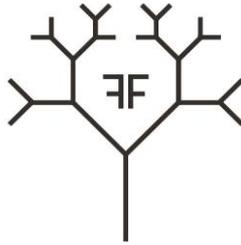


SEVERANCE LOST

A FRACTAL FORSAKEN BOOK



J. LLOREN QUILL

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For the wonderful Quill girls,
who are more amazing and fantastical than
anything you will read in this novel.

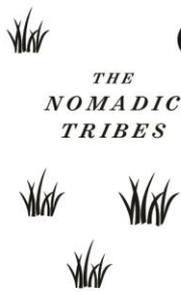


PILLAR

THE KINGDOM OF MALETHYA



MINOT



THE
NOMADIC
TRIBES

A central area containing several building icons and labels: a castle icon labeled 'Ispirtu', a palace icon labeled 'Darik's Palace', a square icon labeled 'Bellator', a multi-story building icon labeled 'Slate's Apartment', a cross icon labeled 'Infirmary', a large rectangular building icon labeled 'Arena', and a leaf icon labeled 'Catalpa Grove'. A street labeled 'Rue St' is shown between 'Ispirtu' and 'Regallo Estate'.

RAVINAI



PORTSWAIN

THE
DISENITES



REFLECTION OF REGRET

A single ray of light entered the room and carried with it the hope of a new day. The light warmed Slate Severance's eyelids, gently rousing him from tortured dreams. In this moment when the nightmares end and the day begins, mistakes of the past are stripped away, leaving behind one's true self. Slate felt honest, virtuous, and determined to protect the defenseless.

Slate rose from bed, but wakefulness followed slowly and so the mingled moment remained. Aspirations for the day mixed with memories of yesterday. *Yesterday wasn't so bad. Memories of yesterday would not ruin today. He was destined for great things.*

He staggered toward the bathroom on waking legs and relieved himself, but memories from the week prior tainted the simple pleasure. *It wasn't his fault. He didn't have a choice. The drunken soldier had attacked him and he had to defend himself.* There is no dishonor in self-defense, his father would have said.

He cleansed his hands in the basin. *These hands killed that soldier.* Memories poured into his head. Last month, a squadron tracked him to his campsite in the middle of the night and attempted to collect the bounty on his head. They failed. *Were these hands good for anything but killing?*

Slate looked in the mirror. He shouldn't have looked in the mirror. His muscular physique,

born of life-long training, was drained of color and laced with scars that crisscrossed his torso like ribbons. More memories came back at the sight of his injuries, memories he wanted to forget, memories of pain. He could withstand any pain suffered. He could tolerate the memories of pain inflicted; he was destined for great things.

His gaze rose to meet his eyes in the mirror. These were not the eyes of a righteous man. Blood vessels emanated from the accursed eyes in deep red reminders of his failures. These were the eyes that inspired fear throughout the kingdom. They called him demi-god. They called him a Shadow of the Night. They had once called him Stonehands. They told stories of him to frighten children at campfires. And the stories were true.

Slate clung to the hope carried on the rays of the day's first light, but he couldn't escape the binds of regret. *If only I could re-live my life... If only I could make it right...*

A LEAF IN THE WIND

Slate stood in the depths of the Arena, awaiting his introduction. From the tunnel entrance he could see a small portion of the crowd, and it comprised the largest congregation of people Slate had ever seen. Noble families proudly displayed their house symbols from elevated seats, but Slate barely registered their presence. He absently spun the staff from hand to hand to check his grip. He felt as if all the moisture in the air had been removed and sent straight to his palms, leaving him with a dry mouth and a healthy appreciation for the leather grips wrapped around the middle of his staff.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of Malethya, welcome to the opening match of the Guild Tournament," the crier yelled, and the musicians quieted their instruments. "Our first contestant comes to the city of Ravinai from the far reaches of the kingdom. Born in the northwestern mining village of Pillar and wielding a staff, here is Slate Severance!"

Slate ran through the tunnel and controlled his breathing to calm his nerves. Deafening clapping, stomping, and shouting resonated through the stone around him and urged him toward the sunlit entrance of the dueling courtyard. The brilliance of daylight blinded him, and he failed to notice the step down to the sandy courtyard. His instincts responded quicker than his feet, and he planted his staff

in the sand and vaulted overhead. A slight over-rotation during his flip caused him to drop to a knee upon landing and swing his staff back into position. What the crowd witnessed was an acrobatic, staff-flourishing entrance. Applause erupted, and Slate unwittingly became a crowd favorite in the eyes of the raucous citizens.

He counted his good fortunes and waited for his opponent. Most contestants in the tournament were seasoned from service in the King's army but hadn't yet reached their physical prime. The crier announced, "His opponent hails from the nomadic tribes of the Southern provinces, Rainier Tallow, who has chosen two short swords for this contest." An unimposing figure, both short in stature and boyish in looks, entered the courtyard. He did not entertain or even acknowledge the onlookers, so the applause died quickly. Despite minimal enthusiasm from the crowd, Rainier's lithe and confident gait reflected much experience. Slate didn't see him adjust his grip on his short swords or lick his lips to combat the dry air, so he presumed the fighter came by his confidence honestly.

The crier outlined the rules of the match for the crowd. "A bugle signals the start of the contest, and the two combatants fight with magically blunted weapons within the confines of the dueling courtyard. The first combatant to knock down his opponent is the winner. Contestants, turn and acknowledge the members of the Crimson Guard in attendance."

In the seats of honor above the commoners and nobility sat the Crimson Guardsmen. An impressive showing in the tournament could earn an invitation to train for the Crimson Guard in

one of the guilds. Citizens of Malethya and members of the King's army could participate in the Guild Tournament, requiring Slate to win dozens of preliminary fights in the outlying provinces before making it to the Arena.

Slate and Rainier bowed to the Crimson Guardsmen and faced each other. Rainier's darting eyes locked on Slate and a nearly imperceptible smirk found its way to the tiny fighter's mouth. They crossed staff and sword and a bugle sounded.

Rainier advanced in a series of feints and testing blows, forcing Slate to use the longer staff defensively as he kept the short swords at bay. Rainier darted left and right, changing forms fluidly and keeping Slate on the retreat. Slate kicked dirt from the ground to daze Rainier, but Rainier anticipated the trick and struck Slate's unguarded ribs. Rainier backed away before Slate's counterattack could reach its mark.

A backward glance marked the approaching edge of the dueling courtyard. Slate gave ground more rapidly to counterattack with more forceful blows in the space created, but Rainier deflected the counterattacks and pushed Slate even closer to the edge of the dueling courtyard and victory.

Slate decided on a painful gambit. He kicked sand at Rainier once more, purposefully leaving his wounded ribs exposed. He had difficulty predicting Rainier's position during his offensive flurry, and by exposing his wounded ribs, he was hoping the aggressive nature of the fighter would leave him vulnerable. Rainier avoided the sand and came at Slate with a high-guard on his right side, expecting a blow from above by his taller opponent. It was exactly

what Slate wanted, and he thrust his staff into the right leg of Rainier. He felt his blow land just as a blinding pain spread across his ribs.

Not trying to be a hero, Slate distanced himself from Rainier. He assessed the damage his blow had done to Rainier and saw he clearly favored his left leg. Slate took the offensive, swinging his staff from a distance that left Rainier unable to counter with his shorter weapons and loss of mobility. The skill of the nomadic tribesman prolonged the match awhile longer, but then Slate landed a sweeping blow to Rainier's left leg, and his wounded right leg could not support his weight. Rainier fell to the courtyard and a bugle sounded, signaling the end of the match.

Slate reached down and offered his hand to his opponent. Rainier shook off his disappointment in the loss before accepting help onto his feet. They both soaked in the applause of the crowd before making their way across the courtyard. Rainier then surprised Slate by following him out of the tunnel, outside of the Arena, and into Slate's camp.

Each fighter returned to his tent to rest between fights. Slate's tent was nearly empty. He had traveled to the tournament by foot, carrying rations for the trip and a sleeping blanket. In addition to the tent, the tournament had provided a cot, armor, and a stand of blunted weapons. Slate returned the staff to the weapon stand, sat on his cot, and started the slow and painful process of removing his armor. Rainier hauled a discarded crate into the tent and used it as a chair.

"That was well fought, Slate. Many of these soldiers trained in the King's army stick to their forms with too much rigidity. This makes

them predictable and unable to turn the tide of battle if they are outmatched. They don't take risks like you did," he paused, "You fight like a tribesman."

Slate smiled at the backhanded compliment that valued cunning over might. But Rainier had also clearly stated that Slate had won with a fair amount of luck. "I fight like my father," Slate replied.

As they talked, Rainier's servants entered the tent. Each had the olive skin associated with the southern provinces and dressed in silks wrapped and tied at the waist. Ornate tattoos covered their hands and feet. Within a matter of minutes, the servants transformed his tent into a room fit for a nobleman. Blankets and lounge pillows covered the dirt floor and hanging silks provided privacy for bathing. Rainier ignored the changes around him, so Slate didn't acknowledge them either.

"...then your father should be proud. I thought I was the only remaining fighter without formal training in the King's army."

The tent flap opened and two people entered, and Slate understood the servants' preparations. The first was a man dressed in simple traveler's robes with a well-worn woodcutter's axe hanging from his side. He carried himself with the self-assuredness of a king. "My name is Lucus. I am a wizard currently traveling with the Tallow tribe." Slate had never met a wizard, but enough tales had reached the small village of Pillar for him to know of magic in Malethya. Lucus' simple attire did not fit Slate's preconceived notions of wizards gathered from campfire stories. Lucus said, "Rainier has resisted the traditions of the Tallow tribe up until this

point by refusing to name a Teacher, but it is with great pleasure that I formalize Rainier's acceptance of your offer to serve in this esteemed position."

"I didn't intend to offer anything..."

"You extended your hand to Rainier when he was fallen. He accepted your hand, sealing the pact." Rainier remained silent and Lucus contributed little in the way of explanation. "I believe I can shed some light on tribal customs, but first I offer a gift to celebrate your honorable victory and help you prepare for your next match. Would you allow my apprentice Sana to treat those injured ribs?"

"I thank you for the offer, Lucus, but magic is not allowed in the tournament," Slate responded, temporarily ignoring the misunderstanding in favor of keeping the tournament rules. But the pain in his ribs became sharper and made breathing more difficult now that the adrenaline of the match had subsided. Slate feared that several of his ribs were broken rather than just bruised or cracked.

Lucus gave a knowing smile. "Magic may not be applied during tournament matches. There are no stipulations preventing healing between matches. The tournament is intended to showcase our most talented warriors, not to leave them bloodied and broken."

Slate nodded his acceptance with some trepidation at having magic used upon him, but his fear dissipated when Sana lowered the hood of her robes. She likely had suitors from the highest courts, but she approached with a purposeful stride that implied she was unaware of her beauty or purposely dismissive of it. "Healing is easiest when I have direct contact

with the wound," Sana told Slate as she started removing his leathers without bothering to ask permission. When she unhooked and pulled away the last of his leathers, the pain in his ribs spiked as his chest was allowed to expand, making the full extent of the wounds apparent. Thankfully, his inability to draw a deep breath made it impossible to scream in agony, and he only managed to produce a stifled grunt. Sana turned her gaze from the wound to Slate and lectured, "Your leather armor distributed the force of the blow over a large area and prevented puncture of the skin, but the red color and immediate tissue swelling suggests internal damage. I am going to touch the wound and probe its extent. You will feel a slight tingle."

Slate needed to stare at something to ignore the pain and found Sana's face convenient for the purpose. Her eyes fixated on the wound and reminded Slate of the focused state he entered in battle preparation, but it differed in a manner he couldn't quite place. Her lips articulated an inaudible conversation with herself that her clenched jaw resisted. Sana placed her hands on his side, closed her eyes and a warm tingling sensation radiated from her cool touch. The warm sensation moved around through his chest, always probing deeper and never staying in the same location. After several minutes, Sana opened her eyes and explained her diagnosis. "You have two broken ribs with multiple fractures of each. They have damaged the surrounding muscles and connective tissue but have not impacted your lungs. I will realign your bones and then stimulate them to grow and reconnect. There will be pain as the bones realign and travel through the damaged

tissue. The growth of the bones and the final healing of the surrounding tissue will leave you fatigued but should not cause significant pain. Try to remain still until I have finished. Are you ready?"

Slate grabbed the edges of the cot for support, clenched his teeth, and nodded. As promised, the pain of the bones realigning was excruciating. When they were broken, it had happened in an instant. Realigning the bones required more time and exacting focus. Slate began to worry that if it took any longer he would lose consciousness and Sana would have a perfectly still patient to work upon.

Finally the pain abated, but Sana's continued concentration told Slate that her work continued. Sana's lips moved inaudibly as she worked and Slate realized why the nervous habit bothered him. When he first learned to fight, his father told him to concentrate. He squinted his eyes, clenched his jaw, and tightened his muscles. Later in his training he understood these reactions were counterproductive and that true concentration required an open mind to read your opponent and the control to use only the muscles necessary to prevent fatigue. If training to use magic was anything like his experience with combat, then Sana had not yet gained this experience. This realization coincided with Sana straightening up with a smile on her face, leaving Slate to feel foolish for questioning her talents. But before he could thank her, a new pain throbbed in his sides. It felt like his skin was being stretched from the inside. He gasped in pain.

Sana probed the wound again, but Lucus intervened. "What did you find?" he asked his apprentice calmly.

"I have properly aligned the bones, but they continue to grow." Lucus casually took her place near Slate and within seconds the warm feeling returned and the pain subsided. Sana hid her frustration behind a mask of professionalism. "You are healed and will require some rest before your next match. I wish you the best, but I have other matters to attend." Sana abruptly left the tent, leaving the impression that her early exit had more to do with her failed attempt at healing than anything else on her agenda for the day.

Lucus explained. "Sana has immense potential but struggles to control her spells. Unfortunately, this can be the most difficult part of being a wizard. The use of magic is not difficult if you have the ability. If you apply the correct techniques, the spell is cast, but applying it in the correct dose for the situation is what differentiates a wizard from a simple traveling magician and his tricks." Slate intended to ask Lucus about the Tallow clan, but fatigue ran over him like a wave. He fell asleep in his cot before he could verbalize his questions.

Rainier awoke Slate by gently shaking his shoulder. "Teacher, the crier is announcing your semifinal match. Prepare for battle." Slate jumped out of bed and suited up with Rainier's help as he offered information on his opponent. "I have sparred with this contestant. He is powerful and relentless, but slower than you. Your staff will not withstand a direct blow from his broadsword. Try to deflect his blows rather than block them. Good luck, Teacher." So far, Rainier seemed to be the Teacher in this relationship.

Slate grabbed his staff and ran for the Arena

entrance as the crier announced his name. Slate sprinted through the tunnel, flipping over his staff and landing on one knee in the dueling courtyard. The crowd cheered loudly at his now familiar entrance.

"Weighing in at 260 pounds and wielding the broadsword, Magnus Pudriuz!"

An equally large cheer arose for Magnus as he stepped into the courtyard and extended his broadsword into the air. Slate saw why it would be easy to cheer for Magnus. He was a physical specimen and looked the part of a tournament champion. His arms were the size of Slate's legs and his leather armor needed to be specially made to fit his large frame.

Slate and Magnus bowed to the Crimson Guardsmen in the Arena and turned to face each other. Magnus glowered and remained standing during Slate's bow, impressing Slate. Many contestants attempt to rattle their opponents with fear, and Magnus had a talent for it. It was a valuable trait, but it was a gimmick. Rainier's quiet confidence threatened Slate much more than Magnus' glowering. Slate extended his staff to cross Magnus' broadsword. Magnus swung at Slate's staff in a display of strength rather than simply crossing it. Slate loosened his grip on his staff and allowed it to fly through the air upon contact, landing ten yards away. Magnus and the crowd laughed at his expense while he went to pick it up, but his feint allowed Slate to judge the power behind Magnus' blow and found that Rainier's advice was correct. He would need to avoid direct engagement.

As the laughter died down, Slate entered into a defensive fighting stance and tried to appear frightened. He considered peeing his pants to

heighten the effect, but the look on Magnus' face showed that his acting was convincing enough without that embarrassing ploy. The bugle sounded and Magnus rushed Slate. Slate took a few shuffling steps backward in a continued display of fear as Magnus began to lower an overhead swing that would have snapped his staff in two. Before it found its mark, Slate launched himself to the side, easily avoiding the slow powerful swing. He planted the staff into the ground and altered the momentum of his body, swinging toward Magnus's backside. Before he could turn, Slate delivered a powerful kick to the back of his knee. Magnus didn't drop, but his balance faltered. Slate swung the staff into his other leg and toppled the large fighter with one final, well-placed blow to the back. Magnus landed face-first in the sand and the bugle sounded. The crowd applauded after coming to grips with this quick change of events. Slate ran back to the tunnel entrance and left Magnus cussing and swearing after Slate as he picked himself up from the ground. Before he reached the tunnel, he heard the crier say, "Let's hear it for Slate Severance, who just won his tournament match in record time!" Slate raised his staff for the crowd but didn't slow down.

Rainier met him at the tunnel and fell into a jog at his side. Slate thanked him for his insight about Magnus but found Rainier quiet on their return to the tent, where Lucus awaited.

"Let us talk quickly before the headmasters of the guilds arrive. Our time is short."

"The headmasters of the guilds are visiting?" Slate questioned.

"It is tradition for the heads of the guilds to meet each of the final contestants before

the championship bout. It is a great honor, but you must handle these meetings correctly. The Crimson Guard is filled with people whose skills and talents are only exceeded by their egos and personal agendas. You must tread carefully during these meetings. Do not promise anything to the headmasters until you have a better understanding of the consequences. How much do you know of the Crimson Guard?"

"Nothing," Slate acknowledged. "Most people from Pillar spend their entire lives working in the mines. My father was enlisted in the King's army and taught me to fight, but I know little of the guilds or the guard."

"King Darik commissioned the Crimson Guard to train the land's most promising warriors in the guilds. No member of the king's army can question or accuse a member of the Crimson Guard since their directives come directly from the king. All Guardsmen belong to one of three guilds: Bellator, Sicarius, and Ispirtu.

"Bellator specializes in various fighting techniques and the use of weaponry. Its headmaster is the famous war hero, Villifor. He will undoubtedly be interested in having you join his school regardless of the outcome of the championship bout. Magnus was his prized recruit and your showing in the semi-finals will have piqued his interest.

"Ispirtu trains all of the mages that enter the Crimson Guard. Their headmaster is a powerful wizard named Brannon. I advise added caution when speaking with Brannon. He is not only the headmaster of Ispirtu but also the father of your finals opponent.

"Sicarius is the last guild. It teaches stealth, strategy, and the art of deception. I do not know the name of Sicarius' headmaster

and if you learn it, I suggest you promptly forget it for your own safety. Members of Sicarius gather information for the king and conduct covert operations." Slate heard a large commotion of people approaching outside of the tent. Lucus said, "That will be Villifor. His fame draws large crowds and his personality does little to discourage the practice. May your tongue be as swift as your staff, Slate Severance." Lucus raised his cloak and discreetly exited the tent, leaving Slate to feel like a leaf blowing in the wind. Unsure of the proper protocol for meeting a war hero or a headmaster, Slate waited outside the tent entrance.

Villifor struck an impressive figure on his approach, surrounded by admirers and greeted by well-wishers. Upon identifying Slate, Villifor hailed, "Good show! Well fought, Slate Severance!" Villifor grasped his forearm and continued loud enough for his entourage to hear, "Let us make our introductions in private. I promise to be brief because I know the importance of preparing for battle." Villifor strode into the tent leaving Slate and Rainier to follow in tow. Slate wondered if Villifor's last statement was meant to discourage his entourage from following into the tent or to encourage them to wait outside until Villifor emerged.

The blankets and lounging pillows spread across the tent floor by Rainier's servants provided the best place to meet despite its informality. Villifor relaxed against a pillow and gestured for Slate to join him. Rainier sat next to Slate without an invitation to join the conversation. Villifor continued with a raised eyebrow in Rainier's direction, "You defeated

Magnus by mixing guile, cunning and decisive action to overcome physical inferiority. Had you faced Magnus in ten consecutive fights, he would have bested you nine times." A twinkle appeared in his eye. "In battle, you only get one opportunity. Identifying weakness and exploiting it is often the difference between life and death. Commit to Bellator and your teachers can instruct you in the forms and techniques required to master your weaponry of choice. Master these forms to decrease the weaknesses in your fighting technique and more importantly . . . survive situations in which you should not." Villifor's eyes momentarily glazed, no doubt remembering some long past battle, before returning to focus on Slate. "There is no better place for a tournament champion to hone his skills than Bellator. You belong in Bellator, an instrument of the king's will, and a protector of Malethya." He stood up to depart and rejoin his mob of adoring citizens, finishing the conversation with, "Excel as a member of Bellator, and find your name sung in songs of valor with fame that precedes your arrival in every town."

Could this day become any more confusing? Lucus warned about the dangers of speaking too openly with the headmasters, and yet Villifor didn't even provide the opportunity to speak. "What do you make of that?" Slate posed to Rainier.

"You would be fortunate if your remaining two meetings proceed as smoothly. You learned that you are welcomed in Bellator, and I believe Villifor spoke plainly. Either he knew you had little experience in these types of encounters, or he did not wish to speak in front of me."

"Why wouldn't he wish to speak in front of

you?"

"Because I will not be joining any of the guilds . . . I have other obligations to my tribe." A complex mixture of pride and duty indicated a long conversation would be required. Switching subjects back to the battle ahead seemed the best course of action. "Do you know anything of my opponent in the finals?"

"You will be facing Lattimer Regallo, the son of Brannon. He has the potential to become a powerful wizard like his father, but he has been training for the tournament determinedly. His forms are well practiced but without the physical prowess of Magnus. I believe he will stay within his capabilities as a fighter, utilizing a stout defense to wear you down. He favors a long sword and shield."

"When is the championship match?" Slate was beginning to understand that the tournament ran according to its own timetable.

"I am not certain, but I could inquire."

Desiring some quiet time to clear his head after a whirlwind day, Slate nodded in affirmation and looked toward the ground. Rainier understood his desire and stepped out. With the tent to himself, Slate sat against a lounging pillow and sorted his thoughts. He had landed a lucky blow to win his match against Rainier and now found the tribesman pledged to his tutelage without direction as to what should be taught. The terms and duration of this teacher/student relationship would have been cleared up by Lucus, but the meetings with the headmasters were a pressing priority. Villifor had praised him in one sentence and told him he would have lost nine of ten contests against Magnus in the next. His father would have told him to clear his mind and focus

on his upcoming match against Lattimer or to prepare for meeting the headmasters from Sicarius and Ispirtu, but Slate could not concentrate on any of these things. He kept picturing Sana, the apprentice with the same drive and determination that reminded him of his early days of training.

A knife blade touched his neck and he froze. His attacker whispered, "Only an idiot meets an opponent on an equal field of battle. Villifor can teach you a thousand ways to kill a man and yet the most junior member of Sicarius could have joined his group of admirers, killed him and left before that pompous figurehead even knew he was dying. Sicarius teaches you to master your surroundings. No door will bar your way. You could sit next to your own mother and she wouldn't know it was you. Most importantly, no one will ever slip into your tent unnoticed and place a knife against your throat again. Sicarius is not for everyone. If you are successful in your missions, there will be no public glory. No one will tell your tale. If you are truly talented, the world may even forget your name . . ." Slate felt a slight electrical twitch against his neck before his eyes rolled up and he blacked out.

When Slate awoke, he waited a few seconds for the fog to clear from his head. He resisted the urge to bolt upright out of worry that the headmaster of Sicarius could still be in the tent. Whatever the Sicarius headmaster had done to him left no lasting effects, but it was impossible to tell how long he had been unconscious. Rainier was not present so Slate presumed that he'd only been unconscious for seconds or minutes, not hours. Slate checked for signs of how the headmaster had entered and

exited his tent. There did not seem to be a mark of any kind indicating entry under the tent walls or tears in the canvas. It was unsettling. During his search he noticed a note folded neatly on the pillow of his cot with a coin shaped object set atop.

Slate,

I offer my apologies for the details surrounding our first encounter, namely the knife and shock stick. Information is more valuable to the right people than any treasure and my identity qualifies as valuable information.

For your first lesson from Sicarius, I will explain how I entered your tent and left you incapacitated, since it is undoubtedly on your mind. I used Villifor's grandeur to blind you. You and Rainier turned to follow Villifor, which allowed me to slip into your tent unnoticed. I bided my time until I had you at a disadvantageous position. There are a number of more elaborate methods at my disposal, but I chose this simple plan to drive home a point; you are defenseless.

In preparation for your training in Sicarius, I suggest utilizing your newfound role as a teacher to implement a game of stealth called Stratego. The game is quite simple in nature but complex in practice. You or Rainier will hold this token at all times. The other can earn the token by stealing it or through surprised incapacitation of the person holding the token. Incapacitation through direct confrontation is not allowed. Leave the frontal assaults to Bellator.

From time to time I will check on you. Try to make it more difficult for me than it was this afternoon. If you decide to join Sicarius, I expect you to report to the guild with the Stratego token in your possession.



Slate examined the Stratego coin. One side of the coin had the same insignia as the letter, and the second side was devoid of any markings. Its heft identified it as iron ore but not the typical hematite mined in Pillar. The coin intrigued Slate. The deformities within the iron ore gave the coin a dull reddish hue and yet the shape was perfectly formed. To be molded and engraved with the Sicarius symbol, the iron needed to be melted down, which would separate the iron from the stone deformities. Since this hadn't happened, this seemingly simple coin was anything but simple. Not knowing the consequences of failing to heed the rules in the letter and the ease with which he had been incapacitated convinced Slate that maintaining possession of the token would be prudent. He wrapped it in a strip of cloth and tied the cloth around his arm.

Rainier stepped into the tent and reported the championship bout was scheduled to occur just after sunset, leaving about one hour to meet headmaster Brannon and prepare for the match. Slate decided not to recount his introduction to the Sicarius headmaster for now, opting to prepare for his next battle instead. Slate gestured for Rainier to join him

in the open area of the tent and began transitioning between several of his battle stances. The familiarity of the forms gave his brain a rest from the headmasters and helped keep his muscles limber prior to his final match. It also made him feel like he was at least attempting to live up to his newfound role as Rainier's teacher, although Rainier easily followed the progression of forms.

Toward the end of the progression, Brannon entered the tent. His entire being radiated a sense of superb confidence bordering on narcissism, and his elaborate robes enhanced the impression. The layered black and purple robes bore insignias of both Ispirtu and the house Regallo, signaling that his pride in the family name equalled his station as headmaster, a bold and unconventional statement. Brannon stood to the side and quietly waited as Slate completed his training forms, though he did so with an openly hostile stare. The reason for his angst was unknown to Slate; he knew that one never interrupted a soldier's forms or a mother's prayers.

After his forms were completed, Brannon began, "If you are fit to join Ispirtu, you will follow proper etiquette. Typical punishment for failing to address the head of your order, in this case me, involves serving as a personal attendant until proper respect can be learned through servitude. Of course this assumes that you are able to join Ispirtu. Unlike the other guilds that will accept any farm boy capable of yielding a sword, training in Ispirtu requires the ability to perform magic. "

Brannon stepped forward and laid his hand upon Slate's forehead. Similar to the way Sana

had probed his injuries, Brannon's touch did not end at his fingertips. It extended into every muscle limbered up from his forms and into the deepest cells of his deepest organs. Naked didn't adequately describe the sense of exposure. Thankfully, Brannon's probing lasted for the shortest of time periods, after which he spoke to Slate.

"The champion of the tournament gets to choose his guild, but you do not have the spark required to be trained in the use of magic. If you win the tournament and choose Ispirtu, you will be the lowest member of the guild without the ability to conjure the simplest of spells. For this reason, we have nothing left to discuss. I bid you good luck in your remaining match and in your studies in one of the other guilds."

The Ispirtu headmaster exited the tent, and Slate drank a glass of water thinking it might cleanse the places soiled by Brannon's probing, but time would prove to be the only effective cleanser.

Rainier noticed Slate's discomfort and attempted to refocus his Teacher on the upcoming match. He grabbed a long sword and shield and stepped into the open area of the tent. "I'll show you Lattimer's favorite forms." Rainier's expertise with these weapons no longer surprised Slate, and they sparred for a few minutes until the crier's voice, magically enhanced to be heard throughout the arena's grounds, drifted into the tent.

"The final match of the tournament will begin shortly. Come take your seats to see the surprising upstart, Slate Severance, pit his skills against the tournament favorite, Lattimer Regallo!"