. Since you're traveling at night, it will help light your way."

IT TOOK a full two days for Falcon to catch up to Chaplin's caravan. Ten years ago they would never have considered leaving someone to travel alone; a large group was the only safe way to travel. But over the years Dominick demanded more and more weapons from Spring Forge. Now Dominick sent five carts in the winter and another five spread over the rest of the year. He

claimed it was to make sure all nine legions were supplied with new equipment.

To make sure they arrived on time Falcon volunteered to be the one to stay behind with the last cart, but in truth, he was the only option. No one else could help finish the work in the forge and safely lead the cart at night. Similar to the medallion Colville engraved to emit light, Falcon had engraved the carts' lamps to emit light. The only catch was the lamps needed a constant source of magic. Rocius had left on some errand for Dominick so the only *attuned* left was Falcon.

He caught the group, as they were about to start traveling on the third day. He pulled his cart next to the rear guard, before hopping down.

"Hey Clint, you wanna take over for me? I haven't slept in a few days," said Falcon.

"Sure thing, you should check in with Chap before you fall asleep though," said Clint.

"Thanks. Will do," said Falcon linking arms with Clint and handing him the reins to the cart.

Falcon grabbed his black cloak and pack before going after Chaplin. He found Chaplin tallying something in his notebook as the carts passed by.

"Hey Chap, I just passed my cart off to Clint, was gonna try and get some sleep," said Falcon catching Chaplin's attention briefly.

"Good thing you caught up. I've got a job for you before you pass out," said Chaplin.

"Sure, what is it?" asked Falcon.

"Yeah, the road's blocked a couple miles up. I sent Decimus to take care of it, but he could use some help," said Chaplin.

"Alright," said Falcon.

Falcon started jogging to the front of the caravan letting his breathing fall into a steady rhythm. With each breath he pulled a little bit of magic under control. By the time he reached Decimus

he was filled with enough magic to make his skin tingle. It would be more than enough to clear whatever blocked the road. Decimus was busy hacking away at a fallen tree when Falcon came over to help.

"I've got a better idea," said Falcon.

Decimus looked up at the sound, "What's that?"

Falcon took out a knife, and carved a series of runes in one of the fallen trees. Decimus stopped chopping and inspected the runes.

"Think you can remember them?" asked Falcon.

"I'm hurt, of course I can remember them," answered Decimus.

"Good, prove it," said Falcon.

He touched the runes, activating them, and creating a puff of wind that sliced straight through the tree.

"Cool," said Decimus.

"It won't be as easy as your knife but give it a shot," said Falcon.

Decimus did remember the runes, as Falcon figured. Over the years Decimus had disproved the stereotype of being a big, dumb guy who could only swing a sword. He was an uneducated man, not a dumb one. And he always tried to better himself, showing hard work paid off. If only he could read and do sums he would easily be Chaplin's Optio. They spent the next thirty minutes clearing the trees together, most of the work falling to Falcon since Decimus did not have the ability to refill the magic in his body.

"Last one's all yours Dec," said Falcon.

"I'm spent kid, you've gotta take this one," replied Decimus.

The downfall of using the runes: it drained your magic. And if you did not have the benefit of being *attuned* with the training to refill it quickly, it took a lot out of you. Falcon stepped up to the last tree and activated the runes with a wave of his hand. This time he changed one of the runes, to create a surge of raw force.

The result was the whole tree getting pushed completely off the road all at once.

“I’ll never get sick of seeing that,” said Decimus.

Falcon shrugged then gathered his cloak and pack to wait for the caravan.

AS USUAL, Chaplin led the group to the armory while Falcon took the special deliveries. Falcon looked forward to making deliveries, as it was a rare occasion for him to explore the city. It allowed him to meet new and interesting people, and at the same time catch up with people he seldom encountered. Most of them were more than delighted to offer him some fraction of hospitality. Lord Werval and his wife always insisted on feeding him and catching up. Sir Arik Denali routinely greeted him with a bear hug and his daughter even knit Falcon a pair of warm gloves. It’s funny how such a small gesture meant the world, even though he never once wore them.

When his deliveries were complete he went to one of the few places he had never been: the Pathos Academy. He knew little about the academy other than Praetorian Connelly was headmaster. At one time Connelly had given him an open invitation to attend the academy, but since Rocious had trained him privately for years that may have become a closed invitation.

Falcon entered the academy grounds trying to look more relaxed than he felt. When he noticed most *pathos* walking with their hoods up he quickly flipped up his hood and tried to blend in, although they wore robes and he still had traveling clothes under his cloak. He scanned the various buildings looking for any clue as to where he could find Connelly, but they all looked similar. Not wanting to dawdle, Falcon decided he would need to take a closer look inside if he was going to find Connelly. The first couple of buildings appeared to be dormitories, one of which kicked him out since he was obviously not a girl. Contin-

uing his search he eventually found the academy's library, and decided to ask for directions. There was a pleasantly curvy girl working the library's front desk, but she was focused completely on her book and did not notice Falcon.

"Excuse me," said Falcon.

The girl did not so much as blink. She scratched her face and continued to read as if she was in her own little world.

"Excuse me," said Falcon louder.

Again the girl continued reading, oblivious to Falcon's presence. Either she is deaf or that is one amazing book, he thought. Falcon walked around the desk and started reading the book over her shoulder.

Falcon started reading her book aloud, "Of all loci only those with—"

The girl jolted out of her chair, "BAAHHH!" she screamed, dropping her book. "Who?! What are you doing back here?"

"Same as you. Reading. This is a library right?" asked Falcon with a smirk.

"You can't be here," replied the girl, ignoring his question and pushing him around the desk.

"Actually I am looking for Headmaster Connelly," said Falcon.

"Headmaster Connelly? Who are you?" asked the girl. She was clearly flustered having someone else there.

"My name's Falcon, and you are?" asked Falcon.

"Falcon..." said the girl.

"Yes, like the bird, *falco peregrinus*," said Falcon.

Falcon waited while the girl took a few breaths to calm her nerves. He recognized the rhythmic breathing, as it was the same Rocious had taught him to help bring magic under your control.

"Nice to meet you Falcon, I'm Lucina. Most people call me Lucy. Well, I don't know a lot of people so it's not most. Most people don't even know my name, but if they did they would probably call me Lucy," rambled Lucina.

Falcon spoke up before she continued rambling, "Got it, your

friends call you Lucy, nice to meet you. Can you tell me where to find Master Connelly?" asked Falcon.

Lucy paused to take a deep breath, "Well, his office is actually on the third floor of this building. But he should be giving a lecture right now," answered Lucina.

"Okay, where can I find him?" asked Falcon.

"Cornwell Auditorium I think. I can show you," said Lucina.

"Don't you work here? You're just going to leave?" asked Falcon.

"I do, but in the two years I have worked here I've only seen a handful of people and they usually know where they're going," answered Lucina.

She took a hat, a scarf and a pair of gloves then followed Falcon to the door. Falcon held the door and let her take the lead.

"That's surprising. I would think you'd need to study to learn magic," said Falcon.

"I know, right? That's what I thought. But once everyone figures out the runes they forget about all of the books, and there are only a few masters that reference them," said Lucina.

"Yeah, learning magic isn't at all what I expected ten years ago," said Falcon.

"You're a *pathos*?" asked Lucina.

"Yeah," answered Falcon keeping it simple.

"Oh, it's just that normally students don't wear traveling clothes around campus. When did you start?" asked Lucina.

"About ten years ago," said Falcon reluctantly.

Lucina stopped walking and put her hands up. "Whoa. Look, I don't want any trouble."

"I'm not here to cause trouble, all I want is to talk to Headmaster Connelly," said Falcon trying to look innocent.

Lucina watched him suspiciously. When they first met she seemed to be a total scatterbrain but now she appeared to be ready to fight at the first sign of danger. If there was one thing that Falcon had learned from his years of training, it was what

someone looked like before they attacked. He read Lucina like she was just another book in the library.

Lucina brought her hand back a few inches, "What academy do you go to?"

Falcon dropped his eyes a little lower, "None, I'm—"

Lucina took a quick step and threw a blast of ice. Falcon kept his hands down but hopped to the side, moving barely enough to avoid the ice.

"Whoa there. Calm down," said Falcon trying to keep his voice jovial.

Lucina took another step to send a second blast of ice at him but her reflexes were simply too slow compared to Falcon's. He jumped forward and spun behind her. Her blast of ice flew nowhere near him this time.

"I'm not—" he said.

She spun trying to find him.

"Here—"

Lucina swung a blind fist trying to find him but Falcon caught her hand.

"To fight!" said Falcon.

Staring her in the face, Falcon realized she was frightened and let go of her hand, only to be kicked in the stomach. It was not a powerful blow but Falcon let it knock him over.

Falcon stayed on the ground and showed her his hands.

"Hey, hey," said Falcon. Lucina accepted her victory and stopped attacking for the moment.

"You need to leave," said Lucina.

Falcon stood up but kept his distance.

"First I need to talk to Headmaster Connelly. I'd like your help finding him, but I understand if that's too much to ask. Either way I suggest you not attack me again," said Falcon. Nearby students turned to watch the scene, more out of amusement than concern.

"I don't trust you," said Lucina.

“Tell me where he is then and I’ll be on my way,” bargained Falcon.

“I’m not letting you wander around causing trouble. I’ll show you to his lecture hall,” said Lucina.

Falcon started walking again, “Thank you.”

Lucina walked after him but stayed her distance, “Don’t try anything.”

“Got it,” said Falcon.

Lucina showed him the rest of the way to Connelly’s lecture hall.

Falcon reached for the door but Lucina smacked his hand away, “You can’t barge in during a lecture. They don’t have rules where you come from?” asked Lucina.

“Okay, okay. I’ll wait. Thanks again,” said Falcon.

“Do you cause this much trouble at your own school?” asked Lucina.

“I told you I don’t have a school,” said Falcon flatly.

“You said you were a *pathos*, or was that a lie?” asked Lucina.

“Are you this much of a bitch to everyone?” asked Falcon.

Lucina narrowed her eyes at Falcon, but he ignored her and took a seat on the floor next to the door. Lucina sat next to him, “You’re an asshole.”

Falcon took the medallion from Colville out of his pocket and spun it on his finger. “And yet you were the one who attacked me,” he said offhand.

Lucina turned her head away and they fell into a quiet competition of patience. Lucina started picking at the floor then realized what she was doing and stopped. Falcon stopped spinning the medallion and held it in his hand. Lucina looked down at the medallion and started tapping her foot. Falcon noticed her foot and had to stop himself from laughing.

Most children who grew up around court politics learned the trick to waiting and Falcon was no different. You simply had to find ways to entertain yourself. His most recent trick was acti-

vating the runes on his medallion one at a time, pulling back his magic right before it began to glow. It was something that Rocious made him practice over eight years ago to use magic more efficiently. Now it simply helped pass the time.

Lucina caught herself tapping her foot and gave up on patience, "I'm sorry I attacked you."

Falcon kept his eyes on the medallion, "Not for calling me a liar?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm sorry for calling you a liar and attacking you," answered Lucina.

"Thanks," said Falcon.

"That's all you have to say? *Thanks?*" said Lucina.

Falcon glanced at her hand twirling her hair.

"I accept your apology, so thanks," said Falcon.

Lucina let go of her hair and crossed her arms, "You're not sorry also?"

"No. You were being a bitch, so I called you a bitch. I'm not sorry," said Falcon.

"I take it back, you really are an asshole," said Lucina.

"It's a crappy job but someone has to do it," said Falcon.

Lucina stared, not sure if he was making a joke, flirting or trying to offend her. Either way he had a point.

"You sound like my sister," said Lucina.

Suddenly light burst from the medallion as Falcon turned to Lucina, "You have a sister?"

"Yeah, you have a problem with that?" answered Lucina.

"Does she go here?" asked Falcon.

"Whoa, I brought you to see Headmaster Connelly, that's it." said Lucina.

"I only needed him to help me find a *pathos* with a relative that could help me test something," said Falcon.

"To test runes. Well yes, my sister is here, but she isn't *attuned*," said Lucina.

“That might actually be a good thing. Let’s go,” said Falcon jumping up to leave.

Falcon smiled, trying to look innocent, hoping she would be more inclined to help him.

“You’re talking about genetic transference; it’s a myth,” said Lucina.

“Well, I think I’ve figured out how to do it with this set of runes. But I need some help testing it?” asked Falcon trying to make it sound interesting.

“Alright, but this better not be a trick,” said Lucina.

FALCON EXPLAINED everything about the runes on their walk to the dormitories. Lucina’s sister had arrived earlier in the day and was now resting in Lucina’s room so Lucina opened the door slowly, trying to be quiet.

When the door was halfway open Falcon pushed it the rest of the way, “Are you sure this is your room?”

At the sound of his voice Lucina’s sister jerked away and rolled off the bed getting tangled in blankets. She spit a string of curses as she struggled with the bedclothes.

“It’s alright Aemilia, it’s only me,” said Lucina trying to calm her.

Aemilia finally untangled herself, “Who’s this oaf?”

The first thing Falcon noticed was how attractive the sister was, even with the messed up hair. She had reddish brown hair, and a slim, fit body that was impossible to ignore. But what had him transfixed the most were her bright green eyes that almost seemed to glow. The only problem was that those glowing green eyes were full of rage and directed at him.

Lucina stepped between them, “This is Falcon, Falcon, my sister Aemilia.”

Falcon could not stop looking in her eyes, “Sorry about scaring you.”

Aemilia turned her chin up and looked at Lucina, "Please tell me this isn't your boyfriend," said Aemilia.

"No, I met him today," said Lucina.

"Then why is he here?" asked Aemilia, making a point to not speak to Falcon.

Lucina scratched the back of her neck, "I kind of said I would help him," answered Lucina.

"Actually I will need both of you—"

Falcon was stopped mid sentence by a murderous glare from Aemilia.

She walked up to him with her hands on her hips, "Why should I help you?"

Falcon stood his ground and looked down at her, "I'm not about to beg if that's what you expect."

"Then get out," said Aemilia pointing to the door.

Falcon stepped into the hall and Aemilia slammed the door almost hitting him. Before walking away Falcon took a few calming breaths and tried to not kick the door down. Falcon tried to focus on the reason he came here in the first place, but the girls arguing on the other side of the door distracted him.

"You always have to do this!" yelled Lucina.

"Do what?! Get rid of that self-important jerk," said Aemilia.

"He was actually kind of nice, but you slammed the door in his face, like always," said Lucina.

"Don't tell me you liked him? You can do better, trust me," said Aemilia.

"Easy for you to say, not everyone has options like you," said Lucina.

"Consider yourself lucky," said Aemilia.

Falcon started to feel like he was intruding and decided to leave. On his walk out he figured he'd go back to the castle and send Connelly a letter.

Since arriving at the academy Falcon had kept his hood up and attempted to avoid attention. Aside from the outbursts from Aemilia and Lucina he thought he'd kept a pretty low profile, but

the moment he stepped out of the dormitory he knew something was off.

His senses screamed at him to run, but then Aemilia burst through the door behind him. Falcon started to turn toward her, but she crashed into him. He fell backwards with her on top of him and slid down the steps to the dormitory. Again his senses screamed at him to run. He twisted to look around and saw two hooded figures coming toward them.

COMPLICATIONS



Falcon rolled onto his stomach and tried to push himself up, but Aemilia was still on top of him. She shoved him away and stood up. The moment he was free Falcon bolted to his feet and spun to face the advancing threat. His fears were realized when he saw Fenir and Ruark flip their hoods back. Falcon shoved Aemilia into the bushes next to the steps and spread his feet slightly, ready to run or fight.

His eyes snapped back and forth looking for an escape route. Aemilia started to say something, but Falcon darted at Fenir and Ruark ignoring her completely.

Fenir and Ruark stopped approaching and prepared to fight, "Coming into our turf and looking for a fight?" asked Fenir.

Ruark put his hands up, "Fool."

At the last second Falcon veered to the right and sped up. He was not looking for a fight at all. He only wanted to lead them away from Aemilia and he knew Hal could not be far away. Falcon ran around the side of the dormitory. When he reached the back of the building Hal was standing by the back entrance. Hal was surprised but he quickly recovered and blocked his way. Falcon sped up again as Hal threw a punch meant to stop him

cold. Falcon threw his hands up and shifted slightly to the left. Hal's punch barely glanced Falcon's face and went over his shoulder. Falcon grabbed Hal around the shoulder, kneed him in the stomach, and then shoved him to the side. By chance or great timing, Fenir crashed into Hal and they went down.

Falcon shifted focus to Ruark, quickly stepping in close. Just like Hal, Ruark threw the first punch. Falcon dodged to the right and punched Ruark in the head. Then again. And again. And again. "FFAhhhh!" The first series of punches were justice, the rest were vengeance. He grabbed Ruark's shirt as he started to fall and continued punching. His rage grew as he smashed Ruark's face.

Fenir recovered and tackled Falcon while he bashed in Ruark's head. Falcon and Fenir hit the ground. Falcon twisted and wrapped his legs around Fenir, keeping him in close. They grappled briefly until Falcon got his hands on Fenir's neck. His blood boiling with rage, he screamed in Fenir's red face.

Hal caught his breath while Falcon choked the life out of Fenir. Hal saved Fenir with a running kick. Fenir rolled onto his side coughing. Falcon rolled with the kick and sprung onto his feet. When he connected eyes with Hal, he felt his rage boiling out of control and took a breath to bring it under control. Hal and Falcon looked at each other as if staring at a mirror, hatred reflected back.

Falcon stepped closer with his bloody hands up. Hal threw a couple jabs, Falcon swatted away. Hal's next punch Falcon swatted aside and at the same time he popped Hal in the throat with his palm and hopped back. Hal's eyes widened with fear as he fell to his knees gasping for air.

A broken windpipe would normally kill someone but Hal was *attuned* and would heal fast before it killed him. Falcon stood over Hal watching him claw at his throat. He took a handful of Hal's hair and pushed his face to the street.

"Don't worry, I'm not a good teacher like you," said Falcon. He

knocked Hal's face into the ground and whispered in his ear, "Next time, I kill all three of you."

Before walking away Falcon kicked him right between the legs.

ROCIOUS THOUGHT he had seen the entire castle in the ten years it had been forcibly his home, but time and again Dominick showed him somewhere new. Normally Rocious zoned out while he described some irrelevant piece of history tied to their surroundings. Today, however, he was supposed to meet Dominick in his great grandfather's study. Which meant he should locate a room he did not give a shit about by remembering a conversation he did not give a shit about.

Or he could do what he was doing, because he simply did not give a shit. He was searching for Dominick room by room while slowly getting drunk.

"You in here?!" asked Rocious as he kicked in another door and looked around. "Nope."

He took a swig as he walked down the hall to the next door and kicked it in, "You in here?!" he looked around, "Nope."

"What the fuck are you doing?" asked Dominick.

"Oh, you are in here," said Rocious.

"Are you drunk?" asked Dominick.

"I'm working on it," said Rocious.

"Give me that and close the door," said Dominick snatching the bottle of brandy from Rocious.

"Hey," said Rocious.

Rocious turned back to close the door, and pulled another bottle of brandy he had stashed in his cloak.

"Take a seat before you fall over and tell me how it went," said Dominick.

"I'm not sitting in that old ass chair, smells like... What the fuck is that smell?" asked Rocious.

“Smells better than this... is it blackberry brandy?” asked Dominick.

“Yup, it was the only thing worthwhile in that tomb,” answered Rocious.

“Tell me everything,” said Dominick taking a pull from his bottle.

“Good, right?” asked Rocious leaning in to clink the bottles.

“Surprisingly, yes,” answered Dominick clinking bottles.

Rocious took a nice swig before he recalled the last month he'd spent searching tombs instead of relaxing at Spring Forge. Dominick had been true to his word and over the years did not stop him from spending the winter months at Spring Forge. This year though, he had asked him to cut the time short to search the tombs. If Octavia was not exaggerating, Dominick worried the entire time, but he never said a word.

“I checked all six of the tombs—”

“Seven,” corrected Dominick.

Rocious narrowed his eyes at Dominick, “Were you hiding in the corner while I searched them for weeks? Because I'm pretty sure I didn't see the pale-faced king that I used to call my friend anywhere,” asked Rocious.

“I'm not pale,” answered Dominick.

“Yes, you are. You haven't left the castle in almost a decade. It was six,” said Rocious.

Dominick scratched his chin, “I'm certain there were seven of them. Did you find a clue at least?”

“There were some books in one of the tombs, but they were rotted through. The weapons and armor were similar,” said Rocious.

“You checked them—” Dominick began. Rocious stared at him again until he let him finish his report.

“I checked them but was only able to activate a few of the runes. Nothing special,” finished Rocious.

“You're certain?” asked Dominick.

"Magic is my life, I'm certain," said Rocious.

"There should have been seven tombs so if what you say is true I missed something in the records. I'll need to keep researching," said Dominick.

"Dom, it's time you gave up this madness," suggested Rocious.

"NO!" shouted Dominick smashing the brandy, "I made the mistake of not killing him during the war. I won't let this feud fall to my sons."

"Dom, I'm your friend and I'm asking you for your own good. Find another way," said Rocious.

"I've almost found it, and you expect me to give up?" said Dominick.

"I want you to take a break. Get out of this place once in a while," said Rocious.

They had been friends a long time and Dominick knew how much Rocious struggled with letting people get close to him. It was why he never argued about him spending winters at Spring Forge. So Dominick truly heard him when he warned him about isolating himself.

"Okay, what is this other way you suggest?" asked Dominick.

"Well, it starts by me joining your family for dinner," answered Rocious.

WHEN FALCON ENTERED his room he found Floriana straightening his bed. Not wanting to concern her, he quickly wrapped his bloody hand in his cloak and tried to slip inside his bath. The bath was separated from his main room by a vestibule with a double set of curtains.

The moment Floriana heard him she perked up and went to greet him, "Welcome home."

Falcon gave Floriana a quick hug and went through the curtains, "Thanks."

“You’re early for once, any trouble on your trip?” asked Floriana as she followed Falcon through the curtains.

“No, and I can be early,” said Falcon defensive.

“I will prepare a bath,” said Floriana.

“I can do it, can you get me some fresh clothes?” asked Falcon attempting to get some privacy to clean up the blood on his hands.

“First, let me have those,” said Floriana. Floriana moved closer to help him get undressed, as she had done since they were children.

Falcon turned away and took a few nervous steps back, “That’s alright, I can do it myself.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Floriana concerned.

“Nothing, I just want to do it myself,” said Falcon.

Floriana looked down, “As you wish.”

Before leaving Floriana pulled a chain above the bath to signal the castle’s engineers. The castle was connected with a complex network of stone ducts, and could send warm or cold air and water to almost anywhere it was needed. About thirty seconds after pulling the chain, water started flowing through a channel in the floor and filling the bath with steaming water.

Falcon waited until Floriana left the room before he dunked his hand in the bath and started scrubbing. The blood had dried and was a pain, but he got it off quickly enough.

Satisfied with the result, he took off his cloak and hung it next to the towels. As he was pulling his shirt over his head Floriana came back.

Floriana let out a gasp and dropped his clothes as she ran over to him, “Is that why you refused my help?”

Falcon pulled his head free and looked down at his arm, his shoulder; half his chest and his bicep were covered in blood.

He looked up at Floriana, “I know you hate blood.”

“So you hide it from me,” snapped Floriana.

Falcon turned away, “Because you worry over nothing,”

Floriana touched his shoulder, "I care about you and I don't want you hiding from me."

Falcon took a few steps away and started struggling with his pants, "Well, now there's nothing to hide."

Floriana went over to help, "Then tell me what happened."

"It's over. I'm fine. Can you drop it?" asked Falcon.

Floriana touched Falcon's chest, "Why don't you talk to me about these things anymore?"

Falcon grabbed her hand and moved away, "There's no point in reliving it."

Floriana frowned and moved away silently. Falcon hopped into the bath and started scrubbing off the blood. Floriana refolded his new clothes and picked up the dirty ones on her way out. Once the blood was gone Falcon dunked his head and closed his eyes to soak in the warm water.

When he opened his eyes and stood up Floriana was standing next to the bath. Her eyes looked sunken and slightly purple as if she had not slept in weeks. Her hands shook a little as she started to untie the front of her dress but in a few moments the dress dropped to the floor. Falcon watched her walk around the bath and slip into the water. His eyes moved up her leg and around her hip. She flicked his chin, drawing his attention up to her face.

Despite the exhaustion, she was young and beautiful, "I missed you."

Falcon moved the hair out of her face, and leaned down to kiss her. Floriana kissed him and melted into his arms. Falcon held her, enjoying the smell of her hair, the softness of her skin.

"I missed you too, but I'm tired of talking about every little thing that happens. Can you accept that?" asked Falcon.

"I'll stop asking, but it will help if you talk about these things," said Floriana.

"Thank you," Falcon picked her up and kissed her neck, then her lips. Floriana wrapped her legs around his waist and held onto his shoulders enjoying his reassuring strength. Falcon took

a deep breath, savoring the smell of freshly cleaned clothes and flour that clung to her even in the bath's fragrant water. She always smelled like flour from helping her gran in the kitchens. He kissed her neck. She ran her hands through his hair and let out a sigh.

He moved up to kiss her lips but she touched his mouth, "And no more hiding things from me," said Floriana.

"No more hiding," agreed Falcon as he took her hand linking fingers.

Happy with his answer she pressed her lips to his, and let him satisfy the urge built up from their months apart.

AFTER THEY FINISHED in the bath they laid in bed for a few moments to let their bodies recover. Floriana lay on his chest listening to his breathing slow down while she savored the result of their lovemaking. Like most young lovers, she had become addicted to the way her body felt afterwards and the content she saw in Falcon's eyes. It was one of the only times she saw the sadness and anger from his past be replaced with pure contentment.

Falcon looked down at her, the exhaustion was gone. Her eyes bright and her cheeks slightly flushed, even her hands seemed to move more fluidly.

"We've got more catching up to do," said Floriana as she pushed herself up to sit on top of him.

Falcon picked her up and laid her on the bed, "Later, I have to go to dinner."

"There's time, I'll be really quick. Promise," pleaded Floriana.

"I have to get ready, I don't want to be late," said Falcon slipping away to find his clothes.

Falcon did not see his clothes so he went to check near the bath. When he came back Floriana was wearing his shirt with the

rest sitting neatly on the bed. Falcon walked over to get them, but Floriana stopped him with her foot.

"There's a price," said Floriana.

"And if I don't want to pay?" asked Falcon.

"You can wear my dress, or go to dinner naked," teased Floriana.

Falcon did not wait any longer or say anything more. He simply grabbed her leg and dragged her across the bed to take his clothes back... after paying.

FLORIANA WAS NOT quick like she promised so Falcon was late for dinner, as usual. But it seemed that he was not the only person that had not arrived yet, there were two more empty seats. One was for Dominick and would likely remain empty. The other was for Rocious, who should have returned from another errand for Dominick.

"Right on time," said Fafnir sarcastically as Falcon entered the room.

"He's only late because he has actual responsibilities. Unlike someone else I know," said Drake.

"I have responsibilities, like joining our lovely mother for dinner," said Fafnir.

"Don't forget sleeping until noon," said Falcon.

Falcon tapped fists with Drake before taking his seat. The two had become close over the years, finding a kinship in the weight of responsibility. There was no mistaking them for brothers—Falcon's blonde hair and blue eyes contrasted with Drake's black hair and eyes—but that did not stop most of Dominick's advisors from making that assumption. Likely due to shared mannerisms and inside jokes. They even teased Fafnir in the same way.

"Perhaps you will stop insulting each other so we can enjoy a meal together," suggested Octavia.

“Mother, when will you learn? This is how we enjoy time together,” said Fafnir.

“Well, you will need to find a more pleasant way to speak to each other. I am hosting a party—”

The doors suddenly slammed open. Rocious and Dominick stumbled into the room, clearly drunk. Dominick helped Rocious to his seat then took his own.

“You were saying?” prompted Dominick.

“I was saying... are you drunk?” asked Octavia.

Rocious nodded vigorously, “Definitely, your husband I’m not sure about,” answered Rocious.

“You’re hosting a party,” said Drake.

“Yes, I’m hosting a party. Since Drake’s coronation is less than a year away we will need to find a suitable bride. So I have invited much of Lora’s nobility to attend the party and spend some time in the capital,” said Octavia.

Drake pushed his chair back from the table, “You expect me to randomly pick a bride after some party?!” said Drake offended.

“The party is for you to meet your options. It wouldn’t be fitting to have you marrying someone who cannot handle the demands of our station,” said Octavia.

“And you won’t be picking anyone. We will,” said Dominick.

Drake got up, knocking over his chair, “What the hell?! You wait until now to tell me all of this! It’s ridiculous!” Drake folded his napkin and dropped it on the table before walking to the door. Dominick reached toward him, but Drake pulled away so he got up and went after him.

“Ha ha ha, only guy I know who would complain about going to a party full of single women,” laughed Fafnir.

“He’s not the only one the party is for. You’ll be there too,” said Octavia.

Falcon laughed.

“You too,” said Octavia.

“What? Why should I go?” said Falcon.

"Your parents aren't around to make arrangements for you so the responsibility falls to me," said Octavia.

Whatever Dominick said to Drake it worked because they soon returned to the table. Although Drake's expression was calm, the rest of the meal passed in almost complete silence. Eventually, Dominick got up signaling everyone they could leave. When Falcon reached the hallway, he ran to catch up to Dominick. He had wanted to talk privately since last fall, but had not had the opportunity.

"Your Majesty, may I have a word?" said Falcon as he caught up.

"I understand how you feel. I met Octavia in the same way. At first I hated the idea of it, but we learned to love each other," said Dominick.

"It's not that, I will do my duty. It's my people. I stopped to see them again today and now that construction on the third ring is finished they need work," said Falcon.

"Hmm, what do you want me to do?" asked Dominick.

"Anything really. They work hard and can build whatever the city needs, but they need materials and money. Heck, you could let them farm some of the fields outside the city. I'll even lead them somewhere else if it will help," began Falcon.

"All of that costs money that we don't have. And there is nowhere safe for them to go," said Dominick.

"What about returning to Reed?" asked Falcon.

"The empath's I sent still haven't figured out how to bring down the barrier. Besides, if you did bring down the barrier, you'd need trained men to defend the fort," said Dominick.

"I know, and everyone has built lives here. But without work it's hard to keep those lives," said Falcon. Dominick touched Falcon's shoulder.

"Not today. I know you are worried about your people but I have all of Lora to worry about," said Dominick.

"There must be something you can do, anything," said Falcon.

"I'll have Samuel look into starting some construction projects. For now, you need to focus on your studies, training and this party. It's important that you make a good impression," said Dominick.

"Yes, Sire," said Falcon.

"WHEN WERE you planning to tell me? On the wedding day?" screamed Floriana as she attacked Falcon.

Falcon caught her hands easily, "I found out like twenty minutes ago,"

"Like you weren't hiding earlier?" she screamed as she tried to pull her hands free.

Falcon let her go, "Please Flor, it's not like that."

"Then what's it like? You want me to keep your bed warm until your wife walks by and you have to throw me off the balcony," said Floriana.

Falcon tossed his cloak on the nightstand and took a seat on his bed, "I don't even want to go to this party, but I have to."

"Why? Just don't go," said Floriana.

"It's my duty. I have responsibility as a Count to make alliances for my people," said Falcon.

"Yeah, your responsibility to find a wife," said Floriana.

"Flor, this doesn't change how I feel about you, it's only a party," said Falcon.

"Yeah, a party where Octavia will choose you a wife," said Floriana.

"For her to choose, not me. I chose you," said Falcon.

Floriana sat on the bed and looked down at her hands, "You chose me," she said.

Falcon took her hands and she looked up, "Yes."

"What if she's prettier than me?" asked Floriana.

Falcon let go of her hands and flopped on the bed, "What does that matter?"

Floriana continued her attack from earlier, "She is. Isn't she?"

This time Falcon did not try to defend himself, "There is no she. There's only you, who I've known my whole life, and a room full of strangers."

Floriana stopped attacking and laid on the bed, "I still don't like it,"

"Me neither, but it's my duty," agreed Falcon.

LOVE AND MURDER



*P*raetorian Connelly promptly replied to the letter Falcon sent requesting his help with testing the unique set of runes Falcon had come up with. Connelly suggested a meeting the morning of Octavia's party. The letter only suggested they have a conversation, but Falcon brought the sword in case Connelly brought the brothers he was hoping to have test it. After training with Decimus, Falcon waited in the main courtyard for Connelly to arrive.

"Thanks for the help this morning," said Decimus.

"It's the least I can do after you've trained me all these years," said Falcon.

"I'm just amazed you got something out of Centurion Percy's kid," said Decimus.

"Who?" asked Falcon.

"The one with the glasses," clarified Decimus.

"Oh, Pubic I think they called him. Can't see worth shit," said Falcon.

"Yeah, that one. What did you show him?" said Decimus.

"His dad taught him some complex disarming nonsense. I showed him something simple," answered Falcon.

"What's wrong with that complex nonsense?" asked Decimus.

Falcon shrugged, "It's too much to remember in a fight. You know, you barely have time to react."

"Yeah, but I've seen you use that complex disarming nonsense?" asked Decimus.

"I'm not blind and slow. But I only do that against Colville, he's too good for simple," answered Falcon.

"Same with the sword. Colville changes the game," agreed Decimus.

"Anyway, what happened? I expected twice this many recruits," said Falcon.

"Not until tomorrow," said Decimus.

"Oh," said Falcon.

"That the guy?" asked Decimus pointing to the man entering the eastern gate.

"Yeah, that's him, but I didn't know he would be with those two," said Falcon.

"They look pretty good to me," said Decimus.

"Wait until they start screaming," said Falcon securing the sword on his back.

--Snap--

Connelly arrived precisely when his letter said he would. His letter however did not mention that he would arrive with Lucina and Aemilia. Falcon fought his gut instinct to run and went to greet them. Decimus grabbed his sword and went with Falcon, just in case he needed backup.

--Snap--

"Thank you for coming Praetorian Connelly, Dominick sends his apologies that he is not here. He means no offense, but is busy preparing for the evening's event," said Falcon with a slight bow.

--Snap--

"Tell him there is no offense. I received my invitation a few weeks ago," said Connelly.

“Oh, Octavia didn’t mention she sent you an invitation,” replied Falcon.

“She did not, Prince Drake did. The invitation requested that I escort these young ladies. Lucina and Aemilia Grey, this is Falcon Reed,” introduced Connelly.

“I don’t believe we had a formal introduction last time,” said Falcon moving to greet the two girls.

“Nice to see you again, Falcon,” said Lucina matching his greeting.

“Are we expected to spend all day with him?” asked Aemilia.

“Sorry, you’re not that lucky,” said Falcon while everyone else was still processing her greeting. Aemilia turned to Falcon, but was distracted by the approaching sounds.

--Snap—Snap—Snap—CRACK—

“What is that?” asked Lucina.

“My teacher,” said Falcon as Rocious came flying over the courtyard wall.

--Snap— “I’m here, I’m here,” said Rocious.

“As reckless as always I see,” said Connelly.

“Don’t fix what ain’t broke,” replied Rocious.

“At least your student hasn’t picked up your bad habits,” said Connelly.

Falcon drew his sword and thrust it between Rocious and Connelly. Rocious looked to his student and let the insult drop. The sword’s intricately engraved runes instantly caught Connelly’s attention.

“The sword you mentioned in your letter. May I see it?” asked Connelly.

“Of course. About the letter, your reply didn’t answer any of my questions,” said Falcon.

“Let’s discuss inside,” suggested Connelly.

“Excuse me but we are only here for the party. Is there somewhere we can go while you discuss rune lore?” asked Aemilia.

“Sorry, Ms. Grey, but I told your father I would keep a close

eye on you until he arrives. Plus we may need your assistance," answered Connelly.

"As you wish, Praetorian Connelly," said Aemilia grudgingly.

"Follow me," said Falcon.

Since most of the castle was being prepared for the party Falcon led the group to a small room the soldiers used for meals. It had been cleaned and decorated in a northern theme to accommodate the current guests. After taking their seats Connelly placed the sword on the table.

"I'm glad to see you have taken an interest in rune lore. Now explain this rune you created?" said Connelly.

"I took what I knew about the known bonds and came up with a new and unique bond," said Falcon.

"What are you hoping to achieve?" asked Connelly.

"Each bond has limitations. Permanent bonds limit the user to only one person *ever*. Temporary bonds severely limit the amount of magic and the complexity of the runes. I hope to stretch these limits," answered Falcon.

"Others have tried. It can't be done," said Connelly.

Falcon looked over to Rocius. Rocius closed his eyes for a moment, let out a slow breath and then looked up and nodded to Falcon.

Decimus leaned over to Aemilia, "Annoying, right?" She ignored him.

"What are you hiding Lockland?" asked Connelly.

"I'm sure you know Sir Thomas Colville. He has a suit of armor that has done it," answered Rocius.

"What do you mean it 'has done it'?" asked Connelly.

"The armor has been bonded to his family for generations," said Falcon.

"You saw this rune on the armor?" asked Connelly.

"No. Just like any permanent bond, it disappeared after the original bond," said Falcon.

“Fascinating, I would love to examine the armor,” said Connelly.

“Not bloody likely,” said Rocious.

“Can we get back on track? The test for this is simple. I bond it to Aemilia then Lucina will attempt to use the sword,” said Falcon.

“Bonding is far from simple,” said Connelly.

“He can handle it,” said Rocious.

“I’m only concerned for the girl,” said Connelly.

“I said he could handle it,” said Rocious nodding to Falcon.

Falcon took the sword and stood up. Decimus offered his hand to help Aemilia. Aemilia shoved Decimus and stood up on her own. Falcon walked around the table to stand in front of her.

“Have you ever experienced this before?” asked Falcon.

Aemilia looked over to Connelly confused.

“It’s simple; place your hand over the pommel and Falcon will do the rest,” said Connelly.

“Nothing to worry about,” said Falcon.

“Do I have to touch him?” asked Aemilia.

“Yes, he’ll put his hands on top of yours,” said Connelly.

“Fine, get it over with,” said Aemilia.

Aemilia took the sword like she was instructed. Falcon placed his hands over hers and began the bonding.

“This is going to feel a little strange. You may want to close your eyes,” said Falcon. Then in a low voice he mumbled, “It’s only pain, it’s only pain.”

“Pain,” said Aemilia before she realized he was talking to himself. Falcon smirked at her. He knew this was more than simple pain, but he was ready.

Falcon took a few moments to push magic into Aemilia’s hands, testing how it reacted to her. Then he pushed it through her hands and into the sword. Falcon closed his eyes to tune them out, and pushed more magic through Aemilia’s hands, acti-

vating the first set of runes. The blade began to emit an intense white light.

Falcon took a breath controlling the pain he was syphoning from Aemilia then continued pushing more magic into the blade, activating the second set of runes. The blade burst into flames.

He took another breath to control the pain then more magic activated the third set of runes and covering the blade in ice.

Falcon took a third breath to maintain control, but he felt something was off. The bond was not working. The rune was not working. The instant he felt it resisting he tore the sword from her hand, and completed the bond himself right before blacking out.

ROCIOUS WATCHED CLOSELY as Falcon started to bond the sword to Aemilia, but he was not watching his student. Instead, Rocious watched Aemilia. He looked for any sign of pain or discomfort to indicate the bond needed to be broken. Falcon was talented but this was his first time bonding another person and a lot could go wrong.

It took a few moments for Falcon to prepare himself for the bonding. What he was about to do was let Aemilia take his magic so she could activate the sword. The only problem was, giving up his magic was beyond painful. He would also need to take on Aemilia's pain and maintain his focus and control. Needless to say, *pathos* rarely volunteered to experience so much pain to see zero personal benefit. Hence the whole interest in creating a bond that was more than a one-time deal.

Rocious watched as the sword filled the room with light. He also caught a slightly pleasurable sigh from Aemilia, indicating Falcon was shielding her from any pain. When the sword burst into flames Rocious could not help but smile. Falcon was past the hardest part. When he tore the sword from Aemilia's hand he knew it was the rune that failed, not his student.

“What happened?” asked Aemilia.

“It didn’t work,” said Rocious.

Rocious knelt next to Falcon and put his hand on his back.

“He’ll be fine in a few minutes. Decimus, help him up,” said Rocious.

“Master Lockland, May I have a word?” asked Connelly indicating they should step outside. Rocious cracked his neck and followed Connelly into the hall.

“What is it?” asked Rocious.

“You told me he wasn’t ready to be tested, but he should attempt the trials,” said Connelly.

“He isn’t,” said Rocious.

“Did you see what he did? He bonded that sword without the rune,” said Connelly.

“I saw and not for the first time. But he is still my student, and I say no,” answered Rocious.

“Fine, I’ll sponsor him then,” said Connelly.

Rocious looked toward Connelly; the moment their eyes met Snap—he launched himself at Connelly and caught him by the throat.

Smoke started rising from Connelly’s neck, “I don’t give two shits about the trials, not even when I completed them,” said Rocious.

Connelly slowly reached for the hand Rocious had around his neck. Rocious let go.

“Why not sponsor him? It’s a great honor to attempt the trials and the next generation of Praetorian needs to take over,” said Connelly.

“That trials have nothing to do with *honor*,” said Rocious.

“Let him decide that,” said Connelly.

“No, he isn’t ready,” said Rocious.

“I think you’re being too cautious, but he’s still your student,” said Connelly.

"Funny, you called me reckless a few minutes ago," said Rocious.

"I did, but unpredictable might be more accurate," said Connelly.

"Whatever," said Rocious turning to leave.

"There's one more thing we need to discuss," said Connelly.

Rocious turned back, "What is it?"

"Three of my students were found with injuries that should have killed them. Luckily they were talented enough to heal themselves," said Connelly.

When he did not continue Rocious said, "Why are you telling me this?"

"I believe your student attacked them," said Connelly.

Rocious shrugged and walked away, "Three on one, standards must be slipping," he inquired over his shoulder.

IT TOOK MORE than a few minutes for Falcon to recover. In fact, it took most of the day. After breakfast he was supposed to train with Rocious, but instead he lay in bed all day. Between Rocious creating sparks or explosions every few seconds and Floriana constantly checking on him, he did not actually get any rest.

"Can you stop doing that?" asked Falcon.

"No," said Rocious.

"It's annoying," said Falcon.

"Yup," agreed Rocious.

"You don't have to stay with me, I feel alright," said Falcon.

"If I go downstairs I'll have to talk to Connelly," said Rocious as he stopped pacing and took a seat next to the fireplace.

"What's so bad about that? He's seems like a nice guy, kind of boring but nice," asked Falcon.

"Lets just say we have different views on," Rocious scratched his chin, "everything."

"You mean he doesn't drink," said Falcon.

“That’s something,” said Rocious leaning the chair back on two legs.

“What’s another?” asked Falcon.

“Fuck, I don’t know. Why are you asking me all this?” asked Rocious.

“Octavia said you two were close. I was curious,” answered Falcon.

“Well, we aren’t anymore. Besides I’ll have to suffer his questions all evening. That’s more than long enough,” said Rocious.

“I’d rather talk to Connelly all evening than be on the auctioning block,” said Falcon.

“Sounds like you’re nervous,” said Rocious.

“Whatever, go talk to Connelly,” said Falcon.

Octavia entered the room followed by Floriana who was carrying a stack of clothing.

“Praetorian Connelly tells me you may not be able to attend tonight’s party. Is this true?” asked Octavia.

“He’s fine,” said Rocious as he flicked more sparks at the fireplace.

Octavia kicked one of the legs of Rocious’s chair but he caught himself on the wall.

“I’m fine, no need to worry,” said Falcon.

“Good, you’re wearing this. Flor, make sure it’s perfect,” said Octavia handing Falcon a pile of clothes.

“What’s this?” asked Falcon.

“Your clothes for tonight, now put them on,” said Octavia as Floriana pulled him into the closet to change. “Master Lockland, since I’d rather not hear you complain about wearing formal robes all evening I had some made for you too,” said Octavia.

Falcon let Floriana help him get out of his plain clothes. She had been uncharacteristically quiet all day and he thought it would only upset her if he resisted. Besides, he secretly enjoyed the attention. But then he noticed the cloak Octavia brought for him. Instead of being black, it was grey.

"I can't wear that. Do you still have the old one?" asked Falcon.

"Lady Octavia's instructions were clear. You should wear the grey one," said Floriana.

"You'll have to trust me on this. Get the black one," said Falcon.

Floriana helped with his shirt, it was a simple white with a high neck, "I like the new one. The blue lining brings out your eyes," said Floriana.

"I'm not trying to impress anyone, I just want tonight to be over," said Falcon as he slipped the shirt over his head and let Floriana help with the buttons.

"Don't worry about tonight, I'll be waiting for you after the party," said Floriana.

Falcon looked up at her face suddenly, "Oh? You're not still upset?"

"No. Lady Octavia gave me some new clothes, but you'll have to wait to see," said Floriana.

"New clothes? And you're not mad at me?" asked Falcon.

"Nope, but you need to focus on the party. Be yourself," said Floriana.

Falcon hid his surprise because if she was happy there was no need to spoil it. He stood patiently as she started nitpicking over every little detail of his outfit, "That's the only person I know how to be."

ROCIOUS GOT up to take the outfit Floriana left on the bed. It was fairly similar to the white double-breasted shirt and simple grey pants he normally wore, cut slimmer and the lining was red but mostly the same. His cloak however was totally different. The one he typically wore was grey with a red lining. This one was a pristine white with a dark red lining and trim.

Rocious took one look and tossed them back on the bed, "I'm not wearing this,"

"Why not?" asked Octavia.

"It's white," said Rocious taking his seat again.

"That is not an excuse. Now get dressed," said Octavia as she turned to leave.

"You don't understand what—"

"I am well aware of the meaning," snapped Octavia as she turned back and stared at Rocious.

Rocious leaned back in his chair again, "Then you understand why I won't wear it,"

"I do not. White means you have trained other *pathos*, which you have," said Octavia.

"It means I was able to help teach a *pathos* how to walk the path between our worlds. To teach them how to pull energy from the divine into our world, but I haven't," said Rocious.

Octavia put her hands on her hips, "I spoke with Praetorian Connelly and he says you have. He even offered to arrange the test for Falcon,"

"That COCKSUCKER! I'm going to kill him," screamed Rocious as he jumped up and marched for the door.

Octavia stepped in front of him but he easily moved her aside, "Sit down Frederick!" she yelled.

"Falcon was just telling me I should talk to Connelly. I think he was right," said Rocious on his way out the door.

Octavia rushed out of the room after him.

"I swear if you cause a scene tonight, I will stab you myself!" screamed Octavia.

"You are causing a scene right now!! And the worst part is you are too fucking stupid to realize it!" yelled Rocious.

"No, I am looking out for Falcon's future. You are the one who's too simple minded to see the bigger picture," said Octavia through her teeth.

"The fuck you're looking out for his future. What you are doing is deciding his future for him. If you were really looking out for him, you'd let him spend his life with that servant girl," said Rocius.

Octavia took a step back and looked down without giving a reply. Rocius turned to march off again, but stopped when he realized he did not know where he was going.

"Is that what you told him?" asked Octavia.

"What?" asked Rocius still looking down the hallway.

"Is that what you told Falcon?" asked Octavia louder.

"To marry that girl? No. But it's true, he's been in love with her for years," said Rocius.

"Not that, I made plans for Floriana years ago. Did you tell him that I'm deciding his future?" asked Octavia.

"No, but it's true," answered Rocius.

"I'm sorry you feel that way but the truth is I'm giving him options," said Octavia.

"What does this cloak have to do with his options?" asked Rocius.

"Because for some reason people look up to you as a hero. This cloak reminds everyone that you are his teacher and that is important," said Octavia.

"They shouldn't need a reminder," said Rocius.

"When people look at him they see the kid who lost everything. I want them to also see past that, so we need to show them who he has become," said Octavia.

"The problem is that it tells everyone he's ready to be tested, but he isn't. When he fails we are going to be in a whole shit storm of problems," said Rocius.

"He might fail today, but there is no reason he has to be ready today," said Octavia.

"What are you trying to say?" asked Rocius.

"It's your responsibility to choose by whom and when he's tested. You can choose tomorrow, or in a year from tomorrow.

Announcing to the world that he is ready today doesn't mean he needs to prove it today," said Octavia.

Rocious knew Connelly was trying to play him, but he did not realize until that moment that Octavia was playing Connelly.

"Connelly won't let that happen, but what if he's not ready in a year?" asked Rocious.

"There's nothing he can do about it, and I'm sure my husband will find a way to deal with Connelly if need be," said Octavia.

Rocious snatched the cloak and poked Octavia in the chest, "Damn it I hate these mind games you all play. Give me the cloak, I'll play along, but if this fucks up, it's on you."

Octavia walked away satisfied, "Thank you, make sure Falcon understands," she instructed.

"I'll talk to him, but don't expect me to lie," said Rocious.

"Don't worry Frederick, you're a terrible liar," said Octavia as she left to prepare herself.

"YOU KNOW mom is going to kill you," said Drake.

"She won't know. Besides she's all bark, and no bite," said Fafnir.

"You clearly didn't hear her an hour ago," said Falcon as he walked up to join the two princes, and wait on the staircase of the castle's main receiving hall. They were supposed to officially greet guests as they arrived.

"What happened?" asked Drake as he fixed Fafnir's shirt.

"I'm wearing this for starters," said Falcon as he fanned out his grey cloak. "I'm not sure what else she said to Master Lockland, but I'd be careful about pissing her off tonight."

Fafnir swatted his brother away and pulled out his flask, "I'm her baby boy, she's never pissed at me."

"Congratulations Falcon, when were you going to make the announcement?" asked Drake.

Falcon blinked, "Announce? I didn't know I was supposed to. I found out about it an hour ago."

"Don't worry, I'll figure out a time to announce it tonight if Master Lockland has not planned something formal," said Drake.

"Ha ha, I guarantee he did not plan anything. I don't think you should announce anything. I don't know what I need to do for the test, but I don't think I am ready," said Falcon.

"I'm sure Master Lockland will explain it when he makes the announcement," said Drake.

"Maybe, but it doesn't feel right to me," said Falcon.

Fafnir nudged Falcon's shoulder and offered his flask. "Try a little of this, and it will feel more than all right."

Falcon put his hand up, "Keep that shit away from me."

"It's a party," said Fafnir through a mouthful of liquor. "You two need to learn how to have fun."

"I'll have plenty of fun watching you make a fool of yourself," said Drake.

"Meh, at least I'll be a fool who can dance," said Fafnir.

Drake laughed, "You haven't seen yourself dance,"

"He's right, looks more like a pile of jelly wiggling around than a dance," said Falcon straightening his clothes.

"Sorry brother, we can't all be twinkle toes like you," said Fafnir.

"Ha ha, I forgot about twinkle toes," laughed Drake.

Falcon bumped Fafnir with his shoulder, "Do I need to remind you who the better fighter is?"

Fafnir pushed him back, "Maybe I should remind you that your dance partner isn't trying to hurt you."

Falcon looked back out toward the arriving guests and straightened his shirt, "Wait until you meet Count Grey's daughters."

"No need to wait. Here come our guests," said Drake.

"Wow, I didn't realize so many people were coming," said Fafnir drinking more of his bottle.

“I didn’t know there were that many nobles,” said Falcon.

Drake took one last scan of everyone’s attire and snatched Fafnir’s flask.

“If you don’t remember someone, wait for me. If you can’t wait on me, a silent greeting is better than insulting someone,” said Drake.

“Got it,” said Fafnir pulling out a second flask and taking a swig.

“He’ll never remember everyone if there’s always an out,” said Falcon, even though he too was not sure if he would recognize everyone.

Fafnir turned toward the carriages, “Thank you Drake. Ignore this poser’s lies.”

“I’m the only one here who knows everyone, and tonight is about making alliances not insults,” said Drake resolute.

Falcon nodded, “Alright, follow your lead.”

Over the next hour the three welcomed the realm’s nobility, most of them minor nobles who were not familiar with the protocol. Drake politely directed them to the main hall. Until Fafnir decided to hug Baron Leonide’s teenage wife, Mara.

“Brother, would you mind escorting the Baron and his wife inside?” asked Drake to dismiss his drunken brother from causing any more trouble.

Falcon walked with Fafnir to the door, “Introduce them to Lady Octavia. She would like to congratulate them on their newborn,” added Falcon.

“Of course bro. Right this way Leo,” said Fafnir grabbing Leo by the arm.

Falcon walked back to Drake once they were out of earshot, “Good idea,” said Falcon.

“Nice divert,” said Drake.

“Just truth, she knit some gift for them,” said Falcon.

“Lord Werval, welcome,” said Drake.

Falcon gave a genuine smile, “Nice to see you again.”

Werval gave a deep bow but held onto his wife's hand, "Your Highness. Count Reed, you should come by for dinner soon," said Werval.

"That I should. Remind me later, and enjoy the party," said Falcon walking Werval and his wife to the door.

"I shall," said Werval with a nod.

When Werval was completely inside Drake turned to Falcon, "Be careful around him."

Falcon wrinkled his forehead, "Werval? He's harmless, just a lonely old man."

Drake looked ahead seriously, "A man does not become that wealthy by being harmless."

They both stopped speaking as the next noble approached. The man was well dressed and accompanied by his wife and a boy of about fifteen years old, presumably his son. When they were within ear shot Falcon waited for Drake to make the initial introduction, but he said nothing. Falcon glanced at Drake and waited a few seconds longer. When they got close enough that it was becoming rude to stay silent, Falcon spoke up.

"Welcome Duke Eikard, I'm glad you could make it," said Falcon with a slight bow.

"Thank you, Count Reed, Prince Drake," said Eikard.

"Duke Eikard, nice to finally meet you. Thank you for bringing your family. Enjoy the party," said Drake.

"I'm sure we will," said Eikard.

Eikard gave a slight bow to Drake, then shook Falcon's hand and led his family inside.

"What was that about?" asked Falcon.

"I didn't know who he was, he did not send notice he was coming. I'm surprised you recognized him," said Drake.

"I don't know how, I was still young the last time he came to visit my dad," said Falcon.

"At least we can join the party soon," said Drake.

"Eh, don't remind me," said Falcon.

. . .

FALCON STOOD in the hallway waiting for Drake before they joined the party. While he waited he let his emotions shift out of control drawing magic slowly at first, then faster and faster. He did not try to fight the magic for control. The magic clung to every emotion intensifying it, turning his apprehension into anxiety, his excitement into exhilaration. When Drake's footsteps reached his ears he fought for control. It took him a while to beat back the exhilaration, but inevitably he claimed his reward.

When he opened his eyes Drake was leaning against the wall patiently waiting, "Did you win?"

"Of course," answered Falcon.

"Why do you do that when you're nervous?" asked Drake.

Falcon started walking toward the hall then looked at Drake when he did not move, "How did you know what I was doing?"

Drake smiled, "I asked first."

"I don't do it when I'm nervous, I do it when I feel like things are out of control. It reminds me that no matter how difficult life is, I can fight back, I can win," answered Falcon.

"When we were twelve, I noticed it. My dad said it's the same thing Master Lockland does at court when some lord pisses him off." Drake pushed off the wall, "Let's go."

"Let's go," agreed Falcon.

The two entered the hall together, and were immediately swarmed by people. Falcon moved to let them talk to Drake until he grabbed his forearm. For the first time all evening Falcon realized Drake's poise was slipping. Falcon may have been able to control his anxiety, but Drake was still in the fight and he needed a helping hand.

Falcon squeezed Drake's hand and he let go, "Next time don't wait so long to ask me about it," said Falcon.

"Deal," said Drake.

Falcon and Drake slowly navigated their way through the

crowd of nobles. Fending off their barrage of conversations, questions, and of course, introductions. When one of them stumbled over a question or recent event they were supposed to know, the other swooped in to reply or divert the conversation. Falcon knew most of it was a silly competition for their attention, but he played along. Eventually they made it across the room and took their seats with Dominick, Octavia, and Fafnir.

"I'm glad to see you two didn't try to run off," said Octavia.

"I'm sure you had something planned if we tried," said Drake.

"We're all here now, that's what matters," said Dominick as he walked around his table to address the room. Slowly people glanced up at him and the room fell into silence. Not that Dominick needed silence. He could make his voice boom through the entire hall using his engraved amulet, but that was not the message he wanted to send tonight. The amulet gave him authority, but it also distanced him. That was the opposite of what tonight was about.

"Thank you all for coming. Lately it seems that we see less and less of each other. It has been almost twenty years since we have had a gathering this large. In that time the bonds that hold this realm together have weakened. But..." Dominick scanned the room looking in the eyes of those present. He lingered for a moment on Eikard. "But tonight is about forgetting the past, it's about mending broken bonds, renewing old ones and forming new ones. Tonight I invite you all to join me in a toast." Dominick gestured toward his sons. Then he raised his glass to the room, and waited a moment for everyone to join him. "To forgetting the past, forgetting our egos, and focusing on the future," said Dominick using his amulet to amplify the last word.

"To the future," echoed the room.

After the toast the room broke apart in dozens of little conversations as they were served the evening's meal. As most of the people in the room ate, Octavia turned to Drake and Falcon.

"After eating, you two will need to mingle on your own while I handle your brother," said Octavia.

"As you wish," said Drake. Falcon nodded agreement.

"Don't rush through conversation, but don't dawdle. Later, we'll open the stairs. You two will meet me on the balcony as soon as that happens," said Octavia.

"Yes mother, you've drilled this more than our professors. We know the itinerary," said Drake.

"You'll thank me later. Don't accept any proposal, and if you are interested, try not to seem eager," said Octavia.

"Yes mother. We've got it," said Drake.

Dominick leaned over to Drake and Falcon.

"Just let them talk and try to have fun," said Dominick. They nodded agreement and got up to start mingling. Falcon looked around the room and realized two things. First, that there were dozens of young men and women receiving advice from parents, like Dominick gave them. Second, he realized that he was the only person not being escorted by his parents.

As Falcon started moving away Rocious came over to him with his serving girl a step behind. "Mind if I tag along?"

"Not at all," said Falcon.

"Girl, another brandy," said Rocious.

Falcon put up his hand, "That's alright Claire, no brandy for me."

Claire produced a cup but stopped before filling it, "Non-sense, pour him one," said Rocious.

Claire hesitated until Falcon nodded then she filled the cup. She leaned in to hand it to him and whispered, "Thank you." Falcon smiled.

"You'll be thanking me when Connelly corners you. So what are we supposed to do exactly?" asked Rocious.

Falcon rolled his eyes, "Follow me."

Falcon made his way around the room methodically chatting

with each of the noble families. He gave each time for introductions and answering a few of their questions, but moved onto the next quickly. The conversations were mostly repetitive, but he had been doing this for a long time and danced the dance easily. He started to get a little annoyed by the girls who were too nervous to look him in the eye. Then he remembered how intimidating Rocious could be. The thought shook him, were they shy or was *he* intimidating to talk to? He certainly did not intend to scare anyone.

Rocious on the other hand became annoyed after the first conversation. He was a famous master of the path, but he hated discussing it. Octavia's plan worked perfectly: almost everyone was interested in Falcon's tutelage to the great Praetorian Lockland. The only problem was that Rocious hated small talk.

In the middle of a conversation about travelling with Duchess Camilla, Rocious ducked behind Falcon. He drained the last of his brandy then whispered in Falcon's ear, "Connelly's headed this way, time to move."

Falcon gave the room a quick scan. When he turned back Rocious was already gone.

"Since this is your daughter's first trip to Dominion, why don't we get a better view of the city?" suggested Falcon.

Camilla moved close to Falcon and took his arm, "Such a gentleman. I may need to claim you for myself."

"Actually, I was hoping to speak with the Prince before it got too late," said Camilla's daughter Hadriana.

"Perfect, come with me and I'll introduce you," said Falcon offering his other arm.

When he scanned the room earlier he noticed the stairs were being opened. Falcon led the two women to the closest staircase and away from Connelly. Few people had even realized the stairs were open, and they were the first to actually use them. Across the hall Falcon noticed Octavia shoving Fafnir up the stairs, and Drake close behind.

“Has anyone told you that you have the most beautiful blue eyes?” asked Camilla.

“Thank you,” said Falcon.

“My sisters would be so jealous if they saw me with those eyes,” said Camilla with a wink.

“Please mother, your flirting is offensive,” said Hadriana.

“Harmless banter,” said Falcon. “But if you want to see offensive, watch Master Lockland. He thought Baron Leonide was his wife’s grandfather and suggested he set her free,” said Falcon.

Camilla and her daughter both laughed.

“No, I’m serious,” said Falcon.

“Ha, well, he’s probably right,” said Camilla.

“She does look like she’s going to be sick when she looks at him,” agreed Hadriana.

“I’ll bet half the girls here will end up in similar situations,” said Camilla.

Falcon missed a step but Duchess Camilla kept him from falling, “You seem surprised?” she asked.

“I thought the party was about forming ties for the next generation,” said Falcon.

“It is but marriage isn’t about happiness, it’s about money and power. Mara is the youngest of three daughters so her greatest value to her family is creating a wealthy ally through marriage. Baron Leonide is a bit old and fat for my taste, but he’s kind and wealthy. Her father found a good deal for her,” said Camilla.

“There are certainly worse options out there,” said Hadriana.

Camilla squeezed Falcon’s arm, “And much better ones,” said Camilla as they reached the top of the steps. Falcon led them to the veranda then stopped to glance at the other staircase for Drake.

Drake reached the top of the stairs, “Speaking of which, I’ll be right back.”

All evening Falcon was supposed to be on the look out for a potential bride, but the only girl he thought was perfect was

Hadriana. Not for himself, but for Drake. They both had a passion for history and a quick wit. Not to mention she was gorgeous, maybe a little scandalous like her mother, but that could be chalked up to Antioch's liberal culture.

Drake saw Falcon and met him halfway, "You survived."

"So did you, plus I found the perfect girl for you," said Falcon.

"Please don't say Secundus's daughter," said Drake.

"And get involved with that criminal? Hell no. Seriously, let me introduce you," said Falcon.

Octavia came rushing across the balcony, "There you two are. Come here."

Drake took her arm and pulled her aside, "What's wrong?"

"Count Grey is throwing a fit demanding to see your brother. He says Fafnir insulted his daughter," said Octavia.

"Tell father, let him handle it," said Drake.

"Your father disappeared. I haven't seen him since his speech," said Octavia.

"What about Samuel? He should know what to do," said Drake.

"Wait. I know what this is about. I'll handle Count Grey, just do me a favor," said Falcon.

"What is it?" said Drake and Octavia in unison.

Falcon leaned over the railing to get a better look, "Go talk to Hadriana Antioch, she's on the balcony."

Drake's eyebrows shot up, "That's who you think is perfect for me?"

Octavia shook her head, "Her mother's a harlot, there's no way I'm approving that match."

Falcon shrugged and turned for the stairs, "That's the deal."

Falcon went down a few steps and leaned over the railing again searching for Count Grey. He caught some movement out of the corner of his eye. Count Grey was pushing his way up the adjacent staircase.

Falcon spun on his heel and bounded up the stairs, two at a

time. When he got to the top he took a few quick steps and slowed his pace so he would reach the top of the stairs at the same time as Count Grey. Right before he got there, Octavia stepped between him and Count Grey.

Count Grey was tall and muscular, even from two steps down he looked down at Octavia, "Move woman. This is between me and the boy."

Octavia put her hands on her hip and looked him in the eye, "It's Queen Octavia, and that boy is Prince Fafnir."

"This got nothing to do with titles, move or I move you," said Count Grey.

"Your daughter is malicious harpy. All my son did is give her some long overdue honesty."

Before Count Grey could reply Falcon placed his hand on Octavia's shoulder and gently moved her to the side.

Falcon was shorter than Count Grey but with the steps he matched his eye easily, "Count Grey, may I call you Atilius?"

Atilius climbed the last two steps and looked down at Falcon, "You Reed's boy? Step aside, this is a matter of honor has nothing to do with you."

"Yes, call me Falcon. But I'm afraid I won't step aside Atilius. Not until this matter is settled," said Falcon.

"Get me the boy and I'll settle it," said Atilius.

"Fafnir is probably passed out, so honor will have to wait until morning," said Falcon.

"Where's his father, or his brother? They'll have to man up," asked Atilius.

"If it must be settled tonight, I'm here," said Falcon.

Atilius poked Falcon in the chest, "I respected your father. For his sake I'll forget you said that. Now get the boy."

All emotion drained from Falcon's face, "Perhaps you did not hear me."

"I heard ya boy. You ain't your father. Don't meddle in matters you don't understand," said Atilius.

Falcon stepped back to make room on the balcony, "My father respected you. He would have talked you out of this. But as you said, I am not my father."

Atilius moved across the balcony pushing people to make room, "I'll be glad to beat the stupid out of you."

"You can try," said Falcon rolling up his sleeves.

"That cockiness is gonna get you killed," said Atilius as he took off his cloak and necklace, handed it to one of his daughters and rolled up his sleeves.

Falcon removed his cloak and medallion, "Not today."

He turned to hand it to Octavia, but in her place was Aemilia Grey alongside the rest of her sisters. Falcon flashed a smirk and tossed his cloak and medallion at her.

"Thanks," said Falcon turning to face Count Grey.

Like most northerners Count Grey was a large muscular man, but he moved with a gracefulness that was uncommon in men his size. Regardless, Falcon knew he would never beat Count Grey with brute strength, not that he had much to begin with.

Falcon had a very different type of strength, one that came from countless hours hammering away in a forge and training for hours with Decimus every day. His strength was far more economical. He could not end a fight with one punch like Count Grey, but he could punch a thousand times in a fight after running twenty miles. One punch or a thousand, none of it mattered because Falcon had an advantage that Atilius could never defeat. He had magic.

Falcon took an athletic stance, "Ready?"

Atilius cracked his neck and put his fists up, "Yeah."

Atilius paced steadily forward with his hands up like a boxer. Falcon noticed right away that Atilius was like a ram. He would constantly push closer. He ended fights fast, by never giving his opponent time to breathe. There was little chance of standing directly against him. Falcon dodged left, but Atilius expected it. Atilius adjusted and jabbed again, but Falcon kept his hands up

and spun to the right, putting himself behind Atilius. Falcon poked him in the back of the head and hopped backwards to avoid the arm Atilius swung as he turned.

Again Atilius rushed in like a ram, this time Falcon stood his ground. Atilius threw a barrage of punches. Falcon swatted them aside or bobbed his head, never moving his feet. Once he saw frustration bloom on Atilius's face, he blocked a punch with his left hand and simultaneously tapped Atilius in the face with his right hand. Frustration became rage and Atilius lunged only to have Falcon side step out of the way.

Atilius recovered and took a moment to control his rage and center himself. When Atilius came at him this time, Falcon dropped his hands and closed his eyes. Atilius punched him square in the face breaking his nose. A second punch bent him over and opened a cut above his right eye. A knee to the face knocked out a tooth and rocked him back. Atilius followed up with a punch to the stomach. Another punch further opened the cut above his eye and knocked Falcon to the ground. As Falcon pushed himself up, Atilius stepped forward and kicked him across the face. His head snapped back and he flipped onto his back. Falcon coughed out a mouthful of blood and spit out a tooth.

Falcon rolled onto his stomach and picked himself up. Atilius looked at him, there was no longer rage in his eyes.

As Falcon stood up straight, Atilius dropped his hands and his forehead wrinkled, "What the fuck?"

Falcon watched Atilius's eyes widen and heard gasps from the crowd as he healed himself. His broken nose cracked back into place and his cuts sealed themselves shut. In a few seconds he healed from a beating that would take most men weeks. Atilius looked down at his own hands, he had opened up several cuts on his knuckles and Falcon suspected a couple broken bones.

"Are we done?" asked Falcon.

"Aye, it's done. I still mean to speak with the king's boy in the morning," said Atilius.

Falcon suddenly realized everyone was staring at him. Luckily Atilius came over, put his arm around his shoulder and the crowd turned their attention away.

"Come have a drink with me," said Atilius dragging Falcon down the stairs.

"You just kicked the shit out of me, and now you want to drink?" asked Falcon.

"Fight's done, no hard feelings. A few drinks will numb the pain," said Atilius.

"I'm not much of a drinker. And I'm not in pain," said Falcon.

"Bah, you just need practice. And the pain's mine, I broke my damn hand on your hard head," said Atilius.

"One drink, but let me heal your hand first," said Falcon.

"You can do that? Two drinks and it's a deal," said Atilius.

ROCIOUS WATCHED the nobles enjoying the party, all of them so focused on impressing each other. It made him sick looking at all of them – pompous twits dressed in their rich clothes and covered in jewelry. Several times he considered burning the damn place down. At least he still had a few bottles of blackberry brandy to get him through the party. Octavia even gave him his own serving girl to keep his cup full, probably so he would not drink straight from the bottle.

"Are you even listening?" asked Connelly.

Connelly had finally tracked him down and wasted no time jumping into some lecture about the latest healing techniques. Rocius stopped listening as soon as he realized Connelly was trying to pull him into a debate about the importance of numbing a victim before attempting to heal them.

"Why are you still talking after I told you I don't care? Find

someone else to show off your knowledge to,” said Rocious taking another sip of brandy.

“Falcon will be tested on these whether you like it or not. Your bravado isn’t going to prepare him but I can,” said Connelly.

“If I went and sliced open his stomach right now would you shut the fuck up?” asked Rocious.

“That’s hardly necessary, no student is expected to heal such severe wounds,” said Connelly.

“Then I don’t care. Falcon can handle it,” said Rocious.

“I’m only telling you the standards we hold at my academy, and your boasting about his abilities will only make you look foolish,” said Connelly.

“Let’s not kid ourselves, the only fool here is you,” said Rocious.

“I won’t be the fool when your student doesn’t even know the wounds he’s expected to heal. For Falcon’s sake let me train the boy until the other masters arrive,” said Connelly.

“No,” said Rocious.

“Then why were you so hesitant to allow him to test?” asked Connelly.

“How many times do I need to say it? *Piss off!*” said Rocious.

“It has been a long time since you took part in the tests and we increase the difficulty every year,” said Connelly.

Rocious finished his glass and leaned closer to Connelly, “Alright, answer one question. If you say yes, you can train Falcon all you want.” Rocious put out his hand, “Deal?” he asked.

Connelly looked down at his hand then looked up, “What’s the question?”

“Do any of your classes involve healing infections?” asked Rocious.

“Of course not. What sort of question is that?” asked Connelly.

“No, what’s ridiculous is that you think your students are

prepared. Most people die from infections even after being healed," said Rocious as he got up to escape.

As he was about to leave he stopped cold at the sight of Duke Eikard across the hall. He had to find Dominick.

"You would have me risk my students' lives? It's reckless," said Connelly.

"Do what you want, but don't act like you're preparing them for what they'll face in the real world," said Rocious as he slipped away.

Connelly jumped up to follow him, clearly not finished with the conversation, but he bumped into the serving girl carrying Rocious's brandy. Rocious wasted no time using the distraction to get away from Connelly.

AFTER THE FIGHT, Falcon and Atilius swapped stories and drank. As they traded jokes and laughed, Falcon realized he really liked the people of Stormhelm. They were similar in some ways to his people. Not in that they fought and drank, but because they never hid their emotions. It was refreshing in a strange way. With Atilius you never had to wonder if you offended him; you knew right away. His expressive nature also made him a great storyteller. At the moment he was telling Falcon about the time Lord Cumberland's daughter beat the snot out of him.

"What the heck did you do?" asked Falcon.

"I bedded her, or she bedded me. I'm not sure who made the first move," answered Atilius.

Falcon laughed, "I'm sure Lord Cumberland wanted to kill you after that."

"Worse, he made me marry her," said Atilius.

Falcon burst out laughing again, "Should I congratulate you?"

"Best thing that ever happened to me. She was stunningly beautiful and beneath the screaming she loved me. Gave me two daughters before the fever took her," said Atilius.

“Ah,” said Falcon thinking of his own mother. He could not even remember her face.

“Where are my manners? Let me introduce you to my daughters,” said Atilius. “Stay here, I’ll go find them.” He stumbled out of his seat and pushed through the crowd.

Falcon’s thoughts lingered on his mother. All he had was a cloudy image and the little bits his dad told him. That Laza took her. In some way, losing her was easier than what happen with his dad. It is hard to miss someone you never knew, but that never stopped him from thinking about her. Wondering if she would be proud of him. Aemilia sat down next to him, snapping him out of his thoughts.

Aemilia tossed his cloak and medallion on the table, “Here’s your stuff.”

“Thanks, I forgot I gave it to you,” said Falcon.

Aemilia leaned on the table. “You mean threw it at me.”

Falcon let out a quick laugh, “Yeah, well, thanks all the same.”

Aemilia looked away, “Whatever.”

They sat there in silence for a little while. Falcon was not sure if he should say something or simply wait for Atilius to come back.

“You’ve got a pretty tightknit family,” said Falcon.

“How would you know anything about family?” said Aemilia.

Falcon froze then closed his eyes trying to maintain control of himself. As cruel as she was, she was right. What did he know about family? All he had was vague memories of a father who threw him away when he was still a boy and tiny bits of information about a mother he never knew. He did not even know his own brother’s name. He felt his chest tighten as the magic from all around clung to him.

He grabbed his stuff and stood up, “Goodnight.”

Falcon wandered through the party in a daze, not really focusing on anything. Before he knew it he was standing on the

veranda alone. He stood there watching the city until he heard a voice behind him.

"Your father would have been proud of you today."

He turned to see Duke Cato Eikard leaning against the archway to the veranda. He seemed like he had been watching him for a while.

Falcon turned back to the city, "How would you know that?"

Eikard came over and leaned on the railing next to him, "I knew him better than most. I saw your run-in with Count Grey," said Eikard.

"I'm sure it's the talk of the night," said Falcon.

Eikard shifted to watch Falcon, "Is that why you did it?"

Falcon shrugged, "No."

"Why stand up for him then? If Dominick's boy was too drunk to hold his tongue he needed the lesson," said Eikard.

"That doesn't make it right. If I burnt your house down by accident, would you rather burn mine down as punishment or spend the night next to my fire?" asked Falcon.

"I see your point, but what'll stop you from having another accident? Should I let you burn half the town before you learn?" asked Eikard.

"Mistakes tend to teach more than a beating," said Falcon.

"The beating isn't to teach, it's to be a reminder and a deterrent," said Eikard.

Falcon closed his eyes and hung his head, "If you say so, I'm tired of arguing."

"Not arguing, just talking. In truth I agree with you, but sadly some men need the beating. When you rule long enough, you'll understand," said Eikard.

"What do you want?" asked Falcon.

"Just to meet you, see how deep Dominick's dug his claws. And to give you a gift, that is if you're strong enough to take it," said Eikard.

"That doesn't sound like much of a gift," said Falcon.

“It might not be,” said Eikard.

“Okay, where is it?” asked Falcon.

“Oh, its very far, but I’m hoping you still know the way. I offer you Fort Reed,” said Eikard.

“Nice joke. I’ve had enough banter, and it’s getting late,” said Falcon.

Eikard looked Falcon straight on, “It’s no joke son.”

Eikard started walking inside but stopped, “You think on it. When you’re ready, find me in Keld. If you don’t know where that is, ask Lockland.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Falcon.

Eikard waved a hand but did not reply further. Falcon was too tired to pursue the duke any further, but his words stuck in Falcon’s head. He had thought of taking his people back to Fort Reed for most of his life. Then again, he had a life in Dominion. There were certainly problems here, but so there was everywhere. He had friends and people who loved him.

When Falcon stepped into his room Floriana jumped into his arms hugging him tightly. “You’re alright! I’ve been so worried,” screeched Floriana.

“Yeah I’m fine, not even a scratch,” said Falcon.

“Wait, what are you talking about?” asked Floriana stepping back to look at Falcon. She saw little bits of blood on his shirt. “What is that?”

“It’s nothing, what were you talking about?” said Falcon.

Floriana stared at Falcon hesitantly. “Lord Werval was murdered.”

ARRANGEMENTS



By morning more information leaked its way through the castle. Dominick had the tenth legion lockdown the entire city, but rumors still spread. After escorting his wife home Werval was attacked by an unknown assailant. Two of his guards were killed along with at least ten of the city guards. The trail of bodies led out of the city but no Werval's body was never found.

The moment the bodies were found Dominick had the ninth legion lockdown the castle, forcing the party's guests to stay overnight. Once the city was secure, he brought in one of his generals to take over the investigation. Until the general finished investigating, everyone was locked in his or her rooms or on constant guard in the central courtyard.

Falcon lay on his bed staring at the ceiling when Rocious opened the door and poked his head inside.

"Come on," said Rocious.

Falcon looked up, "What?"

"We've got a task," said Rocious.

Falcon leapt out of bed and snatched his cloak. "What, where are we going?" he asked.

Rocious held the door. "Courtyard. Get more magic now," he said and started jogging down the hall. Falcon closed his eyes and jogged after Rocious calling magic. When he felt it start fighting him he opened his eyes.

Falcon rushed forward catching Rocious, "What's going on?" he asked.

They turned the corner and Falcon hopped just in time to avoid tripping over an unconscious body. Falcon opened his mouth then shut it.

"I don't know exactly. Dom needs us to be seen," said Rocious.

"Do I want to know about the body?" asked Falcon.

"One of Greko's men," answered Rocious.

Falcon closed his eyes for a moment claiming his magic, "Is there a problem with General Greko?" he asked.

Rocious let out a breath, "No."

"Then why are we going against his orders?" asked Falcon.

Rocious started to smile, "We're going to piss in his breakfast."

"Why?" he asked.

"Do I need a reason?" asked Rocious.

Falcon glanced at Rocious with raised eyebrows.

Rocious snorted, "Would you accept, because I want to?" he asked.

Falcon glanced at Rocious again.

Rocious let out a slow breath, "Dominick asked me to keep him in check. Once he's gone we can get to work finding Werval."

"So we're going to do what exactly?" asked Falcon.

Rocious's lips peeled back into a wolfish grin, "Teach," he said.

FALCON AND ROCIOUS almost made it across the main courtyard without a single word of protest. But General Greko caught sight of them and signaled his men to intercept them. He was a rugged middle-aged man with a closely trimmed beard that matched his

short, jet-black hair. Greko's only distinguishing feature was his piercing blue eyes, rare outside of Reed.

"Return to your rooms, I have not completed my investigation," boomed Greko easily making his deep voice carry.

Rocious patted the air next to him, Falcon grunted. "That you, Greko? By all means continue investigating," said Rocious in a magically enhanced voice.

The crowd of nobles and the group of recruits perked up to watch.

"You are interfering with the investigation, return at once," boomed Greko again.

Rocious flicked his hand. Falcon broke off to join Decimus, "My student has duties here. I will be overseeing as I do every day," said Rocious in his normal voice.

Greko stopped in front of Rocious, blocking him.

"What are you playing at Lockland?" he asked in a low voice.

Rocious turned his head and touched his ear.

"What are you doing, Master Lockland?" asked Greko.

"It's Praetorian Lockland. Or as your soldiers—"

"I know what they call you. What is it you want?" asked Greko.

Rocious leaned in, "Nothing General, my student is simply here to train. I will sit quietly, then at noon I will spar with him. That is all," said Rocious.

Greko stood up straighter, "Fine, don't make a scene," he said.

"You know me," said Rocious putting his hand over his heart.

Greko squinted, "Yeah," he said turning to return to his field desk.

Rocious joined Falcon and Chaplin came over, "What do you need?"

Rocious leaned against one of the war carts and flipped his hand at Chaplin, "Do whatever you do," he said.

Chaplin looked at Falcon, then at Decimus and back to Rocious, "What's that mean?"

Decimus shrugged and walked over to this year's group of recruits hoping to join Dominick's Military.

"Line Up! Stand straight!" He waited for them to stop moving, then barked, "We're going for a little run. Keep up, you stay. Fall behind, go home."

Decimus turned and started jogging, Falcon ran by his side and Chaplin took the rear.

It was a slower pace than they normally ran so Decimus and Falcon easily carried on a conversation the entire time. Chaplin goaded the group, searching for the ones that were in over their head. They normally circled the courtyard one hundred times but for the first week, they only had them run fifty times. On the last lap Chaplin joined Decimus and Falcon, giving anyone who had had enough the ability to leave without pressure.

When they stopped Falcon turned to count how many made it, and to see if any were ready to puke. There were more than normal but his eyes stopped on one individual. "Thomas?" he asked.

His old friend waved, "Hey Falcon, long time."

Falcon worked his way through the group, "Too long. You're joining the military?"

Thomas looked down, "Sorta, yeah."

Falcon moved to stand in front of him, "Where've you been?"

Thomas looked away, "Eh, traveling a bit."

Falcon moved into his line of sight but Thomas looked away so Falcon jumped at him forcing him into a bear hug. "I've missed you."

Thomas squeaked out a breath, "you too." Wiggling out of his hug he said, "Fuck dude, you're gonna crush me."

Falcon looked at his hands, "Oh yeah, sorry. Been working in a forge for years."

Thomas motioned with his head, "That Decimus?" he asked.

Falcon tilted his head, "Yeah, you don't remember him?" asked Falcon.

"He looks smaller. He still number one?" asked Thomas.

"Last time you saw him we were ten but yeah he's still ranked first in the ninth legion, why?" asked Falcon.

Thomas cracked his neck, "No reason."

"Hope your ready to spar, they'll start calling people soon," said Falcon.

"Thanks for the heads up. Looks like they're waiting for you," said Thomas rolling his wrists.

Falcon glanced back, "Yeah, I'm the punching bag," said Falcon bidding farewell and joining Chaplin again.

Chaplin whistled drawing attention from most of the courtyard including Greko's men, "Roughly half of the men who come here earn a uniform. But I promise you, every single person will be given equal chance to prove themselves," he said.

Chaplin stepped back and Decimus stepped forward, "Now you'll spar. If we like what we see, you get a uniform," said Decimus pointing to one of the hopeful recruits. "You first."

Decimus leaned against the cart next to Chaplin. Falcon waited in the open area for the first recruit. He was a rough looking but muscular man, "Just fists?" he asked toward Decimus.

Falcon motioned to where the man should stand, "Yup, whenever you're ready."

The man glanced at Falcon and turned toward Decimus, "Why you giving me the kid?"

Falcon stood patiently searching the faces around him. He saw Thomas focused the same way he would watch the weekly challenge matches. Looking farther he saw Count Grey, sitting with his daughters, watching with a wide grin.

Falcon pointed at another one of the hopeful recruits, "Your turn," he said. The recruit looked confused, wondering if he was supposed to wait for the first match. "Don't worry about him, he's already failed."

That got the man's attention, "What'd you say?" he asked.

Falcon turned to him, "What's your name?"

“Burt” said the man.

“I said you failed Burt, you’re welcome to stay and watch or you can leave now. Your choice,” said Falcon.

Burt laughed and turned back to Decimus, “Come on now, do you really want me to fight the kid?”

Decimus let out a slow breath, “He gave you the options,” he said.

Burt put his hands up and faced Falcon, “Whatever, I offered an out.”

Falcon approached Burt steadily, “Sorry Burt, it’s too late for that.”

Burt took a quick jab, but not quick enough. Falcon dashed in and caught Burt’s wrist in one hand and his neck in the other. Burt tried to overpower him but Falcon redirected his strength by slipping under Burt’s arm and twisting it behind his back. Falcon looped his other arm around Burt’s neck and forced him to the ground. Burt struggled briefly until Falcon stood up leaving him passed out on the ground.

Falcon motioned for the next recruit to step up, “Whenever you’re ready,” he said.

FALCON SPARRED the group of men the rest of the morning, trading off with Chaplin and Decimus every couple matches. Thomas stepped up for the last match.

“Whenever you’re ready,” said Falcon.

Thomas put his hand up, “Would you like to take a break first?”

Falcon smiled and nodded, “No, that’s alright, I’ll be fine.”

Thomas put his hands up and nodded, “Okay, ready.”

Falcon stepped closer and Thomas stepped back keeping his distance. Again Falcon moved closer and Thomas moved away. Thomas kept evading for the next minute, but inevitably Falcon was able to corner him against one of the war carts.

"That's enough," said Rocious, it was the first time he spoke all morning.

Almost everyone turned toward him, including Falcon and Thomas.

"You may join the others, take some water," said Rocious hopping down from the cart.

Falcon nodded, and Thomas walked with him to get some water.

"Congrats, but you'll have to fight sooner or later," said Falcon.

Thomas shrugged, "I only like fighting when I'll win," replied Thomas.

Falcon scooped some water from a barrel next to Rocious and handed it to Thomas, "Can't always win," Rocious said as he walked into the open area they were using to spar and waited.

"What's he waiting for?" asked Thomas.

Falcon took a healthy drink, "Me," answered Falcon.

"You already fought twenty men, and now you fight him?" asked Thomas.

Falcon looked over at Thomas, "Yeah, well normally we don't have so many recruits."

"How are you not tired?" asked Thomas, as most of the men were probably wondering.

Falcon put his cup down and started walking away, "Practice."

As he walked up to Rocious, Falcon again scanned the courtyard. Before people watched with a hint of curiosity, now they were completely transfixed. Earlier they watched simply to stage off boredom, but now there was genuine excitement. Falcon shook his head – they had no idea. Falcon connected eyes with Greko for a second then turned his full attention to Rocious.

"Need a moment?" asked Rocious.

Falcon let out a breath, "No, I'm good." The instant he finished speaking Rocious launched himself at Falcon with an explosion. Falcon easily deflected the initial barrage, then they sped up.

Rocious moved so fast his movement was almost impossible to track. Instinct was the only way.

Suddenly they stopped pacing each other in silence. With a snap Falcon dove into a roll avoiding an explosion. They circled a little longer and again Falcon leapt and dodged more explosions, slowly getting closer to Rocious. A few paces away an explosion caught him in the chest. Falcon tumbled into a group of Greko's men.

He bounced onto his feet, but Rocious caught him with a second explosion that seared his face and crushed him to the ground. The fight was over. Rocious glanced at Greko's men, and saw their fear and excitement. He looked back at Falcon and crushed him into the ground again, then again and again, each time he glanced at the crowd.

As people started turning away from the sound of breaking bones, holding their nose from the smell of burning, he finally stopped. Falcon was barely moving, his body twisted at an odd angle with broken bones, his face a bloodied mess. As gasps came from the nobles, Rocious caught a few of Greko's men throwing up at the sight. Slowly the gasps of shock turned into an awed silence. Falcon opened his eyes and in front of their eyes his bones straightened, and he knit his body back together.

Falcon sat up and Rocious extended a hand to help him up, "Round two?"

Rocious looked over his shoulder at the castle, "No. We're done for today."

Everywhere there were faces frozen in shock at what happened. Even Count Grey, who had a glimpse of this last night, looked frozen. Greko pushed his way through the crowd, but before he opened his mouth doors to the castle slammed open. A line of Castle guards filled out and cleared a path. Dominick walked out with Octavia by his side.

"General, escort our guests to the throne room," said

Dominick. Octavia touched Dominick's arm, he looked at her and followed her eyes. "Falcon, Frederick come with me," he said.

Greko snapped into a crisp salute, "Yes, Sire," and marched off giving a string of orders to his men.

Falcon and Rocious followed Dominick inside. Once they were alone in the castle's hallways, Dominick turned to Falcon and Rocious.

"It seems that Werval is being held captive by Duke Eikard. He is the only person not accounted for aside from Werval himself," said Dominick.

Falcon stepped in front of Dominick forcing them to stop walking, "Then what are we waiting for, let's go get him!" he said louder than he intended.

Dominick gently pushed Falcon's shoulder and walked him toward the back entrance of the throne room, "We need to proceed with caution. We don't know where or why Eikard has taken him. Then we need to figure out how to get him back discreetly," said Dominick.

"Eikard is formidable," said Rocious.

Falcon looked at Rocious suddenly, "There's not a man alive that could stand against the two of us and you know it."

Rocious grabbed Falcon by the back of the neck, "I've warned you about overconfidence before." Rocious let go of him and looked at Dominick, "Our goal is finding Werval. If... that means fighting, we'll do it together."

Dominick stopped outside the throne room to address them one last time before entering. "I have a few tasks for both of you. Falcon, I'd like you to speak with Werval's wife. She trusts you and could use the reassurance."

"Consider it done," said Falcon.

"Frederick, I need you to talk with Connelly. He is insisting on having Falcon tested at his academy this week," said Dominick.

Rocious turned on Octavia and snapped, "I told you this was a bad idea!"

Dominick stepped in front of Octavia, "What's a bad idea?"

Rocious let out a breath, "Connelly wants to strip me of my title and train Falcon."

Dominick waved him to hurry up, "No, he wants to be seen training Falcon, that's nothing new. What's the big deal about him being tested? Falcon is more than capable."

"No, he's exceptional, and that has nothing to do with the test," said Rocious.

"You're certain he will fail?" asked Dominick.

"Yes," said Falcon and Rocious in unison.

Dominick pinched the bridge of his nose, "Get to the point."

"Falcon fails and the council will no longer consider me a Praetorian. Praetorian are beyond reproach, free to do as we wish without answering to the council. Connelly and I are currently the only two who have completed the trials," answered Rocious.

"I don't need a history lesson. What do you need? Be quick." asked Dominick.

"Time," said Rocious flatly.

Dominick nodded, "Time."

"How?" asked Falcon.

Dominick tugged the bottom of his shirt.

"I'll make it," he said extending his arm for Octavia and entering the throne room. Falcon and Rocious followed closely behind him. Greko had completed his task promptly and the realm's leadership was waiting when Dominick entered.

"As I'm sure you've all heard, one of our peers is missing. We have reason to believe Duke Eikard murdered two of Lord Werval's guards and kidnapped him." Dominick raised his hand to stop the audience's murmurs, and walked to the center of the room looking in the eyes of those present.

Dominick paced the room looking down.

“War,” he said stopping. He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again he looked up at his family. “It has been over twenty years since I have said that word. If I had my way, it would never be spoken again.”

Dominick looked back to his court, “Return to your homes and assemble your legions. Prepare them to defend your borders, but defend only. I ended one war, and I do not intend to start another one,” Dominick returned to his throne.

The moment Dominick sat Camilla Antioch pushed Count Grey out of the way and shouted, “You mean to let Eikard go? To just let Quintus be taken?!”

Dominick let out a low growl using his amulet to strike an innate fear in the members of his court. Duchess Camilla took a step back but stood her ground.

“I assure you, measures are being taken to find and free anyone Eikard is holding captive,” said Dominick.

“The only captives I see are right here. When do you plan to let us go?” asked Duke Daven Secundus causing a wave of agreed murmurs from around the room.

“Enough!” boomed Dominick using his medallion to enhance his voice. “Eikard took Lord Werval and left a trail of seventeen dead men. Be thankful your name is not on that list, Daven. Now shut your mouth and get out of my city.”

The nobles dropped into silence and the throne room’s doors opened for them to file out. Camilla Antioch and Count Grey stood in the center of the room waiting for the room to clear. Dominick signaled his guard to shut the doors.

Octavia leaned over to whisper in Dominick’s ear, “What is it?” he asked.

Camilla cleared her throat, “Two things, your Majesty. I would like to be involved in the search and rescue of Quintus. He is a dear friend and my loyal ambassador, it is my right.”

Dominick waved his hand, “I have men tracking him as we

“speak, but I will have General Greko include you going forward. What’s the second thing?”

“My daughter, Hadriana,” said Camilla.

“My wife tells me Drake is not interested. Is that all?” said Dominick.

“I heard your wife last night, but respectfully I believe it is her that is not interested. I would like to hear from Prince Drake,” answered Camilla.

Dominick turned to Drake and motioned him forward. Drake knelt next his father to speak privately.

Dominick glanced at Octavia then to Camilla, “They have my blessing, but I suggest they spend some time together away from...” Dominick waved his hand in a circle, “all this.”

Camilla flashed a smile at Octavia, “Thank you, Your Majesty. I will inform my daughter of the good news,” said Camilla as she flipped her hair and turned. She looked over at Count Grey signaling him to speak.

Count Grey cleared his throat and opened his mouth but said nothing. He cleared his throat again. “What is it, Atilius?” snapped Dominick.

“My daughter, well, she also...” began Count Grey.

When he hesitated Octavia said, “Yes, I’ve already made arrangements.”

Count Grey rubbed his hands together, “Yes, for Lucina, but my other daughter Aemilia?” he said.

Octavia let out a breath, “I thought this matter was resolved last night,” said Octavia.

“That’s not what I meant,” said Count Grey.

Dominick hung his head, “Spit it out already.”

“Aemilia and Reed’s boy,” blurted Count Grey finally.

“What!” shouted Falcon. “Hell no.”

Dominick raised his hand to quiet them, and motioned Falcon over to speak privately, “What’s the problem? She’s pretty, and rather intelligent if I hear correctly.”

"She hates me. It'll be torture for us both," said Falcon.

Dominick squeezed Falcon's shoulder, "I understand, but I actually agree with Count Grey."

Falcon returned to Rocious's side.

He looked down and stood up straight, "I'll do my duty for my people."

"It sounds like they don't get along so well," said Dominick to Count Grey.

"Aye, they had a rough start. Aemilia can be a bit wild, but she needs someone like Reed's boy. They just need some time to warm up to each other," answered Count Grey.

"I can't argue with the match, but I have my concerns for Falcon's well being," said Dominick.

"What's the concern? I saw the boy take a beating that should have killed him, and he got up like nothing happen. Surely he can handle a girl half his size," said Count Grey.

Before Dominick could reply Octavia placed her hand on the throne's armrest, "Perhaps a little time to get to know each other," she waved her hand in a circle, "away from all this."

"Alright, make the arrangements," said Dominick.

EXPECTATIONS



Falcon stared at the floor, fixated on the perfection before his eyes. Left foot fourteen inches forward, right foot twenty-eight inches forward, left foot eight inches, left foot six inches left, right foot six inches backward and stomp, twist, repeat. Drake paced back and forth, back and forth in such a precise pattern that it had Falcon mesmerized. It was the same precision he strived for every day as he practiced martial arts.

Fafnir on the other hand was annoyed by it, “Brother, please sit down. You are giving me a headache.”

“That’s probably last night’s wine,” replied Drake never missing the slightest movement.

“What are you so nervous about?” asked Fafnir.

Drake stopped pacing, “There’s a lot that could go wrong.”

“What are you so worried about? You could take her to a brothel, screw half the women there and she’d still happily marry you.”

Falcon and Drake looked at each other then at Fafnir. “What? It’s true.”

Drake continued pacing, “I want tonight to be perfect.”

“I just want to survive,” said Falcon.

"You heard Count Grey, she needs someone like you. Someone to abuse as much as she wants," said Drake.

"A beauty like that can abuse me all she wants," said Fafnir.

Falcon coughed, "What?! What happened to the evil bitch from last night?" asked Falcon.

Fafnir looked at Drake, "Did I say that?" he asked.

"Yeah," answered Drake.

"Oh, well I take it back," said Fafnir.

"Don't expect her sister to be any better, she tried to freeze me to death a few weeks ago," said Falcon.

Fafnir's eyes bulged and he opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Drake smacked him in the side of the head.

"Did you forget about your own bride to be?" laughed Falcon.

"Ha. Ha. No," said Fafnir rubbing his head. "I failed to realize she was *attuned*."

"Why else would our mother push for the match after you insulted her sister and her father wanted to break your face?" asked Drake.

"Aaah," said Fafnir.

"You forgot that part too," said Falcon.

"I didn't forget I just... didn't know. Is he still, you know, wanting to break me?" asked Fafnir.

"No, Falcon took care of it," said Drake.

"What do you mean took care of it?" asked Fafnir.

"He fought Count Grey for you," said Drake.

"Now he's forcing you to marry his daughter?" asked Fafnir of Falcon, "I must be dreaming," said Fafnir.

"Yeah, I'd say you owe him one," said Drake.

Falcon put up two fingers, "Two, for the two teeth he knocked out," said Falcon.

"Wait, you lost the fight?" asked Fafnir.

Falcon shrugged, "They're here!" he said.

Drake turned to Fafnir suddenly, holding out his arms for appraisal.

“You look fine. I want to hear about the fight later,” said Fafnir without looking at him.

Drake turned to Falcon looking for a genuine reply.

“Don’t ask me,” said Falcon standing up a split second before Count Grey pushed open the doors followed by Duchess Camilla.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” said Duchess Antioch.

“Evening,” said Count Grey.

Drake bowed his head, “Good evening.”

“Your ride is waiting outside,” said Camilla.

“You go ahead, I need a word with Falcon here,” said Count Grey.

Drake hesitated, but Falcon waved, “I’ll catch up.”

“Alright,” said Drake.

Count Grey took a seat, “I know this was not your idea.”

Falcon sat next to him, “Honestly, I am surprised Aemilia agreed to it also.”

“Actually she didn’t, and after what she told me I understand her reluctance,” said Count Grey.

Falcon felt his face get warm and looked toward the door, “Then why?”

“I know my daughter, and as crazy as this sounds, she’ll be happy with you,” said Count Grey.

“I find that hard to believe, but I’m worried more for myself,” said Falcon.

“Which is what I wanted to talk to you about,” said Count Grey.

Falcon raised an eyebrow, “Okay?”

Count Grey touched his shoulder. Falcon looked up as the count said, “What do you want? There must be something.”

Falcon rocked back and shook himself, “What? Are you trying to bribe me?”

“No, I want to know what Aemilia’s dowry should be. I don’t have a ton of money, but if that’s what you want I can speak to

her grandfather. Or maybe you'd like to be Stormhelm's ambassador and stay in Dominion?" answered Count Grey.

Falcon started walking away, "I don't want your money."

"What do you want then? Just name it," asked Count Grey.

Falcon turned back, "Nothing, I don't want to spend my life married to a woman who hates me," said Falcon louder than he intended.

Count Grey stood up and grabbed Falcon's shoulders again, "You two don't know each other. Sure she has a temper, but trust me, if you can get past that, I promise you will not regret it."

Falcon hung his head, "Can't you find someone else?"

Count Grey laughed and shoved Falcon, "She's a lot to handle. Most get scared away or turn into a hurt puppy before she gets to know them." Count Grey shrugged, "You're different, more confident and it annoys her because she can't walk all over you."

"Alright, I'll try, but no promises," said Falcon.

Count Grey smacked Falcon's arm, "Splendid, run along then. We can chat about the dowry tomorrow, don't want to keep them waiting too long."

Falcon took one last look at his prospective father-in-law and darted down the hall. He caught up to Drake and Fafnir as they were entering the carriage. He gave a quick wave to Centurion Chaplin and his men then bounced up to the carriage.

The carriage was fairly spacious, but with six people they were forced to sit right next to each other. The girls must have realized that and sat completely on one side together. The result was that the three guys had to practically sit on top of each other.

Falcon poked his head into the carriage, "Good evening," He had to wait for Drake and Fafnir to stop fidgeting and sit down. Drake had a blank look on his face meaning the night had not started as he hoped.

"Good evening," said Hadriana.

"Good evening. You look well," said Lucina.

"I am well, why would I not be?" he asked.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that. Just this afternoon you were beaten half to death,” said Lucina.

“No worries Luci, I still find it weird and I’ve watched it for years,” said Fafnir.

“Years? How long have you?” Lucina glanced at Fafnir, “Don’t call me Luci,” she said.

Falcon shrugged and ignored the question.

Fafnir opened his mouth but before he said anything Drake knocked on the roof to signal their driver. Falcon looked across from him at Aemilia, her expression was unreadable. She did not look unhappy like the last times he had seen her, just lost in thought, not at all interested in having a conversation.

He could respect that so he turned to Drake, “So when are you planning to tell us where we are going?”

Drake perked up at the question, “Right now we are going to have dinner at a little inn. You might know the owner, he’s friends with Sir Colville and Master Lockland,” said Drake.

“Doesn’t sound familiar,” said Falcon.

“The Inngraved Lantern?” asked Hadriana.

Drake’s eyes wrinkled slightly, “You know it? Your mother said you had never been there.”

“I know of it. Who’s the owner you mentioned?” asked Hadriana.

“Sir Denali. My father knighted him for defending the city. His family has owned the Inn for generations. One of the best views of the city,” answered Drake.

“Denali, I do know him. He owns a shop in the eastern market,” said Falcon.

Falcon glanced over at Aemilia again, this time she was looking at him with the same thoughtful expression as before. He flashed a smile and looked out the window. While his companions shared small talk, Falcon tried to think of a way to clear the air with Aemilia. By the time they stopped at *The Inngraved Lantern* he still had not come up with anything.

Closest to the door, Falcon slipped out the door and offered his hand to help Aemilia down. She glanced at his hand, but he waited until she took his hand. When she was on the ground, she pulled her hand back. Falcon looked over at Chaplin, he nodded so Falcon opened the inn's door, "After you."

Aemilia slipped inside without a word.

Denali's daughter Rika was organizing a stack of menus behind a tall desk, "Good evening."

"Good evening Rika, which way to the roof deck?" asked Falcon.

Rika looked up sharply, "Falcon? I'm sorry we are holding a private event for some nobles tonight," she said.

"Yup, that's us. Count Reed, and Lady Grey. The others are right behind us," he said.

Rika froze, looking around the desk, "Um yes. I'm sorry... I didn't, I mean I don't normally do this."

Falcon reached over the desk to touch her hand, "It's alright." Rika looked up at him, "Why don't you get your dad, we'll wait."

Rika smiled, "No, I'm fine now." Rika reached under the podium, "We have everything ready upstairs, right this way."

Aemilia and Falcon followed her to the roof as the rest of the group caught up. There were three tables set up for them spread across the roof, each meant for two people only. Falcon walked over to the closest table.

"How about this one?" asked Aemilia going to the farthest table.

"Fine with me," said Falcon moving to get the chair for her.

Aemilia put her hand on the chair, "I'm not helpless."

Falcon let her do it, "Never said you were."

Aemilia sat, crossed her legs, and rested her hands on top of each other in her lap. As Falcon took his seat he heard Lucina and Fafnir join them on the roof deck. Fafnir was saying something, but it seemed like Lucina was not listening. Fafnir continued rambling oblivious or simply not caring. Then Lucina started

laughing; despite his faults Fafnir did have a way of making people laugh. Hadriana on the other hand was the one rambling while Drake listened intently.

“What did my dad give you?” asked Aemilia.

“Nothing. We just talked,” said Falcon.

“Okay, then what did he offer you?” asked Aemilia.

“Money, and a position so I can stay in Dominion,” he answered.

“How much?” asked Aemilia.

“What does it matter? I said we just talked,” said Falcon.

“I want to know what it took to convince you to come tonight,” said Aemilia.

“A few words of encouragement. But if you must know your dad said he would give me anything I asked for. All he wants is for you to be happy,” said Falcon.

“If you don’t want to tell me fine, but please don’t lie to me,” said Aemilia.

Falcon shrugged, “I told you the truth, your dad offered me anything I wanted. I turned him down.”

“Then why are you here?” asked Aemilia.

Falcon leaned on the table and stared at her, “I’m trying to get to know you.”

Aemilia sat up straight, “Are you—”

“Enough. When you’re ready to have a real conversation you let me know,” snapped Falcon cutting her off.

Rika came over and poured them glasses of wine, then slipped away.

Aemilia sipped some of her wine, “You wanted to get to know me. That’s pretty tough if you won’t answer a few simple questions.”

Falcon laid his napkin in his lap.

“I’d rather share a meal in silence than play games with you.”

Aemilia started to say something then stopped, “Okay. What would you like to talk about then?”

"Tell me about Frostwind? Is it true there are wolves as big as horses?" asked Falcon.

Aemilia pulled her seat closer to the table and tucked her auburn hair behind her ear, "Yes, it's true about the wolves. At least the grey wolves, white wolves are smaller, almost like dogs. But red wolves are almost twice as large and consumed with fury."

"Is that the origin of your family name?" asked Falcon.

"Yes, but it's not the wolf's color, it's their eyes. The fur is similar, but the eyes are not. They say the eyes reflect their true nature, red for bloodlust, white for obedience and grey for loyalty."

"What do you think?" asked Falcon.

Aemilia paused, "I never gave it much thought." Aemilia bit her fingernail for a moment. "It's true enough, but humans caused them to act the way they do. We rewarded the white's obedience and grey became loyal because we hunt and fight alongside them."

"Bloodlust because we kill them," said Falcon.

Aemilia shook her head, "The bloodlust comes from something else."

AFTER SHARING A FAIRLY CIVIL MEAL, a healthy amount of wine and a few laughs, Drake lead the group back to their carriage.

"If you weren't my brother I'd have them arrest you for this cruel form of torture," said Fafnir.

"Patience little brother. Think of it like a test," said Drake.

Fafnir looked at the floor rubbing his head.

"You're making it worse," said Fafnir.

Hadriana took Drake's hand and traced the lines in his palm, "You can give us a small hint," she stated.

He looked up and smiled showing his teeth, "Patience," then closed his hand around hers.

Hadriana pursed her lips then shifted in her seat and crossed her legs, "I don't like to be patient."

Drake glanced down at her legs and followed the slit of her dress up to her hips, "Perhaps just a hint," Drake cleared his throat.

"YOU WILL SEE places old and wild,
And places modern and mild,
One direction the highest peaks,
The other the smallest squeaks.
It's a world hidden as dark as night,
But a stone reveals a world of light."

FAFNIR GAVE Drake a blank stare then hung his head, "Cruel and unusual torture."

"Sorry, I'm not much of a poet," said Drake.

"Nonsense, it was beautiful," said Hadriana.

Lucina kicked Fafnir lightly in the leg, "Would you like to know where we're going?" she asked.

He perked up instantly, "Yes, see brother, not everyone is as cruel as you," Fafnir stuck out his tongue.

"Then you should not have said I have a cold heart," said Lucina leaning back with a big smile.

"I take it back, you're all cruel. And for the record I said you were coldblooded," said Fafnir.

"That's supposed to be better?" asked Lucina.

Fafnir crossed his arms, "It was supposed to be a compliment about your ice powers," mumbled Fafnir.

"How is that a compliment?" asked Aemilia.

Fafnir searched the group for support, "I said, 'damn you're coldblooded!'" he searched the group again.

"Whatever, it was supposed to be a compliment," he turned

back to the window.

As Falcon watched the city pass by he felt his chest tighten. Their next destination was the last place he wanted to go.

The carriage stopped.

"Lucina, would you like to tell everyone where we are?" asked Drake.

Lucina nodded and slipped out of the carriage. She waited for everyone to join her then spread her arms.

"Welcome to Juterna's Garden. It was built by the academy, what, three hundred and fifty years ago?" asked Lucina.

"Three hundred and fifty-seven years ago, but it has been renovated several times since. The latest done by Praetorian Connelly about twelve years ago," said Drake.

"Grab a few stones and I'll tell you the history," said Lucina as she led them into the garden. Falcon stood at the entrance. He had avoided this place for almost ten years but it looked exactly the same. As if the entire garden was frozen in time, locked a beautiful netherworld.

Not wanting to spoil their excitement Falcon drifted off the path and made his way to the garden's pond. He sat on the bank and tossed a stone into the pond and watched ripples bounce around the surface.

Falcon heard footsteps behind him.

"You forgot something," said Aemilia.

Falcon threw another stone into the water, "Forgot what?" asked Falcon.

Aemilia sat next to him and put out her hand, "Me. I'm your date, remember?"

Falcon passed a handful of stones, "I wanted to be alone. Can you just go back to the group?" said Falcon.

Aemilia took a few of the bigger stones and dropped the small stones into a pile, "Back to being the fifth wheel? No."

Falcon took a handful of sand. The same blood-soaked sand

from ten years ago. Falcon let sand slide through his fingers, but did not reply.

Aemilia sorted through the stones, "What's your deal? I thought we were starting to get along," she skipped one of the flat stones across the pond.

"I'm not in the mood for another fight," as he continued to play with the sand.

Aemilia suddenly shoved him, "I wasn't trying to argue with you," she picked up a few of the stones and threw them at him, "but you're being a jerk."

Aemilia grabbed another handful of stones, but Falcon caught her wrist before she could throw them, "What the hell woman? You're going crazy."

Aemilia's temper flared and she lunged knocking him on his back, "Crazy!"

Falcon rolled trying to control her hands while she clawed at his face. He caught her other wrist and pinned her down, "What the hell got into you?"

Aemilia jerked her knee up into his crotch. Falcon instantly let her go and rolled away. But she jumped on him again. He put his hand up to block only to have her bite it. Finally taking the fight seriously, Falcon pulled her waist closer to keep her from kneeing him again and flipped her on her back. At the same time he caught one of her hands and pinned it above her head.

With her other hand she yanked a handful of his hair putting their faces barely an inch apart. Remembering her teeth Falcon tried to pull away but she pulled his hair harder and went in to bite him. But instead of sinking her teeth in she pressed her lips to his.

He tried to pull away, but only for an instant before he gave in. That kiss unlocked a wave of passion he never realized he was denying. The passion caught him off guard and completely took control. Where a moment ago they fought against each other,

now they only struggled to satisfy their desire faster. Lips pressed together as they tore at each other's clothes like animals.

Falcon tried to sit up but Aemilia pulled him in with her leg and undid his belt. He lifted her dress while she tugged at his pants. Her thigh was soft and warm, as he ran his hand up her leg another surge of passion hit him. He dove in for another kiss as she locked her legs inviting him to take her.

Falcon stopped, "You—"

Aemilia pulled his hair to cut him off, "Shut up."

Falcon grabbed a handful of her hair, pulled her head to the side and kissed her neck.

Instinct took over and ten minutes later they lay in the sand panting. Falcon moved a stray piece of hair out of Aemilia's face then watched her open her big green eyes and noticed a few tears escape. She ran her hand through his hair.

As Falcon rolled off of her he heard her suck in a pained breath, "Did I hurt you?"

Aemilia fixed her dress, "Don't worry about it, I'm fine."

Falcon fixed his pants and went to help her up. She waved him off and stood up on her own, sucking in a sudden breath.

"What hurts?" asked Falcon, "I can heal you."

Aemilia laughed, "I'll be fine."

Falcon moved closer to kiss her, but she stumbled backwards. He reached out to catch her and suddenly all the water in the pond surged to the other side. He froze and looked down at his hand, then motioned toward the pond again. Again the water rushed to the other side of the pond.

"We should catch up with the others before they come looking," said Aemilia.

Aemilia pulled Falcon's arm, but he stood still staring at his hands.

"That's cool and all but we should go," said Aemilia as she started to walk away.

When he did not follow she turned back with her arms akimbo, "Seriously?"

When he did not respond she threw her hands up and walked away.

Falcon shook himself out of his daze and ran after her, "Wait."

ROCIOUS POKED his head around the corner, checked both directions then darted down the hall to Falcon's room. When he reached the door he quickly opened it, checked to see if anyone was behind him and closed the door quietly.

"Why do you always hide in my room when you're in trouble?" asked Falcon from his balcony.

Rocious leaned against the door listening, "I'm not in trouble. I'm avoiding trouble," answered Rocious.

Falcon went inside and flopped on his bed, "What is it this time? Burning the carpets? Pissing in the plants? Or did you offend Tatiana again?" asked Falcon.

"I peed in the plants once. And I had a drama-free evening with Tatiana. It sounded like you had a fun night, judging by the girl's screaming. Where is she anyway? I have a job for her," asked Rocious.

"The girl is Floriana, and why do you need her?" asked Falcon.

Rocious stopped listening to the door and took his usual seat next to the fireplace, "To deliver a message to Dominick."

"Why can't you do it yourself?" asked Falcon.

"Dominick is with Connelly," said Rocious.

"I did it last night," said Falcon.

Rocious flung sparks into the fire setting it ablaze, "I figured the girl was either screaming from passion or because of the new one," Rocious paused and put his hand up toward Falcon.

"Aemilia," said Falcon.

Falcon sat on the edge of the bed, "That's not what I meant, I triggered an external expressive force."

Rocious sat up, "Show me."

Falcon rubbed his head, "I don't know how, it just sorta happened. I've been trying all morning."

Rocious sat back again, "Well, you found the trigger, that's what's important. Tell me how it happened, leave out nothing."

Falcon explained his date with Aemilia in excruciating detail. It took almost a full hour to finish because Rocious made him explain his emotional state in every moment.

"The trigger is connected to either the memory of your dead friend or your connection with the new girl..." said Rocious as he put his hand out again.

"Aemilia. Okay, so what do I do now?" asked Falcon.

"Keep trying, but focus on the memories tied to those moments," said Rocious.

Falcon closed his eyes and tried to relive last night.

"Should I be like trying to do something?" asked Falcon.

"What's with your generation? No patience. Figure out the trigger then I can teach you the rest," said Rocious.

"I can't believe you're lecturing me about patience," said Falcon still keeping his eyes closed.

"I don't like to waste time, but I have patience," said Rocious.

Falcon heard a knock on the door and opened his eyes. Rocious put his finger up for him to wait, and then slipped onto the balcony to hide. Falcon rolled his eyes, but waited for him before opening the door.

Dominick pushed the door open and entered.

"Frederick in here?" asked Dominick.

Falcon checked the hall then closed the door, "Yeah, he's hiding on the balcony,"

"What the hell are you doing?" asked Dominick, "get in here."

Rocious poked his head around the edge of the doorframe, "Where's Connelly?" he asked.

"On his way back to the academy I presume," said Dominick taking a seat next to the fire.

Rocious took his seat next to the fireplace again, "How'd you get him to go away?"

Dominick ignored Rocious and talked to Falcon.

"As you know, Connelly wants to hold your test as soon as possible, he's pushing for tomorrow."

"I told you he's not ready yet," said Rocious.

Dominick put his hand up, "You're leaving tonight."

"Tonight? I can't," said Falcon.

Dominick used his amulet to enhance his voice, "Stop interrupting and listen!"

They both shut up and waited for Dominick to finish.

"As much as it pains me, Werval's disappearance could not have come at a better time. I told Connelly I have a lead on Werval's location and I need you to investigate."

Falcon opened his mouth to ask another question then closed it.

"You're going to Spring Forge. That's where you've made the most progress in your training so it's ideal." Dominick paused and narrowed his eyes at Falcon.

Falcon glanced at Rocious and back to Dominick, "What?" he asked.

Dominick leaned on his knees, "Falcon, I'm going to tell you something, but it never leaves this room. No one can know about it."

Falcon moved closer to Dominick, "Got it."

"You know I've sent Frederick on errands for me over the years? He's been helping me search for my ancestor's armor, similar to the one Sir Thomas Colville has in his little museum," said Dominick.

"What is it you want me to do?" asked Falcon.

"To train, but also to help Frederick search," said Dominick.

"Where?" asked Rocious.

"I found records that mention an outpost above Spring Forge," said Dominick.

Falcon's eyes bulged, "Have you seen that cliff? It's suicide."

"That's probably why no one has seen it for generations, but I have faith in the two of you," said Dominick.

"What about finding Werval?" asked Falcon.

Dominick stood up, patted Falcon on the shoulder, "Leave that to me."

Falcon looked down, "Okay."

Dominick gave his shoulder one last squeeze and turned to leave, "Oh, you need to be back for Drake's Coronation. It's customary for the *attuned* to give a gift. Frederick gave me this amulet."

Falcon nodded and then he scratched his head, "Sire, since we are leaving so abruptly, I have a favor to ask?"

"Sure, what is it?" asked Dominick.

"Talk to Aemilia, she was pretty mad last night," said Falcon.

"My sons paint a more scandalous picture of last night. Good thing last night was Count Grey's idea, he may be willing to overlook any loss of virtue in exchange for a proposal," said Dominick.

Falcon turned beet red.

"I didn't... I mean, it just happened," said Falcon.

"Let's hope she's not with child or it'll look like you're running away," said Dominick.

Falcon's eyes bulged, "I..."

THE DEFIANT



“As much as I love seeing you, I have a lot of work to do tomorrow and Flow is gone until autumn,” said Colville.

“We won’t keep you long. Just a few questions, before you go to bed,” said Rocious.

Colville stopped on his way upstairs, “Fine, fetch a round of beers,” he said.

Falcon slipped out into the storeroom as Rocious took a seat with Colville.

“Best wait for him to get back, Rocious said, “he needs to hear this too.”

Colville narrowed his eyes at Rocious, “What’s this about? I haven’t seen you this serious since the war.”

“Nothing like that but Falcon needs to hear your answer more than me,” said Rocious.

Falcon came back with a round and a plate of food then joined them at the table. Rocious raised his eyebrow at him.

“What? I’m hungry, we barely stopped to sleep on the way here.”

Colville took a quick swig and looked up, “What’s so important it couldn’t wait till morning?”

"You remember back, what, twenty-five years, that recruit Edward?" asked Rocious.

Colville stared into his mug, "I remember, his name was Lance, not Edward. I buried him out back."

Rocious looked at Falcon not sure what to say.

Falcon swallowed, "We need to climb the cliff and see what's up there."

Colville stood up, "The hell you need to climb the cliff. I've buried enough people thanks to that fucking cliff. If you plan on killing yourself, you don't need my help."

Rocious hopped up and caught Colville by the arm, "This is me asking, please. Has anyone actually made it to the top?"

Colville kicked the leg of his chair, "Yes, Arthur made it to the top once," he sat down again.

Rocious took his seat also, "How?"

Colville took a long pull from his beer, "As a boy he tried, but I was quick to beat some sense into him. As he grew older he hated that the soldiers would try, but still he obeyed. When Lance died, Arthur was in Stormhelm for some reason, I don't recall. When he found out, I tried to stop him but—" Colville hung his head.

"He was as stubborn as his father," said Rocious.

Colville looked up with a slight smile, "I couldn't stop him. It took almost two hours, but he made it to the top. Smashed the shrine that was up there and spent the better part of a day clearing everything noticeable from the edge."

"No one has tried since?" asked Falcon.

Colville narrowed his eyes at Falcon, "No. And I won't have you dishonoring his memory by falling to your death."

"It must be done," said Rocious as he reached for his mug.

Colville grabbed Rocious's arm, twisted it behind his back until it snapped and slammed his face down into the table. Falcon barely blinked, amazed the old man could still move so fast.

“No, it doesn’t. Whatever the reason, it does not,” said Colville.

Falcon stood up, “There was honor in what your son did—”

“Don’t you tell me about my son!” Colville let go of Rocious and leapt over the table. Falcon anticipated it, and hopped back.

Colville was still a better fighter, but he was blinded by anger. Falcon swatted down his hands and slipped behind him. He looped one arm around the neck, the other under an arm and locked his hands behind Colville’s head forcing him to the ground.

“He saved lives by making that climb. That’s probably what gave him the strength to do it,” said Falcon.

“You know nothing about him,” said Colville.

“I don’t need to, I know you. And you taught me the same lesson you taught Arthur,” said Falcon.

Rocious got up and drank his beer while healing his arm, “Stop being a fool, Tom. Arthur made the climb to save a handful of lives. What we’re doing will save thousands.”

Falcon let him go.

Colville walked around the room cooling off, “Thousands my ass. There’s nothing up there. Arthur would have found it if there were,” said Colville.

“He didn’t know what to look for, but I do,” said Rocious.

“What makes you any different?” asked Colville.

Rocious put his freshly healed hand up and it burst into flames, “Magic.”

Colville shook his head, “Fucking magic.” Colville knocked over the rest of his beer and walked upstairs without another word.

Falcon looked at Rocious, “What’s that mean?”

Rocious finished his beer, “Another round.”

. . .

THE NEXT MORNING Falcon was woken up by a bucket of spring water in the face, "Get up," said Colville. "You're helping me in the forge while you're here. I'm behind."

Falcon covered his eyes and considered going back to sleep. After barely sleeping on the road and staying up late drinking, he felt like shit. Definitely not in shape for working in the forge.

"I've got another bucket," said Colville.

"Fuck, alright, I'm up," said Falcon.

"I should throw it at you anyway for cursing this early. Get dressed, eat and meet me down there," said Colville.

On his way downstairs he caught a glimpse of Rocious still lying in bed; he was soaking wet. Falcon put together a quick meal and left a portion for Rocious to grab whenever he came down.

He fell into the work in the forge as easily as normal, but after about fifteen minutes he felt two things out of place. The first was fairly simple but unmistakable: there was no sound from Flow working. That simple song of the metals he had fallen in love with had a sad tone without her. Falcon wondered if it was the real reason why Colville insisted on his help.

The second thing brought tears to his eyes and filled his stomach with butterflies. For the past few years he had thought of Floriana while he worked, but today his mind turned to someone else. Rocious told him to focus on memories of Lucian, but he simply could not relive that in his mind. But the memories of Aemilia he savored, even when they argued. He was so wrapped up in them, that he missed what triggered his magic for a second time.

"Fuck," he said under his breath, as he toppled his workstation over, and the three next to it.

"What the hell are you doing down there? Clean that up, before one of us trips into the lava flow," shouted Colville.

"I can't," said Falcon. Colville stopped what he was doing and came over to him.

“Why not?” asked Colville.

Falcon moved his hand toward his workstation and flipped the table again. “I can’t control it.”

Colville snapped his fingers in front of Falcon’s face, “Yes, you can, calm down and focus.”

Falcon took his calming breath and centered himself. The magic he had under his control rushed back to him, but with another breath he redirected it to put the table back in place. Then he moved on to cleaning up the other workstations, but he never finished.

“WHAT HAPPENED? WHERE AM I?” asked Falcon jumping up. Rocious held him down with a hand and took a sip from his mug with the other.

“Calm down before you make me spill,” said Rocious.

Falcon relaxed and laid back, “What happened?”

“Used too much magic,” said Rocious.

“How? I barely did anything,” asked Falcon.

“You’ve grown too efficient with healing. You’ve stopped gauging how much magic you use. We’re on a whole other level now, so it’s time to up your game,” said Rocious.

“I could have died,” said Falcon.

“Don’t be so dramatic, you’ll get used to it,” Rocious took a swig of his beer, “or you won’t and yeah, you’ll die.”

“You act like it’s easy,” said Falcon.

“Feels easy. Anyway, get some rest. My plan for the cliff can wait till morning,” said Rocious.

“Great, so if I don’t kill myself, the cliff will,” said Falcon.

Rocious got up to leave but stopped in the doorway, “Oh, what was the trigger?”

“Aemilia, the way she looked at me,” said Falcon.

Rocious leaned against the doorframe and took a swig of his beer.

"I can't explain it, I've never felt that way before. Does it matter?" asked Falcon.

"It always matters, what will you do if those feelings change? Or that memory fades?" said Rocious.

Falcon put his head down and closed his eyes, "I'll let my dreams figure out how I felt," said Falcon.

"Good luck with that," said Rocious.

"I WOULD PREFER you not destroy my home," said Colville.

Rocious poked his head out of the storehouse, "I found what I need," Rocious pulled the end of the rope he found but it got stuck.

"Hold on," said Colville walking over to Rocious.

"That's alright, almost got it," Rocious gave a nice tug and fell on his ass with six feet of rope in his hand.

"Yeah, that's not what you're looking for," said Colville leaning against the doorframe, "How much do you need?"

"You helping us now?" asked Rocious as he shoved Colville.

Colville shifted his weight and rolled his shoulder to keep his balance. He looked at Rocious expressionless, "If you clean up the shed, I'll make sure you don't die climbing that fucking cliff."

Rocious dropped the rope and started walking away, "Consider it done."

"Hey! The shed first," said Colville.

"Yup, I'm on it," said Rocious over his shoulder.

Rocious jogged inside and made a dash for the steps.

"What's got you in a hurry?" said Falcon as he walked out of the kitchen.

Rocious stopped, "Oh, you're up."

Falcon put another spoon of oatmeal in his mouth and smiled. Rocious sat at the table with him.

"What's the rush?" asked Falcon.

“The shed’s a mess. Colville wants you to clean it,” said Rocious.

“I thought you were going to tell me this master plan for the cliff?” asked Falcon.

“I’m going to tie a rope to you so you can pull me up,” said Rocious.

Falcon dropped his spoon into the empty bowl, “That’s your idea?” asked Falcon.

Rocious grinned, “Yup.”

“How does that help me?” asked Falcon.

Rocious scratched his ear, “It helps me.”

Falcon rolled his eyes and headed for the shed. When he got there Colville had already started cleaning the shed. He grabbed a broom and walked over to give him a hand.

Colville snatched the broom and started sweeping, “You two destroy everything.”

Falcon put his hands up, “I just got here.”

Colville pointed the broom at him, “Yesterday you knocked over half the forge. Today Lockland trashed my shed for six feet of rope. You planning to destroy my showroom tomorrow?”

Falcon’s eyes lit up, “Is that all you had?”

“Rope, no. What’s it for anyway?” asked Colville.

Falcon started putting back Colville’s tools, “He wants to tie it to me so I can pull him up there.”

Colville paused then started sweeping again, “I should give you one for me too.”

“I’d expected this from him, not you too,” said Falcon.

Rocious popped his head in the shed, “What are you doing!? You found the trigger, so practice.”

Falcon motioned for Colville to move, “Fine.”

“See, the shed’s getting cleaned, where’s the rope?” asked Rocious.

“In the forge, maybe you’ll even help me work for once,” said Colville.

"You never asked," said Rocious as he started walking toward the forge.

Once they walked away Falcon considered using his hands to get the job over with. No, there was only one way to improve. He extended a thin sheet of magic covering the floor and turned his thoughts to Aemilia, searching for his trigger.

First he thought about how she looked in her slim black and blue dress. He felt his heart speed up as he remembered her small yet curvy frame. The desire he felt was not the trigger so he shifted his thoughts to her attacking him. It was not quite anger that filled him, more annoyance and surprise. That was not the trigger either, so he skipped ahead to the moment she opened her eyes.

Then he felt it; the trigger was so distinctive that he could not believe he missed it. The magic was instantly being drained from him to power the expression he had created. He panicked and cut off the flow a split second after it was triggered.

The next thing he knew he was tumbling through the dirt halfway back to the fort. When he stopped rolling he sat up and shook some of the dirt off, "What the hell!? You never said that could happen."

Colville and Rocious were only a few steps outside the shed and looked over at him.

Rocious walked over to give him a hand up, "Yesterday you could barely trigger the damn thing. You cut off the flow too quick," said Rocious.

Falcon brushed off some of the dirt on his clothes, "I didn't know there was a 'too quick'," said Falcon.

"If you make a construct it takes time for the magic to fill it. If you cut it off too soon, BOOM!" said Rocious.

"Now you tell me. Is there anything else I should know? I mean anything else I should know so I don't almost kill myself or get injured or injure someone else or break something?" asked Falcon.

Rocious scratched his chin, "No."

He started walking toward the forge again then stopped, "Well wait, don't try to um. I forget the name. This," said Rocious as he flicked his hand. A ball of flame formed in his hand. He dropped it on the ground and it continued to burn.

Falcon watched the fire closely, "What is that?"

"It's a ball of fire," said Rocious.

Falcon threw up his hands and started walking away, "Thanks."

Rocious jogged after him, "You good?"

Falcon spun on him, "NO! I'm not good. You're supposed to teach me these things and all you've said is 'it's a ball of fire,'" said Falcon.

"Wait. I learned all of this a long time ago. I don't remember the names anymore. It's sustained fire, it will keep burning until it runs out of magic. But I don't have to feed it anymore," said Rocious.

Falcon stopped, "Okay, so how do I not do that?"

Rocious scratched his chin again, "You need to add complexity to the construct, that one is like unraveling a ball of yarn."

"Complexity? You said I had to give it time but you created that in like half a second," asked Falcon.

"That's different, you can't compare the two," said Rocious.

"Why not?" asked Falcon.

"I'm better than you. For you it takes time, for me... I don't even think about it anymore," said Rocious.

Falcon started walking away, "Great. I'm screwed."

Rocious grabbed his shoulder, but Falcon slouched and pushed him off then kept walking. Rocious threw an explosion at his feet stopping him, "I said this once before but right now you need to hear it again." Rocious flicked his fingers creating a few sparks.

"This shit, this test. It doesn't matter."

Rocius jabbed Falcon's chest with his finger, "This is what makes you great."

Falcon looked down at his chest, "It doesn't help to become a master."

Rocius looked down and shook his head, "This test you are training for is a sham, a way for mediocre *pathos* to show the world how much they know. Any *true empath* knows how little the test means."

"What about Praetorian Connelly? He is not a *true empath*?" asked Falcon.

Rocius let out a laugh, "I met an untrained eight-year-old who was better than him. Connelly doesn't deserve to be called Master let alone Praetorian. If he had any respect, he'd give up the title."

Falcon raised an eyebrow, "Any eight-year-old who knows you is probably in a corner crying."

Rocius smacked him on the shoulder and started walking away, "He's doing plenty of crying."

FALCON FINISHED CLEANING the shed and spent the rest of the day working in the forge with Colville. Rocius actually stayed in the forge and helped as well. As it turned out, a master of fire was extremely useful in a forge. Colville even closed the forge early. After their meal they sat with a round of beers to discuss the cliff.

"I have known you for most of my life Rocius, why the hell did you wait until now to help me in the forge?" asked Colville.

"Are you too old to remember? You kicked me out forty years ago. Told me never to come back," said Rocius.

"Of course I did. You were scraping shit off your boots with my engraving tools," said Colville.

"Hmm, oh," said Rocius.

"Never too late for an apology," suggested Falcon taking a seat.

Rocious leaned back, "I stayed out of the forge. That's an apology."

"There have been enough firsts for today. You want to hear my idea for the cliff?" asked Colville.

Falcon leaned back and took a drink, "If this involves me carrying anyone else, I am gonna cut the damn rope."

"Nothing like that. Arthur did these finger and grip exercises. I thought it was improving his grip for sword fighting, but when he made the climb he held himself on a couple of fingers. I have never seen anything like it," said Colville.

"What are these exercises?" asked Falcon.

"Hold on," said Rocious. "Arthur did those exercises for, what, ten years before he made the climb. We don't have that kind of time."

"Sounds like a useful skill regardless. I think we should reconsider my idea," said Falcon.

"What idea?" asked Colville.

Rocious put his cup down and leaned on the table, "He wants me to use my explosions to jump up there. They're too destructive; to get that high I'd turn this place into a crater."

Falcon put his elbows on the table, "What if you tried to throw me, like the time we crossed the Red Gorge?"

"It's called the Valentian Gorge. But same problem," said Rocious.

"I don't know magic at all but why can't Falcon simply jump up there? His ability isn't violent," said Colville.

Rocious turned to Falcon, Falcon leaned away and squinted at him.

"Don't look at me."

"We'll start training tomorrow. It'll work," said Rocious.

Falcon pushed back from the table and put his hands up, "Wait a minute here, how am I supposed to do it if you can't?"

"You have a better tool. Besides, you already learned how to jump," said Rocious.

"You mean me blowing myself up? No." said Falcon.

"Okay, so you need to refine it a bit. But you got the hard part," said Rocious.

Falcon stood up rattling the table, "Hard part! I don't even know what I did and I don't want to die figuring it out."

"Oh, come on now. You've seen me use magic to jump thousands of times. It's safe," said Rocious.

Falcon slammed the table, "Then you do it."

Rocious slammed the table also, "Dammit boy!"

Colville shoved the table across the floor a few inches knocking Rocious back and forcing Falcon into his seat again, "Clearly the boy's scared."

Colville put his hand up cutting off Falcon as he opened his mouth.

"I don't know a thing about magic, but you can't keep banking on his talent to figure it out. You need to teach him, explain it to him, show him how it works."

Rocious started to speak, stopped, then started again, "You're right to be scared. We... I will try to be more thorough. Where do I begin?" asked Rocious to himself.

"The jumping," suggested Colville.

Rocious scratched his chin, "No, more basic. There are three categories for magical expressions. Four, in my opinion, but whatever. First, the stable construct like what you used to clean up the shed, or the ropes of flame I create. It's the bread and butter of expressive magic. Understand?" asked Rocious.

"Basic construct, I think so," said Falcon.

"Second is burst, like we use for jumping. Hard to do because you need to cut off the flow of magic extremely fast."

"What's so hard about that?" asked Falcon.

Rocious let a quick breath out his nose, "I've been having you refine the skill for years with the runes. It's not something *pathos* usually learn because it's not always useful. Well, not until you refine it."

“Seems a bit shortsighted on their part,” said Falcon.

“It is but cautious. Third is arguably the most difficult, I don’t remember the name. I call it the sustained construct. Like that lingering ball of flame,” said Rocious.

“Okay, what’s the fourth?” asked Falcon.

Rocious leaned back and drained his cup, “We call it simply Omni. You did it when you were in the forge the other day.”

“Who is we?” asked Falcon.

“Our opinion is more accurate. See Omni drains your magic incredibly fast, hence you passing out the other day. It takes an enormous amount of magic to sustain Omni. I have only met one other pathos who has successfully used it for any length of time,” said Rocious.

“Who was that?” asked Falcon.

Rocious put his cup on the table, “The only other *attuned* I’ve known to pass the trials: Praetorian Gaius Augustus Caldwell. My mentor.”

FALCON LOOKED up at the cliff, his eyes following the same cracks and crags he had stared at every day for months. His eyes traced the top of the cliff to the lowest ridge that was his goal. For weeks he had been practicing by launching stones to that ridge, slowly increasing the size of the stones. In the past few days he had successfully launched stones twice his own weight. The plan was to practice for one more day and go for it tomorrow, but when he rolled out of bed this morning he felt tired, so tired.

He was tired not because his body needed more rest or his brain was worn out. He was tired of practicing, tired of delaying. He wanted this trial to be over, and after today it would be. Today, he would not be launching stones he would be launching himself. He would be on top of the cliff, or dead. One way or another the trial would end today.

“Don’t forget the rope,” said Colville holding out the rope.

Falcon slipped his arm through the loops of rope, then his head and secured it tightly around his chest. Rocious squeezed his shoulder and the two men moved away to let him prepare himself.

He honed in on his target, focusing in on the details of the ridge, trying to memorize the shape of every stone and every patch of loose gravel or foliage. He realized he was stalling. He'd memorized every bit of that ridge weeks ago. He could close his eyes and paint every detail if he had to. Instead he closed his eyes and brought a different image to his mind: the image of Aemilia looking into his eyes.

The sheet of magic he had spread beneath his feet pulled magic from him. He closed his hand and cut off the flow sending him soaring through the air. He opened his eyes, locked onto the ridge, and instantly realized he was not going to make it. Something was off and he was going to hit the cliff face at least twenty feet below the top. He quickly spread a small sheet of magic between himself and the cliff then waited to trigger it until he was closer to the ridge.

When he could almost reach out and touch the cliff face he triggered the sheet of magic. A jolt of force sent him flipping end over end. As he was flipping he caught a glimpse of a ridge as he passed by, the next flip he saw it again. Only this time it was farther away. Again he created a sheet of magic to redirect himself and took a wild guess hoping the timing was right to send him in the correct direction. This time he got it right and sent himself into a patch of sage bushes.

He rolled to his feet, checking for injuries. He barely had a scratch on him, just a few minor scraps from the bushes. He had not even cleaned himself off before he heard Rocious and Colville cheering. He shook himself out of the rope, looped it around a solitary boulder that dominated the ridge. Then tossed the ends over the ledge.

Falcon lay on the ground and leaned his head over the ledge, "I made it, but I don't see anything up here!"

"What?!" shouted Colville.

"There's NOTHING UP HERE!!" screamed Falcon again.

"WHAT?! We're coming up!" shouted Colville.

"Whatever," he said to himself.

While they climbed the ropes Falcon climbed on top of the boulder to survey the area. There was not much to see other than the large boulder he was on, a mound that was once the shrine and a flat area covered in sage bushes. On the far side of the flat area was another sheer drop leading into the Hadrian mountain range.

It was beautiful though. From the boulder he could see for miles in every direction, no wonder men risked their lives to man an outpost up here. Even without a sight glass he could survey the entire area.

Falcon hopped down to search the mound for any clues, or at least figure out what the shrine was for. He dug around the stones and pulled up the overgrown foliage until he heard the heavy breathing of Colville reaching the top. Falcon ran over to give him a hand around the lip of the ridge.

Colville cleared his lungs with a quick exhale, "I win," he called over the ledge.

Falcon handed Colville a flask of water from his pack, "Actually, I won."

Colville rolled his eyes, "I didn't bet you."

A minute later Rocious reached the top and with a sudden jolt rolled around the lip of the ridge. He lay on his back panting, "Save the best for last."

They passed around the flask of water and sat for a minute to catch their breath. Falcon emptied the rest of his pack: a few tools for digging, some food for the three of them and a box of candles.

"I found an inscription on the shrine. Some letters, Vul—n," said Falcon.

"Aye. Vulcan is said to be the divine protector of the forge. It was his shrine," said Colville.

"I'll take a look but it doesn't seem like what we're looking for," said Rocious.

The three of them spent the rest of the morning searching and digging, trying to find any sign of the outpost from Dominick's records.

"Let's take a break, I'm getting hungry," said Falcon.

"You're always hungry," said Rocious.

"We could use a break, need a better plan," said Colville.

Rocious stopped digging and joined the other two, "You're right, we are running out of places to look."

"I told you there was nothing up here," said Colville.

Falcon sat next to the boulder, "The wind is picking up, we aren't going to be able to spend the night up here."

Colville joined him next to the boulder, but Rocious stood in front of them scanning the boulder while he ate. After finishing his food Colville hopped up, "We're wasting daylight, best get back to looking."

"Hold on," said Rocious.

"What is it?" asked Falcon.

"I'm not sure, you got me thinking. This wind is getting pretty bad, and today's pretty calm. There's no way an outpost would stay standing up here during a storm," said Rocious.

"You're thinking they buried it?" asked Colville.

Rocious motioned for them to move away from the boulder, "I'm thinking the boulder's on top of it. Or covering the entrance."

"What are you planning to do?" asked Colville.

"Blow up the boulder," said Rocious.

Colville jumped in front of Rocious, "And how do you expect us to get down? The rope is tied to it."

Rocious paused and scratched his chin, "Good point. Falcon should do it."

"Let me get the rope first," said Colville.

Falcon created a series of magical constructs similar to a balloon around one side of the boulder. When he triggered them they expanded slowly until they were squeezed between the ground and the boulder. Then he fed it more magic expanding them until the boulder started rolling. He felt himself start to sweat, and sent a quick surge of magic into the constructs causing the boulder to roll onto its side.

He tried to take a step and his vision went black for a moment. He blinked a few times to clear it and realized Colville was holding him up.

"You alright?" asked Colville.

"Dizzy," said Falcon.

"No more magic for today," said Rocious, slipping his arm under Falcon and helping him sit.

Falcon tried to stand on his own but his vision narrowed, "How's it look?" he asked.

"It looks like Frederick was right. We've gotta dig it out though," said Colville.

"You're not efficient with those constructs. We'll clear it, you rest," said Rocious.

Falcon did not try to argue, he lay down and was asleep in moments. The next thing he knew Rocious was waking him up and the sun had moved across the sky.

"We finished clearing it. Come check it out," said Rocious.

Falcon took a lit candle from Rocious and followed him down a simple stone staircase into the outpost. It looked more like a small library or bedroom. Off to one side was a single bed, a desk and a wardrobe. The room was lined with bookshelves.

Colville had already started searching the desk. Falcon went right to the bookshelves and started scanning them while Rocious checked the wardrobe.

"All the books are rotted through. I can only read the titles of a few, topographical maps, surveying records, and Praetorian Probatio. Whatever that is," said Falcon.

"I found something interesting," said Rocius. He pulled a dusty old cloak out of the wardrobe and showed it to them.

"What's interesting about that?" asked Colville.

Rocius shook some of the dirt off, "For one, it's a master's cloak similar to Falcon's and it's been preserved somehow."

He kept shaking more dirt out of it, revealing a cloak that looked dirty but otherwise flawless.

"My guess is whoever built this place had the same abilities as Falcon," said Rocius.

"His power seems ideally suited for the task," said Colville.

"Anything in the desk?" asked Falcon.

Colville went back to the desk, "No, but I can't get this drawer open. It's locked."

"Let me see. I've never found a lock I couldn't blow up," said Rocius.

"Don't burn the place down," said Colville.

Rocius put his hand to his chest, "I only destroy when I want to."

"Like my shed?" asked Colville.

Rocius pushed him out of the way, took a look at the drawer. He snapped his fingers and the lock popped barely shaking the desk.

"Destroyed the right amount," said Rocius. He pulled the drawer open revealing a package wrapped in doeskin and a key. He took both, handed the wrapping to Falcon and held up the key to examine.

"Did you find anything else? Anything that might take a key?" asked Rocius.

"No," said Colville.

Falcon put the package on the desk and unwrapped the doeskin, "I think I figured out whose place this was."

“Whose?” asked Colville.

Without warning the bed flew across the room almost hitting Falcon and Colville.

They jumped toward the exit, “Do you have to scare the shit out of us like that?” screamed Colville to Rocious. “I almost had a heart attack.”

“I found where the key goes. There’s a lockbox under the bed,” said Rocious.

Colville ignored him and turned to Falcon, “You were saying?” asked Colville.

“Albatross Reed: it’s the name on the package,” said Falcon.

“Mother Fucker. He had a dragon scale,” said Rocious. He tried to lift it, “It’s huge. I can’t even pick it up.”

Colville pushed past him, “Weak.”

Colville strained to pick up the scale until his face turned red and gave finally gave up.

“Told ya it was heavy,” said Rocious reaching over to give him a hand. Falcon joined and the three carried their findings outside.

“I say we toss it,” suggested Rocious.

Colville raised his eyebrows at the thought.

“Unless there’s a better idea, I’m game,” said Falcon, “we could use the ropes, but I’m tired. Let’s toss it,” said Falcon.

They stumbled up to the ledge and tossed the scale as quickly as they could.

Colville checked the position of the sun, “It’ll be tough to get down before dark,” said Colville.

Rocious leaned over over the edge, “See ya at the bottom.”

Then he flicked a loop of flaming rope around the boulder and stepped off the cliff.

“Sometimes I really hate him,” said Colville.

CORONATION



“Clearly the outpost belonged to Falcon’s ancestor,” said Colville.

Rocious swirled his ale, “Dominick would want to see the journal, might lead to his armor,” said Rocious.

“He hasn’t found the armor because he hasn’t earned it and now he wants you to do it for him,” said Colville.

“Is that why you didn’t give it to Arthur? He hadn’t earned it?” said Rocious.

Colville ground his teeth and Rocious could hear his knuckles pop below the table, “Be careful.”

Rocious moved his mug to the side and leaned on the table, “He is your King; I was there when you bent the knee. Are you willing to break that vow over a book?”

Colville relaxed his muscles then placed his hands on the edge of the table and leaned forward slightly, “I intend to keep my vow.”

Rocious relaxed and reached for his mug. Colville lifted his side of the table and kicked it into Rocious’s face. Rocious shattered the table as he sent a ball of fire at Colville. After his kick, Colville spun to the side and caught Rocious’s arm. He jerked

him forward and locked his head. Rocious pushed himself backwards trying to slam Colville against the wall. Colville loosened his grip on Rocious and added to the momentum of the push. Just before hitting the wall he moved to the side and slammed Rocious's head into the wall. Rocious crumpled to the floor. Colville gave him one more blow to ensure he was unconscious.

Falcon rushed down the stairs, "What happened?"

Colville motioned him closer, "Give me a hand."

"Where are we taking him?" asked Falcon.

Colville grabbed Rocious under the arms, "The stable. He's no longer welcome here. The pack horses are stupid, but they know their way to Dominion," said Colville.

"I know he can be a pain but you can't be serious," said Falcon.

Colville started dragging Rocious across the floor, "I am. I wish it were a joke, but it's not."

"He's never going to forgive you for this," warned Falcon.

Colville stopped struggling with his body, "Are you going to help or not?"

"No," said Falcon.

Colville nudged the door open. Falcon returned to his room and sat on his bed then picked up the journal to start reading. He was still on the first page when Colville opened his bedroom door.

Falcon put the journal back on the nightstand, and waited.

Colville sat on the edge of his bed.

"We need to talk," said Colville.

"We don't. This is your home, you can do whatever you want," said Falcon.

Colville got up and sat closer placing his hand on Falcon's shin, "You don't understand."

Falcon swung his legs off the opposite side of the bed turning his back to Colville, "What precisely do I not understand?"

Colville touched Falcon's shoulder trying to see his face, "What happened with Frederick?"

Falcon jerked his shoulder away and went to the door.

"You kicked him out of his home. What *precisely* do I not understand?"

Colville stood up and tried to look Falcon in the eye but he stared straight ahead, "I know you're angry, but I had to send him away."

"I'm not angry," snapped Falcon as he looked at Colville, "I was angry when I lost my home. This," Falcon pointed at his face then at his heart, "This is hatred. Anger is irrational. I am not irrational."

Colville rested his hand on Falcon's shoulder, "This is still your home."

Falcon knocked his hand away, "This was never my home," he said as he shut the door.

"It's a bit early to be down here isn't it?" asked Colville.

Falcon continued pumping the bellows of his workstation, "Felt like making something."

Colville took a seat at Falcon's workstation, "What are you making?"

"Sword," said Falcon pulling it out of the furnace and resting it on his anvil. He went to his workstation and checked a scrap of paper.

"Who's it for?" asked Colville.

Falcon grabbed a hammer and went back to the sword, "Drake."

"You want a hand with it?" asked Colville.

He shifted the sword slightly and took a solid swing.

"No," he said then moved the sword slightly and swung again.

Colville sat and watched Falcon hammer again and again as if he was not there.

After a few minutes of silence Colville finally got up, "Well, if you change your mind, let me know."

Falcon continued working without giving a reply. Colville lingered for a moment before walking away. He went to another workstation and started working on his orders.

Falcon worked ceaselessly, referencing his notes from time to time, but otherwise focused entirely on Drake's sword. Colville went by a few times to take breaks, but he kept to himself letting Falcon work in peace. As the day drew to a close Colville cleaned and organized his workstation then took a seat at Falcon's.

"It's an awfully big sword," said Colville.

Falcon did not reply.

"Anyway, I'm headed up for dinner. You should take a break and eat something."

"I will soon," said Falcon.

Colville stayed seated a little longer, but when it was clear Falcon was not going to say anything he got up, "I best start cooking."

Soon turned out to be several hours later. Falcon poured a single scoop of spring water down the blade to cool the surface and hung it above the lava flow. Finally able to take a short break, he flipped the hourglass on his station and went to get some food. After working non-stop all day, he was glad to find stew waiting for him and even more thankful that Colville had already gone to sleep.

He devoured the first bowl of stew and took a second bowl back to the forge along with Albatross's journal. When he got back to his workstation he checked the hourglass then sat down to continue reading. The journal began on the day Albatross watched his wife die. For Albatross it was a profound moment of sadness and pain that opened his eyes to an entirely new world. Her death was also what guided him to find what he called the *divinus cupla*: the twenty-third rune.

Albatross described the *divinus cupla* like a marriage between two beings: an unbreakable, immutable bond. Once created it could never be broken, binding them together for all eternity. As

romantic as that seemed, Falcon started to have reservations about using the *divinus cupla*. At first it seemed like finding the *divinus cupla* was Albatross's greatest achievement. But the later entries were focused completely on destroying all trace of it.

As he ran out of pages to read, the hourglass also ran out of sand. He hesitated only for a moment before jumping up. He snatched the blade and stabbed it into a barrel of sand to continue the cooling process for approximately two more hours. The exact moment he was looking for was when the blade turned a dark blue hue allowing it to be engraved. Once engraved Falcon would need to clean the blade thoroughly, heat it until it glowed a gentle red, and finally quench and harden the blade completely in pure water.

He had about two hours to change the engravings. He walked around the forge thinking about what he truly wanted the sword to be. He stopped at his station and jotted down a few basic runes to establish the sword's purpose. The runes would allow the blade to absorb and contain magic. He took another lap around the forge before stopping to sketch a series of runes to create various magical constructs. Next, he added the fire rune. Drake was not *attuned*, but he had an affinity for fire so that was an easy choice.

He lapped the forge five times and still had not settled on the hardest part: to use the *divinus cupla* or stick with a basic closed bond. Even before reading Albatross's journal Falcon thought the *divinus cupla* may have been intentionally hidden, not accidentally lost. After reading the journal he decided never to share that knowledge. He even decided to keep Albatross's entire story to himself. He did not entirely trust himself with the knowledge, but he was stuck with it now. The only question now was: did he trust Drake with its power?

He went to check the blade again. The tip was dark blue, the rest would be ready to engrave soon. He secured it to his workstation, took a piece of wax to mark out the pattern of runes on

the blade. When he reached the tang, where he would put the *divinus cupla*, a thought occurred to him. Maybe there was another way.

Falcon sketched two runes repeated down the length of the tang followed by the *divinus cupla*. Satisfied, he reached for his engraving tools.

FALCON OPENED HIS EYES, "HUH, WHAT?" he said.

"I asked how long have you been down here?" asked Colville.

Falcon blinked the sleep from his eyes and stood up, "I must have fallen asleep. Shit! The sword."

Colville put his hand up stopping him, "It's already finished. I found it on my way down here."

Falcon rubbed his head, "Oh, where was it?"

"It was sticking out of one of the springs," said Colville.

Falcon glanced back at his workstation; his engraving tools had all been cleaned and put away. The only thing on the table was an empty bowl from dinner.

"I don't remember doing that," said Falcon.

Colville sat, "Working with dragon scale is a long and tiring process, that's why you usually take shifts. I wish you had told me," said Colville.

Falcon looked down, "I had to do it myself."

Colville stood up and touched Falcon's shoulder, he looked up.

"I understand, know I'm still here for you. What happened with Frederick is regrettable, but it doesn't change anything between us."

Falcon pushed Colville's hand off his shoulder and stepped around him, "I'm leaving for Dominion today."

Falcon turned to leave and Colville took a step closer, "You should get some rest, and stay the night."

"The plan was to leave today and I don't want to be late for Drake's Coronation," said Falcon.

"Take one of the horses then," said Colville.

"I can move faster alone," he said and walked away before Colville could argue anymore.

Falcon went to his room to prepare for his trip back to Dominion. As he was packing it struck him how few belongings he kept here. He had spent so much time here and yet his room looked almost vacant. Back in Dominion he had a closet full of clothing, stacks of books and writings. He had dice and cards from the legionnaires, pictures from Floriana and countless other trinkets collected over the years. All of them tied to some memory or experience.

Normally he disliked leaving Spring Forge, but as he realized how little he had put his mark on this place it somehow became simple, nothing. It was as easy as brushing a bit of sand off his hands. He closed his pack and went to grab his cloak. In the closet he found Albatross's cloak—freshly cleaned—hanging next to his own. Now that it was clean he realized it was nothing like his own. Albatross's was made of some strange material and subtly embroidered with runes on the inside. As far as he knew, runes had to be engraved in order to work.

"Full of secrets," laughed Falcon. He tossed it around his shoulders and slipped out, leaving his old one behind. On the way he snatched the sword from the spring, and to his surprise not only was the sword engraved, the guard hilt and pommel were attached.

ROCIOUS HEARD a knock on the door, "Go away!"

When the door started to open he threw a ball of fire at the door, but ended up hitting the wall next to the door.

Dominick shoved open the door, "What the hell are you doing?! You were supposed to find me when you got back."

“Well, you found me,” said Rocious from his balcony.

“You’re going to burn the damn castle down,” complained Dominick as he put out the flames.

Rocious leaned over his balcony, “I don’t care.”

Dominick shoved him, “What’s gotten into you? Did something happen to Falcon?”

Rocious took a long pull from his bottle of wine, “Falcon’s fine, I had an argument with Tom.”

Dominick grabbed the wine and took a pull, “What about the outpost?”

Rocious took his bottle back, “Took a while but Falcon used his ability to reach the outpost.”

“What did you find? I need details,” snapped Dominick.

Rocious huffed out a breath, “Falcon’s ability was ideal for both reaching and opening the outpost. When we got inside we found a dragon scale, a master’s cloak and the journal of Albartross Reed.”

Dominick bit his lip, “Not what I expected, but it’s a good find. It’s a safe bet that was Falcon’s ancestor. Anything useful in the journal?”

Rocious shook his head.

“Colville kicked me out for wanting to give it to you.”

“What do you mean? You just let him kick you out?” asked Dominick.

“Just because he gave up the sword doesn’t mean he’s gone soft. Could have killed me if he wanted to. Why don’t you go fight him?” Rocious waited for Dominick to answer but he said nothing, “Yeah, that’s what I thought, so shut the fuck up.”

“He would never vow to serve me,” said Dominick.

“I thought he did,” said Rocious.

Dominick huffed out a breath, “No, he vowed to serve the realm. I will need to make sure he isn’t a problem,” he said as he turned to leave.

Rocious grabbed Dominick's arm, "He's doing what he thinks is right."

Dominick pulled his hand free, "It makes no difference. He's stopping me from protecting the realm."

Rocious shoved Dominick, "Drop it, Colville is no threat. Besides, Falcon has the journal. He'll give it to you after Drake's Coronation."

Dominick jerked his head away, "Fine, but I need to ensure Colville's loyalty. Is Falcon ready for the test?"

"Yeah, he'll be fine. I think," said Rocious.

"What do you mean you think? Is he ready or not?" asked Dominick.

Rocious leaned on the balcony again, "The test has three areas he must pass. *Control*, that's easy. *Healing*, for Falcon, also easy. And finally, *expression*. Most pathos have over ten years of practice with expressive magic before taking the test. Falcon has had barely three months."

"Connelly is planning something. Over the past week master pathos from around the realm have shown up in the city unannounced," said Dominick.

"They could simply be here for the Coronation," said Rocious.

Dominick leaned on the balcony.

"I don't have another play for time."

"Praetorian or not, I won't let them take Falcon," said Rocious.

Dominick placed his hand on Rocious's arm.

FALCON REACHED Dominion early the morning of Drake's Coronation with plenty of time to get to the celebration before he was crowned at midday. That is if he could get past all of the people flooding the city. It took him almost an hour to get through the outer gate, and even longer to reach the second ring.

As he pressed closer to the celebration he was forced to duck into a side ally, but it was not the amount of people that forced

him to stop. It was the onslaught of emotions. Even untrained *attuned* would be affected by the excitement and joy filling the city. He sat against one of the buildings in the alley and turned his thoughts to the day his best friend Paul died. Grief replaced excitement and cut off the onslaught of emotion.

He wiped his eyes and continued walking. Back on the streets of the second ring he could not help but notice the vast array of people. He saw tattooed Lucitanian men, and women drinking and laughing while they bet over dice. Yet across the street a pristine group of Valentian men stood having a well-mannered conversation. Near the gate to the center ring he caught sight of a group of northern men grappling and could not help but stop to watch.

Right as he reached the group, one of the fighters flipped onto his back and tapped out. Falcon was then surprised to see the winner was Alvi Grey, Count Grey's oldest daughter, and the man on the ground was easily twice her size. The joy of her victory ran through the crowd and hit him like a charging bull. He fell to his knees and quickly turned his thoughts to the moment he held Lucian's dying body, to block out the crowd.

He felt someone pull him to his feet and opened his eyes, "Careful blondie, this lot'll crush ya," said Alvi.

Falcon brushed the dirt off his hands, wiped his face with his cloak, "Thanks, congrats on the fight."

"Was nothin', you up for a round?" asked Alvi, pointedly ignoring his tears and leaning closer, "I'll split the winnings with ya."

Falcon laughed, "Maybe next time, I have to get to the ceremony."

Alvi frowned but nodded, "Oh, I almost forgot." Alvi turned away slightly and then quickly turned back and punched Falcon in the gut, "That's for running away."

"Ooof," breathed Falcon putting his hand up in surrender.

Alvi clapped Falcon on the shoulder and turned back to her people, "Welcome to the family."

Falcon could not help but smile as he walked through the center ring to the castle's central courtyard. This close to the ceremony he expected it to be packed shoulder to shoulder, but instead the streets were merely busy. He reached the courtyard gate with little effort and casually walked through the east gate until Centurion Percy signaled his men to stop him, "That's far enough."

Falcon looked up at Percy, "Excuse me?"

Percy flicked the air with his fingers, "Move along."

Falcon glanced at the legionnaires. He recognized most of them as Greko's men from the tenth legion, "Stand down, Centurion."

"I said move along before I have you detained," replied Percy signaling his men again.

Falcon triggered a ring of magic he held around him, sending a wave of force in all directions. The legionnaires bounced back. Falcon took a few steps through the gate and triggered another ring of force knocking them back further. He sent a third ring of force knocking them back and clearing his path to the courtyard.

On the other side of the gate he ran into another problem: the courtyard was packed shoulder to shoulder with people. Probably why Percy had been ordered to stop anyone trying to enter. He looked farther ahead and found a raised platform where Dominick and his family stood preparing the ceremony.

He honed in on the platform; compared to the cliff it was a huge target. Falcon turned back to give the legionnaires a wave right before he launched himself across the courtyard. His aim was off slightly and he landed on the edge of the platform. He also misjudged his speed and was forced to drop into a roll.

As he bounced to his feet the crowd burst into sudden cheers for the unexpected show, Falcon gave a quick bow. The guards

around the platform reacted rushing forward, but Dominick stopped them with a wave.

Drake looked at him emotionless, "You're late."

Falcon shrugged his shoulders removing his pack, "I'm always late."

Drake shook his head and pulled him into an embrace, "I'm glad you made it."

Dominick stepped between the two of them and motioned for Falcon to move back, "I'm glad you made it, but I suggest a little punctuality in the future."

Dominick's advisor Samuel came over and bowed, "It's time, Sire."

Falcon tossed his pack next to a chest on the platform and stood between Fafnir and Rocious. Fafnir smirked at him, and put his fingers in his ears. Falcon wrinkled his forehead then winced as Dominick's voice boomed through his amulet. Rocious covered his ears.

Falcon moved closer to Rocious, "You look like shit."

Rocious shrugged, "I feel like shit."

Falcon watched Drake take a knee facing the crowd.

"You shouldn't drink so much," said Falcon.

Rocious leaned on his shoulder, "After I present my gift, you present yours. You did remember didn't you?"

Falcon bounced Rocious off his shoulder, "I did."

Rocious glanced at Falcon suspiciously but said nothing. Falcon ignored him and the two watched Dominick finish his speech. When the speech was done, Dominick walked to the chest on the side of the podium and removed a simple loop of gold with a single red jewel. Falcon could feel pride fill Dominick as he placed the crown on Drake's head and stood next to him. Drake rose igniting cheers from the crowd around the pedestal.

Pride emanated from Dominick and like an uncontrollable fire spread across Dominion. Falcon's own pride opened him to that fire and for a third time the onslaught of emotions threat-

ened to consume him. But this time he was prepared to face it. He drew a slow breath, basking in the overwhelming amount of magic being drawn by the same emotion resonating from so many people.

Instead of blocking it out he let his pride intensify and opened himself to the others. That pride drew in magic from every corner of the city. Like a wild animal it threatened to tear him apart. He steadied his breathing and slowly brought his own pride under control. Then turning his attention to the others, he wrestled the pride of the nation. Beating it into submission, claiming so much magic it made his skin burn.

As he relaxed Rocious grabbed his elbow and pulled him close, "What the hell are you doing?"

Falcon shook his arm free, "What?"

Rocious grabbed Falcon around the shoulder and pulled him in even closer, "Using these people to call all that magic."

Falcon shoved Rocious, "I need it."

Rocious turned back to the ceremony. Octavia was placing something around Drake's neck.

"Every pathos in the city likely felt that," he said.

Falcon turned back to the ceremony and watched Drake receive gifts from Octavia's family. Next, Fafnir stepped up to give him an ornate box containing ink and quill. Rocious stepped up to Drake and pulled a simple ring from his pocket and handed it to him. Drake put on the ring and bowed his head, but clearly did not understand the significance. Rocious rolled his eyes and raised Drake's hand to the crowd. The ring emanated a dome of distorted red light. Drake looked over at Rocious, still confused, so Rocious pulled a handful of nuts from his pocket and tossed them at the dome. The nuts melted into little puffs of smoke. Drake bowed his head to Rocious and thanked him.

Lastly, Falcon went to his pack and removed a roll of cloth. He placed the cloth on the ground and unraveled it. Inside was the dragon scale sword. He quickly wiped the blade clean and

picked up the sword up by the blade. Falcon took a knee in front of Drake and presented the handle to him.

Drake took the blade with both hands and lifted it above his head. Once again the crowd cheered. As the cheers died down Drake offered his hand and pulled Falcon to his feet, "Thank you."

Falcon took a step back and flicked his cloak behind himself, "Don't thank me yet, I need to bond it to you and this is going to hurt. A lot."

"Right now?" asked Drake.

"Yes," said Falcon.

Drake dug the tip of the sword into the platform and gripped the pommel. Falcon wrapped his hands around Drake's and swallowed, "Clear your mind and try to stay calm."

Drake nodded, "Whenever you're ready."

Falcon closed his eyes and focused on the sword. Even through Drake's hand he could feel it hunger for his magic. According to Albatross, once the bond started there would be only one of two outcomes. If it accepted Drake he would be forever linked to the blade. If Falcon failed or the blade rejected Drake, they would both be lying dead in a few minutes.

Falcon sent a tiny bit of magic into Drake's hand, attuning himself to his friend and giving him a taste of what was coming. He waited for Drake to calm himself then he sent more magic through Drake's hand into the sword. The moment magic hit the *divinus cupla*, the sword came to life. Like a starving child it sucked magic from the closest source: Drake. Falcon heard him take a sharp breath and sent a surge of magic through Drake's hand. The sword's hunger grew and it began sucking magic from Falcon.

Falcon bit his lip and endured the pain while the sword drank his magic. The more magic it drank the stronger its hunger became. Falcon looked down at the blade; the runes were glowing red halfway down the blade. Falcon sent another surge

of magic down into the blade lighting up more of the runes, but it still was not enough.

Something cool hit Falcon's hand, he looked up at Drake. Beads of sweat ran down his face that was a tightly controlled mask. Falcon pushed more magic into the blade igniting the last of the runes. Falcon squeezed Drake's hand and started to cut off the flow of magic then suddenly stopped. The blade's thirst for magic was too strong. If he stopped feeding the blade it would focus on the only other source. And Drake would be dead before anyone could blink. But if he did not cut it off, they would both be dead soon.

He had to try something. Falcon slowed the flow and pulled together everything he had left. He clenched his hands around the pommel and sent everything into the blade all at once. The moment the magic left him he cut off the flow. Falcon released the sword and collapsed to his knees, his hands stiff and pained. At the same time Drake stumbled backwards still holding the sword. Dominick jumped forward and caught Drake's arm, holding him up.

The crowd's cheers cut off when they saw Drake stagger. He wiped the sweat from his face and stood up straight. Drake extended a hand to help Falcon up. Falcon took it and tried to stand, but he felt himself blacking out and collapsed again. This time Drake caught him under the arm and held him up.

As Falcon blinked the stars from his vision, he heard Drake whisper, "Thank you, brother."

He waited for his head to clear and stood on his own, "Use him well."

Drake took Falcon's hand and raised it to the crowd, "Him?"

Falcon waved to the crowd to show he was okay, "Altor."

Drake raised an eye, "Who?"

Falcon shrugged, "You'll figure it out."

A SHITTY HAND



“*W*hat are you doing up so early?” asked Falcon. The sun would not be up for another two hours at the earliest, and most of the city was fast asleep.

Thomas wrinkled his forehead, “Me? What are you doing awake so early?”

Falcon started jogging around the courtyard, “I always get up this early.”

Thomas kept pace with him, “Bullshit, the only one I’ve seen this early is Decimus. After yesterday, I doubt we’ll see him at all today.”

“I guess I haven’t been here since you moved into the barracks. How are you settling in?” asked Falcon.

Thomas increased his pace forcing Falcon to catch up. Thomas did not reply but he kept increasing his pace every time Falcon caught him. The two fell into a competitive rhythm, each one pushing the other to go faster, and before they knew it, they had finished a couple dozen loops. Panting, they finally slowed their pace and walked over to the water barrel.

Falcon opened his mouth to ask his question again, but Thomas spoke first, “I’m not sure the legion is for me.”

Falcon took a healthy drink before answering, "Give it time, it gets easier."

Thomas shook his head and leaned on the barrel, "That's not what I mean. I feel like I can do more."

"You can do good work in the legion, live a good life," said Falcon.

"Good work, a good life, I don't even know if I want those things," said Thomas.

"I can't give you any answers. No one can. But maybe what you need are questions. Like why did you join the military?" asked Falcon.

Thomas splashed a little water on his face and ran his hand through his hair, "Decimus. I wanted to be like him. I wanted to beat him, to be the best. Now that I'm here I realize I was just a child dreaming."

Falcon pushed Thomas's shoulder, "I wouldn't say that until you beat him. But there are more important things than fighting."

Thomas laughed, "You mean like getting married?" Thomas shoved Falcon, "Congratulations by the way."

Falcon jerked upright, "What do you mean congratulations?"

Thomas turned to Falcon and wrinkled his forehead, "Octavia announced that you were betrothed to Aemilia Grey. She's a goddess, congrats."

Falcon froze. Octavia announced that to everyone except him.

Thomas smacked him on the back, "Ha ha, don't tell me you're scared of a beautiful woman?"

Falcon splashed a little water on his face, "No one told me, I thought I had time."

Thomas picked up a couple practice swords, "I know what you need, a trip to Tatiana's new place. She's got a new girl, Mary, amazing. Simply amazing."

Thomas tossed one of the swords to Falcon. Falcon let the sword hit the ground, "Did you say Mary?"

Thomas walked over and picked up the sword, "Yeah, why? Do you know her?"

Falcon chopped the air with his hand, "About this tall, sandy blonde hair, hazel eyes, and is always twirling her hair like this?"

Thomas squinted at Falcon, "I take it you know her."

Falcon grabbed Thomas's shirt, "Take me there. Now!"

"ARE you sure this is the place?" asked Falcon. "Doesn't look like one of Tatiana's brothels."

Thomas stepped in front of him, "It's not."

"Then why the hell are we here?" said Falcon as he pushed past Thomas.

Thomas bumped Falcon's shoulder forcing him to turn to keep his balance, "This is the right way, but we're not going anywhere until you calm down."

Falcon pushed Thomas away, "I'm calm."

"It's dangerous to roam the city at this hour especially the day after a large celebration," said Thomas.

"Lead the way then," said Falcon.

Thomas led Falcon half way down a side street, then stopped and looked up at the building next to them, "Can you climb?"

Falcon rolled his eyes and glanced up at the building. Falcon gave Thomas a little wave and launched himself onto the roof of the building. On the roof Falcon leaned over the ledge looking for Thomas, but he was gone. He checked the main street then went back to check the alley again but found nothing.

A pebble hit him in the chest. When he looked up Thomas was standing on the roof across the alley.

Falcon used another burst of magic and hopped over to Thomas, "How'd you do that?"

"Not all of us grew up in a Castle," said Thomas before he jogged to the edge of the roof and leapt to the next building. Falcon ran after him, but each time Falcon jumped to the next

rooftop Thomas was on his way to the next building. In a few minutes they covered what would have taken them an hour on the street. Thomas finally stopped and waited for Falcon to catch up.

"This it?" asked Falcon.

Thomas arched an eyebrow, "It is but wait a minute. I need to see something first."

"See what?" asked Falcon.

"Who's guarding the door," answered Thomas.

"I'll take them out if need be," said Falcon.

Thomas grabbed Falcon's forearm, "Don't be stupid. This city is full of dangers you know nothing about."

Falcon sat back on his heels and watched the street below, "As you wish."

"You're a lot like him," said Thomas.

"A lot like who?" asked Falcon.

"Master Rocious, Lockland," said Thomas.

"How would you know that?" asked Falcon.

"I've been hearing stories about him all my life," said Thomas.

"He's nothing like those stories," said Falcon.

"Maybe not, but there's some truth to them. The castle's staff and soldiers at the barracks have a lot to say too."

Falcon narrowed his eyes at Thomas, "Why are you asking around about him?"

"I didn't ask, people just talk. I listen," said Thomas.

Falcon looked back at the brothel, "What people?"

Thomas picked loose a stone from the roof and bounced it in his hand, "Legionnaires, Drake, Fafnir. Said a lot about you too."

"Like what?" Falcon snatched the stone out of the air. Falcon opened his hand, "The fuck?" His hand was covered in shit.

Thomas started laughing and showed him the stone, "Full of danger."

Falcon reached for Thomas's shirt but he slipped away. Falcon sent a slight bit of energy running down his arm throwing the

shit at Thomas. Again he dodged and the shit coasted into the street outside Tatiana's. Before Falcon saw where it landed Thomas yanked him away from the edge by his cloak.

A fraction of a second later a scattering of crossbow bolts buzzed by where they were standing, "Full of dangers," said Falcon.

Thomas let out a huff, "Yeah, three of them. Two in the alley across the street, one in a window three houses down."

Falcon glanced across the street to find the alley, "I'll take care of the two in the alley," and took off running toward the edge of the roof. Right before the edge he launched himself across the street over the two assailants and into the alley. They were still focused on the roof when he landed. He rushed in, catching the closest man by the chin. His head snapped back and Falcon knocked him onto his back.

The second man dropped his crossbow, drew a pair of daggers, and lunged at Falcon hoping to catch him off guard. Instead he caught a blast of force to the chest and crunched against the side of the alley. Falcon finished the first man with a kick to the head. He took a moment to make sure they were not severely injured then casually walked toward Tatiana's place.

Thomas was already leaning against the door waiting, "I win."

Falcon shook his head, "You're full of surprises."

Thomas held open the door, "Did you think I spent the last ten years twiddling my thumbs?"

Falcon checked down the street toward the window with the third attacker. A small section of the window was broken but otherwise normal. Falcon turned his attention back to Thomas and led the way inside Tatiana's. As usual, a pretty young girl greeted them, "Thomas, welcome back. Who's your friend?"

Thomas smiled back at her, "Morning Kara, Mary still up?"

Kara locked her eyes on Falcon and slid closer to him, "Not sure, ask Sabina behind the bar. I'll take care of your friend." Kara

looped a hand around Falcon's waist and used a finger to move his chin until he looked her in the eyes.

Falcon caught Kara's hand and moved it away from his face, "Sorry Kara, I'm only here for conversation," said Falcon.

Thomas went to the bar, leaving Falcon and Kara behind.

Kara in turn took Falcon's hand and led him farther into the room, "We can talk, if that's what you'd like."

Thomas twisted his wrist free of Kara's hand, "I need to talk to Mary."

Kara pursed her lips, "You know where to find me."

Falcon caught up to Thomas and followed him upstairs, "How do you do that?" asked Thomas.

"Do what?" asked Falcon.

Thomas looked back at him, "Kara, Aemilia, Floriana."

Falcon nudged Thomas up the stairs, "What about them?"

Thomas hung his head, "Beautiful women throw themselves at you and you don't even realize it. Kara's not a working girl. She handles the books and runs the place for Tatiana."

"I didn't realize Tatiana hired girls for stuff like that," said Falcon.

Thomas walked to the end of the hall and stopped in front of the last door, "You'll find more between a whore's ears than between her legs." Thomas knocked on the door.

"That sounds familiar," said Falcon.

Thomas closed his eyes listening, "Something Decimus says."

"Oh," said Falcon.

"Just a minute," called Mary through the door. Falcon reached for the door but Thomas smacked his hand. Falcon narrowed his eyes at him, Thomas held up his index finger. Falcon crossed his arms and waited.

Thomas smiled, "And you say you're not like him."

Falcon started to reply but stopped when Mary opened the door wearing a negligee. Her face lit up when she saw Thomas,

but a moment later it took a dark tone as she noticed Falcon. Her bright smile dimmed and she looked down.

Thomas touched her chin lifting it slightly, "No smile for me today?"

She ducked back into her room, but left the door open. Thomas followed her. Falcon hesitated. He was so focused on getting here that he never thought about what he wanted to say. Falcon cracked his neck then went inside closing the door. When he turned around Thomas was lounging on the bed and Mary had wrapped herself in a less revealing robe. Falcon scanned the room and sat in the only chair next to the door.

"So I take you two do know each other," said Thomas.

Mary sat on the bed and shoved Thomas's feet off the edge, "Why would you bring him here?"

Thomas put up his hands, "Until this morning I didn't even realize he knew you."

Mary's eyes narrowed and she punched Thomas in the arm, "You knew I was from Reed."

Thomas put his hands up to defend himself but did not try to stop her, "You know how many girls from Reed work for Tatiana, heck, there's even guys working the sheets for her. What's the big deal?"

Falcon hung his head in his hands, "Is it really that bad here?" he asked.

Mary stopped attacking Thomas and sat on the bed with her arms crossed, "What do you want me to say?"

Falcon looked up at her, "Tell me the truth."

Mary huffed out a breath, "Is that really what you want?"

"Yes," said Falcon.

Mary hopped off the bed and leaned over Falcon, "You want to hear that the happiest day I've had in ten years was when I lost count of how many times I got fucked, but I got paid. Or do you want to hear about the day I got raped because I walked down the wrong street. Or maybe you just want to hear that

everyone's great so you can go back to your happy life?" asked Mary.

Falcon looked up at Mary, "Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Mary slapped him hard across the face. He squeezed his eyes shut then blinked a few times. As his shock wore off his face started to burn. When he looked up at Mary she was clutching her hand.

"I visit every chance I get. Why didn't you say anything?" asked Falcon as he stood up and reached for her.

Mary turned away, "Oh come on. Nobody wants to talk about it. We live it every day. If you didn't see it then you weren't looking."

Falcon's eyes started to fill with tears. Mary turned back toward him, "Look, nobody blames you."

Falcon looked down, "Maybe they should."

"There's nothing you can do," said Mary as she reached for his face with her injured hand.

Falcon caught her wrist, "Yes there is."

"Yeah, what?" she started to ask as Falcon healed her hand.

Falcon let go of her hand, "Do you have anything to write with?"

Mary went to her nightstand and opened the top drawer, "Yeah, why?"

Falcon took the parchment and quill and started drawing, "How quickly can everyone be ready to leave?"

"What do you mean?" asked Mary.

Falcon kept drawing, "I mean everyone from Reed, how quickly can they be ready to travel?"

Mary looked at Thomas then to Falcon, "I don't know, a couple days."

"A week. To gather food and supplies, make sure everyone has warm clothes. They'll need horses for the carts," said Thomas.

Falcon glanced at him then shrugged, "Whatever, I welcome the help." Falcon handed the parchment to Mary, "I drew you a

map and some instructions, follow them. If all else fails, stay close to the river.”

Mary looked down at the map, “Wait. Are you serious? You want us to just pack up and leave?”

“Yes,” said Falcon.

Thomas put his hands behind his head and crossed his feet on the bed, “Just like him.”

“Where are we going to go? We’ve built homes and lives here. People are not going to want to give that up again,” said Mary.

“Fort Reed. Try to convince them, but don’t force them. It has to be their choice,” said Falcon.

“You’re going to lead them back and what? Sit outside the walls?” asked Mary.

Falcon looked her in the eye, “Not me, you. You’ve done more for them in the past ten years. I’m sorry to ask even more but there’s nobody else,” said Falcon as he opened the door.

Mary shoved the door closed, “What about the barrier?”

“It’s coming down. Even if it kills me, it’s coming down,” said Falcon.

LOGIC AND WHAT'S RIGHT



Falcon had jogged up to the main courtyard's western gate when he heard Thomas panting behind him. He ignored him and went through the gate with a quick wave to the guards. A group of soldiers were engaged in practice matches while Drake and Fafnir stood with a group of instructors watching. Falcon slowed to a walk and approached them.

Thomas caught up still panting, "Fuck you're fast. So what's the plan?"

Falcon put his hand on Thomas's chest and stopped, "The first thing is you stop following me. Then I go talk to Dominick."

Thomas pushed Falcon's hand away, "King Dominick? How is he supposed to help?"

Falcon started walking toward Drake again, "Yes, King Dominick. I'm not sure exactly but if we're getting out of the city I need his permission."

"Just tell me what you need," said Thomas.

Falcon stopped walking and looked Thomas in the eye, "I get that you want to help but this isn't your fight. If it goes south you don't want to be involved."

Thomas stood up straight, "I lost one friend because I walked

away too soon, I won't lose another making the same mistake. You say this isn't my fight, but you're wrong. I'm not sure about much, but helping my friends is something I have no doubt about."

Falcon sucked in a breath, held it for a moment then he let it out and nodded. "Thank you, but I need to talk to Dominick alone."

Thomas opened his mouth but Falcon held up his hand, "Aren't you supposed to be training with the soldiers anyway?"

Falcon and Thomas walked over to the group of soldiers. Drake was in the middle of a duel so they went over to Decimus.

"Where have you two been?" asked Decimus.

Thomas's eyes flicked to Falcon then back, "Went for a little run is all," said Falcon.

"Alright, get ready for the next match: you and me," said Decimus.

"I thought you said to wait until the next challenge match?" asked Thomas.

"I changed my mind, but only bound swords," said Decimus.

Thomas cracked his knuckles and went to get a bound sword.

"I need to talk to Dominick, do you know where I can find him?" asked Falcon.

"I'm not sure, but he was looking for you earlier. Drake told him to check your room. He's probably headed there now," answered Decimus.

"Thanks," said Falcon.

Falcon worked his way through the castle. He kept his eyes open for Dominick, but only caught a glimpse of the back of his head right before he slipped inside his bedroom. He started jogging to catch up but Lucina turned the corner and bumped into him.

"Oh, there you are," said Lucina.

Falcon grabbed her arm to keep her from falling, "Here I am."

Once she caught her balance Falcon continued walking, "Sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Wait, I came to tell you Master Connelly is looking for you," said Lucina.

"Okay, thanks," said Falcon as he waved over his shoulder.

"You have to meet him at the academy," Lucina shouted down the hall.

When Falcon opened his door Dominick was standing next to his bed opening his travel pack, "I heard you were looking for me," said Falcon.

Dominick turned around, "Oh, there you are."

Falcon motioned toward the fireplace. Dominick took a seat and put Falcon's pack next to his chair, "I need to know about your ancestor's journal."

Falcon glanced at his travel pack then sat across from Dominick, "What do you want to know?"

"It'll be easier if you give it to me," said Dominick.

Falcon swallowed, "I can't give it to you, but I can help you get your ancestral armor."

Dominick grabbed the arm of the chair and leaned forward, "What do you mean you can't give it to me?"

Falcon inched forward in his seat, "The journal wasn't meant for you,"

Dominick lowered his voice, "I am your King."

"You are my King but the journal was meant only for me. The armor is yours and you can still earn it," said Falcon.

Dominick stood up and walked around to the back of his seat, "Earn it? I don't need to earn it. It is my birthright. But none of that matters; you have the source of it's power," said Dominick.

"You don't know what you're asking. The *divinus cupla* is not a weapon," said Falcon.

This time Dominick stared into Falcon's eyes. Falcon felt the weight of that stare and sat back.

“I gave you a home, my home. Raised you like a son and now you deny me a simple book?” said Dominick.

Falcon put his head down and closed his eyes for a moment then stood up and watched the fireplace, “I came to ask you for help and in truth I was going to share my ancestor’s secrets with you,” Falcon moved to the edge of the fireplace and looked at Dominick, “But if your ancestors will not share their power with you, nor shall I.”

Dominick stepped in front of Falcon’s pack, “Don’t be like your father. He let some trivial ideals divide our people, and Eikard is no different.”

Falcon’s eyes flared and he ground his teeth, “I’m nothing like my father.”

Dominick became very still then in a flash he grabbed at Falcon’s pack but Falcon was faster. He slammed his hand on the wall activating a network of binding runes carved around the room. Dominick stopped cold, unable to speak or move.

Falcon stepped around him and walked onto the balcony ignoring the pack, “Thank you for giving me a home and a family,” he turned back to Dominick, “It’s not too late to earn your armor. Good luck.”

Falcon released the magic holding the room in place and launched himself into the courtyard. Rocious was right. Using magic to jump was pretty easy after you practiced. Like throwing a ball, except you were the ball and if you did not throw straight you could die. Easy.

The group of soldiers watched Falcon as he landed. Even the men who had known him for the past ten years had never seen anyone except Rocious jump off the tower. They gave him the same awed stares they usually gave Rocious when he casually used his abilities. Falcon glanced at the next duel to find Decimus and Thomas circling each other.

Falcon jogged over to speak with Drake, “Hey,” Falcon

motioned toward the west gate with his thumb, "We need to chat quick. Just us."

Drake said something to the group of instructors then walked with Falcon toward the gate, "I wanted to ask you something also."

Falcon waited until they were out of ear shot, "Some of my people need my help. Actually a lot of them." Falcon paused to think of the right words.

Drake put his arm around Falcon's shoulder, "If I heard nothing more I would tell you to help them."

Falcon smiled, "What if helping them has terrible consequences?"

Drake continued walking for a moment in silence, "Sacrifice is part of life. But keep your wits, and remember what father says. The world changes every day. If you don't change with it, you'll be left in the past."

"I remember the saying differently. Sometimes the world changes you and sometimes you change the world. Anyway, what did you want to ask me?" asked Falcon.

Drake tapped the pommel of his sword, "I've never bonded anything before, or I guess had someone bond it. Does it always feel like this?"

Falcon could not help but smile as he suddenly felt like Rocious, "Feel like what?"

Drake took the grip in his hand, "It's hard to explain. My emotions are erratic. I almost jumped in to stop the practice matches."

"That's Altor: he is a protector. He will help protect the ones you care about," said Falcon.

"You talk like it's alive," said Drake.

Falcon stopped walking, "It's a matter of perspective because in some ways he is. Magic is tied to emotion. Altor is magic."

"You mean I am feeling my sword's emotions? Do you know how crazy that sounds?" asked Drake.

“I just flew off my balcony and you’re saying a desire to protect people is crazy?” asked Falcon.

“You have a point, but I’ve never heard of a sword having feelings,” said Drake.

Falcon smacked Drake on the back, “It’s not Altor’s emotions you’re feeling. It’s yours. The magic makes them...” Falcon turned his palm up toward Drake.

“More intense,” suggested Drake.

“Yeah, more intense. You’ll get used to it, hopefully,” said Falcon.

“I’m glad I’m not going crazy,” said Drake.

Falcon glanced back at the castle. Dominick would probably be here soon if he was coming.

“Not yet anyway. Thanks for the advice,” said Falcon.

Drake tapped Falcon’s shoulder with his fist, “I should be thanking you. Good luck, tell me how it goes at dinner.”

Falcon wasted no more time; he went straight for the gate, fighting the urge to run or look back at the castle. He made it less than a block away before Thomas caught up with him.

“You sure are persistent,” said Falcon.

“Well, I thought you were going to let me help. What did the king say?” asked Thomas.

“It doesn’t matter. I do have something you can help with. You know Dominion better than anyone. Help Mary find a way to sneak everyone out of the city,” said Falcon.

“What do you mean sneak?” asked Thomas, “ten-thousand people don’t sneak.”

Falcon pulled Thomas into one of the side streets, “I just need you to get them to Fort Reed. I don’t care how you do it,” said Falcon.

“What do you mean me?” asked Thomas.

“I have something else I need to take care of,” said Falcon.

“What’s more important than leading your own people home?” asked Thomas.

Falcon checked the road behind them for any sign of Dominick, "Look, I don't have time to explain. If you're going to help, help. But if not, get out of the way."

"I told you I'm in," said Thomas.

"Then talk to Mary, come up with a way to get them out of the city," said Falcon.

"We're gonna need horses to get out of the city and outrun the tenth," said Thomas.

"What?!" blurted Falcon louder than he intended.

"General Greko is camped outside the city with the tenth," said Thomas.

Falcon slammed his hand into the building next to him, "Shit! Fuck! I don't have time to deal with this," said Falcon.

"Then go, I have an idea. Not a good idea but an idea," Thomas cracked his neck and rolled his shoulders.

Falcon hesitated.

"Seriously, go," said Thomas, "I'll get them there. We might have an army on our tails, but I'll get them there."

Falcon tapped Thomas's shoulder, "Thank you, I owe you for this."

Thomas caught Falcon's hand and clasped wrists with him, "No, you will never owe me. This is for me. Now go." Thomas smacked him on the back and took off running farther down the side street.

Falcon checked the main street one last time, and ran like the wind.

TOWER OF WIND



“*Y*our husband cannot delay forever.”

Octavia signaled a group of servants, “My husband is not delaying, Master Connelly. He is a King. As King he is a busy man.”

Connelly waved off the servants presenting food and drinks, “He has had three months. If Master Lockland and his student do not walk through those doors in the next ten minutes, we will be forced to get them. Trust me, you do not want that.”

A middle-aged woman in master’s robes stepped in front of Connelly, “What Master Connelly meant to say is, thank you for your hospitality. Please remind your husband we are waiting.”

Octavia bowed her head, “Thank you, Master Agrippa, I will pass that along.”

“Please call me Drusilla, Master Agrippa is my husband,” said Drusilla.

“My apologies. Speaking of your husband, I’m glad he took the time to come visit. I hear he is to make a second attempt at the trials,” said Octavia.

“I wish he hadn’t made the first, but there is no stopping him,” said Drusilla.

A moment later the doors to the throne room slammed open. Rocious entered and flicked his hand, dimming the torches that illuminated the room then held the door open for Octavia to leave with her staff.

"Would you like me to give you a tour of the castle?" asked Octavia.

Master Agrippa pulled back the hood of his dark blue trimmed cloak and touched his wife's hip, "An excellent idea," said Drusilla without hesitation.

"After you," said Octavia.

Rocious waited for them to leave and closed the door, "Your student found me," Rocious flourished his hands, "Here I am."

Connelly waited for the other masters to join them, "Yet your student is not with you."

"I am not his wet nurse, perhaps you should have given your student better instructions," said Rocious.

"If your student is not here in the next ten minutes we will be forced to consider him a rogue," said Connelly.

Rocious looked into the eyes of the masters standing before him, "You will do no such thing," warned Rocious.

"It is not your decision. In fact, this matter has brought your judgment into question as well," said Connelly.

Rocious flicked sparks on the floor, "I am Praetorian. My judgment is not yours to question."

"I too am Praetorian, and I have the support of this council," said Connelly.

Rocious looked at his nails then flicked more sparks into the air, "So you say. Agrippa, anything to add?"

"The council is united in this decision," said Connelly.

Rocious ignored Connelly and waited for Agrippa to reply, "No one questioned Praetorian Caldwell when he left the path. Perhaps if you explained why you have broken convention," said Agrippa.

"It's too late for explanations," said Connelly.

Rocious flicked sparks in Connelly's directions as he walked across the throne room and climbed the steps to Dominick's throne. Dominick entered through the doors behind his throne with Lucina and stood on one side of his throne, Rocious stood on the other. Lucina walked down the steps.

Connelly snapped through the shadows to stand next to Lucina at the base of the steps in front of the throne.

"Where is Lockland's student?" asked Connelly as the other masters joined him in at the base of the steps.

"I spoke to him in the hall but he seemed to be in a hurry," said Lucina.

Dominick glanced at Rocious then back down the steps, "I believe he has fled the city."

Connelly immediately addressed the other masters, "I will go after the rogue. The rest of you will put Master Lockland into isolation at my academy."

Rocious flicked sparks at Dominick then walked back down the steps, "Let's cut the bullshit," he walked down the steps locking eyes with Connelly and the various masters as he spoke, "Today was not about Falcon at all. You wanted my title," Rocious put his hand out palm up, "I am right here. By all means try to take it."

"Don't be foolish. There are eight of us," said Connelly.

Rocious started laughing, "You claim to be Praetorian,"

Connelly motioned for the other masters to surround Rocious.

"We did not need to be enemies, Lockland."

"See, I'm not the enemy you need to worry about," Rocious raised his hand toward one of the masters making a fist, "Fear," the man dropped to his knees then fell on his side and started twitching frantically. Rocious raised his other hand making a fist, "Contempt," another master let out an agonizing scream and collapsed.

"Stop all magic!" shouted Connelly.

"It makes no difference," Rocious put his hand toward a third man and took a slow breath, "Passion." The third man struggled for a few seconds then fell to his knees panting and sweating.

Rocious closed his eyes for a moment turning his ear toward Connelly then opened his eyes, "Arrogance." Connelly clutched his chest in pain.

"This is your enemy," said Rocious.

Connelly controlled his breathing and relaxed. Rocious moved closer to him, but Connelly hopped back and with a snap disappeared.

Rocious walked toward Agrippa, the other masters huddled behind him, "I will go after Falcon. You will make sure no one interferes."

"Rest assured Praetorian, we came under the pretense of ensuring your student was not dangerous," said Agrippa.

"He is not. You have my word," said Rocious.

"I have no doubt in your judgment Praetorian, but I run a small school. Connelly and the others have far greater influence," said Agrippa.

"Quality over quantity," said Rocious.

"We cannot challenge Praetorian Connelly. Not without your strength," said Agrippa.

"Not strength, confidence," replied Rocious.

Agrippa nodded, "I suggest you hurry."

WHEN FALCON LEFT Dominion he thought he had the perfect plan to get what he needed from Duke Eikard. Now that he was in Keld he realized how terrible his plan truly was. If magic had not solved all of the problems he would have failed, or worse, been dead. Magic cut the week of travel down to three days and the risk of being caught was rendered almost impossible. Jumping over half of the city solved even the difficult task of sneaking into Eikard's castle.

But Falcon was not sure how magic could solve his current problem. He was hiding inside the liquor cabinet of Eikard's council chamber waiting for his advisors to leave. He had been there for almost twenty minutes and the cabinet was not getting any larger. The thought of turning his tiny prison into kindling brought such joy that he longed to make it a reality.

Falcon was reasonably certain he could take Eikard in a fight, but if his advisors were *attuned* with a fraction of Rocious's skill he would surely lose. There were only two advisors who had yet to leave and from how slow they talked they could be here for hours.

Heck, Eikard would probably thank him for ending the conversation sooner. He was tired of this timid bullshit; he did not get this far by being coy. Why was he hiding in the first place? He knew what he had to do. Then it hit him. He was scared. Not of Eikard or his advisors, not even for his people. He was scared that Eikard might have been full of shit. For ten years he had dreamt of Reed, of confronting his father. Now that day was here and he feared that it may have all been a lie.

Falcon kicked open the cabinet and rolled to his feet, "Nobody fucking CARES!!"

The three men were startled into action. The two advisors cowered farther into the room. Eikard threw up his guard and jumped between Falcon and his advisors. Instead of focusing on Eikard, Falcon sent a surge of energy at the liquor cabinet smashing it into a pile of alcohol-soaked kindling.

Eikard realized his attacker was Falcon and took an athletic stance then cracked his neck.

"Is there a reason you destroyed my furniture?" asked Eikard.

"It's too small," said Falcon.

"So is my dungeon, but I'll make room for you," said Eikard.

"Like you did for Lord Werval?" asked Falcon.

Eikard tilted his head slightly, "Ah, is that why you're here?"

"Not entirely, but Werval's coming with me," said Falcon.

"You'll have to kill me first," said Eikard as he moved toward Falcon at a steady pace keeping his head tucked behind his guard.

Falcon did not want to fight. He was only there to get information from Eikard and that meant he needed him alive and conscious. Falcon swung his hand from right to left trying to hit Eikard in the side with a small wave of force, but it missed and he rushed forward. Falcon barely reacted in time to swat down Eikard's series of jabs. Falcon shifted to the side and tried to put a little space between them. But Eikard stayed close trying to box Falcon against the wall.

Falcon's instincts kicked in and barely saved him. Eikard was fast, faster than most *attuned*. Falcon avoided or blocked everything he threw at him by a fraction of an inch each time. He might be able to end this fight in a heartbeat with magic but he still needed time to use it. Eikard must have known, because he pressed his attack ceaselessly. He never let up, and if anything he was getting faster.

Suddenly Falcon's instincts screamed at him, he blocked Eikard's jab and followed it up with a low kick to Eikard's thigh. Eikard toppled to the ground. Falcon jumped back and slammed the ground with a wave of force sending a spider web of cracks around the entire room.

Falcon glanced at the floor; his wave of force had created a perfect circle around Eikard without a single crack. "How? Your family was not one of the Defiant."

"Who?" asked Eikard as he stood up and shook the dust out of his hair.

"Doesn't matter," said Falcon.

Falcon heard the door slam open but kept his eyes focused completely on Eikard.

"Wait!" shouted Werval as he ran into the room, "Wait Cato, please."

Eikard used the distraction to attack Falcon, this time moving even faster, "Get out of here Quintus."

But this time Falcon knew what he was up against. In the same way Rocious used his explosions, Falcon used little bursts of magic to speed up his movements.

Eikard may have been faster than before, but he was limited. Falcon had him beat, not only was he a better technical fighter, but with magic he could redirect any movement at any time. The magic allowed him to practically levitate. Eikard did not stand a chance. Falcon kicked him into one of the walls and caught him around the neck as he rebounded.

Right into Eikard's trap. Eikard shoved himself backward crunching Falcon against the wall. Even worse, every time his armor touched Falcon it burned off some of his magic. Falcon lost his grip on Eikard and fell to the ground. Eikard grabbed him by the neck and held him down.

"STOOPP!" shouted Werval.

"He snuck in here to kill me Quintus," said Eikard as he tightened his grip, choking Falcon.

"He's not a killer. Please Cato. Let me talk to him," said Werval.

Eikard picked Falcon up and held him against the wall by his neck, "It's too late, Dominick's dug his claws too deep."

"Let Katrin see him. Please," pleaded Werval.

Eikard let him go and Falcon crashed to the floor coughing, "Get Katrin, you have ten minutes before I kill him."

Werval ran over to Falcon, "She's your sister Cato, you get her."

Eikard grunted his displeasure, but left to get Katrin. Werval helped Falcon take a seat at the council chamber's table and sat next to him. As if noticing them for the first time, Werval turned to Eikard's advisors still cowering in the corner, "I've called for a war council in the Tower of Wind."

The advisors gave a quick nod and left the room in a hurry. Werval grabbed Falcon's shirt, "Why are you here?"

Falcon gripped Werval's wrist and rubbed his neck with the other, "Why are you?"

"There isn't time to explain, answer me or he is going to kill you when he gets back," said Werval.

Falcon took a painful breath, his neck still hurt, "I thought he knew how I could get into Fort Reed."

Werval let go of Falcon, "You should have asked for his help instead of attacking."

"Why would he help me? He killed seventeen people back in Dominion, kidnapped you, and almost killed me," said Falcon.

"You've got it wrong. Tell him you need his help," said Werval.

"Why are you here and not locked up?" asked Falcon.

Werval stood up, "There's no time to explain."

When the door opened Werval moved in front of Falcon. Eikard entered the room and stood by the door keeping his eyes on Falcon, "If you lay a hand on my sister, I'll send you back to Dominion in a box. You understand me?"

Falcon rubbed his throat again, "I understand, I'm not looking to get my ass kicked again."

Eikard stepped inside and closed the door, "No, next time I will kill you. Say it. You will not harm my sister."

Falcon felt his hands get cold, "I will not harm your sister Katrin."

Eikard held the door open, "Katrin."

The moment Katrin entered the room Falcon was captivated. She was stunning like a tree nymph, the embodiment of nature and beauty. Petite with long brown hair and a heart shaped face; she wore a simple, forest green dress and had wild flowers woven into her hair. As she got closer he even caught a whiff of moss and flowers.

Katrin took Falcon's hand, "Hello Falcon, do you remember me?"

A smile bloomed across her face until it reached her brown eyes.

“No, I’m sorry...”

As she sat next to him a faded memory formed in his mind.

“I suppose you were quite young,” Katrin rested her hands on top of Falcon’s.

“So were you,” said Werval.

She had youthful hands, but she seemed more mature, and if she was close to her brother’s age, she could be old enough to be his mother. Falcon slid his hand back from Katrin’s and sat up straight. Katrin took her hands back and rested them in her lap.

Eikard moved behind Katrin, “What do you think Katrin?”

Katrin smiled at Falcon, “He’s here to take a life, but not yours.”

Katrin’s words affected Eikard like the first ray of sunshine after a weeklong blizzard. Eikard squeezed Katrin’s shoulder as he asked Falcon, “Who are you trying to kill and why did you come here?”

“I don’t want to kill anyone. I came because you said you could help me get my home back,” said Falcon.

“You’ve got a funny way of asking for help,” said Eikard before he looked down at Katrin, “Who did he come to kill?”

Katrin slid her shoulder away from Eikard and stood next to Falcon, “It does not matter, Cato. He is an ally and he needs your help.”

Werval cleared his throat, “I’ve called for a war council in the Tower of Wind.”

Eikard did not hesitate; he was out the door before Falcon registered what happened. Falcon stayed seated and Katrin touched his shoulder, “Don’t worry, I’ll go with you,” she said.

Falcon let her lead him.

“What happened? Just like that, it’s over?” asked Falcon.

Werval walked with Katrin and Falcon, “It’s far from over but yes, Cato is a decisive man. You’d do well to follow his example if you’re to lead your people.”

“I can be decisive,” said Falcon defensively.

Katrin squeezed his hand reassuring.

"No, you are impulsive, don't mistake the two," said Werval.

They had only walked for about a minute, mostly climbing a winding staircase down the hall from the council chamber. Falcon noticed a gentle whistling sound that grew stronger the higher they climbed.

"What's that sound?" asked Falcon.

"The Tower of Wind. It is my observatory and allows me to keep an eye on things," said Eikard.

"It's how I saw the army moving toward Fort Reed and called the war council," said Werval.

"You can see all the way to Reed?" asked Falcon.

"Not anymore," said Eikard.

"Anymore? What changed?" asked Falcon.

"The Severan Storm," said Eikard.

"I don't understand," said Falcon.

"You want your home back?" asked Eikard.

"Yes. Of course," said Falcon.

"Then stop worrying about the storm, focus on this moment. My sister says I can trust you so I will help. But I am one man, you'll need more than my help," said Eikard.

"Will you convince your council to help?" asked Falcon.

"No, you will," said Eikard.

Falcon started to reply, but the whistling intensified and he stopped. Falcon could not hear anything over the high-pitched whistling. When they reached the top of the stairs entering the Tower of Wind, it became completely silent. Katrin snapped her fingers, and smiled as the sound fell flat.

Falcon did not know what to expect, but the Tower of Wind certainly lived up to its name. It was a circular room with eight pillars holding up a stone ceiling carved like a compass. There was a long table in the center and the walls looked like glass allowing you to see impossibly far in every direction. Falcon

tried to touch the glass, but what looked like glass was merely a slight shift in air pressure.

Falcon moved away from the edge when the floor caught his attention. It was littered with thousands of runes that appeared to be some sort of compass. When he got closer to the center he noticed his own name, *Reed*, and spun around to check for more names. He found two more, *Maximus* at the edge of the tower and *Kard* near the center.

“What’s Kard?” asked Falcon.

Eikard slowly worked his way around the perimeter of the tower, “Me.”

“Then I’m Reed,” said Falcon.

“No,” said Eikard.

Before he could ask any more, the rest of the council arrived so he took a seat at the table in the center of the room. Katrin took the seat next to him. Eikard continued working his way around the perimeter. Once everyone was seated Eikard sat.

“Quintus,” said Eikard.

Lord Werval cleared his throat, “Less than an hour ago I noticed maybe two full legions moving along the border, likely more. They must have left Dominion some time in the night and are heading west. If they continue their current pace and direction, Keld will be under siege in roughly three days.”

Two men got up and went to the edge of the tower to check Werval’s claim.

Falcon waited until they came back before addressing the group, “Most of you do not know me. I am Falcon Reed and I may be able to shed some light on the situation. The legion marching west is being lead by General Greko. But he is not marching on Keld, he’s marching on Fort Reed.”

A woman across the table turned to Eikard, “He shouldn’t be here,” she said.

“This is my council, I brought him,” said Eikard simply.

The woman leaned back and crossed her arms, "I will not support any decision that is made while he is here."

"Then leave," said Eikard.

"Ha, you'll lose every pathos in Caledonia."

Eikard folded his hands in his lap.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," said the woman but she stayed in her seat.

Falcon looked at the woman, she was plain looking with a touch of grey in her hair and a stern face.

Falcon met her eye and gave a slight smile, "I hope to surprise you then."

She did not look at Falcon or answer him.

"I believe you have done enough surprising for today. Simply tell us what you know. Alright?" asked Eikard.

Falcon sat back in his seat, "Fair enough, but for the record I was not trying to kill you."

"When intent and action are not aligned, terrible consequences may arise," said Eikard.

"Ironic to quote a man's ancestor when you are at the brink of war with him," said Falcon.

Eikard waved his hand in a circle for Falcon to hurry up, "I think its safe to assume the two legions you saw are my people."

"Did you say two legions? It would take all of Reed's people to field those numbers," said a heavysset man with a thick beard sitting next to Werval. Eikard looked at him. "Beg your pardon, name's Scipio, Anton Scipio," he said turning to Falcon.

"Nice to meet you," said Falcon. "You are quite correct Scipio. It is nearly all of my people. Only about twelve hundred are soldiers, the rest civilian."

"Why are we still listening to this? He's already tripping over his own lies," said the stern faced woman still speaking directly to Eikard. "First he said Greko had only one legion, now he's claiming it's two legions of civilians."

Falcon addressed 'stern face' directly, "Allow me to clarify,

General Greko is chasing roughly ten thousand of my people with a single legion of his own.”

“That would explain the reason for risking traveling at night,” said the man next to Werval. “Do you have any idea what Greko did with his cavalry unit? I did not notice any in either group. Only a handful of carts.”

‘Stern face’ stood up knocking over her chair and looked at Eikard, “Are you seriously believing this? We’d be better off hanging him off the tower for the truth.”

Falcon felt her casual disregard trigger anger in him but he stifled the emotion before it started calling magic.

“Sit down or leave. Are we understood Master McDowell?” asked Eikard.

Denise McDowell huffed out a breath, “If you can’t see through his bullshit story, I’m leaving. Who do you expect your pathos to follow without me?”

“When was the last time you lead them Denise?” asked Eikard, “Now sit down. We will listen to what Falcon has to say then I will make up my mind about the validity.”

The moment Falcon figured out why she was so brazen with him his anger turned to amusement and he almost burst out laughing. Colville once said pathos were a jealous breed; he was right of course and Master McDowell was a prime example. Falcon searched the faces of the council to confirm what he suspected. Nobody wanted Denise here, which meant only one thing. She was either a famous empath or a very skilled one.

Denise flicked her hand and the chair flipped up for her to sit. Eikard turned to Falcon, “The cavalry unit?”

“Quintus can probably explain better than me, but most of the realm has had a massive shortage of horses since spring. The entire military has barely had enough for scouts and messengers. As for Greko’s horses, let’s just say I stole them,” said Falcon.

Eikard turned to a younger man at the far end of the table, “Commander Ducane, what is it?”

"Nothing sir, just a couple holes in the story. I've heard nothing of this horse shortage and if he stole them from Greko, where are they now?" said Ducane.

"Actually the shortage is my doing," said Werval, "I have controlled the horse trade for over thirty years. It's my family's main source of wealth."

"And the horses I stole are now pulling the carts you noticed with my people," said Falcon.

Denise leaned back in her chair, "How was it that you stole these horses? Perhaps ten thousand soldiers smiled at you as you walked off with them?" she asked sardonically.

Falcon smiled at Denise, "You're right, I walked them right out of camp, and some of Greko's *five* thousand soldiers helped me do it. I understand the mistake. Sums... Can. Be. Confusing."

Denise shook her head, "It's ridiculous. Why would they recognize him? And even if they did, there's no way they'd let him go."

"They'd recognize him as Lockland's student. And if you'd met the man, you would understand why they would have jumped to help," said Werval.

Denise's eyes locked onto Falcon, "You're Praetorian Lockland's student?"

Falcon tilted his head and showed his teeth, "Yup."

"Think you're pretty tough," said Denise.

Falcon sat up a little straighter. "No," Falcon cracked his neck, "I know I am."

"Can we get back to the topic here?" said Werval.

Denise raised her voice, "Praetorian Connelly trained me and I know all about Praetorian Lockland."

Werval turned to Eikard, but he put his hand up. The council became silent and turned their attention to Falcon and Denise.

"Then did you know Master Lockland only attempted the trials to save Connelly?" Falcon gave Denise a moment to reply, "Guess not."

Denise stood up and leaned on the table, "He's gonna need to save you too."

Falcon looked to Eikard for his approval before starting a fight but Denise did not wait. She flicked her wrist knocking Falcon's seat out from under him. Katrin tried to catch him but instead fell on top of him. Denise hopped over the table. Falcon held onto Katrin and used a burst of magic to send them sliding across the floor. Denise pressed her advantage throwing another wave of energy at him. Falcon shoved Katrin aside just before Denise's blast knocked him off the tower.

Denise walked over to watch him fall, "Pretty tough."

Falcon flew back onto the tower right into Denise. They both rolled across the floor, but Denise was the first to recover. She hopped to her feet and sent an entire wall of force at Falcon. Eikard tried to run between them, but Katrin got there first. Falcon threw up a wall of energy, but Denise's attack still hit Katrin off the edge of the tower.

"Rin!" shouted Eikard.

Without thinking Falcon threw another burst of force knocking Denise and Eikard back and shooting him off the tower. Falcon spun in mid-air and shot himself toward the ground faster.

INNER DEMON



“Dammit Greko! I should have you hung for this!” shouted Dominick as he knocked Greko to the dirt.

Rocious bent down and offered a hand. Greko jerked his hand up to cover his face, “You’re sure it was Falcon?”

Greko stopped covering his face and took his hand, “Positive. Hard to forget him after that show you put on in the courtyard.”

“Which direction?” asked Rocious as he helped Greko to his feet.

Greko fixed his armor and stood at attention again, “He took the horses back to Dominion, but the tracks lead west.”

Dominick grabbed the collar of Greko’s breastplate, “Fifty horses?! You expect me to believe he simply walked off with fifty horses?!”

“Some of my men helped. I assumed he was acting under your authority,” said Greko.

Rocious started walking west, straight through a group of legionnaires drawn by Dominick’s outburst. When they noticed Rocious they cleared a path immediately, Rocious never missed a step.

Dominick ran after him bumping into a few of the legionnaires as they filled the gap, "Frederick."

Rocious kept walking.

"Frederick, I want him back as much as you, but we have more than Falcon to worry about," said Dominick.

"No, you want his journal," said Rocious.

"He's like a son—"

Rocious launched himself at Dominick catching him by the throat.

Rocious held Dominick's head still, forcing him to look directly into his eyes. Dominick's neck began to sizzle where Rocious touched him, "Don't feed me your bullshit."

"Eikard," groaned Dominick but the sound was cut off as Rocious squeezed.

Rocious lifted Dominick off the ground by his neck, "Eikard can have the journal for all I care. Either help me with Falcon or get out of the way!"

Dominick's face turned red and his lips became blue as Rocious choked him, then he nodded. Rocious let go of his neck. Dominick caught himself on his knees coughing.

Rocious kicked Dominick's foot, "Pick yourself up."

Dominick stood up and scanned the stunned faces until he spotted Greko, "General, I'm giving you command of the ninth. Make sure the tenth is in position around Keld before you approach Fort Reed."

"Yes, Sire," said Greko, then he snapped a salute and started barking orders.

The stunned legionaries broke apart and Dominick turned to Rocious, "What's the plan?"

"Get to Falcon before Connelly. You handle Eikard," said Rocious.

"How am I supposed to do that?" asked Dominick.

Rocious looked down at Dominick's waist, "Taking Drake's sword was your idea, not mine."

. . .

"ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?" asked Falcon.

Eikard took Falcon's shoulder, "Scipio and Werval are more than capable of getting them safely to Fort Reed. But that will be worth nothing if we can't get them safely behind the walls of the city."

Falcon looked down, "I wasn't there for them back in Dominion. And now I abandon them with an army on their heels."

Eikard flicked Falcon's forehead, "You don't need to hold someone's hand to lead them. You are clearing the path."

Right or wrong he did not have time to question his decisions, only to learn from the mistakes. Thus far he had been reacting to things as they happened, thinking only a few moments ahead. Werval said he could not be so impulsive if he hoped to lead his people.

"What do I need to do?" asked Falcon.

Eikard mounted his horse, "I'll explain on the way," and took off riding down the road.

Falcon looked back at Scipio and Werval as they lead almost five hundred Lancers to intercept Greko and escort his people to Fort Reed. Then he turned to Keld where Eikard's people prepared to defend their homes. Finally, he looked ahead to Reed. Eikard had almost disappeared over the crest of the first hill. With a burst of energy Falcon caught up to Eikard and kept pace with his charger.

"Get your head in the game?" asked Eikard.

"Yeah, thank you for your guidance," answered Falcon.

"Better late than never I suppose," said Eikard.

"So how do I get past the barrier?" asked Falcon.

"There's no getting past it, you have to bring it down," said Eikard.

"Can't your armor get past it?" asked Falcon.

"No. My armor has some ability to dispel and store magic but

this is too much. I would make it maybe ten steps past the gate. You have to bring it down.”

“Okay, how do I do that?” asked Falcon.

“Simple. You ask your dad to stop feeding it,” said Eikard.

Falcon stopped. Eikard pulled the reins on his mount and spun to look back at Falcon, “What? It’s that easy? I could have done that ten fucking years ago!”

“I said it was simple not easy. And your dad would not have listened ten years ago. He will now... I think,” said Eikard.

“I’ll make him,” said Falcon as he launched himself down the road.

ROCIOUS SAW the walls of Fort Reed forming in the distance and stopped. He let the cool breeze ease his tension leaving behind a sense of tranquility, the scent of trees and grass wash away the acidic smell of burning from his explosions. As the ringing in his ears faded it was replaced with the chirping of birds and tinkling of running water.

As he embraced the serenity of this place he drew in magic for miles. The untapped land was so rich with it that it was hard to pull away, but then Dominick caught up and smashed it all to pieces, “What are you waiting for? We’re almost there.”

Rocious stifled his irritation and claimed his serene reward, “The sword’s almost drained.”

“Seems fine to me,” said Dominick.

“Shut up and fill it,” said Rocious.

“How?” asked Dominick.

“Get pissed off, shit your pants, fall in love, I don’t care,” said Rocious.

Dominick rested his hand on the sword’s pommel, “How is getting pissed off or scared supposed to help?”

Rocious scanned the area trying to remember the terrain from the last time he was here, “You need to feel something,

something intense. Memories work well, or use the environment.”

Dominick looked around and sniffed the air, “This place smells like shit.”

Rocius closed his eyes and focused on listening to the magic around him. Instantly he heard the sharp sound emanating from Falcon, and right past him the chaotic drum-like banging from Fort Reed. Once he blocked out that banging something struck him. There was a vicious sound coming from Drake’s sword, like a growling lion.

FALCON SAT inches away from the barrier around Fort Reed focusing on the currents of magic coursing through the city, trying to locate the source.

Falcon rolled onto his back, planted his hands and flung himself into a backwards somersault, “Someone’s here.”

Eikard pushed himself away from the front and walked over to stand next to Falcon, “I will handle it. You need to keep searching.”

“It’s like searching for a grain of salt in a bowl of noodles. I keep getting lost,” said Falcon.

Eikard walked over to the barrier and pushed his hand through. The runes on his glove came to life and magic flowed into his armor, working its way up his arm and across his chest until his entire body was covered in glowing runes. When he pulled his arm out of the barrier the runes let out a flash of light and winked out.

Eikard drew his saber and came back to Falcon’s side, “Keep searching; you’re the only one who can bring that barrier down.”

Falcon turned back toward the gate to find Connelly standing right in front of him, “Master Connelly, what are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” said Connelly.

Falcon stepped backwards, "Why?"

Connelly looked at Eikard for a moment then tilted his head to look at Falcon, "I honestly didn't want to do this, but it's the only way."

"Master Lockland?" said Falcon confused.

Eikard stepped in front of Falcon.

Connelly rolled his right wrist and a small dagger appeared in his hand, "You know you are the first person Frederick has loved in almost thirty years," he said to Falcon.

Eikard pointed his saber at Connelly, "Take care of the barrier, Falcon, I'll handle him."

The cold determination on Connelly's face froze Falcon in place. Eikard was not scared and caught the dagger with a flick of his saber, but the attack was a feint, allowing Connelly to slip through the shadows and stab Falcon right in the chest.

As he stabbed Falcon, Connelly slipped through the shadows again, this time pulling Falcon with him and reappearing at the very edge of the barrier, "I'll have to thank Lockland for showing off your healing ability."

ROCIOUS WATCHED the grass burn for a moment and fizzle out then flicked more sparks, "Hurry up."

Dominick let out a long breath but kept his eyes shut, "All your nagging does is annoy me."

"Good, maybe you'll feel something for a change," said Rocious.

"Just give me a moment of silence," said Dominick.

Before Dominick finished speaking Rocious cut him off with an explosion launching himself over the next hill; when he felt Falcon's fear his body reacted without conscious thought. Eikard or no, he had to be there now. Once he was over the hill, he launched himself straight for the front gate.

“CONNELLY!!!” shouted Rocious as he threw an explosion into the cloud of shadows surrounding the gate.

When the smoke and shadows cleared it was not Connelly standing there, instead it was Cato Eikard, “Where is my boy?” barked Rocious.

Eikard waved away the smoke and dust, “He’s using you.”

As the smoke cleared Rocious saw a body on the ground outside the gate, “What did you do!?”

Eikard called on his armor and dashed at Rocious, straight through the wall of flames, but when he reached the other side Rocious was not there. Rocious looped a rope of flame around Eikard’s neck and yanked him to the ground. Eikard reached for his dagger but Rocious shifted and kicked it away from them and the city.

Eikard drew on his armor for speed and kicked Rocious in the face then used the kick to spring himself to his feet, “Stop, this wasn’t—” Eikard threw his hands up to block the wave of flames Rocious spit at him.

When the flames cleared Eikard’s armor was glowing red and his hair was singed, “I’m not your enemy,” he said sagging.

“I am,” said Connelly.

Rocious looked back toward the front gate and saw Connelly standing over Falcon’s body twirling a knife in his hands that matched the one stuck in Falcon’s chest.

Rocious turned away from Eikard and raised his hand toward Connelly, “Arrogant bastard.”

Connelly sucked in a breath and huffed it out his nose, “Not this time.”

Rocious snarled and rushed Connelly using an explosion to add speed. Connelly disappeared in a cloud of shadowy smoke leaving Rocious standing over Falcon’s limp body.

. . .

AS SOON AS his ears stopped ringing Dominick shook the dirt from Rocious's explosion out of his hair and ran after him. He crested the hill just in time to see Eikard kick Rocious in the face. On his way down the hill Dominick drew Altor and felt the sword suck in a gulp of magic.

"Now you're with me? It's about damn time," said Dominick to himself.

When Dominick saw Rocious shift his attention to Fort Reed's gate, fear gripped him and Altor sent a rush of magic into his body. Dominick used that magic to give him speed and rushed in for the kill.

Eikard reacted as if Dominick was moving in slow motion, stepping around his lunge and striking Dominick in the face with the butt of his saber. With the last of his speed Dominick twisted away and brought up his guard.

Eikard brought his sword up to his face then slashed down and to his right, "Decided to fight your own battle? It's about time."

"Yeah, I decided today was a good day to kill you," agreed Dominick.

"Don't fool yourself, you've been trying to kill me for twenty years," said Eikard.

As he finished speaking Eikard drew on his armor and charged inhumanly fast. Dominick swept Altor in front of his body to deflect Eikard's lunge and countered with a slash at his neck. Eikard flicked his wrist and elbow catching Dominick's counter attack on his saber and following up with a defensive slash as he bounced backwards.

The exchange happen in a flash and both men bounced back. Dominick looked down at his breastplate, barely a scratch. Eikard glanced at his shoulder; some of the runes were no longer glowing, "Nice sword."

Dominick raised Altor into a high guard, "Nice armor."

Eikard's slight grin shifted into a blank mask of concentra-

tion, "Only as powerful as the one who wields them," mumbled Eikard.

Before the words reached Dominick's ears Eikard rushed in, the tip of his blade thrusting for Dominick's throat. Dominick shifted Altor just in time to deflect Eikard's attack. A split second later Altor sent a surge of magic up Dominick's arm forcing him to lunge for Eikard's chest. Both men were caught off guard by the masterful counter attack, but with his speed Eikard jumped back unscathed.

As Dominick recovered from the sword taking control of his body, Eikard dashed sideways leaving a trail of dust in his wake. Dominick spun his head trying to follow Eikard's movement, but with Eikard's ever-increasing speed it was impossible. Once again Altor sent a surge of magic up Dominick's arm and intercepted Eikard's blade in a shower of sparks.

This time Dominick simply cleared his mind, and let Altor take control of the fight. Eikard stumbled back as his attack was deflected. Using his speed he sent a series of piercing lunges at Dominick but each one was deflected effortlessly. With each failed attack Eikard stumbled backwards, getting closer and closer to the walls of Fort Reed. In an effort to avoid being cornered Eikard drew on his armor for a massive jolt of speed. As if reacting to his fear Altor slashed at his throat to block off his escape.

Eikard threw up his saber to defend. Altor shattered the simple steel blade but landed only a glancing blow off of Eikard's shoulder.

"Die already!" panted Dominick as he seized control of Altor and slammed the pommel into Eikard's face.

Eikard's head snapped back but his hands caught Dominick's wrist and pulled him off balance "You first."

The two men locked hate-filled eyes as they struggled for the upper hand. Dominick drew power from the sword but Eikard matched his strength with the power of his ancestors' armor.

Suddenly Dominick reversed his effort and stepped back just enough to pull Eikard off balance. He followed it up with a headbutt and a bone shattering blow from Altor's pommel to the side of his head. Eikard dropped to the dirt leaving a splatter of blood across Dominick's breastplate. Eikard started to push himself up, but the glowing runes on his armor winked out and he flopped onto his back.

"You and Reed couldn't just fall in line like everyone else," said Dominick.

Eikard lifted his hand but Dominick slapped it away with the flat of Altor's blade, "After Katrin? What did you expect?" he asked Dominick.

Dominick stepped on Eikard's chest and placed the tip of Altor's blade on his neck, "I do regret that, but your father gave me his blessing."

Eikard pushed his head off the ground cutting his neck on the tip of Altor, "That doesn't make it okay."

Dominick shrugged and lifted his blade for a final thrust, "Still, I wanted you to know."

Eikard closed his eyes. Dominick reversed his grip and slammed Altor downward. Eikard's eyes shot open, his armor flared to life and a thunderous gust of wind blasted Dominick clean over the walls of Fort Reed.

ROCIOUS LOOKED DOWN at Falcon's pale face and the entire world seemed to fade into the background. He dropped to his knees and grabbed the dagger in Falcon's chest. He pulled the blade from his chest and reopened the wound but the magic in his body had already started to close the wound again. But his physical body was already a lifeless shell. Magic might fix his damaged heart but it could not make it beat again.

A cloud of shadowy despair formed around Rocious, feeding the devil living in his own soul. He had kept that beast contained

for almost thirty years. All that time it had stayed happily locked away in its drunken little cage; content to stay buried beneath the layers of intimidation, veiled aggression, and insincere self-regard that he used to lock it away. But now that beast had a purpose. In an instant it broke free of its shackles and took hold of Frederick Lockland, transforming him. Revenge consumed his mind and corrupted his soul turning him into pure *ferocity*.

Ferocious was reborn.

His mouth twisted into a cruel smile as Connelly surrounded him with a cloud of shadows, but he closed his eyes and kept his malicious intent in check, waiting for the last shred of light to be blocked out. When he heard the sound of Connelly's murderous joy drawing near, Ferocious opened his eyes and poured magic into a thousand tiny embers all around him. Each one a miniature inferno, hot enough to liquefy anything it touched. He sent those embers in every direction smashing his prison of shadows like a hatchling breaking out of its shell.

Connelly disappeared just in time to avoid the embers then reappeared thrusting his dagger at Ferocious's neck. Ferocious caught the dagger's blade, letting it slice open his hand, turning the pain into a gout of flames. Connelly tried to pull the dagger back and attack again, but Ferocious grabbed his wrist and sent his flames coursing down Connelly's arm.

Ferocious waved his bloody hand bringing his tiny embers rushing toward Connelly who dropped his dagger and slipped through the shadows a split second before the embers snuffed out his life. But as Connelly slipped away, Ferocious locked onto him, forcing them both to get pulled through the shadows. When they reappeared they were on the opposite side of Fort Reed standing knee-deep in one of the city's many fountains. Connelly kicked and thrashed trying to escape the flames as they spread over his chest. Ferocious saw weakness, and clenched his wrist tighter.

Connelly clawed at his own hand trying to escape into the water, "I had to."

Ferocious let him fall back into the water, "Arrogant bastard."

Then he flicked a handful of embers into the fountain. Instead of fizzling out they burned hotter causing the water to boil and turn into steam. His arm still covered in flames, Connelly tried to flee as the boiling water melted the skin off his lower body. Ferocious swirled the tips of his fingers forming a loop of flaming rope around Connelly's neck and dragged him back into the fountain. Ferocious pushed his head under water, but too much water had turned to steam to make him drown.

Connelly coughed out the water burning his lungs, "They want—"

Ferocious wrapped his hands around Connelly's neck cutting him off.

He stared into his eyes as he squeezed the life out of him. Connelly's eyes bulged and he sputtered out a few weak drops of saliva. Then he tried to peel the hands off his neck, but burned and melted as he was, he had no strength left. A few more moments and Ferocious's transformation would be complete. Frederick Lockland would die, and Ferocious could finally be free.

Connelly was mere moments from death when Dominick crashed into them saving his life. Ferocious tumbled out of the fountain and jumped to his feet, ready to turn the world to ashes for his revenge.

Dominick shook himself and rolled out of the fountain's boiling water, "Control yourself, Frederick."

"Move," grunted Ferocious right before he launched himself at him.

Altor reacted to Dominick's desire to save his friend and took over, slicing through an explosion and absorbing part of it then smacking Ferocious in the chest with the flat of the blade. Barely

slowed, Ferocious continued his attack at blinding speed, but with Altor's skill Dominick knocked him back again.

Ferocious screamed, "Move!" then sent a wave of flames at Dominick, but again Altor sliced threw them.

"Frederick! Come back to me," said Dominick moving closer.

"Falcon," said Ferocious looking Dominick in the eye.

Dominick froze and Ferocious struck with an explosion. Connelly and Dominick flew out of the fountain and rolled down the wide cobblestone street leading to Laza's gate, the only road leading to the treacherous lands beyond.

Ferocious's mouth twisted into a vicious snarl as he went to claim the life he was owed.

Dominick tried to get up but fell in front of Connelly, losing his grip on Altor. Altor slid across the cobblestones along with all hope of saving his only true friend.

BITTERSWEET



*P*ain.

It's such a complex emotion, with thousands upon thousands of different flavors. Some flavors are so distinctly different they hardly seem to share anything except that word: *pain*. While others are nearly indistinguishable, differing by only the subtlest detail. Yet every flavor in this vast continuum holds a single unified purpose.

That purpose is to teach. After living almost eleven years in a world of pain, Condor thought he had tasted every flavor, learned every lesson. And he possessed the strength to endure even the harshest of those lessons. But when the source of his strength was stabbed in the heart the unbreakable will he used to power the barrier became as frail as his atrophied body. Like a single drop of water shattering the calm of an entire ocean, a simple dagger brought the barrier crashing down.

Condor opened his mouth to speak but the words came as a whisper from his parched throat, "Lily, can you still reach him?"

Lily heard him all the same, "Yes."

"Then do it now," mouthed Condor as spread his arms to

welcome death openly. Lily placed her hand on Condor's face to close his eyes and sang in pure legato,

"AS OUR WORLDS INTERTWINE, let family be your guide.

Forget those behind, in time they are by your side.

Open your eyes, no longer undone.

Spirit, mind, body, blend as one."

LILY LIFTED her hand off Falcon's face, knelt by his side and spoke with a firm voice, "Open your eyes."

Falcon blinked his eyes open, "Why?" said Falcon as he clutched his chest.

Lily touched Falcon's mouth with the tip of her finger, "Your mentor needs you. Lazarus's gate. Quickly."

As Falcon sat up Lily faded into a cloud of mist and dissipated. He touched his chest through the hole in his shirt and felt a thin line of skin. He ripped open his shirt and saw a perfectly straight silver scar.

"NOW!" shouted Lily. Her voice reverberated inside his head, forcing his body to move before his mind registered the weight of her words.

Forgetting about his wound he launched himself through the city at breakneck speed. Winding through streets and around buildings with such ease, it was as if he had never left. On the way, memories of his childhood came rushing back; some of the happiest times of his life were spent running down these streets. The city was filled with memories from his previous life. Now that he had it back he swore he would never let it go again.

As he reached the center of the city he saw his family's keep and remembered the years living there with his father. He launched himself even faster for Laza's gate. Once again running blindly into unknown danger.

Impulsive or not, Falcon had no doubt that he made the right decision. Werval thought he needed more information to make a logical decision. But the *attuned* do not live in a world of logic and reason; they live in a world where the intangible is more real than reality. For the *attuned* emotion is tangible and thought is merely a distraction.

So Falcon turned the last corner and sped headlong at Laza's gate ready to face the unknown. He was ready for a fight, but when he reached the gate he found nothing. No scorch marks. No screams or cracking sounds from Rocious's explosions. There was only a faint hint of ashes on the wind. Falcon followed that acidic smell to the other side of the fountain and suddenly froze. Ferocious threw Dominick out of his way with a flaming rope and grabbed Connelly by the neck.

He could not quite place it, but something was wrong, Rocious was not the same man that had raised him. The wicked smile and the wild look of satisfaction were not the man he had grown to love. Whatever happened, hopefully he was not too late. He weaved a tiny ball of magic and threw it at them as he ran. It hit Ferocious in the side and burst sending a wave of force in every direction.

Ferocious flipped over the lip of the fountain and slid along the ground before catching himself with an explosion. Connelly went the other direction landing on top of Dominick.

Falcon jumped over the fountain, but before his feet touched the ground Ferocious blasted him back through the fountain with an explosion. Ferocious swiped his hand creating a ring of flames to cut Falcon off from the rest of them then he turned his attention back to Connelly.

Falcon shouted through the flames, "What the hell's wrong with him?"

Dominick looked around frantically, "It's not him, something's consuming him."

Falcon ran up to the flames and tried to break them apart

with a wave of force but they only intensified, "We have to stop him."

Dominick moved closer to Falcon and motioned toward Altor, "Throw me the sword."

Falcon flicked his fingers and Altor flew into his hand, "Just a second."

"There's no time, give me the sword," instructed Dominick.

Falcon ignored him, sliced his thumb on the blade then swiped a line of blood down the hilt. He flipped the blade over and did the same on the other side, then tossed the blade to Dominick. Dominick caught the hilt and swung the blade into a high guard, sending an arch of flames into the air. The flames swirled in the air for a moment before crashing into the ground and coalescing into the form of a massive lion.

Dominick took a step toward Ferocious and lost his balance. As if responding to Dominick's intent the lion pounced on Ferocious and bit into his shoulder. The lion braced his body with its front paws and flung its head back. Ferocious's body flopped limply on the ground, but the lion was not finished. It continued to tear at his body until a jet of flames shot out of Rocious's shoulder knocking the lion back. The jet of flames poured out of his shoulder for a moment before coalescing into the form of a winged dragon and landed just outside Laza's gate.

Falcon started to go after the new threat but Dominick grabbed his shoulder, "Go to Frederick."

Falcon was about to argue, but he no longer felt the thirst for power that caused him to mistrust Dominick back in Dominion. Now he felt only the love of a father willing to do anything to protect his family.

Falcon smiled slightly and nodded, "Your Majesty."

Falcon obeyed, but when he smelled roast meat and smoke he went over to Connelly first. His body was covered in burns but as he healed his skin looked like melted wax. After checking

Connelly's breathing, Falcon took Rocious's hand and knelt next to him. Lily appeared next to him.

"The *Ferocious* one no longer controls him, but they must be as one."

"You want me to put that thing back?" asked Falcon.

"Now!" said Lily.

Falcon winced as her voice reverberated in his mind, "Okay, okay. How?"

Lily touched Falcon's forehead bringing forth the memory of watching his people burn to death. That memory called forth his own ferocity linking him to the flaming dragon. Such a pure concentration of emotion threatened to consume him but with a slow breath he centered himself and beat it back.

Falcon scooped up Rocious's body and carried him toward Laza's gate. As he moved closer the emotion grew even more intense. But as the intensity grew the dragon's strength waned. Falcon felt a glimmer of hope; with time he could chip away at the dragon's strength and bring it under his control.

The dragon spit a cloud of flames through Laza's gate at Dominick. Altor moved to protect Dominick giving the dragon a clear path to his new opponent; it jumped high into the air and dove straight for Falcon. Instead of maintaining control and slowly draining away the dragon's strength, Falcon stopped fighting altogether. The same ferocity that had overwhelmed Rocious threatened to consume him as well. Falcon turned his thoughts to his people, his home and all of his loved ones for strength.

As the heat from the dragon's breath reached him Falcon extended his hand and shouted, "He's mine!"

It was futile. Falcon's determination may have been a sudden intense burst, but it was nothing compared to the constant pressure of the rage the dragon had built up for decades. Falcon dropped to his knees in failure, but when the flames surrounded him they felt like a warm breeze.

"Mine," breathed Rocious as he opened his eyes. Falcon. Rocious met his eyes for only a fraction of a second, but in that brief moment the wild monster that lived in his soul lost its purpose. Rocious raised his hand casually. The flames broke apart and ashes drifted to the cobblestone street harmlessly.

Falcon looked around at the ashes as they continued to fall, "Is it over?"

Before Rocious could answer, Altor let out a thunderous roar and broke apart as well. Rocious stood up and looked toward Laza's gate. Dominick jogged over to join them.

"That's up to him," said Rocious.

Falcon helped Rocious up and the two of them went to sit next to the fountain in front of Laza's gate. Dominick sheathed Altor and took a drink from the fountain before taking a seat next to them.

"Connelly?" asked Dominick.

Rocious leaned on his knees, "I'm not sure."

"He was still breathing," said Falcon as he turned toward back to where Connelly's body should have been, "Shit, we have to find him."

Rocious touched Falcon's forearm, "It's fine, let him go."

Falcon jumped to his feet, "He stabbed me in the chest. I could have died."

Rocious stood up, but it was Dominick that spoke first, "Sit down! Both of you!"

Dominick waited for them both to sit before he got up and stood over top of them with his hands neatly crossed behind his back. He stood motionless and watched them both in silence. Rocious started flicking sparks then noticed what he was doing and stopped. Falcon sat with near perfect posture and waited patiently. When Dominick noticed the faint glow coming from Falcon's medallion he took a deep breath and let it out.

"I need to figure out how to salvage this fucked up situation and I can't have you two blowing shit up and creating complete

chaos every time there's a problem," on the last words he met Falcon's eye.

"I was looking out for my people," said Falcon.

"Noble intentions, but you are not prepared to deal with the consequences. We are at the brink of war," Dominick turned ninety degrees and flourished his hand at the walls between Fort Reed and Laza, "And for the first time in over three-thousand years there is nothing between us and the poisoned lands of Lazarus."

"I didn't want—" began Falcon but Dominick stopped him with a stare.

"No, you didn't think. And now my army is busy dealing with Eikard's forces and likely causing the next great war. Instead of focusing on defending not only your people but the entire realm," said Dominick.

As if on cue a primal horn blared beyond the wall. Dominick's hand tightened on Altor's pommel as he spun around. Rocious and Falcon jumped to their feet and the three men ran to Lazarus's gate. In the distance several loose clusters of men moved toward each other forming a single hoard that filled the entire width of Reed Valley.

"Dammit, the city's defenseless. We might be able to confine them with a siege," said Dominick.

"No, this is my home," argued Falcon.

Dominick stared out at the advancing army, "We don't have the numbers, even with the sword."

Rocious shoved Dominick behind him, "You and your fucking numbers. Go get the damn army and stop complaining."

Dominick grabbed Rocious's shoulder spinning him around, "Frederick, what are you going to do?"

Rocious smacked his hand away, "What you need us to. Blow shit up and create chaos."

Dominick squeezed Altor tighter making his knuckles pop, "These walls better be standing when I get back."

Rocious flashed a wolfish grin, "Then you better hurry."

A surge of power ran up Dominick's arm and he took off running without another word.

Rocious walked through Laza's gate into the vibrant green grass of Reed Valley and looked down the gentle slope to the savage horde from Laza that fast approached. He took a few steps away from the wall and the grass turned from a vibrant green to a dull yellow, "You know how to drop the portcullis?" he asked.

"Yeah, but what about Dom?" asked Falcon.

"Forget about him. The gate then get over here," said Rocious resolute.

There was no time to argue. Falcon shut the gate and jogged over to Rocious.

"Give me your hand," instructed Rocious turning his palm up.

Falcon placed his hand on top of Rocious's, "I don't have much magic left."

"Me neither," Rocious moved his hand slightly and clasped Falcon's wrist.

"I can try to resonate with them when they get closer," suggested Falcon.

"No," said Rocious flatly "There's barely any magic past Laza's gate, and it will take too long to call it from farther."

"Then why'd we leave the city?" asked Falcon.

"I have another way, but in the city..." Rocious's voice trailed off then he shook his head, "What I'm about to show you, you will never do again."

"Um, okay." asked Falcon.

Rocious yanked his arm pulling Falcon off balance, "You will never do this again, say it."

Falcon pulled his arm back, "Okay. Got it, I'll never do it again."

Rocious held onto his wrist, his nails starting to dig into Falcon's flesh, "You will not speak about it, you will not ask about it, and if anyone ever mentions it, you will deny its existence."

“Okay, I will act like it never happened. Whatever it is,” replied Falcon.

Finally Rocious loosened his grip, “*It* is called a sympathetic link or at least that was the term I was taught. Been a long time since I studied it.”

“I thought that was just another term for resonance,” said Falcon.

Rocious shook his head then turned toward the oncoming horde, “No, you’re thinking of an empathetic link. What we are about to do is similar, but at it’s core it is the complete opposite of resonance.”

“The same but complete opposites? You know you are a terrible teacher,” said Falcon.

Rocious yanked his wrist again and swatted at Falcon’s head. Falcon shifted his weight and blocked Rocious’s hand with a lazy roll of the wrist, “Ha.”

Rocious flicked his finger and created a tiny explosion right behind Falcon’s head, “Pay attention.” Falcon rubbed the back of his head until Rocious snapped his fingers, “Resonance is a term I came up with because what you are basically doing is hijacking someone else’s emotions to amplify your own. The amplified call pulls ambient magic from an exponentially larger area.”

Falcon glanced at the advancing army. They were no more than half a mile away and closing fast. If they did not do something in the next minute, the fight would be over before it began, “Might want to hurry.”

“We are going to link with some of these men in the same way as resonance. But instead of using their emotions to amplify our own, we are going to tear them away,” Rocious squeezed Falcon’s hand, “Center yourself.”

Rocious closed his eyes for a moment then opened them, “This will feel—” Rocious paused to clear his throat, “Um, never mind.”

Before Falcon could ask any more, Rocious linked with him

and a handful of Laza's savages. Excitement ran through them like children playing in a puddle of water on a hot day. It was a beautiful feeling tainted only by the prospect of bloodshed.

A horrifying memory flashed into Falcon's mind. In their memory, one of the savages fought to the death. The moment he came out victorious he filled with the same excitement he felt now. Then the scene repeated. The faces were different, but the excitement was the same. Over and over the scene played out, blood, death, and excitement. The emotions were the same, but every time the faces were different. Each of those faces was burned into his mind as he experienced the savage's joy of killing. The memories ended, but the worst was yet to come.

With a sharp breath Rocious tore the source of those emotions from all the men who owned them. The link broke immediately as all six men dropped dead. The magic that had once been theirs was now under Rocious's control.

Falcon stumbled forward almost losing his balance, but Rocious caught his arm. Rocious tried to help Falcon stand up straight, but he jerked his arm away and puked.

"I can't," said Falcon wiping his mouth.

Rocious simply nodded his head, "I know, but you must. Keep your center and don't lose control."

Falcon covered his mouth as his chest heaved again, "I can't."

"You wanted to lead your people, to protect them. This is what it takes. You must face the ugliness of the world when everyone else turns away. To do the horrible deeds that turn weak men into monsters," said Rocious.

"You don't want me to face the ugliness, you want me to become it."

Rocious's eyes flicked to the army less than a minute away from reaching them, "You always have a choice who you are."

Falcon followed his eyes, glanced back at Fort Reed then raised his hand to link with a group of the savages. Rocious squeezed his hand and let go breaking their connection. Without

the reassuring touch of his master's hand Falcon's hands shook with anxiety for the fast approaching battle. Instead of fighting that nervous anticipation he used it to link with a group at least twenty savages. Their memories blurred through his mind when he heard Rocious say something, but he was too focused to comprehend the words. Just as Rocious showed him, he tore the source of their emotion away. As the men died Falcon absorbed the potent magic that had clung to them. With that magic came a rush of pleasure more intense than anything he had felt before.

"Dammit!" barked Rocious snapping him out of his euphoria, "I said only a few."

Falcon regained focus only to find the army had stopped cold and dozens of bodies littered the ground around them. In the blink of an eye he had killed dozens of them and he'd enjoyed it. Dozens though, was nothing compared to the thousand or so men they faced.

Rocious was the first to act, launching himself at the hoard with an explosive burst. No time to linger on their death, Falcon focused on what needed to be done and launched himself into battle.

DOMINICK RAN through Fort Reed's front gate back down the road to Dominion at full speed, but he still had no clue how he was going to get his army around Eikard and through the city. His original plan was to lay siege to Keld to force Eikard into choosing between Fort Reed and his home. But that plan required time, time he did not have now that the barrier was down.

Dominick stopped twenty paces past the gate when he saw a group of men on foot enter the Valley from the south. He glanced down the main road to his left, but there was no sign of Greko and the ninth. He looked back to the group coming in from the south; a band of cavalry swooped around the group and took up

formation on the main road. The cavalry were nowhere near as disciplined as his legions, but they were organized and fast.

Precisely what he needed to defend the city.

Perhaps surviving the fall from Eikard's attack or successfully saving Frederick had caused him to lose his mind. But somehow ending the lifelong feud with Eikard and taking command of his army seemed simple compared to his previous challenges.

He sprinted down the main road when a band of cavalry led by Lord Quintus Werval broke off to intercept him. Another irrelevant challenge that he did not have time for, the army was all that mattered.

Dominick stopped running and let the band of cavalry surround him. He fought down the urge to draw Altor and kept his hands relaxed at his side, "Get Eikard."

Werval shifted his weight slightly redirecting his mount to face Dominick, "Its too late for that. Lay down the sword, and come along quietly."

"I wasn't asking, Quintus," said Dominick as he wrapped his fingers around Altor's pommel, channeled magic from the sword to his amulet and amplified his voice, "Eikard, we end this now! Just us!"

Werval raised his hand to signal the men surrounding Dominick when a wave of cheers came from the group of cavalry in formation on the road behind. Werval turned to see Eikard riding out from the pack to the cheers of his men. This was the fight they had wanted to see for decades, and Werval knew it. Dominick gave him a smug grin and walked down the road as if the army surrounding him was a flock of sheep.

Eikard stopped thirty paces from Dominick and dismounted, "You survived that fall, lucky."

"Yeah, it was luck," said Dominick refusing to let Eikard bait him.

Eikard raised his hands and looked at his men, "Luck's run out."

Dominick cracked his neck and took in Eikard's army, "They seem well trained. Not as disciplined as I'd like but I look forward to making a real legion out of them."

"Not likely. Even if you defeat me, they will never fight for you," said Eikard.

Dominick put his hand up to stop Eikard's approach, "Give me your word. No matter the victor—"

"I give you nothing," said Eikard before Dominick could finish. Werval rode between the two men stopping at Eikard's side.

Dominick waited for Eikard to meet his eyes, "Defend the city," he said to Werval.

Werval slid out of his saddle effortlessly and removed a thin saber from his mount's saddlebag. Eikard kept his eyes on Dominick while he extended his hand for the saber, "Funny request, considering it's your men attacking."

Dominick grunted, "As blind and foolish as always."

"Enough talking," said Eikard a split second before he dashed into battle.

Dominick and Altor were ready, the pair in perfect sync. They had a singular desire: protect. Protect the men and women he ruled; defend their homes and their lives. No matter the price. Right now that price was Eikard's life. Or was his life the price this time? No, Eikard would never be able to put aside nobility and honor to do what needed to be done.

Dominick was the only one willing to put aside his humanity and taint his soul for the good of the nation. At that thought Altor flared to life. Just like the time Falcon unlocked the blade, a flaming lion shot from the blade toppling Eikard in the process. Before Eikard could recover Dominick crushed his sword hand with a stomp and followed it up with a lunging kick to the face.

Dominick had not even looked up before Eikard's men started charging in for revenge. Altor leapt over Dominick, swatting the men back and scattered them with a thunderous roar.

Dominick sucked in a deep breath and amplified his voice for all to hear, "You all came here to defend the people of Reed. That is what I *command* you to do. The same command I have given my legions. They come here to defend not only the people of Reed, but to defend all of Lora. I ask you now, stand with them! Stand with me! Fight with us today or I promise you will be begging for your lives tomorrow."

Werval was the first to speak, "You expect us to believe you as your men prepare a siege on Keld?"

"Believe that the barrier came down and now Frederick and Falcon are the only thing between us and an army from Laza," answered Dominick.

"Reed's boy is dead," shouted someone drawing a wave of agreement.

Eikard lifted his head slightly, "I saw it myself."

Dominick shoved Eikard onto his back with his foot, "I don't care what you think you saw. Listen Quintus, there isn't time to argue. Fortify the city, just start with Laza's gate."

Dominick glanced around at the faces of Eikard's men, and realized Eikard was right. These men would never follow him, not willingly anyway. He flipped his grip on Altor and stabbed the sword into the dirt, and let go of the grip. Instantly Altor broke apart and returned to the blade.

"Hurry."

BATTLE ALWAYS TURNED INTO CHAOS, no matter how many soldiers there were or how brilliant their strategy. Men screaming, dirt flying, blood spilling. The master of that chaos was none other than Rocious. Everywhere he went men scattered, ears ringing from his explosions they ran screaming for escape. But he was only one man. It was only a matter of time before someone took command and had them knocking down Laza's gate. He had only one idea to stop that. Let Falcon keep them

away from the gate while he searched for their leader and killed him.

Rocious shot a handful of sparks into the air then used an explosion to leap into the air. The sparks popped creating a series of loud bursts and illuminated the entire valley. As he flew through the air he searched the horde for anyone giving orders or organizing the horde. All he saw was a sea of people, far more than they originally thought. Even if Dominick brought all his legions they would be outnumbered.

As he reached the apex of his trajectory there was a sharp twang of a bow and arrow. The sparkling flashes did their job as the arrow whizzed by harmlessly. Rocious was about to launch himself at the archer when he felt Falcon drain the lives of more men.

“Dammit!” cursed Rocious as he launched himself back toward Laza’s gate.

He should never have taught him to drain a man’s life force. The rush of power was great, but it changed you. The dead mens’ life force clung to you, making their desires your own. It had taken Rocious decades to learn to separate their desires from his own. He was a fool to think Falcon could handle it.

He knocked Falcon into the gate with an explosion, turned around and threw up a wall of flames between the hoard and the city walls.

“What the hell’s wrong with you!” screamed Falcon.

Rocious knocked him back against the city walls, “You’re done, get back inside the city. I’ll take care of the rest on my own.”

“The hell I am, this is my home. It’s not over until every last one of them is gone!” said Falcon.

Again Rocious knocked him back into the city walls, “You planning to suck the life from all of them?”

Falcon shoved Rocious back with a wave of force, “If that’s what it takes.”

"Gonna fight me too?" said Rocious.

"Move!" complained Falcon sending another wave of force at Rocious, but this time Rocious was faster. He launched himself forward catching Falcon's shoulders.

Rocious pushed Falcon into the stone walls, but spoke in a low voice, "You've had enough. Either use that power to help or get out of the here."

Falcon tried to push himself free, "Are you blind? I am helping."

Rocious held him in place, "You continue down this path and you'll be draining your own people when they get here. You want that?"

Finally Falcon stopped fighting then looked down, "No."

"Good. I found their leader, but he's surrounded by archers," said Rocious letting Falcon go.

"So what's the plan?" asked Falcon.

"I don't have much left. The flaming wall took a lot," said Rocious.

Falcon looked down at the burnt grass, it almost looked like a pattern. Then looked up at the city walls, "That's how. How long do you need?"

Rocious watched the flames begin to die down, "Thirty seconds, at least."

"Okay, but hurry. I don't know if I can power it that long," said Falcon.

"Power what?" asked Rocious.

"The city," answered Falcon right before he launched himself on top of the gatehouse.

As a boy he remembered his father showing him around the city, constantly lecturing about some useless piece of history or some ancestor that nobody else cared to remember. The whole time he thought his father's lectures were meant to teach him about his family's past. But that was not it at all; he was teaching him how to use the city's defenses.

Just like his bedroom back in Dominion, the city was covered in a network of runes. All he had to do was find the control point for the gatehouse, and keep them back until he heard Rocious's explosion.

"Please be here," mouthed Falcon to himself, "Fuck!"

Falcon was about to give up and choose one of the rune clusters at random when Lily appear next to him, "Here."

Without hesitation Falcon slammed his hand where she indicated and powered the runes.

"Now this one," instructed Lily.

Again Falcon obeyed and powered the runes immediately.

"This one."

Falcon slammed his hand on the last one, and felt the full length of wall energize, using him as the battery. A wave of force shot across the ground in front of the wall, leaving a field of bodies in its wake.

The city fed on his power and caused his vision to narrow, but he fought the exhaustion. Another wave force shot from the city walls. Still he heard no explosion. The room spun threatening to steal his balance.

Lily placed her hand on his, "No more."

This time he did not obey. A third wave of force shot from the city. A moment later the whole gatehouse shook, but still no explosion. He clawed at the wall to pick himself up and fell again.

Lily knelt next him, "Stay. Your companions have arrived."

Falcon listened and let his exhaustion take hold. The last thing he heard was Lily's voice, "Welcome Home."

HOME



Rocious wandered through the halls of what was supposed to be the Reed's home; the place was just as confusing as Dominick's castle. He was considering exploding his way out when he heard footsteps farther down the hall. A young girl with sandy blonde hair walked over to him carrying a tray of food.

"Are you lost Master Lockland?" asked Mary.

"Uh yeah, who are you again?" replied Rocious.

Mary nodded for him to follow, "I'm Falcon's friend Mary. We've met."

Rocious grunted. He was looking for directions not a conversation.

"Are you looking for Falcon's room? That's where I'm headed. His family's quarters are on the top floor, but the rest of the keep is used for housing and feeding anyone who needs shelter from the weather. It's always snowing here, so the place is usually pretty busy," babbled Mary.

Rocious grunted, "I don't like snow."

"I suppose you have more of an affinity for fire. I think they have the fires going in the main hall downstairs, I can take you

there after I drop this off. Oh, and there's the fountains, the water stays warm somehow."

"I don't like water either," said Rocious.

"I can make you some warmer clothes. You probably don't have anything warm other than your cloak."

Rocious put up his hand letting his hands catch fire, "I'm fine."
Mary's eyes bulged, "Right, fire."

When they reached the top floor Rocious thought he somehow offended the girl, as her constant chatter turned into complete silence. He was about to say something when he saw Falcon's friend Thomas leaning against the wall down the hall.

Thomas pushed off the wall, "Hey Mary, Master Lockland. He's still in bed, but trust me he ain't sleeping."

"I'll take the tray," said Rocious.

Mary opened her mouth and stopped. "Ah, okay," she said handing over the tray.

Thomas opened the door for them, but held his hand up to block Mary. Rocious looked around the room, in search of Falcon. The place was huge and filled with natural light. No wonder Falcon said Dominick's castle felt like a dungeon. He quickly spotted Falcon, grabbed a chair from near the balcony and sat down next to the bed with the tray of food.

"The girl brought you food. I'm gonna eat it if you don't," said Rocious.

Falcon rolled over, but said nothing.

"Oh and I think your friend is in love with you," continued Rocious diving into Falcon's food.

"Mary is just a friend," said Falcon.

"I meant Arthur's boy, he stood outside the door all night," replied Rocious.

Falcon sat up straight, "What!?"

"Stood. Outside. All. Night," said Rocious.

"Arthur who?" asked Falcon.

"Fetch me something to drink, and I'll tell you," said Rocious.

Falcon flopped back on the bed, "Get it yourself and stop eating my breakfast."

Rocious put down the tray, "Sitting here isn't going to make what happened any easier. Besides, you're a count now in more than name, that's probably the only thing Dominick and Eikard aren't fighting about."

"Atleast they haven't killed each other," said Falcon.

"Not yet," said Rocious.

"Can I ask you something?" asked Falcon.

Rocious raised an eyebrow, "Fine, but I expect brandy."

Falcon waved away his comment and sat on the edge of the bed, "That thing that came out of you, what was it?"

Rocious closed his eyes and became very still. A few long moments later he replied, "Relax, it was not because of using the sympathetic link."

"Then what was it?" asked Falcon.

"Nothing you need to know about," answered Rocious as he stood up and paced next to the bed. "But there is something you should hear."

"What's that?"

"The council. They were in Dominion the day you ran off. Connelly had their support when he came after you and after what I did to him." said Rocious.

"What?" asked Falcon.

"They probably see us both as rogues," answered Rocious.

"But you're Praetorian."

"That only makes them fear me more," said Rocious cutting him off again.

Falcon jumped to his feet, "Then lets go,"

Rocious put his hand up, "No. They're scared. If we confront them now they'll rally around Connelly."

"Then what?"

Rocious sat down again, "Nothing, I just wanted you to know."

“Nothing?!” said Falcon incredulous.

Rocius snapped his fingers silencing him with an extremely loud but harmless explosion, “Nothing,” said Rocius as he waited for Falcon’s ears to stop ringing. “The council isn’t really scared of us. They’re scared of the unknown. Focus on today. We’ll deal with the council when the time is right.”

Falcon flopped back on the bed, “Or they’ll deal with us,”

“Perhaps,” said Rocius on his way to the door. Before he opened the door he looked over his shoulder, “Welcome home.”

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-*

To read more of my work you can check out what I've got in the works at my website: www.briankdeclan.com or sign-up to my mailing list and be the first to know about new releases: [Subscribe](#).

GLOSSARY

Decanus - Similar to a modern-day Sargent, leader of a group no larger than ten men.

Legatus p. /Legate s. - Leader of an entire legion with five tribunes under his command. Comparable to a modern day General.

Tribunus - Commanders chosen by a Legatus to handle specific aspects of the legion, Logistics, Communications/Intelligence or Scouts, Maintaining camp or Engineering.

Decurion - Leader of a turma, 30 mounted soldiers, typically mounted archers.

Turma - Group of 30 mounted soldiers, typically mounted archers but could also be scouts or heavily armored lancers.

Centurion - Leader of a centuria or a group of 100 men.

GLOSSARY

Optio - Centurion's second in command, must be able to read and write in addition to military experience.

Vexillatio - Temporarily assigned title by a legatus for special tasks, for example to hold and fortify a small town. Typically, a Legatus would select a trusted Centurion and his Centuria

Cohort Consisted of five centuria following the most senior Centurion.

Legion- Consisted of ten cohorts or roughly 5,000 men with a dedicated cavalry unit of 120 mounts.

Divinus Cupla - Literally meaning divine coupling, it is an everlasting bond between two beings.

Cupla Praetruncatus - Severs the bond between body and soul or physical and spiritual world.

Attuned - An individual that possesses the ability to innately perceive concentrations of empathic energy. This perception opens the door to them controlling the flow of this energy.

Empath - An attuned individual that has achieved at least rudimentary control of their abilities.

Praetorian - A title given to an Empath who have survived the Praetorian Probatio and been gifted a reward by the Spirit Tree.

Praetorian Probatio - Also known as the praetorian trials, it refers to the journey to the Pathos realm. In order to complete the trial, you must find your genius and earn their blessing. The genius will then grant a single wish, or gift and send you home.

Vestigium - Also known as Vestige, term for the gift given by a genius as their reward for surviving the Praetorian Probatio. A sign of their blessing. Aggrandize.

Lares - Guardian spirits who are often the heroic ancestors who guard their family from the spirit realm by allowing their decedents the ability to pull magic from the spirit realm.

Lemures - Evil spirits with the desire to enter the world of the living and craft the world in their image. Often brought about because of being neglected by decedents or traumatic death.

