

Starfall

by

W.A. Fulkerson

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Fulkerson, visit www.wafulkerson.com or follow
him on Instagram @wafulkerson

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For Grandpa

Introduction

The sky was silver, the horizon dotted with scattered clouds, lined in plated gray. The birds of the evening grew still, and the only sound was that of the anxious wind.

The world, it seemed, was waiting.

High above in the moonlit, dusky sky, a star quivered. It shook so gently that only the most perceptive of eyes would have been able to notice from the ground below. The world, however, noticed, and it lay silent in reverence.

The star's quaking grew, faster and faster, approaching a frenetic pace. It jerked violently back and forth, remaining chained to its ancient post, yet straining with all of its might to be free of unseen bonds. Heat rose up within the star as the intensity of its trembling grew. Its motion became a blur, a blur so frantic it threatened to destroy itself in consequence. The movement and the heat and the violence rose to a crescendo until abruptly – it was still. The heavens and the earth gasped in the pause, and it was suddenly at rest.

The star, however, was not to be defeated. As a breath of air before the song, as a calm before the storm, and as that frozen moment before a kiss, this moment was yet to come to fruition.

An explosion of crimson fire rocked the sky and in an instant was gone. Then, like a kiss from heaven, the star began to fall to the ground like a single flake of snow.

Chapter One:

Sunset

Wind tussled Ducasus' sandy blonde hair as he chased after his father across the face of a long, rolling hill. The sun was about to set, and grasses of the valley turned to gold. Ladybugs buzzed through the air, and the summer sun presented them in a glorious light.

Ducasus ran gasping and grinning, as fast as his six-year-old legs would take him, but he couldn't seem to catch up to the lean, tall figure that ran before him – always ahead, yet always just within sight. He thought he'd lose him for good if he slowed at all.

To Ducasus, his father was the fastest man in the world. By his age, he should have known that an Ungifted could not hope to keep up with even the slowest of Flares, but Ducasus' filial affection veiled his eyes.

"Slow down, Ducasus!" cried his brother, Malleus, from behind.

Ducasus threw a glance over his shoulder and replied, "Hurry up!"

They ran up the slope of a large hill that rose out of the center of the valley, covered in grass and wildflowers. The boys' father was just cresting the peak far ahead, and it looked like he was slowing down.

Perfume floated through the air as Ducasus ran through a patch of lilies, sweat on his young brow and a smile on his young face.

Everything was perfect.

Ducasus glanced back to see that Malleus was still trailing him, but by a shorter distance now. He always

thought it was strange that he was faster than his twin brother.

His mother had tried to explain their differences to him. She said that they came at the same time (Ducasus was a few minutes before) and looked the same, but they were different people. One of their neighbors in the slaves' village disagreed and said that twins were two halves of the same soul. Ducasus sided with the neighbor's opinion.

By the time they reached top of the hill, Malleus was right behind.

Ducasus panted over the last hump and plopped down face first into the grass. Malleus followed suit a moment later as their father stood in silhouette, gazing into the setting sun.

"Drink it in, boys. We may be slaves, but we have something even the richest men in the world will never see: The best sunset in all of Pontus."

Ducasus and Malleus looked up as their father spoke, Ducasus propping himself up on his elbows and Malleus swiveling to a cross-legged position.

"It's funny, you know," their father continued. "No one wanted these mirror trees when the Flares overran this country hundreds of years ago. So they chopped them all down to get rid of the smell, stuck the peasants and the slaves in the areas with too many of them, and now here we are gazing into splendor."

Below them, in the valley where Ducasus and Malleus lived, there was a forest of countless mirror trees. They were not pleasant to look at most of the time; their irregularly-shaped leaves and overgrown canopies were off-putting to most people, and their odor was repugnant to everyone. They smelled sort of like cheese that had been left in the sun. The trees did not impress on a single, hurried inspection.

The slaves had learned to live with them, however, and they even felt affection for the uneven, spindly trees.

They had learned that the bark, when boiled, was good for a fever, that the roots could be eaten in a pinch (though they tasted like death), and the leaves had the most peculiar quality of reflecting light perfectly in the setting sun. Each of the millions of jagged, ugly leaves reflected like the surface of a wakeless, flawless mountain lake.

At sunset, they looked like a sea of fire.

The trees' reflections were so powerful that they shone back upon the clouds, illuminating them with the fiery light in irregular shapes and at unexpected angles. It was beautiful.

The trees were repugnant most of the day, but they had their moment of glory beneath the setting of the sun.

Ducasus let out a breathy "Wow..." and Malleus sat in silence. Their breathing, still strained from the run, was the only sound.

After watching the fantastical display of fire and light, the father turned to his sons in the faint approach of evening.

"You know why we're here, don't you?"

"To watch the sunset," Ducasus replied.

"Another reason."

"It's because we have early stars," Malleus whispered soberly.

"That's right, Malleus. You both have stars that appear very early in the night, and you should count yourselves lucky that you do. A midnight star is exhausting to watch." He paused for a moment, with a depth in his eyes that showed he was somewhere else, somewhere far away and long ago.

"We're here tonight," he continued, "to look at your stars. You won't have to worry about them falling for another several years, but you need to learn about them now so you can be ready when the time comes. You have to be ready when your star falls."

Ducasus looked to Malleus, then asked, "Why, Dad?"

We want to be like you.”

Ducasus’ father stood quietly in the approaching darkness, then knelt down to lock eyes with his boys.

“No, Son. You want better. I want you to be better than me. The life of an Ungifted is hard, and it carries a lingering shame. A destiny that is mapped out for you, a lifetime of thankless toil for our prideful master... No, Ducasus, Malleus, I want you both to listen closely. When the time comes and you are almost men, your stars will fall. When they fall you must retrieve them and take for yourselves the gifts of your choosing. Whatever you choose, you will be able to go to a new country and start a new and better life. Do not come back here, and when the day comes, leave swiftly and in secret. Atrox will not allow you to leave, so you need to be careful. When the day comes, choose what you will, but never be a slave, and never be a Flare.”

Chapter Two: Less Traveled By

Seasons changed and years passed, and Ducasus and Malleus watched the stars. When it was autumn, the season of their birth, they watched the night sky religiously. They went to the forest to watch, climbing atop mirror trees and resting in the branches above the canopy, sometimes taking shifts to let the other sleep and sometimes braving the cold and weary nights together. They had to be careful not to let on that they were watching for their stars because their master would have them whipped and sold if he found out. Their overlords told them brutal stories of how much worse slavery was elsewhere, specifically where they would be sent if they were caught stargazing.

Atrox, the owner of Ducasus and Malleus' family and of their little village, did not want any of his young slaves running off and retrieving their stars. That would mean their freedom. It was much harder to detain a gifted person, and Ducasus did not think it was legal to own a gifted slave.

Thus, every evening, just as the sun was setting, Ducasus and Malleus would slip away into a world of twisting vines and swaying upper branches, above a protective canopy of leaves. Their mother worried and wondered if they shouldn't just stay home and forsake watching their stars. Whenever the question would come up, their father's eyes would grow distant and he'd simply say, "They have to go."

It was the same look her husband had worn when he was young and obsessed with the falling of his own star.

He had been careless. The pride and arrogance so common in young men had gotten the better of him, and had spoken of his plans too often. He was caught, but because he was such a strong worker, he was not sold. Instead, Atrox had him chained and beaten for three months out of the year for three years in a row to ensure that he never realized his ambitions.

Scars lined his back in proof.

His sons did not know the story. Indeed, their father had never told it to anyone, but his wife was a witness to the terrible cruelty of the Flares as she had watched her love carried away in chains night after night.

~°~

The night was cold. The wind blew and many leaves breathed their last as they severed from their places, floating soundlessly to the forest floor. The trees gently swayed one way and then the other with the rhythms of the wind. The moon was bright, and the stars shone through its light only dimly.

Malleus leaned back against the tapering tree trunk and fished out the bread he had shoved in his pocket when they had left the house. He broke it in half and handed a piece to Ducasus, who accepted it with a grateful nod, never taking his eyes off of the sky.

Many of these nighttime vigils were passed in jokes and conversations. The two brothers had spent countless hours discussing what their starfall would be like, which stories about finding one's star were true, and what gift they would choose when they found their celestial orb.

Neither of them would be Flares; they had decided that long ago. Flares used their great speed to oppress the Ungifteds, as their lives had taught them time and time again. The arrogant, long-haired oppressors would not have their ranks swelled by the sons of Spero.

Ducasus was undecided as of yet, but he was leaning towards choosing the gift of the Nebulae: the fierce warriors of the South, standing seven feet tall, hairless but for the eyebrows, and strong as the ox and the bear that they placed on their banners.

He had never seen a Neb in real life before, but he had seen a picture. Somehow his father had managed to acquire three books over the years, from which he had taught his sons to read and to speak with some degree of refinement. In one of these books was a drawing of a Neb, looking powerful and fiercely majestic. The image was burned into Ducasus' mind.

Malleus had given his choice careful consideration before speaking of it, and he had decided he would receive the gift of the Lux Sidorum, more commonly referred to as the Hawkeyes. These were blessed with enhanced senses and could discern the flapping of a fly's wing, could navigate by smell, and some even spoke of Hawkeyes who were able to tell whether a man was lying just from listening to his voice. As a people, they were renowned for their scholarship and inventiveness. Malleus wanted these traits.

Ducasus glanced at Malleus.

"Break?"

"Yeah," Malleus returned.

His brother continued watching the sky as Ducasus looked downwards for the first time in an hour. He scanned for a quick path down the tree, then proceeded to lower himself from branch to branch. When he arrived near the bottom he hung from the last branch and dropped the final few feet.

The leaves crunched beneath him as he began to wander into the cold, brisk air that nipped at his cheeks.

People always associated autumn with dying and with the ending of days, but Ducasus thought it felt more like waking up, like the world was being stirred to action. Heat

will lull a man to sleep, but cold alerts him. The rushing wind pushes a man toward new roads and the crunching of every step reminds him that he is alive. *This is the world's wake-up call*, Ducasus thought, and the leaves in the trees rattled as bells.

He made his way to a quiet brook that gurgled softly in the moonlight, the frigid water chilling his hand as he cupped it for a drink. The water went down his throat cold and it relieved his thirst. He was still musing when a silent figure approached in the darkness.

The figure saw Ducasus from several yards away and paused halfway behind a sparse sycamore. A smile crept across the stranger's lips and it drew closer to the kneeling youth.

Closer and closer it silently crept, ready for Ducasus to notice its approach at any moment, incredulous that he had shown no sign of wariness.

The stranger drew even nearer still, and breathlessly eased to the feet of Ducasus. The stranger hesitated a moment, and then-

"Hey, Rosae," Ducasus spoke without turning his head. The girl behind him stomped her feet and pumped her arms in frustration.

"Ugh! How do you always know? I thought I had you for sure that time!"

"Oh, you have me alright..." Ducasus replied, then quickly added, "Except that I've known you were there since before I got to the stream."

Rosae's amber hair shone magically, her soft features in stark contrast to her resolute and fiery eyes. She wore a plain, white dress just like all of the other slave girls, which had been stained to off-white from use, but she had embroidered hers with little flowers.

"I'm going to get you one of these days. One moment when you least expect it, I'm going to sneak up behind you, close in within a hair's breadth, and-"

Ducasus laughed, cutting her off. "And do what? Slit my throat? Cut me into pieces? Or maybe you're sneaking up on me for a different reason: so you can smother me with affection and kiss me until your lips fall off."

Did I really just say that? Ducasus thought. *Real subtle, Dummy.*

Rosae scrunched up her face. She lifted her right arm in the air and began trying to grab Ducasus with her left.

"No, I'm going to punch you in the side of the head!"

Ducasus laughed good-naturedly as Rosae tried to pull at the arms of the tall youth, taking swings at him to no avail.

Rosae stopped her struggles and smiled, putting both hands on her hips.

"You're a pig, you know that Ducasus?"

Now it was Ducasus' turn to scrunch up his face.

"You would punch a poor, innocent pig? Rosae, that's disgusting."

Malleus' muted voice rang out from a distance.

"Would you two shut up and make out already?"

Ducasus blushed and looked at the ground, but luckily Rosae didn't see him. She had already bounded off in the direction of the sound.

She arrived at the base of their tree and looked up, leaning against the trunk. Ducasus followed behind, feeling a bit awkward.

"Hello, Malleus," she said.

"Hello, Rosae," Malleus returned, imitating her from forty feet up. He never allowed his gaze to drift from those two precious stars that shone dimly in the night sky. He sat on a high, twisted branch with his back against the tree trunk, exposed in the cool air above.

"If you're so afraid of being caught that you two tromp out here to watch your stars every night, I'd think you'd be more concerned about yelling into the forest."

"I didn't yell. And no one's looking for us anymore,

anyway. It was a small and calculated risk."

Ducasus smiled at the peculiar nature of his twin. They were similar in so many ways, but they certainly had different personalities.

Rosae responded cautiously, the mockery gone from her tone.

"Well, you are seventeen... Most people's stars fall by the time they're fourteen or fifteen. Sometimes even twelve! Is there any possibility you've been watching the wrong stars, that yours have already fallen somewhere?"

Ducasus responded quickly.

"No, they're ours. Our father saw them appear when we were being born. We've seen them up there for as long as I can remember."

"You're just jealous you were born without one," Malleus added.

Rosae frowned.

"I'm told that in some countries a starless woman is considered to be a gift from heaven. The embodiment of the stars themselves."

"Yeah, but they're talking about women who are born gifted, Rosae. Not ungifted."

"Malleus," Ducasus hissed.

"No, he's right," Rosae interjected. "They are talking about Flare women, Neb women, Hawkeyes... It's not fair that some girls are born with their parent's gifting and not their own star. It's not fair that all of you boys at least have the chance to find a gift. But I suppose if I had been born a Hawkeye without having to hunt it, that would be unfair in my favor."

It was quiet, then, until Malleus broke the silence from above.

"Well, they are our stars, anyway. Binary constellations are rare, and I don't know of any other twins near here. Sometimes stars fall late."

Rosae's eyes sparkled bittersweetly, "But seventeen?"

"We're a young seventeen," Ducasus replied.

~°~

The next day found Ducasus and Malleus heading to the fields at the same time as all the others. They could not afford to be among the last to get to work, as any signs of fatigue could be interpreted as evidence of stargazing. They had learned, over the years, how to seem rested when they were not. They had to work harder, with less hesitation and better productivity than everyone else to avoid suspicion.

Today, they didn't get the chance. An overseer with emerald-colored eyes and the long, shining hair that betrayed his gift stopped them, separating the boys from their father just before they reached the tall rows of grain, ready to be harvested. He looked them over silently.

Their father glanced back but continued on, not wishing to anger the lithe Flare who confronted his boys.

"Did you need something from us?" Ducasus asked at length.

Quick as lightning, the Flare struck Ducasus in the stomach. He had hardly seemed to move.

Malleus set his jaw and stared straight forward, grinding his teeth as Ducasus tried to stand up straight again.

"Don't ask me like you have a choice," the overseer said. "And you'll stand there waiting for me as long as I like."

"Yes, sir," Ducasus coughed.

"Yes, sir," Malleus muttered.

"The grain is almost harvested, but we're low on supplies. Go to Pescas and get these things, and have the vendors write down Atrox as buyer." He handed a scrap of paper to Malleus.

"What is that?" Ducasus asked, nodding at the list. "If

you want us to get certain things, you have to tell-

Ducasus fell into the dirt, then. The Flare had a few hairs over his brow out of place now, evidence of his quick violence.

"I know you dogs can read. You don't have any secrets from me. Take the old nag and get what's on that list. And no more comments, or I'll teach you how to take a real beating."

Malleus shook slightly but said nothing. His teeth ground with the effort of restraining himself, and the Flare noticed. He walked up to Malleus so their foreheads nearly touched.

"Your brother, he's an idiot. I've never been concerned with him," he whispered. "But you, you're the dangerous one, aren't you? Malleus, steaming quietly for all these years..." He laughed derisively and stepped away. "If you get any ideas of running away on your trip..." he gestured at their father, who dropped his bag and began slicing at the tall stalks. "You know what we'll do to him. And your mother."

Ducasus got up to his feet and put an arm around Malleus, turning him away from the taunting overseer.

"We'll go right now," Ducasus said.

The Flare turned dismissively, then bolted away to harass someone else.

Ducasus tried to walk upright as they made their way to the dilapidated stable, but Malleus could tell that he still felt the Flare's cruel blows.

"Do you think we have time to say goodbye to Mom?" Ducasus asked.

"No," Malleus replied quietly. "Let's go."

~°~

The sun felt warm on the twins' backs as they headed west and north to escape the valley where they lived. They would pass out of sight of the rolling foothills before the

day was through, foothills which were only the smallest intimation of the vast and powerful mountains that lay to the south, in the country of the Nebulae. These hills, in contrast to their stony, massive relatives, were gentle and sloped long into the grasses of the earth.

They had made the journey to Pescas a number of times over the years, but always with the accompaniment of a Flare overseer. This was the first time they had ever been sent alone.

It was about midday, and Ducasus and his brother sat in the seats at the head of the wagon, staring into the vastness of nature that surrounded them. They didn't speak much at all, and Ducasus was content to daydream about Rosae, like he often did. He'd marry her someday; of that he was sure. When his star finally fell, he would retrieve it, then sweep Rosae off of her feet with declarations of love, and whisk her away to the southlands, to live in peace and bliss forever. He'd imagined the whole thing many times.

The doddering, old horse finally brought Ducasus and Malleus to a fork in the road with which they were well-acquainted. The quicker road was the one on the left, which brought them out of the skirts of the oak forest and led them into the long stretch of plains that preceded Pescas. The road on the right side led deeper into the forest and would eventually lead to the same town, given the proper turns at the proper junctions, but it was less traveled by and in poorer condition. They were accustomed to taking the road on the left.

On this particular occasion, however, they found their customary road blocked by a large tree that had fallen across the way.

"I guess we're taking the long way," Ducasus commented, pulling the reins to the right.

Malleus said nothing. Ducasus glanced at him, then back at the road as the tired horse pulled them along.

After a time, with uncharacteristic emotion in his voice, Malleus finally spoke.

"Do you remember how Dad used to run? How we used to run with him?"

"Yes."

"You ever wonder why he stopped?"

"I guess I just assumed he was getting older."

A dark look loomed over Malleus' sun-tempered features.

"Sixty is older. He isn't even forty yet. He would run easily, for the joy of it. He ran all the way to Pescas once, and he enjoyed it."

Ducasus leaned forward.

"Then... why did he stop?"

Malleus' expression was sullen and somber as his gaze fixated on the ground between the mare and the wagon.

"Something happened. When we were--"

Malleus was silenced by a sharp force that jerked him and his brother off to the side, forcing the wagon diagonal. He looked up to see a rope looped around their horse's neck as it was pulled towards the dark forest.

A base and lusty chorus of yells echoed from both sides of the narrow way and a band of men rushed towards the two youths, murder lighting their wicked eyes.

Chapter Three:

Zealous for a Cause

The two boys looked up in shock as they were met by unknown assailants. A large, barrel-chested man grabbed at Malleus, who lashed out, but his angle was awkward. The oaf met the blow with an open hand, then proceeded to seize Malleus and throw him to the ground.

The fall knocked the wind out of him and dust filled his lungs. As he gasped, a heavy knee was laid on his back, rendering him motionless. He felt his hands being tied together behind him as he turned his head to look under the wagon.

He saw his brother's feet and legs and those of another. In a moment, with a dull thud, he saw his brother's terrified face looking up at the point of a sword.

"Parvus! Come tie this one up," the man with the sword ordered.

Ducasus glanced under the wagon, searching for his brother, and the twins' eyes locked.

A high-pitched voice came from behind the wagon, responding to the swordsman.

"Why don't I just cut his throat, Pompey?" he exclaimed with savage excitement.

The redheaded brute looked up at this comment with hopefulness, but the look faded and he returned to his sullen demeanor once he saw Pompey shaking his head.

"Because we're presently confronted with a pecuniary opportunity, Parvus." The swordsman's voice then lost its grace and he added, "These are two of the young laborers. Our resident slave-owner whom we have been meticu-

lously observing will pay handsomely for the return of his property." He grinned wickedly. "And for our silence."

The man called Pompey, apparently the leader of this ragtag group, was grudgingly obeyed.

A lanky bandit who was missing most of his teeth approached the wagon, winding up his rope. It was apparently he who had dragged the mare off course, and the poor thing didn't have the strength to resist him.

"These aren't star-demons, Pomp. So why we hasslin' them?"

Ducasus and Malleus were lifted and roughly tossed onto the flat of the wagon. Squeaky-voice tied Ducasus' legs while the big oaf watched Malleus. Pompey's response was dismissive.

"No, they're not star-demons, but they'll be at no worse a station when we've been paid. The oppression of the Ungifted peoples is so complete we will not be further adding to their pains, for what is the difference if one wears the shackles of society or shackles of iron?"

"We don't have iron shackles," the squeaky one volunteered. "Just rope."

Pompey frowned.

"Yes, then our rope, which they will wear long enough for us to broker a deal with their errant lord. We, on the other hand, will be better off. And in such a manner of briefly injecting some variety and a change of scenery into their lives, we will be allowed to continue financing the glorious struggle and this life of banditry to which we have grown accustomed."

The lanky bandit shrugged a shoulder as he climbed into the driver's seat of the wagon. The other men climbed aboard as well, except for the large redheaded man, who walked to the side of the road and pulled on some foliage that turned out to be a very cleverly disguised gate. The lanky one snapped the reins and headed into the dark of the forest.

Ducasus looked at Malleus in bewilderment as the sun disappeared above the canopy, and the sword-bearing Pompey declared, "Onward, gentlemen. Let us to the spoils of our victory."



Ducasus' bewilderment passed, and he began to seethe. He sat upon the edge of the wagon scowling, knowing that he had no chance of eluding his captors while both his hands and feet were bound. He looked to his brother to see that he was experiencing similar frustrations.

Leaves fell around them as they passed under the branches of a lone mirror tree, sadly misplaced in the perennial, green-leafed masses of oak. Ducasus ran scenario after scenario of possible escapes through his mind, but he was unable to conjure up anything realistic.

He was still smoldering when a cross Malleus, who had been quietly studying his captors for many minutes, finally spoke.

"You're zealots, aren't you?"

Pompey turned his head from the front where he sat next to the lanky man.

"Perceptive, boy. Tell me how you arrived at this conclusion."

"You're all Ungifted, and apparently not slaves. Also, you don't appear to be florists."

"And those are the only options, are they?" Pompey returned drily.

Malleus spoke again, collected and mechanical as he always was.

"No, but all of the others made less sense. I do think Mongo over here would make quite a florist, though. I bet he collects daisies in secret."

The red-haired brute was dozing when Malleus spoke,

saving him from getting swatted. Pompey swiveled around and sat on the inner lip of the wagon.

"Then we are exposed. I am Pompeius (you may call me the great), the man driving is Longus, the little one is Parvus, and the oaf is Amplus. We are all but humble soldiers in this glorious struggle against the oppressive and evil domination of the so-called 'gifted peoples,' be they fleet Flares, monstrous Nebulae, or the keen-eyed Lux Sidorum."

Longus turned his head back towards the wagon and interjected, "He means Hawkeyes."

Malleus narrowed his eyes and Ducasus spoke.

"We're none of those things. Aren't the zealots supposed to be fighting for the Ungifteds?"

Pompey's voice dropped again, losing its former eloquence. "A glorious struggle's got to be financed, Boy. And unless you youths plan on taking up arms, this is the way you'll be of service."

Aware of his change in manner, Pompey composed himself and acquired the most erudite expression he knew.

"You see, though your eyes condemn our innocent souls as varlets, we are idealists. Zealots, as they call us. We fight for a sacred cause and for a dream." His eyes lit up at this and he continued without caesura. "Yes, a dream! Call me no longer Pompeius, but call me a dreamer, for I have slumbered and traveled a thousand worlds in my sleep. In my somnambulism I encountered a world where the dark skies of evening are encouraged to keep their wicked stars - a world where we are no longer called Ungifted, but beautiful and industrious and educated and ambitious!" He lowered his voice to a dramatic whisper that betrayed practice, and he slowly leaned forward. "You see, boys, I have dreamt of Pontus, but of it without a gifted tribe. I dreamt of a world where we are all equal."

Pompey clenched his fist in conviction with the utterance of his final word, and he maintained frozen posture with his eyes lightly shut so as to let the others consider his profundity in quiet.

Ducasus had no respect for the intended silence.

"Then let us go! You're nothing more than a bunch of common thieves. You don't care about Ungifteds! Don't you know they'll kill our parents when we don't return in time?"

The bandit-philosopher opened his eyes and stood up in the bed of the wagon. He ceremoniously unsheathed his jagged, steel sword and crossed his opposite shoulder with it. Then, drawing it forward again, he struck Ducasus soundly with the flat of his blade.

Malleus dove head-first at Pompey in rage, but he was quickly subdued with a blow to the head from the red-head's meaty fist. Ducasus clutched his face with bound hands and writhed on the wagon floor.

"Words are a dangerous thing, boy. You should leave them to those more instructed in their use."

~°~

By the time Malleus regained his senses, most of the excitement had settled down. Pompey was once again in the front seat, facing the forest trail. Amplus was dozing, and the little one had a large knife out, which he was using as a mirror to study his own features. The driver and horse plodded on, and Ducasus tried to raise himself back up to a seated position, a wide, bright-red mark across the left side of his face.

Malleus hadn't heard much about the zealots, but what he had heard was not very impressive. Supposedly, they were a large, secret society of Ungifteds that fought for the cause of better treatment, but when the overseers talked about them, they seemed more like a loosely

confederated band of outlaws and troublemakers.

Malleus mused on all that had taken place and all that the men had stated. The faint beginnings of a plan stirred in his mind.

Ducasus, on the other hand, let his mind wander away from planning. His face stung where it had been struck and he tried to rub it with his bound hands. It hurt a lot.

Scarcely an hour had passed since the two brothers had diverted their course at the fallen tree before they were rolling into the outlaws' camp.

It was little more than a clearing, still dotted with trees and thickets. There were a few branches and logs placed around what had once been a fire, a stack of crates and barrels on the north side, and a small creek flowing over rocks, running through the middle of the area.

Pompey spoke with enthusiasm as they entered.

"Take heart, my weary sojourners! Though our home lies in the journey, the lies of our journey have led us home!"

The twins rolled their eyes as they pulled to a stop in front of the creek.

"Longus, put the steed in the hollow; Parvus, sort the goods; and Amplus, remove our captives, please."

Pompey stood before Ducasus and Malleus as they were tossed off of the wagon. He had one hand on his hip and the other on the pommel of his sword with his head raised in satisfaction.

"Welcome to my humble abode, boys. Feel free to compliment me on the genius of its location. The first place one would look for us is near a water source," he said. "So we make our camp here because it is the last place one would think to look for us, supposing it to be the first." He smiled at his wit.

"You're an idiot," Ducasus answered drily.

"And supposing you to be an idiot, they'll look in the obvious place first," Malleus added, imitating their captor.

Pompey's smile reversed and a wicked sneer conquered his expression.

"If you would like to feel the sting of my blade like your brother, I assure you that may be swiftly arranged."

The youths fell silent. Despite their bravado, they were afraid.

The sun was getting lower in the sky and the chill of an autumn evening began to blow through the camp. Ducasus and Malleus were led to two trees near the creek bed and were roughly tied to their trunks, then abandoned for the night as the zealots gathered around a fire a ways off.

Ducasus tried to weaken his bonds by rubbing them against the tree, but it had been stripped and smoothed already. He only succeeded in scraping the skin from his wrists.

He eventually grew tired of his struggles and stared at the ground, resigned to his fate. He remained in his slump until the sun began its final descent, when he and his brother simultaneously shifted their gaze to the sky. Neither of them thought about it; it was simply a habit. They had watched their stars every night during the fall ever since they aspired to the age of twelve.

The outlaws ate and murmured and drank around the campfire, casting dancing shadows and bursts of sound into the depths of the forest they inhabited. Ducasus and Malleus paid them no mind as Pompey went on another of his philippics against the gifted peoples and their stars, praising the zealots and reiterating his hopes for a world without a Flare, a Nebula, or a Hawkeye.

The twins only looked at the sky.

It was peaceful that night, and though waning now, the moon was still bright and almost full. The binary stars that represented so much to the twins shone dimly above the mountains to the south, sparkling in a nighttime glow just as they always had for the past seventeen years.

Then, without any warning, the star on the left burst into a crimson flash, immediately followed by its twin. Just as soon as it had happened, the color and the brilliance were gone.

Scarcely knowing whether or not to believe their own eyes, the youths watched as their stars fell silently to the mountains below.

Chapter Four:

Like a Rush of Wind

From between branches and leaves they watched their stars fall fast and silent, yet with a grace that reminded Ducasus of the falling snow. They drifted and disappeared somewhere on the eastern side of a distant mountain to the south.

After only half a minute, with no great ostentation following the initial flash, it was over.

I can see why so many people miss their stars, he thought. *It happens so fast!*

Ducasus didn't know what to think. He was a jumble of excitement, anxiety, frustration, and triumph all at once. He tore his gaze from the distant mountain and looked to his brother, who appeared cool on the surface, as he always did. He was already working on the problem in his mind.

Malleus returned his brother's stare and nodded. He glanced at their captors seated around the fire across the creek, then he ventured to speak in a whisper.

"Did you see where they landed?"

"Yeah. Did you?"

"Yes."

They held their silence a while. Ducasus' ropes chafed his skin. Not only was he bound to the tree, his captors had left his hands and feet bound as well. He was defined by rope.

Their stars wouldn't stay put forever. They had three days at the most until their brilliance faded, their powers vanished, and they became just another pair of rocks on the ground. Their parents had even less time than that if

they didn't return to Atrox's estate.

Ducasus started to sweat. He vainly struggled against his bonds, knowing it would do no good. He tried to twist back and forth, but he was bound too tightly. He tightened every muscle, constricted every tendon and vein; he clenched his teeth in frustration.

We have to get OUT!

Panting with exertion, he rolled his head to the side and looked to his brother. He looked calm like a peaceful sleeper – in part because his eyes were closed. The only evidence of his wakefulness was a rigidity in his shoulders and an occasional flitting of his eyelids.

"Malleus!" he earnestly whispered. "What do we do?"

"We wait," Malleus mouthed the words.

He then opened his eyes and looked towards the campfire where Parvus was arguing with Longus. Amplus was already dozing, and Pompey rested backwards with his hands propping him up.

Ducasus followed Malleus' eyes before he shut them again, and he understood.

His brother had a plan. He always did.

~°~

Malleus waited for his captors' vigilance to wane and for sleep to get the better of them. He kept his eyes shut most of the time, focusing his energy inward for the task ahead.

He had begun to think of how he and his brother might escape from the moment they were bound. He was thoughtful, he was systematic, and most importantly, he was in control.

Ducasus waited with him. What else could he do? He gazed at Malleus searchingly as soon as it appeared that the last of the criminals had fallen asleep. Malleus just shook his head. They would wait a little longer.

After what seemed like an eternity, Malleus opened his eyes and examined the distant thieves. They were still. He strained his ears for the sounds of their breathing, which he couldn't make out very well. It seemed to him that it was regular and that the big one was snoring. He didn't have to strain his ears to hear that, at least.

Satisfied that his hour had arrived, Malleus put his back flat against the tree. He had flexed his arms and pushed out his chest and lower back as much as he could manage when his captors tied him and, as a result, he now had a little bit of space. Space meant opportunity. Opportunity meant freedom. Freedom meant finding their stars.

Malleus leaned his head down as he pushed up on the coils of rope with the lower portion of his arms. He pushed his body back into the tree and slid down a few inches, then stood upright once more. He repeated this maneuver over and over, keeping the coils of rope advancing upwards at a snail's pace but never halting.

Ducasus took the hint from his brother, but having not prepared himself when he was bound, as Malleus had, he found it much more difficult. His ropes were so tight that they pressed into him.

Malleus continued working. After many minutes he had worked the top of the coils to his chest, and he lowered his head to grasp the first of the rope in his teeth. After several tries, he was able to grip it, and he yanked it farther up until it looped loosely about his neck. He continued shrugging, pushing, dropping, and standing back up until he was able to reach each coil with his teeth, one by one.

After a half hour, all of his coils rested about his neck. Using his tied hands to push the ropes out and up, he snuck his chin under the cords, and he was out.

He looked at Ducasus now, who had only succeeded in hurting himself. He had managed to get his ropes just

past the lower extremity of his ribs, but the tree he was bound to widened at that point, and it seemed apparent that he would make no further progress without help.

Mindful of the ropes that still tied his feet and hands, Malleus lowered himself to a squatting position where he searched for a sharp rock.

Spotting a promising candidate in the moonlight, Malleus slowly put his knees in front of him, trying not to rattle the leaves that were scattered on the ground. He then put his hands beneath him and quietly prostrated himself until he could remove his hands and retrieve the rock.

His hands and feet were not tied tightly, and he was able to work them off relatively quickly. Thus freed, it was only a matter of persistence until he had loosed his brother as well.

Then, like the stars that had preceded them, they slipped off silently into the night.



The moon was large and bright, though as the morning approached it sank low in the sky, dimming as it made its diurnal descent. There was sufficient light for Ducasus and Malleus to navigate by, though it reached them in patches through the trees, creating pools of inky black interspersed with tracks of silver. They fled quickly and as quietly as possible, sacrificing a bit of silence for the sake of speed as they distanced themselves from their former captors.

They sped through thickets and dodged trees. They ran with heads high and senses alert, as one who is both chasing a prize and being pursued himself. Ducasus ran slightly ahead of Malleus as he always did.

They had to get away. They had to go home. They had to find their stars. Everything else faded into the blur of

forest that passed them by.

They ran hard for an hour before the twins tacitly agreed that it was safe to rest a moment. They stood panting alongside a thicket of blackberry briars, the last few berries from the summer still lingering on the branches. On every side there were trees with bits of moss hanging from their boughs. The sky above began to warm to a pale light with the approach of day.

"I must be going crazy," Ducasus said through labored breaths. "I've been captured by zealots, I've watched our stars fall, escaped, and now I'm running through the woods trying to find some mountain, hoping nobody catches up with us."

"You aren't crazy," Malleus replied.

Ducasus propped up one knee and set his elbow on it, keeping his other leg extended.

"You know what? You're right. Those zealots are the crazy ones. What a crock."

There was a beat before Malleus chose to speak.

"Yes. But they wouldn't be a problem without the Flares. They made these men, and men like them."

"The *Flares* made these guys hypocritical morons? What are you talking about?"

Malleus shrugged.

"Pompey was right about one thing: The world would be a better place without Flares."

A thrill ran up Malleus' spine as he spoke those words, but the effect was lost on Ducasus, who had been staring down the trail behind them.

"I don't know. I bet it's different in other places."

"So if you had the power to do away with the Flares, you wouldn't do it?"

His brother thought a moment, then wincing a bit, he replied, "No... no, I don't think I would. I wouldn't. Don't get me wrong, I'm not real fond of them, and I'd certainly never become one of them, but they're a part of this world."

The ones I know are terrible, but they have a beautiful gift if you think about it. I'm sure there are Flares who use it well somewhere."

He threw a rock at the oak across from him.

"Instead of keeping us under their thumbs, like here," he concluded.

Malleus' eyes grew distant and the ever-so-active wheels in his mind began to turn anew.

"Malleus, what are we going to do?"

"We're going to go south."

"I mean about our stars, about home. We've waited for these stars for our entire lives, and Dad - he's always told us there was nothing more important, but if I had to I'd... Maybe we have to give that up."

"Calm down."

"We have to go back to Mom and Dad right now. I don't know what I was thinking. We can't-"

"It's on the way, Ducasus!" Malleus laughed the words and stared incredulously. "Make up your mind as we go if you want, but we have two things we have to do, that we can't fail at." He motioned with his hand. "And they're in the same direction."

Ducasus opened his mouth to reply, then shut it without making a sound.

~°~

The day wore on and Ducasus and Malleus grew weary for lack of sleep. They traveled several miles more before deciding to rest at a cave they happened upon. It was isolated, deep, and an excellent hiding place, so they ventured back into the darkness.

Ducasus flopped down on the stone, catching himself with his hands at the last moment, as was his habit. Malleus lowered himself to the ground in a more dignified manner, and soon they were both drifting towards

peaceful sleep upon the cave floor. The air was cool and damp, and an odd current swept through cave in regular intervals. The air would stir, and then stop, and then stir again. The boys hardly noticed, and soon the pattern was matched by their breathing. They found sleep very quickly, but Ducasus felt tickled in the back of his mind as he drifted off – almost as if he remembered something. Something his father had said.

Time passed swiftly in the embrace of sleep, and then Ducasus woke with a start.

We have to get out, he thought.

Ducasus reached over in the darkness and laid a hand on Malleus, who stirred, then sat up.

“What is it?” he asked in a whisper.

Ducasus scanned the cave with wide eyes. His sight had adjusted a little, but it was still quite dark. The winds of the cave continued undisturbed in their bizarre regularity: Rushing then stopping, rushing then stopping. He looked around in studied silence.

Then he saw it.

Not ten feet from them, slightly to the side and between them and the mouth of the cave, was an irregular figure. It was laid out on its stomach, seeming to be about four feet long and facing away from them diagonally. What made this shadowy form strange was that it was changing. It grew outwards and up, acquiring a curve to its outline before regressing to its smaller state. It was expanding and depressing in perfect rhythm with the winds of the cave.

The twins were not alone. They shared their cave with a horror of nature.

Ducasus swallowed hard and raised a finger, pointing at the beast. Malleus squinted for a moment, and then his eyes grew wide. Ducasus spoke in a whisper what both of them were thinking.

“Nexaer.”

Nexaers were more common in the North, but they were known to migrate south on occasion – though rarely as far south as they now were. Nocturnal creatures for the most part, they were even known to enter a person's house if the owner was foolish enough to leave an access point open. Unlucky sleepers would feel an odd draft, then awake to a drooling, hideous face as terrifying as death itself. The victim would have a moment for a short scream, which would be immediately stifled, and then it would be over; nexaers kill their prey by drawing the breath from their lungs. They asphyxiate anyone unfortunate enough to gaze into their glossy, stark white eyes.

Some called them the night terror. Others did not believe they existed.

It was said that nexaers were manifestations of fear itself, but not many encountered the creatures. They usually avoided settled areas, preferring to hunt deer in the mountains, but when food was scarce, they would venture out of the woods and sightings would occur. Death often accompanied sightings.

The thing was sleeping, and the twins felt the immediate need to vacate the premises – which meant passing by it. They didn't expect a nexaer to take kindly to being roused by cave-invaders.

Ducasus and Malleus gingerly began to work their way to the side of the cave opposite the sleeping animal. They continued inch by inch, passing very near the nexaer as they headed towards the light.

They saw it clearer now as they began to reach the shallower half of the cave, where dim light fell on the beast. It was covered in black fur, with an elongated face that resembled a baboon. The creature's trachea seemed to be out of place, but as it took a breath in, the twins could see an additional throat in the usual location. Three large folds of hairless skin hung limp on its side, then suddenly

inflated partway as the creature dozed. They then deflated and continued the rhythm that had now become horrifying to the twins.

Ducasus' father had warned him about such winds in caves, but it had been long ago, and had it seemed almost fantasy to his then-young ears.

He must not have told Malleus, Ducasus thought. *Malleus wouldn't forget something like that.*

The brothers' hearts raced in their chests, their bodies rigid with excitement, yet they had to move slowly and quietly when everything in them told them to run.

They were still within the creature's grasp if he awoke. Malleus focused all of his attention on his feet, ensuring that each step was quiet and soft. He tested the ground softly with the ball of his foot, then silently rolled his weight onto the rest of his foot, never making a sound, never taking a careless step.

Ducasus focused most of his attention on the nexaer. He studied it in fear, thinking of the myriad of horrific stories he had heard about this fierce predator. This made him quiet and hesitant as he made his way towards freedom and a narrow escape at the mouth of the cave.

The sun shone brightly outside, but Ducasus kept his gaze fixed over his shoulder at the sleeping beast that had almost been his undoing.

No small relief swept through Ducasus as they reached the cave's entrance. He turned to face forward once more, but the brightness of the day caught him off-guard.

His left foot hit a rise in the rock beneath him and he stumbled. He reflexively stomped his foot to catch himself, but it came down upon some pebbles that were strewn about the entrance to the cave. It scraped loudly and his momentum launched him forward without his feet underneath him. He fell to the stone with an unfortunate, resounding *thud*.

The world around him froze as realization dawned on him.

“Ducasus don’t look!”

Malleus’ warning came too late, quickly silenced by the sound of rushing air. Ducasus turned to look at his brother and immediately he felt a gasp escape from his lips, a gasp that he had not uttered. A gasp that was stolen from him.

Malleus’ eyes were wide as he moved in a strange slow-motion, trying to turn his face away from the wakened nexaer. It was to no avail. The creature was upon them, and as it advanced, the deadly vacuum that held them grew stronger. Ducasus slid on the pebbles towards the monster. His chest burned as he felt the air being siphoned out of it.

He put his hands on the stone and made an effort to slide his feet underneath him. It was all too easy, for it was movement towards the vacuum, and Ducasus crouched in the midst of it. He struggled to a standing position, feeling dizzy and light-headed as he did so. Forward movement was possible, but undesirable, and moving to the side or backwards was impossible. He stood in the center of the nexaer’s vortex.

Malleus struggled against the deadly current from the fringes. Ducasus was drawn closer to where Malleus struggled as his traitorous feet slid slowly toward the advancing beast stalking forward on all fours. It was then that Ducasus looked into the eyes of this terror of the night.

Its eyes were so white they almost glowed. Furrowed, dark skin framed its face, and its horrific, vacuous maw was open wide, boasting rows of teeth, jagged and fatal. The evil creature stared at Ducasus down its monkey-like snout with empty, dead eyes.

Ducasus prepared himself to die. He hoped that Malleus would escape and continue on their quest for

freedom, that he would return home before the overseers killed his parents. His insides burned and he became nauseous, like his stomach was being pulled up to his throat. The pain started to dull, and it seemed farther away. The creature was close now. The edges of his vision faded to black, and he didn't know if it was the dark of the cave or his own failing senses. He didn't care. Everything seemed so far away now, and all Ducasus wanted to do was close his eyes.

The feeling didn't last long.

Pain stung Ducasus' cheek as his brother's fist sent him reeling. The force of the blow knocked his head from the current. He gasped and inhaled deeply as fresh air filled his lungs and restored him to his senses. He felt the vortex stop a moment, and he saw that the nexaer's skin flaps had inflated to the point of almost bursting. The creature was three times its original size. The nexaer's face contorted in rage, and it closed its mouth, then opened it again.

The beast cried out with a deafening roar that sent Ducasus and Malleus tumbling backwards, blown away by the force of such lungs. The terrible cry went on and on as the two brothers kneeled in the sunlight, clutching their ears, praying that the sound would stop.

They stumbled to their feet, but were blown forward, tumbling. They regained their feet once more and began a hurried departure up the slope of the mountain, running desperately.

The sound finally stopped, but the youths did not, hoping now that the creature's distaste for daylight would dissuade it from pursuit.

If it did not, they could not possibly hope to survive the night.

Chapter Five:

Two Wrongs

Ducasus and Malleus fled without looking back, without stopping, and without a second thought. When they could run no farther, they strained their ears for any sounds of a pursuing animal. The music of the wooded hills made Ducasus jump a few times, fancying he heard pawing footsteps, but his fears proved to be groundless. They could discern no sign of the creature.

They chose a rock outcropping at the top of the vale where they could scout the land around them and get a bearing on their direction. They were headed south, to where their stars had fallen on a mountain near their home.

It was already noon on the first day since their stars had fallen, and the second day since leaving home. Traveling on foot was tiresome and slow, but being pursued had pushed their pace. The striking mass of a mountain that rose in the distance was reachable and hardly even a diversion from their path home. They could reasonably journey there in another day of quick travel, but time was running out. A trip to Pescas should only take two days, three at the most. With each passing hour their parents grew closer to death, and their stars resting on the mountainside grew dimmer.

Malleus sat cross-legged to the south and Ducasus lay on his back with his knees sticking up in the air.

"We'll need something to eat soon," Malleus said.

Ducasus remained motionless on the ground. It felt good to lie still.

"Did you stash any food?"

"Yes."

"On the wagon?"

"Yes."

"Perfect," came Ducasus' laconic reply. He sighed upwards, glad to have the ability to take air in again. "Well, we're alive. That means we're still lucky."

Silence reigned for a minute, nature filling the air with the vast and subtle music of the wilderness.

"I don't believe in luck," Malleus picked up at his brother's last thought. "You were smart enough to get to your feet, the nexaer couldn't hold both of us completely, and I had the presence of mind to figure out how and when we would have a possibility of escape."

Ducasus propped himself up on the back of his elbows.

"Sure, but we didn't plan to be spread out when we got attacked in the cave. You were just far enough to be able to move and just close enough to reach me with that punch. Both sides of my face are bruised now, thanks to you."

Malleus scoffed.

"Yeah, thanks to me. You've been getting the crap kicked out of you lately, by the way."

Ducasus frowned.

"Flares, zealots, and mythical death creatures have been around lately."

"The extraordinary doesn't seem to suit you."

"Apparently it does."

"It follows you, at least."

Ducasus managed a smirk.

"Alright, but I'm done being a punching bag for a while."

"You have no way of knowing that."

Ducasus shoved Malleus off of the log he was sitting on. Malleus didn't fight back, but he didn't laugh either.

Ducasus' grin faded.

"I've been thinking, Ducasus." Malleus picked himself up and dusted off. "We've been taking it for granted that we would go back to the village and then slip out to get our stars, but I think we should do it the other way around."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"Good. It's settled then. Do you know the way?"

Ducasus shrugged.

"Shouldn't be hard for us to find from wherever the stars landed."

"Good."

"Malleus, how will we know which star is which?"

"What do you mean?"

"How do we know which one is yours and which one is mine?"

"It doesn't matter."

Ducasus threw up his hands.

"Of course it matters!"

"Why?"

Ducasus paused, then answered in a softer voice.

"Well, it seems like it matters. We have to find them, for one thing."

"Dad says that when his star fell he was drawn to it, like a deep longing guiding him. Do you feel that now?"

Ducasus nodded slowly. It had been building within him since the night before.

"How else would anyone find something so small in the mountains?" Malleus continued. "I'm sure when we get closer we'll be able to feel the difference if it's that important to you."

"Malleus," Ducasus began, hesitating. "I think you should consider choosing the gift of the Nebulae."

"You would think that."

"I know you don't easily change your mind."

"I might surprise you," he laughed.

"I mean it. If we're going to go back to get Mom and Dad after we find our stars..." Just saying the words gave Ducasus chills. "It might be useful to be packing some muscle." His eyes sparkled. "They say an Ungifted will die with just one blow from an unarmed Neb warrior."

Malleus' joviality began to disappear.

"Ah, so is that how the Nebulae lord over the Ungifteds in the South? Flares hunt them down and Nebs just whack them."

"They're an honorable people. I don't think they're anything like the Flares that own us."

"Nobody's like the Flares that own us," Malleus shot back. "They're evil incarnate."

"Just think about it, okay?" Ducasus nudged Malleus. "Twin giants, two twin warriors side by side - if nothing else, think of the amazing nicknames."

"Yes, they'll call us 'Bald Idiot' and 'Why Did I Listen to My Brother?'"

"I was thinking more like 'Bob' and 'Weave.'"

Malleus laughed, then smiled bittersweetly.

"We'll see."

Content to leave it at that, Ducasus held his peace. Birds chirped in the distance and some bugs buzzed nearby as the twins forced their weary legs to bear them up again and continue on, this time at a leisurely pace.

They found a mountain spring and drank as much water as they could force down, being parched and without anything to carry water in for the rest of the journey. They traveled along the ridge of the foothills that made up the east side of the valley where they lived. Ducasus pointed out their home and fields as they passed them, just as the sun was taking its leave. The forest in the west burned with the brightness of solar fire as far as the eye could see.

They would be at their destination soon, but night fell, and they could travel no further.

The twins bedded down on a pile of pine boughs, deciding quite resolutely to avoid setting foot in a cave as long as they lived. The terrors of the morning were still much too fresh in their minds.

Their camp was a stoic one. They decided that there was very little possibility of the zealots following them so far, but they went without a fire, nevertheless. The mid-autumn air was tolerable, though gusts of wind would meander about them from time to time, chilling them to the bone. Having had their wagon stolen, they were left without provisions of any sort. They had only the clothes on their backs, soreness in their limbs, hunger in their stomachs, and each other, but it was enough. In each other they held a common friendship, a common goal, hope for freedom and a new life. They were more than friends; they were more than brothers; they were twins. Two halves of the same soul, as they'd been told, and Ducasus rested in the knowledge that no matter what obstacles faced them, he and his twin would face them together. He trusted Malleus with all his heart, and he admired him for his loyalty, his systematic way of thinking, and for always staying cool.

The moon rose to find the twins huddled together for refuge from the icy wind.



Ducasus woke very suddenly. It was as if someone had been calling his name, only not quite. It was like someone called him by something deeper than a name, something more real.

He looked towards the south, where the foothills ended and the mountains began. It was at the first of these mountains he felt drawn to, deep inside the pit of his being. It took a terrific struggle of self-control for Ducasus not to raise himself that very instant and run to the

mountain where his star lay, waiting for him.

Calling to him.

He would be a great Nebulae; he had decided firmly. He longed for the quarries of the Illusian Mountains, the mountains that were supposed to make these look so miniature in contrast. To have such a gift of strength! It was so mysterious, so exciting to him, the process of being changed. He would answer the call of his star and obey the will of his father. A new day was coming. A new dawn approached, though it was still a few hours and a few miles away.

Ducasus sighed and imagined what the fortresses of the Nebulae must be like. It was said that there were towers upon towers of stone, impervious to any attack and impregnable to any attempts of breach.

Ducasus' body thrilled suddenly as instinct pulled him from his thoughts. He heard something.

He strained his senses to search the darkly shrouded world around him. He sensed danger, and his gut told him that it was immediate. He tensed everything and listened.

Nothing moved but the trees in the soft wind.

Ducasus looked at his sleeping brother and felt a wave of relief as he realized what must have launched him into such a hyper-sensitive state, such a conviction of danger.

Malleus was asleep and breathing very regularly. The pattern reminded him of the currents of the cave. It was incredible to Ducasus how one experience could so change someone and color his vision. He had lived his whole life hearing the sounds of his own and others' respiration and had thought nothing of it. Now, after one morning of terror, the sound was changed to him. No longer was it a peaceful sound or reassuring. Now it was a memory of trauma and of the day he almost died, helpless to save himself or his brother.

A Neb would have been strong enough, he thought. He

wouldn't be helpless against the blights of the world for much longer. Ducasus clenched his eyes shut and clutched his chest as he felt his star calling to him.

His own star.

Receiving it would certainly be one experience that would color his world. It would allow him to travel to Vis, the stronghold of the Nebulae, and enlist in the King's army. He would be a warrior, never to be helpless again.

Ducasus' mind returned from its musings by way of a strange scent. As he sat next to his brother, lost in thought with his eyes closed, he thought that the air had suddenly acquired a fetid, rotten smell and a humidity that was not there before. The air seemed warmer as well.

Ducasus opened his eyes. The nexaer stared back at him, only inches from his face.

He tried to scream, but he could make no sound. In an instant his lungs were void of air, and he watched in frozen horror as the nexaer laid its heavy paws on his shoulders and forced him down, standing atop of him in triumph. The beast lowered his jaws, revealing rows and rows of teeth, slowly drawing nearer and nearer to Ducasus' face.

Malleus, cursed from childhood as a light sleeper, heard the soft sound of Ducasus' shoulders being forced to the forest floor and it stirred him from his sleep. He opened his eyes to see his brother's head lifting slowly off of the ground towards the ghostly face of his attacker.

The nexaer had tracked them in the night.

Ducasus was nearly unrecognizable. He was white with terror, blue veins visible behind his cheeks, throat, and forehead as he silently gasped and felt no relief. The last bit of life was being sucked out of him.

Malleus stumbled to his feet and ran at the foul creature, but his attempt to shove the beast away was fruitless. The monster was firmly rooted in his position and an eerie concentration held his gaze looming towards

a dying Ducasus. Malleus pushed and shoved the nexaer, only causing the beast to sink his claws into Ducasus' trembling shoulder.

Malleus focused his attention on the dark forest around him, searching in vain for a suitable weapon. The moon lit up Ducasus and his attacker through a break in the trees, but the rest of the area remained covered in shadow.

Precious moments slipped through Malleus' fingers as he again pushed and shoved the beast, raining ineffectual blows on the vicious creature. His demeanor was sober and concentrated, but he knew that his brother was running out of time.

So was he, for that matter.

Just as Malleus began to despair, a cracking noise from a little way to the north reached his ears.

"Quiet, you dunce! Or do you forget that our quarry sleeps?" a hushed voice chided. A squeaky one answered it.

"I'm sorry, Pompey! It's too dark to see where the sticks are."

Malleus lit up.

"Hey, Pompey!" he shouted, "You and your thugs were too stupid to find us all this time, and you won't catch us now! Your terrible vocabulary warns us of your approach from miles away!"

He threw a desperate glance at his brother, who was just closing his eyes.

"Terrible voc... I have an excellent vocabulary, you nitwit! And I shall employ it in lecturing you on the pitfalls of disclosing your location to your pursuer!"

Pompey and his men abandoned all pretenses of stealth at Malleus' call, and Malleus heard them come running from the north. The dim glow of torches began to light the area, and a moment later Parvus burst in through the bushes and waved his torch in front of him, shouting,

"Hiding won't do you any good now!"

Malleus regarded him with steely eyes.

"I know. That's why I called you."

The little zealot's eyes then fell on the nexaer. It was a very angry creature now that it had been so greatly disturbed in its hunting, first by Malleus, and now to an even greater extent by the blazing irritant that was Parvus' torch. The beast turned its baboon-like head away from Ducasus' sallow face and towards this new annoyance. It snarled and leered at Parvus with its glossy, fearsome, white eyes, which reflected the fiery torch and the terrified little man who held it. Parvus' companions were just approaching the bushes when a horrible, ear-splitting cry shattered the night.

The force of such a cry disoriented the zealot and knocked him off his feet, and in a moment the nexaer was upon him. Parvus dropped his torch and the bushes behind him erupted in flame, further confusing and disorienting the zealot's companions.

Amid their screaming, Malleus scooped up his brother and ran through the forested hills to escape the scene of horror. He heard all of the zealots shouting and exerting themselves in confusion and fear. Except for one of them.

The squeaky one's voice was conspicuously absent from the din.

Chapter Six:

Aftermath

Malleus ran hard through the darkness. He ran away from the noise and the fires, the confusion and danger that lay behind him. He struggled with Ducasus' weight, which hung limply over his shoulder. It felt like he wasn't breathing.

He needed to get them to safety fast- that was the first priority. Once they were clear of immediate danger he could see about reviving his brother.

He looks bad... Malleus thought.

Smoke rose from the spot Malleus was fleeing, and howls of pain and struggle dimly reached his ears. He was not sure how he was going to get them out of this one. He had a few ideas, but none of them were a guaranteed success. That unnerved him a little. Malleus was a lover of certainty, or at least of calculated risks and good odds. So much of Ducasus' hope rested in things Malleus could not control.

He lumbered forward faster.

When he felt that he had put enough distance between himself and the zealots fighting that horrible creature, he stopped abruptly and kneeled on the withering grass and twigs. He slid Ducasus gently to the ground, eyeing him for any signs of life.

Determined to stay calm and rational, he laid his head sideways on Ducasus' chest.

Nothing.

He put his hand beneath Ducasus' nostrils, but he couldn't feel any air being expelled. Terror gripped him, but he refused to let so imposing an emotion affect him.

He continued analyzing the situation quickly and calmly. He placed a finger on his brother's neck and felt for a pulse.

There was something. It was faint... so faint that Malleus had to consider the possibility that he had imagined it, but no – it was there. His heart was beating, but only barely, and it seemed to be slowing down.

Malleus searched for a solution. He had received no training as a healer, or even any formal schooling growing up on Atrox's farms, but he had a mind. He had a mind, and he would use it to figure out how to save his brother, who was fading fast.

He thought of something his father used to mutter when faced with a difficult task: "While I breathe, I hope." The aphorism seemed fitting given the circumstances.

He had to get his brother breathing again.

Malleus slapped him hard across the face, hoping the shock would jolt him awake.

No response.

He shoved a fist into Ducasus' stomach, trying to get him to draw in air after the blow, the way someone does in a fight after being hit in the middle.

Again, no response.

Malleus checked his brother's pulse once more. It was barely there, fading away with the life of his twin.

Malleus took his hand away and leaned back on his heels. He looked up to the heavens in desperation, then he furrowed his brow and returned his gaze to his brother.

"Sorry, Ducasus, but this is all I can think of."

Malleus took a deep breath of air and placed his mouth over his brother's lips, pushing air into his lungs. He then inspired and took the air from Ducasus once more, hoping that his brother's lungs would continue the motion. He raised his head for a fresh breath, then pushed air into the lifeless body once more, repeating the process several times.

Malleus couldn't tell if anything was happening, but he kept trying. He was out of ideas. He sucked in life-giving draughts of air and gave them to his brother, but to no end. Despite his despair, he dipped his head again and pushed air into his brother's lifeless lungs, then he began to draw it out one last time.

As he did, Ducasus' eyes shot open and he violently bucked and swung to hit his brother, the blow glancing off of Malleus' neck. Ducasus had panic in his eyes as he flailed to a seated position and backed up quickly and erratically, gasping and wheezing.

It worked! He's alive! Relief flooded through Malleus' bones. Ducasus came to himself a few moments later, still quivering from shock.

"...Is it gone?"

Malleus shook his head.

"No, but it is busy. Our zealot friends tracked us here."

Ducasus was breathing fast and hard. He clamored to his feet, using a fallen tree to help himself up.

"Well, I think we'd better get going then. Don't you?"

He stumbled forward a few steps before his legs gave out, and he rolled over to his back, shaking all over.

"You've just had your second near-death experience in a day. We have to move, but you have to get a hold of yourself first. Take a minute."

They sat quietly in the darkness, listening to the all-too-near cries of the zealots coming from the northwest. Ducasus lay on his back, still shaking, and occasionally he'd grunt sharply and convulse to a new position, shaking his head severely. After a few minutes, he was breathing somewhat regularly, and with a concerted effort he calmed his rebellious body.

"Ready to go?" Malleus asked.

"Help me up."

Malleus got his brother to his feet and the two of them

set out to the south once more, forgetting about their stars for the moment, only thinking of putting as much ground as possible between themselves and danger.

Ducasus' legs were still infirm, so he leaned on Malleus as the two of them made their way through the dark and dangerous night. Neither felt the need to break the silence, except for once, when Ducasus blurted out, "I thought I was dead."

His brother continued forward and somberly replied, "So did I."

They pushed their weary bodies deeper and deeper into the night. Ducasus felt like he'd never sleep again. So did Malleus, but for a different reason entirely.



Another dawn came at last. It found Malleus sprawled out on his back, exhausted and sleeping while Ducasus slept fitfully a yard away, clutching a sharp stick in his repose. It was some small security, the illusion of protection.

The sun peeked over the forested lands to the west and splashed the skies with pigments of red and orange atop a canvas of muted gray. A few birds sang cheerfully in the distance, welcoming the sun in its triumphant approach.

Rays of light settled on Ducasus' eyelids, and he awoke facing the sun and the valley beneath.

He sat up stiffly, rolled his neck and breathed in sharply. It felt good to breathe again. He felt certain it was something he would never again take for granted. His shoulder hurt – dried blood still clung to his shirt where the nexaer had gripped him with its claws.

As he raised his hand to his face to wipe the sleep from his eyes, Ducasus noticed his hand was trembling. He cocked his head quizzically and stretched his arm out

in front of his body. It was shaking like a branch in the wind.

Malleus viewed this spectacle from behind, thinking it better not to say anything. He calmly scrutinized his brother, guessing as to the reasons for his shaking, how long it might last, and how it was likely affecting him. Malleus felt a twinge of regret, and he laid his head back down so Ducasus would not know that he had been watching.

Ducasus stared at his quivering limb in puzzled detachment. He told it to be still, but it rebelled. He closed his eyes and concentrated on making the shaking stop, but it was of no use. He dropped his arm and pushed up to a squatting position. He whipped his arm out to his side several times as he stood up, hoping the motion would loosen it up.

He stopped and examined it again. It was motionless as it hung at his side, but as soon as he raised it, it began to shake. Ducasus frowned and grabbed the recalcitrant appendage with his left hand. His right arm still quaked as long as he attempted to use its muscles.

What is wrong with me? Ducasus thought.

He became frustrated, and he was just beginning to embark on another round of examinations when he heard a loud, almost exaggerated yawn from his brother. He quickly let his arm fall to his side, where it hung like a wet rope.

Maybe I just slept funny, he thought.

Malleus sat up mechanically, then pushed his hair aside as he stood. Ducasus spoke first, as usual.

"Good morning."

"How are you feeling?"

"Pretty well, all things considered."

Malleus avoided his brother's eyes as Ducasus avoided his.

"We'll want to find something to eat soon. We've been

pushing hard."

Ducasus shook his head.

"We don't have time. We're close to our stars now, and then we have to get home fast.

"I suppose you're right."

Malleus squinted towards the horizon.

"The days are getting shorter. We have about eleven hours of light today."

The abruptness of Malleus' observation amused Ducasus, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he began walking uphill towards the ridge and Malleus followed.

The morning gradually turned to day and the foothills gradually turned mountainous. The terrain had less grass and was now more often a mishmash of rocks, dead leaves, and dirt. There were plenty of trees, but they congregated in sections, with sheets of rock and talus slides breaking them up.

As they continued to travel, the twins broke to the east to draw closer to their mountain as well as to avoid having to descend into the gorge that looked up at them from the south. They skirted around the steep descent and continued along the ridge that connected the increasingly mountainous terrain. Birds circled high above over the gorge, and Ducasus had to wonder what they were circling for. Some poor creature had likely been left to die.

Ducasus' mind returned from the birds to considering his new life once more. As he mused on the subject, he realized a problem that he and his brother had somehow overlooked, or at least not spoken about. Malleus rarely overlooked matters of importance.

Ducasus looked troubled as he spoke.

"Malleus?"

"Yes?"

"Where are we going to live once we receive our gifts?"

Silence reigned for some moments as gravel crunched

beneath the twins' feet. Not receiving an answer, Ducasus spoke once more.

"I was planning on settling somewhere in the Neb kingdom of course, probably Vis, but if you decide to ignore my awesome suggestion about twin Neb Warriors, you're going to become a Hawkeye..."

"No one says you have to live in the country of your gift," Malleus replied.

Ducasus spoke carefully, "No, I guess they don't. I just thought you might want to see the Hawkeyes the way I want to see the Nebulae. They're pretty far away to the north and the east. I'm sure it's amazing up there. I can only imagine what kind of cities so precise a people would build, but..."

Malleus chuckled harshly and interjected.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"No! Of course not, no. I want to stick together; I just wanted to make sure I wasn't-"

Malleus cut him off again.

"A Hawkeye would be nothing special in his own country, but he'd be pretty extraordinary somewhere else, don't you think?"

Ducasus smiled.

"So Nebularis, then?"

Ducasus was behind Malleus, so he didn't see the hollow look in his eyes as he responded.

"It sounds nice, though I'd like to travel a bit first."

Ducasus didn't discern the somberness of his brother's reply. Malleus was often somber.

"I could go for that. After we get some supplies and a few decent meals, that is."

"Naturally."

They trudged on. The imminent promise of retrieving their stars made them forget their hunger and the coldness of the nights. Their lives would soon be changed forever, and that thought overshadowed all else in Ducasus' mind.

Malleus, however, was always thinking several steps ahead. Even with such a momentous occasion looming on the horizon, his mind continued to function as it always had: planning out the future, finding solutions to potential problems, and considering all of the new information he'd taken in. Despite the workings of Malleus' mind, he too felt the same sort of pull that had awakened his brother the previous night. As they drew nearer to the mountain that hid their stars, this sensation of pulling only grew inside of him. It was as if his star was calling to him, guiding him, almost. He felt it more with each passing step.

Malleus didn't know much about starfall and giftings, but he was certain that regardless of how it worked, these stars would prove to be tremendously useful. Finding them would be a gigantic leap forward in skills and ability, without losing time to training. He would have to hone his new talents, of course, and he would have to learn the extent of his new powers which would allow him to reach otherwise unattainable heights. Despite all of these revelations and his suppressed excitement, Malleus' mind returned to what must be done, and a hollowness settled in his eyes once again.

Ducasus leaped onto a rock at the pinnacle of the last hill that stood between them and the mountain where their stars had landed. The mountain that stared back at them was thousands of feet tall. It was treacherous and looked very difficult to climb, full of jagged rocks, exposed routes, and very steep besides. The eastern slope, where their stars had fallen, seemed much more forgiving. The twins had trouble discerning much of the eastern slope in the mist, but they could see that it was a gradual ascent and would hopefully cause them no problems.

Ducasus grinned as he leaped down.

"They're close... I can feel it."

"I feel it too."

They stood still for several minutes trying to discern the best route. The eastern ridge where they now stood fell into cliffs, so cutting around to the gentle slopes beyond was not an option. The north face of the mountain was certainly dangerous, but the descent towards it from where they now stood was simple enough. They decided they would head south down the slope until they reached the saddle where the two masses of earth met. Then they would angle eastward, skirting around the mountain's perimeter by way of a mess of large gray rocks that looked climbable. Once they reached the eastern slopes, the going would get much easier.

The world was wrapped in a protective layer of gray as they began their descent. Dew still clung to the dirt beneath their feet, so there was no dust kicked up by their steps and occasional slides. The air was cool but refreshing in the tranquil haze of the late morning. It was the kind of quiet that turns a person inward, hearing the beating of his own heart. Ducasus' breaths were like rushing winds, and every footfall seemed to resound as if magnified a thousand times. The world was asleep, but it would be awake soon.

Ducasus and Malleus picked their way through shrubs and stickers, being thankful for stretches of bare earth when they appeared. This was not, it seemed, a path often taken. Occasionally they would come across a game trail which they would follow as long as they could. Inevitably these narrow reprieves would veer off where the twins did not wish to go, and they were forced to return to picking their way through undergrowth once more. Pines and birches dotted the mountainside as they descended, many of them showing a thick tangle of roots where the land had eroded out from beneath them.

Tension was building inside of Ducasus more and more. By the time they were halfway to the saddle, he could keep it in no longer.

"Malleus, let's run the rest of the way."

Malleus grabbed a branch above his head and used it to guide him down a short section of steep terrain.

"What, are you five?"

Ducasus rolled his eyes. The feeling in his chest was almost unbearable.

"Oh, come on, Malleus! We'll get to our stars sooner and we'll enjoy the journey."

Malleus swatted an insect that buzzed by his face.

"I'm enjoying it now."

Ducasus sped up and leapt off of a rock. He hit the ground with both feet, angling his slide so he stopped backwards, facing his brother.

"You'd be enjoying it more if we ran..."

"Ducasus," Malleus sighed, "we should conserve our energy. We're in the wilderness, we haven't eaten in two days, and someone might be following us. Do you want to make an even bigger trail for them than the one we're making now? Nice skid marks, by the way."

He nodded at the lines in the dirt, then continued working his way downhill. Ducasus was in a rare mood. He followed after his brother, not yet resigned to defeat.

"Oh... I see what this is about." Ducasus waited for a response, but Malleus wasn't to be baited. "You don't want to run because you know I'll beat you there. You don't want to be bringing up the rear the whole way."

"I don't want to run there because it's an unnecessary use of our energy when we have plenty of time."

"I don't think that's why. You just don't want to race your brother." The longing in Ducasus' chest grew with every step they took. He wanted to see his star as soon as he could. "I always have been just a little bit faster than you..."

"I'm not going to run. It makes no sense."

Ducasus sighed. Malleus was hopeless, a slave to cold reason.

Resigned to walking, Ducasus tried his best to keep his excitement at bay by taking in the scenery around him as the birds sang in the trees.

When they reached the pass that connected the two mountains, the haze finally yielded to the warm sunlight, and all things appeared in vivid color.

The windswept pass led to the mess of boulders that stood between them and an easy rise up the mountain. Ducasus' mouth felt dry, like cotton, and he realized he would have to get something to drink soon. It had been a couple of hours since the last creek had passed.

As they approached the jumble of granite boulders ahead, a sudden fear gripped Ducasus. He slowed, letting his brother pass him, and once he had passed, he lifted his arm slowly in front of him.

It shook badly.

Ducasus whirled his arm out a few times, trying to cast the tremors away, but they remained. It was obvious that his arm was too unstable to support him in any way. Could he climb the rocks with only one arm? And his left arm, even?

In his mind he wasn't certain he could do it, but the feeling in his chest told him that he must. He glanced around for a milder route to the other side, but he could find none. These rocks stood between him and his star, so he would overcome them. It was as simple as that.

Malleus had already floated up the first two boulders, which thankfully were quite rough and had large cracks running down them vertically.

Ducasus took a deep breath and started to climb.

The first rock was only as high as his head, so it was not too difficult for Ducasus, who had been climbing trees all of his life. He wedged his left foot in the crevice of the rock, and then he wedged his right foot in a little higher. He pushed his weight onto his right leg and found a handhold. Scrambling to the top was no problem.

The next rock was a great deal taller, but again, it had a crack as wide as Ducasus' fist running all the way down its face. It might as well have been a staircase. The only issue was that Ducasus could only use one hand, and the route looked to be about twenty feet.

I can do it, he decided.

He placed a foot at an angle inside the crack. He then flattened his hand and inserted it into the crevice. When it was in as far as it would go, he made a fist with his hand, causing it to catch against the sides of the crack. He now had an anchor.

He pushed up on his leg and pulled up with his arm, wedging his other foot into the crevice. Ducasus realized that the most dangerous part of the climb would be changing his hand grip. Without his right hand to hold him to the rock, it was much more difficult to avoid sprawling off backwards.

He glanced behind him. It would not be a forgiving fall if he slipped.

To compensate, he pushed his hips into the rock as he slid his hand out of the crack and reinserted it a few feet higher. He placed his left foot above his right in a new hold and continued his ascent. He climbed like this the whole way up the rock, his right arm dangling useless at his side.

Malleus was out of sight around the rocks when Ducasus made it up the second boulder, but he could hear him working his way around the mass of stone. The rock formation continued upwards indefinitely, but to the left was a narrow ledge that skirted around the rocks. That was Ducasus' route.

The ledge was only a few inches wide, and loose gravel rested on the ledge in several places.

That's not good, he thought. Without thinking, Ducasus kicked a rock off of the edge and watched it fall. It disappeared from sight long before it reached the valley

floor several hundred feet below.

He faced the rock and flattened his body towards it, watching his feet as he stepped out onto the ledge. He shuffled slowly, sliding one foot at a time while feeling for grips with his good hand. He tried his best to keep his weary body steady as he slid along, inches at a time. Small rocks scraped underneath his feet as he slowly moved them, making an ominous sound as they dragged along.

The rock curved slowly, but the little ledge remained, sometimes wider and sometimes narrower. It was as if someone had set two rocks down, one on top of the other, only they didn't line them up perfectly, so there was a lip around the perimeter.

Ducasus picked up his foot to avoid stepping on a pile of gravel. Against his better judgment, he stole a look down below.

The thrill of the height ran up Ducasus' spine. The fall was bad enough, but having no practical use in his right arm made it reckless. He turned his head and looked the way he had come, but he could no longer see where he had started from.

Panic filled Ducasus as his lead foot slid sharply off of the ledge. He fell forward with a jerk, the sensation of falling just beginning when he thrust out his arm onto the narrow ledge. His hand held. He ran his feet until his foot kicked against a small hold, and he tensed.

He was frozen, half dangling in the air. His foothold was precarious and high, and his opposite foot couldn't find another hold to support it. Wind gusted up the rocks and Ducasus' heart skipped a beat. Right in front of him, where he had placed his foot before it slipped, was a little pile of dirt and tiny rocks, now disturbed.

That's what almost killed me? Ducasus thought crossly.

The way he had slipped forced Ducasus to turn his shoulder into the rock wall to catch himself. The way he was contorted made his lower half want to shift to match

his shoulders, but that would lead to a fall. He couldn't simply replace his foot because it would push him away from the wall and into the abyss.

Ducasus took a deep breath and shifted his weight. He pushed up on his fingertips as another gust of wind blew through, making his eyes water. With as much poise as he could muster, Ducasus let out a deep breath and removed his hand from the ledge, trusting completely in his right leg, even as his foot hung off a few inches. He slowly and deliberately raised up his body, then he lifted his left leg out of the nothingness and replaced it on the narrow ledge. He let out a pent-up sigh as he put his left hand on the wall once more and stood on the ledge. He slowly continued moving along the rock wall, fully aware of the death that stared at him with eager eyes.

"Ducasus!"

Malleus called to him from beyond the rock wall.

"What?" he hollered back.

"There's a path down over here, keep going along the edge of the rock and you'll come to it soon."

Ducasus carefully made his way along the ledge until he came to the spot his brother had spoken of. A nice scattering of medium-sized rocks led the way down to where Malleus awaited him. It opened up into a wide meadow, of all things. The grass was withered and mostly dead, but to Ducasus it looked like paradise itself.

"What took you so long?" Malleus inquired as his brother scrambled down the last few rocks.

"Trying to be careful."

"And you wanted to run..." Malleus scoffed.

"Not along the ledge of death, I didn't."

"It wasn't that bad."

Ducasus ignored him, opting instead to take in his surroundings.

The slope on the east side of the mountain was very gentle. It flattened into a meadow off to the southeast,

encircled by peaks rising up on all sides. Going up the slope, some of the meadow's influence lingered, but there were more trees on the mountainside.

The pulling in Ducasus' chest grew even stronger. He could hardly contain it. He gazed upward and his eyes gravitated to a particular spot: A shelf of rock that jutted out over the mountainside with a trickle of water falling off and blowing in the wind.

His star would be there. He knew it.

He looked at Malleus and grinned. His brother's gaze was fixed on a different point on the mountainside, a clump of several hundred trees straight in front of them about a half mile away.

"Do you know where yours is?" Malleus asked his twin, still staring into the distance.

Ducasus nodded.

"It's on that rock up there," he said, gesturing with his hand. Malleus turned his gaze and looked to where his brother pointed.

"That rock?"

"Yeah," Ducasus sighed, his mind reeling with all of the adventures and opportunities that awaited him in his new life as a Neb.

"Just right on top of it, or what?" Malleus inquired.

"It... it almost feels like it's inside the rock a little bit, if that makes any sense. But yes, on top of that."

Malleus nodded.

"Let's get to it."

Ducasus began walking up the slope angling towards the south, while Malleus started walking straight up the incline. Ducasus was in his own world, not even noticing that he was walking alone. It was like being in a dream.

"Ducasus!" Malleus called. "Where are you going?"

He stopped, confused.

"Aren't we walking to my star?"

"Let's go to mine first; it's closer."

Ducasus blinked hard. Malleus was right. It was impossible to convince him to do something when he had logic on his side. It did make more sense to go to his star first.

Maybe I can suggest something else...

Ducasus called back, "I thought we could both just go and get our stars. We can meet on top of the mountain."

That's logical, right? Ducasus hoped his brother would agree. He wanted his star so badly...

Malleus shook his head.

"Don't you want to see it happen? Come on, come and help me find my star, and then your star will be next."

Ducasus gritted his teeth. He didn't want to wait another moment, but his brother was right. What kind of a twin would he be if he missed his brother's gifting? He took a deep breath and hiked back to meet him.

"Thanks," said Malleus, slapping his brother on the back as he neared. He noticed Ducasus' face was still bruised on the one side where he had been hit with Pompey's sword.

He's been through it this trip, Malleus thought. He felt sick to his stomach over all of the pain his brother had endured. He'd borne the worst of it.

United once more, they climbed the slope with singular focus. Ducasus set aside his own eagerness and was now simply excited for his brother. They tried to maintain a measured pace, but they ended up jogging uphill, with Ducasus just ahead of Malleus, as usual.

The distance passed in a blur of anticipation. They neared the large grouping of trees and the tension and excitement mounted. As they broke into their shade, Ducasus stopped a moment to let his brother catch up.

He smiled.

"You've got to take the lead now, Malleus. Follow that tug."

Malleus did not return his brother's smile, but he

nodded soberly as he took the lead. Great purpose weighed on his shoulders.

The air was damp and thin in the cool alpine grotto. Moss grew on all of the trees and chipmunks scurried by now and again. Malleus focused and chose his steps very deliberately, turning a few times before continuing on. Ducasus was just about to ask his brother if he really knew where they were going, when Malleus stopped suddenly and declared, "We're here."

Ducasus looked around.

"Where is it?"

"I'm not sure; I just know that it's here."

Malleus thought his heart might burst out of his chest, he felt a pulling so strong. He strayed forward a few more steps past an ancient oak tree, looked to his left, and there it was.

It was lying in a small crater two hand-breadths wide, right up against the tangled roots of the old oak. The tree's trunk was black, as if it had been burned, but Malleus had eyes only for his star.

It was beautiful. It was perfectly white in a way that Malleus could never describe. It was the sort of white that told of depth, of secrets and worlds and destinies all wrapped up inside a small, luminous globe. It sat alone in the center of its little crater, shining dimly and humming softly.

Malleus' eyes grew wide. He was robbed of words.

Ducasus was close behind and he laid eyes on the star a moment after. Malleus hardly even noticed him. He was mesmerized by his star. His destiny stared him in the eyes, and he was enthralled.

"This is it, Malleus," Ducasus spoke softly. "It's just like Dad always said: never a slave, never a Flare. This star is going to give you a new life."

Malleus nodded slowly with his brow furrowed.

"He did used to say that, didn't he?"

Malleus remained frozen in place, locked in thought. Ducasus stood back and smiled, finally resting a hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Come on, take your gift. I'm going to need your Hawkeye vision to help me find my star."

Malleus stared down at the crater before him.

"Not a Neb's strength?"

Ducasus smiled sadly.

"I can give up a dream for you, Malleus. I know this is what you want."

"...Yeah."

Malleus shook his head and kneeled down to the forest floor beneath him. He extended his hands slowly, uncertain as he stared into the depth of light before him. The star grew brighter as his hands approached. Slowly, slowly...

His trembling hands gripped the sphere, and the world was transformed into unendurable darkness and a light more glorious than the sun.

Chapter Seven:

Gifting

Everything in the universe seemed to disappear.

Electricity ran through Malleus' mortal frame and his fingertips were glued to that icy, fiery globe that he held in his hands. The most brilliant light shot forth from the star. Malleus knew it was the purest white, but it seemed to be of all colors at once. The streaming rays appeared now a deep azure, then a rich emerald, and every other shade and color rushed about in resplendent waves.

It was as if every light in the world had gone out, and this alone shined forth into the shadow. Palpable darkness crept around Malleus' back, but magnificent streams of living light ran towards him. The light grew and grew in intensity and Malleus felt his hands drawn upward, still gripping his star. He lifted off of the ground as the light continued to burn and grow, fierce and beautiful. The darkness turned and began to flee, but it remained in Malleus' mind.

Every fiber, every vein, every muscle, every inch of skin, was immersed in power. A deep fire burned inside of him as though it belonged. It did not singe or hurt. He only felt the thrill of pleasure and energy throughout his entire person.

Malleus continued to rise, staring deep into his star as the light reached a crescendo. His arms stretched in front of him and the shining orb pushed him away until they were separated by several feet. He floated motionless in the air.

The star's humming, soft until now, began to increase

and increase in volume and pitch until it rang out with a noise higher and louder than any other within the world. Malleus felt like he was a part of the sound, and he remained chained to it until the moment it sounded out so high and so loud that it burned itself out and became the last rays of light that now dominated everything around. Chills ran through Malleus' body as a voice began to speak.

"Viator, insequae gloriae, filie terae et caeli: bene fecisti quod stellam tuam invenisti. Praemio afficeris. Quid donam optas?"

Malleus did not know what was happening, but the voice ceased speaking and it seemed like it had asked him a question. He considered this in the void and decided that he should speak out what gift he wanted to the mysterious voice. He drew a breath into his tightened chest and tried to speak.

"Opto Velocitum Flarorum!"

Malleus' words came out foreign, bearing his intended meaning, he hoped. It was as if his lips had rebelled against him and he spoke in another tongue. He was bewildered.

There was a deep rumbling then, and everything began to shake. All of a sudden Malleus felt a cool sensation envelop his head. It felt like being brushed with paintbrushes on every side as the sensation passed down his neck and throat to his chest and all the way down. He felt a million, million little pricks and sparks as it washed over him and through him.

The cool, invisible paintbrushes flowed all of the way to his ankles and wrapped around the bottom of his feet, and then the feeling left him. A thrill of pleasure ran through his veins as the voice spoke once more, this time more distant and resonant but just as powerful, separating itself from the constant rumbling.

"Optavisti, ita mutas," it said.

Then the voice ceased, and Malleus felt himself slowly floating downwards back to the ground. He looked about him and saw the miraculous light flying in all directions. Each point of light struggled a moment, then launched away, breaking free of its brethren. Spots of light scattered all around, each spark bearing a different color. Motes of orange and red and blue and green and purple and every other color imaginable broke away into its own and streaked away.

Just as quickly as it all began, it was over, and Malleus found himself on the forest floor once again, but his star was no more to be seen.



Ducasus had been standing by grinning when his brother grasped his star. He saw the star light up and then in an instant he was thrown violently backwards. He hit the ground, still repelled by a mysterious force, and slid to a stop against the trunk of an oak tree.

Shaken, he tried to get his bearings, but all he could discern was a blinding whiteness.

Ducasus sat up straighter as indecipherable sounds of speech echoed among the trees. He heard what he thought was his brother's voice respond, but it was too far away to understand. Then, the ground beneath Ducasus shook greatly and he could hear nothing but the sounds of a shifting earth.

Just when Ducasus thought things could not get any stranger, the air exploded into shards of color and all of the shaking and rumbling ceased. The mountain was still once more.

Birds sang happily in the trees and insects clicked. The wind blew a gust across the tops of the trees now and again, rustling the leaves. All was as it had been a minute before.

Ducasus looked around, able to see once more but with eyes that had just wandered to the sun. He blinked several times, trying to rid his vision of the blue blotches that floated across his eyes.

He scrambled to his feet, eyes adjusting as he searched the area for his brother. Ducasus started forward, running on wobbly legs.

"Malleus!" he called as he neared the place where his brother knelt. "You're a Hawkeye now!" He smiled wide and continued to approach his twin, coming to a halt just behind him. He bent down and laid an arm across Malleus' shoulders and tugged him good-naturedly.

Ducasus sought his brother's gaze, but he didn't find it. Malleus knelt with his head bowed, staring at the ground, motionless. Ducasus laughed inwardly at his brother's stoicism. He shook him again in congratulations, but something struck Ducasus as different.

Malleus shrugged his brother's arm off of his shoulders and stood up. He lifted his head as if it weighed a thousand pounds, but he did it deliberately and with pride, if with a touch of sorrow. He took a few steps away from Ducasus and stared into the trees.

Ducasus was sure, now. Something seemed different about his brother.

The changes must already be taking place!

Malleus' hair was a touch longer and blonder than it had been before. He gave off the impression of litheness, of a lean sort of strength.

Ducasus took a second look at the back of his brother's head, and he had an odd thought. *Aren't Hawkeyes supposed to have feathered hair?*

Something seemed off, but he assumed that some part of gifting had to be gradual, or perhaps the characteristic look of a Hawkeye was simply how they fashioned themselves in their country and not a natural set of features. He had never seen a Hawkeye before anyway.

Malleus, still facing away, finally broke the silence.

"I'm sorry, Ducasus."

Ducasus scoffed.

"Look, forget about it. I know you didn't really want to choose the gift of the Nebulae. I'm happy for you, so let's go and get my star now."

"You don't understand."

Ducasus cocked his head. Malleus continued.

"You remember those zealots who captured us? They were lowlifes, but even lowlifes stumble onto the truth sometimes. It's foolish to look for wisdom only among the wise, as they say. Just because a cause has been perverted doesn't mean that it's not a good cause. The disconnect doesn't mean the thing itself isn't worth doing."

Ducasus raised an eyebrow. His brother was feeling pensive, apparently.

"What are you trying to say, Malleus?"

"That uncommon problems require uncommon men to solve them. Tight binds dictate a very exact sequence of steps to achieve freedom. I wish they didn't, but it's the way of the world. I've thought it all out, Ducasus. I've even thought about this harder than anything I've ever pondered before. There are problems in Pontus. Flares crush Ungifteds beneath their feet. They enslaved us, they humiliated our father, and they defile the land they occupy. The oppressed and leaderless need an uncommon man for things to change. They need someone who seems larger than life for them to believe in the possibility of a new life. Someone must rise to the occasion and try to derive some sense from the chaos."

"What are you talking about?"

"Someone has to execute a plan with exactitude for things to change, Ducasus." Malleus took a deep breath. "Most others lack either the will, the facilities, or the opportunity, but I have all of those, and I believe it's my responsibility to do what others can't."

"That's great, Malleus, but can we talk about this on the way to my star? Standing here won't get us there any faster."

Malleus scoffed.

"Faster. It's funny you should say that word. You were right about one thing, Ducasus - you always have been just a little bit faster than me."

Malleus turned slowly to face Ducasus now, and a storm swelled in the back of Ducasus' mind. His subconscious was aware of what only faintly nibbled at the edges of his conscious mind.

Malleus faced his brother, looking at him with green eyes.

"...But this is one race I can't afford to lose."

Horrendous realization crept over Ducasus, but he did not believe it. He and his brother had brown eyes. Flares had green eyes. Ducasus opened his mouth to speak, but Malleus cut him off.

"I'm sorry, Ducasus, I really am. I know you had your dreams, but you're free to go back and save our parents now. I go to make you more free."

With these words, he turned on his heels and ran. Ducasus felt like his head had just exploded. His right arm shook violently at his side, though he was not trying to use it.

"What?" he screamed after his brother. "Like hell you do!" He rallied his weary limbs and ran after his brother in confusion.

Ducasus sprinted through the trees as fast as he could, but his brother was already well ahead of him. Ducasus gritted his teeth and poured every ounce of energy he had left into running. Shock and anger powered his legs. Adrenaline coursed through his body.

Malleus turned his head over his shoulder at hearing the noises behind him, and with a knowing look, he sped up mercilessly. Ducasus saw on his brother's face that he

had not expected to be chased. Malleus was so fast! Despair welled in the pit of Ducasus' stomach, but he quelled the uprising. It wasn't over yet.

He pushed his worn body even faster in his desperation, but it was to no avail. After a short time, Ducasus could no longer see his brother.

This can't be happening! Ducasus thought. *Malleus would never do this to me. It has to be some scheme of his to get us there faster, to get us out of danger.*

But he didn't believe his own lies. Ducasus shut out his thoughts as he continued to tear through the trees in hopeless pursuit.

The edge of the trees appeared and Ducasus emerged into sunlight, bearing down on the faded meadow grass that blanketed the eastern slopes. The tugging in his heart grew stronger with every step. A momentary feeling of relief washed through Ducasus. *I know where my star is because I feel it! Malleus won't have the first idea where to...*

Ducasus' heart sank. He remembered his brother asking him with such precision where he thought his star was. "Just on top of that rock there? Where exactly? Point it out." Despair raged beneath it all once more.

As the realization of his brother's superior position dawned on him, it was confirmed with his eyes. Ducasus saw a figure running above him towards the rock shelf with the little stream running off of it, tumbling into the wind.

Ducasus was too far away to stop his brother. He watched in horror as Malleus walked towards the edge of the cliff and bent down. The pulling in Ducasus' chest felt stronger now. It was a fervent, desperate cry. He screamed as a flash of light went out from the shelf where his brother stood.

Chapter Eight:

Pain

Malleus' heart raced in his chest. He held the light in his hands as before, staring intently into the deep whiteness. It was all the same as the first time. The shining orb before him, which had been resting at the bottom of a spring in the rock, grew brighter and brighter, radiating pure light all around. Wild colors danced through the atmosphere and the darkness slowly cowered away, but it hesitated this time.

As the star began to rise, carrying Malleus' arms with it first, then coaxing the rest of his body skyward, Malleus wondered why no one else had thought to do what he was doing now: taking another's star. He guessed that the logistics were too difficult. Even if someone saw a star fall from the sky, searching for it without the inner guidance one's own star gives him would be nigh impossible.

Malleus' hands stretched above his head and the toes of his boots slowly peeled off the ground as he rose.

His was a rare opportunity, he decided. His situation was the exception, making him exceptional. His stomach sank a moment as his mind flashed to thoughts of Ducasus. He sharply turned away from those thoughts. He was doing what was best. This was something he had to do for Ducasus, for his mother, for his father, for everyone.

Malleus could concentrate on nothing but the star thereafter. It shined the way it had before, eclipsing everything in its light. The darkness slinked away, almost obliterated, yet a pinprick of blackness darted from the

receding mass and flew to Malleus' heel. It slid up the back of his leg, wrapped around his arm, and just as Malleus' fingers were parting from the celestial orb, it sped down his arm, across his finger, and into the glorious light.

A tiny crack appeared on the face of the retreating star. A sound like cracking ice whispered into the wind as the fracture spread. It ran along the front of the star now, still only the width of a strand of hair. The tiny crevice grew orange as the moments passed, becoming brighter by the second.

Malleus noticed what was happening just as the star clicked, then exploded in all directions like the death of a thousand worlds. The light changed, now a burnt orange-red, as a powerful shockwave impelled Malleus backwards through the air, slamming him against a wall of rock.

He felt his bones break. They shattered as he smashed into the mountainside at high speed, all of the breath robbed from his lungs.

The ground rumbled and the air shook as Malleus was held aloft against the stone, his mind reeling with pain. Despite his fervent desire, neither unconsciousness nor death agreed to rescue him from his all-consuming agony. He was forced to endure it as the world moved.

A deep, powerful voice resounded as before, but it spoke with anger now. At every rise and fall in its tone, the rumbling rose and fell in volume. Bits of granite broke off around Malleus and tumbled down the face of the rock as the mysterious voice spoke, filled with rage.

"In spoilare sidum, erravisti. Temptaberis et consequentias consilii tui sufferes."

Fear pervaded Malleus' pain. He would have given anything to make the pain stop or to keep that beautiful, terrible voice from ever speaking again. His moans were lost in the rumblings from the deep places of the world.

A circle of light appeared in the ominous colors that danced before Malleus. It was a pure, white light, and it shined brilliantly as it approached. Malleus was newly filled with fear, powerless to move his broken body from the impossible station where it mysteriously rested. The voice spoke again.

"De tuo vindico stellae videbimus. Tuo corpo et animo explorabimus."

Malleus panicked. He never panicked, but the circumstances were beyond anything he had ever imagined. He cried out to the voice in desperation, telling it what gift he would have.

"Dona Lux Sidorum opto!"

His words came out foreign once more, in the same manner as those of the mysterious voice. He cried out a second time.

"Dona Lux Sidorum opto!"

The light continued to approach, unyielding. Malleus strained his neck back, but as he did so, pain shot through his over-worked nerves, screaming reports of brokenness to his brain. Finally, Malleus' words came out in his own tongue as the circlet of light drew to a handbreadth away.

"No! No, no, no, no, no, NO!"

He cried out, and the white light stopped directly before his face. It hesitated, then entered his being.

The moment the light came into him, Malleus' pain vanished. He felt a strange, jarring sensation as the bones in his back and legs knit back together again, healing completely. All of his physical pain and brokenness were gone. Malleus turned his head to his arm, which tingled slightly. He had always carried a pronounced scar on his left forearm from a childhood accident. He watched in disbelief as that scar disappeared before his eyes. The light that had entered him was too pure to suffer any imperfection. Or perhaps the healings were incidental side-effects of being touched by celestial light. Malleus did

not know.

His body relaxed, but his mind raced. It warred within him, striving to respond with either peace and acceptance or with anger and hostility. The presence of the light in his body felt both fitting and foreign. He wanted to keep it forever and to cast it away at once. It was at the same time the most glorious blessing he had ever experienced and the most ruthless hell he had ever endured.

The light searched within him. It ran through his veins and arteries, it shot through his nerves. It tensed with his muscles and it fired with the synapses of his brain. The light saw with his eyes and searched his whole being with painless intensity. It came to a halt in the pit of his stomach, revolving around itself many times. It lingered there for some time, turning over and around, resting in the center of his being.

Suddenly, in a flash of white, the circlet of light emerged from Malleus' flesh and disappeared into the atmosphere.

Sweat poured down Malleus' face, and he panted at the great exertion. His body was healed, but his soul felt uncertain. The voice spoke again, powerful and majestic.

"Erravisti, sed verus tuo vindico est. Animus tuus in dui partis natabat, ac stella tua. Donum secundum accipebis, sed memoria de experire tu obsedebit. Tuam propriam carnem sanguinemque prodidisti. Ad animus tuus spoliisti."

The rumbling ceased and the burnt orange atmosphere faded softly to a sky of blue. Malleus sank slowly downwards to the ground where he slumped in a daze. He stood atop the rock shelf he had run to, leaned against a rock wall that formed its border. He shifted his gaze to the edge of the rock and noticed every fleck and droplet of water as it splashed over the lip of the rock. He walked forward cautiously and peered over the edge. Each and every minute drip of water revealed itself to him. He saw

how the sun danced within each drop as it blew in the wind which softly brushed against his cheek. The air was getting warmer, he could tell, but it was getting warmer so slightly each moment that he never would have noticed before.

The sounds of nature seemed clearer to him. He heard birds flap their wings as they rode the mountain drafts above. He smelled the earthy, damp odor of the algae that grew along the edge of the little rock spring behind him.

Malleus' eyes were slowly being opened to Pontus in a miraculous way. He stood on the edge of the precipice which fell hundreds of feet beneath him, but he was not afraid. He knew exactly where his feet were, and he was starting to feel how the shifting winds affected his balance. He felt like he was waking up. It was glorious, and he reveled in the wealth of new sensations as everything slowly came into focus.

All the world appeared to Malleus like a painting that he had walked by many times, but only now was he really seeing it. Everything was so new and felt so wonderful that he was incredulous when he perceived something impact his face, though nothing had approached him. As he fell backwards, he felt a burning and a hungry fire tear through his veins. Pain held his being in a vise from nowhere that Malleus could discern. He fell backwards into the spring with a splash, and his head hit the edge. His body contorted sharply as the fire blazed through his nerves, activating every center of pain. He twisted and jerked violently, torturously overcome.

He writhed and contorted anew, disturbing the waters of the spring as the fire reached his muscles, tensing them horribly and unnaturally. He had no control over himself. Existence was torment. Every moment seemed like a thousand years as he felt the inside of his head catch fire and his eyes burned as though they boiled inside of him. He screamed loudly and desperately. Finally, the fire

reached the pit of his stomach, and Malleus jerked and twisted on the ground, half in and half out of the spring. The blaze burned deep in his center. It turned over itself; it swirled and scraped deep in the pit of his stomach. Malleus had felt no pain like it, even when he had felt his bones break only minutes before.

The burning, piercing inner flame tormented Malleus he knew not how long, but finally he ceased his shrieks of agony, and sleep, the merciful brother of death, wrapped him in his arms.



The wind whipped through the air in waves, bending the long, dying grasses back and forth. It followed the flowing slopes of the mountains, striving upwards and rushing downwards. It continued as it always had for a thousand, thousand years, blowing in what direction it willed, unaffected by the dramas, comedies, and tragedies that played out in the world it caressed. It ran through Ducasus' dirty, sand-colored hair and blew against the hot tears that now ran down the face of a broken young man.

His arm twitched sporadically at his side.

The light had faded from the rocks above, and the pulling urgency in his chest had vanished. His star was gone.

But Malleus remained. Ducasus saw him walk to the edge of the rock with a smirk on his face. *How could he smile after what he just did?* Ducasus demanded inwardly, but then he saw the fall and heard the screaming. His cries were blood-curdling, like nothing Ducasus had ever heard. Chills ran down his spine.

He was so tired... but he had to climb up to where his brother lay, finally quiet after minutes of shrieking. Ducasus picked up his heavy feet and marched upward, towards the rocks. He had no plan, only a vague notion of

raining blows down on Malleus' head until he couldn't swing his arms any longer. In the fantasy that ran through his mind, Ducasus was using both fists to pummel his traitorous brother, forgetting his present infirmity. Anger took prominence over every other emotion and thought. His life had just been stolen from him, and by his own twin brother.

Bitter and angry thoughts pushed Ducasus forward; his heart pounded and his body trembled with rage. His right arm shook even more than the rest of him. It shook violently now and again, infuriating Ducasus further that he was not able to still the stubborn thing.

Even with such powerful rage and the testimony of his eyes for evidence, Ducasus was incredulous. He could not believe what had just happened. He could not believe that Malleus would do such a thing to him.

He broached the crest of earth that opened up into the rock shelf where his star had fallen, and there was Malleus. He was sprawled out and contorted on the ground before a wide panoramic of the mountains and skies beyond. Ducasus clenched his fists, causing his right arm to spasm, and he walked up to his unconscious twin. He was drenched, as was the ground all around a small spring that bubbled out of the rock before it jutted out into nothingness.

Ducasus stood over his brother, seething. He couldn't very well beat him up if he was unconscious. He reached down to his brother's face to flick him, and as he did, he noticed something different. Malleus' nose was a different shape. It was hooked, he thought, but still it hinted of the thin, proud look of the Flares. He flicked his brother on the ear.

Malleus stirred slightly, his eyes still clenched shut.

Ducasus flicked him on the face this time. Malleus clenched his eyes tighter and made a low moaning sound. This time, Ducasus brought his left hand back and slapped

him hard across the face.

Malleus' head jerked with the path of the blow, then he opened his eyes and stared upwards into the shadowed face of his enraged sibling. Ducasus closed his fist and pulled it back to strike, but Malleus rolled away quickly, and in an instant, he was back on his feet. Ducasus turned around to where Malleus had fled.

"Did you have some trouble there? I heard you screaming like a little girl!"

Ducasus advanced towards his brother, and Malleus put up his hands, backing away towards the rock wall.

"Ducasus..."

Ducasus cut him off, his voice cracking with rage.

"And what about our parents? Were you just going to abandon them to die?"

"No, they won't be killed when you go back and say that I'm dead--"

"That last part will be true."

Ducasus jabbed lightning fast, but Malleus stumbled to the side to avoid it.

"Say that the robbers killed me, and they won't kill mom and dad when you return alone. A beating is the worst you three will get."

"So nice of you to think of us!" Ducasus jabbed again, hitting air. "Isn't it great how we always look out for each other, Malleus? We would never stab each other in the back after seventeen years together! Isn't that right?" Ducasus wore a crazed smile. His features were wild.

"Ducasus, wait--"

"Wait for what? Wait for my star? I already did that, Malleus, and you stole it from me, you bastard!"

Malleus stopped backing away a moment and let down his hands.

"Wait, Ducasus, we're twins, so you can't call me a--"

Ducasus charged, screaming at his brother, swinging a wild punch with his left arm. Malleus cocked his head. It

didn't exactly seem to be coming at him in slow-motion, but Malleus felt like he had all the time in the world to dodge the blow. He moved his head out of the way with plenty of time to spare.

Ducasus' haymaker whiffed through the empty space that Malleus' face had occupied only a moment before. He had been sure his punch was going to connect. He followed up with his right by instinct, but his recalcitrant, spastic arm only succeeded in jerking longways in the general direction of his brother.

Suddenly, Malleus was on the other side of his arm. It was as if he had run around him. *Are his gifts taking hold so quickly?* Ducasus wondered.

"Ducasus, stop. You may not understand this-" Malleus ducked out of the path of a jab- "now, but I'm doing this-" he slid gracefully to the side as Ducasus vainly tried kicking upwards at him- "for you!"

Ducasus leapt at his twin with his hand ready to choke him, but Malleus sidestepped effortlessly, and Ducasus smashed into the wall of rock behind.

He crumpled to the ground, clutching his head with his one good arm while his other shook uncontrollably. Malleus thought his brother was the most pitiful thing he had ever seen.

"I didn't want to hurt you, Ducasus, but it has to be this way. I'm going to find my way to the leaders of the zealots and I'm going to help them destroy the Flares. You were willing to give up your gift to help our parents, so accept that you gave it up to help me. To help all of us." Malleus frowned. "If you had been reasonable you could have been helping me plan. You could have gone with me, but I see that that's impossible now."

Ducasus whimpered softly, shaking on the ground.

"You're short-sighted, Ducasus. Go and show up so our parents are safe. Go back to Rosae. I'll come back here someday and set you all free."

Malleus turned and walked away, then stopped and turned his head back, speaking in a softer voice.

"I'm sorry, Ducasus. I really am."

With these words, Malleus disappeared down the mountain slopes and Ducasus was left alone, exhausted, angry, and broken.

Chapter Nine:

Incus

“Aagh!”

Fresh rage filled Ducasus where he lay curled up on the large shelf of rock that wrapped around the side of the mountain.

He rolled to his knees, screaming at the wrong that had been done to him. He panted and struggled to his feet where he bared his chest to the heavens and cried out once more, “Why?! Why? Aagh!”

Ducasus slammed his left fist into the wall of rock behind him and threw his right at it as well. The useless limb only jumped forward awkwardly, and it fell to his side shaking.

“Why are you doing this? STOP SHAKING!!!”

Ducasus gripped his right arm with his left, trying with all his might to hold it still. Marks began to appear where his fingers held on, but the trembling continued whenever Ducasus tried to use it.

“Gah!”

He flung his useless right arm at the rock and he felt a shot of pain as it connected. He turned and kicked a fist-sized rock, then his eyes lighted upon a larger stone. He stumbled to it, crazed with anger, and he heaved it up to his stomach, but his arm gave out, twisting awkwardly to the side, and he dropped the rock. Scowling, he picked it up again with his other arm and rested it against his body before stumbling to the cliff's edge and heaving it off. He watched it tumble down through space, finally making a distant cracking sound when it hit the ground below.

Standing at the edge of the precipice, Ducasus' fit of rage washed away and he was filled with sadness. He looked into the sunlit clouds and thought that he was of all men most pitiable.

He sighed heavily and felt foolish when he noticed pain in the bloodied knuckles of his left hand. His shoulder bled where the nexaer's claws had cut him. Everything hurt. He stood still in the afternoon sun a while, not thinking any particular thing. He simply stared into the clouds, too spent to manage anything else.

Ducasus' trance broke and he realized he had something to do. Malleus had taken his star and with it, his new life. The old life was still there, and in danger.

Embittered, he turned his weary body, a body that now remembered its days of travel with no food and little water. He shuffled along the rock, heading towards the southern side of the mountain. He had no intention of traversing the rocky passage he had arrived by ever again. One close call was enough.

Ducasus ambled for two hours before his tired body, his aching bones, and the setting sun forced him to rest. He had made it around to the southwestern portion of the mountain and he could see the mirror trees igniting in the fading light. He was not far from home; he was looking into the valley where he grew up. He would have been able to see his house in the distance had he been on the west face proper.

Ducasus figured he could be home before dawn if he only rested a little while. Then his family would be safe. He was running out of time, but there was still a little time left. Hunger no longer gnawed at Ducasus' belly the way it had the past couple of days. It seemed a duller sensation now, mostly manifested in his weariness and a splitting headache. As he lay down to sleep, he saw images of his brother high above on a rock shelf being eclipsed by a flash of light.

Having no person or object of affection to hold, he curled up with his sorrow and fell into an empty sleep. He reminded himself to rise the first time he woke in the night.

~°~

"Filius, would you watch what you're doing? You're leading that horse in a zigzag."

"Sorry, Pop."

"...What was that?"

"I mean, sorry, Sir."

"That's what I thought."

Ducasus stirred, hearing voices. He had lain down in a wooded area on the mountain atop a pile of leaves. He was close to the valley, but not near enough to hear any people.

"Puer, blast it, now you're doing it too!"

"I'm leading it straight, Sir. It's just stepping around rocks and things."

"Well it wouldn't be stepping around if you were leading it straight, now would it?"

The voices were close. Ducasus sat up and strained his ears, rustling the leaves beneath him as he did.

"The mule is going to step where it wants to step, I'm just--"

"Shh! Did you hear that?"

The voices all stopped for a moment.

"...Hear what, Pa? Er, Sir."

"Someone is rustling nearby."

A woman's voice spoke.

"Maybe it was a rat, Dear."

The first voice scoffed.

"There aren't any rats in the mountains, Woman! You're as dumb as our boy back there who can't remember the proper way to address his father!"

The boy responded, dejected.

"Sorry, Pa."

The voices sounded familiar to Ducasus. He strained to hear, trying to figure it out.

"Well, let's keep walking, just keep an eye out. This road won't walk itself."

Ducasus brightened with realization. It was another family from the slave village! Dim torchlight appeared as the group made its way uphill through the trees. Ducasus called out as they approached.

"Ignavus!"

The sound of hoofbeats and footsteps stopped. Silent tension hung in the air.

"Ignavus, it's Ducasus. Spero's son."

A voice spoke from the darkness.

"Ducasus? What in the world are you doing out here?" Ignavus chuckled. "Put the ax down, Puer, it's only Ducasus."

Ducasus rose to his feet as the dim torchlight grew brighter and a family of four, plus a horse and a mule, all stepped into view.

Ignavus chuckled.

"You gave us quite a fright there, Ducasus. You're lucky you spoke again, or I might've killed you. Haha!"

The youngest boy piped up.

"But Pa, you handed the ax to Puer when we heard him. And you went into the bushes."

Ignavus' face turned sour.

"Be quiet, Filius, I was being strategic."

"Oh," said the small boy, looking down. Ignavus spoke again.

"So anyway... What in the world brings you to this neck of the woods?"

Ducasus hesitated.

"I'm just heading home. My brother and I set out for Pescas a few days ago, but things didn't go our way."

"Oh, well that's too bad, Ducasus. Where is your brother?"

Bile rose up in Ducasus and he clenched his fists.

"He's gone."

Ignavus cast a glance at his timid wife and turned back to Ducasus, the torchlight dancing upon his features.

"Gee, that's too bad. Just the worst. So what are you going to do now?"

The question surprised Ducasus.

"I just told you. I'm going home. I have to show the overseers that we didn't run away."

Ignavus clicked his tongue and shook his head. His wife and two boys looked at the ground.

"Gee, I guess you wouldn't know, would you, Ducasus? See, that's not really much of an option for you right now. Everybody's gone."

"What do you mean, 'Everybody's gone'?"

"I mean they're gone. Atrox died, Ducasus, and a couple of his relatives showed up and started fighting over who inherited what up at the manor, and the overseers had to rush up there to try and keep things civil, I suppose. Then one of the kids saw the overseers beat it out of the manor like bolts of lightning and head for the hills. We saw that as our chance to split - because of the confusion and disorder, you see? Not sure what made them overseers run the way they did. Anyway, most of the other slaves left during the day, but we waited until nightfall to see if we could get away safe. Nobody went down to check on the village all day, so we left at dark and now we're just trying to put some land behind us. Those fool relatives are still fighting up at the manor, from the looks of it. Must be a real mess, because there were royal soldiers later on too."

Ducasus shook his head.

"What does all that mean?"

Ignavus winked and clapped a hand on Ducasus' shoulder.

"We didn't stick around to find out, Boy. Well, not past tonight."

"Which way did my family go?"

Ignavus looked back to his wife again, then back to Ducasus.

"I'm afraid I don't know. It was as if your father had a premonition or something. Three, no wait, let's see..." Ignavus counted on his fingers. "Two nights before tonight I saw your father out in the fields finishing up some reaping. I remember because I heard the fool making a ruckus and I was afraid he'd draw the overseers on us, thinking that we were trying to escape, see? Well anyway, I had just walked out my door when I saw him look up to the sky a minute. He dropped his tools and stared into the sky like a madman for the longest time, and I just watched him. Then he turned around and walked back to his house, so I went back to bed. The next day he and his wife were gone."

A knot formed in Ducasus' stomach.

"How is that possible? How'd they get away from the Flares' hunters?"

"It was pretty clever, actually. By the time the overseers noticed they were gone it was too late. They brought out the leathery demons to smell them out, but your father had tied his clothes and tools and sheets to just about every animal around. There were so many scent trails of your father and mother, the hunters didn't have the first idea where to start. You should have seen those overgrown wolves turning in circles and growling. Ha! But your family, your family is long gone by now."

It was too much for Ducasus.

Dad had told us to leave and start a new life, Ducasus thought. He must have seen our stars fall. There was no more reason for him to stay.

Ignavus cleared his throat and shuffled his feet. Ducasus returned his attention to the present and looked up at him.

"Well, it sure was good seeing you, Ducasus. Best of luck out there."

The family roused their horse and mule and began walking again. Ducasus interrupted their departure.

"Wait. Is there... Is there any way I could go with you? I've just realized that I have nowhere to go."

Ignavus looked uncomfortable and scratched his head.

"I don't know if that's such a good idea, Ducasus. After all, you... Well, you've got your parents to find!"

"You said that you didn't know what direction they went in, that they were long gone."

"Yeah, but, ah... It doesn't hurt to start lookin'! See, we're going out of the way, might even try and cross to the southern border. I figure slaves there wouldn't be doing any heavy lifting because Nebs could do it so much easier, see? But you don't want to go way down there with us."

Ignavus scrunched up his face like traveling along with them would be a chore. Ducasus just wanted company and a way to survive. It was apparent that Ignavus was not willing to give him those things, despite his need. Ducasus felt ashamed that he had to ask.

"Then can you spare some food? I haven't eaten in almost three days now, and if the village is deserted, I don't know where I'll eat next."

Ignavus lowered his voice and avoided Ducasus' eyes.

"I'm sorry, Son, but we only have enough for ourselves."

Apparently Ducasus didn't warrant a crust of bread from a neighbor. Again, he felt ashamed of having nothing and being forced to ask for food.

Ignavus' wife spoke up, breaking the silence.

"Dear, we could give him the--"

"Shhh!"

"But we have plenty of-"

"Zzzbt!"

"You said we had more than-"

Ignavus cut his wife off again, this time with words.

"Quiet, Dear. We don't have enough and that's that. He'll have to fend for himself." He turned towards Ducasus with a false and pedantic enthusiasm in his voice. "Besides, these hills are teeming with grub if you know where to look! There's berries and game and fish - mm! You'll have no trouble, no trouble at all."

With that, the little family turned and walked away, the wife trying earnestly to discuss something with her husband but being shushed and argued with until Ducasus could hear them no more.

It's late autumn, so there's no berries. I don't have any weapons or traps, and I don't know how to fish, Ducasus thought. *Thanks for nothing.*

He sat down again as the full weight of his situation came upon him. He lay down on his pile of leaves once more, robbed of breath and feeling as if someone was holding a boulder on top of his chest.

Ducasus lay awake until sunrise, detached from the world. He did not notice the brisk touch of the air on his cheeks or the dazzling colors the morning sky greeted him with. He didn't notice the mirror trees, the bird's songs, or the insects' happy buzzing. There was only emptiness. Every breath was an effort, and he even stopped several times in his malaise, only rescued by his body's autonomic processes.

During the night he had run various scenarios through his head again and again, first of revenge on his brother, then of all the further misfortunes that were sure to soon befall him and how he might die alone and abandoned in this wilderness. By morning he no longer cared to even stroke his wounded ego with pitiful fantasies. He was

hollow. Everything had been emptied out of him, taken from him. Death did not seem unwelcome.

By the time the sun had risen and the day was light, Ducasus was still lying atop his pile of leaves with his eyes wide open, staring blankly and mournfully at the sky. Sleep, though not sought after, finally rescued him from his despair.

~°~

Birds chirped softly and the sound of bubbling water reached Ducasus as he awoke. He blinked several times, confused by the blurry environment around him. He rubbed his eyes and the blurriness went away, but the confusion remained.

Where am I?

He looked around to see a small clearing with a large fire in its midst. A stump rested next to the fire and two forked stakes stood in the ground on either side of the flame, suspending a pot of boiling liquid above it.

The trees were different than those he remembered around him when he had lain down, and he realized he was no longer on a slope.

He sat up and immediately he regretted the decision. His head ached fiercely, and he became acutely aware of his weakness. He sat still a moment with his eyes closed and waited for the pain to abate. Once it settled down, he lifted his blanket off of himself.

Wait, he thought, I didn't bring a blanket. The zealots stole all of our supplies.

Thoroughly bewildered, Ducasus rose to his feet, which were bare of his shoes.

That's odd.

The latent chill of the morning hung in the air, and Ducasus approached the blazing fire to warm himself.

Did Ignavus come back for me? he wondered. He blew

hot air into his hands and rubbed them together before shaking his head. *No, he wouldn't come back. So how did I get here?* He searched his mind for memories and explanations that were not there.

As Ducasus continued to gaze around the humble camp, his eyes fell on an extremely large pack leaning against an oak tree. It had a bed roll strapped to the top of it and a few straps dangling loosely from the sides. He returned his attention to the large fire and stood up on his toes to see what was in the boiling pot. There were roots and herbs and a bubbling liquid encompassing it all.

I wake up alone in a new spot, my shoes are gone, I magically acquired a blanket, and soup is on over the fire?

He leaned in and sniffed the hot air rising from the pot. The soup smelled nice, if a little bland. All of a sudden his stomach cramped and he remembered his hunger. He didn't care if the soup had rocks in it, he wanted some.

The smell began to intoxicate him, and the thought of a warm bowl took the forefront of his mind. It was all he wanted. He had to find a spoon or a bowl, some way to eat it. His eyes landed on the pack again, and he was just about to walk towards it and search it for utensils when the sound of rustling leaves stopped him.

Ducasus turned towards the noise, but a large thicket blocked his view into the forest. It was clear, suddenly, that someone was approaching.

The thicket rustled, and then from behind the bushes a giant emerged.

He was entirely bald and without facial hair. He wore a green shirt under an animal skin vest, and he did not seem surprised to see Ducasus. The giant stepped to the side of the stump placed a little way from the fire and dropped enough wood to build a small house. He had apparently been collecting firewood.

He didn't speak, but he looked at Ducasus with his stony face, scanning him up and down before sitting on

his stump. He began sorting the wood into piles, saying nothing.

Ducasus was frozen with fear, though his curiosity was quickly overpowering it. The man in front of him had to be seven and a half feet tall. His figure was bulging with musculature and very imposing, yet he did not seem clumsy in any respect. Ducasus' eyes went to the deep scar on the stranger's neck, and his breath caught in his throat as he glanced from the woodpiles to the pot of soup and back to the giant again.

It was too late to hide. Ducasus began to fear the worst. He watched the stoic giant a little while more before he gathered the courage to speak.

"Are you going to eat me?" Ducasus asked.

The giant smiled wryly and continued to sort his wood. After a moment he chuckled.

"That's a new one." Pieces of wood clacked against one another as he tossed them into piles.

Ducasus had been expecting more of a straight answer. Curiosity continued to overcome his fear, replacing it in a sudden onslaught.

"So... that's a no?"

The gigantic man acted as if he had not even heard the question.

"I'm surprised to see you up so quickly. I had guessed it would take more time before you were able to stand."

Ducasus shifted his stance and raised an eyebrow. He was very, very confused.

"...And why would you think I couldn't stand?"

"You were almost dead when I found you," returned the giant in his low voice.

A coarse laugh burst from Ducasus' lips.

"Almost dead? I was taking a morning nap. You found me this morning and carried me here?"

The giant shook his head.

"I found you three days ago, dying in a pile of leaves.

You had bleeding sunburns on your skin, no supplies. I'm certain you had already been in that spot at least two days. I carried you here to recover."

The words hit Ducasus like a blow. He shook his head.

"That's not possible. I stayed up half of last night thinking, then I fell asleep this morning. It's still the same day."

"Look at your arms," The giant said softly, "And your legs. Have they always been so lean?"

Ducasus stared back at the giant in bewilderment, then he studied his emaciated limbs. He had always been thin, but never like this. Ducasus put his hand inside his shirt. He felt ribs. He felt all of his ribs.

"How is...?" Ducasus started again, "How did I...?"

The giant stood up from his stump, wiping the dust off of his hands.

"For the last three days you've been here. I poured water down your throat in small doses, and from time to time when you would sit up to rave unintelligibly, I would try and spoon a few mouthfuls of food into you. You've been sleeping most of the time, and never have I seen you lucid before now."

Ducasus' eyes grew wide. Another cramp seized his stomach and his legs were weak. His head felt much too light. He stared into the fire.

His legs began to buckle and he caught himself. He looked up to see the giant stepping towards him. All of a sudden, everything went black.

~o~

Dim light slowly appeared at the center of Ducasus' vision. He opened the slits of his eyes wider and found himself in the giant's camp once more. He was back in his blanket again, and the giant, who evidently did not want to eat him, was sitting on his stump fiddling with

something. Ducasus rubbed his eyes and looked more carefully at the towering figure illuminated by the dancing flames of the fire. He had a small knife, small for him at any rate, and he was whittling something.

The giant focused on the piece of wood with care, and little shavings curled and fell away from his hands with each stroke of the blade. He turned the wood this way and that so as to carve all sides, but Ducasus couldn't make out what it was supposed to be. He was too far away and the firelight did not reveal the details to him.

"What are you making?"

The giant's only response was to shrug.

Ducasus strained his eyes, but the giant's massive hands blocked his view of most of the figure as he held it. The colossus continued scratching away with his little knife as Ducasus stared.

"Are you a Neb?"

The giant stopped carving and looked down at the pile of wood shavings he had created. He then looked up at Ducasus quizzically. Ducasus felt sheepish and quickly blurted out a qualifying statement.

"I'm sorry, was that rude? Or maybe it was just a stupid question. Sorry." He paused a moment, then worked his way up to a sitting position, the blanket wrapped tight around his knees. His joints were stiff in a way he wasn't used to. "It's just that I've never met one before. A Nebula, that is. I mean, I've seen a picture, but that doesn't really count. But is that what you are? A Nebula?"

The man slowly nodded his head. Ducasus beamed.

"I've always wanted to meet a Neb." His smile faded as quickly as it had come, however. His eyes sank down, and after a moment he heard the scritch-scratching sound that told of the Nebula's carving again.

All Ducasus had ever wanted was to grow up and travel to the South as a Neb. Malleus had taken that all

away. He thought the world must be a terrible and cruel place to mock him with the presence of a Nebula only days after his chance to become one was stolen. Ducasus felt like he might vomit.

The imposing Neb tilted his knife and flicked at his piece of wood with the point several times. He then held it up to the light and examined it, turning it over twice to view it from all sides. He brought it to his lips and blew the stray shavings from its surface, then rose and walked to where his pack rested, placing the figure inside. He returned after a moment of rustling in his bag, holding a wooden bowl in his hand as he approached the boiling pot, still suspended over the fire. He scooped the soup into his bowl and stretched the steaming liquid out to Ducasus.

"You should eat."

Ducasus greedily accepted. He burned his mouth eating, but he didn't care. He wanted food in his stomach too badly to wait. His middle felt warm from the hot soup.

He looked into his now empty bowl disappointed. He felt like he could eat a horse.

The Nebula saw Ducasus' expression and turned his hand over in a welcoming fashion, gesturing at the pot.

It was all the invitation Ducasus needed.

He dipped his bowl into the pot of roots and herbs, boiling away. He could barely endure getting so close to the fire, but it was worth it.

Ducasus took his time with the second bowl. He allowed the broth to linger on his tongue, he savored the taste of pepper and another seasoning he couldn't identify. The giant studied him as he ate.

"What do they call you?"

Ducasus looked up and swallowed the mouthful of soup he had been swishing around.

"Ducasus, son of Spero," he replied. "What do they call you, Friend?"

The Neb scoffed.

"Not Friend. I'm called Incus. I have no father but the Father of Lights who watches us all."

"It's good to meet you, Incus. Thanks for the grub."

The giant nodded in response, and it was quiet again.

"We were ambushed, our supplies stolen. I've been days without food since we escaped."

"We?" Incus asked.

Bile began to rise in Ducasus' stomach. His arm shook very slightly.

"Malleus. My brother." Ducasus looked away. "My own twin brother."

Incus sat calmly, resting his forearms on his powerful legs. Ducasus stared into the fire, and at length he continued.

"He didn't get killed or anything. That isn't why he's not here. He's not here because he's a back-stabbing traitor who left me for dead." Anger boiled inside of Ducasus as he fought back tears. "After everything we had been through! He stabbed me in the back with a smile and then he left. He's not here because he ran off."

Mania tickled at the edges of Ducasus' mind. His eyes bulged, enraged. But then a sudden, despondent calm washed over him, and Ducasus unclenched his fists. He drew in a deep breath.

"He stole my star. I should be a Nebula like you, but he ran ahead of me and took my star after taking his own first. I hate him."

Incus raised an eyebrow.

"What you say is impossible. Are you certain you're feeling well?"

Ducasus responded harshly.

"Of course I'm feeling well. And he did it, so what do you mean it's impossible?"

"Because," Incus began, shadows dancing across his face in the firelight, "if it were true he'd be dead, and what a horrible death it would be."

Chapter Ten:

Persona

Malleus raced through the diminishing mountains as he traveled north. He sprinted with all of his ability, yet he never tripped over treacherous roots or rocks. He knew exactly where he would place each step and he could feel exactly where his body was in space at all times. His senses were awake, and they were awakening further all the time.

He was getting faster, too. He had been able to cover an extraordinary amount of distance over the last several days. With each passing hour he felt that he was faster than the last. Trees and hillsides flew past him in a blur, the wind whipping through his hair, which was growing longer at an impressive pace. It just reached his shoulders now, falling in sections and layers behind his neck. It, like the rest of him, had changed.

Malleus twisted his body to the side as he ran at full speed, just narrowly missing a wayward branch. He then finished the turn and continued sprinting at his super-human pace.

It was surprising to Malleus how differently Pontus appeared to a Hawkeye. Colors were richer and more varied, shifting winds brought subtle scents drifting on the breeze, and he understood how his body related to the world better than he ever had before. With his newly heightened senses, it was not hard for him to glance around and catch sight of the telltale signs of food. He dug up many roots and he was able to acquire meat unaided. By standing in a stream and waiting for fish to swim by,

Malleus discovered he was able to dart his hands into the water and toss the fish out, providing him with a nice meal. He could stare deeply into the water and see how the light refracted and adjust his angle of entry accordingly. His already analytical and calculating mind made tremendous use of the wealth of information that rushed at him from all sides now. This new skill had allowed Malleus to eat well for the past few days.

It was a good thing, too. As Malleus had expected, running such great distances each day made his appetite insatiable.

He felt that his gifts worked together perfectly, accenting and complementing one another. He was able to move in time with his perceptions, and he was able to perceive the world around even when he ran his fastest. He held tremendous advantage over those who only had one or the other gift.

He crested a low, rolling hill and stopped at the overlook.

I may not be a god, but I'm certainly more than a man, Malleus thought.

His smile disappeared suddenly.

What am I thinking? These gifts are a burden, and I have to use them to improve the lives of the Ungifteds and to bring down the Flares. For Ducasus, for everybody.

Malleus began mulling over what he had already considered for so long: His goals were ambitious, and he needed to get himself in a position to accomplish them. He had already set himself up for leadership. As a Hawkeye and a Flare, he held a tremendous advantage over the Flares, perhaps as large as the one they used to oppress the Ungifteds. Perhaps even larger, he thought.

He looked over the scenic vista before him and spied a town not too far from the foothills, lying at the side of a river that flowed from an enormous lake. Malleus' Hawkeye vision allowed him to see the shores that lay to

the northwest, miles and miles and miles away.

That must be Lake Torrens, which means Velocitum is north of it, Malleus thought. His knowledge of geography was limited, but he had heard talk of Velocitum, the capital city of Flaroria. His immediate course was laid out before him.

Malleus returned his thoughts to his plan as a whole. He had set himself apart for leadership in that he possessed extraordinary abilities, but he would have to convince the zealots that he was there to help them.

He would have to prove himself; that was certain. He would have to earn their trust as well, which was a different task but perhaps related.

Malleus lowered himself to a seated position atop the hill. He closed his eyes and sat cross-legged in the late afternoon sun, calmly thinking of his best course of action. He felt the air temperature slowly fall as the sun sank lower in the sky.

My goal is to bring peace to the Ungifted peoples by defeating the Flares. In order to accomplish this I will need an army. I must enlist the aid of many men. Advantages: I am perhaps the only person alive who is twice gifted. Malleus shuddered as memories of breaking bones, explosions of strange light, internal fire, and that all-consuming voice filled his mind. The memory of pain was too real. He saw an image of his pitiful, broken brother lying at his feet, shaking. Malleus felt sick to his stomach.

He shoved the thoughts from his mind. He knew what he was doing, and he needed to focus.

Other advantages: there is already a group known as the zealots who resist the Flares. Enlisting their help or, rather, leading them, would be much more effective and efficient than attempting to begin from scratch. The problem is that zealots hate all gifted peoples, not just the Flares, and I carry the touch of two stars. They will hate and fear me.

Malleus tilted his head, his eyes still held shut as a

thought occurred to him.

I can work with fear. I can overcome hate by deflecting it to a group they would hate more than me.

A plan began to form, and he rotated it this way and that in his mind. As he did so he realized that it had been his plan all along, ever since he had decided to relieve Ducasus of his star. The plan seemed solid.

He would be a monster, an anomaly. He would play up a rhetoric of destiny to the zealots and reckoning to the Flares.

I possess their ability to shame them with it, but I am not one of them.

He would be dramatic. He would lean into the fear. He had accepted the abomination of the Flares to rid the world of them. It was really quite noble, Malleus thought.

His eyes opened.

The plan for ingratiating himself with the zealots was formed, if still inchoate. What remained to him now was to find the zealots' leadership and work his way into their counsel.

Ducasus' pain will not be for nothing, Malleus thought, standing up once more.

He looked down on the tall, golden grasses below as they swayed gently in the wind. The clouds threatened rain, looming dark and ominous overhead, blown in unexpectedly from the southeast. It would be night in a few hours. Malleus began running towards the town below like a horse at full gallop, placing his feet near-perfectly at every stride. His great mission had begun.

~°~

The tavern, as a whole, was dimly lit. Hanging lamps illuminated the areas beneath them, but the lights' influence was sparse, giving the room a sharply contrasting pattern of light and dark. A few men were scattered

inside the humble building, all Ungifteds. Rain beat down on the thatched roof and slow drips formed on the ceiling.

Servus, the barkeeper, slowly toweled off a mug as his eyes scanned back and forth across the room, looking for signs of trouble and potential customers.

Rain continued to beat upon the roof, and Servus' mind began to wander. He had a new shipment of glasses coming in from Velocitum soon. They were supposed to have arrived the previous day, but orders never seemed to come on time.

You would think the fastest people on the planet would be able to get things to their proper places on time, Servus thought. Flares...

A glass pounded on the bar two times in quick succession and Servus was torn from his thoughts.

"Hey, Serv! Keep 'em coming, huh?"

Servus stopped wiping out the mug and set it behind the bar. He then walked over to where the man called him from, holding out his glass like a beggar holds out his hat. His face lay buried in his arm, resting on the wood of the bar.

Servus stopped in front of him and leaned against the bar, his arms bowed like a bulldog.

"You got any plans for paying me, Mickey, or is this one gonna be on credit?"

The man lifted his head and smiled with his eyes shut.

"On credit, if you please."

Servus leaned across the bar and smacked Mickey upside his head.

"I don't think you pay attention, Mickey. I'm not giving you credit. I'm not giving you another blasted thing until you lay some money on this bar."

Mickey rubbed the back of his head, sorely.

"But Serv, gentle, understanding Servus, you know my pains. You know I'd give you a mountain of gold if I had it."

Somewhere in the tavern a man snorted.

"To pay off half your bar tab?"

Scattered chuckles filled the room. Mickey glanced behind him sullenly, then he turned back to Servus again, a softer expression in his swollen eyes.

"Servus, generous Servus, you know of my position. Our noble queen (may she endure forever) has chosen me for a lover and a suitor, and in a very short time I shall have at my command the vast riches of the Kingdom of the Sun. I shall not forget your kindness when I have ascended to power."

Servus snatched Mickey's mug from him.

"Yeah? And tell us how you became the queen's lover."

Mickey sat up, enthused.

"Why, I passed her on the street one fine day and she and her guard came sliding to a stop behind me. She looked me up and down and then walked over to me, at which time she fell upon me and began to smother me with kisses and promises. It would be shameful for me to repeat the things she said to me."

"And you expect us to believe this?" The bartender said, sweeping his hand across the room. Everyone was watching this exchange now. "That the queen of the biggest kingdom in Pontus came across you - a stranger, a drunk, and an Ungifted, and she decided she loved you and threw herself at you? Why would she do such a thing? Tell me, Mickey, I want to know. Why would she do that?"

"Well," Mickey began, "she is a very fast woman."

The tavern erupted into laughter. A few of the more tipsy among them fell off of their chairs laughing at the unexpected pun, and even the bartender smiled after rolling his eyes. He chuckled to himself and placed Mickey's mug at the tap of a cask of ale.

"Alright, Mickey, I'll give you one more. But don't

forget about that pile of gold." He winked, sliding the mug to Mickey.

Mickey stood up and gave a bow with exaggerated formality.

"Thank you, my noble vassal."

Servus walked away shaking his head and grinning. He returned to the far end of the bar where he began wiping out mugs once more.

Mickey returned to his seat and embraced his glass of ale, holding it to his face in a fool's caress. Foam sloshed out of the glass as he pulled it towards him. He began to thirstily imbibe the yeasty brew.

Rain continued to fall steadily outside, and Servus returned to his thoughts once more. He hardly noticed when a dripping wet silhouette opened the tavern door and stood in the entrance a moment, trying to shake some of the water from himself. He squeezed his long locks of hair to void them of their moisture.

He was a traveler, certainly. Servus saw plenty of them come through town, most of them on their way to Velocitum. He paid them little attention. They would stop in for a night and pass on.

The stranger stepped underneath a hanging lamp as he casually made his way forward. He had a slender, hooked nose and he wore peasant's clothing and an inscrutable expression. The Ungifteds in the bar felt compelled to glance at the stranger. He was young, clearly, but he had a presence about him. As he neared, even Servus thought so.

"Do you have lodgings for the night?" the stranger inquired, approaching the bar.

"I do. Will you be needing a room?"

The stranger nodded soberly.

"It's gonna be 15 scratch. If you need to stay more than a night you can pay me again tomorrow."

A small pool of water formed on the bar from where

the stranger leaned. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of silver that clicked as he placed it on the bar.

Servus looked at the piece and smiled.

"That's a generous tip, Stranger."

The youth looked up and stared Servus in the eyes for the first time. Dim light reflected from his glistening, wet face.

"It's Malleus."

Servus did a double-take, unsure of what he'd seen. He looked into the stranger's eyes again, and this time he was certain. His eyes were two different colors, split in two like a half circle on each side. The lower half of each eye was green, but the upper was a deep, electric blue. Servus had never seen anything like it.

Servus stuck out his hand mechanically.

"Servus. At your service."

Mickey piped up from the end of the bar, holding his half-empty mug against his forehead.

"Servus! Servus!"

An annoyed expression conquered the barkeeper's face.

"What is it, Mickey?"

"Oh, I wasn't calling your name. I was asking you to serve us, this gentleman and I, some more ale."

"Your last joke was better, Mickey." Servus shook his head and turned back to Malleus.

"That's our resident loser," he said, gesturing with his thumb. "He's a drunk and occasionally a comedian."

"A comedian?" came Mickey's reply from the other end of the bar. "I am a great warrior! I make a pun of your name and that renders me a... comedian? If that is so, then all of you are murderers, for you have butchered my name on every occasion."

The bartender rolled his eyes and continued talking to Malleus.

"Listen, do you need anything? If you do, just let me

know and make sure you have the coin to pay for it. Of course, if that silver's any indication..."

Malleus nodded in assent while Mickey painstakingly removed himself from his stool. He had a look of intense concentration on his face as he gently swayed back and forth while trying to slide back off of his seat. He succeeded, with some stumbling, and he staggered over to the seat next to Malleus and plopped down.

"My name," the drunk started, "is Amicitia." He leaned in towards Malleus, opening his mouth wide as he pronounced each syllable. "Ah-Mik-EE-Tee-Uh. Amicitia. Nobody around here can seem to get that right."

Malleus tried to ignore him. Someone a few tables back responded.

"We can get it right, Mickey. It's just that your real name is too fancy for you."

"Too fancy?" Mickey raised his head quickly, causing himself dizziness. He waited a moment and continued. "Too fancy? Nothing is too fancy for a noble--"

"You're not a noble."

"For a well-educated--"

"Nope."

"Well, no name is too fancy for so passionate a man as myself."

Servus responded while he hefted an empty cask up onto his shoulder.

"Passionate? Mickey, you're a slug. You don't care about anything aside from ale."

Mickey's eyes widened.

"Ale? Yes, I do love ale. I love it like..." Malleus had been staring straight ahead during the exchange, but after several moments of silence he turned his head to see why the sentence had not been finished. Mickey was motionless, with his mouth open. He was still thinking. "Like something really good!" he finally exclaimed.

"But passionless, no!" he continued. His crooked,

stained teeth showed as he laid a hand on Malleus' shoulder and smiled. "You might even say I'm zealous." He leaned into Malleus' ear. "You might even say... I'm a zealot." Mickey released his grip and began giggling in a high-pitched voice as he stumbled getting off of his stool and then zigzagged to the corner of the tavern where he fell down and began snoring at once.

Malleus looked after him, hoping he had misheard.

The drunk is a zealot?

Chapter Eleven:

The Fear Inside

Ducasus stared at the giant Nebula in disbelief.

"What do you mean he'd be dead? He's not dead."

Incus blinked back at Ducasus with equal incredulity.

"You said that he laid hands on your star?"

"Yes," Ducasus said.

"Then he burned up from the inside out in one of the most horrible and torturous deaths known in all of Pontus. Such is the punishment for attempting to take another's star. Did you not go to school?"

Ducasus shook his head slowly, a little ashamed at his lack of knowledge, yet still unconvinced of what Incus was saying.

"So if you're right, when does this... fiery death ordeal take place? A day later? A week?"

"Instantly," Incus rumbled in return.

"I watched him," Ducasus said, flustered. "He took my star and stole my gift. I heard him scream for a while, and then he got up and ran away. He is most certainly not dead. And he has two gifts while I have none," he added bitterly.

Now it was Incus' turn to be confused.

"How can that be? It is common knowledge that attempting to take another's star is death. I have seen it with my own eyes."

Ducasus laughed starkly.

"Of course. No one else's star can be stolen, but my own twin brother, the other half of my own soul decides to give it a try. And what do you know? It works." Ducasus sighed and punctuated his breathing with occasional

scoffing sounds.

Incus thought a moment, lost in the corridors of imagination.

"Perhaps that is why he was able to take your star. Because you are so similar."

Ducasus stood up in protest.

"That's not true. I would never do what he did to me," he growled.

"You just called him the other half of your soul. Usually that sort of language is reserved for a woman you are trying to convince to marry you."

Ducasus fumed.

"It's just something one of the other slaves used to say about twins."

"Perhaps it's true."

Ducasus looked away and nodded. Incus continued, locked in thought.

"If you heard his screams, it must have started. He must have been in the process of internal burning, but he didn't die. You're certain he got up and went his way?"

"I saw him."

Incus shook his head.

"A man with two gifts... I've never heard of such a thing." He paused. "Everything has a price, whether it is the recipient who pays or another. Nothing is free."

Ducasus raised his head, a sour look on his face.

"Well, for starters, he no longer has the pleasure of being my brother."

Incus grunted in agreement and stood up from his log. He dusted himself off and walked to where his pack rested.

"You should go back to sleep. It's late."

Ducasus had to agree. He was feeling weak and very tired. He wandered in thought as he laid himself back down.

Incus removed his bedroll from his pack and spread it

near the fire, which was slowly dying. The giant was placing a large rock at the head of his bedroll when Ducasus spoke.

"Why have you helped me?"

Incus looked up from his task and turned his head towards Ducasus.

"You needed help, did you not?"

Ducasus hesitated a moment.

"Yes."

Incus looked at Ducasus like he had asked a stupid question, then returned to adjusting his rock pillow.

Incus stretched out upon the ground, pulling his roll of blankets over him, and in a moment it appeared he was asleep, slumbering deeply and silently in the embrace of the night. It seemed this way to Ducasus, at least. In reality, Incus rarely slept.



Ducasus awoke the next morning to the gentle rhythm of Incus' knife peeling away chips of wood from whatever he was carving. Again, Ducasus could not see the figure well enough to guess as to what it was.

Incus focused intently on the wood as Ducasus rose from his bed and stretched, his right arm shaking as he did so. He picked up his bowl from the previous night and approached the cooking pot.

"Don't faint again." Incus nodded toward the fire, still picking at the wood with his knife. "That will make quick work of you."

"Thanks for the warning," Ducasus said as he dipped his bowl into the warm soup. He wondered how long it had been over the fire as he raised the wooden bowl to his lips. Once the broth reached his mouth he didn't care if it had been there a month.

Ducasus walked leisurely to the edge of Incus' little

camp and took in the surroundings while he consumed his breakfast.

Incus scratched at his figurine thoughtfully, giving it several quick strokes before blowing on it and examining it. He put it into his pack gingerly, which was now at his feet. His bedroll was packed and strapped to it already.

"What's in the pack?" Ducasus asked.

"Pelts."

"What kind of pelts?"

"Deer. Boar. Those wolves that Flares call 'hunters.'"

Ducasus tilted the bowl into his mouth, chewing a root thoughtfully.

"What do you do with it all?"

"Empty it."

"Empty it?"

Incus nodded.

Ducasus laughed in spite of himself.

"Why do you empty it?"

"I find a city and sell them. When the pack is empty, I leave for more."

"You're a trapper?"

Incus shrugged.

"I took you for more of a warrior. Mercenary soldier, maybe," Ducasus said, chuckling. "A trapper..."

"Where do you wish to go?"

Ducasus' cheerful expression faded.

"What?"

"Your health is improved, and I can help you find your way home. Is it nearby?" Incus inquired. "Or are you traveling elsewhere?"

Ducasus stared at the dirt and leaves at his feet. He tried vainly to think of where he should go or what he should do. Breathing became difficult, and despondency began to creep upon him again. He was ashamed, and deeper inside he was angry, too. He was angry with his brother for ruining everything.

Incus sat patiently upon his stump, hands folded and awaiting a response. He had asked a question and it would be answered. It was as simple as that.

Ducasus finally spoke, still staring at the ground.

"I don't know. I don't have anything. My brother betrayed me, and my family and friends ran away." Ducasus spoke dully and flatly, a manner of speaking with which he was not well acquainted. "It doesn't matter where I go."

Incus appeared unmoved. He continued to stare at Ducasus before speaking again.

"We'll head north then. I want to be out of the southern range before winter arrives. My pack is full, besides."

Ducasus looked up in surprise.

"You're taking me with you?"

"If you need somewhere to go."

Ducasus hesitated, then nodded slowly. Incus looked at him with the same expression he had worn when Ducasus had asked why he was helping him.

"And... you're not taking me with you as your slave?"

Incus raised an eyebrow.

"You ask very strange questions. What use has a Nebula for a slave? We have never had slaves."

Ducasus sighed in relief.

"Well, then. I guess we should get going then?" he asked, stepping forward happily.

"After I cook you and eat you," Incus replied, cinching a strap down.

Ducasus stared at the giant for a long moment.

"That was a joke, wasn't it?"

Incus slung his massive pack up to his shoulders, grabbed the pot from over the dead fire, and began walking away without a word.

Ducasus hurriedly rolled up his blankets and bounded after.

"So that was a joke? Because I would taste terrible. I just want you to know that."

~o~

Malleus stared at the drunkard in the corner in disbelief. *Is he really a zealot?* Malleus wondered. He sort of hoped not. Between Pompey's gang and this drunk named Mickey, his allies did not seem to be the highest quality of men.

"Servus."

"Yeah?"

Malleus nodded his head in Mickey's direction.

"How long is he going to be out?"

Servus looked where Malleus had motioned, and his expression sank as he saw Mickey snoring in the corner.

"Eh... he'll be there all night. I usually don't kick him out until morning."

Malleus nodded. He had to speak with Mickey, but he had to do it while the man was sober.

"Don't kick him out before I talk to him, alright?"

"If you say so," the bartender shrugged. "Not sure why you'd want to talk to a vagrant like Mickey, though. The only reasons we keep him around is that he's funny sometimes and he buys a lot of ale. When he has money, that is."

"Just don't let him leave," Malleus said flatly, rising from his seat.

Servus bent below the bar and retrieved a candle and a key. He slid them over to Malleus, nodding at a lantern on the wall.

"You can light that over there. Your room's up the stairs and to the right. Second door on the left. And if you have to relieve yourself, lean out the window."

Malleus shrugged. It was better than what he was used to.



The morning was quiet and serene as Malleus descended the stairs to the tavern below. Rays of light shined through the cracks in the walls, and the only sound was the creaking stairs and Mickey's snoring.

The rain had stopped sometime in the night and the slow drips from the ceiling had ceased. All was still.

The air had a musty, earthy smell to it, tinged with a hint of urine, which soured Malleus' expression. Apparently having an advanced sense of smell could be more of a curse than a blessing. He stood over a sleeping Mickey, who stank like rotting grain and vomit.

Malleus had considered his position during the night and he considered it again now. He had spent the silver piece he had found outside the tavern. Only a slight edge of the coin had been sticking out of the mud, but Malleus' increased powers of perception allowed him to catch its glimmer in the moonlight. In any case, he no longer had it, so he could not buy off the drunk before him. He did not want to force him – an unwilling ally would hardly be an ally at all.

I don't want to touch him, Malleus thought. That left him with one idea.

He scanned the snoring man at his feet, searching for some clues as to who this drunk was. The Ungifted's long shirt was disgraceful. It was the color of a tea stain, but not originally. It was so filthy that it had adopted that shade.

That doesn't help me, Malleus thought. *What am I going to do? Tell him he has poor hygiene?*

Malleus continued to scrutinize him.

He saw tiny flecks of hay stuck in Mickey's hair. He saw a small bloodstain just outside of a hole in his worn shoes.

I can work with this, Malleus decided. *I need something*

else as well... something big.

An idea occurred to Malleus. He stepped over to the drunkard's head and tried to peer down the back of his shirt. It hung open slightly due to the fetal position in which Mickey now laid in repose. Malleus saw short lines of white skin, which was just the thing he had been looking for. It occurred to Malleus that it was odd that Mickey had not returned to a slave-owner at the end of the night. Probably no one wanted him, but it was odder still that so many Ungifteds should be able to gather at a bar at all. He didn't think they all could have been zealots, but he kept the possibility in his mind.

Malleus tried to ignore the man's horrid stench and he nudged him with his boot. Mickey snored on, oblivious. He nudged him again.

"Mickey."

No response.

"Mickey!" He kicked him again, but the sleeper only rolled over and continued to snore.

"Amicitia!" Malleus yelled now, but the drunk would not wake up. He searched the room for a solution.

A bucket of dirty suds next to a mop caught his eye.

That'll do, he thought.

Malleus retrieved the bucket and raised it high over Mickey's head. With an almost ceremonious motion, he flipped the pail, and its brown, gritty contents emptied out onto Mickey's head.

Mickey rolled immediately, spitting putrid water out of his mouth and shouting.

"What is it? Why would you do that? Oh, ptoo, bleh!" He shook off and raised himself up on his hands, rising to his knees. Malleus stood expressionless over him. It was time to perform.

Mickey rubbed his eyes and pointed at Malleus.

"That was unkind."

"It's time to wake up, Mickey," Malleus returned,

stone-faced and in the lowest voice he could convincingly manage. "It's time for everyone to wake up. You have slumbered too long and the world has changed, but fear not. I'm here to wake you."

Mickey ran his hand through his thinning hair and looked up at Malleus with an eyebrow raised.

"Have I been drinking again? Or are you just daft?"

Malleus smiled.

"When were you last not drinking, Mickey? And no, I am not daft, I am destiny. I am here to help you and those like you in their glorious quest."

Mickey snorted.

"Ha! You're going to help me find a woman?"

Malleus shook his head slowly and ominously.

"No. No, my friend. I am here for a greater purpose, as are you. You are passionate, perhaps, for women and ale, but you are not zealous for them. I speak to you as a zealot."

Mickey's eyes grew wide momentarily, and then a scowl passed over his face.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

So not everyone in the bar is a zealot, Malleus thought to himself. He thinks he needs to keep it a secret.

"So you are not one of the zealots?" Malleus asked.

Mickey slowly began to stand, a complacent look on his face.

"I don't even know what that is. Perhaps they only have those where you're from. I'm merely a common citizen, sorry to disappoint."

Mickey made it to his feet and began to walk by, but something didn't feel right to Malleus. Something about the vagrant's voice caught his attention. It was like there was a deep trembling beneath it all. It was a sound that Malleus realized he had heard before, but never taken notice of. Mickey was lying.

Time to go for it.

"Disappoint?" Malleus began, in a deep, somber voice. "You disappoint indeed if you sever ties with that which has given you purpose. Are you not tired of bedding down in the hay? Do your feet not bleed from wandering, unwelcome at every door? These are the things that disappoint."

Mickey turned slowly around, his scruffy face a picture of cynicism.

"Yeah, you saw where I sleep. Incredible."

"I didn't see, Mickey. I knew. I know. There's no hay in this corner now, is there? But I knew."

"Just what do you want from me?"

"I want you to tell me where I can find the zealots of Velocitum."

Mickey looked confused a moment, then he laughed.

"You want me to think you're psychic with a few random details, but you don't know where the zealots are at the center of the whole movement?" Disdain crept into Mickey's voice. "You look like a Flare... Not much of a disguise, dying your hair." He leaned in closer, inspecting him. "You do have some weird eyes, though."

What? Malleus thought. *What is he talking about?* He decided to go with it.

"My eyes have been blessed. Parts of the future are yet shrouded to them, but in the presence of a man I see him entirely. I see your pain and I see your scars. I hear your cries as the whip falls on your back again and again, wielded by the hand of a cruel and unjust Flare."

Mickey looked back in shock. He held his forehead with his hand, nursing his headache.

"Who are you?"

"I am a monster. I am a liberator. I am the nightmare that haunts the Flares as they try in vain to sleep." Malleus paused dramatically, searching for an impactful ending to his response. "My name is Malleus, and I have come to lead the zealots to victory."



Their travel was slow at first, and it was filled with frequent rests. Ducasus felt dizzy much of the time as he walked, but on the whole he was doing alright. Incus did not seem to mind the slow pace, but rather was surprised at how well Ducasus was doing. The miles added up very slowly, but they progressed.

They did not speak much as they traveled. Ducasus found that he had to focus on keeping his body moving, and Incus seemed the type who was more than comfortable with silence. When they rested, they spoke a little. Usually the talks devolved into Incus being surprised at how poorly educated Ducasus was. Eventually, after several occurrences of this, Ducasus stressed to Incus how education was discouraged among the Ungifteds where he had grown up. He had been a slave, after all, so he thought that should have been obvious. Then again, he knew that the house slaves in Atrox's mansion were treated a little bit differently, which was likely the source of the confusion. Ducasus didn't have the look of a hard laborer, especially not now, emaciated as his journey had made him.

Incus looked sad at Ducasus' explanation and told him that education was encouraged in most parts of Pontus. From then on he was more patient with Ducasus' ignorance and he would explain things to him when it appeared that he did not understand.

The travel was exhausting to Ducasus, though they had journeyed barely more than ten miles. They made camp in the afternoon to allow him a chance to rest.

He slept through much of the fading day, and he ate whatever food was offered to him. He listened to the trickling stream near where they camped and he dozed, trying not to think of his brother or the bitterness that

gnawed at his heart.

Nightfall found Incus returning from an unsuccessful hunt and Ducasus already fast asleep. The giant set down his pack and bedded down on the opposite side of their dying fire.

~°~

Incus slept lightly, as he most often did when he slept at all. He was aware of his surroundings, if only faintly, as he dozed. All seemed to be well. He relaxed his massive shoulders, listening to the sounds of the wind blowing softly through the trees.

He remembered the trees that used to sway in the wind outside of his window as a boy. The leaves would rattle in a comforting rhythm, lulling him to sleep on many an autumn night like this one. He dreamed that it was the trees that stood still and the rest of the world that bent and swayed. He breathed in and out, and it seemed as though the world breathed in and out with him. The stars above sang to him as he dreamed, and soft footsteps approached him on the forest floor. Soft footsteps.

Footsteps.

The footsteps were real.

Incus was wide awake in an instant. He silently removed his blankets and crouched, looking around. The canopy above them shut out most of the light of the stars. Incus turned his head to his right and stared into their dead fire. Its only remnants were a thin trail of wispy smoke and a few faintly glowing coals, red streaks in the blackness. He strained his ears and shifted in his crouch, turning his head to the left.

There was a pair of empty, haunting, white eyes.

The beast's breath reeked of rotting meat, and despite the darkness, Incus knew he was looking into the face of a nexaer. He smiled savagely.

A vacuum of air suddenly sprang into existence and Incus clenched his fists, but he did not have the chance to employ them.

His slowly adjusting eyes glimpsed movement, and he heard a fierce, almost deranged cry as a dark figure leapt at the hunting nexaer, his arm rising and falling again and again and again in the dark of the night. The vortex ceased immediately, and the nexaer let out a yelp of pain. Its ghostly white eyes fluttered, and then it cried out again as it fell to the ground. Incus heard sounds of grunting and of flesh tearing, but he still could not see anything beyond a dark shape.

Incus grabbed a pine bough that lay at hand and tossed it on the still-warm coals. A flame eagerly rose up, snapping and popping with motes.

In the brief fire's glow, Incus recognized Ducasus. His face dripped with sweat. At his feet was the slain nexaer, blood pouring from the external lungs at its side. Incus saw the gleam of his whittling knife in Ducasus' hand, and then the flame died down as quickly as it had appeared, and they were enveloped in darkness once again.

Ducasus' breathing was the only sound, save for an occasional popping from the coals.

No one said anything for several moments. Eventually Incus nodded at the animal's body and spoke evenly.

"It will keep until morning," he said, looking up at the black canopy overhead.

"I hate those things," Ducasus said.

Incus picked up his blanket and his rock pillow and moved to the other side of the burning coals. He lay down and quickly fell back into a light sleep.

Ducasus, however, remained awake, awaiting the first rays of dawn.

The next morning, Incus began skinning the fallen beast. He sliced it down the middle and removed much of the animal's pelt, then prepared to carve off the best cuts of meat.

Ducasus stood by their rekindled fire, warming himself and thinking about the previous night, which seemed like a strange dream.

"Hold this," Incus said, holding up the nexaer's hind leg.

Ducasus, torn from his thoughts, stepped towards the crouching Nebula. He extended his left hand to hold the beast's leg while Incus worked with his knife below it.

"The fur won't be of much use to us," Incus began. "You shredded it to pieces last night."

Ducasus didn't respond, and Incus continued in his work.

"Take this," the giant said, handing the knife to Ducasus as he finished the work with his hands. It was not the smaller whittling knife that Ducasus was used to seeing but rather a huge hunting knife. It was proportional to the seven-and-a-half foot colossus before him, so in Ducasus' hands it was quite oversized. Having his left hand already occupied, Ducasus extended his right to receive the weighty knife. He turned it in his grip, looking at it closely. Etchings of weaving, interlocking patterns ran along the upper half of the blade with faces of animals and birds throughout the design. He lifted the blade higher and was about to ask about it when a realization struck him that left him white. His arm wasn't shaking.

Ducasus stared at his arm in wonder as he held the large hunting knife out in front of him, perfectly still. In awe, he moved the blade up and down slowly, then to the side, yet his arm remained in control, if a bit fatigued from sudden use after days of idleness. Relief washed over him.

"You had the fear inside you," Incus said. "I see now that it has gone."

Ducasus continued to work his arm in disbelief.

"You saw it shake before?"

Incus returned to his work, nodding.

"I take it you've crossed paths with one of these before?" He gestured toward the fallen monster.

Ducasus nodded, still holding onto the animal's leg with his left hand while holding out Incus' blade with his right.

Ducasus stepped away from the animal and allowed its leg to fall. He walked a few paces and swung the Neb hunting knife all around, thrusting and swinging it with amazement. The knife was like a short sword to him, yet its weight did not cause his arm to spasm. He swung the knife around until he was nearly exhausted.

Incus stood up to watch with his gory arms folded. The hint of a grin rested on his massive, fierce jaw.

Ducasus smiled widely and returned to Incus, extending the knife back to him. The Neb received the blade and wiped it off, sliding it into a leather sheath beneath his vest, attached to a belt that went from shoulder to hip.

"You have some fight in you after all," declared Incus. "I was concerned that you'd given up."

Ducasus regarded the firm, bulging muscles of the giant before him and asked, "You could have killed the nexaer anyway, couldn't you?"

"Without even using my hammer. But you rose up and defended me, and for that I'm grateful."

"It was nothing."

"It was not nothing." Incus' usual somber expression replaced the hint of a smile. "Nebulae do not believe in carrying debts. I will repay you for your actions on my behalf."

"Incus," Ducasus began, "you're not in debt to me. If anything, I'm still indebted to you."

"I have but one account, and it is not paid into in advance. If you want, I will teach you how to fight."

Ducasus cocked his head to the side.

"To repay me?"

Incus nodded.

"Couldn't that be dangerous for me?" Ducasus asked. "I've heard that Nebs can kill Ungifteds, Flares, and Hawkeyes with a single blow."

"We can," Incus agreed. "And it is, but attacking a nexaer in the black of night is dangerous as well, and you seemed content to do that."

"I was just asking. I want to learn. Just don't kill me."

"Good."

Incus turned, then looked thoughtful. He walked over to his pack and unstrapped the massive black hammer that lay across it. Ducasus had eyed it from time to time, but he had never seen it in Incus' hands as of yet. He palmed the head of the weapon and set the end of its shaft on the ground before Ducasus.

The mighty hammer had a point on one side of the head and a flat edge on the other. It was made of a rough, black metal that looked different from the iron instruments Ducasus was used to seeing. The hammer reached from the ground to the bottom of Ducasus' lips.

"It would be impractical for you to use so large a weapon, and besides, were I to train you with it I would not begin by handing it to you. I show it to you now for other reasons. This is Bellum."

The hammer has a name, Ducasus thought, eying the giant warily.

Incus took no notice of Ducasus' reaction and heaved Bellum up into his hands. He began to skillfully maneuver it through the air; at times it seemed to weigh as much as a planet, at others seeming to weigh nothing at all. It flashed about with surprising speed as Ducasus watched the Nebula swing his massive hammer around his head, then change its direction at a moment's notice. He flipped his hands fluidly, changing his grip on the shaft to suit his

purposes. He flipped the hammer and caught it again, then brought it swinging around before raising it over his head and moving to strike the ground before him with all his might. He slid his right hand towards the head and stopped the hurricane of force just before the hammer was to strike.

"Bellum is a part of me," he continued, "an extension of my own arms. Yet before I was ever allowed to handle a weapon, I was first taught to control my own body."

Incus returned the hammer to its position, standing before Ducasus, its pommel in the ground.

Ducasus eyed the hammer in amazement, and an inscription on its flat end caught his eye. Ducasus made out the words "Fortuna, Miseria, Memoria."

"What are these words here?"

Incus snatched up his hammer and returned it to his pack's fittings.

"They are words from the tongue of names and none of your concern." Incus continued as if nothing had happened. "Now, controlling your body means training in many areas, but since I have told you I will teach you to fight, this takes the form of the study of Ar-lenti."

"What is that?" Ducasus inquired.

"It is a martial art," replied the giant. "And one that uses no weapons and no strikes or blows. It is the art of position and timing."

"Oh, we're starting now?"

"I told you I would teach you how to fight."

"Oh. Alright. I thought it was just a demonstration," Ducasus said, and then he cocked his head. "Did you say no weapons? And no hitting?"

"It is the art of position and timing," Incus repeated.

"How can you fight with position? You have to hit them at some point, don't you? Position is just a means to an end."

"Position is the end," Incus replied firmly. "You can

soundly defeat an opponent without ever striking him. You can even defeat him without using your hands or arms, if you're skilled enough. The study of Ar-lenti teaches us how an enraged opponent may be overcome by patience, how a stronger opponent may be defeated through leverage, and how an impossibly fast opponent may be struck down by timing."

That sounded good to Ducasus. He didn't understand the theory, but he liked the idea.

"Do all Neb warriors train in Ar-lenti?" Ducasus asked.

"No. Nebulae practice a different art, and Flares a different one still. Ar-lenti was developed by a Hawkeye named Caias while he was in exile from his native land. He developed the art on the outskirts of Nebularis, where he found himself having to defend against Nebulae. He used his powers of perception to create an art that could overcome the strength of giants and eventually the speed of Flares as well. As an old man he was welcomed back to his native country and he took on many students, which is how the art has survived to be passed down to us today. His school of Pugnamus still stands in Spectare today, eight hundred years later." Incus stood solemnly after finishing his tale.

"But... I'm not a Hawkeye."

"Nor are you a Neb. The principles of the art apply universally."

Ducasus nodded in agreement.

"How did you learn it?"

"I've trained in it from the time I was three years old. I eventually traveled to Spectare and studied there myself under Grandmaster Scion." Incus picked up and shouldered his pack as he said this, preparing to leave.

"Wait," Ducasus protested. "I thought you just said you were going to start teaching me."

Incus turned around.

"So I have."

"Aren't we going to spar now?"

"Before a day of travel? No. You're still regaining your strength. Think about the theory I described to you."

Ducasus' grin faded, and frustration began rising up in him. He struggled to control it, closing his eyes and sucking in a deep breath through his nostrils.

"I thought you just said you were going to teach me how to fight."

"I will," Incus said as he began striding away.

Ducasus was left standing alone and anger twisted fiercely in his stomach. He felt enraged, like he had been deceived, but he also had a vague idea that it was odd he was feeling that way.

What is wrong with me? Ducasus thought as he took a deep breath and tried to sigh his frustration away, not understanding that it came from a deep place. It only sort of worked. He pushed the bitter thoughts out of his mind and chased after his guide.

He caught up quickly and settled into a typical pace next to the stoic Neb. Every once in a while he was forced to jog forward and catch up; the Neb's longer legs caused Ducasus to fall behind if he wasn't careful. Ducasus wondered how tall he would be if he had been able to get to his star first.

The dull, ever-present fire that had ignited when Ducasus was first cheated flared up again. He fed it with his thoughts, warming himself with it, pulling back now and again. It singed him, and his hatred for his brother grew.

Lingering traces of love fought against his disposition, but they did not prevail. He didn't feed them, so the dull fire continued to burn.

Ducasus was jolted all of a sudden and swatted at the air. Something sticky pulled at his face.

"Spider web," Incus warned from several paces ahead.

"Thanks," Ducasus replied, peeling off the invisible strands. He caught up with Incus shortly after, keeping an eye out for more webs.

"Where are we going today?" Ducasus asked.

"North."

The giant continued walking, offering no further explanation.

Ducasus waited for a qualifying statement that did not come. He prodded Incus for more information.

"There's a town in the hills we will come upon this evening. We'll see if we can find a horse for you."

"You aren't going to get one?"

Incus looked down at Ducasus.

"If you can find one that can carry me, let me know. We need to travel more than ten miles a day if we want to get to Velocitum before the weather turns cold. The horse will help us do that while you regain your strength."

Ducasus was about to protest, but a wave of exhaustion came over him, and he realized they would have to rest soon. Perhaps there was something to what the Neb was saying.

"So you'll start teaching me Ar-lenti, then?"

"We will discuss the theory. I'll begin training you when you're ready. Be patient and recover your strength."

Chapter Twelve: Poison and Wine

“...And that, of course, is why I am still to this day referred to as ‘The Maestro’ among more refined circles.” Mickey spoke with a flourish, bringing yet another of his long-winded stories to an improbable end.

It had been seven days, and Malleus was starting to tire of Mickey. His stories were amusing on occasion, but most of the time he was just annoying – lying like it was going out of style. It occurred to him more than once that Mickey may not prove to be as useful to him as he had hoped, but he was his only lead for now. That did not bother Malleus too much. What really irked him was that he had to walk at a snail’s pace with the vagrant.

I could have made it to Velocitum in two days, easily, Malleus thought. His legs were restless. He knew he was getting faster as the days passed and the gifts continued to sink into him and change him. His hair grew surprisingly fast, for one thing. It passed his shoulders now, falling in shimmering layers of chestnut-colored locks. He did not know what Hawkeyes were supposed to look like, but he imagined his appearance was changing to resemble them as well.

“So what do you think, Malleus?” Mickey was still talking. “Do you think I should? I’ve still got the talent in these old bones of mine.”

Malleus hadn’t been listening. He had been studiously ignoring Mickey, in fact. Now he was asking Malleus a question, and he had a persona to play. He could not simply say “huh?” He had to seem all-knowing, severe.

“I’m sorry,” Malleus began, lowering his voice, “I do

not suffer to indulge in the matters of fools. I have only ears for the sounds of pain in the throats of Flares and for cries of triumph from those of the common man."

Mickey's expression fell.

"You're an odd man, Malleus. Well, I know that I could once again lead the royal symphony. I think you just don't want me distracted from your cause." He turned up his nose.

Malleus grinned darkly, his two-toned eyes sparkling.

"Our cause, Mickey. And the cause of every man, woman, and child who was ever told they were 'Ungifted.'"

"Well, then our cause. I still can't see why you don't call me by my name."

"Because you do not deserve a name such as Amicitia. It is too noble for a drunk such as yourself."

Mickey scoffed.

"I'm sober now, am I not? I have not even tried to drink a drop of liquor these past seven days."

"We've been in the wilderness these past seven days. Be a friend to the zealots and fight for the cause, and perhaps one day you will be worthy of your own name."

This quieted him, and Malleus pondered over his performance. It wasn't yet inspiring the sort of awe he was after. He began thinking about what he could do to improve it and seem more sinister. Acting did not come easily to Malleus, but he was confident, as with everything, that he would find a solution or improve.

The two dusty, unwashed travelers reached the fork in the road where their own path met up with the road from Sol to the west. They were not far from Velocitum now.

The huge, glittering lake that had been their companion for the past seven days was now left behind as the road turned to follow the river.

Mickey perked up suddenly.

"Look! I can see the city in the distance. Ah, its proud

five towers greet me yet another time as an adventurer who has frequented these beloved courts many a time and knows their city like one knows his own skin." Mickey took a deep breath.

Malleus raised his eyes to the city beyond. There were six towers. He laughed inwardly. Perhaps he would keep this fool Mickey around; he was amusing. Malleus had been able to see the distant city for the past day, besides. His senses continued to sharpen.

As time went on the road grew more and more crowded. Malleus glanced at farmers driving bulky carts of produce and groups of Flares speeding past them, leaving nothing but clouds of dust to tell of their passing. Some men and women plodded along on horses while others went on foot. The Flares were never present long enough for Malleus to watch them much, but he thought it unfair that the Ungifteds should have to struggle and plod on in the heat and the dust while the Flares nonchalantly hurricaned by.

This thought was enough of a trigger to cause Malleus to brood on his hatred for the Flares.

After a few hours of traveling along the riverside, Malleus and his guide found themselves at the mighty gates of the city. People bustled about on all sides of them now, Flares and Ungifteds alike, because it was too densely packed before the gates for anyone to run. Everyone rubbed shoulders as they shifted back and forth, shuffling slowly forward to pass inside the city limits.

Malleus smelled a thousand odors in the thronging crowd around him. He heard the rumble of every individual conversation and sound as he and Mickey fought to make their way through the crowd. Every sweep of his eyes caught sight of a thousand faces, all rich in minute details and meaning. Impressions and realizations flashed through Malleus like lightning. He couldn't control it, and the constant stream of information besieged

him. It was overwhelming. He felt a soft push of wind as a bird flew briskly over the crowd, low in the sky. He felt the sweat on the man's shoulder next to him as they bumped into each other. He heard Flare guards shouting at the crowd. He saw every tiny and insignificant crack in the massive, sand-colored arch they moved towards. It was too much for Malleus.

In desperation, he clamped his hands over his ears and shut his eyes, trying to stem the rushing tide of information. Surprisingly, it helped quite a bit. He could still hear a great deal of the commotion around him, and his senses of smell and touch were as active as ever, but he could see nothing more than the light on the outside of his closed eyelids. Having one less sense to worry about and one sense reduced in intensity allowed Malleus to deal with the situation. He could still navigate with the crowd because he could feel it moving towards the gate.

Mickey looked at him strangely and tried to speak to him, but Malleus ignored him, just as he was trying to ignore everything else that clamored for his attention.

He felt the crowd begin to spread out and he perceived that they now stood inside the city.

Malleus opened his eyes and removed his hands from his ears. As he had guessed, they stood in an expansive square at the other side of the gate. The noises had settled down some, and people were not as close to him now. The ground beneath his feet felt strange somehow. He looked down and saw a red, textured material that made up the surface of the streets.

What is this stuff? he wondered. It looked like a type of rock, but it was odd.

"So what was all that about?" Mickey asked, now that Malleus no longer covered his ears. He made a face and imitated Malleus' low voice, "I cover my ears and shut my eyes in imitation of the Flares who have grown deaf to the sacred cries of the Ungifteds and blind to their plight!"

"The crowd irked me," Malleus responded sharply. Then, he did something that surprised him. His hand flashed out and smacked Mickey in the head. He almost apologized as Mickey stumbled forward, but he refrained. *Stay in character*, he told himself, suddenly disturbed by how in character he had felt.

"I'm sorry, noble sir," Mickey quickly apologized, looking down. "I meant it in fun, not as a slight."

Malleus fumbled for the right response. He settled on lamely muttering, "Don't mock me."

"I won't," Mickey replied, rubbing the back of his head and keeping an extra foot of distance between them.

The excitement died down around them, and Malleus began turning to look upon the magnificent city when an odd sensation struck him.

He felt as if something had run into his face, but he saw nothing. He felt its force move inside of him and in an instant, Malleus knew what was happening.

Not again! he thought as his eyes went wide and torturous fire began to consume him from the inside.

Malleus dropped to the crimson, textured ground and began to twist and contort horribly, screaming all the while. Each moment seemed to be an eternity to Malleus. He could feel nothing but pain, he could hear nothing but an overwhelming rumble – even his own screaming reached his ears as muffled somehow. He smelled the dust of breaking rocks and he tasted fire. After a time, his vision failed him. Oblivion came as a welcome relief.

~o~

It was nearly evening by the time Ducasus and Incus came upon the little village, hidden among the hills. The sun sank low in the sky and all of the villagers bustled about, preparing to return to their homes for the evening.

The village had only twelve or thirteen buildings that

Ducasus could see. The majority of them were built close to each other, but a few houses sat on the top of their own hills, only tenuously connected with the others. Square patches of earth on the hillsides told of farms, and on a hill to the east of the main grouping of houses, Incus spotted a corral with a few horses grazing inside.

The travelers made their way down the grassy hillside, turned straw-colored now that winter was almost upon them. The sun had set by the time Ducasus and Incus approached the lone house, and the first stars of evening shined overhead. Ducasus did not look at them.

It was a two-story house, much nicer than the shack Ducasus had grown up in. It had two windows on the second story that faced them and a wide porch that wrapped around two sides of the little, white house.

The corral was on the south side of the building, next to a small sheep pen. There were three horses grazing in the light of the half moon above. One of the horses was quite large; its back rose a good deal higher than the others. Ducasus noticed and tapped Incus with the back of his hand. Incus peered at the horse and grunted before turning back to the house and knocking on the door. He announced their identities, as was customary.

"Ducasus, son of Spero and Incus, son of none. We are here to ask after horses and lodging." He spoke in a full voice, projecting so those indoors might hear him.

There had been some slight commotion inside as the two travelers approached the house, but it stilled after the knocking. There was silence for a moment, then a clatter of hurried steps as someone ran down the stairs. The wooden house resounded with quick steps that approached the quaint, little door where they waited. Incus and Ducasus wondered why someone should be in such a hurry to greet strangers when the little red door was pulled open and there she was.

Rosae stood in the doorway, breathing quickly and

wearing an expression of shock and joy.

~°~

Voices conversed hurriedly and softly. Malleus lay prostrate in a dark room, slowly coming back to himself. *Where am I?* he wondered as he looked around in the darkness. His Hawkeye vision allowed him to see with very little light, so he was able to perceive that he was in a stone chamber. A strong wood and iron door appeared to be the only access to the room.

The distant voices grew clearer.

"Why the blazes should I care? How long has he been like this?"

"My dear Commander, you should care because he can help us. He's been out only for a few minutes - I brought him straight to you." Malleus recognized Mickey's voice, and remembering that he had struck him, he wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not.

"Well, if your magician can't pull himself out of his trance, I don't see how much good he can be."

"I've never seen him do this before, wise and decisive Commander, but I assure you that he is much more than a magician. He claims to be the instrument of destiny. He explained it all to me. We have encountered a celestial reckoning to the Flares."

"You talk a lot of nonsense; you know that?"

Malleus sat up on the table where he had been placed, and his mind whirled with activity.

Mickey called him "Commander." Is this the leader of the zealots? Malleus thought hopefully. *Or could it be an official in the Flares' army?* Malleus realized that he had no idea where he was. He did, however, realize that he had a part to play, and if in fact he was in the care of the zealots, he would have to get this right.

He thought of Mickey's earlier mockery, annoyed, and

decided he would do a better job of sounding ominous this time.

He took a deep breath and positioned himself directly in front of the door. He closed his eyes and tilted his head down. His thick hair fell on each side of his face. He remained motionless as he heard keys jingling in the door's lock.

"All I want to know, Mickey, is if- Son of a--"

The commander jumped back as the door swung open to reveal Malleus only inches from himself, standing silently and ominously.

"Hello, Commander." Malleus spoke evenly, with his eyes still closed. "You might see to your tongue. Loose words imply loose lips, and in these dark times we cannot afford to have loose lips, can we?"

The commander looked shell-shocked, and as soon as Malleus had finished speaking, he whirled on Mickey and shouted, "You told him who I am?! What, did you draw him a picture and tell him how to get here too? I should--"

"He told me nothing, Commander. I look at a man and I see into his soul." *Play it up...* Malleus thought. He raised his head slowly and opened his eyes. "I see you."

"Listen, you freak," the commander stepped forward aggressively, jabbing his finger in Malleus' face, "cut the act and let me get one thing straight with you..."

Malleus tuned him out, quickly taking in what he could in a few moments. He smelled wine, faintly, and in the flickering light of the torch which the commander held, he saw deep lines across the man's forehead. Underneath the sides of his lip were more subtle lines, but lines nonetheless. His eyes sagged just a bit, with lines beneath them as well.

The commander had finished his rant and expected a response. When he didn't get one, he turned on Mickey.

"You brought me a blasted lunatic, didn't you?"

Malleus maintained his glare, staring right into the

commander's eyes.

"I am no lunatic, Commander, but I am driven mad by the oppression of the Flares. I know that you worry that there is no hope for you. I know that you lie awake at night searching in vain for sleep. This pain has caused you to drink – more than you should, but you are not a clown to drink before others and laugh. No, yours is a more desperate case. You drink wine alone and you pray that it will poison your enemies and squelch your fears."

The commander was dumbfounded. He tried to stutter out a few words, but he was cut short by Malleus.

"Those days of darkness are coming to an end. I am here to ease your pain and give you hope. I am here to permit you to sleep again. Dispense with your foolish wine, for I have arrived. I will poison your enemies. I will squelch your fears."

"You cause me new fears," the commander said soberly, after clearing his throat.

"Good," Malleus replied. He smiled grimly. "You called me a 'freak.'"

"I apologize," the commander quickly interjected, wary of this new stranger.

"Don't," Malleus replied. "It's what I am. Tell the others."

Chapter Thirteen:

Reunion

“Ducasus!” Rosae exclaimed just before she leaped forward into his arms for a tight embrace. “I’m so glad to see you!”

“Rosae!” he sighed as he held her. After a long embrace they let go and looked into each other’s eyes with both joy and bewilderment.

“Rosae, I’m so glad to see you. What are you doing here?”

“I was about to ask you the same question. Here,” she said, pushing the door open, “come inside, it’s chilly out there.”

Ducasus’ heart fluttered and he smiled broadly as he followed Rosae into the house. Incus followed behind, all but forgotten as the door shut in front of him. Incus grunted and opened the door for himself, stooping down in order to enter the little house. He had to turn sideways as well, as his shoulders were too broad to pass through the doorway.

The inside of the house was dimly lit in the entryway, but Rosae led them into a sitting room where a roaring fire blazed on the hearth, illuminating the space. There were two simple chairs and a long, wooden bench all arranged facing the fire. Rosae seated herself on the bench and Ducasus followed suit. Incus walked in a moment later and scanned the room for a suitable place to sit. Finding none, he elected to stand.

Seated on the bench, Ducasus and Rosae looked deeply into one another’s eyes and embraced once more.

“I had heard you left our village, but I didn’t know

where. I was worried I'd never see you again," Ducasus began.

"Well, here I am," replied Rosae with a smile. She unconsciously flicked her hair away from her eyes. She had such exquisite, beautiful, amber hair. Ducasus thought it was fitting that he had never met another person with the same color. "I didn't know where you had gone either. You and Malleus must have been on your way to Pescas when Atrox died, but your parents left days before that happened, so I figured you wouldn't come back." She smiled again. "It's good to see you, Ducasus."

"It's good to see you too."

Amidst the staring, Incus began to feel uncomfortable. He was well acquainted with solitude, but he was not used to being so thoroughly overlooked. He was an imposing figure, even among Nebulae. He shrugged, thinking it strange, more than anything else, and stood silently and patiently, deciding that he was grateful for a reprieve from having to participate.

"Alright," Ducasus began, finally breaking the silence. "Tell me how you got here. Did you walk all the way from Atrox's estate? And where is 'here' anyway?"

Rosae removed her gaze from Ducasus for the first time since they'd arrived. Sadness settled over her.

"My mother and I heard the news about Atrox while we were grooming the horses. You and your family had left us already, and I knew a new master meant someone trying to prove himself and all of that nonsense. I told my mother we should leave. We heard shouting and fighting, so we grabbed the reins of three horses as quickly as we could. We took a racehorse for my mother, another one for me, and an Ignisian Puller in case we made it to somewhere we could farm in peace. I don't know what we were thinking. We were so terrified. My mother said she knew of a remote village north of where we were, and so that's where we went."

Her story finished, Rosae returned her eyes to Ducasus and smiled weakly.

"And that's how I ended up here in a nice woman's house. Her name is Inira and she's asleep already. She's kind of an old grandma."

At the mention of the woman's name Incus' head snapped towards Rosae and his eyes grew wide, listening intently. Then he scowled and returned to his own thoughts again.

Ducasus felt like something was off. Usually when Rosae told a story it was full of commentary, rabbit trails, and laughter. There had been none of that here. Ducasus returned the girl's smile.

"So you're the one that started the prison break."

Rosae laughed briefly.

"I think you did. And then your father."

"So is your mother sleeping now? All of that traveling must have been hard on her."

Rosae's smile faded and then disappeared completely.

"It was. The coughing got worse after the first night we spent outside. She couldn't get warm. Not even the next day." Rosae's lips trembled, and she rested her face on her hand. "It's my fault," she said through tears. "I'm the one who told her we had to go."

Ducasus reached for Rosae and she readily accepted the embrace. She wept hot tears onto her friend's shoulder. Ducasus only held her tight and waited, timidly moving his hand to the back of her head, and after hesitating, he began to stroke her hair as she cried.

After a long while, Rosae sniffed and looked up at Ducasus with swollen eyes. She smiled tragically as she spoke.

"I don't know what to do, Ducasus. My mother was the last bit of family I had left. I don't have a home." She began to cry once more, softly. Ducasus' heart wrenched. He wished that he could take her pain from her and bear it

himself, but since he could not, he took her by the shoulders and tilted his head down towards hers.

"Rosae, look at me."

She slowly raised her eyes to meet his. A diamond tear ran down the side of her cheek as she did so.

"I will be your family, and I will find us a home. We're going to Velocitum, and there we can have a whole new life. We'll build something new together." Ducasus' throat tightened as he prepared to say his next words. "I... I won't leave you, Rosae. You've always meant the world to me. I'll take care of you."

Rosae's eyes were wide.

"You'll take care of me? Ducasus, you're only seventeen. You're just as scared and lost as I am."

"I'll prove it to you. I'll do what has to be done." He took her small hand, rough from the unending labor of a slave but delicate nonetheless, and kissed it. "I promise."

"I'll go with you," Rosae said softly. "As friends."

Ducasus felt a lump form in his throat.

"Yes. Friends."

~°~

The fire was out and the early morning light crept inside, finding the two youths slumped over on the bench and the gargantuan Nebula sprawled out across the floor. The old woman who lived in the house feebly worked her way down the stairs, taking each step slowly and carefully, being sure "not to cause any excitement." She finally reached the landing and proceeded to make her way to the living room with the intention of laying a log on the fire. Her old bones needed something burning in the house, especially on a morning in late autumn, such as it was.

She shuffled down the corridor, always watching her feet and holding onto something because, "we don't want

to cause any excitement." She passed the dusty walls as she did each morning, walking by her old drawings that she had hung in the hall so she could see them every day. Everything was serene and calm and the same as every other day in the hall.

The same could not be said for the living room. She caused excitement in the living room.

The three sleepers awoke to a feeble and wheezing scream that none of them could place at first. It sounded very little like a scream, but it was jarring nonetheless, and they all awoke with a start.

The poor old woman had been born, raised, married, and widowed in that hilltop house, and seeing a seven and a half foot tall colossus rise from the floor and almost hit his head on the ceiling was something that life had simply not prepared her for. She continued her wheezing scream over and over as she tried in vain to get a bearing on the situation.

"Is there a duck in here?" Ducasus wondered aloud as he got up, not seeing the old woman.

Incus looked down at the frightened old woman, who was barely more than half his height, and he had no idea what to do. She looked up at him with fear, occasionally glancing at the other strange man in her house, wheeze-screaming all the while.

Rosae rose and rushed over, and thankfully the old woman recognized her. She took the old woman by the hands and tried to calm her down. She was a whole head shorter than Rosae.

"It's fine, Inira. These are my friends! They came here last night after you had gone to sleep and I let them in. They're friends!"

At this, the sounds that Ducasus had mistaken for a duck quacking stopped, and the curly, gray-haired little woman looked at the two visitors with wide eyes and tight lips. Everyone looked at each other for an uncomfortably

long moment.

"Oh, how nice!" she said abruptly, breaking into a smile. "Welcome, welcome. Your father must have been a horse!" she said, turning to Incus.

Incus raised an eyebrow at this, uncertain as to how he should respond. Rosae jumped in.

"Inira, this is Ducasus," she said calmly, guiding her to her friend.

"Oh, my! It's a pleasure to meet you, Du Cabbage," she said, shaking his hand. Then, leaning over to Rosae, who leaned down in response, she put her withered hand to her ear and spoke.

"Keep your hands on this one, Rosae," the old woman began, speaking much too loudly for her words to remain secret. Both Ducasus and Incus heard every word clearly as she nearly shouted into Rosae's ear. "He's handsome – not like that man-horse over there."

Both Incus and Ducasus blushed.

"Um... okay." Rosae began, "And this is Malleus, Ducasus' brother. Sorry I haven't said 'hi' yet, Malleus."

"Oh!" the old woman exclaimed, extending a hand to Incus.

"Rosae, that's not-" Ducasus tried to explain, but he was cut off by the old woman shaking the giant's hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you! I'm Inira."

Incus shook her hand gently, and a look of abject despondency overcame him. "...No you're not," he said under his breath. The giant sighed heavily and released her tiny hand from his massive grip.

"Rosae." Ducasus was trying to get her attention still.

"Well isn't that nice we've met everyone!" the smiling old woman exclaimed. "You are all welcome, make yourselves at home – especially you, Cabbage." The old woman leaned over and spoke to Rosae, again, much too loudly. "Bat your eyes at Cabbage, dear. You aren't getting any younger!" She resumed her normal tone as she began

to shuffle back down the hall. Her normal tone was only slightly louder than when she whispered. "Well, I'm off to do a drawing. You've given me an idea! It was lovely to meet you all!"

The gray-haired woman shuffled away slowly and disappeared into the other room. The three left remaining stood in silence, everyone thoroughly embarrassed in some way or another. At last, Ducasus remembered what he had been trying to tell Rosae.

"Rosae, this Neb here--"

Rosae cut him off.

"He's your brother, I know. I guess you two were right to keep watching your stars. I thought that you wanted to be the Neb and Malleus wanted to be the Hawkeye. You seem to have done that backwards."

A sadness welled up in Ducasus.

"No, Rosae. I'm not a Hawkeye. I'm not anything. This isn't Malleus, it's Incus. He saved me when I was in the mountains."

Incus nodded his head solemnly, still thrown off by the old woman's strange intrusion.

Rosae cocked her head slightly and bit on her fingernail, the pointer finger of her left hand. Ducasus loved it when she did that. He found it feminine and alluring. She took her hand away from her mouth and asked, "Wait, then where's Malleus? And where are your parents? I figured you were all together."

Ducasus smiled weakly, as Rosae had the night before.

"It seems we've both lost something."

"What happened to Malleus?" she asked gently. "I know you were with him. Why isn't he here?"

Ducasus' eyebrows furrowed and he clenched his fists, looking at the ground. Incus stepped in and saved him from having to respond.

"His brother betrayed him and took the powers of both stars. Somehow he survived."

"He abandoned you?" Rosae said in shock. "I don't believe it! Ooh, I wish he was here so I could-"

"Rosae!" Ducasus interjected. "It's okay." His expression softened slightly. "It's okay. We have each other now."

Rosae folded her arms and looked at Ducasus strangely.

"You better be talking about you and gigantor there."

Ducasus scrunched up his face.

"What?"

"Ducasus," Incus interjected, pulling him to the door, "help me gage the weather outside."

"It's sunny. Wait-"

Incus shoved Ducasus outdoors and followed behind, letting the red door close behind them.

"Incus, what are you doing? I was talking to Rosae."

"What is the name of the martial art I've begun teaching you?"

"Ar-lenti. Why?"

"What does it mean?"

"The art of gentleness."

"Good. Practice it here. With her."

"I was being gentle!"

"No, you were being a ham-fisted dullard putting a vulnerable girl in an uncomfortable situation. You were using the art of 'coming on too strong and being a blockhead.'"

Ducasus frowned at the giant.

"Just because you've helped me out doesn't mean you get to interfere in this. Rosae and I have always had eyes for each other."

"Perhaps," the giant shrugged. He put a hand on Ducasus' shoulder as he walked past. "But right now, you're doing a terrible job."

"Are you sure you want to leave today?" Ducasus asked Rosae as he lifted the saddle onto the black charger. "We could stay another night if you want to."

Rosae stroked her gray charger's long snout, looking deeply into the horse's eye. The horse seemed calm and indifferent.

"No, I've been here too long already. I want to see some more of the world, you know?" Her eyes sparkled as she spoke, causing Ducasus' stomach to flutter.

How does she do that? he thought. He was about to say something about their new life together when he remembered what Incus had told him. He pondered as he cinched up the saddle, then finally said, "Rosae, I'm sorry if I was awkward yesterday or coming on a little strong."

"A lot strong."

Ducasus grinned in return.

"Yeah. A lot strong. We've always been close, and I was just so glad to see you. Sorry for being weird."

Rosae's shoulders dropped, like a weight was suddenly lifted off of her. She sighed and regarded Ducasus for a moment.

"It's alright. I mean, Ducasus, I feel close to you too. I even think you're - Well, we don't need to talk about that right now."

Yes we do! Ducasus shouted in his mind. *Finish your sentence! Please!*

Rosae laughed.

"Look, I'm glad to see you, that's what I'm trying to say. Really glad. But with everything that's happened lately, you can't just show up on my doorstep talking like you're my husband or something."

"You're right," Ducasus returned seriously. "That's for a few months down the line when I win you over with my charm and wit."

"And good looks," Rosae said wryly as she took a handful of hay and pressed it against Ducasus' face. She

walked away shaking her head but wearing a grin.

Ducasus brushed the straw from his brow and watched her as she walked to retrieve her small bag of provisions.

"Ar-Lenti," Ducasus muttered to himself with a smile. He patted his horse on the nose, then led him around to the front of the house.

Incus stood a short distance away, trying to be patient with the shriveled woman before him. The Ignisian Puller and the black that Ducasus would ride grazed in front of the house, but the other charger, a young, gray mare, was still in the corral. Incus stood beside it and the old woman stood on the other side of the fence.

"Now, there are two gates to leave the pen. I used to only use them for sheep, you know, so I don't think they're the best for horses. The one farthest from us, on the other side of the pen, dear, is probably the one you should take him through. The gate right here has a loose hinge, and I think using it only makes it worse."

Incus tugged on the horse's reins and began walking to the other end of the corral along the fence.

"But you know..." the old woman interjected, "The gate you're heading to is probably too small to fit a horse through. You'd better take her back here."

Incus blinked his massive eyelids and turned the horse around, walking him in the other direction now.

"But now that I think about it, this gate isn't the best, and I don't want it broken. You'd better use the other," the old woman said.

Incus turned and began leading the horse in the other direction.

Ducasus and Rosae, now finished with all of their preparations, sauntered over to watch.

"We're all ready to go, Incus. Just waiting on you," Ducasus called.

Incus cast a glance at them as he changed directions

yet again, at Inira's insistence.

"Actually, dear, could you be so kind as to use the closer gate? You won't fit through that other one." Incus sighed and turned once more, helpless. "But there is that hinge..."

Incus stopped and looked down at the little woman who had her finger on her lower lip and appeared to be deep in thought.

"Yes, yes. You know, use the other gate. It shouldn't break on you. But then again..."

Incus sighed heavily and glared at Inira. Then, he walked to the flank of the horse, bent down, and lifted it up on his massive arms, setting it down on the outside of the corral. Perhaps no one was more surprised at this tremendous feat of strength than the horse itself, having never been lifted before.

Rosae was stunned as Incus proceeded to step over the sheep corral and regain the stallion's reins. She leaned over to an equally stunned Ducasus.

"Can they all do things like that?"

"I don't know. I don't think so..."

Incus arrived before them with the same stony expression that he usually wore, though it betrayed a touch of annoyance. He breathed out heavily.

"Time to go."

Rosae ran and gave the old woman a hug and thanked her for all her hospitality. Inira just smiled and gave more loud, embarrassing advice concerning Ducasus. Rosae laughed this time, glad that the others were a ways off.

With their thanks and farewells given, the three sojourners set off once again in the direction of Velocitum: Rosae atop her gray charger, Ducasus atop the black, and Incus on the large, brown Ignisian, looking none too pleased about having to ride, but riding expertly and with dignity nonetheless. Rosae's amber hair floated gently in

the wind, and from time to time when she thought he wasn't looking, she cast a gaze at Ducasus.

Chapter Fourteen:

The First Time

Malleus sat in a stone-walled chamber that served as the commander's personal quarters. Compartments and shelves were chiseled into the rock, and Malleus saw several books and scrolls and maps. He gazed at the titles on the books: *Comparative Anatomy of the Gifted Peoples*, *Battle Strategies across Pontus*, *Travels to the Northern Lands*, and others. Malleus had never heard of any of them. He made a mental note to obtain books for himself to read. He was ignorant of the world, and painfully aware of that fact. He intended to become better informed. He didn't recognize any of the names on the books either – the commander had volumes by Marcus, Marius, Scipius, Clementia, and others. It appeared that he had several old diaries on the shelves as well.

"I perceive that you still don't trust me, Commander."

"Trust is earned," the commander responded gruffly.

Mickey had been dismissed by Malleus, and now he was going through the passageways telling the zealots he encountered of a fierce new leader they had acquired, who happened to be very good friends with Mickey. This left Malleus and the commander alone in his quarters. Malleus sat calmly while the other paced the room.

"And have I not earned it in conversing with you? I've demonstrated that I am an instrument of destiny to help you in your glorious struggle against the Flares."

The commander scoffed.

"You think you can earn my trust in a conversation? No. No, I haven't stayed alive and undiscovered by trusting every snot-nosed rebel who tells me what he can

do for me. You've earned some fear and some suspicion, but you have not earned my trust."

This man is tougher than Mickey. And definitely smarter, Malleus thought. He chuckled softly and smugly, causing the commander to stop pacing and scrutinize the mysterious young man before him.

"I applaud you, Commander," Malleus began. "It is refreshing to see a man of character leading this rebellion."

The commander looked disgusted.

"We haven't been a rebellion in forty years. We've only been thieves and prey."

"Ah, but Commander, since my arrival, we are a rebellion once again. I know that you have greater ambitions than of simply stealing from the rich and giving to... yourselves. You are a man interested in conquest, and so am I. You long to gather your forces together and raise your banner in triumph, but you fear and do not know how."

"Oh, I know how. I know exactly how I'd gather my forces together and lead them against the three nations. I've studied the problem my entire life. And afraid? You better believe I'm afraid. When the zealots called the Ungifteds of this world to fight forty years ago it was a disaster. I was a boy, but I remember. My father was leading the combined forces. We outnumber 'gifteds,' star-demons, on this planet, you know that? There are two of us for every one of them!" The commander was yelling now, impassioned by the content of his speech. "But that wasn't good enough. Every time we stood to a pitched battle we were routed. Decimated. After a couple of months, we couldn't get an army of any size to even stand formation before a battle."

The commander strode over to Malleus and looked down on him. Malleus busied himself with his fingernails, trying his best to seem disinterested and all-knowing, yet listening intently the whole time.

"So you had better believe I'm afraid. I'm afraid of killing the cause for good and for spending the lives of so many people like me on a gamble. That's why we hide and steal. That's why we're not issuing the orders to march on Vis and Velocitum and Cogitare right now. Our network still exists, and our ties are strong, but it would be a march to death and nothing more." The commander eyed Malleus carefully as he continued to stare at his fingers, bending them and straightening them as though incredibly bored. The commander turned angrily and continued his pacing.

How did I not know all of this? Malleus thought. *There was a war?*

"In the meantime," the commander spoke again, "I have to decide what to do with you."

Malleus lowered his voice, remembering all of the sudden that he was supposed to be ominous, as well as all-knowing. He had been coming across wrong for the last few minutes. Incompletely, at least. Keeping up a persona all of the time was hard.

"You need a change of strategy, not a different goal."

"You know," the commander began indignantly, gathering courage from his anger. "You're awfully calm for someone who looks so much like a star-demon. This is a dangerous place for you."

Malleus stood up slowly, raised his eyes to the ceiling, and smiled darkly.

"Nowhere is dangerous for me."

That was good, he thought. I need to keep coming across like that. I am a monster and a reckoning.

The commander sneered.

"I'm tired of you. You and your weird eyes."

Why do people keep saying that? Malleus wondered. *The stars must have changed them.* He made a mental note to study his eyes the next time he encountered a reflective surface.

"Guards!" the commander barked.

Immediately two sentries that were positioned outside the door burst in.

"This is a mistake," Malleus said calmly, in a quiet, even tone.

The commander ignored him.

"Take this freak away. Lock him up and don't feed him until I figure out what to do with him."

"I do not wish to harm my own soldiers, Commander," Malleus said somberly as the two sentinels approached him with their spears lowered. Malleus' heart raced in his chest. He was glad that they carried spears and not swords; he and Ducasus had grown up stick-fighting all of their lives. Their father had taught them. Malleus wouldn't have had the slightest idea what to do with a sword.

"*Your* soldiers?" the commander said incredulously. "You don't want to harm 'your soldiers'? Funny how they listen to me then, isn't it?"

Malleus focused, listening carefully as the sentinels' footfalls told of their position, closing in behind him. One was slightly ahead of the other. Malleus' gifts gave him the advantage. One more footstep and the smell of the spears' iron tips told Malleus it was time.

Like a whirlwind, Malleus spun to his left and placed the spear under his arm, grabbing the shaft farther down with his left hand. The force of his turn and the speed in which it was done allowed him to rip the weapon out of the sentinel's hands. Malleus completed his spin and went beyond, slapping the shaft of the spear into the side of the other sentinel's head like a lightning strike. He fell to the ground in what seemed to be slow-motion.

Malleus instantly threw his right hand in front of his left in a reverse-grip, and raising the spear in the air, he switched grips with his left hand and catapulted the spear over his head, snapping it down on top of the spearless

sentinel's skull. The blow struck with the head of the spear, and Malleus felt a strange sensation in his hands as the weapon connected. The sentinel fell to the ground, and it was over. The whole exchange had lasted hardly more than a second.

Well that was easier than I remember, Malleus thought, pleased with himself. His speed allowed him to catch his opponents off-guard and it caused his strikes to be more powerful. His abilities of perception ensured that his aim was flawless.

The commander stood in shock, wide-eyed at the impossible display he had just witnessed.

"You're... you're a Flare! That drunkard brought a Flare into our hideout!" the commander bellowed.

Malleus tossed his spear to the side and shook his head.

"No. I'm something much worse than a Flare. I have been given their powers to mock them with, but I have other powers besides." Malleus stared intently at the commander with his two-toned eyes. "I will chalk this attack up to your ignorance, but I will not be so forgiving again." Malleus' bloodstream thrilled with the audacity of what he was saying. This feeling was intoxicating, what he had just done. It was incredible. It was so easy!

"Forgiving?" The commander walked to the sentinel whose spear Malleus had taken. He touched the man's throat beneath the chin. "You killed one of my best men. Antony is dead."

Dead? He can't be dead. Malleus thought. *I only hit him once. He's not dead.*

The commander put his ear to the fallen zealot's chest and listened. Crestfallen, he raised his head and shook it as he stood. Malleus panicked on the inside.

I'm not a murderer. He can't be dead! Besides, it's his own fault, he attacked me. How is he dead?

The commander took a breath and spoke soberly.

"I say again, you have certainly earned my fear, but not my trust."

It took every ounce of Malleus' self-possession to remain in character. He was manic on the inside.

"I warned you, Commander. I did not," Malleus almost choked, but he caught himself and continued. "I did not want to harm my soldiers. I am a dangerous man and you threatened to imprison me when I came to you as a friend." Malleus was barely holding it together. The second sentinel stirred slightly and moaned. A huge lump had already formed on the side of his head. "We will speak again. Give me quarters and come speak to me again when you've buried your friend."

The commander sighed heavily. He gestured out the door with his hand.

"The drunk will show you."

Malleus turned around without another word and walked down the stone passageway with trembling legs. It was the first time he had ever killed a man, and the lifeless face remained in Malleus' mind.

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Malleus paced in his new quarters. He'd had enough presence of mind to ensure it was a door that only locked from the inside and not an accidental prison. He had instructed Mickey to stand guard outside the heavy, wooden door, worn with age.

I killed somebody - and not even a Flare. It was a real person! Malleus was twisted up inside. His head was in turmoil about the events that had transpired only hours before.

It isn't fair! he thought, clutching the hair on the sides of his head. *It's not my fault. Besides, he attacked me. Or, he was going to attack me.* Malleus sighed heavily and fell into a wooden chair. He rubbed his face with his hand. *I am a*

monster, he thought.

He was torn from his thoughts by the shallow sound of footsteps beyond his door. The sound was so soft that only the best ears of the Ungifteds would have been able to hear it, but Malleus' starborn abilities allowed him to do more than just detect it. He could hear slight variations between the footsteps of individuals: How long they took between steps, the way they laid their feet down, how heavily each foot fell. He therefore knew that it was the commander who approached him.

His head was still a mess, but there was work to be done.

Some sacrifices must be made, Malleus thought with an exertion of will. *The cause is what matters.*

He positioned himself directly before the door, again looking down. The commander opened the door.

"What in Pontus?" The commander jumped back, disturbed once more by Malleus' manner of meeting him at the door.

"Hello, Commander," Malleus began, cutting off the other. "Are you ready to trust me yet?"

The commander brushed past Malleus and went deeper into the lamp-lit, windowless room.

"That depends. Are you ready to tell me what the blazes it is you want? And stop waiting for me right behind the door. It's terrifying."

Malleus smiled grimly.

"I'll tell you what I want. I want to see a world where Flares no longer exist."

"Sure, that's the idea. But how exactly do you plan on accomplishing that?"

Malleus lowered his voice.

"Fear. By breaking their spirit. By focusing all efforts here instead of spread out across the whole of Pontus." Malleus took a few steps with his hands folded behind his back. His layered hair swayed with him over his peasant

shirt as he turned.

The commander looks interested, Malleus thought. He wants to believe me. I've just got to convince him.

"You told me of a war, years ago, and of how our people were embarrassed. The Flares are not afraid of us, so if we were to march against them today they would be full of courage and valor. They would be fighting at full strength. We would be soundly defeated." Malleus turned back towards the commander, his green-blue eyes burning fiercely. "Now here is the solution: Begin to gather your forces. Let the people flock to you, awaiting their orders. Establish a foothold here. In the meantime we will begin to teach the Flares to fear. We will work in secret, gnawing away at their strength as rats in the night until the moment arrives for us to show our faces proudly and advance. But we must first make them afraid."

"What are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting you inform zealots across Pontus that we move against the Flares. Prepare for war in secret. Before we reveal ourselves we will strike them in the night, from afar, and with a disguised hand. We will scatter them and teach them to fear."

"Sabotage?"

"And terror," Malleus replied, a wild look in his eyes.

The commander rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You make it sound as if we would steal the star of the nation itself."

Malleus was caught off-guard by this.

"The kingdom has a star?" Malleus immediately regretted his words. Wasn't he supposed to be all-knowing?

The commander gestured with his hands and raised his eyebrows as if the answer was obvious. "...Yes."

Malleus recovered.

"Then perhaps we will steal it, as you said."

The commander scoffed.

"I was joking. That star is uncommonly well-protected."

"I am an uncommon man, Commander," Malleus replied with all confidence. "Send word to your cohorts that we move in Flaroria. In the meantime, I require books, maps, and a man knowledgeable about this city to question. I wish to learn how we may best exploit these sub-human Flares. We will begin our campaign of fear soon."

The commander was quiet for a long time, staring at nothing in particular but with active eyes as he stroked his chin.

"Alright," he finally said, looking up. "We'll see what you can do for us. You'll have your books."

Malleus grinned.

"And you shall have a freer world because of it."

Chapter Fifteen:

Taken

Traveling by horse was uncomfortable for Ducasus. He didn't really know how at first, and Rosae and Incus had to teach him. His legs were sore and his back was stiff, but what mattered was that he was with Rosae. He was fairly certain that he was experiencing heaven.

The mountains were long behind them now, and the hills became fewer and farther between. The land was scattered meadows and plains interrupted by patches of trees growing together in clumps. There were even occasional copses of mirror trees which they would watch together as the last rays of the sun faded away. Rosae had lately begun resting her head on Ducasus' shoulder during these times as they watched the leafy reflections shine up into the clouds.

This was bliss for Ducasus.

The nights grew colder and the three travelers slept closer to the fire at night. The sky was gray most days, but it didn't rain. Their luck, so far, had held.

Ducasus and Rosae grew closer. What started as settling back into their old routine of jokes and ribbing one another slowly became something sweeter. Rosae rode close to Ducasus on the long days of travel, and they talked from sunrise to sunset, increasingly lost in each other's company. Incus, ever the stoic, was more than content to ride ahead and enjoy the silence.

It was a particularly cold day, and they wore their blankets around them as they rode. Incus had been inured by many winters of wandering, so he did not mind the weather overmuch. Ducasus and Rosae conversed, as had

become their habit.

"We'll have to be careful when we arrive," Ducasus said. "I assume big cities are the most dangerous for us."

"Why is that?" Rosae asked. "More people to blend in with."

Ducasus shook his head.

"Maybe, but it's the capital of Flaroria! The Kingdom of the Sun. All sorts of trade must go through it, and I'm sure the auctioneers and slavers are active there."

Up ahead, Incus caught the tail end of Ducasus' statement and was pulled from his thoughts. He held up his large horse and waited for his companions to catch up.

"Hmm," Rosae replied. "I hate to admit it, but you might be right. Maybe the countryside is just safer. I've always wanted to see one of the big cities, though. To maybe even live in one."

"Oh, we'll see it, at least. Incus said he was planning to sell his pelts in Velocitum, and he'll take us with him. We just have to be smart. Maybe we'll say that we're Incus' slaves until we figure out how things work in the city."

Incus put a hand out and stopped Ducasus' horse.

"Who taught you to think so strangely?" Incus asked.

"No, it's a good idea, Incus," Rosae interjected, pulling on her horse's reins. "That way no one snatches us up and puts us on the auction stand. We've heard the stories."

"We don't want to be sent back to Atrox's estate," Ducasus added. "Whoever runs it now might be worse."

"And there's a chance we'd be split up," Rosae added. "I don't want that to happen again."

Incus did not understand.

"You're worried about being forced into slavery in Velocitum?" Ducasus and Rosae exchanged glances and agreed.

"We're Ungifteds," Ducasus explained. "That's just how it is."

Incus stared first at Ducasus, then at Rosae, his expression inscrutable.

"Slavery has been outlawed for three hundred years."

Ducasus blinked, not sure what to say in response. Rosae was feeling more articulate.

"Then I guess we imagined our upbringing, right Ducasus?"

"You were raised as slaves?" Incus asked.

In response, Ducasus turned in his saddle and raised his shirt. His back was covered in thin white lines, telltale signs of the whip.

"Father of Lights," Incus muttered. "Your ignorance begins to make sense now."

Rosae, irritated, pulled her horse around to face Incus's Ignisian.

"So are you mocking us? What were you talking about that it's been outlawed for three hundred years?" She frowned. "It hasn't seemed very outlawed to us."

"I do not know what to tell you, but I am speaking the truth. In Nebularis, we have never held Ungifted slaves. Nebulae could perform labor with more efficiency anyway. In Lucia it was banned even before Flaroria, where it used to be widespread but was wiped out three hundred years ago."

"Except where we grew up," Ducasus said quietly. "In a place so remote no one ever looked."

It was quiet, then, and no one made eye contact with the others. Only Incus held his head high, and even he was lost in thoughts. The injustice of it all chafed at Ducasus, added to the list of misfortunes that had befallen him.

Eventually, Incus nudged his horse around Rosae's charger and spoke.

"You won't have to pose as slaves in Velocitum. That's been done away with."

He urged his mount forward, and slowly, gradually, Ducasus and Rosae followed.

No one spoke again for the rest of the day.



"Incus! Look!"

Incus had been looking. He saw the road Ducasus pointed to now, but he was torn. On the one hand, navigating would be much easier if they ceased from the countryside and adopted the road. On the other hand, there was a better chance of encountering thieves and criminals along that way.

"Should we take it?" Ducasus asked him. "My legs are numb from all of this up and down through the meadows."

Incus looked at the youth he had rescued. He was looking stronger now, regaining his strength. He had a lean frame, but strong. Some of his despair had left him when he had encountered Rosae, and the fear he had chased out himself. A seed of bitterness seemed to remain in him, however.

"Criminals frequent the road," Incus said soberly.

"But you're with us," Rosae replied from atop her gently cantering mount. "I can't imagine anyone would try to give you trouble."

"You'd be surprised..." Incus muttered.

"I think you're right, Rosae. And it will be easier to travel on the road." Ducasus rubbed his sore legs.

Incus acquiesced. In truth, he didn't much care for riding over the uneven terrain either. He preferred to walk, but if they had to ride, the road would take them to their destination quicker.

"Whatever you wish."

The trio diverted their course and trotted towards the bend in the road that Ducasus had spied.

The going was easier then, and when the road cut through patches of forest, the chilling effects of the wind

were diminished. There were fewer evergreens now, but there were plenty of bushes and ivies that clung stubbornly to their leaves. Most of the canopy that hung above them was made up of scattered brown and red leaves. Empty branches mourned in the light of the cold afternoon.

Rosae and Ducasus rode side-by-side, following behind Incus. Rosae looked ahead at the stern, stoic giant and realized she had hardly said a word to him, and certainly she hadn't had a conversation with the giant that did not include Ducasus.

He seems like an interesting character, she thought. She had never seen a Nebula before. A fancy took her, and she kicked her horse to speed up and ride alongside the imposing Neb.

"Hello," Rosae said, sweetly. Ducasus watched from behind. She had a winning smile, she was beautiful... He couldn't imagine a person who wouldn't tell her anything she wanted to know.

"Hello."

"I haven't gotten to properly introduce myself to you, and that's just terrible of me." Rosae spoke emphatically.

She waited for a response, grinning in her special way that always drew out whoever she was speaking to. Incus continued riding in silence. Rosae was undaunted.

"My name is Rosae, as you know, and I come from the same village as Ducasus – but I suppose you knew that as well." Rosae looked to Incus for encouragement or a response. She received neither. *Alright... maybe direct questions are the way to go here,* she thought.

"Where are you from?"

"Nebularis. The city of Vis," his deep voice rumbled from atop his huge Ignisian.

"Oh, Vis. Is that an important city in the Nebula Kingdom?"

Incus nodded.

"I've always wanted to travel there. Well, I've always wanted to travel anywhere," she explained. "You don't get to see much as a slave. You have to tell me all about it. Did you love it?" she asked, enthusiastically.

"No. That's why I left."

The sound of clacking hooves walking on the hard-packed dirt road filled the void in the conversation. Rosae did not know how to proceed. She glanced back at Ducasus for help. He raised his hands helplessly. Rosae turned back and tried again. She noticed the discolored, parallel scars that ran on the giant's neck. *Aha!* she thought. *Men love to tell scar stories.*

"How did you get that scar?" she asked, gesturing to the location on her own neck.

Incus glanced at her to see where she indicated. He had plenty of scars to choose from, but none so prominent as the one she referred to. He raised his gaze to the canopy above as he answered.

"I picked a fight with something bigger than me."

Rosae scoffed and turned to look at Ducasus again, who was shaking his head. He didn't know the story.

"You found something bigger than you and then you decided to fight it?"

"More or less."

Rosae was playfully incredulous, but also genuinely surprised.

"You're tall for a Nebula, aren't you? I've never seen one besides you."

Incus nodded.

"Though there are a few who are taller. There are tales of a Nebula living in Silva who stands above ten feet at the shoulders."

"Ten feet?" Rosae exclaimed, feeling proud that she had gotten more than two words out of the giant. She turned around. "Did you hear that, Ducasus? Ten feet!"

"At the shoulders!" Ducasus added lamely, instantly

regretting opening his mouth.

Rosae turned her attention to the Neb.

"Wow. Okay, so you picked a fight with something bigger than you. How did you make it out after you lost?"

Incus smirked.

"I didn't lose."

"What?" Rosae and Ducasus were laughing now, and Incus' smile broadened a little. It was still just a grin, but Rosae thought it was good progress. She jovially continued, encouraging him, turning her head down and raising her brow.

"Your father must have been proud, to have such a warrior. And I bet all of the girls were crawling over you."

All traces of a smile vanished instantly from Incus' face. He stared straight ahead; his expression set in stone.

"I have no father but the Father of Lights, who watches us all."

Rosae looked down, and even Ducasus' foolish expression faded. There was a beat before Incus spoke again, in a voice hardened by remorse and sorrow.

"And she tried to come for me, but she was unable. I was unable to get to her."

Incus kicked his mount and trotted several steps ahead, wishing to be with his own thoughts for a time. Rosae fell back next to Ducasus again, a look of sad empathy on her face. Ducasus reached over and squeezed her hand. She squeezed his in return, her eyes inhabiting somewhere far away. In a moment, she snapped her reins and galloped up alongside the Neb once more. Ducasus' black charger trotted behind to catch up.

"I don't have a father either," she said. "Or a mother, now, but you heard that story." Tears began to fill her eyes. "We worked in the stables at Atrox's manor. That was our job as slaves. When I was only seven my father was beaten because one of our master's favorite horses got sick. It wasn't even his fault, it just got sick. They beat him

so badly that he died. The horse got better a week after, but it was too late." Rosae sniffed hard and kept her tears in; only one escaped. It slid down her face as a piece of light, and then it leapt off of her chin, falling to the earth below.

Incus remained tense, but he tilted his head down.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"I'm sorry for yours, too. But it doesn't mean you have to shut people down."

Incus nodded and Rosae slowed her horse once more, allowing Ducasus to catch up with her and ride alongside. He reached across the gap between them and held her hand. She stroked his hand softly with her thumb in return.

After a few moments, she stood in her stirrups and leaned over to give Ducasus a quick kiss on the cheek, catching him by surprise. Ducasus blushed and his heart beat rapidly, but Rosae returned to her saddle without mentioning it.

"What you said when we left was right, Ducasus. We will start a new life in Velocitum. And it will be together."

She looked at him, then, shyly. A wave of peace washed over Ducasus' soul. He gave a modest nod of agreement, and that was that.



The day turned to evening and the three wanderers found themselves in a group of hills that butted against each other, rising out of the lower elevation of the meadows, which now blew this way and that in the wind, as if waves of the ocean moved through each and every gray and purple strand of grass.

The hills stood alone in their sight. Everything before them was meadow with copses interspersed here and there. The tail end of the foothills that marked the last

vestiges of the southern mountain range lay behind them, and the cluster of hills they now approached appeared as an island bearing off of an archipelago of mountains amidst a sea of meadows.

They had taken some food with them when they left the village in the foothills, but their stock was now long gone, and most importantly they were out of meat. Incus declared that the hills would be a good place to hunt, causing Ducasus to wonder for the first time how exactly he captured game. It certainly couldn't have been with the huge hammer he carried. He never saw any traps either, like he would have expected from someone who sold pelts for a living. Ducasus asked, but Incus did not offer any explanation.

The road wound between the hills and they continued to follow it, planning to find a campsite to wait for Incus' hunt.

The sun sank low and filtered through the pine needles of the few conifers that grew upon the hills, in stark contrast to their bare counterparts. Incus turned up the hill, wanting to retire off of the road a ways, and the others followed him. They reached a site just below a small rise that was relatively flat and surrounded by leafless trees standing guard.

Tired and sore from travel, the sojourners tied their horses and lay down to sleep immediately, despite the cold. It was a little more bearable now that they were sheltered by the hills that encompassed them, and the low mound at the head of their camp served as a sort of windbreak. Ducasus helped Rosae make a bed, then he threw himself on the ground and fell straightaway into a deep and dreamless sleep. The stars twinkled above, as they always had.

Ducasus woke softly, still half-engaged in slumber. The gentle light of morning bathed the camp and made everything new once more. He still clutched his cover, but upon lifting his head he noticed that Incus was gone. His pack and his horse remained, but not his hammer.

He does use the hammer, Ducasus thought. How does that even work?

Ducasus blinked the sleep away, and his eyes fell on a slumbering angel, lightly wrapped up in dreams. Ducasus smiled at Rosae's beauty. Her amber hair fell softly around her pale face. The chill in the air caused her cheeks to blush, planting roses in beds of white. He was sure he would never gaze on anything so beautiful as her. When he was near her, his lost star and lost brother didn't seem to matter anymore.

We'll be married in Velocitum, Ducasus thought. And I'll wait for her to be ready. I can be patient.

With no need for haste, Incus absent, and Rosae still peacefully asleep, Ducasus did not see any harm in returning to sleep for a little while longer. He clutched his cover up to his chin and rolled lethargically onto his side. Sleep met him quickly, only too happy to oblige.

A piercing scream rang out, and Ducasus was jolted awake. He threw off his blanket and shot a look at Rosae, who stared into a sneering face with cruel, green eyes.

It was a Flare.

He wore no shirt but had on a pair of white pants, stained from dirt and dust, with a red sash tied around his waist. He held a rag in his hands as if he had been trying to sneak up on Rosae to gag her when she awoke.

"Hey!" Ducasus shouted as he leapt towards Rosae's assailant. Out of nowhere, he felt his legs kicked out from under him and his body went sprawling into the soil. Ducasus quickly rolled over to see three more Flares that had arrived, one of whom must have kicked him. All of them had blonde hair of various shades, poisonous, green

eyes, and a curious tattoo of seven stars.

Ducasus leapt up but felt himself shoved down again. The Flare before him seemed to have barely moved. Rosae, meanwhile, attempted to get up and run from the first Flare, but she stumbled. Before she knew what was happening, she tasted a dirty cloth in her mouth, and a knot was speedily tied to close it around her.

Ducasus tried to leap up again, and again he was knocked down. Something had hit him in the face.

Enraged, Ducasus moved to stand again, but this time he planted his hands behind him, as before, and instead of trying to get up, he launched his foot upwards in a quick kick. The Flare nearest to him was caught off-guard, trying to show off with his preemptive attacks of speed once again. He fell, holding where he had been kicked. Ducasus scrambled to his feet. There was a sudden flurry of motion before him as he backed up and ran into something. He turned around and found himself face to face with a Flare.

"Incus!" Ducasus called from deep in his lungs.

A strike he never saw sent him flying through the air and he landed hard, sliding through fallen leaves and dirt, snapping twigs as he went. Rosae was kicking and flailing with all her might but without much success. Her attacker tried to hold her, and Rosae managed to elbow him in the nose. As she tried to sprint away, however, the Flare grabbed her once again, only a moment later.

Ducasus rolled over, starting to get to his feet. His face bled where a twig sliced into him, and he was covered in dust and sweat.

"No!" he shouted, but as he rose to pursue Rosae's attacker, he felt a blow to the stomach and saw the sneering face of a Flare standing over him. He was joined by one of the others, the one that Ducasus had kicked, and the fourth Flare went to Rosae and struck her on the side of the head with a back fist. Her struggling stopped.

Ducasus roared with rage and flailed wildly. A foot hit

his ribs and pressed down, keeping him in place as the two Flares that stood over him unsheathed their rapiers. The early morning light was deflected in all directions off of the glistening metal.

No, no, no! Ducasus' mind and heart raced.

The first Flare moved his foot to Ducasus' throat, and the other strutted to Ducasus' side, blocking out the sun. He flipped his sword a few times in his hand, then he raised it in front of his face, pointed downwards at Ducasus' chest.

The Flare winked at Ducasus just before taking a breath, tensing his shoulders, and then he was suddenly struck by a flash of black which sent him flying through the air in a mist of blood. Ducasus turned and looked up.

"Incus!"

The giant was upon them, raising Bellum above his head as he pivoted toward the other Flare. He swung downward from his colossal height, but the Flare's great agility saved him, giving him enough time to dive to the side and roll. He immediately threw his sword at Incus, not allowing a moment's opportunity to pass him by. Incus, expecting this, dove away as soon as the Flare went into his roll, and the missile flew by, slicing Incus' shirt as it shot through the air. The sword landed with a *thunk* in a nearby tree.

Ducasus, seeing his chance, leapt up to run for the sword. Incus turned immediately as he came out of his roll and ran in the same direction. Ducasus saw nothing between himself and the sword, but Incus cried out and heaved Bellum in a wide arc – right where Ducasus was heading. Ducasus shouted and fell back as he saw the Flare appear suddenly in the hammer's path. It struck him soundly in the back and the cracking sound that followed assured them that Bellum had claimed another victim.

Ducasus looked to Incus in surprise, and Incus glanced at him. His face was controlled but angry. Sweat

beaded his hairless head, which he immediately turned towards Rosae and her two captors. Ducasus grabbed the sword from the tree and did the same.

The two Flares exchanged terrified glances at the behemoth in front of them, and they turned on their heels to flee down the hill.

As they went, Incus gave a fierce and barbaric cry, launching his hammer flipping through the air. It connected with the back of one of the Flare's heads, but the one who held Rosae slung over his shoulder ran frantically and disappeared from their sight after only a few moments' time.

"What do we do?" cried Ducasus.

"Untie the horses," Incus commanded, already shouldering his pack. "With them we might be able to catch him."

"Might?" Ducasus exclaimed. "He's on foot and he's carrying a person!" he shouted incredulously as he ripped his horse's reins off of a tree.

"Yes, might. Let's go!" Incus replied, mounting his Ignisian and slicing through the reins of Rosae's horse with his knife. They charged down the hill, and Incus reached down on the side of his horse and snatched Bellum up from the ground as they passed the Flare it had felled. They drove their mounts in determined pursuit.

They pushed the horses as hard as they could, but the creatures could only move so quickly downhill without flipping over. They stumbled all of the way down to the valley floor without ever catching sight of the kidnapper. Ducasus drew in the reins of his horse and looked down the long, funneled road to his left and to his right, seeing nothing.

"Do you see a sign of him?"

"No. I saw places where he had slid as we came down the hill, but then they disappeared. He must have changed direction on a rock shelf. He could be anywhere."

"I saw a rock shelf!" Ducasus replied, wheeling his horse around, sending it charging back up the hill. Incus followed, his Ignisian struggling to complete the tasks asked of it.

They clamored their way back up and came to the site Ducasus recalled. He was too riled up for his heart to sink, but Ducasus knew in the back of his mind that they would not easily be able to find their quarry. The rock shelf spread out in both directions along the mountain, and it was not obvious which way the Flare could have gone. Incus looked down at the trail that ran between the shelves of rock and sighed in frustration.

"He slid here. He must have slid to a stop. The first time we descended it looked like all the other downhill skids, but it is different."

"So what do we do?" Ducasus asked, exasperated and wild-eyed.

"We pick a direction and hope it's right."

Ducasus' mind raced. He twisted his head to the north, then to the south.

"There's no sign on the rocks?"

Incus shook his head.

"None that I can see."

Ducasus thought hard, knowing that each second cost them valuable time.

"North. We'll try north," Ducasus declared.

~°~

Evening set upon them, and Ducasus and Incus still had not seen any sign of the Flare. They had searched all day in desperation, and now they sat atop their horses, looking into the vast plains beyond them. The sky burned a dull orange mingled with pink and purple clouds on the horizon. Ducasus stared straight ahead, silent and sullen.

Incus came alongside him and laid a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Ducasus said nothing and Incus stared into the dying sun with him. At length he swung off of his large horse and spoke, unstrapping his saddle.

"We should make camp for the night. It will be dark soon."

Ducasus only continued to stare into the sun as Incus went about his labors.

"I think it's about time you taught me Ar-lenti. More than just the philosophy."

Incus set down his pack and stood up, dusting off his hands.

"I agree."

At this, Ducasus swung around and hopped off of the horse. He approached Incus with his arms open.

"So teach me. Where do we start?" Ducasus asked, anger behind his voice. His brow was furrowed in frustration.

Incus eyed Ducasus knowingly, then closed his eyes and sighed, shaking his head imperceptibly.

"We start with discussing where the slave-trader will be taking your woman."

Ducasus threw his hands in the air.

"I thought you said slavery didn't exist!"

"I said it is illegal. And the kind you described, working on a large plantation, I've never heard of it existing anywhere. But there are other reasons someone might want to capture a person, particularly a young, beautiful woman. They're called 'merchant brides,' and one or two rogue groups traffic in them. Did you see the tattoo on the Flare's back? The one I threw my hammer at?"

Ducasus was breathing heavily. His horse walked away a few paces, following Rosae's riderless horse, who was grazing. Ducasus nodded in assent.

"It means he's an anarchist, an outlaw. Anyone who bears the crest of seven stars is an enemy of the kingdom."

Ducasus tried to maintain control over himself. His fists were clenched into balls and his jaw tensed.

"How does that help us now? How can we find him?"

Incus turned his head to the north and squinted into the distance. It was almost dark now.

"Heading to Velocitum is our best chance. Rosae might not be intended to stay there forever, but if anywhere, she would probably be sold there. Our course remains firm."

"What will we do once we reach the city?"

"We'll find her," Incus said flatly, unrolling his make-shift bed. "However we can."

"Hey! What are you doing?" Ducasus shouted in protest. Incus was covering himself with blankets, which only covered half of his body. "Aren't you supposed to be teaching me how to fight?"

"Tomorrow," Incus began. "You are too angry today."

"I need to start learning now! I was almost completely useless against those Flares," Ducasus protested.

"You showed courage," Incus returned with his eyes closed. "And for that reason, I am optimistic about teaching you, but there is something else."

What else? Ducasus thought, burning with rage at the Flare who had taken Rosae, at his brother, at his dead slave-owner, at the Flares.

"What else matters?" Ducasus interjected. "I'm willing to learn and to fight, and my anger makes me strong."

Incus' eyes burst open and he sat up, looking at Ducasus intently.

"No. Your anger makes you foolish. Your anger makes you rash. Your anger causes you to compromise and be manipulated." Incus drew in a breath. "You can be angry at things that are unjust, and you should be. But never let your anger lead you. Anger has a fierce cousin called

Bitterness, and if you eat from his hand you will be his slave. You will live in misery and pain, and your vision will become distorted. You will become a broken and wicked man, poisoned."

Incus stopped a moment and considered how he ought to proceed. He breathed in long and hard.

"If you want to be strong you must learn how to forgive. To let go and move on."

Ducasus stood in silence, piercing the ground with his stare.

"I've seen a root of bitterness in you. It is still young, and it is not a fast-growing plant like the fear you had inside of you when we met. Nonetheless it will grow if you feed it, and it will master you and turn you into someone you could not possibly recognize. It will make you stubborn, irrational, and hateful. It is for this reason that I hesitate."

Ducasus felt so much pain and anger and adrenaline swarming through him that he almost did not know how to endure it. He spoke slowly, his voice trembling.

"You mean to tell me that you expect me to forgive the lowlifes who stole Rosae? To let them run free while she suffers?"

"There is only one left to forgive. The other three have paid for their sin. And no, we cannot let him run free, but you must forgive him nonetheless. It takes a man to understand this, but I see that you are still a boy."

Ducasus was so enraged that he shook.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to be completely betrayed by your own flesh and blood, by someone who's supposed to love you and fight beside you? Do you have any idea what it's like to have destiny dangled in front of your face only to have it torn away? Do you have any idea what it's like," Ducasus was screaming now, with tears of frustration forming in his red, intense eyes, "to have the only girl you ever loved, that you always loved, ripped

away from you before your eyes?" Ducasus' voice cracked. "Do you?! Well do you, you unfeeling wall of stone?"

Incus' expression remained set. It was intense, yet controlled. He lifted his blanket from his knees and stood to his full seven-and-a-half-foot stature, and he walked to Ducasus. He stood only inches from the youth and stared down into his eyes.

"Yes."

Neither of them broke their glare. Somehow, Ducasus did not doubt the veracity of Incus' one-word monologue.

Ducasus broke the staring contest first. Overwhelmed and unsure how to handle everything, he fell forward and hugged the giant, burying his face in the folds of his shirt.

Incus, surprised by this, stood still and allowed himself to be embraced. He was an outcast and a foreigner, unused to any sort of acceptance from those he encountered. Finally, he reached with his massive hand and covered Ducasus' back with it in a gesture of consolation.

"They took her from me, Incus!" Ducasus exclaimed, his words muffled by Incus' shirt.

"I know, Ducasus," Incus said, gazing up at the stars. "We'll get her back."

Chapter Sixteen:

Ar-lenti

The commander of the zealots walked briskly through corridors of stone. The path was only dimly lit by torches placed along the walls. The air smelled earthy and slightly stale, and bits of moss clung to the walls. He ceased walking abruptly and stopped in front of Malleus' door. He started to walk away, but then he sighed hard, inhaled deeply, and raised his chin. He walked back to the door and gripped the handle. He held it there a moment, then pulled with a breath of anticipation.

Malleus was sitting at the table poring over a map while he took notes in a little book. Papers and books surrounded him in a very systematic manner and the assistant he had requested was busied with shuffling papers into a particular order.

"What, no ominous greeting for me today? I'm disappointed."

"Too busy," Malleus responded without looking up. "Startle yourself, please."

"Very funny." The commander looked around. "Where's the drunk?"

"Fetching lunch."

The commander nodded his head and took a seat on the low bed that lay near the door. He looked around passively and did not speak. Malleus blinked slowly and set down his pen, closing his book of notes and setting it atop the city map he was studying.

"Is there something I can do for you, Commander?"

Malleus tried his best to sound bored and imposed upon, but the opposite was true. After all of his study he

was brimming with ideas and eager to share them. It took resolve for him to stay put and wait for the commander to come to him. It was very important that the commander learn to come to him.

He folded his hands.

"You've had your books. You've had your assistant," the commander said, gesturing with a sweep of his hand before folding it with his other once more. Malleus' bespectacled assistant jumped when he heard himself referred to. Spending the last few days with Malleus had unnerved him to the core. "And you've had three days of seclusion and study. I want to see what you have to show for it."

Malleus smiled darkly.

"You seek my counsel. That is wise of you. I see our trust is starting to grow."

"I never said that."

"I have plans for several attacks, targets that will create confusion and disorder when struck. If we carry them out dramatically, they will also cause fear and resentment towards the government."

"Go on."

"My assistant tells me that there is an underground river in this subterranean abode of ours. Is this true?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. That will allow us some freedom of action. Gather some men. Tonight we will begin to remove the Flares' illusion of insulation and safety."

"How will we do that, exactly?"

"We go after their water, of course. It doesn't take a large stretch of the imagination." Malleus realized he was slipping out of his ominous demeanor. He reassumed it, noticing every micro-expression on the commander's face as he spoke. "You will warn the others like us not to use the main water source for many days. These are merely details, and we can discuss them later. There are many

such missions we will execute in the coming days and weeks. But first, my assistant informs me that there are small groups of Flares who are unhappy with the current line of succession."

The commander nodded in assent.

"Yes. There is the Remus family and the Seven Sisters, anarchists. There are probably a few others."

Malleus nodded.

"And do your connections have a way of reaching these anarchists, these so-called 'Seven Sisters'?"

The commander thought for a moment.

"Yes, I could figure something out."

"Excellent. We will employ them for perhaps our most important move in our campaign of fear. I wish that we could do it ourselves, but we must remain cloaked in the shadows until the time is right for our glorious unveiling."

Malleus turned back to his maps and reopened his notes.

"In the meantime, assemble a small team for tonight. And send me someone to run for supplies. I will inform them how to proceed."

The commander almost objected to the vagueness of Malleus' demands, but he decided against it. He wanted to see how this stranger would go forward.



Ducasus and Incus had spent the day traveling, and as the sun began to sink low in the sky, they decided to make camp. Ducasus took some small comfort in the fact that Rosae would slow her captor down. He would either have to carry her or put her on a horse, and both options would be slow for a Flare.

This world is so much smaller for Flares, Ducasus thought as he tossed his bedroll on the ground. They can travel a hundred miles in a day if they want to.

Ducasus and Incus, however, could not travel a hundred miles in a day. Incus' Ignisian Puller was not the swiftest of horses, and Ducasus' charger, though fast, was not bred for such distances.

"What if we don't stop?" Ducasus said abruptly, breaking the silence of their new camp. "I've heard of men who sleep in the saddle and ride through the night." His heart ached for Rosae, and he shuddered to think what would happen to her if they did not find her.

Incus considered, then slowly shook his head.

"We would kill the horses if we tried that. Without them we'll never make it to Velocitum in time to save her."

Ducasus unsaddled his horse and let it wander off to graze in the surrounding meadow.

"That isn't what I wanted to hear."

Incus shrugged and continued unstrapping his pack, not interested enough in the conversation to continue.

Ducasus' resentment towards the Flares stirred up, but he reminded himself of what Incus had told him: The men they had encountered were criminals, and most Flares were not like them. Ducasus' experience tended to disagree. He put the question out of his mind, unsettled.

Incus walked out into the meadow and stood in silence for several minutes, causing Ducasus to wonder what he was doing. The giant waited in the fading rays of the setting sun, surrounded by the tall grass as it swayed in the waves of the wind. He seemed unconcerned with his surroundings and was peaceful, focused. After a while, he beckoned Ducasus to join him.

"Tonight we begin your study of Ar-lenti," he began. "It is an old and powerful art that will serve you well if you work hard and use it rightly."

Ducasus nodded eagerly. Visions of Flares flying from his powerful blows danced through his mind. He saw himself rescuing Rosae in dramatic fashion, driving away

scores of attackers.

"I'm ready."

"Good. We will begin with the basics. They are called 'basic,' but even the masters of Ar-lenti are continually honing their skills in the basics. They are the foundation of Ar-lenti, and you will never progress beyond them, though I will eventually teach you further techniques that have been called 'advanced.'"

"Great."

"Great."

Incus began to speak once more when Ducasus burst in with a question.

"So how do I attack someone so fast? What's the best way to finish off my opponent?"

The stoic giant shook his head.

"That is for later. You must always learn to fail before you succeed."

Ducasus' heart fell.

"What?"

"We will begin with falling, the proper way to do it."

Ducasus spit.

"I already know how to lose a fight, Incus; I need to learn how to win them!"

"When will you trust me, Ducasus?" the giant said with a sigh.

Ducasus cut him off, venomously.

"I don't know, Incus. You told me you were a trapper, and then you threw a battle hammer at a guy's head as he ran away – and you hit him! Can I trust you?"

"I never said I was a trapper. I said my bag was full of pelts."

Ducasus simmered, but he knew that his anger was misplaced. Incus waited with admirable patience.

Finally, Ducasus gritted his teeth and took a breath.

"Sorry. I'm still angry. Not at you."

"I know."

"But why do I have to learn how to fail at fighting?"

"Those who do not learn how to fail never truly know how to succeed. With loss, humility may grow, and humility allows you to learn. With pain comes toughness but also understanding, so that it affects you less, yet you know what your actions would cause others. If you want to be a great fighter, a great warrior, then you must first learn how to fall."

Incus said these words with finality and conviction. Ducasus released some of his tension and tried to accommodate Incus' bizarre methodology. He rolled his neck around, trying to keep calm.

"Fine. Then tell me, what is the 'proper' way to go down?"

"Fighting." Incus grinned fiercely. "Now, distractions aside, let me instruct you on how to fall without getting hurt."

They spent what seemed like an eternity falling again and again in the grass. Incus explained to him the technique of dispersing the shock of impact to less vulnerable parts of the body. He taught him how to fall straight back, but to protect his ribs, neck, and organs by sending the impact to his extremities. He taught Ducasus how to roll properly, both going forwards and backwards. He explained that the technique was particularly helpful when forward or backwards momentum was involved in a fall, because one could disperse their force through the friction involved in rolling. Ducasus did not know what "friction" was, but he took Incus' word for it and rolled as he was instructed, turning his head towards his rolling shoulder when he went backwards, and away from it when forwards.

Finally, feeling vaguely dizzy from too many falls and rolls to count, Ducasus stood up in the frosty night air. The sun had long since disappeared, and he was tired.

"Are we finished with today's lesson?" He shouted to

Incus, who was many yards away next to a fire, whittling at his wooden figure. Ducasus still could not make out what it was.

The mountainous Nebula gingerly returned his carving to his pack and stood.

"There is one more thing."

Ducasus' shoulders sank. Incus strode up to him and stood before him.

"Do you understand the techniques I've taught you?"

"Yes..." Ducasus tried not to roll his eyes. He had repeated them endlessly.

"And you're confident after these hours of practice that you could employ them correctly?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Incus grabbed Ducasus by the shirt and pants and he threw him up in the air. He was tossed just above Incus' head, but he was sprawled out and could not hope to land on his feet. He reacted in midair and turned the best he could. He slapped the ground hard with his arms and feet, keeping his back arched and away from the ground as gravity claimed him. It was all one motion and a reaction.

"What are you doing? Do you want me to break something?"

"How are your arms?" Incus asked, calmly.

Ducasus inspected himself.

They tingle a little, but other than that they're alright.

"They're fine."

"How is the rest of you?"

Ducasus stood up and checked himself.

"It's... It's all fine."

"You've just taken a nine-foot fall and you are unhurt?"

Ducasus hesitated.

"Yes."

"Good." Incus turned around and strode back to the

fire where he lay down on the ground, laid his head on a stone, and went to sleep.

Ducasus was left sitting in the meadow, bewildered. Adrenaline still lingered in his bloodstream after the shock of being thrown.

Maybe there is something to what he's teaching me.

Ducasus wondered how much good being able to fall would help him when he did not even know how to properly strike. He decided that it would at least draw out the fight some.

He approached the fire and lay down, hoping that he would learn how to strike the next day.

~°~

Ducasus did not learn how to strike the next day. Instead, after a long day of riding, Incus took him to a boulder as tall as Ducasus himself.

"What can you do with this boulder?" the Neb inquired. Ducasus blinked at him.

"Well... nothing. It's too big for me to move or throw or anything. Maybe I could roll it a little if I had something to brace against. Probably not."

"You're right, you cannot move it, but you can do many different things with it. Remember that your opponent shares your surroundings. You must know what can be moved and what is fixed. Move what can be moved in such a way as to be advantageous to you. Adapt to what is fixed so that it is an advantage to you. Now, tell me again, what can you do with this boulder?"

"I could jump off of it, I guess."

Incus nodded.

"And?"

"And... I could knock someone against it."

Incus continued to nod, expecting further answers.

"I could... um, I could brace against it. I could push

off of it."

Incus made Ducalus continue until he had thought of ten more uses for the rock. He then shifted their focus to the rest of their surroundings: How dirt could be thrown into the eyes, how one can slip on wet grass, and on and on. He stressed the importance of the environment in a confrontation and pushed Ducalus' imagination to the limit as he had him think up scores of uses for every bit of the land. It was taxing, but Ducalus decided it was probably beneficial. He hoped Incus would teach him how to kick or something at the end of the nature lessons, but he was disappointed. Incus had him practice his rolls and falls many times before declaring it enough for one day. At the end of it all, Incus tossed him in the air again. Ducalus dispersed the impact of the fall and was unhurt.

The next evening's lesson involved a sapling.

"This is a young tree, and weak compared to an older, stouter tree."

Ducalus nodded in agreement.

"You are so eager to strike; break it with a punch."

Ducalus had gotten momentarily excited at the insinuation of striking, but then it faded.

"Well, I can't break it by hitting it straight on."

"Why not?" the muscular giant inquired. The scars on his neck showed prominently in the fading light.

"It'll just bend."

Incus nodded.

"Exactly. As far as something bends, it will not break. This is true in life as well as in fighting. The flexible warrior will endure much and remain unscathed, able to continue fighting. Touch your toes."

Ducalus looked at Incus, bewildered, and he squatted down and put his hands on his toes.

"Not like that. Do it without bending your knees." Incus leaned forward and touched his fists to the ground, all the while keeping his legs straight.

Ducasus tried to imitate him, but he found that he was only able to reach to just above his ankles.

"From now on you will stretch every morning and every night. Being flexible is just as important as being strong. Now, hit the tree."

"Didn't we just talk about that?"

"Hit it."

Ducasus complied. The sapling moved with his fist, bending outwards a few inches, then retreating to its original position when he removed his hand.

"The tree is flexible, but it also moves with your force. Hit it again, but quickly this time, and follow through deeper."

Ducasus complied. He punched at the sapling, pushing it to where it bent well away from its original position, but it slipped off of his fist and snapped back at him, striking Ducasus' chest where he stood.

"Ow!"

"If you flow with an enemy, you can use his own strength against him, redirecting his force back onto him. Remember this. The sapling is weaker than you, just as you will be weaker than many opponents, but it was still able to get the best of you."

Ducasus rubbed at his chest and looked beneath his shirt. A red mark appeared where the tree had whipped him.

"Now, I will teach you more stretches."

Incus taught Ducasus how to increase his flexibility, and every night and morning Ducasus found himself rolling and stretching, rolling and stretching. The following evening, Incus taught Ducasus about the five balance points of a person and how he will fall if pushed beyond any two of them. He stressed the importance of balance like he had stressed the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and falling. He made Ducasus stand on one foot on a rock in a stream while tossing him things to

catch. He fell into the water many times.

By the time the next evening came, Ducasus was very skeptical. He had learned a few tricks, but it seemed like he spent most of his time falling or making a fool of himself with ridiculous exercises. He was tired from all of the hard travel they had been doing every day, and he was impatient to learn how to actually fight.

They made camp under the massive bridge that crossed the Nocibur River, and Incus called Ducasus over to him once again. Ducasus grudgingly came.

Incus stood on the shore of the wide expanse of water, slowly snaking its way to the ocean. It sparkled a deep wine color, and Incus awaited his companion at its liminal, stick in hand.

"Today I will begin teaching you about positioning." Incus stooped down and began to draw in the wet sand with a stick to illustrate his words. Ducasus, impatient with his friend, interjected.

"Positioning?" Ducasus thought of his brother and the abilities that he had stolen from him. "I don't need positioning, I need speed, strength, or perception. I thought you were going to teach me how to fight!" Ducasus sat down on the bank abruptly, feeling hopeless.

Incus did not react with anger at Ducasus' rashness; he only set his stick down and turned his head. He answered the youth gently.

"You have those things. You just don't have as much of them as a Flare, a Neb, or a Hawkeye."

Ducasus sighed in despair and looked troubled, falling on his back.

"Remember the boulder, Ducasus?"

Ducasus didn't feel like speaking. Of course he remembered the boulder. What did that have to do with anything?

"I remember it."

"You missed your star. It was taken from you. That is

something you cannot change or move. It is a boulder that you have to accept as part of your surroundings."

Ducasus scoffed and Incus continued.

"Your bitterness makes you a poor listener. Hear me. You do not have a gift of the stars. That is something you cannot change. How then, can you use this to your advantage?"

Ducasus barely whispered in response.

"I can't."

Incus shook his head.

"That is something for you to think on, because if you position yourself rightly, there is always an advantage to be found, even in a troubling environment." The giant continued. "Or at the very least, focus on what you can change. Lying on your back and stroking your wounds ensures failure."

"I thought I needed to learn how to fail," Ducasus returned spitefully.

"You do. And this is not how. You've fallen, you need to try and minimize the damage, learn something from it, and then you need to get back up. That is how to fail."

Ducasus sat up and rubbed his face with his hand.

"Then why won't you just teach me how to fight, Incus? That at least would make me some kind of useful."

"I am teaching you. You just aren't paying attention."

"Position?" Ducasus asked. "How can I fight with position?"

"Better than anyone else who employs a different philosophy," Incus returned. "Fighting is positioning. A battle is a struggle for position. Striking is pointless if your position is poor. You cannot win without positioning, but you can win without striking, if you position yourself well."

Ducasus looked up at Incus, not understanding.

"I was going to draw out some common positions that can happen in a fight, but instead I'll show one to you."

Incus motioned for Ducasus to rise, and he did so, approaching Incus with the damp sand squishing under his feet.

"You seem to be skeptical of what I tell you, so can we at least agree on this: it is advantageous for you to be behind your opponent?"

Ducasus nodded.

"Alright, good. We agree. It's hard for your opponent to strike you, he can't see you, and you can choke someone very easily if you are behind him. Keep that in mind."

Incus began to remove his vest, and then his shirt, tossing them to the drier parts of the bank. They landed softly on a pile of smooth, black rocks.

"Now, you seem so intent on striking. Hit me."

Ducasus looked up at the wall of muscle that rose up before him.

"Um..."

"Go on," Incus said calmly, motioning with his hands.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"I don't think I should-"

"I said hit me."

"Okay..." Ducasus sighed, "but don't like, kill me or anything."

Incus smiled. He didn't say anything; he just smiled.

Great, thought Ducasus.

Ducasus pulled back his fist and threw his arm forward towards Incus' stomach, which happened to be just below where Ducasus' head reached. As he did, something bizarre happened. He felt two quick touches on his arm and he felt his body turn slightly. Incus was behind him.

Ducasus turned and faced the Neb, bewildered.

"How did you do that?"

"I parried and stepped. Hit me again."

Less afraid this time and intent on hitting his target,

Ducasus let a quick punch fly. He watched as Incus slid his arm and emerged on the other side, behind him again. Ducasus tried to turn around, but Incus matched him, still looming over him from behind.

Ducasus tried to turn again, and this time Incus let him face him before throwing an arm around Ducasus' right and swinging around on it, taking him down with him and snatching Ducasus' other arm with his legs. Ducasus landed with both arms immobile, his head resting on the Neb's torso. He couldn't move.

"Turn your head this way," Incus said.

Ducasus looked to his right and saw the Neb pinning his right arm in his left, with his massive right hand completely free. Ducasus struggled, but his arms were both locked in place.

Incus closed his meaty right hand into a fist and slowly moved it to Ducasus' chin. It covered most of the side of his face as Incus gently tapped him with it.

"I would say I'm in a good position to strike now, wouldn't you?"

Ducasus nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on the fist. The giant continued.

"Striking is unnecessary, though helpful sometimes. A fight is won with position."

Ducasus swallowed hard and nodded his head. Incus let his fist fall away from Ducasus' face.

"Are you ready to learn now?"

"Yes."

"Good."

The tension in Ducasus' arms was released and his head hit the sand as Incus rolled away from him. He sat up and rubbed the inside of his elbows.

"Be honest, Incus. Do I stand a chance of being helpful next time we have to fight some Flares?" he asked, looking up at his friend. Incus was pulling his shirt on once again.

"Right now? No. In time, perhaps. They will always be

faster than you, but there are other things besides speed."

"And what if I have to fight a Hawkeye?"

"Don't," Incus replied, shrugging on his animal skin vest.

Incus returned to the wet sand where he picked up his stick once more and proceeded to teach Ducasus about the various positions in a fight. Ducasus listened more intently than he had during previous nights. His arms still hurt, which reminded him to listen to what Incus had to say.

He wondered if Malleus was a Hawkeye now. He wondered what his brother was at all. What did a second gifting do to a person?

Thinking about his brother made him feel bile start to rise, and he noticed that it distracted him from Incus' teaching. He pushed it out of his mind. He hoped he would be able to smash his brother's face in, gifts or no gifts.

After all, all Malleus knew how to do was stick fight.



Malleus clutched his spear as they darted out of a crevice and down a dark alleyway. Clouds covered the moon, and the cool night air made the men alert. It was the perfect night for a mission such as theirs.

Malleus had prepared himself, having studied the city's layout and its famous aqueduct system. He felt alive, and a tension coursed through him as the others crouched and ran with him, navigating the hurried streets.

The layout of the city seemed almost random. Streets wound this way and that and would suddenly end. They would turn in sharp, ninety-degree angles and continue. It was as if the aqueducts were the only aspect of the city that was planned.

Malleus looked up at them against the dark, night sky. Huge, brick and stone arches pervaded the city. These

feats of engineering ran all the way through the countryside north by northwest to where a mountain river served as their source. Once the water reached the city, it flowed into a central hub where it branched off into three diverging aqueducts that ran throughout the city, emptying out in various locations as the water source of the people of Velocitum.

They ran along the southwestern arches, making their way to the hub at the center of the city. With Malleus were three other men. One was lean and fierce-looking, like an animal. He had leathery skin, prominent veins, and a receding hairline. He had no large weapon, but he carried rows of small, straight knives strapped to his torso. His eyes shifted from side to side, always scanning as they passed beneath each archway.

The next man was stocky but athletic with brown hair and a no-nonsense look about him. He carried a curved sword strapped to his back in a leather scabbard.

The last man, who was at the head of the party, was very hairy. His hair was dark against his pale skin, and he ran ahead of the others with a singular focus. He wore an odd piece of light armor that looked as if it had been cut short to fit him as it rested on his shoulders, covering his chest and back. He carried strange weapons with three prongs- two short ones on each side and a central prong that was longer than the others. Malleus had never seen such weapons before. They looked dangerous and black as the night itself.

Mickey had shown up at the exit from the zealots' underground hideout, strapped to the teeth with weapons, expecting to accompany the group. Malleus dismissed him. He couldn't risk a loudmouth like him coming along on a mission in which success centered on stealth. Mickey had protested and begged, but Malleus was unyielding. He simply donned the black hood of the cloak he had requested for the night and headed into the darkness of

the city above with the three men who had been provided to him. Mickey was left crestfallen, sulking off in search of an ale to drown his sorrows in.

Part of Malleus had wanted to take him along, but he had a cause to think of. He had greater plans that he could not allow the drunkard to compromise.

He thought about the cause as they reached the square where the aqueducts met. The three men accompanying him ran silently to the tiered base of the brick structure, and they began to climb.

It was very quiet at the base of the hub, and Malleus stared up the stonework, suddenly pensive. He was outside of himself for a moment, unconcerned with the urgency of the task or the need for stealth.

Is it right to be so harsh with the Flares? he wondered.

It was not something he had ever questioned, but he had never taken action like he was about to take now. The Flares had been harsh to the Ungifteds. He remembered what had been done to his father when he was just a child. Malleus closed his eyes and watched one of innumerable memories where a Flare overseer beat Ducusus mercilessly, because he could. Because Ducusus had too much passion to remain silent all the time. Because he was an Ungifted and a child and a slave.

Malleus reached up and pulled himself to the second tier.

It was right to be harsh with the Flares, he decided. It was just. But a warm breeze blew past, and again Malleus paused, lost in his thoughts.

Was war and annihilation the solution to the Flares' abuse of power? His mind drifted to wondering if there might be a compromise. Something easier that required less suffering. Something that invited change before resorting to a course of action that necessarily involved so much death.

No. Malleus shook himself. The Flares don't respect us.

They would never listen to us. They're unreasoning and stubborn, like animals. Power and pain are all they understand. He reached up and climbed to the third tier.

How can I justify what I'm doing? Who made me the judge?

It was an odd thought, and Malleus stopped once more on the ledge. He didn't have an answer right away.

The other men were already climbing to the top of the aqueduct. Malleus could hear them perfectly as they scrambled over the edge and neared the basin. His Hawkeye perception allowed him to notice even the smallest details.

I made myself the judge, Malleus decided. I received two stars by force, and I am the only one who can lead this rebellion. My ability is my authority. He climbed up the last two tiers quickly and pushed further philosophic inquiry out of his mind as he stood at the edge of a large pool. The water flowed in steadily from the aqueduct farthest from him and it collected in the pool at his feet. It then emptied out into the other channels that ferried fresh water to the whole city.

Malleus hesitated as the wind picked up and filled his black, hooded cloak.

Most of the Ungifteds of the city had been warned, and the rest soon would be. Flares would be the main casualty group from their attack, which was exactly the point. The three men with Malleus stood all around the pool, looking at him. They all held empty glass bottles in their hands, having already fulfilled their part of Malleus' plan. Now they looked at Malleus and wondered why he delayed.

One extra bottle won't do much more, Malleus thought, pulling the container from beneath his cloak. The others have already been emptied in it now, anyway.

He uncorked the bottle and held it up in the darkness, but he hesitated. It was as if something was caught in his

throat, or some force pushed him backwards.

The shifty-eyed zealot crouched and began glancing all around.

This was my own plan, Malleus thought, I have to go through with my own plan. I have a reputation to build.

The other men still watched Malleus as he slowly brought the bottle to a tilt, but not enough for any of its contents to escape.

He thought of the suffering that this little bottle would bring upon the city. It was easy to talk about scare tactics and murder in the dark, but it all looked different as he acted at the scene himself.

But as he stood beside the pool, he knew that he had no other choice. He was going to have to start killing Flares sometime if he intended on fighting a war against them, and by doing it this way he would save some Ungifteds in future battles. It was a mercy. The Flares of Velocitum would be devastated and the Ungifteds would be unscathed, mostly. Enough of them would likely die from the concentrated poison he was about to loose into the water system so as to not allow suspicion to fall on a reborn and unified movement of the zealots.

Malleus ceremoniously turned the bottle upside down in a quick maneuver and watched as the poison fell to the pool below.

It's a tragedy, he thought, but some sacrifices must be made.

~°~

The commander walked down the stone hallway and was relieved to find that Malleus' door was open. Before he reached it, he heard, "What tidings do you bring me, Commander?"

He stopped in the hallway and waited for the chill that went down his spine to pass.

Cheap parlor-tricks... he thought. He cursed under his breath at the strangeness of this young man called Malleus.

The commander raised his chin and walked to and through the doorway that spilled its light into the hall. He looked at Malleus, who sat at his table, writing furiously on sheets and sheets of paper. Three different books lay open and several candles and an overhead lamp all flickered, basking the room in an orange glow. Malleus had hung his black cloak from the previous evening on the back of the chair he presently sat in, and he worked with alarming focus.

"My spies returned to me this evening," the commander began, "several from the streets themselves. One watched the largest crematorium, another few the market, and we even have a man inside the castle who stole a glance at the official numbers."

Malleus stopped writing.

"...And?"

"Several thousand of the enemy fell today," the commander declared triumphantly. "It was not until early afternoon that the city at large realized what was happening, and by then our assault had run its course."

The news was good, but a bit distasteful to Malleus. Thousands was a lot of people.

Not people, Flares, he reminded himself. Still, he was glad he did not have to see it happen.

"And how many of our brothers fell?" Malleus asked.

The commander adopted a pained expression, then tried to compose himself. He answered gruffly, after clearing his throat.

"Two hundred-fifty. We put out the word not to drink the water the night before, but not all of the Ungifteds heard or believed our warnings. None of our zealots were harmed," the commander said, clearing his throat again, "but we lost some good, innocent people."

Malleus nodded slowly, while staring off at the wall.

"That is the price of freedom. Some good and innocent men must die."

"I wish they had been just men," the commander said with regret.

"Your numerical advantage begins to grow, Commander. Have I earned your trust yet?"

He eyed Malleus warily.

"No. But you have earned some confidence."

Malleus smiled.

"Why, that is the same thing. I see that you will allow me to aid you in freeing our people from the oppression of the Flares."

The commander sneered.

"Yeah, and of all the other star-demons too. We'll conquer the Flares, the Nebs, and the Hawkeyes. One day."

Malleus responded quickly, in his adopted persona.

"I am only here to help you with the Flares, but you shall not merely conquer them, you shall destroy them."

The commander seemed confused at this remark.

"What about the Ungifteds who live under the oppression of the Nebulae and the Hawkeyes? Don't you care about them?"

Malleus turned back to his desk and began to collect and stack papers.

"One step at a time, Commander. Velocitum was not built in a day. I cannot alter my mission. I am here to lead us to victory against the Flares."

"You mean 'here to aid me' in leading Ungifteds to victory over the Flares."

Malleus smiled darkly.

"Of course."

He finished collecting papers and handed them to the commander.

"Here are some further missions that will teach the

Flares to fear. Employ them soon, and send word to your contacts in Sol, Merx, and Superosia to do the same, with modifications, of course." The commander turned to go, but Malleus stopped him. "Have you been in contact with your connections? Do they gather our forces?"

"Slowly, yes. Secret things take time."

"Don't take too long, Commander. The moon passes before the sun only rarely, as they say. I have two more pressing matters. I wish to speak with one of the men from last night. He was very hairy, and he carried unusual weapons."

The commander thought a moment.

"Legatus?"

"He was with me during the mission."

"Yeah, Legatus, then. He's a useful man, blacksmith by trade."

"Good. Send him to me."

The Commander looked annoyed.

"I'll have someone check for him. What was the second thing?"

Malleus smiled inwardly.

He is already reporting to me and running errands. Soon it will be apparent who the leader of this rebellion is.

"I wish to reach out to the Seven Sisters. Send me someone who can tell me where to find them."

"Flares?" the commander asked incredulously. "You want to bring in a group of Flares?"

"Of course not. Do not allow yourself to be blinded towards my intentions. One of our more crucial missions requires an exposure we cannot yet risk, so I wish to use the anarchists as fall men and tools. Send me what I've requested."

The commander, still incredulous, scoffed and left.

Malleus returned his attention to his table and his books. He resumed studying a volume on the early history of Flaroria. He was reading about the end of Supero I's

life, the first king of the Flares, when knuckles rapped against his door. He had heard the man's approach much earlier, but for the sake of creating a dynamic in which he was leader, he did not acknowledge the zealot until he asked to be acknowledged.

"You wanted to see me?"

The man from the night before stood leaning against the doorway. He no longer wore the armor, but he instead covered himself with an oversized vest made of bear skin. It hung down on each side of him. His black hair stood out against his pale skin, and Malleus, now taking the time to see him in the light, could see all of the light freckles that dotted his face. Malleus rose and walked to him.

"I did. I am told your name is Legatus."

"It is. And who are you, exactly? Some of the men are talking."

Malleus grinned wickedly.

"I am a bad dream, Legatus. I am a monster and an unstoppable storm of destruction. I have come to tear down and strangle and mock and torture those who resist me – but I am here to help you. I come as a reckoning to the Flares."

Legatus raised an eyebrow.

"And you're in charge now or something?"

I'll have to be careful how I answer that, Malleus thought.

"I am not interested in titles. I'm interested in removing the Flare disease that ails our land." Malleus looked at Legatus deep in the eyes. He perceived a man not easily intimidated.

Legatus, in turn, looked over the stranger in front of him.

"Aren't we all? What did you want to see me for?"

Malleus continued to analyze the man before him, seeing every visible detail, hearing deviations from normal speech, and even considering the odors that surrounded him. He needed a little more time to look him over before

he answered the zealot's question.

"Your vest is too large for you," he said, deflecting.

Legatus shrugged.

"It ought to be. It was made for a Neb."

"Isn't that contradictory to your identity as a zealot?"

"I don't think so. I just like their craftsmanship. It's like the Trophy Hunters of the desert, in a way, wearing their clothes."

"I see," Malleus responded. He didn't see. He had never heard of the Trophy Hunters of the desert. Growing up on an isolated estate as a slave made him ignorant of the world. It was a disadvantage that he was working to correct.

"Then was that re-tailored armor last night intended for a Neb as well?"

Legatus' expression grew brighter.

"Yes. It's light armor for when they travel or fight in uneven terrain. I wouldn't be able to carry their standard armor. I have all sorts of Neb equipment, though. It's the best."

Malleus nodded knowingly.

"And you want to kill them?"

Legatus chuckled.

"Well, I want us to rule over them, sure, but that doesn't mean they don't make nice things."

Malleus liked the man in front of him. He seemed steady and undaunted. He had acted capably in their mission the night before, which was to his credit. As usual, Malleus felt that his gut instinct had been correct.

"And what of those strange weapons you carry? Are those from the Nebulae as well?"

Legatus shook his head.

"I made them," Legatus said, removing his three-pronged blades from their straps. He rotated them slowly in his hands. "I call them sai. They're useful for fighting a faster opponent."

Malleus was impressed. He decided to proceed.

"I don't know if you know this, Legatus, but we are to be a true rebellion once more. I have put into place a series of events that will weaken our enemy and allow us to meet him and defeat him in open war. I'm going to need a few men around me – good, dependable men and fierce warriors who are willing to fight by my side." Malleus paused, imagining himself on a battlefield, dual-wielding his gifts of speed and perception. He would have to have some sort of guard in the chaos of battle, even still. "I want you to be one of these men, Legatus. It will be a most coveted position."

"Serve a kid like you? Normally, not something I would consider. But the commander... Well, let's just say I can feel a change in the wind. How old are you, anyway?"

Malleus frowned. He didn't have to pretend to be brooding any more.

"I am the age of resentment itself."

Legatus grinned.

"I'm in. I like a little bit of excitement."

Just as Legatus was finished speaking, Mickey appeared under his arm, entering the room with two goblets in his hands.

"You should realize what an honor it is to be elected by our leader. As the first and the leader of this elite guard, I—"

"You're not part of the guard, Mickey. You're my errand-boy," Malleus cut him off, annoyed at the interruption.

"But... What do you mean? I am the premier of soldiers. I would gladly fling myself before the assassin's blade. I am he who slayed the seven-tongued serpent of old!"

"Great story, Mickey. It was entertaining the first time. You're a drunk. You are not in the team of elites."

Malleus turned back to Legatus.

"We will speak again soon. And if you refer to me as 'that kid' or anything like it, there will be severe consequences. Do not underestimate me."

Legatus maintained his grin and nodded.

"I wouldn't think of it. No matter how old you are, it's about time we started getting serious around here."

"You're dismissed," Malleus replied. Legatus dipped his head and exited.

Mickey was distraught. He stood motionless in the center of the room, still holding a goblet in each hand.

"What do you mean? Of course I'm part of your guard. I was the one to lead you to Velocitum. I carried you when you fell, I--"

Mickey continued to talk and Malleus passively listened as he let his mind wander. He saw the pathetic, middle-aged drunk he'd had to wake up by pouring filthy suds on his head. He saw the man who lied in his stories and talked too much. Mickey had helped him out, but he did not want to have to depend on him at all. He had enough problems to worry about.

"Mickey," Malleus began, "you have a different set of skills. You are no warrior; that much is obvious. After all, you're a drunkard and have been so for - I can only imagine that it's been for the majority of your life." Malleus laid a hand on the older man's shoulder. "You will be more like... my assistant. Your job is crucial. I need someone on the inside track who can get things done for me and bring me what I need. You don't want to be a part of my guard. There's going to be several of them, but there's only one assistant."

Malleus realized that this pedantic comforting was a slight deviation of character, but he was at least in some manner grateful to Mickey. Besides, he was still upset that Legatus had commented on his youth.

"But I am a warrior. I am a fighter the likes of which this land has never seen! I have fought in the far north

where savage men make war, I have killed a nexaer with nothing but my hands – I once struck down three men with a single stroke of my blade!”

Malleus approached Mickey, taking a goblet from him and patting him on the shoulder.

“Sure you did, Mickey. Good story.” He then proceeded to sit in his chair and return to his studies.

Mickey looked down at the cup of wine he still held, which he had brought for himself. He stared into its enticing, swirling tide of purple as it swished around alluringly. Little bubbles formed at the edges of the intoxicating, inviting drink of oblivion. He stared deep into the contents, desiring them.

Mickey shut his eyes and placed the goblet upon the table. He released his hand from the stem but left it hovering motionless there for a moment.

Then, he took his hand away and sighed a deep sigh as he walked out of the room empty-handed.

Chapter Seventeen:

Velocitum

The sandstone arches of Velocitum rose up impressively before the thronging crowd of thousands at its entrance. Ducasus and Incus, having left their horses at a stable outside the walls, found themselves in the thick of it, trying to gain passage. Citizens and travelers were only allowed into the city walls by the central gate. The others were used only by the army and for the queen's purposes. Thus, a substantial bottleneck was a constant feature of the fastest city in all of Pontus.

Incus had continued to teach Ducasus about Ar-lenti the past two nights, finally teaching him some attacks. He had taught him how to choke from behind, how to break the arm at the elbow, and how to break a wrist. None of these were strikes, but at least they were offensive – though Incus maintained that they were simply extensions of position. Ducasus had done so much rolling and stretching that he was sick of it, but he held onto the hope that it was doing some good.

As Ducasus glanced around at the confusing mess of a crowd, he hoped that he wouldn't have to use his Ar-lenti here. There was nowhere to maneuver. Flares and Ungifteds alike pushed in on all sides. At one point, a regal-looking group of Nebulae passed through a part in the crowds to enter the city uninhibited, but these were the only Nebs Ducasus saw besides Incus.

He had never seen so many Flares in one place before. They looked impatient with the slow pace of the crowd, but then, Ducasus himself was impatient with the crowd's pace. The Flares all had emerald-green eyes and long,

shining hair, always a shade of blonde, varying from almost white to a dark, golden blond.

He still wasn't sure how he felt about being near all of these Flares. The memories of Rosae's abduction still burned fresh in his mind. He held onto Incus' insistence that most Flares were not like those he had encountered.

Seeing all the Flares made Ducasus think of Malleus and how he had become one of them, part of the very people he said that he despised. Ducasus could feel himself growing angry, but he remembered what Incus continued to tell him. He gritted his teeth and pushed thoughts of his brother out of his mind. He wasn't sure if he could forgive him, but he could at least keep himself from obsessing over the betrayal.

It'll be easier once we get Rosae back, he thought.

Beyond the Velocitum's gates, there was a large square where Ducasus and Incus soon found themselves, standing on the red, spongy rock that was supposed to cushion the falls of errant, speeding Flares. Ducasus craned his neck to look at the vastness of the city around them, overwhelmed. Aqueducts were omnipresent, and a great cascade of water emptied out into the square, falling over a staircase of colorful tiles into a tranquil pool below. Magnificent, patterned towers rose up from the city walls, six in all, one of them having only been recently completed, according to Incus.

Ducasus had never been to a real city before. He had never been farther from the slave village than Pescas, and Velocitum was not the least eminent among the cities of Pontus.

Ducasus' awe of the city did not steal his focus away from his main concern. His heart rushed at the thought that they might be so close to Rosae, even at that very moment. How would they find her in so vast a city?

Ducasus looked up at his friend, who squinted as he scanned the area. His face remained impassive, as usual,

but from time to time he'd wrinkle it up as though he saw something unpleasant.

"We're here, Incus," Ducasus declared, looking in the same direction as the Neb. "Where do you think she is?"

"I don't know."

"Alright... Then how do we find her?"

Incus turned and glanced behind him.

"We look."

He then started walking north into the city, along the underside of the aqueducts. Ducasus scrambled to catch up.

"See, that sounds like you don't have a plan."

Incus shrugged without looking back, clearly undaunted by the prospect of searching for one girl in a city of more than a hundred thousand.

"Where are we going to start?" Annoyance crept into Ducasus' voice.

"With selling my pelts. Then a tavern."

"A tavern?" Ducasus returned incredulously. "Are you that hungry? We should be trying to find Rosae!"

Incus lowered his brow, irked.

"That's what we're doing. No more questions."

They walked beneath the columns and arches of the aqueducts until they reached another large, open square. Incus left to find the stall of the Ungifted who typically purchased Incus' furs when he passed through Velocitum, leaving Ducasus to take in the sights.

A majestic statue of a Flare stood in the center of a grand plaza, well over thirty feet tall. The stone Flare rested on one knee and held up a large sphere, larger than his head. His eyes were steadfast and full of courage as he gazed into the globe. Ducasus admired it quietly for a long time, finally speaking again when Incus returned with his pack lighter and his coin purse heavier.

"What is that?" Ducasus asked, indicating the statue.

Incus looked to where he gestured.

"That is the famous statue of Supero I, sculpted by the renowned artist Octavius, who died centuries ago in Vis."

Ducasus examined the massive work of art more closely, in awe of its age and majesty. Something about it drew him in, filling him with hope, somehow.

"What is he doing?"

"He's receiving the star of the Kingdom of the Sun, Flaroria."

Ducasus raised an eyebrow.

"Is that metaphorical?"

Incus looked down at Ducasus incredulously.

"They really didn't teach you anything on that farm of yours, did they?"

"My dad taught us lots of things," Ducasus protested.

"It is not metaphorical. It depicts the moment when the first king of the Flares received a nation star from the heavens and he knew that it was his destiny to conquer and to rule. They still keep the star today, locked somewhere deep inside the palace."

Ducasus was caught off guard with this information. He had never heard of anything like it.

"There are *nation* stars?"

Incus nodded, and Ducasus was lost in thought for a few minutes as they continued searching for a tavern. He piped up again.

"But stars disappear once you use them. How could they still have it?"

"It is a nation star. The time of their nation's dominion has not yet come to an end."

"Do all of the kingdoms have a star? Does Nebularis?"

Incus nodded.

"I've seen it."

Ducasus gaped, hardly believing what his companion had just said.

"What does it look like?"

"Big. And red. They say it grows larger with each

passing decade."

"How did you get to see it? You said the Flares keep theirs locked away in their palace; wouldn't the Nebs do the same?"

"I spent some time in the castle," Incus returned flatly.

"How did you manage that? Were you a cook? No, that can't be right. I've had your cooking."

Incus glared at Ducasus.

"I wasn't a cook."

"You aren't a trapper, either. What does that leave us with?"

Incus grunted, which was as about as much of an answer as Ducasus expected.

The two travelers wound up and down streets, twisting and turning their way to the rougher-looking parts of the city. Up to this point, Ducasus had pointed out several markets and eateries that seemed suitable, but Incus shot him down each time. Ducasus was starting to get frustrated again. He wanted to find Rosae.

At long last, in the dirtiest, seediest part of the city, Incus stopped before a ramshackle building. The wood of the place looked rotten, and a sign that read "Light Up Tavern" hung sideways by one chain, the other having snapped long ago. Paint was peeling everywhere, and the smell of the place was insufferable.

"You can't be serious..." Ducasus began.

"It's perfect."

Ducasus glanced up at the weathered structure again, just in time to see the sign's final chain snap, sending it crashing to the ground in front of the tavern.

"It reminds me too much of home. None of the other places we saw worked for you? You want to go here?"

"We're not here for comfort. We're here for information."

Ducasus stared for a moment.

"I figured you were looking for a place to eat."

"I wasn't. Now listen: I attract attention."

The seven and a half foot colossus looked down at Ducasus.

"You certainly do."

"So you are going to go in first and ask around. When you think you've found someone who knows something, whistle loudly and I'll come in."

"Slight problem..."

"You can't whistle?"

"Nope. Also, how do I know who to talk to?"

Incus rummaged through his pack and pulled out a wooden whistle. Ducasus got excited briefly, but it was much too small to be the piece he had seen him carving by firelight on many occasions.

"You'll figure it out."

Ducasus took the wooden instrument and gazed up at the late afternoon sun. They had been walking for a while.

No time to lose.

He pushed the spring-loaded doors apart and stepped into the shack.

It was poorly lit inside, and it took several moments for Ducasus' eyes to adjust. The place smelled far worse on the inside than on the outside. Directly in front of him was a long bar that stood before rows of casks with a haggard-looking bartender in between. She had the green eyes of a Flare, but her hair had a reddish tint to its blonde, and none of the luster that he had seen in most Flares.

He looked to his left and saw several Flares seated around an Ungifted who played away on his nautilus, a metal instrument that resembled a tortoise shell. He rapped on it with his fingers and knuckles in different places to produce a melody while keeping time with slaps of percussion simultaneously. The effect was very dreamlike.

He looked to his right and saw a small group gathered around two Flares playing some sort of game. There was a

board and several figurines that the players moved from time to time, but it was unfamiliar to Ducasus. The men around seemed to be betting on the game.

The place was repulsive, but Ducasus couldn't help but be amazed. Ungifteds and Flares were mingled together, talking, sharing meals, arguing, gambling... There didn't seem to be any division based on gifting.

A few tables and chairs were scattered in the center of the room, occupied by strung-out Ungifteds and Flares. Ducasus maneuvered around them and approached the bar.

"What can I do for ya?" the woman behind the bar asked.

Alright, time to be charming, Ducasus thought. He gave her his best suave smile.

"You can tell me how a pretty Flare like you ended up in a place like this."

"I made some choices. You're a little young for me, Amasio, and you're bad at this. What do you want?"

"Amasio?"

"I was making a joke. What do you want?"

A man several stools down the bar snickered. Ducasus glared at him and turned back to the woman.

"I'm looking for somebody who might know something about... how people move... live cargo in this town. People. Property. Brides."

The scraggly bartender raised an eyebrow and put an elbow on the bar.

"You trying to ask me about merchant brides, kid?"

"No, no, no, no. No. Of course not." Ducasus paused. He had thought of an idea of how to play this out covertly, but now it was gone. He had no idea what he was doing. "Well, actually, yes. I want to know about that."

The woman looked at Ducasus condescendingly and smacked her lips as she began to talk.

"I happen to think the idea is disgusting. Don't know

anything about it, not that I'll tell the likes of you." She leaned in and whispered sarcastically, "And don't ya know that kinda thing is illegal?"

Ducasus turned around, hearing some scuffling, and he saw an Ungifted at the game table being pulled away as he protested. Two men held onto him while another punched him repeatedly in the stomach and face.

Ducasus was shocked, but he kept it together.

He gestured behind him.

"I can see you're very interested in keeping the law here."

The woman threw her hands up.

"We're practically lawyers. Now do you want an ale, or food, or what?"

Ducasus frowned. This was going nowhere.

I'd better order something- maybe she'll talk to me then.

"Yeah, bring me... bring me-"

"Yeah?"

He glared at the sarcastic Flare. This woman was starting to get on his nerves.

"Just give me your finest ale," he said. The man several seats down from him was still snickering.

The haggard bartender turned around and grabbed a mug when Ducasus remembered that he didn't have any money. He figured this was a bad place to be a deadbeat.

"Um, actually, never mind." The woman turned and glared at him. "I, uh, need some time to decide what I want."

The Flare woman rolled her eyes and walked away, rag in hand as she began wiping down empty tables.

Well, I just made a fool of myself.

The man a few seats down took a swig of his ale and continued laughing, some of his ale dripping out of the side of his mouth as he did so.

"A brilliant performance, Maestro!" the drunk exclaimed to Ducasus, raising his glass and laughing. He

was starting to tear up from all his mirth. "You read her like a story-book! She opened right up to your smooth line of interrogation."

The drunk continued to laugh. Ducasus was less than amused.

"And I suppose you could do better?"

The drunk shrugged.

"I have been known to be quite the... charmer on occasion, let me assure you. I once convinced a king of the barbarian north to tell me his plans of battle when I was fighting for the rival tribe!" The drunk devolved into giggles.

"You're drunk," Ducasus began, disgusted. "You're probably drunk all the time, too."

The man's head shot up at this remark and he pointed his finger up in the air.

"Not true! Just—" The man stuck out his tongue and clumsily counted on his fingers. "Three days ago! I turned down a goblet of wine. It looked delectable, and I wanted it, but I just set it down." The drunk squinted his eyes and nodded his head as he spoke of his triumph of self-control.

"I can see how much that decision has helped you. Now leave me alone."

The drunk raised his glass to his lips and drained it of the last of its foam and ale. He wiped his lips on his arm, then clumsily slid off of his stool and stumbled over to where Ducasus sat. He stank worse than the bar itself.

The drunk laid a hand on Ducasus' shoulder and looked repentant.

"I'm sorry. I've been getting treated miserably poor by my master... I was just having fun with you. Fun with the boy. With the kid. How old are you?"

The strong smell of ale hit Ducasus as the drunk leaned in to ask his question.

"I'm seventeen."

"Seventeen," the drunk said, looking thoughtful.

"That's good... a good year. My master is young too. Probably not as young as you. I don't really know. How old is he?"

The drunk stared off into space pensively and Ducasus was left feeling uncomfortable, uncertain as to how he should handle the situation. The drunk suddenly shook himself and returned to the present.

"I suppose that's not important. Anyway, the one you want to talk to is over there playing tralia."

Ducasus at the Flare he indicated. He was somber, reclining confidently as he played his game. Men and Flares were still gathered around, passing money back and forth occasionally.

"He's involved in merchant brides?"

The drunk nodded.

"He's your Flare. His name's Talpa. Now if you'll excuse me: the name is calling my privy. I should get back anyway... Got to get belittled and insulted by my master some more."

The drunk nodded to Ducasus and Ducasus nodded back, still thrown off by the bizarre exchange. He looked over to the man at the game table again, who was placing a black figurine ahead on the board triumphantly.

Can I trust what the drunk told me? Ducasus wondered. He looked around the bar and thought of Rosae locked up somewhere, alone and cold. *I guess I don't have much of a choice.*

He walked up to the circle of gamblers watching the game and pushed his way next to the Flare he sought, who looked to be deep in concentration as he pondered his position. It occurred to Ducasus that he should wait until the game was finished, but he couldn't stop seeing images of Rosae in his mind's eye. He had to find her. No game was going to delay him.

He tapped the Flare called Talpa on the shoulder, who looked up laconically, then turned back to his game.

"I want to talk to you," Ducasus said.

"I don't care if you lost your money. I just play the game. Bet on me next time and you won't be hurting, eh?"

"I didn't bet anything. I'm here to talk business."

The Flare raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to the side as he reached forward and moved a dragon-like piece in front of where his opponent had moved.

"Your business or mine?"

"Yours," Ducasus responded quietly. "Your business has become my business."

Talpa shook his head and returned to his apathetic mannerisms.

"I don't talk about my business with strangers, eh? Even if you are Ungifted. If you want a job, you go talk to Lucius like everybody else."

Ducasus was frustrated. He pulled the whistle out of his pocket and blew it loudly at the Flare who was standing between him and his goal.

"I don't want a job. I need to talk to you about your business," Ducasus said through gritted teeth.

All of the men at the table jumped at the unexpected sound of the whistle and now turned, glaring at Ducasus. He remained calm.

A tall Ungifted approached Ducasus behind. He could see him out of the corner of his eye, slowly emerging from the dark of the room, rope in hand. Ducasus didn't even pay him the courtesy of fear as he raised the rope above his head. He continued shouting at the Flare, who didn't want to be bothered.

"You know things that I need to know, and I want you to talk to me!"

Talpa rolled his eyes.

"You're gonna get yourself killed, Kid. You think I'm afraid of you?"

A deep, rumbling voice answered from above them.

"You should be."

A hand appeared out of the darkness, and the Ungifted behind Ducasus was thrown through the swinging doors at the entrance. Incus lunged into the light and snatched the unsuspecting Talpa by his clothes, kicking over his table in the process. He shoved the shifty-eyed Flare against the wall, holding him three feet off of the ground.

The others saw what was happening and scattered. No one wanted to tangle with a Neb unless they had to, especially not a Neb as big as Incus. The giant stared intently into his captive's eyes, never speaking, just holding him in stony, unyielding silence.

"I told you I need to talk to you about your business," Ducasus said again.

The Flare looked for companions nearby, but everyone who had been surrounding the table just moments before was now gone. Ungifteds and Flares watched the scene unfold from across the room, the dreamy music having now stopped. The Flare was confused and indignant about this sudden turn of events.

"Hey, I have friends, eh? You don't want to try this."

Ducasus turned his head back and forth.

"Are they here?"

The Flare gritted his teeth and looked down. Incus growled slightly.

"I didn't think so. Now tell me what you did with Rosae! She's an Ungifted, my age, reddish-brown hair, hazel eyes. Where is she?"

The Flare looked up in confusion, his feet still dangling from where Incus held him against the wall.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Kid."

"Well, then think!" Ducasus shouted. "She was taken almost two weeks ago by four of your Flares." Ducasus frowned and leaned in to where the Flare was suspended, looking up. "Only one of those four made it back."

The Flare hung his head and chuckled softly.

"Is something funny?" Ducasus asked.

"Yeah," the Flare said, rolling his head to meet Ducasus' gaze. "You've got the wrong person. I don't use Flares as kidnappers; that would be a logistical nightmare. They would want more money, they're more visible, I can't chase them down and kill them as easy... You've got the wrong trader."

Ducasus' heart sank. He exchanged glances with Incus before returning to the haughty Flare.

"Then you must know who took her. Tell me."

"Eh..." The Flare shrugged, now feeling cocky. "I'm not sure if I feel like it."

Ducasus gestured at Incus with his thumb.

"If you tell me, my friend won't crush your legs with his bare hands."

The Flare swallowed hard and looked up at Incus, who still stared at him unwaveringly, but now had a hint of a fierce grin on his face.

"Sounds fair." The Flare cleared his throat. "It was probably the Seven Sisters. Anarchists. They usually send out their squad in groups of four. They just got into the business a year or so back, but it's not really their main event. They're trying to fundraise, eh? They're the ones you want."

That lines up with what Incus said, Ducasus thought.

"Where do we find them?"

Talpa shrugged.

"That I don't know. They're very private. Trying to usurp a government is serious business, eh?"

"I said tell us where they are," Ducasus growled.

The Flare gestured, putting his hands up in ignorance.

Ducasus' eyes were wild and anger coursed through him. He slammed his palm into the wall and yelled.

"You know!"

None of this would have happened if Malleus hadn't-
Ducasus shook the thought from his mind, trying to stay

in the present. Thinking of Malleus wasn't going to help now.

"Nobody knows. Believe me, I'd like to know, but these are hard people to find. They're not so big, but they're loyal and secret. If you find them, let me know. I'd like to keep an eye on the competition."

Tears of frustration threatened to emerge from Ducasus' eyes. He turned away and blinked them back.

"Then how do you know about them?"

"I used to be the only game in town. Now rich Flares from the outskirts pass through and don't want to buy from me. They say they found another source. Took me a while to get enough information to even know it was them."

Ducasus sighed heavily and ran his hand across his face. Incus lowered the criminal to the floor.

"About time, eh?" Talpa said, readjusting his shirt and coat.

Incus leaned down as the Flare moved to leave.

"Find a new line of work."

Talpa smiled and disappeared in a flash. The saloon doors swung back and forth and he was gone.

Incus glanced around the darkened interior of the Light Up Tavern and saw all of the faces in the room staring at them in silence. He grunted and pushed through the saloon doors, thinking that they had better find a different place to stay for the night.

Chapter Eighteen:

Shadows and Secrets

Malleus pulled his black cloak tighter around him as he headed to the western outskirts of the city. The winter air nipped at his skin, and he noticed every point of contact, feeling the changing direction of the winds. He listened carefully with gifted ears as he effortlessly made his way through the dark streets and alleyways. There was plenty of light for him to see by. Malleus guessed that anyone but a Hawkeye would have been lost in the darkness.

Just before he reached the city walls, he halted behind a building constructed of shaped stone blocks. The structure seemed out of place in a quarter of the city where almost all of the buildings were of wood.

Here we are, Malleus thought, approaching the structure in silence. To be doubly certain that he had arrived at the correct spot, Malleus pressed his ear against the wall and focused. At first, he heard nothing, but then the sounds of a man shifting his weight reached Malleus' sharp ears.

He grinned. He had not been led astray.

Starting from the ground, he counted five stones up, and then he counted twenty-one stones from the eastern corner of the building. His eyes lit on a particular stone that was worn slightly more than the others.

Malleus reached out to it and slid his fingers into the space around. The stone was not sealed in. It scraped against its fitting as Malleus eased it out, leaving an inky, black void in its place. He recalled the words he had been told.

"Is there no home for the free? Where does the

liberator lay his head?"

Dim eyes appeared in the hole, and a somber voice answered him.

"There is rest, but what do you seek?"

Malleus spoke deeply, clothing himself with his adopted persona as an old and familiar coat.

"I seek the destruction of this government's oppression, and I bring plans to bring it about."

The eyes disappeared from the hole, and Malleus heard urgent whispering between two voices. After several moments, the eyes returned.

"Enter as a friend. Enemies live not long in our home."

The stone wall opened then, and a gaping doorway appeared before Malleus. He looked into the darkness beyond and passed into it boldly.

"A friend indeed."

As he crossed the threshold, he could not help thinking how much grander and more exciting this present moment was compared with anything he had experienced in his slave village. He was certain he had found his calling. He was made for great things.

"You used the old door." A voice came from the darkness next to Malleus. "No one uses it anymore."

"Too obvious?"

Light from the dim streets revealed a Flare nodding in response.

Malleus' stomach knotted tightly. This was the worst aspect of his clever plan; he had to spend this time with Flares. It made Malleus sick to his stomach, even if he was a Flare himself. He made himself sick sometimes.

Malleus still clutched the stone he had removed, and he watched as the door he had entered by slowly closed, leaving the passage in near total darkness. The only light came through the small, rectangular gap in the door. Malleus returned his stone to the hole, and then the darkness was complete.

"Here," the voice said, handing Malleus one end of a short rope. "Hang onto this."

Malleus closed his fingers around the rope as it seemed to be handed off to someone else. Even Malleus could not see in the blackness that enveloped them.

He felt two tugs on the line and then tension as whoever held the other end began walking.

I don't need this rope, Malleus thought. I could just follow the sound of his footsteps.

He continued to hold on nonetheless, led in various directions but always angled downwards. The passage twisted and turned, and Malleus wondered how the man before him knew where to go. He supposed he had it memorized.

The air was damp and earthy, similar to the underground hideout the zealots occupied beneath the city. It was stale here, however, and it grew more so as they continued. His skin tingled with cold, and he heard the soft splash of a shoe hitting shallow water just before he himself stepped into it. The path leveled out for a while, but a few inches of water was spread evenly over the ground, making the going uncomfortable. Finally, the passage began to angle up and the water was left behind them, only present in their tracks.

They arrived at a stopping point, and Malleus heard the man in front of him say, "Keys." A metallic jangling followed, then a muted sound as the man caught the tossed objects. Malleus heard a lock turn, then keys being tossed again.

"Thanks," Malleus' guide said, pulling on the rope once more. The doorkeeper only grunted in response.

Stone scraped against stone, and suddenly there was some dim light, revealing that the guide was a Flare. His hair went down to his hips and he wore leather sandals strapped to his feet. A narrow sword hung from his side.

Though it was still too dim for most to see by,

Malleus' gifted eyes allowed him to watch the Flare in front of him as they stopped again, this time before a stone wall.

The Flare placed his palm on the stone directly in front of his face, pushing on it. He then reached down and pushed on the stone at his feet, and the wall slid away, letting Malleus and his guide pass into the light once more.

An underground river splashed through the expansive cavern, running along the far wall out of the darkness before disappearing into a tunnel near them. Beside the water was a large, open space with a high ceiling, at least forty feet to Malleus' estimation. Stalactites covered the top of the cavern and large forests of stalagmites dotted the ground. Torches lined the walls and lights hung from the stalactites above. Flares milled around, going about their business. Several tents were erected across the floor, and all in all, Malleus estimated that there were some forty Flares present, although the expansive cavern could certainly contain many times more than that.

A tall Flare with dark green eyes and a buckler strapped to her back approached Malleus and his guide. She gave Malleus' guide a nod, then walked to Malleus and stood before him.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she demanded.

Malleus scanned the Flare from top to bottom. He tried to obscure his disdain.

"I am someone who wants to see our present tyranny come to an end, and I have come to speak of ambitions."

She raised an eyebrow at Malleus.

"And how do we know you can be trusted?"

Her voice was low for a woman, yet crooning, inviting. She must have been beautiful once, now hardened by life. She exuded a confidence that made people want

to please her, to gain her approval.

Malleus didn't trust her at all.

His hood covered his face, and he looked to be the very apparition of death itself, which is what he had been going for.

"Do you remember the poisoning of the water supply? The destroyed granaries? The fires?" he spoke calmly and with a chilling timbre.

"All recent events," the tall woman replied. "We didn't cause them."

"No," Malleus responded, looking up to meet the Flare's gaze. "I did. There will be another fire in the wealthy section of the northern quarter if you don't believe me. It will begin in about an hour."

The Flare straightened her shoulders and smiled widely.

"Then you are a horrible, horrible Flare! I offer you my congratulations. We need more like you to get things done."

Malleus' guide looked on, listening without response. A few other Flares began gathering around as the gifted woman continued.

"Now, what can we do for you?"

"I've come to speak to your leader about a scheme that will make everyone forget these other, lesser disasters." *Something with a little less collateral damage this time*, Malleus thought. Too many Ungifteds had died.

The tall Flare woman looked at all of the faces around her and then turned to Malleus once more.

"We have no leader. That would be oppression, would it not? But you may speak to me, Merope. Let us go somewhere a bit more private."

Merope beckoned and led Malleus to the far wall where an iron door was set in the rock.

"Gravis!" she demanded.

Malleus heard a clatter behind him, followed by a

rustling of canvas as a Flare came huffing his way over to where they stood. Gravis had the typical features of his gift, but he lacked the lithe quality that all the others seemed to share. Malleus had never seen a corpulent Flare before, and it threw him off for a moment. It seemed like an inherent contradiction.

As Gravis handed an iron key to Merope, she noticed Malleus looking at Gravis with curiosity. She chuckled and slapped the fat Flare on the back, then shoved him away.

"I see you find our companion Gravis strange. You might be wondering how a man blessed with the incredible gifting of the Flares might attain to his level of blubber. So are we, frankly; it must take a concerted effort. But we believe that everyone should do what they want here. After all, we are anarchists. No one is going to tell me what to do, so why should I tell him to stop stuffing his face?" The tall woman chuckled as they walked through the iron door, removing a torch from the wall before crossing the threshold. The other Flares were left behind.

The metal door shut, and Malleus took in their new surroundings. It was a prison. Eight large cages lined the wall before him, lit by the dancing light of the torch. He could make out outlines of people behind bars here and there, their features haggard and worn. People without Malleus' gift would have had trouble seeing anything at all.

"Alone at last," Merope said, a distasteful smile on her lips. "So what do I call you?"

Malleus ignored the question.

"So you are one of the Seven Sisters?"

Merope smiled.

"The youngest, but perhaps the most influential. Now tell me of this plan of yours."

Malleus nodded, hesitating a moment.

"I can deliver you a chance at the queen," he said. "We have many spies, some in the castle, and we know where she will be and when. I will provide the opportunity, and I want you to kill her." Saying the word "kill" like this still felt strange to Malleus. It was unreal, as if the persona had said it rather than Malleus himself.

"It seems we have very similar interests. Only one question: Why don't you take the glory of the regicide for yourself?"

"Your men are experienced in assassinations, I'm told. We can't afford to allow this opportunity to be botched. Thus, we call upon the professionals."

"We don't believe in professionals," Merope returned. "It smacks of... order. But we are the best."

"Good."

"I apologize for the mess," Merope said, sweeping the room with her arms. "It's just that we've gotten into a new source of revenue lately. I'll be happy to neglect it for so exciting a venture as you propose."

"I should expect nothing less."

A source of revenue? Malleus thought as he glanced about the cells. *Are the anarchists selling slaves?*

Malleus felt sick to his stomach and he resisted the strong urge to attack Merope right there and free the prisoners. He told himself that it would be foolish; it made much more sense to free them in the long run than to free them now, only to be recaptured. Freeing them in the long run meant destroying the Flares, and destroying the Flares meant keeping this wretched woman on friendly terms for a while, but her day would come.

Malleus seethed inwardly.

"You're into slave-trading, are you?"

"Why yes! Specifically merchant brides. It's a good deal easier to hide than your prototypical slave. Plausible deniability and all that. I'm surprised we didn't start decades ago." She hummed, placing her torch in the

opposite hand. "Come, I'll show you what we're working with; maybe you'll want something."

The thought of owning an Ungifted so repulsed Malleus that he threw away all regret for the people who had died because of his schemes. He knew that he had to rid the world of these Flares that had enslaved his family all of their lives. A bitter fire burned deep within him.

Merope led Malleus from cage to cage. Some were empty and some had several Ungifteds in them. All of the faces they passed looked so desperate, so pale, robbed of all hope in the world.

"We deal mostly in females," she said as they passed a cage crammed with seven women. "They're easier to sell. It seems that no one is willing to risk it in the hard labor market, but plenty of buyers are looking for a wife, or I suppose 'concubine' would be a more accurate term. We do have some males, though. I'm not sure what we'll do with them. We haven't sold any yet."

Merope held the light up to a cage of three men with long beards and rags for clothes. She continued to prattle about something, but Malleus was not listening. He only looked into the hungry, shamed, hurting faces of the captured Ungifteds. They were powerless to defend themselves against the Flares.

"But anyway, we capture and sell merchant brides to fund the cause. It's easier than you'd expect."

"And as a woman," Malleus began, but Merope cut him off.

"No, it doesn't bother me, if that's what you were going to ask. These girls are weak, stupid. You could never catch me and keep me in there, so why make the comparison?"

"Forgive my curiosity," Malleus pressed further. He knew he should stop, but he could not believe what was in front of him. "Were you born with your gift, or did you have a star?"

Merope laughed.

"You think that I'm one of the noble, privileged girls born as a Flare? No. I had a star, just like a man. And I hunted it down and I found it. Now if we're done with the personal inquiries, did anything among our merchandise catch your eye?"

Malleus looked up at the villainous Flare, torn from his thoughts. It took all of his self-control not to throw Merope into one of her own cells. He knew he could do it, too, contrary to what she had said.

"Nothing did, no. What's beyond the door behind you? Another row of cages?" Malleus' distaste almost bled through into his words, but he was in control of himself. He would not allow that to happen.

"No, not another row, just one girl." Merope spoke with noticeable irritation. "We put her in there to calm her down. She's a feisty demon, that one." Merope turned the handle on the door as she spoke and opened it into another pitch-black room. As the torch entered and Malleus behind it, he could perceive a row of bars that ran from one side of the little room to the other. They approached hesitantly.

Merope held the torch to the cell.

"What's the matter," she cooed, "no insult for me today?"

Light fell on the figure of a lone girl, holding her knees to her chest. She looked up defiantly, but she did not say a word.

Malleus couldn't breathe. The girl in the cell was Rosae.

"Oh, I see. You'll be polite in front of guests. Well at least--"

Malleus cut her off.

"I want her."

Merope turned her head, shocked.

"Her? You want the stubborn demon?"

"Not everyone's afraid of a sixteen-year-old girl," Rosae interjected. "Not everyone is pretending to be tough."

Merope smiled bitterly.

"And not everyone has to put up with an enchantress from hell. There are things we have not yet done to you..."

"It'd sure be a shame to hurt my resale value."

Merope frowned, then turned back to Malleus.

"This sort of thing is why we're generally against free enterprise. It's just so restricting."

"How much for the girl?"

Merope shook her head.

"She's already been purchased, believe it or not. Although I can't fathom why someone would want to buy a toothless wench like her." She turned and spat the last words at Rosae, who, in turn opened her mouth wide, showing all of her teeth.

Merope frowned.

"Anyway, a rich merchant from Sol sent his servant here a while ago and he put in a deposit on her. He'll be along when it's convenient for him to pick her up. It'll be a couple of weeks."

You piece of trash... Malleus thought.

"I'll buy him out. How much do you want?"

"I told you, she's already been sold. Buy one of the other girls."

Malleus controlled himself with effort.

"She fits my needs perfectly. Let me buy her."

"No. And I think we've had enough of this side trade. Why don't you tell me more details of your plan? When are we to take out the queen?"

Malleus seized the opportunity.

"What if I make this girl a condition of the deal? No information without the girl."

Merope's dark green eyes glowered.

"I don't know how familiar you are with anarchists,

stranger, but here's a tip," she growled. "We do not like to be threatened. And no one tells us what to do. You may soon find yourself in a very perilous position if you forget that."

With an effort of will, Malleus produced a dark laugh. He was trying to change Pontus, and he needed this Flare's cooperation.

"You believed me serious? That's good. That's amusing."

Merope's scowl faded and slowly turned to a smile. Malleus continued, "You think I'd trade my plans for a slave? That's funny, but no," Malleus said, growing serious. "I want what you want. I want the queen dead and Velocitum in turmoil."

Malleus pulled some papers from the inside of his cloak.

"Our opportunity presents itself in two days' time in the afternoon. The details are here," he said, handing her the papers. "Ensure that your men are waiting where I've indicated and when, and we shall be victorious."

"Excellent news, mister..."

"Malleus."

"Excellent news, Malleus. I think you might be one of us after all," Merope said, staring at the papers with perverse satisfaction.

"Only one thing," Malleus added.

"What?"

"I'd like to spend some time with the girl. I'm rather interested people with so much fight in them... it's an obsession, really."

Merope scoffed.

"If you can stand to be near her, be my guest. We carry out our designs in two days' time!"

Merope left in triumph, leaving Malleus and Rosae alone in the darkness, her gleeful laughter fading as it echoed down the cave. They remained silent until they

were sure no one could hear.

Rosae got up quickly and ran to the bars.

"I couldn't see you, but I heard your voice. I knew you'd come, Ducasus!"

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint, but it's only the other twin."

There was an awkward pause as the two stood in darkness.

"...Malleus?"

"The very same." He bowed slightly before he remembered that she wouldn't be able to see the motion.

Malleus perceived that Rosae made several small sounds indicative of imminent speech, but each time she hesitated and declined to speak. There was something she wanted to say but was holding back.

"Have you come to rescue me, Malleus?"

Why does her voice sound like that? Malleus thought. *I need to learn what these vocal variations signify.* He gripped the bar in front of him with his right hand. *How can I explain this?*

"Unfortunately, no. I was not aware of your presence here until moments ago."

"Malleus, why are you talking so weird?"

Was I talking weird?

"What?"

"You're speaking really low, and you sort of growl when you talk. It's weird."

I don't have to speak as my persona with Rosae. Malleus had grown so used to being in character all the time that it was hard to turn it off.

"My apologies. Rosae, how did you get here? Did that slime Atrox sell you?"

"No." Rosae sounded angry. "These lowlifes stole me. Ducasus fought for me, but I don't really know all of what happened. They hit me on the head and I woke up tied to a horse with a Flare leading it. He didn't have a horse

when he captured me... I don't know." Rosae's anger lingered, but with a touch of exasperation now. "So how are you going to get me out of here, Malleus? I can't spend another moment with these creeps."

Malleus felt sick to his stomach, but he had already decided. He could not jeopardize his mission. Talking to the girl was bad enough. Besides, he had tried to buy her.

"Well... I'm not going to."

Rosae was shocked.

"What?"

"It sounds bad, but it's for the best. I've thought it all out."

"Wait, wait, wait. You mean to tell me that you're here, but you won't try to free me?"

"I need these anarchists for something, and I can't afford to anger them by doing something like freeing you all. Believe me, I want to, but there are bigger things happening."

Rosae backed away from the bars.

"Bigger things..." she said as she sat back down on the wet, clay floor. "Is that why you stole Ducasus' star?"

The question caught Malleus off-guard.

"How did you-"

"Is that why you apparently want to kill the queen?"

"Look, it's not-"

A voice rang out down the walls.

"Malleus!"

Malleus turned his head sharply in the direction of the voice. He turned back to Rosae, speaking in a whisper.

"It's not only that. I have a-"

The voice called out again. It was Merope.

"Malleus! Come out here, we forgot to discuss payment!"

"Payment?" Malleus repeated to himself unbelieving. "The hypocritical... What payment?"

He turned back in the direction of Rosae, her image

still protected by the darkness.

"Look, I'll explain everything to you later. It's not as bad as it sounds. I need these Flares for a job in two days, then maybe I can come free you, or maybe when your buyer comes. Just wait, alright?"

Rosae did not respond. Malleus turned down the hall, then he stopped and looked back in Rosae's direction.

"I'm not the bad guy, Rosae."

He waited a long moment, waiting for a response that never came. He stormed out of the solitary confinement to try and find Merope.

~°~

"You've got to be kidding me," Ducasus said.

"What?" Incus returned as they stood outside a ramshackle place of lodging.

"We stayed here last night and got bitten by bed bugs the whole time. We spent all day trying to track down the anarchists to find Rosae, and we came up with nothing. I'm hungry, I'm tired, and now you want to stay at the bed bug place again?"

Incus shrugged.

"They didn't bite me."

"That's because they're afraid of you. Look at this-" Ducasus lifted up his shirt to reveal a line of red bites on his side. "I lived in a slave's hovel for seventeen years, and I've never had bites this bad."

"It's cheap and it's a bed. Come on."

Ducasus let his shirt fall back down and followed the giant.

"How much money do we have?" Ducasus asked.

"Enough for tonight and that's it."

"But you can sell the pelts?"

"Yes. But that will take time."

Ducasus' heart sank. How were they going to find

Rosae when they didn't even know where they would find food and a place to stay?

The wilderness is easier than this, Ducasus thought.

He dreamed about Rosae every moment. He longed to rescue her, to hold her tightly in his arms... but she wasn't there, and Ducasus didn't know how to find her.

Incus said that the Father of Lights would help them. Ducasus hoped he was right.

~°~

The metal door sounded as Malleus pushed it open into the lonely, secluded room. He carried a torch this time, so he was able to see everything by its light. Rosae sat against the back wall, again with her knees pulled into her chest. Her white dress with the little flowers she had embroidered on was now smeared with grime and dirt. Rosae was not looking well, yet she had a defiant disposition that declared she would never be defeated.

She looked up as Malleus entered the room alone, his long, chestnut locks trailing behind him and his cryptic, two-toned eyes already scanning and analyzing the room.

"Rosae?"

"Have you come to rescue me today, Malleus?"

"You know that I haven't," he returned, closing the door behind him.

"Then why are you here?"

"Is that any way to treat a friend?"

"You stopped being a friend when you betrayed your brother and left me in here to rot."

Malleus rolled his eyes.

People can be so thick-headed sometimes.

"Well, that's why I'm here: To explain. I had to come and take care of some details with the Seven Sisters tonight, and I told Merope I wanted to speak with you again. She let me because she says you were quieter after

we last talked."

"You made me ill," Rosae returned mockingly. "I try not to talk when I'm feeling sick."

"I'll come and get you tomorrow night. These Flares will be done with my mission by then."

Rosae looked steadfastly at Malleus, saying nothing. She looked hopeful, but frightened. Malleus continued speaking.

"Now, I don't have to lecture you on the evils of the Flares, I'm sure you've experienced plenty of it yourself. My aim in all of this is to free the Ungifteds of this worldwide institution of slavery and oppression. My aim is to rid the world of Flares."

Rosae remained fixated on the strange-looking entity in front of her, listening intently.

"When Ducasus and I were searching for our stars, I found out from his own mouth that he did not possess the resolve to help me in my quest to rid the world of this disease, these people for whom slavery and oppression is an ingrained part of life."

Rosae shook her head, uncertain.

"You keep saying that slavery is... omnipresent, but Incus told us that it's illegal here."

Who's Incus? Malleus lowered his chin and responded condescendingly.

"Rosae, look where you are. Don't be naïve."

"Malleus, you can't possibly think that every single Flare--"

Malleus cut her off, shouting.

"Do you remember what they did to my father? Do you? If Ducasus had been there, he would be here, right alongside me!" The words had burst forth from Malleus like a volcano. He had yelled them, which shocked Rosae. She had never seen him lose his cool before.

Malleus breathed deeply and recomposed himself before he continued.

"Yes, Rosae, I do think that every single Flare is like them. They're born with cruelty already flowing through their veins. Need I remind you of the whips and the beatings and the overseers' hunters that wouldn't allow us to leave? No, you remember them as well as I do. They are why I took Ducasus' star. It's an uphill battle against the Flares as it is, and we need every advantage we can get. It would have been unforgiveable to have only employed one of our two gifts in the struggle for justice. And now I have embarked upon a plan of my own creation. I have enlisted the aid of the zealots to help me first teach the Flares to fear, then to throw them into chaos, and finally to rid the land of their foul presence. They are monsters to be slain." Malleus completed his philippic in triumph. He thought briefly back to the rogue Pompey, who had captured him and his brother, but he immediately tossed the idea from his mind.

Pompey was an idiot, Malleus thought. I'm nothing like him.

"But Malleus," Rosae spoke softly, with sadness in her voice. "You're a Flare."

Malleus turned his head up, stiffening his body.

"Yes. Cruelty now runs in my veins as well. I am a monster." He turned his gaze to Rosae, who silently gasped at the fierceness of his two-toned eyes. "But I am a monster to the Flares. I have become like them so that I might destroy them. I have made the ultimate sacrifice."

Confusion and sadness vied for eminence in Rosae's disposition.

"The ultimate sacrifice? Malleus, what has happened to you?" she asked, almost pleading.

"I've been changed, Rosae. You see it even in my features."

Rosae stood up slowly and walked to where Malleus stood in the torchlight. She extended a trembling hand towards his face, then pulled it back.

"Yes," she said. "You have been changed. You've always been smart, and your features are very striking."

Malleus had not been expecting Rosae's response. He looked at her with hard, curious eyes as she continued.

"Do you know what vanity is, Malleus?"

He raised an eyebrow. *Where is she going with this?*

"Self-absorption?" he returned.

Rosae shook her head.

"It means empty. You have a very beautiful outside, Malleus," she said, and then she turned and walked the two steps back to where she had been sitting. She sat down again, with her knees pulled into her chest, but this time she faced the wall and turned her back to Malleus, who stood before the bars in confusion.

"Ducasus and Incus will come for me," she said quietly.

Malleus had just been turning to leave when she said this.

"Is he here? In Velocitum?"

Rosae nodded her head, still facing the wall.

"We were heading here before I was taken, and I know he'll follow me."

"Who's Incus?" Malleus ran through a mental list of the other slaves from their village.

"He's a Nebula," Rosae said softly. "He saved Ducasus after you abandoned him."

Ducasus is here? Malleus thought to himself.

Chapter Nineteen:

Regina

"What do you mean you can't give us our horses back? We paid in advance for two days!" Ducasus and Incus stood before the doors of the stable where they had left their horses upon entering the city.

"Exactly," the stable owner, a short Ungifted with curly black hair, replied. "You paid for two days. Today is the third day. We keep them unless you pay us for today."

"But it's only midmorning!" Ducasus exclaimed.

"...On the third day. Pay or we keep them until you can pay."

Ducasus gestured up at Incus with his thumb.

"Look, do you want my friend here to--"

A giant hand fell on Ducasus' shoulder.

"Not here."

Ducasus protested while the little stableman looked on in confusion. Incus only shook his head.

"It's not worth it. We don't need the horses unless we leave. We only came to avoid paying more."

"But we're being cheated!"

"It's common practice," the stable owner interjected. Flies buzzed all around.

Incus was already turning to go.

"You're giving up already?" Ducasus called after him. "What happened to 'go down fighting'?"

Incus turned back to his companion.

"Pick your battles, Ducasus. This one isn't worth it. Finding your girl is. Let's not get distracted from that because you are angry."

Ducasus wanted to take the tiny stable owner and

drag him behind his horse, but Incus was right. He sighed in submission.

"Where do we start today?"

Incus squinted up at the sky, gauging their position from the sun's.

"Northeast. We have yet to search there."

Ducasus and Incus walked away from the stable near the main gate of the city, which was thronging with Flares and Ungifteds alike, as usual. The two searchers walked a long way through the city, crossing the main square and arriving on the eastern side of the city. They discussed what they knew relating to Rosae's location, which wasn't much, and about the Ar-lenti that Incus trained Ducasus in every evening. Ducasus was beginning to understand it better, and he felt fairly confident in his ability to evade attack, at least from an unarmed opponent. Incus taught him about facing an enemy with weapons when he had none. It sounded hard.

They passed under aqueducts and treaded over miles of red rock underfoot while three-story sandstone buildings rose up on either side of them. The structures were nicer in this part of the city, if older. In the western quarter everything seemed to be made out of wood, much of it rotten. Ducasus liked it better here.

They asked for information wherever it might be found, but to no avail. The Flare from the bar had been right; no one seemed to know where the anarchists were. Even the city's soldiers told Ducasus and Incus that they had spent years looking for their hideout, without success.

The news was discouraging, and Ducasus and Incus did not speak for a while afterwards, lost in thought. Finally, as they approached the northeast quadrant, they began to speak again, first commenting on how narrow many of the passages were around them, then returning to discussing the finer points of Ar-lenti.

"That's not right," Incus answered Ducasus' inquiry.

"Well, why not? If I use my thumb on the other side of my grip it's a stronger hold, isn't it?"

Incus shook his head.

"It's actually not, and exposing your thumb is asking your opponent to break it. Do it the way I taught you."

Ducasus thought about this. Two Flares passed by ahead of them, leading a dark-haired, alluring woman through the alleyway. They looked like bodyguards.

"Alright, but what if I was—" Ducasus stopped speaking when they heard thunderous noise and sudden shouting.

They turned just in time to see a massive horse-drawn cart speeding toward them. Ducasus and Incus flattened themselves against the walls and only narrowly avoided being hit. Others had not been so lucky. Ducasus looked up after the speeding cart, which cut between the two bodyguard Flares and the woman they had been leading. It whipped around ninety degrees and stopped, jammed between the walls of the alleyway, blocking it off. Just as it did, the braces on the back of the cart broke and the tall sheets of rock it had been transporting fell to the ground, creating a wall of stone. The driver jumped off of his cart and ran, leaving the Flares shouting and banging on the rock. One of the Flares took off in a blur, searching for a way around. The rock was too tall to climb and the horse cart kept it wedged up to the walls.

Ducasus felt a fire inside of him, a different sort of fire than he was used to of late. He wanted to act.

"Something's not right," Ducasus growled as both he and Incus hurried to the scene of the commotion.

They stopped and looked up at the sheets of rock, and Ducasus turned to Incus quickly as the Flare stopped his shouting to look at them.

"Think you can throw me over?" Ducasus said.

Incus squinted at the top of the rock, fifteen feet high.

"Quite a fall."

"Well, I'm not doing all these rolls for nothing, right?"

From the other side of the barrier, they heard a woman's voice shout, "Get back! Do you know who I am? Get back!"

That settled the question.

There was no time to hesitate. Incus grabbed Ducasus around the middle and put a hand under his feet.

"Remember," he said as he swung him back, "feet, forearm, shoulder, back." With that, he heaved Ducasus over the fifteen-foot sheet of rock.

At the apex of his flight, Ducasus couldn't help wondering if this had been a bad idea. He looked down to see the woman, six rough-looking Flares, and the ground, rapidly approaching.

Ducasus rolled well, following Incus' instructions of the past weeks perfectly. He sprang to his feet beside the woman, who was still crying, "Back! Get back!"

The odds were not good. Six Flares approached slowly, grinning horribly. They carried narrow swords in their hands as they neared the dark-haired woman.

"Get back!" Ducasus shouted, repeating the woman's cry as two Flares came within a body's length. Ducasus looked down the narrow alley where they stood and noticed that the other side was blocked in by sheets of rock as well. Whoever had planned this had been thorough.

Ducasus cried out with abandon and moved to tackle the first of the offending Flares, who saw his intentions in time and stepped out of the way in a flash, then drew his sword in an arc towards the woman's neck. In a burst of speed so quick that Ducasus nearly missed it, the woman had drawn her own narrow sword from a hidden scabbard attached to her back. She deflected the blow downward and ducked under a strike from a second Flare.

Ducasus got up quickly and ran at the second Flare, who was swinging his sword at the woman while she backed away, defending herself with skillful flicks of the

wrist. The other four Flares neared slowly, boxed out by the narrowness of the alleyway, yet they laughed as if it were all some kind of a joke. Ducasus launched at the Flare before him, and much to his surprise, he connected.

He and the Flare tumbled to the ground, the Flare losing his sword as they did so. It slid along the red rock and came to a halt at the barrier that blocked their hopes of escape.

Ducasus grabbed the Flare around the neck and wrapped his legs, immobilizing him.

Just then, an ear-splitting *crack* rent the air, and huge fissures appeared in the stone barrier. The four Flares that had been laughing turned pale now. They rushed forward as another ear-shattering crunch resounded, and they were thrown to the ground by a shower of rock. Incus stood in the rubble brandishing Bellum before his sweat-pocked brow with the good Flare behind him.

"This is Gladius," Incus declared. "I think he's angry with you."

The Flare behind Incus careened through the split wall with his sword held in front of him. He thrust into the stomach of the Flare who was swinging wildly at the dark-haired woman. Incus ran in behind and swung his hammer in a wide arc at the four Flares in front of him. Being pinned between Incus, two buildings, and a stone barrier, they had no room to move. They held up their swords in a vain attempt at stopping the mighty onslaught of Bellum, but they were all crushed in its path, caught in their own trap.

Ducasus struggled to find a chokehold on the Flare he held immobilized, who tried desperately to worm his way out of Ducasus' arms.

"Don't hurt him!" the woman suddenly ordered Ducasus. "We need to know who's responsible for this."

Incus bent over one of his victims and lifted up his shirt. An insignia tattoo with seven stars arranged in an

arc appeared.

He nodded toward the markings and grunted.

The woman exchanged glances with Gladius, just as her other bodyguard returned.

"What happened?" the returning Flare inquired. "I tried to find a way around, but there was none."

The woman ignored her companion's question and advanced on Ducasus' captive.

"Who are you?"

The fallen Flare, seeing no way of escape, looked up with wild eyes and a forced cackle.

"I'm not one of your puppets, wench."

The newly arrived bodyguard struck the captive's cheek with the flat of his blade.

"That is no way to address the queen!"

The queen? Ducasus thought.

"Who are you?" the queen repeated.

"Just a drop in the bucket."

"There aren't more than sixty of you in the whole city, and your enclaves elsewhere are much smaller. What is that to me?"

The Flare smiled toothlessly.

"It's a mistake to underestimate the Seven Sisters, Love, but we got hired out by someone bigger. Someone you cannot stop."

"Who?" the queen demanded. "Who enlisted your services?"

The Flare cackled evilly in response, and the queen narrowed her eyes.

"Gladius, we're taking this man back to the palace for questioning."

The fallen Flare spit.

"I don't think so," he growled. He then he threw a quick fist at Ducasus, who had let down his guard. Ducasus tumbled off of him, and the anarchist made a grab for Gladius' sword, but the other Flare ran the scoundrel

through with his own. The anarchist sank to the ground with a look of surprise on his face, devoid of life.

"Well, so much for that," the queen stated bitterly.

Gladius turned to the queen, not in the least phased by the tumultuous events of a moment past.

"We need to get you back to the palace right away. We don't know if more of them are around." He spoke evenly, and his companion nodded in agreement.

The queen sighed heavily and closed her eyes.

"I suppose you're right, Gladius... but I must ensure that my saviors are rewarded." The queen turned and faced Ducasus and Incus. Incus was reaching over his head, sliding Bellum back into its straps, and Ducasus remained motionless, transfixed on the situation.

"You're... the queen? Of Flaroria?" he managed to stammer to the gorgeous, slim woman before him. Her hair was as black as the clothes that covered her closely.

"The very same," the queen responded, "but we've no time for pleasantries. Come to the palace and tell Vir that I'm expecting you." The queen glanced over the Ungifted and the Nebula before her. "I suppose you won't be able to keep up with us. Come to the palace immediately."

With that, the three Flares turned and sped through the broken sheets of rock, running impossibly fast. Ducasus and Incus stood in silence for several moments, processing what had just taken place. Finally, Incus' voice came from above Ducasus, breaking the silence.

"Nice roll," he said.

Ducasus looked up at the bald, powerful Neb.

"Thanks."

"We should head east to follow."

"I guess we should."

Ducasus shook his head like a dog coming out of the water, then he and Incus picked their way through the broken rocks and headed eastward at the intersecting alleyways. A few heads appeared in windows above them,

staring down, but after a few blocks of walking all was peaceful again. Except for the beating in Ducasus' chest, it was as if nothing had happened.

"Incus?"

The giant grunted in response.

"I tackled one of the Flares from behind. I wasn't really expecting to get him. I was just trying to fight, but I hit him, and I held him down."

"I noticed."

"How was I able to do that? I figured he would have flashed out of the way or something."

Incus grunted again, harshly.

"They're not gods, Ducasus. They might be fast, faster than you can ever be, but they are not Hawkeyes. Their reactions are no better than yours, they just move faster. They can be surprised or sneaked up on. There are ways of overcoming them."

Ducasus nodded, deep in thought. Incus continued.

"That is why I've told you to always take your adversary to the ground. That's where you have an advantage. Standing up and running circles around you is their advantage, so don't let them have it."

"You didn't take them to the ground. How do you fight them standing up?"

Incus grunted, but he did not reply.

Ducasus' mind was already in another place as they continued to walk down the red rock streets of Velocitum. The buildings grew sparse the farther east they traveled. There was more open space, waterways, and vegetation.

"So the woman we saved is the queen?"

"Yes."

"And she's a Flare?"

"You saw her run."

"I've seen Flares with dark skin, but never dark hair."

Incus shrugged, apparently uninterested.

As they approached a final row of dusty-yellow

buildings, a scenic vista spread out before them. To the north Ducasus spied a beautiful and ornate aqueduct angling in from the distant, haze-covered mountains. This was not like the other aqueducts they had seen in the city, made of brick and mortar, but instead it looked to be of marble. It was brilliantly white and exquisitely carved with columns, statues, and representations of fruits and animals. It was very fine in appearance. It led Ducasus' vision to the gardens where it ended, streaming out of apertures on either side into little pools hidden amongst the greenery, with one central fall of water coming from the middle of the aqueduct which cascaded into a fountain below.

To the south lay large tracts of green grass, remarkable for the time of year. These were very peaceful views, and Ducasus breathed them in deeply. He regarded the palace in front of him, about a mile away at the brink of a vast canyon. It was magnificent. Strong walls surrounded the outside, giving it double protection from attack, but inside the walls the structure was lean and graceful, like the Flares themselves. Pillars and columns lined the front of the expansive structure, creating a long, semi-open hall that led into the main of the palace. All of this supported a large, golden dome that rested magnificently above the city, reflecting the sun's resplendent rays in a pattern of waves across its surface. It almost looked like the sun itself.

"It's magnificent to see for the first time, isn't it?" Incus spoke, looking at the exquisite estate before them. A rare smile played at his lips.

Ducasus was incredulous at his friend's experience. He looked up at Incus.

"Have you been everywhere?"

"Everywhere that matters and quite a few places that don't," the giant responded.

The pair of travelers continued down their path until

they reached the gate that closed the palace walls. The walls were made of a sand-colored rock that seemed to be without interruption. They were very thick and impressive, and there was no sign of activity near them.

"Hello?" Ducasus called as he looked around. Incus only closed his eyes and waited. "Hello?" Ducasus called again. The gate stood closed, vacant, and still. Ducasus dropped his cupped hands from his lips and examined the imposing iron doors that kept them out of the grounds. He found it confusing that there was no one there to watch the gate.

"How is anyone supposed to get in here?" he asked Incus.

Just then a helmed Flare appeared at the top of the wall. He wore a light metal frame that covered his head and face, leaving only holes for his eyes, mouth, and the tip of his nose. His golden hair streamed out from beneath it all.

"Who goes there?" the Flare called down to them.

Ducasus looked to Incus to speak, but he kept his eyes closed, waiting. Ducasus decided that he'd better be the one to reply.

"The queen is expecting us. Are you Vir?" he shouted upwards.

"I am. You have permission to enter the grounds," Vir shouted in return, and then he disappeared.

Ducasus grinned, expecting something to happen. He looked to his friend who still stood motionless with eyes closed.

Is he asleep?

Ducasus waited, growing impatient. The doors of the gate still stood resolutely closed.

"Aren't they going to let us in?" he complained.

Just then, Incus' eyes opened, and a screeching sound reverberated into the afternoon air. Ducasus could hear the clanking of a chain and the straining of machinery as

the gigantic, studded doors slowly began to open outward. The gates inched apart and then stopped, along with all of the noise and activity, once they had opened a few feet.

Incus strode forward, and Ducasus followed. A long reflecting pool appeared before them, with sandy paths and cypress trees on either side. Birds chirped happily and swooped down from the trees now and again to snatch at the surface of the pool. Ducasus was in awe.

"Was the castle at Vis like this?" he asked, overcome by the elegance of the place.

"No," Incus returned. "It is opulent, but much different in character."

Vir appeared beside them. He had removed his helmet and was now holding it to his side. He had bright eyes and a welcoming demeanor, much different an impression than the one he gave while wearing his helm.

"Welcome!" he exclaimed good-naturedly. "The queen has instructed me to escort you to her offices, and may I just say on behalf of all of this great kingdom, thank you for what you've done." Vir bowed low.

"We receive your blessing and your thanks," Incus replied. "The queen employs a most worthy servant."

Vir stood up from his bow, smiling.

"Many of them, I assure you. Right this way, please." The Flare motioned broadly to the front of the palace, then walked before them, leading them along the reflecting pool towards the white pillars that supported Velocitum's great hall.

Exquisite statues lined the inside of the hall, depicting animals and monsters, Flares and Ungifteds, and other kinds of people Ducasus did not recognize. Scenes played out among the characters born in stone, chiseled out of smooth marble, delicate and elegant. Some of these sculptures depicted war and others coronations and hunts. Each piece carried a depth of meaning that stirred

Ducasus somehow.

They walked down the great hall and came to a large room with a vaulted ceiling, an enormous chandelier, and two half-spiral staircases on either side of a wall that spouted water out of a sea monster's mouth. They climbed the stairs and continued further inside the palace, passing lively paintings and tapestries as they went. They traveled up another set of stairs and turned westward again, finally arriving at a polished oaken door.

Vir knocked rapidly. It opened and Gladius' stern face appeared.

"This is where I must leave you," Vir said, bowing once again. "All the best." An instant later he was gone, and Ducasus realized that he had been walking at their pace for courtesy's sake.

Gladius beckoned Ducasus and Incus into the room.

"Welcome, Friends."

Incus nodded in acknowledgement, and Gladius returned the sign. Ducasus was too absorbed in their surroundings to do likewise. His eyes followed the exquisite crown molding that bordered the whole of the room. Large windows ensured that the queen's office was well lit, and it felt as spacious and open as the wilderness itself. The queen stood on the raised platform that held her desk, staring out of the large window that looked over the city.

"My Queen," Gladius' counterpart spoke. "Your rescuers have arrived."

The dark-haired, graceful queen turned as Ducasus and Incus halted in the center of the room. She had a presence about her that did not command attention, but rather persuaded it. Four pairs of eyes were upon her.

"Thank you, Clypeum." The queen glowed with a winning smile as she stepped from her stage and approached the others. "And what are my saviors called?"

Incus did not immediately reply, so Ducasus jumped

in, introducing himself the way Incus had done at Rosae's house in the hills.

"Ahem. Ducasus, son of Spero, my Lady, and Incus, son of none."

The queen's eyes grew wide at this and she gingerly stepped closer to the giant. He towered over the thin woman, but she was not intimidated.

"Incus..." the queen began, as if searching her memory. A grin appeared on her soft lips. "Incus! I have not seen you since you were a boy!"

Incus' stone face softened as he looked down on the queen.

"And I haven't seen you since you were a girl," he replied.

"How small the world is! How good it is to see you, old friend! You've certainly grown into yourself- and what is this nonsense about 'son of none'? Your father is-"

"It's good to see you too, Regina. If I may still call you by your first name, that is."

The queen sighed.

"Well, normally I have people killed for that sort of thing, but alright." She smiled broadly.

Ducasus stared at Incus in disbelief.

"You two know each other?"

"Well, we did once upon a time. Back when the world was simpler, I'm afraid." Queen Regina turned back to Incus. "I know something about your story, but what of your companion?"

"We've been traveling together for a month. He is from southern Flaroria and has recently escaped from his life-long occupation as a slave."

The queen's countenance fell, and fire burned behind her eyes. She walked to Ducasus and took his hand in both of hers, looking him in the eyes intently.

"You have my most heartfelt apology. This is my realm and I take responsibility for the fact that this

disgusting crime is still in existence at all. Tell me where you are from and I will send a legion to destroy your master's estate and free the other slaves."

The queen continued to stare piercingly into his eyes, but Ducasus did not know how to respond. Slavery had always been a fact of life for him; now someone, the queen, even, was here apologizing for it.

"That, uh, that won't be necessary, Your Highness."

"I think it is most necessary. Why should it not be?"

"Well, shortly after my brother," Ducasus blinked hard at the thought of Malleus. "After my brother and I escaped, our owner died. His relatives came and got into a scuffle over inheritance, and in the confusion the others escaped. There were even some royal soldiers who showed up. So I'm told," he said, looking down to break the intense gaze of the queen. "I haven't been back."

The queen released his hand.

"I see. Then it appears I have already sent a legion. Atrox was the scoundrel's name, was it?"

Surprised, Ducasus nodded.

"We found out about him recently. He is the only active slaveholder I have encountered during my reign, and you have my deepest sympathies that a cruel twist of fate should have caused you to be born inside this crack in time." She forced a smile and blinked quickly. "Well, today is a day to celebrate, for you are free and have saved me. You are welcome to reside in the palace as long as you desire, and," the queen threw a glance at Incus, "perhaps we can sneak down to the cellar like old times?"

Ducasus raised an eyebrow, and the queen noticed it out of the corner of her eye. She flushed.

"Oh, not like that. We were children. We would sneak down to the cellar's vault to look at the nation star. Incus and I always loved to see it, and the guards would let us pass. And besides, no disrespect to Incus, but I've waited for my love ten years, and I shall continue to wait until he

is in my arms." The queen looked as if she were the only one in the room, smiling suddenly. "He is a warrior and a poet. He has fought in wild lands and sailed upon the ocean..." The queen returned to herself and looked up, smiling. "You are a treat, Incus, but I await another."

Incus bowed courteously, with eyes shut.

"I also, gave my heart away, long ago."

Gladius raised an eyebrow. Ducasus was, for the hundredth time that day, unsure as to how he should respond. The queen spoke before he had to.

"Well then. To the vault with us."



The subterranean levels of the palace were so well lit and opulently decorated that they hardly seemed to be underground at all, except for a lack of windows. Vividly painted landscapes made up for it.

"These pictures are so beautiful," Ducasus said, marveling as they rounded a corner. Queen Regina glanced over her shoulder.

"Well thank you," she said, stopping to admire a dark piece before them. It depicted a field of grain in a storm, and it was rich in dark purples contrasting with the muted gold of the rain-beaten flax in the foreground. The painting had such a sense of cohesion to it, even though some parts were blurry and others clear. It all seemed so intentional, so true.

"You will find more 'realistic' paintings in the realm of the Lux Sidorum," the queen said while admiring the artwork, her head tilted to one side. "Being a people given to speed, we have always been drawn to impressionism. A Hawkeye may capture the texture of a thing or its lighting, but we Flares capture the moment. We understand that life is not a marathon but a sprint, and we must therefore snatch at opportunity and live in each moment as it comes,

for hesitation will rob you of them. We keep our eyes before us, looking for pitfalls, but we know how quickly it is all to be over."

The queen remained with her head turned, looking at the art. Everyone had been mesmerized by her words and a stillness covered them as they contemplated.

"I suppose I'm rambling again," the queen said, breaking the spell. "You'll have to forgive me; habits of my lover linger with me still." The noble, elegant Flare then turned and continued down the corridor and the others followed.

"Ah, here we are," she said after they had walked the length of another hall. A cumbersome door of stone stood resolutely before them and a Flare with white-blonde hair and caramel skin guarded the passage.

"Hello, Marcus," the queen greeted him.

"My Queen," he replied with a bow. He then turned and unlocked the imposing stone door.

"You may be wondering why we would use such an unwieldy door; after all, is not metal lighter and stronger? But you have to remember that this palace was built in the old days, when our nation was still young and we had to take certain measures of precaution against those who were here before. We prefer to build with wood, of course. Stone takes much too long, and you'll see that only the older parts of the city are made out of it. But stone does not easily melt, now does it?"

The queen grinned, and Ducasus did not understand at all. Incus seemed to be following, however, so Ducasus decided not to speak.

The stone door slid along the floor on wheels tracked in grooves, moving very slowly, but opening, nonetheless. The queen stepped over the threshold as soon as the way was wide enough, stepping around Marcus as he strained against the weight of the door. The others followed her example.

The room was filled with pulsing, pure light which emanated from a central globe fixed upon a stand in the middle of the circular room. There were no shadows, and somehow, despite the light's intensity, Ducasus found that he could look at it without harm. It dawned on him that he was looking upon a nation star, just as Incus had described it. It was three feet in diameter and gave off a pleasant warmth. It hummed softly, refreshing Ducasus' weary mind and body.

Three fearsome Flares guarded the sphere, and the room contained nothing else. They were dressed ceremoniously in flowing, scarlet and gold robes, but there was nothing ceremonious about the gleaming swords that were strapped to their sides.

"Isn't she magnificent?" the queen asked in a breathy voice, her face illuminated by the nation star's luster.

It is magnificent... Ducasus thought, captured by the majestic star. He wanted to touch it.

He reached out his hand and immediately felt a giant hand grip the back of his clothes, pulling him back. The queen chuckled.

"You won't be wanting to do that, Ducasus. Anyone but a Flare who touches our star dies where he stands. He burns on the inside, then outside, perishing in a most undesirable manner."

Ducasus looked up at Incus, who nodded solemnly in corroboration.

"Ours is a young nation," the queen said. "And our star still burns brightly. Still the memory of those who inhabited this land before us lingers in our minds."

"The Neb's?" Ducasus asked.

The queen's guards both turned and looked on Ducasus in confusion. The queen looked to Incus.

"I thought you said he was from this country."

Incus cleared his throat. "The circumstances in which he was raised disallowed the opportunity for education."

"Ah..." the queen said, understanding.

Ducasus blushed, his ears burning. He didn't like feeling like the ignorant boy from the countryside.

"Well, then," the queen began, "In answer to your question, no. The Nebs have never inhabited this land. In the very south of this country there is some territory that is disputed between us and them, and a few wars have been fought over it," she added under her breath, "but the Nebulae have never extended into most of our territory. Before us were the Novae – Novas, as most call them, but Novae is proper. They were a fearsome and harsh people. Their star burned out the same hour Supero the First received this one before us now, according to tradition. It took decades for young Supero to gather sufficient forces to conquer the Novae, but he did, and thus Flares earned a place in Pontus."

"I had no idea," Ducasus began. His curiosity nagged at him. "Where did the Flares live before they fought for this territory? In the north? Across the sea?"

The queen looked at Incus again, concerned. Then she looked back on Ducasus tenderly.

"Ducasus, do you really not know?" Her voice was soft and young, for a queen. She could not have been much older than thirty.

Ducasus blushed again, growing frustrated.

"I'm sorry I don't know anything. My slave owner didn't teach us history," he said venomously.

The queen looked at the floor, and Incus began to lean down to chasten Ducasus for speaking so impertinently, when the queen stopped him.

"No, Incus, he's right. It's not his fault." She breathed in a great draught of air and let it out. "It's the fault of this cruel and evil practice that clings to its victims even in rout and defeat." Queen Regina reassumed her dignified manner and spoke softly, explaining. "Ducasus, there were no Flares before Supero. He was the first one."

Ducasus looked from person to person to see if this was some sort of joke.

"That's impossible..." he began. "Stars give us the gifts, and people can choose the gift of the Nebs, the Hawkeyes, or the Flares."

Incus cleared his throat.

"A thousand years ago, the choice was between the gifts of the Nebulae, the Hawkeyes, and the Novae," he said.

Ducasus turned and stared deeply into the shining, blazing light that they stood before.

"So what are you saying?"

The queen spoke again.

"When this nation star fell, a new nation was born and a new gift, just as the old faded away. Before you lies our authority, our power, and our permission sent down from the heavens to rule."

The implications rushed at Ducasus.

"Then what could the Novae do? What was their gift?"

"Fire-wielders," Gladius said, staring straight ahead. Clypeum turned his head sharply, in a tacit reprimand to his counterpart for speaking out of turn in the queen's presence.

The dark-haired queen did not seem to mind, however. She only shivered at his words and nodded in assent.

"Come, I tire of our history lesson. Let us speak of happier things, of our own time," she said, making it clear that the topic was finished.

Ducasus was disappointed. He wanted to know more.

Fire-wielders? he thought. *What does that even mean?*

With effort, he held his tongue as the group turned their attention to the nation star once more, its three loyal guards standing resolute and motionless around it still. The queen sighed.

"I never tire of looking at it," she said whimsically. "Count yourself lucky, Ducasus. Few ever get the chance to look upon a nation star." She laughed softly. "And your friend Incus here may be the only living mortal who has seen them all."

Ducasus looked up at his friend incredulously.

"Only three of them," Incus replied. "No one has seen the stars that have been, or those to come."

Chapter Twenty:

Meetings

"Merope!" Malleus exclaimed, smiling darkly as he made his way across the cavern where the anarchists met together. "Tell me news of destruction and chaos."

The tall Flare looked up from speaking to another and replied, "Our assassins were destroyed and it was chaos."

Malleus' expression fell, turning foul.

"What?"

"I said, our assassins were destroyed and it was chaos!"

Malleus strained to control his rage. He removed the black hood from his head.

"How is that possible, Merope? We presented you with a perfect opportunity."

The Flare's dark green eyes flashed.

"It was interrupted. Two strangers entered the trap after it was closed and fought off my assassins. There were no survivors." She spoke through gritted teeth.

"How, then, do you know the story, O Anarchist Queen? If there were no survivors."

"We always have a watcher," Merope replied. "Someone a ways off and hidden to give an honest report and to alert those involved if danger comes. He lived, but in the trap there were no survivors. Are you satisfied with my response, Your Grace?" Merope mock-curtsied, clearly angry. "And incidentally, I thought of something. You didn't tell me about those two strangers."

"I don't know anything about them. You were to send six assassins. How could two strangers stop them?" Malleus demanded.

"I don't know, Malleus, I wasn't there," Merope returned sarcastically. She then sighed and spoke in a flatter tone. "Right after the barriers were placed a Nebula and an Ungifted showed up. The Neb tossed the Ungifted over the wall and he went to aid the queen while the Neb broke through the barrier with a war hammer. The queen's guards rushed back in, everyone fought, and our assassins lost."

Malleus did a double-take.

"Did you say it was a Neb and an Ungifted?"

"Yes... an odd pairing, I agree."

"And they were together?" he inquired.

"That is my understanding. Do you know who they are?"

"Where is your watcher? I would speak to him."

Merope scanned the cavern.

"Videvi!" she called.

A scrawny Flare stood up from beside the subterranean river.

"Ah, there you are. Come and speak to us."

Videvi raised an eyebrow and trotted over.

"You saw the attempt today?"

"Yes."

"What did the Ungifted look like?"

The Flare shook his head, searching for the words.

"Sand-colored hair... sort of young... light skin."

Malleus nodded.

"And did they give any indication as to where they were going afterwards?"

"They followed in the queen's footsteps, in the direction of the palace."

"Thank you, Videvi," Merope said. "Now, Malleus, do you know who these interlopers are? I'd like to teach them a lesson."

"I may have an idea."

Malleus turned to go, then stopped, as if he had just

thought of something.

"Merope--"

"Yes, Your Grace?" her tone dripped with sarcasm.

"Have your people spread word of the assassination attempt. Spare the embarrassing details, but let the city fall into fear that its monarch is in danger."

Merope grinned cruelly.

"Malleus, I love it when you talk that way. You are a horrible creature."

Malleus turned and continued walking briskly to leave.

"I have to be," he said.

~°~

The commander found himself walking down the damp stone hallway yet again. He did not like visiting Malleus' quarters.

"What news, Commander?" Malleus' voice reached him in the hall.

How does he always know when it's me? he mused, irritated. He finished closing the distance and entered the room to find Malleus poring over books and writing notes on sheets of paper.

"I should ask you the same, and, in fact, that's why I've come. Why do you never come to my quarters to report to me?"

"I'm a busy man, Commander. What is it you wish to know?"

"Oh, your clairvoyant powers can't--"

Malleus cut him off, irritated.

"You wish to know about the assassination attempt. It went badly. The anarchists bungled a perfect plan, but fear is spreading, and you had roasted lamb for dinner, with wine."

The commander's face went pale. Malleus enjoyed the

expression. Having increased powers of perception was quite useful.

"Also," Malleus continued, "our more audacious plan is in motion and we are almost ready to execute. Have you gathered our forces?"

"Word has been spread. Weapons are ready to be distributed at any time. We have thirty thousand men in Velocitum alone, and we hope to recruit more of our brethren soon. I've contacted my counterparts in Nebularis and in the East, and they will be sending us some thousands more when we request them."

"Good. Have you begun implementing the propaganda scheme we discussed?"

"Yes, sir. I-" The commander stopped, took a breath, and continued, now angry with himself. "Yes. We are spreading the stories you came up with and creating discontent. We should have more men soon."

Malleus nodded, setting his quill down on its holder.

"The fierce inequality..." he began, speaking softly. "Some have while others do not. Leaving those who did not find their stars as something lesser... Their day will come, Commander." Malleus turned his head suddenly, as if a thought had struck him. "What is your name, Commander? Your real name?"

He hesitated.

"It's Scipio."

Malleus nodded.

"You have a good name, Scipio. Strong. We will destroy these demonic Flares together, will we not?"

"Of course we will," the commander agreed.

"Good. Now," Malleus stood from his chair. "I have a few questions. First, how good are your men inside the palace?"

"They're the best. They've held their posts for years."

"And you can contact them?"

The commander indicated that he could.

"Excellent. I need to be placed inside the palace tomorrow, Scipio."

"That's too soon. It takes some time to get messages to and from them. They are difficult to reach."

"Well, then when can you get me in?"

The commander thought for a moment.

"We could get you in the day after tomorrow, in the evening. That should give them enough time."

"Good. Set it in motion, please. They are still prepared for our grand unveiling?"

He nodded.

"The timing is perfect, I think. The city is on edge from all of the recent sabotage."

"Indeed. We will not be hiding in the shadows much longer, Scipio. The glorious revolution will soon be here, drawing more men to our cause and bringing about the end of our enemies."

"It will be a great day for my men. You've served us well, Malleus."

He's still trying to convince himself he's my superior... Malleus thought. *He'll be cured of that foolish notion soon enough.*

"Indeed," Malleus returned drily. "A few more orders of business: Prepare a team for me for our mission and our glorious unveiling. You will come, of course, as will Legatus, and the other two men who poisoned the water supply with me. Bring the arsonist, Flagro; he shows promise. And find two others. Also, be sure that the men are spreading the story of the attack on the queen. It failed, but we can still use it for fear's sake." Malleus was thinking out loud now. "Of course, that means I don't want to sever ties with the Seven Sisters until we are revealed... We might need them. I guess she'll have to wait." He trailed off in thought.

"Who?" the commander inquired.

"The anarchists keep some Ungifteds as slaves, it

seems. They call them 'merchant brides.'"

The commander became furious.

"I'll assemble a team right now! Let us bathe in blood the path to their freedom!"

Malleus smiled. The commander breathed heavily.

"Oh, we shall, Scipio. Just not there and not tonight. I'm sending someone to take care of it soon."

~°~

The dew sparkled on the early morning grass. The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, illuminating the sleepy world below. Incus and Ducasus had been up for an hour, practicing Ar-lenti as usual. Incus felt that Ducasus was a quick learner, and in light of their circumstances, Ducasus was voracious for improvement in the skill. If he needed to fight for Rosae again, he was determined to win.

Having finished practicing his rolls, falls, and maneuvers that he was already familiar with, Incus began teaching him how to throw and sweep an opponent.

"There are two things you need to do to throw your enemy," Incus spoke solemnly, as was his habit. "Off-balance them," Incus pulled at Ducasus' arm, jerking him forward, "And place your center lower than their center." Incus stepped in front of Ducasus and grabbed the back of his pants, then he dropped his hips and tossed Ducasus lightly over the top of him, slowing him to a stop before setting him on the ground.

"There are countless ways to do this, but the principles are always the same," Incus said, standing over Ducasus where he lay on the grass. "I'll teach you a few."

Ducasus nodded. He took his lessons seriously now, even more so after the attack on the queen, in which he was able to see some of the possibilities of Ar-lenti.

Ducasus stood up off of the grass and squared up with

Incus again. His skin was wet from the grass and almost numb from the morning chill, but he didn't care. He kept thoughts of Rosae in his mind.

"Always keep in mind the five points of balance, the folds of the body, and your opponent's momentum. Use these to your advantage. Direct your enemy's rage. Flow, then strike."

"I thought you said I didn't need to strike."

"Strike with position, with chokes, with joint manipulations, with throws."

"When do I get to use a weapon?"

"When you learn to control your body. Now come here. If you can grab a wrist, then place your other hand here," Incus said, placing a giant hand on Ducasus' throat. "And take a step like this, swinging your leg up, then throwing it back while pitching forward." Incus enacted the steps of the throw as he spoke them, and in a moment Ducasus was looking up at him from the grass again.

"Got it?" the giant asked.

"I think so," Ducasus replied.

"Let's see you try it."

A foreign voice interjected.

"Ahem. Master Ducasus? Lord Incus?"

The two fighters looked up from the ground. A young Flare woman with creamy, white skin stood before them. She was dressed in the uniform of palace servants.

"The queen would see you in her offices," she said.

Incus released Ducasus from his grip and stood up, wiping himself off. The Flare was lost in his shadow. He bowed slightly.

"Thank you."

The girl bowed in return, then vanished in a flash. Ducasus propped himself up on his elbows.

"No more throws?"

"Later," Incus replied.



Ducasus and Incus approached the polished oaken door that led into Queen Regina's offices. They followed an Ungifted servant, a squat, middle-aged man dressed in crimson velvet. Ducasus and Incus donned new clothing that the queen had provided for them, which they changed into after their sparring session. Ducasus was appareled in tan pants, cut in the fashion of the Flares at the calf, and he wore white linen on his upper body. Incus wore a pair of tan pants as well and a red shirt. He still donned his old animal-skin vest, complete with straps for Bellum, which he did not have on his person presently, out of courtesy.

"Announcing Lord Incus and Ducasus," the squat man declared as he opened the door. The queen sat at her desk reading a scroll, which she laid down upon hearing the herald.

"Incus, Ducasus, have a seat," she said, motioning to the chairs before her. Incus bowed gracefully and Ducasus followed his friend's example. They sat before the queen.

She stacked some papers and set them off to the side of her large, sturdy desk.

"Reports, treaties, agreements, requests..." The queen smiled. "It never ends."

Ducasus smiled in return. He wondered why she had called them.

"I am terribly sorry that I had to leave you yesterday. A group of ambassadors from Vis demanded my attention. Your people really can be quite brutish sometimes, Incus."

"It's why I left," Incus replied. Ducasus looked up at him, expecting to see a grin. The giant was stone-faced.

"Well," the queen continued, "since we did not get the chance to finish our conversation yesterday, I think we should do so now." She folded her hands on the stout

desk. "You two saved my life, as far as I'm concerned. You are welcome to stay in the palace and we'll reward you how it seems fit to us, but is there anything else you want? Anything I can do in gratitude?"

Incus turned and looked down at Ducasus.

"Yes, actually there is," Ducasus said with resolution. He furrowed his brow. "My... friend has been kidnapped, an Ungifted girl my age named Rosae. We've been trying to find her, and we need help."

"Of course, you shall have it."

"The Seven Sisters have her," Incus interjected.

The queen's expression changed, and she tilted her head slightly, unfolding her hands.

"Well, that's a bit more complicated then, isn't it?"

"Why is it more complicated?" Ducasus asked. "It's the same group that attacked you."

The queen did her best to smile graciously.

"Yes, Ducasus, and my most reliable servants are already looking for them. But it's more complicated because she is, as you say, Ungifted."

Ducasus frowned.

"It isn't what you think," the queen continued. "I hope I'm not rude in assuming you aren't up to speed on our little anarchist ring?"

"He doesn't know much," Incus interjected.

"Very well," the queen said. "Ducasus, the Seven Sisters have been around ever since my great grandfather abolished the slave trade. They were called the 'Titans' then, but were essentially the same, if more specifically antagonistic toward your kind, from which they grew a resentment for the monarchy. They believe in the most extreme form of libertine life, complete governmental dissolution, and in the inferiority of Ungifted peoples."

Ducasus nodded, impatient to get to the point as the queen went on.

"There aren't many of them. Most of this country is

thoroughly disgusted with their ideas, but they make a splash from time to time." Her expression darkened. "We think they've been selling merchant brides, as of late."

"I know about the merchant brides."

The queen folded her hands diplomatically.

"Then you see why it is more complicated. She will have to be found quickly, or else she will be sold and moved, and locating her will be more difficult. I didn't say it was impossible, but we have our hands full as it is with this pernicious organization. Fires, poisonings, the killing of four members of my staff..."

"If your hands are too full," Ducasus said, rising to his feet, "then we must be going to continue our search." Thoughts of Rosae in chains were running through his mind. "Thank you for your hospitality, Your Highness."

"Sit down, Child," the queen said firmly. Ducasus looked to Incus, who was still sitting. He complied.

"My men are scouring the city," she continued, looking alternately at Ducasus and Incus. "They will find where my would-be assassins stay, and if you are not here, how will I pass on the knowledge to you? Even if she is gone by then, they will find evidence." The queen reached for the scroll she had been reviewing when they entered. "The best thing for you to do for now is to stay here and wait." She then returned to reading her scroll. It was clear that the meeting was over.

"Thank you, Regina," Incus said, rising to his full height.

The queen looked over the top of her scroll.

"You're welcome. I'll have you informed when we find something."

Incus dipped his head in acknowledgment. Ducasus rose out of his chair as well and crossed the large room behind Incus, bursting with urgency as they left the room.

"We can't just sit here and do nothing, Incus!"

"We won't be doing nothing."

"Last time I checked, sitting around and waiting *is* doing nothing. We need to be out looking for Rosae."

"We have been unsuccessful in our search. Her men will find her."

"But I can't do nothing!" Ducasus exclaimed.

"Then I will prepare you with more Ar-lenti."

Ducasus tensed in frustration. He knew Incus was right; he just didn't want to admit it. He closed his eyes and drew in a large breath, and then he let it out slowly.

"Alright," he said. "We'll wait."

~°~

Waiting was awful. Incus kept Ducasus busy with practicing Ar-lenti and in teaching him new maneuvers, specifically how to handle an armed opponent. They continued working on their sweeps and throws, and Ducasus sparred with the giant many times. Their contests were not close.

The queen's servants brought them meals and refreshments, giving them gifts of new clothes, diversions, and time to bathe, but Ducasus cared for none of it. He only thought of Rosae.

Why should I luxuriate while she suffers?

Thus, throughout the day, whenever he had a moment to himself, he would simply pace and look troubled. He paid close attention to his lessons with Incus, knowing that they very well could make the difference in saving his life, and possibly Rosae's as well.

Incus spent a great deal of time preparing Ducasus to face opponents with swords. Ducasus listened and practiced, but he complained that he would need a way of protecting himself. After all, his enemies were impossibly fast, so how could he hope to avoid their blades?

Incus relented finally, not by giving him a sword, but by finding a pair of metal bracers for him in the palace

armory. This way at least he could hold his arms up and hope to parry a blow. It was better than nothing, and it still allowed him freedom of motion.

After training, Ducasus and Incus went to the dining hall in the south wing, the most isolated part of the palace. In the other wings there was a loud, raucous celebration that disagreed with Incus' personality and Ducasus' mood.

Dinner was served and consumed, scarcely noticed by Ducasus, who was lost in thoughts, fears, and hopes. He and Incus wandered to the balcony after, mostly because they didn't have anything else to do.

Ducasus leaned against the elegant wooden banister, looking out into the distance, gazing at the stars for the first time in over a month. It was difficult to make them out, as the moon reflected off of Lake Torrens in the distance and filled the sky with reflected light.

"Incus," Ducasus began, "we're going to find her, right?"

"Yes," he replied.

Ducasus nodded slowly, looking over the forests beyond the grassy plains surrounding the palace, beyond the city walls.

"I feel like you want to find her almost as badly as I do."

At first, Incus only grunted in response, but a moment later he closed his eyes and spoke. "She reminds me of someone. So do you."

Ducasus nodded, knowing that questioning Incus further would yield no results. He did not like to talk about his personal life or his past. If he had more to share, he would share it. If not, then Ducasus couldn't make him.

Incus did not have more that he wished to share, so they stood in silence a while. Ducasus brushed his gaze over the stars, trying his best not to be bitter. Memories still haunted him, and the very mention of his brother's

name caused bile to rise up in his throat. He tried to avoid thinking about it. Incus had asked him to let go of resentment toward his brother. It had seemed an absurd notion at first, but as time went on, Ducasus began to see the wisdom in the idea. He was not yet certain if he could forgive Malleus, but perhaps he could try.

"Do you see the great nebula from your home?" Incus asked, breaking the silence.

"The big, purple-pink spiral in the south?"

"Yes."

"We can see it a few days out of the year, just over the horizon," Ducasus said.

Incus continued looking into the stars.

"It is from that spiral my people take our name. In the South we see it all summer long, and sometimes into the fall." Incus spoke slowly and deliberately in his deep voice. "It stands resolute and firm. You cannot move it. It has strength and endures many countless generations."

The doors behind Incus and Ducasus clicked as a Flare in a servant's uniform entered the open air with a watering pail in hand. Ducasus and Incus paid him no mind.

"What I miss the most about being in the Illusian Mountains is looking up," Incus pointed up with a large finger, "and seeing the Nebula, reminding me that some things do not change."

"Other people refer to it as the Swirl of Emnon," the servant with the watering pail said over his shoulder, "After the Nebulae's semi-mythical founder, Emnon the Mighty."

Incus and Ducasus were both surprised at the interruption and turned towards the darkened figure, who had his back to them as he continued emptying large amounts of water on a tree with fernlike leaves.

"You believe him mythical, do you?" Incus said, indignantly.

Ducasus looked at the servant closely. There was something strange about him.

"Why are you watering the plants at night?" Ducasus asked. "Won't they get root rot, or freeze?"

"I want them to die," the servant replied, emptying more water on the plant. "And I said that he was semi-mythical, not that I thought him fictional. However," he said, tilting his head as he emptied the remainder of his bucket onto the now-drowning plant, "taming a bear to fight alongside of him in battle, being the first to teach a bull to plow his fields by wrestling it into submission whenever it disobeyed... It sounds fairly mythical." The Flare proceeded to hang his pail from a branch of the tree, and then he turned to face them. "But then, perhaps history will always look on those who are exceptional as myth. Perhaps I too will pass into the realm of demigods one day."

Light streamed out of the dining hall and fell across the servant's face. He had eyes of two colors. Ducasus cocked his head, and the Flare opened his arms.

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

Ducasus' mind raced, taking in the unfamiliar face of the man in front of him, then replaying the sound of his familiar voice in his mind.

It can't be...

"Malleus?" Ducasus almost whispered.

"A more perfect edition of the very same." He bowed low in a mocking gesture, sweeping his foot all the way back.

Anger began to well up in Ducasus. His limbs nearly shook, but he controlled them. His eyebrows tensed and he scowled.

"What do you want?" Ducasus asked.

Incus regarded Malleus coldly, standing as a statue. Malleus laughed and brushed the chestnut-colored hair from his eyes, haughtily.

"I want you, Brother. Things haven't been the same-I'm doing big things now, and I want you to be a part of them."

"You dirty, miserable, stealing-" Ducasus was cut off by a nonchalant Malleus.

"Are you still upset about the star? I told you I'm sorry, but it had to be done. You were just going to waste yours when there are great works to be done."

Ducasus tried to respond, but he was too angry. He wanted to punch his brother in the face, maybe try out some *Ar-lenti* on him.

"Ducasus, haven't I done things for you?" Malleus asked. "Didn't I free you from that idiot, Pompey? And save you from the nexaer? Let's let bygones be bygones. I need your help. I want you with me in my work."

Incus raised an eyebrow. The Flare was excellent with words. Incus rarely trusted men who could speak like him.

"You think that makes it all okay?" Ducasus blurted out. "Stealing my destiny, then leaving me to die in the wilderness? If it wasn't for Incus, I'd be dead!"

"You're not nearly so helpless as you pretend to be, Ducasus."

Ducasus seethed.

"What could you possibly be doing that you would think I would just forget about everything and run to your side?"

"I already told you. I intend to destroy these evil people. I wish to rid the world of Flares. I have all sorts of ideas."

Ducasus' angry expression turned to disgust.

"You're hilarious, Malleus. I don't know what you're actually doing, and I honestly don't care. Now get as far away from me as you possibly can. You're fast enough."

Malleus sighed.

"Well, that is disappointing. Know that the offer stands... For a while, at least." Malleus strode over to the

glass-paneled doors leading back into the dining hall. "Oh, one more thing."

"I will not care."

"Oh, you might," Malleus replied. "Your girlfriend is being held by the anarchist group known as the Seven Sisters. They intend to sell her as a merchant bride in a week or two."

Ducasus' eyes grew wide and chills crept over his body.

"What?"

Malleus yawned.

"You can't get her tonight. It has to be tomorrow evening, an hour after sunset. Go to the western quadrant, traveling two blocks south of the main aqueduct there. Find a building made of shaped stones - all of the others are wood - and remove a stone five up from the ground and twenty-one over from the eastern corner on the south wall."

"Wait, slow down!" Ducasus struggled to retain the information that was being thrown at him. "Five up, twenty-one over-"

Malleus continued, unfazed.

"Say the words, 'Is there no home for the free? Where does the liberator lay his head?'"

"Malleus, slow down!" Ducasus pleaded. Incus stood quietly with his eyes closed. Malleus spoke faster, unheeding, a look of cruelty in his eyes.

"Go down the tunnel till you reach a door. Ask for the keys. Continue further until you reach a stone door. Press the center stone at face-level, then the one at your feet. Across the cavern is an iron door. Inside this room is another door that leads to Rosae's cage. Tell her I said hello."

"Malleus, wait!" Ducasus called, but it was too late. He was already sprinting away, much too quick to follow.

Ducasus clutched the sides of his head and grimaced,

struggling to remember all that had been said.

"West part of town... shaped stones... twenty up, five down... Agh!" He sank to the ground and rapped on his head. "Is there no place for the free, for the liberator to lay his head?" he repeated to himself. "Then four doors: first one stones, then keys, no that's not right..."

"Ducasus," Incus said quietly.

"What?" he snapped.

"I remember."

Ducasus' scowl disappeared.

"You're sure? All of it?"

Incus nodded.

"There are ways to train your mind as well as your body. I will not forget."

Ducasus rose to his feet quickly.

"Okay, then. Alright." He processed this new information, then abruptly groaned in frustration. "I wish we could get her now! Why did he say to go tomorrow night?"

"Perhaps she will not be accessible till then."

Ducasus pounded his palm against the door.

"I can't keep waiting like this while she's in pain!" he shouted. He slid his hand off of the door, then looked up and spoke softer. "But there's hope now, Incus. We're going to find her."

Incus nodded.

"The queen will want to know."

~°~

"I appreciate your concern," the queen said as she walked briskly down an ornate corridor, "but our security has no breach. We looked into the person you told us about and everything is in order."

"That's impossible!" Ducasus exclaimed. "He broke into the palace to talk to us."

The queen raised an eyebrow, looking up from a scroll she was examining as she walked.

"Is it? Then why are all of his papers in order? We celebrated the one hundred-twentieth birthday of the viceroy of Sol last night and we needed some extra staff. We often hire servants for short periods of time when we have large events. Such as last night. Despite whatever falling out you and your brother may have had, he was in the palace legitimately as temporary serving staff."

One hundred and twenty? Ducasus thought incredulously. He sighed in frustration.

"In any case, we know where the Seven Sisters are. Did you read the message we had brought to you?"

"That's impossible," the queen said, dismissing the thought with a wave of her hand.

Ducasus looked to Incus for a reaction and spoke.

"It is possible. That's where they are."

The queen stopped a servant and gave him a few orders as she crossed his path. Ducasus and Incus were following her through the richly decorated halls of the palace, trying to speak to her as she walked.

The queen dismissed the servant she had been speaking to and sighed, turning to Ducasus.

"Well, I suppose my men are wrong when they tell me they have found the anarchists' hideout." She leaned in closer and spoke softly, a little annoyed. "It's not where you insist it is."

Composing herself, the dark-haired queen turned and continued walking down the long hall, heading towards a magnificent grand banister.

"You are welcome to accompany them, of course," she continued, "You've already proven yourselves capable. The raid will take place tonight."

They reached the ornate banister, which was housed in a central room that looked up into the interior of the large, golden dome. On the stairs they were joined by the

queen's bodyguards, Gladius and Clypeum. Gladius handed her a scroll, which she immediately unfurled and scanned.

"Regina," Incus began, his deep voice resonating softly in the large room. The queen turned from her scroll and looked up at him. "We've decided," he said.

The queen stroked a few strands of her hair as she thought, her eyes far away.

"Well, I can't spare any more soldiers," she said. "They've all been prepared for my raid or are performing other necessary duties."

"Surely you can do something."

The queen looked from Incus to Ducasus and back again. Ducasus thought he saw a glimmer of softness in her light green eyes, but then she looked back to her scroll, focused once more. As she started to walk away, she waved her hand.

"Gladius, go with them tonight. Clypeum, you stay with me."

Gladius bowed his head in submission to the queen's will.

"One Flare?" Ducasus said from the top of the stairs. "We're trying to infiltrate a criminal organization and you send us one Flare?"

The queen paused, many steps down the great staircase.

"Gladius is the best swordsman in the kingdom. He is more than sufficient."

"Thank you, Regina," Incus said, bringing the matter to a close.

The queen and her two Flares continued walking away until they were out of sight, leaving Ducasus and Incus alone atop the staircase in the expansive room. Ducasus sighed.

"So there's three of us against who knows how many of them. So much for royal gratitude."

Incus grinned roguishly, catching Ducasus' eye.

"Why are you smiling?"

"I like a challenge," Incus replied.

Ducasus stared at him like he was crazy.

"You do realize that we're going to die."

"Let's go find you some armor," Incus said.

Chapter Twenty-One:

The Calm

Malleus stood before a body-length mirror, intently studying his own features with his Hawkeye senses, noticing every detail and color. What had begun as simple introspection had now turned into something more like admiration. The stars had changed his appearance greatly.

His plan was brilliant, really. Audacious, unprecedented. No one else had either the mind or the heart to carry out what he intended for tonight. It was going to be glorious.

Malleus smirked, noting how the expression changed his face. He had never gotten to look in a mirror as a child. He only knew his own appearance by seeing blurry reflections in the water – and from seeing Ducasus.

He huffed at the thought.

Ducasus has done nothing with his freedom except lose his girl, while I have ascended to power in only a short time. Our similarities have their limits.

Light footsteps in the stone corridor outside reached Malleus' sensitive ears. It had to be Mickey, judging by the rhythm of his steps. He continued to study his features in the glass: his thick, chestnut-colored hair, his hypnotizing blue-green eyes, his powerful jaw line...

"Here is your clothing for tonight," a voice spoke up behind him. It was certainly Mickey.

Malleus turned and eyed the pile of clothes.

"I already received my clothing yesterday." He motioned to the bed with his eyes. Mickey turned and saw a pile of clothing identical to the one he held in his arms.

"So you have. Terribly sorry, I don't have any idea

how this could have happened. It's such a waste." Mickey paused a moment, then lit up. "Wait a minute. If we have an extra set of clothes anyway, why don't-"

"You're not coming, Mickey."

Mickey's eyebrows furrowed.

"And why not? Do I not know the Flare palace better than anyone? I have spent countless evenings in it, wandering its halls."

Malleus turned back to the mirror, watching himself as he spoke.

"A lovely story, Mickey. Your friends at the bar would eat that up." He brushed a few stray hairs from his face. "Were these visits after you returned from fighting off armies in the North?"

Mickey stood up straight as he answered.

"Most of them were, yes."

"Hm."

Mickey's eyes lit up.

"So I can go?"

"No." Malleus saw Mickey's expression in the mirror as he deflated. "You're a drunk and a liar and I can't risk you screwing things up." Malleus peeled a dead fleck of skin from his nose. "Now go and bring my team here."

Dejected, Mickey stared down at the uniform he held in his hands. He stood still a moment, and then, sensing that Malleus was ignoring him, he slinked away.

Malleus noticed his dejection, but he paid it no mind. He had bigger things to think on.

~°~

Infidus stood atop an impressively tall ladder, dusting the chandeliers of the palace's foyer. It was mid-morning, and the sun illuminated every drop of crystalline ornamentation crowning the golden light fixture. Infidus wore his servant's uniform neatly and unwrinkled. He did

his work diligently and well, never complaining and never questioning. In fact, he hardly spoke at all.

But he listened.

Infidus was always listening. Because he was an unassuming, smallish Ungifted, people usually didn't notice him. If they did, they would often continue to speak about their private matters or the affairs of the realm without giving him another thought. Infidus did not talk much, but he listened, and he remembered.

The air was characteristically chilly on this winter morning, but the temperature was rising with the sun. Infidus went about dusting in the manner he always went about his work: meticulously and quietly. He rubbed his little cloth around each curve and even in the in-between spaces where no one would ever be able to tell if he had dusted or not.

The only part of the chandelier he did not dust was the chain. He stopped when he reached it and examined the rust that had built up on the outside of the connecting link. Every day when Infidus dusted this particular chandelier, he would pull out a little vial and dab a few drops of water on the connecting link. It wasn't quite enough of a buildup to weaken the chain - that would take years, but it was very visible rust. It certainly looked dangerous. Instead of a vial on this day, Infidus took out a jeweler's saw from his bag of tools. He looked around him and saw no one, but it did not really matter anyway since he was high up and no one usually paid him any attention.

He began to saw at the rusted link of the chain that held the chandelier to the ceiling. He sawed both ends of the link gingerly, leaving only a thin piece of metal on each side supporting the heavy light fixture. Normally, he would have replaced the candles on the chandelier, or at least he would have trimmed the wicks, but it was best that this chandelier look a bit neglected.

Infidus climbed down his ladder and carried it with him back to where it belonged. Cleaning the chandeliers wasn't even his job. He had offered to do it for another servant, a Flare by the name of Defessus. He had told him that he looked overworked, and Infidus had some extra time in his schedule to help. He'd been cleaning the chandeliers for a while now, but their supervisors did not know of the switch. It would have been frowned upon.

The chandelier would fall and break soon, and the poor Flare would definitely lose his job, and they would probably whip him. Poor Flare. Infidus waved to his supervisor as he placed the ladder in storage. The supervisor did not return the gesture. He seemed to have overlooked it.

~°~

Ducasus wriggled into a hardened leather cuirass, forcing his head through the small opening. Once he got it through, he was pleasantly surprised to find that the armor actually fit quite well. The armory had so many of them that it wasn't hard to find his size.

"How is it?" Incus asked. Vir, who had granted them access, stood nearby and looked on.

Ducasus swung his arms back and forth.

"It's light."

"It ought to be," Vir said. "Our advantage in battle is speed. All of our armor is light."

Ducasus tried to move his shoulders around, feeling some resistance from the mottled material this time.

"Will it protect me?"

"Well enough," Incus replied.

Vir turned to the opposite wall and removed a sword from its place. It was a single-edged sword a little over an inch wide, with a simple hand guard but an exquisite wrapping around the grip, which depicted a golden sun

against a red background. Vir rested the sword across his open hands.

"This is the sword that a soldier would use. We call it a 'cade.' We use these in battle because we can manipulate them with speed, yet they are strong enough to deal damage to an armored foe." Vir returned the sword to its place and pointed up to a mounted crest on the wall that held two rapiers affixed to a golden shield.

"The weapons you will encounter tonight will be more like those swords - thinner, faster, and much more common." Vir turned to Ducasus and rapped on his cuirass with his knuckles. "Your armor will protect you from indirect hits and slashes. A stab may pierce it, however, so be wary."

Ducasus nodded, appreciative of the warning.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" the likeable Flare asked.

"No, thank you. You've helped us greatly."

"Thank you, Vir," Incus added from down the hall. He had become transfixed on a row of spears in the center of the armory and examined them closely with the eyes of a connoisseur.

Vir bowed and took his leave, returning to his post outside of the heavy doors that barred the way into the armory. Ducasus turned to say something to Incus, but the muscular giant was rapt studying the various weapons he encountered further down in the room.

Ducasus hesitated, and his eyes wandered to a table near him covered with knives, each wrapped with a leather strip around its sheath. Ducasus cast a glance at Incus again, then snatched one to examine.

The leather strip was long enough for him to tie it around his waist. He quickly did just that, tying the leather in such a way as to leave the knife at his right hip. He lifted his white drapery that wrapped around his shoulders and let its tail fall over the blade, concealing it.

Just in case, he thought.

Incus had told Ducasus that he wasn't ready for a weapon – mostly because he didn't know how to use any – but he thought it best to have an emergency recourse. Besides, he had been given permission from Vir to take whatever he needed from the armory.

Thus equipped, he spoke to Incus, who hadn't noticed his addition.

"Are you going to take anything?" he asked. Incus shook his head.

"I have Bellum," he rumbled. "That's all I need. I only wear armor in real fights."

"There's three of us and probably fifty of them, all Flares."

Incus grinned.

"They don't have anything in my size."

Ducasus chuckled.

"Well, that's true."

"Nebs prefer real armor, heavy and strong. We are strong enough to wear it and yet fight. We have some light armor for difficult terrain, but we do not often use it."

Incus finished looking down the shaft of another spear, running his thumb to the tip. He set the weapon in its place and joined Ducasus, who had grown serious once more.

"What's our plan, Incus?"

"I never was much for plans," the giant replied. "Prevail. Win. Survive."

Ducasus sighed long and deep as they walked to exit the armory.

"So I'm going to have to be the brains?"

"You'd be better off as the strength."

"Yeah, I get it – you're smarter than me too. Hilarious."

Ducasus wasn't in a joking mood. Visions of Rosae alone in chains and darkness plagued him. Incus held his

peace and allowed him to brood on his thoughts as they walked.

Gladius was scheduled to meet them at the eleventh hour. They would then march to meet impossible odds, but Ducasus did not care. He had decided that he would save Rosae if it was the last thing he did. It seemed likely that it would, in fact, be the last thing he did, but he would not fail her. Of that he was certain.



They stood beneath the large, golden dome inside the palace, flanked by two ornate, winding staircases centered around a sea monster spitting water into a basin. The sun had not yet set but soon would, leaving them to accomplish their mission under cover of darkness.

The darkness was the enemy's perennial ally, not theirs. It spread its branches over the perverse and the unjust, who knew its pathways well. It hid them and allowed them to accomplish their deeds in secret, but it was their undoing as well. They would not see Ducasus, Incus, and Gladius until first blood had been drawn.

Ducasus looked up and noticed a chain dangling from the ceiling. It wasn't attached to anything; it just hung down.

That's odd, he thought.

"You're nervous," Incus said, watching Ducasus glance around and pace as they waited for Gladius.

Ducasus shook his head.

"I don't know how I'm going to live long enough to save Rosae, but I will. I have to." He gritted his teeth. "Forget the numbers. I just wish each one of them didn't have such an advantage."

"An advantage often carries a disadvantage on its back," Incus responded. "Flares pride themselves on speed, but it can also be their undoing."

Ducasus stopped pacing.

"How?"

"Flares are much faster than you and I, but they see things no better. In fact, they often overlook details because they are moving so quickly. How do you overcome a Flare? Misdirection, anticipation, and by using their quickness against them."

Ducasus nodded soberly.

"You can sneak up on them, too," a voice proclaimed from the staircase above them. It was Gladius. "Which is why," he continued, "we will be as unassuming as possible. Stealth is key." He descended the last step and stood with them, his long, golden hair catching the rays of the late sun.

"Do we have a chance?" Ducasus asked.

"No," the Flare replied. "Now let's go."

Chapter Twenty-Two:

The Storm

The moon hid behind looming clouds in the night sky, leaving only the stars to yield heaven's light to the mortals below. Cold air whipped around an Ungifted as he sat shivering in the seat of his cart, holding the reins of a faithful horse that pulled the load. A young man sat beside him – another Ungifted, barely able to grow a beard. The driver did not speak to him as their wheels rolled over the red stone path, interplaying with the rhythm of the horses' hooves.

A second cart followed close behind the first, driven by a bald man with a prominent facial scar running from his ear to his lips. He too, rode in silence, towing a tarp-covered cart identical to the first.

"Halt! Who goes there?" called a voice from the darkness.

The driver of the first cart, a redheaded man with an abundance of freckles on his clean-shaven face, responded.

"We've come about the chandelier," he shouted to the invisible speaker. The horses whinnied as they stood still.

"Pull forward a ways."

The Ungifted snapped his reins gently, and he and the cart behind him inched forward, nearing the palace's imposing southern gate.

A light appeared out of the darkness, revealing a short Flare carrying a torch.

"Who is it who calls on the royal grounds?" the Flare asked.

"Repairmen," the driver of the first cart responded, yawning. "We're here to fix the chandeliers that broke."

The Flare looked the repairman up and down with searching eyes, his face illuminated in the darkness by the light of his torch.

"Uh-huh..." he said, walking to the back of the cart. "And what's all this?" he asked, gesturing at the oddly shaped mass that rose out of the bed of the cart, covered by a tarp.

"The replacement chandelier," the repairman responded in a tired voice. "The other one's back there," he said, gesturing to the second cart.

The diminutive Flare lifted up the tarp and peered inside. The light from his torch played off in a thousand directions from the tiered glass that met his eyes. He set the tarp back down and walked to the other cart. The driver stared steadfastly ahead, not acknowledging him.

"Hey!" the small Flare said. "Who are you?"

The bald man with the facial scar remained fixated ahead. "I'm with him," he said mechanically, pointing to the driver of the first cart.

The guard grunted in response. He sauntered back and lifted the tarp to once again find rows of reflective glass rising up in tiers. The Flare set the tarp down and walked back to the first cart, nodding at the driver of the second as he went. The bald man kept his eyes trained ahead and did not respond.

"Wait here," the guard said, wandering away into the darkness. The Ungifted seated next to the redheaded man looked uncomfortable, but for his part, the redhead simply looked bored. After a few minutes, the short Flare arrived back at the carts.

"You're not supposed to be coming until tomorrow."

The redhead gestured behind him.

"We were told to come as soon as we could. We thought we wouldn't be able to make it out tonight, but we got our things together, and here we are."

"Well, you can pass," the Flare spoke up to the first

driver. "You're on my list, even if you're coming early." The guard leaned in. "I don't doubt they wanted you to drop everything and head over, though. That Ancula can be one demanding whip-cracker."

The driver of the first cart yawned again.

"I guess so, yeah."

The Flare rolled his eyes.

"Well, anyway. I'll open the gate for you."

~°~

Ducasus looked up at the night sky to see that thunderheads were moving in quickly. A storm was brewing.

Gladius held the lead, urging them to go faster. They had passed through the town square a half hour ago, and they were now well inside of the western quarter of the city. The normally red and tan of the ever-present aqueducts appeared a dull blue in the strange light of the evening. Ducasus continually kept an eye on the aqueducts to ensure that they stayed two blocks south of them in the winding, confused streets.

The buildings were all of wood, a stark contrast to the sandstone structures in the older parts of the city. Flickering lights appeared in the windows of taverns occasionally, but the streets themselves were deserted. Horrible things had happened of late, and fear had begun to settle on Velocitum. Gladius, Incus, and Ducasus felt like the only visible inhabitants in a city of shadows.

Ducasus rubbed his hands on his arms quickly, trying to warm himself from the friction.

Incus looked up at the sky and squinted, then pulled his hood over his head.

"It's going to rain," he said.

~°~

Rain fell like sheets of melted ice as the repairman drove his cart to the southern end of the palace. He rolled under the protective eaves just in time. The second cart lined up behind it, and the redheaded repairman jumped from the driver's seat, gritting his teeth.

Blast, it's cold, he thought.

Double doors large enough to admit four horses side-by-side acted as the servants' entrance to the palace. Strong oak panels with iron fittings stood resolutely closed, and two guards, one Flare and one Ungifted, sat on a planter near the great doors.

"We're here to repair the chandeliers!" the redhead shouted over the crashing rain.

The guards reluctantly rose from their seats. The Ungifted walked up to the repairman as the Flare ran and began peeking under the tarps that covered the carts.

"Already? I thought you weren't supposed to be here until the morning," the Ungifted guard said.

The repairman put his hand on the man's shoulder and continued speaking in a raised voice in an attempt to overcome the rain.

"We were told to come right away, and we already had the pieces. We're just here to install them."

The guard stuck out his lip and pondered.

"Okay," he said, then he called to the other guard, shouting, "Aureaus! I'll let them in. Go tell Ancula the repairmen have arrived."

The Flare looked up and sprinted off in a flash, leaving the redhead and his men alone with the Ungifted guard. The guard unhooked a ring of keys from his belt and walked to the large oak doors.

"You know where you're going?"

The redhead shook his head.

"I'm afraid someone's going to have to show me."

The guard nodded as he turned his skeleton key in the lock.

"Ancula will be here in a moment; she'll tell you where to go."

"Great," the repairmen responded, smiling.

The guard pushed the oak doors open slowly and a warm, yellow light spilled into the night. A wide hallway appeared before them, and in it stood the Flare who had run off only moments before, accompanied by a prim, lean Flare woman with golden hair braided in the fashion of Sol.

"You weren't supposed to be here until tomorrow," she said, her hands on her hips.

The redhead bowed shallowly.

"We heard what an urgent matter this was, and we had the pieces on hand. We were told it would be better the sooner we could arrive."

The woman's tense face softened a touch.

"Well, thank the Father of Lights. It is just a disaster. And right in the entryway! Go deal with it, but work quietly, if you can."

The redhead dipped his head and motioned to his companions to bring the horses and carts inside.

"Wait," the woman began, her finger over her lips. "It looks as if you've brought two chandeliers."

"We were told two chandeliers had fallen..." The redhead paused, indicating that he did not know how to address the Flare woman with whom he spoke.

"Ancula," she said. "Head of domestic servants here at the palace. Now, I don't know where you got that idea, but only one chandelier needs replacing."

The redhead turned and looked at the carts behind him. The rain had not let up.

"You sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," she snapped. "We only need one."

The worker scratched his head.

"Well, I've got a problem, then. Can I leave the other

cart in here while we replace the broken one? I don't want it to sit out in the rain."

"This is not a stable."

"I need my men with me, and I can't leave a delicate piece like--"

"Fine, fine, just get to it. Now Augustus, back to your post. Bring your men and follow me, Repairman."

"Flagro," he corrected her. "My name is Flagro."

~°~

"I see it!" Ducasus exclaimed as they trudged through the driving rain. They were soaked to the skin. "There's the building!"

Gladius gripped the pommel of his sword.

"Gladius," Ducasus said, "you're going to have to be the one to approach the entrance. Incus and I might raise suspicion in an all-Flare group."

He dipped his head in acknowledgement as they reached the stone structure and felt along the wall for the proper spot. Gladius raised his hands to a stone and looked to a drenched Ducasus for approval. The youth nodded silently as he and Incus moved flush against the wall. Gladius' fingers closed around the rock's edges, and he pulled.

It was loose. He carefully shifted the piece of shaped stone back and forth until he had wiggled it out enough to grasp. He pulled it from its home, leaving only a small, black hole in its place. They waited several moments, until Ducasus pantomimed the word "Speak."

"Is there no home for the free?" Gladius asked into the hole with some small hesitation. "Where does the liberator lay his head?"

Just then lightning flashed, jolting Gladius, for in the hole were two beady eyes, momentarily illuminated by the sudden light.

"There is rest," the owner of the eyes spoke, "but what is it that you seek?"

"We have matters concerning the captives," Gladius replied without skipping a beat.

You better believe we do... Ducasus thought silently, pressed up against the wall.

The disembodied voice spoke once more.

"Enter as a friend. Enemies are quick to die here."

"They certainly are," Gladius muttered as the stones swung open slowly as a door.

Gladius gripped his wet hair and deftly tied it up as he strode past the threshold. Incus and Ducasus chased after him and arrived inside just as the door shut, closing off the dim source of light that had allowed Gladius to glimpse the gatekeeper's face.

"Who are they?" the gatekeeper demanded "They're not even Flares. Intruders!" he shouted.



Flagro and his men followed Ancula as Aureus rejoined the other guard and helped to close the large oak doors. Footsteps echoed softer and softer until they disappeared down the stone hallway, leaving the second cart laden with its chandelier all alone.

It wasn't long until the chandelier, tarp and all, raised itself several feet, then sank down again as several additional shapes appeared from underneath.

One by one, Malleus, Legatus, Scipio, and the two men who had accompanied Malleus on his first mission all rolled out of the cart. They each wore servants' uniforms, though with weapons and scabbards beneath their white coats.

Malleus stood to his full height, though the others crouched, and he boldly began traveling down the hall, his feathered chestnut hair swaying as he walked. He

appeared entirely calm and collected, though a trace of cruelty was present in his eyes. The other zealots followed his example of nonchalance and walked after him.

Malleus had a vague irritation at the back of his mind that had been bothering him all day. He felt as though he was overlooking something, but it wasn't possible.

He glanced back to see the order of his men. Legatus was closest, wearing a ridiculous piece of Neb craftsmanship, as always. He had been told they would be allowed to wear no visible armor, so he was forced to leave his standard equipment behind. Instead, he wore a bear claw attached to his belt. Malleus did not know what it was for, but he assumed it had a purpose beyond simple ornamentation as it had a cork pressed into the top of the claw.

Scipio walked behind him, carrying the tightly rolled scroll.

Good, Malleus thought, taking everything in with a glance.

The two others lurked behind. The first was named Lupus, a wolfish, lean man with a receding hairline, who Malleus had learned was a dangerous knife-thrower. He unbuttoned his coat as they walked, revealing rows of blades strapped to his torso. He then held his coat shut by putting his hands in his pockets and pushing them across his middle.

The other zealot was a stocky Ungifted named Pugnax who walked stiffly. He had not enjoyed riding in the back of a cart, hidden beneath a chandelier with four other men. It had been cramped, and his face betrayed his irritation.

They had been successful thus far, except for the mishap with the queen, but even that had been beneficial to their purposes. Yet even with success tonight, Malleus wondered if the advantage would be enough.

He shook himself. Of course it would be enough. After all, he needed the others to see his confidence – and it was

a good plan. The Flare's nation star was the pride of the kingdom. Flares considered it to be their right to exist, that it bore their authority, power, and gifting. Losing it would be a devastating blow.

They finally reached an arched door down the long and deserted hall. Silently they slipped inside, and they began to descend the stairway that appeared before them.

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"Intruders!" The gatekeeper shouted and turned in the darkness to flee, but Gladius was too quick for him. In a decisive motion, Gladius struck him down unconscious, using the stone he already held in his hand. A dull thud resounded as the anarchist slumped to the floor.

Ducasus couldn't see a thing. The only light was the small hole they had opened in the wall.

"I think we should-" Gladius began, but all of a sudden his words were stifled, and sounds of a struggle ensued. Unable to see anything, Ducasus was helpless.

He heard the sound of a sword leaving its sheath and a revolting gushing sound, followed by an exclamation of pain and a thud. Then there was only the sound of labored breathing.

Ducasus lowered himself into the fighting stance Incus had taught him, and he waited.

"Gladius," Incus' voice began, "What happened?"

The sound of gasping continued for a few more moments before Ducasus and Incus heard a response.

"He slipped a rope across my throat. He tried to strangle me." It was Gladius' voice.

"I don't like being blind," Ducasus said. "We would have helped."

The labor disappeared from Gladius' voice.

"What for? I killed the scoundrel, didn't I?"

With that, they ventured into the unknown, with only

Malleus' hurried instructions to lead them. Ducasus hoped they could trust them, for who knew what horrors could be lurking in the dark.



Malleus and the four zealots emerged from yet another stairway and hurried down a hall lined with impressionist paintings and many sculptures. He held the lead, and something still nagged at the back of his mind.

We've laid the groundwork, and they know what we're capable of, Malleus thought, assuring himself. *The results of tonight's mission will place the Flares in a panic. We will have unveiled ourselves, calling aid from all of the oppressed Ungifteds from every corner of Pontus. It's perfect.*

Yet the nagging feeling wouldn't go away. He wondered if the zealots would be able to defeat the Flares in pitched battles, even with the aid from foreign zealots. The Flares had a professional army, and they possessed formidable abilities besides. Malleus wondered if his position and numbers would be enough.

Suddenly, it was as if Malleus stood outside of himself, and he realized how quickly everything had changed. Not so long ago, he had been living in a shack, reaping grain in the fields and dreaming of a better life.

The nostalgia was quick to pass, and the zealots rounded a corner to hurry down another art-filled corridor. All was quiet except for the rustling of their clothes and their padded footfalls as they closed in on their goal. Tension filled the air, waiting to be released at any moment.

Coming to another corner, the decorations became austere, and Malleus motioned for his companions to stop. He adjusted his coat and shook his hair back, and the others took the hint to do the same, composing themselves. The dark, cruel expression that accompanied

Malleus' monstrous persona appeared on his brow as he casually turned and walked down the last hall.

It was made of rough-cut stone, an abnormality in Flaroria, and frequent torches lined the walls. At the opposite end sat a guard. Malleus could discern his features perfectly, even at a distance. He was a Flare, and his sleeveless attire showed large, defined arms. He wore a leather jerkin, and his white-blond hair contrasted strikingly with caramel-colored skin.

As the five imposters approached, he rose to his feet.

"Turn around!" the Flare called in a commanding voice. The zealots were still a good distance from both him and the stone door he guarded. "You are in the wrong area."

Malleus continued walking, unabated.

"No, it's alright. We're from the kitchen staff," he replied, holding his hands in front of him. The other zealots continued walking behind him, bold and resolute. Fierceness illuminated their eyes, awaiting a release of the ever-building tension.

"We have nothing to do with the kitchen here," the caramel-skinned Flare replied. He reached behind his back and pulled out two identical cades. "Leave this place."

Malleus shook his head as he continued to close the distance.

"Ancula sent us. We're on a special errand to you."

"Last chance. Leave this place," he said again, leveling his weapons.

"Not until we've delivered our message," Malleus replied coolly. "I have it here." He moved like a bolt of lightning, pulling a knife from his inner coat pocket and weaving it past the Flare's guard to drag it across his throat. It was one motion, so precise and quick that it was unstoppable. Malleus' victim crumpled to the floor in an instant, dropping his blades and clutching his throat in a vain attempt to stem the blood that surged from the fatal

wound. Malleus watched him choke with vague indifference until he was dead.

"Get his keys," Malleus ordered, turning to examine the stone door before them.

Legatus jumped forward and crouched down, searching the bloody corpse. He quickly found what he was looking for and carried the keys to the locking mechanism embedded in the rock. Lupus and Scipio watched their rear, and Pugnax observed as Legatus quickly sorted through the ring of keys until one of them turned inside the lock. Malleus stood to the side and motioned towards the door.

"Well? Will you make Legatus open it himself?"

Lupus, Pugnax, and Scipio all joined Legatus in shouldering into the stone door. Their feet slipped on the Flare's blood that had pooled on the stone. They pushed with all their might, but the door gave way only a few inches at a time.

Malleus found himself wishing for Ducasus' Nebula to push the door open for them; he would certainly have made short work of the task.

It would be nice to have a few of them when we fight the Flares in battle, Malleus thought.

Just as the thought entered his mind, amidst the grunting of his fellows and the grinding of stone against stone, everything was illuminated. Countless scenarios played through Malleus' sharp mind as he considered all of the possibilities. He had been overlooking something indeed, but now his plans were flawless.

The small wheels beneath the stone door slid, then slowly turned along their track.

The wall opened until a man could fit through if he turned sideways. Inside, a radiant light filled the room, but all Malleus had eyes for was the robed warrior who eyed him quizzically. Malleus held up a finger and stepped behind the stone door. He grabbed Lupus by the

shoulder and motioned with his head.

Lupus grinned and stepped to the opening, which allowed him to see the ceremonial guard staring at the tide of blood that slowly leaked inside, alarm growing on his disbelieving face.

Lupus threw open his jacket and flicked two razor sharp daggers into the room. The guard ducked beneath the projectiles at the last possible second and pushed off of his back foot, launching himself towards Lupus, who only had time to reach his hands to his sides to grasp more darts when the Flare's blade pierced his stomach.

Legatus, already equipped with a sai in each hand, thrust forward as the Flare withdrew his sword from Lupus' belly. Legatus' three-pronged weapon clanked against the Flare's sword, and Legatus rotated it immediately, trapping the sword between its center and side prongs. He then swung his other sai at the captive sword, bending it. The Flare looked in surprise at his useless blade as Malleus drove a knife into his body. Legatus retracted his weapons, and Malleus dragged the Flare into the hall to open up the entrance once more. He swelled with anger when he saw Lupus dead beneath his feet. Pugnax rushed to the opening in the stone with his blade before him, pushing the next guard back into the vault. Legatus and Scipio followed as Malleus quickly stripped the fallen Flare of his undamaged sword.

Malleus entered the room to see Legatus and Scipio in mortal combat with one of the dual-wielding guards on the far side of a central globe, glowing white and brilliant in the middle of the room. Pugnax fought with another guard on the other side, already covered with gashes and soaked in his own blood. The stocky man thrust his blade at the guard with all his might, but the much quicker Flare easily batted it to the side and sank his sword deep into the Ungifted's side.

Malleus needed no other opportunity. He threw

himself forward with his sword extended and drove into the back of the Flare. The guard and Pugnax fell to the ground in a lifeless tangle.

Malleus turned to where the others fought, finding Scipio and Legatus holding off the much quicker Flare by way of constant, combined attack.

The Flare parried and parried as the two zealots hammered their blows down on top of him. They seemed locked in equal struggle, until Legatus trapped one of the Flare's blades between the prongs of his weapon just as Scipio slashed towards the neck. The Flare parried Scipio's blow, then, with a quick flick of his wrist, sliced upwards at Scipio's exposed shoulder. Legatus struck the sword he held with his free sai, bending it as Scipio cried out in pain, unable to hold onto his weapon. Anticipating an attack, Legatus deflected a dizzying blow from his attacker, then turned his other sai to the side and captured the Flare's good cade. Then, he shoved his free sai under the ribs of the Flare, who vainly tried to protect himself with his rent sword. Legatus stabbed him again, and the guard sank to the ground slowly, staring into Legatus' eyes with defiance until his last moment of life.

"Scipio!" Malleus called.

"It's nothing," Scipio returned through clenched teeth, clutching his wound. With shaking hands and painstaking effort, he removed a scroll from his inner pocket. "Here's our declaration."

"Keep it," Malleus replied, staring into the pure, radiating globe before him. "We've had a change of plans."

Chapter Twenty-Three:

Deeper In

Gladius and Incus followed as Ducasus led them deeper into the darkness of the earth. They could hear a faint dripping sound, smell the moss, and feel the cold, but they had no other sensation as they blindly forged through the blackness. Ducasus felt no indications of progress. He imagined the world was rotating beneath him as he walked, keeping him always in the same place.

This feeling changed as Ducasus' feet splashed into shallow water. He halted a moment, as did the others. None of them dared to voice their concerns of whether or not they were going the right way. Ducasus picked up his back foot and plunged it into the water. His mind was stayed on Rosae, and he would get to her no matter what.

The water got deeper, but it leveled out once it reached Ducasus' calf. After a long time, it began to slowly recede. Ducasus listened to the darkness intently, trying to ignore their echoing splashes, straining to hear any sign of danger. In the void, he wasn't certain which sounds were real and which ones he imagined.

As time went on, Ducasus began to think he heard breathing ahead of them. He listened closely, but he could not hear the sound when he focused on it.

He had a moment of panic when he realized that he didn't know if Incus and Gladius were still behind him, but he would carry out his mission even if they were not.

He heard the sound again. It seemed like someone was ahead, breathing steadily in and out, in and out. This time, the sounds did not vanish. They walked nearer and nearer to the sound until it was right in front of them.

Ducasus stopped, remembering the instructions.

"...Keys?" he asked.

Sounds of movement, then the jangling of keys rang out in front of Ducasus. He gingerly reached his hand forward, grasping a set of keys and brushing a cold, rough hand.

Ducasus steeled himself against the strangeness of the situation and felt around for a door. Finding it, and fumbling across it with his hands, he managed to locate its keyhole as well. He slipped a key in the lock and turned it, pushing the door open on its squealing hinges. It sounded like nails grinding against glass.

"Thanks," Ducasus said, extending the keys back into the darkness. A vague wheezing sound was the only response he received as the objects were taken from his hand.

They continued down the tunnel, waiting to come upon the stone wall that Malleus had described. It felt a little bit lighter in their current section of the tunnel, but it was still too dark to see. The point was driven home when Ducasus stepped forward, as he had been doing for the length of the tunnel, and his knee struck rock.

He resisted the urge to call out as pain ran through his leg. The others stopped behind him.

"Which one is it, Incus?" Ducasus whispered.

A heavy hand slid Ducasus to the side as the giant stepped forward and pressed a stone at his chest-level, which would have been eye-level for anyone else. He then bent down and pushed on the stone at his feet. With a grinding sound, the wall retracted, and the three rescuers were met with a world of light.

Torches hung from the ceiling everywhere, and an underground river coursed by on their left. They found themselves standing inside a glittering cavern filled with stalactites, stalagmites, and scattered tents.

And Flares. There were a lot of Flares.



"What do you mean, 'We've had a change of plans'?" Scipio asked, exasperated. Legatus looked on, ignoring the conversation but alert.

Malleus' eyes filled with the reflection of the brilliant star before him, burning brightly. He slowly extended his hands forward.

"Oh, don't worry. We're still taking the nation star. However, today is not the day of our glorious unveiling. Ensure that proclamation on the scroll remains with you."

Scipio ground his teeth.

"We have tens of thousands of men ready to fight. Our ties with the other nations have come through. We have the advantage now!"

"No!" Malleus snapped, dropping his hands to turn and snarl at Scipio. "What we have is worthless! You've told me of the last war. Our numerical advantage must first increase, as must the fear. We need to stack the odds double in our favor - triple." Malleus turned his head. "Legatus!"

Legatus turned towards Malleus and dipped his head.

"Take that ridiculous claw off of your belt."

Legatus slowly reached down and unfastened his piece of Neb memorabilia. He held it clenched in his fist.

"Now toss it over here."

Legatus appeared hesitant to part with a piece of his collection, but he obeyed. The corked bear's claw slid to a stop beneath the outer ring of the stand that propped up the nation star.

"There," Malleus said, turning back to the star. "Isn't it a shame how the Nebs broke into the palace and had the audacity to make off with their rival nation's star?"

Understanding began to dawn on the Commander's face. Legatus only stared at his sacrificed ornament.

"I thought you were only going to help us against the

Flares," Scipio said, slowly.

"I've had a change of heart," Malleus responded, stretching his arms towards the glowing orb once more. "We must end oppression wherever it lies."

Malleus' hands connected with the nation star, and in an instant, everything changed.

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Malleus found himself standing in a golden field of flax. The sky was a deep, electric purple, and a fierce storm raged in the heavens.

Have I gone insane? Malleus thought after looking around. The wind blew savagely, and rain crashed down everywhere.

He looked at his hands. They appeared normal, but he could feel energy pulsing into them and running the length of his body, swirling through every part of him.

I'm still in the vault, Malleus decided. *This is another one of those strange visions that come with the stars.*

He took a few steps forward, bending stalks of grain as he went.

"Well, what is it?" Malleus shouted to no one. Energy swirled in his stomach. The rain continued to pound mercilessly, and the wind sent waves through the expansive rows of flax.

I don't have time for this, Malleus thought.

A sound in the sky captured Malleus' attention. He looked upwards to see the heavens opening up, stretching to reveal a space free of clouds or storm. He watched a dusty canyon appear in the space. It came in blurry at first, but the image grew sharper by the moment.

Malleus watched as a thirsty, scrawny, and miserable-looking youth entered the scene from a distance. His eyes grew wide as they settled on what looked to be the exact star Malleus knew he was touching now. The scraggly

youth stumbled forward through the blistering heat and fell to his knees before the nation star, resting his hands on it and weeping. Pure, exquisite light flooded the vision, and it was gone.

Suddenly, a new image appeared. It was the same youth, but older now. He was still young, but he looked to be more confident as he ran through villages and towns, demonstrating his new abilities and encouraging others to join him.

The sky stretched again in a hundred smaller spaces surrounding the first, and Malleus saw flashes of innumerable young men finding their own, smaller stars, then exhibiting the characteristic emerald eyes of the Flares. Malleus looked at the center of it all and saw the first Flare once more. This time his hair was grayed and he wore a warrior's clothes. He looked experienced yet strong as he stood at the head of tens of thousands of Flares and Ungifteds, destiny shining in his eyes.

Brilliant flashes of orange and shrieks of pain filled the sky. Malleus saw the Flares running their fastest, leaping, cutting, and dodging to avoid torrents of fire that emanated from their fantastical opponents. The hundreds of little stretches of sky showed houses burning in the night, women and children fleeing – not from the Flares, but from the men of fire. The stench of vomit and charred flesh reached Malleus where he stood, making him blanch and cover his face.

Then, the skies filled with a new vision. Malleus saw Flares and Ungifteds arrayed in white as they stood before the illustrious palace and placed a crown atop the heroic Flare's head. Stories of peace and progress played across the sky, and images appeared of grateful Nebulae journeying from the South, working to help the Flares rebuild what was lost and to repair what was damaged. He saw the great aqueducts of Velocitum being raised up as fields grew colorful with the increase of crops.

Malleus saw the old Flare as a dying man, then as a corpse, wept over by all. He saw him interred and monuments raised up in his honor. Everything increased in speed. The center stretch of sky split into many as information rushed at Malleus, every stretch telling its own piece of the story.

Malleus saw kings and queens and craftsmen, artists and warriors. He saw a people decline and grow greedy, placing shackles on those weaker than themselves. He saw the master's whip, the cries of helpless men, and suffering.

Then, the center of the sky filled with enraged Flares, citizens with indignation scrawled upon their brows. He saw these Flares arguing and working and adding to their numbers. He saw Flares sacrifice their youth, their livelihoods, and even their lives to advance their petitions that they continually brought before the king, who eventually signed.

Malleus saw celebrations and the breaking of chains. He saw dancing in the streets and a people turned away from their greed. He watched a people recover and begin to slowly restore the balance of peace that had been lost.

Then everything shifted out of order. Malleus saw skirmishes and wars, exploration, harvests, and coronations. He saw cities built up and torn down and rebuilt again. Then, one by one, every open expanse of sky began to close itself, leaving only a purple, electric sky behind.

Except for the center. The middle of the heavens opened up wider and displayed the sole image in all of the heavens. It flashed to *Velocitum*, then to innocent and happy Flares drinking from the city's fountains and aqueducts as they always had. Then Malleus saw a blur of blindingly-fast images depicting horrible, sudden death. Malleus' extraordinary sight made certain that all of them registered in his mind.

He then saw fires and men leaping from the darkness to drive knives into the backs of prominent Flares – Flares

who had fought for the good of their city. He saw more fires and a people afraid. He felt the fear in his bones.

Then the sky closed up, and that old, indescribable pain seized Malleus' body once more, sending him into uncontrollable convulsions as he screamed in pain up to the empty, stormy sky.

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"You there!" A lanky Flare ran to where Gladius, Incus, and Ducasus entered the cavern. "What are a Flare, a Neb, and an Ungifted doing together?"

Fear seized Ducasus. They hadn't planned for this. They hadn't planned for anything, really, but he had hoped to have the element of surprise.

"I showed them in," Gladius responded, sounding annoyed. "We have a potential buyer from Nebularis, and this is his unfortunate brother," he said, indicating Incus and Ducasus.

"Ah, I see," the other Flare replied, his aggressive demeanor now gone, replaced with smug superiority. "I suppose we can't all find our stars. I imagine the wife's for him," he said, indicating Ducasus. "Do you want me to get Merope?"

Gladius waved his hand. "That won't be necessary. Just let these men into the inventory room. I'll keep an eye on them."

The lanky Flare nodded.

"Come with me. I believe Gravis is about." He motioned for them to follow and he began walking. "You know," he said, studying Gladius closely, "You fellows on the old rotation don't see enough of this place. I'm not sure if we've met."

Gladius smiled and bowed shallowly.

"Praestigiator."

"Well that's a mouthful," the other Flare muttered.

"I'm Ignotus."

"Charmed," Gladius replied, still smiling.

He's good, Ducasus thought. He lowered his head, trying to look unassuming as they walked among stalagmites emerging from the ground all around them.

"Gravis!" the Flare yelled upon reaching the far side of the cavern.

Ducasus looked up, and there was the door. It was just as Malleus had said. His heart raced with hope for Rosae.

"Gravis!" the Flare repeated just as an obese Flare burst out of a tent clutching a turkey leg in each hand. "What?" he mumbled through his packed mouth.

"We have buyers! Give me the key."

Gravis took another bite, then tucked one of the turkey legs under an arm and began to search his body for the ring of keys. Upon finding it, he tossed the keys to Ignotus, but his throw was short, causing them to land at the lanky Flare's feet.

Ignotus growled and bent over. Gravis stared with wide eyes, but Ignotus ignored him.

"Here you are," Ignotus said, handing the keys to Gladius. "Give them back to the fat one when you're finished." Then, lowering his voice, he added, "And try not to blow the sale."

Gladius winked in response and spoke to Incus and Ducasus.

"Right this way, gentlemen."

Gladius led Incus and Ducasus to the iron door, then unlocked it and led them through. He closed it behind them and locked the door from the inside.

Ducasus surged forward.

"According to Malleus, Rosae is in another room that connects to this one." He looked around. It was dark everywhere, except for a thin crack of light coming in under the door. "I just wish we could see."

The room suddenly reverberated with a rhythmic

pounding on the metal door. Gladius put his key into the lock and opened the door. Ignotus stood in the doorway with an eyebrow raised and a torch in his hand.

"Forget something?" he asked.

Gladius reached out and took the torch, then smiled.

"Many thanks."

He then shut the door and locked it once more, leaving Ignotus in the cavern.

"That's better," Ducasus said, turning to look at his companions in the torchlight.

Incus was cross. He looked angrier than Ducasus had seen him in a long time. Following the giant's gaze, he suddenly saw why. Before them stood a row of cages filled with women and a few men, pale from the dark and lean from poor nourishment. It was horrifying.

Gladius held the torch up to the cages as he walked down the row of helpless souls. Some cages had more inhabitants than others and some were empty, but all of them were small. The arrangement spoke of casual cruelty, of a seared collective conscience.

Incus' eyes landed on an old wretch who sat in a cage by himself. His white, feathered hair flowed behind him in layers, as if he was looking into the wind. All Hawkeyes gave this impression.

"I never thought to see a Nebula in here," the old Hawkeye said, looking up.

"I never thought to see one of the Lux Sidorum here," Incus replied gravely.

The Hawkeye grunted and lowered his head once more, but Incus advanced to the cage and laid his hands on two of the bars, looking at the old Hawkeye inside. He grunted and pulled sharply, and the iron bars popped free from their fittings with a metallic *clank*.

The Hawkeye raised his gaze again, then drew himself slowly to his feet.

"Thank you," he said with wide eyes.

Incus nodded, then turned and continued down the row of cages with Ducasus and Gladius. The elderly Hawkeye gingerly followed.

"Here it is!" Ducasus exclaimed upon arriving at another door. "Give me the keys."

Ducasus fumbled with the keyring, trying too quickly to find the one that would unlock the final door. The lock finally clicked, and the metal door groaned as Ducasus forced it inwards.

"Rosae?" he called in a low voice, full of hope and doubt. He entered before Gladius and his torch had the opportunity.

"Ducasus?"

A moment later the light entered and revealed a tired but resolute Rosae walking toward the bars.

"It's really you," Rosae whispered, nearly in tears.

Ducasus' heart felt as if it was going to burst out of his chest as he grasped Rosae's cold hands across the bars of her prison. His expression showed both sorrow and love as he touched her face; then he grew focused and let her go.

"We have to get you out of here."

Taking his cue, Incus approached the metal bars and strained against them, popping two out of their places as he had done for the elderly Hawkeye, who now stood behind the group in Rosae's isolation chamber, his eyes still wide with fascination.

Rosae ran to Ducasus and clung to him tightly. He hesitated, afraid to believe it, but then he raised his arms and held her as passionately as she held him. He kissed the top of her head and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Well this is a sight to see," Gladius began, softly. "Now! What's your plan for getting us and the other captives out?" he asked, looking from Incus to Ducasus, who now held Rosae at his side.

Ducasus looked at Incus warily.

"We, uh... We don't have a plan."

Gladius turned and walked away a few steps. Then, turning around, he said, "Of course not. How silly of me. How are we supposed to die heroically if we have a plan of escape?"

The old Hawkeye standing behind them stuck out his lower lip and tilted his head, nodding in agreement.

Gladius noticed the old one's expression.

"I was being ironic," he said.

The old Hawkeye slowly raised his head and mouthed the word "oh," then closed his lips again, his active eyes watching the deliberations.

"We did not know the situation we would find ourselves in," Incus replied. "A plan would have been no better than a guess before. Now we're here, and we know what faces us."

"It wouldn't be hard to get Rosae and one or two others out," Ducasus began. "We could just say that Incus and I bought them."

"There are other people to save," the giant replied.

The old Hawkeye nodded thoughtfully.

"So there are..." Gladius said, deep in reflection. "And you would need money to walk out of here with them in tow. Incus."

Incus shifted his attention to the Flare.

"How many Flares can you conceivably fight at the same time? A Nebula of your birth is sure to have been trained in war."

"Ten," Incus responded flatly.

Gladius raised an eyebrow.

"I can handle four- and even that is stretching me thin, I think. Ducasus, how many can you handle?"

Ducasus looked steadfastly into Gladius' eyes, sorrow and a dull anger filling them.

"Not more than one."

Gladius sighed.

"Well, at our best, we can dispatch fifteen of them before being torn into pieces."

Ducasus looked at the ground, and Rosae rubbed his hand tenderly.

"I'm so sorry, Rosae," he said softly. "If Malleus hadn't stolen my star, I'd be able to help a lot more."

The old Hawkeye turned his head askew at this. Rosae lifted Ducasus' chin and kissed him.

"You came for me," she said. "That's all that matters."

Ducasus smiled, but it faded quickly.

"What matters is that I get you out of here."

"Did you say that... you had your star taken from you?" the old one interrupted, inching forward.

"His twin brother stole it from him after he found it," Rosae said quickly, then turned back to Ducasus.

The old Hawkeye furrowed his brow and placed a hand on his chin.

"Well... you should go to the Source, then. That just doesn't sound fair to me."

"The Source?" Ducasus said, skeptically.

"He speaks of the Father of Lights," Incus interjected.

"No one knows where the Source is," Gladius said, irked, "or if the 'Father of Lights' is even real. I don't see a great forge in the sky, producing gifted stars, do you?"

"Oh, it's real," the Hawkeye replied. "I've been. And I know how to get back, too."

"Wonderful," Gladius cut in, stepping in front of the Hawkeye. "But let's return to the problem at hand, shall we? I get the feeling we don't have a lot of time."

"Incus, can you let the other prisoners out the way you did Rosae and the elderly gentleman?" Ducasus asked.

Incus spit on his hands and rubbed them together, nodding. Ducasus spoke again.

"We'll have them on our side. We'll give them bars from the cages to fight with. We'll have the element of

surprise, and I think they'll all be itching for some payback."

"Slight problem. With the exception of our delusional little Hawkeye here, they're all Ungifteds." Gladius said.

"At least we'd have a chance to fight," Rosae said softly.

No one spoke until Gladius stifled a laugh.

"Well, it's not a great plan, but I don't see how we can do any better. May fortune favor fools tonight!"

Incus went to work prying bars from their fittings, much to the shock and welcome relief of the captives. Incus quickly grew tired of pulling the bars out by hand, so he took to using his battle hammer as a lever, which worked quite well.

"There are likely no less than forty anarchists out there, all of them gifted. Running is not an option, and fighting less so. We could stick to the shadows and hope that no one notices us, but that seems fanatically stupid." Gladius paced. Being unable to assist Incus, Ducasus, Rosae, and Gladius set about trying to better their odds.

"We have some twenty Ungifteds here. That's got to give us something," Ducasus said, his words punctuated by the occasional metallic *clank*, informing them that Incus had removed another bar.

"Yes, so that means we're only outnumbered two to one. And we have all Ungifteds and they have all Flares. Also, most of our troops are women."

Rosae put her hands on her hips.

"And what's wrong with that?"

Gladius was unrepentant.

"Can you fight a Flare with a sword when you only have an iron bar, which, by the way, is probably too heavy for you?"

Rosae's cheeks flushed with anger.

"I can try!" she returned defiantly.

Gladius straightened.

"I suppose you can. There's no sense in dying poorly, now is there?" Gladius hesitated, as if debating with himself. "Hit them in the knees if you get half a chance," he said. "You might as well have something to aim at."

Rosae's eyebrows were still furrowed, but she released a pent-up breath.

"Thank you."

Gladius nodded.

"Of course, you won't get the opportunity to touch them," he added. "They're much too fast."

Ducasus saw a thin woman approach and tap Gladius on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," she said in a small voice. "You have the keys that open the door to the cave, yes?"

"Yes," Gladius replied, taken aback by the interruption.

"Then why didn't you use them to unlock the cages? They are the same set of keys."

Incus' low voice growled from the end of the row. He was in the process of removing bars from the final cell.

A disgusted look washed over Gladius' face.

"Thank you for your timely comment."

"Oh, you're welcome," the timid woman responded.

"We needed the bars to arm them with anyway!" Gladius called back to Incus. Rosae was laughing.

"I guess while you men were out learning how to fight, the women were busy developing brains," Rosae said.

Gladius glared at her.

"I didn't hear you suggesting the same." He gave a forced smile and put his hand on Rosae's shoulder. "Use that big brain to figure out a way for us to survive, hmm?"

With that, Gladius walked away from Ducasus and Rosae, heading to where Incus was handing the last of the Ungifteds an iron bar.

"It's as bad as he makes it out to be, isn't it?" Rosae

asked.

Ducasus nodded in the dim light.

"But it's like you said," he responded. "We can try. I don't know what's going to happen to me or to anybody else, but I'm getting you out of here alive."

Rosae looked at the floor, suddenly shy. She took a step back from Ducasus.

"I love you." Ducasus blurted the phrase, not meaning for it to have left his lips.

"I know," she said. She looked up at him with exquisite, searching eyes, trying to find the right words. "And I'm glad."

Ducasus smiled weakly.

"Glad that I'm here or glad that I—"

"Ducasus," Incus appeared, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder. "It's time."

"I don't want you to die," Rosae said softly. She forced a smile then, and punched Ducasus in the arm. "Don't be a hero, okay?"

Ducasus didn't laugh.

"Stay close to me. If I go down, don't go to Incus. He'll be the center of attention. Find Gladius. He'll be able to take care of you if it all falls apart. You might be able to make it if he carries you."

Rosae picked up the bar Incus had given to her earlier and wrung it in her hands. She nodded.

"Don't you need one?" she asked as they neared the door. Ducasus shook his head.

"Nope. Captain Nebula thinks I'll be more effective without a weapon."

He glared at Incus, who had begun to roll out his neck.

"It's not my fault you took a tiny knife instead of a sword."

"You know about the knife?"

"Alright, everyone," Gladius declared, "it's time!"

"We should have had a plan," Ducasus muttered.

"Too late now!"

With a mighty kick, Incus thrust the door open, snapping it off of its hinges, and the Nebula, the Flare, and the Ungifted walked into the glistening light of the cavern.

The captives, as instructed, remained in the darkness of what Gladius had referred to as the inventory room. Ducasus, Incus, and Gladius strode forth boldly, encountering a tall, indignant Flare standing with four others behind her. The trio stopped several yards from where they had emerged and some ten yards away from the tall Flare and her cronies.

"And who are you, exactly?" the tall Flare called to them, her arms folded menacingly. Her followers stood behind her, slowly unsheathing their thin, lightning-quick rapiers.

Incus looked down at the Flare and stated, "I am Incus, he is Ducasus, he is Gladius," then, reaching behind his head, he retracted his faithful war hammer from its straps, "and this is Bellum."

Gladius unsheathed his sword, and Ducasus lowered himself into a fighting position, feeling slightly ridiculous.

The tall Flare laughed.

"You wish to fight us? Do you even know who we are?" she asked, glaring at them with fierce eyes. "Not only have you come into a den of the Seven Sisters, but you have challenged their most notorious leader. I am Merope, and I assure you, you will quickly be dead."

"So be it," Ducasus replied.

Confusion played at the edges of Merope's haughty expression.

"Kill them," she said.

At that same instant Incus swung his hammer before him, trusting in the Flares' inertia to keep them from being able to avoid his blow. As he had been instructed to do, Ducasus swept his leg in a wide arc on the ground and

Gladius waited, trusting in his own great speed to match that of his opponents.

Bellum cracked against the speeding bodies of two Flares who had burst forward at full speed, unable to see the attack in time to change course. Ducasus' sweep caused another to trip, and Gladius parried a blow from his attacker, twisted the sword out of his hand and into the air, stabbed him with the one in his hand, and then catching his enemy's departed sword, he buried it instantly in the body of Ducasus' fallen Flare.

Disbelief and rage soured Merope's expression.

"Everyone!" she hissed. "Attack!"

Flares emerged from all sides, coming out of tents, rushing up from the waterside, and approaching from every corner of the cavern with swords drawn. They descended upon the place where the three warriors stood, encircling them.

"Anarchists! Brothers!" Merope called. "These strangers have broken into our home and killed four of your own. Choose for yourselves what you think should be done..."

The newly assembled rabble grumbled with anger as they laid eyes on their companions, lying dead at the feet of the three intruders. They began to edge closer to the heroic trio.

"If you'd like a suggestion, however," Merope called out again, "then I'll give you one. We are a people given to quickness, so disarm them quickly. But," she added, "let us try to kill them slowly. One at a time, so they can watch."

The anarchist Flares cackled on all sides, inching closer all of the time and feigning charges, trying to elicit flinches from the three defenders.

"Now?" Gladius whispered out of the side of his mouth.

"Not yet," Ducasus returned, keeping his eyes on the

enemies approaching them.

Incus saw a glimmer in one Flare's eye as they approached in a mass, and with a fierce cry, he hefted his hammer over his head in a crushing strike. The blow crunched the Flare Incus had seen, who had thought it a good idea to sprint in without warning.

Incus turned his head and spit, and then he raised Bellum in front of him again, holding it ready in his hands.

"Now?" Gladius asked, strained.

"Now," Ducasus agreed.

Gladius whistled as loudly as he could, and the three fighters did what the anarchists least expected: They charged.

Merope was surprised at their audacity once again as their cries of war seemed more powerful than they ought to have. Then, Merope and the mass of Flares froze as they saw all of their merchant brides burst forth from the darkness. They ran to meet the Flares, armed with the very iron bars that had once imprisoned them.

It was enough of a distraction for Incus to get a good upward swing with Bellum, cracking against a sturdy Flare's jaw, sending him back through the air. Gladius clashed swords with one opponent, then flicked his wrist to parry the blade of another. Ducasus threw himself at a bearded Flare before him and trapped his arm in a key lock, shattering his opponent's elbow as he forced it upward. Ducasus felt a sudden pressure in his back and he whipped around to see a Flare retrieving his sword. The anarchist's thin blades were not strong enough to pierce his armor. Ducasus went to take the offending Flare down, but the Flare with the broken arm cracked him in the back of the head with the butt of his sword, sending Ducasus sprawling forward.

He felt pressure on his back and a thin sword appeared under his throat, but then the weight was torn off of him. Ducasus rolled over, head pounding, to see a

besieged Incus, holding his attacker in one hand while five Flares held onto Bellum, fighting with Incus for its possession. Incus smashed the Flare he held into the others who tried to take his weapon from him as two more jumped onto his back, gripping an iron chain. Incus threw a back fist above his shoulder, sending one of them flying off, but the other managed to quickly wrap the metal around Incus' large neck as the unyielding colossus swung Bellum in a wide arc before him, launching an unfortunate Flare through the air, lifeless. The Flares who had been hit with one of their own now rallied and appeared before Bellum once more, grabbing onto the mighty weapon. Others appeared behind the great warrior, gripping the ends of the chain, sliding along the ground as Incus resisted them.

Incus' arm strained from pulling against five Flares holding onto his hammer while he reached at his throat to try and tear away the chain. Another Flare ran toward Incus with his sword drawn, but the crafty Nebula swung his leg up and sent the attacker sprawling to the floor.

A Flare grabbed onto Incus' hammer while another sped at him with his sword extended. Incus still grabbed blindly behind him with his left, trying to relieve the pressure on his constricted windpipe. He twisted sharply sideways, trying to place the mass of Flares between himself and the new attacker. His aim was accomplished as his attacker's blade sank into one of the offending Flares, but in the process his hammer slipped from his grip into the greedy arms of the besieging anarchists.

A Flare strode over to Ducasus, who was disoriented and struggling to rise. The anarchist foe pointed a sword at Ducasus' throat.

"Don't move," he said.

It was like a bad dream. Ducasus watched Incus fall to his knees as he ran out of oxygen, then watched him struggle again, but both of his arms were restrained by

several Flares. Merope strode up to the giant and pointed her sword at his exposed chest.

It was an unnecessary gesture. Incus fell to the ground with a thump, sending reverberations throughout the cavern. Fourteen bodies lay in his wake, slain by the hand of the mightiest of Nebulae.

Ducasus began to panic. He shifted his gaze to see Gladius disarmed and restrained, two swords pointed at his throat and his clothes spattered with blood. The Ungifteds had all been deprived of their makeshift weapons, and now they all stood at the point of merciless swords.

They had killed twenty-one of the enemy, but it wasn't enough.

Ducasus' head continued pounding from the force of the blow he had received. Clouds converged on his consciousness.

Rosae! he thought just before his vision blurred, and everything disappeared.

Chapter Twenty-Four:

Trapped

Malleus opened his eyes. He was back in the palace vault, his hands released from the nation star. The memory of pain remained with him, but the pain itself did not.

"Malleus," Legatus spoke. "What do you want us to do?"

Malleus felt dazed. The experience had filled him with memories, with history, with the stories of a young race. He shook it all from his mind.

They're still Flares, he thought, invectively.

"How long was I holding the nation star?" Malleus asked.

"Just a split second," Scipio replied, still clutching his wounded arm. "Is that a trick question?"

Malleus hid his surprise. He forcefully turned his thoughts to the present, purging the shock.

"Get the bodies of Lupus and Pugnax," he said in a low voice. "We can't have them finding Ungifted bodies here."

Legatus nodded and ran to the small opening in the door to retrieve Lupus. Scipio staggered over to Pugnax to try and pull him from the fallen guard. He hissed in pain when he exerted himself, and Malleus had to go over to help him extricate the body.

"Lupus is alive!" Legatus called from the entrance, "But he won't be for long if we don't get him out of here."

Malleus cocked his head in the direction of Legatus' voice, and as he did so, he noticed something strange. The nation star, which had been burning a pure white, now seemed to storm on the surface, changing colors in a

swirling, tumultuous manner. It pulsed from white to gray to tan with ripples spreading out along its surface.

That's odd... Malleus thought, distracted.

Just then, the stone wall across from the entrance began to move. Malleus watched in disbelief as the face of a ceremoniously dressed Flare appeared in the gap. The guard looked just as shocked as Malleus, seeing the carnage in the room, but Malleus did not hesitate. He bolted forward with his salvaged sword and ran the guard through only to find that two others stood behind the first with wide eyes.

"We came during the changing of the guard?" Malleus cried in disbelief as he threw the skewered body behind him, crossing blades with the next as the door continued to grind open.

Malleus was no master swordsman, but he saw every flick of his opponent's wrist, every twitch of his shoulder with absolute clarity. He knew where the blade was going before his opponent did, and he was fast enough to respond to every action. He sliced the man's fingers after parrying a vain strike, causing the guard to release his weapon.

Malleus whipped his sword across the Flare's throat, felling him where he stood braced against the thick stone door. The third guard turned and began sprinting up the long flight of stairs, winding upwards in a spiral. Malleus chased after him.

After bolting up three flights in only a few seconds, Malleus stopped and felt the weight of his sword while watching the speeding Flare, slightly encumbered by his robes.

"Let's try something..." Malleus growled through gritted teeth as he took aim.

He whipped around and threw his sword like a dart, aiming it perfectly. The blade flew upwards several flights and met the fleeing guard in the chest.

Malleus did not enjoy the bloodshed, but he reveled at his demonstration of skill. He ran to the place where the fallen Flare lay.

His breathing was labored, and the cade stuck upwards out of his chest. His breaths were quick and filled with pain.

The guard screamed as Malleus placed a foot on his torso, yanking the sword out.

"Sorry," Malleus said ironically, "but I can't have you telling this story."

The guard coughed hard, racking his own body.

"You're too late," he wheezed. "The doorkeeper ran ahead of me - ran to get help the moment you stabbed-" the guard was racked by hacking again, interrupting his sentence. Blood trickled from his lips.

"So if he ran out right away, he didn't see me then?" Malleus asked indifferently. The door had only been open a crack.

"He'll see you soon..." the guard whispered.

"So that's a no," Malleus affirmed. "Excellent." He swung his sword down across the helpless guard's neck. The coughing stopped.

A vague sickness began to well up in Malleus, but he swept the feeling away. He re-centered his mind on all the wrongs that had been done to him and his family. When he looked at the bloodied, horrified face of the fallen guard, he tried to only see a predator, cut down before he could take his prey.

"They're all the same," Malleus muttered as he backed away, then sprinted down the stairs.

"What was that?" Scipio exclaimed upon Malleus' reentry.

"More are coming, but they didn't see us. We have to move quickly."

Faint sounds of shouting echoed down to Malleus' adept ears. He walked to the star, laying his hands on its

storm-tossed surface, feeling the warmth and energy flow into his hands.

"You two take the bodies, I'll roll the star."

Legatus protested, "Body, sir - Lupus isn't dead."

"Then have him walk!" Malleus snapped.

"He can't!" Legatus returned loudly, "And the Commander can't carry Pugnax with his arm sliced open. We have to leave now, without the nation star."

"We came for the nation star," Malleus growled, looking at Scipio, whose arm was now bleeding profusely. Malleus' fine-tuned ears heard running footsteps from far above them.

"Sir," Legatus began. "You are the leader of this mission, and I follow your orders, but you're not looking at the facts. We have to leave now!"

Malleus' mind buzzed with paths and possible outcomes. Legatus was right.

"I'll carry Pugnax, you get Lupus," Malleus ordered. Legatus nodded and headed for the entrance. "Scipio, do you still have that scroll?"

"Yeah," Scipio replied.

"Keep it. The Nebs made this mess and they're going to have to pay for it." Turning his head, Malleus laid eyes on the Flare whom he had stabbed in the back. He quickly grabbed his helmet and began to smash it into the dead man's skull. Scipio watched, too shocked to question him. Malleus then took the helmet and threw it against the wall, then he hefted Pugnax on his shoulders and followed Legatus out the door, down the rough-cut stone hall.

"What was that about?" Scipio asked in disbelief as they ran.

"Nebs smash things," Malleus replied coolly. "I'm helping the Flares see what they want to see. Now don't bleed a trail behind us, that's all we need."

The zealots raced through the corridors and up the stairs. They reached the dark hallway where their cart

waited and ran to it, hearing footsteps coming down the halls. The zealots threw the tarp up and dove into the back, just as a group of guards rounded a corner and headed down the hall to the door from which Malleus and the others had emerged only moments prior.

The sound of wooden wheels and horseshoes on the stone reached Malleus' ears as Flagro returned in his cart with the other two zealots.

Malleus heard knocking on the large oak doors, and Augustus, the outer guard, opened them, not yet knowing anything of the attack on the palace, but knowing that he was supposed to let the chandelier men out when they were finished.

Malleus felt his cart begin moving, and then millions of tiny blows began to strike the cart as they trotted out into the pouring rain.



Ducasus opened his eyes. He was still in the expansive cavern, and his head throbbed with the memory of a blow. He had been propped up against a wall of rock, where he now found himself, guarded by an ill-tempered Flare.

"Be rough if you like, but don't injure the girls," Merope said to the anarchists leading the last of the captives to the wall where Ducasus sat. "They're worth more healthy. No one will want to buy damaged goods. Or they'll expect a discount, anyway."

Ungifteds sat on either side of Ducasus, their heads hanging in despair. He turned and caught a glance of Incus and Gladius, each held at the tips of many swords.

Ducasus felt a prick against his throat.

"Let's keep your head forward, shall we?" Ducasus' guard growled, pointing his sword menacingly.

He looked ahead once more, and the pressure on his neck released as the anarchist wandered forward a few

feet. Something amber-colored caught the corner of Ducasus' eye on the other side. He was then aware that someone was holding onto his arm.

"You said to stay close," Rosae whispered.

Ducasus' throat tightened. Not because of the sword looming before him, but because he had failed. She was still a captive, still ready to be sold to a lecherous monster.

"I did," Ducasus agreed, almost choking on his whispered words. "Keep staying close. I'm going to keep you safe. I'll get you out of here tonight." But he no longer believed he would be able to keep that promise.

He turned to look at Rosae with sad eyes. She managed a weak smile, and Ducasus noticed that the two of them were at the end of the line of captives. They were either first or last.

"Fools, murderers, and merchant brides..." Merope walked up and down the line of captives. "I think that includes all of you, with one term or another. You have made me an angry woman." Her eyes glimmered sadistically. Behind her, Flares were bustling about, fussing with a fire they had built and hauling metal, wood, and blocks near the flames.

So we will be revisiting a practice from older times," she continued, "from an age where Flares were freer and could do as they pleased, without an oppressive government breathing down their necks. The Flare and the Nebula," Merope said the names with disdain, "Will be receiving a stricter sentence. Namely, death, and a very creative and slow one, at that. But for the rest of you, we wish to remind you of your place. So!" Merope turned and pulled a long rod of metal from the fire. "We are going to brand you."

Chills ran down Ducasus' spine.

Merope stared into the white-orange end of the rod as she spoke. It had seven stars for its tip, arranged in an arc.

"It will not be pleasant. We may have to hold it in

place for a long time so we get a clean impression. That's what these stocks are for," she said, motioning behind her. "That way each of you will get a clean and clear marking of our insignia to remind you of who your betters are."

Rosae squeezed Ducasus' arm tighter. His mind raced, searching for a solution to what seemed an impossible problem.

"Ignotus, bring me the first slave," Merope said carelessly, twirling the branding iron before returning it to the coals.

Suddenly, two Flares approached Rosae and pulled her up by her shoulders.

"Hey, wait!" Ducasus cried, jumping to his feet only to be faced with the tip of another sword. "Don't you touch her!" he screamed.

"What's this?" Merope asked, laying eyes on Ducasus. "Don't worry, you'll get your turn, you poor Ungifted fool. I don't know how we'll sell you yet, but you'll still get our brand, just like her."

"Don't you touch her!" Ducasus screamed again, his voice hoarse from yelling. "Give me her brand!"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk..." Merope shook her head, speaking as the two Flares hauled Rosae into the heavy wooden stocks. "I think some sort of puppy love has infected you. You think we'll let someone off that easily? I can't let you trade a brand for a brand." Merope lifted the white-hot iron out of the fire once more. Rosae's hands and feet were secured, and she was motionless as Merope advanced toward her. Her eyes were wide and her breathing heavy, but she did not make a sound. She had some steel in her.

"Then brand me ten times," Ducasus called out. "But don't touch her!" His voice cracked with emotion as Merope neared Rosae's chest with the iron.

Suddenly, she stopped.

"How heroic," Merope said sarcastically. "You could die from that, you know. Between the shock and the

burns, you might not live."

"I don't care," Ducasus hissed. "Just don't do it to her."

Merope laughed.

"Fine. Ten brands for the tragic hero."

She returned the branding iron to the fire, and another Flare unfastened Rosae's restraints as she protested.

"No!" she shouted. "I don't agree! I don't agree!"

Two Flares carried her back to her spot on the wall where she tried to reach for Ducasus as others came and escorted him forward.

"Ducasus, you don't have to do this! I love you- Wait!" Rosae cried, stretching out her hand towards Ducasus as they passed, but missing him.

Ducasus approached the stocks silently and laid himself down. Gravis secured him in the restraints after removing the leather cuirass that had saved Ducasus' life, as well as the white linen that had covered his upper body. He confiscated Ducasus' knife and metal bracers also, which hadn't helped him in the skirmish. His things were tossed in a pile away from the fire.

Once more Merope removed the branding iron from the flames.

"Now then," she said, cruel lines playing at the corners of her mouth. "Who wants to hear the boy scream?"

The fire snapped and popped next to him, and Ducasus' heart raced.

I won't make a sound, Ducasus resolved in his mind. No matter the pain, I will not cry out.

Merope looked over her shoulder a moment, then turned back to Ducasus.

"Do you hear that?" she asked. "It's the sound of no one coming to save you." She plunged the white-hot metal into Ducasus' side.

Ducasus caught his breath before it escaped in a

scream of horror. He had never felt such excruciating, savage pain. Merope pushed the brand until it melted into his flesh, and then, at length, finally pulled it away. Ducasus gasped raggedly, and tears escaped from his eyes.

Merope was irritated. She set the brand back in the fire, took a fresh one, and plunged it into the exact same spot on Ducasus' side. The pain was unreal. He opened his mouth and arched his back in desperation, praying only that the pain would end. Still, he did not scream.

Merope pulled the brand away from Ducasus' bubbling, charred skin and placed it in the fire again.

"That's one!" she shouted to the horrified captives. The other anarchists chuckled wickedly.

Merope retrieved another branding iron and walked to the other side of Ducasus, forcing it against his side. The burning metal hissed against his skin, and then it was in deep. Ducasus felt like vomiting. His body screamed in pain, but his lips did not. Stabs of pain interrupted his attempts to put his mind elsewhere, and more tears escaped down his pained face.

Merope removed the brand and set it in the fire. She walked to Ducasus' side, trailing a seductive finger over his chest.

"It's very cute what you're doing, puppy love - not screaming just to spite me." She leaned in, then, whispering in his ear. "I'm still going to brand her. I just wanted to give everyone some hope before I take it away."

Ducasus' eyes went wild with rage.

"Don't you dare touch her!" he hissed through the intense pain that dug into his sides with iron claws.

A sickening smell reached Ducasus' nostrils, and he realized it was his own flesh. The intense urge to vomit returned.

Merope ignored Ducasus' demand and retrieved the brand again.

"I think it's quite noble," Merope shouted to the terrified onlookers, "how this worthless Ungifted is willing to face the pain for another. Speaking of faces..."

Ducasus tried to turn his head away, but Merope motioned for a nearby Flare to hold him still. He broke his vow of silence as Merope eased the branding iron onto his forehead. Ducasus shrieked in pain. The burning metal felt like it was boring into his brain, such was the heat and the pressure.

Even after the brand was removed, he continued howling in agony. The hands that had held him released, and he punctuated the silence with shouts of torment.

"They've come in the new entrance!" Ducasus heard a voice near him cry. All of a sudden there was a great din. Ducasus was listless from the pain and could hardly see. He opened his eyes to see the blurred forms of a hundred shining soldiers in golden armor streaming in from the mouth of the underground river. Water sprayed out from their sides as they charged the banks, and the anarchists could only flee or try in vain to resist the superior force of Flares.

Ducasus rolled his head to the other side to see Incus standing before him, guarding his helpless companion during the chaos that ensued.

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"Capitis!" Gladius shouted to a regal Flare with platinum hair, trying to get to the man through the crowds in the cavern. The anarchists had been subdued except for only a few who had escaped out of the old entrance, whose existence the queen's force had not been aware of. Flarorian soldiers in brilliant, golden armor were scattered throughout the cavern, taking charge of the situation. "Capitis!" Gladius called again. The older Flare turned around this time, hearing his name.

"Gladius? What are you doing here?"

"The queen sent me with the Nebula and the Ungifted who saved her," Gladius replied. "Do you have a healer in your force? The Ungifted called Ducasus is badly burned."

Capitis shook his head.

"No, we were assembled only to invade and apprehend. He'll have to endure it until we reach the palace."

Gladius bowed slightly.

"Thank you."

Capitis bowed shallowly in return.

"Gladius," he began. "What happened here?"

"A fool's rescue, sir, and exemplary courage."

Capitis raised an eyebrow, and Gladius took his leave. He strolled deeper into the glistening cavern, searching for his brave companion who had stood before a superior force without a gift to aid him and without fear.



Queen Regina rubbed her temples as she surveyed the carnage of the vault. Now was not the time for this.

She looked at the bodies of the fallen guards who had died to protect the authority and sovereignty of their country. Flaroria needed more like them. Now it had seven less, including Marcus, who had been brutally slain at the vault's entrance. Clypeum and a few other guards stood by as the queen slowly navigated the room, silently taking it in.

How could this happen?

Something was wrong with the nation star. It looked tumultuous, as if it was at war with itself. Regina had never heard of such a thing, and it worried her.

"You've touched nothing?" she asked.

"Only the necks of the fallen to check for signs of life," a sinewy Flare replied.

The queen continued pondering gravely. Then she lifted her eyebrows and asked in almost a whisper, "Who is responsible for this?"

"We leave that for you to decide, Your Majesty, but we did find this-" the sinewy Flare answered, pointing to a small, black object on the floor near the nation star's stand.

Regina strode to the object indicated and bent over to pick it up. Her face clouded as she turned the black object in her fingers.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked the Flare without bothering to look at him. He shook his head timidly.

"No, My Queen."

He's young, she thought. Too young to have fought.

"It's an ursanguis," she said, her words like a melted spring. "It is made from a bear's claw, which is hollowed out and filled with chalk. Nebulae carry them when they go into battle to dust their hands with. It helps one grip things," she said coldly. "Clypeum."

Clypeum stepped forward.

"Ask the ambassadors from Nebularis to meet me in the throne room," she ordered.

Clypeum stared at the damaged nation star.

"That is impossible, Your Majesty."

The queen took a deep breath, barely containing her frustration.

"And why is that?"

"They left this morning, after your meeting. It was their scheduled departure."

"Of course it was," the queen said exhausted, rubbing her temples.

"My Queen," another guard spoke up on the other side of the room.

"What is it?"

The Flare crouched next to one of the robed guards who lay dead on the floor.

"This one's had his head smashed. Even his helmet is bashed in."

The queen sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"They are not a people gifted for subtlety, are they? Even when they aim for it." The queen stepped forward and stared deeply into the nation star, which was changing color and swirling on the surface. "One of the ambassadors muttered under his breath as they left my offices, Clypeum."

"Did he, My Queen?"

"Yes, he did," she responded, continuing her thought. "We had been discussing border disputes in our southern province – the Nebulae call it Certamen, as we do. They claim parts of it as theirs, despite the weight of evidence deeding it to us."

"Truly an irrational contention," Clypeum said softly.

"Indeed," the queen replied. "The discussion had devolved into a rather unruly display of intimidation. At the end of it all, he muttered that there would be consequences for ignoring their claims. And so there are." The queen narrowed her eyes. "Assemble my advisors," she said to the sinewy Flare. "There is only one response to such an attempt."

~°~

The rain had ceased, and the stars shone clearly between scattered clouds in the night sky. The triumphant party of soldiers and their horse-drawn cart sloshed through the ground water as they made their way back to the palace. Most of the queen's Flares were still at work transporting the anarchists to prison or searching through their cavern for information, but a small contingent of Flares was sent with Ducasus, Rosae, Incus, and Gladius to escort them back to the palace. The former captives had

remained in the cavern and were being taken care of, except for the old Hawkeye, who decided it best to continue following after Ducasus and his companions.

Ducasus faded in and out of troubled consciousness as they rolled along. The way was not smooth, and every jolt ignited his wounds.

Incus sat backwards, looking over the rear of the cart. Gladius was next to the driver, the Hawkeye sat in the back holding his knees to his chest, and Rosae sat beside Ducasus where he lay, stroking his hair as he passed in and out of sleep.

A thought returned to Rosae as they moved through the cold night. It was a thought that had occurred to her before, but she had pushed it to the side during all of the commotion. She rubbed a lock of Ducasus' sand-colored hair between her fingers thoughtfully, then turned and smiled sweetly at the old Hawkeye.

"I don't believe you ever told us your name," she said brightly.

The Hawkeye perked up at this and stretched his legs out, blushing.

"My name is Liberius," the little, old Hawkeye said, smiling. "But you can call me Li if you like."

"Oh, I like 'Liberius.' It sounds very dignified."

The old Hawkeye blushed again.

"How did you end up in that cage, Liberius? I thought they only took Ungifteds as merchant brides. And you're not a bride, anyway."

"Oh, they were probably going to sell me to a wealthy family as a tutor. Hiring a Hawkeye to teach isn't unheard of, but they're usually paid, of course. Or at least allowed to leave," he added.

Rosae nodded sympathetically.

"I'm sorry they captured you."

Liberius smiled.

"I'm free now, aren't I?" His childlike eyes sparkled.

"I suppose you are. We all are," she said. "I wanted to ask you, Liberius – Back in the cavern you said something to Ducasus. You told him what happened to him didn't sound fair. You said he should go to the Source?"

Liberius nodded soberly.

"And you know where it is?"

He nodded again.

"Why would he want to go there?" she asked.

"Well, he could get his gift back. Someone had to put those stars up in the sky – that's the Father of Lights. The Source."

Rosae she looked down at Ducasus, whose head lay cradled in her lap.

"Is this true?" she asked Incus, looking up.

The stoic giant nodded hesitantly.

"The Father of Lights may do whatever He wishes."

"It's a myth," Gladius said over his shoulder. "Don't waste your time."

Rosae was about to respond to him when a palace guard called out. They had reached the gate.

"Halt! None are permitted to enter this night." Ducasus woke at the sound of the familiar voice. It was Vir.

One of the Flares who had been walking alongside the cart replied.

"We've just returned victorious from the queen's mission. Let us pass."

"None are allowed in or out tonight. There has been an attack."

"What kind of attack?" Gladius asked, rising from his seat.

"The Nebulae have tried to steal our nation star," Vir said, wavering. "They failed, but seven Flares lay dead, and the rain has washed away all evidence of their escape."

"What?" Incus said, turning forwards.

"I'm afraid it is so," Vir said solemnly. "You should go to the barracks north of the city. You may wait this out there."

The party muttered in disbelief as the driver pulled on the reins to turn the horses around, heading north. Ducasus, who was still in a daze, fell asleep once more, but the others remained awake and in silence, pondering the strange and terrible news.

Chapter Twenty-Five:

Onward

Ducasus eased into consciousness. Light played at the edges of his eyelids, which he held tightly closed. Rough sheets enveloped his skin, but to him they felt like heaven. As his senses began to wake him from his slumber, he gingerly opened his eyes, and the world came into focus.

An angel seemed to hover over him. An angel with wavy, amber hair and fair, smooth skin. Shining hazel eyes looked down a perfect nose and sweet lips, staring into Ducasus' soul. It was the best awakening he could imagine, even with the pain in his sides and on his forehead.

She was here, and she was safe.

"Rosae..." he whispered as the shining rays of the sun gilded her image in gold, filtering in through a thin linen curtain.

She leaned in and kissed his cheek. She still wore the same dress, but it looked as though it had been cleaned, and her face was fresh and renewed.

"You kept your promise," she said.

Ducasus smiled.

"It was a lucky break," he said. "I'd ditch this 'Ducasus' if I were you. He sounds like a real loser."

Rosae giggled, then folded her arms.

"And forward, too. You know that he told me that he loved me?"

"Not loved. Loves."

The silliness vanished, and Rosae sat up straighter. She looked at Ducasus a moment, and then she smiled, taking up his hand.

"I don't want you to feel obligated-" Ducasus began, but Rosae cut him off.

"I loved you before you came for me, Ducasus. I just didn't know how to handle it."

Ducasus was beaming. He tried to sit up, then instantly regretted it and sank back down, though with a grin still on his lips.

"So maybe this Ducasus guy isn't such a loser after all."

"No, he is... but he's my loser," she said, nuzzling her head in Ducasus' shoulder.

There was a quiet knocking on the door, and Rosae answered without moving from her spot.

"He's awake," she said, and the door opened to reveal the amusing sight of the gigantic Incus, who had to stoop over to fit through the door, and the diminutive Liberius next to him.

"How do you feel?" Liberius asked, joining Rosae at the side of the bed.

"Can't complain."

"Were you awake when we were at the palace last night?" Rosae asked gently.

"Yes," Ducasus replied slowly. "Something about an attack. From... the Nebulae?"

"It's a lie," Incus said firmly.

"How do you know?" Rosae asked, sitting up.

"We Nebulae place no honor in sneaking about like cowards in the dark. We were not built to hide, but to fight."

An odd thought struck Rosae, and she cocked her head, considering it slowly.

"Ducasus, I didn't tell you before," she said quietly. "I had a strange conversation with your brother while I was in that cell. He told me he was going to assassinate the queen and destroy the Flares. I didn't know what he was talking about."

Ducasus shook his head.

"Malleus? No. He was just talking crazy. If the palace says it was the Nebs, I'm sure they have a good reason for thinking so."

"He seemed serious," Rosae said. "It was disturbing, and now I think he meant it."

"Even if he did," Ducasus replied, "how could he pull something like that off? He's just like us, never been to Velocitum before recently. He's barely more than a kid for crying out loud."

"Something's happened to him," Rosae said softly, and Ducasus knew she was right.

The room was quiet for several moments as they all pondered.

"Is Gladius here?" Ducasus finally asked, breaking the silence.

"He left a few hours ago to check on things at the palace. He should be back soon," Rosae said.

Ducasus nodded. He was still thinking about what Rosae had said. It was ridiculous, of course.

Malleus... if he hadn't stolen my star...

"Wait," Ducasus said, sitting up, then clenching his teeth as the movement aggravated his wounds. He lay back down, irked that he had forgotten his limitations a second time. He took a deep breath and looked at Liberius. "Last night, did you say something about me getting my gift back?"

The old man looked to Rosae, who tacitly encouraged him to speak.

"Well, it's certainly possible. Anything is, at the Source."

"Where is the Source?" Ducasus asked intently.

Liberius tossed his head to the side before answering.

"Well... it's many places, but it can always be found in the desert," he replied.

"And you know the way?" Ducasus asked.

"The way to it is very clear in the desert. Even my old eyes can see the signs."

Ducasus turned to the muscular giant, who was still wearing his palace clothes from the queen, with the addition of his ever-present vest and Bellum slung across his back.

"Could be," he said. "I have never been to the Source, nor met any who have, but I've heard stories."

Rosae leaned in and kissed Ducasus' cheek.

"Looks like you get a second chance," she said.

Just then, everyone's attention shifted to the doorway, where Gladius stood erect, with something on his back.

"May I come in?" he asked.

Rosae crossed her arms.

"They couldn't have sent someone else?"

Ducasus raised an eyebrow at her.

"I don't like him very much, that's all."

"Come in, Gladius," Ducasus said, still looking quizzically at Rosae.

"Thank you," the Flare said as he entered. He took a burden from his back and handed it to Incus. It was his pack. Incus held it aloft and looked at Gladius in confusion.

"Is the rumor true?" Rosae asked.

"I'm afraid so," Gladius replied solemnly, with his eyes shut. "They found evidence."

Incus only shook his head in response.

"The queen," Gladius began speaking again, "sends a message." Everyone listened as Gladius pulled a roll of parchment from his sash and cleared his throat before he began to read:

Lord Incus and Master Ducasus-

I repeat my thanks to you once more for aiding me in my moment of need. I hold you both as brave and in the highest of esteem. However, we have just entered into a time of war, and I'm afraid all of the traditions, rules, and protocols must change during such a time.

Though I am grateful to you both, the fact remains that last night the vault that contains our nation star was broken into, and an attempt to steal it was made. Seven good and honorable Flares are now dead, evidently at the hands of the Nebulae. It appears the larger employer that our anarchist friend spoke of was a very literal depiction.

The sad fact remains that the two of you are the only non-Flares who have been shown the nation star's vault in over a decade, and on the night when the majority of my private force was engaged on a raid (information that you are known to have been privy to), a very sophisticated attempt to steal it was carried out. The situation is not helped by the fact that you, Ducasus, are from the Southern Province. Nor does it help that you, Incus, are a Nebula of the birth that you are – whether you have chosen to ostensibly abandon it or not.

The demands of leading this nation in time of war require me to inform you that you are no longer welcome here, or in all of Flaroria. You must leave immediately or face such consequences as would sadden my heart to see carried out against you. Such is the way things must be.

I have provided you with a small sum of money that should be sufficient to escort you away from this place. If you are stopped or detained by a member of Flaroria's military for being present in this country, Incus, you need only show this letter as proof of your amnesty, provided that you are making a good-faith attempt to leave the borders of this kingdom.

I write this letter with regret, yet inexorably. I wish you good fortune wherever the road may take you.

-Regina

Gladius finished reading and looked up from the parchment. The room was in shock.

"So... we have to leave?" Ducasus asked.

Incus sighed and Gladius spoke softly.

"I'm afraid so. May I just say that I hold both of you as incapable of treachery - and as warriors of the highest caliber."

Incus bowed to Gladius, slightly, and Gladius bowed low in return, first towards Incus and then towards Ducasus.

"I must return to the palace," Gladius said. "I wish you good fortune." He turned to leave, then stopped, remembering something. He removed a vial from his pocket and tossed it to Ducasus. "Something for the burns." He then turned to the giant. "And Incus?"

Incus looked down at the faithful Flare.

"Teach the Ungifted to use a sword."

Incus grinned.

And then, Gladius was gone.

Rosae, Incus, and Ducasus were silent. Liberius stood quietly and introspectively, not making a sound.

So much had taken place in so short a time, and now they were forced to move along again, not just to another city, but out of the country where they had been born: A country of mirror trees, of sweeping plains and rivers, of forests growing in the low foothills of the South. They had been displaced from their homes, separated from their families, they had traveled, fought, been captured, and escaped again.

"Well," Ducasus said at length, "to the desert then."

End of Book One

What follows is a special
sneak peek of book 2 in the
Starfall Trilogy:

Star-Crossed

Chapter One:

Exile

There was a chill in the air as Ducasus crossed the threshold of the barracks into the pale light of dawn. He winced from the pain of his wounds and proceeded down the steps that led away from the imposing tower. Incus' heavy footfalls were close behind, and Liberius, or Li, as Ducasus had begun to call the old Hawkeye, brought up the rear. Rosae walked alongside Ducasus, holding onto his arm and smelling of roses. She clutched him a little tighter as a cold gust of wind came up from the west.

They were being sent into exile, but Ducasus' spirits were high. He had accomplished what he had come for, and he had managed to live, thanks to the Imperial Guard. If not for the unexpected intervention of the Queen's soldiers, Ducasus could have died in the stocks where the Seven Sisters had tortured him. The brands in his sides were messy, blistered, and unclear, but the mark he bore on his forehead was the picture of clarity. Seven stars arranged in an arch marked his brow, with the center star larger than the others. It was the mark of an outcast, a symbol of an anarchist group that he opposed, and it assured that he would be misunderstood everywhere he turned. He planned to grow his hair to cover it as much as possible.

He was glad to be leaving Velocitum. He and Rosae had hoped to settle here, but that was before she was kidnapped. Now the proud, ancient city was nothing more than a museum of bad memories. Freedom lay beyond, and the road beckoned. It sang songs of freedom, and Ducasus was looking forward to singing along.

What stirred him more than any other benefit of the road was a hope – A hope to reclaim his star, to receive the gift that was rightfully his. Li had told them of the Source and that it could be found in the great Desert of Nihl. It was there that Ducasus and his company would steer their course, to meet the maker of the stars, or at least the one who gives them their power.

Ducasus felt Rosae press her head against his shoulder and stroke his bicep with her thumb. She looked unsettled but calm.

She's a strong woman, Ducasus thought. Not many could go through what she's had to and bear it so well.

She loved him. Ducasus smiled at the thought. What had seemed so certain since childhood, and then quite impossible after all they had lost, had come to pass. Adversity brought them together, and the idea of Rosae consumed Ducasus. He would never be apart from her again.

How much more will she think of me when I'm a Neb? Ducasus mused, returning his thoughts to the Source.

"I don't see why they won't let us through the North Gate," Rosae muttered as the company turned away from the city walls and headed south.

"I think only the army uses it," Ducasus ventured. "I hear it leads into the canyons."

"We head for Lake Torrens," Incus said mechanically, "The South Gate is preferable."

Rosae breathed out slowly.

"They still could have offered."

Li raised his eyebrows. His wide, Lucian eyes sparkled in the early light of day.

The four travelers marched through the proud city, through the oldest quarter of Velocitum, with its sand-colored buildings and its narrow, grid-like streets. They walked beneath the grand aqueducts and passed by Queen Regina's palace from afar. Despite its beauty, none

wanted to look that way; it was from the palace that they had received their banishment, implicated in a rash attempt at stealing the nation star of Flaroria. Though Incus insisted that it could not be so, it was widely accepted that warriors from Nebularis had carried out the attempt in response to recent border disputes with Flaroria. One of the Antiquae, the ceremonial guards of Flaroria's nation star, had been found bearing telltale signs of Neb warfare. An ursanguis had been found at the scene as well, giving the Flares all of the evidence they had needed. War had been formally declared while Ducasus had slept unaware in the military barracks, the sixth tower of Velocitum. The declaration of war would arrive in Nebularis in less than a week, thanks to the awesome speed of the Flares. In the meantime, Velocitum prepared for war, as did the rest of the Kingdom of the Sun.

It took two hours of walking before the four companions finally arrived at the central plaza near the South Gate. One of the aqueducts ended here, cascading into a colorful pool lined with tiles, making the air misty and damp. Something about the pool caught Rosae's attention, and she released Ducasus' arm.

"Rosae?" Ducasus asked, turning around to see her heading backwards. They were nearly out of the city.

Rosae ignored Ducasus and walked between Incus and Liberius back to the pool. She stood before it and cocked her head to the side in contemplation. It was a rather beautiful design.

Ducasus looked up at Incus, but the giant was expressionless. Li had turned around to watch the capricious girl as well, but none of them were sure what she was doing.

Ducasus glanced back to the gate.

We really should be leaving, he thought.

"Rosae!" he called over the din of the crowd and the splashing of the water.

Rosae flipped her hair over her shoulder and came skipping back towards him.

"I just wanted a look," she called nonchalantly.

Ducasus almost rolled his eyes, but he grinned instead.

Silly girl.

Rosae had almost caught up with the party when they turned towards the gate once more and closed the distance. It was already crowded this morning. They would have to stick to the side of the road to avoid getting caught in the flow.

Veering towards the east side of the gate, Ducasus squeezed by a line of guards, followed by Incus, who drew a series of confused and dirty stares. Li followed behind Incus, and Rosae behind Li.

"What are you doing?"

Ducasus whirled around. It was so loud at the gate that it was hard to tell, but he thought that he had heard Rosae calling out. His eyes zeroed in on two guards taking Rosae by the arms and dragging her back into the city.

Adrenaline surged through Ducasus' veins.

"Hey!" he cried, shoving through the crowd to get back inside the gate. He ignored the burns in his sides as they howled in pain. "Let go of her!" he screamed.

This is a mistake, he thought as he pushed his way forward. *The Queen helped us save her; they wouldn't take her away.* His muscles tightened and he gritted his teeth as he emerged into the open, Incus right beside him and Liberius peeking out timidly from behind Incus.

"What in Pontus do you think you're doing?" Ducasus demanded of the guards.

Rosae's captors stopped and turned around, keeping their grip on her. She struggled against their hold to no avail as a young Flare with a boyish sneer stepped forward from the wall to answer.

"And who in Pontus do you think you are?" the cocky

Flare returned. "Go about your business, guards."

"We are the rescuers who saved the Queen from assassination!" Ducasus snarled at the sneering Flare, whose sneer quickly vanished. He looked to be in thought a moment, staring up at the great, sand-colored arch.

Ducasus, impatient with the Flare's reticence, moved to continue forward, but the guard put out his hands and stopped him.

"Julius, Graccus, stop," the guard called out. "Bring her back here, but keep hold of her."

Rosae's escorts turned and walked her back to the entrance of the city once more, where Ducasus, Incus, and Li stood. Ducasus was livid.

"Perhaps there has been a misunderstanding, so let's all calm down. My name is Spretio, and I run this watch at the gate. We were told an Ungifted and a Nebula rescued our great queen... but what do you have to do with this girl?"

"She is one of us," Incus rumbled from above everyone's heads.

"More than that!" Ducasus exclaimed. "And you can't have her!"

"There's nothing to be upset about," Spretio began, putting his hands up before him. "We informed the lady that the queen requested her presence, but she refused to turn from her course, so we were escorting her to the palace. If you are who you claim, I'm sure it would be no problem for you to accompany her."

Ducasus and Incus exchanged looks.

"What if she doesn't want to go?" Ducasus replied sternly.

"There is no need for anger. As I said, you may accompany--"

"Sir?"

A bearded Flare pulled a piece of paper from the wall and handed it to the boyish guard, whose expression

quickly shifted.

"Ah. Well, this changes things."

Ducasus waited with a furrowed brow, impatient with the pause. When Spretio continued to stare at the parchment, Ducasus could not refrain from speaking.

"What?" he asked.

Spretio hesitated, then handed Ducasus the parchment. He took it quickly, then turned it over, having grabbed it upside down.

The paper displayed pictures of Ducasus and Incus, drawn on the center of the sheet. A paragraph of writing ran beneath the sketches and a seal stood at the bottom.

"It appears you have some special circumstances. You will not be accompanying the girl to the palace. Now move along."

Ducasus' stomach tightened and his forehead burned.

"You will not take her," he whispered.

"What's that?" Spretio leaned in with his hand cupped to his ear. "I think we will. Queen's orders." He sneered once again, now free of the burden of needing to be civil.

"I don't want to go!" Rosae struggled against her captors.

"You will not take her," Ducasus said again, growling the words a little louder this time.

"Wait!" Rosae exclaimed. "Ducasus, wait for me outside the gate, I'll come and find you when they release me."

"There will be none of that," Spretio interjected, snatching the parchment from Ducasus' hands. He waved it in front of him. "You are under imperial orders to keep moving towards the border. If we find you camped near the city, it'll be your head."

"Why are you taking me away from him?" Rosae shrieked over the noise of the crowd. She had lost her usual calm demeanor.

She needs me, Ducasus thought, glowering at the

guards.

"It's simple," Spretio replied, again waving the parchment, this time in Rosae's face. "We have two imperial orders, which are not common, by the way. You are wanted for questioning concerning your time in captivity."

"She's in captivity now." Li's meek voice interrupted the guard's.

The guard glared at the small Hawkeye and continued.

"And they have an order to head straight for the border. We plan on enforcing both orders."

Ducasus' gaze lowered and his clenched fists began to tremble.

"Can't you just wait a little bit? Question me here!" Rosae shouted, looking as though she was at the point of tears.

"I'll go with her," Li walked out from behind Incus' massive legs.

"No and no. Julius, Graccus, take her to the palace."

"You will not take her!" Ducasus yelled. Rosae kicked at her captors' legs as they began to drag her. Incus reached a hand behind his head and slowly withdrew Bellum, his massive war hammer, from its straps. Ducasus, having no other weapon to brandish, pulled his knife from his belt and framed it along his arm. He rolled his head back and forth, a wild look in his eyes.

Li, looking over at his friends, turned back towards the guards and raised his trembling, ancient fists.

The boyish guard sighed long.

"Are you sure? After all, there are many of us and, well, you."

Incus twirled Bellum inside his grip, waiting. Whispers began to pass up and down the line of guards, who had all unsheathed their swords. The boyish guard continued. "If we do this, you will die, and there will be a

mess, and some good Flares may be injured. Surely that is not what you want."

The whispering among the guards grew louder until finally one of them, an older Flare with a salt and pepper goatee, cried out.

"He's Fellhammer! That's Incus Fellhammer!"

Murmuring rose up among the guards and they began to shift back and forth.

"Quiet," Spretio said softly, annoyed. "Quiet. Quiet. Quiet!" he finally screamed. He unsheathed his sword. "I'm sure even 'Incus Fellhammer' cannot defeat ten trained Flares of Velocitum."

"That's not what the stories say!" another guard called out.

"I was there... He most certainly can." the salt and pepper guard added.

Spretio growled.

"Even if that were the case, there would be many more of us here in an instant. Surely you see how unwise this is."

Rosae was crying now, digging her heels into the ground and struggling against her guards. She had been pulled only ten feet since they had been told to once again take her away.

"I'd rather die than see you take her," Ducasus growled as he lowered himself and prepared to charge. Incus tensed his grip on his hammer, and Li swallowed nervously as his perceptive eyes shot back and forth.

"No!" Rosae shrieked, loud enough to be heard. Ducasus turned his gaze towards her as she dug her heels into the ground again. "No! Ducasus, don't die here. I want you to live! Go and find the Source!" Tears streamed down her reddened face. Ducasus thought it a crime that Rosae's pale, beautiful complexion should ever be marred.

"How would I find you?" Ducasus answered after taking a breath. He wavered. "How?"

"I'll send word to you in Acies!" She elbowed one of her guards in the stomach and tried to surge back to Ducasus, but the other Flare held on tightly. "I love you, Ducasus!" She spoke through tears, barely audible this time over the sounds of the oblivious crowd.

Tears welled in the corners of Ducasus' eyes.

"I love you, Rosae! I'll find you!"

"Find Gladius!" Incus' deep, resonant voice bellowed, cutting through the din of the masses of people. "He'll look after you!"

Rosae fell to her knees, racked with sobs, but her guards only picked her up and continued away. She was mouthing something but Ducasus couldn't make it out before she disappeared into the city.

Incus frowned, then raised his war hammer above his head and slid it back into its straps. Li slowly lowered his shaking fists, his face white with fear. Ducasus didn't move. He felt frozen in time.

"Now that's the right choice," Spretio said. "Now keep moving." He turned to another guard and whispered something inaudible.

Ducasus felt a giant hand rest on his shoulders and begin to ease him away.

"Come on," Incus said. "We have to go."



The flickering of torches bathed the stone room in a dull, ever-shifting glow. The room was tidy for the most part: the bed was made, the body-length mirror was shined, but there were a few exceptions. Contradictions, really. A wooden table stood in the center of the room, piled with mounds of books, scrolls, and charts. Quills and inkwells were aligned neatly at the top of the working space of the table. In the center there lay a single map. It was full of neatly written notes and markings such as

arrows, x's, and circles. Seated before this map and writing furiously in his leather-bound journal was Malleus, the twice-gifted catalyst of freedom.

His two-toned eyes gleamed in the torchlight as he glanced back and forth from his map to his journal, occasionally picking up a nearby book and searching through it diligently.

War was beginning, and there were many plans to be made.

Malleus was still working furiously when he spoke.

"What news, Legatus?"

There was some shuffling near the door as Legatus picked up his animal skin boots and entered Malleus' chamber.

"How did you know it was me?" Legatus asked.

Malleus stopped writing and set his quill down, closing his journal.

"I'm an instrument of destiny, Legatus, and I've been granted certain powers," he said, turning to face the zealot.

Legatus nodded.

"Scipio has improved, though it will be some time before he's holding a sword again."

"And he'll be ready for this evening?" Malleus inquired.

"Yes."

"Good," Malleus returned without emotion. "And Lupus?"

"We thought we were going to lose him yesterday, but he's rallied. It is uncertain, but for now he's pulling through."

Malleus nodded slowly.

"It's a shame our enemies have slain Pugnax. He was very useful to us... a martyr for the cause."

"He was a good man," Legatus agreed quietly, maintaining his gaze where it rested on the far wall of the

little room.

"Indeed," Malleus agreed. "The Flares will pay for what they've done."

Legatus tensed his brow and nodded.

Malleus allowed an appropriate amount of silence to reign before resuming the conversation. There was much to be discussed, but Malleus had to maintain Legatus' loyalty. Besides, Malleus really was grieved at the death of a fellow zealot.

All the Flares do is kill... he thought.

Finally, returning to himself, Malleus cleared his throat and spoke.

"Everything is in order for tonight?"

"Yes. We only convene so completely every five years. They'll all be there."

"How many?" Malleus asked.

Legatus shrugged, his oversized furs exaggerating the motion. He made a habit of wearing things intended for Nebulae, evidence of his supposed dominance over them.

"A few hundred," he replied.

"Excellent," Malleus began before rising from his chair to pace the room. He caught sight of his aquiline nose and his graceful, strong features in the mirror, but he turned away after hesitating a moment. There were important matters to discuss. "Legatus, I've told you of my desire for a team of elites... a special guard of sorts." He spoke in his lowest voice. The mannerisms of his adopted persona felt almost natural to him. It was very easy to slip the mask on now.

"Yes, sir," Legatus agreed.

"You are, of course, the first and greatest within this group, but the time is quickly approaching when I shall need others." Malleus turned his back to Legatus and continued speaking. His long, chestnut colored hair fell to the middle of his back now, naturally arranged in layers. "I look at a man and I see his soul, but you have seen these

men fight."

Legatus nodded.

"Not much action till you came along, but yes."

"Assemble the best. I want five others under your supervision, and together the six of you will be my elite."

Legatus bowed slightly.

"Thank you, sir."

Malleus turned around to face the warrior and began walking towards him.

"The men you choose must be the best of their kind: fighters, intelligent, loyal-" Malleus stopped midsentence and looked past Legatus to the door where Mickey was standing. He knocked on the doorframe. "Not now, Mickey, we're discussing matters of importance."

"But I needed to-"

"Get out of here," Malleus said dismissively, as though he were swatting at a fly. Mickey's demeanor fell and his shoulders sank as he looked up at Malleus before walking away.

That's odd, Malleus thought. *His eyes weren't red. The drunk is always a little bit red around the eyes.* Malleus had the gift of the Hawkeyes, so he knew that he could not have been mistaken. He shook it from his mind and returned to the matter at hand.

~°~

Ducasus sulked all along the main road that led away from Velocitum. The crowds were thinner now, but dust still hung heavily in the air.

It's like breathing sand, Ducasus complained silently.

None of the wayward trio knew what to think. It was a time of war and they were under imperial orders to leave the country. Going back for Rosae would only mean imprisonment or death.

She told us she'd send word to Acies, Ducasus thought for

the hundredth time that day, reassuring himself. *So we'll go to Acies and wait.*

He could not believe that the queen would do this to him after all he'd done for her. He railed against her in his mind.

"So... where are we heading?" Li asked from behind, pulling Ducasus from his bitter thoughts.

"If we walk into the night, we will make it to Oppida Laci in time to get some rest. Then we can take the first ferry across the lake and continue from there," Incus replied.

"Oh," the old Hawkeye responded, huffing slightly from the effort of keeping their pace. "What's the rush?" he finally asked.

Ducasus stopped and looked back at Li, who had fallen behind several paces. He was ready to be angry at the old Lucian, but seeing the exertion apparent in his face softened Ducasus. The Hawkeye was slowing them down, but he was trying his best.

"Incus," Ducasus called to the Neb. "Let's rest a minute. My burns hurt from walking."

In truth, they did hurt, but Ducasus had called for the rest mostly for Li's sake. When the elderly Hawkeye caught up to where Ducasus and Incus stood, he wheezed as he bent over and rested his hands on his knees.

"Come on," Ducasus said, leading Li. "We can sit on that log over there."

Once seated, Ducasus reached into his small pack and removed the vial of burn salve that Gladius had given him.

"Rosae told us she'd send us a message in Acies, Li. We want to be there when it comes. If she sends a Flare--"

"Or an avis," Incus interjected.

Ducasus looked to Incus with uncertainty.

"Messenger bird?"

Incus nodded in response.

"Well anyway, if she sends a Flare or an avis, it'll travel much faster than we can. We want to be there when it arrives."

Ducasus uncorked the small vial he held and a pungent, floral scent quickly filled the air.

"What is that?" he asked.

"Lavender oil," Li answered him before Incus had a chance. "I've been smelling it since the Flare gave it to you."

Ducasus raised an eyebrow.

"You could smell it while it was corked and wrapped up inside my pack?"

Li beamed childishly.

"He is a Hawkeye," Incus said.

"Still, that's incredible!" Ducasus replied as he began to dab the lavender oil onto the rag he had wrapped it in. "Why don't your gifts decrease with age?" he asked Li.

"They do, just like all gifts do... but experience makes up the difference where intensity has left."

Incus dipped his head in agreement.

"Wow, I think that's- Agh!" Ducasus cried out as he dabbed the rag onto his charred side. "Ugh! Isn't this supposed to be helping the burns? It feels like I was just stabbed."

"The pain is from you touching an open wound, not from the salve. Lavender oil will soothe the pain once you get it on and bandage it again."

A cross look came upon Ducasus as he hesitantly returned the rag to his burns. He exhaled sharply and closed his eyes as he continued applying the remedy.

Incus looked away from Ducasus once he was almost finished with his work, letting his gaze fall on Li. Some of the color had returned to his face, which was a good sign. Incus wasn't sure how well-suited for travel the old Hawkeye was.

"How long ago did you travel to the Source?" Incus

inquired of Li. Ducasus began to wrap his bandages around his torso again. He had elected to keep the scar on his forehead free of the muslin wrap, which chafed at the injury.

"Just a few years ago, the last time," Li said cheerfully. The short rest had returned his spirit to him.

"And the path is the same today?" Incus rumbled.

Li half-smiled and agreed vigorously.

"The path is always the same when you're going to the Source. The roads are always a bit different, though."

Incus and Ducasus exchanged glances at this.

"You know how to get there, right?"

"Oh, yes!" the wizened old Lucian exclaimed.

Ducasus studied Li's features. His skin was wrinkled and tan. He had a prominent, hooked nose, and white, feathered hair that flowed backwards. Ducasus assumed that the old Hawkeye was looking into the wind, but then he realized that the air was still.

"We have a lot of distance to cover," Incus said brusquely as he rose and shouldered his pack. Ducasus followed suit, and Li slowly got to his feet as well.

Li had only just started walking when his feet left the ground, and before he knew what was happening, he was seated on Incus' shoulders.

Ducasus suppressed a laugh. The tiny, old Hawkeye sitting atop the towering Neb was a very strange sight. Incus started off without a word, his face the picture of gravity. Li beamed as he held on high above the ground, occasionally swinging his feet from his perch.

Ducasus smiled.

"You've got to be our lookout, Li. You've got the best vision and the best view!"

Li giggled.

"I accept!"

Ducasus laughed as he started off after the bizarre sight before him. He thought of a joke to tell Rosae, but

then his expression fell and his demeanor soured.

She isn't here, he thought and swallowed hard. He felt guilty for his moment of levity. *I hope she's okay.*



Rosae looked through blurry tears at the pristine halls of the palace she was being dragged through. She had endured a lot the past few weeks, but she had always managed to keep a level head and a cool demeanor. When her mother had died, she pushed on, not knowing what she was looking for. When she was kidnapped, she was scared to death, but she kept calm on the surface, knowing that Ducasus would come for her.

But being taken from her rescuers was the last straw.

The Flare guards had been forced to half-carry, half-drag her all the way through the city while she sobbed and screamed. She was angry, she was sad, and she was not going to help whoever had separated her from Ducasus.

Rosae and her guards arrived at a crimson door, inlaid with patterns of gold throughout. One of the guards let go of Rosae and opened the door, then stood to the side. The other pulled her inside, and the door shut behind them.

Rosae was released from the guard's grip, and she crumpled to the floor, sobbing anew.

It's not fair! she thought. *These are supposed to be the good ones, the people who freed us from the Seven Sisters.*

She buried her face in the soft carpet where she had fallen.

Time passed, and Rosae slowly regained possession of herself. She was still a mess of emotions, but she stopped crying and eventually looked up from the floor. She was being held in a large room that contained a magnificent bed, intricately carved chairs, and a table, as well as other furniture. There were silk curtains obscuring a balcony, and all sorts of paintings hung on the walls. If this was a

prison, it was a beautiful one. There were even flowers on the table in a little vase.

She carefully lifted her thin body from the floor and stood up straight, adjusting her white peasant dress. She had tried to wash it the other day, but it was still stained in places from the dirt and dust of her captivity. The little flowers she had embroidered onto the dress were clean, however. They remained a symbol of her quiet revolt during her time as a slave.

Rosae breathed in slowly, then lifted her head and glared at her guard, who held her gaze, annoyed. Carrying a hysterical Ungifted girl across the city was not how he had planned to spend his day.

There was a sound at the door, and Rosae turned just in time to see a graceful, golden-haired Flare enter the room. He stepped to the side, and a slim, raven-haired woman entered behind him, a circlet of diamonds atop her head.

Rosae looked at the woman disdainfully. She noticed how perfect her smooth complexion was and how tightly she wore her black clothing to her disgustingly perfect form.

She's never lifted a finger in her entire life, Rosae thought. She probably spends all of her time squeezing into her whorish clothes. Rosae narrowed her eyes at the woman, and then a surprising thing happened. From behind the queen, Gladius appeared, calmly entering the room with his gaze cast down. A moment later, he raised his eyes and looked at Rosae with recognition. He gave her a tight-lipped smile and took his place at the queen's right side.

It was only two days since Gladius had helped Ducasus and Incus rescue her. It was nice to see a familiar face, even if it was Gladius, Rosae thought. She almost smiled, but her scorn won out. She returned her attention to the queen, who smiled warmly. Rosae was practically scowling.

"Thank you for coming," the queen said with a healthy dose of irony. Her tone was, nonetheless, businesslike as she moved towards the table. "Although, I'm told you were something of a handful on your way."

Rosae narrowed her eyes.

Queen or not, I hate this woman.

The Queen moved regally to the wood-backed chairs that surrounded the table and seated herself.

"Will you have a seat?"

"If I say no will you have me dragged into one?" she replied, placing her hands on her hips.

The queen's voice lowered and her expression lost its warmth.

"Yes."

Rosae frowned and sauntered to an empty chair across from the monarch. Gladius and his counterpart Clypeum stood on either side of the queen, looking vigilant.

I hate this woman, Rosae thought again.

"Well," the queen said, folding her hands atop the table. "Here we are. I am a very busy woman, and you don't appear to be in the mood for chatter, so I'll get right to it. About a week ago an assassination attempt was carried out against me by the Seven Sisters. We know now that they were working with the Nebulae in an attempt to weaken our kingdom. As you have recently spent time in the custody of the Seven Sisters, I have a few questions that I hope you can answer."

Rosae laughed bitterly in response to the queen. Everyone paled.

The queen lowered her gaze and unfolded her hands. Gladius gave a look of concern to Rosae, desperately trying to send her tacit signals to stop her scornful laughter.

"You understand that I have people killed for this sort of disrespect," the queen said without humor.

"And?" Rosae exclaimed. "You think I'm going to

help you? After what you've done?"

"What I have done is send aid into your prison and liberated you. Now why are you unwilling to answer your queen's questions?" the queen said through gritted teeth. "And again, keep in mind that I am now seriously considering your execution."

Rosae scoffed.

"You know, when you banished Ducasus and Incus after they had saved your life, I thought you were simply ungrateful, but now I see that you're just a spiteful canis!"

Everyone in the room gasped.

"The queen has never been called such a word!" Clypeum exclaimed, drawing his sword.

"She's just not around to hear it. I wager she's called such a word in every house in every city every night!"

"Clypeum, Trajan, off with her head," the queen declared.

"Your majesty, please reconsider," Gladius began in earnest, but he was cut off by Rosae as she was forced to the floor.

"Add murder to your list! You already banished Ducasus, my love, but then as we're leaving you had to take me away from him too? You wouldn't even let him wait for me. They said he'd be killed!"

Rosae's voice was stilled a moment as her head was forced to the floor. Clypeum held her down as Trajan pulled his cade from its sheath. Gladius looked on in horror.

"My queen, this must be a misunderstanding! No one would ever--"

"Ducasus travels for weeks to save me after I'm captured, and then he saves you! Then he risks his life and rescues me, and you come along and decide to split us apart!" Rosae was screaming through tears, her face shoved into the carpet. "How am I going to find him? How? You canis!"

Trajan raised his sword above his head, taking aim so that he would only have to swing once. Just as he was about to let his blade fall, the queen sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger.

"Trajan," she said, "put it away. No swords." She then sighed again, muttering, "I am a canis."

Rosae remained where she was, sobbing into the carpet. The queen rose from her seat and hesitantly walked to her, then laid a hand on her shoulder, gesturing Clypeum away. She lifted Rosae's chin off of the floor, her face a mess of tears and carpet burn.

"Now, child," the queen began, "tell me what happened."

Rosae shook uncontrollably, all of the strains of her recent traumas coming upon her all at once. Tears streamed down her pained face and she wept, unable to speak.

"Shh..." the queen whispered, patting Rosae's back softly. The queen tilted her head curiously at this frail creature in front of her. The girl was clearly not a Flare, and the queen was certainly not a mother, but something about Rosae awakened her maternal instincts and compassion.

I never felt right about sending them away, the queen thought. *It's all politics.*

"Hush, child," the queen said softly, looking Rosae in the eyes. "It was not my intention to separate you. We'll make this right. Clypeum!" she said, shifting her tone markedly in calling her guard's name.

"Yes, my queen."

"Bring me parchment and pen. And send a runner here."

"Yes, my queen," Clypeum replied, bowing low before opening the door and vanishing from sight.

Rosae cried, but softly now. Having spent all of her tears, she simply shook. The queen continued to kneel by

her side and comfort the broken girl.

Before long, Clypeum returned. The queen rose in a stately manner and walked to the table, writing quickly.

"Runner, what is your name?"

The lean Flare answered timidly.

"Felix, your highness. Son of Marcus."

The queen nodded soberly and finished her missive.

"Well, son of Marcus, take this letter with you. Did you see Lord Incus or Master Ducasus while they were here?"

"Yes, my queen, in passing."

"Good. Find them, give them this letter, and escort them back to the palace." The queen handed the folded parchment to Felix and turned to Rosae. "Where were they heading, dear?"

Rosae looked up with surprise.

"They... they were heading for the lake, to take the ferry across."

"Well, they won't reach it in one day, not without a Flare carrying them, that is." The queen returned her attention to the messenger. "Find them along the lakeward road. There are only two of them that you need to bring: the Nebula and the Ungifted."

"And a Hawkeye," Rosae timidly added, "named Liberius."

"Well, then three. And I should think it a rather easy task to find them. It is a strange occasion to catch sight of a Nebula, a Hawkeye, and an Ungifted travelling together."

"Yes, my queen." The messenger bowed and left in a flash, speeding away to find the three wayward travelers.

Once more the queen rose from her chair and walked to Rosae, who was now sitting, her arms wrapped around her knees.

"You have to remember," the queen began, reaching down to help Rosae to her feet. "We are in a time of war, just begun. I had no choice but to send them away. If I had

allowed Incus to stay, he would have looked as an enemy to my people and a traitor to his own. Ducasus was associated with Incus, and there was the matter of the attack and their recent visit to the vault." The queen smiled weakly. "Sometimes as a queen you have to do things you don't want to do. I am not ungrateful to your friends, but sending them away is for the best. However," she paused and picked a piece of carpet thread out of Rosae's amber hair. "I did not intend to cause any of you harm or to separate you. We will bring them back and you may all leave together. Alright?" the queen asked warmly.

Rosae nodded her head in agreement.

"Now," the queen began, taking Rosae's hands into her own. "Will you answer my questions in the interim? Some very bad people are trying to harm our kingdom and we need to figure out who and why."

Rosae hesitated and then slowly agreed.

"Good," the queen said softly. "And understand that I've chosen to look kindly on you, but one more outburst like that one in my presence, and I'll not stop Trajan from his grisly work. Understood?"

Rosae looked to Gladius, who seemed relieved. She nodded, and the queen smiled.

"Good. Now let's begin."

The Adventure Continues in

Star-Crossed

by
W.A. Fulkerson

War is coming.

Flaroria's ancient rage has erupted. The grudges of Nebularis rise to the surface. A clash between strength and speed, giants and lightening, is now inevitable, and Ducasus and his friends find themselves in the middle of it. Yet the Desert of Nihl calls to them with the promise of a new star, and it is a journey most perilous. Malleus, meanwhile, buries himself in intrigue, hiding amongst the shadows and tugging at invisible strings. New temptations and nightmares of his past appear before him, and he will not remain unchanged. No one will remain unchanged. War is coming.

*"Oh, for the old lands,
Before the liar, the fire, and flame"*

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- W.A. Fulkerson